How Disinformation Can Influence a Nation: The Case of Romania

Jak dezinformacja może wpłynąć na naród: przypadek Rumunii

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Abstract: Disinformation is a major threat in the digital age, affecting politics, society, and the economy. Unlike misinformation, which is unintentional, disinformation is deliberately created to manipulate public opinion, destabilize governments, and influence elections. The rise of social media has amplified its impact, making false information spread rapidly without verification. Historically, disinformation has been used for political gain, from the forged Donation of Constantine to wartime propaganda and modern deepfake technology. Today, digital platforms, bots, and microtargeting strategies have transformed disinformation into a powerful tool for influencing public perception. A striking example is the case of Călin Georgescu in Romania. A nationalist and Eurosceptic politician, C. Georgescu gained popularity through social media, particularly TikTok, with anti--establishment rhetoric. However, investigations revealed coordinated disinformation campaigns, likely supported by Russia, to manipulate public opinion and destabilize Romania's political landscape. These efforts included deepfake videos discrediting opponents, fake news articles, manipulated social media trends, and cyberattacks targeting independent media.

As a result, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of presidential elections, highlighting the dangers of digital interference in democracy. The European Commission launched an inquiry into TikTok for potentially violating the Digital Services Act by allowing manipulated content to spread. This case underscores the urgent need for stricter regulations on digital platforms, better fact-checking tools, and media literacy programs to counteract disinformation. A coordinated effort between governments, tech companies, and civil society is essential to protect democracy and ensure the integrity of public discourse.

Keywords: disinformation, social media, Georgescu, elections

Streszczenie: Dezinformacja stanowi istotne zagrożenie w erze cyfrowej, wywierając wpływ na politykę, społeczeństwo i gospodarkę. Dezinformacja zamierzona – w przeciwieństwie do niezamierzonej – jest celowo konstruowana w celu manipulowania opinią publiczną, destabilizacji systemów rządowych oraz ingerencji w procesy wyborcze. Rozwój mediów społecznościowych znacząco spotęgował skalę tego zjawiska, umożliwiając szybkie rozprzestrzenianie niezweryfikowanych informacji. Zjawisko dezinformacji ma

długą historię wykorzystywania jej do realizacji celów politycznych – od sfałszowane-go dokumentu zwanego jako „Darowizna Konstantyna", poprzez propagandę wojenną, aż po współczesne zastosowanie technologii *deepfake*. Obecnie platformy cyfrowe, boty i strategie mikrotargetowania przekształciły dezinformację w potężne narzędzie wpływu na opinię publiczną. Uderzającym przykładem jest przypadek Călina Georgescu w Rumu-nii. Ten polityk o poglądach nacjonalistycznych i eurosceptycznych zyskał popularność dzięki mediom społecznościowym, w szczególności platformy TikTok, promując retorykę antysystemową. Dochodzenia wykazały jednak istnienie skoordynowanych kampanii dezinformacyjnych, prawdopodobnie wspieranych przez Federację Rosyjską, mających na celu manipulowanie opinią publiczną i destabilizację rumuńskiej sceny politycznej. Działania te obejmowały m.in. tworzenie materiałów *deepfake* dyskredytujących przeciw-ników, publikację fałszywych artykułów informacyjnych, manipulację trendami w me-diach społecznościowych oraz cyberataki wymierzone w niezależne media.

W rezultacie rumuński Trybunał Konstytucyjny unieważnił pierwszą turę wy-borów prezydenckich, podkreślając niebezpieczeństwa związane z cyfrową ingerencją w demokrację. Komisja Europejska wszczęła dochodzenie w sprawie TikToka za poten-cjalne naruszenie ustawy o usługach cyfrowych poprzez umożliwienie rozprzestrzeniania zmanipulowanych treści. Sprawa ta podkreśla pilną potrzebę wprowadzenia bardziej rygo-rystycznych przepisów dotyczących platform cyfrowych, lepszych narzędzi do sprawdza-nia faktów i programów edukacji medialnej w celu przeciwdziałania dezinformacji. Skoor-dynowany wysiłek rządów, firm technologicznych i społeczeństwa obywatelskiego jest niezbędny do ochrony demokracji i zapewnienia integralności dyskursu publicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: dezinformacja, media społecznościowe, Georgescu, wybory

Disinformation represents one of the most significant and insidious threats of the contemporary era, deeply and lastingly affecting the social, econom-ic, and political fabric of modern societies. It is a phenomenon that goes beyond the simple dissemination of incorrect information, as it involves the deliberate dissemination of false or distorted content with the explicit intent of manipulating public opinion, destabilizing governments, influ-encing political and economic decisions or, again, generating profit by ex-ploiting the dynamics of online traffic. It can be used as an instrument of power in the hands of interest groups, individuals, or institutions that seek to orient collective thought in a direction favourable to their causes, often to the detriment of truth and social cohesion.

This practice is clearly distinct from misinformation, which instead con-cerns the inadvertent dissemination of incorrect information, often by in-dividuals who, unfortunately, believe in its veracity and have no intention of deceiving. While misinformation can be seen as the result of errors in judgment or understanding, disinformation is strategic and intentionally malicious. Both phenomena, however, have acquired a new dimension and

danger in the digital age, thanks to the widespread dissemination and wide accessibility of information offered by the Internet and social media. These tools, while offering enormous advantages in terms of communication and connectivity, have also created fertile ground for the spread of false news at an unprecedented speed and scale. In this context, information can be manipulated and reproduced at viral speed, reaching millions of people in a matter of hours and often without any truthfulness filter.

A prime example of how disinformation can profoundly impact the political and social landscape is the case of Călin Georgescu in Romania. Disinformation strategies have been used to distort reality, undermine public debate, and influence political choices, creating a significant impact on the stability and balance of the national political system. The consequences of such practices are multiple and often difficult to counter, with devastating effects on trust in institutions and the quality of democracy. Faced with these challenges, fighting disinformation has become a global priority for governments, international organizations, the media, and civil society, who must work together to stem this growing phenomenon and protect truth and public trust.

This article aims to investigate how digital disinformation has affected political trust and voting behaviour in Romania in the run-up to the 2024 presidential elections. The central research question is: to what extent has exposure to disinformation campaigns favoured the rise of populist and anti-establishment political figures such as C. Georgescu? The analysis focuses on the hypothesis that the increase in exposure to online disinformation is associated with a reduction in trust in traditional institutions and an increase in support for populist political movements. To this end, public data, opinion polls, and voter turnout indicators will be analysed.

1. Theoretical Framework of Disinformation

Today, obtaining, processing, and sharing politically relevant information online and through social media has become more accessible than ever. However, this increased ease of access also makes individuals more vulnerable to an overwhelming influx of unverified information, often presented as false or misleading content. Among these, disinformation is particularly concerning (DiResta et al. 2019). The rapid and uncontrolled spread of

disinformation has not only instilled fear within societies but also threatens the fundamental pillars of democratic states. This is because the dissemination of false information and the resulting confusion can erode the factual basis upon which citizens make informed decisions (Søe 2021).

Disinformation can destabilize a state by negatively impacting its institutional, administrative, and decision-making processes, as well as undermining its social, economic, and cultural foundations. Since 2016, disinformation has become a prominent subject of academic and public debate, driven by the rise of white, right-wing nationalism, as demonstrated by events such as Brexit and Donald Trump's electoral victory (Griffin 18.10.2016).

For years, Russia has developed a series of false narratives that its disinformation and propaganda system continuously injects into the global information space. These narratives are crafted with a single principle: a complete disregard for the truth to shape the information environment in favour of Russia's policy objectives. While the Russian government tightly controls social media within the country, it cannot censor foreign media outside its influence. Nonetheless, Russian authorities and pro-Kremlin actors actively work to spread propaganda and misinformation internationally, aiming to shape global perceptions in favour of Russia and garner support for its actions. Russian disinformation is often compared to a matryoshka doll: as one layer is uncovered, another similar yet smaller layer appears, leading to a never-ending cycle. This strategy, termed the "matryoshka system of perfect disinformation," involves multiplying information sources within a specific pattern, making each new source seem credible while ultimately misleading the audience (Musiał-Karg, Łukasik-Turecka 2023).

In this context, fake news represents a central aspect of disinformation and involves the spread of deliberately false news, created to manipulate public opinion or for economic purposes, such as increasing web traffic through clickbait (Lazer et al. 2018). In addition to fake news, disinformation can take many other forms, including propaganda, used by governments or powerful groups to influence public opinion and reinforce a political or ideological agenda; deepfakes, which are technology that uses artificial intelligence to create fake videos and audio, making it difficult to distinguish the real from the fake (Chesney, Citron 2019); satire and parody, which are sometimes misinterpreted as real news, leading to the unintentional spread of false information; fabricated content, which consists of completely invented information with no basis in reality (Wardle, Derakhshan 27.09.2017). In a geopolitical context, targeted disinformation operations can be used to

alter the course of elections, spread propaganda, or influence media narratives on international conflicts and crises. Digital platforms and social media amplify these phenomena, thanks to algorithms that favour sensational and polarizing content (Marwick, Lewis 15.05.2017).

Modern disinformation has evolved in a variety of ways, including the use of bots and troll farms, automated networks and organized groups that spread fake news to influence public opinion; political microtargeting, which uses personal data to spread misleading messages to specific groups of users; algorithmic manipulation, which uses social media platforms' algorithms to amplify sensational and polarizing content (Vosoughi, Roy, Aral 2018).

A key aspect of disinformation is its impact on society. On the political level, it can influence elections, undermine trust in democratic institutions, and foster the rise of extremist movements. The use of coordinated disinformation campaigns can generate distrust in traditional media, delegitimize independent journalism, and distort public debate. On the public health front, disinformation can spread conspiracy theories about vaccines and medical treatments, putting people's lives at risk. During the COVID-19 pandemic, false information about ineffective treatments and conspiracy theories have contributed to slowing down vaccination campaigns and generating confusion among the population (Brennen et al. 7.04.2020).

Nowadays, Russia is by far the most active actor of disinformation in Europe. Whether on the battlefield in Ukraine, in related global or regional coordinated and highly professional disinformation campaigns, such as "Doppelganger," "Portal Kombat" or "Matryoshka" and "Operation Overload," Russia and Russian propaganda broadcaster, like RT, has made use of genAI during the past three years and is increasing doing so (Checkfirst 4.06.2024; Technical Report 5.06.2024; VIGINUM 15.02.2024; VIGINUM 11.06.2024).

2. The Case of Călin Georgescu: Disinformation in Romania

In the months preceding Romania's 2024 presidential elections, the country became the target of a complex and sustained disinformation campaign largely attributed to Russian-aligned actors. This was not an isolated phenomenon but rather the continuation of a broader strategic effort by the Kremlin to destabilize democracies across Europe, especially in countries

on North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) eastern flank. Romania, sharing a border with Ukraine and historically sensitive to Russian geopolitical ambitions, was particularly vulnerable due to its internal political instability and systemic weaknesses in institutional trust.

Russian disinformation efforts intensified markedly in early 2024. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), Romania was among several Eastern European countries subjected to targeted influence operations designed to sow discord and polarize public opinion. These campaigns often relied on recycled narratives that emphasized themes of national betrayal by pro-European elites, the supposed moral decay of the West, and conspiracies about European Union (EU) control over Romania's judicial system and sovereignty (European External Action Service 2025). Many of these narratives were disseminated through Telegram channels, fringe news websites, and TikTok influencers, exploiting Romania's growing reliance on social media as a primary news source, especially among younger voters.

Internally, the political climate was already unstable. Romania's traditional parties, like the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Liberal Party (NLP), were experiencing a legitimacy crisis. Years of corruption scandals, public service failures, and an opaque judiciary had severely eroded public confidence. The European Commission's Rule of Law Report, published in July 2024, underscored persistent issues in judicial independence, weak anti-corruption frameworks, and political interference in media outlets, all of which contributed to a widespread sentiment of disillusionment among citizens (European Commission 2024). This fertile ground of distrust created the perfect environment for foreign disinformation to take root and flourish.

Before December 2024, Romanian authorities responded to the escalating threat of disinformation with a mix of public warnings, limited institutional efforts, and cooperation with civil society, but their actions were widely criticized as reactive, fragmented, and largely insufficient given the scale of the threat. The National Audiovisual Council and Central Electoral Bureau, the bodies officially responsible for media oversight and electoral integrity, faced legal and logistical constraints. Romania lacked comprehensive legislation to regulate digital political advertising and misinformation on platforms like TikTok, Telegram, and Facebook. As we can see, the response was marked by a lack of urgency and coordination. Disinformation monitoring and countermeasures were not prioritized until after the crisis had

fully materialized. This inertia enabled hostile foreign actors to deeply infiltrate the Romanian digital information space and shape public opinion long before any substantial institutional pushback.

A prime example of how disinformation can influence politics is the rise of C. Georgescu in Romania. A politician with nationalist and Eurosceptic views, he has gained unexpected popularity thanks to a communication strategy based on the intensive use of social media, especially TikTok. His anti-establishment rhetoric, combined with promises of radical reforms, has attracted the support of a population tired of corruption and economic hardship. However, his rapid rise has been accompanied by numerous signs of foreign interference and coordinated disinformation campaigns, allegedly orchestrated by Russia to destabilize the Romanian political framework and undermine European cohesion.

According to an analysis carried out using specialized software "Osavul"[1] carried out by the independent media start-up CONTEXT, which aims to grow and expand the community of investigative journalists in Romania, there is possible coordination between these accounts, thanks to which C. Georgescu's profile and messages ahead of the elections have reached millions of Romanians through foreign channels. According to Osavul data, the number of posts in support of C. Georgescu on anti-Western accounts outside Romania has risen to over 1,100 per day since November 1, compared to an average of less than 100 per day before that date, as well as pro-Georgescu posts on the websites pravda-en.com and pravda-es.com, both affiliated with the Russian Federation. These data collected from social networks X, Telegram and Facebook showed a series of accounts linked to Russia with hundreds of thousands of followers and with obvious pro-Russian, anti-Western and conspiratorial sympathies that consistently promoted C. Georgescu (Roșca 29.11.2024).

But Osavul's is not the only investigative activity that has led to these conclusions; thanks to the messages documented by a journalist of Info Sud-Est (ISE), who infiltrated the Telegram group with over 4,000 members called "Implică-te și tu, Renașterea Romaniei,"[2] it was possible to observe the modus operandi of the group. The channel, which deleted its previous

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[1]   Osavul, AI-powered platform for information environment assessment. Available at https://www.osavul.cloud/.

[2]   As of today, April 10, 2025, the Telegram channel is still open, with 914 subscribers, and can be reached at the following link: https://t.me/propagatorcg.

content on December 6, functioned as a command hub to provide content and instructions to participants. It distributed pre-edited materials, such as video clips from C. Georgescu's public appearances, formatted and ready for immediate sharing on platforms such as TikTok. In total, more than 1,800 photos and videos have been sent to members since June, to be distributed simultaneously across all social networks. One of the main instructions repeated by the group's moderators was that this content should be individually edited and customized by each user, to fool algorithms and allow social media platforms to identify it as their own content and not as copied/repeatable content. To that end, the channel's moderators also posted a video tutorial showing members how to use tools such as CapCut and Filmora to edit the clips.

The channel in question was just the tip of the iceberg in the complex network of interconnected Telegram groups. On July 20, the channel released a list of 41 Telegram groups, each dedicated to one of Romania's counties. These groups were labelled with the so-called "National project" of C. Georgescu, titled "Harnă – Apă – Energie,"[3] followed by the name of the corresponding county. Members were also asked to join the group for their county of residence, thus creating a local structure to organize and mobilize supporters at the regional level in preparation for the presidential election.

Alongside the Telegram campaign, there was also a second front operating on TikTok. In November, C. Georgescu's TikTok account saw significant growth in subscribers (2.541%), likes (1.496%), comments (1.581%), and shares (1.146%), despite a 29% drop in video uploads to his account in November compared to the previous month (Olari 12.12.2024). Călin Georgescu's supporters have used coordinated strategies on TikTok to amplify his visibility, exploiting the platform's algorithms through repetitive comments and interactions on unrelated posts. This tactic has brought millions of views to videos linked to C. Georgescu, raising questions about the authenticity of the engagement. According to social analysis by the Digital Forensic Research Lab, the twelve most popular hashtags promoted by C. Georgescu's campaign have totaled 1.4 billion views on TikTok. The top hashtag, #calingeorgescu, appeared in 51,700 videos, generating 783.7 million views. For comparison, Romania's population is 19 million.

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[3]   Translated: Food – Water – Energy.

Such political coordination, of course, is not inherently illegal in itself; however, the Romanian electoral authorities noted that C. Georgescu was promoted illegally, i.e. without a mandatory mark indicating that the promotional materials were part of an electoral campaign (Vulcan 21.11.2024). After a Romanian intelligence investigation that claimed C. Georgescu was supported by social media campaigns like those implemented in Ukraine and Moldova, C. Georgescu's first-round victory was later annulled over alleged Russian interference (Administrația Prezidențială 4.12.2024).

As regards the contents of social campaigns, the disinformation strategy in its favour was articulated in several elements characterised:

1. A first element is represented by the fake news of a conspiracy nature, which sees a large conspiracy with C. Georgescu, both before and after the elections. The Kremlin's disinformation machine has also set its sights on Romania, fabricating an upside-down world where the EU supposedly controls Romania's judicial system like a puppet master for several years (EUvsDiSiNFO 13.08.2022). Unsurprisingly, pro-Kremlin disinformation has framed this straightforward legal process as "EU tyranny," portraying Romania as a helpless victim of "Brussels despotism" (EUvsDiSiNFO 10.03.2025).

2. A pro-Russian online portal published an article claiming, without evidence, that the EU had already decided to block any Romanian government that was not openly pro-Western. This manufactured narrative serves Moscow's broader strategy of undermining trust in democratic institutions while positioning pro-Kremlin candidates as "popular victims" of Western persecution. This widespread narrative reinforced the idea that C. Georgescu was the only candidate free from external influences, but that Brussels decided to intervene to exclude the man of the people (EUvsDiSiNFO 16.12.2024). This is very reminiscent of other unfounded accusations of Russian origin, such as those about United States (US) bio-laboratories in Ukraine or the presence of French combat troops on the front lines in Ukraine (EUvsDiSiNFO 9.03.2025). Or, exploiting the TikTok platform to fuel fears related to the war in Ukraine, suggesting that Romanians could be recruited to fight (Erizanu 8.12.2024). This narrative has spread in a context where the Romanian government has failed to communicate effectively to reassure citizens.

3. Similarly, AI-generated images and deepfakes depicting C. Georgescu as a patriotic hero were widely disseminated, bolstering his nationalist credentials. The campaign also exploited anti-Semitic tropes and

anti-Western sentiments, painting C. Georgescu as a protector of Romania against external globalist forces. This resonated with segments of the population alienated by globalization and perceived Western cultural dominance, and further solidified C. Georgescu's base of support (Mihăilescu 28.11.2024).

After the election, TikTok denied any responsibility for the Romanian presidential election, saying it does not allow political advertising and is very vigilant in its efforts to block misleading behaviour. However, investigative journalists from Recorder and Snoop have shown that TikTok appears to have a security breach that can be used to easily create fake accounts and use bots that can boost a (fake) candidate to 1 million views in less than two hours (Radu 21.01.2025).

To better understand how this may have influenced the outcome of the elections, it is good to explain what is meant by "parasocial opinion leader" (Stehr et al. 2015). A parasocial opinion leader can be any mass media character with whom we have no real interaction: a politician who tries to arouse more empathy in his constituency by starting to cry or by introducing us to his house or his children; a real person who trolls a journalist on social media, while exaggerating his feelings; a character in a serial drama who has the life we think we live or would like to live; a bot with a profile featuring a cute cat and a beach vacation that says "I will vote for Călin Georgescu"; in short, any character that seems similar to us, in some way. We don't actually know them, but we feel like they're our friends, hence the parasocial relationship we've developed with these media characters. Romanian TikTok influencers used for C. Georgescu's campaign were known for their interest in makeup, cars, fashion, entertainment, Expert Forum (23.11.2024) explains. Can these parasocial opinion leaders influence the vote, just as they influence the way people dress or comb their hair? Probably, for some members of the public, under specific conditions, with specific messages. All presidential candidates were present on social media. Trolls and bots were used by several parties during the election campaign.

The consequences of this disinformation campaign have been far-reaching. On December 6, 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court ruled to invalidate the first round of the presidential election due to external interference, an unprecedented decision that has sparked debate about the vulnerability of modern democracies to digital interference (Muschei 14.02.2025). This case has highlighted the need for more stringent measures to combat the spread of fake news and to protect electoral processes from external

manipulation. The EU has launched an investigation into TikTok to verify whether the platform has violated EU regulations by allowing the propagation of manipulative content. In addition, efforts to regulate the use of digital platforms and to develop more effective information verification tools have been stepped up.

The investigation is still ongoing. Towards the end of February 2025, prosecutors also said C. Georgescu is accused of "founding or supporting fascist, racist, xenophobic, or anti-Semitic organizations, as well as publicly promoting war criminals and extremist ideologies" (McGrath, Alexandru 26.02.2025). Furthermore, since an official investigation was opened against him, C. Georgescu cannot leave the country and has been placed under judicial control for 60 days. There are at least six charges against him, including incitement to actions against the constitutional order, communication of false information, continuous false financial declarations, public promotion of the cult of persons guilty of crimes of genocide and war crimes, and establishment or support of an organization of a fascist, racist, xenophobic or anti-Semitic nature (Brezar 9.03.2025).

But C. Georgescu is not the only person under investigation in this gigantic story. His interrogation is part of a large nationwide police action that has targeted a total of 27 people, investigated for a series of crimes, including unconstitutional actions, possession of illegal weapons, incitement to racism, fascism and xenophobia, and promotion of a personality cult accused of genocide and war crimes (France24 26.02.2025). Law enforcement has reportedly carried out 47 searches in five different Romanian counties, starting with the homes of several of C. Georgescu's close associates. The sweep also involved Horațiu Potra, a mercenary previously linked to C. Georgescu (Körömi 10.03.2025). The owner of a private military company and a former for the French Foreign Legion, he was arrested in mid-December on charges of planning large-scale protests in support of C. Georgescu. He was investigated for possession of weapons and ammunition and for publicly inciting illegal gatherings, but was eventually released.

On March 6, six more people were arrested on charges of treason and attempted *coup d'état*, having maintained contacts with Russian agents and travelled several times to Russia to discuss plans to subvert power (Chouet 10.03.2025). The group's goal was to withdraw Romania from NATO, promulgate a new constitution, change the national symbols, dissolve political parties, and install a new government composed of their supporters. The Russian strategy aimed to weaken NATO and eliminate its

influence in the Black Sea region. Russia's interest in destabilizing Romania stems primarily from the desire to undermine the unity of NATO and the EU, using hybrid warfare strategies to create political and social instability. Russia uses nationalism and populism to divide society and weaken the Western front, aiming to reduce Western influence in Eastern Europe. A destabilized Romania could undermine EU and NATO support for Moldova, paving the way for further Russian moves in the region.

In March, Romania's Constitutional Court upheld its decision to disqualify C. Georgescu from a rerun of the election scheduled for May, refuting allegations that the EU had banned his candidacy. Contrary to claims on social media, the EU did not ban any candidates but instead took measures to counter foreign interference in Romania's elections. Prior to this ruling, Romania's Central Election Commission had already suspended C. Georgescu's candidacy, as he did not meet the legal requirements to hold the presidential office. Under Romanian law, candidacies are assessed on a case-by-case basis, meaning C. Georgescu could potentially attempt to run in future elections. In addition to C. Georgescu, Diana Sosoaca, an MEP and leader of the ultra-nationalist S.O.S Romania party, was also disqualified from the presidential race in mid-March. Known for her pro-Russian positions, D. Sosoaca reacted to the decision by accusing the US, the Jews, and the EU of having plotted to rig the elections before they even began (Nilsson-Julien 19.03.2025).

The annulment of the first round of the 2024 presidential election by Romania's Constitutional Court, following evidence of Russian interference in favour of far-right candidate C. Georgescu, has raised significant concerns about the vulnerability of the country's democratic process. According to a survey conducted by INSCOP Research February 22–29, 2024, 45.6% of Romanians identified Russia as the main source of propaganda and disinformation in the country, a significant increase from 27.3% in January 2022. Following the C. Georgescu case, a further INSCOP survey, conducted December 16–23, 2024, confirmed that 45.3% of citizens continued to perceive Russia as the main source of disinformation. These data suggest a broad awareness among the population regarding external disinformation threats.

In parallel, trust in traditional political institutions has declined. An INSCOP survey published in November 2023 indicated that only 19.4% of Romanians trusted the government and 17.4% the parliament, which compared to 2013 were 34.8% and 26.7%, respectively (Marica 14.11.2023). These results highlight a growing distrust towards political institutions and a widespread perception of information manipulation. However, it will be

necessary to wait for further surveys to assess how much the C. Georgescu affair has had deleterious effects on the Romanian electorate's trust in their institutions. Finally, a further INSCOP Research survey published on January 7, 2025 showed that Romanians' trust in Russia has fallen to a historic low of 5.9%, eleven times lower than their trust in the EU (Dumitrescu 7.01.2025).

Conclusion

The analysis conducted considerably confirms the initial hypothesis: exposure to online disinformation campaigns has indeed favoured the rise of populist and anti-establishment political figures in Romania, as in the emblematic case of C. Georgescu. Data from post-election surveys highlight a clear weakening of trust in traditional political institutions and a parallel strengthening of the perception that external actors, especially Russia, influence the national information landscape.

In particular, the exponential growth of consensus towards C. Georgescu, favoured by a digital strategy strongly centred on TikTok and Telegram and fuelled by disinformation content, coincided with an increase in distrust towards parties such as the SDP and the NLP. After the annulment of the first round of elections by the Constitutional Court, a significant part of the population perceived the intervention as an unjustified interference, reinforcing the victimized and anti-establishment narrative promoted by pro-Georgescu propaganda.

Polls conducted December 2024 – March 2025 also confirm that the population increasingly clearly identifies Russia as the main source of disinformation, and that this recognition occurs in a context of growing polarization. At the same time, trust in independent media and democratic institutions is at an all-time low, while indifference or adherence to conspiracy and populist narratives is increasing.

Considering these results, disinformation does not only act as a cognitive distortion but is also a powerful agent for reconfiguring political consensus, capable of dismantling traditional party structures and creating new leaderships based on simplistic, emotional rhetoric that is often hostile to liberal democratic values. To respond to these challenges, it will be necessary to strengthen digital literacy measures, promote the transparency of social

platforms, and restore trust in representative mechanisms before the disinformation spiral irreversibly undermines the country's democratic stability.

The fight against disinformation is a complex and global challenge that requires constant and collective effort. In an era where information spreads rapidly through social media and digital platforms, the risk of manipulation of public opinion is higher than ever. It is not only a matter of protecting the truth, but also of protecting democracy itself, since an informed citizenry is the basis of free and aware societies.

To effectively address the problem of disinformation, it is essential to adopt an integrated approach that involves various social actors. Governments must implement regulatory policies that promote transparency and hold digital platforms accountable, without limiting freedom of expression. At the same time, technology companies must invest in the development of more sophisticated algorithms capable of detecting and combating misleading content, and adopt more ethical and transparent practices in the management of information.

The role of education cannot be underestimated either: it is necessary to train citizens, starting from school age, to develop critical thinking and greater digital awareness. Only in this way will it be possible to reduce the impact of fake news and promote a healthier and more reliable information ecosystem.

Finally, it is essential to promote a culture of verification and individual responsibility. Citizens must learn to distinguish between reliable sources and manipulative content, actively taking part in the construction of a safer and more truthful information space.

The battle against disinformation cannot be won by a single actor, but requires the participation of everyone: institutions, technology companies, media, and citizens. Only through a collective and constant commitment will it be possible to stem the wave of fake news and guarantee free, correct, and accessible information for all.

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