



Targeting Social Cohesion: Russian FIMI Operations in Romania

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Abstract: This research article examines Russia's presence in the Romanian public sphere during the unprecedented four rounds of elections in 2024, which culminated in the first-ever annulment of a presidential election. It aims to analyze how Russia sought to legitimize its invasion of Ukraine, diminish Romanian public support for Ukraine, and erode confidence in national authorities and in the commitment to democracy and Western values.

Keywords: propaganda, information warfare, disinformation, FIMI, Romania, Russia, Ukraine.

Introduction

This research article examines Russia's information warfare against Romania, a NATO member, by analyzing its perception and use of information to advance its objectives. The study examines critical indicators of public approval concerning Romania's support for Ukraine in its defense against the Russian invasion, utilizing various measures from 2022 to 2024. The article also provides new data from a public survey commissioned by the author and conducted by the prominent Romanian polling agency IRES at the end of February 2024. The survey evaluates the impact of dominant Russian narratives on Romanian public discourse. This study examines the evolution of attitudes within specific demographic groups, highlighting that, despite a historical context of anti-Russian sentiment in Romania, Kremlin-generated narratives have notably shaped public opinion.

Clarification Regarding the Terminology Employed in the Article

To ensure continuity and relevance, this article uses the terminology used in NATO's official public communications regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict since February 2022: "Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine," "Russia's war against Ukraine," and "full-scale invasion of Ukraine."

Furthermore, in examining the disinformation and propaganda campaigns conducted by Russia in Romania, this article employs the European Commission's terminology of "information integrity" and "countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)," while aligning with the EU's interpretation of the FIMI concept as detailed in the 2025 report on FIMI:¹

FIMI is a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.

FIMI often seeks to stoke polarisation and divisions inside and outside the EU while also aiming to undermine the EU's global standing and ability to pursue its policy objectives and interests.²

Research Hypothesis

In the lead-up to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and particularly following the commencement of the aggression in 2022, the Russian Federation escalated its Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) efforts aimed at influencing public opinion in NATO and EU member states, notably those on the Eastern flank, including Romania. Consequently, we formulated the hypothesis that the principal objectives of Russian information manipulation and interference in Romania are:

- (1) To legitimize the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, framed as a necessary act of self-defense in response to persistent NATO aggression;
- (2) To diminish Romanian public support for Ukraine, whether through governmental actions or via NATO and EU initiatives;
- (3) To undermine Romanian public confidence in national authorities, especially those responsible for security and defense; and
- (4) To damage Romania's democratic framework and Western values.

¹ European Union External Action (EEAS), "Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference (FIMI)," EEAS – The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, March 14, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-countering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi_en.

² EEAS, "Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference (FIMI)."

Research Questions

In accordance with the research hypothesis, we developed the following research propositions:

- (1) Given the historical grievances of the Romanian people based on past relations with the Tsarist Empire and the USSR, the level of popularity of the Russian Federation is low among the Romanian public opinion;
- (2) The main pro-Russian narratives through which the Kremlin seeks to justify its illegal war against Ukraine have a rather modest level of acceptance among the general public in Romania, in line with the EU average;
- (3) Taking into account some sensitive aspects of Romanian-Ukrainian relations over the past decades (since Ukraine became an independent state and Romania's largest neighboring country), the Romanian public's approval of measures supporting Ukraine—through actions by the Romanian Government and by the EU or NATO—is lower, but not notably lower when compared to the EU average;
- (4) The level of attachment of the Romanian public to the values and principles of democracy and the rule of law remains high, in line with the European average.

Research Methods

Quantitative Methodologies: National Opinion Survey

We conducted a nationwide opinion survey in Romania at the end of February 2024, allowing us to assess the perspectives of the target audience on ten narratives classified as pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian, as well as their level of confidence in the country's principal public institutions, democracy as a political framework, and values and principles endorsed by the West.

Survey Methodology

The poll, conducted via computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), targeted Romanian individuals aged 18 and older residing in the country. Random probability sampling was employed to produce a nationally representative sample, with a total of 983 respondents nationwide. The sample structure was formulated based on the following primary criteria: gender distribution (51 % female / 49 % male), age demographics (18–35 years: 25 %, 36–50 years: 28 %, 51–65 years: 26 %, and 65+ years: 21 %), educational attainment (elementary: 35 %, college: 48 %, and university or higher: 17 %), urban/ rural classification (urban: 54 % / rural: 46 %), and geographic region (Transylvania and Banat: 35 %, Southern Romania, Bucharest, and Dobruja: 46 %, and Moldavia: 19 %).

The poll was representative of Romania's voting population, with an accepted margin of error of ± 3.2 %. The contractor was the Romanian Institute for

Evaluation and Strategy (IRES), located in Cluj-Napoca, and the fieldwork period ran from 20 to 29 February 2024.

To design the set of five pro-Russian and five anti-Ukrainian narratives to be measured, we analyzed the most prevalent themes and messages in the Romanian public space and their frequency of use. Polling operators asked respondents to evaluate each statement on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing “totally disagree” and 7 representing “completely agree.” Similarly, we selected five statements to measure attitudes toward democracy and Western values.

The findings enabled us to better understand the objectives pursued by Russian Federation-sponsored FIMI activities, either through direct actions or via local or Western channels, within the Romanian public sphere. Consequently, we were able to explore the impacts of FIMI activities on social cohesion, including declining trust in the Romanian authorities’ capacity to govern and manage public affairs effectively, reduced adherence to democratic norms and principles, and the fostering of aspirational models of political organization grounded in authoritarian and illiberal ideologies.

Study of Documents

To explain how the Russian Federation employs manipulation and propaganda and interferes in democratic processes such as elections in Western countries—particularly Romania—and to understand how Romanian public opinion about Russia and Ukraine has evolved over the last three years, we consulted studies available in academic databases (e.g., ProQuest, EBSCO eBooks, Scopus, and East View Information Services). We also used reports and studies from the European Union, including the latest Standard Eurobarometer from 2023 and 2024, as well as research conducted by the Slovak think tank GLOBSEC between 2022 and 2024. These sources were used to assess changes in Romanian public attitudes regarding perceived threats to regional and global security, democratic values, and identity positioning between the West and East, in order to identify key indicators and track their evolution over time.

Findings

The Research Context

In 2024, Romania, as an EU member, called its citizens to vote in an unprecedented four rounds of elections: for the European Parliament, local authorities, national parliamentary representatives, and the presidency.

Numerous researchers and public reports have extensively demonstrated that Russia has attempted to interfere in and influence electoral processes in various Western nations. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the unusually protracted process of electing Romania’s representatives at all levels would be perceived as an opportune moment for the Russian propaganda apparatus to disseminate heavily manipulated narratives and exploit the Romanian electorate’s frustrations and escalating discontent with the performance of mainstream political actors over the past decade.

The electoral debate in Romania was significantly influenced by Russian-sponsored FIMI operations that exploited various social grievances, including COVID-19 pandemic measures, economic stagnation, and deterioration in the average quality of life. The Kremlin's influence was so extensive that, on December 6, it compelled the Constitutional Court to invalidate the first round of the presidential election, marking a historical first in Romania. This decision, revealed several days after the court had affirmed the initial round, followed the National Security Council's unprecedented declassification and publication of documents from Romanian intelligence services concerning illicit activities by certain competitors, particularly in the online electoral campaign.³ The declassified files explicitly linked Russia to the FIMI efforts, especially on TikTok, which benefited one candidate and resulted in his unexpected first-place finish after the initial round. Solea indicates that the declassified reports revealed evidence of electoral manipulation via social media, illicit campaign financing on TikTok, cyberattacks by external entities, and alleged Russian interference favoring the previously obscure candidate who won the initial round.⁴

The unexpected outcomes of the initial round of the presidential election have prompted significant inquiries: Was the abrupt rise in Romanian public support for populism and right-wing extremism, referred to as sovereignism, truly unforeseen? Was this transition a consequence of a natural evolution driven by a legitimate public response to governmental errors and policy failures, or was it an attitude deliberately fostered and subtly instigated by foreign interference? Could Russia have executed a large-scale manipulation campaign within the Romanian public sphere while remaining mostly undetected?

In summary, yes, Russia is extensively prepared for large-scale active measures and disinformation campaigns, targeting not only Romania but the entire Western world. And, no, the Kremlin's actions were not undetected; rather, they were largely underestimated and overlooked by those with the capacity and authority to counter such extensive foreign interference.

Data Interpretation

The analysis of data gathered from the national poll conducted in February 2024 disconfirms research question #2, which assumed that the level of acceptance of pro-Russian narratives among the general public in Romania was rather modest. The data indicate that predominant pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives have significantly influenced a substantial portion of Romanian public opinion. Approximately 70 % of the local populace perceives government assistance for the 80,000 Ukrainians fleeing the war and seeking temporary refuge in Romania

³ "Press Release," The President of Romania Official Website, December 4, 2024, <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/comunicat-de-presa1733327193>. – in Romanian

⁴ Anda Iulia Solea, "Why Romania's Election Was Annulled – And What Happens Next," *The Conversation*, December 16, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/why-romania-election-was-annulled-and-what-happens-next-245779>.

as inequitable toward vulnerable segments of the domestic population, despite their representation being a mere fraction of the 7.3 million Ukrainians who have entered the country and headed to other destinations. Moreover, nearly 50 % of Romanians view refugees as a liability to the national economy.

The study additionally assessed expectations regarding the cessation of Russia's attack. A significant number of respondents agree that ceding territory would be an acceptable concession for Ukraine in order to expedite the resolution of the crisis, thereby averting a nuclear confrontation that poses a threat to the entire region. Since February 2022, these narratives have been extensively circulated on prominent Romanian social media platforms, primarily Facebook and TikTok, and have received significant amplification from the far-right political spectrum during public debate and political discourse. The median level of acceptance of this perspective on Russia's war against Ukraine, which is more closely aligned with Kremlin narratives, was estimated at approximately 50 % (see Figure 1).

Through the cross-examination of public sentiments regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine alongside the strategic narratives disseminated by Russia or its proxies, we found that research question # 3 was not confirmed. Despite the predominant opposition among Romanians to these fabricated narratives, the proportion of respondents endorsing the Kremlin's rationale for ending the war in Ukraine and holding anti-Ukrainian attitudes comes close to half of the responses (Figure 2).

These findings corroborate earlier indications from surveys published in 2023 and 2024 by the European Commission, which demonstrated that Romanians' support for Ukraine across multiple domains—financial, economic, military, etc.—ranked among the lowest among EU member states.

The European Commission's Standard Eurobarometer 100, published in 2023 and 2024, indicates that although median support for various actions in response

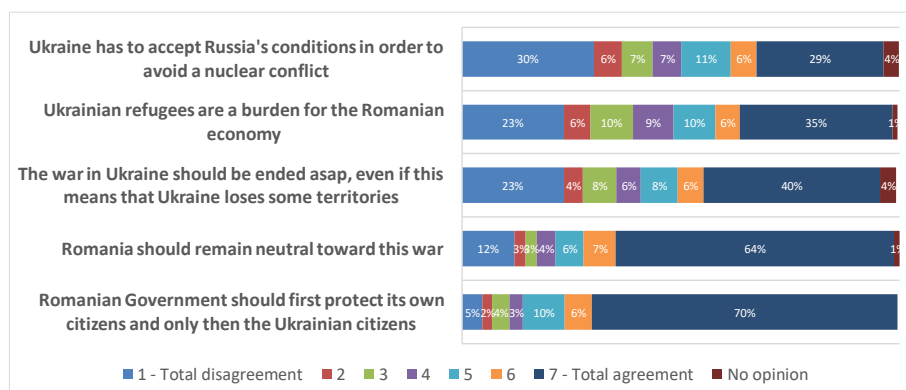


Figure 1: Romanian public attitudes regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (source: national survey commissioned by the author, February 2024).

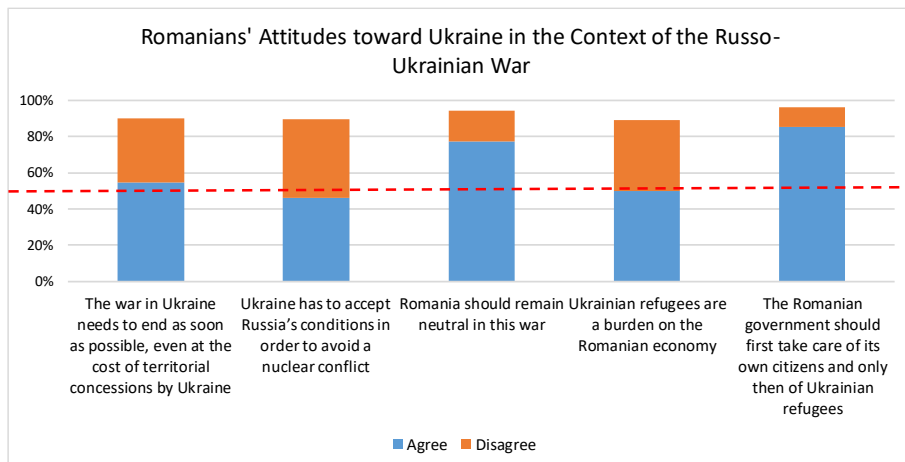


Figure 2: The median level of negative attitudes toward Ukraine is around 50 % of the total opinions indicated across five statements on this subject.

to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is relatively high across the European Union, Romanians report the lowest levels of favorability toward providing different forms of assistance to Kyiv.⁵ With 70 %, Romania ranks last among EU member states in favorability toward providing EU humanitarian support for those affected by the war in Ukraine (2023 survey). By the end of 2024, Romanians' favorability toward providing EU humanitarian support for war refugees decreased by 3 percentage points (Standard Eurobarometer 100, Autumn 2024).⁶ According to the survey published in Standard Eurobarometer 100, Autumn 2023, fewer than half of Romanians support EU financing for the purchase of military equipment for Ukrainian forces, and this position did not reach a majority in the 2024 opinion survey. This aligns with the results of the 2023 GLOBSEC Trends research, which indicate that 59 % of Romanians perceive military assistance to Ukraine as a national security issue (Figure 3).⁷

A comparable number was observed among respondents who, while acknowledging that aiding Ukrainians escaping the war is morally justified, consider that the Romanian government is implementing these measures to the det-

⁵ Verian, "Standard Eurobarometer 100 – Autumn 2023" (European Commission, Directorate General for Communication, 2023), <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=90137>.

⁶ "Standard Eurobarometer 102 – Autumn 2024: Europeans and the EU Budget" (European Commission, Directorate General for Communication, October–November 2024), <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215>.

⁷ Dominika Hajdu et al., "GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United We (Still) Stand" (Bratislava, Slovak Republic: Centre for Democracy & Resilience, 2023), 23, www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2023-united-we-still-stand.

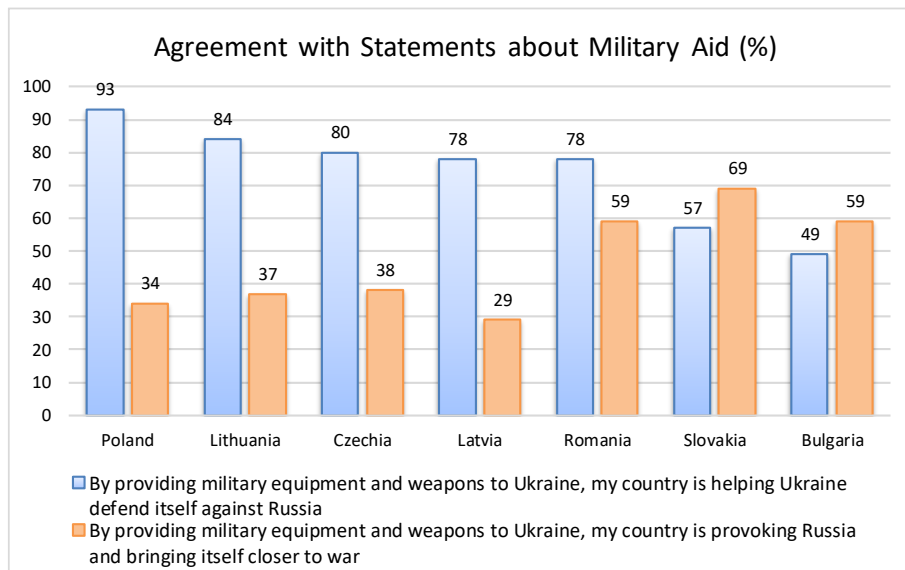


Figure 3: A majority of Romanians (59%) consider military aid for Ukraine a national security concern (source: GLOBSEC Trends 2023).

rimment of vulnerable populations in Romania, who are thus overlooked. Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia are once again distancing themselves with this approach⁸ (Figure 4).

The statistics gathered from our nationwide survey on five pro-Russian storylines indicate that certain egregious falsehoods propagated by Russian propaganda have permeated a substantial portion of Romania's voting populace. For instance, nearly 40% of respondents concurred that Vladimir Putin is a patriot safeguarding his nation's interests, 37% endorsed the notion that Russia is surrounded by hostile NATO countries and has no alternative but to defend itself, and 35% affirmed that Russia bore no responsibility for initiating the conflict with Ukraine (Figure 5).

The graph illustrated in Figure 6 shows that the median share of Romanian respondents aligned with the Russian perspective on the Ukraine conflict is slightly above 30%, indicating substantial traction for Russian-sponsored narratives within the Romanian public sphere.

The public opinion poll gathered data on Romanian attitudes toward the core principles of democracy: individual liberties, the checks and balances inherent in constitutional democracy that inhibit the unrestrained exercise of power, and the independence of the media.

⁸ Hajdu et al., "GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United We (Still) Stand," 25.

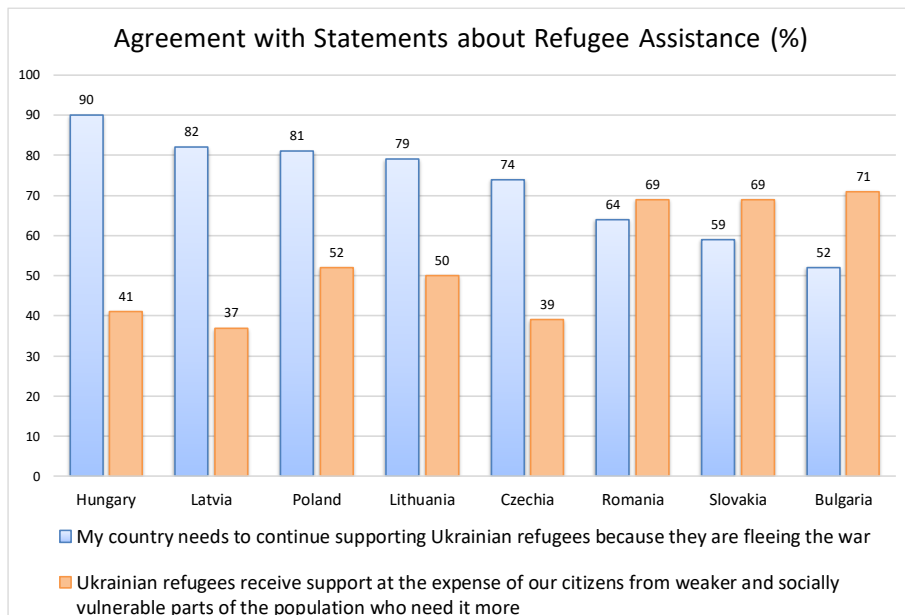


Figure 4: Almost 70 % of Romanians feel that their own socially vulnerable groups are overlooked by the government in favor of Ukrainian refugees.

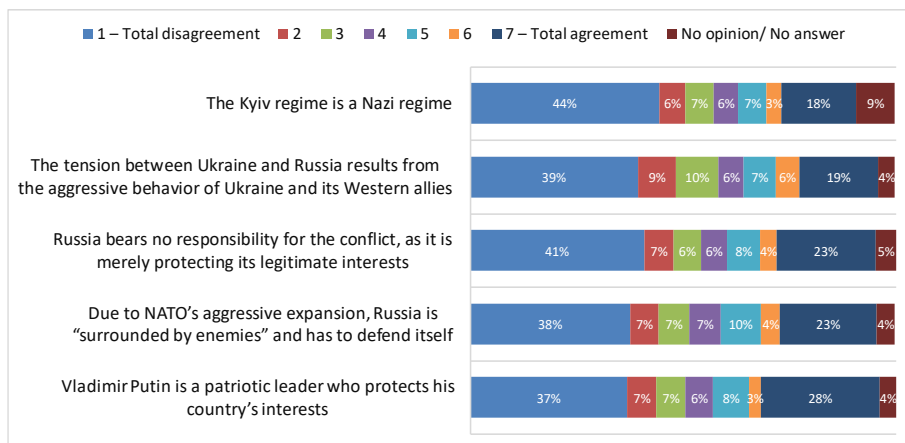


Figure 5: Level of acceptance of pro-Russian narratives in Romanian public opinion (source: national survey commissioned by the author, March 2024).

These factors were assessed to determine how popular perceptions correlate with Russia's strategic aim of undermining democracy and electoral processes in the Western world, as abundantly documented in recent decades in the United States and major European democracies.

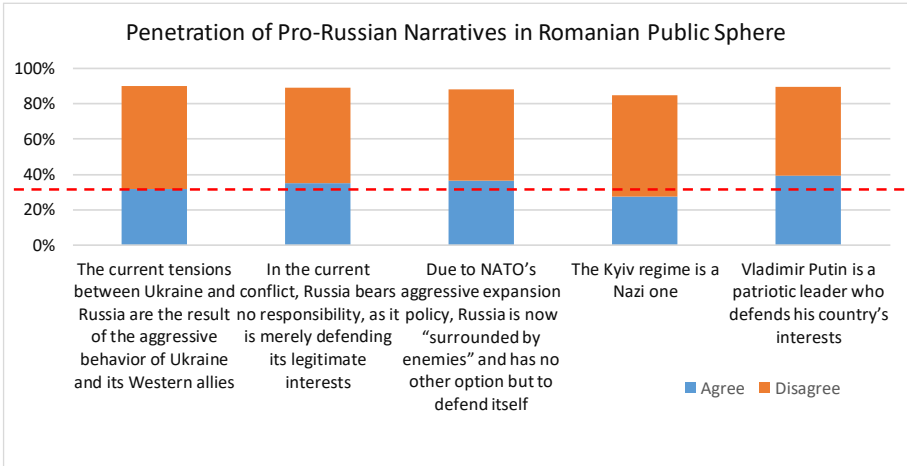


Figure 6: Median level of acceptance of pro-Russian narratives among Romanian public opinion (source: national survey commissioned by the author, March 2024).

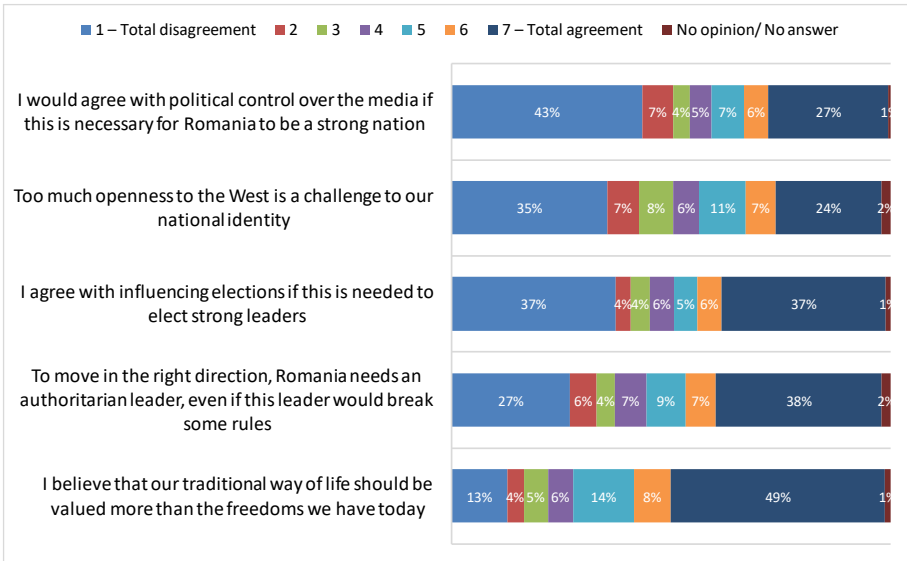


Figure 7: Attitudes of Romanians toward democratic values (source: national survey commissioned by the author, March 2024).

The results indicate that significant portions of Romanian society exhibit a preference for authoritarian political leadership, prioritizing ultra-conservative beliefs and traditions over the advancement of democratic principles in society and the state. Approximately 71 % of respondents hold a favorable view of upholding the traditional lifestyle of Romanians, even at the cost of the individual

liberties that define contemporary Romanian society. Additionally, 50 % of Romanians support the prospect of authoritarian governance. Some members of the public are prepared to pay this price to restore the country, while others even support exerting influence over electoral processes to secure such strong leaders. Approximately 40 % of respondents are willing to compromise the media's editorial independence to strengthen Romania as a nation (Figure 7).

The significant departure from the pro-Western stance that had defined Romania for the previous three decades became apparent in 2022, when GLOBSEC evaluated Central and Eastern European populations' perspectives on Western values and principles. The 2022 study revealed that Romanian society had shifted slightly toward the eastern end of the spectrum, with only 27 % of respondents identifying the country as part of the West. This represents a significant decrease from 43 % in 2021 (Figure 8).

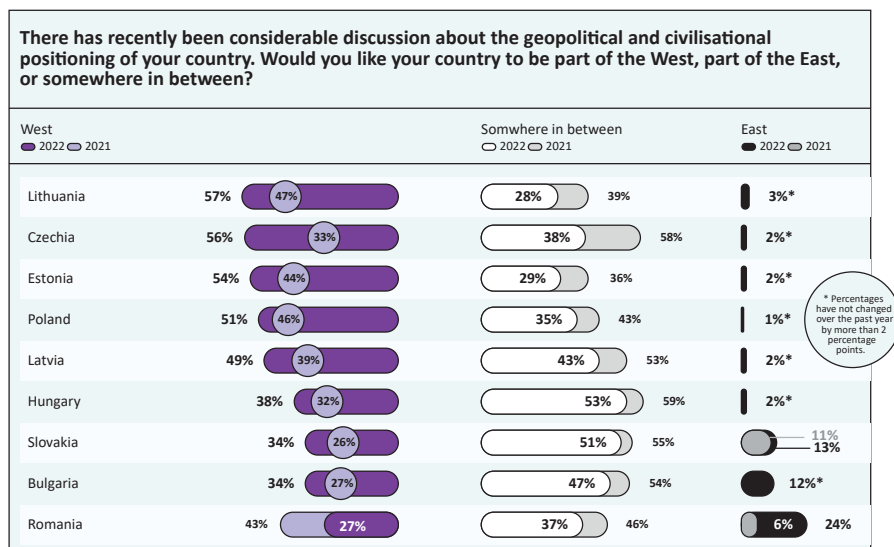


Figure 8: In 2022, only 27 % of Romanians identified the country as belonging to Western civilization – a dramatic decrease from 43 % in the previous year.⁹

Despite GLOBSEC's findings indicating a slight increase in public satisfaction with democracy over the past three years (2022–2024), Romania remains positioned low in the hierarchy of Central and Eastern European countries, ranking

⁹ Dominika Hajdu et al., "GLOBSEC Trends 2022: CEE amid the War in Ukraine" (Bratislava, Slovak Republic: Centre for Democracy & Resilience GLOBSEC, 2022), <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>.

sixth out of nine¹⁰ (Figure 9). Romania also ranks low in public opinion on whether democracy—as a political system founded on equality, human rights, and the rule of law—is beneficial to the country. Alongside Slovakia, it recorded the highest percentage of the population that perceives a totalitarian regime devoid of regular elections as advantageous for the nation¹¹ (Figure 10).

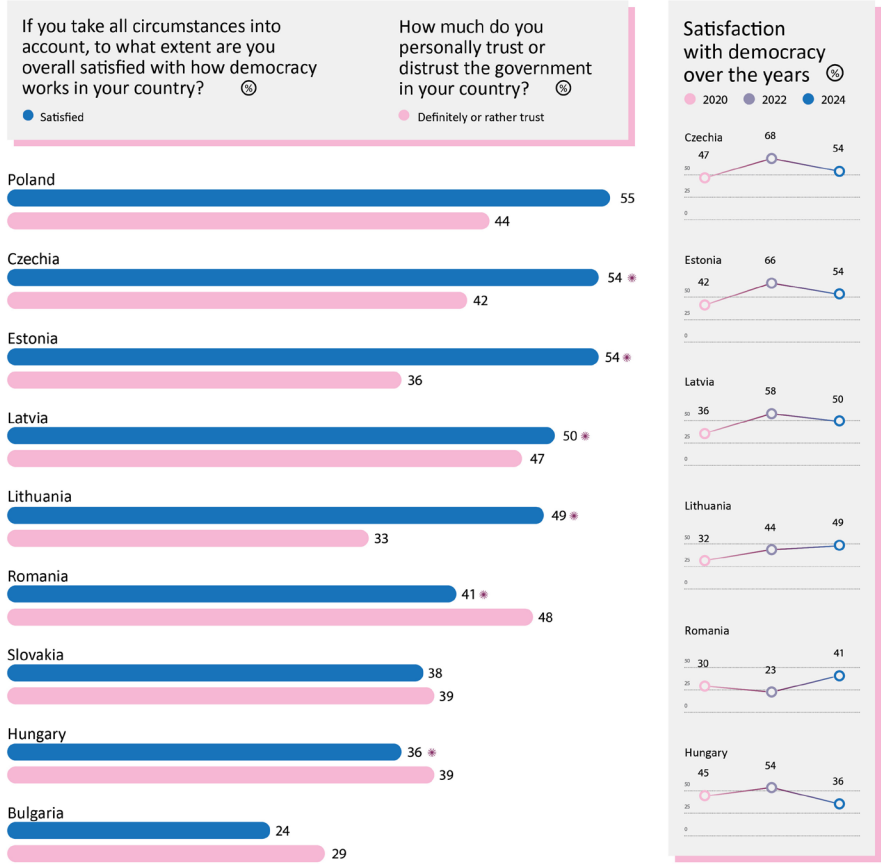


Figure 9: Romanians rank 6th in a chart comparing public satisfaction with democracy across CEE countries, 2022–2024 (Hajdu et al., 2024).

¹⁰ Dominika Hajdu et al., “GLOBSEC Trends 2024: CEE – A Brave New Region?” (Bratislava, Slovak Republic: Centre for Democracy & Resilience GLOBSEC, 2024), 68-69, www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/GLOBSEC%20TRENDS%202024.pdf.

¹¹ Hajdu et al., “GLOBSEC Trends 2024: CEE – A Brave New Region?” 72-73.

Totalitarian system without regular elections is good for our country. (%)

● Agree ● Disagree ● Do not know (not read)

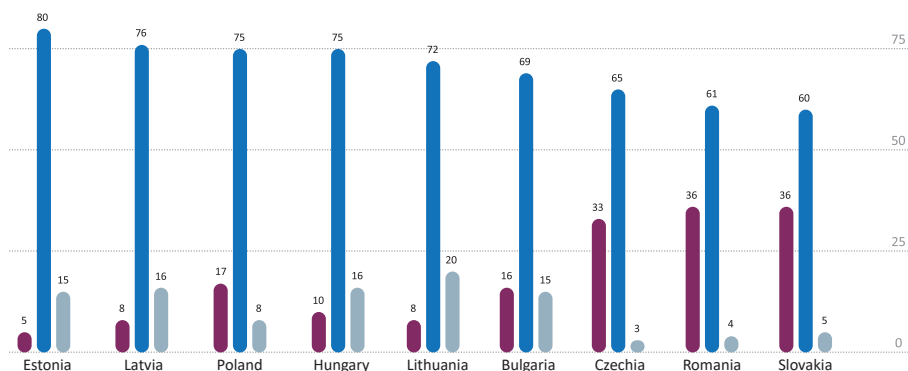


Figure 10: Romanians’ attitudes toward democracy in 2024 compared with other CEE countries (Hajdu et al., 2024).

The results gathered from the public survey conducted in February 2024 facilitated a more comprehensive investigation of Romanians’ attitudes toward democratic values. Over 50 % of the Romanian electorate perceives authoritarian-style leadership as a viable option for the country, and over 70 % prioritize the preservation of historic Romanian values over the maintenance of current freedoms. A substantial portion of Romanian voters (40 %) believes that political control of the media is a justifiable cost in the pursuit of national fortification, and nearly 50 % hold favorable views on manipulating elections to secure robust leadership (Figure 11). These results acquired particular relevance during the December 2024 presidential elections, following the Constitutional Court’s annulment of the polls due to foreign involvement in the electoral process.

Through various FIMI actions and operations targeting Romania, Russia aims to stir societal divides and unrest by employing measures designed to undermine democratic institutions and erode public trust in elected officials and public authorities. Concurrently, Russia is attempting to meddle in electoral processes while exacerbating historical grievances and amplifying disagreements between Bucharest and Kyiv. The Kremlin also seeks to expand its influence in the Republic of Moldova, which perceives Bucharest as a primary proponent of its accession to the European Union. Subverting the Bucharest-Chișinău partnership and misrepresenting Romania’s image among the Russian-speaking population in the Republic of Moldova—especially in Transnistria and the Gagauz Autonomous Region—facilitates Russia’s exploitation of the enduring conflict in Transnistria to advance its strategic objectives related to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

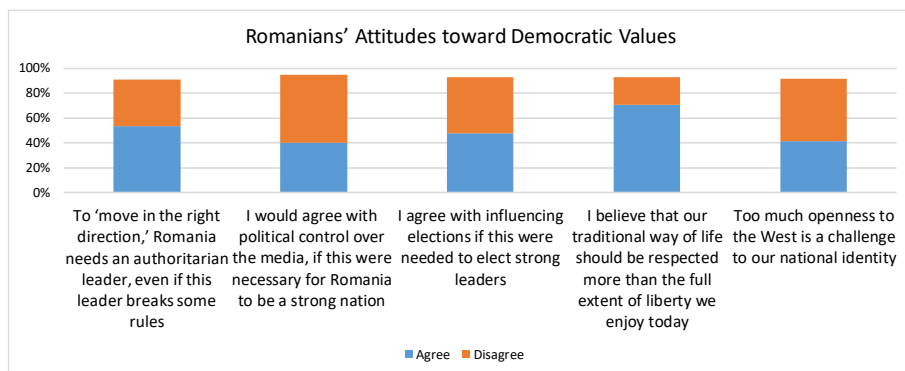


Figure 11: Romanians' attitudes toward democratic values shortly before the four-stage electoral process of 2024.

Discussion

Russian Influence Operations and Romania: Context and Constraints

Thompson¹² notes that the Russian Federation's efforts to undermine Western societies' trust in their governments and to propagate distrust through manipulation and influence of public discourse remain unyielding:

Inspired by President Vladimir Putin's desire to turn Americans against one another and armed with increasingly sophisticated cyber operators in the Russian military, Russian disinformation has become a powerful twenty-first-century information weapon that will not be easily defeated. Russian tactics are constantly evolving, and rapid advances in artificial intelligence and deep-fake videos will make detecting disinformation and other active measures increasingly difficult in 2020 and beyond.¹³

The instruments Russia employs to disseminate misinformation represent, in many respects, a reconfiguration of previous Soviet-era methods, now leveraging the capabilities of contemporary information technologies.

Fully immersed in an information conflict with the West—aimed at undermining its coherence and cohesion while weakening NATO and the European Union—Russia is tailoring its influence tactics to each targeted nation. The Kremlin is simultaneously exploiting nation-specific divisions to disrupt individual Western societies and, on a broader scale, to undermine the legitimacy of NATO and the European Union among significant segments of the population in targeted countries. This holds true for Romania as well.

¹² Terry L. Thompson, "No Silver Bullet: Fighting Russian Disinformation Requires Multiple Actions," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 21 (2020): 182-194, 184, <https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2020.0033>.

¹³ Thompson, "No Silver Bullet: Fighting Russian Disinformation Requires Multiple Actions."

The historical relationship between Romania and Russia is characterized by contention. Examining the historical ties between the USSR/Russian Federation and Romania, Rebegea observes that “Romania has become disconnected from Russia as far back as the communist era.”¹⁴ After the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1958, Romania, though a member of the Warsaw Pact, adopted a more independent course. Multiple incidents of provocation against Moscow followed. One of the most significant dissenting positions occurred in 1968, when Communist Romania refrained from participating in the USSR-led invasion of Czechoslovakia. Additionally, Romania sided with China against the USSR when it abstained during the January 1980 UN General Assembly vote on the resolution calling for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. *The Washington Post* portrayed this position as “inflicting on the Soviet Union its most remarkable diplomatic defeat since the global condemnation of its 1956 invasion of Hungary,”¹⁵ emphasizing Communist Romania’s status as an outlier within the Eastern Bloc.

Following the sudden and violent collapse of Ceaușescu’s totalitarian dictatorship in 1989, Romania has consistently refrained from cultivating closer ties with the Russian Federation. Goșu and Manea described its post-1990 foreign policy toward the USSR/Russia as “perpetually in counter-step.”¹⁶ The historical grievances between the two countries centered on the denunciation of the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which facilitated the annexation of significant Romanian territories—Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina—by Stalin’s USSR. Following the dissolution of the USSR, these territories remained part of independent Ukraine, and the issue of the National Bank’s treasury, confiscated by the Bolshevik regime after World War I, remained unresolved.¹⁷ This discord delayed

¹⁴ Corina Rebegea, “Russian Influence in Romania,” in *The Historical and Current State of Romanian-Russian Relations*, ed. Tomasz Piotr Poręba (Brussels, Belgium: New Direction – The Foundation for European Reform, 2018), 53, <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-Report-RomaniaRussia-preview%28low-res%29.pdf>.

¹⁵ Karen DeYoung, “Overwhelming U.N. Vote Condemns Soviets,” *The Washington Post*, January 14, 1980, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/15/overwhelming-un-vote-condemns-soviets/346d9a75-e904-48c5-9b58-c1b007926501/.

¹⁶ Armand Goșu and Octavian Manea, “Romania in a Changing Global Context: Relations with the US and Russia,” in *The Historical and Current State of Romanian-Russian Relations*.

¹⁷ For safety reasons, during World War I, Romania transported the National Bank Treasure—consisting of 91.5 metric tons of gold coins and ingots—to Moscow by rail. Valued at over six billion USD in 2024, it was sent along with jewels and cultural artifacts, including works of art. The Bolsheviks confiscated the gold following their seizure of power in Russia in 1917. Subsequent attempts by Romania to reclaim the gold were unsuccessful. In 1935 and 1956, certain cultural items were returned by Soviet authorities; however, the gold was not among them. See more: Ion I. Jinga, “The Odyssey of the Romanian Treasure Taken to Moscow,” Permanent Representation of Romania to the Council of Europe, <https://coe.mae.ro/en/local-news/1655>; and “Russia Should Return Romania’s Gold Sent to Moscow During World War I, European Parliament Says,” *AP*, March 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/romania-russia->

the signing of a bilateral treaty for another decade. It was signed on July 4, 2003, in Moscow, and subsequently ratified by both parliaments. However, this did not result in a substantive improvement in Russo-Romanian relations. Gôrka notes that “in the post-Soviet era, Russia held little significance for Romania and vice versa, as both nations faced their own challenges and priorities.”¹⁸ Consequently, Romanians viewed the post-Soviet region primarily through the lens of their immediate neighbors, Moldova and Ukraine.

A joint study released by three Eastern European think tanks indicates that the historically entrenched animosity of Romanians toward Russia—which Kremlin propaganda inaccurately characterizes as *Russophobia*—limits Russia’s already constrained economic, cultural, and political influence on Romanian domestic affairs.¹⁹ Rebegea reaches a similar conclusion, observing that “Russia’s power of seduction in Romania is very limited.”²⁰

Empirical Evidence: Public Opinion and Societal Resilience

This assessment aligns with additional research on Romanian trust levels toward Russia over the past decade. A 2023 INSCOP national survey reveals a decline of over 50 % in Romanians’ favorable perceptions of Russia (Figure 12).²¹ This period includes Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, the subsequent escalation of aggression in the following years, and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The 2024 survey corroborates this trend. Respondents expressed a markedly low level of trust in Russia, with fewer than 10 % indicating confidence, while NATO and the European Union retained significantly higher levels of trust (Figure 13).

The poor performance in Romanian preferences, coupled with the evident persistence of this attitude, did not deter Russian propaganda strategists from focusing on Romania. Numerous reports document interference by Russia’s FIMI apparatus in electoral processes in the United States (2016 and 2020 presidential

gold-wwi-cbf57ea60eb9ca16c601ffee6f73e421. In March 2024, the European Parliament adopted a “Resolution on the Return of Romanian National Treasure Illegally Appropriated by Russia,” Joint Motion for a Resolution, March 13, 2024, www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0169_EN.html.

¹⁸ “Russian Influence in Romania: Conversation with Stanisław Gôrka,” in *The Historical and Current State of Romanian-Russian Relations*, 8-19.

¹⁹ Sofia Security Forum, Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), and New Strategy Centre, “NATO’s Role in Addressing Security Threats and Challenges in the Black Sea: Time for a Comprehensive Strategic Approach for the Region?” <https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Security-threats-and-challenges-in-the-black-sea-web.pdf>.

²⁰ Rebegea, “Russian Influence in Romania.”

²¹ INSCOP Research, “National Opinion Poll – October-November 2023 Part VI. Comparison 2013-2023,” *News.ro*, 2023, <https://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/15.11.2023-INSCOP-News.ro-Simpatie-tari.pdf>. – in Romanian

Sentiments Toward Countries — 2013 vs. 2023 Comparison

I will read you a list of countries. Please indicate what kind of sentiment you have toward each of them. (% RATHER POSITIVE)

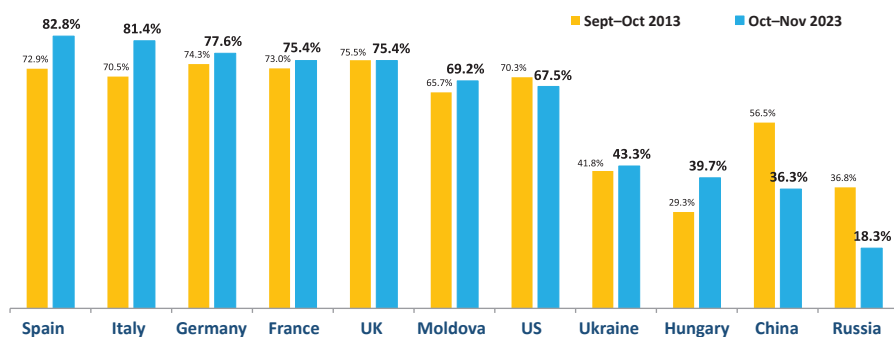


Figure 12: Romanian sentiments toward countries between 2013 and 2023 (translated by the author from the INSCOP Romanian-language graphics).²²

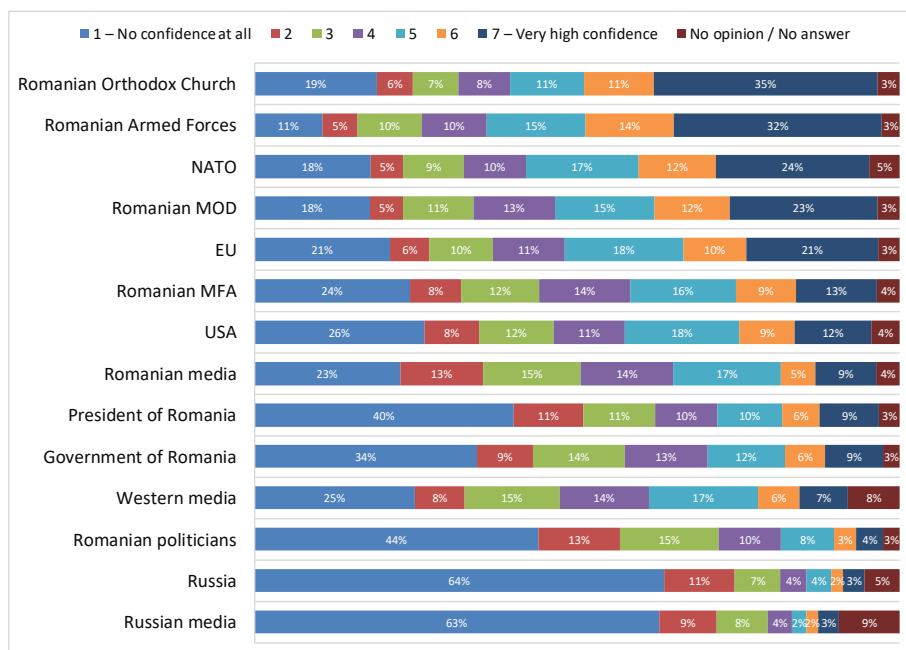


Figure 13: Level of confidence in various Romanian and international organizations and institutions.

²² INSCOP Research, “National Opinion Poll – October–November 2023.”

elections), the United Kingdom (the 2016 Brexit referendum), France (2017 presidential elections), as well as a coup attempt in Montenegro. According to Rebegea, Russia exhibits “an increasing apprehension towards the potential use of a variety of active measures,” refining Soviet-era tactics for internet-based platforms and automated technologies.

While Moscow has much fewer inroads into Romanian society, economics, and politics, there is evidence that it is using a combination of hard power intimidation and manipulation of the information space in order to sow distrust and create a rift between Romania and its Western partners.²³

Rebegea further asserts that the primary objective of Russia’s influence campaigns targeting Romania appears to be diverting it “from its European path and from adopting Western values and participating in current alliance structures. Moscow would like to see a continuously corrupt Romania, doubtful of the benefits of being a part of the Euro-Atlantic institutions, distrustful of the security guarantees it receives as a member of NATO, and more inclined to embrace its narrative and pursue an ambivalent relationship with Russia (currently rather antagonistic).”²⁴

Broader Strategic Implications and Regional Spillover

The joint study published in 2023 by three Eastern European think tanks highlights that the Russian Federation has developed a comprehensive toolbox, drawing on the Soviet Union’s extensive experience with active measures.²⁵ This toolbox incorporates a diverse array of disinformation and influence techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTPs), alongside cyberattacks, intelligence operations, economic coercion (particularly through energy leverage), aggressive diplomacy, and blackmail, among others.

Russian disinformation campaigns adeptly exploit societal vulnerabilities and leverage questions related to cultural and identity aspects of targeted states, often appealing to historical, Slavic, or Russian Orthodox Church connections, thus adding new fuel to a complicated heritage affecting communities with a complex religious or ethnic background.²⁶

Despite the conventional nature of the war waged by Russia in the trenches of Ukraine, Răducu and Hercigonja argue that the Kremlin’s long-term strategy is grounded in “an ideological war, between authoritarian and democratic political views, between the East and the West.”²⁷

²³ Rebegea, “Russian Influence in Romania,” 3.

²⁴ Rebegea, “Russian Influence in Romania.”

²⁵ Sofia Security Forum et al., “NATO’s Role in Addressing Security Threats.”

²⁶ Sofia Security Forum et al., “NATO’s Role in Addressing Security Threats.”

²⁷ Roberta Mihaela Răducu and Srdjan Hercigonja, *Disinformation in the Context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Narratives Used by Russian Propaganda in the Balkans.*

Russian propaganda's strategic objectives in targeting Romania's public space extend beyond undermining support for Ukraine and also aim to disrupt Romania's relations with the Republic of Moldova. The Kremlin has consistently fostered a negative perception of Romania among the Russian-speaking population in Moldova, particularly in Transnistria and the Gagauz Autonomous Region, through economic and political incentives such as subsidized energy prices, investments in local projects, and the financing of Russia-aligned political parties. The frozen conflict in Transnistria has consistently served as a significant mechanism for exerting pressure on Chișinău.

Conclusions and Outlook

Although troubling, the article's findings do not yet allow for definitive conclusions regarding the political choices Romanian society is likely to make over the next decade. The current geopolitical shifts complicate such predictions.

Despite Russia's FIMI operations, Romania appears likely to maintain its pro-European trajectory. A January 2025 INSCOP survey reveals increased public support for NATO and the European Union in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A total of 87.5 % of respondents favor Romania's political and military alignment with Western entities, such as the European Union, the United States, and NATO, up from 77 % in January 2022. In contrast, only 4.1 % support Romania's alignment with Eastern actors (i.e., Russia and China), down from 10.4 % in January 2022. The non-response rate is 8.4 %²⁸ (Figure 14).

The survey also indicates that 80.4 % of respondents perceive the United States and the European Union as more likely to exert a positive influence on Romania, an increase from 61.8 % in September 2021. Only 9 % of the total sample perceive Russia and China as more likely to exert a positive influence on Romania, a decline from 16.5 % in September 2021 (Figure 15).

While these results reflect a favorable geopolitical orientation, Romanian society must prepare for potential future turbulence, as the likelihood of change in the region is rising. Rebegea identifies disinformation and propaganda as essential mechanisms through which Moscow executes its divisive strategy, cultivating distrust, modifying attitudes and opinions, and potentially provoking civic action or political behaviors.²⁹ Similar to the 2024 electoral cycle in Romania, Russia is expected to continue its low-risk, high-gain influence strategy by exploiting Romanian conservative traditions. This approach seeks to intensify divisions among

Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia (Timișoara, Romania: Editura Universității de Vest, 2023), https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/hbw_final.pdf.

²⁸ INSCOP Research, "Romania between National and European in the Era of Disinformation. Economic Patriotism, Values and Conspiracies, December 16-23, 2024, 1000 respondents, error +/-3.1%, Comparative study 2021/2022 vs. 2024," January 2025, <https://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/21.01.2025-Raport-final-INSOP-Funky-Citizens.pdf>. – in Romanian

²⁹ Rebegea, "Russian Influence in Romania," 47.

Which Direction Is Best for Romania: East or West?

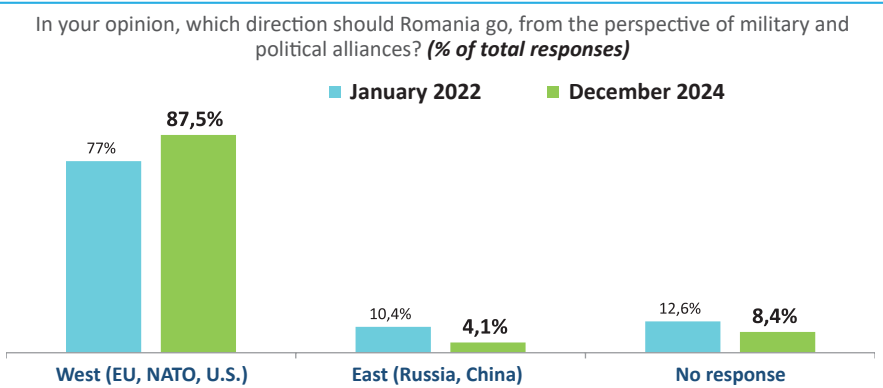


Figure 14: Romanians’ pro-NATO, pro-EU, and pro-US stances have consolidated since 2022 (source: INSCOP, 2025).

Positive Influence on Romania: U.S. & EU vs. Russia & China

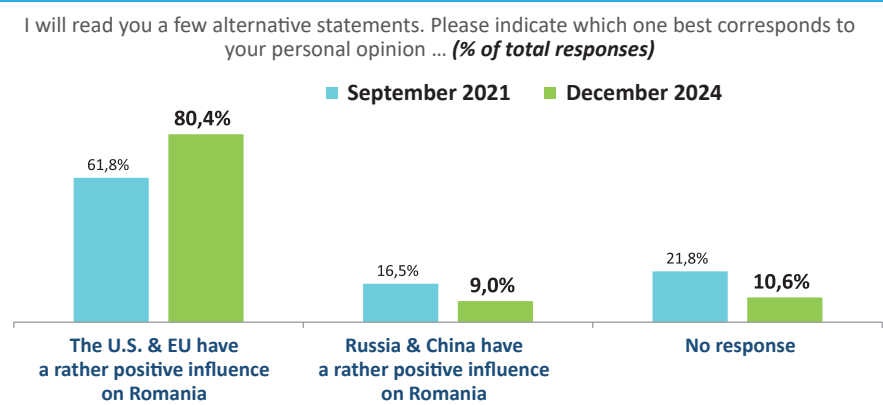


Figure 15: Romanians’ views on positive foreign influence (source: INSCOP, 2025).

generations and societal groups, ultimately aiming to undermine Romania’s commitment to Western values and institutions.

The Kremlin is aware that it cannot expect Romanians to quickly overcome their entrenched grievances and develop a favorable view of Russia. However, its objective of undermining the positive perceptions of NATO and the EU within Romanian society seems achievable. Indicators of such interference are evident; yet, as in other Western nations, responses by Romanian authorities have often

been delayed and insufficiently calibrated to the scope of the threat posed by the extensive, divisive propaganda orchestrated by the Kremlin.

Contrary to the expectations voiced by U.S. President George W. Bush in Bucharest more than three decades ago, Russia does not seek “peaceful, stable neighbors, like Romania”³⁰; rather, the situation is quite the opposite. Without adequate measures implemented by Romanian authorities to strengthen societal resilience, this strategic objective may become attainable for Kremlin strategists. Concerns have emerged in Bucharest. The potential for a nationally coordinated strategy to safeguard the country from Moscow’s propaganda tactics remains uncertain. Additionally, it is important to recognize that Russia is not the sole actor in this arena. Preserving the democratic gains of the past three decades remains imperative.

A Final Note

This article was prepared and first submitted for publication in March 2024, based on research and a presentation delivered to the G.C. Marshall Center faculty at the conclusion of the author’s scholarship at the Center. As the election period advanced in Romania, the identified trends were confirmed by the results of the electoral process, beginning with the local and EU elections and concluding with the parliamentary and presidential elections. Official reports submitted to Romania’s National Security Council by the intelligence community indicated substantial penetration of Russian-sponsored propaganda during the initial round of the presidential elections in December 2024. The declassified reports, issued two days before the second presidential round, indicated that the Russian-backed candidate was in a favorable position and had a significant likelihood of winning the popular vote, while also providing compelling evidence of Russian interference in the Romanian electoral process. The Constitutional Court annulled the presidential elections for the first time in history. At the time of submitting the final draft of the research article in May 2025, the presidential elections were ongoing in Romania, with the second round scheduled to take place shortly.

Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Partnership for Peace Consortium, its participating institutions, or any governmental or international organizations affiliated with its governance structure.

³⁰ Bush, “Remarks to the Citizens of Romania, Piata Revolutiei, Bucharest, Romania, November 23, 2002.”

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