



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Romania goes to the polls in the shadow of Trump and Russian interference claims



The scenario is simple: The Trump administration will allow Putin to dismantle Ukraine or force it into a destructive deal. An emboldened Russia will seek to repeat the trick with the Baltic countries and re-establish control across Eastern Europe.

Hypothetical, yes, but not as far-fetched as it might sound. Even without Trump, Russia has been busy **interfering** in elections across the former Soviet sphere of influence, most recently and blatantly in Moldova and Georgia.

But those two countries are neither part of the European Union nor NATO, at least not yet. The upcoming elections in Romania, a key member of both blocs, are a whole different kettle of fish.

For one, the country will soon host NATO's largest airbase in Europe. Yet, claims and counterclaims of Russian involvement are also swirling around its elections.

To be sure, some of these concerns seem to be highlighted by Ukraine, which has a natural interest both in preventing pro-Moscow governments from emerging in Eastern Europe and in damaging Russia's name.

But the concerns are more wide-spread, also relating to Moldova, with which Romania has a historic relationship. Romania, of course, borders both these two flashpoints of Russian interference and is also positioned strategically on the Black Sea.

Opinion polls

Romania's Prime Minister, the pro-Western Social Democrat leader Marcel Ciolacu, is reported to have asked both Ukraine and Moldova to back up claims that his far-right, pro-Russian rival in the upcoming presidential elections, George Simion, has ties to Russia.

Ciolacu is on course to win the first round of the presidential elections on 24 November. Opinion **polls** give a widely varying picture as to who might come in second and face him in the run-off on 8 December, but this could well

be Simion. A recent election debate in which Ciolacu did not show up, gave Simion extra exposure.

To complicate things, the country also holds parliamentary elections in between, on 1 December. Ciolacu's PSD looks set to remain the largest party but Simion's AUR is poised to come in second, potentially complicating future coalition building.

The Romanian authorities, including Ciolacu, seem reluctant to lean into allegations that Simion has ties to Russia. This might have something to do with a previous backlash after the country's Constitutional Court in March banned another pro-Russian populist, Diana Sosoaca, leader of the small ultra-nationalist Eurosceptic opposition SOS Romania party, from running in the presidential elections.

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Sosoaca responded with an antisemitic, anti-European diatribe, yet opinion across the political spectrum questioned the court's decision. The PSD's coalition partner, the liberal PNL, was particularly opposed to Sosoaca's disqualification.

Since then, the Prime Minister has played down claims of possible outside election interference and foul play. He has rejected reports in the country's media that some candidates had troll farms spread misinformation.

Russian interference

Yet, accusations of Simion's involvement with Russia are not new, and Ciolacu in March this year accepted that Ukraine and Moldova had sufficient 'administrative' grounds to ban the opposition party leader from entering. Moldovan politicians have accused Simion of being part of Russia's efforts to influence that country's recent elections and EU referendum.

Simion says that Moldova and Ukraine target him because of his advocacy for the Romanian minorities in those countries. Some in his party favour incorporating Moldova into Romania and annexing parts of Ukraine with a large Romanian presence, further challenging those two countries' already precarious positions.

In June, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken cited **cooperation** between Romania and other Western allies to prevent Russia from overthrowing the Moldovan government. He spoke at the signing ceremony of a Memorandum of Understanding on Countering Foreign State Information Manipulation.

At the signing, Blinken warned about further Russian interference: "One of the most critical challenges that we face together and that all Allies face – and, indeed, countries in other parts of the world face – is misinformation and disinformation, a tool that's been increasingly weaponized, particularly by Russia as it seeks to advance its interests."

But that was the Biden administration speaking. The new US president and his team might not be so concerned with countering Russian misinformation and manipulation.



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One of the US government agencies closely connected to the memorandum of understanding is the State Department's Global Engagement Center, GEC. It's stated

mission is to counter foreign propaganda and misinformation efforts but critics have accused it of mission creep.

Republicans, who now wholly control Congress, as well as, unsurprisingly, Trump's intended government efficiency Tsar Elon Musk, have called for the GEC to be defunded.

Much will depend on the Secretary of State designate, Marco Rubio, who is known to be a foreign policy hawk and might not be so inclined to let propaganda and misinformation go unchecked, at least not where it comes from China, if not Russia.

While it's unclear how much difference an agency such as the GEC has made, its closure and just the fact of Trump being president again, might well encourage pro-Russian and anti-Western elements, also in Eastern Europe.

The discussion on whether there's a Trump boost to autocratic, far-right, pro-Russian and anti-European groups and politicians is still ongoing and might never be settled, yet these politicians themselves seem to have embraced the narrative.

Dissatisfaction with the political class

Romania's Simion, in a post on Facebook, showed himself elated with Trump's victory. "It's a victory for the patriots over the globalists. I expect all this neo-marxist, woke, transhumanist ideology to stop there and be left alone. We have ... elections in Romania. We can also [win] in Romania."

There seems, for now, not to be a real danger of Romania being diverted from its pro-Western, pro-European course. Support for NATO is strong across the political spectrum, with even the AUR in favour of the alliance. And with Romania poised to enter the Schengen free travel zone fully next year, support for the EU also seems solid.

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But the country is facing serious economic troubles, with the highest debt to GDP ratio in the European Union and sluggish growth. There's widespread concern over corruption and, as in many other democracies at the moment, dissatisfaction with the political class.

This is a fertile breeding ground for right-wing, nationalist and anti-establishment parties to flourish, and the strong performance in the opinion polls of the AUR is on a par with that of other such parties, both in the east and the west.

Russian interest in undermining and destabilising a West that it sees at the very least as a rival and in many cases as a threat, is by now a given. While its level of involvement in Romania can for now not be said to be greater than anywhere else, it would be hard to imagine that Russia has no interest in what's happening in this key NATO ally, so strategically positioned on the Black Sea.