

Undermining democracy: The weaponization of social media in Romania's 2024 elections



Executive summary

Romania experienced an exceptionally intense electoral year in 2024, with local, European Parliament (EP), general, and presidential elections all scheduled. Although the local and EP elections in June were marked by some controversy, they paled in comparison to the unprecedented events surrounding the presidential elections. The first-round votes were recounted, and subsequently, the elections were annulled due to allegations of foreign interference. The situation remains fluid, with some individuals feeling that democracy was saved at the last moment, while others believe it died with the annulment. Recently, social media has seen a surge in calls for action and protest, accompanied by an increase in false narratives.

The unprecedented annulment of Romania's 2024 presidential election first round marks a critical moment in European democracy, revealing how social media platforms can be weaponized to undermine electoral processes. At the center of this crisis stands TikTok, whose platform became the primary vector for allegations that a sophisticated, state-backed disinformation campaign has ultimately affected Romania's democratic integrity and leading to the [European Commission formally opening](#) formal proceedings against TikTok on election risks under the Digital Services Act.

The campaign propelled Călin Georgescu, a previously marginal figure known for anti-Western views, to an unexpected first-round victory through what seemed like a carefully orchestrated social media operation. Intelligence services formally accused the existence of a €1 million campaign involving 25,000 coordinated TikTok accounts, none of which was declared in official campaign finance reports. According to disclosed documents, the operation displayed clear state-actor characteristics, with Russian-linked technical infrastructure supporting content distribution across 19 countries.

Most concerning according to officially declassified documents was TikTok's apparent inability – or unwillingness – to detect and counter this threat. The platform's algorithm seemed to have been systematically exploited to amplify anti-democratic messaging, while paid political content flowed through influencer networks without proper disclosure. In just two months, Georgescu's content garnered over 100 million views, with hashtags promoting his candidacy dominating the platform's Romanian political discourse. The Constitutional

Court's decision to annul the election came after revelations from Romania's intelligence services exposed the scale of foreign interference.

This crisis serves as a stark warning: without substantial reform in platform governance and oversight, social media platforms risk becoming powerful tools for undermining democratic processes. The Romanian case demonstrates that current platform safeguards are inadequate to protect elections. This time TikTok was the most prominent stage for such vulnerabilities for the electoral integrity to manifest. But it is not only TikTok. We expect that, as the legitimate anger and frustration of citizens will continue to be unmet by the political establishment, more and more malign influences to be put to work and for state and non-state actors to exploit the distrust in the electoral process and ultimately undermine the very foundation of our liberal democracies.



Social media analysis

Social media analysis reveals a complex landscape of political discourse and public engagement across multiple platforms in Romania. The period between November 20 and December 10, 2024, saw significant online activity centered around electoral themes, with particular intensity following the Constitutional Court's decision to invalidate elections.

The campaign's social media presence achieved remarkable reach, particularly on TikTok, where the primary campaign hashtag garnered 100 million views at its peak in late November. This platform proved especially effective for political messaging, with related hashtags also showing substantial engagement – including 17 million views for political party content and notable spikes for youth-oriented political messaging reaching 7 million views.

However, beneath these surface-level metrics lies a more nuanced picture of the campaign's digital footprint. Analysis of over 9,000 Telegram posts from 35 campaign-affiliated groups, active until their closure in early December, revealed a consistent pattern of controversial narratives. These groups served as echo chambers for conspiracy theories, historical revisionism, and anti-Western sentiment, though their content maintained a pragmatic tone that resonated with their audience's shared values.

The campaign's messaging strategy wove together several interconnected narratives. At its core was a strong nationalist theme that idealized Romania's past, particularly emphasizing Dacian heritage as a symbol of resistance to foreign influence. This historical narrative provided a foundation for contemporary anti-globalist messaging and fed into broader conspiracy theories circulating at both local and national levels.

A particularly prominent thread in the online discourse portrayed Western influences as existential threats to Romanian identity. This narrative framed progressive values and international alliances, particularly NATO and EU membership, as mechanisms of cultural erosion and national subjugation. The messaging consistently positioned Romania as a victim of Western exploitation, with particular emphasis on how this allegedly affected traditional values and national sovereignty.

The analysis also identified a significant surge in content questioning electoral legitimacy, especially following the Constitutional Court's intervention. This narrative gained considerable traction across platforms, interweaving with existing conspiracy theories and anti-establishment sentiment.

It's important to note the limitations of this analysis. The opacity of TikTok's platform mechanics, the inability to recover deleted content, and the exclusion of audio-visual material from detailed analysis create significant blind spots in our understanding. Additionally, the rapid evolution of social media conversations means that some nuances may have been missed in the data collection process, which relied on tools monitoring Meta, TikTok, Twitter (X), news sites, and blog comments.

The findings suggest a sophisticated understanding of platform-specific dynamics and audience preferences, with content strategically tailored to resonate with different user segments across various social media channels. This multi-platform approach allowed for both broad reach and deep engagement with core supporters, though the true impact of these digital campaigns on voter behavior remains challenging to quantify.

Last but not least, one of the main insights stemmed from the analysis of the discourses disseminated online is that most of the narratives concentrated within the electoral period were not new. In fact, there was a steady stream of socially polarizing narratives being disseminated across social media platforms and online media sites alike. The daily frequency spikes observed in the electoral and pre-electoral periods, as well as the consistent reach of these narratives reflect a discursive and societal phenomenon which takes place on a daily basis across platforms. Obfuscated by the social media platforms' lack of transparency, the complexities of data collection, processing and its sheer volume, these narrative complexes lurk within each personalized social media bubble, in wait for the next vulnerable moment to come.

In light of the developments related to the digital space during the elections in Romania, Signatories of the Code of Practice – including the four major online platforms signatories (Meta, TikTok, Google, and Microsoft) have agreed to activate the Rapid Response System under the Code. This time-bound framework of cooperation and communications allows civil society organizations and fact-checkers to report time-sensitive content that they deem to present threats to the integrity of the electoral process. Funky Citizens, as part of the Bulgarian-Romanian EDMO Hub (BROD) has been involved in this process, and flagged over 1000 pieces of content. A full report on the effectiveness of the mechanism will be published after the RRS will be closed.



The presidential elections

Given the initial calendar, **the first round of the presidential election was supposed to take place on November 24 and the second round on December 8, with the general elections being scheduled for December 1.**

On Sunday, November 24, as polling stations closed in Romania, [exit polls](#) provided preliminary results for the first round of the presidential elections: Marcel Ciolacu (PSD) led with 25%, followed by Elena Lasconi (USR) at 18%, Călin Georgescu (independent) at 16%, George Simion (AUR) at 15%, and Nicolae Ciucă (PNL) at 14%. However, these figures were significantly overturned during the official vote count, revealing a dramatic shift in the [final standings](#): leading the race is independent candidate Călin Georgescu, who secured 2,120,401 votes (22.94%), followed by Elena Lasconi (USR) with 1,772,500 votes (19.18%), and Marcel Ciolacu (PSD) with 1,769,760 votes (19.15%).

Previous [polls](#), published just days ahead of the elections, pictured Ciolacu, incumbent PM, as a clear winner of the first round, with Simion and Lasconi fighting for the second place. There were even [rumours](#) of a possible intervention by PSD to ensure Simion would have entered the second round of the elections with Ciolacu, which would convince people that wouldn't otherwise vote for Ciolacu to do so, faced with the threat of a populist, far-right president.

The **unexpected victory of Călin Georgescu** was a shocking expose for analysts, media, the general population and, as later revealed, to the authorities. Georgescu's rise and his campaign were [largely overlooked](#) as they unfolded, particularly on social media platforms like TikTok, where he rapidly gained traction. Moreover, Georgescu's rise underscores a **growing divide between pro-European and sovereignist factions, reflecting a shift in voter sentiment away from traditional party politics**. Georgescu's campaign has been characterized by a mix of [nationalist rhetoric, pro-Russian stances, and a rejection of Romania's pro-European and pro-NATO trajectory](#). His ability to appeal to a diverse electorate, particularly through professionally crafted TikTok videos, has proven to be a key factor in his success, resonating with voters both within the country and across the diaspora. Remarkably, according to data from the Permanent Electoral Authority, Georgescu did not spend a single Euro on his campaign.

When the results were in and a second round between Georgescu and USR's Lasconi was official, the polarization in society grew. People, especially the youth and students, [started to protest against Georgescu and his far-right, anti-European messages](#), including a [large pro-EU rally](#) in Bucharest, and more signs of support were directed towards Elena Lasconi. Lasconi's past transgressions, like her support for the 2023 family referendum, which

proposed defining marriage in the Constitution as a union between a man and a woman, which went against USR's position and led to public backlash and resulted in [her being removed from the party's list for the European Parliament elections](#), were set aside. Even during the campaign, Lasconi has tried to appeal to both progressive and conservative voters, often displaying religious and national symbols, to mixed results. Her [lack of knowledge on foreign politics](#) was sidelined as well and [Lasconi became the pro-EU, pro-Western and democratic candidate](#) that [businesspeople](#) and the other major parties, like [PNL](#) and [PSD](#), rallied behind.

Meanwhile, on November 28, just four days before the Parliamentary elections, **the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) requested the Central Electoral Bureau (BEC) to recount all votes from the first round of the presidential elections**, according to a [court statement](#). The CCR has also postponed the decision regarding the confirmation and validation of the first-round results. The court unanimously decided to recount all ballots, including valid and null votes, from the presidential elections held on November 24, 2024. The recount was done under controversial conditions, with [no external observers being allowed](#) and [no video surveillance](#), as it happens during the regular counting of votes. The results were supposed to be announced on the same day as the parliamentary elections, but the announcement was delayed. More than 9 million votes were recounted in record time, thus, **on December 2, the Constitutional Court announced that the first round of the elections was valid and that on December 8, the second round of the presidential elections will take place between Georgescu and Lasconi.**

Another major event took **place on November 28: President Klaus Iohannis convened a meeting of the Supreme Council of National Defense (CSAT) to analyze potential risks to national security**. The agenda includes discussions on cyberattacks and foreign interference, particularly from Russia, which have impacted the recent presidential elections. The CSAT reviewed the preferential treatment allegedly given to a candidate on TikTok, which violated electoral laws by not marking campaign videos as political content. Following the meeting, Funky Citizens, along with 12 other non-governmental organizations, have sent an open letter to President Klaus Iohannis, [urging the immediate declassification of the information discussed](#). Given the circumstances, on November 29, [the European Commission requested TikTok to provide detailed information on how it manages the risks of information manipulation during elections](#), particularly regarding inauthentic or automated exploitation and the functioning of its recommender systems.

On December 4, President Klaus Iohannis [declassified documents from the latest CSAT meeting, revealing significant details about Călin Georgescu's presidential campaign.](#)

The documents, provided by the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI), Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI), and Special Telecommunications Service (STS), highlight aggressive promotion tactics that bypassed national electoral laws and exploited social media algorithms to boost Georgescu's popularity. The SRI noted that Georgescu's campaign declared zero expenditure, yet evidence showed involvement from TikTok accounts and influencers funded through platforms like FameUp. Additionally, over

85,000 cyberattacks targeted electoral IT infrastructure, aiming to access and alter data. Following the declassification of documents from the Supreme Council of National Defense (CSAT), the Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT) has opened [a criminal case regarding Călin Georgescu's presidential campaign](#). The investigation focuses on illegal operations with devices or software, attempts to disrupt the functioning of IT systems, and attempts to gain unauthorized access to an IT system.

On December 6, when the voting had already started abroad, [the CCR decided to annul the first round due to significant voting irregularities and fraud](#). This decision followed the review of documents declassified by the CSAT, which revealed extensive manipulation, and overturned the initial validation of the elections announced just days before. As a result, the entire electoral process will restart, with the government tasked with setting a new date for the elections. The current president's term ends on December 22, [leading to an extension of Iohannis' term until the new president will be sworn in](#). The new election date is expected to be set for the spring of the following year, with ongoing discussions about the interim leadership of the country.

On [December 7](#), Romanian authorities conducted multiple raids targeting supporters of Călin Georgescu and leaders of the Legionary Movement. These actions were part of an investigation into the use of fascist, legionary, racist, and xenophobic symbols. The police carried out 15 searches in various locations, including Bucharest and several counties, focusing on individuals who had used Nazi salutes and displayed Legionary symbols during a commemoration event for Corneliu Zelea Codreanu in Tâncăbești. The investigation, led by the Ilfov County Police Inspectorate and the Prosecutor's Office, is part of a broader effort to address the rise of extremist activities and ensure public order.

Meanwhile, [multiple calls to action and protests](#) were made on social media by supporters of Georgescu, including calling for the destruction of political parties and institutional headquarters. The protests are fueled by dissatisfaction with the Constitutional Court's decision to extend Iohannis's mandate until a new president is sworn in, following the annulment of the initial presidential elections. Additionally, the [temporary broadcast suspension of Realitatea Plus TV station](#) has further fueled calls for action. The protests are framed as defending democracy, with some posts featuring military imagery. There are also warnings that violent protests could extend Iohannis's mandate and harm Georgescu's image. The situation is further complicated by narratives suggesting border closures and mandatory drafting for a potential war against Russia, which have been key talking points on social media.



The parliamentary elections

With so much controversy going on ahead of the parliamentary elections, real discussions on the programmes and plans parties put forward were overshadowed by the discussion on the presidential elections. Notably, the highest turnout was recorded in the first post-revolution election in 1990, with 86.19% of eligible voters participating. This high level of engagement gradually declined over the years, reaching its lowest point in the 2020 elections, where only 31.94% of voters cast their ballots.

On [December 1](#), PSD has secured 22,3 % of the vote. The far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) follows closely with about 18,3 %, while the National Liberal Party (PNL) garnered around 14,3%. The reformist Save Romania Union (USR) received roughly 12,2% of the vote.

In total, seven political parties have surpassed the 5% threshold required to enter Parliament. These include the far-right parties SOS Romania and the Party of Young People (POT), as well as the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). Despite the rise of far-right movements, traditional pro-Western parties have managed to maintain control of Parliament. This election saw a record turnout, with over 9.45 million Romanians voting, representing 52.5% of eligible voters.

The Social Democratic Party (PSD), National Liberal Party (PNL), Save Romania Union (USR), Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), and representatives of national minorities have announced their [commitment to form a pro-European government together](#). This coalition aims to establish a majority in the Romanian Parliament and is also considering the possibility of supporting a common candidate for the presidential elections. Mirroring this initiative, Claudiu Târziu, the President of the National Leadership Council of AUR, has proposed the formation of a "[sovereignist political bloc](#)" with the parties AUR, SOS, and POT, which have a third of the seats in Parliament.

POT in Georgescu's aid

The [Young People's Party](#) (POT), founded in 2023 by ex-AUR's [Anamaria Gavrilă](#), emphasizes national values, Christian spirituality, and social harmony. Supporting Călin Georgescu in the 2024 presidential elections, [POT is known for its conservative, anti-abortion, and anti-vaccination stance](#). In the June 2024 local elections, POT won 11 local councillor seats and 18 mayoral positions, but did not participate in the European parliamentary elections.

POT's leadership includes Anamaria Gavrilă, Bianca Eugenia Gavrilă, and Crinela Mihaela Meidinger. The party has faced criticism for its radical approaches and violations of electoral

rules. Its Facebook page, initially created in 2019 as "Explorum," underwent several name changes before becoming "Partidul Oamenilor Tineri" in 2023. Anamaria Gavrilă's Facebook page also experienced name changes due to alleged account theft.

Despite being a recently established party, POT has gained national attention through its public campaigns and polarizing messages, spending RON 11,750 on Google Ads and RON 35,417 on Facebook Ads. POT promotes the "Romanian mission," emphasizing harmony, prosperity, and dignity, with rhetoric rooted in spiritual and nationalist themes.

POT opposes the proposed Pandemic Treaty, criticizing the WHO and Romanian Health Minister Alexandru Rafila for perceived overreach. The party also criticizes President Klaus Iohannis for prioritizing foreign interests and involving Romania in unnecessary conflicts. The party denounces Romania's involvement in international conflicts and the illegal transfer of the Patriot missile system, advocating for peace and neutrality.

In November, the [hashtags #partiduloamenilortineri and #pot garnered over 7 million views on TikTok](#), entering the top 50 by December 2nd, with #pot at 13th and #partiduloamenilortineri at 45th. POT fielded 79 candidates in the 2024 parliamentary elections, including entrepreneurs, lawyers, drivers, sales experts, and engineers, but did not have candidates in all counties.



Călin Georgescu – messages, campaign, strategy

[Călin Georgescu](#), a 62-year-old agronomist and contentious political figure, emerged victorious in the first round of Romania's 2024 presidential elections. Born on March 26, 1962, in Bucharest, Georgescu completed his studies at the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, where he earned a doctorate in pedology. He furthered his education with postgraduate studies in national security and defence at the "Carol I" National Defense College. Georgescu's career spans several decades, encompassing both national and international roles. He served as an advisor and later as the Secretary-General at Romania's Ministry of Environment from 1997 to 1998. Additionally, he spent 17 years working with the United Nations on environmental conservation projects and led Romania's National Center for Sustainable Development, where he oversaw the development of national sustainable development strategies in 1999 and 2008. In 2020, Georgescu was [AUR's nominee for the position of Prime Minister](#). Georgescu was under criminal investigation for [praising fascist historical figures](#).

Călin Georgescu's unexpected victory in the first round of the presidential elections can be attributed to a mix of political, strategic, and societal factors, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction among Romanian voters. For years, sovereignist and extremist movements were largely ignored by authorities and mainstream political parties, allowing pro-Russian and anti-Semitic sentiments to grow unchecked. The [disqualification of Diana Șoșoacă](#), the pro-Russian leader of SOS România, turned her into a victim, likely shifting her voter base to Georgescu. Additionally, the campaign was marred by shallow debates and scandals, which allowed Georgescu to stand out as an anti-system candidate. His independent candidacy appealed to voters disillusioned with traditional parties, turning his support into a broader protest vote against the political establishment. Traditional media outlets, focused on their relationships with political power, neglected grassroots sentiments about economic struggles and the aftermath of the pandemic. This created a vacuum where anti-system candidates like Georgescu thrived. His rise was fueled by an aggressive social media campaign, particularly on TikTok, which capitalized on voter frustrations. Sociological data from the INSCOP institute showed [a significant surge in his popularity in the final weeks of the campaign](#), especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

[His key messages center around controversial statements](#), including:

- **[Criticism of NATO](#)**: Georgescu opposes Romania's NATO membership, arguing that the alliance does not provide genuine security guarantees. He has criticized the Deveselu missile defense system as a "diplomatic disgrace," reflecting his broader skepticism toward Western alliances and raising concerns about the impact of his leadership on Romania's defense policy.
- **[Statements Against Western Alliances](#)**: Georgescu frequently criticizes Romanian leaders for their perceived servility toward Western powers, claiming that such alliances entangle the country in external conflicts. He has expressed satisfaction that Romania has not entered the Schengen Area, framing it as a positive outcome for national independence.
- **[Economic and Strategic Sovereignism](#)**: Georgescu advocates for a nationalist economic policy focused on "Food, Water, Energy," positioning it as an alternative to globalist frameworks. He criticizes initiatives like the PNRR as compromising Romania's sovereignty and promotes resource self-reliance and economic nationalism, appealing to voters who feel alienated by foreign influence.
- **[Ambiguous Stance on Vladimir Putin](#)**: Georgescu has avoided directly addressing his views on Russian President Vladimir Putin, though he has previously described Putin as a leader who "loves his country." This has fueled speculation about his potential alignment with pro-Kremlin ideologies, raising concerns about his stance on Romania's foreign policy.
- **[Climate Change](#)**: Georgescu resigned from the Club of Rome due to disagreements over its climate change narratives, which he publicly denies. This stance aligns with his broader rejection of globalist narratives and appeals to segments of the population skeptical of environmental policies.

- **Praising the Fascist Past:** In 2022, Georgescu praised legionary leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and former head of state Ion Antonescu for their "good deeds," and downplayed the Holocaust in Romania, stating that Romanians are not generally anti-anything.
- **Misogynistic Statements:** Georgescu believes women should not be presidents, as their role is to give life and support men in leadership. He criticizes feminism as a destructive Western imposition and views C-section births as breaking the “divine link” between mothers and children.
- **Conspiracy theories:** Georgescu has claimed that COVID-19 does not exist because nobody saw it, that the Moon landing was fake, 5G technology poses serious health risks and soft drinks contain nanochips, among others.

In terms of the campaign, while social media in general is largely unaccounted for, **TikTok is the main focus** of any conversation on Georgescu’s campaign, due to reactions from both national and international stakeholders. Declassified reports from the Supreme Council of National Defense revealed that Călin Georgescu's campaign was **a well-coordinated operation with state actor characteristics**. The documents indicated that TikTok accounts from 2016 and Telegram accounts from 2022 were used in the campaign. The Romanian Intelligence Service reported that the campaign initially involved 25,000 TikTok accounts, which became very active two weeks before the first round. Additionally, 797 accounts from 2016 were reactivated on November 11, 2024. The campaign was well-organized, significantly increased followers, and had a budget of 1 million euros, with \$381,000 paid to TikTok.

An analysis of TikTok data reveals parts of the campaign tactics that propelled Călin Georgescu to prominence in the presidential elections: Georgescu matched the top candidates' virality in just two months through a network of direct promotion accounts and influencers who indirectly promoted him without marking paid ads. He declared zero campaign spending, which authorities are investigating. The **#echilibrusivverticalitate campaign** (*balance and verticality*), with 2.4 million views, featured influencers describing Georgescu without naming him, resonating with a broad audience, including AUR’s fanbase. By November 18, Georgescu's views surged by 52 million in four days, indicating an artificial boost supported by coordinated promotion and influencers. His TikTok followers grew from 31,800 in September to 154,900 in November, focusing on themes like national sovereignty and economic issues.

Despite warnings about risks to civic discourse, TikTok has not addressed these issues, and its stance against political ads is contradicted by ads promoting Georgescu. This has led to ultimatums from the European Commission regarding election influence, to be discussed in the plenary on December 17.

Georgescu's campaign also targeted other social networks. His supporters coordinated on Telegram to flood platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook with content, bypassing algorithms and avoiding detection. This effort aimed to amplify his messages and reach

vulnerable voters using tactics like editing content to appear original and leveraging influencers.

There are several investigations that look into the mechanisms at play behind Georgescu's campaign, namely:

- [Public Record](#) uncovered a Russian-coordinated network behind Călin Georgescu's presidential campaign, named "Portal Kombat," active in 19 countries. This network spread pro-Kremlin propaganda, portraying Georgescu as a patriot and sovereignist. Multiple Telegram channels coordinated his supporters in Romania and the diaspora, creating echo chambers that amplified misinformation and undermined trust in democratic institutions. A key element was the Romanian version of Pravda, which spread false claims before and after the elections, including calls to annul the elections due to Georgescu's stance on the Ukraine war. The Pravda network, with technical features and IP addresses traced back to Russia, disseminated pro-Georgescu content across Europe using automated translations.
- [Context.ro](#) reported that Călin Georgescu's campaign was significantly boosted by Russian-linked accounts on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Telegram, and Facebook. These accounts, with hundreds of thousands of followers, promoted Georgescu using pro-Russian, anti-Western, and conspiratorial content. The analysis, using the specialized software "Osavul," revealed a coordinated effort to elevate Georgescu's profile to millions of Romanians through foreign channels. These accounts were part of a broader network aimed at destabilizing democracies. Georgescu's campaign portrayed him as a "whistleblower" against a supposed global network of oligarchs, a narrative that resonated with a significant audience and was amplified by accounts promoting Russian interests.
- [Europa Liberă](#) reported that Călin Georgescu's campaign used Facebook pages created in 2023, which gained hundreds of thousands of followers and millions of reactions by promoting nostalgic and religious content. Initially neutral, these pages later spread pro-Georgescu messages without clear ownership. The campaign also leveraged older, established pages with millions of followers, some linked to AUR-associated businesses. This strategy allowed political content to be widely disseminated under the guise of entertainment, bypassing political advertising regulations. The use of Communist nostalgia and Orthodoxy appeals are long-standing tactics of Russian propaganda in Romania, discussed in mainstream media for the past decade.

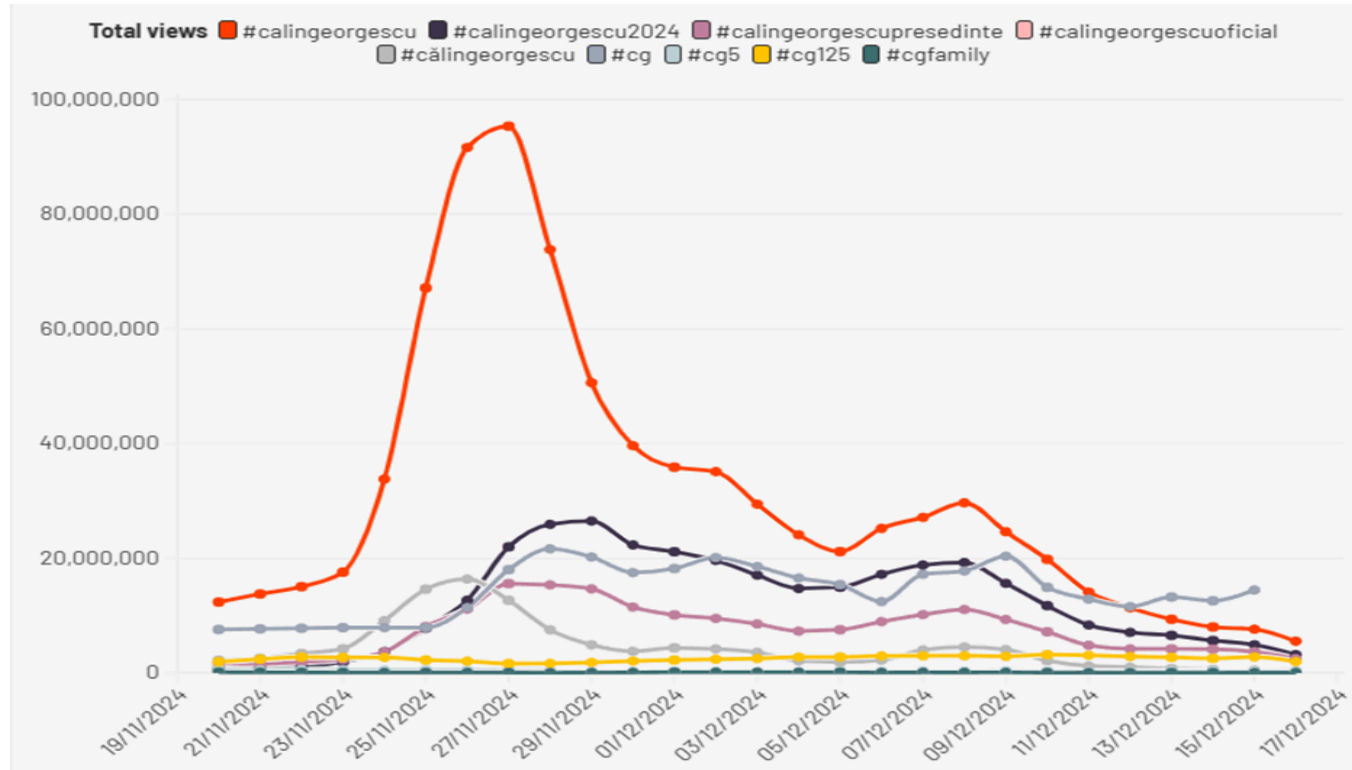


Hashtags analysis - TikTok

Our analysis is based on tracking various hashtags on the TikTok platform, focusing on those with significant reach and high view counts. However, the videos analyzed under these hashtags may include content with both supportive and opposing perspectives. Please note that our measurement reflects the total views of the videos, not the nature or sentiment of their content.

The network graph below illustrates the interconnected nature of discussions surrounding the candidate on social media platforms. The most significant observations include:

- **Central Themes:**
 - The hashtag **#calingeorgescu** and its variations (e.g., **#calingeorgescu2024**) dominate the network, connecting strongly with broader topics such as **"romania"**, **"presedinte"** (president), and **"alegeri"** (elections).
 - This reflects the candidate's central role in conversations and their association with major electoral themes.
- **Diaspora Engagement:**
 - Hashtags like **"diaspora"** and **"diasporavoteaza"** highlight the active role of the diaspora in the discourse, linking back to election-related narratives.
- **Peripheral Conversations:**
 - While central hashtags dominate, niche discussions emerge on topics like **nationalism**, **diasporaprestance**, and specific political figures.



These are popular choices among people when referring to the candidate, as seen in the hashtag performance on TikTok. For example, **#calingeorgescu** stands out with a peak of approximately **100,000,000 views** around **27/11/2024**, demonstrating significant popularity. Other hashtags like **#calingeorgescu2024** and **#calingeorgescupresedinte** also performed well, while hashtags such as **#cg**, **#cg5**, **#cg125**, and **#cgfamily** maintained lower but consistent levels of engagement.

The network graph below illustrates the interconnected nature of discussions on social media platforms, with a central focus on the node "POT". This central theme connects various political, electoral, and viral conversations. The most significant observations include:

- It links strongly to broader topics such as "**romania**," "**politica**," "**diaspora**," and electoral hashtags like **#calingeorgescu2024** and "**presedintele2024**".

Candidate-Related Discussions:

- The **#calingeorgescu2024** cluster stands out, with hashtags like "**calingeorgescupresedinte**" and "**politica**" forming a concentrated discussion network.
- These hashtags are closely associated with national conversations, including elections and leadership topics.

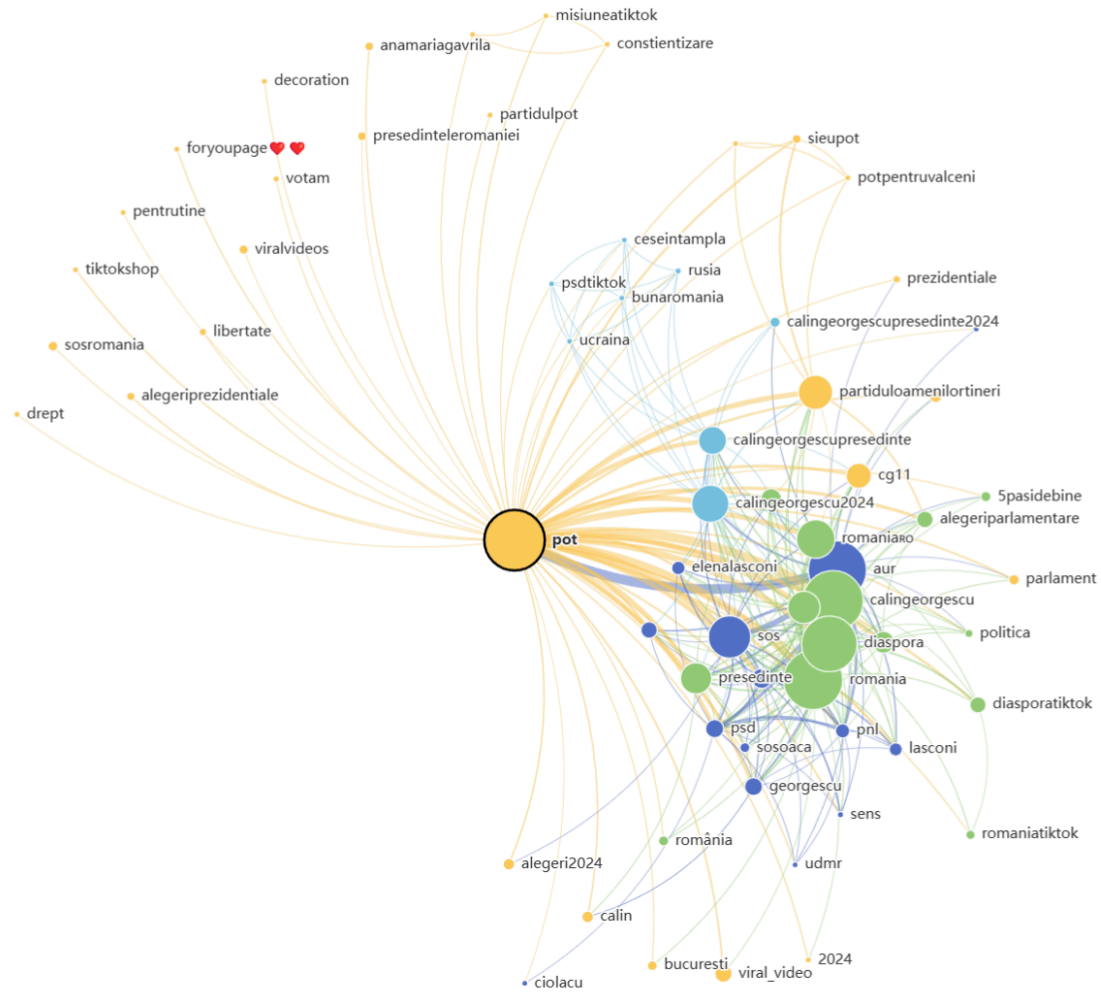
Diaspora Engagement:

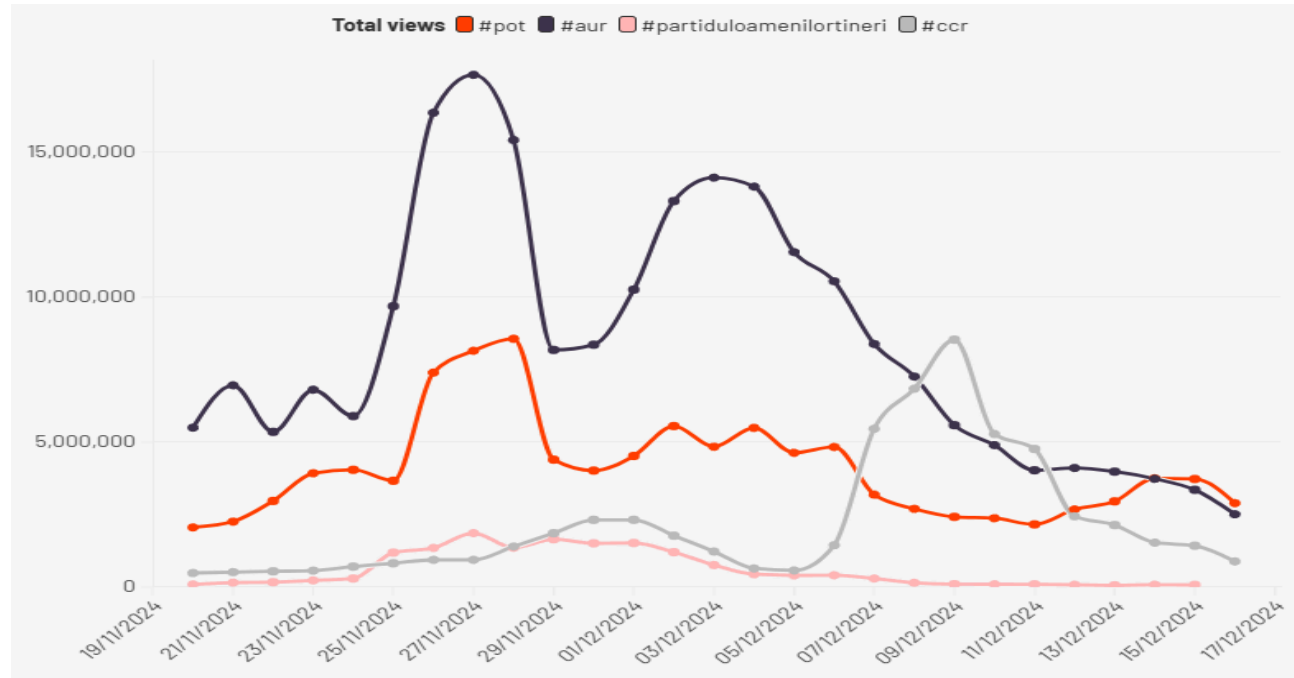
- Terms like "**diaspora**," "**diasporatiktok**," and "**diasporavoteaza**" highlight the active involvement of diaspora communities in the discourse.
- This cluster connects discussions on voting, participation, and civic engagement abroad, underscoring its importance in election-related conversations.

Peripheral Conversations:

- While the core discussion focuses on "POT" and political narratives, peripheral topics such as "**alegeriprezidentiale**," "**libertate**," and "**presedintele2024**" show niche and specific conversations, often driven by trending content or smaller communities.

- aur
- romania
- pot
- ceramics
- calingeorgescu2024



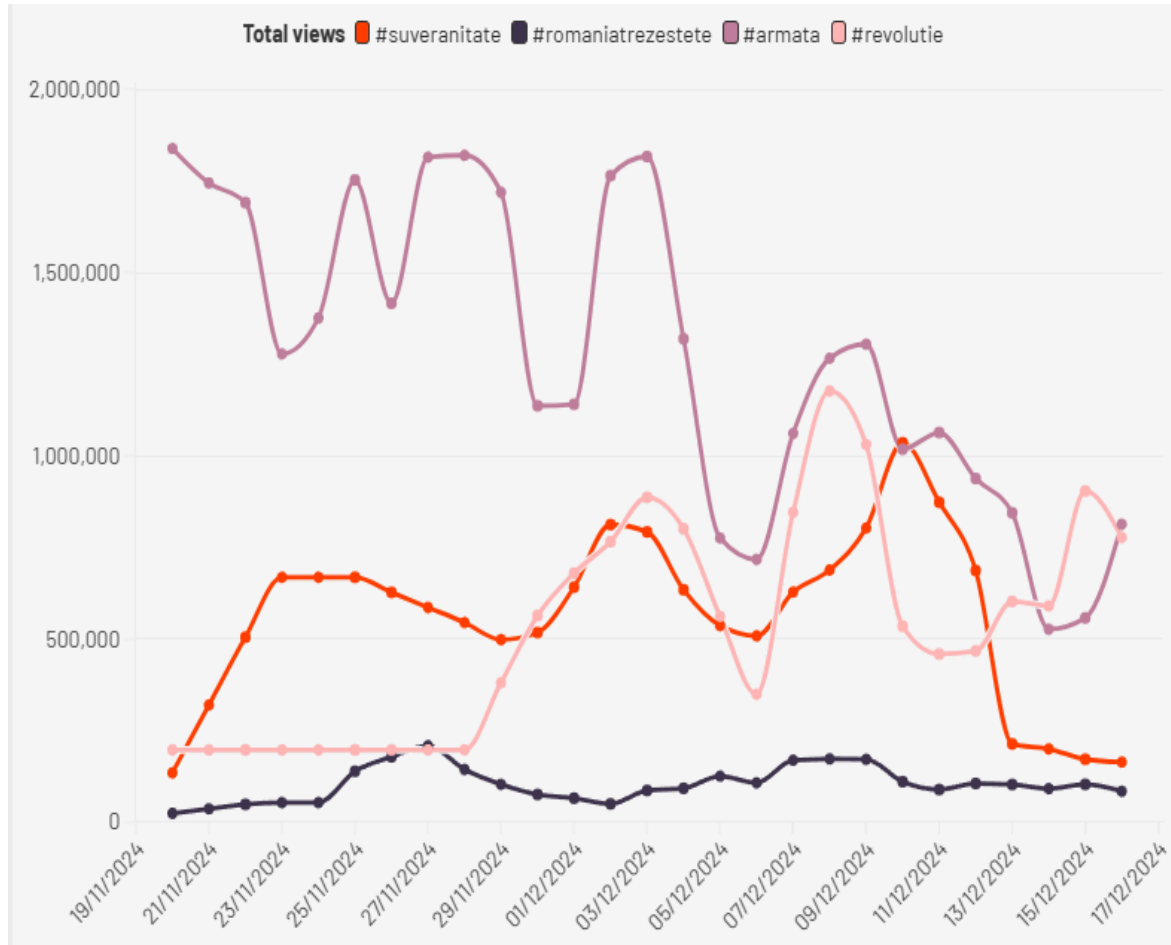


These are popular choices among people when referring to political topics and entities, as seen in the hashtag performance on TikTok.

- The hashtag **#aur** stands out with a peak of approximately **17,000,000 views** around **27/11/2024**, demonstrating significant traction and interest during this period.
- **#pot**, while maintaining consistent engagement, peaked at around **5,000,000 views** towards the end of November, showing a steady level of visibility throughout the timeline.
- The hashtag **#partiduloamenilortineri** experienced a notable spike around **09/12/2024**, reaching approximately **7,000,000 views**, suggesting a temporary surge in attention.
- Comparatively, **#ccr** (Constitutional Court in Romania) remained at lower levels throughout the observed period, with only slight increases in engagement. The engagement was primarily driven by discussions regarding the cancellation of the first round of elections by the Constitutional Court.

The network graph below illustrates the interconnected nature of discussions around political, electoral, and national topics, with a prominent focus on the node “**ccr**” (likely referring to the Constitutional Court of Romania). Key observations include:

1. **The central node "ccr"** dominates the graph, acting as the core hub that links various political, electoral, and social themes. It connects with terms such as "**viral_video**," "**breakingnews**," and "**anularealegeri**" (election annulment), reflecting its central role in ongoing debates about elections, governance, and public trust.
2. **The "romania" node** (in red) emerges as a significant secondary cluster, reflecting discussions focused on national identity, elections, and political events. It is closely tied to hashtags like "**vote**" and "**democratie**", suggesting themes related to civic engagement and electoral processes.
3. The "**calingeorgescu**" cluster (in blue) forms a notable sub-network, highlighting discussions around the candidate. It is connected to topics like "**presedinte**" (president) and "**calingeorgescupresedinte**," signaling its focus on presidential campaigns.
4. **Political and electoral discussions:** Nodes such as "**alegeri**" (elections), "**prezidentiale**" (presidential elections), and "**libertate**" (freedom) reflect key issues in the political discourse. These terms highlight public engagement with topics like voting rights, democracy, and leadership.
5. **Niche but relevant nodes:** Terms like "**rusine**" (shame), "**lovituradestat**" (coup), and "**coruptie**" (corruption) suggest the presence of polarizing and critical conversations surrounding governance and legitimacy, further connecting to larger political themes.
6. **Diaspora and national interest:** The node "**diaspora**" appears as a recurring theme, pointing to discussions around Romanian citizens abroad and their involvement in elections or political narratives.



In the last period, we had different disinformation related to protests, war, and the army in Romania. The hashtags in this graph fall into the "Other" category, showing moderate to low levels of engagement compared to primary trends.

- **#armata** consistently maintained the highest level of views, fluctuating between **1,500,000 and 2,000,000 views**, peaking multiple times during the observed period.
- **#suveranitate** experienced a notable increase, peaking at approximately **700,000 views** on **06/12/2024**, before declining steadily toward the end of the timeline.
- **#revolutie** showed a similar pattern, with a spike reaching around **600,000 views** at the start of December, followed by a drop.
- **#romaniatrezesteste** remained the least visible among these hashtags, with consistently low performance, staying below **200,000 views** throughout the period.



Telegram insights

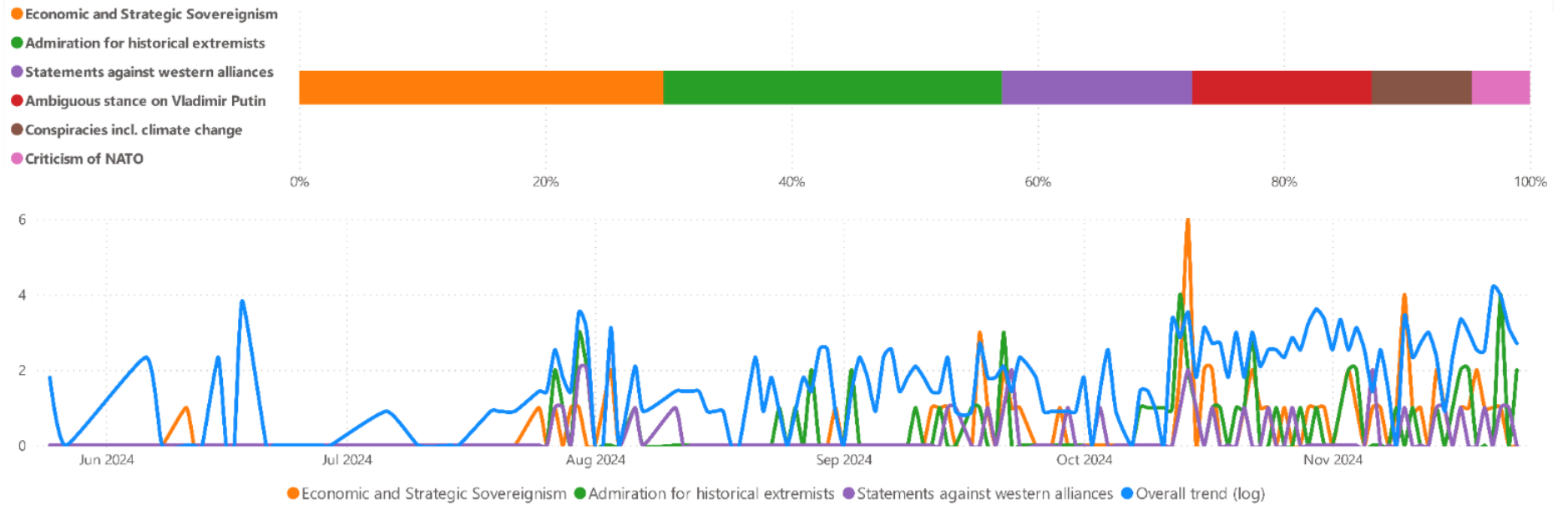
A thematic analysis of over 9,000 Telegram posts collected from 35 groups affiliated with Georgescu's campaign revealed the presence of several controversial narratives during the electoral period. After a period, in the beginning of December, all the groups were closed. While these narratives showed a rise in frequency, the overall atmosphere within these groups appeared more pragmatic, reflecting the dynamics of a homogenous social group with synchronized values.

The most prevalent narrative type within this corpus was **Conspiracy Theories**, including climate change denial and antisemitic rhetoric. These were followed by **Admiration for Historical Extremists** and **Glorification of the Past**, which consistently engaged users. Another significant narrative depicted **Romanians as Victims of Western Exploitation**, featuring **Criticism of Western Alliances** and **Ambiguous References to Vladimir Putin**. These references often linked Romania's geopolitical positioning to criticism of NATO, with discussions about the war in Ukraine contributing to this theme.

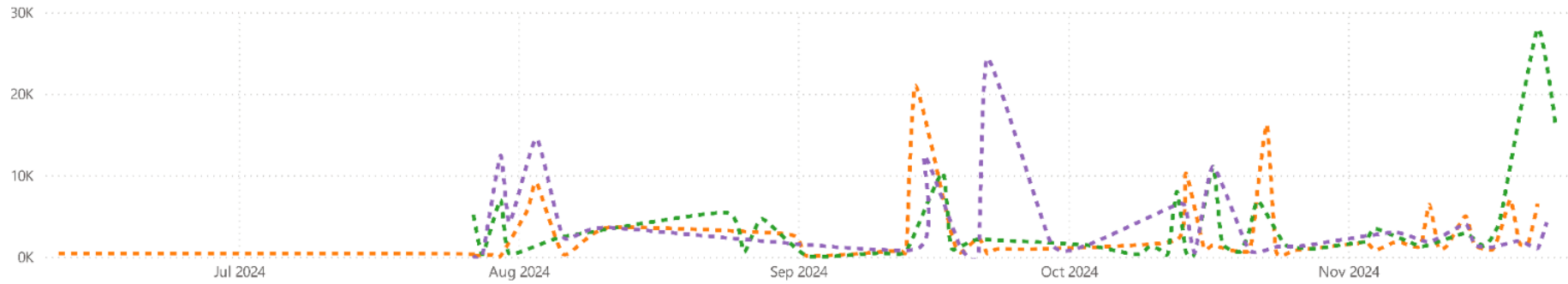
Narratives involving **Conspiratorial Thinking** extended beyond climate denial to include topics such as vaccine skepticism and subliminal mind control. These posts maintained considerable engagement across the reporting period. In contrast, **Criticism of NATO**, while present, showed lower engagement levels overall but an increase in frequency during the electoral period.

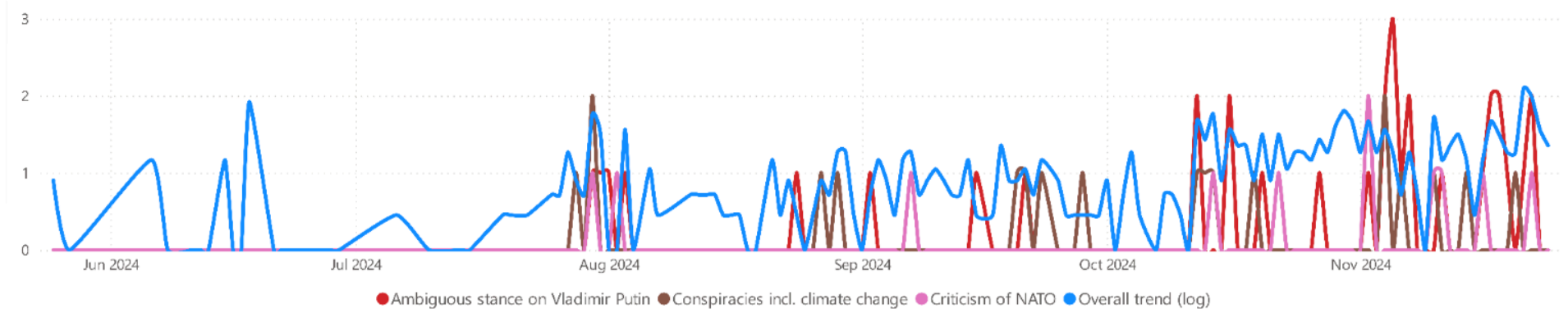
Despite these insights, the analysis faces significant limitations. The data set includes only textual content from Telegram, excluding other platforms such as TikTok, where the campaign was notably active. TikTok's lack of transparency further restricts monitoring capabilities, while deleted content cannot be recovered or analyzed. A more comprehensive, multi-platform analysis, including audio-visual data, would be necessary to fully capture the breadth and depth of Georgescu's campaign narratives.

Controversial Narratives Disseminated by Candidate Calin Georgescu Between June and November 2024, by Theme

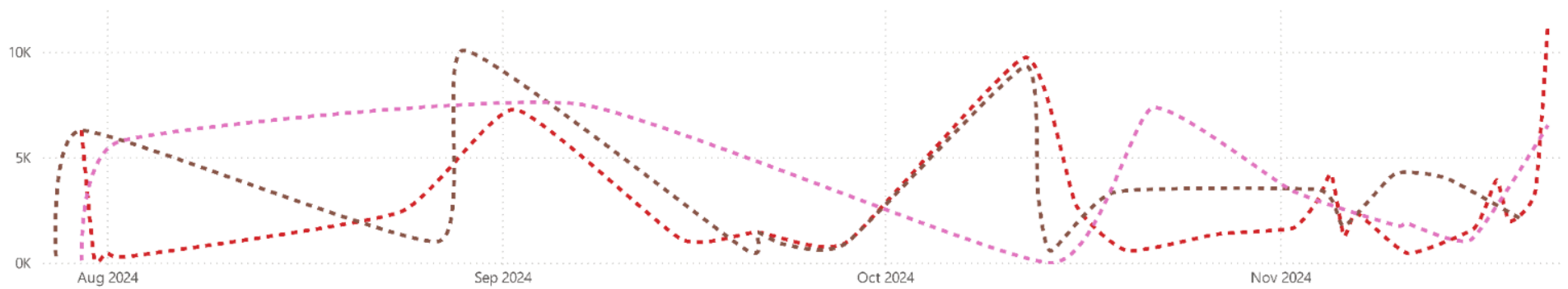


Audience Engagement by Theme

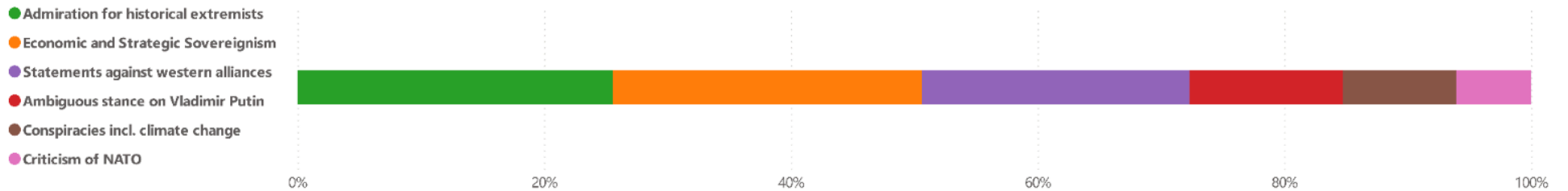




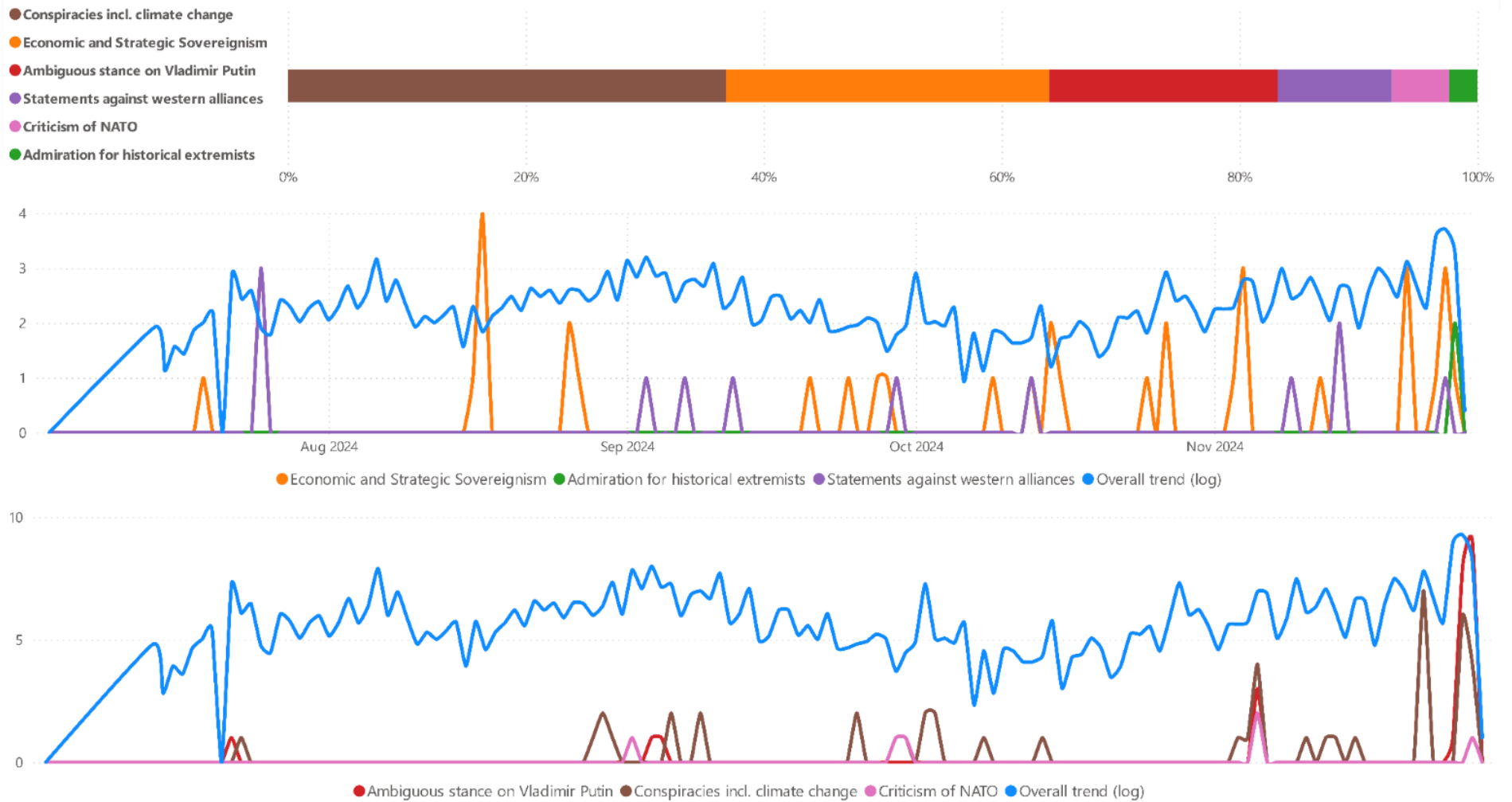
Audience Engagement by Theme



Audience Engagement with Controversial Narratives Disseminated by Candidate Calin Georgescu Between June and November 2024



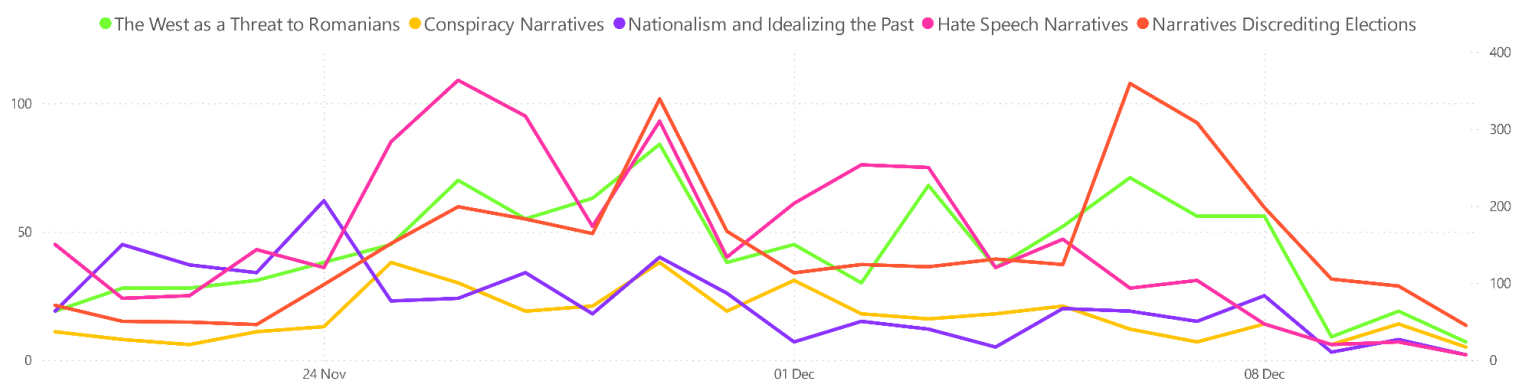
Main discursive themes aggregated from 35 Telegram Groups moderated by candidate Calin Georgescu's Campaign, between August and November 2024



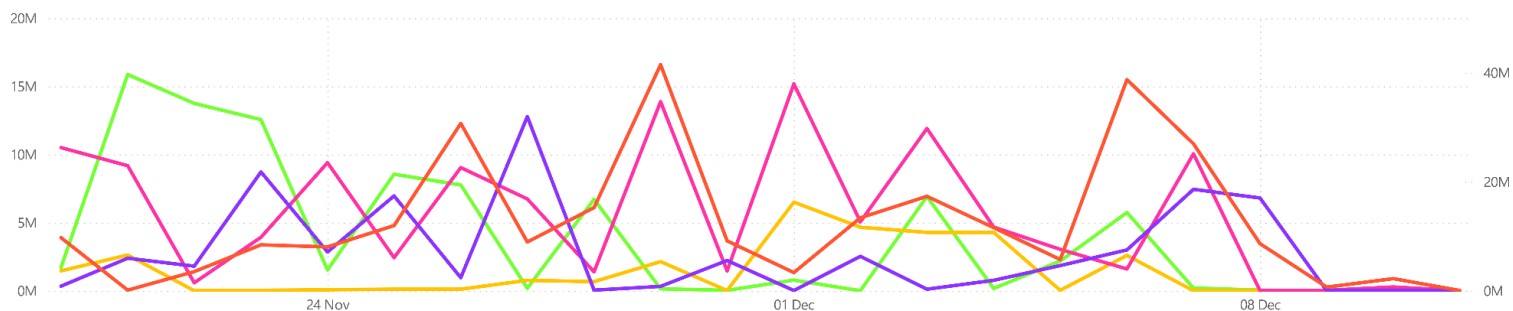
Methodology

Data was collected from Meta, TikTok, Twitter (X), News, blog sites and their comments, using several social media listening tools. The data was modelled and an exploratory analysis was performed, which resulted in the identification of several main themes that were used to classify the texts contained in the online content. “Reach” was then calculated¹ for the social media content and integrated in the visualizations. Due to constraints on data collection, not all the online content disseminated within the timeframe of the analysis was collected, reducing the dataset’s representativity of the discursive phenomena portrayed in this analysis. At the same time, given the considerable differences between the values of the Narratives Discrediting elections and others, a logarithmic function was used to represent the frequencies of this narrative in the time series visualizations.

Daily narratives disseminated on Meta, Tiktok, Twitter (X), News, other platforms and comments



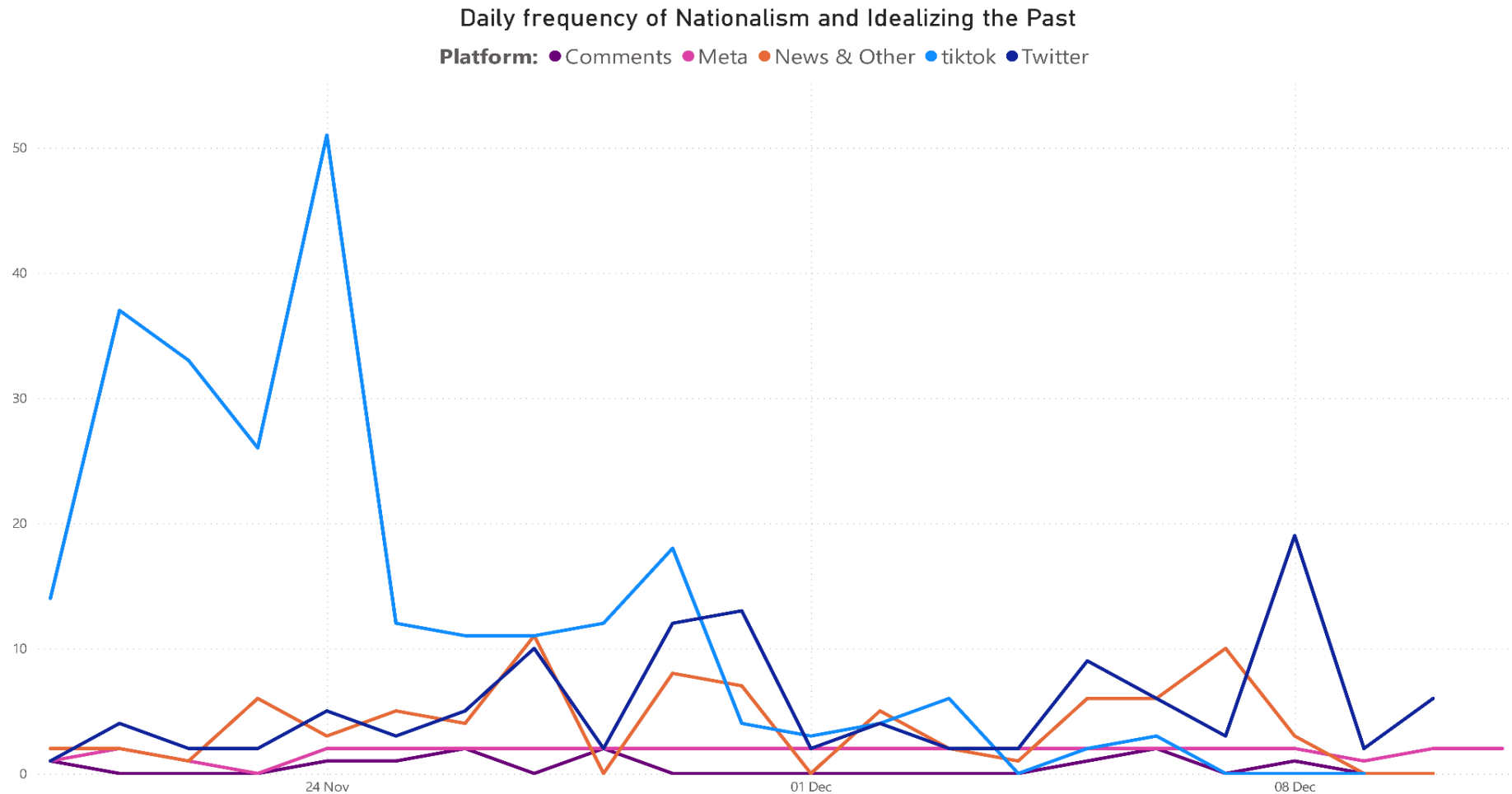
Narrative reach:



¹ Reach=Views+(Likes×w1)+(Comments×w2)+(Shares×w3)

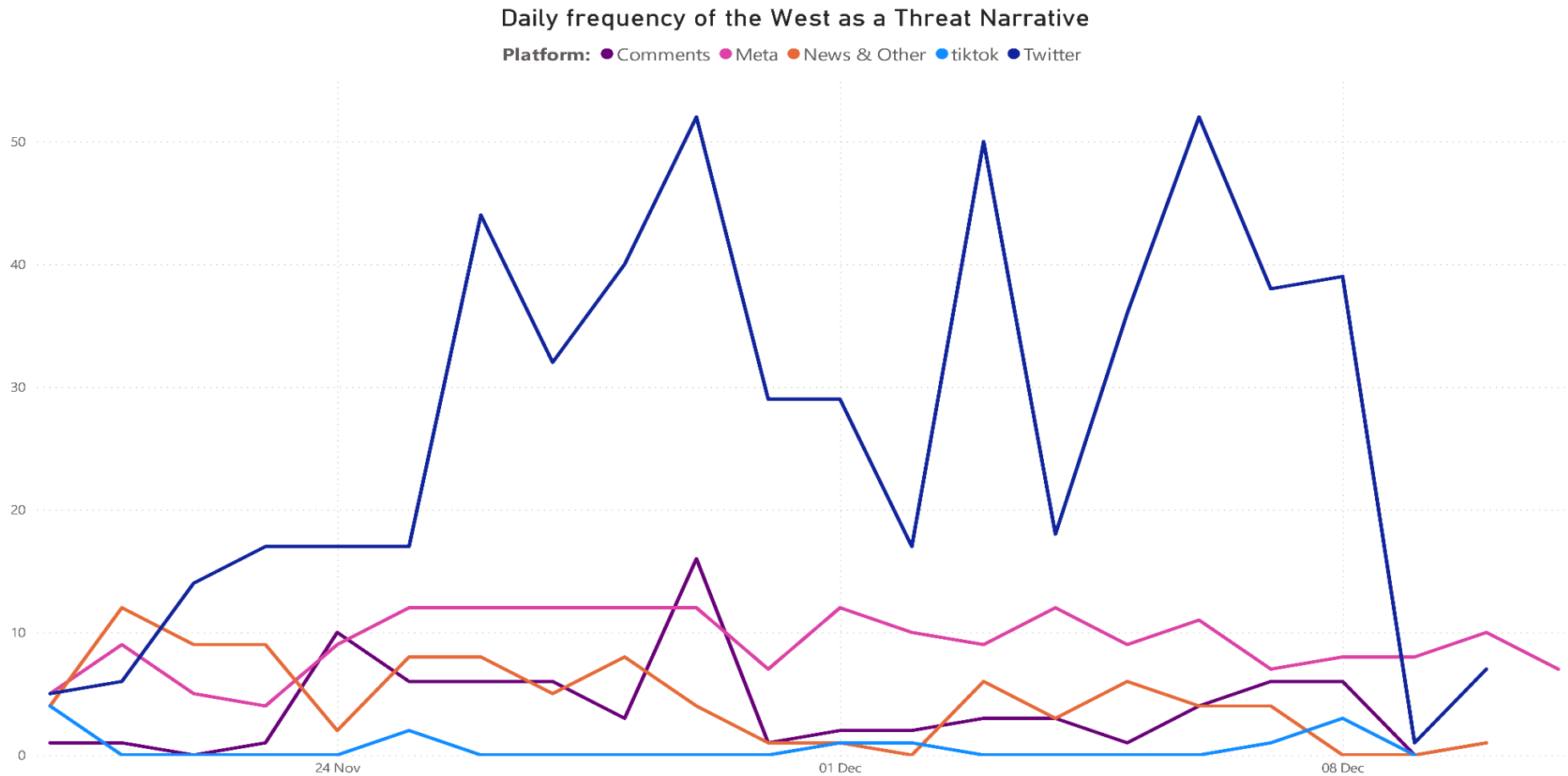
Nationalism and the idealised past

Far-right campaigns in Romania frequently rely on narratives that celebrate the nation’s history and heroes to build a sense of group identity, often excluding others. The Dacians, portrayed as noble and resistant to foreign influence, are a recurring symbol, aligning with current anti-globalist sentiments. These themes are sometimes linked to conspiracy theories spread at both local and national levels, including by political figures. By evoking a “glorious past,” such rhetoric seeks to instil collective pride and purpose while fueling revisionist views and societal divisions.



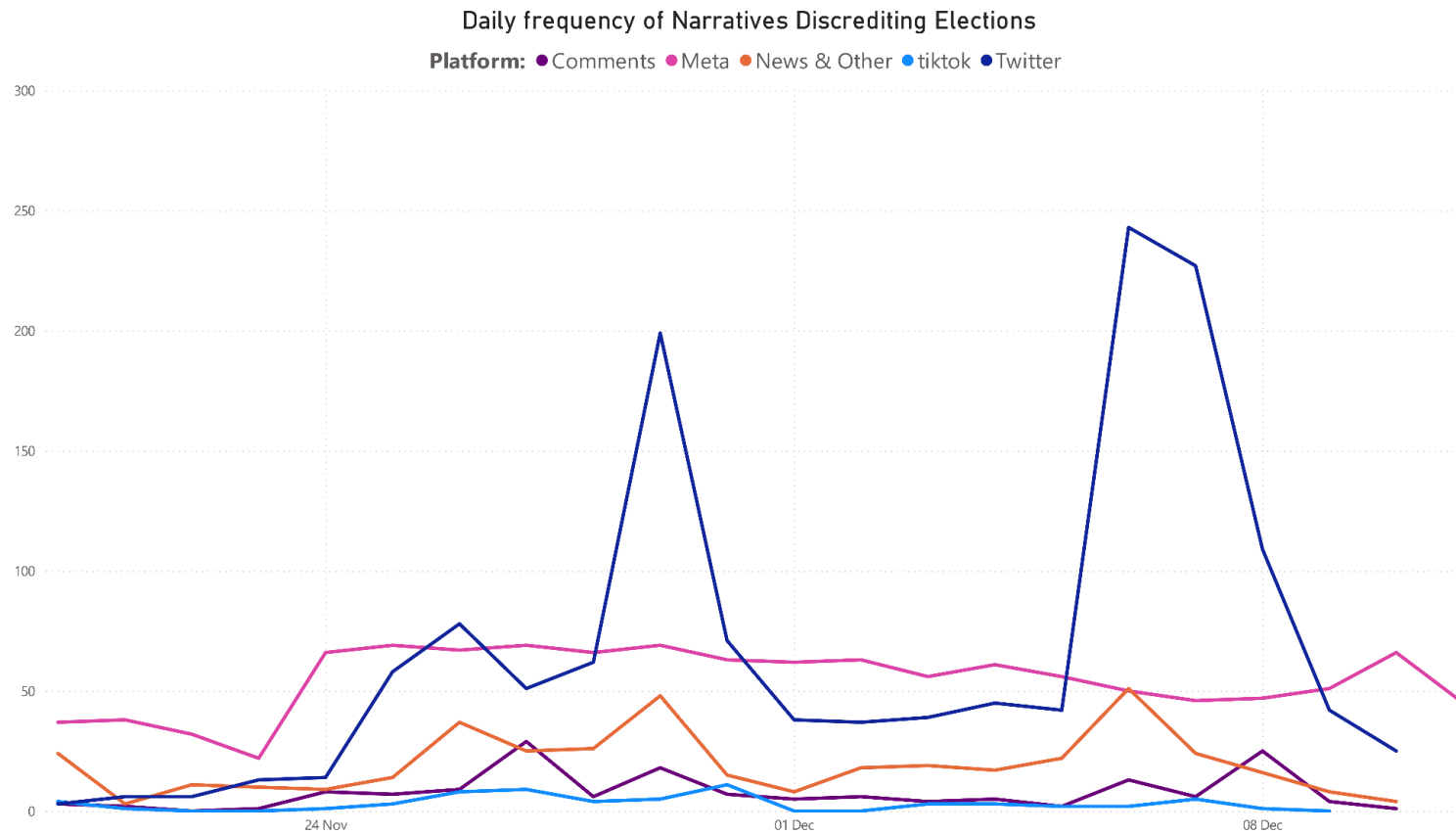
West as a threat narrative

This narrative presents Western values, particularly those focused on human rights, as a threat to Romania’s identity, traditions, and sovereignty. It frames progressive ideals, such as inclusion and gender equality, as tools used by the West to weaken Romanian society and exploit its resources. Additionally, it ties into anti-LGBTQI and anti-feminist rhetoric, portraying Romania as being taken advantage of by Western powers and Ukrainian interests. NATO and the European Union are depicted as enforcers of foreign ideologies that erode the country’s conservative values and autonomy. This perspective amplifies fears of Romania becoming subservient to external forces, fostering a perception of cultural and national vulnerability.



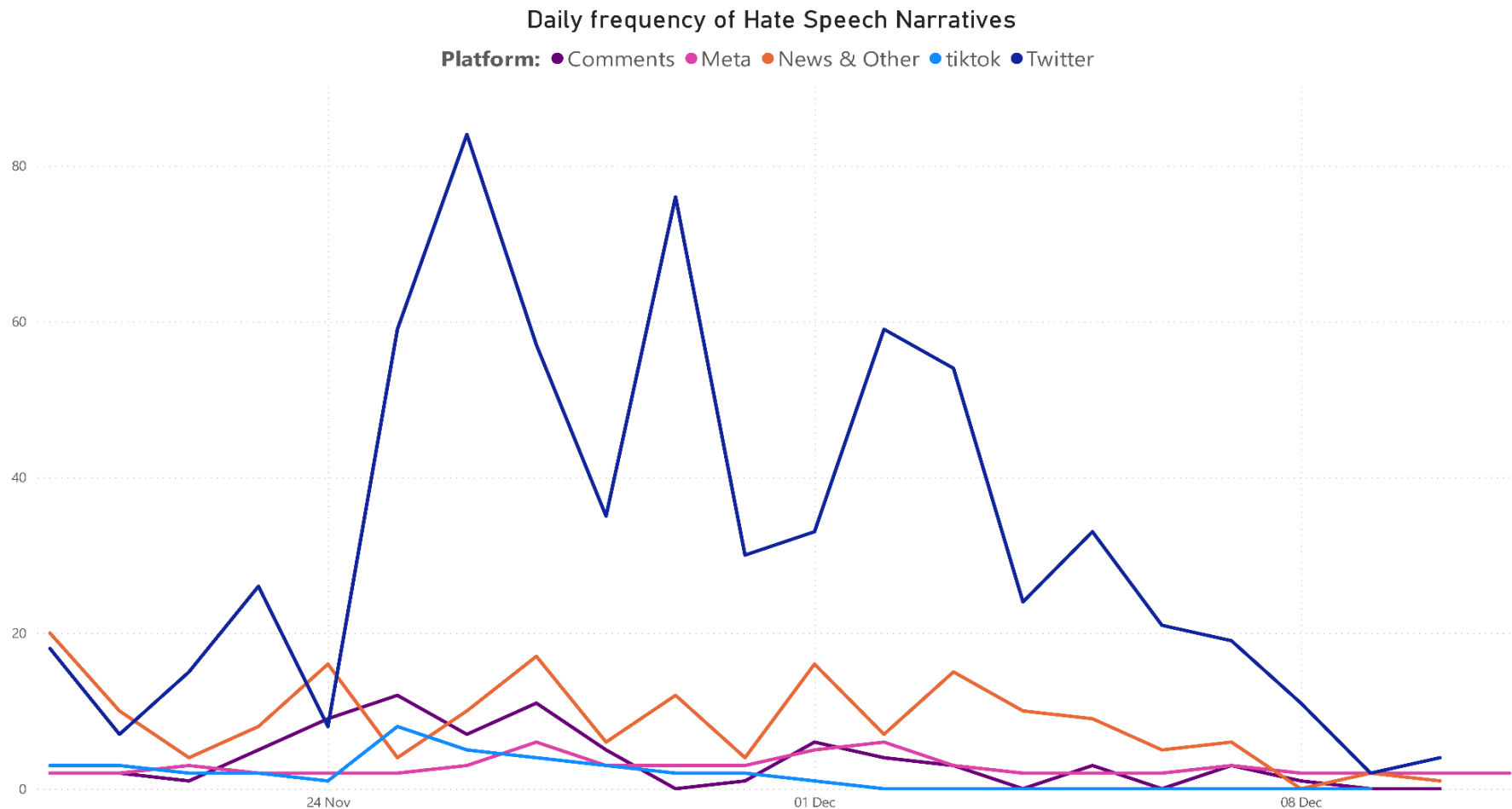
Discrediting elections

This narrative seeks to undermine public trust in elections by presenting them as rigged or meaningless. It relies on themes of external interference, betrayal, and conspiracy to question the legitimacy of electoral outcomes that do not favor specific political or ideological agendas. The invalidation of elections by the Romanian Constitutional Court has fueled these claims, portraying the process as a tool for advancing foreign or ideological interests. This rhetoric argues that globalist priorities are placed above national sovereignty, silencing the voices of ordinary citizens. A prominent version of this narrative focused on the Parliamentary elections, suggesting that if a particular party did not secure enough seats, the elections would be invalidated to serve hidden agendas.



Hate speech narrative

This narrative fuels social division by using inflammatory and dehumanizing language to portray specific groups as threats to cultural, moral, and societal norms. Outgroups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, are falsely associated with criminal or immoral behavior, like paedophilia, while traditional values are depicted as under attack by a Western-imposed agenda corrupting the youth. Similar tactics target ethnic and religious minorities, often through conspiracy theories that amplify fear and hostility. References to the “legionary” movement, a fascist and antisemitic group, are also employed, sometimes by political figures, further deepening social polarization and reinforcing exclusionary rhetoric.



Conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy theories are a cornerstone of many disinformation campaigns, particularly those suggesting the COVID-19 pandemic was intentionally orchestrated by governments, foreign entities, or occult forces. These narratives prey on existing fears and mistrust, amplifying anxieties around health, economic uncertainty, and restrictions on personal freedoms. By revisiting the challenges of the pandemic years, they fuel concerns about an overarching, deliberate agenda. While such claims may now seem less pervasive, events like the invalidation of elections can reignite these fears, further weakening public confidence in institutions and democratic processes.

