ROMANIA UNDER DIGITAL ASSAULT

THE GEORGESCU CASE AND THE THREAT TO EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

THE GREENS/EFA in the European Parliament

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 Romanian presidential election exposed the unprecedented power of coordinated digital and hybrid influence campaigns. Independent candidate Călin Georgescu, initially polling at just 1%, surged to a first-round lead of 23% due to systematic foreign interference. While no ballots were directly altered, the Constitutional Court annulled the election on December 6, citing the impact of these operations, marking the first European case in which an election was canceled because of cyber manipulation. Subsequent investigations revealed a sophisticated infrastructure of bots, influencers, sleeper accounts, and covertly coordinated networks designed to manipulate public perception, exploit identity-based grievances, and disseminate nationalist, anti-EU, and anti-NATO messaging across multiple demographics.

The campaign demonstrated that modern political influence extends far beyond traditional campaigning. Georgescu functioned largely as a figurehead, with the real force driven by structured networks that masked political propaganda as lifestyle or cultural content, lowered resistance through emotional and identity-based appeals, and deployed targeted segmentation to maximise reach. This infrastructure represents a **digital 5th column**, capable of shaping electoral outcomes without direct fraud, undermining democratic stability, and eroding trust in state institutions.

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The implications extend far beyond Romania. Bucharest was one node in a wider constellation of aligned leaders whose coordinated influence could collectively pressure institutions, manipulate public sentiment, and weaken the European Union. The Georgescu case underscores that such networks are already operational across Europe, posing an immediate threat to the integrity of democratic processes, institutional resilience, and the stability of the EU project. Urgent measures to safeguard democracy, strengthen oversight, and build resilience against hybrid influence are now a continental imperative.

KEY POINTS

1. **Unexpected First-Round Lead**: Călin Georgescu, initially polling at 1%, surged to 23% in the first round of Romania's November 2024 presidential election due to coordinated foreign interference.
2. **Election Annulment**: Romania's Constitutional Court canceled the election on December 6, 2024, citing the impact of external manipulation, marking the first annulment in Europe due to cyber interference.
3. **Sophisticated Digital Infrastructure**: The campaign relied on a network of bots, sleeper accounts, influencers, and covert coordination to amplify messaging and create the illusion of broad grassroots support.
4. **Candidate as Figurehead**: Georgescu functioned largely as a symbolic candidate; the real influence was exerted by structured online networks and orchestrated messaging.
5. **Hybrid and Parapolitical Messaging**: Political propaganda was disguised as lifestyle, cultural, or everyday content, lowering audience resistance and fostering parasocial bonds with influencers.
6. **Identity and Cultural Appeals**: Messaging emphasised national sovereignty, traditional values, religion, and anti-Western sentiment, targeting rural, older, and diaspora voters to exploit identity-based grievances.
7. **European Strategic Implications**: Bucharest represented one node in a wider constellation of aligned leaders whose combined influence could undermine EU institutions and policy coherence.
8. **Threat to Democratic Stability**: The Georgescu case illustrates the continental risk of digital 5th columns, which can manipulate elections, weaken institutional integrity, and threaten the EU project, making robust democratic safeguards an urgent priority.

ROMANIA 2024

On November 24, 2024, Romania held its presidential elections. Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate with minimal public support, unexpectedly won the first round with 23% of the vote. Investigations quickly revealed that his surge was the result of coordinated foreign interference, including social media manipulation, bots, and disinformation campaigns promoting his anti-EU, anti-NATO, and nationalist messages.

Although there was no ballot fraud, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the election on December 6, 2024, citing the impact of foreign interference under national electoral law. This made Romania the first European country to cancel a presidential election due to cyber manipulation, creating a political crisis and forcing a rescheduled vote in April–May 2025.

In the months that followed, the full scale of the cyberattack on Romania's electoral process was revealed, showing a pattern of electoral manipulation that combined coordinated social media campaigns, algorithmic amplification, and disinformation networks to systematically influence public opinion. Analysts found that these operations targeted specific demographics, exploited identity-based grievances, and shaped narratives around nationalism, EU skepticism, and anti-establishment sentiment—demonstrating how modern digital tools can distort elections without touching a single ballot.

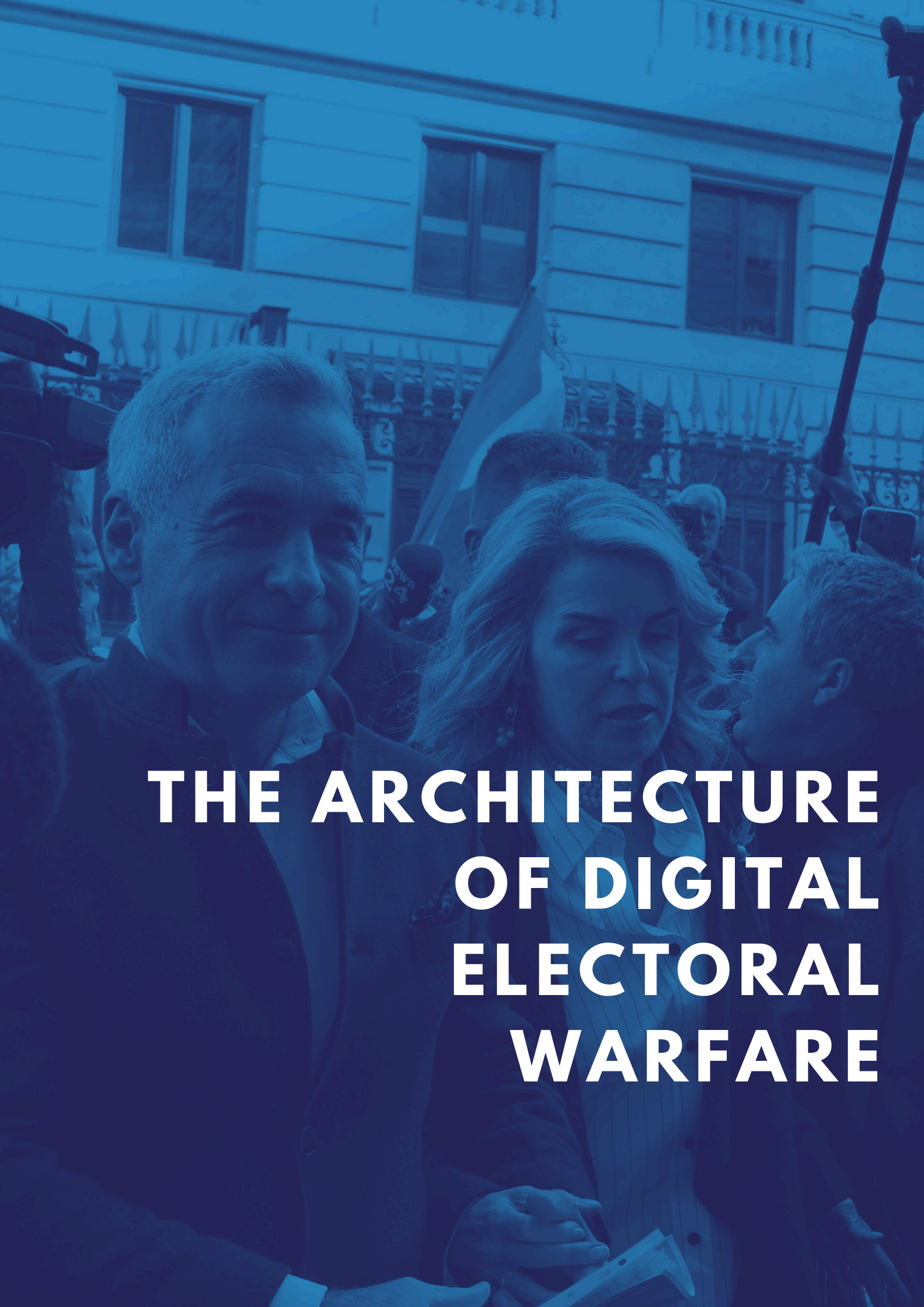
At the outer layer sits the public, whose real engagement—after being seeded and guided by artificial boosts—completes the cycle. Once real users begin sharing and repeating content, the message becomes self-reinforcing. It appears organic, grassroots, and authentic—even though its initial distribution was anything but.

THE WEAPONIZATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Documents released by Romania's SRI, SIE, STS, and Ministry of Interior revealed that Georgescu's campaign was not just unusually popular—it was strategically engineered. In the two weeks before the first round of elections on November 24, 2024, intelligence reports identified a coordinated effort involving over 25,000 TikTok accounts, many of which had been dormant since 2016. These accounts published videos, hashtags, and emojis designed to amplify Georgescu's message, evade content moderation, and create the illusion of widespread grassroots support.

Romanian intelligence classified the operation as a Russian "hybrid aggressive action", combining cyberattacks, leaks, and targeted interference. Attacks were traced to over 30 countries, including attempts to disrupt the Central Electoral Bureau and the Permanent Electoral Authority. Posts were coordinated through channels like @propagatorcg on Telegram, maximizing reach among younger voters and politically disengaged demographics.

The effect was an artificial surge in popularity, propelling Georgescu from obscurity to a first-round lead of 23% despite reporting no official campaign expenditures. The Constitutional Court ultimately annulled the election, citing foreign interference, marking the first time a Romanian presidential vote was canceled due to cyber manipulation and signaling a new era in the weaponization of digital platforms against democracy.



THE ARCHITECTURE OF DIGITAL ELECTORAL WARFARE

The influencers

The network included real influencers and opinion-makers who were co-opted into promoting Georgescu publicly, often through ambiguous or seemingly apolitical content. According to the declassified report from Ministerul Afacerilor Interne (MAI), over 100 influencers with a combined audience of roughly 8 million followers were enlisted to broadcast support or at least favourable content for Georgescu. These influencers sometimes refrained from naming the candidate directly, instead using neutral tags or slogans — a strategy to evade legal restrictions on election propaganda while still shaping public sentiment. This would also have an impact on financing in that it would allow skirting campaign funding restrictions by not being directly associated with the party.

The Bots

The backbone of the network was a massive cluster of fake or reactivated social-media accounts, especially on TikTok, which had as their main function to manipulate the algorithm to artificially increase distribution. According to the declassified dossier from Serviciul Român de Informații (SRI), about 25,000 TikTok accounts were mobilised for the campaign. Among these, 797 accounts were originally created years ago (as early as 2016), but remained virtually inactive until they were “switched on” simultaneously in mid-November 2024 — roughly two weeks before the election. This indicates a premeditated infrastructure, built in advance, ready to be activated when needed. But perhaps most importantly it points to the use of “sleeper digital cells”, which like regular sleeper cells are capable of avoiding detection and allow stealth coordination.

The puppet-masters

Third, at a higher level, the campaign appears to have been orchestrated by an entity with state-actor capacity. The coordination came through structured mechanisms: there was a central "briefing / direction" layer — reportedly via Telegram channels — which set out instructions for content (hashtags, timing, style, narrative) to be followed by both automated accounts and genuine influencers. Payment for influencer participation was reportedly channelled through a "possibly ghost" advertising company; one TikTok account identified, "bogpr", allegedly made transfers to pay for promotion, even though Georgescu officially declared zero campaign expenditure. In parallel, the campaign used fake profiles mimicking Romanian state institutions — presenting them as official bodies to reinforce legitimacy — a tactic designed to mislead and manipulate public trust.

The candidate

Lastly and as in other cases worldwide—such as with Javier Milei in Argentina, Karol Nawrocki in Poland or Donald Trump in the United States—the structure of Georgescu's network shows that the candidate is often secondary to the digital and political infrastructure behind them. The individual functions more as a symbolic figurehead, while the real power lies in the coordinated online networks, influencers, and strategic messaging that drive visibility, manipulate public perception, and ultimately determine electoral outcomes.

KEY POINTS

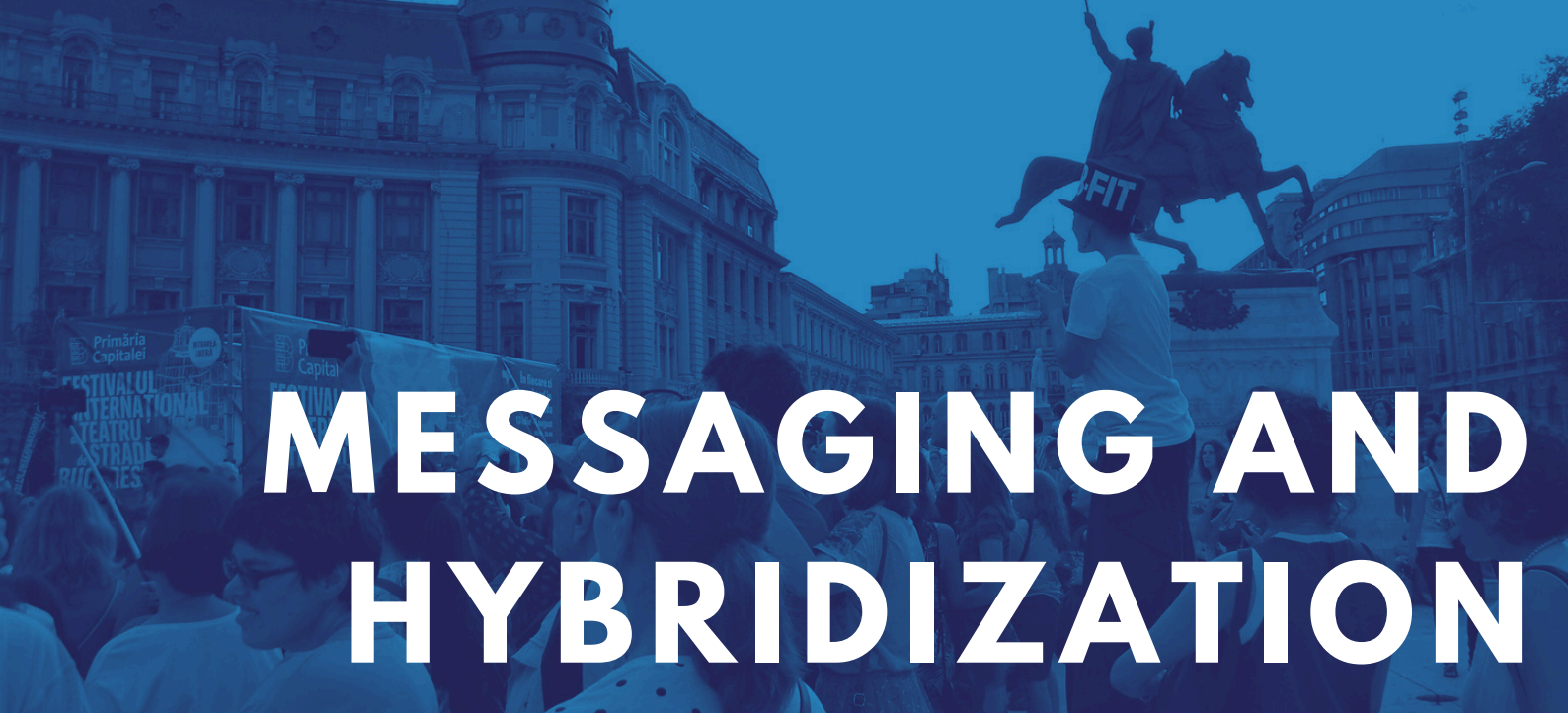
1. Influencer co-option: Over 100 influencers with a combined audience of around 8 million were enlisted to promote Georgescu indirectly, using neutral or apolitical content to evade election-propaganda and campaign-financing restrictions.

2. Bot-driven amplification: Approximately 25,000 TikTok accounts — including nearly 800 long-dormant profiles dating back to 2016 — were activated to manipulate algorithms and artificially boost the candidate's visibility.

3. Sleeper digital cells: The reactivation of old accounts shortly before the election suggests a pre-built, covert digital infrastructure designed for stealth coordination and difficult to detect.

4. Centralised command and financing: The operation was reportedly coordinated via structured Telegram channels, using a ghost advertising company and fake institutional profiles to manage payments, messaging, legitimacy, and narrative control.

5. Candidate as figurehead: As seen in other countries, Georgescu served mainly as a symbolic front; the real power lay in the orchestrated digital networks, influencers, and coordinated messaging systems shaping public perception and electoral outcomes.



MESSAGING AND HYBRIDIZATION

The messaging of the campaign across the breadth of channels was tailored to different demographics: from youth (short-form TikTok, lifestyle) to rural or older voters (traditional values, sovereignty, religion, nationalist pride), as well as diaspora communities — making the identity and cultural messaging broad but flexible, crossing social divides. The most important issue in this regard is the construction of large fields of parapolitical influence and messaging.

Parapolitical messaging

Many posts masked political messaging as everyday, apolitical content, with influencers in fashion, lifestyle, entertainment, or beauty sharing videos of make-up routines, cooking, car rides, or casual chatter, subtly embedding slogans, hashtags, or references to “balance and uprightness,” “sovereignty,” or “a candidate for real Romania”; this approach leveraged parapolitical influence, where audiences perceive the influencer as a trusted peer or “one of us,” making the political message feel personal, relatable, and less like traditional propaganda.

Ideological messaging

The campaign highlighted national sovereignty, traditional values, and collective pride, portraying Romania as threatened by foreign institutions and “Western elites,” while presenting Georgescu as the defender of “Romanian dignity and self-determination,” resonating especially with rural, older, religious, and diaspora voters.

The three strategic considerations concerning messaging and hybridisation

1. Lowered resistance — by packaging political propaganda as cultural or lifestyle content, the campaign reduced skepticism and bypassed critical filters. People encountered messages in everyday contexts (beauty tips, cooking, entertainment), not in overt political advertising.

2. Emotional appeal and identity resonance — tapping into feelings of national pride, cultural belonging, disenchantment with globalization, and fear of foreign influence created strong emotional bonds. This appeals especially to voters who feel alienated or excluded by establishment politics.

3. Broad demographic reach and segmentation — by using different "masks" (youth-oriented content, religious/traditional messages, diaspora-focused patriotism) the campaign could address multiple voter segments with tailored content — maximizing scope and impact beyond conventional political campaigning.

CONCLUSION

The Georgescu campaign revealed how external actors have built powerful and effective digital 5th columns capable of shaping political outcomes across multiple countries. What holds for Romania should be assumed to hold for other political battlefields around the EU.

Georgescu's political ascent exposed a clear and present danger: from parapolitical operators to covert financing and sleeper digital cells, these networks are already operational throughout Europe, linking aligned figures and manipulating public sentiment to advance the strategic objectives of Europe's enemies. Collectively, such nodes could weaken, constrain, and eventually dismantle the European Union project, making the protection of democratic resilience an urgent continental priority.

The Georgescu campaign shows how modern elections can be systematically manipulated through digital infrastructures and hybrid networks, capable of shaping public opinion, exploiting identity-based grievances, and bypassing institutional safeguards. These operations directly threaten democratic stability by undermining the integrity of electoral processes and eroding trust in state institutions.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Strengthen Electoral Security:* Define bot networks, coordinated digital attacks and algorithmic amplification favouring content of a particular political candidate or party independently from users' individual choice as systemic risks under the Digital Services Act. Implement advanced digital electoral monitoring, detection, and rapid-response systems to identify and neutralise coordinated digital attacks, bots, and algorithmic manipulation before they influence outcomes.

2. S*hut off recommender algorithms which are not based on explicit user choice* at least 90 days ahead of elections, for instance, engagement-based ranking which is not based on users' choice but on users' reactions. Make sure people see content they chose and not content they engage with, which exploits unconscious triggers and reactions. The functions of bot networks is to manipulate algorithmic amplification by simulating engagement. If the algorithm does not privilege engagement, their bot operations become less relevant in campaign dissemination.

3. *Enforce existing regulation around electoral campaigning and party financing:* Enforce strict transparency requirements for any kind of expense, including disclosure of sponsorships, funding and origins of content, alongside limits on automated amplification and coordinated campaigns. Artificial amplification of content by paid actors or the platform should be considered party or campaign financing.

4. *Expose Manipulation to the Public:* Inform citizens when they are being targeted by coordinated influence operations, misinformation or parapolitical messaging or campaigns. Help voters recognise manipulation and make informed decisions. Expose in particular harassment and defamation campaigns directed at actors promoting transparency around such campaigns.

5. *Monitor and Disrupt Hybrid Networks:* Establish specialised units to track and neutralise sleeper accounts, fake influencers, and covert digital networks deployed by foreign actors with cross-border cooperation among EU intelligence and cybersecurity agencies. Use the DSA framework to access digital platforms data to conduct the necessary analyses.

6. *Strengthen Institutional Resilience:* Enhance legal frameworks and institutional procedures to protect electoral integrity, including contingency mechanisms to respond to foreign interference, safeguard trust in democratic institutions, and maintain EU cohesion.

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