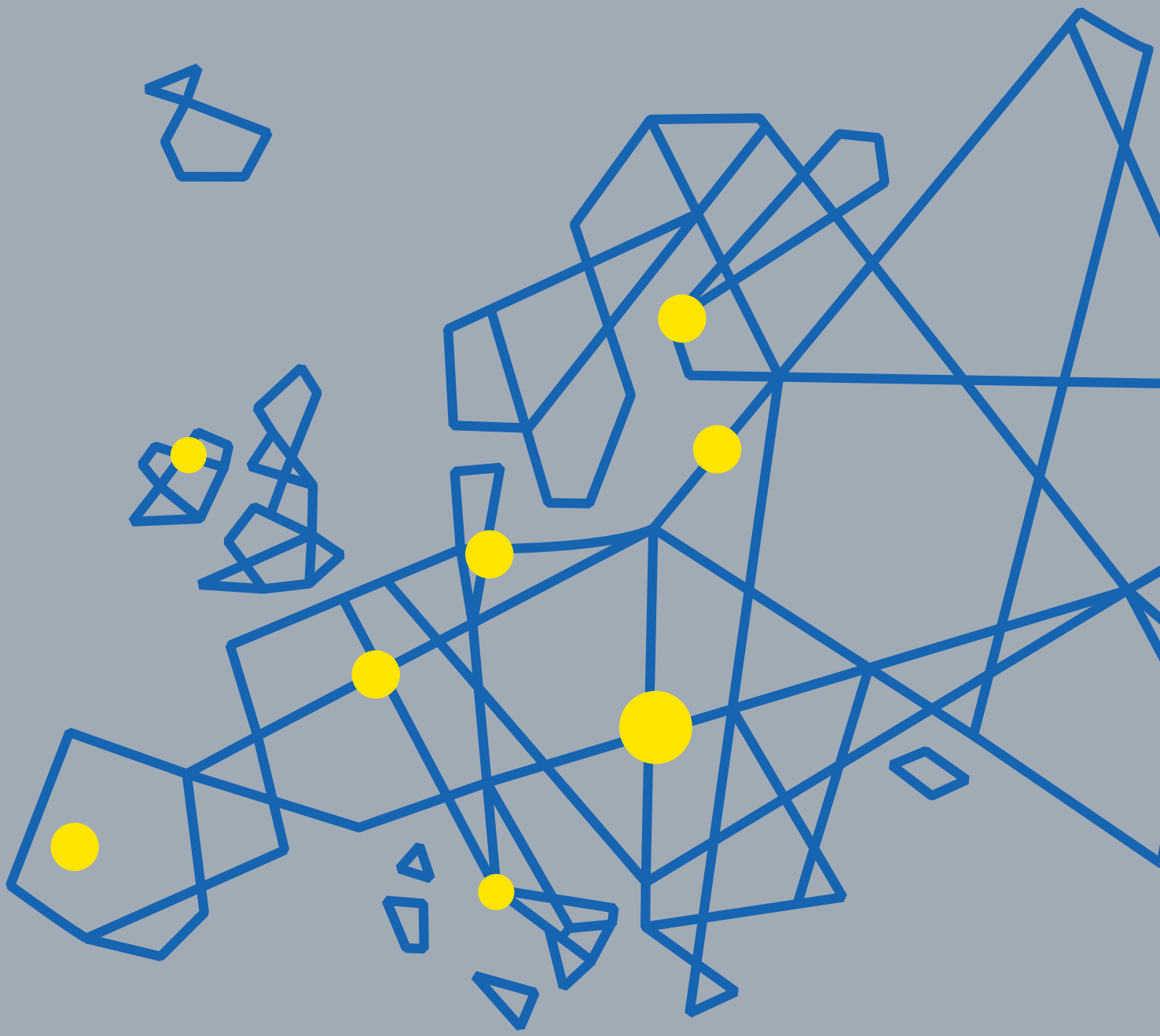

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FUELLING THE FIRE:

Russia's Role in Romania's Democratic Struggles

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Main thesis

1. The Romanian authorities have been largely reactive, rather than proactive, in countering foreign interference, including that of Russia, leaving critical vulnerabilities in the country's political and economic systems.

2. The weakening of Romania's democracy is primarily driven by domestic movements and systemic flaws, with external forces like Russia exploiting these weaknesses rather than directly initiating them.

3. Russia's influence in Romania is predominantly indirect, operating through local actors who align with Kremlin objectives. This group promotes nationalist narratives, Euroscepticism, and anti-Western disinformation campaigns.

Introduction

Russia has a multi-layered approach to influence, blending economic leverage, political infiltration, and information warfare to destabilize democratic processes and weaken public trust in institutions in EU member states. These countries are, though to varying degrees, exposed to Russian pressure. Romania distinguishes itself among the EU member states with a greater vulnerability to Russian meddling. By exploiting governance deficits and amplifying divisive narratives, Moscow seeks to erode Romania's resilience to external and internal threats.

Attitudes towards Russia among Romanians has gone from a moderate level of sympathy to a clear rejection in recent years. This shift has been accentuated by the Russian war in Ukraine. Despite historically strained relations between the two nations, Russia has found fertile ground in Romania for influence through local actors who share its strategic goals. This dynamic has intensified in the context of Romania's support for Ukraine during the ongoing conflict, turning the country into a key battleground for competing geopolitical agendas.

State Capture through Strategic Asset Control

Despite international sanctions, Russia maintains a significant economic footprint in Romania, particularly in the energy sector. Lukoil, one of the largest Russian oil companies, has faced scrutiny for its activities in Romania, which are seen as potential tools for economic coercion. The latest figures show turnover for its refineries doubled in 2023 compared to 2022, with a profit of almost 13 million euro. Following a tax evasion scandal in 2014, the tax authorities began an investigation that exposed how the company funnelled money to political figures close to the then Prime Minister[1] Victor Ponta. This included the parliamentarian Sebastian Ghiță and even the leader's mother. The trial faced numerous delays and was restarted twice until 2023, when the tax authorities formally requested significant

1 De la Lukoil, un milion de dolari pentru apropiații lui Ponta, Rise Project, 08.10.2014. https://www.riseproject.ro/investigations/uncategorized/de-la-lukoil-un-milion-de-dolari-pentru-apropiatii-lui-ponta/
Atitudini ale publicului românesc față de SUA, UE, NATO și Rusia în vreme de criză, Project-E, 01.09.2022. https://project-e.ro/2022/09/01/atitudini-ale-publicului-romanesc-fata-de-sua-ue-nato-si-rusia-in-vreme-de-criza/

amounts in unpaid taxes. Despite such efforts, Russian companies are still free to do business in Romania, indirectly financing the Kremlin and its invasion of Ukraine. One such company is Sustainable Energy Supply North SRL, which made huge profits from the onset despite having only 2 employees.

In terms of sanctions, the Romanian authorities act like rule takers as opposed to taking any initiative. There is a wilful lack of transparency regarding the type and amount of help granted to Ukraine, which feeds narratives of Romania no longer being a sovereign state. While Finland moved to confiscate Russian diplomatic buildings as an enforcement of damages won by Naftogaz in The Hague, in Romania, such assets are apparently exempt from taxes.[2]

Social mood

According to recent polls, Romanians' distrust of Russia has increased drastically. For example, a survey conducted by INSCOP in October-November 2023 shows that 92% of Romanians distrust Russia, compared to 82% a decade ago. By 2022, pro-Russian support or sympathies were more visible in certain segments of the population, such as young people without higher education or supporters of populist parties. However, after the invasion of Ukraine, even those groups gradually lost trust in Russia.

The same study reveals that the percentage of negative feelings towards Russia increased from around 63% in 2013 to 82% in October 2023. The war was a key factor in this change, which led to an increase in Romanians' support for NATO, the EU and other Western organizations. At the same time, Russia was perceived as a threat by 73% of Romanians in 2024, up from 64% in 2023, and 30% in 2020.

Since then, however, Russian disinformation efforts have picked up, challenging pro-Western narratives and portraying Ukraine in a negative light, with the result that only 55% of people in 2024 blamed Russia for the invasion, down from 65% in 2023. On the other hand, 22% of Romanians blame Ukraine for the war. While support for the European Union and NATO remains high, there is a sharp increase in the belief that the EU dictates to Romania without the country having any power to influence decisions (up to 71% from 57% in 2023).[3] According to Eurobarometer, in autumn 2024 only 49% of Romanians agreed that the EU should purchase and supply military equipment to Ukraine (50% EU average), while 47% were against (37% EU average). Such shifts in public opinion are consistent with the rise of "sovereigntist" political movements, which argue for increased self-reliance and the greater isolation of Romania.

Influence through political parties

In Romania, the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), which won 18% of votes in the most recent parliamentary elections (December 2024), maintains an ambivalent stance toward Russia. The party outwardly condemned the invasion of Ukraine while promoting narratives aligned with Russian strategic objectives, such as Romania's

2 Bogdan Groșereanu, Finlanda confiscă proprietăți ale Rusiei pentru anexarea Crimeii; România le scutește de impozite, *Dare de Seama*, 12.11.2024. https://daredeseama.ro/finlanda-confisca-proprietati-ale-rusiei-pentru-anexarea-crimeii-romania-le-scuteste-de-impozite/

3 Globsec Trends 2024: CEE: A Brave New Region?, Globsec, 30.04.2024. https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/GLOBSEC%20TRENDS%202024.pdf

"re-sovereignization", "RoExit" and criticism of the EU that mirrors narratives promoted by Russian disinformation channels like Sputnik. Despite formally condemning the invasion of Ukraine, AUR asserts that the war is "not ours" and opposes both military support for Ukraine, as well as the transit of Ukrainian agricultural products through Romania.

Initially, in early 2022, AUR choose Călin Georgescu as its honorary president. However, tensions arose following his televised praise of two members of the interwar fascist Iron Guard. He referred to these individuals as "martyrs" who "did good deeds". This led to internal party disagreements and a criminal investigation for encouraging praise of persons guilty of genocide and war crimes.[4] Subsequently, Georgescu distanced himself from AUR and pursued an independent political path, culminating in his candidacy in the 2024 presidential elections. In the parliamentary elections, Georgescu endorsed the Party of Young People (POT), an anti-establishment and nationalist party whose mission statement interestingly mentions God twice. It was founded in July 2023 by Anamaria Gavrilă, a deputy elected in 2020 as a member of AUR. Despite little visibility prior to the final few weeks of the electoral campaign, the party managed to submit the required 100,000 signatures needed to run in the elections, and obtained 6% of the vote. This saw the group become the 6th largest party in Romania following a campaign visible mostly on TikTok.

A party more outspoken in favour of Russia is S.O.S Romania, which just made the threshold to enter the European Parliament in the last election in June 2024 (5%). It then increased its popularity in the national elections to 7% in December 2024. The party is headed by Diana Șoșoacă, a lawyer initially elected senator for AUR, who was later expelled from the party for repeatedly breaking with its official line. S.O.S promotes considerably more radical right-wing positions than AUR, such as actively exiting the EU and reclaiming the territories in Ukraine and Moldova that belonged to interwar Romania. Șoșoacă was accused by her ex-husband of working undercover and receiving money from the Kremlin. While there is no evidence of this, she does frequently visit the Russian embassy; has asked people close to Putin for support; and has given interviews for Russian media, claiming that Ukraine has territories that belong to Russia. Fans on Șoșoacă's Telegram group freely post hate speech, endorsements of Putin, conspiracies, and calls for a "Russian Orthodox Jihad" against the West.[5] In October 2024, the Romanian Constitutional Court invalidated Șoșoacă's bid for the presidency, arguing that her public conduct, including towards Russia, would threaten the constitutional order were she elected.

Leveraging the anti-system vote

The first round of the presidential election, held on November 24th 2024, yielded surprising results. Călin Georgescu ran as an independent, securing a plurality with 23% of the vote. This saw him surpass the two top favourites in the polls: Marcel Ciolacu and George Simion. Neither of these candidates made it to the second round. His campaign, which gained substantial traction on TikTok, capitalized on nationalist and "anti-war" sentiments, as well as scepticism towards the European Union.

4 Matthew Garvey, AUR îl susține pe Călin Georgescu, deși în urmă cu doi ani se delimita de el după ce a făcut propagandă legionară, Digi24, 26.11.2024. https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2024/aur-il-sustine-pe-calin-georgescu-desi-in-urma-cu-doi-ani-se-delimita-de-el-dupa-ce-a-facut-propaganda-legionara-3021853

5 *Jihadul Ortodox Rusesc – ce susțin fanii Dianei Șoșoacă pe grupul acesteia de Telegram*, România Curată, 04.07.2024. https://www.romaniacurata.ro/jihadul-ortodox-rusesc-ce-sustin-fanii-dianei-sosoaca-pe-grupul-acesteia-de-telegram/

However, the election was marred by allegations of foreign interference, particularly from Russia. A declassified report from the Romanian Information Service (SRI), which was discussed with President Klaus Iohannis in the National Security Council (CSAT), claimed that over 25,000 accounts had been set up specifically to distribute content featuring Georgescu (and later the Party of Young People – POT running for parliament). Some of these accounts were affiliated with Sputnik media.[6] Investigations uncovered that AdNow, an online advertising company with Russian origins, was involved in disseminating disinformation and promoting Georgescu's campaign through targeted advertisements.[7] Another company, Bunelu Ltd., shares the same London address as AdNow, and has a Romanian subsidiary called Tracia Unită, which coordinates a network of companies. The network's coordinator is Mihai Rotaru, who was formerly employed by the Romanian army, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Russian-Romanian Chamber of Commerce. Several members and investors of the Tracia Unită Group have made repeated visits to the Russian embassy, have invited Georgescu for interviews, and feature in the S.O.S parliament group.[8]

Georgescu officially spent no money at all on his campaign, which was financed illegally by supporters with money of unknown origin. President Iohannis mentioned a "subtle and complex" foreign intervention, though direct evidence released by the secret services was insufficient to conclusively identify Russia as the source. Moreover, an investigative journalism platform found that the "Balance and Uprightness" campaign, which supported Georgescu, had been paid for by the National Liberal Party (PNL). This was confirmed by Kensington Communication, the company behind the campaign, which later claimed that their work had been hijacked by Georgescu supporters. The campaign focused on the question of what kind of president people wanted for Romania. It involved approximately 130 influencers and garnered around 2.4 million views.[9] Romania's Tax Office (ANAF) confirmed that PNL had funded the campaign, which mirrored the Russian "Brother for Brother" campaign carried out in Ukraine before the invasion. Such evidence is circumstantial, with no direct links to the Kremlin. Finally, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the presidential election, restarting the entire electoral process. The first round for the new elections is to be held this year on May 4th, with the second round two weeks later.

Parliamentary elections took place on December 1st 2024. The result was a fragmented parliament. The governing Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) lost their majority in both chambers, while far-right anti-system parties such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), S.O.S. Romania, and the Party of Young People (POT) reached 32% altogether. A Romanian special parliamentary committee reported that Russia had launched cyberattacks intended to sway public opinion and support for Eurosceptic candidates during the parliamentary electoral campaign. The results of the far-right parties raised concerns about the resilience of Romania's society and democratic institutions, as well as the influence of foreign actors (particularly Russia) in its political processes.

6 Document CSAT SRI I, Administrația Prezidențială, 04.12.2024. https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente%20CSAT/Document%20CSAT%20SRI%20I.pdf

7 Marton Dunai, From vaccines to votes: Russian ad agency influences Europeans, *Financial Times*, December 24 2024: https://www.ft.com/content/31af3e55-97f7-4bc2-a4e6-89ed2c0c461e

8 Victor Ilie, Cazul Bunelu: firma susținătorilor lui Georgescu și legăturile rusești. Cum se fac 300 de milioane de euro pe hârtie, *Snoop,* 05.12.2024. https://snoop.ro/cazul-bunelu-firma-sustinatorilor-lui-georgescu-si-legaturile-rusesti-cum-se-fac-300-de-milioane-de-euro-pe-hartie/

9 Mirela Neag, Cătălin Tolontan, Iulia Roșu, Răzvan Luțac, ANAF a descoperit că PNL a plătit o campanie care l-a promovat masiv pe Călin Georgescu pe TikTok, *Snoop*, 20.12.2024. https://snoop.ro/anaf-a-descoperit-ca-pnl-a-platit-o-campanie-care-l-a-promovat-masiv-pe-calin-georgescu-pe-tiktok/

Media Manipulation & Disinformation

Journalist investigations conducted recently revealed that over the past eight years, numerous publications, influencers, and advertisements in Romania have been financed by Russian sources.[10] Especially since 2020, the Kremlin has been successful in promoting anti-Western sentiments among Romanians by amplifying alone or in cooperation with local actors nationalist and "sovereigntist" narratives. Moscow has also encouraged themes such as conspiracies, pro-Kremlin attitudes, fascist content, Dacian mythology and communist nostalgia. This is often carried out through social media channels (increasingly TikTok due to poor oversight of video content) and fringe news sites that replicate disinformation sourced from Russian Telegram channels and other pro-Kremlin outlets.[11] Russian propaganda expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-22), when the far-right AUR met the threshold to be in parliament in December 2020. This was despite a lacklustre performance at the local elections only a few months prior.

The goal of such online campaigns is not to increase solidarity with Moscow. Given that Romania has few cultural, economic or political ties to Russia, as well as no ethnic or linguistic ties, the two countries have a solid history of enmity. In this context, the narrative is meant to weaken support for Western institutions and ideas.

The Romanian media landscape, already vulnerable due to low media literacy; low trust in media; and opaque funding structures, is exploited in order to disseminate conspiracy theories and anti-EU sentiments in line with Russia's interests. These narratives are often repurposed from global conspiracies, aligning with domestic issues to increase their impact.

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine of 2022 intensified Russian efforts to influence political action and discourse in Romania. One example of this was the accusation that Ukraine was causing environmental damage by dredging the Bâstroe Canal on the Danube to make way for shipping. The topic was amplified by media outlets and became a main talking point until its eventual resolution.

Conclusion

While pro-Russian sentiment in Romania has declined sharply since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, trust in political parties and institutions remains low. All the results of the elections of 2024 can best be described as anti-system votes, in which far-right candidates and parties took advantage of the poor enforcement of electoral law; a low resilience to extremism; and years of poor performance by governing parties. The Constitutional Court's decision to invalidate Diana Șoșoacă's candidacy but not that of Călin Georgescu seemed arbitrary. There was also no strong legal ground to do so, with the decision to annul the elections weakening even further trust in the democratic process itself.

Evidence that PNL financed a campaign that ultimately helped Georgescu points to him being a product of the Romanian system rather than a Kremlin 'invention'. However, the

10 Victor Ilie, Strategia cu bani rusești. Cum au ajuns reclamele la medicină naturistă și știrile cu sfinți să influențeze votul românilor la prezidențiale, *Snoop*, 03.12.2024. https://snoop.ro/strategia-cu-bani-rusesti-cum-au-ajuns-reclamele-la-medicina-naturista-si-stirile-cu-sfinti-sa-influenteze-votul-romanilor-la-prezidential

11 Ciprian Cucu, *The disinformation landscape in Romania*, EU DisinfoLab, 19.09.2023. https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/disinformation-landscape-in-romania/

backing of companies such as AdNow suggests that Russia takes advantage of opportunities and exploits weaknesses in the political and democratic system whenever they might appear, including Georgescu's case.

All of this highlights the need for Romania to develop societal resilience – to propaganda, infiltration, disinformation and illiberalism. Meanwhile, it takes a lot of time to implement laws that safeguard democratic processes. They need to be prepared, passed through parliament and finally be enforced efficiently alongside existing regulation. In the worst-case scenario, in the meantime, Romanian democracy may turn out to be too fragile to survive both internal transgressions of the democratic process, as well as the external illiberal pressure from Russia.

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