

## Research Paper

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# Social media dynamics in the 2024-2025 Romanian presidential election campaign

TikTok's disruptive role and the enduring importance of journalism and legacy media

**Abstract:** This article investigates the interplay between social media, mainstream media, and democratic processes in Romania's 2024–2025 presidential election, highlighting the pivotal role of media freedom and professional journalism in an era dominated by digital platforms. While social media, particularly TikTok, emerged as a powerful force capable of influencing political discourse and amplifying fringe candidates through algorithmic bias and coordinated inauthentic behavior, the study also underscores the enduring importance of legacy media as a space for public debate, critical questioning, and accountability. The case of the finally winning presidential candidate Nicușor Dan illustrates how a combination of traditional media appearances and creative engagement on platforms like TikTok and Meta can overcome the asymmetries of algorithm-driven information flows. Consistent visibility in mainstream media, combined with adaptive strategies in the social media landscape, remains a winning formula. The Romanian experience offers lessons for democracies navigating the challenges of maintaining electoral integrity and media pluralism in the face of digital manipulation techniques and regulatory challenges.

**Keywords:** Social media; TikTok; electoral manipulation; algorithmic bias; coordinated inauthentic behavior; Romanian politics

Contemporary political realities have increasingly challenged the traditional assumption that mainstream legacy media have a decisive influence on election

outcomes. A compelling illustration of this paradigm shift can be observed in Romania's 2024 presidential elections, where the far-right candidate Călin Georgescu secured an unexpected first-place position in the initial round (which was annulled later), despite conspicuously abstaining from conventional media engagements and public debates. Instead, Georgescu opted for a communication strategy primarily centered on social media and on podcast appearances, effectively circumventing established media channels while still resonating with a significant portion of the electorate. This phenomenon exemplifies what Chadwick (2017) has termed the »hybrid media system« wherein legacy media no longer monopolize political discourse but instead compete and interact with – and often find themselves overshadowed by – alternative communication platforms. The Romanian case demonstrates how candidates can now successfully navigate electoral campaigns by cultivating direct connections with voters through decentralized digital media, thereby undermining the gatekeeping function traditionally exercised by journalists and outlets of legacy news media.

The surprising electoral performance achieved through such strategies suggests a profound transformation in how political information circulates and influences voting behavior. As Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) argue, this represents not merely a tactical innovation but a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between media, political actors, and citizens in the digital age. This article examines the transformative impact of social media, with a special focus on TikTok's unprecedented role in shaping political discourse and electoral dynamics in Romania. Romania's digital landscape presents a compelling case study for understanding broader global trends in political communication. The country's unique position – with its post-communist legacy and its still relatively recent development of free media (cf. STARCK 1999), its current digital transformation, and an evolving media regulatory framework – offers insights for scholars and practitioners interested in the intersection of (digital or traditional) media and democratic processes.

At the end of some turbulent months, the moderate candidate Nicușor Dan was elected as the new President of Romania in May 2025. His success, as we will emphasize, is also proof that the established media cannot be written off just yet. Traditional journalism, TV debates, and serious, rapid fact-checking can still make a difference.

## TikTok's role in the 2024 Romanian presidential election

The 2024 Romanian presidential election marked a significant shift in political campaigning strategies, with the social media platform TikTok emerging as a crucial battleground. This analysis examines how politicians leveraged the

platform, the effectiveness of various approaches, and the subsequent regulatory concerns that arose. Romanian politicians across the political spectrum embraced TikTok during the 2024 campaign, though with varying degrees of success. Notably, ultranationalist candidate Călin Georgescu – previously a relatively obscure figure in Romanian politics – conducted what analysts characterized as an »adroit campaign« on the platform (CARLUGEA/WESOLOWSKY 2024). Through use of short, viral clips, Georgescu effectively reached millions of young voters, accumulating approximately 260,000 TikTok followers by election day. His content primarily consisted of question-and-answer segments and critiques of the European Union and NATO (PĂVĂLUCĂ 2024).

Although other political figures maintained TikTok presences – including far-right AUR leader George Simion, former prime minister Victor Ponta, Social Democratic Party leader Marcel Ciolacu, and reformist candidate Elena Lasconi – observers consistently noted that Georgescu alone »unlocked the full potential of the platform« (CARLUGEA/WESOLOWSKY 2024). Evidence of this effectiveness can be found in the disparity between traditional and social media engagement; for instance, one of Georgescu’s television interview excerpts garnered approximately 70,000 views in its original broadcast format but achieved 4.1 million views when shared on TikTok. Several political parties attempted to leverage paid influencer campaigns on TikTok, despite the platform’s formal prohibition of political advertisements. Investigative journalism revealed that the governing center-right National Liberal Party (PNL) contracted a third party to orchestrate a TikTok influencer campaign for its candidate. Paradoxically, this campaign appears to have been »hijacked« to benefit Georgescu instead – a finding subsequently confirmed by Romania’s tax agency, which verified that PNL had financed TikTok promotions and hashtags that ultimately favored Georgescu (GOURY-LAFFONT 2024).

Furthermore, declassified intelligence documents allege that an »aggressive promotion campaign« included approximately \$381,000 paid to TikTok influencers specifically to promote Georgescu (CHAN 2024). This suggests that informal influencer endorsements functioned as a circumvention mechanism for TikTok’s ban on formal political advertising. Consequently, while various political actors attempted to utilize TikTok for conventional campaign messaging, their success was inconsistent, whereas Georgescu benefited from a particularly effective, youth-oriented strategy. Romanian TikTok users demonstrated unusually high political engagement for a predominantly young demographic. A December 2024 poll of TikTok users aged 18-35 found that a majority reported exposure to election-related content and dubious claims on the platform immediately preceding the canceled runoff election (GLOBAL WITNESS 2024). Although TikTok questioned the methodological rigor of this poll, its findings align with other indicators of significant political content saturation on the application. In

practice, many young Romanians utilized TikTok not merely as an entertainment platform but as a primary news source. According to Eurobarometer data, social media have long been more important for current information in Romania than in other EU countries on average (EUROBAROMETER 2023).

Georgescu and his supporters employed viral content strategies and hashtag campaigns to maximize engagement. Users created participation-oriented memes – such as »Where are you supporting Georgescu from?« – that encouraged sharing and fostered a sense of collective identity. Georgescu’s personal content blended nationalist and anti-EU rhetoric with relatable everyday imagery, including church visits, judo training, and jogging, to cultivate a likable persona (GLOBAL WITNESS 2024). One of Georgescu’s most widely-circulated TikToks propagated the false claim that Ukrainian refugees received substantially more financial aid than Romanian children, an assertion subsequently debunked by fact-checkers (FACTUAL 2024). Despite its inaccuracy, this video accumulated over 5 million views (ARAMBESCU 2024). This suggests that the TikTok messaging campaign effectively combined emotional nationalist appeals, misinformation, and explicit calls for content amplification.

Multiple investigations concluded that TikTok’s recommendation system disproportionately amplified Georgescu’s content. Controlled experiments using balanced TikTok accounts revealed that pro-Georgescu posts were recommended between 4 and 14 times more frequently than content supporting rival candidate Lasconi (GLOBAL WITNESS 2024). Romanian media outlets and non-governmental organizations reported that automated accounts, inauthentic profiles, and algorithmic bias on TikTok contributed significantly to Georgescu’s transformation from a marginal figure to the winner of a plurality of votes (HENLEY 2024). While TikTok denied providing preferential treatment to any candidate, the magnitude of Georgescu’s online surge is noteworthy: He amassed many thousands of followers and millions of video views, substantially outperforming his competitors (HAECK 2024; ILIE 2024). In late November 2024, Romanian authorities formally addressed these concerns when the telecommunications regulation agency (ANCOM) requested that the European Commission initiate an investigation under the Digital Services Act (DSA) regarding TikTok’s role in the election. Shortly thereafter, the Constitutional Court took the unprecedented step of annulling the election’s first round, citing »foreign intervention« and algorithmic distortion – an acknowledgment that TikTok may have substantively influenced the electoral outcome (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2024).

Covert influence operations and disinformation campaigns on TikTok raised significant concerns among regulators. TikTok informed regulatory authorities that it had identified several »covert influence networks« targeting Romanian voters. By mid-December, the company reported having banned tens of thousands of inauthentic accounts and removed millions of fraudulent likes and

followers. Specifically, TikTok disclosed its disruption of a network comprising 4,453 fake accounts operating from Turkey, each with approximately three followers, primarily promoting the AUR political party and, to a lesser extent, Călin Georgescu. Following the election's annulment, TikTok banned an additional 22,764 accounts from this same influence network. Other inauthentic campaigns were also identified: one Romanian-based network of 78 accounts had promoted Georgescu (disrupted in November), while separate networks comprising dozens of accounts advocated for the PNL and PSD parties. According to TikTok's transparency reports, the platform blocked over 92,000 fake accounts and prevented millions of fraudulent engagements in Romania during the campaign period (TIKTOK NEWSROOM 2024). The 2024 Romanian presidential election illustrates the profound impact that social media platforms – particularly TikTok – can exert on democratic processes, highlighting urgent questions about algorithmic transparency, platform governance, and the evolving nature of political communication in digital environments.

## Regulatory frameworks and emerging challenges

Romania's electoral landscape has undergone significant transformation in response to the proliferation of digital platforms and their influence on political communication. This section examines the regulatory frameworks established to govern digital content in electoral contexts and analyzes the emerging challenges posed by sophisticated manipulation tactics in the Romanian political sphere. Romania has established a complex regulatory architecture for digital content in electoral contexts. Notably, the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM) has been designated through Law No. 50/2024 as »the authority responsible for all aspects related to the supervision of online services,« including oversight of major digital platforms (CRISTESCU 2024). This designation is particularly significant as it centralizes regulatory authority and establishes a clear institutional mechanism for addressing illicit content and electoral disinformation.

Nevertheless, this centralization has not eliminated jurisdictional complexities within the regulatory landscape. The National Audiovisual Council (CNA) has attempted to extend its control over online video content, issuing »removal orders« for social media posts. However, this expansion of authority has been criticized by civil society organizations such as ApTI and ActiveWatch, which contend that the CNA »illegally extends its jurisdiction« and imposes disproportionate sanctions without clear legal foundation (BUNEA 2025). Additionally, the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) and Central Electoral Bureau (BEC) coordinate the monitoring of online electoral content through complaints which, if

substantiated, require major platforms to remove illegal advertisements (G4MEDIA REDACTION 2025a).

The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) implementation in Romania further complicates this landscape by imposing transparency obligations on platforms. Users affected by restrictions can directly challenge platform decisions and, if dissatisfied, can notify ANCOM with detailed evidence. ANCOM can resolve complaints if the platform is established in Romania or forward them to the coordinator in the respective country (G4MEDIA REDACTION 2025b). This approach, while comprehensive, presents challenges in terms of coordination and effectiveness. In response to the annulment of the November 2024 elections, the Romanian Parliament has adopted stringent online regulations. Sponsored political content must now be marked with identification codes (campaign and sponsor) in each electoral message. Messages that fail to comply with this labeling can be deleted by platforms »in less than five hours« according to the law adopted in January 2025 (CHASTAND/MALINGRE 2025). These measures complement DSA obligations regarding transparent political advertising and combating disinformation.

The implementation of these regulations has led to new reporting mechanisms whereby citizens can report suspected illegal online messages to the BEC. If the complaint is justified, BEC issues an order to platforms (through AEP) to restrict the content. ANCOM has published guidelines and complaint forms to assist citizens and parties in identifying and reporting non-compliant electoral content (G4MEDIA 2025a). Furthermore, electoral campaigns must comply with legislation on financing and advertising, with each paid material being reported to BEC. Despite these regulatory advances, controversial situations have emerged during campaigns that highlight imbalances in enforcement. Nicușor Dan, for example, has accused the AEP of »bad faith« for not prohibiting anonymous defamatory materials freely circulating online. He maintains that his supporters who post organically (without paid advertising) are penalized by algorithms, while anonymous negative content »is not sanctioned« (EMILIAN 2025). This case shows the persistent challenges in enforcing regulatory frameworks equitably across different types of content and actors.

A significant development in Romania's electoral dynamics has been the shift from traditional fake news to more sophisticated manipulation techniques. According to a report by Expert Forum, the focus has moved beyond combating false news to addressing »the ability to flood the digital space with oceans of information, memes and videos about one's own candidate, plus negative propaganda about opponents« (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). This phenomenon, identified as Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB), represents a fundamental change in digital electoral tactics. The impact of CIB on candidate visibility has been substantial, with evidence of artificial enhancement of visibility and credibility through the use of bot networks and inauthentic accounts. Expert Forum's analysis

reveals exploitation of platform algorithms at the limit or beyond the provisions of Romanian laws. Data collected over 30 days showed over 100 million views produced by 600 CIB-type videos, with 270 clips supporting George Simion and 180 promoting Crin Antonescu (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025).

Furthermore, suspicious growth patterns were observed in candidates' official accounts. Victor Ponta recorded an increase of 100,000 new TikTok followers in the last analyzed week (April 20-24), followed by Nicușor Dan with approximately 30,000. Analysis of comments on candidates' videos indicated a significant proportion of duplicate comments, suggesting bot usage. Victor Ponta had 47.6% potentially duplicate comments, Nicușor Dan 37%, and George Simion 23.1% (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). Particularly noteworthy is the case of Crin Antonescu, whose positive visibility (118 million views in recent months) stemmed »mainly from support networks, not from the activity of his official account« despite having a »systematically neglected« official account. This demonstrates the coordinated action of inauthentic networks in shaping public perception independently of candidates' official communications (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). The opacity of TikTok's algorithm presents a significant challenge in addressing CIB. Expert Forum emphasizes that »we are practically in the dark« due to the opacity of TikTok's viralization algorithm, which selects content based on unknown criteria (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025).

Additionally, the Romanian state lacks dedicated structures with genuine expertise for monitoring inauthentic networks. Expert Forum argues that digital platforms have »an obligation of compliance, not just one of voluntary collaboration« in combating systemic risks. The document contends that at the national level, easily quantifiable aspects (e.g., complaints to BEC) are prioritized at the expense of systemic issues related to CIB (IONIȚĂ/VOINEA 2025). The case of Nicușor Dan further illustrates these structural limitations. In April 2025, he announced that he had stopped paid promotion (approximately €15,000/day) after his Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok pages were »invaded by hundreds of thousands of fake accounts« aggressively distributing his posts (BULARCA/POPESCU 2025; OTOPEANU 2025). He informed the AEP and filed complaints with DNSC and ANCOM, requesting identification of those who »paid the bots.« While DNSC confirmed receiving such a notification regarding »inauthentic behavior« on his accounts, and ANCOM officially received the complaint and announced its analysis, the outcome remains uncertain.

The Romanian case demonstrates that despite establishing comprehensive regulatory frameworks for digital content in electoral contexts, significant challenges remain in effectively addressing sophisticated manipulation tactics. The shift from fake news to Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior represents a fundamental change in digital electoral tactics that current regulatory approaches struggle to address adequately. This evolution highlights the need for enhanced

monitoring capabilities, greater platform transparency, and more proactive collaboration between regulatory authorities and digital platforms. Moreover, the discrepancy between regulatory intent and implementation effectiveness raises questions about the adequacy of current approaches in safeguarding electoral integrity in digital environments.

## Image transfer and transfer of electoral capital between Georgescu and Simion

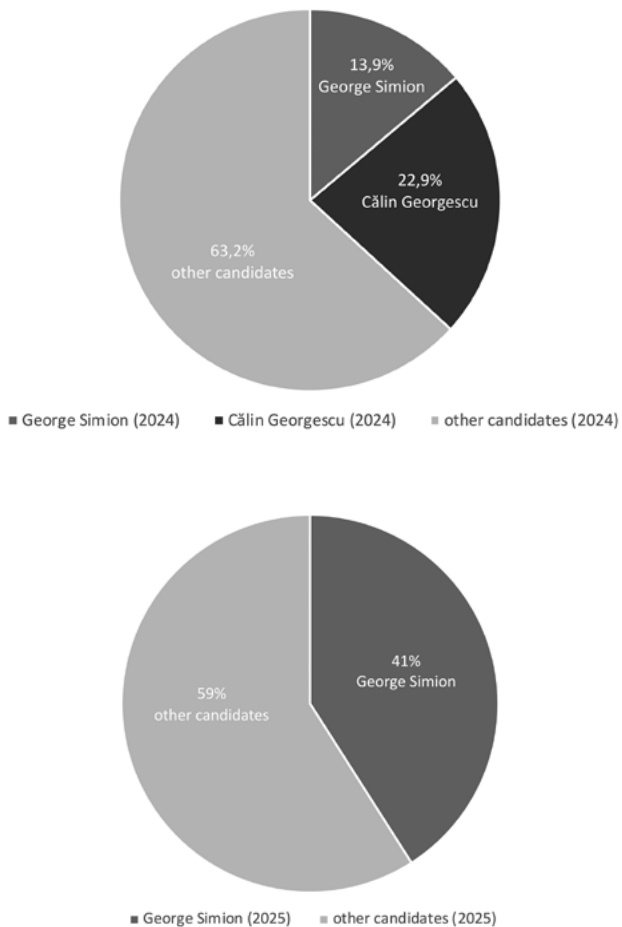
In the context of the Romanian presidential elections, the political relationship between Călin Georgescu and George Simion offers a notable example of symbolic alignment and electoral capital transfer. George Simion, the leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), has been portrayed in media reports as using Georgescu primarily as a symbolic figurehead – a »sovereignist image« to be marketed to the electorate (POPESCU 2025). This strategy appears to have yielded substantial political gains in the first round of the 2025 presidential elections.

In 2024, Georgescu, an »independent« candidate, had emerged as the frontrunner in the first round, securing 2,120,401 votes, amounting to 22.94% of the total. In the same election, Simion received 1,281,325 votes (13.86%) (POPESCU 2025). One year later, however, in the 2025 election, Simion recorded a dramatic surge, receiving 3,862,761 votes (40.96%) – a figure that not only surpassed his own previous performance but also significantly exceeded the combined total of votes he and Georgescu had received in 2024 (3,401,726 votes) (AGERPRESS 2025; CRISTEA 2025).

This 2025 outcome suggests a successful consolidation of the sovereignist electorate under Simion's candidacy, alongside a noteworthy expansion of his support base. The approximately 460,000 additional votes he received beyond the 2024 combined total of both candidates point to attracting new voters outside the original sovereignist segment. Media analyses reinforce this interpretation, noting that Simion's campaign effectively appropriated Georgescu's sovereignist appeal while mobilizing broader public support (HOTNEWS 2025). Moreover, the shift in voter behavior may also reflect wider political dynamics. Some former supporters of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) appear to have gravitated toward the sovereignist discourse represented by Simion, suggesting that his electoral gains were not solely due to Georgescu's endorsement or symbolic influence. In contrast, other political figures, such as Crin Antonescu, did not resonate with this segment of the electorate. The electoral data and media narratives converge on the conclusion that George Simion successfully absorbed Georgescu's political image and voter base while expanding his appeal to new segments of the electorate. The 2025 election results underscore this achievement: not only did Simion consolidate the sovereignist vote, but he also transformed it into a broader political force.

Figure 1

**Vote distribution 2024/2025 (first rounds)**



Source: own diagram

## Nicușor Dan's media exposure and the role of television

During the campaign period for the second round of the 2025 presidential elections, Nicușor Dan participated in a series of televised programs with significant viewership, strategically attempting to consolidate his visibility and bridge the vote gap with his opponent. His participation in debates and nationally impactful broadcasts constituted a strategic component of his campaign, particularly considering that George Simion chose to avoid individual television appearances, instead concentrating his communication efforts on online platforms, predominantly TikTok. This strategic divergence created an imbalance in traditional media presence between the two candidates, consequently allowing Nicușor Dan to capture the attention of mainstream audiences, especially among voter segments less engaged in digital environments.

For instance, the debate broadcast by the public station TVR 1 on May 15, 2025, recorded an average national audience of approximately 220,000 viewers, according to data published by Obae (2025c). Although the overall rating was relatively modest compared to other programs, Nicușor Dan's presence in a space associated with TVR's editorial neutrality can be interpreted as an attempt to consolidate his image as a serious candidate open to broader public engagement, particularly among urban viewers and those interested in substantive debates.

Another notable appearance occurred on May 14 at România TV, where a special program featuring Nicușor Dan attracted an average of approximately 665,000 viewers, corresponding to a national rating of 3.8% (OBAE 2025b). Since România TV is perceived as favorable to George Simion's electorate, this platform provided an intriguing framework for Nicușor Dan to communicate his message to a traditionally less favorable audience segment. This exposure can be interpreted as an attempt to penetrate his opponent's supporter »bubble« seeking to bring his message to those who would otherwise have been less exposed to an alternative voting option.

On the evening of May 13, Nicușor Dan participated in a debate on Antena 3, moderated by Mihai Gâdea, which was watched by approximately 480,000 viewers nationally (OBAE 2025a). Given Antena 3's profile, which attracts an audience interested in political subjects as well as more »spectacular« debate formats, this appearance allowed the candidate to express his viewpoints in a high-visibility format and establish a leadership profile before an electorate that combines interest in political current affairs with mainstream television consumption.

In contrast, opponent George Simion did not participate in individual programs with significant impact during May 4-18, 2025, focusing his communication almost exclusively on the TikTok platform. This strategy limited the general electorate's ability, particularly those less active in digital environments, to evaluate his positions and personality in formal debate contexts directly. The only

direct encounter between the two candidates occurred during the Euronews-moderated debate on May 8, 2025, which attracted 272,000 national viewers – a figure smaller than the cumulative audiences of Nicușor Dan’s appearances (BUNEA 2025).

Table 1

### TV appearances by Nicușor Dan in the 2025 election campaign

Format (Show)	TV Station	Date	Time interval	Rating (National)	Rating (Urban)	Rating (Commercial)
Debate (Mihai Gâdea as presenter)	Antena 3	13.05.2025	19:00-23:45	480,000	355,000	115,000
Debate	România TV*	14.05.2025	20:00-22:00	665,000	450,000	150,000
Debate	TVR 1	15.05.2025	21:00-00:00	220,000	160,000	60,000
Debate (only true debate with both candidates)	Euronews	8.05.2025	20:00-00:00	272,000	233,000	135,000

\* A television station that caters to George Simon’s fanbase.

Therefore, Nicușor Dan’s multiple exposures in television programs with significant audiences served as an important vector for electoral visibility, especially given his opponent’s absence from these traditional public debate spaces. Through participation in these programs, Nicușor Dan successfully reached diverse audiences, transmitted his messages to viewers from different audience categories (national, urban, commercial), and implicitly created a contrast between his profile as a candidate present in traditional public space and George Simon’s more restricted strategy, focused on digital communication within a specific supporter »bubble.«

Contextualizing these audience figures is essential, as Nicușor Dan’s mainstream media participations were not merely simple appearances but became catalysts for consolidating critical narratives against his opponent, George Simon. For example, following the first debate, Nicușor Dan was perceived as the victor, benefiting from George Simon’s frequent blunders, including remarks such as »I am better than you at throwing words,« to which Nicușor Dan promptly responded with »exactly, exactly« (SAVA 2025). This dynamic was subsequently exploited by the pro-European camp, which amplified Simon’s image as an unprepared and superficial candidate.

## The symbolism of absence

George Simion's absenteeism from subsequent debates was, in turn, transformed into a media symbol. The empty chair reserved for Simion in television studios became a metaphor for absence and lack of courage in facing direct confrontation, being ironized both in online spaces and in symbolic campaigns. Brands and users replicated the empty chair image, using it as a point of irony: »we found George Simion« (COȘLEA 2025). This symbolism was amplified by incidents such as the one generated by stand-up comedian Micutzcu, who organized a neutral debate to which George Simion initially confirmed participation but later refused to attend, subsequently denying that he had accepted the terms. The publication of an audio recording in which Simion expressed his agreement accentuated perceptions of insincerity and inconsistency, and Micutzcu ironically punctuated the situation with the remark »why do we flee from debate and then lie« (ZIA 2025), a comment that also included an allusion to the grammatical errors made by members of the extremist PÖT party (Young People's Party).

The impact of this dynamic was felt even in the symbolism associated with George Simion in the digital public space: users began repeatedly using the chair emoticon in response to his posts, ironizing his absence from essential confrontations. Moreover, his meetings with European political leaders, such as Georgia Meloni or the nationalist candidate from Poland, Nawrocki, did not produce official support, which accentuated the perception of failure in consolidating his image as an international leader. Consequently, Nicușor Dan's consistent presence in traditional media space, combined with the symbolism created around his opponent's absence, contributed significantly to consolidating his position in the second round. This strategy successfully exploited George Simion's lack of response, allowing Nicușor Dan to assume the role of a present, prepared, and dialogue-oriented candidate, in contrast to his adversary's isolated and evasive leader image.

## Free press in the age of short-form content: A case for prebunking and responsible journalism

On the morning of May 17, 2025, just one day before the second round of Romania's presidential elections, the TikTok account of George Simion, the far-right AUR party's presidential candidate, unexpectedly disappeared. Without prior context or warning, users trying to access his page were met with the platform's default message: »*This account could not be found*«. What followed was a textbook example of narrative hijacking. Given his self-styled position as an anti-system figure, Simion seemed poised to claim political censorship. A journalist from

Realitatea TV, known for echoing populist themes, quickly posted that »the system's desperation is showing,« while a network of TikTok influencers amplified the claim in near-real-time. It was a critical moment shortly before the election, which must also be seen against the background of the nationalists' claim for weeks, reinforced by US Vice President J.D. Vance, that also Georgescu had been cheated out of an election victory.

Yet, the strategy failed. And it failed precisely because of timely, evidence-based journalism. Here, the concept of prebunking – a proactive strategy in combating misinformation – proves essential. Unlike *debunking*, which reacts to false claims post-distribution, *prebunking* functions as a form of psychological inoculation, preparing the public in advance by exposing the rhetorical and emotional tactics likely to be used in disinformation campaigns (LEWANDOWSKY/VAN DER LINDEN 2021; ROOZENBEEK/VAN DER LINDEN 2019). In this case, the editorial team at Context.ro applied a prebunking logic by immediately reaching out to TikTok for clarification. Within minutes, they received confirmation that George Simion had deactivated his own account voluntarily, thereby defusing the narrative of censorship before it could metastasize.

With the initial disinformation line exposed, Simion was forced to improvise. He declared a »day of silence« ahead of the Sunday election, announcing the suspension of all his social media accounts. Yet, contradicting his own premise, he continued posting on X (formerly Twitter), maintaining contact with a loyal base nested within his ideological bubble. This event illustrates the critical importance of a genuinely free press in countering strategic misinformation – particularly in the attention economy fostered by short-form content platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels (NAPOLI 2019). It also underscores the dangers of echo chambers, where algorithmically-driven content reinforcement minimizes ideological diversity, intensifying group polarization and susceptibility to populist disinformation (CINELLI et al. 2021; SUNSTEIN 2018). Within such closed systems, misinformation spreads rapidly – unless disrupted by timely and credible counter-narratives. The fragmented nature of online discourse continues to challenge traditional journalistic authority, this case study reaffirms that prebunking, combined with responsive, investigative reporting, can still act as a democratic safeguard. In the age of viral populism, the truth (accurate facts), verified swiftly and communicated transparently, remains the best defense.

## Conclusion

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential election offers a stark illustration of the evolving dynamics of political communication, where the boundaries between traditional media, social media, and algorithmic influence are increasingly

blurred. While TikTok emerged as a disruptive force capable of amplifying fringe candidates and distorting public debate, the ultimate success of Nicu or Dan underscores that a multifaceted strategy remains key to electoral success. His consistent presence in mainstream media – through televised debates, interviews, and public appearances – provided a crucial platform for critical engagement, message amplification, and credibility building, particularly among demographics less active on digital platforms. Simultaneously, his creative use of TikTok and Meta allowed him to connect with younger audiences, demonstrating how innovative campaigning can complement, rather than replace, the foundational role of traditional media in shaping democratic discourse.

The Romanian example is encouraging in that it reveals the enlightening potential of TV debates during election campaigns, which, in the age of populism and extremism, have become more of a problem for democracy in other countries and have in some cases literally turned into »slingshots of lies« (SCHULTZ 2024). However, Nicușor Dan benefited in Romania also from the fact that his populist opponent George Simion avoided most debates and only faced a direct TV duel once.

This case highlights the critical importance of preserving media freedom and ensuring pluralistic access to information in an age where algorithmic gatekeeping and coordinated manipulation threaten to erode the very foundations of democratic debate. While social media offers unprecedented opportunities for direct engagement, it also introduces vulnerabilities that can be exploited to undermine electoral integrity. The Romanian experience demonstrates that mainstream media remains an essential space for public scrutiny, offering a counterweight to the opacity and volatility of algorithm-driven information flows.

Ultimately, safeguarding democracy in the digital age requires a dual commitment: to support resilient, independent journalism and to develop robust regulatory frameworks capable of addressing the challenges posed by algorithmic amplification and digital manipulation. The Romanian case offers a timely reminder that while the tools of political communication are evolving, the core principles of transparency, accountability, and media freedom must remain at the heart of democratic practice.

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