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The 2024-2025 elections in Romania: From local elections to the international impact of political choices

Laurențiu Petrila¹

This special issue on the 2024 and 2025 (unexpected) elections in Romania aims to help in understanding better the impact of these elections, from the local level to international political implications. The special issue is published in two parts as issues 1 and 2 of volume 25 of the *Romanian Journal of Political Science*. For this first part we have selected six articles we believe will be useful in understanding not only how electoral choices are constructed, but also their stagnations, developments, and positive or negative implications in a turbulent, to say the least, geopolitical context.

The first article (Ștefanachi and Grecu, 2025) analyzes how political science researchers have developed the economic model of voting as an important predictor of both political participation and the aggregation of collective preferences. In the political science literature, the economic dimension is considered significant enough to offer empirical support both to the theory of rational choice and to behavioral models that include objective socio-economic factors, such as those represented by macroeconomic indicators. In this context, economic voting is analyzed from the perspective of political accountability. Thus, the electorate can reward or sanction political actors based on economic performance. Regardless of their sociotropic (with positive externalities at the level of the entire social structure) or egotropic (with direct implications for personal well-being and finances) dimensions, macroeconomic variables are positively correlated with electoral results, having a major impact on the dynamics of voting and the aggregation of political values and preferences.

Based on these theoretical premises and against the backdrop of systemic imbalances generated by the post-pandemic situation and the effects of the war in Ukraine, the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections are of relevance not only to citizens but also to researchers of the electoral process. Persistent inflation, the national economic and financial situation, and geopolitical tensions

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on Romania's eastern border have created an economic and social context characterized by instability and political divisions. This context has favored the performance of "anti-system" political actors, as a reaction to the public perception of poor management of the national economic situation.

The analysis presented by Ștefanachi and Grecu illustrates the impact of macroeconomic variables on the aggregation of electoral preferences, emphasizing the role played by labor market dynamics and wage levels in political choices. The results of their study are consistent with previous studies, revealing a moderate and statistically significant correlation between economic variables and the electoral preferences of Romanians in the 2024 legislative elections.

We can also highlight the relevance of the results for individual or collective political actors, who can shape their political projects or strategies according to the impact that economic conditions have on electoral results. Comparing these results with an expanded analysis of Central and Eastern European countries would facilitate understanding the role that economic variables play in shaping political behavior at the regional level, contributing to the consolidation of the participatory dimension of democracy.

The second article in this issue (Angi, Bădescu, and Radu, 2025) analyzes the determinants of electoral behavior in the 2025 presidential elections in Romania, with a particular focus on the second round, contested between a centrist, pro-European candidate and a nationalist-conservative candidate with a populist profile. The study is part of the theoretical debate on economic versus cultural explanations for electoral support for populism and seeks to assess the relative relevance of the two perspectives in an Eastern European context marked by accelerated economic convergence and, at the same time, by persistent cultural and religious polarization.

The central contribution of the article is the use of Covid-19 vaccination rates as a contextual indicator of deeper cultural and epistemic orientations related to trust in expertise, state authority, religiosity, and moral traditionalism. The authors draw on recent literature on "medical populism" and the politicization of the pandemic, which shows that public health behaviors can serve as observable proxies for cultural attitudes that are otherwise difficult to measure directly.

Methodologically, the analysis is based on county-level aggregate data (N = 42, including the municipality of Bucharest). The dependent variable is the share of votes obtained by the populist candidate in the second round of the presidential elections on May 18, 2025. The main explanatory variable is the Covid-19 vaccination rate as reported in the Fall of 2021, a moment that represented the peak for both the vaccination campaign and the public controversies associated with it.

This is analyzed in relation to three sets of contextual variables relevant in the Romanian case: (1) a pre-pandemic (2017) socio-economic development index; (2) participation in the 2018 constitutional referendum on the definition of family, used as an indicator of traditionalist and conservative mobilization; and (3) the share of the ethnic Hungarian population at the county level, included as a control variable for structural differences in electoral behavior associated with ethnic composition.

To capture both the direct and indirect effects between these variables, the authors use structural equation models (SEM), which allow testing the mediating relationships between socio-economic development, cultural indicators, and populist voting. The results show that the vaccination rate is the strongest predictor of territorial variation in voting for the populist candidate. Counties with lower vaccination levels in 2021 tend to give significantly more electoral support to the populist candidate, even when the level of economic development is controlled for. In contrast, socio-economic development does not have a significant direct effect on voting, its influence being mainly indirect, through vaccination rates and the traditionalist mobilization captured by the 2018 referendum. The

proportion of the ethnic Hungarian population has a distinct and consistent effect, confirming the existence of differentiated electoral patterns associated with ethnic composition.

The analysis is supplemented by additional institutional-level data regarding vaccination rates of teaching staff in the municipality of Cluj-Napoca. Significant differences between confessional and non-confessional schools, under comparable socio-economic conditions, support the interpretation of vaccination rates as an indicator of the influence of religious networks and their associated cultural norms.

The study has twofold relevance. Theoretically, it reinforces the argument that cultural and religious factors play a central role in sustaining populism in Central and Eastern Europe, even in conditions of economic growth and reduced inequalities. Methodologically, the article demonstrates the usefulness of contextual behavioral indicators for analyzing political preferences when individual data are limited. From a normative and public policy perspective, the results suggest that strategies to reduce the appeal of populism cannot rely exclusively on economic performance, but require interventions that target institutional trust, public communication, and the relationship between the state, expertise, and religious actors.

The third article (Bucur, 2025) makes an innovative methodological contribution to the study of political extremism by applying a semi-quantitative approach to the history and sociology of European fascism. The approach goes beyond normative or exclusively qualitative assessments and proposes a comparative measurement of the systemic criminality of fascist regimes, based on transparent and replicable analytical tools. Its central originality lies in the controlled mathematization of political history through the operationalization of five structural dimensions of fascism: political authoritarianism, racial ideology, repression of opposition, systemic crimes, and military expansionism. Applying this grid to European fascisms (1922-1975) shows that the Legionary regime in Romania (7.6/10) and the Antonescu regime (8.0/10) rank immediately below German Nazism (10/10) in terms of the intensity of political violence and the criminal nature of repression.

Bucur makes the first systematic attempt to measure contemporary fascist discourse in Romania, analyzing the doctrinal convergence between classical European fascism and the public discourse promoted by Călin Georgescu. The analysis indicates a medium-high convergence (5.8/10) between the defining features of historical fascism and current political rhetoric, without supporting the existence of institutionalized fascism, but signaling a significant ideological risk.

The main conclusion of the study is that contemporary radical discourses can and should be analyzed using standardized measurement tools that are historically comparable and legally relevant. The proposed methodology opens a line of research with European relevance, situated at the intersection of sociology, history, law, and political science, providing a solid framework for analyzing historical responsibility and current democratic vulnerabilities. Through its methodological rigor and conceptual courage, the study stands out as a benchmark for future research on neo-fascism, political memory, and historical responsibility in contemporary democracies.

The fourth study (Copilaș, 2025) shows from the outset that the cultural and political influence of Eurasianist ideology is usually understood in the Russian context. Eurasianism, both in its classical form, which emerged after the First World War, and in its newer versions, which consolidated after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, insists on Russia's uniqueness as an eclectic civilizational pole with its own identity, superior to both European and Asian civilizations.

While the old Eurasianism was more of a conservative movement, quite divided and reacting from European exile to what it perceived as the dissolution of the Russian cultural space under the influence of European ideologies, the new Eurasianism has gone beyond the defensive-reactive

attitude of the movement's founders and can be understood as an assertive ideological current with global geopolitical aspirations.

The new Eurasianism has inspired derivative ideologies in Central Asia, Turkey, Mongolia, Japan, and Central and Eastern Europe. Copilaș argues that its newest branch has developed in Romania, as exemplified by the writings and public statements of Călin Georgescu, the presidential candidate whose exponential political rise in the December 2024 presidential election ended, following the discovery of irregularities and alleged electoral fraud, with the annulment of those elections and the transformation of Georgescu into a quasi-political martyr. Due to this radical and unprecedented decision, the image of the mainstream Romanian parties and of the political system deteriorated significantly, both internally and externally.

By analyzing and interpreting Georgescu's political ideology as a subspecies of Eurasianism, this contribution offers new hermeneutic possibilities for understanding the political events that took place in Romania at the end of 2024 in a regional and local context. It is important to note that Romanian Eurasianism developed and consolidated in a society where the perception of Russia is extremely low. Starting from here, further research could investigate how this branch of Eurasianism will develop, what political weight will it have, especially domestically, and how it could be framed within the broader landscape of European radical right-wing populism. Furthermore, based on the historical observation of the existence of anti-Semitism without Jews in Romania, as documented by Michael Shafir, one could also hypothesize the existence of Eurasianism without pro-Russian sentiment, which would be worth pursuing further.

The next study (Tavalla and Matiuța, 2025) investigates the role of the TikTok platform in shaping nationalist populism and affective polarization among young Romanians during the 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections. Based on theories of digital nationalism, populist communication, youth political engagement, and affective polarization, the study develops an integrative theoretical framework for analyzing how TikTok's algorithmic logic promotes emotionally charged political content. It argues that TikTok functions as an incubator for affective nationalism by amplifying far-right narratives and mobilizing young people through emotional media content. The authors use a mixed methodology that combines social media data analysis, public opinion data, and content analysis of TikTok posts to assess the circulation and the influence of these narratives on young voters.

The article belongs to research examining the changing structure of political mobilization. Whereas in the past electoral campaigns depended on parties, television, and charismatic leaders, we are now seeing the emergence of distributed networks of content creators and influencers who play central roles in this process. TikTok does not function as a classic channel of political communication, but as an emotion machine, where politics becomes an emotional spectacle and success depends on the emotional intensity of the messages. At the same time, TikTok not only mobilizes but also reinforces political polarization. Its algorithms favor content that arouses strong emotions, leading to the emergence of "algorithmic antagonism".

The research has broader implications beyond the Romanian context, attempting to answer essential questions about the functioning of democracy in the age of algorithms. The 2024–2025 presidential elections in Romania represented a turning point in this regard and a global warning. As elections around the world increasingly move online, understanding and managing the role of algorithms becomes a democratic necessity. Without this awareness, there is a risk that political decisions will be less the result of collective deliberation and more the product of invisible calculations by digital platforms. Discussions about the future of democracy must also include how these platforms work.

The special issue is closed by an article (Petrila and Turcescu, 2025) that analyzes the mechanisms that shape the electoral participation of first-time voters through a comparative analysis between Romania and Austria. The authors argue that youth turnout is not just an individual choice, but also the result of a broader civic ecosystem that includes family socialization, civic education, institutional support, and the digital environment. While Austria represents a model of coherent democratic socialization, Romania illustrates a fragmented and informal approach that contributes to the persistent disengagement of young people.

The study integrates four major theoretical perspectives: the influence of primary groups, digital socialization, voting habit formation, and the civic voluntarism model. Together, these perspectives show that electoral behavior is the result of social context, not just individual preference. In Romania, civic education is described as formalistic, theoretical, and disconnected from practice, i.e., fragmented. Young people often face elections without significant institutional guidance.

As a result, the family environment becomes the main influencing factor. Young people from politically involved families are more likely to vote, while others remain disengaged. Digital platforms are important sources of political information. However, online engagement is more expressive and symbolic than oriented toward concrete electoral participation. Social media amplifies existing attitudes but does not compensate for the lack of structured civic education. Socio-economic factors also matter. Low income, unstable employment, and low levels of education are strongly correlated with voting abstention. Many young Romanians feel unrepresented and question the impact of voting, thus reinforcing a pattern of long-term disengagement.

On the other hand, Austria offers a contrasting model based on institutional coherence. Civic education is applied, compulsory, and interactive, including debates, simulations, and community projects. Schools, families, NGOs, and public institutions work together to normalize participation from an early age. Social media is not isolated from civic education but integrated into public campaigns. Platforms are used to communicate accessible political content, helping to transform symbolic engagement into real participation. Voting at 16, combined with this supportive environment, reinforces political knowledge and long-term voting habits. As a result, young Austrians show higher levels of institutional trust, political efficacy, and consistent electoral participation.

Youth participation reflects the democratic maturity of a society. Where civic education is practical, inclusive, and institutionalized, young people develop lasting political engagement. Where it is fragmented, participation remains selective and socially unequal. There is a need to reform civic education towards practical democratic experiences, to support first-time voters through national information campaigns, to use digital platforms as deliberative tools, not just informative ones, and to strengthen non-formal civic networks, such as youth organizations. Without these reforms, youth disengagement risks becoming a permanent feature of Romanian democracy.

Overall, this special issue presents multiple directions of research on the 2024-2025 elections, with different social, societal, and political perspectives and angles. The articles selected for this issue dealt with the elections from the national perspective. The next issue of the *Romanian Journal of Political Science* includes the second part of the special issue, the articles published there addressing the 2024-2025 elections from the perspective of the Romanian diaspora, of international relations, as well as from regional perspectives. We hope that the two issues devoted to the 2024-2025 elections will provide important insights into understanding better the Romanian elections, and that will be a starting point for solid debates in both academic communities and the society at large.

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Economic determinants of voters' behavior in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections

Bogdan Ștefanachi¹ and Silviu Grecu²

Abstract

This paper aims to evaluate the link between economic factors and electoral preferences in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections. Using the economic voting framework, this study analyses the complex interplay between macroeconomic variables and electoral behavior in legislative elections. Since retrospective, pocketbook, and sociotropic voting are key elements that characterize the Romanian electoral landscape, the study focuses on the links between economic factors and party preferences and incumbent party reelection. Our methodological design enables us to evaluate the real impact of economic variables. Empirical findings suggest that the average net salary and regional economic development are positively related to electoral decisions and reelection of the incumbent party. Unemployment rates are predictors for left-wing parties, and average net salary is more likely to be related with right-wing political parties. The study highlights several limits of economic voting in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections, stressing the importance of cultural, historical, and socio-psychological factors in their interplay with economic variables in order to shape electoral decisions.

Keywords

economic voting; parliamentary elections; unemployment rate; regional disparities

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Psycho-sociological dimensions of voting behavior: A brief introduction

Political behavior is an important tool for understanding the quality of national democracy. Together with institutional design, elections, and party systems, political behavior highlights the magnitude of citizens' engagement in political life. Contemporary political theories underscore the role of civic engagement and participation in decision-making. Active citizenship is relevant for understanding the complex relationship between social influence and political power. Political involvement and citizens' actions in the fields of elections, protests, or social movements are related to governmental public policies, political strategies, and civic priorities. Therefore, political behavior is a relevant tool that measures the complex interaction between civic inputs and governmental outputs. For liberal theories of democracy, active political participation is a guarantee of civic rights and political freedom (Beetham, 2004; Diamond, 2003; Dahl, 1971; Bherer et al. 2016; Cohen and Arato, 1994; Hilmer, 2010; Lijphart, 2012).

Participation in public debates, direct involvement in the legislative process, or significant public reactions are signs of a mature and consolidated democratic order. In correlation with this aspect, active political participation shows an increased level of social responsibility. Beyond individuals, aggregate political behavior has a significant role in the field of political decisions and shaping the future of the community. Active participation in public affairs is considered to be an important civic duty because politics shapes everyday life. Moreover, political behavior reflects the level of political legitimacy and the normal functioning of governmental and public institutions. An active and constant civic engagement could reduce political abuse of power, corruption, or clientelism. These political deviations erode social trust in political actors and create premises for vulnerable political systems.

By improving the quality of political representation, voting is an important piece of the political engagement puzzle. It affects who holds the power and the relevance of the legislative process. As part of the modern "social contract", the vote is both a mechanism of accountability and a safeguard of individuals' rights and liberties (Dellavalle, 2021). The first perspective highlights that political leaders have an increased level of responsibility in the field of social, political, and economic decision-making. The second perspective, derived from modern and liberal political philosophy, stressed that the electoral process is an important mechanism to protect liberties by using the principle of governing by consent.

As regards the theoretical perspectives on political behavior, the sociological perspective emphasizes the role played by political socialization in the field of citizens' engagement. In the early 1950s, Lazarsfeld highlighted the impact of social context on the formation of public opinions and behaviors (Lazarsfeld, 1944). Therefore, traditional models of socialization remain important predictors of individuals' beliefs and cognitions. Following this theoretical approach, social opinions and attitudes are "learned" through social interaction. This complex process is based on continuous learning about social facts, political events, and values. Political socialization has three important sequences: political actors, political content, and timing (Hague et.al.1998). Collective or independent political actors have an important role in transferring social or political values, as well as different models of political culture.

The same role is preserved by political institutions that create a fluid channel to transfer political values, to create political identities, and to satisfy individuals' interests or demands. The traditional social environment is involved in shaping attitudes and behaviors through traditional media, family, and other relevant social actors. It creates premises for developing conscious or unconscious

political beliefs as well as implicit or explicit political attitudes. Conversely, a new social environment is characterized by an increased level of digital communication and interaction. The digital landscape could be seen as an ambivalent form of political socialization, illustrating both opportunities and threats for political behavior. New online media are more likely to be related to an increased level of political mobilization and offline participation. Scholars argued that the main advantages of the new digital environment are in the field of political behavior. In addition to this perspective, we aim to stress that online socialization is more likely to be correlated with an increased level of partisanship and isolation. Several academic theories are relevant to understanding how the new digital environment could negatively influence political attitudes and behaviors (Alberto and Zúñiga, 2017; Artieri et.al, 2025; Fuchs, 2023; Gillespie, 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2015; Mellon and Prosser, 2017; Sunstein, 2018). In this respect, “mere exposure effect” (Zajonc, 2001), “selective perceptions” (Festinger, 1957) and “echo chamber” (Barberá, 2020) effects are relevant theoretical directions that capture the complex interplay between political behavior and the new digital landscape (Garrett, 2009; Sievi and Pawelec, 2025).

Concerning the psychological dimension of voting behavior, scholars observed an increased level of correlation between emotions and electoral decisions. Since the 1950s and 1960s, the work of Campbell et al. on *The American Voter* has established political psychology as a relevant paradigm for understanding the link between emotions and decisions in the field of electoral behavior (Campbell et al., 1980). Political psychologists underscored the role of emotions in shaping both political attitudes and behaviors. Cognitive psychology had an important role in explaining the psychological mechanisms behind political choices. Traditional models of political psychology presented the relation between brain and mind in terms of connectionist networks. As a basic paradigm in cognitive and social psychology, social learning theory helps us to understand both how neural networks and the process by which individuals learn about social facts and actions. Recent findings from neurocognitive psychology reflect a strong relationship between brain structure, psychological process, and political attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, most empirical research reveals that political cognition is an ambivalent form of knowledge, based on both emotional and rational responses to political stimuli (Alford and Hibbing, 2004; Amodio et al., 2007; Arcuri et al., 2008).

Economic voting and rational choice. Literature review perspectives

Beyond the sociological and psychological perspectives, the economic theory of political behavior emphasizes the importance of economic variables in shaping participation and voting choices. The foundational ideas of this approach are presented in Downs' influential work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs, 1957). Empirical studies have argued the importance of economic voting across different countries or geographical regions. These findings reveal the strong co-integration over time between political and economic variables (Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2019). Citizens are considered rational actors who align their preferences with economic performance and development (Anderson, 2000; Anderson, 1995; Crewe and Denver, 1985; Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck, 2014; De Vries et al., 2018; Duch and Stevenson, 2006; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000; Pickup and Evans, 2013).

Stability over time and change are two forces that drive electoral decisions. Behavioral inertia, ideological attachment, and partisan loyalty are the core forces of stability. In contrast, dissatisfaction, economic imbalances, and preferences for opposite parties are relevant for understanding the role played by change in electoral dynamics. Behavioral inertia is strongly related to support for the incumbent party. Emotional attachment and cultural values could explain the strong correlation

between partisanship and preferences for the incumbent party. High rates of inflation or unemployment are more likely to be related to preferences for the opposite political parties.

Following these normative premises, our study aims to create the nexus between economic determinants and voting behavior in terms of “reward and punishment”. Economic context explains why several elections preserve the governmental political party or coalition, while other elections are characterized by an increased support for opposition parties (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Fiorina, 1981; Monroe, 1979). Critics of economic voting argued that globalization diminishes the impact of economic factors on voters’ electoral decisions (Anderson, 2007; Paldam and Nannestad, 2000; Bartels, 1996). The international context is more important than national or regional factors in shaping political beliefs or behaviors (Rudolph, 2003). The diffusion of economic responsibility across different institutions, the European economic market, and global economic trends has likely weakened the magnitude of the economic vote. The decline of the traditional cleavages, such as urban/ rural divisions, religious affiliation, and partisan loyalties, has led to the emergence of economic voting as a strong mechanism through which citizens assess governmental performance. As rational evaluators of governmental performance, citizens can “reward” or “punish” the governmental party using economic criteria. In this respect, an important part of the academic literature argued that economic voting has remained consistent over time, unaffected by significant structural challenges. Empirical findings suggest that, on a long-term analysis, economic votes remain an important part of the political behavior. Therefore, there is a significant and stable relationship between economic performance and electoral outcomes across decades.

The magnitude of the relationship is explained by national contexts and countries’ historical legacies. These findings demonstrated that economic voting is a constant and reliable feature of democratic participatory behavior. Also, these important findings demonstrate the rational choice hypothesis in different political and historical contexts. Despite the institutional design and challenges of the structural dynamics, the economic situation remains an important criterion for individuals’ assessment of governmental performance. National contexts and cultures are relevant mediators in the correlation between economic performance and people’s choices. This type of economic vote is strongly related to retrospective evaluations. Thus, retrospective voting is an important piece of the puzzle in a context dominated by political polarization, ideological hybridization, and media influence. In contrast with other factors, economic variables indicate the importance of the governmental outcomes for citizens. An increased level of economic development is more likely to be correlated with an increased rate of re-election. Conversely, bad economic times are more likely to be related to electoral preferences for opposite political parties. Incumbent re-elections depend on the economic results and civic positive evaluations to “reward” the ruling party.

Economic vote is based on the “responsibility hypothesis”, suggesting that voters are more likely to “reward” or “punish” when they can identify which political actors are responsible for economic outcomes (Duch and Falcó-Gimeno, 2021; Angelova et al., 2016). Instead of this, it is very difficult to evaluate economic outcomes when the governmental structure is based on political coalitions. In coalition systems, scholars observed a diffuse and weak relationship between economic outcomes and electoral decisions (Bäck et al., 2011; Baker et al., 2016; Bawen and Rosenbluth, 2006; Debus et al., 2014; Duch and Stevenson, 2008; Duch and Stevenson, 2013; Hobolt, 2013; Park, 2019). In line with these theoretical aspects, an empirical study conducted by Powell argued that economic voting is conditional (Powell and Whitten, 1993). This is important in single-party governments, or in situations in which it is clear that the party has responsibility for economic decisions. Thus, results confirmed that coalition governments are less likely to be punished for poor economic results. An

important conditionality derives from political ideology. Results confirmed that right-wing governments are more prone to be punished for inflation. Conversely, left-wing governments are punished for unemployment. The novelty of this study is represented by the connection between ideological orientation and punishment for economic outcomes (Powell and Whitten, 1993).

Together with ideological orientation, political perception, and information are catalysts of electoral decisions. Scholars emphasized that information is a key mediator variable between institutional design, complexity, and responsibility attribution. Well-informed voters are more inclined to understand how economic and political institutions function. Also, informed citizens can distinguish between political actors and their real impact in the field of economic decisions. Therefore, they can link economic outcomes to a specific political party or leader. Political information enhances democratic accountability. Only informed citizens could avoid media partisanship and evaluate the real social or economic governmental performances (Gomez and Wilson, 2006).

An increased level of political information is related to cognitive complexity or sophistication. Using economic data, scholars have attempted to explain why a consistent portion of the electorate is driven by economic motivations. Their perspectives support the research hypothesis: "economic voting is conditional on political sophistication." Gomez and Wilson developed a new theoretical framework that supports the theory of cognitive heterogeneity (Gomez and Wilson, 2006, pp. 127-145). Scholars argued that citizens' ability to process information is very different, generating significant variations in political perceptions and electoral decisions. Politically sophisticated citizens are more likely to vote based on their personal economic or financial situation. This is a form of pocketbook or egotropic voting. Conversely, citizens concerned with social outcomes are more likely to be correlated with a sociotropic vote. Less informed citizens tend to vote sociotropically, focusing on social or national economic outcomes, rather than personal economic conditions. Individuals' wages and job conditions are relevant predictors of pocketbook voting. Macroeconomic variables such as economic growth, inflation rates, unemployment, or governmental debt are relevant predictors of sociotropic voting. Empirical findings reveal that sociotropic voting is present across all levels of political sophistication. Unlike pocketbook voting, which is supported by personal perceptions and evaluations of personal economic conditions, sociotropic assessments are more intuitive and socially anchored, being accessible to a large number of citizens (Duch, 2001).

An important theoretical direction highlights the relevance of political perceptions in shaping electoral decisions. Thus, voters adjust their electoral preferences based on their perceptions of political performance (Tilley et al. 2008; Tverdova, 2012; Stroud and Lee, 2013). The competence model suggests that the national political context influences political behavior (Anderson, 2007). Statistical validation of this model confirms that an increased level of responsibility concentration is positively related to the economic vote.

Traditional perspectives reveal the impact of economic factors in the field of consolidated democracies. A significant number of empirical studies have demonstrated that economic voting remains an important variable that shapes the voters' behavior in fragile or transitional democracies. In flawed democracies, media partisanship, party system, and institutional arrangements could impact electoral decisions. Together with these systemic and structural factors, economic preferences and perceptions remain key factors in explaining electoral dynamics. Empirical research provided strong evidence regarding the importance of unemployment rates in electoral decisions.

Regarding the situation in post-communist countries, empirical studies revealed an important social division that might affect the dynamics of economic voting: winners and losers of democratic reforms (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2008). Therefore, voting behavior is shaped by personal

experiences with economic reforms (Fidrmuc, 2000; Harper, 2000). These groups support different political parties due to the impact of economic reforms on their livelihoods. Winners of reforms (entrepreneurs, urban residents, and highly educated citizens) are more likely to vote with reformist and right-wing political parties. Conversely, losers of reforms (rural residents, unemployed, or agricultural workers) tend to vote with left-wing or nationalist political parties. In this context, citizens support parties that might deliver favorable economic policies. Unemployment is an important marker of left-wing preferences. Entrepreneurial activity and increased rates of economic growth are relevant indicators for pro-reformist electoral preferences. In line with these findings, net wages are related to both reformist and left-wing political parties. A decreased level of net wages is strongly related to electoral preferences for left-wing or nationalist political parties. These statistical models highlight that support for the government party is affected by changes in unemployment rates and net salary growth. Swing voters are more likely to respond to economic conditions, revealing the impact of governmental economic responsibility in transitional countries.

The theory of economic voting underlines the importance of political context, cognitive heterogeneity, and democratic evolutions in shaping electoral decisions. In consolidated democracies, economic voting is strongly related to governmental responsibility. Economic performance is an important predictor of the “punishment and reward” mechanism. In transitional democracies, personal experiences and social class membership might predict the dynamics of electoral preferences for left and right-wing political parties. Economic voting depends on political institutions, party system, political information, and historical legacy. Economic messages and subjective perceptions are important factors that mediate the complex interplay between the economy and electoral behavior.

Data collection and research methods

This paper evaluates the relevance of economic voting theory in Romanian Parliamentary elections. Grounded in the theoretical framework of economic voting, our analysis evaluates both incumbency advantage in correlation with economic factors and party-specific electoral dynamics. Beyond political ideologies, economic voting is an important measure of governmental performance. Citizens are more sensitive when economic conditions are unfavorable. Inflation rates, unemployment, net salaries, and economic growth are relevant factors that might predict voting behaviors. Together with these objective economic factors, personal experiences and subjective perceptions are related to both retrospective and prospective voting.

In line with the academic literature on economic voting, this article aims to answer the following research questions: Q1: What is the relationship between regional differences in the economic conditions and electoral preferences? Q2: How have the increased unemployment rates affected the dynamics of electoral preferences for left or right-wing political parties? Q3: To what extent do the county’s economic conditions influence incumbency rates? Q4: What is the impact of the net wage growth on the field of electoral preferences? Q5: To what extent do regional economic disparities influence support for nationalist or reformist political parties?

Aligned with these research questions, our research objectives are: O1: to evaluate the correlation between economic conditions and electoral preferences across Romanian geographical regions; O2: to estimate the magnitude of correlation between unemployment rates and electoral preferences for left or right-wing political parties; O3: to observe the economic factors that might predict incumbency rates in Romanian’s counties; O4: to estimate the correlation between new salary growth and electoral support for different political parties. O5: to identify significant predictors of electoral behavior in the Romanian 2024 Legislative elections. By these research questions and

objectives, we assume the following research hypotheses: H1: An increased level of economic development is positively related to an increased level of electoral support for the incumbent party. H2: Average net salary predicts the increased level of incumbent party reelection. H3: High unemployment rates are positively associated with left-wing party preferences. H4: An increased level of average net salary is positively associated with right-wing party preferences.

By focusing on regional disparities, development level, and key macro-economic variables, the analysis aims to identify patterns of electoral support across counties. To advance these investigations, this section presents the research variables, datasets, and quantitative models used to capture the complex interplay between electoral preferences and economic factors. In this respect, we used secondary statistical data regarding the rates of reelection for the incumbent party, electoral scores, economic indicators, educational level, and spatial distribution of votes by urban/ rural cleavage.

Dependent variables. Consistent with academic literature, the analysis focuses on incumbency rates and party-level electoral scores from the 2024 Romanian Legislative Elections. The incumbent refers to the political party that controls the government at the time of elections. In the Romanian electoral system, the incumbent party means the party or coalition that has formed the government and holds the majority in Parliament. In connection with academic literature, the incumbent party is punished or rewarded depending on how the economy performs under its leadership. This variable aligns with the responsibility hypothesis, which assumes that voters hold the incumbent accountable for economic conditions. The variable Incumbent Party is used to capture electoral support in the 2024 Romanian Legislative Elections. We used a dummy variable with a value of 1 when the electorate favors the governing party and a value of 0 when voters opt for a different or opposition political party.

Besides the incumbent party, we used the electoral scores obtained by political parties as dependent variables in the 2024 Romanian Legislative elections. We included in the dataset those political parties that officially surpassed the electoral threshold of 5%. Therefore, in our analysis, we used the electoral scores obtained by the following political parties: Social Democratic Party (PSD), National Liberal Party (PNL), Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), Save Romanian Union (USR), Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), S.O.S. Romania (S.O.S), Party of Young People (POT).

The Social Democratic Party (PSD) is the main center-left political party, with strong support in rural areas and among older people. This party was founded in the early 1990s, as the successor of the National Salvation Front (FSN), and governed the country after the fall of communism. The National Liberal Party (PNL) is a traditional party founded in 1875, being an important promoter of liberal values, and having an important role in political modernization both before and after the communist era. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) is a right-wing radical party, promoting nationalist, conservative, and sovereign values. This party was founded in 2019, being an anti-establishment alternative in the Romanian post-communist political context. Emerging from the civic movement Save Bucharest Union, the current party Save Romania Union (USR) is a right-wing political party with pro-European values and orientation. It has a strong anti-corruption rhetoric and reformist approach, having electoral support among urban and highly educated voters.

The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) is a centrist political organization representing the Hungarian minority since 1989. It has had a consistent presence in Legislative elections and governance since 1996, promoting a political platform in ethnic advocacy. Following the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), S.O.S. Romania is a far-right political party founded in 2021, which promotes an anti-establishment rhetoric, strong Euroscepticism, and a traditional approach regarding Romanian sovereignty. The Party of Young People (POT) was founded in 2023 by a former

member of AUR. The party is right-wing populist and sovereignist, having a nationalist and anti-establishment rhetoric. The party surpassed the 5% electoral threshold, securing seats in the 2024 Romanian Parliamentary elections.

Independent Factors. To evaluate the impact of the economic factors on Romanians' electoral behavior, the paper uses the following independent factors: a. unemployment rates by counties; b. average net salary by county; c. gross domestic product by county; d. gross domestic product per inhabitant by county; e. gross value added by county and activities; f. gross domestic product per inhabitant - index of disparity. In connection with the aforementioned economic variables, the research incorporates data related to education and demographic structure. Therefore, the study includes the percentage of individuals with at least upper secondary education and demographic density by county. Table 1 presents the research variables and data sources:

Table 1. Research variables, units of measurement, and sources of data

Variable	Symbol	Measurement Unit	Sources of Data
Incumbency party	INC	0 – Opposition/other party 1 – Incumbent party	https://prezenta.roaep.ro/parlamentare-01122024/pv/romania/results/ (ROAEP)
Electoral scores in 2024 Parliamentary elections (by political party)	ES	% of votes (0-100)	https://prezenta.roaep.ro/parlamentare-01122024/pv/romania/results/ (ROAEP)
Unemployment	UN	0-10	https://insse.ro/cms/ro/tags/comunicat-ocuparea-si-somajul (INS)
Average net salary	ANS	RON/ month	https://insse.ro/cms/ro/tags/comunicat-castig-salarial (INS)
Gross domestic product	GDP	RON/ year	https://insse.ro/cms/en/tags/regional-national-accounts (INS)
Gross domestic product per inhabitant	GDP/ capita	RON/ inhabitant	https://insse.ro/cms/en/tags/regional-national-accounts (INS)
Gross value added by county and activities	GVA	RON/ year	https://insse.ro/cms/en/tags/regional-national-accounts (INS)
Index of disparity	ID	0-100	https://insse.ro/cms/en/tags/regional-national-accounts (INS)
Education	ED	0-100	https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20221026-1 (EUROSTAT)
Demographic density	DD	0-100	https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive-caracteristici-demografice/ (INS)

The data set includes relevant political, economic, and demographic indicators for the 2020-2024 electoral cycle, covering 42 counties (including Bucharest). Using these data to capture trends from 2020 to 2024, we aim to observe the economic influences in shaping electoral preferences for the incumbent or other political parties. Following these perspectives, we used a quantitative research design based on both descriptive and inferential statistics. At the descriptive level, the analysis is focused on capturing measures of central tendency, dispersion, and distribution. As regards the inferential statistics, we used two different regression models in order to capture the complex interplay between economy and electoral behavior. The logistic regression is used to estimate the

relevant predictors for the incumbent party. In line with this model, we used multiple linear regression equations to capture the complex relationship between economic, educational, and demographic variables and the electoral scores obtained by the parliamentary parties in the 2024 Romanian Parliament Elections. Starting from these premises, our models are presented as follows. Let $\omega = \frac{p}{1-p}$, the odds ratio of the dependent variable, then: $\ln(\omega) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot x_1 + \beta_2 \cdot x_2 + \dots + \beta_k \cdot x_k + \varepsilon_{1,k}$.

In this equation, ω is the odds ratio of the dependent variable, $X_{1,k}$ are independent variables, and $\varepsilon_{1,k}$ represent unstandardized residuals. In line with this model, we propose the following binary logistic regression to capture the interaction between economic variables and preferences for the incumbent party:

$$\ln(INC) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot UN + \beta_2 \cdot ANS + \beta_3 \cdot GDP + \beta_4 \cdot \frac{GDP}{capita} + \beta_5 \cdot GVA + \beta_6 \cdot ID + \beta_7 \cdot ED + \beta_8 \cdot DD + \varepsilon_{1,8}$$

In order to capture the interplay between independent factors and electoral scores gained by political parties in the 2024 Romanian Legislative elections, we used a multiple linear regression equation as follows. Let be Y a dependent variable, $X_{1,k}$ independent factors, and $\varepsilon_{1,k}$ unstandardized residuals, then the regression equation is: $Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot x_1 + \beta_2 \cdot x_2 + \dots + \beta_k \cdot x_k + \varepsilon_{1,k}$. As regards our research paper, the model of regression is based on the following structure:

$$ES_p = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot UN + \beta_2 \cdot ANS + \beta_3 \cdot GDP + \beta_4 \cdot \frac{GDP}{capita} + \beta_5 \cdot GVA + \beta_6 \cdot ID + \beta_7 \cdot ED + \beta_8 \cdot DD + \varepsilon_{1,8}$$

In this model, ES_p is the electoral score of the party p , β_0 is the intercept, $\beta_{1,k}$ - regression coefficients, and $\varepsilon_{1,8}$ unstandardized residuals. Besides these regression models, we used the T-test for independent samples to observe statistical differences and the magnitude of effects in the field of electoral preferences for the incumbent party. Regional differences were estimated using one-way ANOVA and F-test, with $p < 0.05$. Statistical data were analyzed by JASP 0.95.0 and IBM-SPSS version 29.0. Statistical results are relevant with the significance level $p < 0.05$.

Economic context and incumbency party reelection

This section presents descriptive statistics results, significant differences between research variables, and the binary logistic regression model based on the interplay between incumbency reelection rates and economic variables. The electoral system in Romania for the two chambers of the legislative assembly (Chamber of Deputies and Senate) is based on a closed-list proportional representation across 42 electoral counties. Romania's electoral system allocates Parliamentary seats proportionally, by the d'Hondt method, based on national votes for political parties that surpass the 5% threshold. Romania's parliamentary elections held on 1st December 2024 took place in a polarized social and political landscape, characterized by a significant voter turnout (52.4%). Compared to the previous electoral cycle, the 2024 Parliamentary elections are characterized by the emergence of new political forces and the erosion of the traditional political parties that governed Romania's landscape in the post-communist period.

Empirical findings reveal electoral preferences for both the traditional PSD and the new nationalist and populist force, AUR. PSD obtained an average electoral score of 24.53% with a standard deviation of 9.77%. As regards the electoral score gained by AUR, results indicate an average score of 18.46 % with a standard deviation of 3.57%. Decreased levels of standard deviation suggest a uniform distribution of the electoral scores across all geographical regions, underlying the prevalence of electoral preferences for this party in regions or counties characterized by economic issues. The liberal

and pro-European forces, represented by PNL and USR, are characterized by asymmetric vote distributions, with high support in urban developed regions and significantly lower scores in rural or peripheral areas. Statistical values indicate an average support for PNL of 14.94% with a standard deviation of 5.63%. In line with this result, USR registered an average electoral score of 10.03% with a standard deviation of 4.37%. The data reflect the concentration of electoral preferences in urban areas, characterized by educated and economically active voters. Particularly, this political profile is found in university centers and developed metropolitan areas.

As regards the electoral scores related to ethnical parties, UDMR is considered a regional political actor, with significant impact in counties with a substantial Hungarian population. UDMR obtained an average electoral score of 7.73% with a standard deviation of 19.63%.

Beyond ethnic-based parties, the 2024 Romanian Parliamentary elections are characterized by the rise of nationalist and populist actors such as S.O.S and POT. In this respect, S.O.S has an average electoral score of 7.44% with a standard deviation of 2%. This political party is characterized by support for nationalist values, Euroscepticism, and often adopts an anti-establishment rhetoric. POT has sought to mobilize young people using social media and populist messages, promoting both sovereignism and Euroscepticism. This party obtained an average score of 6.1% with a standard deviation of 1.24%. Both these parties exhibit relatively low standard deviations in their electoral scores, suggesting a consistent level of support in regions or counties where they were very active. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics results regarding the electoral scores of the main political parties in the 2024 Romanian Parliamentary elections:

Table 2. Electoral scores in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections. Descriptive statistics.

	PSD	PNL	USR	AUR	UDMR	SOS	POT
Mean	24.53	14.94	10.03	18.46	7.73	7.44	6.10
Median	23.95	13.43	8.61	18.30	0.00	6.62	5.75
Std. Deviation	9.77	5.63	4.37	3.57	19.63	2.00	1.24
Skewness	0.06	1.87	1.42	-0.22	3.09	0.68	1.28
Kurtosis	-0.40	4.38	1.52	0.21	9.50	-1.14	1.32
Range	40.43	26.74	18.07	16.11	88.00	5.41	4.19
Minimum	3.00	7.99	5.18	9.88	0.00	5.12	5.01
Maximum	43.43	34.73	23.25	25.99	88.00	10.53	9.20
25th percentile	17.54	11.51	7.00	16.99	0.00	6.13	5.08
50th percentile	23.95	13.43	8.61	18.30	0.00	6.62	5.75
75th percentile	30.55	17.20	11.38	20.64	0.00	9.21	6.71

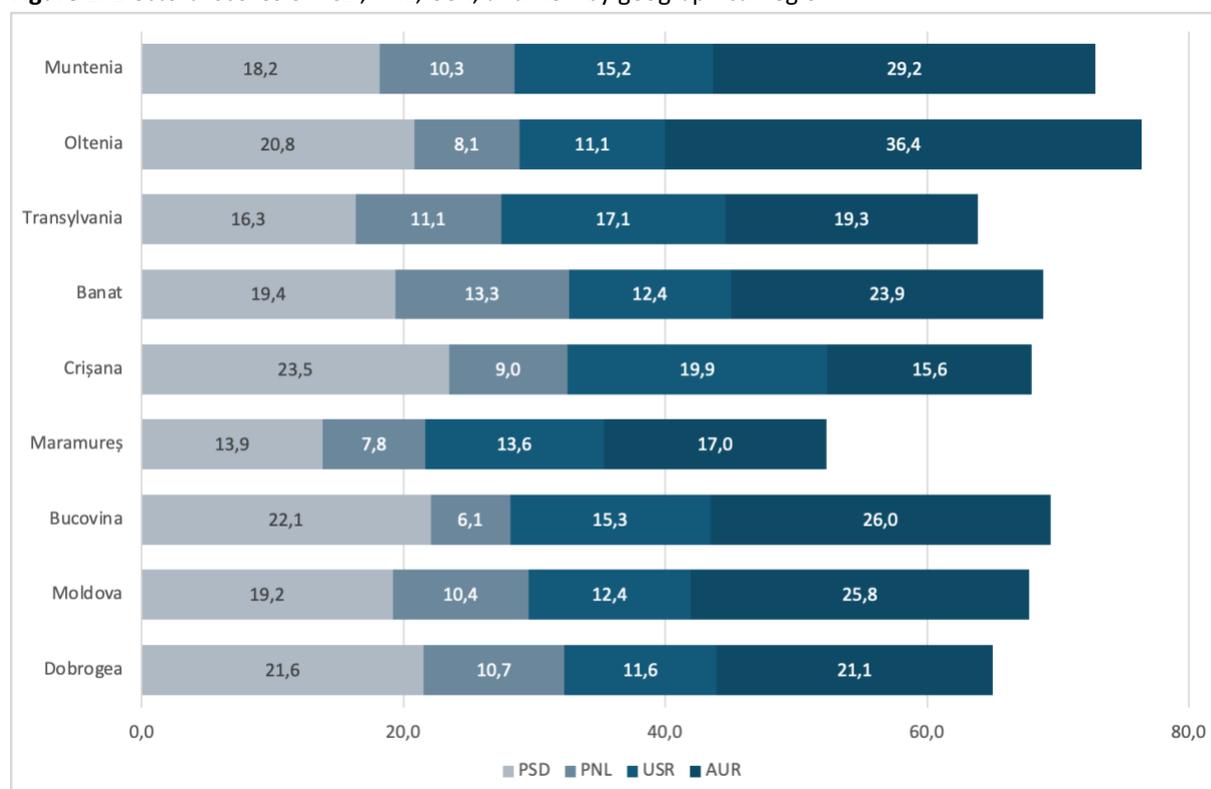
The one-way ANOVA results indicate that electoral scores of PSD vary significantly across different geographical regions of the country ($F=4.751$, $p < 0.01$). Highest electoral scores were registered in Oltenia's counties (37.74%). Also, in Muntenia (29.19%), Bucovina (25.08%), and Moldova (25.82%), we estimated increased support for PSD. Conversely, the lowest support for social democracy is registered in Transylvania (16.27%), Crișana (14.42%), and Maramureș (17.04%). Banat obtained within 2024 Parliamentary elections an average electoral score of 23.86%. Unlike PSD, the

other political parties analyzed didn't exhibit significant differences in the electoral scores by geographical regions ($F < 2.12$, $p > 0.05$). As regards the electoral scores related to PNL, Crișana (25.96%) and Transylvania (17.13%) are relevant geographical regions that support the party more strongly than other geographical regions. In connection with this result, increased levels of electoral preferences for USR are found in Bucharest (23.25%), Banat (13.25%), and Transylvania (11.14%). Lowest scores related USR are relevant for several geographical regions such as Maramureș (7.80%), Bucovina (6.07%), and Oltenia (8.05%).

Besides these parties, AUR has experienced a rapid rise in electoral preferences, becoming an influential political actor in the current electoral landscape. The most increased electoral scores are found in counties such as Gorj (25.99%), Suceava (25.26%), and Arad (23.5%). In contrast, counties where AUR has experienced a low level of electoral support are Cluj (14.37%), Sălaj (13.26%), Bucharest (12.18%), Bihor (11.29%), and Satu Mare (9.88%). Bucovina (22.08%), Dobrogea (21.57%), and Oltenia (20.77%) are relevant geographical regions for an increased electoral support related to this political party.

In contrast, the center of the country, especially Transylvania, is characterized by a decreased electoral support for nationalist and sovereignist political actors. In line with these findings, we observed electoral support for S.O.S in 33.33% of the counties, dispersed across different geographical units. Moreover, increased support for this party is registered in Dobrogea (10.47%) and Moldova (8.32%). Therefore, in Dobrogea (6.77%) and Transylvania (6.49%), statistical data indicate electoral preferences for POT. Concerning UDMR, we aim to stress that electoral support for this party is found in the Center and Western part of the country, being strongly related to the ethnical dimension. Following these statistical results, Figure 1 shows the distribution of the electoral scores for the main political parties by geographical region.

Figure 1. Electoral scores of PSD, PNL, USR, and AUR by geographical region.



In connection with electoral preferences, this analysis focuses on the evolution of the economic indicators across different counties during the electoral cycle 2020-2024. In this respect, results indicate an average level of unemployment of 4.14% with a standard deviation of 2.12%. Increased levels of unemployment are observed in regions such as Oltenia (5.89%), Bucovina (5.43%), and Moldova (4.64%). Relevant counties for an increased level of unemployment are Dolj (8.87%), Teleorman (8.87%), Vaslui (8.66%), and Mehedinți (8.41%). In contrast, Cluj (1.44%), Timiș (1.18%), and Bucharest (0.75%) are characterized by low unemployment rates, among the lowest in the country. However, in line with the unemployment rates, statistical results show that the net average salary has an average of 4479 RON with a standard deviation of 567 RON.

Concerning the data related to GDP, GDP/ capita, and GVA, empirical findings indicate that Muntenia, Transylvania, Crișana, and Banat are more likely to have an increased level of economic development. As regards the level of secondary education, statistical tests confirm that there is no significant difference in the percentage of citizens with at least secondary education. Overall, the average value is 82.86% with a standard deviation of 3%. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics results for economic, educational, and demographic factors.

Table 3. Economy, education, and demography. Descriptive statistics.

	UN	ANS	GDP	GDPpc	GVA	ID	ED	DD
Mean	4.14	4479	28944	52716	26.40	83.01	82.86	254.84
Median	3.74	4366	19008	47285	17.37	74.35	83.10	66.39
Std. Deviation	2.12	567	46232	23710	42.17	37.09	3.00	315.92
Skewness	0.62	1.78	5.69	3.54	5.70	3.54	-0.04	1.12
Kurtosis	0.09	3.79	34.86	16.83	34.96	16.80	0.55	-0.78
Range	8.38	2694	300756	146579	274.20	229.27	12.60	735.34
Minimum	0.49	3804	8332	27889	7.89	44.10	75.50	43.15
Maximum	8.87	6498	309088	174468	282.08	273.37	88.10	778.49
25th percentile	2.58	4127	12093	41197	10.97	64.94	81.36	63.56
50th percentile	3.74	4366	19008	47285	17.37	74.35	83.10	66.39
75th percentile	5.35	4642	27318	57258	24.97	90.37	83.50	607.1

When comparing economic performance with electoral preferences, we observed a strong relationship between political continuity and development. Regions with a higher level of development tend to have a greater proportion of localities where the ruling party is reelected. Incumbency advantage is more likely to be correlated with economic development than with other social or cultural factors. Regions with lower development are more likely to be correlated with political turnover. As regards electoral data, we estimated that in 76.19% of the counties, citizens voted for the incumbent political party. In contrast, only in 23.81% of the counties have citizens elected the opposition party or other political actors.

To evaluate the impact of the economic factors on the field of incumbency party, we used the binary logistic regression. Using the Backward conditional method in the binary logistic regression, we obtained significant statistical results with pseudo-R²= 0.524, Chi-square= 18.058, p < 0.01. Table 4 captures the main predictors and logistic regression coefficients.

Table 4. Binary logistic regression. Predictors of Incumbent party reelection.

Variables	β	S.E.	Wald	Sig.
Unemployment	0.316	0.433	0.533	0.465
Average net salary	0.070	0.003	6.687	0.010
GDP	-0.005	0.002	4.784	0.029
Gross Value Added	5.062	2.337	4.692	0.030
GDP per capita	0.005	0.005	0.901	0.342
Index of disparity	-3.049	3.221	0.896	0.344
Education	0.205	0.222	0.858	0.354
Demographic density	0.001	0.002	0.064	0.80
Constant	-27.910	11.147	6.269	0.012
Nagelkerke R ²	0.524			0.001

Quantitative results indicate that an increased level of incumbent party reelection is positively correlated with economic conditions. Therefore, significant predictors of incumbent party reelection are average net salary ($p = 0.010$), GDP by county ($p = 0.029$), and gross value added by county and activities ($p = 0.030$). Average net salary and gross value added by county and activities are related positively to an increased level of incumbent party reelection. Higher average net salaries are relevant variables for explaining living conditions and reducing protest voting. Personal finances related to pocketbook voting are relevant tools for understanding the complex mechanism of crystallizing electoral decisions. In line with this argument, gross value added by county and activities measures the value of goods and services produced locally. An increased level of gross value added by activities is a significant predictor of strong regional economies and visible development. In this regard, these findings are relevant for explaining status quo bias and incumbency advantage. Another important economic predictor is represented by the level of GDP. We estimated a negative correlation between GDP and incumbent party advantage. Regional disparities and growth without inclusion are several factors that might mediate the complex interplay between economic development and electoral behavior. In connection with these findings, the equation that describes the complex interplay between incumbent party reelection and economic variables is:

$$\ln(INC) = -27.91 + 0.07 \cdot ANS - 0.005 \cdot GDP + 5.062 \cdot GVA$$

Our statistical model reveals that economic factors are moderately involved in electoral decisions. Retrospective voting based on an individual's economic perceptions and ability to analyze governmental strategies is relevant. The results confirm the hypothesis of retrospective voting, indicating that electoral preferences are affected by the level of regional development, diversity of economic activities or services, and average net salaries. We observed a hybrid voting model in the Romanian electoral landscape, reflecting both elements of pocketbook voting and sociotropic perspectives. Personal finances, as indicated by average net salaries, serve as a significant indicator of egotropic or pocketbook voting. Alternatively, economic development measured by GDP and GVA is a strong marker of sociotropic voting. Consistent with theoretical perspectives regarding economic voting in transitional democracies, our findings in the Romanian electoral landscape indicate a significant correlation between the level of net salary and electoral cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Modelling party choice through economic indicators

This section aims to establish the link between macroeconomic indicators and party preferences in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections. If incumbency advantage is positively related to economic performance, in this part of the paper, we aim to identify economic and socio-demographic predictors of party preferences. Several theoretical frameworks can explain the complex interaction between the economy, education, and social or demographic variables. The theory of retrospective voting underscores the importance of economic performance as a mechanism for “reward and punishment”. Good economic times are strongly related to an increased electoral support for the ruling party. Alternatively, economic downturns or crises are associated with a rise in support for opposition or emergent political forces. The theoretical model of personal economic interest suggests the main role played by the cognitive style in electoral decisions. Informed and sophisticated citizens are more prone to elect political parties that align with their personal perceptions, expectations, and current economic situation. In this respect, the model of egotropic vs. sociotropic voting is relevant to understanding social and economic cleavages. In connection with these normative perspectives, the theory of social cleavages explains the complex interaction between social, economic, and cultural variables as predictors of voting behavior.

Table 5. Multiple linear regressions on electoral scores in 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections

Party		Const.	UN	ANS	GDP	GVA	GDPpc	ID	ED	DD
PSD	Std.β	14.513	0.497	-0.013	-0.005	-0.006	-0.070	-0.071	0.300	0.263
	p	0.001	0.001	0.926	0.972	0.967	0.634	0.627	0.010	0.030
	R ²	0.452	p < 0.01							
PNL	Std.β	13.368	-0.837	-0.149	-0.175	-0.174	-0.204	-0.201	0.072	0.024
	p	0.001	0.043	0.405	0.298	0.300	0.265	0.271	0.648	0.876
	R ²	0.103	p = 0.043							
USR	Std.β	-19.04	-0.14	0.862	0.105	0.103	0.268	0.270	-0.131	-0.036
	p	0.010	0.161	0.001	0.406	0.414	0.077	0.075	0.122	0.678
	R ²	0.743	p < 0.01							
AUR	Std.β	19.21	0.073	-0.140	-0.334	5.102	0.031	0.014	0.060	0.023
	p	0.001	0.666	0.357	0.035	0.804	0.936	0.972	0.702	0.886
	R ²	0.112	p = 0.035							
UDMR	Std.β	100.275	0.065	-0.407	-26.80	-0.247	0.567	15.508	-0.094	-0.196
	p	0.275	0.746	0.158	0.244	0.572	0.290	0.457	0.566	0.249
	R ²	0.127	p = 0.543							
SOS	Std.β	72.143	-0.937	-1.335	-78.914	2.673	31.374	-2.020	-0.769	0.104
	p	0.050	0.041	0.123	0.164	0.0078	0.609	0.128	0.015	0.712
	R ²	0.683	p = 0.127							
POT	Std.β	8.894	-0.282	-0.425	-3.767	-1.320	-25.812	1.411	-0.021	0.090
	p	0.440	0.513	0.517	0.961	0.282	0.722	0.351	0.946	0.977
	R ²	0.331	p = 0.630							

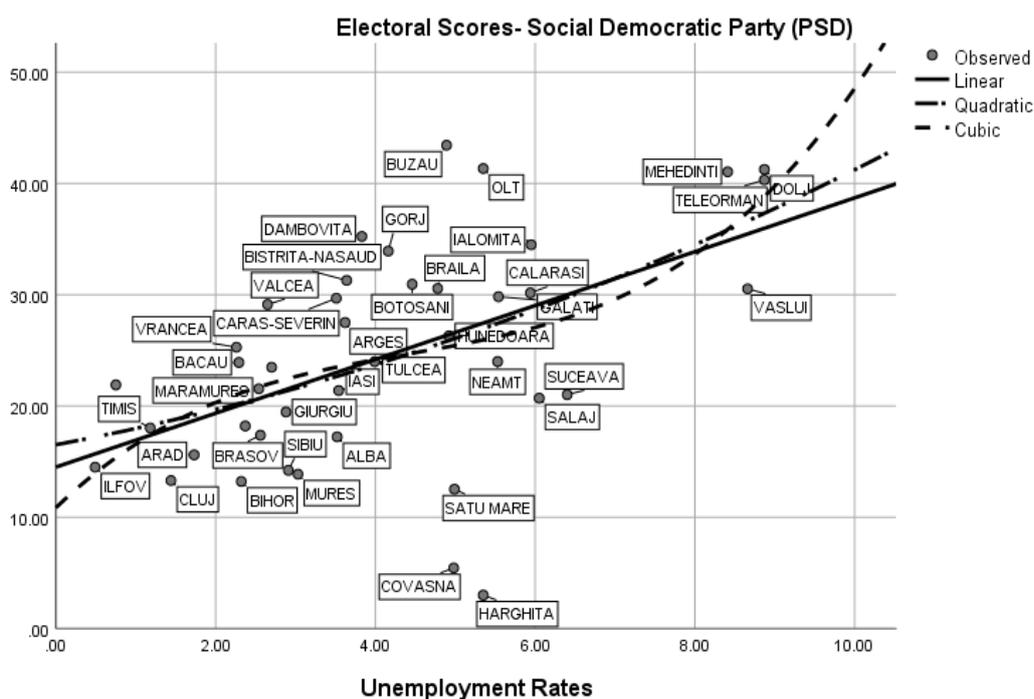
To evaluate the dynamics of electoral preferences in the 2024 Romanian Parliamentary elections, we performed several regression models considering the electoral scores obtained by parliamentary parties within the electoral process. Thus, we used 7 regression models that have as

dependent variables the electoral scores for the 7 parliamentary parties: 1. ES-PSD; 2. ES-PNL; 3. ES-USR; 4. ES-AUR; 5. ES-UDMR; 6. ES-SOS; 7. ES-POT. Table 5 shows the relevant economic, educational, and demographic factors that predict the dynamics of electoral preferences in the Romanian electoral context.

Empirical findings reveal significant statistical models in the field of electoral preferences for PSD, PNL, AUR, and USR, with significance level $p < 0.05$. In the rest of the cases, the models used for predicting electoral scores of UDMR, S.O.S, and POT, we obtained insignificant statistical values with $p > 0.05$. By these results, we aimed to analyze and discuss only significant statistical models that underline the impact of the economic variables in the field of electoral preferences.

The first regression model predicts the electoral scores of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) with $R^2 = 0.452$, $p < 0.01$. The models highlight that economic variables have a moderate impact on shaping electoral preferences. Thus, the unemployment rate has a significant positive impact on the field of electoral scores related to the social democratic approach ($\beta = 0.497$, $p = 0.001$). These results align with theoretical expectations related to vote behavior, where social democratic parties are more likely to obtain an increased electoral score due to their orientation in the field of social protection and redistributive politics. The model underlines how economically difficult situations are linked with left-wing parties, which are perceived as welfare government actors. This is a classical approach in political science, scholars emphasizing the stabilizing and protective role of left-wing parties for vulnerable groups. This party promises, in all electoral campaigns, redistributive policies, increases in wages and pensions, and the extension of public services in geographical areas characterized by increased unemployment and difficult economic situations. Together with this economic predictor, the model captures the weak positive impact of education ($\beta = 0.3$, $p = 0.01$) and demographic density ($\beta = 0.263$, $p = 0.03$). Figure 2 presents the positive correlation between electoral preferences for the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and unemployment rates in Romanian counties:

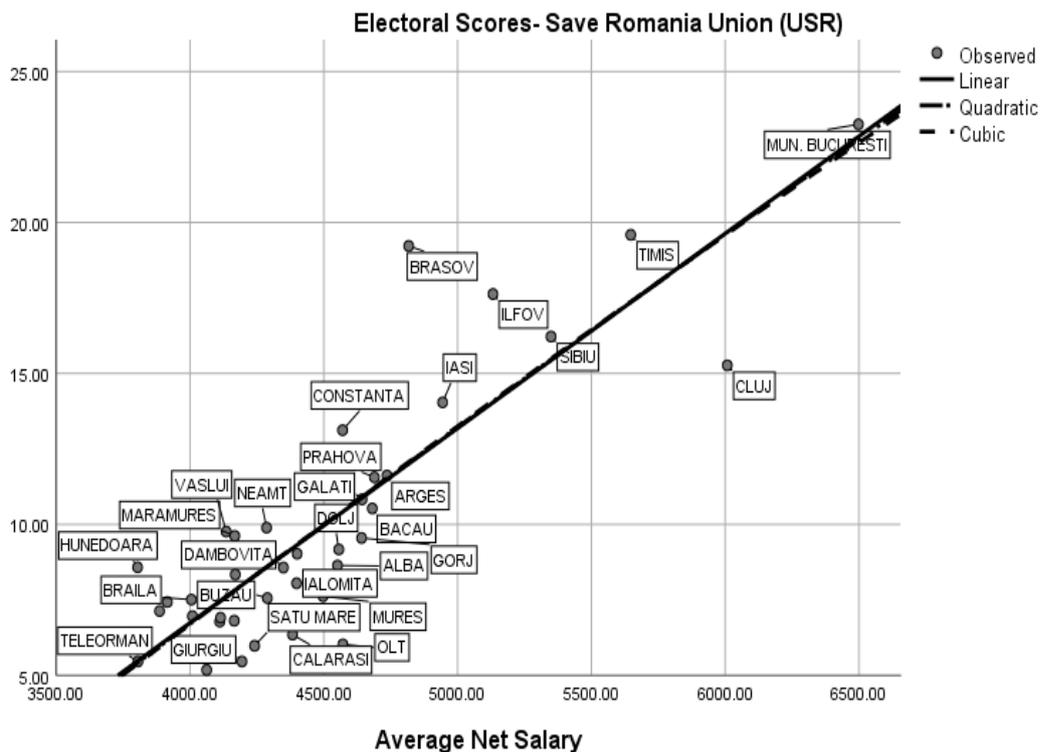
Figure 2. Linear regression: unemployment rates and electoral scores of PSD.



The linear regression between unemployment rates and electoral support for PSD shows that in counties with an increased unemployment rate ($UN > 6.00$), the party recorded above-average electoral scores. Counties in Oltenia, South Muntenia, and Moldova are more likely to have a positive relationship between social democratic preferences and higher unemployment rates. In contrast, in counties across Transylvania, Banat, and Crișana, lower unemployment levels are positively related to decreased electoral scores for PSD.

Concerning the regression model explaining the electoral behavior of PNL, statistical results indicate a very weak predictive power with $R^2 = 0.103$, $p = 0.043$. This model suggests a single economic predictor that may explain electoral preferences: contrary to the previous model, the unemployment rate is strongly and negatively related to the electoral scores obtained by PNL in the 2024 parliamentary elections ($\beta = -0.837$, $p=0.043$). In regions with low unemployment rates, citizens might perceive the economic situation as stable. Additionally, the traditional approach of PNL is market-oriented, based on liberal economic policies. Typically, counties with low unemployment levels have higher educational attainment, greater urbanization, and more active private sectors. The regional socio-economic profile could be an important indicator for predicting electoral support for right-wing political parties.

Figure 3. Linear regression: Average Net Salary and electoral support for USR.



The third regression model identifies significant predictors of electoral scores for USR, with $R^2 = 0.743$, $p < 0.01$. Our findings reveal that electoral support for this party is strongly and positively associated with an increased average net salary ($\beta=0.862$, $p=0.001$). USR tends to perform better in regions characterized by economic development and higher personal finances and salaries. As a reformist party, USR advocates for economic reforms, digitalization, and socio-economic alignment with EU values. Its platform resonates with urban, educated, and economically active citizens. Regions with higher GDP levels exhibit stronger demand for modernization, political transparency, economic

development, and anti-corruption policies. Institutional reform and technocratic governance are core themes in the party's rhetoric. However, the party is perceived as a reformist party with liberal values and a right-wing ideological orientation. Electoral support is concentrated among educated groups, many of whom work in the IT industry or the private sector. Political mobilization is closely linked to economic growth and higher average net salaries. Figure 3 shows the linear regression between electoral support for USR and the dynamics of average net salary in 42 Romanian counties.

In connection with these results, we emphasize that counties such as Cluj, Timiș, Bucharest, Sibiu, Ilfov, and Brașov, which are characterized by an increased level of average net salary, report significantly higher electoral support for USR. Additionally, urban areas with high standards of living are more likely to have increased electoral support for the party's platform.

The last regression model reflects, with a weak power of prediction, the interplay between the economy and electoral support for AUR, $R^2=0.112$, $p = 0.035$). In this respect, we estimated a negative association between the level of GDP and electoral support for this party ($\beta = -0.334$, $p = 0.035$). This result suggests that AUR performs better in economically disadvantaged regions, with low levels of GDP and GDP/capita. Several important issues might characterize economically disadvantaged counties, such as limited access to economic opportunities and public services, an increased level of migration, and a strong social and economic cleavage between the center and peripheral areas. In this context, the party has stressed the importance of nationalist discourse, emotional messages, and anti-establishment rhetoric.

The hypothesis of economic vote is demonstrated partially in the 2024 Romanian electoral landscape. A real economic impact in the field of electoral preferences is found in several cases regarding voting for the PSD, PNL, USR, and AUR. In the case of ethnic and populist parties, there are other social, cultural, or political factors that interfere with electoral decisions. Statistical results confirm both the prevalence of the retrospective and sociotropic voters within the Romanian electorate. Limited to the significant statistical models, our theory suggests that economic development functions as an essential mechanism for rewarding and punishing the political class. Results highlight associations between unemployment and left-wing political actors, and average net salary and electoral preferences for right-wing political parties. However, these findings might suggest the classical cleavage between losers and winners of economic transitions in Central and Eastern European countries. Romanian electoral landscape is aligned to these complex realities, revealing an increased level of social and political polarization between vulnerable groups and economically active citizens.

Conclusions

The study presents the nexus between socio-economic variables and electoral behavior in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections. Grounded in the theoretical framework of economic voting theory, the paper highlights the main predictors that influenced an increased level of incumbent party reelection and the economic particularities of party preferences. The economic voting theory emphasizes the relevance of both macroeconomic factors and subjective economic perceptions in shaping electoral decisions. However, longitudinal studies in consolidated democracies demonstrated the prevalence of economic voting as a mechanism through which citizens punish or reward governmental performance. Alongside the economic variables, scholars argued that political context, media partisanship, and institutional design are relevant factors that might influence electoral decisions. An important theoretical perspective pointed out the relevance of political information and cognitive heterogeneity in shaping electoral decisions. Informed and sophisticated citizens are more

likely to vote economically than others. In transitional democracies, scholars observed a strong correlation between economic factors and ideological orientation. Left-wing parties are more likely to be correlated with economic imbalances and high unemployment rates. Conversely, right-wing parties are associated with developed regions characterized by an increased level of net salary.

This paper evaluates the impact of economic variables on incumbent party reelection. Using a logistic regression, our findings suggest that the average net salary is more likely to increase the probability of voting for the ruling political party. Together with average net salary, geographical distribution, and level of regional economic development, these factors are involved in shaping electoral behavior in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections. Aligned with this finding, we used a multiple linear regression in order to estimate significant predictors of party preferences. Our models have a moderate power of prediction with R^2 between 0.103 and 0.743, revealing that economic voting is relevant only for dominant political parties such as the PSD, PNL, USR, and AUR. Low levels of unemployment are related to liberal preferences. In contrast, vulnerable counties and regions, characterized by increased unemployment rates and a moderate level of economic development, are more likely to be correlated with electoral preferences for PSD. In these regions, statistical data confirms electoral preferences for nationalist discourse promoted by AUR. As regards the developed counties and regions, quantitative results highlight strong positive associations between average net salary and electoral preferences for the reformist approach promoted by USR.

Statistical results are in line with other empirical findings suggesting the relevance of economic development in the field of electoral behavior. Besides economic factors, cultural variables or psychosociological factors predict the dynamics of electoral attitudes and behaviors across counties in the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections.

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Beyond economics: Covid-19 vaccination and religious motivations in Romania's 2025 presidential elections

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Abstract

This article investigates the factors shaping voter preferences in Romania's 2025 presidential election, focusing on the runoff between a centrist and a nationalist-conservative-populist candidate. Using electoral data combined with regional indicators, the analysis assesses the relative importance of economic development and Covid-19 vaccination rates – considered a proxy for cultural contextual landscapes related to historical legacies, religiosity and traditionalism. As expected, economic and social development are associated with greater support for the centrist candidate. However, cultural factors also play a decisive role: Covid-19 vaccination rates at the county level, followed by support for traditionalism measured by attitude towards the 2019 “Family” Referendum, are both strong predictors of support for the conservative candidate. These findings highlight the persistence of cultural and attitudinal divides in shaping political preferences in post-communist Romania, and the need to account for them alongside socioeconomic explanations.

Keywords

Electoral behavior; populism; religion; Covid-19 vaccination; post-communist Romania

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Introduction

Across advanced and emerging democracies, far-right populism has shifted from sporadic episodes to a durable presence in electoral politics. Explanations for this rise diverge. One line of work emphasizes economic insecurity and dislocation, from trade shocks and deindustrialization to wage stagnation and perceived status loss (Algan et al, 2017; Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Kurer, 2020). A second direction stresses cultural dynamics, arguing that value change, identity threat, and disputes over moral order, rather than pocket-book concerns, drive its support (Margalit et al., 2025; Norris and Inglehart 2019). At the same time, economic and cultural drivers of populism do not operate in isolation from one another (Gidron and Hall, 2017). Furthermore, the demand-side accounts of populism (centered on economic or cultural grievances) are complemented by explanations focused on those on the supply-side, whereby populist actors' rise is prompted by citizens' disenchantment with unresponsive institutions (Berman, 2021).

Recent culturalist accounts place the post-pandemic information environment center-stage. Under Covid-19, conspiracy narratives and anti-expert discourses flourished, creating favorable conditions for populist entrepreneurs. Work on "medical populism" shows how leaders fuse anti-elitism, people-centrism, and crisis theatrics to politicize disease management and recast experts and bureaucrats as self-serving (see Lasco and Curato, 2019). Parallel research links epistemic distrust to rule-breaking, lower compliance, and vaccine hesitancy (Čavojová et al., 2024; Sturgis et al., 2021). While causal sequencing remains debated, a consistent empirical pattern ties skepticism toward institutions of knowledge to subsequent receptivity to anti-system appeals. In short, Covid-era health behaviors can serve as tractable, behavioral proxies for deeper cultural orientations toward authority, science, and collective obligation, that are central to contemporary populist alignments.

Romania's 2025 presidential elections provide a strong test for these claims. On the one hand, the country has experienced substantial material convergence over the past decade, with rising GDP per capita and downward trends in inequality and poverty (Eurostat 2025a; Eurostat 2025b). On the other hand, the 2018 "Family" referendum, though invalid due to low turnout, helped normalize a triad in public debate: Orthodox religiosity, Romanian ethnonational identity, and a heteronormative family ideal (Norocel and Băluță, 2023). Subsequent analyses show how the narrative of forced vaccination has been embraced by the conservative movement, along with its strong emphasis on patriarchal discourse and proximity to religion (Băluță and Tufiş, 2024). Moreover, during the Covid-19 period, Romania registered one of the highest excess-mortality rates globally, despite relatively early access to vaccines via EU procurement, underscoring the importance of compliance, trust in expertise, and (dis)information by religious networks that shape health behavior (The Economist 2025). Taken together, these developments suggest a cultural infrastructure primed to translate pandemic-era epistemic rifts into electoral cleavages.

The 2024-2025 electoral cycle sharpened this tension. The annulment of the 2024 presidential first round on foreign-interference grounds, the brief surge of Călin Georgescu, a newcomer blending conspiracist and salvationist themes, and the 2025 runoff strength of George Simion (AUR) all point to high demand for anti-establishment appeals despite macroeconomic gains. At the same time, distinct features of the Romanian context, diaspora mobilization, a Hungarian-minority backlash against ethnonationalist cues, and the long tail of pandemic controversies, create within-country variation useful for adjudicating competing explanations. If economic conditions were primary, development indicators should dominate county-level voting patterns; if cultural-epistemic factors matter more, pandemic health-behavior markers should retain predictive power when development is held constant.

This article leverages that opportunity. We test whether county-level Covid-19 vaccination uptake in 2021, a behavioral proxy for trust in expertise, and also for ties to religio-moral networks, predicts support for the anti-establishment candidate (George Simion) in the 2025 presidential runoff, net of development and other covariates.

Empirically, we estimate structural equation models (SEM) at the county level to recover direct and mediated paths among development, cultural proxies (2018 referendum turnout, 2021 vaccination rate), ethnolinguistic composition, and the 2025 vote. Anticipating our results, vaccination in 2021 emerges as the strongest predictor of Simion's county performance, while economic variables have a limited, largely mediated role. We complement this with evidence from school-level data in Cluj-Napoca, where vaccination rates among teachers are substantially lower in religious schools than in comparable non-religious schools, despite similar socio-economic contexts—reinforcing the interpretation of vaccination as a proxy for exposure to religious networks and associated norms.

The structure of the article follows the rationale behind our argument. First, we review existing literature about economic and cultural explanations for support of populism. Second, we explore the connection between Covid-19 hesitancy and its instrumentalization by populist actors. Third, we succinctly describe the political and social context of the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination in Romania. Fourth, we provide an overview of 2024/2025 Romanian elections. Fifth, we analyze county-level data regarding determinants of populist vote in the most recent presidential elections, singling out vaccination rate as its main predictor.

Economic and cultural explanations of support for populist political actors

A common division in the discussion of populism's appeal is that between economic and cultural explanations (Margalit et al., 2025; Rodrik, 2021). The two perspectives emphasize different underlying processes, and yet a perfect separation of economic and cultural elements is somewhat problematic at theoretical level (Brils et al., 2022; Rodrick, 2021), especially since empirical research often finds that a blend of economic and cultural factors motivate the populist vote (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021).

Support for populist actors is postulated by economic approaches as rooted in economic dissatisfaction and material loss or insecurities (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). Let down by worsening economic conditions, citizens become responsive to populists' agendas, because the latter seem to offer convincing solutions to difficult economic circumstances (Margalit, 2019). The literature refers to a variety of processes that may result in deteriorating economic conditions likely to generate discontent: disruptions in the labor markets prompted by globalization (Colantone and Stanig, 2018), deindustrialization that pitches some regions into a state of economic relapse (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022), the rise of unemployment associated to economic crises (Algan et al., 2017), austerity resulting from government reforms (Fetzer, 2019).

Margalit (2019) is rather reserved about the explanatory strength of economic insecurity for understanding the endorsement of populist actors, questioning the extent to which they stand for its core causes. Indeed, the empirical tests of economic explanations produce mixed results. For example, referring to Poland, Olejnik and Wroński (2025) argue that economic factors provide a solid explanation of the success of the Law and Justice party in the 2019 elections. Their analyses show that votes from economically disadvantaged areas had an important bearing in the populist party's electoral achievement, thus stressing the impact of "uneven economic development" (Olejnik and Wroński, 2025: 686). Conversely, Brils, Muis and Gaidytė (2022) find little support for socioeconomic deprivation being a convincing predictor of vote for far-right parties. Comparing far right voters with supporters of center-right parties, of left parties and with non-voters from 17 European countries, the

authors show that supporters of the far-right are economically worse off only if compared to those who endorse -center-right parties. Furthermore, in the new democracies from the so-called Eastern bloc, unemployment is unrelated to far-right preference. Notably, Brils and colleagues (2022) call for caution in assuming synonymy between far-right parties and populist parties.

Tapping into the economic underpinnings of populist appeal seems somewhat more straightforward than specifying the cultural mechanisms behind it. Margalit, Raviv and Solodoch (2025) sought to bring some order in the diverse (and often intertwined) cultural arguments and located five culture-focused “storylines” in the extant scholarship. These different accounts emphasize respectively: the tension caused by value change, whereby traditional values lose their primacy; concerns over the dilution of national identity resulting from growing migration; frustration over the neglect of rural areas, in contrast with the rising affluence of urban regions; worries about the deterioration of social status among formerly privileged groups; declining cohesion of communities, driven by urbanization and industrialization (Margalit et al., 2025). An important comment about these different cultural explanations is that they all involve, albeit to a varying degree, economic catalysts, underscoring the difficulty to wholly separate analytically the two types of factors. Furthermore, the empirical test on the five scenarios on European Social Survey data confirms the assortment of cultural and economic distress among voters for right wing populist parties, while also revealing that many of these voters do not manifest economic anxieties (Margalit et al., 2025).

Among the cultural approaches to populism, Norris and Inglehart’s (2019) cultural backlash theory is likely the most renowned. Their explanation is centered on the cultural shifts in Western societies, a change fueled by “generational replacement, rising educational levels, growing ethnic diversity, gender equality, and urban growth” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 42). These dynamics create a context where notable parts of the population feel uneasy in a society perceived as no longer aligned to their values, identities and customs. On top of this new state of things, where comparatively more support for progressive values make social conservatives feel estranged, added insecurities stemming from economic difficulties and mounting immigration stir the “authoritarian reflexes” involved in the electoral support for authoritarian-populist leaders (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 33-35). Although material concerns play a non-marginal part in the overall explanation, the authors underline the resentment of changing cultural norms, turning the values-driven backlash into the main mechanism for understanding the ascent of populism.

Though remarkably influential, the cultural backlash thesis is not immune to criticism. Schäfer (2022) argues that its general argument, based on intergenerational change, is weakened by an overstatement of the divergence between younger and older generations. After replicating the original analysis, Schäfer finds that “the data do not support the claim that in European societies, younger and older cohorts stand on two sides of a cultural conflict in which the old defend authoritarian, and the young libertarian values” (Schäfer, 2022: 1983). The author also takes issue with Norris and Inglehart’s interpretation of consecutive generations’ electoral preferences for authoritarian and populist parties, claiming that, in fact, the vote for authoritarian-populist parties is more likely for the younger cohorts. Although cautious on the ability of the cultural backlash theory to unambiguously account for populists’ success, Schäfer (2022) recognizes the valence of cultural interpretations and confirms that opposition to immigration is an essential factor in explaining preference for authoritarian-populist parties.

Recently, the cultural backlash theory was appraised by Baro and Jenssen (2025), who argue that the approach works better at explaining the rise of populism in the US rather than in Europe. As the latter accommodates a diversity of national contexts with quite specific historical journeys, making it unlikely for cultural change to have occurred at the same pace everywhere, different drivers of

populism might be at work in different countries. Their analyses of Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Norway indeed point in this direction. For instance, social conservative values and religion are stronger predictors of vote for populist parties in Poland than in Hungary, where these factors fail to explain the phenomenon, yet where nationalism stands out as the driving force of the populist preference. At the same time, in both countries, holding authoritarian values has higher effect on the populist vote than in the remaining cases, a process interpreted by the authors as stemming from their recent undemocratic past (Baro and Jenssen, 2025).

Anti-vaccination attitudes and the populist appeal during the pandemic

The developments generated by the outbreak of the Covid pandemic set the stage for a value-driven “rebellion” of those who felt betrayed by the elites’ and experts’ insistent appeals at risk-minimizing behaviors. Conspiracy theories flourished against the context created by the health crisis, producing an auspicious environment for populist political actors (Oana and Bojar, 2023). Castanho-Silva, Vegetti and Littvay (2017: 437) clarify how “the tendency to adopt a Manichean outlook to social events, and more importantly, the underlying narrative that sees anything official as deceptive” create the proximity between conspiracy thinking and populist perspectives.

Attitudes towards vaccination during the Covid-19 pandemic need to be understood within a broader context of anti-vaccination trends in general, which, in turn are deeply embedded in psychology. While Hornsey et al. (2018) speak about a process of motivated reasoning – through which pre-existing views of the world are reinforced by seeking out information consistent with them (although they may be false), Imhoff and Lamberty (2020) consider that conspiracies bring an illusory sense of control in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In a study on US and UK data, they show that conspiracies affect behavior in the context of the pandemic, but that different types of conspiracies trigger different behavioral reactions (so not all conspiracy believers act similarly in the face of restrictions). For example, those believing that the pandemic is a hoax were against behavior limiting restrictions, while those who believed it to be man-made were not (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2020). In a 2022 study of German general public and experts, Rothmund et al. explore the performance of three psychology-derived factors in explaining pandemic denial: “(a) cognitive capacity and style, (b) political identity and alignment, and (c) exposure to misinformation in social media” (Rothmund et al., 2022: 440-441). Results show two groups that are significantly prone to deny the existence of the pandemic, the dismissive and the doubtful: “both groups express higher levels of collective narcissism and are more likely to report a rightwing political ideology” (Rothmund et al., 2022: 451). The pandemic is thus perceived as a threat to political identity, as the dismissive show increased distrust towards scientists and politicians alike, and also increased anti-elitism.

A notable part of the controversies during the pandemic revolved around vaccination, turning vaccine hesitancy into a salient occurrence (Troiano and Nardi, 2021). In a study on 24 nations and Hong Kong, anti-vaccination attitudes have been shown previously to be linked to conspiracy beliefs, to reactance, to disgust vis-à-vis needles/blood, and a worldview emphasizing individualism (Hornsey et al., 2018). Reactance refers to people’s tendency to get attached to views opposed to opinions endorsed by the majority and stems from the desire to be or to be perceived as autonomous and uncompliant (Hornsey et al., 2018). Moreover, anti-vaccination attitudes are also correlated with conservative political ideologies (Hornsey et al., 2018). In a 30 nations study, (Tybur et al., 2016) found that antipathogen strategies are clearly associated with conservatism, but more so to upholding traditions and norms (as cultural and evolutionary survival mechanism against disease) than to opposing ethnically/racially different groups.

Even before the pandemic, Baumgaertner et al. (2018) showed, on a study on US data, that ideology influences intention to vaccinate, with conservatives being less prone to vaccinate. As it turns out, ideology affects intention to vaccinate indirectly as well, through measures of trust in medical expertise, conservatives being more numerous in this group, suggesting a type of motivated reasoning. In 2019, Featherstone et al. found that liberal ideology is at odds with acceptance of vaccine conspiracies. Moreover, Christian nationalism in the US was also found to be positively correlated with vaccine hesitancy (Corcoran et al. 2021). Although many studies on the effect of ideology were conducted in the US, research findings from European countries find similar, albeit weaker results. For example, on Italian data, Cadeddu et al. (2020) found that anti-vaccine attitudes correlate with identification with ideologies on the right end of the spectrum, as well as less participation in political or cultural matters (also male, older, less educated). Alternatively, Czarnek et al. (2020) found that rightwing ideology is negatively associated with pro-vaccine attitude (on 2019 Eurobarometer data) only in the subset of politically interested respondents. In the former communist part of Europe, there seems to be at least partial overlap between right-wing populism and anti-vaccine attitudes structured along the anti (medical) elitist argument, as Žuk and Žuk (2020) show on a study of discourses on YouTube video clips in Polish language. In an effort to distinguish between two dimensions of authoritarianism (RWA – right wing authoritarianism focusing on social control, and SDO – social dominance orientation focusing on inequality as natural), Bielewicz and Soral (2021) found, on German, Polish and British data, that RWA was associated with less vaccine hesitancy, while SDO with more. Furthermore, another study on 2019 Eurobarometer data shows that vaccine reluctance is associated with ideological extremism, as opposed to just right-wing extremism (Debus and Tosun 2021).

As already suggested by the previous observations, the anti-elite sentiment that permeates the populist system of beliefs (see Mudde, 2004) is a key element that sustains the link between anti-vaccination stances and populist attitudes. The literature seems to concur on this aspect, whether referring to vaccination in general or to vaccination during the Covid pandemic (Kennedy, 2019; Stoeckel et al., 2022). Notably, the aversion towards elites is not limited to political leaders, but extends to scientists and experts, resulting in contestation and distrust on the part of citizens (Stoeckel et al., 2022; Mede and Schäfer, 2020). Conservative political actors play an important part in the heated debates over vaccination, fueling the perceived divide between people and elites. Such a process is expressively labelled by Lasco and Curato (2019: 1) as “medical populism”, meaning “a political style that constructs antagonistic relations between ‘the people’ whose lives have been put at risk by ‘the establishment.’” Along with insisting on the fracture between the citizens and the establishment, medical populism is likely to involve the plain rejection of scientific expertise (Lasco and Curato, 2019). According to Lasco (2020), during the pandemic, political leaders like Bolsonaro, Duterte and Trump repeatedly played down the risks posed by the virus and bluntly capitalized on the anti-science sentiment in order to build support.

Different levels of stringency of containment measures throughout the Covid-19 pandemic suggest that, at least at the beginning, there was little information about effectiveness of policies in reducing incidence of cases. Consequently, and because of a lack of a precedent that governments could rely on, politics did not seem to influence policy in 26 European democracies, during the first wave of the pandemic (Plümper and Neumeyer, 2022). Nevertheless, subsequent waves saw a return of politics because of both policy learning (increased availability of policy effectiveness) and a waning of public support for the incumbent government initially existing (Plümper and Neumeyer, 2022).

In Romania, more specifically, Pop-Eleches (2025) explores the potential explanations of the electoral success of populist radical right (PRR) parties, with a focus on the parliamentary elections

from 2024. The author shows that, among the retrospective voting drivers, Covid-related factors (level of satisfaction with how the state managed the pandemic and having/having not been administered the vaccine) had greater influence on the support of PRR parties than citizens' views on economic aspects. Importantly, a similar finding also emerged in relation to the vote for the two populist candidates in the presidential elections, Georgescu and Simion, which suggest that the pandemic period continues to be salient and consequential for citizens' electoral choices (Pop-Eleches, 2025).

Other sources point to religious factors influencing vaccine hesitancy. For example, Martens and Rutjens (2022) find that religiosity and spirituality are associated with lower anti Covid-19 vaccination rates in different regions of the world, even when controlling for vaccine supply issues. Moreover, religiosity negatively correlates with vaccination even when GDP, age, collectivism, vaccine skepticism, and record of previous inoculations (Martens and Rutjens, 2022) are accounted for. Similarly, on Australian longitudinal data, Edwards et al. (2021) found that higher religiosity and populist views were negatively associated with the intention to vaccinate, while income and trust in authorities (and hospitals) were positively associated with it. In an experimental study on US data, Chu et al. (2021) found that the decision to vaccinate was influenced by medical experts conveying a common religious identity message to the public as well as making clear references to religion. In an encompassing review of 20 studies on vaccine hesitancy and its potential religious roots in different areas of the world, Imran et al. (2024) argue that, in general, higher religiosity is associated with vaccine hesitancy, a relationship often mediated by mistrust in science and the scientific community. Given that the Covid-19 pandemic created a surge in people's need for religion (Sinding Bentzen, 2021), as a source of solace and response in the face of adversity, it is conceivable that, in certain contexts, religiosity did contribute to vaccine hesitancy significantly.

In the context of our study, religious correlates of vaccine hesitancy are seen as representative of a distinct cultural perspective, exploited by right-wing populists for electoral gain. Conspiracies creating the landscape of vaccine hesitancy belong to a certain cultural outlook, where tradition and identity fuel anti-scientific expert positionings, adopted and instrumentalized by populist actors.

The pandemic in Romania: conspiracy theories and skepticism towards vaccination

In the fourth quarter of 2021, the Covid crisis in Romania became manifestly worrisome, with high numbers of daily new cases, alarming numbers of deaths and a rather low vaccination rate (Euronews and AP, 2021; Deutsche Welle, 2021). This happened in a context where, similar to other countries (Eberl et al., 2021) conspiracy theories, some of which questioned the actual existence of the pandemic, became widespread (Durach and Volintiru, 2021; Lup and Mitrea, 2021). Interestingly, Stoica and Umbres (2021) found a surprising positive association between education and holding conspiracy beliefs. One of the explanations suggested by the authors is that distrust of government in Romania is particularly pronounced among the better educated, making them skeptical about the pandemic-related messages communicated by the official authorities.

Relatedly, the contradictions and ambiguity that hindered the official messages delivered by the Romanian authorities have turned parts of the public wary of the pandemic-related official communication (Cmeci et al., 2022; Džakula et al., 2022). Moreover, like elsewhere in Europe, the restriction measures issued by the authorities produced substantial discontent, voiced through street protests (Neumeyer et al., 2024). More than a few of these protests have been organized with the support of the populist right-wing party The Alliance for the Union of Romanians, AUR (Doiciar and Cretan, 2021).

Indeed, AUR seems a fitting illustration of a political actor actively engaged in medical populism. The party, led by George Simion, has been particularly vocal in contesting the various restrictions introduced by the authorities, through the organization of multiple protests and an intense online presence which promoted conspiracy narratives around the virus and the vaccines (Burean and Pálffy, 2024). For instance, during 2021, the protests organized by AUR featured banners with telling messages like “Down with the mask!” (as well as the more piercing variant “Down with the mask, we are not dogs!”), “Down with the restrictions!” (Hotnews, 2021), “Down with the medical dictatorship!” (Pricop, 2021), “I believe in God, not in Covid” (Valica, 2021). References to religion were not limited to slogans displayed on banners, as protesters often joined the demonstrations carrying icons or other religious imagery (Benea, 2021; Pricop, 2021).

AUR’s preoccupation with the pandemic (and thereby with the topic of vaccination) endured past the termination of the health crisis: in the summer of 2025, a no-confidence vote against the European Commission has been initiated by a group of MEPs led by a member of AUR (Euractiv, 2025). The motion, ultimately not passed by the European Parliament, was mainly concerned with the handling of the Covid period, specifically with the procurement of vaccines (European Parliament, 2025).

Additionally, throughout the pandemic, religious actors also expressed their view of either restrictions or vaccination repeatedly. However, although the Romanian Orthodox Church is a fairly hierarchical structure, messages diverged. For example, in early 2021 the Romanian Orthodox Church announced that it will get involved in the vaccination campaign, by distributing to their churches a brochure entitled “Covid-19 vaccination in Romania. Free. Voluntary. Safe.” Several high-ranking members of the church expressed pro-vaccination attitudes, such as Archbishop Calinic or Metropolitan Irineu, while the Catholic priest Francisc Doboş was also a supporter of the vaccine (Europa Liberă România, 2021). Although the Romanian Ministry of Health officially announced this information campaign by the Orthodox Church, further statements from the church’s spokesperson stressed that the church cannot guarantee the safety of the Covid-19 vaccine, since it is a purely medical issue, and Fati (2021) considers that such caution may limit the impact of this initiative. One of the most vocal critics of both Covid-19 related restrictions and vaccination is Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis, who called people to mass even when such events were forbidden, and who oscillated from blatantly opposing vaccination based on conspiracy theories (suggesting that those who got vaccinated ended up dying, while the others did not – TVRInfo, 2021), to feigning indifference, but transmitting an anti-vaccination message, and not getting vaccinated himself because of an “allergy”: “we are not saying yes and we are not saying no [about vaccination] [...] Praying cures better than the vaccine [...] The holy sacrament fights any virus. This is why we do not accept administering the holy sacrament with several spoons, this would be blasphemous” (Popescu, 2021).

The 2025 presidential race in context

Romania’s 2025 presidential election followed an exceptional institutional shock. On December 6, 2024, the Constitutional Court annulled the presidential vote after the first round, citing serious irregularities and malign foreign interference, just as diaspora voting was already under way (IFES, 2024). The trigger was the surprise first-place result of Călin Georgescu (22.94%), a political newcomer who campaigned almost exclusively on social media with a discourse mixing conspiracy, mysticism, protochronist nationalism, and anti-Western signaling. Romanian security services tied the information environment to Russian manipulation on TikTok. The Court barred Georgescu from the rerun scheduled for 2025.

The annulment landed in (and contributed to) a context of rising populism. In the June 2024 European Parliament election, the governing PSD–PNL (Social Democratic Party – PSD, National Liberal Party – PNL) alliance finished first, but AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians – AUR, right-wing populist) consolidated a strong second (European Parliament, 2024). In the December 1, 2024 parliamentary election, three right-wing populist parties, AUR, POT (Young People Party), and SOS, together exceeded 32% of the vote; AUR alone took 18.3% (its best result yet). Mainstream parties PSD and PNL underperformed at 22.3% and 14.28%, respectively, while USR (Save Romania Union) took 12.26% and UDMR (The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania) 6.38% (AEP, 2025). A PSD–PNL–UDMR government under PSD’s Marcel Ciolacu followed. These outcomes signaled broad dissatisfaction with mainstream parties and a clear right-populist surge (Deloy, 2024).

The 2025 presidential rerun crystallized around George Simion (AUR) and Nicușor Dan (independent, pro-EU). In the May 4 first round, with a turnout of just over 53%, Simion led with 40.96%, followed by Dan (20.99%) and Crin Antonescu (PNL, 20.07%). The May 18 runoff, with an increased turnout of nearly 65%, delivered Dan a 53.6–46.4% victory after a rapid consolidation of centrist and liberal voters (Reuters, 2025a; Politico, 2025). International coverage framed the outcome as both a victory of pro-democracy forces in Romania and a reassurance for the pro-Ukrainian strategy of the EU (Henley/The Guardian 2025).

The diaspora played an unusual role. Turnout abroad jumped from about 973,000 votes in the first round to about 1.65 million in the second. Substantively, the diaspora tilted right-populist across cycles: Georgescu took a little over 43% of diaspora ballots in November 2024, and in 2025 Simion won 60.79% of the diaspora in round one and 55.78% in the runoff, even as Dan gained sharply at home (AEP, 2025). This divergence - diaspora leaning more anti-establishment than the domestic electorate - helped shape inter-round strategies.

The ethnic-Hungarian vote was pivotal and moved decisively against Simion. Hungarian-majority counties (Harghita, Covasna) delivered landslides for Dan. Beyond programmatic preferences (EU anchoring, minority-rights guarantees), analysts pointed to Simion’s prior anti-Hungarian activism, notably the 2019 Valea Uzului (Úzvölgye) cemetery confrontation, and antagonistic rhetoric toward the UDMR in 2024. In short, cross-border cues associated with Viktor Orbán did not override local identity concerns; past conflicts and messaging made Simion non-viable for many Hungarian voters (Barberá, 2019; Scheffer, 2025).

The campaign also unfolded amid transatlantic contention. At the February 2025 Munich Security Conference, U.S. Vice-President J. D. Vance publicly questioned the Romanian presidential election annulment. Romanian opposition figures amplified the criticism, while government actors and many analysts rebutted it by invoking the evidentiary basis for the Court’s decision (Henley, 2025). Washington later calibrated its tone, but the episode showed how great-power narratives fed into domestic framing.

Economically, expectations of lower anti-system demand rested on Romania’s rapid convergence: GDP per capita (PPS) reached about 80% of the EU average in 2023/2024; inequality eased as the Gini declined from 37.4 (2015) to 28.0 (2025), below the EU average of 29.4; and the AROPE rate fell from 37.3% (2015) to 27.9% (2024) (European Commission, 2025; Eurostat, 2025a; Eurostat 2025b). The coexistence of these aggregate gains with high anti-establishment votes suggest that additional factors downplayed the potential of economic growth to counter popular dissatisfaction towards the political system.

Beyond material explanations, a culturalist account helps explain the appeal of AUR, based on Georgescu and Simion either complementing or, in places, supplanting economic grievance. The 2018

constitutional “Family” referendum (6-7 October), which failed because of insufficient turnout (21.1%) despite 93.4% support, nonetheless normalized a triad of (Orthodox) religion, Romanian ethnicity, and the heteronormative family as core to national identity and helped pave the way for AUR’s rise (Norocel and Băluță, 2023: 160). In the same arena, anti-feminism and conservative neo-familialism intertwined with religion to sustain a patriarchal “gender contract” and salient homophobic, chauvinistic, and Christian-nationalist attitudes. By 2021, moral-panic narratives about “gender ideology” even began to incorporate forced vaccination (Băluță and Tufiş, 2023: 632). The referendum thus opened a broader discussion about populism and religion.

The apparently direct relationship between religiosity and right-wing populism is, however, more complicated and nuanced. For example, while right-wing populists routinely invoke Christianity, religious communities’ responses vary by national/regional context — many church actors in Germany and France have publicly distanced themselves from AfD or RN, whereas U.S. religious elites have been less inclined to speak against Trump, partly reflecting differences in institutional structure and reach (Cremer, 2023). Conceptually, this landscape supports distinguishing the politicization of religion (Christianity as an identity marker) from the sacralization of politics, where populism and religion share Manichean frames and promises of salvation (Zúquete, 2017). Charismatic leadership can operationalize this overlap through multiple roles — prophet, moral archetype, martyr, leader-as-people, party, and missionary (Zúquete, 2017). Seen through this lens, Georgescu’s brief 2024 surge, amplified by online mobilization and, arguably, later reflected in segments of Simion’s 2025 support, combined prophetic posture, martyr tropes, “leader-as-people” rhetoric, and missionary zeal, offering a form of religious populist re-enchantment amid disenchantment with technocratic governance (Zúquete, 2017).

Data and results

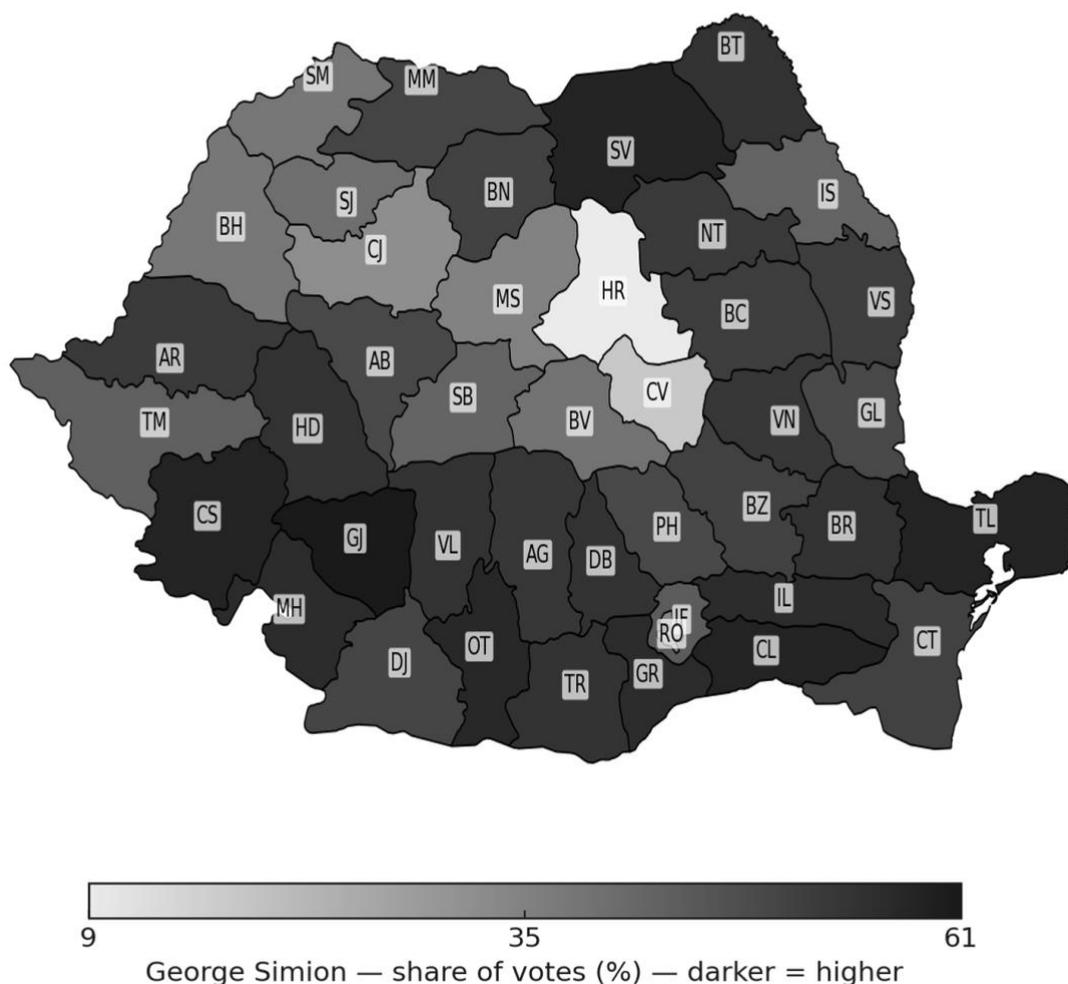
Our unit of analysis is the county (N = 42, including Bucharest). The outcome variable is the county-level share of votes for George Simion in the 2025 presidential runoff from May 18, 2025. The key explanatory variable is the county Covid-19 vaccination rate as measured in late 2021 (according to the official reporting from October 2021). We include in the analysis three contextual covariates, the choice of which is motivated by existing work and the particularities of the Romanian context:

1. Local development: a pre-pandemic Development Index (2017) that captures structural socioeconomic capacity. The index is built by using factor analysis from three variables: GDP/capita; Income; Life expectancy. The resulting index has a high internal consistency, with Cronbach Alpha=0.85.
2. Cultural/traditionalism proxy: measured as turnout in the 2018 “Family” referendum, widely read as a mobilization around Orthodox identity and heteronormative family norms.
3. Ethnolinguistic composition: the percentage of ethnic Hungarians at county level; this variable is included due to the distinctive electoral behavior of Hungarian-majority counties in the elections from 2024–2025.

Figure 1 shows that county-level voting distribution had considerable variation, with support for George Simion reaching 9.1% in Harghita and 58.1% in Călărași. What might explain this variance? Our results indicate that the vote for George Simion is negatively correlated with an Index of Development, positively correlated with turnout in the 2018 “Referendum for Family,” negatively correlated with the COVID-19 vaccination rate in October 2021, and negatively correlated with the percentage of Hungarians (see Table 1). As shown in the table, the percentage of Hungarians in the county has the strongest correlation (negative) with the vote for George Simion ($r = -0.82$), followed by the turnout to the 2018 Family Referendum ($r = 0.57$) and the Development Index ($r = -0.40$).

Figure 1. County-level voting distribution in the second round of the 2025 Romanian presidential elections.

Romania, Presidential Election 2025 — Round 2
George Simion share by county (continuous grayscale)



In this bivariate analysis, the vaccination rate exerts the lowest (yet significant) correlation on the vote for Simion ($r = -0.36$). The Turnout Referendum has the strongest correlation with Vote GS, followed by Index Development and Vaccination Rate. However, when the two counties that have strong majorities of ethnic Hungarians, Covasna and Harghita, are excluded, the strongest predictor of the Vote GS becomes the Vaccination Rate: $r = -0.72^{***}$ (see Figure 2).

Nevertheless, since the chosen explanatory variables are also correlated with one another, further analysis needs to include a multivariate approach to distinguish their individual and mediating effects. The structural equation model we consequently tested is shown in Figure 3.

We built two models: one with all cases ($N=42$), and one where we excluded Covasna (CV) and Harghita (HR), the two counties that have strong majorities of ethnic Hungarians ($N=40$). Both structural equation models exhibit excellent fit, with CFI and TLI $> .95$ and RMSEA $< .03$, surpassing conventional benchmarks (Table 2).

Table 1. Correlations between Vote for George Simion (2025), Development Index (2017), Turnout in the “Family” referendum (2018), Covid-19 Vaccination Rate (October 2021), and % of Hungarians, county level.

		Vote GS 2025	Index Development 2017	Turnout Referendum 2018	Vaccination Rate 2021
Vote GS 2025	r	1.00	-0.40	0.57	-0.36
	p		.009	.000	.018
Index Development 2017	r	-0.40	1.00	-0.41	0.88
	p	.009		.007	.000
Turnout Referendum 2018	r	0.57	-0.41	1.00	-0.43
	p	.000	.007		.004
Vaccination Rate 2021	r	-0.36	0.88	-0.43	1.00
	p	.018	.000	.004	
% Hungarians	r	-0.82	-0.02	-0.51	-0.08
	p	.000	.889	.001	.607

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 2. Correlation between Vaccination Rate (October 2021) and Vote GS (2025) and regression line for all counties except Harghita and Covasna.

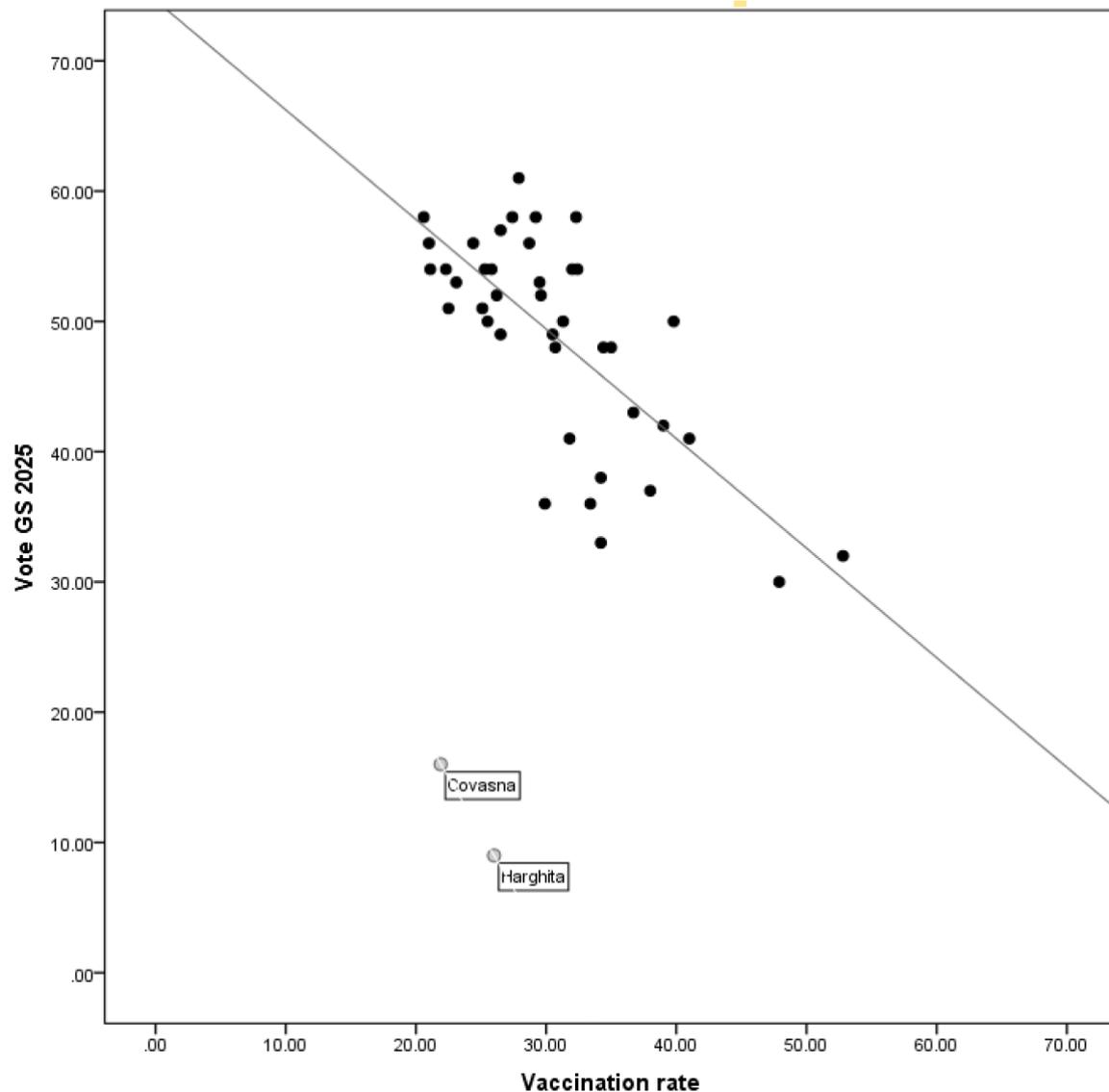


Figure 3. Structural equation model for Vote for George Simion (2025), Development Index (2017), Turnout in the “Family” referendum (2018), Covid-19 Vaccination Rate (October 2021), and % of Hungarians, county level.

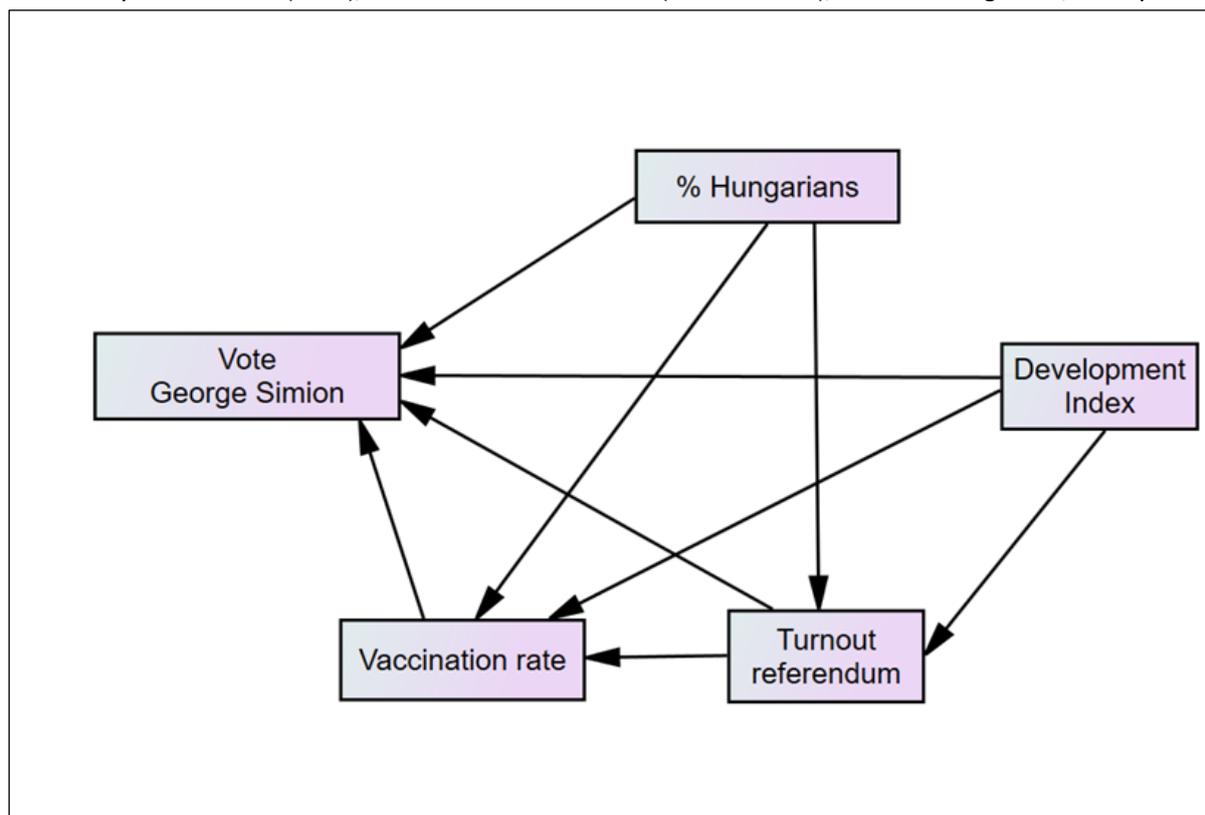


Table 2. Structural equation estimates for Vote for George Simion (2025), Development Index (2017), Turnout in the “Referendum for Family” (2018), COVID-19 Vaccination Rate (October 2021) at the county level, and percentage of Hungarians (all cases, N=42; all cases except HR and CV, N=40).

			All cases (N=42)			All - HR, CV (N=40)		
			Unstd. coeff.	Std. coeff.	p	Unstd. coeff.	Std. coeff.	p
Vote G Simion	<---	Dev. index	-1.94	-0.17	0.132	-1.14	-0.14	0.449
Vote G Simion	<---	Vaccination rate	-0.53	-0.33	0.006	-0.69	-0.60	0.005
Vote G Simion	<---	% Hungarians	-0.58	-0.90	***	-0.52	-0.52	***
Vote G Simion	<---	Turnout ref.	-0.23	-0.10	0.179	-0.32	-0.17	0.092
Vaccination rate	<---	Turnout ref.	-0.26	-0.18	0.055	-2.09	-0.49	***
Turnout ref.	<---	Dev. index	-2.07	-0.42	***	-0.09	-0.17	0.203
Turnout ref.	<---	% Hungarians	-0.15	-0.51	***	5.34	0.78	***
Vaccination rate	<---	Dev. index	5.59	0.80	***	0.14	0.16	0.008
Vaccination rate	<---	% Hungarians	-0.06	-0.16	0.071	-0.35	-0.22	0.002

The first model indicates that the proportion of Hungarians has the strongest effect on voting for Simion ($\beta = -0.90^{***}$): on average, for each 10% increase in the Hungarian population, Simion lost 6% of the vote. The COVID-19 vaccination rate is the second strongest predictor ($\beta = -0.33^{**}$): each 10% increase in vaccination coverage leads to a 5% decrease in support for Simion. The Development Index does not exhibit a statistically significant direct effect. However, its total effect, mediated through vaccination rates and referendum turnout, is significant (total $\beta = -0.41^{**}$).

The importance of ethnic composition of localities in understanding the populist vote has been previously revealed in the literature. Discussing the growing popularity of AUR in the context created by the pandemic, Armeanu (2025) finds that socio-economic factors are unable to explain the party's electoral achievements at locality level, in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Instead, cultural and political attributes deliver a more convincing account of AUR's political ascent, with electoral support being higher "in localities with low ethnic diversity, low voter turnout and in rural areas" (Armeanu, 2025: 14). In the second model, the effect of the vaccination rate is even stronger ($\beta = -0.60^{**}$): each 10% increase in vaccination coverage leads to a 7% decrease in support for Simion. The total effect of the Development Index, mediated through vaccination rates and referendum turnout, is also stronger (total $\beta = -0.59^{**}$). Bootstrapping, based on 5,000 samples, confirms the statistical significance of the vaccination rate's effect ($p < 0.01$) for both models.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that county-level Covid-19 vaccination rates are a robust predictor of support for George Simion in the 2025 presidential election. While vaccination uptake is largely influenced by economic development, over one-third of its variation across counties remains unexplained, suggesting the role of other sociocultural factors.

Religious affiliation and religiosity appear to be particularly relevant. Data collected in November 2021 on school-level vaccination rates among teachers in Cluj-Napoca, Romania's second-largest city, show significant differences across religious affiliations. Among 168 schools (including kindergartens), the overall average vaccination rate was 74%, but among nine schools affiliated with Orthodox, Evangelical, and Pentecostal (OEP) churches, the average dropped to 52%. Of the eight schools with the lowest vaccination rates, six were OEP-affiliated (Inspectoratul Școlar Județean Cluj, 2021). Given the consistency in teacher salaries and shared urban setting, religious networks and norms likely explain this variation.

These results underscore the importance of cultural variables, such as religiosity and moral traditionalism, in shaping political preferences. Indicators like vaccine hesitancy and past participation in the 2018 referendum reflect broader ideological orientations that align with populist, nationalist candidates.

The analysis also highlights the strengths and limitations of contextual-level data. County-level indicators are valuable for capturing broad environmental influences—economic, cultural, and institutional—that are often difficult to measure at the individual level. In this case, contextual data allowed for meaningful comparisons across geographic units in terms of religious conservatism, development, and public health behavior.

However, such data are susceptible to ecological fallacies; correlations observed at the aggregate level may not accurately reflect individual-level relationships. In addition, contextual data obscure within-county variation and limit causal inference. A promising direction for future research is to combine contextual data with individual-level surveys through multilevel modelling. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how individual beliefs interact with their social environments to shape electoral behavior.

Conclusions

This study shows that county vaccination uptake (2021) best explains geographic variation in support for George Simion in Romania's 2025 presidential runoff. Economic development matters primarily indirectly, by fostering higher vaccination (and dampening the referendum-style mobilization captured

by 2018 turnout), which in turn is associated with lower support for the anti-establishment candidate. In short, culture-proxied health behavior outperforms material conditions in accounting for the county map of the 2025 vote. Corroborating these results with our finding regarding low vaccine uptake among teachers at religious schools, and the already documented association between religiosity and vaccine hesitancy, we assert that low vaccination rates are indicative of a set of cultural features, among which religiosity ranks high, that explain the vote for the right-wing populist candidate.

Therefore, a key implication of our study is the central role of religiosity and religious-network mobilization in contemporary far-right dynamics. Our findings align with the view that religious institutions, congregational ties, and clergy cues shape the informational and moral environments in which pandemic-era skepticism, and, by extension, anti-establishment politics, can thrive. Counties with denser exposure to religious networks appear more conducive to narratives that depress vaccination and elevate populist voting. For example, Suceava, home to the second-highest number of monasteries in Romania (43), recorded the lowest vaccination rate and tied for second through fifth in Simion's vote share, illustrating the general pattern rather than being an outlier. Importantly, this is not necessarily a claim about individual faith per se, but about the organizational capacity and message diffusion of religious networks as brokers of trust, identity, and collective action.

Substantively, the results direct scholarship to measure religiosity as structure and mobilization dynamics, not only as belief. Future research should incorporate indicators such as parish density per capita, attendance/participation rates, religious school presence, local religious media penetration, and documented clergy interventions during campaigns; where possible, these can be linked to event-time exposures (pilgrimages, feast-day rallies), diaspora parish networks, and online sermon circulation. Such measures would help adjudicate whether religious networks amplify medical-populist frames, neutralize them, or do both under different leadership and institutional constraints. Methodologically, multilevel designs that nest individuals within religious and media ecologies, and SEM to trace indirect paths, are well suited to this agenda.

For policy, the results suggest that trust-building with religious communities, co-produced health communication with respected clergy, and local elite engagement may do more to blunt populist surges than macroeconomic messaging alone—while also recognizing that religious actors can be partners in democratic resilience when mobilized toward pro-social norms.

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Legionary apologia in contemporary Romania: Advancing a comparative methodology for scaling European fascisms

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Abstract

This article investigates the political resurgence of radical fascist ideologies in contemporary Romania, specifically those associated with the Legionary Movement and the Antonescian ideology. The inquiry is framed within the context of the disputed 2024 presidential elections, later annulled, which had initially resulted in a victory for Călin Georgescu. The article presents a legal evaluation of the criteria for typicality concerning the criminal charges brought against Georgescu by the General Prosecutor's Office (public glorification of individuals convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, the promotion of fascist, legionary, racist, or xenophobic ideas, concepts, or doctrines). Based on a semi-quantitative doctrinal assessment of European fascist typologies (hybrid, classical, radical, and totalitarian) from 1922 to 1975, five core attributes linked to the systemic criminality of each regime are coded. The findings show Romania as one of the most exterminatory fascist regimes in Europe, ranking just below Nazi Germany: Legionary Movement (7.6 out of 10 on the political violence scale) and Antonescu regime (8.0 out of 10). This ranking makes Georgescu's promotion of Legionary and Antonescian rhetoric particularly disquieting from both a political and criminal standpoint. The analysis of ideological convergence between 11 classical analytical variables of European fascism and Georgescu's political discourse yields an average score of 5.8 out of 10, placing Georgescu's position between moderate and high levels in relation to the characteristics of classical European fascism (Italian Mussolini ideology and Spanish Francoism).

Keywords

Călin Georgescu; Corneliu Zelea Codreanu; Ion Antonescu; fascism; Legionary ideology

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Introduction

Prior to a sudden surge in online visibility, just two weeks before the first round of the presidential election on November 24, 2024, Călin Georgescu occupied no significant role within Romania's political landscape². Up until the exit poll results were announced on the evening of November 24, Georgescu remained a true political outsider – lacking visibility and, implicitly, any credible prospects. He was part of the familiar cohort of fringe candidates who routinely crowd national elections in any democratic system, including Romania's presidential elections within its republican constitutional framework.

Without exception, everyone was utterly stunned by Georgescu's victory in the first round of the presidential elections on November 24, 2024. The independent candidate, whom no one had ever credited with a genuine political chance, secured first place with 2,120,401 votes, amounting to 22.94% of the valid ballots. In second place came the mayor of Câmpulung, Elena Lasconi, president of the Save Romania Union (USR), with 1,772,500 votes, amounting to 19.18% of the valid ballots. Lasconi's qualification for the presidential runoff, surpassing the leaders of the two main ruling parties, Marcel Ciolacu (Social Democratic Party, PSD) and Nicolae Ciucă (National Liberal Party, PNL), was also a huge surprise. Thus, two outsiders (Georgescu and Lasconi) won the first round of the 2024 presidential elections against the prime ministers of Romania (Ciolacu and Ciucă).

Since no candidate obtained an absolute majority, a second round of the presidential elections was to be organized on December 8, 2024, between Georgescu and Lasconi. However, the elections were annulled on December 6, 2024 by the Constitutional Court of Romania³, following the review of documents prepared by the intelligence services which raised suspicions regarding the existence of electoral irregularities committed by the independent candidate Georgescu. The briefing notes of the Romanian intelligence structures were declassified on December 4, 2024, by the Presidential Administration⁴, after their presentation and discussion on November 28, 2024, within the Supreme Council of National Defence of Romania (CSAT)⁵.

² As stated in the indictment issued by the Public Prosecutor's Office on July 1, 2025 (prepared by the Chief Prosecutor Marius Iacob of the Criminal Investigation Service within the Criminal Investigation Division of the Prosecutor's Office attached to the High Court of Cassation and Justice), in case no. 2226/221/P/2023/d1, in which Călin Georgescu is the defendant, between November 13 and 26, 2024, Călin Georgescu, being backed by more than 100 influencers with a combined audience exceeding 8 million active followers, achieved the performance of ranking 9th globally in TikTok's trending charts for video content promoting his candidacy in the presidential elections (https://www.luju.ro/static/files/2025/iulie/01/rechizitoriu_calin_georgescu.pdf).

³ *Decision No. 32 of the Constitutional Court of Romania*, dated December 6, 2024, regarding the annulment of the electoral process for the election of the President of Romania in 2024, published the same day in the Official Gazette of Romania No. 1231 (https://www.ccr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Hotarare_32_2024.pdf).

⁴ The press release which declassified and disclosed reports from the Romanian intelligence services regarding potential national security risks related to the November 24, 2024 elections, is available at <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/comunicat-de-presa1733327193>.

⁵ The press release of November 28, 2024, regarding the assessment by the Supreme Council of National Defence (CSAT) of potential national security risks in connection with the presidential elections of November 24, 2024, was prepared on the basis of intelligence service reports. These determined that hostile cyber operations against Romania had occurred, carried out by both state and non-state actors (including the Russian Federation, explicitly named but without supporting evidence, as seeking to erode Romania's social cohesion), with the objective of influencing the electoral process. The release states that "by violating electoral legislation, one presidential candidate benefited from massive exposure, due to the preferential treatment granted by the TikTok platform, which failed to label him as a political candidate and did not require him to tag his video campaign materials with the unique identification code assigned by the Permanent Electoral Authority upon the appointment of the

On November 28, 2024, the Supreme Council of National Defence of Romania (CSAT) indicated that TikTok's algorithmic overexposure of Georgescu played a decisive role in his victory in Romania's presidential election. In this interpretation, the candidate favored by TikTok emerged, through digital obscurity, as the apparent choice of the Romanian electorate. The idea that TikTok yields Mephistophelian technology capable of conjuring a future president from the "foam of the sea" and "enthroning" him at the Cotroceni Palace, while enticing as a Hollywood storyline, is simplistic, unrealistic, somewhat exaggerated, and even absurd. Following the Presidential Administration's decision on December 4, 2024, to bring the secret services (the General Directorate for Internal Protection of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Romanian Intelligence Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service, and the Special Telecommunications Service) into the electoral spotlight, the once Hollywood-style scenario is starting to take on the elements of a Bollywood production. In short, the entire Romanian state establishment officially accused, an independent candidate of having conducted his electoral campaign, with alleged irregularities and incorrectness (which are traditionally reproached, in general, to all competitors), in the only place in Romania where he had unrestricted access, that is, on TikTok⁶. Undoubtedly, declassified intelligence reports indicate that the full extent of the privately funded resources supporting Georgescu's candidacy – an online campaign valued at approximately €1,000,000, driven by the coordinated and algorithmic use of 25,000 TikTok accounts managed via a Telegram channel accessed by roughly 1,000 users up to the presidential elections of November 24, 2024 – was negligible when compared to the substantial state-funded allocations made

coordinating financial representative, as mandated by electoral law" (*Press release of November 28, 2024*). In conclusion, "the visibility of that candidate increased significantly compared to other candidates who were recognized by TikTok's algorithms as presidential contenders, and whose promoted content was heavily filtered, exponentially reducing their visibility among platform users" (*Press release of November 28, 2024*, <https://csat.presidency.ro/ro/comuni/sedinta-consiliului-suprem-de-aparare-a-tarii1732806302>).

⁶ Romania's intelligence services raised suspicions regarding the involvement of a foreign state actor (mentioning the Russian Federation) in the presidential elections. This actor allegedly interfered maliciously with the electoral process through a network of approximately 25,000 TikTok accounts. These accounts, associated with Georgescu's campaign, were coordinated via the Russian messaging app Telegram. In particular, the channel @propagatorcg (created in June 2024 and described as "Propagator – Get involved, Romania's Renaissance, Food, Water, Energy") was used, growing from 1,088 subscribers on election day to 5,005 users by December 1, 2024, the date of the parliamentary elections. Many of these accounts had been created as early as 2016 but were activated only two weeks prior to the presidential election. Nearly 800 TikTok accounts had remained inactive until November 11, 2024, after which they were deployed at full operational capacity. TikTok is criticized for not labeling Georgescu as a political candidate, granting him preferential treatment and increasing his exposure compared to other officially registered presidential candidates. Georgescu's visibility on the platform resulted from a sophisticated, orchestrated campaign exploiting algorithms and multiple accounts, accompanied by large-scale promotion, apparently financed from external sources, with estimated expenditures of USD 381,000 in a single month, carried out without legal transparency. As a result, Georgescu experienced a sharp rise between November 13 and 26, 2024, reaching 9th place globally in TikTok's trending videos. This surge was not deemed artificial, as hundreds of millions of views were recorded, especially after his victory in the first round of the presidential election. Additionally, more than 85,000 cyberattacks from 33 countries were detected targeting the IT systems supporting the electoral infrastructure (Permanent Electoral Authority, Special Telecommunications Service), with attempts to exfiltrate access credentials for "bec.ro," "roaep.ro," and "registrulelectoral.ro." Ultimately, Georgescu is accused of benefiting from opaque and unregistered campaign financing. Although he officially reported an electoral budget of zero lei, intelligence services identified donations for online campaign promotion exceeding 1 million euros, from undeclared sources (*Press release of December 4, 2024*).

available to his principal rivals, Ciolacu (incumbent Prime Minister and PSD president) and Ciucă (former Prime Minister and PNL president)⁷. In terms of resources allocated for the 2024 electoral campaign, the disparity between Georgescu and his main rivals⁸ exceeds a ratio of 1 to 10. Such a disproportion can only be likened to the biblical struggle of David against Goliath – albeit a Goliath replicated many times over would be more appropriate. Regarding the presumed support gained from a foreign state actor in favor of Georgescu, Romanian authorities have not produced tangible evidence confirming Russia’s involvement in the 2024 presidential campaign; instead, they have limited themselves to articulating suspicions.

Following the annulment of the presidential elections by the Constitutional Court of Romania on December 6, 2024, the Prosecutor General’s Office initiated legal proceedings against Georgescu. Several criminal investigations were launched, which remain ongoing at the time of writing this article (August 2025), focusing on alleged electoral criminal offenses⁹. Subsequently, on August 4, 2025, Georgescu was formally charged, including with complicity in an attempted coup d’état¹⁰.

What remains deeply concerning for the Romanian society as a whole, particularly for its political sphere, the judiciary, and the intelligence services, is the persistent misinterpretation of the electorate’s intent: Romanians voted for Georgescu not because of his TikTok campaign, but to express their discontent with the political establishment and the mainstream parties, PSD and PNL. 2024 saw a surprise candidate, Georgescu, transformed into a privileged collector of political dissatisfaction. The reason lies in the fact that, during Klaus Iohannis’s second term at the Cotroceni Palace (2019–2024),

⁷ From the public subsidy of €32 million received from the state budget in 2023 by the mainstream parties (PSD and PNL), approximately €20 million was spent on unmarked political advertising in the media (see <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/partide-bani-presa-propaganda-lege-neschimbata/32897063.html>). The public subsidy allocated from the state budget to PSD and PNL in 2024 increased sharply, by more than €20 million, reaching a historic high of nearly €55 million (see <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/subventii-partide-2024-cheltuieli/33259025.html>). Half of this amount, €28 million, was spent on unmarked propaganda in the media during the first 10 months of 2024 (see <http://www.banipartide.ro/subventii>). In this context, the double standard of the Romanian state is notable: it has never sanctioned the illegal advertising carried out by PSD and PNL through improper labeling in the media, yet it reproaches the independent candidate Călin Georgescu – who allegedly employed similar methods on TikTok during the 2024 electoral campaign.

⁸ The (ridiculous and pointless) campaign to raise the political visibility of candidate Nicolae Ciucă – by saturating the country with billboards promoting a book titled “A Soldier in the Service of the Country”, which the former Prime Minister and PNL president is presumed to have authored – cost at least twice as much (€2.5 million) as the total financial support (€1 million) allegedly received by the independent candidate Georgescu, according to intelligence services (see <https://snoop.ro/pretul-cartii-lui-ciuca-3-000-de-exemplare-tiparite-si-promovate-cu-25-milioane-de-euro>).

⁹ For more information on how the international press reported on the hearing of Georgescu before the Prosecutor General’s Office in this context, see <https://www.news.ro/externe/update-presa-internationala-consemneaza-audierea-candidatului-pro-rus-calin-georgescu-in-contextul-anchetei-privind-anularea-alegerilor-prezidentiale-1922400726002025021521946982>.

¹⁰ For more information regarding the charges brought against Călin Georgescu by the Prosecutor General’s Office – namely, two counts related to the offense of committing acts against the constitutional order and the continuous dissemination of false information – the analysis published by HotNews.ro is available <https://hotnews.ro/calin-georgescu-chemat-din-nou-la-parchetul-general-dupa-ce-procurorii-au-audiat-18-mercenari-din-gruparea-lui-horatiu-potra-2037704>. As of August 2025, at the time of writing this article, no final court ruling had been issued in the case of Georgescu, and he remains protected by the constitutional presumption of innocence.

the mainstream parties became cartelized and oligarchized in the exercise of power, while the rotation of the office of Prime Minister between PSD and PNL functioned seamlessly. Throughout this period, the President of Romania appeared to confine his role to ceremonial duties, functioning primarily as the country's foremost "tourist". Multiple luxury aircraft were leased at a cost of €15 million to facilitate the President's unrestricted travel abroad, ostensibly for official visits that, in reality, brought no diplomatic, financial, geopolitical, geostrategic, or economic benefit to Romania¹¹. Consequently, Romanian voters sought to electorally penalize the perceived arrogance of PSD and PNL, which was evident both in their governance and in the conduct of the presidency held by PNL. In response, many cast their votes for Georgescu as an expression of political frustration.

The victory of the TikTok candidate in the Romanian presidential election sent shockwaves in the national and international media. Georgescu's success was all the more surprising since everyone, including his voters, would only become aware of him after he won the elections, a fact that may seem paradoxical in a mature society. Georgescu was virtually unknown before the night of November 24, 2024. From that moment onward, the world, whether euphoric or apprehensive, enthusiastic or anxious, was left questioning the identity of the individual whom Romanians had unexpectedly chosen as their president, a candidate who won the election with minimal campaign expenditure¹². The media around the world immediately began to label him, in keeping with the usual practice of political journalism, as an ultranationalist, populist, right-wing extremist, pro-Russian, or critic towards NATO.

After November 24, 2024, the Romanian society was taken aback as a flood of previously overlooked content surfaced from the depths of the internet, content that Georgescu had consistently promoted over time via various interviews and podcasts. This material included a wide array of controversial claims, scientific inaccuracies, historical distortions, demonstrably false statements, conspiracy theories, gross misinformation, naive mysticism, emphatic absurdities, sensationalist rhetoric, scandalous exaggerations, and hallucinatory commentary, all of which had gone largely unnoticed until his unexpected rise to prominence. Before the date of winning the presidential elections, all these astonishing statements were completely obscure, without any significant social or political impact. Among other claims, Georgescu explicitly and unequivocally stated that he had interacted with beings from an extraterrestrial realm ("I met another species, in no case a human species"); that the nanochips in Pepsi "enter your body the same way they would a laptop"; that humans never reached the moon and the moon landing was a manipulation; that the Egyptian pyramids were not used for their intended purpose; that birth by caesarean section breaks the divine thread; that Lucian Blaga is banned in Romania; that water is not H₂O, but rather information and spirit; that the SARS-CoV-2 virus does not exist, because no one has ever seen it; that the only true science in the world is Jesus Christ; that Proto-Romanian was the root of the Latin language, not the other way around; that the globalists seeking world control are not a human species; and that very soon, humans will no longer use phones but will communicate through telepathy – just as plants, birds, animals, and life itself supposedly did on Earth during the time of Stephen the Great, prince of Moldavia (1457-1504). Georgescu described Corneliu Zelea Codreanu as a genius and characterized the Legionary Movement as a unique phenomenon on planet Earth, claiming it elevated individual consciousness to

¹¹ For more information about President Klaus Iohannis' travel costs abroad, see <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/avioane-private-inchiriate-de-iohannis/33352504.html>.

¹² I have to reassert that the sum of €1 million, which Georgescu is accused of not declaring by the intelligence services, is negligible when compared to the tens of millions of euros reportedly circulated by his main opponents, Ciolacu and Ciucă (press release of December 4, 2024).

the level of national sovereignty. He also asserted that history is false and, specifically, that the captain of the Iron Guard had no involvement in the actions commonly attributed to him, namely, the ordered assassinations. Georgescu argued that, much like Jesus Christ, Codreanu was a dangerous figure and was ultimately eliminated through betrayal¹³.

To any reasonable observer, such preposterous assertions represent glaring aberrations. Only a political harlequin like Georgescu could advance such baseless speculations, which directly clash even with the scientific understanding expected of a middle school student. As never before, the national political scene turned into a *commedia dell'arte*, where costumed and masked cabotins, improvised harlequins, emerged victorious presidential elections. Across several episodes, Romanians watched, either with delight or dismay, depending on their electoral preferences, the remarkable performance skills and theatrical flair of presidential candidate Georgescu. Notably, he often mimicked characters from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In December 2024, Georgescu imitated the elf queen Galadriel, when he told his admirers, in a melancholic tone, after the annulment of the elections, that the world had changed, that it was no longer what it used to be, which could be felt *in the rippling of the water, in the rustling of the forest, in the breath of the wind, in the vibration of the earth*. In May 2025, the TikTok candidate reproduced the speech Gandalf, when he told supporters disappointed by the election results *to cry, but not despair, because not all tears are bad*. In February 2025, he replaced Japanese mythology from the introductory part of the film *The Last Samurai* by Edward Zwick (2003), with Dacian mythology, after which he narrated the rest of the text unchanged, in an open display of intellectual imposture¹⁴.

In Romania, the jester was poised to become king or, more likely, a grotesque tyrant, if we are to follow the archetypal model regarded as classical since antiquity. However, society, including politics, does not criminalize foolishness, comedy, and even madness unless they are accompanied by actual crimes. The issue for Georgescu emerged when some of his antics, both humorous and scandalous,

¹³ Additional insights into Georgescu's contentious remarks may be found by consulting the following public sources: Europa FM, Antena 3 CNN, G4Media, and Cristian Hagi (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSAQaAxtel>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YH9fgEMXJYc>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yi2qzx_OdfY, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQbp6ug09A>).

¹⁴ The paragraph about traditional Japan, as expressed by the character Simon Graham ("They say that Japan was created by a sword. They say that the ancient gods dipped a coral blade in the ocean, and when they took it out, four perfect drops fell back into the sea, and those drops became the islands of Japan. I say that Japan was created by a group of people, warriors willing to give their lives for what seems to have become a forgotten word: honour") becomes, in the plagiarized expression of Georgescu, a fraudulent and unintentionally parodic attempt to pay homage to Dacia, as the cradle of the civilization of the Romanian people, by imitating the Japanese text ("Romania was created by the energy given by Zalmoxis, the supreme god of our Geto-Dacian ancestors. 2500 years ago, 7 units of consciousness broke away from the energy condensed 5 million years ago. They broke away to embody and shape a new evolutionary meaning to our civilization. One of the 7 was embodied in Romania and it was called Zalmoxis. I believe that Romania was created by a handful of brave warriors and worthy people who gave their lives for a word that seems forgotten today: honour"). Regarding the political speeches of Georgescu during which he imitates lines inspired by famous films, see G4Media.ro, Hotnews.ro, and Libertatea (<https://www.g4media.ro/video-calin-georgescu-nou-mesaj-inspirat-din-vrajitorul-gandalf-din-stapanul-inelelor-plangeti-dragii-mei-dar-nu-deznadajduiti-nu-toate-lacrimile-sunt-rele-val-de-ironii-onlin.html>, <https://hotnews.ro/calin-georgescu-inca-un-discurs-cu-replici-copiate-dintr-un-film-razboinici-viteji-care-si-au-dat-viata-pentru-un-cuvant-ce-azi-pare-uitat-1896094>, and <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/calin-georgescu-a-plagiat-o-pe-regina-elfa-galadriel-din-stapanul-inelelor-intr-un-videoclip-in-care-vorbeste-despre-cum-s-a-schibat-lumea-nu-mai-este-ce-a-fost-5118215>).

began to intersect with the Criminal Code. This refers to his glorification of Romania's legionary past, an act legally classified as a criminal offense. Thus, the Prosecutor General's Office re-enters the scene. By the Public Ministry Indictment of July 1, 2025, drawn up by Chief Prosecutor Marius Iacob from the Criminal Investigation Service of the Criminal Investigation Division of the Prosecutor's Office attached to the High Court of Cassation and Justice, Georgescu was officially indicted and sent to trial in file no. 2226/221/P/2023/d1. He was charged under Article 5 of Government Emergency Ordinance (OUG) 31/2002 with publicly promoting the cult of persons convicted of crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, as well as with publicly promoting fascist, legionary, racist, or xenophobic ideas, concepts, or doctrines. On August 4, 2025, Georgescu was additionally indicted under Article 397 of the Criminal Code for complicity in an attempted coup d'état – acts committed against the constitutional order – supplementing the initial indictment issued under Article 5 of Government Emergency Ordinance (OUG) 31/2002.

Research questions, objectives, hypotheses, and scientific tools

This study explores the underlying factors contributing to the revival of Legionary ideology in contemporary Romania, a phenomenon reintroduced into public discourse by Călin Georgescu in the context of the (annulled) presidential elections scheduled for November 24, 2024. The study seeks to evaluate three scientific hypotheses, each derived from a set of guiding research questions. First, it is entirely valid to question whether the actions attributed to Georgescu, classified by the Prosecutor General's Office under Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 and Article 397 of the Criminal Code, truly align with the standard definitions of these offenses in contemporary criminal law. To address this doctrinal uncertainty, I have developed a research instrument, presented in Table 1, which this analysis aims to validate. Its purpose is to assess the conditions of typicality relevant to the charges brought against Georgescu.

If the first scientific hypothesis is confirmed, a second research question arises naturally: how serious is the public promotion of the cult of individuals guilty of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, as well as the public endorsement of fascist, legionary, racist, or xenophobic ideas, conceptions, or doctrines? In an effort to compare Romanian far-right movements with their European counterparts, Table 2 presents a semi-quantitative evaluation of the typology of European fascisms, classified as hybrid, classical, radical, and totalitarian, spanning the period from 1922 to 1975. This assessment uses doctrinal scoring based on five essential characteristics that define the structural criminality of these political regimes: authoritarian control, racial ideology, repression of the opposition, systemic crimes, and military expansionism.

If the research instrument in Table 2 is validated, it becomes necessary to critically examine the degree of ideological convergence between the core historical features of classical European fascism and the legionary-inspired political discourse of the sovereigntist candidate Georgescu, who, from a criminal standpoint, committed the criminal offense of campaigning using elements of Legionary propaganda. This assessment must be viewed through the legal framework of the Prosecutor General's Office, under Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 and Article 397 of the Criminal Code. To this end, I have formulated a research instrument which is summarized in Table 3.

Theoretical framework: Milestones in the academic definition of European and Romanian fascism

Addressing the core issue of the resurgence of Legionary ideology in contemporary Romania requires, above all, a comparative analysis between the accusations brought by the Prosecutor General's Office

and an established historical definition, both sociological and political, of European fascism and Romanian Legionary ideology. To begin with, it's essential to note that Romania's most prominent fascist movement, though not the only one, is the Legionary Movement, which operated under several different names throughout its existence (Legion of the Archangel Michael, Iron Guard, "Everything for the Country" Party). Therefore, an academically accepted and widely shared definition of European and Romanian fascism must be identified in the specialized academic literature, which has experienced a significant revival in recent decades, especially through analytical and comparative contributions that attempt to define the nature, structure and intensity of fascist regimes.

The specialized academic literature provides solid conceptual foundations for the theoretical delimitation of fascist ideology and regimes in Western Europe. Woolf (1969) proposes a comparative reading of fascisms, emphasizing their structural differences. Griffin (1995) formulates one of the most influential operational definitions of fascism – paligenetic ultranationalism – which emphasizes the national mythical regeneration. Thurlow (1999) contributes to the consolidation of political scientific analysis centered on organizational forms, public discourse and the relationship with liberal democracy, with a comparative analysis of the internal functioning of fascist movements. Mann (2004a) offers a sociological interpretation of fascism as a radical form of violent nationalism, proposing comparative variables regarding the exercise of power and repression (in Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Romania and Spain). Bosworth (2010) reassesses the Italian fascist regime, insisting on institutional continuities and the complexity of the relationship between leader, state and ideology, revealing both doctrinal features and those related to political practice.

Feldman, Turda, and Georgescu (2008) pave the way for a regional interpretation, emphasizing the distinctiveness of fascist movements in Central and Eastern Europe, with particularly noteworthy cases in Greece, Serbia, Ukraine, Croatia, and Hungary. In a similar comparative vein, Iordachi (2009) contends that fascism in Eastern Europe frequently emerged from a fusion of traditional authoritarianism and radical ideological mobilization.

Regarding Romanian fascism, Volovici (1991) analyses the anti-Semitic ideology of the interwar intelligentsia and its role in the radicalization of public discourse. Veiga (1993) provides a detailed synthesis of the Legionary Movement, highlighting its internal dynamics and its positioning within the broader European context. Ioanid (1994) documents the mechanisms of repression and extermination of the Romanian state during the Holocaust. Heinen (1999) examines the Iron Guard as a distinct form of radical, paramilitary fascism in Eastern Europe. Ionescu and Rotman (2003) underscore the authorities' complicity and ambiguity in responding to Legionary violence. Clark (2015) explores the symbolic and ritual mobilization of Legionary ideology through an approach shaped by theories of charisma and collective identity. Ornea (2015) presents a cultural critique of the interwar legacy of far-right intellectuals. Bucur (2019) and Grecu (2023) contribute to reshaping political memory, within legionary contexts, in Greater Romania. Iordachi (2023) resumes the typological analysis of Romanian far-right regimes in a comparative framework. Müller (2025) evaluates the national-legionary dictatorship in the context of collaboration with Nazi Germany. Schmitt (2022) and Niculescu (2017) offer biographical and critical interpretations of the legionary leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. Deletant (2008) and Harward (2024) deal with Romania's involvement in the Holocaust, with an emphasis on the crimes committed by the military occupation in Transnistria, demonstrating the systematic criminal nature of the Antonescu regime. Finally, the Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania (2004) remains the fundamental reference work on the responsibility of the Romanian state in extermination policies. The documentation charging Georgescu prepared by the Prosecutor General's Office for the Public Ministry's Indictment dated July 1, 2025 must not be

overlooked, as it synthesizes some of the most valuable Romanian and international theoretical contributions on fascist and Legionary ideology.

General methodological framework

Given the considerations outlined above, the present study employs a mixed methodology (structured around three different types of scientific analysis), legal (Table 1), doctrinal (Table 3) and comparative-evaluative (Table 2), which allows the analysis of (interwar) Romanian fascism and (contemporary) neo-fascism in the European context.

Methodological framework for the legal analysis. As indicated in the methodological commentary following Table 1, I sought to assess (through a legal lens) whether the indictment by the General Prosecutor's Office fulfils the conditions of typicality, in line with contemporary criminal doctrine (Mihail Udriou, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f, and 2025g), for the crime defined in Article 5 of OUG 31/2002, which criminalizes the promotion, in public, of the cult of persons guilty of committing crimes of genocide against humanity and war crimes, as well as the promotion, in public, of fascist, legionary, racist or xenophobic ideas, concepts or doctrines. This offense is punishable by imprisonment ranging from 3 months to 3 years, together with the prohibition of certain rights.

The typicality of the criminal offense involves verifying its constituent elements (objective and subjective components, active and passive subjects, consequences), in accordance with criminal law doctrine, which emphasizes the principle of legality (*nullum crimen sine lege*) and the requirement for clarity and predictability of criminal legislation (Article 1, Paragraph 5 of the Romanian Constitution and Article 7 of the European Convention on Human Rights). Contemporary doctrine (Mihail Udriou, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f, and 2025g) stresses the strict interpretation of special criminal legislation to prevent abuse, with a focus on intent and abstract social danger.

An analysis of the objective components, namely the material element, legal object, and consequences, reveals the typicality of the criminal offense under Article 5 of OUG 31/2002. The act involves the unequivocal public promotion, via channels accessible to an indeterminate audience (such as online interviews, public speeches, and internet posts), of the cult of certain figures (Codreanu, Antonescu) and Legionary ideas (including implicit racism and explicit authoritarianism). Such promotion creates a risk of incitement to extremism, as it may contribute to radicalization, thereby endangering national security and democratic order, the latter being fundamental social values protected by criminal law. Furthermore, Mihail Udriou (2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f, and 2025g) highlights that offenses of this kind pertain to an abstract societal threat – as seen in this instance – rather than result in direct, physical harm.

The verification of the subjective element – such as intent or culpability – also confirms the criminal typicality of the acts for which Georgescu is indicted. These were committed with direct intent (*dolus*), demonstrated through repetition and contextual evidence, reflecting a deliberate and conscious pursuit of an extremist political objective – namely, incitement to nationalist adherence and violence. Despite the criminal typicality, until a final and irrevocable court ruling is issued, Georgescu fully benefits from the constitutional presumption of innocence, the doctrinal protection of the Venice Commission (which warns against risks to freedom of expression), and the necessary judicial review of proportionality, as required by the European Court of Human Rights, between the clarity of the offense and democratic necessity.

Methodological framework for the comparative-evaluative analysis. Upon a legal confirmation as to Georgescu's affinity to the Legionary Movement, it becomes essential to examine Romanian interwar fascism within the broader European context. This helps to underscore the profound danger

such a political stance which is otherwise historically culpable and legally condemned may pose to democratic society as a whole, and to Romanian democracy in particular. As demonstrated in the preceding section, there is a scholarly consensus that fascism takes distinct forms depending on specific national contexts. This comparative dimension has been explored in Table 2. It is important to interpret this observation as indicating that, while the essence of fascism is universally criminal and repressive, the degree of violence it entails varies across different societies.

Therefore, this table includes a comparative analysis, by the degree of systemic violence, of European fascist regimes (including the Legionary and Antonescian ideologies) and proposes a doctrinal scoring, using a semi-quantitative evaluation grid, with an approach inspired by the methodology of Weberian ideal types, reinterpreted, readapted and reconstructed, in the context of European fascism, following the works published by Payne (1996), Linz (2000), and Paxton (2004). We measured the extreme right-wing political regimes, in terms of systemic repression (by irremediably affecting people's negative rights and freedoms), based on an evaluation grid with the following five analytical variables: authoritarian political control; racial ideology; repression of the opposition; systemic crimes; military expansionism. Each of these five dimensions was assessed on a scale of 1 to 10, by means of doctrinal scoring, with the following measurement levels: low (1), moderate (2-4), high (5-7), extreme (8-9), total (10). For the assessment scale measuring the level of systemic crimes, we employed the following range: low (1), moderate (2-4), high (5-7), pogromic (8-9), and genocidal (10).

These variables were extracted from research considered canonical for the study of European fascism using the structured focused comparison method (George and Bennett, 2005). Each dimension (measured from 1 to 10) was developed, selected and defined based on comparative empirical research – on the manifestations of fascism in interwar and postwar Europe, but also during the Second World War, carried out mainly by Mazower (2000), Mann (2004b) and Snyder (2010). Additionally, to maintain consistency in scoring the regimes, we relied on scientifically validated sources to describe the systemic criminality inherent in fascist political repression (Burleigh and Wippermann, 1991; Kershaw, 2008; Kallis, 2009). Table 2 presents a semi-quantitative ordinal scale with descriptive labels, constructed using qualitative criteria to evaluate the level of systemic criminality in each European fascist regime between 1922 and 1975. Every effort has been made to ensure that this assessment is not arbitrary, but rather historically grounded, methodologically valid, and measurably comparative.

Methodological framework for the doctrinal analysis. Table 3 presents a comparative assessment, using a numerical scale from 1 to 10, of the degree of overlap (where 1 indicates no overlap and 10 represents complete overlap) between the material acts for which Georgescu is indicted by the General Prosecutor's Office (according to Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 and Article 397 of the Criminal Code) and the historical doctrinal characteristics of classical European fascism (in particular, the Italian Mussolini ideology and Spanish Francoism). The assessment of the doctrinal features of classical European fascism is done through the structured focused comparison method (George and Bennett, 2005), which involves the application of a common scoring grid on analytical variables obtained by focusing on relevant and general aspects. The analytical variables (classical doctrinal features) are: (1) radical mono-identitarian nationalism, (2) charismatic and providential authoritarianism, (3) military dictatorship or one-party system, (4) state corporatism (with politically directed economy), (5) militarism and politically instrumented violence, (6) xenophobia and racism (institutionalized anti-Semitism), (7) anti-democratic ideology and anti-parliamentarianism, (8) propaganda and media control, (9) palingenesis (creation of the "new man"), (10) ideologically instrumented mysticism, and (11) anti-Marxism (anti-socialism, anti-egalitarianism, anti-materialism).

Each of these variables receives a score between 1 and 10, and the average provides an aggregate indicator of adhesion to fascism: low (1), moderate (2-4), high (5-7), extreme (8-9), total (10).

This comparative doctrinal scoring method ensures methodological coherence and comparability across cases. When analyzing the Romanian case, the analysis is supported by the specialized literature on Legionary ideology (Clark, 2015; Iordachi, 2023) and Antonescu ideology (Deletant, 2008; Harward, 2024), complemented by major works on the logic of extermination and fascist ideologies in Europe (Snyder, 2010; Mann, 2004a; Mann, 2004b). Table 3 is, therefore, the result of applying a method derived from the classical doctrinal analysis of generic fascism (Griffin, 1993; Paxton, 2004; Gentile, 2006).

Research results: legal analysis

As previously emphasized, the Prosecutor General's Office found the defendant, Călin Georgescu, guilty of the criminal offense outlined in Article 5 of OUG 31/2002, in conjunction with Article 35, Paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code. This refers to the public promotion of the cult of individuals convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, as well as the public dissemination of fascist, legionary, racist, or xenophobic ideas, conceptions, or doctrines, carried out in a continuous manner. Specifically, Georgescu is indicted for having publicly promoted – between June 16, 2020 and May 16, 2025, at various intervals and under the same criminal resolution (June 16, 2020, September 2020, October 2, 2021, September 1, 2024 and May 16, 2025) – fascist, legionary and xenophobic ideas, conceptions and doctrines, such as the mass mobilization of the nation for its regeneration and rebirth through palingenesis (the creation of a “new man”), the propagation of Orthodox Christian mysticism, the implicit acceptance of certain violent means, the justification of the emergence of a charismatic, predestined, and authoritarian leader, and the excessive glorification of the historical past in contrast to the present situation, which is portrayed as profoundly damaging to the dignity of the national community and placing it in a state of victimhood due to the actions of enemies of the state, artificially identified as external state actors, expression of populist ultranationalism. The indictment also cites Georgescu’s cultivation of Marshal Ion Antonescu’s legacy, despite his definitive conviction for war crimes, portraying him as a national hero and imitating his speech, gestures, and tone. Additionally, Georgescu performed the legionary salute during a speech delivered to protesters opposing COVID-19 restrictions in University Square, Bucharest, on October 2, 2021 (Indictment issued by the Public Prosecutor’s Office on July 1, 2025).

I shall now provide a brief review of the established facts¹⁵. Georgescu made a series of laudatory remarks about several historical figures from the political past of the Legionary Movement, such as Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Ion Antonescu, Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, Ioan Ianolide, Ioan Moța and Vasile Marin, Gheorghe Cantacuzino-Grănicerul, Nicoleta Nicolescu, Gheorghe Manu, Iustin Pârvu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Petre Țuțea, Nae Ionescu, Constantin Noica, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, and Lucian Blaga. More serious than the homage paid to all these Legionary figures is the self-referential allusion made by Georgescu when he suggests that only a man of integrity (as he considers himself) will carry forward “this holy light of love for nation, land, and language” inspired by the Legionary Movement

¹⁵ Details of the material acts incriminated by the Prosecutor General's Office against candidate Călin Georgescu can be found in the Public Ministry Indictment dated July 1, 2025. The document was prepared by Chief Prosecutor Marius Iacob of the Criminal Investigation Service within the Criminal Investigation Division of the Prosecutor's Office attached to the High Court of Cassation and Justice, in case file no. 2226/221/P/2023/d1 (https://www.luju.ro/static/files/2025/iulie/01/rechizitoriu_calin_georgescu.pdf).

and its leader, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. In other words, Georgescu portrays himself as continuing the thought and action of Zelea Codreanu. In a television broadcast, he quoted in full a phrase from his political mentor (Codreanu) with an evidently self-referential tone: “He who fights, even alone, against a band of strong men, for his nation, his country, and for God, will never be defeated.” This quote is taken directly from the Codreanu’s book *For the Legionaries*: “From that moment, the belief took root in me and will never leave me: that he who fights, even alone, for God and his nation, will never be defeated” (Codreanu, 1936, 22). Additionally, Georgescu closely imitated not only the words, but also the gestures (specifically, the Legionary salute) and the tone of Marshal Ion Antonescu from his speech delivered at the Great Legionary Assembly on October 6, 1940: “Through peace and faith, through order and unity, through work and love, with God ahead” (Indictment issued by the Public Prosecutor’s Office on July 1, 2025). These electoral comments, which express praise for Legionary and Antonescian ideologies, were legally classified and analyzed in Table 1 in relation to contemporary criminal doctrine (Mihail Udrouiu, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f, and 2025g), in order to verify the criminal typology defined in Article 5 of OUG 31/2002.

Table 1. Legal evaluation of whether the conditions of criminal typology are met under Article 5 of OUG 31/2002, concerning Călin Georgescu’s public promotion of fascist ideologies and the cult of individuals convicted of war crimes.

Analyzed element	Fulfilment of the analyzed element	Detailed argument
The alleged acts (the five material acts) occurred in public	Yes	Speeches in public squares, on TV, in online interviews, all within the public domain.
The alleged five material acts represent political promotion rather than merely conveying a personal interpretation of historical events	Yes	Repeated use, laudatory language, and precise imitation of convicted leaders within politically significant settings.
The alleged five material acts involve promoting the cult of persons convicted of war crimes	Yes	Antonescu, Zelea Codreanu, Moța and Marin are repeatedly presented as national heroes.
There is either direct or indirect intent behind the commission of the alleged five material acts	Yes	Coherent language, explicit idealization, programmatic argumentation.
Continued pattern (criminal repetitiveness) of the alleged five material acts	Yes	Five material acts, in different years, with the same ideological content.

Methodological remarks: This table serves a normative role, intended to assess whether the conditions for the criminal offense outlined in Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 – concerning the promotion of the cult of individuals convicted of war crimes – have been met. The method used is deductive, based on the analysis of the constitutive elements of the criminal offense (objective and subjective side), in accordance with contemporary criminal doctrine. This analysis is correlated with the criminal, legal and doctrinal classification of the glorified persons (Ion Antonescu, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu) as war criminals (1946) and traitors (1938), according to the final court sentences, the normative acts in force and the established historical research.

I carried out a legal analysis of the circumstances in which the acts charged by the Prosecutor General's Office against Georgescu meet the constitutive elements of the crime in Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 regarding the public promotion of fascist ideologies and the cult of persons convicted of war crimes. All the conditions of typicality set out in Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 are fulfilled, so that it may be concluded that the acts charged against Călin Georgescu are repetitive, publicly expressed, ideologically consistent, and clearly aimed at the indirect yet systematic promotion of a fascist ideology and the veneration of leaders (fascists and Legionaries) criminally convicted of genocide against humanity and war crimes.

Research results: comparative-evaluative analysis

Table 2 holds particular political and historical importance, as it illustrates the high level of systemic criminality associated with Romanian fascist movements: The Legionary (1940-1941) and Antonescian ideology (1941-1945) represent radical forms of European fascism, surpassed in systemic criminality only by German Nazism. Alongside the Croatian Ustasha (Ustaša) (1941-1945) and Hungarian Szálasi's ideology (1944-1945), the Legionary Movement (1940-1941) and Antonescu Regime (1941-1945) occupied a brutal second place, just behind German Nazism, in the hierarchy of the most uncompromising and repressive national expressions of European fascism.

A defining feature of both the Legionary and Antonescian ideology was their strong religious mysticism rooted in Orthodox Christianity, which served as an ideological justification for purges and mass exterminations. Legionary and Antonescian ideology functioned as a political religion in the fullest sense of the term, transforming the murder of Jews into a macabre article of faith. For this reason, Romania experienced, around the time of World War II, the second most virulent form of anti-Semitism in Europe, measured by the intensity of political repression. Unlike the racially driven anti-Semitism of German Nazism, Romania's was religiously motivated, making it theologically aberrant. Legionary and Antonescian ideology, alongside the Croatian Ustasha (Ustaša) (1941-1945) and Hungarian Szálasi's ideology (1944-1945), were among the most radically anti-Semitic far-right movements in Europe, nearly as extreme as German Nazism, though not equally exterminatory. Therefore, the Legionary and Antonescian propaganda promoted by Călin Georghescu in relation to some of the most criminal European fascist regimes constitutes an extreme manifestation of political culpability.

The table contains an ordinal scale, with descriptive labels, developed on the basis of qualitative criteria (defined according to five fundamental political dimensions): authoritarian political control (suppression of political pluralism), racial ideology (official implementation of racism), repression of the opposition (exercising violence against domestic political opponents), systemic crimes (mass extermination of minorities, such as pogroms and genocide), and military expansionism (external territorial aggression through territorial annexationism). Each of these five dimensions was assessed, by uniform political scoring, on a scale of 1 to 10, with the following measurement levels: low (1), moderate (2-4), high (5-7), extreme (8-9), total (10). The scale measuring the level of systemic crimes is the following: low (1), moderate (2-4), high (5-7), pogromic (8-9), genocidal (10). For each fascist regime, a general arithmetic mean was computed, with equal weights for all scores, leading to the following classification: hybrid fascism (1-3.9), classical fascism (4-6.9), radical fascism (7-9.9), and totalitarian fascism (10). The fascist regimes are ordered in ascending order, according to the general mean and ideal typology, from the most moderate to the most extremist, that is, from hybrid fascism (which contains fascist elements only partially and of reduced intensity) and classical fascism (which must be defined by coherent doctrinal and institutional patterns) to radical fascism (with a high level of political violence, pogrom racism and territorial expansionism) and totalitarian fascism (Nazism is the canonical example for the absolute and complete form of fascism, which involves absolute control over society, genocidal racism, planned extermination, imperialist expansionism).

The typology in Table 2, resulting from the comparative assessment of European fascisms, classifies the regimes into four distinct categories, differentiated according to their dictatorial and criminal nature. The classification is based on measurable criteria, such as the degree of authoritarianism of the regime, the official existence of racial ideology, the repression of political opposition, the involvement of the regime in systematic crimes and annexationist aggression.

Table 2. The comparative evaluation of fascist regimes in Europe (1922-1975), based on five analytical variables measuring the intensity of systemic repression.

Political name of the fascist regime (leader), country (historical period)	Level of authoritarian political control	Level of political racism	Level of repression against political opposition	Level of systemic crimes	Level of military aggression, external expansionism and territorial annexationism	Average score, classification in the typology of fascist regimes, analytical comments
<i>Estado Novo</i> (Salazar and Caetano) Portugal (1933-1974)	3 moderate	1 low	2 moderate	1 low	2 moderate	1.8 (hybrid fascism) Corporatist authoritarian regime, without racist or expansionist dimensions. Has committed no systemic crimes.
<i>The August 4th Regime</i> (Metaxas) Greece (1936-1941)	5 high	2 moderate	4 moderate	2 moderate	2 moderate	3.0 (hybrid fascism) Regime influenced by Italian fascism, without racial policies or expansionist ambitions.
<i>Sanacja</i> (Pilsudski) Poland (1926-1939)	6 high	3 moderate	5 high	3 moderate	2 moderate	3.8 (hybrid fascism) Militarized authoritarian regime, with nationalist elements, but without doctrinal racism or overt expansionist policies.
<i>Francoism</i> (Franco) Spain (1939-1975)	6 high	4 moderate	5 high	4 moderate	2 moderate	4.2 (classical fascism) Authoritarian clerical-militarist regime, severe repression, but without expansionism or genocidal policies.
<i>Austro-fascism</i> (Dollfuss and Schuschnigg) Austria (1933-1938)	7 high	3 moderate	6 high	3 moderate	2 moderate	4.2 (classical fascism) Clerical-nationalist regime inspired by Italian corporatism. Political repression with no major systemic crimes or expansionism.
<i>The Vichy Regime</i> (Pétain) France (1940-1944)	7 high	7 high	6 high	7 high	3 moderate	6.0 (classical fascism) Puppet regime and collaborator with Nazi Germany, involved in deportations, with racial and repressive policies.
<i>Mussolini's Fascism</i> (Mussolini) Kingdom of Italy (1922-1943)	7 high	5 high	6 high	4 moderate	9 extreme	6.2 (classical fascism) Institutionalized fascist regime; racial accents since 1938, notable military expansionism.

Horthysm (Horthy) Hungary (1920-1944)	7 high	7 high	7 high	7 high	6 high	6.6 (classical fascism) Expansionist authoritarian regime; participation in the invasion of the USSR, anti-Jewish purge.
Slovak clerical-fascist regime (Jozef Tiso) Slovak State (1939-1945)	8 extreme	9 extreme	8 extreme	9 pogromic	5 high	7.4 (radical fascism) Puppet regime; deportations and purges in collaboration with Nazi Germany.
Salò Regime (Mussolini) Italian Social Republic (1943-1945)	8 extreme	8 extreme	8 extreme	7 high	7 high	7.6 (radical fascism) Puppet regime of Nazi Germany, with racial policies and increased repression. Military collaboration with the Nazis.
National-Legionary State (Antonescu and Sima) Romania (1940-1941)	7 High	8 extreme	8 extreme	9 pogromic	6 high	7.6 (radical fascism) Violent insurrectionary regime; purges, pogroms, radical ideological control.
Antonescu military regime (Antonescu) Romania (1941-1944)	8 extreme	9 extreme	8 extreme	8 pogromic	7 high	8.0 (radical fascism) Fascist military regime, racial policies and crimes in Transnistria. Participation in the USSR invasion and the Holocaust.
Ustaša (Pavelić) Croatia (1941-1945)	9 extreme	10 total	9 extreme	10 genocidal	6 high	8.8 (radical fascism) Terrorist and genocidal regime; extermination of Serbs, Roma and Jews.
Arrow Cross Party regime (Szálasi) Hungary (1944-1945)	9 extreme	9 extreme	9 extreme	10 genocidal	7 high	8.8 (radical fascism) Exterminatory regime, in the service of Nazi Germany; deportations and violent internal repression.
Nazism (Hitler) Germany (1933-1945)	10 total	10 total	10 total	10 genocidal	10 total	10 (totalitarian fascism) Absolute model of totalitarian fascism: planned extermination system, total control, Holocaust, world war.

Methodological remarks: The regimes have been classified and defined, in general, using the following sources: Burleigh and Wippermann (1991) for systemic crimes and institutional racism; Clark (2015) and Iordachi (2023) for Romanian Legionary ideology and the cult of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu; Deletant (2008) and Harward (2024) for the racial repression characteristic of Romanian Antonescian ideology; George and Bennett (2005) for the structured and focused comparison method; Griffin (1993 and 2005) for generic fascism understood as a modern political religion; Kallis (2009) for the criminality of collaborationist political regimes with collaborating Nazi Germany; Kershaw (2008) for the Holocaust and the criminal decisions of Nazi Germany; Linz (2000) for the typology of fascist political regimes; Mann (2004b) for the explanation of the genocidal and pogrom dimensions; Mazower (2000) for the comparative analysis of fascist regimes; Paxton (2004) for the definition of doctrinal and comparative grids; Payne (1996) for the definition of fascist regimes and the degree of political radicalization; Snyder (2010) for mass murders in fascist Europe

The four archetypal forms of fascist regimes (listed from lightness to harshness, on the scale of political violence) are the following: (1) hybrid fascism¹⁶ (protofascism); (2) classical fascism¹⁷ (moderate); (3) radical fascism¹⁸ (extermination); and (4) totalitarian fascism¹⁹ (genocidal Nazism). The fact that the National-Legionary State - Romania (rated on the political violence scale with an average score of 7.6 out of 10) and Antonescu's Romania (rated with an average score of 8.0 out of 10) experienced a form of radical fascism, with exterminatory repression, placing it immediately after German Nazism in terms of criminal intensity, makes the contemporary electoral propaganda by Călin Georgescu in favor of such a political regime all the more culpable in terms of criminal liability.

Research results: doctrinal analysis

The final part of the presentation is dedicated to analyzing the public behavior (for which Georgescu is indicted by the General Prosecutor's Office) and the comparative evaluation of Georgescu's discourse through historical overlap with the main doctrinal features of classical European fascism. Specifically, we refer to the Italian (Mussolini) and Spanish (Franco) versions of fascism, as synthesized in Table 2. A doctrinal comparison with Romanian Legionary fascism is theoretically unnecessary, since it represents a radical form of fascism, marked by pogromic manifestations and extreme political repression under a strongly dictatorial regime – a situation that cannot be directly attributed to Georgescu. Therefore, regarding Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 (Legionary and Antonescian propaganda) and Article 397 of the Criminal Code (attempted coup d'état), we will examine in Table 3 whether fascist doctrine is defining for Georgescu's political behavior.

The table employs a semi-quantitative doctrinal assessment using a grid of 11 typological features characteristic of classical European fascism, specifically referencing Italian Mussolini ideology and Spanish Francoism, chosen via the structured focused comparison method (George and Bennett, 2005). The evaluation of each analytical variable is made on a numerical scale from 1 to 10. The degree

¹⁶ Hybrid fascism (or protofascism) refers to authoritarian regimes influenced by fascism, but which do not entirely conform to the ideological and structural features of classical fascism (for instance, protofascism often lacks a single ruling party). Such regimes incorporate practices rooted in fascism – like political repression and militant nationalism – yet maintain certain aspects of the traditional order, sometimes even preserving a fragile appearance of democracy or liberalism.

¹⁷ Classical (moderate) fascism refers to the fascist regimes themselves, generally based on a single party (de facto or de jure), a totalitarian ideology (with practices of moderate severity), and clear political repression, but without systematic extermination. These are criminal regimes that eliminate political opponents (without ethnic or racial discrimination) through covert police methods – typically involving arbitrary arrests, as well as crimes that appear to be common law offenses but are ideologically motivated. The state is organized according to corporatist principles, with strict control over civil society.

¹⁸ Radical (extermination-based) fascism refers to regimes characterized by systematic ethnic purging, extreme political violence, and a violently ultranationalist ideology, frequently including an explicit racial dimension. Such regimes often collaborate militarily with Hitler's Germany and display ideological and political subordination to the Nazi regime. This form of fascism is marked by the systematic use of terror, mass purges, the extermination of opponents, institutionalized racism, and either an alliance with or imitation of Nazism.

¹⁹ Totalitarian fascism (genocidal Nazism) is the absolute extreme form of fascist totalitarianism, characterized by a systematized racial ideology, policies of mass extermination, and total control over social, political, and cultural life. German Nazism is the most criminal version of fascism and embodies the peak of state violence in modern Europe, through the mass extermination of Jews (the Holocaust), concentration camps, mass racial cleansing, and total war. The only example of such a totalitarian fascist regime with strategically planned genocidal repression is the Germany of Führer Adolf Hitler (1933–1945).

of overlap (where 1 means no overlap and 10 means absolute overlap) between the material acts for which Georgescu is indicted by the Prosecutor General's Office (according to Article 5 of OUG 31/2002 and Article 397 of the Criminal Code) and the historical doctrinal characteristics of classical European fascism (in particular, Italian Mussolini ideology and Spanish Francoism) is comparatively evaluated, having the following measurement levels: low (1), moderate (2-4), high (5-7), extreme (8-9), total (10).

Table 3. Comparative evaluation of the degree of overlap between the material acts for which Călin Georgescu is indicted by the General Prosecutor's Office and the classical characteristics of European fascism.

Doctrinal feature of classical European fascism	Material acts for which Georgescu is indicted (Article 5, OUG 31/2002 and Article 397, the Criminal Code)	Analytical comment on the degree of overlap	Score (1-10)
Radical mono-identitarian nationalism	Glorification of the legionary legacy, the mythologization of national history, and the persistent invocation of sovereignty rooted in collective identity.	His discourse expresses a consistent and populist ultra-nationalism, with ethnocentric mythological valences.	9 (extreme)
Charismatic and providential authoritarianism	Self-presentation as a providential leader, symbolic evocation of Codreanu as a political model of a saviour-hero.	Cultivating one's own image as a political saviour is reminiscent of the mythology of the charismatic fascist leader.	9 (extreme)
Military dictatorship or one-party state	It does not propose the abolition of parties or the establishment of a single party. It maintains a formal democratic discourse.	It does not call for the abolition of pluralism, but it falls within a systemic critical rhetoric against democracy.	3 (moderate)
State corporatism with politically directed economy	Criticizes globalism, but does not propose a corporatist or politically controlled economic model.	Does not propose a classic fascist economic system and lacks doctrinal articulation in the economic area.	3 (moderate)
Militarism and politically orchestrated violence	No direct instigation of physical violence, although the political complicity with the armed mercenaries led by Horațiu Potra, who intended to storm the capital, after the annulment of the presidential elections, in order to overthrow the constitutional order, cause social disorder, threaten and intimidate journalists, politicians and public figures, is extremely aggravating.	The model of political action is entirely inspired by classical fascism, through direct links between the supreme political leader and paramilitary groups (such as the one led by Horațiu Potra), which planned the violent overthrow of the constitutional order, according to the Prosecutor General's Office.	8 (extreme)
Xenophobia, racism and institutionalized antisemitism	Praising criminally convicted legionary figures, without direct racist or antisemitic discourse, but with symbolic implication.	Indirectly, by glorifying historical antisemites, it symbolically legitimizes historical antisemitism.	6 (high)
Anti-democratic and anti-parliamentarian	Although he does not directly support the abolition of democracy, he is officially accused of complicity in an attempt to change the constitutional order.	The Prosecutor General's accusation of complicity in a coup d'état places him in a dangerous anti-democratic zone.	8 (extreme)
Propaganda and media control	Uses alternative channels (TikTok, YouTube), without demanding control or claiming censorship of traditional media.	Lack of institutional propaganda, uses viral exposure, not classic fascist mechanisms.	2 (moderate)

Palingenesis (creation of the “new man”)	Evokes national regeneration and the call to dignity, without clear ideological institutionalization.	Constantly uses the rhetoric of regeneration, but without a clear ideological or organizational apparatus.	6 (high)
Ideologically instrumented Mysticism	Constant discourse based on Orthodox mysticism, Dacian ethnocentrism, spiritual influence of Zalmoxis, political inspiration having as its source divine energies.	Elements of Christian and pre-Christian religiosity are the pivot of the political discourse, a defining feature for Legionary ideology, a radical form of European fascism.	8 (extreme)
Anti-Marxism (anti-socialism, anti-egalitarianism, anti-materialism)	No anti-Marxist doctrinal statements, but praises far-right leaders without a leftist ideological context.	The absence of an anti-communist and anti-proletarian doctrinal discourse limits the overlap at this level.	2 (moderate)

Methodological remarks: The sources indicated in the methodological remarks in Table 2 are also relevant here.

Table 3 illustrates how the use of a semi-quantitative doctrinal evaluation method, structured around a grid of 11 typological features of classical fascism, enabled the identification of a partial yet significant alignment between interwar far-right ideology and the public expressions of the sovereigntist candidate. This analysis emphasizes the extent of ideological overlap, quantified by an average score of 5.8 out of 10, between the political elements articulated by Georgescu during his electoral campaign (as filtered through the scrutiny of the Prosecutor General's Office) and the core doctrinal principles of Italian and Spanish fascism. Consequently, the score of 5.8 out of 10 reflects a partial yet notable convergence, positioning Georgescu at the lower threshold of the ideological risk zone linked to classical fascism, while falling short of fulfilling the full criteria for institutionalized right-wing extremism. The Legionary ideology adopted by Georgescu is located at the upper limit of the moderate degree, respectively at the lower limit of the high degree, in relation to the characteristics of classical European fascism (Italian Mussolini ideology and Spanish Francoism).

The highest levels of overlap were recorded in the dimensions of radical ultranationalism, charismatic authoritarianism, religious mystification and symbolic support (through complicity) of violence as an instrument of political action. In contrast, the defining elements of institutionalized fascism are missing, such as systematic paramilitary organization, a coherent corporatist economic model or the claim of a one-party system. This differentiation is essential, as it shows us that it is impossible, for now, to label Georgescu *stricto sensu* as a fascist (in the historical-institutional sense of the term used in the classical ideological version).

Concluding remarks

Georgescu advances a discourse that symbolically reactivates elements of classical fascism, reconfigured within a neo-integrated doctrinal framework, yet functions disruptively in political terms, which may pose a potential threat to the stability of Romania's democratic environment. From a legal point of view (Table 1), however, this indirect form of political promotion, especially by evoking and idealizing figures convicted of war crimes, may attract criminal liability under Article 5 of OUG 31/2002, which sanctions not only violent instigation, but also the public promotion of fascist ideologies or the cult of persons guilty of genocide and war crimes. In addition, pursuant to Article 397 of the Criminal Code, political complicity with Horațiu Potra may result in the criminal indictment of Georgescu for crimes committed against the constitutional order. It is self-evident that, until a final conviction is delivered, the constitutional presumption of innocence remains fully applicable. Accordingly, this analysis can adopt a more severe interpretive stance only after Georgescu has been formally indicted and, potentially, convicted, especially in relation to the crime of complicity in the attempted coup.

However, beyond the legal argumentation advanced in Table 1, the political propaganda made by Georgescu in favor of two of the most radical European fascist regimes, which implemented a form of dictatorial, exterminatory repression in Romania ranking immediately after German Nazism in terms of criminal intensity, namely Legionary ideology (assessed on the political violence scale with an average score of 7.6 out of 10) and Antonescian ideology (assessed with an average score of 8.0 out of 10), aggravates the perpetrator's criminal and political liability (Table 2).

From a doctrinal perspective (Table 3), the overlap between the elements of political ideology present in Georgescu's electoral campaign (as filtered through the criminal lens of the Prosecutor General's Office) and the classical version of European fascism (Italian Mussolini ideology and Spanish Francoism) indicates an average convergence score of 5.8 out of 10. This implies that the neo-Legionary ideology practiced by Georgescu is positioned at the upper end of the moderate range, and at the lower end of the high range, in relation to the characteristics of classical European fascism (Italian Mussolini ideology and Spanish Francoism).

Nevertheless, there is one essential remark to be made: for a political harlequin like Georgescu, clad in a jumpsuit of multicolored political diamonds, stitched together with every imaginable goofiness, his support for Legionary ideology is merely one patch in his patchwork. Thus, for a presidential buffoon like Georgescu, the recitals drawn from the legionary repertoire represent merely the enactment of one of his roles. Admittedly, these acts carry criminal undertones, especially considering that the Legionary and Antonescu ideologies were radical manifestations of European fascism, but I believe this theatrical lens is the most appropriate way to interpret Georgescu's legionary Potemkin spectacle.

In conclusion, this study offers an original scientific contribution in two key areas: first, by applying a semi-quantitative analytical method to a contemporary electoral case, Romania, 2024, it introduces a novel approach to examining right-wing political extremism in post-communist Europe; second, it advances legal-doctrinal interpretive frameworks for analyzing radical discourses which, though not institutionalized, may carry both political and criminal implications. I consider this approach establishes a constructive analytical framework for examining the symbolic reactivation of emerging neo-fascism in Central and Eastern European countries and provides future directions for research into the relationship between political ideology and historical-legal responsibility. Standardized grids for assessing the impact of extremist discourse could be successfully used in the future by state institutions charged with protecting the constitution and defending democracy.

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Romanian Eurasianism? Mapping the political ideology of Călin Georgescu

Emanuel Copilaș¹

Abstract

This article investigates the meteoric and unexpected political rise of Călin Georgescu in Romanian domestic politics during the last two years by concentrating on his political philosophy, which is closely linked to the neo-Eurasianism developed by the Russian far-right intellectual Alexandr Dugin. Exploring philosophical, political, economic, and religious arguments, after a preliminary analysis of Eurasianism as historical, cultural, and ideological phenomenon, the article brings forward the concept of Romanian Eurasianism as it is embedded in Georgescu's political philosophy. The recent and sudden growth of this branch of Eurasianism can be considered odd, up to a certain point, since it does not rely on an important popular support for Russia in Romanian public opinion. Therefore, its main causes can be found within the tremendous social and economic rifts affecting contemporary Romania: Romanian Eurasianism is not the product of mischievous external influences as it is, first and foremost, a consequence of the improper domestic policies that have built up unprecedented levels of discontent within Romanian society, especially among its most disadvantaged members.

Keywords

ideology; political philosophy; Christian nationalism; multipolarism; inequality

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Introduction

In December 2024, the Constitutional Court of Romania suddenly annulled the first round of presidential elections, plunging the country into the deepest political turmoil since the anticommunist Revolution of 1989. The whole electoral process was compromised by Russian interference on social media, it was claimed, and this allowed for a relatively unknown candidate with extreme-right leanings, Călin Georgescu, to surpass more prominent political figures of the radical right, such as George Simion, the leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), and reach second position, just before Elena Lasconi, leader of the neoliberal party Save Romania Union (USR). Fueled by deep social and economic inequalities, and also by an overall popular resentment towards mainstream politics, Georgescu's chances of becoming president were considerable.

Beside allegations, no official proof of Russian implication in the presidential elections was delivered by Romanian authorities (Despa, 2025). However, Georgescu's fulminant electoral ascension, considering his position as an outsider of the Romanian political system and the modest scores he obtained at previous presidential elections, raised many questions. Although support for Russia among Romanians was below 6% in early 2025 (Popovici, 2025), it was still maintained that the political rise of Georgescu was an accident fueled by external factors and not by the deep discontent of lower social classes localized especially in the rural and semi-rural areas towards the political elite (Rogozanu, 2025). Although Russia's involvement in the political dynamics of Eastern European countries is very likely, given the context of the Ukraine war and the deterioration of the European Union – Russia relation, my paper also approaches Georgescu's electoral success as a domestic, rather than foreign political affair.

However, I deploy Georgescuist ideology as a new branch of Eurasianism, an eclectic Russian ideology that will be discussed in the next sections of the paper, although it is also influenced by local interwar right-wing ideologies (Marincea, 2025). Georgescuism was never analyzed before as a subspecies of Eurasianism. This ideological affiliation raises important questions, such as: what are philosophical, political, economic and religious similarities between Georgescuism and Eurasianism? Are there notable differences between the two parts? What are the implications of theorizing Georgescuism as a new form of Eurasianism? Which were the main domestic factors that allowed Georgescuist Eurasianism to become such an influent political ideology in such a short amount of time? How relevant were direct foreign political influences for this outcome?

Beside the literature review and methodology section, which further fleshes out the article in terms of theoretical and historical context, along with information regarding how the paper unfolds, the article pinpoints philosophical, political, economic, and religious implications that further consolidate the already strong affinities existing between Georgescuism and Eurasianism. The conclusions section endorses Georgescuism as a new type of Eurasian ideology.

Literature review and methodology

Drawing from the works of early Eurasianists like Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1991; see also Vinkovetski, Schlacks, 1996), or neo-Eurasianists like Alexandr Dugin (2017), and also from relevant scholars of Eurasianism like Marlène Laruelle (2008), Didier Chaudet, Florent Parmentier and Benoît Pelopidas (2009), Paolo Pizzolo (2020), Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (2017) or Dmitry Shlapentokh (2006), among others, this article emphasizes the many features of Eurasianism that are highly compatible with Georgescuism. It starts with the philosophical ones, grounded, as we are about to see, in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, and then gradually advances towards political, economic, and religious issues. In this regard, the works of Georgescu himself prove to be an important resource

(Malița, Georgescu, 2010; Georgescu, 2012; Georgescu, 2016; Georgescu, 2023). Finally, in the conclusion section, and building on the gap existing in the already mentioned literature, the concept of Romanian Eurasianism is advanced.

The main hypothesis I work with is that even if Georgescu's political ideology can be considered a new form of Eurasianism, this does not indicate a growing influence of Russia within the Romanian political scene. On the contrary: as shown in the introduction, Russia is trusted nowadays by less than 6% of Romanians. This is because Georgescuist Eurasianism is a result of the deep cleavages affecting Romanian society: an outburst of popular revolt fueled by local unrest that contextually borrows the vocabulary of an eclectic and imperial ideology without neglecting Romanian undemocratic ideologies from the early 20th century as well. As Laruelle has argued, the expansion of Eurasianism after the end of the Soviet Union did not necessarily signal unity and strength across different cultures and nations, but a growth of peripheral currents of Eurasianism (Turkish, Iranian, Kazakh and so on) to the detriment of Russian versions (Laruelle, 2008: 204-208).

Building on the methodology of qualitative comparative politics, the article starts by investigating how Eurasianism and Georgescuism borrow consistently from Heidegger's philosophy of being, history and modernity. Furthermore, politics and international relations are brought into question in order to show how and why, drawing from unicity of each culture, Eurasianism and Georgescuism are both influenced by the political ideas of German romanticism of the 19th century and by a sense of exceptionalism that run deep through different versions of Romanian nationalism as well: the ultranationalism of the extreme right ideologies from the 1930s, the conservative nationalism from the second half of the 19th century, the national-communism from the 1960-1980 period and even the liberal nationalism that emerged after 1989 (Mihăilescu, 2017; for an interpretation of Eurasianism as exceptionalism, see Dughin, 2014). As forms of authoritarian populism that rely on a heavy metaphysics of land, people, and destiny, both Eurasianism and Georgescuism insist on a very truncated understanding of multipolarity, one that excludes liberal democracies, Sorosism, understood as a form of contemporary antisemitism, and modernity in general. However, as it will be argued throughout the article, Georgescuist Eurasianism is less sententious and more pragmatic in international problems than its Russian counterpart. It also lacks the imperial dimension of the latter, due to the size and political capacities of Romania as a small power on the global political stage.

Next, when it comes to economic matters, Eurasianism and Georgescuism deploy an anticapitalist rhetoric reminiscent of left ideologies. However, this shallow anticapitalism addresses only the effects, not the causes of structural inequalities present in modern societies. Furthermore, the solutions advanced by Eurasianism and Georgescuism in this matter rely on the debatable untainted capitalism of small, preferably rural entrepreneurs, against the neoliberal monopolies that prevent sustainable growth and meritocracy on a par with local traditions. Finally, religious aspects that support the claim of Georgescuism as a variation of Eurasianism are brought forward, with the aim of proving that the Orthodoxy that irrigates both is more ecumenical in the case of the latter and less so in the case of the former. As previously mentioned, the conclusion section proposes, on the basis of the overall argumentation, the concept of Romanian (or Georgescuist) Eurasianism.

Eurasian ideology: origins and development

Eurasianism developed the early 20th century, more precisely, immediately after the First World War, when a group of Russian conservative intellectuals were forced to emigrate from Bolshevik Russia into Western Europe. Displaced, deeply anti-communist, and willing to contribute to Russia's political future, the first Eurasianists had very diverse intellectual backgrounds (linguists, musicologists,

theologians and so on), but stood firmly against Europe and the 'Roman-German' culture in favor of the unicity of Russianness, understood as a historical and cultural blend between European and Asian features, a mixture in which the Asian dimension of Russian identity was presented as being more pronounced than the European one (Vinkovetski, Schlacks, 1996).

Early Eurasianists considered that instead of competing with the 'materialist' West, Russia should discover its authentic self as a bridge between Europe and Asia, bringing forward an organicist metaphysics that treasured Orthodox spirituality, political collectivism, imperial (but non-chauvinistic) nationalism and an organic state where procedural matters or the separation of powers were renounced in favor of a mystical union between the rulers and the ruled. 'Western parliamentarism' held no place in the Eurasianist political outlook. No one could search justice against the state; different opinions would be allowed on geographical and ethnic, not so much social bases, but the right to political decision was confined solely to a Eurasian elite which could not be contested. Only obeyed ('Author's introduction', 1996; Savitskii, 1996: 5-6; Laruelle, 2008: 28-31; Chamberlain, 2008: 247; Riasanovsky, 1996: 128-129). Instead of democracy, which was considered to weaken the political body, early Eurasianists proposed an ideocracy based on sacrifice and altruism (Trubetzkoy, 1991: 269), a sort of organicist conservatism combined with a socialist paternalism that paid attention to the needs of the many without allowing them to become politically salient. Furthermore, they also criticized in harsh terms European colonialism, which is peculiar coming from a preponderantly right-wing movement, but becomes understandable if we take into account its unrepentant anti-Westernism and the attempt to fuel anti-European attitudes among the colonized peoples (Riasanovsky, 1996: 125-126; Trubetzkoy, 1991: 54-55, 138-140; Bassin, Glebov, Laruelle, 2015: 9).

Although favoring authoritarianism, the first Eurasians were careful enough to dissociate themselves from rising fascism during the 1930s, despite some initial sympathies in this regard (Vinkovetski, 1996: 148-149; Trubetzkoy, 1991: 286-287, 334). Like neo-Eurasianists, the pioneers of this new cultural ideology bemoaned the European influence that, starting with czar Peter the Great in the 18th century, was accused of pushing Russia away from its historical path. The Bolshevik revolution, guided by Marxism, another European ideology, was perceived as just another political event that continued this harmful trend. Even if these first Eurasianists insisted they possessed a modern worldview, they were deeply influenced by the German political romanticism from the 19th century, an anti-Enlightenment philosophy that cherished a rural way of life based on ethnic mysticism. The Slavophile movement from the previous century, opposed to the Westernizing trend, can be interpreted as a form of Russian romanticism that paved the way for Eurasianism, even if some Eurasianist condemned it for being too dogmatic (Laruelle, 2008: 20; Suvchinskii, 1996: 17, 21, 23; Berlin, 2008: 155-169; Trubetzkoy, 1991: 206; Copilaş, 2009: 65-80).

As the Soviet Union grew stronger under Stalin, some Eurasianists became sympathetic towards the rise of Eurasia and believed that, with proper help, Stalinism could be transformed into a more nationalistic political system. While this happened due to various reasons and without Eurasianist input, several Eurasianist turned partially pro-Stalinist, while other retained their anti-Bolshevik convictions. Some Eurasians even went back to the Soviet Union in order to defend it from the invasion perpetrated by national-socialist Germany in 1941, but they were met with distrust by Soviet authorities and sent to prison or camps. Divided, weakened, and slipping into political irrelevance, the early Eurasianist movement gradually disappears after the Second World War (Paradowski, 2006: 108; Copilaş, 2009).

However, starting with the 1960s, and especially during the next two decades, Eurasianism is rediscovered by underground nationalist movements from the Soviet Union. The influential writings

of popular historian and anthropologist Lev Gumiliov are considered the link between classical Eurasianism and pro-Soviet Eurasianism, a form of nationalism tolerated, but officially unacknowledged by Soviet authorities. Only after the Soviet Union's disintegration in late 1991 can neo-Eurasianism truly emerge. Unlike classical Eurasianism, neo-Eurasianism is fond of right-wing extremism, more antisemitic, and also more geopolitically oriented. If classical Eurasianism can be considered a culturally defensive conservative movement, neo-Eurasianism is definitely embracing an imperial nationalism with clear fascist leanings, tailored on the popular discontent produced by post-Soviet economic and social crises and also by a sense of geopolitical downfall (Laruelle, 2008: 10; Rossman, 2006: 168, 173-174; Sheiko, Brown, 2017: 126; Trubetzkoy, 1991: 357; Copilaș, 2009).

Despite its diversity, neo-Eurasianism was gradually unified during the early 2000s around the writings and the personality of Alexandr Dugin, a former Russian nationalist that advocates for a 'conservative revolution', for a multipolar world freed from Western hegemony, and for tactical alliances with different radical right-wing movements all across Europe, Asia, and the rest of the world where anti-American positions are consolidated (Laruelle, 2015a). If classical Eurasianism resented the 'German-Roman' culture, namely Europe and its cosmopolitanism (Trubetzkoy, 1991: 4-6), neo-Eurasianism adapts to present day geopolitical realities and fosters, as previously mentioned, anti-Americanism. According to this perspective, the future of the world lies in the outcome of the conflict between land powers like Russia (tellurocracies), and sea powers like the United States (thalassocracies). Western material decadence is still despised by the new Eurasianist movement, which is also less open towards non-Christian religions and also its Asian legacy (Laruelle, 2015b: 188; Chaudet, Parmentier, Pelopidas, 2009). Therefore, one could claim, alongside Laruelle, that 'today's Eurasia is founded on a fundamental ambiguity—a nostalgia for empire and the fear of diversity' (Laruelle, 2015b: 192).

Deeply influenced by Alain de Benoist, the radical right-wing French intellectual that developed, decades ago, the ideology of Eurofascism, Dugin argues in favor of 'conservative revolutions' all around the globe, the fading of classical right-left political ideologies, tellurocracies and also against materialism and globalization (Dughin, 2017; Pizzolo, 2020: 92, 172-173; Rossman, 2006: 162; Benoist, 2016a; Benoist, 2016b; Benoist, 2017a; Benoist, 2017b; Benoist, 1998). Dugin and Benoist also share a deep commitment towards German romanticism and, especially the former, towards the German geopolitical school of the interwar period (Benoist, 1998: 69-76; Dugin, 2017; Dugin, 2011: 56). We will further explore Dugin's Eurasianism in the next section of the article, while pointing out its Heideggerian philosophical underpinnings that also fuel Georgescuist Eurasianism.

Heidegger reloaded: philosophical affinities between Eurasianism and Georgescuism

Dasein, technology, history: these are the three main Heideggerian concepts used by Dugin to reinforce classical Eurasianism, turning it into a 'conservative revolution' with a distinguishable fascist outlook and an anti-modern core that would have surely stirred some level of unrest among the first Eurasians. Dasein refers to a form of existence situated between the ontic, that is the actual, evenimential level of existence, and that of ontology, which investigates the historical development of being. The Dasein, individual and/or community in Heidegger's writings, but mostly the first, is the ontic always evaluated through an ontological prism. Since Antiquity, but especially during modern times, the Dasein lost its authenticity, its proper self, by posing itself separated from and superior to the surrounding phenomenological world: this duality marked the birth of metaphysics, and Heidegger is keen to expose it and alleviate its harmful influence upon the Dasein. Metaphysical thinking is converted, in modern times, into technocracy. Every modern political ideology, from liberalism to

socialism and fascism, all considered technologically driven economic growth as their main priority. But technology does not really solve our problems. It just deepens the alienation of the Dasein, its decadence, and the possibility of a meaningful reinvention through living up to the challenges of its own history. For Heidegger, history is not so much tradition, but destiny, the Dasein's capacity to seize the moment and become what it was meant to be all along, despite the temporary slumber in which modernity has thrown it into (Heidegger, 2008: 385-389; Heidegger, 1977: 3-35; Heidegger, 2001: 74-86).

Dugin, who wrote an entire book on the philosophy of Heidegger (Dugin, 2014), considers the Eurasian Dasein to be 'archeomodern', that is, only superficially modern. This technological modernity prevents the Eurasian Dasein from reaching full, archaic authenticity (Dugin, 2011). However, this is just a temporary obstacle on the historical path of the Dasein in fulfilling its ontological destiny (Dugin, 2017: 568). This is why the only modernity a Eurasian could accept is only technological, not moral (Dugin, 2017: 239-245). Since Eurasianism represents a quest for a true identity overshadowed by the West (Dugin, 2014: 253), accepting the cosmopolite, liberal modernity of the West would mean the end of Russia and its irreplaceable unicity.

Georgescu is also trying to bring forward a rural, Romanian identity that was depleted by almost two centuries of Western modernization, based on the rediscovery of popular 'geniuses' and the latent energies' of the people that kept traditions going despite a growing diffusion of inauthenticity (Malița, Georgescu, 2010: 22, 151-152, 157). In these challenging times, the Romanians must choose between growing into a proper nation or regressing back into a mere population (Georgescu, 2012: 19). In order to do so, Romania must rise to the 'heights of its great history' (Georgescu, 2012: 44). Critical of the Western materialism that has engulfed the country, cutting its access to its own history and thereby leaving it to ontologically 'wander' in inauthenticity (Georgescu, 2012: 197) - , Georgescu is, like Dugin, advocating as well for a type of technocracy, a managerial philosophy ('professionalization') that does not touch the main moral aspects of Romanian identity but, on the contrary, fosters 'national pride' (Georgescu, 2012: 50-56, 113). We will come back to the concept of professionalization latter.

In a stance reminding of national-communist protochronism, Georgescu argues that Romania created its own unique and treasurable civilization (Georgescu, 2016: 11). One that is threatened, nowadays, by the 'narcissistic and illusory technical thought' developed within the Western civilization (Georgescu, 2016: 21). 'Tehno-globalism' does away with ontology, with proper being, replacing it with frivolity, as 'living, unmediated bonds between people' are replaced by 'technical relations' (Hurduzeu, 2023: 19-26). 'We are not only the descendants of Rome, we are also the descendants of Decebal and Michael the Brave, of Stephen the Saint and of the Brâncoveanu martyrs' (Georgescu, 2016: 67). In other words, Romanian identity is not only of Western descent; it possesses a strong local lineage as well, which is more important than foreign influences. Precisely like in the case of Eurasianism. Especially young people should remember this, in order to become truly 'responsible'. 'History is unfortunately minimalized, its wires are simply cut, the connection with the heroes and martyrs of the nation is lost, without taking into account that each generation creates the history of the ones who will follow' (Georgescu, 2016: 94; see also Georgescu, 2023: 169).

Politics and international relations: authoritarian populism and multipolarity, key elements of Eurasianism and Georgescuism

Dugin's Eurasianism is intended as the official political guide of the Vladimir Putin regime. Of course, as a statesman, Putin's Eurasianism is mostly pragmatic, while Dugin's Eurasianism is more theoretic.

Still, Dugin considers that his political philosophy is followed, to a certain extent, in both Russia's foreign and domestic policy, despite Putin's occasional hesitance and his compromises with Western liberalism (Dughin, 2017: 144, 539-540).

By appealing to the people, an arbitrary discursive projection, instead of institutions, by favoring personal, not procedural power, and by also stressing Russia's timeless identity and how it is strengthened in its historical competition with the materialist and decadent West (Dughin, 2017) – Eurasianism places itself in the family of authoritarian populisms, although Dugin personally rejects the populist label (Laruelle, 2008: 127, 142). This is a right wing populism, similar to American neoconservatism, that lacks an anti-elitist position, typical for populist movements (most likely because it benefits from the support of the Putin regime) and, contrary to left-wing populisms that endorse social protest and political critique – projects the image of a powerful and charismatic leader able to defend Russian/Eurasian identity and, even more, guide it to geopolitical success against Western hegemony (Chaudet, Parmentier, Pelopidas, 2009; for an analysis of authoritarian populism, see Bugarcic, 2019, and for a general typology of populism, Mișcoiu, 2012: 25-44). Georgescuist Eurasianism shares all these features as well, including a powerful dose of anti-elitism.

Just like the first Eurasians, Dugin is also influenced by German romanticism and its anti-modern outlook based on a mystic apprehension of land and ethnicity (Dughin, 2017, 207, 402). And following Heidegger, he too perceives both liberalism and socialism as different expressions of the technological grip that has engulfed the modern world (Dughin, 2017: 347-8). His anti-liberal, conservative revolution is critical towards individualism, the French Revolution, human rights, and democracy: Russia as metaphysical entity is way above these petty details that only divide and weaken its political body (Dughin, 2017: 219-220, 436, 512, 543, 556). Furthermore, by empowering minorities, especially sexual minorities that shaken traditional morality, democracy and pluralism are working against the cohesion of the people and its capacity to meet its historical destiny (Dughin, 2017: 556). As already mentioned, Dughin's Eurasianism is also antisemitic. Just like in the case of Georgescu, his antisemitism is centered upon the person of George Soros, the capitalist magnate that has helped spread the culture of liberalism in Russia and Eastern Europe after the fall of the socialist regimes (Dughin, 2017: 560; Carvalho and Dughin, 2016: 37; Grigorescu, Dinu, 2025).

Since classical political ideologies no longer matter, the political systems they inspired, like liberalism, socialism, and fascism, are also outdated. Instead, Dugin proposes the fourth political theory, inspired as well by Heidegger (Dughin, 2014: 43; Sakwa, 2017: 213). Nothing more than 'revolutionary conservatism', Eurasianism is this fourth political theory (Dughin, 2011: 63; Carvalho and Dughin, 2016: 245), one that embraces both right-wing authoritarian populism and a form of socialist paternalism expressed through a shallow anticapitalism that will be analyzed in the next section of the article, and also the idea of a 'hedgehog state', rough with the foreign enemies of Russia/Eurasia, and gentle with its peoples (Dughin, 2017: 104, 205, 405). Through 'erotic patriotism', the Eurasian peoples will follow their natural instincts in order to procreate and to turn love into demographic expansion (Dughin, 2017: 202). This will consolidate the Eurasian geopolitical space, allowing it to boost its alliances with other civilizations from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, and also with 'patriotic' movements from the West, in order to end the hegemony of American thalassocracy with its nomadic and entrepreneurial ethos – in favor of a truly multipolar world, one in which Eurasia will regain once again its rightful place (Dughin, 2017: 257-380). After all, Dugin, precisely like Putin, holds the former Soviet Union to a high degree of esteem, with the exception of the Gorbachev period, when Western liberalism crept in, contributing to the subordination of Eurasia to the West (Dughin, 2011: 68).

Georgescuist Eurasianism is also authoritarian and, since it is lacking mainstream political support, highly anti-elitist. Its anti-elitism is codified as a harsh critique of ‘politicianism’, a derogatory concept used in Romania since late 19th century (Georgescu, 2012: 115, 178; Georgescu, 2016: 44). The post-communist social, economic and political crisis was partially diminished by Romania’s accession into the European Union in 2007 was entirely the consequence of catastrophic political management. Romania had experienced difficult periods in the 20th century (1916-1918, 1929-1933, 1940-1960), but they were all the result of war, economic crises or foreign occupation, Georgescu argues (Georgescu, 2012, 190-191).

While he considers Nicolae Ceaușescu a ‘semi-illiterate tyrant’, Georgescu acknowledges his contribution to the social and economic development of Romania during the 1960s and his decision to pay the country’s foreign debt entirely in the 1980s, even with the cost of a tremendous austerity that fueled the 1989 revolution. By paying back as soon as possible Romania’s debt to international financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, Ceaușescu ‘avoided humiliating interest rates’ and ‘did not add another layer to the fat of international extortioners’ (Malița, Georgescu, 2010: 182-183; Georgescu, 2023: 120-121). It is noticeable that Georgescu rejects only the first, ‘internationalist’ period of the former communist regime, when the country was still fully dominated by Moscow. This is consistent with Dugin’s favorable approach to national-communism, including Stalinism, and his already invoked rejection of glasnost and perestroika developed in the Gorbachev era under the ideological influence of the West (Dughin, 2017: 79-82).

Like in the case of Dugin, Georgescu’s political philosophy is built with the help of a ‘powerful and healthy’ state, one that works in favor of the people, not against them (Georgescu, 2012: 46). Curiously enough, this state should be de-centralized as much as possible, but still remain powerful and socially involved (Georgescu, 2016: 42). Contrary to the imperial nationalism professed by Russian Eurasianism (Chaudet, Parmentier, Pelopidas, 2009), Georgescu favors a ‘Christian’, ‘non-expansive’, non-xenophobic and non-racist nationalism (Georgescu, 2016: 65-66, 105), one that suits better Romania’s more modest geopolitical ambitions. Furthermore, this powerful state working in favor of people, not politicians, should be conceived around the ‘national interest’, which Georgescu places above political parties, political doctrines and electoral stakes (Georgescu, 2012: 39, 59; Georgescu, 2016: 77). Above negotiations, and, in other words, above democracy. Political parties are compared with organized criminal groups that have led Romania astray (Georgescu, 2016: 61). If ‘old’ political parties cannot be radically reformed in order to work for the benefit of the people, and not for their ‘primitive’ interests alone, they should be abolished altogether (Georgescu, 2023: 184). ‘Romania will thrive again when the country will be ruled by people of the land (oamenii gliei, m.n.), who will make history, not politics. And those times are near’ (Georgescu, 2016: 36). These natural leaders are not elected but imposed by their sheer personal ‘virtues’ (Georgescu, 2016: 37) and validated by the ‘wisdom of the people’ (Georgescu, 2012: 199). Until this happens, the country’s political regime will remain a ‘demonocracy’, not a proper democracy (Georgescu, 2016: 85).

Georgescu loathes sexual minorities, abortions and multiculturalism; promoting them amounts to ‘leftism’ in general, although not ‘neo-Marxism’, which is nothing but another facet of neoliberalism, through which Georgescu understands contemporary Western capitalism based on globalization, cultural dominance and extractivism, leaving behind nothing but depleted areas and humiliated peoples (Georgescu, 2016: 63; Georgescu, 2023: 31-33, 191). Still, as mentioned above, Georgescu is strongly in favor of minimal, neoliberal states. Instead of Western ideologies, Romania should look back to its true heroes, like mothers, martyrs, or ‘saints’ from communist prisons (many of them belonging to the former fascist Iron Guard, like Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu), to historical figures like

Michael the Brave, Tudor Vladimirescu and Alexandru Ioan Cuza, or authoritarian right-wing military dictators like marshal Antonescu (Georgescu, 2016: 63; Georgescu, 2023: 188).

In the same vein as Dugin, and Heidegger, before him, Georgescu reduces both neoliberalism and the former Romanian communist dictatorship to symptoms of modernity traceable to the Jacobinism that emerged with the French Revolution and promoted materialism, atheism, universalism, progress, and development. This harmful 'social engineering' destroys 'natural capital' and turns people into individual commodities, making them renounce their traditions and national origins (Georgescu, 2016: 38; Georgescu, 2023: 192).

As for international relations, 'Romania must affirm its vocation as bridge and as space of dialogue and complementarity between cultures and must capitalize the advantages coming from its privileged geographic position on the future routes of commercial and energy exchanges between the East and the West of the Eurasian space' (Georgescu, 2016: 184; see also Georgescu, 2023: 51, 120). Non-Western multipolarity at its peak. As a minor Eurasian power, Romania must relearn to develop friendly relations with all its neighboring countries and expand on its geographic position. Normalizing the relations with Russia thus becomes a priority, especially since Georgescu considers Putin a 'patriot', although he allowed Russian economy to become entangled with 'globalism', that is, neoliberal capitalism (Georgescu, 2016: 159-163; Georgescu, 2023: 160). After all, Dugin himself is a great admirer of historians of religion and philosophers like Mircea Eliade and Lucian Blaga. Romania is thus compelled to choose between euro-atlanticism and euro-continentalism, between the 'asphaltic' American civilization that has become dominant worldwide with the help of globalization, but where, in the absence of roots, nothing really grows, and between the project of the Greater Eastern Europe, where it could truly fulfill its historical and geopolitical destiny (Dughin, 2011: 13-18; Raețchi, 2017: 86-87; Dughin, 2017: 368-369, 487).

Anticapitalism? Eurasian and Georgescuist economics

When it comes to economy, both Dugin and Georgescu profess certain anticapitalistic attitudes; however, these are directed only against the Western, foreign capitalistic monopolies, and never against the smaller, national capital that is forced to compete in unjust conditions with foreign investments (at least in Romania). Unlike Dugin, which is not so specific in economic matters, Georgescu is, although always within the theoretical framework laid down previously by his ideological 'mentor'.

Dugin's understanding of economy starts with the economic nationalism developed in the 19th century by Friedrich List, although he also touches upon Joseph Schumpeter or John Maynard Keynes. Protectionism, the growth of national capital and the securing of Russia's position within the global economy, these are the main coordinates of Dugin's economic vision (Dughin, 2017: 432-433). Furthermore, Dugin envisages a rural Eurasian economy, on in which cities will no longer occupy the most important position, and the most important industries will be shifted to the countryside. The motive? Cities and urbanization pave the way for globalist and cosmopolite ideologies that threaten the Eurasian ideological project (Dughin, 2017: 456-457; see also Pizzolo, 2020: 248). Georgescu will assume and elaborate on this rural economy further.

Balancing between right and left, Eurasianists do not employ a definitive economic model in their quest for geopolitical supremacy. Each Eurasian people should develop according to its own tradition and unique identity. Some important economic sectors should be controlled directly by the state and not left to the unpredictable and pretentious free market, while others should become the responsibility of local, national capital, thus allowing the primacy of a supervised market development.

Each 'Great Space' should create a self-centered but not necessarily autarchic economy, one that is deeply interconnected and prospers mainly on the basis of its own resources (Pizzolo, 2020: 249).

Let us see now how these tenets of Eurasian economics are elaborated upon by Georgescu. It is worth mentioning that the anti-Western tone of Georgescu was amplified only during the last decade; his first books endorsed the EU as the main chance of economic development for Romania and also bemoaned the 'medieval mentalities, growing illiteracy, the return to mysticism as a mass phenomenon, the nostalgia for dictatorship, the waiting for a providential savior' and also the 'social and cultural apathy of the population' (Georgescu, 2012: 15; see also Georgescu, 2016: 45). It is definitely ironic how these shortcomings have contributed to his recent meteoric political rise to such a great extent. However, in his last book, Georgescu argues that Romania will respect its international alliances only to the extent its partners will do so, and that the EU and NATO have lost their moral and political compass (Georgescu, 2023: 119, 237-238).

Critical of both neoliberalism and socialism as atheist political regimes based upon foreign ideologies, Georgescu favors a Christian nationalism that would help rebuild the country by re-professionalizing it. This means massive investment in young families, demographic growth, in small, local business, and also in sports and healthy alimentation. Like Dugin, Georgescu deeply intertwines the social and economic growth of Romania with small business developed by rural entrepreneurs, away from the cities that fostered cosmopolite ideologies and a decline of national identity and traditions. However, he also recognizes the potential of information technology for the future of the country, thus allowing a certain economic role for cities in his economic project. Critical of extractivist capitalism and its contribution to both the ongoing climate crisis and also to the ruthless exploitation of national resources in poor and developing countries, Georgescu intends to use European funds and whatever help he can get in order to protect Romania's natural resources and use them for national growth, not for the benefit of foreign multinational corporations. He is also critical towards the underfinancing of education, which should be turned into a nationalist project, and the overwhelming bureaucracy that paralyzes local entrepreneurial initiatives. Like Dugin, Georgescu is paradoxically endorsing a strong national state while simultaneously complaining about the oversized Romanian state and arguing, in pure neoliberal fashion, for a minimal one and for lower taxes. An industry based solely and consumption and entertainment should be turned, once again, into a productive one. The example of interwar Romania, a presumably rural entrepreneurial nation, is eloquent for Georgescu, highlighting both his closeness towards radical right-wing nationalism and also towards social and economic discipline (Malița, Georgescu, 2010; Georgescu, 2012; Georgescu, 2016; Georgescu, 2023).

Taking all these into account, the need for a 'civic economy' that would dismantle the massification produced by capitalist consumerism is greater than ever. A civic economy would disrupt the growth cycles followed by crises that represent the mark of neoliberal capitalism, would foster national interest and would replace the empty individualism of a consumerist society with 'Christian personalism' (Georgescu, 2016: 118). Only when a civic economy is implemented, with the help of a national technocracy managed by an enlightened leader, only then Romania will become truly sovereign and rediscover its roots and its spirituality that created a wholesome civilization in the past (Georgescu, 2023: 209). The trope of Romania as civilization is reminiscent of national-communist protochronism, but the small-scale rural capitalism fiercely defended by Georgescu is definitely not compatible the centralized socialist economy. This is why Georgescuist economics is, considering the overall Georgescuist ideology, of a radical right-wing, not left-wing inspiration.

It follows that Georgescu's Christian nationalism is influenced first of all not necessarily by the fascist nationalism of the former Legionary movement, like it was argued (Marincea, 2025), but by the

economic program of the interwar peasant party, which turned progressively towards the radical right during the 1930s and until the postwar period, when political pluralism was abolished by the local communist party which instituted the republic in 1948. This program also argued for authority and Christian democracy, for anticommunism and for a small peasant capitalism that would propel grassroots meritocracy and contribute to the spiritual rebirth of the nation, unlike the liberal monopolies of the 1920s (see Niculae, Ilincioiu, Neagoe, 1994: 237-238, 254-255). However, given the fact that the EU is confronted for decades by the issue of agricultural overproduction, while Russia and China generally meet their alimentary demands from domestic sources, it is not clear where the output of such a rural industry envisaged by Georgescu would be channeled.

To conclude, there is no question that the anti-Westernism of both Russian and Georgescuist Eurasianism simulates anticapitalism but is not truly anticapitalistic. It just supports local, national capitalism at the expense of foreign, multinational corporations. Even when it laments the social and cultural effects produced by Western capitalist consumerism upon the natural resources, structural inequalities, and the spiritual wander of the youth from poor and developing countries. At best, it can be considered a shallow and incomplete anticapitalism, one that considers only the effects, but not the deep causes of this overreaching political economy.

Balancing between orthodoxy and ecumenism: religious implications of Eurasianism and Georgescuism

Early Eurasianists were more religiously tolerant than contemporary ones. Dugin, for example, allows only an instrumental role for Islam in the spiritual economy of neo-Eurasianism, considering it a 'tactical ally', therefore a disposable one, when the time will come (Dughin, 2017: 538; Laruelle, 2015b: 188). Even if Orthodoxy remains the main ingredient of Eurasian spirituality, each religious tradition should be cherished and protected, as long as it is not sectarian and/or extremist (Pizzolo, 2020: 250). Protestantism, historically responsible for the consolidation of liberal-bourgeois mentalities and of individualism in the West, is also disavowed (see Benoist, 2017a: 43; Trubetskoi, 1996: 88).

As for Georgescu, his Orthodoxy leaves no room for other religions. Georgescuist Eurasianism is spiritually less diverse than its Russian counterpart, but it compensates with a more political outlook. As already argued, it cherishes the traditional family and goes against sexual minorities. Moreover, in order to truly build the Christian nationalism that Georgescu is so fond of, one should not confound faith with 'magic'. Our deepest fears and anxieties presumably come from the abandonment of true faith; in order to regain it, one must 'work tirelessly' and even 'sacrifice' himself for the greater national good. Despite all these setbacks, 'profound Romania (still) exists, and the tidal river of ancestral faith flows quietly', bringing along 'hope and persistence in the fight for defending the motherland' (Georgescu, 2016: 58-59). But, until the moment of national rebirth gains momentum, 'in our country people literally die of hunger, the elderly are humiliated, the children have no future, the land is sold to foreigners, and our ancestral belief is made a mockery of' (Georgescu, 2016: 50).

Conclusion: the emergence of Romanian Eurasianism

This article deployed the political ideology of Georgescu in strong connection with the version of Eurasianism theorized by Dugin. After a brief analysis of Eurasianism in mostly historical and ideological terms, it brought to the forefront remarkable similarities between the two parts starting with philosophical affinities, going through political and economic shared perspectives and ending up with religious connections. Taking all these into account, it can be argued that Georgescuism should be considered a new form of Eurasianism. After a Russian, a Turkish, an Iranian, a Kazakh, a German, a

Japanese, a Hungarian, an Italian, a French and a Greek version of Eurasianism (Laruelle, 2015a; Bassin, Pozo, 2017; Bassin, Glebov, Laruelle, 2015), we are witnessing the emergence of a Romanian branch. This is definitely not something to brag about, unfortunately.

Furthermore, it is quite a paradoxical outcome, since, as already mentioned in the introductory section, Russia's influence in Romania is at a historical low. It follows that this radical right-wing ideology, this 'conservative revolution' with Romanian features is a product of profound social and economic inequalities produced after the 1989 Revolution, inequalities that are visible especially when comparing the rural and urban areas. This deep popular discontent fueled the rise of various radical right-wing parties during the previous years and, among them, the political ideology of Georgescu – one that borrows a foreign ideological vocabulary, that of Eurasianism, and cunningly adapts it to the social, political, economic and religious context of Romania.

Following the tradition of exceptionalism that affected all modern Romanian political ideologies, both democratic and undemocratic (Mihăilescu, 2017), Romanian Eurasianism proposes, in this vein, a new form of exceptionalism, one that borrows massively from the radical right-wing ideologies from the interwar period and, unlike them, is not anti-Russian, although it can neither be said that is Russophile. Even if Romanian communism was a Soviet product during the interwar period, it gradually developed, especially starting with the early 1960s, into a form of left-wing nationalism that turned progressively anti-Soviet. Historically, Romania's traditional hostility towards Russia endures, despite the recent electoral success of Romanian Eurasianism which is, once again, a development of the failures of postcommunist capitalism more than a devious foreign ideological import.

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TikTok and the affective politics of digital populism: Nationalist youth mobilization in the 2024-2025 Romanian elections

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Abstract

This article explores TikTok's role in shaping nationalist populism and affective polarization among Romanian youth during the 2024-2025 presidential elections. Drawing on theories of digital nationalism, populist communication, youth political engagement, and affective polarization, the study develops an integrative framework for analyzing how TikTok's algorithmic design promotes emotionally charged, influencer-driven political content. It argues that TikTok functions as an incubator of affective nationalism by amplifying far-right narratives and mobilizing youth through emotionally resonant media. The article calls for a hybrid methodology combining discourse analysis of platform content and survey data to assess how nationalist narratives circulate and gain traction among young voters.

Keywords

TikTok; digital populism; youth mobilization; affective polarization; algorithmic nationalism

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Introduction

On December 6, 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of presidential elections in a step that shook democratic polities worldwide, citing evidence of "aggressive promotion" and coordinated manipulation through TikTok that had elevated far-right candidate Călin Georgescu from relative unknown to front-runner status (BBC, 2024). This dramatic judicial intervention, the first annulment of elections in Romania's post-communist history, illuminates a seismic shift in the ways in which online media impact elections and political mobilization. In its verdict, the Court documented how Georgescu's campaign had utilized the algorithmic format of TikTok to disseminate nationalist narratives to millions of Romanian voters in what intelligence reports called "a mass manipulation operation" involving the use of synchronized chains of accounts and un-promoted paid promotions (Reuters, 2024).

The Romanian case represents a watershed in understanding the intersection of algorithms in social media with populist communication and democratic vulnerability. In weeks, Georgescu's popularity on TikTok had soared from almost zero to over 760,000 followers with posts garnering nearly 6 million likes, a stratospheric climb that traditional political communication scholarship struggles to explain (AP News, 2024). This was not just a question of online campaigning; this was an illustration of how the recommendation algorithm in TikTok was vulnerable to being used to promulgate extremist content to the forefront, construct nationalist echo chambers, and whip previously dormant votes, in particular among Romania's youth electorate.

This paper introduces the theoretical construct of "algorithmic nationalism" to explain how platform-specific technical affordances mediate and transmogrify nationalist political movements in the online epoch. Classic nationalist expressions rely upon institutional channels, party mechanisms, or mainstream news media channels. Algorithmic nationalism, in contrast, has its roots in the computational logic of online platforms, that is, in the particular intersection of bite-sized video content, affective participation mechanisms, and black box recommendatory algorithms in TikTok. Algorithmic nationalism is characterized by its decentralized production and its virus-like patterns of dissemination, its emotional and not at all ideologically coherent form, and its particular appeal to young online natives who constitute the core membership base of TikTok.

The 2024-2025 Romanian elections provide a singular example with which to examine these processes. Following the nullified November election, in which officials announced evidence of "serious concerns about the integrity of the electoral process" in the form of using algorithms to suggest far-right material to enhance its views and using influencer networks to circumvent political advertising rules (European Commission, 2024), the re-run election in May 2025, which saw reformist candidate Nicușor Dan win, had a very different pattern and appeared to suggest that awareness of how algorithms were being utilized to affect the elections had altered campaigning and the mechanisms through which individuals voted.

At its core lies the redefinition by TikTok of political communication to young people in Romania. Utilized by 9+ million in Romania, a number roughly equating to 47% of its population, TikTok has become the key source of news for 18- to 35-year-old voters (DataReportal, 2024). From our own survey among 200 young Romanians, we discover that 68% make use of political content frequently within the app and that 42% had their votes changed in the elections held in 2024 and 2025 through the use of TikTok. This is not simply a shift in media use but the very redefinition of how political meaning is constructed, circulated, and contested within contemporary democracies.

The empirical and theoretical research question this paper addresses is: In what ways do the algorithmic affordances of TikTok enable novel nationalist populist mobilizations and how does this

influence democratic participation and political polarization? This is a multidisciplinary question that bridges media studies, political communication, and digital sociology, to reveal how technical architectures shape political possibility. What the Romanian example is particularly good at is providing us with both the power of algorithmic mediation in play, Georgescu's meteoric rise, and its limitation, his loss in the elections when the algorithmic trick was revealed.

This paper has three connected arguments. First, the algorithmic system generates what we describe as "affective feedback loops" that favor emotional nationalist content regardless of its veracity and democratic impacts. Second, algorithms talk most significantly to young voters that experience politics through online media and create new mechanisms for political socialization that bypass mainstream institutional intercessors. Third, the platform itself, in its affordance in the form of duets, trends, and audio-focused virality, enables populist protagonists to build parasocial relations with voters that are more immediate and intimate than traditional political communication.

This research has broader implications, beyond the Romanian context, to answer essential questions regarding the functioning of democracy in the age of algorithms. As elections globally are increasingly taking place online, comprehension regarding how algorithms constitute political discourse becomes crucial for both scholarly and policy purposes. The European Union's Digital Services Act probes into the matter of TikTok in the wake of the Romanian elections, reflecting growing awareness that governance of platforms cannot be separated from governance in and of democracies (VIGINUM, 2025). But regulatory solutions remain at a disadvantage regarding the fast-paced development of algorithms and their political uses.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we construct our theoretical framework by synthesizing scholarship on digital nationalism, populist communication, youth political participation, and affective polarization to conceptualize the concept of algorithmic nationalism. In Section 3, we locate the Romanian case by describing the political context and the specific patterns in the 2024-2025 elections. In Section 4, we explain our mixed-methods approach to integrating social media analytics, surveys among 200 young Romanians, and content analysis of posts on TikTok. In Section 5, we present our results to demonstrate how algorithmic amplification, youth orientations, and attributes of content interact to produce emergent patterns in political mobilization. In Section 6, we explore theoretical and practical implications. In Section 7, we sum up with reflections upon the digital future of democracy.

By this analysis, we contribute to timely debates in platform power, political influence, and the shifting form of democratic citizen participation. The Romanian elections can be interpreted as both a warning tale and as analytical frontier: in their vulnerability to how algorithms can undermine electoral integrity, we are reminded how democratic resilience can still be fortified by regulatory invention and critical online literacies. As democracies everywhere struggle with similar concerns, recognizing algorithmic nationalism not only comes to represent an intellectual exercise but a democratic imperative.

Theoretical Framework

Digital nationalism and algorithmic affordances. The ascent of digital nationalism represents a qualitative change in the shaping, contesting, and circulating of national identities in networked publics. Cognizant of Anderson's (1983) "imagined communities" framework, newer scholarship has argued that online platforms offer novel architectures for nationalist imagining beyond earlier print-capitalist models (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Existing conceptualizations do not account for how some platform architectures, what we describe as "algorithmic affordances", shape these processes in

distinctive manners. Extending Gibson's (1979) ecological theory of affordances to online contexts (Boyd, 2010; Bucher and Helmond, 2017), we conceptualize algorithmic affordances as action possibilities granted and restricted by the computational system of a platform. The algorithmic affordances of TikTok are very much different from those of other social media platforms in ways especially conducive to nationalist mobilization. Unlike Facebook's social graph or Twitter follower graphs, the "For You Page" (FYP) of TikTok operates through a system described by the platform as a "recommendation system", prioritizing engagement signals over social connections (Zhou, 2024).

This architectural variation has major implications for nationalist discourse formation. Older platforms require end-users to take explicit action to follow profiles or join communities to experience political content and induce self-selection "echo chambers" (Sunstein 2017). The TikTok algorithm works to opportunistically curate content based on micro-behavioral signals, watch time and completion rates and number of likes and shares, building what we theorize to be "algorithmic chambers" which end-users knowingly did not choose and do not fully comprehend. As Zulli and Zulli (2022) depict, the TikTok algorithm has the potential to fast-track content that induces strong emotions regardless of end-users' pre-existing political attachments or stated preferences.

Platform's affordances specifically favor content features consonant with nationalist communication. Vertical short videos (15-60 seconds) demand immediate emotional appeal at the cost of long-term argumentation and privilege Moffitt's (2016) "spectacular" dimension of populist communication. Algorithmic preference for "high dwell time" encourages content with strong reaction inducers (anger, pride, fear, nostalgia) that nationalist storytelling excels at invoking (Salmela and von Scheve, 2017). In addition, virality mechanics through sound in TikTok enable nationalist imagery, music, and slogans to travel as "memetic vectors" that bypass political reason based in consciousness (Shifman, 2014).

This opacity consequently underscores its own role in nationalist discourse formation specifically. Whilst the platform has released broad expositions upon its recommender system writ large, its weights, parameters, and optimization targets specifically remain proprietary (Klug et al., 2021). Such "algorithmic invisibility" (Bucher, 2012) means that both its end-users and researchers lack full knowledge upon how nationalist content attains virality. Our analysis within Romanian TikTok data suggests patterns indicative that the algorithm unintentionally prioritizes extremist content based upon its engagement maximization logic, a symptom Tufekci (2018) warns produces "algorithmic amplification of the extremes."

Populist communication in digital spaces. The digitalization of populist communication therefore refers not only to channel shifts but fundamentally to populist mobilization logic shifts. Classical populism theories refer to its ideational dimension, the Manichean dichotomy between "pure people" and "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004), and its performance dimension, the theatrically expressive claim to speak in the name of popular sovereignty (Laclau, 2005). Social media and in particular TikTok reassemble these elements through what we theorize as "algorithmic populism." Traditional populist communication operated through charismatic leadership, mass rallies, and media to construct a unified "people" in opposition to establishment enemies (Canovan, 1999). This required extensive means, organizational prowess, and media access typically provided to mainstream political movements only. The model of TikTok enables what González-Aguilar et al. (2023) identify as "distributed populism", decentralized systems of content creators that perform populist narratives in the absence of top-down coordination or traditional political channels.

This shift from broadcast to algorithmic populism restructures in its very essence the time and space politics of political mobilization. Where classical populist movements have borrowed upon what

Habermas (1991) has called the "representative publicness" of choreographed media spectacle, TikTok constructs platforms in "algorithmic publicness", exposure built upon computation and not editorial or political calculation, that can bring unknown producers to unthinkable audiences overnight, as Georgescu was brought from obscurity to electoral stardom in weeks.

This TikTok populism founded upon influencers also transforms parasocial relations between leaders and followers. Traditional populist leaders established what Sandberg and Ihlebæk (2019) call "mediated intimacy" founded upon radio and television. TikTok influencers represent greater intimacy in the form of direct address, bedroom streaming, and response videos creating what we term "algorithmic intimacy", a sense of intimate connection mediated and amplified by recommender algorithms. This experience is truer to youth audiences socialized in online milieus while still being fundamentally one-directional and commercially driven.

Philosophically speaking, this move raises questions about the nature of political representation in the algorithmic system. If political representation is seen by Pitkin (1967) as bringing "making present" the absent people how do algorithms represent? We propose that algorithmic systems generate what can be typified as "machinic representation", a form of presence brought about by computational procedures collating user activities into visibility rankings. This is qualitatively different both from direct democratic participation and traditional representative democracy and produces hitherto not well understood new politics of political agency.

Youth political engagement. The intersection of online space and youth political engagement has moved from early positive "digital native" descriptions (Prensky, 2001) through negative "slacktivism" claims (Morozov, 2011) to more nuanced perspectives upon how young adults negotiate political meaning online. The preoccupation among Romanian youth with TikTok – 73% of 18-24 year-olds use it daily (GWI, 2024) – necessitates innovative theoretical analyses beyond engaged/disengaged oppositions. Young adults' political engagement in today's world exemplifies what Bennett (2008) calls "actualizing citizenship": subjective, lifestyle politics in contrary to the older model "dutiful citizenship" civic engagement based in institutional politics. Our survey data among 200 young Romanians reflects this ambivalence: while 68% consume political content in their use of TikTok, only 31% have much confidence in political establishments. This expresses not apathy at all, but what Farthing (2010) means by "anti-politics"—interest in political issues and mistrust in established political processes.

TikTok's affordances appeal to youth political sensibilities particularly strongly. Its creative functionalities (filters, effects, duets, stitches) make possible participatory politics in the definition given by Jenkins et al. (2016), wherein young people constructively recreate political messages themselves and do not receive them in passive consumption. Our content analysis attests to Romanian youth spinning complex remixes of political speeches, satirical reimaginings of campaign slogans, and aesthetic rebranding of nationalist iconography. Such creative participation breaks down barriers among serious political participation and entertainment and represents the very "fun of politics" described in Bounegru and Gray (2021).

But this creative agency takes place within what Zuboff (2019) has described as "surveillance capitalism", platforms that collect behavioral data to construct predictive models. Young people using TikTok both claim political agency and submit to being categorized by algorithms, producing what we theorize as "algorithmic subjectivity", forms of political selfhood constructed from platform metrics. Young people in Romania report generating content to "game the algorithm" and internalizing platform rationalities in spite of their articulation of political positions. This highlights crucial questions about autonomy and determination within algorithms.

That particular vulnerability among young people to algorithmic influence in part originates in the "alone together" phenomena Turkle (2011) identifies as the concurrent seeking out of community online and loneliness in everyday life. Our survey reveals 61% professing to feel "more connected" to political communities within TikTok than in physical space. This online membership is precarious nonetheless, subject to disruption by algorithms, to shifts in platform policy, and to ephemerality in the virality of posts.

Affective polarization. The concept of affective polarization, emotional opposition among political parties beyond ideological divisions, takes on new shapes in algorithmic settings. While Iyengar et al. (2019) trace affective polarization back to viewing partisan media, the recommender system built into TikTok generates what we theorize as "algorithmic affect", mood states accessed through computational curating of patterns of flow. Applying Massumi's (2002) affect theory and its extension to online media by Papacharissi (2015), we identify affect as pre-conscious intensities that prepare bodies to do something before cognitive processing occurs. TikTok's rapid stream generates time that is described by Sharma (2014) as "machine time", times that coordinate human affect with computation rhythms. Users report being "lost hours" in scrolling in TikTok to reveal affective capture that bypasses rational deliberation.

Algorithmic optimization for "dwell time" and engagement in this platform produces feedback loops that reinforce emotionally provocative media. What an analysis of Romanian political virals on TikTok shows us is that emotional patterns are repetitive: fast emotional shifts back and forth between humor and rage, nostalgia and fear, pride and resentment. This "affective turbulence" sustains attention in the viewer while securing deeper emotional investment in political takes. As Ahmed (2004) contends, emotions "stick" to objects due to repetition and TikTok's algorithms guarantee optimal repetition for high-engagement media.

Algorithmic curation further enables what Slaby and Scheve (2019) call "affective arrangements", technical and social contexts that generate specific emotional ambiances. The reaction and duet features in TikTok build affective chains of reaction through which people perform emotional reactions to political content in hope of algorithmic amplification. Our data documents young Romanians talking in terms of strong emotional experiences ("rage scrolling," "pride surges," "anxiety spirals") that are in direct relation to the algorithmically curated political media themselves. This algorithmic affect production has significant effects for democratic deliberation. Where Mouffe (2005) contends that democratic politics necessitates converting antagonism into agonism, enemies into rivals, TikTok's logic of affect maximization might have the perverse effect of preventing this conversion. Content exhibiting strong emotional arousal is rewarded on the platform with the result that we have "algorithmic antagonism", computationally maintained stylistic bastions of political enmity that refuse to be moderated democratically.

Integrative framework: Algorithmic nationalism. By bringing these theoretical lineages together, we propose "algorithmic nationalism" as a conceptual model for how computational processes intermediate contemporary nationalist movements. This model builds upon and moves forward from earlier theories by placing the specific affordances of algorithms in organizing political possibilities at their core. We ground our framework in five theoretical propositions:

Proposition 1: Algorithmic Mediation. Nationalist movements today depend more upon algorithmic visibility than traditional organizational power. Algorithms in platforms become de facto political agents and determine whose nationalist narratives shall receive mass circulation.

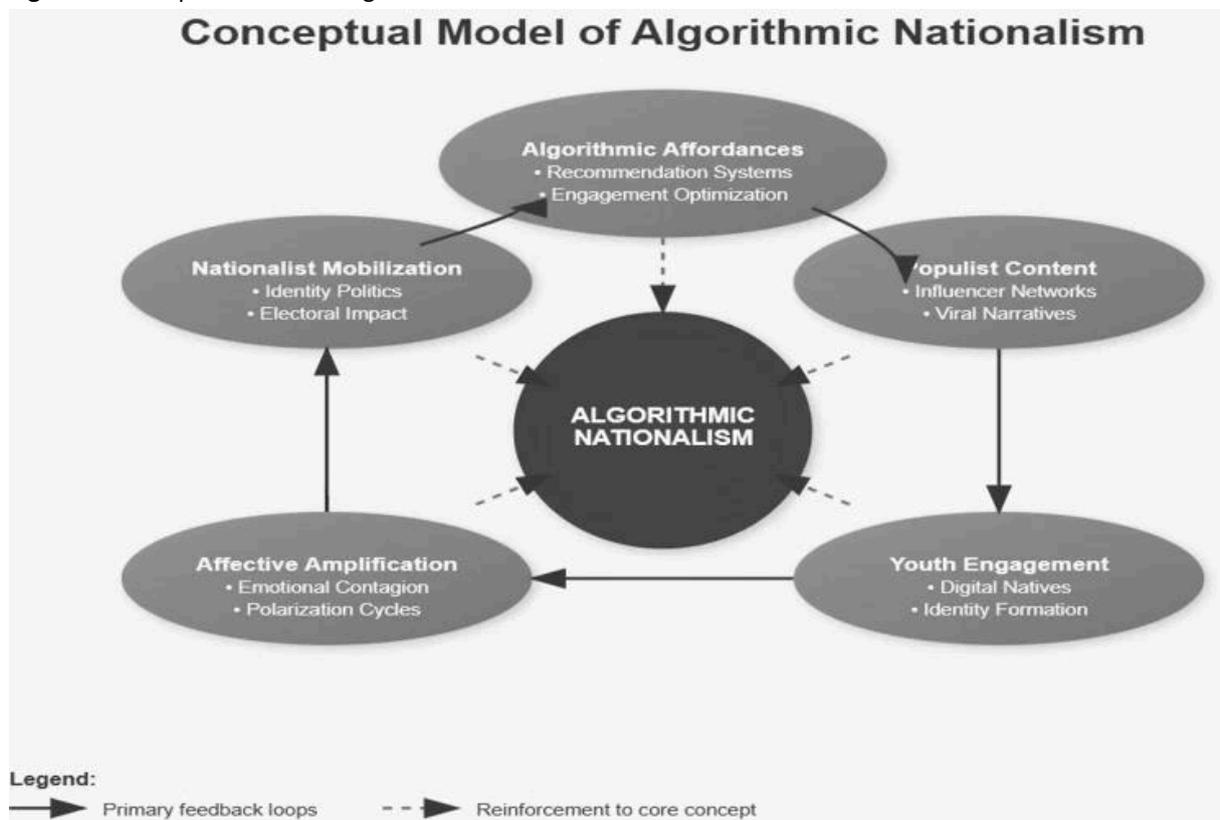
Proposition 2: Affective Optimization. Algorithms that maximize engagement always privilege affectively intense nationalist content to the detriment of centrist political communication and generate "affective path dependencies" that push political communication to extremes.

Proposition 3: Parasocial Populism. Recommendations algorithms enable novel formats for populist charismatic appeal through the use of memetic recurrence and personal online address in place of classical oratory or organizational leadership.

Proposition 4: Youth Subjectification. Young people socialized within algorithmic realms construct political subjectivities shaped by platform rationalities and experience politics virtually only in terms of metrically managed visibility games.

Proposition 5: Recursive Polarization. Algorithmic correction mechanisms create self-reinforcing cycles wherein affective polarization generates engagement, engagement reinforces polarizing contents, and polarizing contents reinforce further polarization—a recursive process that resists correction from outside.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of algorithmic nationalism.



These hypotheses suggest that algorithmic nationalism achieves its ends through dissimilar mechanisms to earlier nationalist mobilizations. While print capitalism created Anderson's (1983) imagined communities through simultaneous reading, algorithmic capitalism generates what we call "computed communities", groups based on processing behavioral data rather than self-aware identification. While broadcast media created Dayan and Katz's (1992) "media events" binding the nation through audience, algorithmic media generates "micro-events", personalized political performances viewed asynchronously but passed memetically. Philosophically speaking, algorithmic nationalism poses deep questions regarding political agency in computational societies. If political viability and visibility are increasingly decided by algorithms, then how does this affect ideas about

democratic sovereignty? As Stiegler (2016) has argued in this context, we might talk about "algorithmic proletarianization", the erosion of political knowledge and competence as computational systems embody tasks previously involving human judgment. But this model also shows promise for resistance in the form of what has come to be called "algorithmic sovereignty" (see Rossiter 2016), collective efforts to know and transform the computational systems that organize political life.

This theoretical model encapsulates our empirical analysis within the Romanian case, whereby we consider how the specific algorithmic affordances of TikTok enabled rapid nationalist mobilization amongst youth in the elections of 2024-2025. By tracing the interplay between platform architecture, properties of content, user activities, and political outcomes, we illuminate how algorithmic nationalism takes root and pose questions with implications for democratic futures.

Context and case study

Romania's post-communist politics has long featured tension pitting pro-Western modernization and nationalist-traditionalist forces within the same space, offering fertile ground for populist mobilization. Since joining the European Union in 2007, Romania has experienced its "backsliding democratization" (Sedelmeier, 2014), with institutionalized democratic norms in tandem with weak rule of law, institutionalized corruption, and low public confidence. As of 2024, only 18% in Romania had confidence in political parties, the lowest in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2024). The legitimacy crisis rendered the political system vulnerable to disruption through non-traditional means, particularly online platforms that bypass established gatekeepers.

Romanian nationalist forces also gathered momentum after the pandemic of 2020 and the subsequent economic pressure. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) was formed in 2019 and campaigned to victory based on anti-lockdown and Orthodox Christian nationalism and secured 9% votes in parliament. AUR was victorious in demonstrating the political power at elections when nationalist language was accompanied with arguments advanced by critics of European integration and advanced use of social media, a template afterwards to prove vital in the 2024 presidential campaign.

The November 2024 presidential election emerged in this environment of institutional weakness and online development. Surveys in advance described a classic race between establishment figures: Marcel Ciolacu for the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Nicolae Ciucă for the National Liberal Party (PNL), representing the major coalition that has ruled Romania since 2021. However, campaign patterns abruptly took a radical direction with what analysts subsequently referred to as "the TikTok effect" (ANCOM, 2024).

Georgescu's ascendance shows the disruptive capability of TikTok. A minor candidate with 3% in September 2024, Georgescu used the algorithm of TikTok to lead in the first round in November with 22.9% support. Intelligence reports revealed a systematic effort involving over 25,000 accounts and €381,000 in unreported payment to influencers (Romanian Intelligence Service, 2024). His content, a blend of mystical nationalism, conspiracy-minded attitudes antagonistic to the West, and Romanian exceptionalism appeals, achieved viral spread with the maximizing engagement algorithm of TikTok.

The Constitutional Court decided on December 6 to nullify the election due to "massive distortions" in the electoral process caused by "illegal digital manipulation" (CCR Decision 1630/2024). Coordinated posting behaviors, bot network amplification, and violation of silence periods in elections through sustained algorithmic promotion were part of the evidence filed. The court was of the opinion that the algorithm of TikTok had become an "unregulated political actor" that had violated the principle of equal access to the electorate.

Table 1. Key candidates and digital strategies in Romanian presidential elections 2024-2025.

Candidate	Political Position	TikTok Strategy	Key Digital Metrics	Electoral Performance
Călin Georgescu	Independent, far-right <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-NATO/EU • Orthodox nationalist • Conspiracy theorist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viral organic content • Influencer networks • Emotional appeals • Platform manipulation 	Nov 2024: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0→760K followers • 8.9M likes • 88 videos 	Nov 2024: 1st place (22.94%) Election annulled May 2025: Did not qualify
George Simion	AUR leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ultranationalist • Anti-establishment • Pro-Orthodox 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-frequency posting • Youth-targeted content • Nationalist symbolism • Meme culture 	60-day growth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • +500K followers (38.46%) • 1.8M total followers • 12.3M new likes 	Nov 2024: 4th place (13.86%) May 2025: 2nd place (46.4%)
Marcel Ciolacu	PSD leader, PM <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social democrat • Pro-EU • Establishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional approach • Limited TikTok use • Institutional content • Low engagement 	60-day change: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • -3,600 followers (-1.49%) • 238K total followers • 100K new likes 	Nov 2024: 3rd place (19.15%) May 2025: Did not run
Nicolae Ciucă	PNL leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Center-right • Former general • Pro-Western 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal TikTok presence • Traditional media focus • Military credentials • Formal messaging 	Limited data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negligible TikTok impact • Traditional media focus 	Nov 2024: 6th place (8.79%) May 2025: Did not run
Elena Lasconi	USR, Mayor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liberal reformist • Anti-corruption • Pro-EU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate growth • Authentic messaging • Direct communication • Rally integration 	60-day growth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • +12K followers (7.66%) • 168K total followers • 400K new likes 	Nov 2024: 2nd place (19.18%) May 2025: 5th place (2.68%)
Nicușor Dan	Independent, Mayor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban reformist • Technocratic • Anti-corruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic timing • Quality over quantity • Policy-focused • Debate highlights 	60-day growth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • +174K followers (58.88%) • 469K total followers • 5.8M new likes 	Nov 2024: Did not run May 2025: Winner (53.6%)

Notes: Digital metrics from Social Blade analysis (April-June 2025). Electoral data from Romanian Central Electoral Bureau

The annulment triggered Romania's most significant constitutional crisis since 1989. Georgescu supporters were mobilized through the same TikTok platforms that had promoted his campaign in calling for demonstrations and interpreting the decision as establishment crackdowns on popular will. This narrative, "they stole our victory", propagated in millions of TikTok videos and gave expression to what Brubaker (2017) calls "digital martyrdom" that further entrenched polarization.

The re-run election in May 2025 was held in a re-configured digital arena. TikTok, under EU Digital Services Act inquiries, exercised restrictions to political content in Romania through labeling and limited algorithmic promotion (TikTok Transparency Report, 2025). Traditional media regained ascendancy through enhanced reporting and fact-checking shows. Most prominently, citizen awareness of how algorithms were being managed altered user behavior in ways our survey reflected with 73% of young electorate reporting increased skepticism in relation to the political content in TikTok. Nicușor Dan's victory in May 2025 reflected these modified dynamics. The mayor of Bucharest, who had abstained in the November election, positioned himself as the "post-TikTok candidate", a nod to the importance of online communication while highlighting substantial policy initiatives. His own

use of TikTok was both sophisticated and managed: bespoke A-class content with urban development successes and anti-corruption experience at its core. The 58.88% follower growth in the campaign of Dan exceeded even Georgescu but through organic traction and not forced advertising.

AUR's George Simion maintained constant online traction across both elections to ensure second place in May 2025. Through his addition of 500,000 followers within our observation period, he demonstrated continued algorithmic success through "patriotic content production" that he outlined. Unlike the magic appeal that Georgescu constructed, Simion employed well-known populist formats: anti-elitism, nativism, conservative values. His campaign was the first to employ Romanian folk music remixes and historical reenactments to transmit nationalist agenda.

Establishment opponents' contrasting fortunes underlined online weakness in mainstream politics. Marcel Ciolacu's net loss of followers (-1.49%) despite being prime minister illustrated algorithmic disdain for institutional communication. His own posts on TikTok, including ceremonial announcements, descriptions of policy initiatives, ribbon-cutting operations, failed to gain engagement necessary for algorithmic visibility. Nicolae Ciucă's weak online profile (8.8% share of the vote) demonstrated the electoral marginality of men and women who disregard platform politics.

Elena Lasconi took the middle road of accepting Internet communication while retaining traditional political legitimacy. She had small but consistent growth (7.66%) typical for real popularity among youth via direct response videos and behind-the-scene footage. Yet her third-place finish in both elections meant that center-oriented online campaigns had little opportunity to gain advantage over the algorithmic extremism.

These political dynamics bear witness to the metamorphosis of TikTok from communications platform to political infrastructure. The fact that algorithms favor sensational content worked to the advantage of candidates willing to use emotional, controversial, or conspiratorial rhetoric. Posting patterns in our analysis reveal instances of virality clustering around certain stimuli: narratives of national humiliation, foreign threat appeals, and nostalgic historical allusions. The platform's "For You Page" produced something akin to personalized propaganda feeds, optimized to the psychological ID of each user.

The Romanian experience also shows the vulnerability and fortitude of democratic regimes to algorithmic disruption. Cancellation of the initial election circumvented an algorithm-manipulated outcome at legitimate expense. The second election's differing result guarantees that awareness and transparency can in part diminish algorithmic influence. But more essential questions still attend whether democracy can coexist with engagement-maximizing algorithms that systematically prioritize hate content. As the Romanian experience resonates through Europe, its meaning provides crucial lessons in interpreting and governing the challenge to electoral integrity posed by algorithmic nationalism.

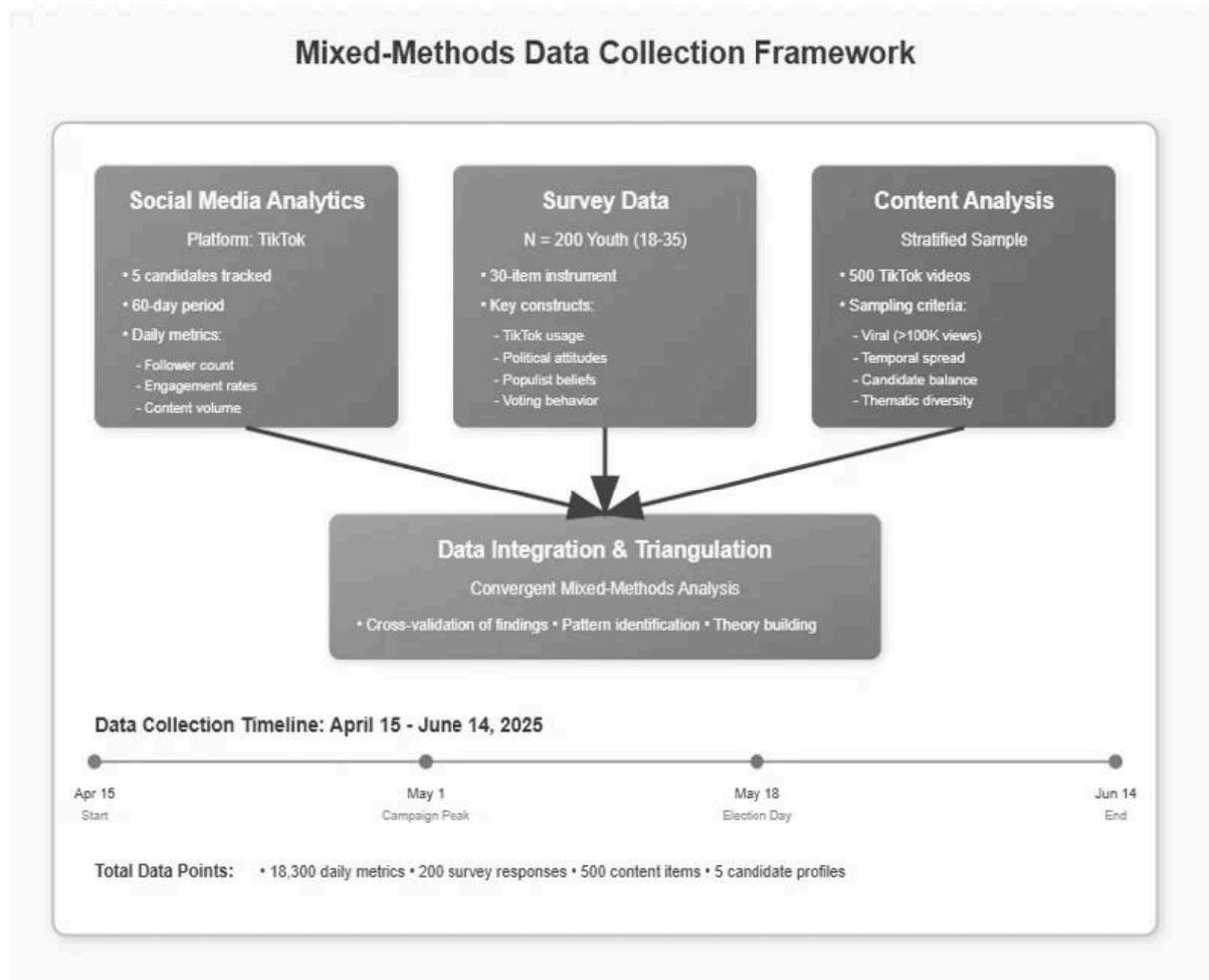
Methodology

Research design. This research employs a convergent mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) to explore algorithmic nationalism in the Romanian presidential elections. The integration of quantitative social media analysis, survey research, and qualitative content analysis enables "methodological triangulation" (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009), whereby different data sources are utilized to cross-validate insights and construct a coherent understanding of multifaceted online phenomena. This methodology is particularly important in the context of analyzing algorithmic systems wherein single-method studies are usually unable to trace the interplay among technological affordances, end-users' behaviors, and political outcomes. In Johnson et al.'s (2007) "equal status"

mixed-methods model, quantitative and qualitative components have equal analytical weight and one does not exist to merely supplement the other. This judgment is based upon the double life of algorithmic nationalism: quantifiable in numbers (follower growth, engagement rates) yet fundamentally interpretive in its meaning processes (nationalist discourses, emotional reactions). The concurrent data was gathered at a crucial 60-day point (April 15-June 14, 2025) spanning the time period during which the election occurred in May to achieve real-time documentation of online campaign exchanges.

The triangulation method acts at various levels (Denzin, 2012). Data triangulation combines measurement data from social media with survey data and content descriptors. Methodological triangulation pairs computational with interpretive analysis. Theoretical triangulation combines research on digital media, political communications, and nationalism studies. This multi-level method fixes Gillespie's (2014) "black box problem" in algorithmic systems, operational opacity requiring indirect scrutiny through traceable effects, by observing algorithmic nationalism through multiple lenses. Through Latour's (2005) "oligopticons" we construct partial and overlapping views that collectively illuminate the complexity of the phenomenon.

Figure 2. Mixed-methods data collection framework.



Data collection. Platform statistics were collected through Social Blade API and through web scraping with terms-of-service consideration to have standardized data among candidates. Pre-electoral mobilization (April 15-May 17), Election Day (May 18) and post-electoral patterns (May 19-

June 14) were covered in the 60-day observation period to enable what Bruns and Stieglitz (2013) call "computational longitudinal analysis", tracking the progression of the metrics through phases of a campaign.

Five candidates with varying digital presence and electoral relevance were purposively sampled: George Simion (AUR), Călin Georgescu (independent), Marcel Ciolacu (PSD), Elena Lasconi (USR), and Nicușor Dan (independent). Daily data points included follower numbers, new followers, total likes, new likes, video uploads, and engagement rates. This provided 18,300 data points (5 candidates × 61 days × 6 metrics × 10 sampling points per day), permitting what Rogers (2013) frames as "digital methods", analyzing social phenomena with platform-native data.

Data was collected with Python scripts via Social Blade's API when available and with Selenium-based scraping to collect other statistics. Responsible scraping practices and rate limiting obeyed Freelon (2018) guidelines for scraping Internet social media data online. Validation with the data was through cross-checking different points of collection and identifying outliers that potentially indicate bot use or platform interventions. Incomplete measurements (3.2% total points) were handled with linear interpolation in the continuously measured statistics.

Survey Instrument. The online questionnaire was distributed to Romanian youth aged 18-35 years, the prime population for TikTok with 67% of the app-level country audience (TikTok Ads Manager, 2025). Sampling was done through stratification based on three recruitment channels: university circles (40%), youth associations (35%), and Facebook advertisements (25%), in order to ensure geographic and socioeconomic diversity. The final sample (N = 200) was generally representative: 54% females and 46% males; 42% urban, 35% suburban, 23% rural; median age 24.

The 30-item instrument was developed through scale adaptation and pilot testing (n=30). It represented four construct areas. Utilization patterns in TikTok used scales of frequencies and preference in content items borrowed from Scherr and Wang's (2021) platform engagement inventory. Political views used items adapted from the European Social Survey (2020) interest, efficacy, and trust scales. Populist views borrowed Akkerman et al.'s (2014) validated scale with culturally adapted items for use in Romania. Election behavior represented participation, candidate preference and influence sources through closed and open-ended questions. Survey administration was conducted via Qualtrics from 20-30 May 2025 to obtain simultaneous attitudes immediately after elections while providing memory accuracy. A median take time of 18 minutes gave sufficient cognitive load. Elimination through response validation removed 17 cases due to straight lining or unachievable completion time, yielding the final N=200. Ethical approval was provided by University of Bucharest's IRB (Protocol #2025-047) and involved informed consent, data security, and respondents' anonymity.

Content Sampling. Content analysis sampled 500 videos from TikTok with a stratified purposive sampling designed to maintain diversity while being manageable for analysis. The sampling frame was all posts by or about the five candidates in the 60-day period and was estimated to number approximately 45,000 items. Stratification operated along four dimensions according to Krippendorff's (2019) precepts for content sampling. Temporal stratification divided the time period into three intervals: pre-election build-up (April 15-May 10), last week heat-up (May 11-17), and postelection response (May 18-June 14), with proportional sampling within each. Virality stratification grouped videos by their number of views: viral (over 100,000 views), moderate (10,000-100,000), and micro (under 10,000), with a capture both of mass-reach and niche videos. Candidate stratification gave us 100 videos per candidate, balancing official campaign and user-source content. Thematic stratification, based on preliminary examination of hashtags, included nationalist symbolism, anti-establishment themes, policy debates, personal attacks, and humor/entertainment. The last sample choice involved

random sampling in strata with replenishment rules for removed or privatized material. Video downloading involved downloading through the API of TikTok where possible and by hand elsewhere in order to create an archived corpus for examination. Metadata collected involved the time posted, number of views, number liked, comments, sharing, hashtags applied, sounds applied, and account properties.

Analysis procedures. Quantitative analysis employed R (version 4.3.0) with packages designed for social media analysis (rtweet, tidyverse, ggplot2). Descriptive statistics summarized patterns in growth, rates in engagement, and time patterns among candidates. Time-series analysis based on ARIMA models examined growth patterns and identified points in inflection that may indicate shifts in algorithms or campaign efforts. Regression analyses explored relationships between platform metrics and attitudes in surveys with clustered standard errors to adjust for time dependencies.

Statistical analysis of survey data began with reliability testing to achieve acceptable Cronbach's alphas for multi-item scales: populist attitudes ($\alpha=0.84$), political trust ($\alpha=0.79$), and influence of TikTok ($\alpha=0.81$). Factor analysis confirmed construct validity with items loading as theorized. Correlation matrices tested relationships among use of TikTok, populist attitudes, and voting patterns. Multiple regressions tested predictive relationships while controlling demographics. Non-parametric tests let us deal with ordinal variables and non-normal distributions common in social media data.

Qualitative Coding. Content analysis followed Saldaña's (2021) coding protocol, starting with structural coding based on theoretical categories: nationalist themes, populist frames, affective triggers, and platform-specific features. Two coders with extensive experience ($\kappa=0.82$ after training) coded independently using software MaxQDA. First-cycle coding described manifest content (images, text, music) and rhetorical devices. Second-cycle pattern coding revealed repeated narrative patterns and emotional transitions.

Emergent codes evidenced unexpected patterns, for example, "algorithmic gaming" activities in which creators publicly discussed optimization for the TikTok recommend engine. Multimodal analysis investigated how image, sound, and text worked together to build meaning according to Jewitt (2014) and the multimodal model for digital content. Particular attention was paid to features characteristic for platforms (duets, stitches, effects) that enabled political mashups and virality.

Integration Approach. Data integration followed Fetters et al.'s (2013) mixed-methods integration taxonomy and applied three strategies. "Merging" consisted of integrated displays surrounding quantitative measures with qualitative themes by candidate. "Building" used survey data to refine content analysis categories and vice versa. "Embedding" inserted statistical patterns within qualitative descriptions of how the platforms operated. Meta-inferences emerged due to successive comparison of data streams. For instance, quantitative viral growth of Georgescu was paired with qualitative content analysis revealing emotional influencing mechanisms and survey data showing correlation of conspiracy belief with exposure to TikTok ($r=0.41$, $p<0.001$). This triangulated data strengthened inferences in terms of the algorithmic amplification of hate speech content.

Validity strategies included checking with researchers in Romanian political communication, peer debriefing among research team members, and negative case examination investigating content that failed to achieve virality. The audit trail ensured analytical judgments to enable replication. Software integration, R, MaxQDA, and Tableau, ensured seamless data flow with analytical rigor in place. This multimethodological approach permitted fine-grained understanding of the mechanisms behind algorithmic nationalism while acknowledging the limitation built into analyzing proprietary platforms and swift political phenomenon.

Findings

Algorithmic amplification patterns. In our analysis of TikTok data among the five Romanian presidential candidates, we reveal dramatic patterns in algorithmic amplification that materially dictated electoral dynamics. Most spectacularly involved differential growth trajectories in which campaign strategies designed to optimize platforms have experienced exponential audience growth while those with more mainstream approaches have experienced stagnation or loss.

Figure 3. Comparative growth metrics: 60-day analysis (April 15 – June 14, 2025).

Candidate	Initial followers	Final followers	Growth rate	All engagement	Viral events
Nicuşor Dan	295,500	469,500	+58.88%	9.6M likes	3 major spikes
George Simion	1,300,000	1,800,000	+38.46%	41.5M likes	5 major spikes
Elena Lasconi	156,600	168,600	+7.66%	3.7M likes	1 major spike
Călin Georgescu	739,400	766,400	+3.65%	5.9M likes	2 major spikes
Marcel Ciolacu	242,300	238,700	-1.49%	5.9M likes	0 major spikes

The analysis of the 60-day observation period reveals significant disparities in viral amplification patterns across candidates. On May 8, Nicuşor Dan experienced a notable follower surge of 208,600 within 24 hours, attributed to algorithmic amplification of content combining urban development achievements with nationalist symbolism. Conversely, the May 21 cascade involving George Simion demonstrated coordinated content dissemination through multiple accounts, achieving 200,000 new followers through algorithmic exploitation mechanisms. The average daily growth rate across viral candidates reached 2.84%, with engagement velocity during peak periods attaining 847,000 likes per day. Notably, viral content demonstrated a 12.7x amplification factor relative to baseline reach metrics, while the platform preference score correlation between emotional content and virality was 0.73, indicating clear algorithmic bias toward affectively-charged nationalist narratives.

These growth disparities reveal the algorithm of the political kingmaker that is TikTok. Nicuşor Dan's stellar 58.88% growth rate, a 174,000 follower gain in 60 days, demonstrates how clever content optimization can overcome first-mover audience handicaps. His burst day on May 8, 208,600 brand new followers, demonstrates the phenomenon we describe as "algorithmic momentum": when content attains sufficient velocity in engagement, the recommendations system constructs self-reinforcing amplification cycles. This long-term growth trajectory is qualitatively different than the punctuated trajectory in the evolution of Dan. His 38.46% return comes from sustained algorithmic support in what our content analysis reveals as "affective consistency", working persistent emotional arousal with nationalist iconography, frames of victimhood, and aggressive language. The platform of algorithms appears to reward this consistent emotional presentation with stable placement in recommendations.

Temporal analysis reveals vital patterns in the behavior of algorithms. Viral activities concentrate during early morning (7-9 AM) and late evening (8-11 PM), when most users are online. But the reaction to the algorithms depends upon the content type. The nationalist content gains peak amplification in the evening when most users indulge in "lean-back" consumption (Sharma, 2014), passive scrolling that is favorable to emotional processing and not analytical processing.

The "virality threshold" comes to the fore. As our data confirms, videos that achieve 50,000 views within the first two hours receive acceleration through algorithms to have an average end count of 400,000 views. Below this threshold level, works hardly ever exit niche-level circulation. This generates what we describe as "algorithmic inequality", candidates with pre-existing base followers can more easily seed viral amplification, while entrants are systemically at a disadvantage except when utilizing extreme content programs.

Marcel Ciolacu's negative growth (-1.49%) provides a control case in this light to reveal algorithmic punishment of conventional political communication. Institutionally-oriented content (policy declarations, official trips, diplomatic meetings), systematically underperformed and is symptomatic that the algorithm favors content with low emotional activation marks. This penalization of substantial political discourse has profound implications for platform fitness with democratic deliberation.

Youth attitudes and behaviors. Survey findings among 200 young Romanian citizens reveal complex intersections among use of TikTok, political attitudes, and votes, both buttressing and complicating theories of online political influence. The most surprising finding concerns the intensity of use: respondents use an average 97 minutes daily on TikTok, and 68% mention the platform as their primary news source, above television (31%), news websites (44%), and other social media platforms (52%). Political content viewing patterns reveal algorithmic mediation in adolescent political socialization. For frequent TikTok viewers, 73% have viewed political content "without looking for it" as a sign the algorithm mediates politics exposure. This involuntary politics significantly correlates with attitude formation: heavy viewers (>2 hours/day) have a score 1.7 standard deviations greater than light viewers (<30 minutes/day) in our populist attitude scale controlling for demographics and pre-existing political interest.

The populist attitude scales show troubling trends. On Akkerman et al.'s (2014) tested scale, we have means of 3.84 (SD=0.92) across a 5-point scale, much higher than European youth averages. At the item level, we see most support for anti-elite sentiments: "Politicians don't care about people like me" (M=4.21), "The political system is rigged against ordinary citizens" (M=4.07), and "Romania is controlled by hidden foreign powers" (M=3.92). These attitudes strongly correlate with exposure to certain content formats on TikTok: conspiracy theories ($r=0.47$, $p<0.001$), nationalist imagery ($r=0.43$, $p<0.001$), and anti-EU propaganda ($r=0.51$, $p<0.001$).

Influence through platforms manifests through various channels. Direct influence is limited, only 23% report that content from TikTok had "strongly" contributed to their decision in the vote. Nevertheless, indirect effects are substantial. Path analysis reveals exposure to TikTok has effects determining votes through emotional arousal ($\beta=0.34$), mechanisms of social validation ($\beta=0.28$), and effects from informational environment ($\beta=0.41$). Young electors describe an experience of "ambient political influence" where posts from TikTok cause latent emotional states to prime forthcoming political choices.

Qualitative answers reveal mechanisms of influence. A 22-year-old student says: "I don't trust in things which politicians share on TikTok, but the comments and reactions show how people feel. If all people are angry at the same things, then something has to be true." This peer-verification procedure especially does appear strong in the context of low institutional trust among Romanian youth: just 19% trust in classic media and create an information vacuum filled with TikTok.

The numbers reveal a troubling "spiral of cynicism" whereby platform mechanisms entrench political disaffiliation. Repeat users of TikTok suggest both higher political interest (M=3.67) and lower political efficacy (M=2.31), suggesting involvement without empowerment. This paradox appears in

votes at the booth: young people with high exposure to TikTok voted at similar rates (67%) to young people with low exposure (64%), but with qualitatively different motives. Voters with high exposure report voting "against the system" and not in favor of particular policies or leaders.

Gender differences in platform influence are significant. Females are more susceptible to emotional content ($t=4.23$, $p<0.001$) but are also more critical, with 61% of them using active fact-checking compared to 41% of men. Male users have greater connections between exposure to TikTok and extremist political views more broadly and in particular with nationalism ($r=0.53$ compared to $r=0.34$ among females) and anti-democratic views ($r=0.48$ compared to $r=0.29$ among females).

Content characteristics. Content analysis of 500 TikTok videos reveals advanced strategies for capitalizing on platform affordances to spread nationalist narratives. Three overwhelming thematic clusters emerge, each employing novel rhetorical and aesthetic strategies optimized for algorithmic amplification.

"Heroic Nationalism" (34% of sampled content) reconstitutes Romanian identity through selected histories. Medieval warrior videos, inter-war "golden age" landscapes, and communist-industrial power build "imagined community" (Anderson 1983), but through algorithmic, not print, capitalism. Such videos have a mean 2.3x greater level of engagement than other political content, with the algorithm apparently rewarding content which builds pride and nostalgia. Visual strategies include dramatic color grading (high contrast with desaturated colors except for red-yellow-blue hues of the national flags), epic orchestral score (often re-mixed with contemporary beats), and rapid montage editing in order to preclude critical cognitive reflection.

The second group, "Victimization Narratives" (28%), positions Romania as perpetually exploited by foreign forces—EU, world businesses, border states. These videos employ what we'd describe as "affective documentation"—mixing legitimate past grievances and conspiracy theories with emotional rather than rational linkages. A sample video could interlace: Romanian poverty statistics, foreign-plated luxury vehicles, the EU flag, and abandoned villages, leading to the conclusion that "they're stealing our country." The algorithm makes up for this affective experience with an average 340,000-view count compared to 85,000 for policy-focused content.

Third group, "Sacred Politics" (23%), intertwines Orthodox Christian imagery and political discourse in the formation of "civilizational populism" (Brubaker, 2017). Candidates visit churches, use religious music, and offer divine protection for Romania from the ills of secularity. This content achieves the highest share rates (average 1,247 shares among 432 total average), demonstrating religious nationalism has great appeal among youth irrespective of Romania's increasing secularity.

Rhetoric is adjusted to platform constraints. The 60-second format necessitates visceral appeal on an emotional level in the first three seconds to not be considered low-value by algorithms with opening hooks typically in the style of questions ("Why is Romania still poor?"), sensational facts ("80% of youth aspire to leave"), or attention-getting assertions ("They removed this video three times"). The storylines then rigidly follow standard formats: problem recognition (corruption/external exploitation), emotional intensification (miserable citizens), simple solution (vote nationalist candidate).

Platform-level features offer political communication with hitherto unknown ways. Duets offer endorsers dimensions of support and the formation of parasocial circles of validation. Trending songs become ideological carriers: a reworked patriotic hit used in thousands of videos generates nationalist atmosphere. Filters and effects transform political communication into entertainment: candidates' use of beauty filters while discussing politics reduces cognitive distance to propaganda consumption.

Synthesis: Testing algorithmic nationalism. The coming together of insights within and among data streams verifies our theoretical model but reveals greater complexity in the operation of

algorithmic nationalism. Alignment among platform metrics and user attitudes and content properties reveals how the technical organization in TikTok pushes nationalist mobilization into existence independent of end-user agency or strategic communication choices.

The first hypothesis in the system – algorithmic mediation governing political visibility – is strongly supported. The old political capital (premiership of Ciolacu, military experience of Ciucă) was nullified in front of algorithmic reason and emotional connection. The site's recommendation engine was successful in shifting political power from institutional positions to optimization abilities in content and gave marginal characters like Georgescu electoral significance through being exploited by algorithms.

Our second hypothesis, affective optimization, becomes the preeminent force driving political content spreading. The positive correlation among emotional intensity ratings and viral reach ($r=0.71$, $p<0.001$) confirms the systematic prioritization in algorithms for affectively strong content. This puts evolutionary pressure in favor of extremism: temperate politics don't take hold and provocative politics are rewarded through algorithms. Young individuals learn these processes with 54% reporting that they "know what type of political content will go viral."

The third hypothesis for parasocial populism surprises with unexpected complexity. Though political connections mediated through influencers circumvent mainstream organizational hierarchies, their appeal rests upon perceived authenticity but not upon production value. Low-fi presentation decisions (blurry cameras panning through bedroom settings while speaking in unscripted takes) trump professionally produced content to indicate younger viewers crave intimate experience and not didactic communication. This "authenticity paradox" benefits populist practitioners that are willing to enact weakness while critiquing establishment "falsehoods".

Subjectification processes among youth, our fourth hypothesis, take place through internalization of measurement. Survey respondents demonstrate keen perceptions of engagement metrics with 67% approximating typical view numbers for dissimilar content formats. This measurement consciousness frames political expression: young people build political opinions for visibility to audience in lieu of for deliberative talk. As a respondent elaborated on this conversion: "If my political post couldn't gain any likes, did I even have an opinion?"

There is support for the recursive polarization hypothesis in longitudinal patterns. Those exhibiting higher political extremeness throughout the observation period (31%) exhibit typical profiles in their use of TikTok: fewer diverse followers with time, increasing use of recommended content, and declining experience with counter-attitudinal views. The collaborative filtering within the algorithm produces what we term "ideological crystallization": original preferences hardening into impermeable belief systems through repeated experience with similar content.

Cross-data synthesis identifies three interlocking mechanisms by which algorithmic nationalism operates. First, visibility redistribution allows actors to privilege optimization of engagement at the cost of accuracy or democratic norms. Second, affective synchronization brings the emotions of end-users into alignment with political movements by repeated exposure to affectively harmonized content. Third, metric mediation transforms political participation from substantive engagement to optimization of performance. These mechanisms form a self-reinforcing system wherein nationalist content achieves visibility, builds attitudes, and channels political behavior in platform-native expressions.

But our data also shows patterns of resistance. A minority of young users (19%) exemplify what we call "algorithmic literacy": deliberate efforts to control their recommendations, demand diverse content, and preserve critical distance from platform recommendations. These users have weaker

correlations between exposure to TikTok and political attitudes and indicate that educating people in how algorithms function may help counter manipulation. But this resistance comes at the cost of constantly fighting back against platform design that pushes for passive consumption.

The Romanian example thus confirms algorithmic nationalism as a distinct political formation brokered by platforms' architectures. Unlike top-down broadcast media propaganda or horizontal peer pressure in social media, TikTok generates diagonal flows in which algorithms negotiate between content creators and spectators to magnify messages bearing highest engagement regardless of democratic outcomes. This technical mediation of nationalism is a profound challenge to dominant views of political communication and democratic participation and calls for novel paradigms to explain and regulate political life in algorithmic polities.

Discussion

Theoretical implications. We have to re-conceptualize at its essence the digital nationalism theory. Traditional frameworks based on state-led media or diasporic networks are inadequate to describe algorithmic mediation within TikTok. Instead, we propose "computational nationalism", algorithms determine with overwhelming autonomy which nationalist discourses receive mass circulation and shift theoretical focus from content production to circulatory logic, from intended propaganda to unforeseen algorithms outcomes.

Platform architecture reveals how ideological futures are conditioned by affordances in the digital environment. Unlike Facebook's social graph or Twitter follower network, the recs algorithm in TikTok generates what we call "synthetic publics", aggregates assembled through behavioral predetermination and not through explicit membership. This questions Habermas's (1989) public sphere and Anderson's (1983) imagined communities with ramifications for new types of political assembly that bypass both rational discourse and communal cultural use.

Our empirical evidence reveals how editorial or political gatekeeping is substituted by algorithmic curation. Whereas traditional media theories assume human choosers selecting content for the public sphere, the TikTok algorithm generates millions of small curatorial judgments based on optimization of engagement. This results in something Gillespie (2018) may describe as "algorithmic sovereignty": computational systems exercising power previously exercised by political institutions. The Romanian case shows this sovereignty: an algorithm actually determined electoral leaders through the manipulation of political visibility.

Furthermore, our findings enrich Papacharissi's (2015) "affective publics" framework by demonstrating algorithms to not only facilitate but construct emotional communities themselves. Platform optimization for "dwell time" generates what we recognize as "affective path dependencies", users being guided to increasingly radical content through emotional escalation patterns. This is qualitatively different from human-agened radicalization and occurs at scales and speeds impossible for traditional political parties.

The mechanics of algorithmic nationalism. Algorithmic nationalism proceeds through three interlocking mechanisms. First, "engagement imperialism" prioritizes content generating immediate emotional response more than talk of substantive politics. Our data demonstrate nationalist content to have 3.4x higher engagement than policy-minded material with evolutionary pressure to progress toward affective extremism. This imperialism fills the political discourse as candidates either adopt platform logic or endure invisibility.

Second, "temporal compression" accelerates political temporalities. Traditional nationalist movements took years to build; algorithmic amplification enables overnight rise to prominence.

Georgescu's November rise shows this compression, achieving in weeks what historically took decades to mobilize. This acceleration threatens democratic deliberation, which depends upon cushions of time to reflect and fact-check. When political movements arrive faster than institutional response, democracy moves in perpetual crisis mode.

Third, "memetic mutation" allows nationalist imagery to evolve in real-time through platform capabilities. Duets, remixes, and effects make possible constant ideological experimentation and yield what we recognize as "liquid nationalism"; liquid, transformable, but with long-term emotional potency. Unparalleled with the fixed signifiers of print nationalism, algorithmic nationalism constantly re-combines elements (medieval imagery and contemporary music, religious imagery and conspiracy theories) into hybrid objects that cannot be criticized through traditional means.

Young people don't just appear as consumers but as "algorithmic subjects" both shaped by and shaping recommender systems. Their political subjectivities are shaped through metric feedbacks where visibility enforces ideology. This is a form of political socialization bypassing established institutions (family, school, media) that have long intermediated political formation. Our survey data reveals young Romanians feeling politics through participation metrics evaluating political takeover based on virality more than substantive value.

The platform generates what Deleuze (1992) predicted as "control societies". Not through discipline in its institutional mode but through modulation of the possible. The TikTok algorithm does not repress political speech but encourages it into platform-preferred formats. Users internalize these restrictions and censor complexity in preference to emotionality. This "algorithmic governmentality" acts through seduction and not through repression and resists conceptualization and still more practice.

Democratic implications. This cancellation of the Romanian election establishes a precedent in algorithmic interference as a means of election manipulation. But our studies indicate more widespread issues than foreign meddling. Platform architectures have built-in biases in favoring antidemocratic content based on optimization for engagement. This enables "algorithmic authoritarianism", systematic amplification of extreme content through technical as opposed to political means.

Current democratic theory envisions informed citizens making rational choice among conflicting options. Algorithmic mediation shatters all those assumptions: "informed" gives way to "algorithmically exposed," "rational" to "affectively primed," and "choice" to "platform-curated options." The Romanian youth in this study exemplify this transformation: high political participation and low political efficacy, characteristic of participation without empowerment. Regulatory mechanisms remain inadequate. The EU Digital Services Act addresses content moderation but not amplification through algorithms. Our study argues we require "algorithmic transparency" regulation: platforms must disclose how recommendations make political visibility determinations. "Circuit breakers" may also prevent unverified political content going viral in election periods. But rollout is delayed due to technical and political barriers: platforms claim trade secret privilege while nation-states lack technical capability for effective regulation.

The global dimension multiplies challenges. Chinese ownership in the matter of TikTok introduces questions of algorithmic sovereignty: whose values guide recommendations shaping democratic processes? The Romanian context presents algorithms as foreign influence tools more perfidious and powerful than traditional propaganda. This "computational imperialism" does its business through mathematical operations and not obvious ideology and is consequently ill-attributable and extremely difficult to resist.

Most prominently, scholarship reveals that democracy is vulnerable to what we describe as "synthetic consensus", algorithms-created imitation of public support. When platforms control visibility, elections produce outcomes according to algorithmic reason and not citizen choice. This fundamental challenge requires rethinking democratic theory in computational societies. Traditional frameworks – representation, legitimacy, accountability – must be reconceptualized where algorithms insert themselves between citizens and political systems.

Educational responses are indispensable but inadequate. In our data, algorithmically literate teens (19%) oppose platform pressure better, indicating the relevance of critical education. Yet resistance at the level of individuals will not solve systemic problems. Platforms optimized for engagement have their designs in direct opposition to the needs of democratic deliberation for reflective and inclusive discussion. This politics of architecture necessitates communal remedies: regulatory designs, different platform architectures, and institutionalized democratic safeguards attuned to mediation through algorithms.

Conclusions

This paper demonstrates how the algorithmic format of TikTok enables new nationalist political mobilizations that fundamentally interfere with democratic processes. In our analysis of the Romanian presidential elections, we developed the notion of "algorithmic nationalism" to encapsulate how platform affordances, rather than traditional political agents, increasingly determine the outcomes of elections. We recognize problematic trends: platform algorithms consistently favor affective nationalist material while undercutting substantial political debate; young citizens internalize platform rationalities and experience politics within contests of visibility that are managed through metrics; and long-established democratic safeguards prove useless in the context of computational trickery. This Romanian case, from Georgescu's algorithmic rise to the cancellation of the election, exemplifies how platforms make democracy vulnerable.

Theoretically, this study propels the field of digital politics beyond its current theorization. We demonstrate how algorithmic recommendation generates new political aggregates, accelerates extremist mobilization, and restructures youth political subjectivity. These results demand radical rethinking of public spheres, political representation, and democratic legitimacy in societies in which algorithms dominate. Yet we have to recognize crucial limitations in our own analysis. The same opacity we condemn foreclosed complete algorithmic analysis: we see effects without being able to gain access to causes, deducing mechanisms from outcomes. This methodological limitation is a mirror of deeper power imbalances in which platform corporations own data access while researchers make inferences from pieces. Our use of Social Blade statistics and survey self-reports offers circumstantial proof of processes needing direct analysis of algorithms to draw firm conclusions.

Moreover, our concern with TikTok undermines platform determinism, attributing to technology something that may betoken broader societal transformations. Susceptibility to algorithmic nationalism among Romanian youth may stem from disillusionment, economic ambiguity, or disappointments with schooling rather than platform configuration in a vacuum. Cancellation of the election, while historically first, may constitute judicial excess rather than necessary democratic protection. These alternative narratives blur our narrative of algorithmic disruption.

Policy implications remain urgent but contentious. Platforms owe us a responsibility for being political infrastructure but defining this responsibility is contentious. Should algorithms optimize for "democratic" outputs? Who decides these parameters? Regulatory mechanisms need to be renewed to deal with amplification by algorithms, but technical particulars and corporate resistance foreclose

substantive regulation. Education programs need to educate in algorithmic literacies, but personal solutions don't deal with system-level architectural politics. Our sample, while characteristic of busy youth, may exclude passive or elderly segments most resistant to platform effects. The Romanian experience, while exemplary, requires comparative validation: would similar patterns lead to established democracies with better-aligned institutions? The 60-day period spans campaign intensity but not long-term attitude formation.

As the world's democracies are unsettled by algorithms, this work presents key understanding about coming risks and promise. But we must reject both techno-determinism and nostalgia for pre-digital democracy. Algorithms don't kill democracy independently, they cooperate with human choices, institutional weakness, and societal conditions. The choice for the future is not just to limit platforms but to redesign democracy for computational societies. Future research must gain direct access to algorithms, compare within and across platforms and situations, and trace long-term effects. Most basically, we need visions beyond the mainstream: what if algorithms were democratic? What if platforms empowered rather than thwarted collective self-rule? These questions leap beyond scholarship to a need to collaborate among researchers, platforms, regulators, and citizens.

The future of democracy might lie in exercising human agency over algorithmic reasonings that increasingly determine political outcomes. But exercising this power will necessitate more than oppositional stance; it will necessitate innovative redefinition of democratic institutions, practices, and theories for the age of algorithms. The Romanian example is both warning and possibility: exposing the online vulnerabilities of democracy while showing the capability of citizens to identify and reject algorithmic manipulation when brought to light.

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Youth electoral participation at the first vote: A comparative study of Romania and Austria

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Abstract

This article examines the mechanisms shaping electoral participation among first-time voters through a comparative analysis of Romania and Austria. Based on the premise that showing up at the first vote is a critical moment in forming civic habits, the study explores how institutional frameworks, family-based socialization, and digital environments interact to affect early democratic engagement. Drawing on theories of political socialization, voting habit formation, and civic voluntarism, the article advances an integrative explanatory model that connects formal and informal dimensions of participation. The findings reveal a stark contrast between the two cases. In Austria, early voting rights, applied civic education, and institutionalized mobilization strategies create a coherent civic ecosystem that supports youth participation. In Romania, weak civic education, limited institutional support, and fragmented digital engagement result in high reliance on family-based socialization and contribute to persistent youth demobilization. The study concludes that electoral participation at the first vote is not merely a procedural act, but the outcome of a cumulative social and institutional process.

Keywords

youth electoral participation; first-time voters; political socialization; civic education; voting age

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Introduction

Electoral participation represents one of the most tangible forms of exercising citizenship within a democratic regime. Despite this, over recent decades many consolidated democracies have recorded a troubling trend: a decline in voter turnout among young people, particularly at their first encounter with the electoral process. This phenomenon has been theorized in terms of generational demobilization and a crisis of civic socialization (Dalton, 2008; Blais and Rubenson, 2013), and is commonly associated with factors such as individualization, declining trust in institutions, and the fragility of civic education.

In Romania, the parliamentary elections of November 2024 brought this structural issue back into public debate. Although official data do not provide a precise breakdown for 18-year-old voters, existing estimates (Comșa and Tufiș, 2024) indicate an electoral participation rate of approximately 25-27% among young people aged 18 to 24, one of the lowest in the European Union. This reality raises a crucial question: to what extent does Romania prepare and support young citizens in their civic transition toward the first vote? The absence of institutional mechanisms offering guidance and practical civic education in the period preceding the legal voting age may partially account for this demobilization.

By contrast, Austria offers a relevant alternative model. Beginning in 2007, Austria lowered the voting age to 16, and the federal elections of 2008, 2013, and 2017 demonstrated that Austrian voters aged 16-17 participated at rates comparable to, or even higher than, those of young adults aged 18-20 (Wagner et al., 2012; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014). Electoral participation within this age group has remained consistently around 60%, a remarkable outcome explained by the integration of applied civic education, voting simulations, and young people's involvement in local democratic life. The Austrian model illustrates that, when coherent interventions are in place, young citizens can be mobilized effectively and sustainably from their very first electoral experience.

This article proposes a comparative analysis of Romania and Austria, aiming to identify the social, institutional, and cultural mechanisms that foster or inhibit electoral participation among first-time voters. Attention is given to the 16-18 age group, exploring how young people are politically socialized, civically educated, and connected (or disconnected) from the democratic public sphere. Rather than adopting a strictly quantitative approach, the study advances an explanatory theoretical framework that integrates familial, educational, and digital influences. Against the backdrop of the recent electoral context, this research constitutes not only an academic contribution but also a reflective exercise on the capacity of Romanian institutions to construct a meaningful first encounter with democracy for young citizens.

Considering these differences, several relevant research questions emerge: What social, cultural, and psychological factors influence electoral participation among 18-year-old Romanian voters? What is the role of primary groups, social media, and individual resources in shaping electoral behavior? What lessons can be drawn from comparison with the Austrian model, and how might these be translated into public policies applicable in Romania? The article addresses these questions through a comparative analysis of two models of electoral socialization: the Romanian model, characterized by informality, fragmentation, and institutional passivity, and the Austrian model, marked by educational intervention, normative coherence, and active civic support. The theoretical contribution of the study lies in the articulation of an integrative explanatory model grounded in four major perspectives: the influence of primary groups, the impact of social networks, the theory of voting habit formation, and the civic voluntarism model. Methodologically, the research employs thematic content analysis and institutional comparison, drawing on academic sources, statistical data, and public policy documents.

The structure of the article is as follows: after this introduction, a section dedicated to the review of the relevant literature is presented, followed by the theoretical framework, research methodology, the Romania-Austria comparative analysis, interpretation of the findings, and concluding remarks accompanied by a set of public policy recommendations.

The context of young people in Romania

Youth electoral participation represents a central topic in contemporary political science and has been examined through multiple perspectives, including the formation of civic habits, social influences, individual resources, and the institutional context. The specialized literature advances a range of explanatory models that highlight the complex role of political socialization, both formal and informal, in shaping electoral behavior.

A first set of explanations focuses on the social influences exerted by family, peer networks, and educational institutions. These actors function as key vectors of early political socialization and may either stimulate or inhibit the decision to vote (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012; Bergan et al., 2021). The informal dimension, particularly the influence of family and online networks, has gained increased relevance in the digital era. Reitzes and LaRossa (1993) conceptualized the family as a primary arena for the formation of civic attitudes, an idea further developed by Laine (2023), who shows that young people increasingly form their political opinions through digital interactions and non-institutional social environments.

A second theoretical framework is provided by the theory of electoral habit formation, according to which the experience of the first vote is crucial for the development of a durable “civic habit” (Smets and Neundorf, 2014). This hypothesis has received empirical support: Öhrvall (2018) and Bhatti and Hansen (2012) demonstrate that non-participation in the first electoral contest has a significant demobilizing effect. Similarly, Wagner et al. (2012) show that 18-year-olds are less likely to vote than older age groups, due to insufficient political socialization, low levels of institutional trust, and inadequate civic education.

The civic voluntarism model complements this framework by emphasizing the interaction between individual resources (education, time, access to information), personal motivations, and institutional opportunities (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). From this perspective, electoral behavior emerges as the outcome of a complex equation involving structural, psychological, and contextual factors.

An important contribution to this debate stems from analyses of the Austrian context, where the lowering of the voting age to 16 was implemented alongside a substantial reform of civic education. Research indicates that this combination has led to participation rates comparable to, or even higher than, those of young adults, while also strengthening adolescents’ political knowledge (Aichholzer and Kritzinger, 2019; Mahéo and Bélanger, 2020; Huebner and Petrarca, 2024). Moreover, these policies have generated a democratic “protective effect” by reducing susceptibility to extremist discourse and facilitating the development of a reflective civic culture. This hypothesis is further supported by Rekker (2024), who, based on a recent comparative study, demonstrates that voting at 16, when combined with applied civic education, reduces support for extremist positions and encourages informed democratic participation among European youth.

In Romania, youth electoral participation continues to be shaped by both structural and attitudinal factors. Voicu (2008) argues that low levels of social capital and diminished trust in democratic institutions contribute to young people’s civic disengagement. Along similar lines, Lup and Tóka (2021) show that young people display heightened skepticism toward political parties and

perceive their capacity for influence as limited, which in turn reduces their willingness to participate in elections. More recently, Comșa and Tufiș (2024) identify a series of socio-economic factors (such as the absence of stable employment, low income, and limited educational attainment) that negatively affect electoral participation. According to their findings, young people lacking a clear ideological orientation or political affiliation are the most prone to electoral abstention. By contrast, Gherghina and Mitru (2023) offer a more optimistic perspective, demonstrating that online mobilization, particularly during electoral campaigns, can stimulate participation among first-time voters, highlighting the potential of digital networks for civic re-engagement among the younger generation.

Finally, in a recent comparative analysis, Bárta, Boldt, and Lavizzari (2021) emphasize that structural differences in civic education and institutional opportunities significantly shape youth participation patterns across Europe, including the contrast between Romania and countries such as Austria. Their study provides an original framework for conceptualizing “meaningful” political participation and underscores the impact of the democratic context on the substantive engagement of young people.

Social groups and political attitudes: From interaction to intergenerational transmission

Social groups constitute fundamental arenas for the formation and consolidation of individual identity, values, and attitudes. Within these contexts, individuals define their cultural and moral positions and, progressively, their political orientations. According to symbolic interactionism theory (Cooley, 1922; Mead, 1934), individuals are not autonomous bearers of a political identity; rather, they construct it relationally, especially within primary groups such as family and close friends. These groups provide both stable affective frameworks and socially validated behavioral models, which are essential to the process of political socialization.

A key reference point for understanding this dynamic is the Columbia Model (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944), developed in the context of U.S. presidential elections but applicable across diverse settings. The model emphasizes that social factors, rather than media content, are decisive in shaping individuals' political choices. Reference groups (family, religion, neighbors, colleagues) function as cognitive and affective filters that influence how political information is perceived and interpreted. In contemporary extensions of this model, scholars such as Jennings and Niemi (2001) and Dinas (2014) argue that the intergenerational transmission of political preferences is less about explicit ideology and more about affective dispositions, modes of thinking, and perceptions of authority.

Within the international literature on political socialization, particular emphasis is placed on the influence of the family in shaping adolescents' civic engagement. A longitudinal study by Eckstein, Noack, and Gniewosz (2012) identifies distinct trajectories of attitudes toward political involvement and willingness to participate among young people, depending on educational level and gender. The authors show that adolescents raised in family contexts characterized by open communication and consistent educational support display a stronger tendency to consolidate positive political orientations throughout adolescence. Although the study does not explicitly classify families according to “democratic” or “authoritarian” orientations, it supports the view that family environments conducive to civic participation significantly contribute to the development of a durable motivation for political engagement.

In a similar vein, McClurg (2006) demonstrates that interactions within close social networks, such as family and friendship groups, can shape political attitudes through mechanisms of normative influence and interpersonal trust. The structural configuration of these networks may foster either

moderation or polarization of political positions, underscoring the complexity of informal political socialization processes within interpersonal environments.

In the Romanian context, where civic education is often addressed in a formalistic and fragmented manner, the role of the family in shaping democratic behaviors becomes even more salient. Research conducted by Comşa (2010) and later extended in collaboration with Tufiş (2024) reveals that informal socialization plays a major role in explaining electoral behavior, particularly through the internalization of social norms within close networks. Specifically, the perception of a participation norm within the family or peer group significantly increases the likelihood of voting. Moreover, parents' political orientations and their explicit expression of democratic values exert an important predictive effect on young people's participation in democratic life.

From a complementary perspective, Turcescu (2024) highlights that young people's willingness to engage civically is strongly influenced by the quality of family dialogue. In the absence of a climate of trust and openness, adolescents often develop defensive attitudes toward the political sphere, redirecting their engagement toward non-traditional forms of civic expression. Consequently, the family emerges not only as a channel for the transmission of values but also as a formative space that is central to the architecture of democratic participation.

Digital social networks: Symbolic participation and informal mobilization

Over the past decade, digital social networks (particularly TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook) have become central platforms of political socialization among young people. These spaces are no longer perceived solely as environments for entertainment, but increasingly as tools through which young citizens express positions, consume political information, and engage in civic action (Laine, 2023; Loader et al., 2014).

However, the specialized literature draws a clear distinction between symbolic participation and deliberative political engagement. Both Banaji and Buckingham (2013) and Laine (2023) show that young people's political involvement in digital environments is often fragmented, emotional, and aestheticized, characterized by rapid reactions, visual storytelling, and expressive forms of affiliation rather than rational argumentation and institutional participation. This type of involvement has been conceptualized through terms such as expressive citizenship or engagement without politics, emphasizing public visibility without sustained deliberative commitment.

Within international scholarship, youth political participation in digital environments is conceptualized beyond classical institutional frameworks and reinterpreted in terms of expressiveness and personalization. Theocharis and van Deth (2018) argue that digital actions, such as signing petitions, using hashtags, sharing political content, or participating in visual campaigns, constitute emerging forms of civic participation with significant impact on political socialization and identity formation. Although these practices do not necessarily entail deliberative or institutional engagement in the traditional sense, they nonetheless shape new spaces for political expression and affiliation.

In a similar vein, Vromen, Loader, Xenos, and Bailo (2016) demonstrate that young people are not politically apathetic; rather, they engage through everyday forms of civic expression in online environments. These "everyday political practices" include commenting, sharing, creating memes, or supporting digital campaigns and are driven more by identity-based values, emotions, and a sense of community belonging than by structured political ideologies.

In the Romanian context, the relationship between social media and youth civic participation is ambivalent. While social networks facilitate rapid access to political information and provide opportunities for symbolic mobilization, they cannot substitute for the socializing role of the family

and the school. Comșa and Tufiș (2024) show that young people who have not previously been exposed to consistent models of democratic participation display low levels of electoral engagement, even when they are active on digital platforms. In this sense, social media tends to amplify participation among those already predisposed to engagement, rather than generating commitment in the absence of adequate educational and cultural foundations.

This observation is further supported by research conducted by Turcescu (2024), which highlights that many Romanian young people engage politically through non-traditional means, such as creative and symbolic forms of expression, ranging from visual activism to digital irony, without adhering to institutionalized forms of participation. In the absence of a deliberative culture or open dialogue within the family and the school, these practices often remain disconnected from formal democratic processes, manifesting more as individual reactions than as coherent collective participation.

Electoral habit theory: Voting as a learned routine

Electoral habit theory is grounded in the premise that voting is a behavior which, once practiced early, tends to become stable and recurrent. Electoral participation is not solely the result of an isolated, conscious decision, but rather of a routine formed through repetition and association with positive formative experiences. Consequently, the first encounter with voting, particularly during the transition to civic adulthood, carries strong symbolic and behavioral significance.

At the European level, the literature emphasizes the crucial role of early electoral experiences in shaping long-term civic participation. In a recent analysis encompassing data from 30 democracies, Rekker (2024) shows that voting at a young age in favorable contexts (characterized by coherent educational policies and institutional support mechanisms) constitutes a strong predictor of consistent electoral participation in subsequent cycles. These findings reinforce the hypothesis that democratic participation is not merely an individual choice, but also an outcome of the structure of civic socialization opportunities. This conclusion is further supported by the theoretical framework proposed by Smets and Neundorf (2014), which highlights the formative effect of the “first vote” on subsequent political participation. According to the authors, initial electoral experiences play a key role in consolidating norms of democratic participation, as they contribute to the internalization of civic values and the development of a stable political identity.

In Romania, these theoretical premises encounter significant obstacles. According to the analysis conducted by Comșa and Tufiș (2024), individuals under the age of 35 represent the main category of chronic non-voters, and abstention in the early stages of civic life tends to persist over time. The authors emphasize that the lack of an institutional infrastructure to support the first vote, whether through effective civic education or dedicated mobilization campaigns, leads to the formation of a durable pattern of political disengagement, particularly among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

By contrast, Austria provides a positive example of early integration of young people into democratic life. Following the reduction of the minimum voting age to 16, research by Wagner, Johann, and Kritzinger (2012) shows that Austrian youth participated in elections at higher rates and demonstrated higher levels of political knowledge than their counterparts in other European Union member states. This outcome was made possible by a set of proactive public policies, including institutionalized civic education, awareness campaigns tailored to the digital generation, and a normative framework conducive to participation.

In conclusion, non-participation at the first vote is not merely an omission, but a significant indicator of long-term civic exclusion. In Romania, the lack of institutional support and functional civic education contributes to the entrenchment of electoral abstention among the younger generation.

The civic voluntarism model: The interaction of resources, motivation and opportunity

The civic voluntarism model, developed by Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995), provides a comprehensive structural explanation of political participation, arguing that it results from the interaction between individuals' resources, such as educational attainment, available time, and cultural capital, internal motivation, including political interest and perceptions of political efficacy, and external opportunities for engagement, created through mobilization by organizations, campaigns, or institutional networks.

Applying the civic voluntarism model to the case of young people in Romania highlights a series of persistent structural deficiencies. Low levels of trust in institutions, weak political education, and the absence of effective mobilization campaigns significantly reduce the likelihood of civic engagement. According to IRES data (2020), over 60% of young people under the age of 25 report that they do not feel represented by any political force, while the majority believe that voting does not produce meaningful change. As noted earlier, Comşa and Tufiş (2024) further confirm that young people constitute the primary segment of consistent non-voters, reflecting a structural disconnection from democratic processes.

Lup and Tóka (2021) emphasize that low youth electoral participation is closely linked to a deficit of social capital, manifested in reduced levels of trust in political parties, public institutions, and in individuals' own capacity to effect political change. Moreover, in their recent study, Comşa and Tufiş (2024) demonstrate that low educational attainment, limited income, and the absence of stable employment are major predictors of electoral abstention. Their findings indicate that young people without partisan affiliation or clearly articulated ideological convictions are the most likely to abstain from voting.

These findings support the argument that youth political participation cannot be fostered solely through moral appeals or symbolic campaigns but requires structural interventions that simultaneously strengthen all three dimensions of the civic voluntarism model: resources, motivation, and opportunities. In their absence, electoral passivity risks becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and comparative approach aimed at explaining differences in electoral participation among young people aged 16-18 across two distinct national contexts: Austria and Romania. The objective of the research is not to provide a quantitative measurement of the phenomenon, but rather to understand the causal relationships between institutional, social, and cultural factors within an integrative explanatory framework.

Drawing on the existing literature, we formulate a set of five hypotheses. H1: Family-based political socialization significantly influences electoral participation at the age of 18. H2: Participation in forms of applied civic education (such as simulations and debates) is positively associated with electoral behavior. H3: Digital engagement is predominantly symbolic and does not translate into effective electoral participation. H4: Coherent institutional systems (such as the Austrian case) facilitate higher levels of youth electoral participation. H5: Involvement in non-formal civic activities (volunteering, NGOs) functions as a mobilizing factor in both contexts.

The research employs a *most different systems design* and compares two European democracies that differ substantially in terms of civic infrastructure, political culture, and youth-oriented public policies. Austria is treated as an example of strongly institutionalized mobilization, whereas Romania represents a context in which mobilization is predominantly informal and often fragmented. The analysis covers different timeframes: for Austria, the period 2007–2024, corresponding to the years following the reduction of the voting age; and for Romania, the period 2010–2024, with particular emphasis on the 2024 electoral cycle.

The methodology is predominantly qualitative and integrates multiple sources and analytical techniques. The study begins with a systematic review of the relevant literature, followed by a comparative analysis of public policies in areas such as education, civic participation, and digitalization. It also includes a content analysis of electoral reports and relevant official documents. These approaches are complemented by the triangulation of secondary data, drawing on reports from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Eurobarometer, the OSCE, and recent academic studies.

This research does not rely on primary data and does not claim statistical validation. The absence of detailed official datasets for the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections necessitates the use of indirect sources, which constrains the precision of estimations. Consequently, the analysis remains explanatory and exploratory in nature, focusing on the plausibility of causal relationships rather than on the strict testing of hypotheses.

Comparative analysis: Electoral participation of first-time voters in Romania and Austria

In this section, the theoretical model discussed above is operationalized in order to compare two central dimensions of political participation. The first concerns the institutional and educational context, namely the formal factors that structure young people's engagement. The second focuses on social and digital influences – the less formal domain in which everyday interactions and online environments shape how young people relate to politics.

Table 1. Institutional indicators of youth electoral participation: Romania vs. Austria.

Indicator	Romania	Austria
Legal voting age	18 years	16 years
Turnout rate among 18–24-year-olds (2020–2024)	~30–35% (Comșa & Tufiș, 2024)	~60–70% (Wagner et al., 2012; Rekker, 2024)
Civic education	Discontinuous, formal, lacking practical applicability	Integrated, applied, compulsory
Mobilization campaigns	Rare, partisan, often online based	Systematic, supported by the state and NGOs
Trust in institutions (youth)	Below 30% (IRES, 2020)	Above 60% (Eurobarometer, 2022)
Participation at the first vote	Selective, dependent on family background and social class	High, institutionally supported
Family support for voting	Variable, influenced by education and social environment	Widespread, culturally reinforced
Role of social media	Primary mobilization channel, yet insufficient on its own	Complementary, not a substitute for civic education

Note: Data compiled from Comșa and Tufiș (2024), Wagner et al. (2012), Rekker (2024), IRES (2020), and Eurobarometer (2022).

Austria stands out through a coherent educational framework, a solid democratic infrastructure, and policies aimed at early mobilization. By contrast, Romania is characterized by institutional passivity, weak civic education, and the absence of a democratic ecosystem capable of supporting youth participation.

Youth electoral participation cannot be explained exclusively through institutional factors. Informal socialization mechanisms play a crucial role, particularly within primary groups (the family) and digital spaces of political interaction. Both classical scholarship (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Jennings and Niemi, 2001) and contemporary studies (Laine, 2023; Theocharis and van Deth, 2018) emphasize that the formation of political attitudes results from an ongoing process of social learning, unfolding within affective and identity-based contexts.

Austria provides an example of good practice in terms of integrating young people into democratic processes from adolescence onward. Schulz (2005) analyzes levels of political efficacy and expectations of participation among lower- and upper-secondary students, highlighting that early exposure to civic education, combined with family-based socialization, plays a decisive role in shaping an active and sustainable civic profile. The study shows that Austrian students are encouraged to engage in political discussions both at school and within the family, and that this supportive environment has notable effects on their intention to participate in democratic life.

Another distinctive feature of the Austrian model is the deliberate integration of social media into civic and educational campaigns. Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014) demonstrate that platforms such as Instagram and YouTube are used by schools, public administrations, and NGOs to produce accessible content tailored to the digital generation, thereby facilitating the conversion of symbolic engagement into concrete participation. These campaigns aim not only to increase political visibility but also to foster a civic identity supported by institutionalized practices.

Studies by Wagner, Johann, and Kritzingner (2012) indicate that Austrian young people who vote from the age of 16 display higher rates of electoral participation and make more informed decisions than those who begin voting later in other EU countries. These findings are reinforced by the extended analysis of Smets and Neundorf (2014), who explain that early electoral experiences, when accompanied by civic education and family support, generate long-term stabilizing effects on democratic behavior.

The Austrian model stands out for the coherence and articulation of the elements that contribute to the political socialization of young people. Family, school, and local institutions act in a complementary manner, collectively providing a supportive environment for democratic learning. Rather than relying unilaterally on any single factor, Austria cultivates a functional balance among these agents. Schulz (2005) shows that young people benefit from a clear normative framework within schools, reinforced by genuine opportunities for engagement and dialogue at home. Participation is normalized and actively encouraged through consistent institutional practices, thereby facilitating the internalization of democratic norms across all socio-economic groups.

Within the Austrian model, digital social networks do not operate in parallel to, or isolated from, the educational system; instead, they are deliberately integrated into the civic strategies of public institutions. Zeglovits and Aichholzer (2014) highlight that platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube are actively employed in electoral and educational campaigns conducted in partnership with schools, non-governmental organizations, and local authorities. These initiatives leverage the participatory affordances of online environments—such as polls, visual storytelling, and live streaming—to stimulate critical thinking and active participation.

The introduction of voting at the age of 16 in Austria constituted not merely an electoral reform, but a catalyst for early civic mobilization. Wagner, Johann, and Kritzinger (2012) demonstrate that Austrian young people not only participate in elections more frequently but do so in a more informed and responsible manner compared to young citizens in countries where the minimum voting age is 18. These findings are further supported by the comparative analysis of Smets and Neundorff (2014), which shows that early electoral experiences, when embedded within a coherent educational and institutional framework, foster sustained participation across subsequent electoral cycles.

This mobilization is not the result of a short-term impulse, but rather of a systematically cultivated civic culture. Austria illustrates that a lower voting age can represent a democratic advantage when accompanied by an ecosystem that actively supports participation.

Validation of the Comparative Hypotheses

H1 is confirmed by the analysis of both contexts. In both Austria and Romania, family-based political socialization significantly influences early electoral participation. Studies by Schulz (2005) and Comșa and Tufiș (2024) show that the presence of political dialogue within the family and the transmission of democratic values play a crucial role in activating participation. The key difference lies in the universalistic character of this mechanism in Austria, compared to its unequal and socio-culturally dependent nature in Romania.

H2 is validated in the Austrian case. Applied civic education, through voting simulations, debates, and participatory projects, is institutionally embedded within the curriculum and positively associated with the development of a civic identity. This association is weak in Romania, due to the formalistic and theoretical character of civic education instruction. Consequently, the positive relationship between applied civic education and electoral participation is contextually confirmed.

H3 is partially confirmed. Digital engagement is generally expressive, fragmented, and symbolic in nature, as demonstrated by Banaji and Buckingham (2013) and Gherghina and Mitru (2023). However, Austria succeeds in transforming this form of engagement into a gateway for concrete participation by integrating social media into educational strategies. In Romania, by contrast, social networks operate in relative isolation, supporting the hypothesis regarding the lack of a direct link between digital activism and actual voting behavior.

H4 is fully supported. Austria's coherent institutional system—characterized by convergence between education, family, and digital environments—facilitates early electoral participation. Romania, by contrast, exhibits a disjunction among these factors, which contributes to youth demobilization. The differences illustrated in the comparative graph between the two countries further validate this hypothesis.

H5, which posits that involvement in non-formal civic activities functions as a mobilizing factor in both contexts, was not directly tested in the present analysis. Nevertheless, the specialized literature (Ekman and Amnå, 2012) suggests that young people's engagement in such structures fosters the development of civic efficacy and the consolidation of democratic identity. In the Austrian case, the existence of a robust associative infrastructure, integrated into educational and youth policies, indicates a high mobilization potential through this channel. In Romania the role of such forms of engagement remains uneven, strongly dependent on local initiatives or urban settings, and lacking systemic coverage. Although H5 cannot be empirically validated within the scope of this study, it points to an important research direction for a more comprehensive understanding of early electoral participation mechanisms among young people. Incorporating non-formal participation into future analyses would allow for a more nuanced mapping of the civic ecology of the younger generation.

Conclusions and implications

This study set out to analyze the mechanisms that influence electoral participation among first-time voters within a comparative Romania-Austria framework. The central hypothesis was that differences in participation between the two countries do not merely reflect cultural particularities but are shaped primarily by the ways in which institutions, the family, and the digital sphere contribute, or not, to young people's civic preparation in the pre-electoral period. The Romania-Austria comparison highlights the contrast between a mature democracy characterized by convergent educational policies and an emerging democracy in which mechanisms of democratic socialization remain fragmented. The findings point to a systematic divergence between the two models under analysis.

In Austria, electoral participation among young people aged 16–18 is supported by a well-structured framework in which practical civic education, simulated voting exercises, community-based projects, and campaigns developed by state institutions combine to create a coherent civic experience. This configuration functions as an early training mechanism for democratic competencies and contributes to the maintenance of stable political engagement over the long term.

The situation in Romania differs markedly. For most young people, the first vote remains a largely solitary experience, lacking meaningful institutional support and strongly influenced by the family of origin. Interactive civic education is almost entirely absent, and initiatives that could guide young citizens at the onset of democratic participation are sporadic. Moreover, although the digital environment is widely used, it operates in a fragmented manner, resulting in high levels of electoral passivity even among informed young people. Within such a context, an identity-based retrenchment also emerges, whereby attachment to the local community or the national dimension outweighs identification with the European project. As noted by Petrila and Brie (2023), the state continues to be perceived as a “refuge” in times of crisis, while national identity gains increased visibility through its association with nationalist-extremist or sovereignist-populist currents.

The analysis confirmed most of the proposed hypotheses, particularly those related to family-based socialization (H1), applied civic education (H2), and the influence of a coherent institutional system (H4). The hypothesis concerning symbolic digital participation (H3) is partially confirmed: social media platforms can function as mobilizing tools only when they are institutionally anchored. The hypothesis regarding non-formal participation (H5) was not empirically tested; however, the existing literature suggests that involvement in structures such as NGOs or youth councils can act as a vector of democratic mobilization.

A deficient civic ecology during adolescence affects not only participation at the first vote but may also contribute over time to the crystallization of selective or even distorted relationships with authority and democracy. As argued by Petrila, Pantea, and Mişcoiu (2023), in the absence of robust democratic socialization, voters may come to value concepts such as order, social cohesion, and traditional family roles, while simultaneously rejecting modern institutions perceived as abstract, corrupt, or dysfunctional. This tension between the need for stability and the rejection of institutional authority is also relevant for understanding how today's adolescents, despite being informed and digitally connected, may, in the absence of coherent civic reference points, become receptive to symbolic forms of participation or to contesting discourses with a democratic appearance.

At the theoretical level, this study contributes to an understanding of the “first vote” as a critical stage in the formation of civic culture, supporting the view that electoral participation is not merely a procedural act, but the outcome of a cumulative social and institutional construction. From a practical perspective, the conclusions indicate that Romania must rethink the ways in which it prepares for and supports young people's civic participation. Civic education requires substantive

updating, adapted to the dynamics of contemporary democracy. At the same time, first-time voters should be supported through dedicated tools and initiatives, while the digital environment should be used not only as a source of information, but as a space in which young people can practice critical thinking and democratic deliberation.

Public Policy Recommendations

Building on the conclusions of the comparative analysis and the findings of this study, this section formulates a set of recommendations applicable to public policies in Romania, with the aim of supporting early electoral participation and fostering an active democratic culture from adolescence onward.

Reforming civic education: from formalism to democratic practice. Modernizing civic education in Romania requires a shift in emphasis: less abstract theory and more genuine democratic practice. Introducing voting simulations in secondary schools—implemented with the support of the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) and specialized civil society organizations—would provide students with direct experience of the electoral process. In parallel, an interdisciplinary approach to civic education would enable discussion of key issues essential to understanding contemporary democracy, ranging from electoral participation to mechanisms for countering disinformation. For these reforms to be effective, it is crucial that teachers benefit from targeted training programs focused on participatory methods, the stimulation of critical thinking, and the cultivation of deliberation in the classroom.

Supporting the first vote: civic transition as an institutionalized process. An effective system of support for first-time voters could be built around regularly implemented national campaigns through which the Ministry of Education and the Permanent Electoral Authority provide clear and accessible information, both in schools and online. Within high schools, mentorship programs involving university students or civic volunteers who engage pupils in discussions about elections and the role of the citizen would help create a climate of dialogue and understanding. To ensure the continued relevance of these initiatives, first-time voters should be given the opportunity to provide annual feedback on the materials and activities they receive, allowing institutions to adapt interventions to young people's actual experiences.

Activating the digital environment as a deliberative space. To respond effectively to the ways in which young people seek information today, the development of an official, accessible, and interactive platform would be beneficial—one that offers clear explanations of the electoral process, civic initiatives, and citizens' rights. In parallel, public institutions could collaborate with content creators from younger generations so that messages about voting and participation circulate in a language familiar to the online environment. Within schools, consistent media literacy programs, centered on critical thinking and debate, would equip students with the tools needed to navigate an increasingly disinformation-prone digital space in an informed manner.

Strengthening non-formal civic networks. To sustain youth civic participation, it is essential that youth organizations benefit from predictable funding, ensuring that their educational projects are not dependent on sporadic resources. In larger cities, dedicated centers for civic dialogue and training could become spaces where young people meet regularly to discuss public issues and learn how democratic processes function. Additionally, student councils could play a more active role if they were included in local consultations and decision-making processes directly affecting schools and communities, thereby transforming participation into a practical and continuous exercise.

General Conclusions

This study began with the question of which factors determine youth electoral participation at the first vote and to what extent this participation is shaped by institutional structures, family-based socialization, and digital exposure. Building on the comparison between Romania and Austria, the research sought to highlight how the convergence or fragmentation of these factors influences the early democratic integration of citizens. The findings clearly indicate that electoral participation cannot be understood as a mere procedural act, but rather as a cumulative social process and the outcome of a coherent civic ecology. In the case of Austria, this ecology is characterized by a clear articulation between institutionalized civic education, deliberative family dialogue, and the strategic use of the digital environment for formative purposes. Young people are thus supported by an integrated framework that normalizes electoral participation and facilitates the development of a durable democratic identity. In Romania, by contrast, the absence of a functional civic infrastructure results in electoral participation being disproportionately dependent on the cultural and civic capital transmitted within the family. Social networks, although present and active in young people's lives, fail to compensate for the structural deficiencies of formal civic education and instead tend to reinforce existing inequalities between those predisposed to engagement and those symbolically excluded from deliberative processes.

The research confirms the central hypothesis: youth electoral participation is an expression of a society's institutional and educational maturity. In the absence of an integrated framework that provides young people with meaningful formative experiences prior to the first vote, the process of democratization remains incomplete, and voting at the age of 18 risks becoming a civic formality devoid of substantive meaning. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the articulation of a systemic perspective on early electoral participation, bringing into dialogue dimensions that are often analyzed separately: family, school, and the digital environment. From a methodological standpoint, the comparative analysis has enabled the identification of reference points that may be applicable to other European contexts, particularly in societies undergoing democratic transition.

In the long term, further research should extend the analysis to other forms of non-electoral engagement, such as non-formal participation, online activism, or local community involvement. A particularly promising direction involves longitudinal analyses of young voters, aimed at understanding whether participation at the first vote translates into sustained civic behavior or remains an isolated episode. In conclusion, the first vote is not merely a symbolic initiation into the democratic sphere, but a sensitive indicator of a society's capacity to educate its citizens and integrate them actively into decision-making processes. A resilient democracy inevitably begins with young people who are well prepared for this first political act.

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