

CHAPTER 3.

ÎN CĂUTAREA ECHILIBRULUI: STRATEGII DE REZILIENȚĂ ÎN FAȚA AMENINȚĂRILOR LA ADRESA SECURITĂȚII. STUDIU DE CAZ PRIVIND ALEGERILE PREZIDENȚIALE DIN ROMÂNIA

Gabriela GOUDENHOOF¹³

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4264-5232>

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Rezumat: Prezenta lucrare examinează alegerile prezidențiale din România din perioada 2024–2025 ca un test critic de presiune pentru reziliența pentru reziliența și legitimitatea instituțiilor democratice, în contextul amenințărilor hibride, al mobilizării populiste și al polarizării sociale profunde. Anularea fără precedent a primului tur de scrutin de către Curtea Constituțională — prezentată ca o măsură de protejare a integrității electorale — a scos la iveală atât potențialul, cât și limitele democrației militante, ridicând întrebări fundamentale privind echilibrul dintre intervenția protectoare și încrederea publică.

Prin integrarea unui cadru analitic multidimensional, care combină dimensiunile instituțională, simbolică și civică ale rezilienței, articolul urmărește modul în care populismul amplificat algoritmic, excepționalismul judiciar și clivajele politice adânc înrădăcinate au convers pentru a pune la încercare stabilitatea ordinii democratice din România.

O secțiune aparte dedicată analizează „fenomenul Georgescu” ca exemplu ilustrativ de populism hibrid, ce combină narațiuni etno-naționaliste, spiritualism New Age și retorică anti-elitistă, reușind să mobilizeze un electorat eterogen, dezamăgit de politica tradițională. Perspectivele comparative din Republica Moldova – confruntată cu o influență rusă persistentă și implementând reforme direcționate spre transparența electorală, independența instituțională și combaterea dezinformării — demonstrează că strategiile de reziliență nu sunt niciodată definitive, ci necesită o adaptare continuă la amenințări în evoluție. Paralele cu Austria, Ucraina și Bulgaria consolidează relevanța europeană mai largă a acestor constatări.

¹³ Habilitated Doctor, University Professor, Director of the Department of Political Science and Communication Studies, Faculty of History, International Relations, Political Science and Communication Studies, University of Oradea, Gabrielagoud@gmail.com

• Studiul conchide că reziliența democratică nu poate fi redusă la o simplă rezistență procedurală. Ea trebuie înțeleasă ca un proces continuu de recalibrare normativă, adaptabilitate instituțională și refacere simbolică, susținut de guvernare transparentă, participare civică și un ethos constituțional reînnoit. Criza electorală din România este astfel interpretată nu ca o anomalie izolată, ci ca un moment limită care oferă, deopotrivă, un avertisment privind fragilitatea legitimității și o oportunitate pentru reînnoirea democratică.

• **Cuvinte cheie:** reziliență democratică, integritate electorală, populism, amenințări hibride, legitimitate politică.

IN SEARCH OF BALANCE: REZILIENCE STRATEGIES TO SECURITY THREATS. A CASE STUDY OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA

Abstract: *This study examines the 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections as a critical stress test for the resilience and legitimacy of democratic institutions in the context of hybrid threats, populist mobilization, and deep societal polarization. The unprecedented annulment of the first round by the Constitutional Court—framed as a safeguard of electoral integrity—exposed both the potential and the limits of militant democracy, raising fundamental questions about the balance between protective intervention and public trust. By integrating a multidimensional analytical framework that combines institutional, symbolic, and civic dimensions of resilience, the article traces how algorithmically amplified populism, judicial exceptionalism, and entrenched political cleavages converged to challenge the stability of Romania’s democratic order.*

A dedicated section analyses the “Georgescu phenomenon” as an illustrative case of hybrid populism, combining ethno-nationalist narratives, New Age spiritualism, and anti-elitist rhetoric to mobilize a heterogeneous electorate disillusioned with mainstream politics. Comparative insights from the Republic of Moldova, facing sustained Russian influence and implementing targeted reforms in electoral transparency, institutional independence, and counter-disinformation strategies, demonstrate that resilience strategies are never definitive, but require

constant adaptation to evolving threats. Parallels with Austria, Ukraine, and Bulgaria reinforce the broader European relevance of these findings.

The study concludes that democratic resilience cannot be reduced to procedural endurance. It must be understood as an ongoing process of normative recalibration, institutional adaptability, and symbolic repair, sustained by transparent governance, civic participation, and a renewed constitutional ethos. Romania's electoral crisis is thus framed not as an isolated anomaly, but as a liminal moment offering both a warning of legitimacy's fragility and an opportunity for democratic renewal.

Keywords: democratic resilience, electoral integrity, populism, hybrid threats, political legitimacy.

Introduction

In recent years, democratic systems have been increasingly exposed to hybrid threats that blur the boundaries between internal dissent and external manipulation, making resilience not a mere stereotype but an essential requirement in the face of growing and diverse threats. Electoral processes, long considered the hallmark of democratic legitimacy, now face layered risks: foreign interference, algorithmic amplification of falsehoods, institutional delegitimization, and systemic disinformation. These challenges test not only the procedural integrity of elections but the resilience and the very sustainability of democratic institutions themselves.

The Romanian presidential elections of 2024–2025, uniquely marked by the annulment of the first round and the rerun ordered by the Constitutional Court, provide a compelling case study in democratic resilience under duress. Romania, frequently described (most notably by President Iohannis in a 2017 speech) as a consolidated democracy in Eastern Europe [1], nevertheless faces ongoing debate over the accuracy of this label. While the term carries symbolic and diplomatic weight, suggesting institutional maturity and resilience, the country's political dynamics often reveal persistent vulnerabilities: politicization of institutions, weak checks and balances, and episodes of democratic backsliding. The recent electoral crisis crystallized this tension, simul-

taneously highlighting the formal robustness of certain democratic mechanisms and exposing the fragility of the broader institutional and civic culture that sustains them. In this setting, the very concept of resilience must be understood not as static resistance, but as a dynamic negotiation between institutional response, societal behavior, and symbolic legitimacy. Resilience is not one thing. It's legal safeguards, institutional adaptability, a clear normative frame and, crucially, the trust and vigilance of citizens.

The hypothesis I am pursuing looks at the Romanian case through the lens of a “dual reality”, not only in terms of overlapping institutional and technological challenges, but also in the deep-seated tensions within the political imaginary. As I have shown in my previous research on Romanian political culture, the national imaginary is often shaped by binary oppositions and antinomic representations, patterns of thought that encourage an “either/or” logic, resist nuance, and fuel polarized narratives. [2] These cognitive patterns can both obscure and shape the responses to crisis. What appears as institutional decision-making may, in fact, be deeply embedded in mythic-symbolic structures, operating beneath the surface of political discourse.

The main research question from the start is: How did Romanian institutions and civil society respond to complex, hybrid security threats during the 2024–2025 electoral crisis, and what does this reveal about their capacity for sustainable resilience in the face of democratic disruption?

Methodologically, the study draws on a qualitative case study approach, combining legal document analysis, electoral data, media discourse, and secondary academic literature. Special attention is paid to the discursive strategies of legitimacy, the interplay between myth and law, and the tension between security and representation.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that Romania's electoral crisis reveals a deep structural tension: between legal rationality and symbolic politics, between normative stability and discursive volatility. Understanding this “antinomical structure” [2] of democratic experience is essential if we are to grasp not only what resilience means in emerging democracies, but how it is performed, narrated, and challenged under the pressure of hybrid threats.

Anatomy of an Electoral Crisis: Romania's 2024–2025 Presidential Race

The Romanian presidential elections of 2024–2025 constituted an unprecedented episode in the country's post-communist political development, marking the first instance in which a presidential vote was constitutionally annulled and subsequently repeated. The sequence of events that occurred over this period revealed profound institutional tensions, legal dilemmas, and symbolic fractures within Romanian democracy. More importantly, the process provided a test case for evaluating the capacity of electoral institutions and democratic norms to absorb and respond to systemic stress.

Against this backdrop, tracing the chronology of the electoral process becomes essential for understanding not only how the crisis unfolded step by step, but also how each stage reflected and, in some cases, amplified the underlying institutional and societal tensions. The following timeline outlines the key developments from the initial campaign period to the eventual repetition of the vote, highlighting the moments that proved most decisive in shaping both the outcome and its broader democratic implications.

➤ 24 November 2024 – First Round of Presidential Elections.

According to the official report published by the Permanent Electoral Authority [3], the first round of elections was conducted under standard operational parameters, with high voter turnout, particularly from the diaspora. However, the report also noted logistical inconsistencies and the need for improved oversight in the management of overseas polling stations.

The initial round of presidential elections featured a wide and ideologically diverse array of candidates. Voter turnout exceeded 50%, with diaspora participation reaching historic levels. The top two contenders were Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate with nationalist, anti-systemic positioning, and Elena Lasconi, representing the pro-European progressive spectrum.

Despite Georgescu securing a plurality of votes, the process was marred by significant irregularities, including opaque campaign financing, coordinated online disinformation campaigns — particularly via TikTok — and procedural ambiguities in the management of overseas voting.

Results of the 1st round of the presidential election in Romania on 24 November 2024

Turnout: 52.55%

Nr.	Candidate	Ballot Vote	Percent (~)
1.	CĂLIN GEORGESCU	2,120,401+347,901	22,94 %
2.	ELENA-VALERICA LASCONI	1,772,500+2,740	19,17 %
3.	ION-MARCEL CIOLACU	1,769,760+488,435	19,14 %
4.	GEORGE-NICOLAE SIMION	1,281,325+469,373	13,86 %
5.	NICOLAE-IONEL CIUCĂ	811,952+228,054	8,78 %

Source: <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/prezidentiale24112024/pv/romania/results/>

➤ 6 December 2024 – Annulment of the Elections by the Constitutional Court

In a decision of exceptional gravity, the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) annulled the results of the first round, just days before the second round, citing substantial violations of electoral integrity, evidence of foreign interference, and breaches of constitutional standards [4]. The Court's ruling mandated a complete restart of the electoral process.

The first round of Romania's 2024 presidential election was annulled after declassified intelligence revealed evidence of large-scale foreign interference, attributed to Russia, involving tens of thousands of coordinated TikTok accounts and cyberattacks promoting candidate Călin Georgescu in violation of election laws. This disclosure, which overturned an earlier validation of the vote, led the Constitutional Court to conclude that the integrity of the electoral process had been compromised beyond repair.

This move, the first of its kind in Romania's democratic history, triggered intense public debate, legal critique, and political polarization. Supporters viewed the annulment as a necessary act of institutional self-correction; critics, however, raised concerns about judicial overreach, the lack of concrete evidence, and the long-term impact on democratic legitimacy.

➤ January–March 2025 – Electoral Campaign Reset

In the aftermath of the annulment, political parties and candidates recalibrated their electoral strategies. The campaign period was characterized by heightened scrutiny from both the Permanent Elec-

toral Authority and civil society watchdogs. A renewed emphasis was placed on transparency in political financing, platform accountability, and combating algorithmically amplified disinformation. The electoral field narrowed, and the polarization between nationalist and pro-European platforms became more pronounced.

➤ **4 May 2025 – Re-run: First Round of Elections**

The first round of the repeated elections produced a new set of finalists. George Simion, leader of the nationalist and sovereigntist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), emerged as the frontrunner, securing approximately 41% of the vote. Nicușor Dan, independent candidate and mayor of Bucharest, qualified for the run-off with roughly 21%. The campaign dynamics were shaped by strong populist mobilization, digital activism, and the continuation of polarizing narratives across online platforms.

Results of the 1st round (repeted) of the presidential election in Romania on 4 May 2025

Turnout: 53.21%

Nr.	Candidate	Ballot Vote	Percent (~)
1.	GEORGE-NICOLAE SIMION	3,862,761+1,882,994	40,96 %
2.	NICUȘOR-DANIEL DAN	1,979,767+86,837	20,99 %
3.	GEORGE-CRIN-LAURENȚIU ANTONEȘCU	1,892,930+662,766	20,07 %
4.	VICTOR-VIOREL PONTA	1,230,164+977,443	13,04 %
5.	ELENA-VALERICA LASCONI	252,721+192,039	2,68 %

Source: <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/prezidentiale04052025/pv/romania/results>

In the rerun of Romania's presidential election, right-wing nationalist George Simion won the first round with 40.96% of the vote, emerging as the clear favourite over liberal Bucharest mayor Nicușor Dan. Simion, a Eurosceptic who opposes military aid to Ukraine but supports NATO bases in Romania, drew strong backing from the diaspora, securing over 70% of votes in Italy, Spain, and Germany—and attracted much of the former electorate of disqualified candidate Călin Georgescu. His victory has raised concerns in European capitals, Washington, Kyiv, and Moscow ahead of the 18 May runoff.

➤ **18 May 2025 – Second Round: Dan vs. Simion**

The run-off was widely interpreted as a referendum on Romania's democratic trajectory. The contest between a nationalist-populist vision and a centrist, institutionalist alternative mobilized significant civic participation. In a politically tense and highly mediatized environment, Nicușor Dan secured the presidency with an estimated 54% of the vote. His victory was perceived as a symbolic reaffirmation of Romania's pro-European commitment and a rejection of authoritarian tendencies.

Results of the 2 round of the presidential election in Romania on 18 May 2025

Turnout: 64.72%

Nr.	Candidate	Ballot Vote	Percent (~)
1.	NICUȘOR-DANIEL DAN	6.168.642+829.589	53,60 %
2.	GEORGE-NICOLAE SIMION	5.339.053	46,40 %
3.	TOTAL	11.507.695	100,00 %

Source: <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/prezidentiale18052025/pv/results?pv-candidate-chart-type=bar&pv-scope=total&pv-relative-max=max>

In Romania's 18 May presidential runoff, independent candidate and Bucharest mayor Nicușor Dan, backed by several centre-right and pro-European parties, defeated far-right leader George Simion (AUR) with 53.60% to 46.40% of the vote. Dan's 30-point surge between rounds was fuelled by a record 64.72% turnout, including 1.64 million diaspora voters, amid fears of a far-right presidency. The election followed the Constitutional Court's annulment of the November–December 2024 vote over Russian interference and the banning of first-round winner Călin Georgescu. Campaigning on anti-corruption, institutional reform, and keeping Romania on a Western course, Dan takes office in a politically and socially fractured country marked by inequality, disillusionment, and entrenched party patronage.

➤ **Post-Election Period – From June 2025 Onward**

Although the election results contributed to short-term political stabilization, public discourse continued to grapple with unresolved structural questions:

- The long-term legitimacy of the Constitutional Court's intervention;

- The normative implications of annulling a democratic vote in the absence of judicial prosecution or transparent evidence;
- The capacity of Romania’s electoral framework to adapt to hybrid threats, algorithmic influence, and intensified polarization.

These post-electoral debates underscore the fragile equilibrium between legal authority, democratic legitimacy, and public trust, and serve as a reminder that resilience is not merely institutional, but also discursive, participatory, and symbolic. They also highlight the extent to which Romania’s democratic trajectory remains contingent on the interplay between domestic political culture, the evolving threat landscape, and the credibility of both formal and informal mechanisms of accountability. In this sense, the 2024–2025 electoral crisis was not only a stress test for institutions, but also a mirror reflecting the deeper tensions shaping the country’s democratic future.

Table: Key Events of the 2024–2025 Romanian Presidential Elections

Date	Event	Details
24 Nov 2024	First Round of Presidential Elections	Călin Georgescu and Elena Lasconi emerge as front-runners. Significant diaspora turnout. Allegations of irregularities and disinformation.
6 Dec 2024	Constitutional Court Annuls First Round	Court cites electoral integrity violations, foreign interference, and procedural irregularities. Orders full re-run of the elections.
Jan–Mar 2025	Electoral Campaign Reset	Political actors recalibrate strategies. Increased regulatory scrutiny. Civil society mobilization and focus on disinformation mitigation.
4 May 2025	Re-run: First Round of Elections	George Simion leads (~41%), Nicușor Dan follows (~21%). Populist rhetoric and polarization define the campaign environment.
18 May 2025	Second Round of Elections	Nicușor Dan wins (~54%). Result interpreted as a reaffirmation of democratic legitimacy and pro-European orientation.
June 2025 →	Post-Election Developments	Ongoing debates on the Constitutional Court’s role, legitimacy of the annulment, and need for electoral law reform.

This chronology illustrates not only the complexity of Romania's electoral process during this period but also the layered interactions between legal authority, political legitimacy, civic agency, and democratic resilience.

Conceptual Framework: Security, Democracy, Legitimacy, and Electoral Resilience

In the context of democratic governance, resilience has emerged as a central yet multifaceted concept, increasingly invoked in academic, institutional, and policy discourses. Far from being a purely technical or managerial term, resilience, when applied to political and electoral systems, encompasses structural, normative, and symbolic dimensions. It reflects the capacity of democratic institutions not merely to withstand shocks, but to adapt, transform, and restore functionality without sacrificing their core principles. [5, 6].

Administrative resilience, increasingly prominent in public discourse and a core objective of reform, refers to the capacity of political and administrative systems to absorb disruptions—whether internal or external—while preserving their essential functions, structure, and values. As the backbone of political societies, institutions depend not only on structural robustness but also on the human resilience of public officials. Resilience thinking, which shifts focus from mere efficiency to adaptability and option-creation, is vital for managing risk and complexity in a rapidly changing world. In the context of European integration, candidate states face stringent requirements on democratic institutions, the rule of law, and human rights, making their ability to maintain institutional independence and stability amid political turnover, crises, or geopolitical pressures a critical test of democratic resilience.

Resilience in political systems refers to the ability of institutions to absorb internal or external disruptions, while maintaining the legitimacy, efficiency, and coherence of governance. This includes crises such as electoral disputes, constitutional breakdowns, disinformation campaigns, or foreign interference, all of which were present in the Romanian electoral cycle of 2024–2025. But resilience cannot be reduced to institutional rigidity or procedural repetition; on the contrary, it implies adaptability, normative responsiveness, and systemic

learning [7]. Institutions must preserve stability, while remaining open to self-correction and reform [8,9].

Electoral resilience, a specific dimension of democratic resilience, refers to the capacity of the electoral process to deliver legitimate outcomes even in the presence of attempts to delegitimize it, distort information, or undermine public trust [10]. This includes legal safeguards, civic participation, media pluralism, administrative competence, and independent oversight mechanisms. The resilience of an electoral system is therefore not only a function of technical accuracy or cybersecurity, but also of social legitimacy, institutional trust, and representational inclusiveness [11].

In the Romanian case, resilience was tested both formally and symbolically. On the formal side, the Constitutional Court intervened to annul a contested electoral result, invoking violations of electoral integrity, a rare and radical act that demonstrated the legal system's corrective potential, but also raised concerns regarding constitutional overreach and democratic legitimacy [12]. In the Romanian case, resilience was tested both formally and symbolically. On the formal side, the Constitutional Court intervened to annul a contested electoral result, invoking violations of electoral integrity, a rare and radical act that demonstrated the legal system's corrective potential, but also raised concerns regarding constitutional overreach and democratic legitimacy. The decision reflects a shift toward a militant democracy framework, in which the constitutional order assumes a protective posture against perceived threats, even at the cost of temporarily suspending the electoral process. While such measures may be normatively grounded in the imperative to safeguard democratic continuity, Iancu warns that this logic becomes problematic when legal certainty, due process, and evidentiary rigor are replaced by broad, discretionary invocations of national security or institutional trust. The Court's justification relied heavily on abstract notions of "democratic integrity" and "foreign manipulation", but lacked concrete, falsifiable evidence of systemic fraud or coercion. This undermines the principle of electoral sovereignty and opens the door to a form of juristocratic interventionism, whereby constitutional guardianship risks sliding into political arbitrariness. In this view [12], such actions may paradoxically weaken the very legitimacy they seek to defend, by introducing

an element of constitutional exceptionalism that bypasses electoral accountability and public deliberation.

On the symbolic side, the rerun of the elections required society to reaffirm trust in the democratic process, despite narratives of manipulation, betrayal, or illegitimacy, especially prevalent in online and populist discourses.

But thinking on institutional reform and EU integration, resilience is not static; it must be constantly reproduced through proactive governance, transparency, and societal engagement. Resilient systems are those that learn from crisis and incorporate that learning into structural reform. They are marked not by the absence of disruption, but by the presence of mechanisms that allow them to recover and evolve without collapsing or abandoning their democratic ethos.

Moreover, resilience must be sustainable. Institutional sustainability involves long-term investments in administrative capacity, civic education, legal predictability, and participatory governance. It also includes the capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue across political, social, and ideological divides — a function particularly important in polarized societies, such as Romania, where the political imaginary is shaped by antinomies and binary oppositions.

In sum, conceptualising resilience in democratic and electoral terms requires a multidimensional approach, one that combines legal safeguards, adaptive institutions, informed public participation, and normative clarity. In the following sections, we will examine how these elements materialized during the Romanian presidential elections, offering both a test and a lesson in democratic resilience under pressure.

Key Security Threats in the Context of the 2024–2025 Romanian Presidential Elections

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections must be understood not merely as a procedural confrontation between political actors, but as a revelatory episode for the structural vulnerabilities of democratic systems in the face of new configurations of power, influence, and destabilization. What appeared, in formal terms, to be a regular electoral cycle, soon revealed its embeddedness in a complex matrix of hybrid threats, discursive manipulation, institutional fragility, and normative contestation. The electoral arena was redefined as

a space of symbolic confrontation, where the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the coherence of the constitutional order were simultaneously tested.

Four principal vectors of threat can be identified that shaped the 2024–2025 electoral context: hybrid interference and informational warfare, understood as deliberate strategies of cognitive and algorithmic influence; populist polarization and societal cleavage, whereby electoral mobilization operated through the fragmentation of symbolic imaginaries; cybersecurity and the limits of institutional preparedness in anticipating and responding to asymmetrical attacks; and the legitimacy crisis generated by the Constitutional Court’s unprecedented intervention, interpreted by many as an instance of constitutional exceptionalism.

Together, these dimensions reflect not only a convergence of threats, but a reconfiguration of the political imaginary and of the democratic normativity upon which electoral processes rest. In this context, resilience is no longer reducible to administrative efficiency or legal response but presupposes a deeper re-articulation of trust, transparency, and institutional equilibrium.

The Romanian presidential elections of 2024–2025 were not merely a political contest but a profound stress test for democratic security and institutional resilience. In this electoral cycle, security threats were multifaceted, ranging from classical hybrid operations to algorithmic disinformation, foreign interference, and domestic radicalization. These threats must be analyzed both as individual risk factors and as components of a broader ecosystem of strategic destabilization.

The 2024 Romanian presidential elections unfolded in an operational environment increasingly shaped by the dynamics of hybrid threats, as defined by recent national security doctrines. According to the National Defense Strategy 2020–2024, hybrid warfare entails the simultaneous use of conventional and unconventional tools, ranging from political and economic pressure to cyberattacks, psychological manipulation, and disinformation, aimed at undermining state sovereignty without resorting to overt military aggression [12]. Within this paradigm, electoral processes become key targets, as adversaries seek to exploit societal cleavages, discredit institutions, and delegitimize democratic outcomes. The erosion of public trust in the integrity of

elections is not an incidental effect, but a central objective of hybrid operations designed to destabilize liberal democratic orders from within. One of the most visible dimensions of this phenomenon was the algorithmic amplification of radical narratives, especially through TikTok, a platform with nearly 9 million Romanian users in 2024 [13]. Populist candidates with limited traditional media exposure relied on the virality and affective engagement potential of short-form videos, generating content that evaded electoral oversight while appealing to emotions and identity symbols. The use of TikTok for political manipulation was compounded by external actors, suspected to exploit platform vulnerabilities to distort public opinion [7].

The rise of candidates like Călin Georgescu epitomizes the security challenge posed by homegrown radical populism. Drawing from national-mystical rhetoric, conspiratorial anti-elitism, and esoteric narratives, his campaign blurred the boundaries between political communication and ideological radicalization. Such narratives eroded democratic cohesion and cast doubt on the legitimacy of institutional actors, including the Constitutional Court and electoral authorities.

This echoes a broader pattern observed across Europe, where electoral legitimacy is undermined not only through external interference but through internal instrumentalization of identity politics and anti-institutional sentiment [7].

The Romanian intelligence services and the Permanent Electoral Authority acknowledged the growing salience of cyber vulnerabilities in the lead-up to and throughout the 2024–2025 presidential elections. In line with the objectives articulated in the National Defense Strategy 2020–2024 [12], hybrid threats, particularly cyberattacks and coordinated disinformation campaigns, were officially designated as key challenges to national security. Despite this recognition, the institutional infrastructure for countering such threats proved insufficient, revealing critical gaps in early detection, cross-institutional coordination, and platform accountability. Most notably, efforts to foster public resilience through civic education and digital literacy remained fragmented and largely reactive. The absence of a comprehensive public communication strategy on hybrid threats, combined with the limited integration of media literacy into formal education, contributed to a

vulnerability landscape in which large segments of the electorate remained susceptible to manipulation, distrust, and polarization.

The unprecedented annulment of the first round of the 2024 presidential elections by the Constitutional Court of Romania marked a critical juncture in the relationship between constitutional authority, national security, and democratic legitimacy. The Court justified its decision by invoking classified intelligence reports that allegedly revealed substantial violations of electoral integrity, including foreign manipulation, disinformation campaigns, and procedural irregularities. Yet, this intervention exposed a fundamental tension at the heart of Romania's constitutional architecture: the absence of a clearly articulated legal mechanism for annulling presidential elections.

Moreover, the Court's heavy reliance on non-transparent intelligence briefings, which were neither publicly disclosed nor subjected to adversarial scrutiny, generated significant concerns about judicial activism and constitutional overreach. Rather than reinforcing democratic resilience, the decision may have inadvertently introduced a new form of systemic vulnerability, namely, a weakening of legal predictability and a disruption of electoral continuity. From a security perspective, such opacity can erode public trust in democratic checks and balances, particularly when exceptional constitutional interventions are not accompanied by clear procedural safeguards or post-facto justifications.

This case is to be situated within the broader framework of militant democracy; wherein state institutions assume the right, and the responsibility, to curtail or suspend democratic procedures in order to preserve the democratic order itself [13]. While such logic may be defensible in extreme contexts, its application in the Romanian case was marked by ambiguity, haste, and lack of transparency, raising the specter of discretionary power supplanting democratic accountability. In this sense, the Court's decision, while framed as a protective act, undermined both electoral sovereignty and normative legitimacy, calling into question the institutional balance between constitutional guardianship and democratic representation.

The Constitutional Court's decision to annul the first round of the 2024 presidential elections triggered a wave of intense and polarized reactions across Romanian society and its institutional landscape.

From the outset, the ruling generated a crisis of confidence that transcended partisan divisions, raising profound questions regarding the boundaries of constitutional authority and the fragility of electoral legitimacy.

Official institutions reacted with caution and ambiguity. The Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) issued a measured statement acknowledging the Court's ruling while emphasizing its technical and administrative readiness to organize a new electoral process [14]. The Presidency refrained from directly commenting on the merits of the annulment, instead calling for "constitutional order and public calm" [15]. Meanwhile, parliamentary parties adopted diverging positions: pro-European factions expressed concern over legal uncertainty and the lack of precedent, whereas nationalist-populist parties framed the decision as a triumph of national sovereignty over "external manipulation".

The public response was equally divided. Civic organizations such as *Expert Forum* and *Funky Citizens* criticized the opacity of the process and the absence of public access to the intelligence that had allegedly justified the annulment. Multiple editorial voices warned of a "dangerous normalization of exceptionalism" under the guise of protecting democracy. At the same time, segments of the population, particularly those aligned with anti-system narratives, interpreted the decision as a confirmation of long-standing claims that the electoral system was corrupt and externally controlled.

In digital spaces, misinformation and speculation proliferated, exploiting the absence of official clarification to deepen public confusion and distrust. The lack of a coherent communication strategy from the authorities further exacerbated perceptions of institutional fragility and opened the door to populist reinterpretations of constitutional authority.

Beyond the institutional vacuum created by disinformation and fragmented official messaging, another critical dimension of democratic vulnerability became increasingly visible: the symbolic repurpose of national unity, not as a unifying constitutional ideal, but as a tool of populist polarization and rhetorical exclusion.

Among the most revealing dynamics of the recent Romanian presidential elections lies the paradoxical deployment of national unity as

both a constitutional principle and a rhetorical instrument. Framed in political discourse as a unifying ideal, the notion of unity was strategically co-opted by radical populist actors, resulting in its transformation into a mechanism of electoral polarization and symbolic exclusion. Rather than fostering civic cohesion, national unity was re-defined through the lens of populist discourse: exclusive, emotionally charged, and identity-driven, culminating in a deeply fractured public space.

The elections occurred in a socio-political context marked by ideological polarization, economic precarity, and recurring crises of democratic legitimacy. Within this environment, populist narratives gained traction, invoking themes of sovereignty, national identity, and the defense of “traditional values”. Though rooted in collective imaginaries, these references were frequently instrumentalized for electoral gain, undermining their constitutional and civic significance. Populist rhetoric relies heavily on binary oppositions: the “pure people” versus a “corrupt elite”, the “authentic nation” against internal or external enemies. In this discursive frame, national unity is no longer conceived as civic solidarity among equal citizens, but as a homogenizing project, hostile to pluralism, cultural diversity, and institutional accountability. [16].

This mirrors broader global patterns, where nationalist-populist parties (from AfD in Germany to Fratelli d'Italia and Fidesz in Hungary) capitalize on societal discontent by promoting simplified, emotionally resonant political messages. [17].

In Romania, this strategy reached its apex in the unexpected rise of Călin Georgescu, a formerly marginal figure whose campaign merged anti-elitist populism with national mysticism and spiritual exceptionalism. Portraying himself as a providential leader, Georgescu invoked Orthodox religious symbolism, esoteric nationalism, and conspiracy rhetoric to frame his candidacy as a moral and civilizational mission. His messaging resonated especially with disenfranchised or distrustful voters, offering a narrative of purification and national rebirth. Despite early denials from domestic intelligence services regarding foreign interference, Georgescu’s online campaign, heavily promoted on platforms such as TikTok, often in violation of electoral law, raised public concern. The campaign’s virality, emotional appeal, and am-

biguity of expression allowed it to evade traditional media scrutiny while tapping into latent frustrations with mainstream politics. In this respect, Georgescu's rhetoric exemplifies a hybrid populism, combining authoritarian conservatism with the aesthetics of New Age personal empowerment and conspiratorial thinking.

Such rhetorical strategies, while not overtly extremist, carry the potential to erode democratic cohesion, particularly when they reinterpret national unity as exclusionary identity. They risk radicalizing voters through affective, pseudo-sacred appeals that bypass critical deliberation and constitutional norms. This trend is exacerbated by a perceived representational vacuum in the political system, with traditional parties failing to articulate inclusive, future-oriented projects capable of addressing citizens' concerns in credible ways.

In conclusion, defending the constitutional meaning of national unity in contemporary Romania demands more than symbolic invocation. It requires active efforts to protect pluralism, foster civic literacy, and strengthen democratic institutions against rhetorical and algorithmic manipulations that distort public understanding of identity, belonging, and political agency.

Anatomy of a Populist Surge: The 2024 Romanian Presidential Elections

The unexpected electoral performance of Călin Georgescu in the first round of the annulled 2024 presidential elections constitutes a revealing case study in the dynamics of contemporary populism. Far from being an isolated episode, his rapid ascension reflects a convergence of structural vulnerabilities, socio-political discontent, and strategic narrative engineering that resonated with disenfranchised segments of the electorate. This surge cannot be understood solely in terms of individual charisma; it is the product of an enabling political environment in which institutional fragility, ideological polarization, and mediated populist rhetoric interacted to redefine the symbolic terrain of electoral competition.

At the sociological level, Georgescu's appeal was rooted in a bifurcated political imaginary. On one side, the established parties, PSD and PNL, were perceived as part of a self-referential elite, unable or unwilling to address pressing social grievances, thus reinforcing the

perception of a closed political system. On the other hand, Georgescu projected an image of outsider authenticity, presenting himself as a providential figure untainted by political compromise. His discourse blended moral absolutism, nationalist mysticism, and anti-elitist critique, creating an affective repertoire that could mobilize both conservative-religious voters and younger citizens alienated from traditional politics.

Many factors underpin this electoral surge. No single factor alone would have been sufficient to account for Călin Georgescu's electoral success. Rather, it was the result of a *perfect storm*: the inaction of certain state institutions; the strategic missteps and short-sightedness of PSD and PNL leaders; the possible involvement of a foreign state actor; the low calibre of competing candidates; an unfavourable socio-economic and political context; voter disillusionment with the traditional political offer; the ambiguous role or inadequate action of intelligence services and their retired networks; and, above all, the deep political and social cleavages entrenched within Romanian society. [18].

First, the socio-economic discontent generated by persistent inequalities, inflationary pressures, and perceived stagnation in public service delivery created fertile ground for anti-system rhetoric. Second, the cultural dimension of political identity, amplified by algorithmic echo chambers on platforms like TikTok – allowed for the viral dissemination of emotionally charged, symbolically dense messages that bypassed traditional media scrutiny.

Third, the failure of mainstream parties to offer a coherent counter-narrative left a discursive vacuum in which simplistic yet emotionally resonant frames of “national renewal” and “moral purification” could flourish.

The political efficacy of Georgescu's campaign lay in its hybrid populism – an amalgamation of right-wing authoritarian conservatism, civilizational exceptionalism, and New Age-inflected spiritualism: (Călin Georgescu's half-learned discourse blended themes from the ethno-nationalist *vulgata* of the Ceaușescu era with elements of Christianity and New Age spirituality – finding resonance among a semi-educated public eager for similar aspirations and fantasies) [18, p.136]. This hybrid form allowed his rhetoric to be deliberately ambiguous, avoiding explicit alignment with extremist doctrine while sign-

aling to multiple constituencies that their values and grievances were being acknowledged. Also, such rhetorical flexibility is a hallmark of successful populist insurgencies: the ability to articulate a common enemy while permitting heterogeneous audiences to project their own aspirations onto the candidate.

From the perspective of democratic legitimacy, Georgescu's rise is symptomatic of representational erosion. The surge of support for a figure operating largely outside traditional institutional accountability mechanisms underscores the degree to which legitimacy is increasingly contingent on symbolic performance and perceived authenticity rather than programmatic substance or institutional track record. In this sense, the Romanian case reflects a broader European and global trend, wherein populist actors weaponize the disjunction between procedural democracy and substantive representation to destabilize established political orders.

Ultimately, the "Georgescu moment" in Romanian politics illustrates both the adaptive capacity of populist movements to exploit structural vulnerabilities and the limitations of existing democratic safeguards in countering such mobilisations. The annulment of the first electoral round did not erase the underlying conditions that enabled his rise. Absent meaningful institutional reform, narrative reconstruction, and a credible rearticulation of national unity within a pluralist framework, similar populist surges are likely to recur further challenging the resilience of Romania's democratic system.

A further dimension of the "Georgescu phenomenon" lies in its role as an unintended stress test for Romania's political institutions. The sudden visibility and electoral performance of a candidate operating at the intersection of nationalist mysticism, anti-elitist rhetoric, and digital populism placed unprecedented pressure on the formal architecture of democratic governance. It exposed institutional blind spots in monitoring campaign legality, regulating digital campaigning, and ensuring that electoral competition remains anchored in the constitutional ethos.

Yet, whether these institutions *passed* the resilience test remains an open and contentious question. On one hand, the annulment of the first electoral round by the Constitutional Court could be interpreted as a decisive assertion of institutional integrity – a legal intervention

designed to safeguard electoral legitimacy against procedural violations and possible manipulation. On the other hand, the absence of clear constitutional precedent, the opacity of intelligence-based justifications, and the political polarization that followed have left lingering doubts about the proportionality, transparency, and democratic costs of such a radical measure.

In this sense, the Georgescu episode represents a double-edged moment in the evaluation of democratic resilience. It demonstrated that Romania's institutions possess the formal capacity to respond to perceived threats to electoral integrity, yet it also revealed the fragility of public confidence in those same institutions when interventions are made without an accompanying framework of transparent deliberation and civic communication. As resilience theory reminds us, the capacity to absorb shocks is only one dimension; equally important is the ability to recover in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, long-term legitimacy.

The unanswered question, therefore, is not simply whether Romanian political institutions survived the challenge posed by the Georgescu candidacy, but how they did so, and at what symbolic and democratic cost. Without a deliberate process of public reflection, accountability, and narrative repair, the lessons of this stress test risk remaining underutilized, leaving the system vulnerable to future episodes of populist disruption.

Democratic Narratives and Symbolic Repair after Crisis

In the aftermath of such crises, procedural restoration alone is insufficient to heal the fractures in democratic legitimacy; it must be complemented by deliberate processes of symbolic repair. This involves reframing the public narrative in a manner that restores coherence between constitutional authority, institutional action, and civic perception. In the Romanian case, the annulment of the first electoral round created a discursive vacuum that was rapidly filled with competing interpretations — some rooted in legal reasoning, others in conspiracy-driven populism. Addressing this fragmentation requires three strategic pillars:

- Narrative reframing – shifting public discourse from binary narratives of “victory” or “betrayal” toward a shared understanding

of the crisis as a constitutional stress test capable of strengthening democratic safeguards when handled transparently.

- Transparency and public deliberation – ensuring that exceptional measures, particularly those justified on national security grounds, are accompanied by accessible explanations and evidence, thus pre-empting disinformation and reinforcing institutional credibility.
- Civic engagement beyond the ballot box – creating participatory mechanisms, such as deliberative forums and local consultation platforms, that allow citizens to co-produce solutions in the aftermath of institutional crises.

Lessons from the Romanian case underscore that post-crisis legitimacy is not automatically restored through the resumption of electoral procedures. It demands visible institutional learning, consistent communication, and the symbolic re-anchoring of unity as a pluralist value rather than an exclusivist slogan.

These insights hold direct relevance for Moldova, where persistent external influence and contested integration narratives call for robust transparency and symbolic cohesion strategies, and for Ukraine, whose electoral institutions operate under wartime constraints and must guard against the normalization of exceptional measures. In both contexts, integrating symbolic repair into resilience planning strengthens not only procedural continuity but also the deeper civic trust on which democratic sustainability depends.

Following the unprecedented disruption of the 2024–2025 presidential elections, the Romanian democratic system was confronted not solely with the task of institutional stabilization, but with a more profound necessity: that of reconstituting the symbolic foundations of legitimacy. The erosion of public confidence in constitutional mechanisms, compounded by discursive fragmentation and competing interpretations of sovereign authority, rendered insufficient any merely procedural response. What was required, rather, was a reconstruction of democratic legitimacy understood not only in juridical or electoral terms, but as a normative and narrative rearticulation of the democratic order, one capable of reestablishing coherence between institutions, political imagination, and civic trust. The path toward democratic repair transcends technical fixes; it requires the **reconstruction**

of collective meaning, where national unity, transparent governance, and civic resilience are re-narrated to reestablish shared values. Public rituals, such as referendum acts, commemorative statements, or civic dialogues, must be deliberately crafted to enact a renewed social compact that acknowledges the crisis while reaffirming democratic cohesion [19, 20].

In the aftermath of Romania's 2024–2025 presidential elections, the legitimacy crisis that occurred was not reducible to legal or institutional dysfunction. Legitimacy in transitional democracies must be reconceptualized beyond procedural legality [16] encompassing symbolic coherence, civic recognition, and normative continuity. The rupture caused by the annulment of the first electoral round, an unprecedented institutional gesture, generated a moment of destabilization in the collective political imaginary, where the formal order appeared decoupled from its symbolic anchoring.

Also, in the Romanian case, the 2024–2025 electoral crisis may become not only a political rupture but a foundational moment in the collective memory of democracy, where competing actors attempt to narrate the crisis as either a democratic safeguard or a constitutional trauma. The way societies choose to remember or forget such moments is crucial for the (re)construction of political identity and institutional legitimacy [20]. If the annulment of the first electoral round is framed solely as an exceptional necessity, without public reflection or civic pedagogy, the deeper symbolic rupture may persist unhealed, feeding future mistrust.

From a perspective of cultural theory of performance [19], a complementary perspective is offered: political legitimacy is sustained through credible public performances that align institutional roles with shared moral narratives. When such performances fail, when elites appear disembodied from their civic functions or discursively incoherent, a vacuum opens, often filled by populist figures who simulate authenticity and moral clarity through emotionally resonant, myth-laden rhetoric. In this sense, the Romanian case illustrates the convergence between performative failure and symbolic fragility, where traditional political actors lost their claim to legitimacy not solely because of procedural failure, but because they could no longer *perform the democratic script convincingly*.

In this context re-legitimation after crisis requires more than technocratic restoration; it demands a symbolic act of reconstruction, grounded in transparency, deliberation, and civic inclusion. Thus, both theoretical frameworks converge in highlighting that legitimacy is not merely institutional, but performative, narrative, and culturally embedded. It must be enacted and sustained through discursive practices capable of restoring coherence between constitutional authority, democratic values, and the citizen's normative expectations.

In post-crisis democratic contexts, legitimacy must be rearticulated not only through institutional correction, but through the symbolic recuperation of meaning, memory, and public trust. Legitimacy in transitional democracies is inseparable from the narrative and normative reconstruction of political order. The 2024–2025 Romanian electoral crisis has thus created a moment of discursive inflection, in which past fractures, institutional opacity, and populist contestations must be addressed through mechanisms that transcend technocratic response. Such crises become memory-constitutive moments [20], where political actors compete to define the meaning of rupture, responsibility, and institutional fidelity. If left uninterpreted or deliberately obfuscated, these moments risk solidifying into collective trauma or distrust.

To prevent this, it is essential to embrace a deliberate model of public discourse, wherein citizens, civil society, and institutional actors participate in the co-construction of new narratives of belonging, accountability, and repair. In line with Habermas's theory of communicative action [21], deliberation must go beyond reassurance; it must actively restore ethical legitimacy by reconnecting formal constitutional authority with the civic imagination and the lived experience of democratic agency. In this sense, deliberation becomes not only a procedural ideal, but a mechanism of symbolic healing, one that enables the political community to reintegrate disrupted meaning and re-legitimize the democratic ethos.

Post-crisis re-legitimization also depends on fostering mechanisms of **counter-democracy**, active civic oversight, media accountability, and participatory feedback loops [22]. The Romanian electoral crisis illustrated not only a breakdown in institutional procedure, but a broader transformation in the nature of democratic legitimacy. As Rosanvallon argues, citizens increasingly enact their democratic agen-

cy not merely by voting, but by monitoring, contesting, and demanding transparency from those in power. In this context, post-crisis legitimacy must be understood as provisional and reflexive, sustained through continuous acts of public scrutiny and discursive accountability, not just institutional restoration. In societies where democratic trust is fragile, promoting open channels for citizen monitoring institutional behavior is a form of symbolic repair in itself, restoring agency to the electorate and reinforcing institutional accountability.

Finally, the memory of disruption must be wocitizenso the democratic conscience as a **warning, not a spectacle repair, restoring**d forgetting remind us that collective resilience depends on appropriately remembering and normatively integrating experiences of crisis [23]. The remembrance of the electoral unsettlement should serve not as a source of continued division, but as a catalyst for strengthening democratic norms, institutional transparency, and public education.

Through symbolic repair, narrative reconstruction, and participative oversight, Romania's democratic experiment can transcend the rupture of 2024–2025, transforming crisis into a more inclusive and resilient political identity.

Post-Electoral Symbolic Reparation and the Challenge of Democratic Continuity

The formation of a new government following the unprecedented annulment and re-run of Romania's 2024–2025 presidential elections marked not only an institutional recalibration, but the emergence of a new symbolic framework through which democratic legitimacy might be reconstructed. While the electoral process culminated in the victory of President Nicușor Dan, a figure associated with urban reformism and civic moderation, the post-electoral moment was not uniformly perceived as a definitive closure of the legitimacy crisis. A considerable segment of society remained skeptical, interpreting the change of leadership as a procedural necessity rather than a normative renewal. This disconnection between institutional outcomes and symbolic restoration reveals the depth of the fracture experienced during the crisis and the complexity of re-legitimizing the democratic order.

From the outset of his mandate, President Dan emphasized constitutional responsibility, institutional transparency, and the restoration of civic trust. However, the vector of more radical reform has been

assumed by the newly appointed Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, whose background in administrative modernization and local government lent credibility to a reformist mandate. In his initial addresses, Bolojan advanced a program of deep democratic reform, targeting systemic dysfunctions revealed by the electoral crisis.

His agenda includes:

- a comprehensive revision of the electoral law, particularly regarding campaign oversight and disinformation control;
- the depoliticization of constitutional adjudication and the strengthening of electoral monitoring bodies;
- the implementation of algorithmic regulation and platform accountability mechanisms;
- and the institutional anchoring of civic education as a democratic safeguard, not merely a curricular add-on.

Placed in the immediate post-electoral context, the “Bolojan Agenda” transcends its technocratic appearance, operating as a symbolic act of governance in a fragile legitimacy environment. The austerity blueprint functions on two registers: externally, as a performative pledge of fiscal discipline to Brussels and international markets; internally, as a stress test for the durability of the coalition’s mandate and for the public’s tolerance of short-term hardship in exchange for long-term stability. This dual function exposes a deeper dynamic in post-crisis governance: the need to integrate economic necessity into a broader narrative of democratic repair. In the absence of sustained civic engagement and transparent communication, such measures risk being reframed by opponents as externally imposed austerity, undermining the very symbolic capital that the electoral victory sought to restore. The Romanian case thus illustrates how, in a volatile political climate, the consolidation of democratic continuity requires not only the correction of fiscal imbalances, but also the careful management of political symbolism and public perception.

Yet, despite their normative clarity, these initiatives must confront not only political resistance, but also the symbolic deficit left by the crisis. But legitimacy cannot be restored solely through functional restoration; it requires a reconstitution of public meaning, a discursive reaffirmation of democratic values, and a pedagogical effort to integrate the crisis into the collective memory as a moment of democratic reflexivity, not as a silent rupture.

This task cannot be delegated exclusively to state institutions. Civil society, academia, and independent media bear a critical responsibility in facilitating a symbolic rearticulation of legitimacy, capable of bridging institutional credibility with civic recognition. Without such a multidimensional strategy of democratic reconstruction, even a reformist government such as Bolojan's risks governing under conditions of latent distrust, where legitimacy remains formally intact but symbolically unsettled.

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections revealed the extent to which democratic resilience cannot be reduced to institutional continuity or procedural correction. The crisis that unfolded, marked by electoral annulment, judicial exceptionalism, and symbolic contestation, exposed not only systemic vulnerabilities but also profound fractures in the civic imagination and public trust. In this context, legitimacy emerges not as a static attribute of institutions, but as a dynamic and contested process of ethical justification, symbolic coherence, and public recognition.

As this chapter has argued, restoring legitimacy after systemic disruption requires more than legal solutions or technocratic reform. It demands a re-articulation of democratic meaning, one that integrates memory, responsibility, and civic pedagogy into the architecture of political repair. The responses of President Nicușor Dan and Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan offer distinct but complementary trajectories: one grounded in procedural restraint and civic prudence; the other oriented toward structural modernization and reform. Yet both face the same underlying imperative: to rebuild democratic credibility in both institutional and symbolic registers.

It is worth noting that both President Nicușor Dan and Prime Minister Bolojan stand far removed from the expectations embodied in the “saviour myth” that Călin Georgescu appeared so eager to fulfil. The populist promise of redemption, capable of catapulting an outsider from political obscurity into the national spotlight [24], no longer occupies, at least for the moment, a place in Romania's political landscape. The question that remains is whether leaders lacking in personal charisma can nonetheless achieve what the unsubstantiated vision of the self-styled “guru” claimed to deliver.

Drawing on theoretical contributions, we can conclude that post-crisis legitimacy must be cultivated through transparent deliberation, narrative coherence, and participatory reconstruction. Democratic institutions must not only function, they must perform, convince, and be perceived as morally intelligible. In this sense, the future of Romanian democracy depends on its ability to transform rupture into reflection, and crisis into constitutional maturity.

From Crisis to Reform: Institutional and Civic Implications

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections serve as a critical juncture in the trajectory of post-communist democratization, highlighting both the vulnerabilities and the latent adaptive capacities of political systems under stress. The annulment of an electoral round, while exceptional, is not without parallels in other European contexts. Episodes of institutional intervention in electoral processes, whether in the form of judicial annulments, heightened scrutiny over campaign financing, or regulatory action against disinformation have occurred in countries such as Ukraine (post-2004 Orange Revolution) [25]), Austria (2016 annulment of the presidential run-off), and Bulgaria (constitutional interventions on electoral legislation). These cases collectively underscore that institutional resilience is neither static nor linear; it is tested, recalibrated, and often redefined in the aftermath of crisis.

From an institutional perspective, the Romanian case confirms that formal mechanisms for crisis response must be complemented by transparent, deliberative, and normatively coherent procedures [22]. The absence of such coherence risks transforming protective interventions into sources of further polarization and distrust. Comparative experience within the EU suggests that states with robust electoral commissions, independent media regulators, and codified mechanisms for digital platform accountability, as in Estonia or Denmark, are better equipped to navigate electoral disruption without incurring severe legitimacy costs [26].

The Republic of Moldova offers an instructive comparative perspective on the interplay between electoral integrity and democratic resilience under conditions of sustained external pressure. While its democratic institutions remain comparatively fragile and its political

system more directly exposed to overt geopolitical influence, particularly from the Russian Federation, recent electoral cycles have prompted targeted reforms aimed at enhancing transparency in campaign financing, strengthening the operational independence of the Central Electoral Commission, and developing institutional mechanisms to counter disinformation. Notably, the establishment of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, alongside the banning of certain pro-Russian media channels and political parties, reflects a strategic attempt to address vulnerabilities exploited through “active measures” such as staged protests, illegal campaign financing, and manipulative electoral promises.

Yet, as experts [27]. observe, these countermeasures remain constrained by deep-seated structural vulnerabilities: a polarized political landscape, fluctuating judicial independence, entrenched oligarchic influence, and persistent pro-Russian sentiment in certain regions such as Găgăuzia. The Moldovan case illustrates the concept of “double reflexive control” whereby hostile actors adapt their tactics whether the state acts or refrains from acting, thereby ensuring that institutional responses are never final or unproblematic. This underscores a central lesson for post-Soviet and post-communist democracies: institutional reform must grapple not only with procedural deficiencies, but also with the enduring legacies of informal power structures and identity-based cleavages that can be readily instrumentalized in the electoral arena.

From a civic standpoint, the Romanian crisis revealed the pressing need for democratic literacy as a form of resilience infrastructure. The capacity of citizens to critically evaluate competing narratives, resist disinformation, and demand accountability from institutions is not innate, it must be cultivated. Here too, Moldova provides a relevant comparison: civil society organizations, often supported by international donors, have developed media literacy programs and fact-checking initiatives (e.g., StopFals.md) to combat the pervasive influence of propaganda in electoral contexts. Yet, the reach of such initiatives remains uneven, especially in rural areas, and their impact is contingent upon the parallel strengthening of institutional responsiveness.

In this light, the Romanian experience should be leveraged not merely as a cautionary tale, but as a policy laboratory for aligning

institutional reform with civic empowerment, an alignment equally relevant for neighbors such as Moldova. Electoral law revision, enhanced judicial transparency, and regulatory frameworks for digital campaigning must be paired with participatory deliberation, historical reckoning, and symbolic repair. Such an approach ensures that reform is not only a matter of administrative redesign, but a process of re-legitimizing democratic authority through shared ownership of the political order.

Ultimately, the lesson from Romania, and from other East-European and EU precedents, is that democratic resilience requires a dual track of action: one that fortifies institutional safeguards while investing in the civic competencies that give those institutions their meaning. Without this alignment, reform risks becoming a technocratic exercise divorced from the lived reality of democratic citizenship.

The Romanian electoral crisis, when placed within the broader panorama of twenty-first-century political upheavals, compels a deeper interrogation of what we mean by institutional stability. In a world characterized by accelerating technological change, intensified geopolitical competition, and the proliferation of hybrid threats, stability can no longer be equated with procedural regularity or constitutional inertia. Political institutions operate in an environment of permanent contestation, where legitimacy is tested not at fixed intervals but continuously, in real time, under the scrutiny of a hyper-connected public sphere. In such a context, the decisive question is not whether institutions can *endure* disruption, but whether they can adapt without eroding their normative core. This requires more than the mechanical reproduction of legal frameworks; it demands the cultivation of anticipatory capacities, cross-sectoral cooperation, and the embedding of resilience as a cultural and ethical norm, not merely as an administrative function. The Romanian case reveals both the potential for decisive institutional intervention and the fragility of public trust when such intervention lacks transparent, participatory justification, raising the question of how stability itself should be redefined in an era where crises are not anomalies but structural features of the political landscape.

Conclusions

The 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections were not just a bump in the usual political calendar. They shook the very idea of how resilient and adaptable our institutions really are, especially in a time when hybrid threats, algorithmic populism, and entrenched social divides are no longer exceptions but the backdrop of politics. It all started like any other election—until it didn't. The first round's annulment, something no one had seen before in post-communist Romania, turned the race into a constitutional rupture. Supporters called it a necessary safeguard against procedural breaches and even foreign meddling. Critics saw something else: a reminder that militant democracy can act with force, but sometimes at the expense of public trust, and perhaps with a taste of judicial overreach.

From this vantage point, resilience emerges not as a static attribute of political systems, but as an inherently dynamic, multidimensional process. It requires the ability to absorb shocks without collapsing, to adapt institutional practice to evolving threats, and to restore normative coherence and symbolic integrity in the aftermath of disruption. In the Romanian case, the simultaneous presence of judicial exceptionalism, algorithmically amplified populism, and a highly polarized public sphere revealed that electoral legitimacy is not an automatic by-product of constitutional design. Instead, it must be actively constructed, performed, and reaffirmed through transparent governance, participatory deliberation, and inclusive political discourse.

The responses of President Nicușor Dan, emphasizing constitutional prudence and procedural order, and of Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan, pursuing deep structural reforms of the electoral, judicial, and administrative systems, embody two complementary logics of post-crisis governance: stabilization and transformation. Yet both face the same strategic challenge: bridging the gap between the formal restoration of democratic function and the symbolic reintegration of democratic meaning. Without sustained efforts in civic education, public communication, and the creation of participatory oversight mechanisms, institutional repair risks remaining formally effective but symbolically incomplete.

Comparative experience reinforces this conclusion. The Republic of Moldova, operating under persistent geopolitical pressure from

the Russian Federation, has undertaken targeted reforms in campaign finance transparency, electoral commission independence, and counter-disinformation strategies. As Andronic [27]. observes, Moldova's defensive measures, ranging from the banning of politically controlled media channels to the dissolution of parties acting as proxies for foreign influence, remain constrained by structural vulnerabilities: fluctuating judicial independence, entrenched oligarchic networks, and identity-based cleavages in regions such as Găgăuzia. Crucially, Moldova illustrates the principle of "double reflexive control", whereby hostile actors adapt whether the state intervenes or refrains, ensuring that resilience strategies are never final. Parallel lessons can be drawn from Austria's annulment of its 2016 presidential run-off, Ukraine's post-2004 electoral reforms, and Bulgaria's constitutional interventions in election law, each case demonstrating that resilience is not a destination, but a continuous process of recalibration.

In light of these converging insights, the Romanian episode should be understood as a liminal moment in the country's democratic development, a threshold that exposed the fragility of legitimacy while simultaneously opening space for democratic renewal. It underscores the need for a broader theory of democratic repair that integrates institutional reform, symbolic reconstruction, and civic capacity-building. Such a framework must draw on the interplay between memory (Ricoeur), communicative action (Habermas), and counter-democratic vigilance (Rosanvallon) to ensure that democratic systems do not merely survive crises but emerge from them strengthened in both structure and meaning.

Ultimately, the lasting lesson is that resilience is never definitive. Each democratic crisis uncovers new fissures between political authority and social reality, compelling renewed institutional learning and civic engagement. For Romania and for other European democracies navigating similar pressure, the challenge is not simply to restore what was disrupted, but to transform crisis into an enduring opportunity for constitutional maturity, societal cohesion, and the deepening of democratic culture.

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Gabriela GOUDENHOFT, born on March 9, 1967, is a full professor, habilitated doctor, and Director of the Department of Political Science and Communication Studies at the University of Oradea. With academic backgrounds in Philosophy, History, and Law, her research and teaching activities focus on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives involving governance, social and political imaginaries, European policies, public communication, human rights, and identity dynamics within migration and transnational contexts.

As department director, she oversees academic, financial, and quality management processes, while also contributing to doctoral training as a PhD supervisor in Political Science. She has participated as expert, coordinator or principal investigator in numerous national and international projects, including Jean Monnet Modules and Excellence Centres, research grants on democracy, European governance, disinformation, diaspora studies, and social integration.

She is the author of influential books such as *Percepția de sine în spiritualitatea interbelică* (2005), *Legitimitatea. Ritualuri ale legalității și autoritate discursivă* (2014), *Going back home through one's language* (2016), and *Politici și guvernare în Uniunea Europeană* (2022). Her publication record includes more than 50 articles, book chapters, and studies, complemented by participation in over 70 national and international conferences.

Her work stands out through a sustained commitment to understanding the mechanisms of contemporary governance, the cultural and discursive foundations of legitimacy, and the transformations of identity and communication in today's European societies.