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Russia and Romania. Who's Dracula Now?

Iulia-Sabina Joja, Ph.D.

**Black Sea Program, Middle East Institute
Georgetown University
George Washington University**

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Russia's Black Sea aims are twofold. The first objective is centered around Ukraine – winning the war, controlling resources, and putting a stop to Ukraine's Western orientation. Second, Moscow's aim has remained unchanged for centuries – to control the Black Sea. It's Russia's access to crucial maritime trade routes that's at stake. Moscow uses the Black Sea region to project power into the Mediterranean.

Ukraine has been a Russian focus since at least 2013. Black Sea countries have played an increasingly important role for Russia since the full-scale invasion in February 2022, as Moscow has actively attempted to undermine support for Ukraine across the region.

How are Russia's Black Sea objectives reflected in the region? The short answer is: it depends on the country. For at least a decade, Russia has been engaging in tailored propaganda and influence operations, made to measure for specific national audiences. Russian narratives in Moldova differ dramatically from those in Turkey. In Moldova, Russian influence focuses on preventing the country's EU integration and stoking fears of a Russian invasion. In Bulgaria, where Moscow has deep roots in the financial and tourist sectors, Russian narratives lobby for neutrality and decoupling from the West. In Turkey, Russia is attempting to portray itself as winning the war and working with Ankara to divide the Black Sea among the two more powerful countries in the region.

Across Central and Eastern Europe there is a meta-narrative: Russia as defender of traditional values and bulwark against the decadent, dysfunctional liberal West.

Russia's Romania policy

In the case of Romania, Russia's influence operations seem subtle compared to those executed in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. But Romania's importance to Moscow is clear and the Kremlin's engagement is real.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine immediately increased Romania's relevance to Russia. Romania shares the longest EU and NATO border with Ukraine. Flows of refugees, military aid and, most importantly, agricultural products depend on Romania's support for Ukraine. More than [half](#) of Ukraine's grain exports since the war has been exported through Romania. Exports through the Black Sea depend on Romania as well. Romania and Poland are the largest Eastern Flank countries with the largest economies. Hence, Romanian 'hearts and minds' have become even more important than they were before the war.

Broadly, Russia's [objectives](#) in Romania are to weaken trust in the EU and NATO, to fuel an identity conflict between 'traditional' values and liberal values, and to portray the West's strategic interests as illegitimate, especially when it comes to Ukraine.

Russia's Political Fingerprints in Romania



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Russia's fingerprints can be found on certain narratives, particularly on the far right in Romania. One powerful and long-lasting narrative has been that of Romania's colonization by Western powers such as the EU and NATO. It has become a major conspiracy theory — foreigners exploit Romanian resources and treat the country's people like second-class citizens. This narrative has been voiced since the 1990s among Romanian far-right circles, but has gained new [ground](#) in the context of the new far right movement that has taken root in recent years.

The evidence of Russian malign influence is at times weak and not entirely verifiable. However, indications are ubiquitous. Bucharest sources tell me that there is preliminary evidence that Cailin Georgescu's recent presidential campaign was financed with money coming from or through Russia. On December 4, 2024 the National Supreme Security Council of Romania declassified reports from all relevant national security and intelligence services stating that Romania has become "a priority for Russia's hostile actions, with a growing interest in the Kremlin to influence (at least) the mood and agenda of the Romanian society in the electoral context" through propaganda and disinformation, the support of Eurosceptical candidates and the support of anti-system movements and the diminishing of support for Ukraine. More than three months after the annulment of the election Romanian, however, authorities have failed to provide public proof of foreign interference.

Early investigations [point](#) to a digital advertising firm tied to the Kremlin channeling money into "Romanian media and influencers promoting conspiratorial and far-right content." An increasing number of young people say they're ready to live in one-party state. Causal relationships may not

exist but there are certainly correlations between Kremlin narratives and illiberal trends in public opinion. What's more:

- Romania's Supreme Council of National Defense report of 2023 [confirms](#) Russia has attempted to penetrate national security, defense and information services to obtain information, including on Romania's and allied assistance to Ukraine, and allied military presence in Romania, and has attempted to undermine through propaganda and disinformation Romanians' trust in the military and in allied support.
- The report also [highlights](#) Russia's aggression against Romania through drone attacks near the border to Ukraine, cyberattacks, organized trans-border criminality, attempts to infiltrate Ukrainian refugees in Romania, and the risk of sabotage of military facilities and Ukrainian military aid transport.
- Far right politician George Simion of the AUR party been accused by Ukrainian intelligence of ties to Russian intelligence, leading to Ukraine [banning](#) him from entering the country. Simion is also banned from entering Moldova due to national security concerns.
- Diana Șoșoacă, leader of the far-right SOS party, who was a former senator from Romania and is now a Member of the European Parliament, is believed to be involved with Russian military intelligence. In 2023 Șoșoacă tabled a bill in the Romanian parliament calling for the annexation of parts of Ukraine that seem to be [coordinated](#) with Hungarian claims of Ukraine. The Romanian-language Sputnik, the Kremlin's propaganda outlet, named Șoșoacă 2021 [politician of the year](#).

A bit of background can be useful here. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) is a far-right party that entered the stage in Romania's 2020 parliamentary elections. Its leader, George Simion, is banned from entering neighboring Moldova, where he is deemed a threat to national security, and from Ukraine, where he is accused of working with the Russian FSB. AUR surged in the 2020 elections to fourth place with approximately 9% of the vote. In the first round of Romania's presidential elections in November 2024, AUR reached almost 14%, even though the party split. Two alternative far right parties and respective leaders have emerged from AUR: Diana Șoșoacă and her SOS party and, most recently, Călin Georgescu and his POT party. Șoșoacă regularly visits the Russian embassy in Bucharest, has been a vocal proponent of closer relations with Moscow, and was banned by Romania's Constitutional Court in October 2024 from running in the presidential elections due to a "systematic" violation of the country's constitutional [foundation](#).

The most spectacular political rise has been that of Călin Georgescu. Georgescu has a background in the Romanian establishment, having worked at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UN's Global Sustainable Index in Geneva. His views have become extreme right, pro-Russian, and deeply anti-Western. His presidential campaign was conducted on TikTok, leading to his spectacular surge to number one, scoring 22,94% of the votes in a first round. TikTok officials summoned to the European Parliament specified that the moderators took down 66,000 fake accounts and 10 million fake followers ahead of the election.

After the first round of the presidential elections and the shock of the results, investigative media discovered ample narrative overlaps between Georgescu and Russian propaganda. Georgescu argues that Romania's best bet is to follow "Russian wisdom," that the war in Ukraine must stop immediately; Georgescu considers Putin a great patriot and [NATO](#) the "weakest alliance on the planet."

Alexandr Dugin, the infamous Novorossiia Kremlin ideologist, has praised Georgescu. Before the second round of presidential elections, Georgescu declared that if he became president there would be [no more political parties](#) in Romania. In the parliamentary elections of December 1, Romanian far right and pro-Russian parties surged in popularity, with AUR, SOS, and POT garnering a combined total of more than 32% of the total vote. The pro-Russian AUR became the second largest party in Romania, doubling its votes in four years from 9% in 2020, when the party [was first launched](#), to over 18% in 2024.

The phenomenon of far right pro-Russian parties mushrooming in Romania over the past few years coincides with Russia's concerted efforts to diminish Romanian support for Ukraine and for the West. It's a neighborhood issue. In Moldova, a much smaller and poorer country without EU and NATO membership, but where a significant part of the population has Romanian citizenship and everyone speaks Romanian, Russia invested over in 2024 alone. Russia's aim was that Moldova's referendum on EU membership would fail and that Maia Sandu, the pro-Western president running

for her second term, would lose re-election. Russia failed, but only by a small margin on both accounts. In Romania, Russia seems to be more successful.

Russia's Exploitation of Romania's Societal Vulnerabilities

Disinformation and propaganda studies over the past decade have demonstrated repeatedly that Russian influence preys on existing societal vulnerabilities. Moscow amplifies existing fault lines rather than trying to create them. In Romania, Russia pushes on several open doors: conservatism, religion, and young, fragile democracy.

Romania is one of the [most socially conservative countries](#) in Europe. Moscow's narratives promoting 'traditional' family values and opposing liberal values ostensibly stemming from Brussels resonates deeply with many Romanians. [31% of Romanians](#) believe that Western values are a threat to their national identity, a percentage overlapping with far right votes in recent elections. The messages of the far right parties AUR, SOS and now POT are regularly equated by Romanians with patriotism, while nationalistic anti-EU messages are [not penalized](#) as undemocratic. Romania is also majority Christian Orthodox and the [most religious country](#) in Europe. Russian Orthodoxy is hence a highly powerful instrument of foreign and defense policy the Kremlin can employ in Romania.

Romania is also a young, fragile democracy in which the dangers of authoritarianism are underestimated, mostly due to limited civic education. According to a study from 2024, 41% of

18-34-year-old Romanians [consider](#) that a totalitarian regime without regular elections would be good for their country.

Russian Influence over Romanian Foreign and Security Policy

The Kremlin's pressure on Romania to reduce its support for Ukraine during the war has borne fruit. This is visible in opinion polls. The percentage of Romanians who blame Ukraine for Russia's aggression increased from a mere 6% in 2022 to 22% in 2024. Russian disinformation works by creating confusion. Those who do not know whether Russia, Ukraine or the West is responsible for the war has also increased over the past two years by four points to 9% of Romania's population. High inflation and governmental mismanagement of the economy have helped Romanians grow wobbly in their stance on Russian aggression.

Pro-Russian forces in Romania push the narrative that Ukraine is Romania's [enemy](#). This narrative has been amplified in recent years; historical border disputes are resurfacing, stirred even by mainstream [politicians](#).

Traditionally, before the war, Russian disinformation narratives targeted two main aspects of Romania's foreign policy: Bucharest's close military ties with the United States and its historically and culturally very close, at times symbiotic, relationship with neighboring Moldova. In the case of the former, Romania's hosting of U.S. ballistic missile defenses became a focal point for Russian attacks. The Kremlin framed Romania's hosting of part of the shield as a "direct threat"



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opening the possibility of Russia [attacking](#) Romania. In 2019 Romanian channels of disinformation claimed American soldiers from the base hosting the missile shield were involved in a murder case, a narrative that [resurfaced](#) during the full-scale invasion. Romania's buildup of Western troops and capabilities especially following the full-scale invasion have added further fuel to Russian rhetorical attacks.

The other thorn in Russia's Romania side is Bucharest's close relationship with Moldova. Before World II, present-day Romania and Moldova were one country. In 1940, as a consequence of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, Romania was compelled to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union, leading to the creation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (Moldavian SSR). As the Soviet Union began its collapse, the Moldavian SSR [declared independence](#) on August 27, 1991, taking the name Moldova, although Russian forces remained on Moldovan territory east of the Nistru River in the breakaway region of Transnistria, where they remain today. Over the decades Romania has poured most of its foreign policy resources into Moldova with the aim of [helping Chisinau](#) towards EU membership. Over the past decades Russia has [exploited unionist sentiments](#) in both countries to portray Romania as an aggressive force attempting to [annex Moldova](#).

Tools: Russia's preference for social media

Russia's access to the European media landscape was radically reduced in 2022, when the EU banned the Kremlin's principal outlets in Europe, Sputnik and RT. Moldova followed suit,

prohibiting an additional number of the Kremlin's Romanian language outlets. This has drastically limited Russian access to Romanian-speaking audiences. Already before 2022, but accentuated with the bans of 2022, Russian narratives became spread through [alternative](#) news networks and websites, [especially](#) online media.

Despite these actions, Russian narratives in Romania have become increasingly present on social media. The war has led to Russia restricting principal Western social media, such as Facebook (widely used in Romania), Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). AUR, which swiftly ascended from its emergence in 2020 to win 9% of total votes in Romania's parliamentary elections, has focused heavily on Facebook as a medium for campaigning. In 2024, Călin Georgescu's shocking victory in the first round and his new party POT can be attributed to TikTok, even though investigations over funding of the TikTok campaign are ongoing. Georgescu's campaign focus on TikTok earned him the name "[TikTok Messiah](#)".

Beyond online and social media, Russia's levers of influence in Romania are through the Russian embassy, NGOs and think tanks, and the Orthodox Church. SOS party leader Diana Șoșoacă attended a Russian embassy event [celebrating](#) the war in Ukraine in 2022. [Days](#) after she gained a seat as member of the European Parliament in the 2024 elections, she was at the embassy again, ostensibly for celebration and consultation.

Politicians from far-right and mainstream parties regularly attend Russian embassy [events](#). Former politicians, including a former prime minister, and prominent intellectuals have Russia sympathies



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and hold events at think tanks and NGOs or propagate Russian propaganda when hosted themselves, such as on the stage of the national theatre in [Bucharest](#). There's nothing new in this. Back in 2014, in the context of Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian investigative journalists sent a list of Romanian public figures supporting Russia to the Romanian government. The names featured in Romanian [media](#).

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