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Romania's election saga — continued

After the chaos of the 2024 presidential elections, can Romania get it right this time?

The first round of the Romanian presidential elections in November 2024 sent a shockwave across the world and sparked significant concern both domestically and internationally. As the country braces for a new round of elections on Sunday (4 May), uncertainty and concerns remain over whether the authorities have learned from past mistakes and can ensure a fair and transparent process.

Back in November, we saw a candidate who pretty much flew under the radar and hardly appeared in any polls take the lead and claim the first spot with over two million votes. He campaigned without a political party, with zero money (as declared by the candidate) and with a heavy social media presence that exploded shortly before the elections. His campaign messaging was a blend of mysticism, fascism and nationalism, with clear views against the EU and NATO.

So how did a candidate with extremist views that many would have considered marginal manage to come surprisingly close to securing the presidency? This troubling reality prompts critical questions about foreign interference in elections, the influence of social media platforms and whether our democratic institutions possess the necessary mechanisms to confront these challenges effectively.

Zero budget for a €50 million campaign

One of the most striking things about the meteoric rise of Călin Georgescu is that he declared his campaign budget to be ZERO. Yet, he had a huge online presence, particularly on TikTok and other social media platforms, which is estimated to cost as much as €50 million.

So where did this money come from?

In Romania, there are pretty strict rules about political campaigning and transparency over political campaign financing. Candidates need to

declare all money received and spent on political campaigns, and online campaign material needs to be marked as such. It is now clear that these rules weren't followed. The ongoing criminal investigations, so far, uncovered payments of up to $1 million made to several online influencers. Apparently, Georgescu himself received several significant cash instalments, as well as bodyguards, and was even provided with luxury cars during his campaign.

All of this is now coming to light, but in many ways, it is a bit too late. These new revelations only show how unfunctional existing reporting systems are and their failure to prevent illegal campaign financing and unfair political campaigning.

Systemic failure

Another alarming aspect of these elections is the rise of extremism and fascist ideology. The fact that we have candidates who openly embrace fascism – and that one of them nearly became president – indicates a systemic failure at multiple levels. How did a candidate with such radical views manage to fly under the radar? The answer lies partly in the ineffectiveness of established checks and balances.

Romania has legislation that makes it a crime to promote fascist ideology. However, this legislation is hardly applied, which has allowed fascist discourse to thrive all over the country, including in the Romanian Academy. Even the General Prosecutor admits very few cases of promoting fascist ideology are reported and investigated.

Now that we have seen this discourse almost taking over the presidential office, it seems Romanian authorities are finally starting to take things seriously and are cracking down on growing networks of fascist groups. This, however, does not excuse the fact that for so long this discourse was left unchecked, to grow, fester and claw its way into the mainstream.

The media landscape in Romania, like in many countries, plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. However, during the elections, media regulators appeared ill-equipped to combat misinformation and manipulation across social media platforms.

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Although we had several record-breaking fines applied to media outlets for promoting misinformation and hate speech, this does not seem to have worked. The public was constantly bombarded with fake news about a looming war and imaginary threats. This fuelled a general

rapid spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories.

state of anxiety and distrust and sabotaged any possibility of real dialogue and exchange of ideas.

The situation is even worse if we look at what is going on online. Here, state institutions are clearly not prepared to deal with bots, AI-generated content, and the rapid spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Existing attempts to address these have actually backfired. We have seen police officers making house visits to ordinary citizens asking them to delete Facebook posts. This has added to the mistrust and even shows how out of touch and ill-equipped these institutions really are.

Foreign interference in elections has become a real issue globally, and Romania is no exception. The potential for external actors to influence electoral outcomes raises serious questions about national sovereignty and the integrity of democratic processes. In this digital age, foreign entities can exploit vulnerabilities in the electoral system, creating chaos and confusion among voters.

We saw in neighbouring Moldova the extent to which foreign countries can actually influence national elections. It is believed that Russia has spent approximately €100 million to try to influence these elections. There, however, we have seen a very active response from state institutions, journalists and secret services to tacked this interference.

In Romania, we somehow lacked this level of awareness. Even the president initially declared he had no knowledge of any foreign intervention in our elections. Later, after the first round of elections, it seems like this information did appear, suggesting that there were indeed organised networks of support acting for one candidate.

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The Constitutional Court of Romania also found itself at a crossroads during the election period, which tested the limits of the Court.

First, in an unprecedented decision, it decided to not allow another extremist candidate to run for president. It analysed her public statements, positions and participation in certain events to find that she was unfit to run for office. It nonetheless approved Georgescu's candidacy.

Then, after the first round of elections, the Constitutional Court went

through a set of very confusing decisions. It first of all asked for all the votes to be recounted, then approved the results of the first round of elections. A few days later, it went back and decided to invalidate the elections and decided they should start from scratch.

This decision was the pinnacle of this electoral saga. It might as well have been the thing that prevented an extremist from taking office, but it also raises serious questions about the whole process, what could and should have been done differently, and whether our institutions are, in fact, able to counter misinformation, manipulation, foreign interference and growing mistrust in state institutions.

Moving forward

Romania is now in the midst of a new round of presidential elections, set for 4 May (with a second round scheduled for 18 May). This new round is, however, still marred with political and legal challenges and is again testing the ability of state institutions to respond to and address the challenges from previous rounds.

For starters, this round, the Electoral Bureaus rejected the candidacy of the two extremist candidates, Diana Șoșoacă and Georgescu but approved other candidates who have similarly extremist views — again raising the question of who can be barred from running for presidency and where to draw the line.

We did observe stricter rules for online campaigning, and the Electoral Bureau received extra competencies around electoral campaigning. However, experts have warned that these competencies might be abused and that the Electoral Bureau has already used them to censor several political messages. The Bureau has also treated everyone, including ordinary citizens, as political actors, asking them to mark any political messages as political advertisements.

Lastly, the discussion around the annulled presidential elections is still not over. Recently, a judge decided to overturn the Constitutional Court's decision — a complete judicial nonsense that has already been nullified by the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, the decision reignited calls from many who demand a return to the annulled elections.

How Romania navigates this critical moment will define the strength and resilience of its democracy for years to come.



Cristinel Buzatu

Cristinel Buzatu is a Romanian human rights lawyer, registered in the Bucharest Bar. He has an LLB and an LLM in Human Rights law and has extensive civil society experience, gained in the US, Hungary and Romania. As a lawyer, he collaborates with several national and international organisations on a wide array of issues, including discrimination, domestic violence, sexual violence, refugees, and freedom of expression and association.