GLOBAL
FOCUS

Foreign Malign Influence in Romania

Factors, techniques and recommendations

Andrei Tiut
Senior Researcher

GLOBSEC
Vulnerability
Index 2021

www.vulnerabilityindex.org

The present report complements the findings of the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021[1] by providing additional background, selecting more impactful vulnerabilities, and indicating, where possible, a course of action to improve the situation.

Romania scores well in the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021, compared to other regional countries. With a total of 29/100[2] it shares top place in terms of resilience with Czechia. It has a strong pro-Western commitment, which is reflected in policies that seek to foster cooperation and the further strengthening of the EU and NATO, as well as enhanced security across the Black Sea Region. A tendency toward the securitization of foreign policy - generated by perceptions of the permanent threat of instability in Romania's vicinity and of Russia as a hostile neighbor - has motivated the adoption of legislation paving the way for additional scrutiny over the involvement of foreign actors in critical infrastructure aimed at averting foreign malign influence. Romania's extensive economic integration with the EU and identity-cultural legacies further mitigate its vulnerability to foreign interference.

However, significant internal vulnerabilities exist that offer inroads for external influence.

The nation is mostly defined in the mainstream discourse (through high culture, general education, and political communication[3]) as ethnicity-based and exclusive of minorities. Internally, this creates space for nationalist and anti-liberal movements that are implicitly aligned with Moscow, even where no direct link may exist. Externally, a framing of

history construed as great power play, with Romania caught in the middle, on occasion makes the population highly suspicious of cooperative approaches in international relations due to a suspicion of hidden agendas[4].

Public discourse is highly prone to information manipulation, especially as the official message is often regarded with suspicion that stems from very low trust in government and institutions. The media landscape is riddled with systemic corruption, favoring polarization and misinformation. While the diversity of presumably corrupt interests offers a measure of resilience, the end result is an information landscape in which establishing the truth is difficult, and foreign interference and manipulation may prove easy.

Finally, while the bureaucratic elites are largely committed to the EU and NATO and to these organizations' efforts to fight propaganda and foreign interference, their commitment is oftentimes shallow. Since political elites are the main perpetrators and beneficiaries of information manipulation, and the public administration is highly politicized, there is only limited availability to relinquish these means at their disposal, which may result in vague policies and little action.

These vulnerabilities may be compounded by the current situation, where high political instability and poor pandemic management have increased dissatisfaction with political elites and have sent voters to seek alternatives[5].

The main beneficiary of this context would be Russia. China is not seen by the experts

interviewed for the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021[6] as having any effective influence at the moment. Hungary could be a second beneficiary, but its propaganda inroads in Transylvania[7] are currently motivated by internal Hungarian politics[8].

Public opinion

While the Romanian public is staunchly pro-EU and pro NATO, its self-image is not that of a civic liberal nation but rather of the ethnic and exclusive nation that used to be taught in Communist-era textbooks and is still promoted across the region by Russia as an alternative to "Western" values.

The hegemonic discourse[9] defines Romanians as an ethnic nation that happens to coexist peacefully with other different nations (the ethnic minorities). The nation is portrayed as proud, orthodox, heterosexual, and striving for unity rather than diversity. Polls consistently show that many Romanians proclaim conservative values[10] and express pride in ethnic unity[11], while sexual minorities continue to feel excluded[12].

At the societal level this provides discursive space to divide citizens between the "us" as "true Romanians" and the "other" ethnic, sexual and other minorities. Since Western discourse is supportive of minorities whereas Russian discourse is dismissive, this creates a shared ideology

between local ultraconservatives and Russia, even when the former may define the latter as an adversary[13].

At the foreign policy level this prompts a general belief that opportunism is a mandatory action principle for medium powers like Romania, which needs to cooperate with stronger and more influential partners while being constantly careful that its position of weakness is not abused. Many Romanians believe that other nations define themselves and act exclusively out of unscrupulous self-interest. For example, 38% believe that the United States is deliberately provoking Russia[14]. Most Romanians are highly mistrustful of Russia[15], which to a certain degree shelters them from overt or transparent Russian involvement. But a sizeable minority believes that the West is not necessarily better; it only happens to have an interest in allying itself with Romania and may change course once that interest wanes[16].

How did we get here?

This ethnic, exclusive and competitive definition of the nation was taught in schools during the period that is sometimes called National Communism[17]. Whilst not openly hostile to anyone, it was wary of the generic danger that 'Others' pose 'Us'. The fact that this discourse is not explicitly anti-Hungarian, anti-American, or anti-LGBT left ample room in the 1990s and 2000s for liberal, inclusive, civic policies to be implemented

without popular uproar. But since then the definition itself and associated set of narratives have remained unchallenged, and have in fact been strengthened by an increasingly radical Orthodox Church and an education system which did not update its teaching of national history. Politicians have continued to pay at least lip-service to this idea of the nation, the Orthodox Church[18], and (ultra) conservative values[19]. The liberal framing of the nation has never been promoted (although the younger generation's views may naturally diverge from the older generation's[20]).

In short, according to our analysis the foundation of Romanian identity on ethnocentric and exclusive values has generated a natural confusion of patriotism with ethnic nationalism and ultra-conservatism. Hence, most nationalists would never conceive of themselves as intolerant, illiberal, or out-of-place in the EU. This makes for both the strength and weakness of ethnonationalism. It is resilient because it has been unchallenged, but also limited in effects since it never challenged the status quo. Romanian nationalism is a source of vulnerabilities rather than an immediate threat.

Such vulnerabilities are currently compounded by high political instability[21] and bad governance, against a background of democratic disillusionment[22]. Poor management of the pandemic[23] has made it tempting to paint political elites as the "others", foreign from the body of the nation, under the influence of foreign corporations and nations that want to peddle their high-cost medicines at the expense of "better alternatives" that can

be cheaply imported from Russia or the Republic of Moldova[24]. Furthermore, a large number of immigrants requesting asylum at some point in the future would also prove a highly divisive issue[25] and add further vulnerabilities.

What can be done

→ **The education system** could teach history and literature in a more objective and scientific way without elements of propaganda, showing the lights but also the shadows in the country's evolution. The fact that a history textbook about the Holocaust has been compiled[26] is a step in the right direction in a society that has yet to recognize the full extent of its past actions against Jews or the Roma[27]. It should be complemented by textbooks about the treatment of the Roma and on Romanian Fascism. Subjects such as sex education, media and Internet literacy should be taught in school from an early age and with a proper curriculum, as opposed to the present trend of marginalizing such issues.

→ **Liberal politicians** should stop paying lip-service to ultraconservative ethno-nationalist values. Such a position is counter-productive from the political point of view[28].

→ **Officials** should stop communicating EU directives and their implementation at the national level as external impositions, and openly assume the country's status as an EU member that participates in the decision-making process. Emphasis should be placed

on the rationale behind new measures and legislation, and how these can improve life for the average citizen. "I am a European Citizen and I have rights" is a rare example of an official public communication campaign that actually seems to have made an impact in popular culture[29]. It might be good to further develop it.

→ Government and political elites may be better off acknowledging that negotiations among the 27 EU and 30 NATO member states include a fair amount of promotion of national interest, a position as legitimate as the eventual compromise reached. Unquestioning conformity to majority preference and an effort to portray every decision as high-minded and value-driven (even when it fails to serve Romania's interests[30]) only generates frustration among a public that already easily embraces victimization.

Information and media landscape

Although direct foreign influence is comparatively limited, Romanian media has on its own reached the post-truth era. For three decades, the press has been increasingly polarizing and often under the control of corrupt and opaque interests. This has wrought havoc on the quality of public debate and genuine plurality. Direct foreign interference might be the next step.

At a glance, the media landscape in Romania appears highly diverse,

oftentimes offering polemic perspectives. And this very diversity enables the media to be a source of resilience.

Yet media ownership is highly problematic, as influential media networks are controlled by only a handful of 'oligarchs'. In fact, nearly all owners of private news televisions have been convicted or prosecuted for corruption[31]. It can be argued that corruption is not an exception, but rather an integral part of the news television business model. One visible indicator of favoritism is that several major outlets have failed to pay due state taxes on time – or at all; only Intact Media Group has been impounded[32]. Accusations have been made that TV stations accept under the table money from political and business interests, whilst other accusations are rampant - often based on sudden and otherwise inexplicable shifts in editorial policy.

During the pandemic, the government has also provided generous amounts of money to the press for their (presumed) effort to correctly inform the public about the pandemic situation[33]. Yet television stations have been a major source of disinformation and vaccine skepticism[34], while websites that received government subsidies have simultaneously voiced antivaxx messages[35, 36].

At this time, Romania seems to lack a print or audio-visual equivalent of a 'newspaper of record'. Moreover, media outlets often engage in open conflict, resulting in a cacophony of contradictory narratives. There is no referential, standard-setter, or widely trusted source to consult in order to verify information[37].

As such, it should be reasonably easy for foreign actors like Russia, China, or anyone willing to spend the money to find one or several entry points, and to do so in a non-transparent manner. Such misinformation could be difficult to counter, at least in the initial stages, due to the lack of credible and impartial news sources. Yet it would be much more difficult, probably impossible, to try to dominate the diversity of the media landscape.

How did we get here?

The current situation is informed by multiple factors. Broadly put, there is a media-political system where influential elites form extensive networks of interests that have captured both decision-making processes and public communication[38]. This has resulted in an environment where journalists, politicians, and political consultants trade jobs quite frequently. So despite being in opposite camps, as political fortunes change neither category is likely to advocate for ethical standards or regulation that would fight disinformation or pressure media owners to be more transparent. Unsurprisingly, the official media watchdog (National Audio-Visual Council) is politicized[39] and highly ineffective.

What can be done?

Regulation of the free media, even when done competently and with the best of intentions, will have limited effects, and needs to be weighed against freedom of speech requirements. Yet the current lack of regulation and self-regulation leaves much room for improvement. Potential steps include:

➡ The state should assist independent media by providing better and more timely information about public institutions' work and policies. It is currently commonplace for public servants to eschew transparency requirements by abusively invoking GDPR regulations. While this affects all media, the larger trusts have more resources to handle it. It is also starting to be standard for politicians in public office not to hire professional spokespersons, but rather to handle communications personally and on-the-fly.

➡ The Government and Parliament should promote laws discouraging misinformation. These laws should be written in concert with professional media associations, and considering the EU framework. Effective self-regulation should be encouraged whenever possible.

➡ There should be transparent and non-political mechanisms for supporting public news sources (such as television, radio, and news agencies) to become public champions of fair information and standard-setters. The public news agency Agerpres is well respected in the field and offers limited public access - its information could be easily and cheaply optimized for public consumption. Public television and radio are well-funded but far less respected, often viewed as tools of disinformation and in the hands of political elites – reform is sorely needed.

Public bureaucracy

Plans and strategies to fight foreign interference and misinformation exist, are updated regularly, and are composed in consultation with Western allies[40]. The bureaucrats who might need to implement these plans have the same pro-NATO and pro-EU orientation (albeit with occasional nationalist undertones) as the general population[41].

Yet such plans tend to remain poorly implemented, if at all. Romania maintains a rigid, hierarchical, outdated, reactive, and state-centric approach to countering disinformation that relies on institutions of force and is led by the Ministry of Interior. The strategic communication strategy (elaborated following an inter-agency review of national responses) has been shelved for now. Funding and support for broader resilience measures - integrating the broader public, including civil society organizations and local authorities, to create a proper whole-of-society approach - remain largely non-implemented. Such deficiencies are visible, for example, in the absence of adequate measures to combat Hungarian interference activities directed at the Hungarian minority based in Romania.[42]

How did we get here?

Romania has largely been spared major, critical, or damaging cases of foreign interference (misinformation about the pandemic may prove an exception). Consequently, there appears to be a feeling of complacency fueled by a reliance on support from external partners and trust in the population's general anti-Russian attitude.

As such, there is no clear separation of roles among the groups that need to combat foreign interference. There does not appear to be a clear chain of responsibilities, with penalties for bureaucrats or even dignitaries that may fail to diligently combat foreign interference and misinformation.

In a roundabout way, foreign interference may already be happening. In an analysis of Romanian Facebook using the Graphika AI tool[43], we discovered a cluster of Moldovan social media accounts (political, cultural, and civil society) that can be used as a bridge between an isolated group of Russian clusters to more mainstream-oriented Romanian political discourse.

What can be done?

What can be done?
From the organizational perspective, a clear definition of roles, responsibilities and mandates will help. Personnel recruitment, though, is equally important, and ambitious public sector reform is the only way to rid state institutions of rent-seeking networks that to a significant extent have captured them. Yet such reform is only likely to be successful through a strong parliamentary majority, potentially formed around one of the newer, civic parties since mainstream parties have preferred to cartelize around mutually-dependent groups of interests that advance agendas within institutions. A clearer separation of political vs. public service positions is sorely needed[44] at higher levels, where building a competent and politically satisfactory minister cabinet can be challenging. But politicization and corruption are affecting all levels of bureaucracy. At the same time, civil servants should be socialized into democratic values through courses, study visits, interaction with civil society, etc. This in fact happened before Romania became an EU and NATO member, but stopped thereafter, and has resulted in the growing nationalist and anti-Western sentiment within the state system.

Unfortunately, it is likely that the quality of the public service with regard to hybrid threats might only significantly improve once a clear and present threat has been perceived at decision-making levels.

→ References

1 https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_Romania.pdf

2 Whereas 0 reflects absolute resilience and 100 reflects absolute vulnerability.

3 For example, the president of the Romanian Academia is an avowed nationalist, and history textbooks generally tend to exclude minorities and omit embarrassing moments in history (https://scoala9.ro/istoria-care-nu-se-preda-la-scoala/250/), etc.

4 https://larics.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Barometru-Securitate_octombrie-2021-Partea-1.pdf, p13

5 https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_Romania.pdf

6 Both in quantitative and qualitative interviews.

7 https://expertforum.ro/monitorizare-online-propaganda-fidesz-in-transilvania/

8 Hungary has a policy to grant citizenship to ethnic Hungarians from Romania (and other countries) who require it. Fidesz is the overwhelming beneficiary of votes coming from Transylvania https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-16991501-rezultatul-alegerilor-din-ungaria-vot-incredibil-pentru-fidesz-maghiarii-din-strainatate-inclusiv-romania-cum-reusit-victor-orban-castige.htm).

9 See note above

10 https://www.revistasinteza.ro/sondaj-ires-ce-ramane-dupa-referendum

11 https://ires.ro/articol/362/100-de-ani-de-romania--percep%C8%9Biile-%C8%99i-atitudinile-romanilor-cu-privire-la-sarbatorirea-celor-100-de-ani-de-la-marea-unire-%E2%94%82-2018

12 https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/lgbti_survey_country_sheet_romania.pdf

13 This is not to say that progress has not been made. The last bout of ethnic violence was in the 1990s, and perceptions of the LGBT+ community seem to have improved after the failed referendum that had sought to enshrine a heterosexual definition of the family in the constitution.

14 https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_Romania.pdf

15 https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-19919960-analiza-imaginea-rusiei-estul-europei-grav-afectata-razboiul-dus-ucraina-cum-schimbat-perceptia-fata-moscova-cetatenii-din-romania-republica-moldova-bulgaria-ungaria.htm

16 https://larics.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Barometru-Securitate_octombrie-2021-Partea-1.pdf, p13

17 National Communism is an effort by Communist authorities to use ethnic nationalism as a source of legitimacy.

18 Famously, ex-communist president Ion Iliescu, a self-declared free thinker, felt he needed to attend religious ceremonies during electoral campaigns.

19 Sometimes politicians may be even more conservative than their electorate. The referendum for including a heterosexual definition of families was supported by the two major parties (National Liberal Party and Social Democratic Party) (https://www.activenews.ro/stiri-politic/Coalitia-pentru-Familie-a-facut-publice-protocoalele-cu-PSD-PNL-si-ALDE-prin-care-partidele-s-au-angajat-sa-programeze-referendumul-pentru-familie-in-luna-aprilie-142132) while the Save Romania Union, arguably the most liberal mainstream party, opposed it only after much internal turmoil (https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/familia-traditionala-la-usr-a-anuntat-rezultatul-referendumului-intern-776795)

20 https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/12142.pdf, p 131 and subsequent

21 As exemplified in the high churn rate of government cabinets, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Romanian_governments

22 https://www.global-focus.eu/2021/01/voices-of-central-eastern-europe-romania-country-report/#more-1775

23 https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer?zoomToSelection=true&time=2020-03-01..latest&facet=none&pickerSort=asc&pickerMetric=location&Metric=Confirmed+deaths&Interval=7-day+rolling+average&Relative+to+Population=true&Align+outbreaks=false&country=ROU~European+Union

24 Actually antivirals that have shown no proven effect against COVID-19 https://romania.europalibera.org/a/arbidol-tratament-covid/31539718.html

25 https://ires.ro/articol/304/criza-imigranilor-in-europa---percep%c8%9bii-publice-ale-romanilor

26 https://www.librariaonline.ro/carte_scolara/istorie/generalitati/istoria_evreilor_holocaustul_manual_pentru_liceu_florin_petrescu-p10006995

27 Official condemnation has not been followed, until recently, by measures to include it in official historic discourse (textbooks, dedicated museums).

28 Polls consulted by GlobalFocus Center show a sizeable progressive and radical pro-West minority, with 35% of Romanians declaring themselves as progressive (Avangarde, July 2021) and 15% going as far as to say that Romania should be "ruled by the EU" (Larics, Oct 2021). Yet no party prioritizes this electorate, or even more moderate liberals. The National Liberal Party switched from ALDE to EPP and is host to several important ultra-conservative figures, and the Save Romania Union (Renew) at one point defined itself as "modern center-right" in what appears to be an effort to avoid offending conservatives by using the word "liberal".

29 https://www.google.com/search?q=%22sunt+cetatean+european+si+am+drepturi%22&ei=--OUYezCEtDc7_UP-0I29mAE&oq=%22sunt+cetatean+european+si+am+drepturi%22&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd-2l6EAMyBggAEAcQHjIECAAQHjIGCAAQBxAeOgcIABBHELADOgYIABAWEB46BggAEAUQ-HkoFCEASATFKBAhBGABQgQVY6x9gpyFoA-HACeACAAXOIAbgCkgEDMS4ymAEAoAEByAEI-wAEB&sclient=gws-wiz&ved=0ahUKEwisrOW-dop_0AhVQ7rsIHdBGDxMQ4dUDCBg&uact=5

30 https://euobserver.com/democracy/152406

31 https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_Romania.pdf

32 https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/justitie/anaf-antena-1-si-antena-3-au-cinci-zile-sa-evacueze-sediile-486896

33 https://www.g4media.ro/exclusiv-guvernul-orban-a-dat-bani-la-presa-cat-n-a-putut-duce-din-200-de-milioane-de-lei-puse-la-bataie-in-plina-campanie-s-au-cheltuit-140-de-milioane-unele-redactii-acuza-ca-nu-si-au-primit-inca.html

34 https://www.romaniatv.net/bill-gates-cere-statelor-bogate-sa-se-solidarizeze-cu-intreaga-planeta-in-lupta-cu-covid_536994.html

35 https://evz.ro/covid-19-e-cea-mai-proasta-veste-despre-vaccin-vine-de-la-seful-savantilor-de-la-moderna.html

36 https://evz.ro/fost-vicepresedinte-pfizer-nu-este-nevoie-de-vaccin-pandemia-s-a-incheiat.html

37 Small independent media outlets trying to escape this model by providing a more honest and independent perspective. They form a robust environment, but are only slowly starting to exert influence over society at large. Due to funding, the output and reach of these outlets is also insufficient to challenge biased media reports.

38 Tudor Barbu, for example, went from journalist to populist politician to journalist again at a mainstream TV station. His party boss, Dan Diaconescu, founded OTV television, then the Dan Diaconescu People's Party, and now dabbles in online television. The PPUSL party is funded by media mogul Dan Voiculescu, and occasionally stars from his media group will run for the party. Rareș Bogdan, an influential vicepresident of the National Liberal Party, is a former TV star and had a prolonged transition in both media and politics. Gabriela Firea (Social Democratic Party) was a journalist, then spokesperson for the prime minister, then journalist again, then mayor of Bucharest. Madalina Puscalau mediated presidential debates, and then went to work for one of the participants. Robert Turcescu went the same way and also returned to journalism.

39 https://romania.europalibera.org/a/cine-sunt-cele-patru-nume-care-vor-schimba-majoritatea-in-cna/31189798.html

40 https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_Romania.pdf

41 Idem

42 Idem

43 https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Influence-of-pro-Kremlin-public-pages-in-Bulgarias-and-Romania%E2%80%99s-Facebook-ecosystem-ver3-web.pdf

44 The number of political appointees in government is arguably limited, and generally not enough to allow for both competent advisers and paying political debts. Therefore, political favorites are hired for what are nominally posts for high public servants, resulting in some cases in lack of competencies.