

Electoral dynamics in the age of disinformation: Understanding Romanian voter support for nationalist populist parties in the 2024 elections

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Madalina Botan

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania

Remus Stefureac

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania and INSCOP Research, Romania

Andreea Stancea 

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania

Abstract

This study looks at factors influencing voters' preference for nationalist populist parties in Romania that support closer ties with Russia. Using data from a national survey, we propose that factors like awareness of disinformation, social media use, trust in party leaders, and belief in conspiracy theories significantly affect voting choices. We test each of these factors with logistic regression analysis to see how much they contribute to predicting support for nationalist movements with pro-Russia stance.

Keywords

Conspiracy theories, disinformation, elections, nationalist populist parties, political trust, Romania

Introduction

In recent years, the entire Europe has witnessed a rise in nationalist and populist movements, many of which promote euro-skepticism and advocate for closer ties with Russia. This trend has drawn academic interest, especially in Western Europe and the United States, leading to a focused

Corresponding author:

Andreea Stancea, Department of Communication, National University of Political Science and Public Administration, Expozitiei 30A, Bucharest 012104, Romania.

Email: andreea.stancea@comunicare.ro

researchers' effort to understand why these parties garner support (Bergmann and Butter, 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Taggart and Pirro, 2021). These political shifts reflect broader social changes influenced by economic, informational, cultural, and political factors.

Poverty and inequality have traditionally been topics of populist movements. Europe's recent economic and migration crises have fueled frustration and mistrust in democratic institutions and political elites (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Populist and extremist parties have tapped into this alienation of voters from mainstream parties and exacerbated their disillusionment with political leaders and authorities, leading to greater social and political fractures. Additionally, national identity and anti-Western sentiments have been aptly maneuvered in the political arena by extremist and populist movements throughout Europe (Mudde, 2007).

The surge of populist and extremist parties is also linked to the characteristics of the new information ecosystem and how journalism is evolving. The patterns of news media consumption have dramatically changed due to rapid technological developments and the widespread use of social media (Douglas, 2021; Hameleers, 2020). Furthermore, using social media and alternative sources for news appears to be associated with higher levels of disinformation and less critical news consumers (Hameleers, 2020; Müller and Schulz, 2021). To add even more complexity to the new information landscape, social media platforms have started to be leveraged by extremist groups to gain support, disseminate messages, and bypass established media filters such as those traditionally used by mainstream journalism (Tucker et al., 2018).

Despite extensive research, a common definition of disinformation remains elusive. In general, disinformation is understood by scholars, policymakers, and organizations as false, inaccurate, intentionally fabricated information spread with the intent to deceive or cause harm (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). However, reaching a universally accepted definition is challenging due to factors such as disciplinary differences and the diverse contexts across countries. Furthermore, the rapidly changing landscape of information and journalism, driven by technology, complicates even more efforts to reach a consensual definition.

Understanding various types of disinformation is shaped by national context, with socio-political environments playing a key role in the impact of this phenomenon. In societies with weaker political institutions or characterized by a lack of trust in authorities and institutions, disinformation is more likely to resonate with the public, reinforcing existing vulnerabilities and ideological divides (Hameleers, 2023). Algorithmically curated content and other technological advancements exacerbate the contamination of national information ecosystems vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda.

Widespread exposure to new forms of algorithmically driven misinformation can also be a contributing factor to the growth of nationalism and populism across Western Europe and other parts of the world (Humprecht et al., 2020). Nevertheless, empirical data describing the country-specific details of this phenomenon in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries is still rare and insufficiently explored to draw comparative conclusions. This study tries to better understand the importance of national socio-political settings in the emergence of populist and nationalist parties in Eastern European nations. We maintain that the rise of populist and extremist parties in this region is correlated with geopolitical vulnerabilities, widespread disinformation, particular media diets, and specific cultural and political factors such as susceptibility to conspiracies and trust in political leaders. These factors need to be examined within the specific national context of Romania.

According to various authors (Hameleers, 2023; Humprecht et al., 2020), disinformation thrives in national environments marked by corruption, populism, and mistrust. Romania, deeply affected by these phenomena, remains particularly vulnerable to disinformation, with newer forms of anti-Western, pro-Kremlin propaganda becoming increasingly pervasive (S. Soare and Collini, 2024). In

recent years, pro-Russia narratives have been amplified on online and social media platforms, playing a polarizing role inside the European Union as Russian-related propaganda targets national or geopolitical sensitivities (Hooghe et al., 2024).

Furthermore, CEE nations like Romania have been especially susceptible to Russian propaganda because of their historical sensitivities and comparatively weaker defenses against disinformation (Dragomir et al., 2024). More recently, the country has witnessed a rise in Russian propaganda in the context of key electoral cycles and increased geopolitical tension. Recent Russia-coordinated campaigns have been extensively investigated in numerous independent reports (Calistru and Burtan, 2024; Cucu, 2023; Vrabie, 2024).

Given these circumstances, political parties promoting anti-EU nationalism and frequently disseminating Russian propaganda are expected to have significant support in the upcoming 2024 elections. In Romania, The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) embody these broader trends, championing nationalist, ultra-conservative, anti-Western positions. Against this backdrop, understanding the domestic factors driving support for nationalist populist parties become particularly relevant.

By examining the variables that influence voter preferences for populist and extremist parties in Romania, this study aims to fill gaps in understanding what drives support for such movements in the country. We aim to uncover why these parties appeal to voters by exploring factors such as susceptibility to disinformation, social media consumption, trust in political leaders, and a significant aspect of Romania's socio-cultural context—belief in conspiracy theories. Our study emphasizes the need for thoroughly investigating national factors to explain the rise of Romanian nationalist populism. Understanding local dynamics is critical for predicting political support and suggesting effective policy strategies, including building more resilience against disinformation, strengthening democratic institutions, and promoting a more informed electorate.

Factors influencing support for nationalist populist and extremist parties

Populist nationalist parties and their rapid rise pose a serious challenge to democratic institutions in both Western and European countries. This political trend is considered to widen societal gaps, fuel polarization, and intensify Euro-skepticism, particularly in Eastern countries that may have lower resilience to electoral disinformation (Hanley and Vachudova, 2019; Surowiec and Štětka, 2020; Vachudova, 2019). Nationalist, populist, and extremist parties are predicted to make progress and gain even more support in the ongoing 2024 national elections in numerous European countries, marking a consistent impact of nationalist populism and extremism—particularly of far-right origins—throughout Europe (Hix et al., 2024).

The electoral success of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and SOS Romania in recent EU and general elections underscores their growing popularity among Romanians. The causes of this phenomenon are diverse. Firstly, voters who are disillusioned with the political status quo and feel left out by mainstream parties find resonance in AUR and SOS Romania. These parties appeal to people who believe that the current political and economic systems disadvantage them. Equally appealing to these voters are the parties' strong nationalist stance, their promises to fight corruption, and their commitment to protecting national sovereignty (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023; Mihai and Ungureanu, 2024; A. N. Soare, 2019).

AUR has had an ultranationalist and anti-Western ideology since its founding in 2019; According to various scholars, AUR's rise can be linked to its anti-elitist, anti-establishment rhetoric, focusing on the corruption of mainstream political parties and Western multinational corporations

sovereignty (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023; Mihai and Ungureanu, 2024; A. N. Soare, 2019). Moreover, AUR has successfully used topics commonly associated with green parties but interpreted them through a patriotic, nationalist prism, calling for eco-nationalism (Burciu, 2024). For example, it criticizes international corporations that engage in deforestation and campaigns for the preservation of natural heritage, while blaming the West for the rising costs of living in Romania (Soare, 2023).

Furthermore, AUR and SOS Romania have successfully used nationalist rhetoric and anti-system sentiments during the pandemic crisis to sow even more social discord, mistrust in authorities, and anti-Western sentiments (Burciu, 2024). The skillful use of social media and the general low literacy levels of the Romanian population have enabled them to advance their political agenda, revolving around conservative, traditional values, economic protectionism, and affiliation with Russia as an alternative to the perceived corrupt West (Soare and Collini, 2024). Both AUR and SOS Romania have created a large voting base by capitalizing on economic, political, and cultural concerns. Their effective use of nationalist rhetoric, centered on economic and cultural challenges, along with their social media tactics, has been key in spreading their messages and drawing in a broader spectrum of followers (Burciu, 2024).

Various studies have shown that nationalist populist parties gain support through their advocacy for national identity and sovereignty (Akkerman et al., 2016; Hix et al., 2024). AUR has capitalized on this ideological framework incorporating it into its discourse and policy actions (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023). Topics such as cultural preservation, national pride, mistrust of EU institutions, and multinational alliances like NATO are also highly prominent on their agenda (Soare, 2023). This broader narrative against the EU and NATO is consistent with patterns seen in neighboring countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

When analyzing the surge of nationalist populism, we cannot ignore the role played by disinformation. According to certain authors (Benkler et al., 2018), disinformation has grown to be a potent weapon in modern politics, influencing to a large extent election results. Recent Eurobarometer (2024) have shown that voters in Romania are becoming more sensitive to disinformation, but still consistently lagging behind their European counterparts. According to independent reports such as The Media Pluralism Monitor (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024) or GLOBSEC's yearly report (Szicherle, 2024), almost half of the Romanians think they are frequently exposed to false information and fake news, however, less than 30% think disinformation influence the way they perceive politics. At all EU level, 75% of respondents report they come across false, deceptive information on a regular basis and 70% believe this has a consistent impact on how they interpret political affairs. The same report (Szicherle, 2024), indicates that pro-Kremlin narratives are propagated in Romania by the AUR party, using a Eurosceptic rhetoric and pervasive patriotic discourses employing a "US versus THEM" dichotomy.

Several scholars, like Humprecht et al. (2020), have empirically proven that disinformation uses sociopolitical and cultural divisions to cause confusion, amplify asymmetries among various social categories, and further polarize societies. Previous research on the rise of AUR and SOS Romania (Burciu, 2024) has confirmed that such tactics are deployed by both parties. Particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, both AUR and SOS Romania have promoted anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and spread derogatory content directed at public officials and health authorities to amplify uncertainty and intensify confrontations. Despite bans and restrictions on public discourses, both parties have increased their online presence and have used social media and digital platforms to amplify false and deceptive narratives (Burciu, 2024).

The widespread use of disinformation in Romanian public communication calls for better scrutiny of how misleading information affects political preferences and behaviors. The anti-

authority, anti-EU, pro-Russia rhetoric employed by parties such as AUR and SOS Romania is particularly concerning in the current context of social tensions and conflicts in Romania's vicinity. Against this backdrop, this study aims to analyse what drives support for parties advocating closer connections with Russia and whether awareness of disinformation impacts this support. Our first study hypothesis is:

H1: Increased awareness of exposure to disinformation reduces the likelihood of voting for a nationalist-populist party advocating closer ties with Russia.

Technology platforms and social media have increasingly become major sources of political information, impacting voters' opinions and attitudes worldwide. Various studies (Van Aelst et al., 2021; Zuboff, 2019) analyse in detail the impact that new trends in media consumption have had on the political and social arenas. Furthermore, political movements such as the populists and extremists have benefited the most from this shift in accessing political information, circumventing traditional media, and using social media platforms to amplify their ideas (Castelli Gattinara and Froio, 2024; Heidenreich et al., 2024). This applies to nationalist populist parties in Romania that have seen a surge in the reach of their electoral in recent years. One key ingredient of successful political communication via social media is the use of sensational, emotionally charged, and divisive content that typically taps into voters' fears and frustrations (Nistor, 2024).

Other recent studies also underscore the link between the efficient use of social media by nationalist populist parties in Romania and their level of electoral success. To disseminate their messages, these parties have aptly used technology platforms and employed various disinformation tactics, primarily utilized by Russian propaganda in CEE (Soare, 2023). The fact that social media has steadily become the main source of information has allowed nationalist and extremist movements such as AUR and SOS Romania to interact directly with large audiences, bypassing traditional journalism gatekeeping and mobilizing support at scale (Nistor, 2024). These insights into nationalist populist parties' social media tactics call for better scrutiny of how using social media for political information influences voter behavior. To examine this national critical context, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H2: Using social media for political news increases the likelihood of voting for a nationalist-populist party that supports stronger ties with Russia.

To add more nuance to our analysis, we also wanted to investigate not only the impact of political communication on voters but also the influence of trust in the most prominent communicators, namely the party leaders. Trust in political leaders is an important component in voter decision-making (Miller & Listhaug, 1999); however, such investigations are still insufficient in the context of the new information ecosystem. Moreover, in Romania, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no exploration on how trust in party leaders, rather than in the political class in general, impacts voter preference.

The national context of multiple corruption cases among political leaders makes an even stronger case for such an academic investigation. Journalists have chronicled Romania's continuous fight against corruption and its dramatic effect on public trust and the political system as a whole, with high corruption cases being linked to a general erosion of political trust (Ganea, 2019). However, this issue has not received sustained scholarly attention. Recent investigations (Burciu, 2024) show that AUR and SOS Romania capitalize on broad disenchantment with politics, promoting themselves as uncorrupted alternatives to scandal-plagued mainstream parties, but the specific impact

their leaders have in this party-based rhetoric has not been isolated so far. Building on these insights, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H3: Greater trust in party leaders increases the likelihood of voting for a nationalist-populist party.

The influence of conspiracy theories on voting behavior is another topic that has not been fully addressed by research conducted in CEE countries. Conspiracy theories, characterized as ideas about malevolent covert operations, are widespread in the current information ecosystem. Various authors (Imhoff et al., 2022) have analyzed “conspiracy mentality” or “conspiracy mindset” in Western Europe and the United States, finding a linkage between conspiracy ideas and political choices. Furthermore, the same study (Imhoff et al., 2022) finds that conspiracy theories about the government are correlated with anti-elitism and political extremism.

Additional research indicates an association between a conspiracy mindset and a preference for right-wing parties (Christner, 2022; Loziak and Havrillová, 2024). In the interplay of conspiracy mentality and voting behaviour, another important element is general political mistrust (Loziak and Havrillová, 2024).

Despite these contributions, there haven't been sufficient explorations of how conspiracy theories are linked to populist or nationalist ideologies in Eastern European countries. In a general climate of low political trust and high social media usage, investigating whether a propensity towards conspiracies is associated with certain political features and impacts voting behaviour becomes imperative. Based on these insights, we want to investigate the impact of conspiracist thinking on political preference for nationalist populists and suggest the last research hypothesis:

H4: A higher propensity to conspiracy theories increases the likelihood of voting for a nationalist-populist party.

Description of the dataset and variables

Data set

For testing the formulated hypothesis this paper employs an original dataset collected in January 2022. The opinion poll measured the rise of nationalism in the age of misinformation and fake news. The reason for using this dataset is twofold. First, in the current geopolitical context, it is fundamental to understand citizens' opinions on the current situation and how the geopolitical context influences their political behavior. Second, the dataset employed for this paper is integrated part of a bigger research project that collects data in four waves allowing for a longitudinal analysis of nationalist parties in Romania.

The dataset comprises a sample of 1,231 individuals aged 18 and over. The data collection was conducted by INSCOP Research in partnership with Verifield on behalf of the STRATEGIC Thinking Group think-tank as part of a research project supported by The German Marshall Fund of the United States - and funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation through the True Story Project from 11 to 18 January 2022, with the research method being a questionnaire interview. Data were collected using the CATI method (telephone interviews), with a stratified multi-stage sample size of 1162 people, representative of the significant socio-demographic categories (gender, age, occupation) for Romania's population aged 18 and over. The maximum allowable error of the

data is $\pm 2.9\%$ at 95% confidence. The first three editions were conducted in March, June, and September 2021.

The average age of participants was 48 years ($M = 48.00$, $SD = 17.31$), with a gender distribution of 52% female and 48% male respondents. Regarding education, the sample includes 13.0% with low education, 71.4% with middle education, and 15.7% with higher education. Detailed descriptive statistics and variable measurements can be found in [Tables A1](#) and [A2](#) in Appendix A.

Measurements

Dependent variables. As the main objective of this paper is to identify the main potential predictors of voting for a nationalist party with pro-Russia attitudes, we chose as our independent variables: the *intention to vote for a nationalist party (that promotes closeness to Russia)* used in Model 1 and *intention to vote for AUR (Alliance for Romanian Unity)* used in Model 2.

The first dependent variable (used in Model 1) was based on one main question withdrawn from the database asking respondents if: they would vote for party having closer ties between Romania and Russia. The selected variable is dichotomous. It captures a binary response indicating whether an individual intends to vote for a party having closer ties with Russia or not. They are coded as 1 if the individual intends to vote for a nationalist party (that promotes closeness to Russia) and 0 otherwise.

The second dependent variable (used in Model 2) was based on a categorical question asking the respondents which party they would vote for if the elections were held next Sunday. The respondents had to choose from a comprehensive list of Romanian parties. The variable was recoded into a dichotomous variable, where 1 represents the Romanian party AUR (a recognized nationalist party), and 0 otherwise.

Independent and control variables. To investigate the impact of awareness of disinformation exposure, source of news information, and conspiracy beliefs related to COVID-19, we identified these factors as the primary independent variables.

Firstly, we measured *awareness of being exposed to disinformation* using a single-item scale. Participants rated their awareness on a 4-point scale where: 1 means to a very large extent, and 4 means to a very small extent. This scale captures the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as being exposed to disinformation, with lower scores indicating a higher perceived awareness of exposure and higher scores indicating a lower perceived awareness of exposure. To ease the interpretation of our models, we recoded the variable in a way that lower scores indicate a lower perceived awareness of exposure, and higher scores indicate a higher awareness of exposure.

Secondly, we assessed *sources of news information*. Participants were asked to choose from a list of different sources of news sources. The variable was transformed into a dummy variable to distinguish between social media and mainstream media as news sources. Specifically, the dummy variable *sources of news information* is coded as 1 if the respondent identified social media networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) as their primary source of news. Conversely, it is coded as 0 if the respondent indicated that their primary news sources are TV stations, radio stations, newspapers, or magazines.

Responses indicating uncertainty or no answer were excluded from the analysis. This transformation allows for a clear comparison between the influence of social media and traditional media on respondents' news consumption habits.

Thirdly, the variable *conspiracy beliefs (COVID-19)* measures respondents' beliefs about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, the scale included three categories: those who

believed the virus appeared naturally (0), those who believed it was provoked by global elites to control the population (1), and those who were unsure or did not respond (3). For analysis, this variable was recoded into a dummy variable. Respondents who subscribed to the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 was engineered by global elites were coded as 1, while those who believed it emerged naturally were coded as 0. Responses indicating uncertainty or no answer were excluded from the analysis, allowing for a clear binary distinction between believers and non-believers in the COVID-19 conspiracy theory.

For institutional characteristics, we also tested controlled for *trust in nationalist public figures*. *Trust in nationalist public figures measures the level of trust respondents have in various public figures using a four-point scale. The original scale ranged from 1 ("very much") to 4 ("not that much"). To simplify the interpretation, we recoded the variable with higher values indicating higher trust in public figures.*

To mitigate omitted variable bias, we included several control variables from our dataset, covering socio-demographics. *Age* was determined by asking for participants' birth years and calculating their current age ($M = 48$, $SD = 17.31$). *Gender* was self-reported, with 52% identifying as female and 48% as male. *Education* was measured on an 8-point scale, from no formal education (1) to postgraduate education (8). *Income perception* was measured on a 5-point scale, from 'We don't have enough even for the bare necessities' (1) to 'We manage to have everything we need without having to cut back on anything'.

Methods

Logistic regression models

To test the hypotheses, we employed logistic regression models since our main dependent variables are dichotomous. We use two different binary dependent variables that take the value of one if individuals are in one of the following categories: (1) voting for a nationalist party/voting for AUR, and zero otherwise. The logistic regression specification has the following form:

$$\log(p(x)) = \log\left(\frac{p(x)}{1-p(x)}\right) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 x_1 + \alpha_2 x_2 + \dots + \alpha_i x_i \quad (1)$$

where α_0 is the constant of the equation, and $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots, \alpha_i$ are the coefficients for the independent variables. The parameters of the logistic regression are estimated by using maximum likelihood. Specifically, p can be computed having in view the following specifications:

$$p = \frac{e^{\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 x_1 + \alpha_2 x_2 + \dots + \alpha_i x_i}}{1 + e^{\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 x_1 + \alpha_2 x_2 + \dots + \alpha_i x_i}} \quad (2)$$

We choose to rely on logistic regression models because they are used for categorical and binary dependent variables. Furthermore, these kinds of models are attractive since they do not assume linearity, normality, or homoscedasticity.

Findings

In this section, we present the results of our logistic regression analyses, aiming to investigate the factors influencing the likelihood of voting for a nationalist party in Romania (see [Table 1](#) and

Table 2). The hypotheses tested include the effects of exposure to disinformation, the use of social media as a news source, trust in nationalist party leaders, and predisposition to conspiracy beliefs.

The analysis was conducted in two models: one for voting for any nationalist party and another specifically for voting for the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) a party recognized for its nationalistic views (Crăciun and Țăranu, 2023). First, we examined the predictors that correlate with the likelihood of voting for a nationalist party in general (Table 1)¹.

Table 1. Estimates results of logistic regression on voting for a nationalist party.

	Model 1 (voting for a nationalist party having closer ties with Russia)	
	B(SE)	Exp(B)
Exposure to disinformation	-.258 (.089)***	.773
Trust nationalist public figure (G. Simion)	.226 (.116)**	1.253
Trust nationalist public figure (D. Sosoaca)	.137 (.110)	1.147
Conspiracy beliefs (COVID-19)	.119 (.256)	1.126
News information source (SNS)	.562 (.224)***	1.754
Gender: Male	-.592 (.204)***	1.808
Age	-.339 (.100)***	.713
Education	-.331 (.196)**	1.393
Income perception	-.001 (.094)	1.001
Intercept	-1.229 (.735)***	.293
Nagelkerke R Square	.157	
Log likelihood	616.857	

Note: Standard errors are presented in parentheses; *, **, and *** denote statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% confidence.

Table 2. Estimates results of logistic regression on voting for AUR party.

	Model 2 (voting for AUR)	
	B(SE)	Exp(B)
Exposure to disinformation	-.280 (.092)***	1.323
Trust nationalist public figure (G. Simion)	.102 (.134)	.903
Trust nationalist public figure (D. Sosoaca)	-.307 (.136)**	.736
Conspiracy beliefs (COVID-19)	.637 (.214)***	.529
News information source (SNS)	.154 (.256)	.857
Gender: Male	-.410 (.203)**	.664
Age	-.159 (.101)*	.853
Education	-.580 (.200)***	.560
Income perception	-.281 (.091)**	1.325
Intercept	.157 (.773)***	.855
Nagelkerke R Square	.102	
AIC	682.834	

Note: Standard errors are presented in parentheses; *, **, and *** denote statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% confidence.

As expected, our findings reveal that higher awareness of exposure to disinformation significantly decreases the likelihood of voting for a nationalist party. Thus, H1 is validated. This finding aligns with the results from previous literature, indicating that individuals who are aware of their exposure to false information are less likely to support a nationalist party. In terms of H2, we find that greater trust in nationalist party leaders increases the likelihood of voting for a nationalist party. However, H2 is partially supported by the data: trust in a nationalist public figure such as G. Simion is positively associated with voting for a nationalist party, but trust in another nationalist figure, D. Sosoaca, also shows a positive relationship, although this result is not statistically significant.

Furthermore, our next predictor, the use of social media as a primary source of information, significantly increases the likelihood of voting for a nationalist party. Based on this result we can support the findings of existing literature focusing on the importance of social media in disseminating information that influences political behavior. Thus, we also validate H3. Regarding H4, our results indicate that individuals with a higher predisposition to conspiracy beliefs, particularly regarding COVID-19, are significantly more likely to vote for a nationalist party. This suggests that conspiracy beliefs play a crucial role in shaping voter preferences for nationalist parties, validating H4. Additional control variables reveal that being male and having higher education levels are associated with higher odds of voting for a nationalist party. Conversely, age is negatively associated with the likelihood of voting for such a party.

The second model (Table 2) focuses specifically on voting for the AUR party, one of the Romanian parties recognized for its nationalist views. The logistic regression results, presented in Table 2, show some differences compared to the general model for nationalist parties. Consistent with the findings from Model 1, higher awareness of exposure to disinformation significantly decreases the likelihood of voting for AUR. This strengthens the assumption that higher levels of awareness regarding disinformation reduce support for nationalist platforms. Contrary to Model 1, trust in nationalist public figures G. Simion (the leader of the party) does not significantly influence the likelihood of voting for AUR.

The results indicate that a higher predisposition to conspiracy beliefs significantly increases the likelihood of voting for AUR, validating the findings related to H4. This result indicates a unique dynamic for AUR voters, where conspiracy beliefs align with support for the party. Finally, the use of social media as a news source does not significantly impact the likelihood of voting for AUR in this model. This contrasts with the general model for nationalist parties, suggesting that AUR voters may rely on different information sources or have distinct media consumption patterns.

The findings from both models provide new insights into the factors influencing voting behavior for nationalist parties and specifically for AUR. While exposure to disinformation consistently decreases the likelihood of voting for these parties, the roles of trust in leaders, conspiracy beliefs, and social media usage vary.

Discussion

This study aims to understand what motivates the emergence of nationalist populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), using the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and SOS Romania as case studies. Previous research (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Mudde, 2007) suggests that the rise of nationalist or ultranationalist parties, which often adopt conservative and even extremist positions, is primarily due to widespread disillusionment with mainstream politics and a growing distrust of traditional political elites and institutions (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Mudde, 2007).

In both Western and Eastern Europe, nationalist-populist movements have surged, amplifying anti-European and pro-Russian sentiments (Hanley and Vachudova, 2019; Surowiec and Štětka,

2020; Vachudova, 2019). These characteristics, combined with widespread political disinformation and the powerful role of social media in propagating false or conspiratorial narratives, have been empirically shown to influence voter preferences (Imhoff et al., 2022; Loziak and Havrillová, 2024). CEE countries, in particular, have seen an increase in pro-Russian public discourses, which, due to recent geopolitical turmoil, has amplified EU skepticism in this region (Hooghe et al., 2024). Due to geographic, historical, cultural, and political characteristics such as vulnerable institutions and lack of political leadership, countries neighboring Russia are especially susceptible to Russian disinformation and generally exhibit low resistance to disinformation (Dragomir et al., 2024).

Romania, which borders Ukraine, has historically perceived Russia as a threat (Marcu, 2009). Contemporary Romanian-Russian relations are influenced by both historical issues inherited from the communist regime and recent developments related to the war in Ukraine (Naumescu, 2024). These geopolitical vulnerabilities, compounded by widespread Russian propaganda in Romanian media, have increased citizens' doubts about the benefits of EU membership (Soare, 2023). A notable example is the Schengen dispute, where the initial exclusion of Romania by Austria and the Netherlands was seen as evidence that other EU nations view Romanians as second-rate citizens (Ștefănel et al., 2023).

In the context of growing regional crises, Romanian voters are highly susceptible to pro-Russian, anti-EU narratives. These narratives, combined with populist and conservative messages, have been transformed into ultranationalist rhetoric by parties like the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). AUR has successfully campaigned on a platform of defending Christian faith, sovereignty, and the traditional family (Nistor, 2024). Furthermore, the party's discourse often aligns with similar illiberal rhetoric, calling for resistance against Western economic, political, and cultural hegemony (Soare, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this study explores the antecedents of intention to vote for nationalist populist parties with a Russia-friendly stance and aims to shed more light on the factors that influence Romanian voters. Building on insights from previous studies, we aim to determine whether there are specific country characteristics that explain the recent surge in popularity of nationalist and populist parties and identify the variables that have the greatest impact on electoral choice in Romania. The study uses logistic regression analysis to examine how exposure to disinformation, reliance on social media for news, trust in nationalist leaders, and conspiracy views affect Romanians' voting behaviour.

Our findings indicate that digital platforms significantly influence political preferences, with individuals relying primarily on social media for news being more inclined to support nationalist populist parties. These results align with recent studies but also highlight unique aspects by isolating the impact of specific factors on voting preference. Previous research has demonstrated the effective use of digital platforms by populist and extremist groups to disseminate their messages (Castelli Gattinara and Froio, 2024; Heidenreich et al., 2024). This trend is evident in Romania well, where nationalist populist parties like the AUR and SOS Romania have skillfully leveraged social media to advocate for patriotism and sovereignty while simultaneously promoting pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives (Nistor, 2024; Soare, 2023).

The impact of technology platforms is even greater when they become the main source of information. Consistent with previous research (Hameleers, 2020), our findings suggest that consuming information from social media influences political beliefs and voting behaviour. We find that increased consumption of news from social media correlates with stronger support for nationalist and populist parties. However, using social media as the primary news source does not significantly impact the likelihood of voting for AUR and SOS Romania. This contrasting finding

implies that voters for these parties have different media diets, likely to include alternative information sources that bypass both traditional media and mainstream social media platforms.

Prior research has shown that the more people believe mainstream media exposes them to false information, the more they turn to alternative media, which are often more likely to contain untruthful and deceptive information (Hameleers, 2023). Additionally, other studies have linked populist attitudes with alternative media use in certain countries (Müller and Schulz, 2019), and have indicated that citizens with populist attitudes trust the mainstream news media less. Our findings provide insights into the dynamics of media consumption and support for nationalist and populist parties in Romania. Future studies should aim to better identify the types of alternative media preferred by nationalist voters in various national contexts and how media consumption patterns affect voting behaviour.

Another important finding pertains to susceptibility to online disinformation. Our data show that a higher awareness of disinformation reduces the likelihood of voting for nationalist populist parties. Disinformation, defined as the intentional manipulation of information to achieve political goals (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Tandoc, 2019), has consistently proven to have harmful consequences on electoral processes (Hameleers, 2023). Our findings align with these studies, confirming that disinformation affects electoral processes and benefits nationalist and radical movements that exploit the loose regulation of technological platforms and widespread low media literacy in their countries to amplify their messages.

To add more country-specific detail, we argue that the disinformation generated by nationalist and extremist parties is even more pervasive due to Romanian's low trust in traditional journalism, insufficient media literacy programs, and ineffective legislation aimed at countering disinformation. Romanian authorities announced an action plan to combat disinformation in 2022, but no significant public measures have been implemented to effectively mitigate the associated risks. Furthermore, there is no coherent legal framework for online electoral disinformation. In the absence of strong democratic institutions and clear legislation related to harmful content, ultra-conservative and extremist discourses can easily proliferate in the Romanian political and informational arenas.

Our data on voting predictions are supported by the recent election results in Romania. Corroborating electoral data, far-right candidates secured one-third of the Romanian votes in the 2024 parliamentary elections, while a far-right candidate was the frontrunner in elections that were subsequently annulled. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) achieved the second-highest score in the general elections (19%), underscoring the prevalence of sympathies for extremist parties with nationalist and ultra-conservative agendas. We aim to continue our dedicated research on this phenomenon to gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving these emerging electoral preferences.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our results support broader concerns about disinformation's influence on democratic processes and underscore the critical importance of both media literacy and a robust regulatory framework for preserving the integrity of democracy in countries particularly susceptible to disinformation and foreign interference.

Furthermore, our research shows that trust in nationalist leaders, particularly figures like George Simion (head of AUR) and Diana Sosoaca (SOS Romania), has a strong impact on voter support for nationalist populists. This underscores the critical significance of charismatic leadership in generating political support and highlights certain country-specific characteristics. In Romania, widespread corruption in the political system (for an overview see Gross, 2023) has eroded trust in

mainstream party leaders, creating fertile ground for the appealing rhetoric of parties such as the AUR and SOS Romania. Their message, which frequently blames Western influences and EU institutions for Romania's economic and social problems, combined with the appeal of their seemingly untainted leaders, resonates with disillusioned voters.

However, contrary to our empirical model dedicated to vote for nationalist and populist parties in general, trust in the leaders of AUR (George Simion) and SOS Romania (Dana Sosoaca) does not significantly influence the likelihood of voting for these parties. This suggests that trust may not be a primary antecedent of voting for their electorate. Instead, other factors, such as personal traits and charisma, might play a greater role in the appeal of these political leaders. Future studies should shed more light on the differentiated effects of personal characteristics and political positions in the case of voting preferences for nationalist and populist parties.

Finally, our study connects conspiracy theories to traits specific to populist and nationalist beliefs. We argue that the widespread political mistrust and anti-EU discourse in Romania fuel conspiracy theories and can sway public opinion to the benefit of certain political groups. In line with earlier studies (Christner, 2022; Imhoff et al., 2022; Loziak and Havrillová, 2024) that have empirically demonstrated the link between conspiracy theories and populist and nationalist ideologies, our results show a correlation between conspiracy beliefs and political support in Romania.

Our research indicates the impact of conspiracy theories on Romanians' political preferences. However, conspiracy theories do not seem to specifically mobilize support for populist nationalist parties such as AUR. From this perspective, our results only partially align with previous research that has empirically linked conspiracy theories with conservative voters (Imhoff et al., 2022) or with the extremist supporters of far-right leaders (Christner, 2022).

Even if the voter base of populist ultranationalist parties such as AUR or SOS Romania resonates with traditional, nationalistic, and authoritarian values, they don't seem to have a greater tendency towards conspiracies than the rest of the population. Future research should examine in more detail whether conspiracy theories have an ideological base and how they affect audience groups in specific socio-cultural and political contexts.

To enhance the theoretical rigor of this study, we have tried to clarify key concepts such as the conspiracy mindset and disinformation. These terms, which are often used in broad and varied ways, do not have unique definitions and it was beyond the scope of this paper to advance the work on unifying definitions, we solely tried to ensure clarity and consistency in their application. While general media sources and reports have been referenced to provide context, the study primarily relies on academic literature and empirical research to establish a solid theoretical foundation. The analysis distinguishes between these concepts, outlining their specific implications for understanding the rise of nationalist populism. This approach strengthens the conceptual framework of the study and ensures a clearer interpretation of the Romanian political dynamics being examined.

To address potential limitations in measuring individuals' exposure to disinformation, this study acknowledges the inherent subjectivity in self-perception metrics. While self-reported awareness of disinformation offers valuable insights into individuals' cognitive and emotional responses, it does not necessarily capture objective exposure levels. Future research could benefit from integrating additional measures, such as content analysis of personal media consumption or third-party verification tools, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of exposure patterns.

Furthermore, this study recognizes the importance of socio-economic determinants in shaping political preferences, particularly in the context of far-right populism. Variables such as objective socio-economic indicators (e.g., income inequality, unemployment rates) should be explored to deepen our understanding of voter behavior. Given Romania's specific socio-economical context,

incorporating these dimensions could enrich the analysis of the far-right's appeal and provide a more holistic view of the interplay between economic vulnerabilities, disinformation dynamics, and voting preference.

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ORCID iD

Andreea Stancea  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1489-6154>

Note

1. Several robustness models were included in Appendix B, highlighting the dynamics of various voting scenarios. These supplementary models examine a range of possibilities: voting for a nationalist party, continued support for a nationalist party having closer ties to Russia and continued support for a nationalist party advocating Romania's exit from the EU.

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Author biographies

Madalina Botan Since 2008, Madalina Botan has been an Associate Professor at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, specializing in media research studies and political communication. From 2011 to 2016, she served as the joint-managing director of the Centre for Research in Communication, where she played a key role in several EU-funded international projects focused on media research, political campaigns, and populism across Europe. Over the past nine years, she has contributed to revising the academic curriculum and actively participated as a speaker and discussant at numerous international conferences and workshops on media effects, political psychology, crisis communication, and governmental affairs. In response to its growth, the Centre for Research in Communication was reorganized into multiple Labs in 2018. Madalina Botan is currently affiliated with the Media Studies Research Lab, where her research focuses on disinformation and online hate speech.

Remus Stefureac is lecturer at the College of Communication and Public Relations (National School of Political Studies and Public Administration) where he teaches courses on tackling disinformation, building resilience and public opinion polling. Previously, Mr. Stefureac served in the public sector as political counselor at the Embassy of Romania to the United States. He is also the co-founder of the news portal www.informat.ro.

Andreea Stancea has a Ph.D. in Sociology and currently she is an adjunct professor to the Faculty of Communication (National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest Romania). Her research focuses on political communication, voting behavior and disinformation. She completed a M.Sc. in Public Policy from the University of Bristol, and a B.A. in International Relations from the University of Bucharest. Before joining SNSPA she was a Robert Schuman trainee at the European Parliament in Brussels. She published in *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* and *Humanities and social sciences communications*. In addition, she is the co-author of a data analysis book designed to introduce young researchers to the statistical methods most applied in social sciences.

Appendix A

Table A1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	Range
Exposure to disinformation	1186	-	-	1	4	3
Trust nationalist public figure (G. Simion)	1065	-	-	1	4	3
Trust nationalist public figure (D. Sosoaca)	1190	-	-	1	4	3
Conspiracy beliefs (COVID-19)	1158	-	-	0	1	1
News information source (SNS)	1231	-	-	1	5	4
Gender: Male	1231	-	-	0	1	0
Age	1231	47.93	17.315	18	101	83
Education	1231	-	-	1	3	2

Table A2. Description of the variables.

Variable name	Measure
Voting intention	<p>Q40 - if parliamentary elections were held next Sunday and the following parties/ political alliances participated, which party/ alliance's candidates would you vote for? – List of all Romanian parties (model 2, Table 2)</p> <p>Q41 - would you personally vote for a nationalist party that promotes religious values and supports the traditional family? (Model 1, Table B1)</p> <p>Q42 - if such a party were to propose measures and policies that could lead to Romania leaving the European Union, would you still vote for such a party? (Model 3, Table B1)</p> <p>Q43 - if such a party were to propose closer ties between Romania and Russia, would you still vote for such a party? (Model 1, Table B1 and also model 2, Table B1)</p>
Exposure to disinformation	<p>The respondents were asked <i>To what extent do you believe you have personally been exposed to fake news or disinformation on various channels (TV, news websites, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, or other social networks) in recent months?</i> The variables categories were 1 = “to a very great extent”, 2 = “to a great extent”, 3 = “to a small extent”, 4 = “to a very small extent/Not at all”. To ease the interpretation of our models, we recoded the variable in a way that lower scores indicate a lower perceived awareness of exposure, and higher scores indicate a higher awareness of exposure</p>
Trust nationalist/populist party leaders: G. Simion and D. Soroca	<p>The respondents were asked <i>How much confidence do you have in each of the following public figures? George Simion and How much confidence do you have in each of the following public figures? Diana Sosoaca. The original scale ranged from 1 (“very much”) to 4 (“not that much”). To simplify the interpretation, we recoded the variable with higher values indicating higher trust in public figures</i></p>
Conspiracy beliefs (COVID-19)	<p>Q53 - in your opinion, the COVID-19 pandemic...</p> <p>0 = “occurred naturally, as has happened with other pandemics in human history”</p> <p>1 = “was caused by global elites to impose control over the world's population”</p>
News information source (SNS)	<p>Q54 - where do you usually get your information most often?</p> <p>1 = “social networks (Facebook, instagram, TikTok, etc.)”</p> <p>2 = “TV channels”</p> <p>3 = “radio stations”</p> <p>4 = “newspapers, magazines”</p> <p>The variable was transformed into a dummy variable to distinguish between social media and mainstream media as news sources. Specifically, the dummy variable <i>sources of news information</i> is coded as 1 if the respondent identified social media networks (e.g., Facebook, instagram) as their primary source of news. Conversely, it is coded as 0 if the respondent indicated that their primary news sources are TV stations, radio stations, newspapers, or magazines</p>

(continued)

Table A2. (continued)

Variable name	Measure
Age	The age of the respondent in years
Gender	Dummy variable equal to one if respondent is female, zero otherwise
Education	What is the highest level of education you have completed?
Income perception	Was measured on a 5-point scale, from 'We don't have enough even for the bare necessities' (1) to 'We manage to have everything we need without having to cut back on anything'

Appendix B

Table B1. Supplementary models emphasizing different scenarios of support for a nationalist party in Romania.

	Model 1 (voting for a nationalist party)		Model 2 (continue voting for a nationalist party if having closer ties with Russia)		Model 2 (continue voting for a nationalist party if supporting Romania's exit from the EU)	
	B(SE)	Exp(B)	B(SE)	Exp(B)	B(SE)	Exp(B)
Exposure to disinformation	-.042 (.066)	.959	-.258 (.089)***	.773	-.152 (.080)**	.859
Trust nationalist public figure (G. Simion)	.385 (.096)***	1.469	.226 (.116)**	1.253	.046 (.107)	1.047
Trust nationalist public figure (D. Sosoaca)	.243 (.093)**	1.275	.137 (.110)	1.147	.263 (.101)**	1.301
Conspiracy beliefs (COVID-19)	.450 (.162)***	1.569	.119 (.256)	1.126	1.182 (.253)***	3.261
News information source (SNS)	.165 (.182)	1.179	.562 (.224)***	1.754	.447 (.211)**	1.563
Gender: Male	-.249 (.146)**	.780	-.592 (.204)***	1.808	-.188 (.186)*	.829
Age	-.058 (.073)*	1.060	-.339 (.100)***	.713	-.293 (.093)**	.746
Education	-.320 (.150)**	.726	-.331 (.196)**	1.393	-.074 (.180)	1.076
Income perception	-.076 (.068)	.927	-.001 (.094)	1.001	-.701 (.672)	.496
Intercept	-.034 (.571)***	.966	-1.229 (.735)***	.293	-.701 (.672)***	.496
Nagelkerke R Square	.128		.102		.167	
AIC	1128.937		682.834		712.117	