RO2025
ELECTIONS

ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS IN ROMANIA AND ITS DIASPORA: CROSS-PLATFORM DYNAMICS AND STRATEGIC NARRATIVES DURING THE 2024-2025 ELECTORAL CYCLE
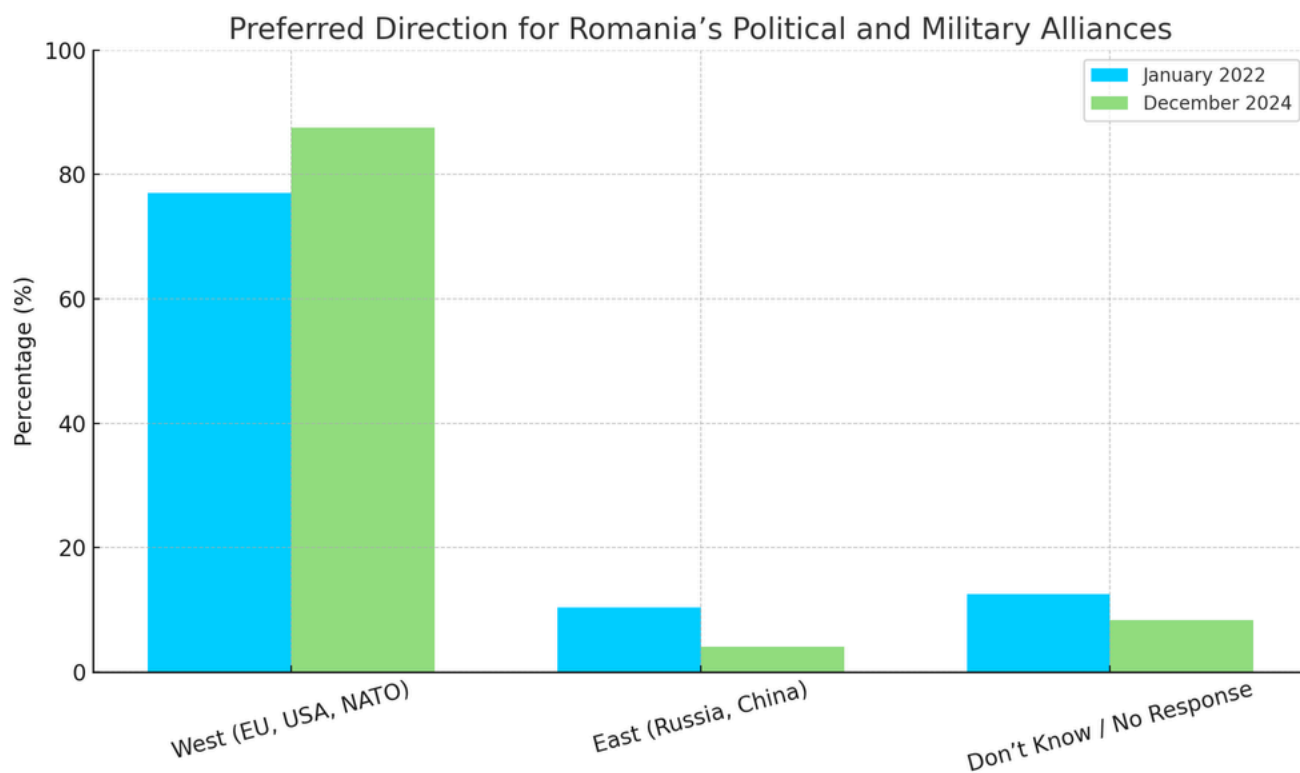
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RO2025

Executive summary

Cross-Border Clicks: Disinformation, Diaspora, and the Algorithmic Battle for Romania's Presidency

This report investigates the disinformation landscape across X, TikTok, and Facebook during Romania's super 2024–2025 electoral cycle, with particular attention to the role played by Romanian diaspora communities, with a particular focus on those based in Italy. Drawing on network analysis, thematic clustering, and engagement metrics, we document how platform-native narratives such as those surrounding national sovereignty, electoral fraud, and anti-institutional sentiment, achieve virality and cross-platform propagation both within Romania and across diaspora networks. The findings illustrate the differentiated role of each platform in shaping discourse and reveal the presence of both organic and coordinated information campaigns, posing critical challenges to democratic integrity.

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Where are we standing?

The 2024–2025 presidential elections in Romania marked one of the most tumultuous and digitally contested episodes in the country's post-communist history. Initially held on 24 November 2024, the first round produced a surprise: independent ultranationalist Călin Georgescu surged to nearly 23% of the vote, propelled largely by a viral online campaign on TikTok and Facebook, bypassing traditional media scrutiny. This electoral context marked the early stage of a new era witnessed at a larger level in all Europe. The struggle between liberal and anti-liberal movements, nationalism and internationalism, euroscepticism or tempered optimism. Survey data indicates that Romanians are still in large number in favor of consolidating the partnerships with the EU and NATO. However, the future will be decided by the domestic political will to support more integration instead of disintegration, but also by external developments over which Romanians have little or no control.

Preferred Direction for Romania's Political and Military Alliances

Source: INSCOP Research, Funky Citizens, Strategic Thinking Group (2024)

Where are we standing?

Furthermore, reports by watchdog organizations like Funky Citizens[1] and Expert Forum[2] flagged massive spikes in unregulated campaign materials, third-party influencers, and opaque advertising on Meta platforms. Despite efforts by Romania's Permanent Electoral Authority to enforce transparency, civil society reports documented limited success in tracing political financing in the digital space. On 6 December 2024, the Constitutional Court annulled the results, citing electoral manipulation and procedural irregularities, particularly regarding unverified online campaigning and disinformation dissemination. The annulment, unprecedented in Romania's democratic history, sparked nationwide protests and online mobilization, polarizing public trust in institutions and intensifying anti-elite sentiment.

In the May 2025 re-run, far-right leader George Simion, capitalizing on digital grievance narratives and sovereigntist rhetoric, emerged as the dominant populist candidate. His online outreach, featuring short-form videos laced with anti-EU messages and nationalist symbolism, drew millions of views, particularly among the youth and diaspora. Independent monitoring by Funky Citizens showed that TikTok engagement for Simion tripled in the two weeks before the vote, while Expert Forum flagged concerns about coordinated inauthentic behavior across social media.

Opposing him was Nicușor Dan, a pro-European independent supported by an ad-hoc fragmented centrist coalition aimed at curbing the spillover toward ultra-sovereignist discourses. Dan's campaign struggled to match Simion's virality but drew strength from pro-european actors, civil society support, and urban voters wary of a democratic backslide. Ultimately, Dan won the runoff on 18 May 2025 with just over 53%, a narrow but a decisve victory seen by EU observers as halting Romania's potential drift toward illiberalism.

[1] https://funky.org/raport-interimar-analiza-primului-tur-al-alegerilor-prezidentiale-din-romania-2025/

[2] https://expertforum.ro/cum-cresc-conturile-candidatilor-tiktok/

A particularly striking feature of this election was the mobilization of the Romanian diaspora, especially in Italy, Spain, and Germany. In the second round of the 2025 Romanian presidential elections, the Romanian diaspora in Italy demonstrated a strong electoral preference for George-Nicolae Simion. Out of a total turnout of 284,334 votes cast in Italy, Simion secured 189,891 votes, amounting to 66.78% of the ballots, while his opponent, Nicușor-Daniel Dan, received 94,443 votes, or 33.22%. These results confirm a decisive victory for the far-right candidate among one of the largest and most politically active Romanian diaspora communities. Simion's nationalist and anti-establishment rhetoric appears to have resonated strongly with Romanians living in Italy, potentially reflecting frustrations related to economic precarity, national identity, and dissatisfaction with traditional political elites. While diaspora voters have long played a decisive role in Romanian elections, their engagement in this cycle was marked by a qualitative shift: not only did they vote in large numbers, but they also actively shaped the digital discourse. Romanian citizens abroad, especially in Italy, used both Romanian and Italian to disseminate political content on TikTok and Facebook.

These posts were often emotionally charged, highly shareable, and heavily saturated with nationalist and anti-elite rhetoric. In many cases, diaspora influencers helped frame the domestic electoral debate by linking homeland grievances to broader critiques of the European Union and global institutions. This form of transnational digital activism, what might be termed diasporic digital sovereignty (Brinkerhoff, 2009), demonstrates how political participation is being redefined across borders and languages. The involvement of the diaspora not only broadened the reach of certain disinformation narratives but also added complexity to monitoring and enforcement, as much of this content was created outside the legal jurisdiction of Romanian electoral authorities.

[3] https://edmo.eu/blog/algorithmic-influence-on-elections-insights-from-romanias-case-study/

Where are we going?

As President Dan took office on 26 May 2025, he inherited a polarized polity and a public sphere deeply reshaped by algorithmic communication. In the aftermath, researchers[3], policy groups and civic platforms called for updated digital electoral regulations, real-time ad monitoring, and enhanced cooperation with tech companies. The 2024–2025 cycle exposed the vulnerabilities of democracies in the digital age, as well as the ineffectiveness of reactive (post-factum) measures intended to reduce electoral disinformation without fully understanding the nuances of the phenomenon .

Thus, this report examines the structure and thematic content of electoral disinformation on X, TikTok, and Facebook using a mixed-methods approach that integrates network analysis, post-level engagement data, and thematic interpretation. The analysis shows that sovereignty-based disinformation, conspiratorial framing of electoral events, and personalist hero narratives were particularly resonant in both the domestic and diasporic segments of the Romanian digital space.

Methodology

The data analyzed were collected between December 2024 and May 2025 from three of the most influential social media platforms in Romania and Italy: Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter. This effort was made possible through collaboration with the civic technology organization Reset Tech, which facilitated access to cleaned and structured datasets for all three platforms. The research is a first of its kind a collaboration between twoacademic partners with the EDMO network: Luiss University in Rome (IDMO Hub) and SNSPA in Bucharest (BROD Hub) both research partners contributed to the design, interpretation, and validation of cross-border disinformation dynamics, LUISS focused on the Romanian diasporic communities in Italy and SNSPA zoomed in on narratives circulated in Romania..

In total, over 8,000 public posts were gathered, enriched with metadata on engagement performance (likes, shares, views, and comment counts). To map the narrative dynamics at play, we employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods designed to reveal both the structure and content of online political discourse.

We began by constructing hashtag co-occurrence networks, treating individual hashtags as nodes and linking them whenever they appeared together in the same post. These networks were analyzed using modularity-based community detection to uncover organically clustered narratives. The resulting thematic clusters were manually labeled and interpreted based on dominant discursive patterns, such as anti-Western rhetoric, sovereignty-focused messages, and personalized political mythologies.
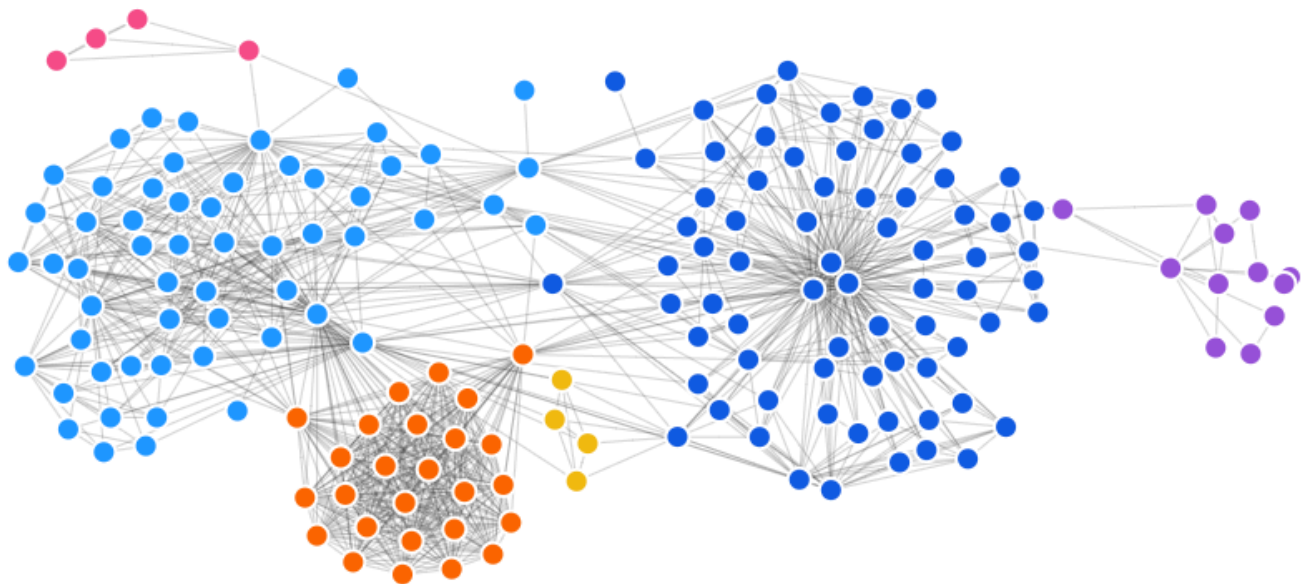
Beyond structural mapping, we analyzed engagement metrics to assess which narratives attracted the most attention. This allowed us to draw connections between network prominence and viral performance, identifying both mainstream amplification and fringe narratives that gained traction. Additionally, we introduced a light-touch language detection heuristic to separate Romanian-language content from Italian-language posts. This approach enabled us to spotlight a unique dimension of the electoral discourse: the role of Romanian diaspora voices, particularly in Italy, who used Italian-language Facebook and TikTok content to engage in homeland politics.

Throughout the analysis, we triangulated network indicators (e.g., hashtag centrality, cluster density) with close readings of post content to ensure that our findings captured not only quantitative dynamics but also qualitative resonance.

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Facebook: Legacy Narratives and Hyper-Political Echo Chambers

Facebook's role in the disinformation ecosystem remains rooted in long-form narratives and older user demographics. Our network analysis showed tight clusters formed around hashtags such as #PNTCD, #AurelianPavelescu, #alegeriprezidentiale, and #statulroman. The thematic overlap was substantial, but the communicative style differed markedly.

Communities ● 0 ● 1 ● 2 ● 3 ● 4 ● 5

Group 0
Echoes of Cold War rhetoric and anti-globalism, especially targeting the EU and U.S. foreign policy.

Group 4 & 9
Messianic support for Călin Georgescu as a patriotic alternative to the mainstream political class.
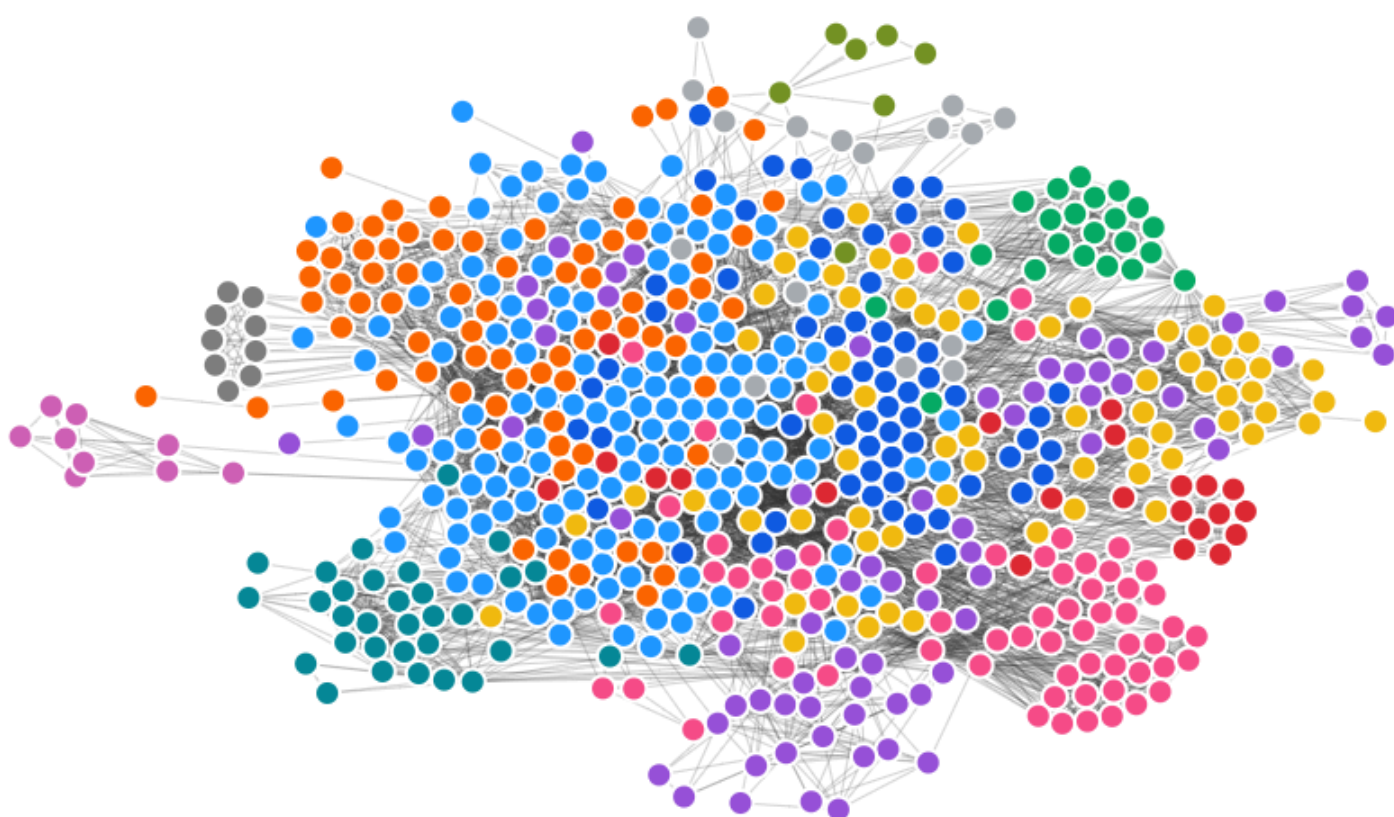
Group 2 & 5
Narratives emphasizing betrayal by the Romanian "deep state" and calls for judicial purges.

Unlike TikTok or X, Facebook posts featured more elaborate textual content, often accompanied by symbolic imagery (e.g., religious icons, national flags, historic figures). The comment sections were highly active, suggesting strong user engagement but also reinforcing homogenous political bubbles.

TikTok: Emotional saturation and populist remix culture

TikTok played a distinctive role in spreading disinformation by merging political content with audiovisual trends. The platform's native mechanics, short videos, remixing tools, algorithmic feeds, enabled users to encode political messages into entertainment formats, making them more palatable and shareable.

Communities ● 0 ● 1 ● 2 ● 3 ● 4 ● 5 ● 6 ● 7 ● 8 ● 9 ● 10 ● 11 ● 12
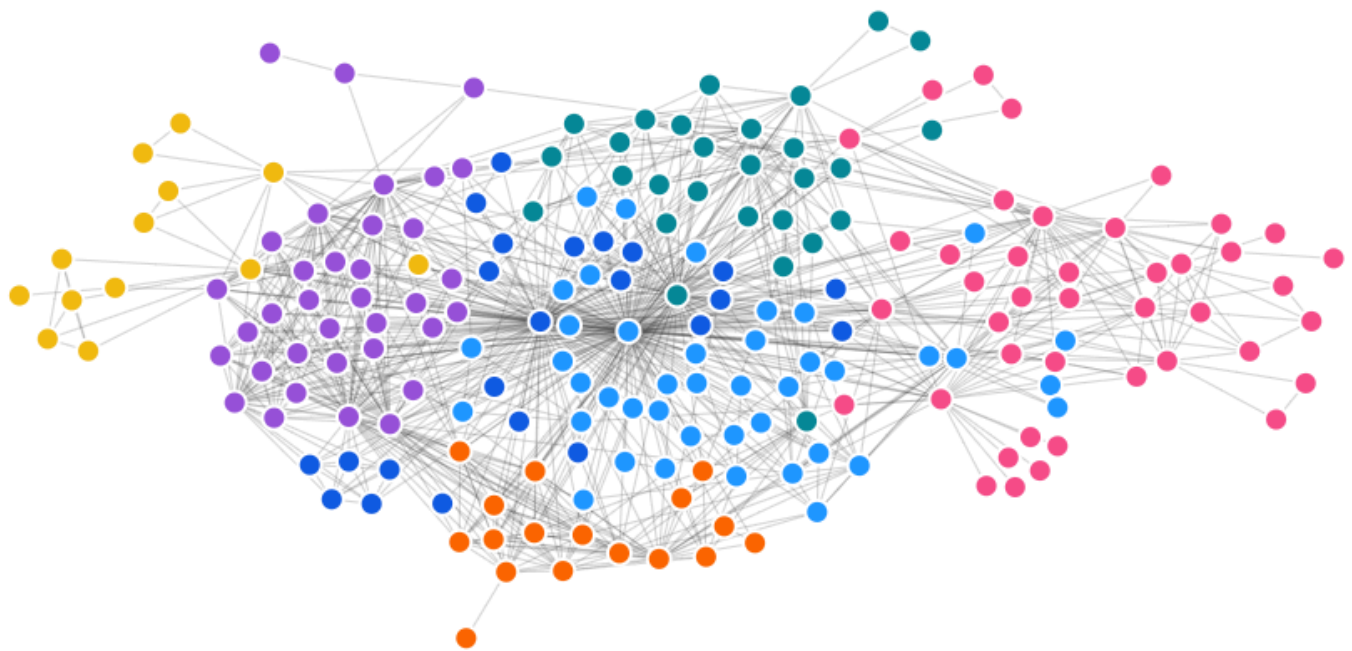

Group 1 & 5
Blending of nationalist themes with nostalgic or folkloric elements (e.g., references to salt mines, natural remedies, or pre-modern Romanian traditions).

Group 0
Criticism of political elites framed as humorous or ironic sketches, often set to trending sounds.

Group 2
The framing of Călin Georgescu as a victim of state repression, often exaggerated through visual editing

A particularly viral account, @3d_dog_danutz, used recurring audio loops and visual montages to generate tens of thousands of views. This user repeatedly framed Romania's electoral scene as corrupt, externally controlled, and in need of radical change. Unlike X, where ideological clarity prevails, TikTok thrives on emotional ambiguity, irony, and aesthetic coding, making fact-checking more complex.

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X: Ideological Clusters and Conspiratorial Hashtag Networks

X's hashtag co-occurrence network revealed dense clusters around nationalist and conspiratorial themes. The central node was consistently #Romania, which acted as a bridge between several ideological sub-networks. Hashtags like #CG (Călin Georgescu), #suverana, and #respect were frequently connected, forming a coherent narrative ecosystem.

Communities ● 0 ● 1 ● 2 ● 3 ● 4 ● 5 ● 6

Group 4
Calls for national restoration, with religious undertones and references to a lost sovereign past.

Group 0
Expressions of outrage over alleged electoral fraud, frequently invoking nationalist slogans and populist imagery.

Group 3
Discourse critical of mainstream media and foreign influence, often referencing NATO, the EU, or "globalist elites."

Engagement analysis revealed that posts employing emotional language and accusations of betrayal or manipulation gained disproportionate visibility. Retweets and quote tweets helped spread these narratives beyond their original audiences, suggesting that X remains a key node in the diffusion of ideologically polarizing content.

Diaspora discourse: Italian-language posts by Romanians abroad

An important dimension of our dataset involved posts in Italian, particularly on Facebook. These were authored predominantly by Romanian diaspora members residing in Italy and addressed both Romanian electoral themes and broader European political contexts. Though Italian-language content was less voluminous than Romanian posts, it consistently echoed themes of disillusionment with global institutions, sovereignty, and the political elite.

On Facebook, Italian-language posts averaged over 387 likes and 1,300 views, while TikTok Italian posts (all Romanian-authored) garnered an average of 819 likes and nearly 9,000 views. These metrics suggest diaspora voices not only engage actively with homeland politics but also contribute to the internationalization of Romanian nationalist and conspiratorial narratives. Their presence adds complexity to content moderation and electoral integrity monitoring, as these messages often circulate in hybrid linguistic forms and evade detection in mono-lingual analytic systems.

Furthermore, on X, the first election featured narratives about foreign interference, especially by Russia, in Romania and Georgia, with claims of election cancellations, media manipulation, and suppression of dissent benefiting the U.S. or a globalist elite. The second election posts focused on alleged democratic manipulation in Europe and the U.S., including claims of invalidated Romanian elections and efforts to suppress parties like AfD and figures like Le Pen. On Facebook, first election narratives accused the U.S. and EU of subverting democracy through election interference, dissent suppression, and proxy wars to maintain power. During the second election, posts compared Western actions to Nazism, citing media control, opposition silencing, and the Gaza blockade, while defending Russia and challenging Western portrayals of it as the aggressor..

Comparative analysis: cross-platform synchronization

Though each platform exhibits distinct affordances, several narrative themes were consistently present across all three:

Theme	X	TikTok	Facebook
Electoral fraud allegations	#fraudaelectorala, #deepstate	Embedded in humor/parody	Elaborate posts with citations
National sovereignty	#suverana, #CG	Remix videos invoking "the people"	Recurrent in party messaging
Institutional distrust	NATO/EU bashing	Hidden power symbolism	Direct geopolitical critique
Personalist narratives	Georgescu as martyr	Heroic remixes and edits	Religious/patriotic framing

These overlaps suggest more than coincidence. Content originating on one platform was often reappropriated or reframed on another, pointing to a coordinated or at least convergent media strategy. In particular, TikTok served as a viral engine for memes and emotions, while Facebook offered ideological reinforcement and X operated as the battlefield for narrative dominance.

Key takeaways

The Romanian electoral experience exemplifies the shifting nature of political communication within a hybrid media ecosystem, one in which traditional journalistic norms and editorial oversight are increasingly displaced by platform-driven dynamics of visibility and virality. In this evolving environment, the communicative authority once held by legacy media is eroded, while algorithmic systems privilege emotionally resonant and controversial content over fact-based, deliberative discourse. This convergence of affective appeal and technological amplification has created fertile ground for disinformation actors to adapt their strategies, exploiting the affordances of distinct platforms while reinforcing narratives across media environments.

Normalization of fringe narratives

Repeated exposure to radical or conspiratorial claims across multiple platforms gradually reduces their perceived extremism. Content that once resided on the margins is pushed into the mainstream, often through shares, remixes, and indirect endorsements by influencers or high-visibility accounts.

Hybrid virality

Emotional and aesthetic content (especially on TikTok) acts as a catalyst for the amplification of ideological narratives (more prevalent on Twitter and Facebook). These narratives reinforce each other and are harder to challenge because their emotional framing inoculates them against traditional fact-checking efforts.

Algorithmic amplification

TikTok's recommender system, optimized for engagement and watch time rather than informational quality, privileges emotionally charged or controversial material. In this ecosystem, disinformation is not only surfaced but rewarded through visibility, creating perverse incentives for users to reproduce polarizing content.

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[4] Reset Tech. (2025). Digital Threat Monitoring Romania: Disinformation patterns and TikTok virality during the 2024 elections. Unpublished dataset.