

The Illusion of Containment: Why Removing Extremist Candidates Will Not Halt the Far-Right in Romania

by Veronica Anghel

On 6 December 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court took the unprecedented step of annulling the country's presidential election just days before the final round of voting. The justification – based on a declassified intelligence report – was that the electoral process had been compromised “throughout all its stages” by foreign interference.¹ The main beneficiary of this operation, according to Romanian authorities, was Călin Georgescu, an independent far-right candidate who had unexpectedly surged to first place in the initial round.

¹ For the declassified document, see the Romanian Intelligence Service's Note No. 1 to the Romanian Supreme Council for National Defence (*Document CSAT Serviciul Român de Informații I*) attached to the Romania's Presidency press release of 4 December 2024: <https://klausiohannis.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/comunicat-de-presa1733327193>. See also US Embassy in Romania, *Statement on Romania's Presidential Elections*, 4 December 2024, <https://ro.usembassy.gov/romania-presidential-elections>.

The Romanian state took a stand in defence of democratic integrity. Yet the decision, opaque in its initial justification and abrupt in its execution, has deepened public distrust of the very institutions the decision was meant to protect. And in the months since, events have only confirmed a sobering truth: revealing and removing extremist candidates does not resolve the problem of democratic erosion – it merely displaces it.

Romania's experience offers a cautionary tale for other democracies confronting hybrid threats. In a context where algorithmic manipulation, disinformation ecosystems and institutional vulnerabilities converge, far-right extremism is proving remarkably adaptive. As the country now heads toward rescheduled presidential elections in May 2025, it is not the exclusion of dangerous candidates that defines the landscape – but the proliferation of figures eager to inherit their mantle.

Veronica Anghel is Assistant Professor in the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute (EUI).

The legal logic behind the ban

Călin Georgescu was formally disqualified from the May 2025 elections by the Central Electoral Bureau (BEC), a decision upheld by the Constitutional Court. Georgescu's public positions – such as pledging to ban political parties and praising Romania's interwar role in the Holocaust – are illegal under Romanian law, as they constitute attacks on the constitutional order. Polling data suggests that a slim majority of Romanians supported the move to ban Georgescu, but nearly half of the population found the rationale insufficiently explained.² The ban came on the heels of a sweeping criminal investigation into Georgescu's campaign, which revealed ties to far-right paramilitary networks, undeclared campaign financing and influence operations linked to Russian and Iranian actors.

Georgescu now faces multiple criminal charges, including incitement against the constitutional order, dissemination of false information and the promotion of fascist and antisemitic content. He is under judicial control and barred from international travel or digital activity that promotes extremist ideologies.

His removal from the race, however, has not led to political stabilisation. Quite the opposite: Georgescu's narrative – that he was the victim of a

² Maria Ionescu, "Sondaj: Ce părere au românii despre interzicerea candidaturii lui Călin Georgescu la alegerile prezidențiale" [Poll: What do Romanians think about the ban on Călin Georgescu's candidacy in the presidential elections?], in *HotNews Press*, 18 March 2025, <https://hotnews.ro/?p=1926835>.

Western-backed "coup" to silence anti-system voices – has gained traction. His disqualification did not discredit his movement; it mythologised it.

A digital insurgency

Georgescu's campaign is a textbook example of hybrid information warfare. By relying on viral content distributed via TikTok, Telegram and YouTube, Georgescu's campaign created a self-reinforcing ecosystem of conspiratorial, emotionally charged messaging. These tactics demonstrated a high level of digital proficiency, leveraging algorithms, social media manipulation and targeted disinformation – with many of them being transnational and covertly supported.

Forensic analysis traced much of the campaign's amplification to Russian and Iranian networks, with content routed through Chinese-owned platforms.³ This was not an isolated attempt to tilt an election. It was the activation of an ecosystem, cultivated over time to be deployed in moments of democratic vulnerability.

The strategic objective was never necessarily to install Georgescu in office. It was to demonstrate the fragility of democratic institutions and to signal to NATO's eastern flank that even its elections are fair game. In that sense, the operation was a win-win for the Kremlin.⁴

³ Andra-Lucia Martinescu et al., *Networks of Influence: Decoding Foreign Meddling in Romania's Elections*, Foreign Policy Center, 20 December 2024, p. 13, <https://fpc.org.uk/?p=7742>.

⁴ Veronica Anghel, "Why Romania Just Cancelled its Presidential Elections", in *Journal*

The Illusion of Containment: Why Removing Extremist Candidates Will Not Halt the Far-Right in Romania

Romania's election was not only halted – it was discredited.

The necessary removal of Georgescu has not weakened the far right. Several figures now vie to inherit the political base Georgescu activated. Chief among them is George Simion, leader of the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), who is currently polling ahead of all other candidates in the first round. His rhetoric mirrors Georgescu's – blending nationalism, Euroscepticism, and hostility towards the democratic order – while trying to distance himself from his previously overt pro-Russian stances.

In a recent interview, Simion framed the annulled election not as a defensive act against foreign subversion but as an “elitist conspiracy” orchestrated by Brussels and Paris.⁵ He accused the Romanian establishment of eliminating “inconvenient candidates” to ensure a sanitised ballot. Simion is also under criminal investigation for public incitement after he declared that Electoral Bureau members should be “flayed in the public square”. Diana Şoşoacă, a MEP with extremist views and a pro-Russian agenda, who leads the party SOS Romania, has also been banned from running in the presidential elections. The Constitutional Court has

rejected her candidacy in the past for her anti-democratic stances similar to those of Georgescu. She nevertheless remains a vocal supporter of the pro-Russian agenda in Romania.

Other figures – including Ana-Maria Gavrilă, leader of the Young People's Party, and former prime minister Victor Ponta – are positioning themselves as heirs to Georgescu's anti-system message. The political energy behind Romania's far-right movement persists.

Mainstream paralysis

For pro-European and centrist forces, the unprecedented institutional crisis presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Nicușor Dan, an independent candidate aligned with the pro-EU forces, appears best positioned to win a run-off. Current polling suggests that he would defeat both Simion and the governing coalition's candidate, Crin Antonescu, in head-to-head matchups.

But Dan's path to victory will be complicated by a splintered opposition and a disengaged electorate. While the ruling coalition of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the Democratic Liberal Party (PNL) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) remains in power, it has offered no compelling narrative in response to the crisis. Antonescu's nomination is widely seen as symbolic – a choice that maintains internal coalition balance but fails to generate popular enthusiasm. Elena Lasconi, the leader of the Save Romania Union party (USR), is also in the race for the presidential run-off, positioned to further fragment voters from the centre.

of Democracy, December 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-romania-just-canceled-its-presidential-election>.

⁵ “Romania Annuls Presidential Elections” (video), in *WeltwocheDaily*, 16 March 2025, <https://weltwoche.ch/daily/putsch-gegen-demokratie-rumaeniens-oppositions-chef-george-simion-ueber-die-einmischung-der-eu-den-kampf-fuer-freie-wahlen-und-was-in-rumaenien-fuer-ganz-europa-auf-dem-spiel-steht>.

The Illusion of Containment: Why Removing Extremist Candidates Will Not Halt the Far-Right in Romania

This non-confrontational approach has ceded political ground to the far right. The pro-EU incumbent parties, themselves socially conservative and with a recent history of rule of law challenges – including episodes of procedural stretching and state capture by both PSD and PNL during crises such as the post-2008 financial downturn and the Covid-19 pandemic – continue to lose their agenda to even more radical challengers.⁶ Their failure to articulate an alternative forward-looking vision has contributed to a sense of institutional drift.

Structural fragilities and strategic gaps

The far-right's appeal is not merely rhetorical. It feeds on genuine discontent: Romania suffers from chronic underinvestment in infrastructure, persistent political corruption and some of the highest poverty and inequality rates in the EU.⁷ Nearly one-third of the population is at risk of social exclusion. Among

⁶ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Riders on the Storm: The Politics of Disruption in European Member States during the COVID-19 Pandemic", in *East European Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2022), p. 551-570, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/74869>. PSD, in particular, pushed through judicial overhauls several times in the last ten years. Its leaders aimed to weaken judicial independence and prompted the largest street protests since the 1989 revolution: see AP and Reuters, "Tens of Thousands Protest against Corruption in Romania", in *The Guardian*, 21 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/8x2kq>.

⁷ Eurostat, "Living Conditions in Europe - Poverty and Social Exclusion", in *Statistics Explained*, last updated on June 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion.

youth, school dropout rates remain the highest in the Union.⁸ Rural youth unemployment in Romania exceeds 30 per cent despite over 34,000 job vacancies nationwide, due to a mismatch between job locations and local opportunities. Most jobs are concentrated in major cities, while rural areas offer limited prospects, pushing young people toward informal or illegal sectors.

Digital literacy is also critically low.⁹ Despite having one of the highest concentrations of IT specialists in Europe, Romania lags behind in digital public services and civic education – conditions that create fertile ground for disinformation. According to EU-wide polling, Romanian public opinion is increasingly sceptical of support for Ukraine, with many believing that NATO and the US are greater threats to peace than Russia.¹⁰ These are precisely the narratives that Georgescu, Simion and others have strategically amplified.

The stakes are not limited to Romania. NATO's current strategy against hybrid threats – though improved – remains underdeveloped.¹¹ Inconsistent

⁸ European Commission, *Romania: Preventing Early Leaving from Education and Training*, last updated on 25 March 2024, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/node/2053>.

⁹ Issue Monitoring, *Romania's Digital Environment: Navigating the Path to a Tech-Driven Future*, 23 August 2024, <https://issuemonitoring.eu/?p=7287>.

¹⁰ See EUI website: *EUI - YouGov - SOLID 'Solidarity in Europe' (SiE) project*, <https://europeangovernanceandpolitics.eui.eu/?p=2182>.

¹¹ NATO, *NATO's Approach to Counter Information Threats*, 18 October 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_231905.htm.

The Illusion of Containment: Why Removing Extremist Candidates Will Not Halt the Far-Right in Romania

threat monitoring, limited attribution mechanisms and the ambiguity surrounding collective defence thresholds all leave openings for adversaries to exploit. In Romania's case, the information operation was not a bolt from the blue. It was a long-term, iterative campaign, seeded in digital platforms and activated at a critical moment. The failure was not in response – but in preparation.

One of the most striking – and deeply unsettling – aspects of the crisis is the convergence between Moscow and Washington in condemning the annulment of Romania's presidential elections. US Vice President JD Vance, Trump ally Elon Musk, Trump-aligned media, alongside Kremlin officials and Russian state outlets, have all branded last year's cancellation as illegitimate.

The controversy now casts a heavy shadow over Romania's relationship with the US. Pro-Trump Romanian leaders have openly called for withdrawing American troops from the country and halting the expansion of the Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, NATO's future stronghold on the eastern flank. The Trump administration has also suspended Romania's entry into the Visa Waiver programme – further eroding trust between two long-standing allies. A US pullback from a strategically pivotal and closely aligned partner would critically undermine NATO's eastern defences and leave the Black Sea region increasingly vulnerable to Russian aggression, especially as Moscow edges closer to Odesa.

From reactive containment to proactive resilience

If Romania's experience offers a lesson, it is this: democratic systems cannot afford to remain reactive in the face of hybrid threats. The disqualification of extremist candidates may be legally justifiable, even strategically necessary – but it is not sufficient. Without structural reforms, narrative counterweights and institutional transparency, the space they vacate will be filled by others who have learned from their example.

What Romania requires – what NATO and the EU must support – is not merely vigilance, but resilience. This includes investment in digital civic infrastructure, the development of independent watchdog institutions, the regulation of content distributed by social media giants and the creation of cross-platform rapid response teams that can expose and disrupt information operations before they become entrenched. Advanced resilience proposals are numerous: developing a coherent strategy for the EU's future dealings with Russia that includes responses to hybrid attacks, avoiding an extension of Russian influence in Ukraine,¹² introducing a more centralised threat intelligence monitoring within NATO and a proportional escalation protocol for hybrid attacks, and/or establishing a deployable communications task

¹² Veronica Anghel and Giuseppe Spatafora, "Global Risks to the EU: A Blueprint to Navigate the Year Ahead", in *EUISS Commentaries*, 6 February 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/3345>.

The Illusion of Containment: Why Removing Extremist Candidates Will Not Halt the Far-Right in Romania

force.¹³ These are not speculative recommendations; they are overdue.

Romania's political crisis is not an outlier. It is a warning. The removal of extremist candidates may disrupt a campaign, but it cannot dismantle an ecosystem. It may bar a man from office, but it cannot erase the narrative he has amplified into the political imagination of millions. To believe otherwise is to mistake containment for resolution. In doing so, democracies may find themselves increasingly well-defended on paper, while haemorrhaging legitimacy in practice.

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¹³ Corneliu Bjola, "Algorithmic Invasions: How information Warfare Threatens NATO's Eastern Flank", in *NATO Review*, 7 February 2025, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2025/02/07/algorithmic-invasions-how-information-warfare-threatens-nato-s-eastern-flank/index.html>.

The Illusion of Containment: Why Removing Extremist Candidates Will Not Halt the Far-Right in Romania

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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