MANIPULATION AND DISINFORMATION IN THE 2024 ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Mihai VACARIU

Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *The 2024 Romanian presidential elections marked the emergence of a new model of digital populism, driven not by ideology but by algorithmic virality, collective emotion, and participatory disinformation. This article analyzes the rapid rise of Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate who mobilized anger, fear, and resentment through a coordinated online campaign rooted in anti-system, anti-EU, and anti-Ukraine narratives. Drawing on theories of collective psychology, mimetic behavior, and affective publics, the study introduces the concept of mimetic voting in networked environments to explain how thousands of voters coalesced around a candidate most had not heard of two weeks before the election. By situating the Romanian case within the broader context of hybrid threats and post-truth populism in Eastern Europe, this paper reveals how social platforms no longer just disseminate political content — they construct political identity itself.*

Keywords*: digital media; disinformation; electoral manipulation; microtargeting; collective psychology*

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 Romanian presidential elections marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of political communication in Eastern Europe. Călin Georgescu, previously unknown to most of the electorate, won the first round with over 2 million votes, largely due to a massive online campaign on platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. This unexpected success was not the result of traditional party mobilization, but rather the outcome of a sophisticated digital operation that echoed the disinformation strategies tested in Ukraine.

As in Ukraine, populism in Romania has emerged amid overlapping crises: economic instability, distrust in institutions, and geopolitical tensions related to the war in Ukraine. Disinformation narratives targeting the EU, NATO, and Ukrainian refugees became central to the political discourse. According to Expert Forum (2023), narratives such as "Russia offers cheap energy, but the EU refuses for ideological reasons" or "Brussels is to blame for inflation" were instrumental in creating a climate of Euroscepticism. These narratives—similar to those used in Ukraine post-2014—undermined support for pro-European parties and made space for candidates like Georgescu.

2. MECHANISMS OF DISINFORMATION

Georgescu's campaign relied heavily on social media virality. Over 25,000 TikTok accounts, many previously inactive, were activated in the two weeks before the elections. These accounts posted videos that echoed a coordinated narrative strategy. One of the most viral slogans—"Support for Ukraine is leading Romania to war"—garnered over 1.3 million views. As VIGINUM (2025) reports, these dynamics were not organic: they were the result of a sophisticated astroturfing operation that included influencer payments, Discord coordination groups, and algorithm manipulation.

Romanian disinformation narratives reflected the broader regional playbook. Fake news about Ukrainian refugees portrayed them as violent, privileged, or part of a Western colonization effort (CRC, 2025:14). These messages were already prevalent in Russian campaigns in Ukraine, Moldova, and even Poland. Their goal was clear: fracture solidarity, fuel resentment, and weaken support for Ukraine.

Platforms like TikTok played a central role. As shown in the "Romania Election Analysis" report, AUR—a far-right party with pro-Russian tendencies—accounted for 26% of all TikTok interactions while generating less than 9% of the content (CRC, 2025:10). This shows how the architecture of virality favors emotional, anti-system rhetoric. Georgescu's campaign exploited this mechanism by using influencers who never disclosed political sponsorships, creating the illusion of grassroots support.

3. DIGITAL NATIONALISM AND THE WAR NARRATIVE

Beyond anti-refugee narratives, Georgescu's messaging invoked a broader ideological frame: a platform-driven nationalism rooted in sovereignty, tradition, and resistance to globalism. TikTok videos often echoed slogans like "Romania must be neutral," "Let's stop this war," or "We are not NATO's puppets." This style of algorithmic nationalism closely mirrors what Ukrainian civil society faced before 2022: hybrid identities built online, where "neutrality" masked pro-Kremlin agendas. According to the *Romania Election Analysis*, this trend is best understood as a fusion of national grievance and algorithmic amplification: "The digital logic of identity politics merges with engagement farming, creating a new form of hybrid nationalism." (CRC, 2025:11). These narratives blurred the line between resistance and submission, reframing peace as capitulation to Russia's sphere of influence.

4. PROXIES, INFLUENCE, AND COORDINATION

The most striking similarity between Romania and Ukraine lies in the use of domestic proxies to advance foreign narratives. Just as pro-Russian actors in Ukraine used clergy, local oligarchs, and media channels, in Romania, platforms like "Daily Romania" and personalities like Georgescu served to mainstream pro-Kremlin content. AUR and associated influencers functioned as "anti-Western in substance, though nationalist in form" (CRC, 2025:9).

The broader campaign ecosystem included 18 interconnected websites promoting coordinated articles, Facebook ads, and conspiratorial videos. According to Șierka & Stănoiu (2024), over $381,000 was funneled toward digital promotion in just a few weeks—money not declared in Georgescu's official campaign reports. This raises serious questions about the transparency of electoral financing and the regulation of political communication online.

5. PSYCHOLOGY AND POLARIZATION

Cass Sunstein (2007) argues that in contexts of uncertainty and instability, individuals become increasingly vulnerable to simple, emotionally charged narratives. The 2024 Romanian presidential election occurred precisely in such a context—marked by inflation, an energy crisis, deep distrust in institutions, and the psychological reverberations of the war in Ukraine. Yet what made Georgescu's campaign uniquely effective was not only the exploitation of technological affordances, but his strategic engagement with collective emotions, particularly anger.

6. ANGER AS A POLITICAL EMOTION

Anger, as political theorist Martha Nussbaum argues in *Anger and Forgiveness* (2016), becomes explosive when it arises from perceived humiliation, exclusion, or systemic injustice. According to Nussbaum, anger appears to serve three significant functions. First, it acts as a vital signal through which the oppressed become aware of the wrongs committed against them. It also serves as a crucial source of motivation, driving them to protest, to resist injustice, and to make their grievances known to the broader world. Finally, anger often seems simply justified: indignation in the face of grave injustice is appropriate, and in that sense, anger expresses a moral truth (Nussbaum, 2016:211). In contemporary politics, such anger is often not aimed at specific policies, but at symbolic enemies: elites, outsiders, abstract institutions.

Antonio Momoc (2025) shows that Călin Georgescu's rise was not driven by traditional grassroots mobilization or mainstream media visibility, but by a "below-the-radar" digital campaign, strategically segmented and algorithmically amplified, particularly on TikTok. His campaign was artificially boosted through networks of bots and fake accounts, while local influencers circulated pro-Georgescu messages without fully grasping his ideological affiliations. This strategy drew users into affective modes of participation that not only helped content go viral but also deepened their own radicalization. As Momoc notes, the campaign functioned as a digital revolt against elites, mobilized through emotion rather than deliberation.

> The loss of trust in political elites, parliamentary parties, and the President of the state, as well as in the Romanian mass media, is the result of growing disillusionment and distrust among the popular classes, the socially marginalized, and the broader public affected by the economic crisis—people determined to take revenge against the political establishment, the leaders of major parliamentary parties, and also against the media elites, perceived as politicized and involved in corruption scandals. (Momoc, 2025:94).

In Romania's 2024 presidential election, this anger was omnidirectional but strategically reframed. It targeted political elites but was projected onto "Brussels," "NATO," "the West," "Ukrainian refugees," and "Soros." Călin Georgescu did not seek to pacify this sentiment. He channeled and weaponized it, transforming dispersed emotional frustration into a cohesive identity: the angry Romanian patriot, betrayed by globalism, awakening against the system.

George Lakoff argues that political emotions such as anger are never isolated or purely instinctive—they are activated, shaped, and sustained by deeper cognitive frames that organize how individuals interpret the world. Within this framework, anger functions not merely as a spontaneous reaction, but as a structured response embedded in narratives that determine who is virtuous, who is culpable, and what kind of moral action is warranted. As Lakoff notes, "Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world… they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act" (Lakoff, 2004:XV). These frames reconfigure facts into emotionally charged moral dichotomies: austerity becomes betrayal; NATO becomes occupation; Ukraine's suffering becomes Romania's burden. In the case of Georgescu's campaign, such reframings were crucial—they reduced geopolitical complexity to affective clarity, transforming confusion and frustration into targeted moral outrage.

In her analysis of populist movements, Ruth Wodak notes that "emotions like fear and anger are not epiphenomena but central features of political strategy" (Wodak, 2015:21). Georgescu's campaign, much like Trump's or Bolsonaro's, did not arise from rational deliberation over policy platforms but from emotional mobilization: a visceral response to perceived loss — of status, of sovereignty, of identity.

The narrative "Support for Ukraine is leading Romania to war" was powerful not because of geopolitical accuracy, but because it offered emotional relief. It redirected fear into certainty, confusion into blame. As Sara Ahmed claims in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), that emotions work to align individuals with communities, and that is why, anger, in our case, becomes a means of belonging.

Moreover, Nussbaum warns us that anger often demands retribution rather than repair. The emotional grammar of Georgescu's supporters was not "let's fix Romania" but "let's punish those who ruined it." His slogans, imagery, and TikTok campaigns consistently used us/them dichotomies, reinforcing tribal resentment and moral superiority.

This dynamic was amplified by algorithmic feedback loops, which ensured that users who engaged with angry or fearful content were systematically exposed to more of the same. Political psychologist Karen Stenner, in *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (2005), argues that individuals with a predisposition toward authoritarianism become significantly more intolerant when confronted with what she terms "normative threats" — situations in which social consensus breaks down, group values seem contested, or political leaders are perceived as weak. These threats, often framed in terms of identity and belonging, trigger an affective shift: anger and fear become catalysts for a yearning toward order, obedience, and uniformity. Georgescu's messaging exploited precisely this psychological mechanism — transforming digital frustration into moral certainty and authoritarian receptiveness (Stenner, 2005:32).

In short, Georgescu's rise must be understood not as a rational electoral phenomenon, but as an emotional alignment: a collective act of catharsis masquerading as a political campaign. Anger was not the byproduct of disinformation — it was the fuel, the architecture, and the connective tissue of an alternative political community forged in TikTok loops and Telegram channels.

7. FROM INDIVIDUALS TO CROWDS: THE GROUP MIND

To understand how this anger scaled from individual sentiment to electoral force, we must return to classic theories of collective psychology. Gustave Le Bon, in *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), argued that individuals in crowds exhibit behaviors and beliefs they would never adopt in isolation. Social media platforms are today's digital crowds—environments where individual cognition is suppressed in favor of mimetic behavior, tribal alignment, and emotional contagion. Georgescu's supporters did not vote as

isolated individuals, but as part of affective communities—groups organized not by ideology, but by shared ressentiment. As Craig Calhoun (2004) observed in his work on nationalism, collective identity is often activated in moments of crisis through narratives of injustice and humiliation. TikTok and Telegram groups functioned as affinity spaces, where emotional narratives were rehearsed and reinforced until they became political truths.

8. GROUP DYNAMICS AND BELIEF REINFORCEMENT

Călin Georgescu's campaign cannot be understood merely through the lens of individual persuasion. Its strength lay in its ability to activate and organize collective emotions, transforming isolated frustrations into a coherent group identity. This transformation occurred not in town squares or televised debates, but inside digital ecosystems — personalized, emotional, and self-reinforcing.

As Eli Pariser (2011) explains in *The Filter Bubble*, digital platforms curate reality according to past behavior. Once a user engages with a nationalist or conspiratorial video — "Romania must be neutral," "We are being dragged into NATO's war" — the algorithm offers more of the same, effectively sealing the user inside a self-reinforcing emotional universe. These bubbles create not just epistemic insulation, but identity enclaves.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2011) describes how repetition triggers cognitive familiarity, which in turn breeds perceived truth. When users see the same slogan — "Support for Ukraine is leading Romania to war" — dozens of times, shared across different influencer accounts, their brain registers it not as manipulation, but as common sense. This is especially effective in short-form, high-frequency environments like TikTok, where cognitive overload is bypassed in favor of emotional immediacy.

Yet the most important transformation is social, not cognitive. Platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram do not simply isolate users — they connect them into communities of affect. These are not structured around debate, but around mimicry, affirmation, and symbolic performance. Craig Calhoun (2002) argues that collective identity is not merely inherited, but actively constituted through public participation, particularly in response to perceived threats or crises. In such moments, shared narratives of injustice and public discourse serve as the foundation for solidarity and the imagining of common belonging. In these environments, belief is performative. Sharing a meme, remixing a TikTok, or commenting "Down with NATO" is less about conveying information and more about displaying allegiance. Support for Georgescu became a social marker — not just a political preference, but a signal that one was "awakened," "against the system," "on the right side of history." This process aligns with what Sunstein (2001:67) calls "group polarization": when like-minded people interact, their views become more extreme. In Georgescu's networks, this led to an amplification of distrust, radicalization of rhetoric, and increased intolerance toward dissenting opinions. TikTok's duet and remix functions created feedback loops of ideological escalation, where fringe ideas became normalized through repetition and group validation.

In *The Misinformation Age*, O'Connor and Weatherall (2019) argue that individuals often adopt beliefs not based on personal conviction, but by inferring credibility from the actions of others. This mechanism, known as an information cascade, occurs when people set aside their own knowledge in favor of what appears to be socially validated truth. In digital environments, where engagement metrics serve as cues of credibility, such cascades are rapidly amplified — a handful of viral posts can quickly generate the illusion of consensus and produce what appears to be a shared truth (p. 30). When individuals see others acting on a belief — for example, voting for Georgescu, endorsing conspiracy theories, or attacking mainstream media — they often follow not because they are convinced, but because they assume others must know something. In digital networks, this logic accelerates. What starts as a few viral posts becomes, very quickly, a shared truth.

Even more insidiously, conformity pressure begins to operate. People within these digital micro-communities begin to suppress doubts in order to avoid social exclusion. The more tightly knit the group, the stronger the incentive to align with the dominant narrative. In these spaces, even rational, skeptical individuals may end up adopting and defending false beliefs, simply to maintain belonging. This mechanism was at the heart of Georgescu's digital strategy. His campaign did not rely on argumentation or debate. It created an environment where belief became identity, and where truth was less important than solidarity.

9. FROM PASSIVE AUDIENCES TO PARTICIPATORY BELIEVERS

The success of Călin Georgescu's campaign was not simply due to the spread of disinformation, but its performance — and the way users were invited to co-create that performance. Unlike traditional media, where audiences consume content passively, platforms like TikTok and Telegram enable participatory disinformation ecosystems. In these environments, users don't just receive messages — they respond, remix, amplify, and embody them. Georgescu's digital strategy leveraged this participatory structure masterfully. TikTok duets, Telegram polls, meme challenges, and hashtag cascades allowed supporters to play an active role in the campaign's narrative. This was o't a one-way broadcast; it was an interactive ritual, where citizens were encouraged to become producers of ideology, not merely consumers.

Zizi Papacharissi (2015) argues that political expression in digital spaces is increasingly driven by affective circulation rather than rational deliberation. Platforms like Twitter invite affective gestures — short, emotionally infused acts of communication — that blend opinion, identity performance, and social connection. As she explains, users often share content not to persuade or inform, but "as self-referential attempts to connect the private to the public and the personal to the civic" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 116). This performative logic of participation signals belonging, not belief — a way of affiliating with a cause or community rather than endorsing the truth of a claim.

Posting "Stop the war," resharing a Georgescu TikTok, or joining a Telegram thread wasn't just an act of communication — it was a declaration of identity. Supporting Georgescu thus became a form of digital belonging. His slogans — "Romania must wake up," "Down with the system," "We want peace, not NATO's war" — were less about policy and more about moral alignment. These became identity markers for users who felt excluded from traditional politics but empowered in digital communities.

José van Dijck (2013) shows that identity formation in the digital age is increasingly co-produced by humans and machines, as platforms shape not only how individuals interact, but also how they perform and perceive themselves. Through algorithms, protocols, and engagement metrics, social media infrastructures do not merely facilitate civic expression — they actively structure it. This process, which van Dijck does not name explicitly but can be described as the platformization of civic identity, transforms participation into a calculable and performative act, where visibility and influence are mediated by technical defaults rather than democratic parity. As she notes, platforms subtly reconfigure "what it means to be connected, to be social, and to be a citizen" in a culture where connectivity often overrides connectedness (van Dijck, 2013:32–34).

TikTok's design — built on virality, remixability, and short-form intensity — turned political ideas into aesthetic content. Users did not just endorse Georgescu; they danced to his message, lip-synced his soundbites, and wove his rhetoric into lifestyle posts.

This participatory turn is crucial for understanding the depth of commitment among Georgescu's base. Tucker et al. (2018) consider that polarization in digital spaces is not merely a byproduct of misinformation, but frequently its intended outcome. In their analysis, political actors and interest groups deliberately exploit the architecture of social media to spread divisive content, not simply to deceive, but to deepen affective divides and harden group identities. As users engage with emotionally charged narratives — through likes, shares, and comments — their beliefs become more entrenched, and the space for deliberation narrows. Rather than correcting misinformation, such engagement often amplifies it, reinforcing the partisan logics that make democratic dialogue increasingly difficult

Georgescu's campaign, by encouraging participation rather than persuasion, built a collective subjectivity that was not only angry, but proudly oppositional: against institutions, against "mainstream media," against Ukraine, against the West. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) argues in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, platforms are not passive conduits of information—they are engineered systems designed to extract and manipulate emotional data. The more reactive and expressive users are, the more valuable they become within these systems. Participation is not neutral; it trains the algorithm to better anticipate and exploit emotional vulnerability. Georgescu's campaign was finely attuned to this logic. It did not just spread through the algorithm—it worked to intensify it, encouraging users to engage emotionally, which in turn reinforced their own radicalization. "The goal is not only to know but to shape. The systems are engineered to activate, manipulate, and direct human behavior in real time." (Zuboff, 2019:327). Georgescu's campaign did not merely ride the algorithm; it activated users to train it, reinforcing their own radicalization through engagement.

Ultimately, this participatory model created a feedback loop of identity and ideology. TikTok users didn't just learn what to believe — they learned who they were through what they shared. Supporting Georgescu became a mode of self-performance, and the campaign transformed into a community of emotional resonance, not just a political movement.

10. CONCLUSION OF THE SUBCHAPTER

Călin Georgescu's electoral ascent cannot be understood through the traditional lens of individual persuasion or ideological alignment. His rise must be read as a case of digitally mediated collective psychology, in which anger, emotional contagion, and algorithmic structure converged to forge a powerful, oppositional identity.

This was not an electorate shaped by policy debate or rational deliberation, but a participatory public animated by shared resentment and moral certainty. What Georgescu offered was not just a platform — but a role to perform, a narrative to inhabit, and a community to join. In this digital landscape, truth was less important than resonance, and engagement was not about being informed, but about being seen and belonging.

The online crowd did not deliberate — it reacted, remixed, and reaffirmed. It behaved as a collective mind, not because its members were irrational, but because their emotional needs were met more fully through participation than through persuasion.

In 2024, Georgescu didn't just supply illusions — he invited people to co-author them.

11. FINAL REFLECTION: MIMETIC VOTING AND THE NETWORKERD BIRTH OF A CANDIDATE

Călin Georgescu's electoral surge must be understood not only as the result of a sophisticated disinformation campaign, but as the emergence of a new logic of political formation in the digital age. He was not simply "chosen" by voters — he was assembled through affect, performed into visibility, and validated through emotional resonance. His candidacy is best explained by what I propose to call the theory of mimetic voting in networked environments.

This model departs from classical theories of rational electoral behavior or ideological alignment. Instead, it posits that in highly polarized, high-speed digital ecosystems, voting decisions can emerge not from deliberation, but from affective convergence — a process shaped by collective emotions, rapid exposure, and the mimetic behavior of social groups.

Three mechanisms define this model:

1. Accelerated Credibility Through Emotional Repetition. Georgescu's image saturated TikTok and Telegram within a matter of days. As Daniel Kahneman (2011) notes, repeated exposure produces familiarity, and familiarity breeds perceived truth. In the absence of prior knowledge, visibility becomes credibility. People didn't know him — but they saw him, constantly.
2. Social Validation via Affective Belonging. Voters did not simply support Georgescu — they joined a movement, a digital tribe. Echoing theories by Eli Pariser (2011) and Sunstein (2017), information was not weighed individually, but accepted through group dynamics. Liking a Georgescu video or sharing a meme became a performative act of allegiance, a way to declare: "I belong to those who fight the system."
3. Anger as Identity and Engine. Following Martha Nussbaum (2016) and George Lakoff (2004), anger was not incidental — it was the campaign's operating system. Georgescu didn't propose policies — he gave voters an enemy. He turned their rage into a narrative of virtue. Each repost, each remix, each hashtag was a personal contribution to a perceived collective struggle.

In this logic, TikTok was not just a platform for dissemination — it was a stage for political identity formation. Georgescu emerged as a function of a crowd that didn't necessarily agree on a program, but recognized itself in shared resentment. He became the face of a digital multitude that defined itself not by what it believed in, but by what it rejected — elites, institutions, the West, Ukraine, complexity itself.

As Gustave Le Bon warned in 1895: "The masses never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions, and whoever gives them illusions becomes their master." Georgescu did not just give them illusions — he let them co-create them.

In sum, the 2024 election revealed a new paradigm: the networked birth of political candidates, assembled not by party machines but by algorithmic virality, emotional mimicry, and shared anger. The implications go far beyond Romania. In a media ecosystem designed for performance over persuasion, the next candidate may not need a platform — only a hashtag.

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