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ARCHIVING THE PRESENT: THE SOCIAL CONFLICT BETWEEN ROMANIANS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORA ON TIKTOK

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Cristina Oana CRISTEA¹

Abstract

This paper qualitatively analyzes the social conflict emerged on TikTok between Romanians living in the diaspora and those residing in Romania during the 2025 presidential elections. These elections were characterized by a strong polarization of political opinions. The paper examines the relationships established between the platform, algorithms, political factors, and human actors. At the same time, it attempts to address the methodological challenges of conducting qualitative research in the online environment. TikTok is conceptualized here as an archive of the present. It is the space where users produce and preserve multimodal content through which they express their political opinions and interact with one another. The re-archiving of online content enabled the creation of a database consisting of 250 posts disseminated by users between May 5 and June 5, 2025. This database was used for qualitative content analysis. The research findings reveal the mutual antagonization between Romanians inside and outside the country's borders through stereotypes and their integration into local and global socio-economic processes. Social labeling regarding electoral behavior and social values – expressed through oppositions such as civilization vs. barbarism, the European Union vs. Russia, education vs. lack of education – together with the problematization of non-residents' voting rights, reflect social class tensions. In addition, the study highlights how TikTok contributes to the deterritorialization of nationalism and political participation as a result of migratory processes. The paper emphasizes the diaspora's double marginalization: by host countries and, more recently, by the country of origin.

Keywords: diaspora, TikTok, nationalism, social conflict.

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Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse qualitative du conflit social apparu sur TikTok entre les Roumains vivant dans la diaspora et ceux résidant en Roumanie lors de l'élection présidentielle de 2025. Cette élection est caractérisée par une forte polarisation des opinions politiques. L'étude examine les relations qui se tissent entre la plateforme, les algorithmes, les facteurs politiques et les acteurs humains. Elle cherche également à répondre aux défis méthodologiques que pose la conduite d'une recherche qualitative dans l'environnement numérique. TikTok est ici conceptualisé comme une archive du présent, un espace où les utilisateurs produisent et conservent des contenus multimodaux à travers lesquels ils expriment leurs opinions politiques et interagissent les uns avec les autres. Le ré-archivage des contenus en ligne a permis la constitution d'une base de données composée de 250 publications diffusées par les utilisateurs entre le 5 mai et le 5 juin 2025. Cette base a servi pour une analyse qualitative de contenu. Les résultats de la recherche mettent en évidence l'antagonisation réciproque entre les Roumains vivant à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des frontières du pays à travers des stéréotypes, ainsi que leur inscription dans des processus socio-économiques locaux et globaux. Les étiquetages sociaux relatifs aux comportements électoraux et aux valeurs sociales – exprimés notamment à travers les oppositions civilisation versus barbarie, Union européenne versus Russie, éducation versus absence de l'éducation – ainsi que la remise en question du droit de vote des non-résidents, reflètent des tensions de classe sociale. Par ailleurs, l'étude montre comment TikTok contribue à la déterritorialisation du nationalisme et de la participation politique sous l'effet des processus migratoires. Enfin, l'article souligne la double marginalisation de la diaspora: d'une part par les pays d'accueil et, plus récemment, d'autre part par le pays d'origine.

Mots-clés: diaspora, TikTok, nationalisme, conflit social.

Introduction

This article aims to investigate the social conflict between Romanians living in the diaspora and those residing in Romania, as manifested on TikTok during the 2025 presidential elections. These elections were marked by the polarization of opinions and by the questioning of the voting rights of Romanian citizens living abroad, against the backdrop of the annulment of the second presidential election round in 2024.

Moreover, TikTok became the environment in which voters interacted and expressed their political opinions. During and after the presidential elections,

eligible voters created and disseminated online content expressing support for their preferred candidates and criticism toward voters holding different political views.

This social phenomenon is complex both methodologically, because TikTok represents an emerging research environment, and socially, through the discovery of how voters express their political opinions on TikTok and how these intersect with themes such as nationalism, migration, and local and global economic policies.

In this context, the paper is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main discourses constructed on TikTok around the electoral preferences of Romanian citizens with voting rights residing within Romania and abroad?
2. How can political discourses disseminated on TikTok be methodologically researched?

To answer these research questions, an inductive and exploratory approach was employed. The paper is structured as follows: the first section presents the relevant literature, aiming to outline the characteristics of the Romanian diaspora and the theories explaining diaspora voting as a manifestation of nationalism; the second section presents the research methodology, focusing on the empirical steps necessary for studying this conflict on TikTok; while the final sections present the research findings and conclusions, based on the main discursive themes identified.

The research makes two main contributions: proposing a methodological research model for TikTok and investigating the political discourses emerging among Romanian citizens with voting rights. First, the article proposes conceptualizing TikTok as an archive of the present and transforming the researcher into an archivist who qualitatively investigates a virtual environment characterized by a large volume of data. Second, the article argues that the voting behavior of Romanians in the diaspora represents a manifestation of long-distance nationalism, while the questioning of voting rights granted to Romanian citizens beyond territorial boundaries reveals the socio-political tensions faced by Romanian society.

Literature Review

Diaspora as a Political Process

In the academic literature, diaspora is defined as a transnational community whose members have emigrated or been dispersed from their homeland while preserving their group identity (Brubaker, 2005; Grossman, 2019). This study starts from Francesco Ragazzi's (2012) perspective, according to which the ontological politics of defining a population as a diaspora emphasize the process through which that population is constituted. In this sense, the Romanian diaspora is conceptualized as a point of intersection between state policies, the dynamics of the global and local economy, civil society action, and media representations.

The massive emigration of Romanians is a process characteristic of the post-communist economy. The extensive industrial development and pro-natalist policies of the Romanian communist regime became, after the 1989 Revolution, sources of labor force oversupply (Ianoș, 2016). The deindustrialization of the economy generated unemployment in nearby urban centers, internal return migration from urban to rural areas, and a reduction in rural-to-urban commuting in areas surrounding small and medium-sized cities (Sandu, 2010; Andrei, & Mirică, 2019).

In response to these challenges, the reorientation toward subsistence agriculture (Popescu, 2020) and external migration acted as safety valves that prevented unemployment growth (Horváth, & Tamás, 2016). The outcome of this policy was analyzed by István Horváth and Remus Gabriel (2009), who describe the long-term and permanent emigration option chosen by Romanians after 2007.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Diaspora

Official statistics indicate that approximately 5.6 million Romanians were living abroad in 2021, of whom 3.6 million were residing within the European Union (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MAE], 2021). The Romanian diaspora was ranked the fifth largest in the world in 2019 (OECD, 2019).

The top destination countries chosen by Romanians are Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The main identified reasons for emigration are economic and professional factors, followed by family formation or reunification and educational opportunities (Department for Romanians Everywhere, 2023).

The socio-demographic structure of the Romanian diaspora in OECD countries is complex: both employment and unemployment rates among Romanian emigrants are higher than among native populations. Romanians are employed in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and caregiving, regardless of their level of education (OECD, 2019).

Recent data identify 2020 as a turning point in the evolution of population movements: while permanent emigration has increased, temporary migration has been on a downward trend:

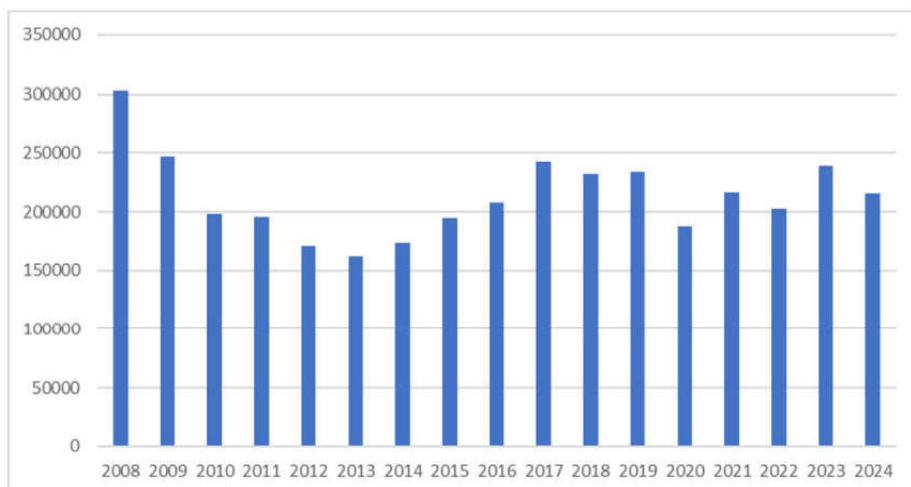


Figure 1. Temporary migrants

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>.

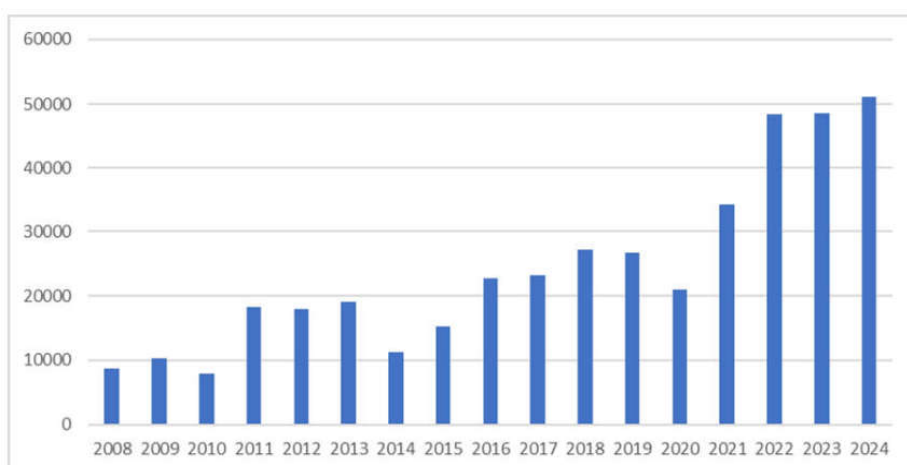


Figure 2. Permanent migrants

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>.

These migration trends overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in 2020, and the economic crisis that immediately followed. The return of Romanians was motivated by the worsening material conditions caused by quarantine measures. This return migration was negatively stigmatized by the Romanian state and the mass media, which portrayed members of the diaspora as alien actors responsible for spreading the virus (Vincze, & Balaban, 2022).

Electoral Behavior of the Romanian Diaspora

Political elections in Romania are characterized by geographical differences in voter turnout among emigrants. The United States and Canada record a lower number of voters compared to Western European countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

In the case of the United States and Canada, time zone differences may negatively affect Romanians' willingness to vote. In addition, the strategy of these two countries to attract highly skilled labor has led migration to be predominantly permanent (Brădăţan, & Kulcsár, 2014; Markley, & Lepadatu, 2015; Anghel *et al.*, 2016). Romanians living in Northern Europe tend to have higher levels of education and more skilled or intellectual professions compared to those living in Southern Europe (Andr n, & Roman, 2016).

During the 2009 presidential elections, the diaspora contributed to legitimizing the close electoral results in Romania. Subsequently, voting patterns remained similar, with the exception of the year 2025:

Table 1. The results of the presidential election in Romania and among the Romanian diaspora

Year	Candidate	National Results (second round)	Diaspora results (second round)
2009	Traian Băsescu	50.33%(5.275.808)	78.86% (115.831)
	Mircea Geoană	49.67% (5.205.760)	21.14% (31.045)
2014	Klaus Iohannis	54.43% (6.288.769)	89.73% (338.873)
	Victor Ponta	45.57% (5.264.383)	10.27% (38.778)
2019	Klaus Iohannis	66.09% (6.509.135)	94% (878.933)
	Viorica Dăncilă	33.91% (3.339.922)	6% (56.072)
2025	Nicuşor Dan	55.16 % (5.445.052)	44.22 % (723.590)
	George Simion	44.84 % (4.426.247)	55.78 % (912.806)

Source: <https://www.rezultatevot.ro/alegeri/prezidentiale-turul-2-2024/prezenta>.

Table 2. The percentage of votes cast by the diaspora out of the total number of votes in the presidential election

Year	Round	Diaspora votes	Total votes	Diaspora percentage
2009	Round I	95.068	10.041.916	0.946%
	Round II	147.754	20.767.270	1.372%
2014	Round I	128.140	9.723.232	1.318%
	Round II	312.796	12.032.140	2.598%
2019	Round I	944.176	10.975.934	8.600%
	Round II	675.276	10.032.140	6.726%
2024	Round I	821.703	9.465.257	8.683%
2025	Round I	973.129	9.571.740	10.167%
	Round II	1.636.396	11.507.695	14.22%

Source: <https://www.rezultatevot.ro/alegeri/prezidentiale-turul-2-2024/prezenta>.

The voting results from the diaspora reflect socio-economic dissatisfaction that have been captured by anti-corruption and anti-establishment discourses. Anti-corruption rhetoric becomes an integral part of populism because it cultivates antagonism between the popular will and corrupt elites (Shafir, 2008; Mudde, & Kaltwasser, 2017). The 2025 elections reflect the dissatisfaction of diaspora voters with the social-democratic and liberal political class of Romania's post-communist transition.

This opposition of the masses against the elites was present in anti-corruption rhetoric as a mechanism of electoral mobilization used by the Save Romania Union (USR) (Momoc, 2018). The diaspora also participated actively and symbolically in the struggle against the political elites of the transition through protests in front of embassies and consulates due to the limited number of polling stations, as well as through the anti-corruption protests held between 2017 and 2019 (Burean, & Popp, 2015). The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) followed the same anti-establishment agenda (Gușă, 2021), differentiating itself through the promotion of nationalist and conservative discourses (Soare, & Tufiş, 2023).

The 2025 presidential elections showed the preference of Romanians in Western Europe for a far-right candidate compared to other regions. This geographical area includes the largest number of Romanians engaged in an economy characterized by precarious, seasonal, and informal labor.

The political consensus regarding the benefits of migration in a globalized world allowed far-right politicians to capitalize politically through nationalist discourses. This phenomenon is captured by Wilterdink (2017), who argues that the rise of nationalist populism represents a reaction to globalization processes, which

have eroded class identities and re-centered collective belonging around national and ethnic dimensions as a form of resistance to growing social inequalities.

In the case of the Romanian diaspora, this identity reconfiguration was expressed through a double marginalization: both toward the country of origin and toward the host countries. The situation was aggravated by the effects of the pandemic, the global economic crisis, and new waves of migrants originating from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

This dual identity reconfiguration can be observed in Romanians' relations with other immigrants in host countries and in their voting preferences for parties and candidates promoting nationalist discourses during Romanian elections. Studies present the ethnic hierarchies through which Romanians abroad perceive non-white migrants (Fox *et al.*, 2015). Their behavior and attitudes are described through an ambivalent cosmopolitanism that combines strategic interactions for survival, cultural openness, prejudice, and ethnic distancing (Datta, 2009; Moroşanu, 2013).

The outcome of the 2025 vote may be explained as a manifestation of long-distance nationalism (Benedict Anderson, 1998), emerging from the desire to compensate for the lack of socio-economic integration in host countries. The mechanisms through which Romanians in the diaspora participate in political life include: economic remittances, political remittances (the right to vote and participation in protests in Romania), transnational institutions (churches, associations, schools, and governmental projects), mass media, and technologies that enable the maintenance of ties with the country of origin.

The roles of mass media and technology were highlighted by Benedict Anderson (2006) through the concept of imagined communities, which refers to the contribution of print capitalism to the emergence of nationalism and the nation. Through the mass printing and distribution of newspapers, books, and pamphlets, members of nations, despite the structural impossibility of knowing, meeting, or hearing most of their fellow citizens, live with the image of a symbolic communion (Anderson, 2006).

The role of imagination was also emphasized by Arjun Appadurai (1996), for whom imagination became part of everyday life through electronic media. The diasporic public sphere is a product of the interaction between imagination and the mediascape, composed of the infrastructure of electronic media and the information transmitted through it, which enable the debate, symbolization, and negotiation of belonging to the nation or to the world (Appadurai, 1996).

A series of studies highlight the important role played by Facebook during the 2014 presidential elections (Trandafoiu, 2013; Covaci, 2015; Tănase, 2015; Ajder, 2018). In the present case, TikTok became the medium through which Romanians produced discourses about the nation, relations with others, and testimonies regarding their personal migration histories.

The political influence of the diaspora from a distance is the result of legislative mechanisms through which the state facilitates ties with those outside its territorial

borders. Today, long-distance nationalism is a process manifested within a political field circumscribed by the state, yet not corresponding to its territoriality. This process was captured by Eric Hobsbawm (1997), for whom the nation and nationalism are products of modernity and centralized states. Invented traditions play an important role in the consolidation and legitimization of power by the state and elites because they provide continuity with the nation's past and contribute to the creation of collective identity (Hobsbawm, & Ranger, 1993).

The Romanian diaspora is therefore understood as a manifestation of homeland nationalism (Brubaker, 1996), because the Romanian state recognizes the citizenship and political rights of those outside its borders, including those from historical regions, while members of the diaspora participate in the political field through votes, protests, and discourses concerning the nation, the country, and political classes.

Methodology

Archiving the Present

This paper represents an exploratory and descriptive qualitative study conducted through the triangulation of sociological research methods and techniques. TikTok is conceptualized as an archive of the present, while algorithms function as structuring agents constituted through users' interactions. Non-participant observation in the online space was combined with archival work, on the basis of which a qualitative content analysis was carried out.

Building on Blanke's (2024) observations, TikTok is understood as an incidental archive, insofar as it is constituted through both humans and algorithms, requiring the researcher's work of reassembly. The reassembly and curation of content are necessary because the platform displays the characteristics of an unstable and temporary meta-field, formed through the aggregation of content based on metadata such as hashtags, sounds, keywords, and algorithms (Airoldi, 2018).

Following the steps described by Blanke (2024) for the reassembly of incidental archives, the content promoted by TikTok on the topic of the relationship between the diaspora and Romanians living in the country was saved, after which the posts and the relationships between actors and their actions were analyzed in order to identify emerging themes.

Algorithmic Involvement

The selection of materials was carried out according to thematic and temporal criteria. The conflict was documented over the course of one month, between May 5 and June 5, 2025, as this was a period characterized by the proliferation of posts related to this topic and by the outcome of the elections.

Temporality represents an important criterion in researching a popular trend on TikTok, because the discovery and selection of content depend on the researcher's presence on the platform and their active use of it in order to immerse themselves in the data circulating in the virtual environment.

Working together with TikTok is possible because it functions as a digital platform that organizes, filters, and promotes online discourse (Gillespie, 2010; 2018), operating as a public sphere distorted by the contradictions between the digital monopoly of private actors, the fragmentation of content (Guzman, 2021; Smyrniotis, & Baisnée, 2023), and personalized algorithms (Heavner, 2021).

Algorithms, the TikTok interface, and its rules play an active role in programmed sociability, through which social relations emerge and are organized (Bucher, 2018). The time spent on TikTok, the viewing, liking, and saving of content, as well as the identification of hashtags that efficiently organize posts (Chafe, 2023), are mechanisms through which the researcher manages to expand their searches.

In addition, algorithms have two main roles: shaping the format of posts by promoting creative mimicry (Zulli, & Zulli, 2022) and curating the content disseminated by users (Braun, & Mateus, 2024). Posts on TikTok reproduced popular ideas, images, and sounds in order to gain visibility. For this reason, immersion in the TikTok world involves a quantitatively increased consumption of the content promoted on the For You page in order to identify the main messages and formats, which multiply through users who reproduce or modify the multimodal templates created by others.

Analysis of Multimodal Documents

A total of 300 posts were selected, while the qualitative content analysis was conducted on a final dataset of 250 posts, as part of the saved content had been deleted by users and by the platform. For this reason, the transition from the fluid TikTok archive to a static archive is necessary.

The algorithmic biases were mitigated by using a secondary account and by monitoring common hashtags such as #Diaspora ("diaspora"), #alegeri2025 ("elections2025"), #diasporavotează ("diaspora votes"), as well as user-popularized audio tracks supporting the two candidates. All content appearing on the *For You* page was followed, liked, and saved, regardless of electoral preferences, in order to increase the diversity of recommendations.

The creation of the static archive involved saving the posts and summarizing them in an Excel document, which represents the source of the content analysis. For the qualitative content analysis of the final database, the stages proposed by Elo, & Kyngäs (2008) were followed: (1) selecting the units of analysis, (2) immersion in the data, (3) open coding, (4) developing the coding sheet, (5) grouping, (6) categorization, and (7) abstraction.

In the first stage, the posts were saved in the archive section made available by TikTok to each user. The transition from TikTok's fluid archive to the researcher's static archive was carried out through the creation of an Excel document that included the following: links to the posts, summaries of the content, transcriptions of written or verbal messages, the supported candidate, the location of the post, the identification of objects present in the posts, and the songs and sounds used.

The static archive enabled the identification of the main narrative core around which the posts were constructed, as well as the identification of the main discursive themes constituted as branches surrounding this core. This step involves identifying the main discursive structure around which posts within this trend are constructed through mimicry.

Accordingly, in the present study, the messages that emerged as variations and transformations of the core discursive structure constituted both the selection criteria for the analyzed content and the mechanism through which attention was shifted from the user to the content itself.

From the perspective of research ethics in sociology, the analysis and interpretation of the data are carried out through the multimodal messages conveyed by the posted content, without establishing any connection between the post and the user. This distinction between the discourses circulating on TikTok and the users themselves is important because TikTok functions as a public sphere distorted by the presence of algorithms (Heavner, 2021). For this reason, the research focuses exclusively on the discourses that emerge on TikTok, without reference to the social and material characteristics of the users.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The Construction of the Origin Myth

The analyzed posts are constructed around the nation, in the form of symbolic inclusions and delimitations. These posts question or affirm the right of citizens from the diaspora to participate in Romania's political life through voting.

The concept of the nation thus becomes a meta-myth which, although it takes infinite media forms, preserves its finite and constant structure (Levi-Strauss, 1973), because the oppositions constituted through it claim belonging to the Romanian nation.

The voting rights of members of society are disputed beyond ethnic origins and redrawn through the normative evaluation of voting intentions. The withdrawal of this right becomes the central action of the ethical narrative, through which Romanian citizens living outside the country's borders were either brought closer or alienated.

The schematic structure of the nation's meta-myth can be visually represented as follows:

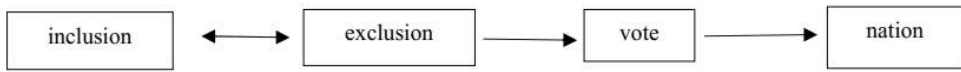


Figure 3. The mimetic structure of the nation's meta-myth as disseminated on TikTok

The figure above represents the memetic structure of TikTok content associated with the conflict under study. This content affirms or denies individuals' membership in the Romanian nation on the basis of voting rights. The figure illustrates how such content problematizes Romanian citizenship according to people's voting intentions.

The following excerpts from posts are reproduced verbatim, without altering the meaning of the original messages:

- “For the Simion supporters who said they would leave the country if Nicușor Dan became president... start packing already, we don't need scumbags in Romania anyway.”
- “The diaspora should no longer have the right to vote. You decided not to return to Romania, so you have no right to decide the fate of those living here or of those who chose to come back.”
- “Thank you, Moldova, for not speaking Romanian with us (saying that you don't know it), but still having the right to vote.”
- “The diaspora is voting, we are taking our country back.”
- “I have friends and family members who have been living abroad for years, but they are responsible and balanced people - they do not complain, point fingers, or live in resentment. They accepted their choices and moved on with their lives.”
- “We are tired of being targets of hatred simply because we regained a right. Romanian citizenship was not handed to us. We searched through archives, paid fees, gathered documents in order to prove what we truly are: Romanians.”
- “I understand that you are upset with the diaspora. Okay, to some extent, rightfully so. But we are not all the same. Some of us also have common sense and civic awareness. Please stop putting us all in the same category, especially considering that the majority in Romania also supported Simion, while thanks to the diaspora Nicușor Dan reached second place.”

Variations of the Origin Myth

Reconfiguring Citizenship in the Digital Imaginary

The analysis enabled the identification of the following social groups: supporters of candidate Nicușor Dan from Romania and from the diaspora, and supporters of candidate George Simion from the diaspora. The identification of these three social groups is due to the mimetic mechanisms specific to TikTok, instrumentalized as means of differentiation among voters.

These mechanisms include: the viralization and standardization of messages and sounds, the duplication of scenarios adapted according to the preferred candidate, and the repost and stitch functions used to respond to posts created by other users.

TikTok contributes to the constitution of imagined communities (Anderson, 2006) by facilitating interactions between people with shared political views, as well as conflict based on divergent opinions. Unlike print capitalism, which implied the emergence of relatively homogeneous social masses (Anderson, 2006), platform capitalism segments users according to their already existing preferences.

The segmentation of users is built upon stereotypical binary oppositions through which representations are constructed around voters' characteristics, state relations, and social values:

Table 3. Characteristics of voter groups identified on TikTok

Voter characteristics	Interstate relations	Social values
education – stupidity	West – East	tradition – progress
skilled labour – unskilled labour	European Union – Russia	LGBT – anti-LGBT
wealth – poverty	Democracy – authoritarianism	authentic nationalism – performative nationalism
self-exile –life in Romania	Romania – Moldova	guaranteeing voting rights – withdrawing voting rights
	Romania – Russia	feminism – misogyny

Nicușor Dan	George Simion
education	stupidity
skilled labor	unskilled labor
West	East
Europe	Russia
democracy	authoritarianism
tradition	progress
LGBT	anti-LGBT
Moldova	Western Europe
feminism	misogyny
self-exile	self-exile

Table 4. The social characteristics associated with the two candidates in the 2025 presidential election

The main shared theme of the two principal groups of voters is self-exile. Leaving Romania or remaining in the diaspora are presented as structural solutions. This resolution reflects the major political tensions among Romanian citizens, who discursively and imaginatively reject the possibility of a political scenario that does not align with their personal expectations.

The following examples are illustrative in this regard:

- “The diaspora reunited for a nerd.”
- “For those in the diaspora who say they won’t return to the country because Nicușor Dan won, we don’t need you anyway. We need intelligent and productive people in major and important fields such as IT, medicine, education, engineering, law, etc. We do not need your two years of schooling and your skill of picking 10 strawberries in 5 seconds.”
- “The educated diaspora votes for ND.”
- “From the UK for Romania, the normal, honest, educated, and intelligent Romania.”
- “Drop your nonsense and come home, nobody is starving here. Nobody who works. Kisses 🍷 #diaspora #home #romaniaRO”
- “Our enemies are in Romania, not in Russia.”

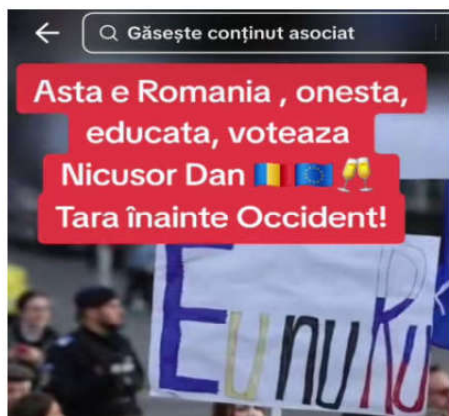


Figure 4. This is Romania: honest, educated, voting for Nicușor Dan. The country moving toward the West!

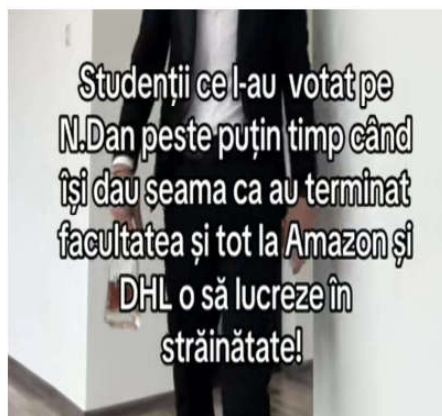


Figure 5. The students who voted for N. Dan shortly after realizing that they graduated from university and will still end up working at Amazon and DHL abroad!

Ideologized Geographies

Choosing a candidate is interpreted through the lens of Romania's possible scenarios and trajectories in the world, alongside other states. The struggle between East and West is translated into rejections of and affinities toward Russia and Western Europe, equated with the struggle between authoritarianism and democracy.

European development thus functions as an invented tradition (Hobsbawm, & Ranger, 1983), providing legitimacy to the choice of the candidate who ensures Romania's continuity within European history. The diaspora destabilizes this narrative through migratory stories and through votes cast for extremist and nationalist parties.

The theme of exile is reflected in the following two online trends: the creation of content by Romanians living abroad, especially mems featuring their personal cars, and the cutting of passports after the announcement of the final results.

Images of personal cars or groups of cars traveling toward polling stations symbolize two sets of binary oppositions: individualism versus collectivity, and material accumulation versus social alienation. The car becomes both proof and symbol of labor abroad, as well as of the driver's estrangement from both the country of origin and the host country. It represents the technology of transition and movement specific to migrants, contributing to a masculine imaginary of stability and power that compensates for the lack of alternatives and choices characteristic of a marginal social position:



Figure 6. "This is how Romanians in the diaspora go to vote!!! Up Romanians, my people, vote with your heart! Romanians from Rimini (IT)!"



Figure 7. "I swear allegiance to my homeland, Romania!"

The delegitimization of this performative suffering was carried out through the following mechanisms: the use of expired passports and identity cards, the cutting of cards with low economic value – such as loyalty cards issued by pharmacies and supermarkets – and challenges encouraging the cutting of high school diplomas, which suggested a lack of education.

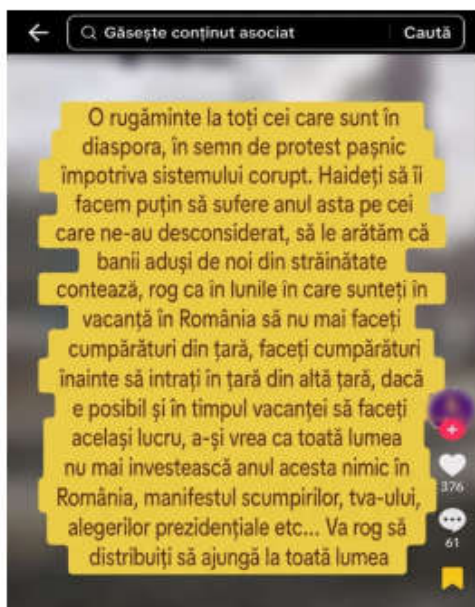


Figure 8. "A request to everyone in the diaspora, as a sign of peaceful protest against the corrupt system. Let's make those who disregarded us suffer a little this year, let's show them that the money brought by us from abroad matters. I ask that during the months when you are on vacation in Romania, you no longer shop in the country; do your shopping before entering Romania, from another country, and if possible, do the same during your vacation as well. I would like everyone not to invest anything in Romania this year because of rising prices, VAT, the presidential elections, etc. Please share this so it reaches everyone"



Figure 9. "The best thing you can do in this country is to leave!"

Competing Forms of Nationalism

The exclusions and inclusions presented in the previous sections outline the imaginary of the Romanian nation and voters' projections onto it. The differences between the two main social groups – George Simion's supporters in the diaspora and Nicușor Dan's supporters in Romania – generated competing forms of nationalism centered around sovereignty or the European Union.

Posts created by Romanians living abroad are part of the political activism and long-distance nationalism characteristic of diasporas (Anderson, 1998). These posts express homesickness and the desire to return, using traditional symbols such

as traditional clothing and nail art with folk motifs, folk music played in cars or on portable speakers, and the Romanian flag.

The posts reproduce the theme of sovereignty promoted by the leader of the AUR party. Sovereignty functions as a discursive mechanism for rejecting the social and economic inequalities produced by economic globalization (Wilterdink, 2017) and by Romania's integration into a supranational European structure. The sovereign nation-state becomes the imagined community projected from afar by members of the diaspora, through which they articulate their material frustrations and marginal social positions in both their country of origin and their host countries.

Content shared by Nicușor Dan's voters emphasizes Romania's European trajectory through its separation from the communist past, its distancing from relations with Russia, and the rejection of the Romanian diaspora in Europe. The symbols shaping this imaginary included the flag of the European Union, the anti-communist song "The Golaniad Anthem" ("Imnul golanilor"), the lyrics "Vote with your head, not with your ass," and the lyrics "I am gonna love you until you hate me." In this case, a symbiosis emerged between nationalism and the European Union, advocating for the preservation of the social and political status quo.

The conflict between the two categories of voters turned into an ethical and civilizational struggle. Following a pro-European demonstration in Romania, the following excerpt from a speech, received with applause from the other participants – went viral on TikTok: "We like bananas, we like jeans. We want to go on luxurious vacations in France, Germany, and Italy. We want equal rights. We want to be human."

The message reflects both an anti-communist attitude, through the reference to jeans and bananas as consumer goods that were difficult to access during the socialist period, and a class-based perspective on Romania's integration into the European Union. European Union countries are portrayed as vacation destinations, even though 58.6% of Romania's population cannot afford a one-week holiday during the course of a year (Eurostat, 2025).

The way votes coming from the Republic of Moldova are framed reflects both their utilitarian instrumentalization within Romanian elections and their role as an essential component of the imagined community built around Europeanism. In this scenario, Romania fights alongside the Republic of Moldova against the Russian threat in order to secure its place in the Western world. This struggle allows the two Eastern countries to claim their Europeaness despite their historical and structural in-betweenness within Europe (Todorova, 2000; Wolff, 2000).

Within this interpretive framework, the diaspora from the Republic of Moldova can be resignified as belonging to a state that is similar to and aligned with Romania's interests, in contrast to the diaspora in Western Europe, estranged by time, distance, and divergent interests.

Unlike state-controlled transborder nationalism, organized through laws and voting arrangements outside national borders on the basis of citizenship (Brubaker, 1996), online nationalism is axiological, with political values functioning as its central organizing principle.

Discussions and Conclusions

The research findings reveal a series of discourses constructed around the nation and citizenship, through which the conflict between Romanians in the diaspora and Romanians living in the country was shaped on TikTok. The nation became an imaginary space of inclusion and exclusion, while citizenship was understood in normative and ethical terms through which the social characteristics and values of voters were evaluated.

The identified discourses focused primarily on the diaspora's voting rights, characterizations of voters, desirable social values, and Romania's positioning alongside other states in the world. These were presented through binary oppositions that framed the struggle between a democratic, European, and educated world and an authoritarian one influenced by Russia, lacking formal education and qualifications.

Contrary to Arjun Appadurai's theory (1996) regarding the emancipatory and unifying potential of the internet for dispersed populations, TikTok contributed to the fragmentation and division of users according to political preferences. The mimetic character of TikTok posts, expressed through the repetition of standardized formats (sounds, scenarios, and reactions), thus reinforced stereotypes and political polarization.

The paper contributes both to understanding the conflict between Romanians living in Romania and those abroad, and to understanding TikTok as an archive of the present. It also problematizes the methodological dilemmas faced by qualitative research in social spaces characterized by the production and existence of big data, the ephemerality of online content, and algorithmic presence. Furthermore, it highlights the need to transform digital activity into social memory through research.

Research Limitations

The research presents a series of methodological and theoretical limitations resulting from the social environment in which online content is produced. First, the findings cannot be generalized because no representative sample was used, and data collection was influenced by algorithmic intervention. In this regard, the database included Romanians located in Western Europe during the elections,

without identifying other geographical spaces, while the selected posts were those amplified by TikTok's algorithms.

Second, the posts were analyzed solely from the perspective of their manifestation on TikTok, without being connected to the socio-demographic characteristics of the users. The absence of an emic perspective on the content implies only a partial investigation of the social tensions amplified during the elections.

In the absence of quantitative research capable of showing the intensity, frequency, and virality of posts over time, the avoidance of bias remained partial and insufficient despite the use of a secondary account and the saving of all posts recommended by TikTok.

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