

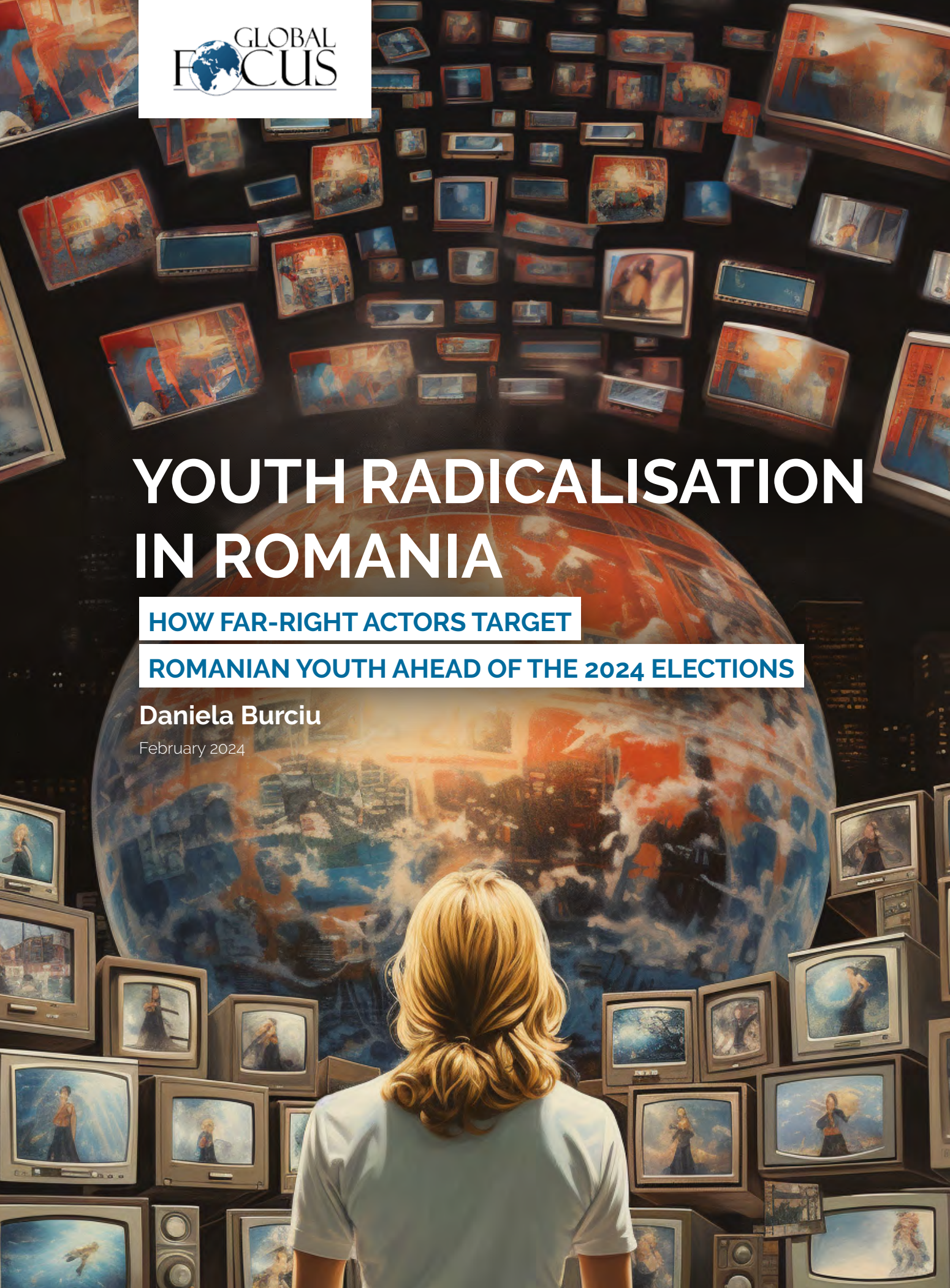
# YOUTH RADICALISATION IN ROMANIA

HOW FAR-RIGHT ACTORS TARGET

ROMANIAN YOUTH AHEAD OF THE 2024 ELECTIONS

Daniela Burciu

February 2024



A project by



Bucharest, Romania

January, 2024

The report can be accessed at [www.global-focus.eu](http://www.global-focus.eu)

or ordered at [office@global-focus.eu](mailto:office@global-focus.eu)

+40 721 259 205

Bd. Iancu de Hunedoara 35, sc. B, ap. 43, Sector 1, Bucharest, Romania

**GlobalFocus Center** is an independent international studies think-tank which produces in-depth research and high quality analysis on foreign policy, security, European affairs, good governance and development. It functions as a platform for cooperation and dialogue among individual experts, NGOs, think-tanks and public institutions from Central and Eastern Europe and Euro-Atlantic partners.

Layout by Florin Vedeau

**DISCLAIMER**

GlobalFocus Center reserves all rights for the present publication. Parts thereof can only be reproduced or quoted with full attribution to the GlobalFocus Center and mention of publication title and authors' names. Full reproduction is only permitted upon obtaining prior written approval from the GlobalFocus Center.

# Table of contents

---

Introduction	4
Context	5
Back-to-back crises, conspiracy theories and the rise of far-right.	5
Political (dis)engagement of youth.	7
Targeting youth through political organisations.	8
Other far-right organisations.	10
Targeting Youth on Social Media.	10
Case studies – who radicalises the Romanian youth?	13
1. “You are few amongst your circle of friends” – George Simion	13
2. “Break them! Come with me and I will teach you how to rule the country” – Diana Iovanovici-Șoșoacă	16
3. “Hit her and establish terror, you do it for the good of the community and you become the hero of the bunch” – Dana Budeanu	18
Conclusions	21

# Introduction

---

2024 marks the biggest electoral year yet for Romania, with European, local, parliamentary and presidential polls scheduled to take place on the background of significant domestic and global challenges, with the potential to further destabilise and polarise society. The rise of far-right and right-wing populists, correlated with a surge of disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war, has reached an otherwise politically overlooked segment of the population – young people. Feeling unrepresented and severed from the political discourse, Romanian youth is at significant risk of radicalisation, being particularly vulnerable to extremist voices that aim to capitalise on their frustrations and disengagement, while leveraging their preferred channels of information and communication with increasing efficiency. Social media and youth susceptibility to online echo chambers and influencers provide pathway for manipulation by malicious actors whose political agenda aligns – more often than not – with the Kremlin's (anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-Ukraine, pro-Russia).

This research focuses on the radicalisation of young people in Romania (approximately defined between ages 17 and 35) and aims to identify and highlight how far-right groups and actors target youth and expose them to extremist narratives and messages, via social media, primarily on Instagram and TikTok (platforms predominantly used by younger demographics), as well as outside of the online environment, through traditional media, public demonstrations, networking activities, trainings and recruitment campaigns, analysing their backgrounds, activities, discourse and impact in figures.

For this purpose, a series of far-right organisations targeting young people were identified and examined. Subsequently, an analysis was conducted on the discourse of three politicians/influencers that appear to have a significant impact and following among youth, targeting them explicitly on their platforms of choice, particularly Instagram and TikTok.



# Context

---

## Back-to-back crises, conspiracy theories and the rise of far-right.

The current Romanian political landscape is marked by insecurity and rising inflation, while the country still experiences the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale war still unfolding at one of its borders, in Ukraine. Almost 67% of Romanians think that the country is heading in the wrong direction<sup>1</sup>, and trust in political institutions is showing a significant decline<sup>2</sup>, making society even more vulnerable to present challenges – domestic and foreign alike – providing new opportunities for extremism and radicalism to rise on the background of social crises, threatening overall democratic resilience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public confidence in the government's abilities and intentions dropped and created a void of legitimacy that far-right forces rapidly sought to fill, primarily by criticising political leadership for their handling of the health crisis. Conspiracy theories proliferated and started permeating mainstream media, as vaccination rates declined across the country. Though the pandemic subsided, parties in government continue to draw criticism for how they managed the situation, while many of the conspiracy theories circulated during that period (for instance, 65,7% of Romanians believe that the pandemic was provoked by global elites in order to control world population, and almost 28,5% believe that there is a global plan to implant microchips through vaccination<sup>3</sup>), along with a significant number of far-right actors that rose in popularity by spreading them, remain in public attention.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shifted focus from COVID-19 to the war unfolding at Romania's borders.

Most Romanians do not sympathise with Russia, which they typically perceive through the lens of its Soviet legacy. Moreover, opposition to Russia is a fundamental part of the myth surrounding

---

1 INSCOP, 4 December 2023 – <https://www.inscop.ro/deceembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-realizat-la-comanda-news-ro-partea-a-ii-a-directia-in-care-se-indreapta-romania-si-intentia-de-vot-la-alegerile-parlamentare/>

2 A poll on trust in public institutions comparing results from 2013 to 2023, showed that the government lost more than 15 points in the last decade (down from 34.8% to 19.4%), the parliament lost almost 10 points (down from 26.7% to 17.4%), while the presidency went up approximately 4 points (from 25.8% to 29.4%). INSCOP, 14 November 2023 – <https://www.inscop.ro/noiembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-realizat-la-comanda-news-ro-partea-a-v-a-incredere-institutii-dupa-10-ani-comparatie-2013-2023/>

3 INSCOP, Verifield for Strategic Thinking Group, 4 February 2022 – <https://www.strategicthinking.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/4.02.2022-Capitolul-7-Sondaj-INSOP-STG-GMF.pdf>

the origins of the Romanian far-right<sup>4</sup>, dating back to the interwar fascist movement The Iron Guard<sup>5</sup>. Positioning themselves as openly pro-Russia would have posed an excessive risk for most Romanian far-right actors, especially in the emotionally charged context of the first few weeks of the full-scale invasion. Instead of endorsing Putin's invasion, they settled on rousing the anti-Ukraine sentiment. Arguably, Romanians were already primed to some degree of suspicion about their neighbour due to the critical portrayal<sup>6</sup> by media and various politicians of the Ukrainian authorities' discriminatory treatment of ethnic Romanians living in Southern Ukraine. This may have also contributed to the rising popularity of far-right actors speaking out against supporting the neighbouring country.

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR, which is also the word for "gold" in Romanian), is expected to secure significant electoral gains in the 2024 legislative elections, currently polling third<sup>7</sup>, at roughly 20%, behind the governing parties PSD and PNL. Formally established in late 2019, AUR is a far-right, economically populist, ultranationalist, anti-West party, incorporating Christian-Orthodox identity elements, along with xenophobic, homophobic and anti-semitic stances, with fascist/legionary undertones, under the slogan "*Family, Nation, Faith and Freedom*"<sup>8</sup>. The logo of the party alludes to the map of "Greater Romania", with extended borders over the Republic of Moldova and the Bukovina region in Southern Ukraine. Their activity in Parliament was marked by scandals<sup>9</sup>, violent protests<sup>10,11</sup>, numerous disruptions<sup>12,13</sup> and direct provocations<sup>14</sup> of political opponents. The same survey shows that another far-right player, the S.O.S. Romania party, rising in popularity via its leader, pro-Russia MP Diana Șoșoacă, polls around the legal threshold of entering the Parliament.

4 A. Tiut, Euronews, 12 May 2023 – <https://www.euronews.com/2023/05/12/pandemic-born-far-right-party-has-rattled-crisis-stricken-romania-democratic-future>

5 The Legion of Archangel Michael or the Iron Guard was a fascist political and paramilitary organisation in Romania, active primarily during the interwar period, known for its extreme ideology, political violence and anti-Semitic beliefs.

6 El País, 31 January 2023 – <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-01-31/treatment-of-ethnic-communities-pits-ukraine-against-neighbors-romania-and-hungary.html>

7 INSCOP, 4 December 2023 – <https://www.inscop.ro/decembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-realizat-la-comanda-news-ro-partea-a-ii-a-directia-in-care-se-indreapta-romania-si-intentia-de-vot-la-alegerile-parlamentare/>

8 Partidul AUR – <https://partidulaur.ro/>

9 Digi24, 10 May 2023 – <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/politica-aur-scandal-violenta-si-extremism-liderul-partidului-george-simion-a-facut-din-nou-circ-in-parlament-2342463>

10 G4 Media, 5 January 2023 – <https://www.g4media.ro/aur-si-violenta-lungul-sir-de-episoade-in-care-liderii-partidului-extremist-aur-au-folosit-forta-pumnului.html>

11 Digi 24, 10 May 2023 – <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/aveti-noroc-ca-si-au-lasat-toti-cutitele-acasa-protest-ilegal-aur-la-parlament-manifestantii-s-au-batut-cu-jandarmii-2342419>

12 HotNews, 27 November 2023 – <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26714107-scandal-mahala-parlament-presedintele-camerei-deputatilor-george-simion-spus-violez-liderul-aur-arat-cum-injura-morti-mama.htm>

13 Digi 24, 7 February 2022 – <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/george-simion-l-a-luat-de-gat-pe-virgil-popescu-in-timpul-motiunii-impotriva-ministrului-energiei-esti-un-hot-esti-un-prost-1829753>

14 HotNews, 26 June 2023 – <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26358841-video-ciolacu-catre-sosoaca-care-acuzat-vandut-tara-linge-clanta-americani-sunteti-mincinoasa-ordinara.htm>



(Source: AUR on Facebook)

Preparing for the 2024 campaign, George Simion, the leader of AUR, announced the creation of a far-right coalition, called the Sovereignist Pole, aiming to unite smaller populist parties around AUR. In the past year, relatively popular public figures also joined Simion's formation, including a series of politicians and celebrities, as well as newcomers such as Lidia Vadim Tudor, the daughter of Corneliu Vadim Tudor – deceased leader of the far-right Greater Romania Party (PRM) and 2000 presidential finalist. In an effort to strengthen his legitimacy, Simion announced that he aims to "continue the legacy"<sup>15</sup> of Vadim Tudor.

The current governing parties are holding discussions about running for elections together in a grand coalition.

## Political (dis)engagement of youth.

Romanian youth exhibits major disengagement with politics. A 2019 study<sup>16</sup> found that 62.3% of young people aged 18-29 are not interested at all in politics and approximately 80% did not participate in any political activity (e.g. signing petitions, protesting, volunteering, etc.). Youth's evaluation of democracy also warrants attention – Romania has one of the lowest rates of positive opinions about democracy in the EU, with approximately 20% believing that "democracy is not a good form of government" and over 23% agreeing that "in some circumstances, dictatorship is better than democracy".

15 G4 Media, 14 November 2023 – <https://www.g4media.ro/partidul-extremist-aur-a-lansat-polul-suveranist-in-alianta-a-intrat-si-partidul-condus-de-ilan-laufer-care-are-origini-evreiesti.html>

16 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019, *Studiu despre tinerii din România 2018/2019* – <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/15294.pdf>

Romania registered low voter turnouts<sup>17</sup> in most of the elections organised after 1989. The last legislative polls, in 2020, recorded one of the lowest voter turnouts in the entire democratic history of the country, just under 32%<sup>18</sup>. Only 25,39% of voters aged 18-34<sup>19</sup> cast their ballot, significantly below the national average<sup>20</sup> and 6% lower than the previous cycle, in 2016<sup>21</sup>.

Despite institutional frameworks such as the National Strategy for Youth<sup>22</sup>, which includes the promotion of “public, civic and political participation of young people”, current legislation does not incorporate mechanisms dedicated to involving youth in the political decision-making process, not even a consultation role on issues impacting them directly, such as education or social security assistance. Dozens of civic youth organisations, mainly student associations, are active throughout the country, and some cooperate with public institutions in various projects, but their political demands are rarely included on the executive agenda, while the activities of youth branches of political parties are usually limited in scope and mostly serve as a basis for networking and recruitment.

## Targeting youth through political organisations.

Under the slogan “*Young people of AUR willing to bring justice for Romania*”, the youth organisation of AUR, Tineretul AUR (TAUR, which also translates into the Romanian word for “bull”), was launched in August 2021, during a political summer school organised in Covasna, Transylvania<sup>23</sup>. Their main objectives include the promotion of “conservatism, patriotism, Christian faith, traditional family and freedom” among young people and measures related to their “economic, social and cultural development”, as well as establishing connections with like-minded youth organisations from other countries<sup>24</sup>. They established the TAUR National Youth Council<sup>25</sup> and extended their network by opening local branches throughout the country, organising internship programs, public events, protests and recruitment campaigns, as well as charity initiatives and informal gatherings

17 Absenteeism is also due to the decline of the Romanian population, especially related to low birth rates and migration.

18 Permanent Electoral Authority (ROAEP), 6 December 2020 – <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/parlamentare06122020/romania-counties>

19 According to the 2021 census, there are approximately 4.6 million people aged 18-34 living in Romania. INS, 2021 - <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/>.

20 However, the 18-34 age category was the only one to register an increase in the total share of the votes compared to 2016. Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority (ROAEP), 6 December 2020 – <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/parlamentare06122020/abroad-stats>. Youth Council of Romania, 7 December 2020 – <https://ctr.ro/de-ce-n-au-mers-tinerii-la-vot/>.

21 Age-specific data was absent prior to the 2016 elections, thus voting trends among different age groups could not be thoroughly analysed.

22 Strategia Națională pentru Tineret 2023-2027 – <https://mfamilie.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Anexa-planul-de-actiune.pdf>

23 Transylvania is a subject of great interest for the Romanian far-right – historically part of the Hungarian Empire and currently populated by a significant number of ethnic Hungarians, the region is a constant target for nationalists, while the supposed plan of this ethnic minority to secede is a narrative used to stir the anti-Hungarian sentiment among Romanians.

24 AUR Arad on Facebook, 6 October 2022 – <https://www.facebook.com/AURARAD2/posts/pfbido2sKpFNa2PibuCXLsd8Xuz6gpUobrVdDAwyPfpGdZz6SWKbt4LyTh4m5WayKnmuo8Cl>

25 Its first meeting took place at the Romanian Parliament, in October 2023 – Tineretul AUR on Facebook, 25 October 2022, <https://fb.watch/ponmvlbaww/>



(e.g. a PlayStation FIFA match with a famous Romanian football player<sup>26</sup>), while maintaining a steady social media presence, particularly on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok<sup>27</sup>. In October 2023 – under the slogan “Patriots are coming – 2024”, TAUR members attended the “Youth for Romania” Political School, where they debated on topics such as “Education vs. School”, “Patriotism vs. Globalism” or “Traditional Family vs. LGBTQ+”, and attended lectures on public speaking, law and economics, “traditional values”, and listened to speakers such as Gheorghe Piperea<sup>28</sup>, a far-right lawyer and politician who joined AUR after gaining popularity on social media during the pandemic, via an anti-vaccination campaign rooted in conspiracy theories<sup>29</sup>.

Ahead of the 2024 elections, TAUR started the national recruitment campaign “Be the voice of your generation”, which seemingly aims to expand its base beyond the typical AUR supporter profile. For instance, in October 2023, members of AUR marked the beginning of the academic year by staging a protest at the opening ceremony organised at the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, spreading flyers encouraging students from the Faculty of Political Sciences to drop out of the “system’s propaganda laboratory” and join AUR, “the only party that truly promotes youth” and is looking for “brave and honest young people to be part of the change”<sup>30</sup>. TAUR has been connected to other incidents as well, including its former president attempting to enter the parliament building with four bullets in her handbag<sup>31</sup>.

In the spring of 2023, independent (former AUR) MP Anamaria Gavrilă founded the Party of Young People (POT), a nationalist, traditionalist, Orthodoxist formation focused on “the mission to save the identity, nation and future” and “restore the universal principles of life”<sup>32</sup>. The POT leader (and only visible member) is very active on TikTok (where some of her videos passed a million views), where she addresses topical issues using nationalist, populist and alarmist rhetoric, pleading for Romanian people to join the platform in order to replace the establishment politicians that endanger the future of the country. Despite the name of the party, a content analysis determined that Gavrilă’s messages do not target the youth primarily.

26 Tineretul AUR on Facebook, 17 April 2022 - <https://www.facebook.com/TineretulRomaniei/posts/pfbid02W4HWVjaRpMikJahrejax3sjqbegAaBsDbCNRjD2GqC8UKNzLNRvRSdCLRpnH1TtI>

27 At the time of this research, the TikTok page of TAUR was unavailable.

28 Tineretul AUR on Facebook, 1 November 2023 - <https://www.facebook.com/TineretulRomaniei/posts/pfbid02iLsi8NnWSkhZTh3cxdokfbgFPf11arZt31pVVMXAX47EybKoEGQgEygXEcdXHhTI>

29 Gheorghe Piperea on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/gheorghe.piperea/posts/3874213149310948/>; <https://www.facebook.com/gheorghe.piperea/posts/3915721108493485>

30 SNSPA, 2 October 2023 - <https://snspa.ro/rectorul-snspa-remus-precopie-george-simion-presedintele-aur-a-ales-sa-promoveze-discursul-urii-la-snspa/>

31 Observator News, 10 May 2023 - <https://observatornews.ro/eveniment/o-colaboratoare-aur-a-incercat-sa-intre-in-parlament-cu-patru-gloante-femeia-a-fost-condusa-la-sectia-de-politie-522974.html>

32 Partidul Oamenilor Tineri, Viziunea - <https://sieupot.ro/viziune/>

## Other far-right organisations,

activating at local and national level, also focus a significant part of their actions on youth recruitment and training, with some sharing their work, to a certain extent<sup>33</sup>, on social media. Analysing three specific examples, Neamunit (“United People”), Noi Români (“We Romanians”) and Casus Belli, a series of common threads were observed among these organisations, which can be characterised as extremist, ultranationalist, revisionist, xenophobic and socially regressive. In order to attract young members, they use social media to spread rallying messages on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or Telegram, focusing on youth empowerment, organising public manifestations related to issues of interest to young people (against certain governmental policies on education, for example) or training camps and summer schools. Some examples include Casus Belli’s “Nationalist Camp – The Face of the Enemy”, where young people attended church and trained in combat sports in order to learn how to “fight to defend their families and nation against the progressivism and immigrants suffocating Europe”<sup>34</sup>. Similar camps<sup>35</sup> are held by other far-right organisations as well. They also emphasise their charity work, which acts as a legitimating instrument and dilutes some of the extremist content that is usually posted on their social media pages<sup>36</sup>.

## Targeting Youth on Social Media.

Romania has over 13.5 million social media users and rising steadily, across platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, with the latter registering the biggest growth, passing 7.5 million monthly users<sup>37</sup>. However, Romania has the lowest score on digital skills in the EU<sup>38</sup>, and is the second to last member state in media literacy<sup>39</sup>. Trust in traditional media (TV, radio, press) is at an all-time low and social networks are increasingly used as a source of information, particularly among young people (aged 18-24), who now get most of their news via platforms like Facebook and YouTube<sup>40</sup>. Other networks are utilised in this regard with growing frequency – Romania ranked first in Europe in terms of news consumption on TikTok, with 16% of users getting their information from this platform<sup>41</sup>. Individuals aged 18-34 represent the majority of users on Instagram

33 Details about the organisations, their structure, leadership, etc. are limited and faces of those participating in their activities are usually blurred, as to ensure the anonymity of members.

34 Casus Belli on Instagram, 2 October 2023 – [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx5Er7BIRUt/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cx5Er7BIRUt/?img_index=1)

35 Noi Români on Facebook, 10 October 2023 – <https://www.facebook.com/n01r0m4n11/posts/pfbido2n6kt6AdoVe1XXBpAtkS6DgzBwR6hL285igstCKQzvcF8mEUwZg8RRAYxtTzE1tYI/>

Neamunit on Facebook, 23 September 2023 – <https://www.facebook.com/Neamunit.ro/posts/pfbido24fUn6FwMo1BgGfyXo7gNDoeYW9Jj46Uyt1najA7ux26Vm6gCKND7QtRA3uvD83Lkl>

36 Neamunit on Facebook – <https://www.facebook.com/Neamunit.ro/photos>

by: Noi Români on Facebook – <https://www.facebook.com/n01r0m4n11/posts/pfbido2W4wctepdMbyyitZk5r6QRHvL9oKTNF1hzSmUYe2xB8AZyubu6QviRVLY7BzQ7RZvl>

37 DataReportal, 13 February 2023 – <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-romania>

38 Eurostat, 22 March 2022 – <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220330-1>

39 EU Disinfo Lab – [https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919\\_RO\\_DisinfoFS.pdf](https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919_RO_DisinfoFS.pdf)

40 Reuters Institute, 21 June 2023 – <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>

41 Reuters Institute, 21 June 2023 – <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>

(almost 63%)<sup>42</sup> and TikTok (over 95%)<sup>43</sup>, therefore these two platforms were prioritised given their predominantly younger demographic.

Social media has been used by mainstream politicians to raise their public profile for years (to varying degrees of success), but extremist figures have managed to stand out and use digital platforms to their advantage with increasing efficiency, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, by engaging in activities such as pushing anti-vaccination conspiracy theories, live streaming themselves disrupting the work of various institutions or sharing hateful content directed at public officials and health authorities. Their audiences expanded, despite bans, reports and restrictions.

Additionally, decentralised, less regulated and encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram generally provide a favourable medium for the spread of disinformation and radicalisation content that is difficult to track and eliminate, while events like COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and more recently, the Israel-Palestine conflict, supplied the context for harmful ideas to flourish. Telegram in particular has become a destination for malicious actors and various extremist groups activating in Romania, who redirected some of their online presence to this platform, in order to counterbalance Meta's "censorship"<sup>44</sup>.

One demographic is disproportionately impacted by social media activity. Young people tend to spend significantly more time online than other age groups<sup>45</sup>, and are more likely to rely on the internet to get information and news<sup>46</sup>. Despite scoring higher in terms of media literacy, disproportionate exposure makes them particularly vulnerable to disinformation, propaganda and fake news circulating on social networks, and more prone to radicalisation.

Extremist actors capitalise on both the factual and perceived lack of political representation and prioritisation of youth's interests, by advancing targeted messages and narratives through a wide array of online and offline mediums. This is not limited to politicians and messages are not always evidently political, especially on social media, where it is common for users to be exposed to a *memeified* version of instances of abuse, discrimination and extremism, particularly from politicians, influencers and other public figures. One such example is that of the late far-right politician Corneliu Vadim Tudor. Archival videos showing Tudor's extremist speeches, as well as his aggressive outbursts and discriminatory language, especially towards political opponents, women and ethnic minorities, attract large audiences on social media entertainment pages, Instagram and TikTok primarily. These videos are viewed in some cases by millions of users per individual post, while subsequent reposts and edits expand the audience further. Normalisation of extremist ideas,

---

42 Statista, 24 November 2023 – <https://www.statista.com/statistics/805448/instagram-users-romania/>

43 Start.io, March 2023 – <https://www.start.io/audience/tiktok-users-in-romania>

44 GlobalFocus Center, 30 March 2023 – [https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/resilience-of-the-disinformation-ecosystem-how-pro-russian-voices-adjust-when-banned-by-facebook-case-study-diana-sosoaca/#\\_ftn1](https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/resilience-of-the-disinformation-ecosystem-how-pro-russian-voices-adjust-when-banned-by-facebook-case-study-diana-sosoaca/#_ftn1)

45 Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review, 12 April 2022 – <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/who-is-afraid-of-fake-news-modeling-risk-perceptions-of-misinformation-in-142-countries/>

46 European Commission, Radicalisation Awareness Network, 13 January 2021 – [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/ran\\_young\\_galvanising\\_youth\\_07-08\\_122020\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/ran_young_galvanising_youth_07-08_122020_en.pdf)

attitudes or behaviours, by “humour”, or by constant exposure alone, can negatively impact the psychosocial development and worldview of young people, and, implicitly, their political opinions. Low levels of education<sup>47</sup>, corroborated with economic difficulties and lack of professional or educational opportunities – especially in disadvantaged rural or smaller urban areas (where AUR previously showed the best performance) – can exacerbate the anxieties and frustrations of young people and further lower their trust in democracy, leading some to radicalisation.

Most visible and impactful extremist content tends to be associated with prominent public figures. In order to illustrate how they operate and how efficient they are at spreading far-right narratives and attracting Romanian youth, three case studies of far-right actors were chosen, based on their online and offline popularity, cultural relevance and *modi operandi*. Both their official pages and the spread of their content across the networks via other accounts were taken into consideration, using the immediately accessible information provided by the platforms (e.g. the number of views of posts using a person or group’s name) and CrowdTangle. Their different backgrounds were also relevant, as they ensure the coverage of a wider range of public: George Simion stems from the *ultras* community and later gained support from his unionist activism and anti-establishment campaigns; Diana Şoşoacă is a lawyer who capitalised on the social frustrations related to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and protective measures, as well as the war in Ukraine; Dana Budeanu has been in the public eye for decades before turning to politics, with groups of followers attached to her at various stages of her career – from fashion design, to *influencing*, and ultimately as a political commentator.

All three are present on a variety of online networks, as well as in mainstream media, but for the purpose of this paper the focus is placed on their activity on platforms with stronger influence within the youth demographic – Instagram and TikTok.

---

47 According to Eurostat, Romania has the highest rates of leavers from education and training, as well as NEEs in the EU, at approximately 16% and 20% respectively - [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early\\_leavers\\_from\\_education\\_and\\_training](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training); [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics\\_on\\_young\\_people\\_neither\\_in\\_employment\\_nor\\_in\\_education\\_or\\_training](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training)

# Case studies – who radicalises the Romanian youth?

---

## 1. “You are few amongst your circle of friends” – George Simion

George Simion is the president and co-founder of AUR. He has been an MP since 2020, and is expected to be the party's candidate for the presidential elections of 2024. He started his political career as an activist and leader of “Action 2012”, a platform of non-governmental organisations supporting the unification of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, organising public demonstrations on both sides of the border. Since the beginning of 2000s, he was also known within the Romanian football hooligans community – *ultras* – particularly as leader and co-founder of the “United under the Tricolor” and “Honor et Patria” groups supporting the national team. Romanian ultras have been associated with far-right and ultranationalist movements, and very often display messages promoting racism (especially towards the Roma and Hungarian minorities), xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny and violence. Both “United under the Tricolor” and “Honor et Patria”<sup>48</sup> groups have shown their far-right orientation through ultranationalist messages and calls for violence<sup>49</sup>, by using fascist symbols and spreading Iron Guard propaganda<sup>50</sup>, or disrupting football matches with xenophobic, racist and revisionist slogans and demonstrations<sup>51</sup>. In September 2023, “Honor et Patria” and a series of other far-right groups joined the Nationalist Bloc, a newly established extremist platform cooperating with similar organisations from Italy and Serbia<sup>52</sup>. In 2011, George Simion was photographed along with fellow “Honor et Patria” members

---

48 According to a journalistic investigation published in October 2023, a series of AUR members and leaders, including its former Secretary General and the president of the Petroșani local branch, are former or current members of the “Honor et Patria” group. D. Marinescu, GSP, 9 October 2023 - <https://www.gsp.ro/fotbal/nationala/aur-et-patria-ieri-ultrasi-azi-presedinti-de-partid-suporter-campanie-simion-714028.html>

49 Open letter signed by a series of ultras groups, including “Honor et Patria” and “United under the Tricolor” on 22 July, 2022, “warning” political parties about an alleged plan to hold a football match between the Hungarian national and Székely Land U18 teams, which they claimed to be a “separatist danger”, and announced their willingness to “defend the country with all forces possible” if the authorities don’t intervene to stop the game - <https://www.instagram.com/p/CgUnkk1INYT/>

50 A. Marincea, Libertatea, 9 November 2023 - <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/concerte-extremiste-moartea-homosexualilor-si-amenintari-pentru-un-colaborator-libertatea-pe-zidurile-din-capitala-4712383>

51 I. Subotić, Press One, 14 September 2023 - <https://pressone.ro/stadium-geopolitics-how-the-media-in-serbia-and-kosovo-reacted-to-the-scandal-caused-by-romanian-hooligans-in-bucharest/>

52 O. Despa, S. Gočanin, Europa Liberă România, 28 September 2023 - <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/lansare-blocul-nationalist/32612504.html>



displaying a banner containing a racist message towards the Roma population<sup>53</sup>. When later asked about his experience as an ultras, he described his time in these groups as “teaching him more than any school he has ever attended”, adding that the “principles of the ultras life are healthy and can be used on a daily basis”<sup>54</sup>.

## Political rise.

In 2019, Simion ran as an independent in the European elections, running a populist anti-establishment campaign centred around his outsider status, as highlighted in a message from one of his ads – “slap the political parties [in the face], vote for a man”<sup>55</sup>. Simion’s effort was unsuccessful, obtaining only 1,29% of the votes<sup>56</sup>, but his political profile was about to rise significantly along with the launch of the AUR party, in December.

As president of AUR, George Simion showcased himself as a far-right nationalist, economically populist, anti-elite, anti-immigration, socially regressive political leader, focusing his discourse on replacing the political establishment, prioritisation of national industries and companies over foreign ones, rights of Romanian minorities in other countries, the Romania-Moldova relationship, as well as social issues related to the protection of the “traditional family”, in particular through an Orthodox Church-rooted agenda directed mostly against the LGBTQ+ community. During the COVID-19 pandemic he organised demonstrations against public health protection measures and disseminated conspiracy theories about the virus and vaccination campaign<sup>57</sup>. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Simion constantly criticised the government in Kyiv and ridiculed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky<sup>58</sup>, spoke against the international actions supporting Ukrainian economy and agriculture (claiming they negatively impact Romanian economy)<sup>59</sup> and accused Ukraine of trying to “destroy” the Danube Delta by illegally dredging the Bystroye Canal<sup>60</sup>. In April 2023, it was confirmed by the Ukrainian Intelligence Services (SBU) that the AUR leader was banned in 2020 from entering Ukraine, over a series of alleged meetings he attended with FSB agents, including one that took place in Chernivtsi in 2011<sup>61</sup>.

53 D. Marinescu, GSP, 9 October 2023 - <https://www.gsp.ro/fotbal/nationala/aur-et-patria-ieri-ultrasi-azi-presedinti-de-partid-suporter-campanie-simion-714028.html>

54 Newsweek, 8 February 2022 - <https://newsweek.ro/politica/foto-george-simion-plin-de-sange-dupa-ce-s-a-batut-cu-politia-cum-e-sustinut-galerii-in-alegeri>

55 G. Simion campaign ad, 8 May 2019 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7HbDKdMuNA>

56 <https://rezultatevot.ro/elections/4/results>

57 G4 Media, 14 February 2022 - <https://www.g4media.ro/george-simion-despre-pandemia-de-coronavirus-care-a-ucis-61-000-de-romani-noi-am-trait-liberi-in-romania-si-nu-am-patit-nimic-cu-unele-exceptii-a-fost-o-plandemie-organizata-de-c.html>

58 G. Simion on TikTok, 10 October 2023 - <https://www.tiktok.com/@georgesimionoficial/video/7288301774375537952>





59 Euronews, 17 September 2023 - <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/george-simion-il-critica-pe-ciolacu-pe-tema-cerealelor-din-ucraina-slugile-noastr>

60 G. Simion on Facebook, 20 February 2023 - <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=878812376564633>

61 A. Rotaru, Digj24, 15 December 2023 - <https://www.digj24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/podoliak-despre-intalnirea-lui-simion-cu-serviciile-ruse-sustin-ce-spun-serviciile-noastre-rusia-finanteaza-extremismul-in-romania-2616463>

## Social media popularity and appealing to the youth.

George Simion uses social media platforms – especially Facebook<sup>62</sup>, YouTube and TikTok – in order to reach and expand his audience, sharing short text posts, pictures and videos, including numerous live streams of himself disrupting institutional proceedings and calling out – often aggressively – political opponents. His presence on TikTok, where he has over 400.000 followers<sup>63</sup> and the #georgesimion tag has over 270 million views<sup>64</sup>, is consistent and tailored to match the platform’s particularities. On Instagram, Simion has a significantly stronger following (almost 31.000) than both current and former prime-ministers, Marcel Ciolacu (PSD) and Nicolae Ciucă (PNL) respectively (around 5000 each), though lagging behind President Klaus Iohannis, who has over 141.000 followers.

NAME	TOTAL	GROWTH	% GROWTH
 georgesimion.ofi...	30.7K	+2.6K	+9.40%
 klausiohannis	141.8K	+2.9K	+2.10%
 marcelciolacu	5.1K	+1.8K	+55.39%
 nicolae.ciuca	5.3K	+1.4K	+35.02%

(Graphic and data: CrowdTangle)

George Simion’s style of addressing young audiences is illustrated by one of his speeches to the members of AUR’s youth organisation: *“You will discover, if you haven’t already, that you are few amongst your circle of friends, few who think, few who are interested in history, politics, about what is happening in the society. Don’t let that discourage you. [...] in the current rhythm, in 15, 20, 25 years Romania will not exist anymore. [...] If you chose AUR, then you have to know you are probably the last chance our nation has to oppose the current destroying our nation.”*<sup>65</sup>

The AUR leader uses one of the common narratives of the far-right, according to which the country is on the brink of destruction, due to both internal and external factors threatening our way of life. When addressing young people, he transitions from this rhetoric of fear to one of empowerment, emphasising that “only” the new generations – supposedly not yet corrupted by the system – can step in and save the country from its demise, with Simion as a leader rising from their ranks and fighting for their interests. As observable in the quote above, particular attention is reserved for those holding beliefs that tend to be shunned by society (i.e. radical), that may feel isolated from their peers because of views they may not feel comfortable sharing out of fear of rejection, or in the

62 As of December 2023, Simion is the second most followed Romanian politician on Facebook (after president Klaus Iohannis), with over 1.3 million subscribers.

63 By comparison, Prime-minister Marcel Ciolacu has 5000 followers.

64 <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/georgesimion>

65 Excerpt from Simion’s speech, Bursa, 14 September 2023 – <https://www.bursa.ro/george-simion-le-cere-tinerilor-simpatizanti-sa-nu-se-simta-descurajati-60067058>

context of media's portrayal of political correctness. Popular far-right figures such as Simion not only give voice to this segment of the population – young individuals in search of their identity – but also encourage them to become vocal and active themselves, providing them a sense of purpose that mainstream pro-democratic politicians currently seem unable to do.

George Simion also aims to attract young supporters via tailored political promises. For instance, in August 2023, he promised that if his party enters government, youth in diaspora will be given effectively free homes if they choose to return to Romania<sup>66</sup>.

The party's appeal to young voters could be observed from its first political campaign – in the 2020 legislative elections, 40% of present voters aged 18-35 cast their ballots for AUR<sup>67</sup>. A 2022 survey<sup>68</sup> found that the largest group of AUR supporters are aged 18-30, representing approximately 36% of the party's total following; in the general voting population, the same group amounts to around 25%.

## 2. “Break them! Come with me and I will teach you how to rule the country” – Diana Iovanovici-Șoșoacă

A disruptor in Romanian politics, far-right lawyer Diana Iovanovici-Șoșoacă was elected as an MP in 2020 on the AUR list, and first gained attention during the pandemic, through a virulent anti-vaccination campaign based on conspiracy theories, defying protection measures and organising public protests against the government and health officials. She was unknown to the public before COVID-19, and the beginning of her political career is tied to a group of students that requested the cancellation of the Bacalaureate exam on account of the pandemic conditions. Șoșoacă legally represented them and used this opportunity to spread anti-system messages and conspiracy theories, gaining increased media and public attention on the background of the health crisis<sup>69</sup>.

### A Kremlin supporter enters parliament.

Joining the newly-formed AUR, Șoșoacă became known for her populist, ultranationalist, xenophobic, homophobic, anti-EU, anti-NATO and pro-Russian rhetoric, as well as for her

---

66 EVZ, 8 August 2023 – <https://evz.ro/george-simion-promite-case-la-pret-de-un-leu-pentru-tinerii-din-diaspora.html>

67 AUR also registered the most gender unbalanced result in the elections of 2020, with almost 58% of its voters being male.

68 Mediafax, 8 February 2022 – <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/cine-sunt-votantii-aur-sunt-tineri-iar-92-nu-au-studii-superioare-iata-profilul-complet-20511798>

69 Newsweek, 4 December 2023 – <https://newsweek.ro/politica/cum-a-intrat-diana-sosoaca-in-politica-si-cine-sunt-oamenii-din-spatele-ei-cum-o-sprijina-rusia>

aggressive outbursts in parliament<sup>70</sup> and attacks against political opponents<sup>71</sup>. In February 2021, a few months into her mandate, she clashed with George Simion and was expelled from AUR over indiscipline, and went on to form her own breakaway party, S.O.S. Romania, which climbed in polls via her recognition, and may enter the legislative in 2024.

An outspoken Kremlin supporter, she positioned herself firmly against the Ukrainian government in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion, and was one of the few MPs to visit the Russian Embassy in Bucharest after the escalation of the conflict, which she continues to do regularly. The leader of S.O.S. repeatedly accused the neighbouring country of "stealing" Romanian territory<sup>72</sup> and spread disinformation about the discrimination of the Romanian minority in Ukraine – *"They banned [Romanians'] religion, they closed their churches, arrested priests and killed Romanian children, sent them to war. The first [people] to be sent to war were ethnic [minorities] and Romanians. There is an ethnic cleansing of the Romanian people that Ukraine does not recognize."*<sup>73</sup>

Șoșoacă also disrupted president Zelensky's visit to Bucharest, in the fall of 2023, holding a map of "Greater Romania" and calling him out to "return Romanian territories" as he walked the corridors of the Parliament building. Concerned about potential protests by Șoșoacă and her colleagues disturbing the solemn occasion, authorities were allegedly determined to cancel a scheduled address in front of the joint legislative by Zelensky, after the S.O.S. leader threatened that "it will be bad" and that "his legs should be broken"<sup>74</sup>. Videos of her manifestations against Zelensky attracted millions of views on social media, especially on TikTok<sup>75</sup>.

### Social media presence and "empowering" youth.

Despite numerous bans and reports, Diana Șoșoacă is one of the most popular politicians on social media, posting on multiple accounts across online platforms, including Instagram and TikTok. The latter is of particular interest to Șoșoacă, as she posts videos every few days to her over 170.000 followers<sup>76</sup> and occasionally holds live chats with her supporters. Her content ranges from live streams, to edited videos and text posts. Like other far-right actors, she benefits from coverage and reposts on other pages and groups, the real number of users exposed to and engaging with her

70 Ziare.com, 28 November 2022 – <https://ziare.com/diana-sosoaca/scandal-monstru-parlament-ziua-nationala-parlament-tipete-diana-sosoaca-acoperit-discurs-1774904> ; Digi24 on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drasG5T9FWg>

71 Antena 3 CNN on YouTube – [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UFCqNUg\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UFCqNUg_M)

72 Referring to the territory of Bukovina, part of Great Romania before the Soviet invasion of 1940, presently divided between the two countries (Suceava and Chernivtsi).

73 Hotnews, 10 October 2023 – <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26596964-nou-circ-marca-diana-sosoaca-parlament-zelenski-nu-are-cauta-pangareasca-pamantul-romaniei.htm>

74 G4 Media, 10 October 2023 – <https://www.g4media.ro/sources-volodimir-zelenskis-speech-in-the-romanian-parliament-could-be-cancelled-sosoaca-threatened-that-it-will-be-bad-if-zelenski-comes-to-parliament-george-simion-mocked-the-ukrainian-pre.html>

75 [https://www.tiktok.com/@paparazzi\\_tiktokofficial/video/7288333002671787297](https://www.tiktok.com/@paparazzi_tiktokofficial/video/7288333002671787297)

76 Diana Șoșoacă on TikTok – <https://www.tiktok.com/@diana.i.sosoaca.official>

content being much higher than the figures associated with her official pages; the #dianasosoaca tag on TikTok has over 276 million views<sup>77</sup>.

Tracing back to her launch in politics, young people are often at the centre of Şoşoacă's anti-establishment and anti-system messages, emphasising their crucial role in the radical change the country supposedly needs. At an outdoor rave party in Bucharest, the S.O.S. leader appears in a series of online videos with young TikTok influencers, addressing their audiences: "Şoşo here! Break them! It's your life, it's your country, it's your future, come with us and let's rule Romania! Because you will be the ones to do it, and I will teach you how!" Another influencer calls for violence against current leaders – "*we will kick them in the mouths*" – with Şoşoacă's laughter of tacit approval.<sup>78</sup>

In October 2023, Şoşoacă spoke in Parliament about the lack of opportunities for youth involvement in politics and introduced a draft<sup>79</sup> amending the Youth's Law with increased responsibilities for authorities in relation to young people and their participation in decision-making processes, at local and national levels.

The narrative used by George Simion and other far-right actors aiming to attract and influence young supporters, focused on the country's impending demise and the youth's ability and duty to prevent it, with violent undertones, is present in Diana Şoşoacă's speech as well. What sets her apart from other politicians is the occasional emotional layer she adds to her populist displays, not just through aggressiveness, insults and scandals, which are predominant in her appearances, but also through her attempts to reach the electorate by using her motherhood status or even tearing up<sup>80</sup>, in order to provide a sense of genuineness to her care for young people.

### 3. "Hit her and establish terror, you do it for the good of the community and you become the hero of the bunch" – Dana Budeanu

Dana Budeanu is a fashion designer and social media influencer who has been in the public eye for over two decades, becoming, in the last few years, one of the most popular figures in the country, drawing attention for her extremist views, including anti-democratic and anti-EU ideas, xenophobia, homophobia and violent misogyny, as well as conspiracy theories.

---

77 <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/dianasosoaca>

78 <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/gm-KZJoXfTU>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL5xObSi5ko>

79 CDep, 10 October 2023 - [https://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/upl\\_pck2015.proiect?idp=21201](https://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/upl_pck2015.proiect?idp=21201)

80 She made claims about helping a 17 year-old girl who was sexually abused while participating in the AUR political summer school, or about saving the lives of a young couple lost on a mountain trail, highlighting the fact that authorities are "ignoring" young people, posing as a leader who will turn her attention to their needs, unlike the establishment. Capital, 6 October 2023 - <https://www.capital.ro/diana-sosoaca-a-izbucnit-in-lacrimi-daca-patea-asa-ceva-ii-omoram.html>; Gazeta de Cluj, 17 January 2022 - <https://gazetadecluj.ro/diana-sosoaca-sustine-ca-a-salvat-doi-oameni-de-la-moarte-din-nou-arafat-e-depasit-de-situatie/>.



In 2015, Budeanu started a four-year collaboration with the most watched generalist channel in the country, ProTV, as a fashion commentator, which raised her profile significantly thanks to her criticism of celebrities. After a series of offensive statements made against a charitable foundation, ProTV distanced itself from the designer, but by that point her popularity, particularly on social media, had increased enough to ensure her long-term stay in the spotlight. Gradually, her commentary on fashion extended into caustic remarks about Romanian society at large, touching upon a wide array of topics (e.g. relationships, parenthood, public etiquette, etc.) in a *catch-all* type of social media content, which expanded her following on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok – where she surpasses all mainstream and radical competitors by significant margins; the #danabudeanu tag on TikTok alone counts over 790 million views<sup>81</sup> – and eventually turned political.



(Instagram followers. Dana Budeanu is represented in the last bar. Graphic and data: CrowdTangle)

### The political influencer.

The social media success of Dana Budeanu's opinion-based content attracted media outlets in search of larger audiences, especially younger ones. Shortly after ending her collaboration with ProTV, she signed a contract with one of the most accessed news websites in the country<sup>82</sup>, Știri pe Surse, for a regular show called "Political Verdict", in which Budeanu comments on national and international politics. In order to justify her expertise, she claims to have a PhD at the University College London, specialising in European Integration, but Romanian journalists were unable to verify this information, as her thesis was not published in the University's records<sup>83</sup>. Regardless of her qualifications, Budeanu covered political events on television and social media platforms, where she became one of the most followed public figures in the country. While having almost 500.000 followers on Instagram and over 270.000 subscribers on YouTube, the TikTok audience of Dana Budeanu is by far the largest, despite the absence of an official account.

81 <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/danabudeanu>

82 Pagina de media, 12 October 2022 – <https://www.paginademedi.ro/stiri-media/trafic-site-uri-de-stiri-septembrie-2022-20885078>

83 Ziare.com, 24 September 2020 – <https://ziare.com/nicursor-dan/gabriela-firea/cine-sunt-influencerii-din-garnitura-noua-de-la-antena-3-si-sputnik-1632987>

Budeanu-related content includes excerpts from her media appearances, posted and shared by thousands of pages, facilitating an extended exposure to users, often transcending the echo chambers of social media networks, including by *memeification*, which also contributes to the normalisation of her extreme ideas among the young people predominantly using these platforms. Her own posts include conspiracy theories, discriminatory remarks, offensive language, calls for violence, quotes from other far-right actors, both foreign and domestic (e.g. Donald Trump, Tucker Carlson, Rudy Giuliani, members of the Romanian Iron Guard, etc.)<sup>84</sup>. Consequently, while she generally avoids being associated with political parties, the worldview she promotes is deeply illiberal and anti-egalitarian.

### Influencing youth and mainstreamization.

Dana Budeanu's brand of extremism is also deeply misogynistic– in 2020, she was the indirect subject of a criminal investigation after advising men to physically assault their female partners in order to establish dominance in their group and “help the community”: *“The first time she scolded you or talked back to you somewhere in public [...] hit! In front of everyone! [...] Then all of the other [derogatory term used for women] will learn. You do it for the good of the community; this is how you have to think of it. You are not hitting her [...] you instil fear in her and fear is instilled in all the others. You are doing a good for the community and become the hero of the bunch; you are the boss of all bosses. [...] Terror must be established.”*<sup>85</sup> This is one of the many examples of “advice” Budeanu gives on her shows and is widely spread on social media, especially on TikTok, where young audiences are predominant. Their exposure to such messages puts them at a significant risk of extremism and radicalisation, impacting not only their political views on the world, but also their behaviour in society, with violence – towards women, people with opposing thoughts, politicians, etc. – being at the centre of so many of Budeanu's ideas.

Additionally concerning is that this kind of discourse did not deter mainstream media or government officials<sup>86</sup> from providing Dana Budeanu with a platform. On the contrary, she is often invited, in primetime, to comment on politics on some of the most watched news programs on television, including on Antena 3 CNN<sup>87</sup> (official partner of the CNN network in Romania) and România TV<sup>88</sup> (the most watched news channel in the country<sup>89</sup>).

---

84 <https://www.instagram.com/danajustlove/>; <https://www.facebook.com/dana.budeanu.79>

85 Hot News, 12 June 2020 – <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24057334-dosar-penal-deschis-urma-mai-multor-plangeri-impotriva-danei-budeanu-pentru-instigare-violenta-impotriva-femeilor-parchet-fac-cercetari-pentru-fapte-nu-dispus-inceperea-urmaririi-penale-fata-nicio-per.htm>

86 Despite her past anti-governmental messages, Budeanu's popularity is now used as a vehicle by the establishment as well, in the effort to attract segments of the extremist-leaning electorate increasingly observed in polls ahead of the elections. In November 2023, Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu invited her to “interview” him at the Victoria Palace, in an excessively affable manner, practically legitimating this extremist figure from executive level. Libertatea, 17 November 2023 – <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/dana-budeanu-interviu-laude-marcel-ciolacu-youtube-psd-4721317>

87 Verdict Dana Budeanu on YouTube – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxffm70vThU>

88 România TV on YouTube – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4G6BoJwhhc>

89 Pagina de Media, 5 January 2024 – <https://www.paginamedia.ro/audiente-tv/audiente-anuale/audiente-tv-anul-2023-media-pe-zi-21450801>

# Conclusions

---

The results of the 2024 elections may indicate the extent to which far-right actors have managed to efficiently spread their messages and rally support around their anti-democratic agenda, unencumbered and sometimes even aided by mainstream politicians – either ignorant or indifferent to the threat posed by the rise of extremism. Social media platforms continue to provide an effective medium for malicious ideas to be disseminated and amplified and for their exponents to be popularised, via online echo chambers, algorithms prioritising user engagement, as well as the anonymity emboldening individuals to express themselves without the fear of rejection and consequences of non-digital spaces.

Young people, who represent the largest audiences on some of the platforms where extremist content surged on the background of recent social crises, particularly on TikTok and Instagram, are disproportionately exposed and particularly vulnerable to radicalisation. Shaping their identities and looking for a sense of purpose during a period of international turmoil, economic challenges and social polarisation, can lead towards frustration and dissatisfaction with political institutions, which can be easily blamed and often seem to ignore their needs and interests altogether.

Far-right actors can capitalise on both the real and perceived political ineffectiveness of decision-makers and the overall disappointment concerning mainstream ideologies exhibited in young people, by tapping into the feeling of alienation with the politics-as-usual model and promising an “alternative” that takes the power away from the corrupted elites and hands it over to them, as they represent the future of the country. By and large, coherence is not the main feature of their discourse. Instead they attract their audiences through open radicalism, performative departure from societal norms (aggressive behaviours, illegally occupying spaces, insulting opponents) and even calls for more severe offences (e.g. the glorification of domestic violence, demonisation of other societal groups, etc.).

This is one of the common narratives identified among the analysed far-right groups and actors, and is doubled by another common thread uniting these forces, as illustrated by the three case studies chosen (but are not limited to them) – the increasingly violent hate speech and public displays of aggression against opponents and other social groups, particularly women and minorities. What separates the three actors at the centre of this paper also contributes to the spread of far-right messages across different segments of the public, covering more and more ground – their different backgrounds, styles and content account for different (but overlapping) groups of young people becoming increasingly attracted to their agenda, with significant potential of it translating into their political behaviour and choices in the 2024 elections. Simion and Șoșoacă represent distinct and complementary levels of radicalism and aggression, with Simion

playing a more moderate card. Meanwhile Dana Budeanu has access to a more apolitical but equally dissatisfied youth, Lidia Vadim Tudor attempts to forge a link between Simion and her late father, etc.

In the absence of tangible measures of pro-democratic forces aimed at combating extremism, such as StratCom initiatives, legislative actions, inclusive political engagement (especially for youth) or public-civic partnerships, the actions of far-right actors can deepen social divisions and undermine democratic resilience.

This report has been completed with support from Open Information Partnership (OIP). The opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not reflect those of OIP.