



**Vot Corect Election Observation  
Preliminary Conclusions  
4 May 2025 Presidential Election**



*Vot Corect is a civil society coalition formed by Expert Forum, the Civic Resource Centre, Civica, the Center for the Study of Democracy, the Civic Rădăuți Association, the Electoral Observatory, the Federation of Law Students' Associations of Romania and Code for Romania. For election observation in the Republic of Moldova we cooperate with the Promo-Lex Association.*

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## Summary

*The presidential election offered voters a variety of choices and fundamental rights were generally respected. The election administration organized efficiently the technical aspects of the process and election day was orderly, without significant incidents. The fact that the decision to annul the November elections was insufficiently explained to the voters, combined with the lack of a full account of the failed election and the measures that should have been taken to ensure the integrity of the process negatively affected public confidence in the process and cast doubt on the state institutions' resilience against hybrid attacks. The elections were held against a backdrop of distrust in the ruling political parties and polarization brought on by the annulled election.*

*The election legislation is generally adequate for organising democratic elections; however, changes by government emergency ordinance 1/2025 were adopted non-transparently, in violation of procedures and far too soon before the elections. Moreover, some amendments, including those related to the marking of political advertisements, changes in the composition of election commissions and shorter hours for some polling stations abroad affected stakeholders' rights. The elections were organized considering several decisions of the Constitutional Court and recommendations of the Venice Commission related to the 2024 electoral process, which were not, however, transposed into law for greater clarity.*

*The election administration respected the election calendar and took the necessary measures for the good conduct of the elections, but the election commission composition clearly favoured two of the candidates, while in most commissions eight others were not represented at all. Election commission sessions are not public at any level, which reduced transparency.*

*A total of 17,988,031 voters were registered on the permanent lists in the country; the voter register also includes 1,016,350 voters residing abroad. The electronic verification of voter identity and marking in real time those who have voted through the SIMPV allows the identification of multiple voting attempts. Voters who cannot reach polling stations can opt for postal voting, if abroad, or for mobile voting in the country.*

*Out of 25 nominees, the Central Election Bureau registered 12 candidates and rejected 13; 11 candidates remained on the ballot after one withdrew. The high number of supporting signatures required to file a candidacy limits access to the electoral competition, and the lack of visibility of the signature collection campaigns, combined with the non-transparent verification process, raised questions about their veracity. The signature verification process could not be observed, and although the BEC regulated the methodology in a decision, the regulation is not part of the law and does not have an effect on future elections. Although the Constitutional Court issued several rulings after the 2024 annulled election, the law has not been amended to clearly define eligibility criteria and standards related to observing constitutional principles. The short deadlines for vetting, unclear legislation, lack of investigative tools in case of suspicions and the very long timeframes for the resolution of criminal cases reduce the efficiency of this system, which needs significant reform to increase public confidence.*

*During the campaign the right to free speech and freedom of association were generally respected and candidates were able to organize their campaign and deliver their message to voters without restrictions. Restrictive outdoor campaigning regulations, which reduce campaign visibility, prompted several candidates to start campaigning during support signature collection to be able to use large billboards and banners, which are banned during the campaign. Most of the campaign was conducted online and the overall tone of the campaign was rather aggressive and dominated by attacks between candidates. Several candidates took on a conservative and nationalist rhetoric, partly continuing the narratives launched by Călin Georgescu in 2024. The presidential debates added vitality to the campaign and attracted public interest. The CEB and the Ilfov county election commission noted the illegality of an extensive campaign carried out by the AUR party in violation of personal data protection regulations.*

*Online campaigning, especially on Tik Tok, continued to be contaminated by coordinated inauthentic behavior, which was noted by several electoral competitors. Expert Forum social media monitoring identified a significant increase in coordinated, politically motivated content, disguised as organic content and generated by networks of inauthentic accounts. In the absence of regulatory mechanisms adapted for digital content, third-party campaign financing continues to have a significant impact. Expert Forum identified two strategies to promote inauthentic content, both predominantly found on TikTok. In addition to internal inauthentic behavior, the campaign was also affected by foreign interference attempts associated with Russian Federation interests. On election day, the National Cyber Security Directorate (DNSC) reported that numerous websites of public interest had been the target of cyber-attacks claimed by a pro-Russian group; all affected websites were functional during the same day.*

*Competitors did not have equitable access to resources, with the Romania Forward coalition candidate enjoying a visible financial advantage. Limits on income and expenditure are high and this presidential election campaign was the most expensive so far. Political financing relies primarily on public resources, subsidies and reimbursements from public funds, which reduces the parties' independence from the state. The campaign was mostly financed by loans and private funding declared by the parties, and spending most prominently included costs for online and media promotion. Campaign finance transparency remains limited even if revenues and expenditures are disclosed during the campaign, as the donors are not disclosed. Pre-campaigning is not effectively regulated. Although the PEA initiated more checks during the campaign, staff shortage limits the institution's ability to act at short notice. Auditing financial sources beyond the submitted reports is limited and not within AEP's attributions, which significantly limits transparency and allows illegally obtained funds to be reimbursed from public money.*

*The legal framework allows stakeholders to file complaints and appeals, and the deadlines for both the election administration and the courts are mostly reasonable. BEC decisions can be appealed to the High Court or the Court of Appeal, but the election law does not define the procedures for appealing decisions to the courts, with certain exceptions, contrary to international standards. Although Vot Corect has not observed the resolution of complaints in a systematic manner, we consider that in general the deadlines given by the courts were short, at least for appeals related to BEC decisions. The BEC received a significant number*

*of complaints related to online political advertising; of more than 1,700 decisions, few were challenged, and were upheld by the court in most cases. Some of the BEC decisions were criticized, including for considering criteria beyond the legal definitions and for unfair penalties. Since January, almost 150 cases related to the annulment or suspension of the Constitutional Court decision to annul the November election were registered with the courts, eventually finding one judge to decide in favour of the petitioner, even though Constitutional Court decisions are final and binding. While the right of petitioners to lodge complaints is essential and should not be limited, such rulings undermine the integrity and credibility of the process and the appeal mechanisms.*

*Election day was generally calm and orderly. Opening and voting were assessed positively in the overwhelming majority of observed polling stations, but observers also noted cases where the mobile ballot box procedures were not respected and cases where voters residing in another locality were not allowed to vote. Although several procedural omissions were observed during the vote count, observers also assessed the counting generally positively and noted that in almost all observed polling stations results were correctly recorded. Voting abroad was efficiently organized with multiple options for exercising the right to vote.*

## **Background**

The May 2025 presidential election follows the annulment of the November 2024 elections by the Constitutional Court after the declassification of information about an online campaign supporting the candidate who obtained the highest number of votes and the illegal financing of his campaign.

The lack of consistency of the authorities' decisions (abandoning the recount process before it was finalized, annulling the elections after the results of the first round were validated, and even after the start of early voting for the second round), the lack of transparency in decision-making (adoption of emergency ordinance 1/2025 without prior public consultation) and the lack of transparency of the electoral administration (CEB's continuing refusal to hold public sessions, prohibiting observers' access to the recount) seriously undermined public confidence in the electoral processes and in state institutions in general. Against the already existing background of dissatisfaction with the mainstream parties, some of the protests against the annulment of the elections even degenerated into acts of violence against the election administration.

Although the PEA chairperson resigned and the authorities took some measures to limit vulnerabilities ahead of these elections, the fact that the decision to cancel the elections was insufficiently explained and motivated, combined with the fact that no full report on the failed November election and the measures that should have been taken to ensure the integrity of the process has yet been published, calls into question the resilience of state institutions against hybrid attacks.

## Legal framework

The legal framework for presidential elections consists of Law 370/2004, Law 208/2015, Law 288/2015, Law 47/1992, OUG 1/2025 and is complemented by government decisions, numerous decisions and rulings of the CEB and the Permanent Electoral Authority (PEA). In addition, European regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) apply. The election legislation is complemented by rulings of the Constitutional Court, including Decision 32/2024 on the annulment of elections. Although the Constitutional Court issued several rulings in 2024 that have an impact on the organization of elections, no draft legislation has been initiated to amend the electoral legislation. The legislation is generally adequate for the efficient organization of elections, but it is complex and inconsistent and should be strengthened through the adoption of an Election Code after the election is concluded.

Law 370/2024 has not been significantly amended since the 2019 elections, and most amendments were introduced after the 2024 polls through government emergency ordinance 1/2025, which only applies to these elections. The GEO introduced amendments related to the definition of political advertising, election commission composition, voting hours for polling stations in some countries abroad and the deadlines for the registration of postal ballots, and introduced some technical amendments, including on the powers of the institutions involved in organizing elections and polling staff salaries.

GEO 1/2025 was adopted in violation of normative procedures and without transparency and several of the amendments it introduced were criticized publicly. Several CSOs protested against its adoption without prior public consultation and without analyzing what compromised the first round of elections and led to its annulment. Also, some elements of the GEO may affect fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, or are in direct conflict with already existing legislation such as the DSA Regulation or Law 334/2006 on the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns.<sup>1</sup> The GEO has not been approved by law and was tacitly adopted by the Senate.

The GEO established rules for labeling political content, based on EU Regulation 2024/900 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, as well as obligations for VLOPs and sanctions for non-compliance. The new rules were insufficiently clear, especially on the definition of political actors. In addition to an unclear law, the CEB also added criteria based on practice, which were criticized by some stakeholders, such as the inclusion of high profile individuals and regular posters in the category of political actors, without clearly mentioning how these criteria apply.<sup>2</sup>

Expert Forum requested the Government and Parliament, without any response, to repeal the regulations which stipulate that voting ends on Sunday at 9 p.m., but no later than 9 p.m. Romanian time. This means that in some western countries voting ends earlier, which is discriminatory for voters. Following a court case filed by AUR, the Bucharest Court of Appeal admitted the request to refer the case to the Constitutional Court.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/oug-alegeri-2025/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://prezidentiale2025.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CP\\_45.pdf](https://prezidentiale2025.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CP_45.pdf) ,  
<https://expertforum.ro/industria-retelelor-inautentice-pe-tiktok/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://portal.just.ro/2/SitePages/dosar.aspx?id\\_inst=2&id\\_dosar=200000000447252](https://portal.just.ro/2/SitePages/dosar.aspx?id_inst=2&id_dosar=200000000447252)

The amendment to the formation of mid-level commissions and polling boards to grant representation to all parliamentary regardless of whether they had nominated presidential candidates, which favoured certain electoral contestants, was not motivated and changed a key element of the election legislation shortly before the elections, contrary to Venice Commission recommendations.<sup>4</sup>

The Venice Commission published in February an opinion<sup>5</sup> on the annulment of elections by constitutional courts. Recommendations included regulating the possibility for elections to be annulled *ex officio* by the constitutional court and regulating the grounds for annulment of elections, taking into account new risks to democracy and electoral processes. The legislation on the annulment of elections must be revised so that the rules reflect current reality, including the role of social networks in the electoral campaign, and must include the standards set out by the Venice Commission.

## **Election administration**

The election was administered by the PEA and a three tier structure of *ad hoc* commissions, consisting of the CEB, 48 medium-level commissions (one for each county, one for each sector of Bucharest and one for out of country voting) and polling boards (PBs). The Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Special Telecommunications Service, the National Statistics Institute, the Romanian Post, local authorities and prefects were also involved in the organization of the election.

The formation of the mid-level commissions and PBs was changed only a few months before the election by GEO 1/2025 (see *Legal Framework* section). While under the election law representatives of the political parties that nominated candidates were appointed to mid-level commissions and PBs, the new regulation provided for nomination of representatives of parliamentary parties, as for the formation of the CEB. In practice, the new regulation so restricted the representation of candidates that in the overwhelming majority of the BESV two candidates, supported by three parliamentary parties each, had three representatives each, one candidate had one representative and the other eight candidates were not represented at all. Contrary to previous Vot Corect and ODIHR recommendations, independent candidates are not represented at any level of the election administration.

Election commission sessions are not public, contrary to Venice Commission recommendations and international good practice.<sup>6</sup> The CEB and the mid-level commissions did not publish on their respective websites the minutes of their sessions,<sup>7</sup> but only the agendas and the resolutions and decisions adopted. The fact that the materials related to

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<sup>4</sup> Venice Commission [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#), section II.2.b: "The fundamental elements of electoral law, in particular the electoral system proper, membership of electoral commissions and the drawing of constituency boundaries, should not be open to amendment less than one year before an election, or should be written in the constitution or at a level higher than ordinary law."

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-PI\(2025\)001-e](https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-PI(2025)001-e)

<sup>6</sup> Venice Commission [Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters](#), section II.2.b: "meetings of the central electoral commission should be open to everyone, including the media" [...]. Venice Commission [Report on election observers as human rights defenders](#) (December 2024): Election observers have the right to participate in meetings of the election administration. Observers should have the possibility to follow the meetings of EMBs at all levels [...]"

<sup>7</sup> The CEB [Regulation on the functioning of election commissions](#) prohibits publishing election commission session minutes.

each session, often amounting to dozens of pages, were published by the CEB only in scanned PDF format, made the work of the CEB very difficult to follow, further reducing transparency.

The technical aspects of the process were administered efficiently, and the CEB adopted decisions and rulings interpreting the law and met despite the unprecedented workload created by the new online campaign regulations.<sup>8</sup>

Polling board chairpersons and deputies were drawn from the roster of election experts. Vot Corect interlocutors noted that the number of requests for replacements was comparable to that of other elections. The scheduling of the election during the May Day mini-holiday and the decrease in polling staff salary determined some PB members to withdraw.

The training materials developed for PBs were clear and comprehensive. The Vot Corect team was not able to systematically observe PB chairpersons and deputies training, but in the few sessions observed in Bucharest most participants seemed already familiar with the procedures from last year's election rounds.

The voter information campaign was limited, remained almost exclusively online and did not target specific categories of voters.

### **Voter registration**

Romanian citizens aged 18 or older on election day have the right to vote in presidential elections, except those deprived of this right by a court decision on the basis of intellectual or psychosocial disability (contrary to the commitments of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which has been ratified by Romania) or as part of a sentence for a criminal offence.

Voter registration is passive, and permanent voter lists are extracted from the Voter Register administered by the PEA.<sup>9</sup> According to data published on May 1 by PEA, 17,988,031 voters were registered on the permanent lists in the country for this election. The VR also includes a further 1,016,350 voters residing abroad, 6,085 of which opted for postal voting.

Voters who vote at other polling stations than those to which they are assigned, as well as those omitted from the permanent lists, are entered on supplementary lists on election day. In presidential elections, voters may vote in the territorial unit in which they reside only at the polling stations to which they are assigned, and outside that territorial unit at any polling station, including those abroad. The electronic verification of voter identity and real-time marking of those who have voted through the computerized system for monitoring voter turnout and preventing illegal voting (SIMPV) allows the identification of multiple voting attempts.

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<sup>8</sup> The CEB adopted, until and on election day, 1,747 decisions regarding online campaigning, 19 decisions regarding the uniform application of the law, 31 decisions regarding candidate registration, and 57 decisions resolving appeals.

<sup>9</sup> The Voter Register is based on information provided by the National Center for the Administration of Databases on the Evidence of Persons and the General Directorate of Passports and is constantly updated by persons authorized by the mayors, with the support of PEA branches and offices. The accusations made three days before the elections by a political party claiming that a large number of deceased persons are intentionally not removed from the Voter Register were publicly rejected on the same day as false by the PEA and the Ministry of Interior.



Voters who cannot reach polling stations can opt for postal voting - only abroad - or for mobile voting - only in the country. For the first time in these elections, mobile voting was also available for the relatives of people hospitalized in health facilities.

## **Candidate registration**

Romanian citizens over the age of 35 who are eligible to vote and reside in Romania may stand in presidential elections. Candidates nominated by parties and independent candidates could submit their candidacies until March 15. Applications have to be accompanied by lists of 200,000 supporting signatures, which is more than 1% of the number of registered voters. Voters may sign in support of more than one candidate.

Signatures can only be collected in hard copy, unlike in parliamentary elections, where electronic collection is allowed. The number of supporting signatures, criticized by Vot Corect member organizations in previous elections, is the highest in the EU, limiting access to the electoral competitions and leading to possible violations of the law in the signature collection effort.<sup>10</sup> The visibility of signature collection campaigns in this election was low, and the submission of large numbers of signatures in these circumstances raises questions about their veracity. Vot Corect observed that the websites of electoral contestants generally do not provide information on signature collection policies, which reduces the transparency of the process and the possibility for voters to challenge possible abuses. There are no mechanisms in place for voters to check whether their signatures appear on lists supporting an electoral contestant.

Signature verification could not be observed, as the Vot Corect request to the CEB was denied.<sup>11</sup> Positively, the CEB issued a decision detailing the signature verification procedure and allowing candidates and their representatives to observe the verification of their own lists. However, the procedure should have been defined by primary or secondary legislation to apply uniformly to all elections; CEB decisions do not create legal effects for future elections.

Deadlines for signature verification are short, 48 hours. The CEB may not reject candidacies if it identifies signatures that appear to have been entered in violation of the law and must refer the matter to criminal investigation.<sup>12</sup> Two criminal complaints were filed for this election, in the case of candidates John Ion Banu Muscel and Sebastian Popescu. In practice, these investigations can be very lengthy, reducing the effectiveness of mechanisms against fraudulent candidacies. The formal verification carried out by the CEB, the short deadlines for verification, the lack of investigative tools in case of suspicion, and the very long deadlines for the resolution of criminal cases significantly reduce the efficiency of this system, which needs significant reform in order to increase confidence in the elections.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/semnatura-sustinere-prezidentiale-reforma/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/solicitare-bec-verificare-semnatura/>

<sup>12</sup> See Constitutional Court Decision 4/2019

25 candidacies were submitted for this election. On March 20 the BEC announced 11 registered candidates, including four independents.<sup>13</sup> Two of the candidates are women. Ana Maria Gavrilă withdrew her candidacy, already validated by the BEC, on March 19 - the candidacy withdrawal deadline. Thirteen candidacies were rejected by the BEC either for incomplete documentation or for not having met legal criteria. On April 10, USR, which had already registered Elena Lasconi's candidacy with the CEB, announced its support for Nicușor Dan, and following a complaint filed by AUR the CEB decided that USR may not campaign for Nicușor Dan.

The Constitutional Court received 61 appeals against CEB decisions on candidate registration. All were rejected and four were declared inadmissible. Two candidacies, of Diana Șoșoacă and Călin Georgescu, were rejected by citing case law created by the Constitutional Court, including the decision 2/2024 to deregister Diana Șoșoacă. The principles enunciated by the CCR in 2024 were cited, indicating that even a candidacy must respect the presidential oath, which includes a pledge to defend democracy. Several organizations criticized in 2024 Diana Șoșoacă's deregistration on the basis of these criteria, and in the absence of a sufficiently solid justification.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, we believe that the actions taken by Călin Georgescu in the 2024 elections and afterward were more clearly a violation of democratic standards, which must also be respected by candidates.

In its Decision 32/2004, the CEB recognized for these elections its competence to analyze constitutional eligibility conditions established in the jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court by Decision 2/2024.<sup>15</sup> After the 2024 elections, following several Constitutional Court rulings, the legislation has not been amended to clearly define the eligibility criteria for candidates and the standard in terms of constitutional principles. The law should establish clear criteria taking into consideration the Constitutional Court decisions in order to introduce predictable terms, a clear standard for candidate deregistration and the limits of the powers of the Central Electoral Bureau.

## **Election campaign**

The official campaign period started on April 4 at 0:00 and ended on May 3 at 7:00. As in previous elections, the restrictive regulations on outdoor materials, which reduce the visibility of the campaign, were circumvented by several candidates who started their campaigning well before the legally established date while collecting support signatures. In addition to campaigning for a longer period than allowed by law and using large billboards and banners, which are prohibited in the campaign, this practice is also likely to negatively

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<sup>13</sup> [https://prezidentiale2025.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/PV\\_479C.pdf](https://prezidentiale2025.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/PV_479C.pdf), 1. Dan Nicușor-Daniel – independent candidate 2. Antonescu George-Crin-Laurențiu – Romania Forward Alliance 3. Ponta Victor-Viorel - independent candidate 4. Lasconi Elena-Valerica – Save Romania Union 5. Terheș Cristian-Vasile – Romanian National Conservative Party 6. Șandru Marcela-Lavinia –Social Liberal Humanist party 7. Simion George-Nicolae – Alliance for the Union of Romanians 8. Banu-Muscel John-Ion – independent candidate 9. Predoiu Silviu – National Action League 10. Funeriu Petru-Daniel - independent candidate 11. Popescu Sebastian-Constantin – New Romania Party

<sup>14</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/decizie-ccr-sosoaca/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ccr.ro/comunicatul-presedintelui-curtii-constitutionale-a-romaniei-cu-privire-la-publicarea-hotararii-nr-7-2025-privind-contestatiile-formulate-impotriva-deciziei-biroului-electoral-central-nr-18d-din-9-mart/>

affect the transparency of campaign financing and voters' access to information, favoring certain candidates.

During the campaign freedoms of expression and association were generally respected and candidates were able to organize their campaign and get their message across to voters without restrictions. Most of the campaigning was conducted online, while offline campaigning was comparatively slow and with low visibility. The main electoral contenders chose to direct their campaign messages mostly against their opponents, at the expense of informing voters about their policies and programs, and the tone of the campaign was rather aggressive. Several candidates took on a conservative and nationalist rhetoric, partly continuing the narratives launched by Călin Georgescu in 2024. Three debates between candidates were organized - one only with the candidates favoured by opinion polls and two to which all candidates were invited. Although none of the debates were attended by all those invited, and the campaign speeches sometimes degenerated into confrontations and personal attacks, these debates added vitality to the campaign and attracted public interest.

A very large number of complaints received by the authorities related to a campaign that violated personal data protection regulations; the candidate of the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) sent election materials containing their personal data to a significant number of voters. For one of the materials, the print-run was approximately 1 million. The CEB ruled that this activity was illegal and ordered the distribution of the materials to cease. However, AUR sent out a second set of materials, which prompted the Ilfov county commission to file a criminal complaint with the police and the General Prosecutor's Office.<sup>16</sup>

During the campaign, especially shortly before election day, some deliberate misinformation was spread, aimed at creating panic and undermining public confidence in the electoral process: AUR claimed that the voter register included four million deceased citizens<sup>17</sup> (denied by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and PEA) and that there are insufficient ballots for polling stations abroad<sup>18</sup> (denied by the MFA). Another rumor circulated in the public space about a major power blackout on election day (denied by the Energy Ministry).

### **Online election campaigning: inauthentic promotion, foreign interference and digital imbalances**

The campaign took place in a digital context characterized by the emergence of a model of disguised political advocacy through inauthentic support networks. This new type of campaign circumvents existing regulations and standards of transparency and fairness in the digital space. An example is the difference between the content on TikTok and the platform's own policies. TikTok prohibits political advertising through its paid advertising mechanism; whether this prohibition extends to political content distributed through seemingly organic, unbranded advocacy accounts is not clearly defined in the platform's rules<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2025/biroul-electoral-ilfov-a-facut-plangere-la-parchetul-general-dupa-ce-george-simion-a-trimis-din-nou-scrisori-electorale-3222697>

<sup>17</sup> <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/politica/ziua-si-alerta-panicoasa-aur-sustine-ca-sunt-4-milioane-de-morti-pe-listele-electorale-replica-mai>

<sup>18</sup> <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/aur-buletine-vot-diaspora-mae-manipulare/33401430.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.tiktok.com/creator-academy/article/Political-ads>

However, monitoring during the campaign period has identified a significant increase in coordinated political content, disguised as organic content and generated by networks of inauthentic accounts. These accounts do not assume a transparent political identity but pretend to be personal profiles of ordinary citizens. In reality, they follow clear patterns of dissemination and production: they use standardized graphics, broadcast similar messages, post synchronized videos and use common hashtags. Although each account appears to act individually, together they form a structured network that simulates popular support and creates an illusion of political consensus in favor of particular candidates.

We consider this phenomenon to fall under what the Code of Conduct against Misinformation (revised in 2022) and later integrated into the Digital Services Act (DSA) refers to as "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (CIB). Commitment 14 of the Code of Conduct states that signatory platforms must actively detect and mitigate manipulative practices, including through proactive technical solutions.<sup>20</sup> However, in Romania, masked political content proliferated during the campaign period, affecting the balance between candidates and eroding standards of electoral integrity.

The use of inauthentic advocacy networks provides an effective and legally ambiguous form of building electoral visibility. By outsourcing promotion to specialized agencies that manage networks of seemingly independent accounts, it artificially creates the perception that a particular candidate enjoys broad public support. In this context, candidates who choose to follow transparent communication rules are structurally disadvantaged in the digital competition.

At the same time, Romanian legislation on electoral financing prohibits campaign financing by third parties. In practice, however, this provision is difficult to enforce in the online environment, where unidentified entities may indirectly support campaigns without being listed in official records. In the absence of digitally adapted regulatory mechanisms, this phenomenon continues to significantly impact the fairness of election processes.

Expert Forum has identified two strategies for promoting inauthentic content, both predominantly monitored on the TikTok platform<sup>21</sup>. The monitoring carried out since January revealed, on the one hand, an extensive network of inauthentic accounts that repeatedly promoted the messages of some candidates, and on the other hand, a number of anomalies in the growth of followers on the official accounts of candidates.

The first strategy identified was the use of networks of accounts that generated seemingly organic but coordinated content associated with inauthentic behavior. In the last 30 days of the campaign, over 600 such videos were analyzed, totaling over 100 million views.<sup>22</sup> Of these, 270 videos promoted the candidacy of George Simion and 180 were favorable to Crin

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<sup>20</sup> Commitment 14 of the Code stipulates that "In order to limit impermissible manipulative behaviors and practices across their services, Relevant Signatories commit to put in place or further bolster policies to address both misinformation and disinformation across their services" and lists among such practices the creation and use of inauthentic accounts, using botnets to amplify content, impersonation, malicious deepfakes, buying false interactions, non-transparent promotion by influencers, using accounts involved in co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour, and attempts to artificially amplify the popularity of disinformation content.

<sup>21</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/cum-cresc-conturile-candidatilor-tiktok/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/industria-retelelor-inautentice-pe-tiktok/>

Antonescu. For the other candidates - Nicușor Dan, Victor Ponta and Elena Lasconi - the number of such appearances was much lower, less than 50 videos in the sample analyzed.

The second strategy was aimed at the rapid and, in some cases, suspicious increase in the audience of the candidates' official accounts. Between April 20-24, Victor Ponta's account registered about 100,000 new followers, and Nicușor Dan's about 30,000. Both candidates referred to possible hostile digital interference, and Nicușor Dan notified the authorities of attempts of digital sabotage, including sabotage of his social media accounts.

In addition to domestic inauthentic behavior, the campaign was also affected by attempts of foreign interference. ANCOM reported the presence of a Doppelganger network, associated with the interests of the Russian Federation, active in the Romanian online space.<sup>23</sup> It used cloned websites imitating official pages to distribute manipulative content aimed at influencing public perceptions. The operating scheme identified included several steps: disseminating emotional content through fake pages, attracting users with sensationalist headlines, exposing them to advertisements managed by foreign funded entities and finally directing them to cloned sites, where false information was promoted. The Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that countermeasures included judicial actions in cooperation with ANCOM and other relevant institutions.

On election day, DDoS cyberattacks were reported on several public interest websites. Among them were the official websites of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, as well as that of coalition candidate Crin Antonescu. The attacks were claimed by the pro-Russian group NoName057(16). In a public statement, the National Cyber Security Directorate (DNSC) reported that all affected websites were functional on the same day.<sup>24</sup>

## **Campaign finance**

Election campaign financing is regulated by Law 334/2006, GEO 1/2025, as well as by secondary legislation including government decision 10/2016 and PEA decision 9/2025. The PEA has published two guidelines on campaign financing, including for local by-elections.

The income and expenditure limit for these elections is 81 million lei, a high amount that follows the steady increase in campaign costs in previous elections. Sources of revenues are candidate contributions (donations, loans or own income) and party transfers, from private funding or grants; the sources of the majority of funds were loans to candidates and transfers from private income in the case of parties.

Election contestants must report contributions within three days of receipt and expenditure within three days of incurring the expenditure. Expert Forum has requested the PEA to publish this information on a weekly basis, and the PEA has committed to disclosing it at the end of each week.<sup>25</sup> The publication of these data is not regulated by law, contrary to international standards.

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<sup>23</sup> [https://www.ancom.ro/avertizare-privind-prezenta-in-spatiul-autohton-online-a-unei-retele-de-site-uri-de-tip-doppelganger\\_7542](https://www.ancom.ro/avertizare-privind-prezenta-in-spatiul-autohton-online-a-unei-retele-de-site-uri-de-tip-doppelganger_7542)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/DNSC.RO>

<sup>25</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/solicitare-aep-publicare-date-campanie/>

By April 30, the contestants had reported 165 million lei in contributions. This is the presidential election with the highest reported income and expenses to date. As of April 30, the 11 election contestants, including four independents, had reported 55.9 million lei in contributions. No contributions were reported by Crin Antonescu, George Simion, Elena Lasconi and Sebastian Popescu. From transfers, the parties reported 108 million lei by April 30, of which 76.4 million lei were reported by PSD and 26.9 million lei by AUR. Most of the funds (99%) came from loans, i.e. 55 million lei. The only candidate who reported donations is Victor Ponta, while five candidates reported their own income.

Only USR reported subsidies, while the rest of the parties opted for private campaign financing. Political parties only report private funds in order to be able to be reimbursed after the elections if they obtain more than 3% of the valid votes cast, so they can keep the subsidies and spend them on other services. Political financing has become predominantly based on public resources (including reimbursements), which affects the financial independence of political parties.

The electoral contestants spent 133 million lei, of which the alliance supporting candidate Crin Antonescu spent half. The disproportionately high costs in favor of candidate Crin Antonescu limit competition and equality of chances. By category, the most was spent on online (47%), radio/TV/print (28%), print (10%), and the rest of the funds were spent on other types of contracts, including consultancy.

Even with the publication of income and expenditure on a weekly basis, the transparency of the process remains limited. Only the amounts reported are disclosed to the public, while the donors and lenders are not. These reports should include the source of the income (the name of the donor or person/entity who provided a loan) above certain amounts. Moreover, the auditing of the source of funds, beyond the submitted reports, is limited and is not within the PEA's attributions, which limits transparency and allows illegally obtained funds to be reimbursed from public money.

The transparency of campaign financing is reduced by the significant expenditures made by parties and potential independent candidates before the start of the electoral campaign, as well as by the legal prohibition on the use of some outdoor materials.<sup>26</sup> In general, pre-campaign financing by independents is non-transparent and disclosing it is their choice. With the exception of the data published by Nicușor Dan, there is limited information provided by candidates on the source of their pre-campaign funding. In the first three months of 2025, the parties received 60 million lei, of which 49 million for press and propaganda; these propaganda materials are not labeled, which limits the transparency of political parties' spending.

In addition to the reported funding, Expert Forum noted that several Facebook pages have spent non-transparently more than 900 thousand lei during the election campaign and more than 1.2 million lei since the beginning of the year. They did not have a disclaimer allowing the payer to be clearly identified, and the content included negative advertisements against several candidates. Expert Forum has submitted three complaints to the PEA, and the PEA has confirmed that it is in contact with Facebook to obtain data on payments.<sup>27</sup> Several

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<sup>26</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/finantare-precampanie-prezidentiale25/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/tag/plangeri-campanie25/>



complaints submitted to the CEB have resulted in decisions to remove a significant number of posts from these pages.

The PEA organized several checks, related to the activity of AUR, USR and candidate Nicușor Dan. In the case of AUR, PEA initiated an investigation into a possible contract for lobbying services worth 1.5 million dollars. In the case of Nicușor Dan, the PEA referred the matter to criminal investigation for failure to declare income from donations, the use of the mayor's office car while campaigning and the use of a banner.

The PEA campaign finance oversight department has 14 employees, not all of whom carry out control activities. Considering the large workload and the need for the AEP to react in a timely manner, we consider that the staff is insufficient and the capacity of the institution should be increased. The lack of an electronic system for reporting income and expenditure also limits the efficiency of the process.

## **Election Observation**

The PEA accredited 53 civil society organizations (six of which are members of the *Vot Corect* coalition - *Expert Forum*, the *Civic Resource Centre*, *Civica*, the *Center for the Study of Democracy*, the *Civic Rădăuți Association*, and the *Federation of Law Students' Associations of Romania*) and 159 international observers from 32 organizations. This election was observed by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

*Vot Corect* member organizations accredited more than 600 observers in-country and abroad, and received reports from more than 1,000 polling stations through the *Vote Monitor* smartphone app. For observation in the Republic of Moldova, the coalition co-operated with the *Promo-Lex Association*. The observer deployment took into account the observers' own choices, therefore the statistical relevance of the sample of observed polling stations may be affected by the fact that in some counties the number of observers was higher than in others.

For May 3 and 4, *Expert Forum* organized an electoral assistance center in Bucharest, consisting of a helpline 0800 460 002, to which approximately 300 complaints and questions related to electoral procedures were registered. The Coalition issued three press releases on election day and submitted four written complaints to election commissions and the PEA. In addition to the observation forms for accredited observers, the *Vote Monitor* application included the possibility to report election-related irregularities from the general public.

According to the law, observers may observe all polling board activities, including mobile voting. The CEB Decision No. 8D/04.03.2025 stated that the accreditation alone does not give delegates of political parties the right to enter residences and prisons or to use police escort to travel to those locations. Regrettably, the Polling Boards Guide interpreted this as a denial of the right of delegates to accompany the mobile ballot box to the respective locations; moreover, this limitation was extended to all accredited persons, including observers. *Expert Forum* requested a position from the CEB on the observation of mobile voting, but the response did not provide clarity.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, an observer accredited by *Expert Forum* was actually barred from observing mobile voting in County Ilfov following a

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<sup>28</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/reglementari-restrictive-urna-speciala/>

CEB instruction. These interpretations are restrictive and likely to limit the transparency of the electoral process.

During voting, observers were generally well received and the requested information was provided; regrettably, there were also attempts to intimidate observers. Vot Corect observers met observers accredited by other organizations in 18.4% of the polling stations visited during voting and in 21.5% of the polling stations where they observed the counting.

The Vot Corect Coalition did not organize systematic observation of tabulation at the mid-level electoral bureaus and the BEC, as the election law explicitly allows only observation at polling stations.

We would like to thank the institutions involved in the organization of the elections that agreed to meet with the Vot Vot Corect team - the Permanent Electoral Authority, the Special Telecommunications Service, the Romanian Post, the Bureau for out-of-country voting, the Bucharest sector election commissions, as well as all the polling boards visited by the observers for their openness and the information provided. The CEB declined meeting with the Vot Corect team, on the grounds that the institution's program was very busy.

### **Election dispute resolution**

Complaints and appeals are handled by the election administration and the courts. Complaints about election commissions are handled by higher level commissions. Campaign complaints are handled by the county commissions, complaints related to VLOPs are handled according to GEO 1/2025 by the CEB and appeals by the Courts of Appeal. PEA decisions on campaign financing can be appealed to the Court of Appeal. The Constitutional Court supervises the fair conduct of the elections and may receive appeals on candidate registration, on results and on hindrances to campaigning. CEB decisions can be appealed to the High Court or the Court of Appeal, depending on the case, but the law does not define the procedures for appealing decisions to the courts, with certain exceptions, contrary to international standards.

By May 4, the BEC had adopted 56 decisions in dealing with complaints and appeals. It also received a significant number of complaints regarding online political advertising; by the end of May 4, the BEC had issued 1747 decisions, 890 of which were for the admissibility of complaints. On election day, 229 decisions were taken, of which 147 were to reject the complaints. Complaints can refer to one material or may include dozens, even hundreds of links. The BEC published weekly statistics on decisions made, as well as on appeals to the courts; they did not include information on the number of materials removed as a result of the orders. As of April 27, 28 decisions had been challenged in court, and the court had overruled only one BEC decision.<sup>29</sup> Meta challenged BEC decisions in eight cases registered at the Bucharest Court of Appeal in May, including three on May 5.

Since January, almost 150 cases related to the annulment or suspension of the Constitutional Court decision to annul the November election were registered with the courts.<sup>30</sup> On 24 April, the Ploiești Court of Appeal ruled to suspend the execution and annul

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<sup>29</sup> [https://prezidentiale2025.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CP\\_50.pdf](https://prezidentiale2025.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CP_50.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> <https://expertforum.ro/dosare-hot32/>



the Constitutional Court decision.<sup>31</sup> The repeated appeals submitted by a large number of people indicate the practice known as forum shopping, aiming to identify a judge who would decide in favour of the petitioner. Constitutional Court decisions are final and binding, and judicial practice is clear on this subject. The Judicial Inspection has been asked by the Superior Council of Magistracy to check whether the judge who took the decision has committed a disciplinary offence. Other concerted actions to challenge some of the 2025 elections regulations were subsequently identified.<sup>32</sup>

According to the law, courts must ensure permanency during the electoral period hear cases urgently, with short deadlines. Although Vot Corect has not systematically observed the resolution of complaints, we believe that in general the deadlines given by the courts have been short, at least in the case of appeals against CEB decisions. At the same time, the experience of some Vot Corect member organizations in the 2024 elections shows that access to justice was not always ensured. In the case of the ban on the observation of the recount, where complaints were filed on November 29 and 30 at courts in most counties, decisions were made on December 2 and 3, and in some cases even later, after the process had concluded.

## **Election Day**

Election day was generally calm and orderly. The turnout announced by the AEP was 53.21%; a total of 9,571,640 voters turned out to vote, of which 7,287,714 voted on permanent lists, 2,193,886 on supplementary lists, 86,034 by mobile ballot box and 4,106 by mail (3,739 envelopes were sent to the country). The partial results were published on the PEA website shortly after the polls closed.

Several voters complained to the telverde service organized by Expert Forum for Election Day that the online tool provided by AEP to identify the polling stations to which voters are assigned indicated non-existent polling stations.

On the votcorect.ro platform, 480 complaints were registered between 1-4 May. Most of them were related to the continuation of the electoral campaign, images of marked ballots posted online, and the functioning of the election administration. Most of them were forwarded to the responsible institutions.

Most of the questions asked by voters to the call center service were related to mobile voting, voter ID, irregularities in the polling stations, including those related to seals, difficulties for voters to cast their vote or ballots that had been handed out without the control stamp.

Several Vot Corect observers had their IDs checked by gendarmes or police, and in some polling stations in county Ilfov law enforcement representatives noted which organization accredited them and reported it further; this procedure is not regulated anywhere. ID checks of observers by the police, including at the request of PB presidents, without a good reason and outside the legal framework, is abusive. Vot Corect has contacted the Ministry of

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<sup>31</sup> [https://portal.just.ro/42/SitePages/dosar.aspx?id\\_inst=42&id\\_dosar=4200000000073609](https://portal.just.ro/42/SitePages/dosar.aspx?id_inst=42&id_dosar=4200000000073609)

<sup>32</sup> <https://hotnews.ro/un-nou-asalt-asupra-instantelor-pentru-turul-2-inapoi-100-de-procese-deschise-de-un-roman-intr-o-singura-zi-impotriva-curtii-constitutionale-altii-cer-anularea-hotararilor-de-guver-1959621>

Internal Affairs and received assurances that staff will be briefed on how to interact with observers, including on ID checks. In the long term, we believe that the MIA should pay more attention to the relationship with civil society organizations that observe elections.

Voting abroad was organized efficiently, with multiple options for exercising the right to vote. A total of 965 polling stations were organized for these elections, 15 more than in previous elections. The difference is the result of voters registering to set up additional polling stations. Positively, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took over the resources developed by Expert Forum and Code for Romania and included them on their web page.<sup>33</sup>

## Election Day reports

The opening of polling stations was assessed positively with only two exceptions in the approximately 300 polling stations observed, including on Friday and Saturday abroad. Procedures were generally followed, but in three polling stations observers noted the presence of unauthorized persons during the opening.

During the voting, observers visited more than 1,000 polling stations and assessed the process positively in 98% of them. Voter verification in SIMPV worked effectively in more than 99% of the observed polling stations; regrettably, in 6.4% of the observed polling stations there were cases where PBs did not allow voters residing in another locality to vote.

Other problems reported by observers during voting were: overcrowding (11%), mobile voting procedure not followed (6.9%), tension or unrest near polling stations (3.4%) and in polling stations (3.2%), ballot boxes not properly sealed (3.8%), cases where those present in the polling station could not follow the process without restrictions (2.4%), unauthorized persons in polling stations (1.7%). Voting secrecy was respected in almost all observed polling stations.

Almost a quarter (24.4%) of the polling stations visited by Vot Corect observers were not accessible for people with disabilities; voters with reduced mobility were allowed to vote at any accessible polling station. For the first time in these elections, two polling stations in Bucharest ran a pilot project with Braille ballot sleeves, accompanied by an audio guide, which gives visually impaired voters the possibility to vote independently. The project was evaluated positively by the PBs of the two polling stations and by Vot Corect observers.

The vote count was also positively assessed in 98% of the approximately **250 polling stations observed**, but observers noted several procedural errors or omissions: the PB chairperson did not cancel unused ballots before opening the ballot box (2.9%), voting stamps were not sealed separately in an envelope (2.4%), the number of voters who voted was not established by counting all signatures (1.6%). PB chairpersons did not show and announce aloud each vote in 13% of the cases, and BESV members did not have the opportunity to examine the ballots in 2.9%.

The order of the procedures was not strictly followed in 13.9% of cases, the counting was conducted in a tense atmosphere in 12.4% of cases, and in 7.8% of cases the PB

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.mae.ro/node/66216>

chairperson had difficulties in filling in the results protocol. In a worrying 39.8% of the observed polling stations, PB members signed blank results protocols. In 1.6% of cases, persons from outside the PB took part in the vote count.

The positive assessment of the counting process despite these reported problems indicates that the omissions and errors observed cannot be attributed to an intention to compromise the accuracy of the results; observers reported indications of falsification of results in only one case and only one case where results were not recorded correctly.