

## 1. ROMANIA's ELECTIONS OVERVIEW – 28 APRIL 2025

Welcome to the 4th iteration of our bulletin! We aim to provide special insights into how disinformation works and spreads in Romania in the weeks leading up to the presidential elections. At [Funky Citizens](#), we have been monitoring trends and narratives linked to disinformation for the last few years, and we understand how intense this crucial period is. Along with our weekly briefing on election news developments, we offer in-depth analysis on the evolution of social media disinformation campaigns targeting the Romanian presidential race.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[Our analysis of candidates' social media activity](#) revealed evidence of coordinated inauthentic behavior, particularly for Victor Ponta, Nicușor Dan, and Crin Antonescu, with suspicious growth patterns and automated engagement. We have included these key findings in a dedicated chapter of this brief for a more comprehensive examination of the manipulation patterns.

Today, April 28, the first presidential debate organized by Digi24 will take place featuring five leading candidates: George Simion (AUR), Nicușor Dan (independent), Crin Antonescu (PSD, PNL, UDMR and Minorities coalition), Victor Ponta (independent), and Elena Lasconi (USR). Digi24 has invited only the top five candidates according to voting preference polls. Factual will conduct real-time fact-checking of candidates' statements, with verification results published immediately on Factual's social media channels and [website](#).

- A Ploiești Court judge controversially attempted to annul CCR's 2024 election invalidation, but the High Court overturned this decision, confirming the May electoral schedule.
- ANCOM contacted online platforms regarding Nicușor Dan's complaint about coordinated social media attacks, also informing the European Commission which can sanction major platforms. Victor Ponta's campaign has reported experiencing a similar bot attack to the one previously flagged by Nicușor Dan.
- George Simion and Călin Georgescu appeared together at Easter service, their first joint public appearance since the campaign began.
- AEP will report AUR to the data protection authority over personalized campaign letters sent to up to 2.85 million people, including deceased individuals.
- AEP is investigating an alleged \$1.5 million US lobbying contract for George Simion, which AUR officials have denied exists.
- BEC restricted non-candidate political parties from producing materials supporting or opposing presidential candidates.

Social media platforms have become the primary battleground for disinformation campaigns targeting Romania's democratic processes. Analysis of recent content reveals a sophisticated network of false narratives centered on conspiracy theories about a "parallel state" allegedly suppressing Călin Georgescu, claims of election illegitimacy, and allegations of international interference in Romania's sovereignty. These narratives show coordinated dissemination patterns with significant increases during this reporting period, particularly those portraying EU and other foreign actors as orchestrating a coup against Romanian democracy.

## WEEKLY OVERVIEW

A judge from the Ploiești Court of Appeal [made a controversial decision](#) to annul the Constitutional Court's ruling that had invalidated the December 2024 presidential elections. Judge Alexandru Vasile admitted a complaint filed by Gheorghița Popescu against the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR), marking the only such case admitted from over 130 similar complaints filed following a coordinated online campaign. The effort was orchestrated through an online form titled "Instructions for the second round back," where people were instructed on how to systematically file complaints. Former Botoșani Tribunal Vice President Lăcrămioara Axinte guided people through completing the documents and paying court fees through TikTok videos. The High Court of Cassation and Justice (ICCJ) held an emergency session to judge the appeal against the Ploiești Court decision. The ICCJ [announced its ruling to overturn](#) the Ploiești Court of Appeal's decision, following appeals filed by both the Prosecutor's Office and the Constitutional Court of Romania.

Victor Ponta's campaign [has reported](#) experiencing a similar bot attack to the one previously flagged by Nicușor Dan. The unusual activity became visible when Ponta's TikTok videos received only a few thousand views but nearly 90,000 likes. After being contacted by the campaign team, TikTok reportedly removed "over 16,000 fake accounts" following Ponta's profile and an additional 157 accounts posting identical comments on his videos.

These reports of artificial manipulation are consistent with the findings of our newly released in-depth analysis of presidential candidates' social media activity from April 1-23. Our report, ["Analysis of Social Media Presence of Romanian Presidential Candidates"](#) reveals troubling patterns of coordinated inauthentic behavior across multiple platforms. We documented suspicious engagement patterns, including synchronized follower growth spikes, engagement ratios, and suspicious comment content that strongly suggest deliberate manipulation of the digital political discourse. Most notably, Victor Ponta, Nicușor Dan, and Crin Antonescu showed clear signs of artificial amplification, with sudden follower increases, unusual comment-to-like ratios, and cross-platform synchronization that contradicts organic growth patterns. Our analysis also detected the presence of foreign-language accounts and automated comments in multiple languages, including Russian comments. These findings echo the documented manipulation techniques observed during the 2024 elections that led to Călin Georgescu's algorithmically assisted rise, suggesting these practices have become standard campaign tactics. For the complete analysis, including detailed graphs, statistical evidence, and platform-specific findings, we encourage readers to access [the full report](#).

The Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) [stated that they received numerous complaints](#) about personalized letters sent by George Simion. The letters, addressed with recipients' full names, raised GDPR concerns and targeted specific demographics including seniors, youth, and women. Print runs reached at least 1 million copies, with some indicating 2.85 million. Some recipients reported letters addressed to deceased family members, while approximately 100



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additional letters were sent to priests in Bucharest by AUR senators. AEP confirmed this issue will be included in their ongoing investigation into AUR's campaign financing. AUR presidential candidate George Simion [participated alongside Călin Georgescu](#) in the Easter service at an undisclosed "monastery in Transylvania," marking their first public appearance together since the official start of the electoral campaign.

Romania's interim President Ilie Bolojan [has convened a meeting of the Supreme Council of National Defense \(CSAT\)](#) for April 30, just days before the first round of presidential elections. While the elections are not explicitly on the agenda, the meeting will address significant national security matters, including the European Response Plan, the draft National Defense Law, and military mobility planning.

The Central Electoral Bureau (BEC) [issued a decision limiting the activities of political parties](#) without their own presidential candidates, ruling that they cannot produce campaign materials encouraging voters to support or oppose candidates, regardless of funding source. This decision affects parties like REPER, Forța Dreptei, and PMP, which have endorsed Nicușor Dan, as well as POT, which supports George Simion. However, these parties may still express public support for candidates through messages directed to their members and sympathizers, and individual party members remain free to express personal opinions.

The Romanian Communications Regulatory Authority (ANCOM) [announced](#) on Friday that it has contacted online platforms to clarify their obligations under the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) following independent presidential candidate Nicușor Dan's complaint about coordinated attacks on his social media accounts. ANCOM has also informed the European Commission, the only body authorized to sanction the major online platforms cited in the complaint.

Călin Georgescu [appeared at the General Prosecutor's Office](#) on Thursday in the case where he is accused of inciting actions against the constitutional order, with prosecutors extending his judicial control measure for another 60 days. The former presidential candidate faces six serious criminal charges, including disseminating false information and promoting the cult of persons guilty of genocide crimes.

The Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) [has launched an official investigation into AUR's campaign financing](#) following media reports about a potential undisclosed lobbying contract in the United States. The controversy centers around documents published on the U.S. Department of Justice website showing an alleged \$1.5 million contract dated April 18, 2025, between BGD Legal & Consulting LLC and AUR, reportedly signed by Marius Lulea, AUR's first vice-president responsible for party finances. According to the documents, the contract was meant to promote George Simion in U.S. media during his presidential campaign. Both Simion and Lulea have vehemently denied the existence of such an agreement, with Lulea stating: "There is no contract, no payment, no obligation, either from the subsidy, from the campaign, or from other party sources. I have not seen or signed this contract." The investigation comes amid

questions about Simion's recent U.S. trips where he met with various political figures, including former Trump advisor Steve Bannon, during which Simion reportedly encouraged Bannon to connect him with Alex Jones for an interview. Jones is known for spreading numerous debunked conspiracy theories and was ordered to pay nearly \$1.5 billion in damages to families of Sandy Hook victims for falsely claiming the school shooting was a hoax.

## **ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE OF ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES**

[This analysis](#) reveals not just a presidential campaign unfolding on social media, but a digital theater that raises suspicions about some performers who have secretly involved extras to fill empty seats. Examining 23 days of activity on Meta and TikTok platforms, we have documented patterns that don't just suggest manipulation—they practically announce it, with engagement spikes that defy both platform norms and statistical probabilities.

Funky Citizens conducted a detailed analysis of the online activity of presidential candidates on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) and TikTok from April 1 to April 23. The report aims to decipher the digital strategies used by candidates in online promotion, content typology, and to provide an assessment of the impact of campaign messages transmitted by candidates through Social Media platforms. By examining their official profiles, we aimed to identify both distinctive elements and common trends in the way presidential candidates build their image and communicate with the electorate in the online environment.

Key observations:

1. **Synchronized peaks:** The period April 20-22 shows simultaneous increases in followers and engagement across all platforms for multiple candidates (mainly Ponta, Dan, and Antonescu), suggesting a coordinated multi-platform amplification campaign.

This synchronization is particularly evident when we overlap follower growth graphs for TikTok with Instagram likes and Facebook shares—resulting in an almost identical activity pattern in the same time window, despite fundamental differences in the functioning of these platforms' algorithms.

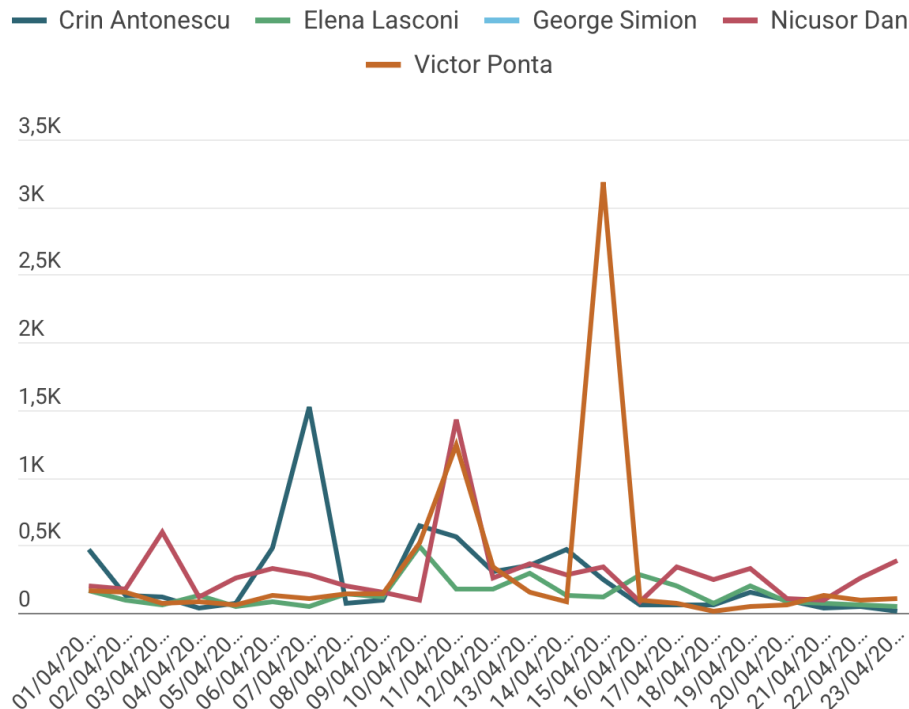
2. **Platform-specific strategies:** Different candidates seem to target different platforms—Ponta dominates TikTok views while Simion leads Facebook reactions—indicating strategic allocation of promotional resources rather than organic audience preferences.

This strategic segmentation suggests a sophisticated approach to the digital campaign, with specialized teams for optimizing presence on each platform and potentially different amplification services used for different metrics and platforms.



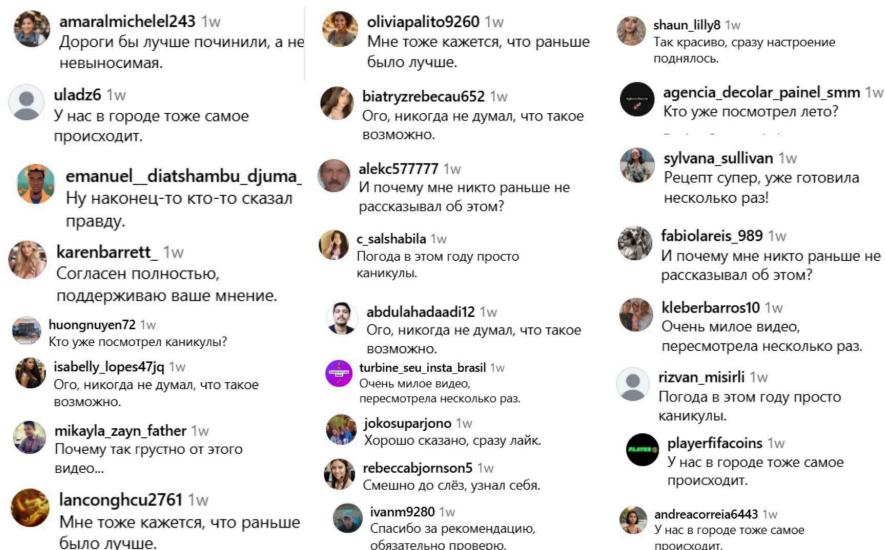
3. **Anomalies in engagement ratios:** Extreme comment-to-like ratios for Ponta on Instagram and almost perfect engagement rates for Dan on TikTok represent statistical impossibilities in organic social media behavior.

## Comments



For perspective, a normal comment-to-like ratio on Instagram varies between 1:20 and 1:100, depending on the type of content and the level of community engagement. Ponta's 1:3 ratio is a severe statistical anomaly which, in the absence of extraordinarily provocative or controversial content (which was not the case), indicates artificial manipulation.

4. **Foreign language infiltration:** The appearance of Russian comments on Dan's Instagram and the prevalence of foreign language follower accounts across all platforms indicate coordination beyond Romania's borders.

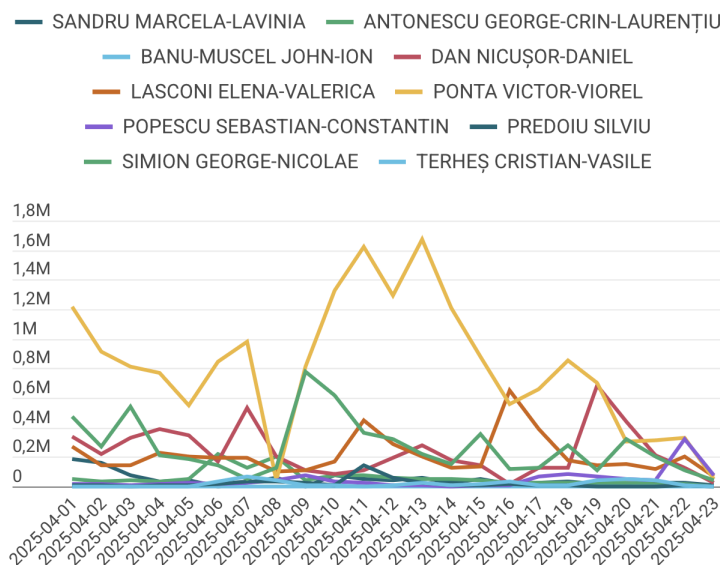


Geographical analysis of posting times for these foreign language comments and interactions reveals patterns consistent with time zones in Southeast Asia and the Middle East—regions known for hosting "content farms" that offer social media amplification services.

5. **Post-peak regression:** Each dramatic engagement peak is followed by an immediate return to baseline metrics, contradicting the natural momentum and algorithmic advantages that would sustain truly viral content.

## Views

with Victor Ponta



In the case of organic viral content, the positive effects on platform algorithms tend to persist, creating a "halo effect" that increases the visibility of subsequent posts. The absence of this effect after the dramatic peaks observed suggests that these increases were generated through mechanisms that bypass the platforms' normal algorithmic recommendation systems.

## SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION

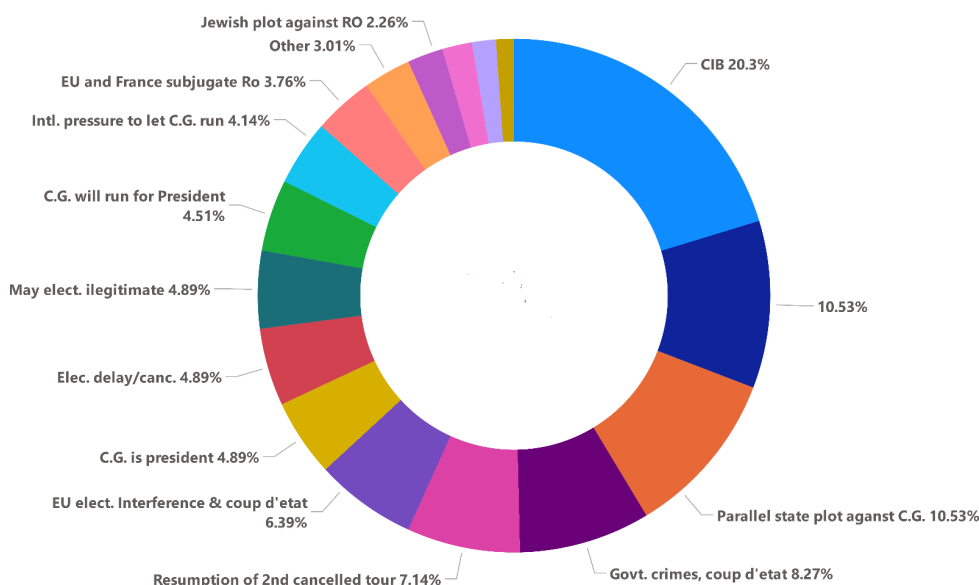


Fig. 1 Total reported urls by narrative.

*(Parallel state plot against C.G.)* The narrative claims that Călin Georgescu and his supporters are the target of a conspiracy by the "parallel state," involving political institutions and media campaigns aiming to suppress him from the presidential race through fabricated charges and public discrediting. It highlights alleged interference by secret services, accusations against the Constitutional Court, manipulation of elections, and foreign control over Romanian politics. It promotes Georgescu as a patriotic figure fighting systemic corruption and fraud, suggesting the U.S. administration and Donald Trump support his cause. As can be seen in Fig. 3, this narrative has been increasing since the last reporting period.

*(May elect. illegitimate)* The narrative portraying the illegitimacy of the May elections alleges that the annulment of the elections was a crime perpetrated against Romanians and that the U.S. authorities, especially Trump's administration, refuse to recognize the results. It claims the electoral process was rigged, manipulated by internal and external actors like PSD, Soros, and anti-Trump factions, and that voters were disenfranchised. It describes orchestrated fraud,

international political pressure, and is relying on audience priming through narratives like - Georgescu had already secured victory before the alleged electoral manipulation. This narrative was also on the rise within this reporting period.

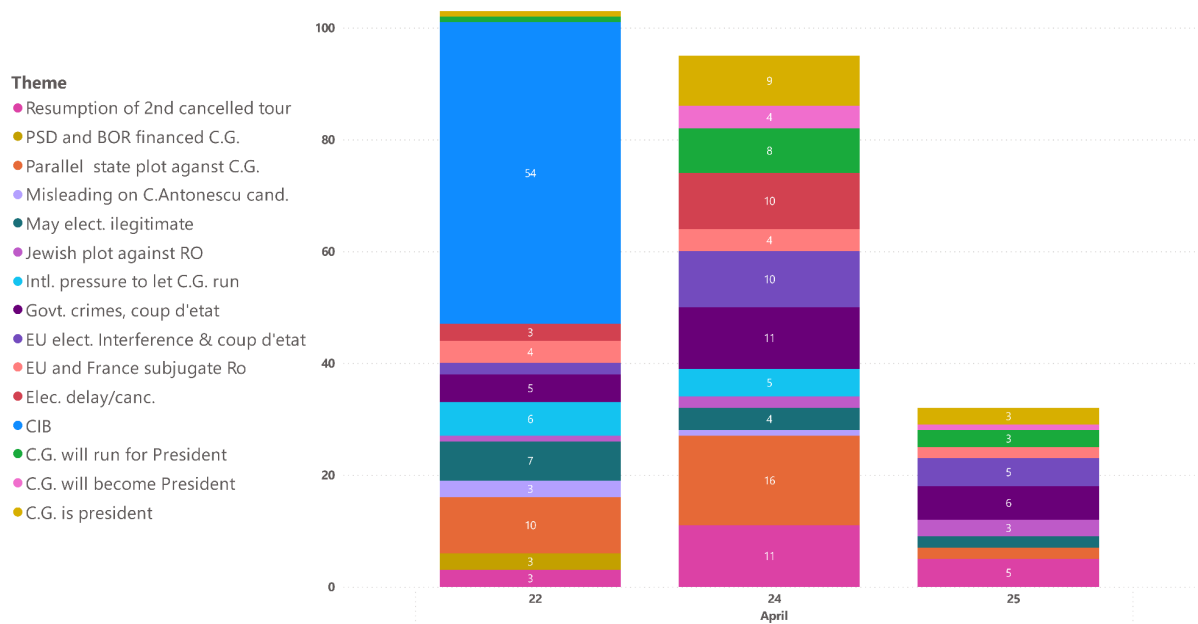
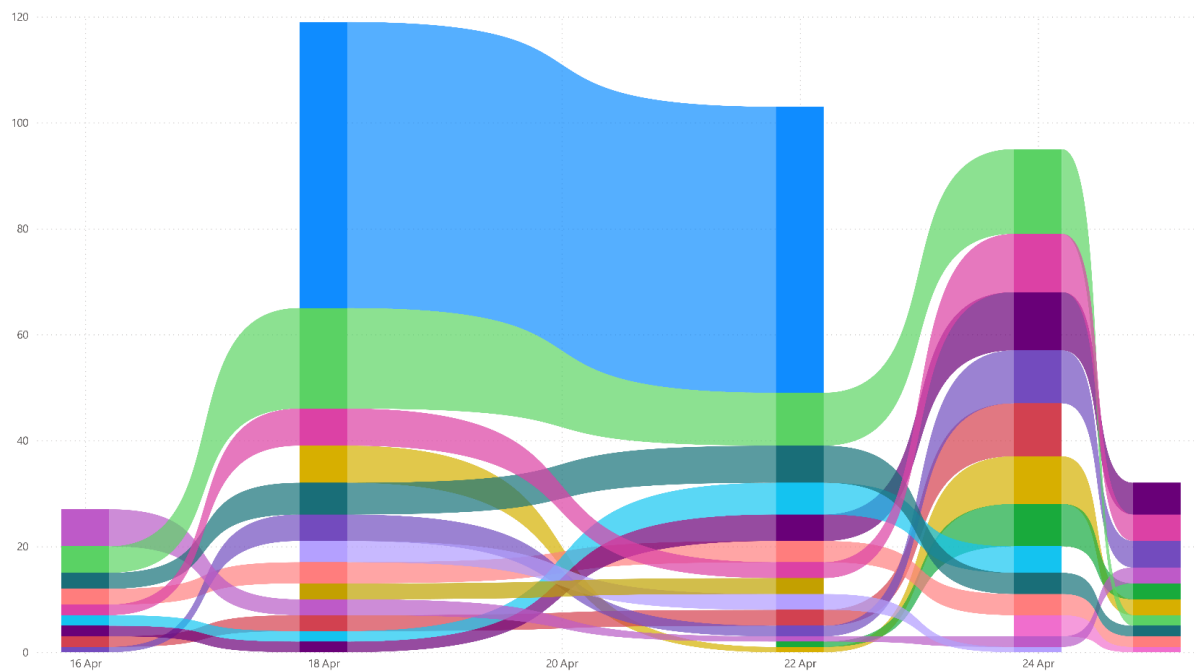


Fig. 2 Narratives by theme and reporting day.



(Elec. Delay/canc.) Narratives suggesting that the May 2025 Romanian presidential elections will be or are already annulled or postponed, are driven by internal and external conspiracies or national events taken out of context. It portrays election cancellations as planned political sabotage, involving high-level Romanian politicians and foreign influence, emphasizing the loss of democratic legitimacy.

(Govt. crimes, coup d'état) Another narrative cluster spreads claims of a governmental coup involving Romanian and foreign authorities, portraying the annulment of elections as part of a larger criminal operation which takes place regularly in Romania. It alleges investigations by the FBI and ICC into Constitutional Court judges, foreign interference under the Biden administration, widespread corruption, and a betrayal of national interests.

(*Intl. pressure to let C.G. run*) Another strand of narratives claims international actors, including the U.S. government, are pressuring Romanian authorities to allow Călin Georgescu to run in the elections. It ties his candidacy to broader geopolitical battles, suggesting that without his participation, Romania's elections would lack international legitimacy. It mentions American and Russian reactions and portrays Georgescu as central to Romania's democratic future.

*(Jewish plot against RO)* An antisemitic narrative alleges a Jewish-led conspiracy targeting Romania, involving Israel and figures like Alex Soros. It claims manipulation of Romanian

politics for control over resources and national fragmentation. Romanian politicians like Ilie Bolojan and Marcel Ciolacu are accused of collusion, motivated by financial incentives and external directives, particularly relating to regionalization and sovereignty loss.

*(EU election interference & coup d'état)* Another narrative portrays the EU as orchestrating a state coup in Romania, using the elections as a test for broader authoritarian strategies in Europe. It promotes distrust towards EU leaders, accusing them of neo-Marxist ideology and manipulating Romania to set precedents for similar actions in Germany and Poland. It warns against EU control and presents election annulment as part of this plot.

*(Resumption of 2nd cancelled tour)* This cluster claims that the annulled second round of Romania's presidential elections are currently to be resumed, often citing legal injunctions, international pressure, or new evidence. It conveys hope for a reversal of the alleged coup and frames Georgescu as poised for vindication, with references to international courts, U.S. political figures, and domestic legal manoeuvres. This narrative has also spiked within this period.

*(RO army & airspace transferred to EU/NATO)* The narrative claims that Romania's Parliament voted to transfer control of the country's army and airspace to NATO and EU command. It frames this as a loss of national sovereignty, portraying Romanian leadership as betraying national interests to external, foreign powers. This narrative supports both disinformation portraying EU as a threat to Romania, and that Romania is being pushed into a war.

*(RO going to war)* This short narrative claims that following an international summit in London, Romanian leaders, notably Ilie Bolojan, committed to continuing military and financial support for Ukraine. It implied that Romania is being dragged into a foreign conflict against its national interest.

*(Misleading on C.Antonescu cand.)* Several narratives target presidential candidates, spreading misinformation about Crin Antonescu's presidential candidacy, suggesting last-minute manipulations by the Constitutional Court and accusing him of unfitness for office, even alleging personal misconduct like drunkenness during the campaign. *(Smear: N. Dan)* Nicușor Dan was targeted as well, insinuating that he was aware of election annulment plans ahead of time and hinting at hidden power brokers controlling him. It promotes distrust toward him by suggesting he is a puppet of a larger, secretive force. *(Smear: V.Ponta & N. Dan)* A fabricated AI-generated video falsely depicts a conversation between Victor Ponta and Nicușor Dan about past floods, suggesting alliance through juxtaposition and involvement in manipulative or negligent behaviour.

*(PSD and BOR financed C.G.)* According to this narrative, Călin Georgescu's campaign allegedly received financial backing from the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR).

Other minor narratives were identified as well, like calls to defend democracy but were not included in this comparative analysis because of their current limited number.

The comparative analysis of the dissemination of the reported themes over these two reporting periods suggest heavy audience priming towards disinformation narratives portraying Calin Georgescu as a viable candidate to the presidential office, as well as towards narratives portraying Romanian institutions and democratic processes as failures paving the way towards an EU imposed dictatorship.

### **FACT-CHECKING CORNER**

*This newsletter is part of our ongoing work with the [Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media](#), member of [EDMO](#).*

The main topics of false narratives this week included **geopolitical conspiracies** (e.g., claims about the U.S. influencing Romania's elections, NATO troops in Ukraine, or Ursula von der Leyen signing a war pact), **pseudoscientific or paranormal theories** (such as weather control through HAARP, secret chambers under the pyramids, or spiritual resets of humanity), and **health and technology misinformation** (like AI-generated weddings, nicotine as a treatment for neurological conditions, or the trading of water on the stock market). One statement targeted **Nicușor Dan**, the mayor of Bucharest and current presidential candidate, falsely linking him to the former Securitate. Another targeted **Ursula von der Leyen**, President of the European Commission, with a partially false claim suggesting Nazi affiliations and personal conflicts of interest. The only statement rated as "missing context" involved a fictional tech company called Psychasec, falsely presented as a real firm offering consciousness transfers. Overall, the batch of disinformation covered a wide range of fabricated narratives, though only a few involved identifiable political figures.

