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## VOLTEN BRIEF

# Cybernostalgia in Romania: From a past perfect to a present tense

# Cybernostalgia in Romania: From a past perfect to a present tense

**By Anouk Vos and Natalia Wojtowicz**

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In December 2024, Romania's presidential elections were annulled due to serious concerns over foreign interference. The Constitutional Court invalidated the first-round results after the Romanian National Security Council released evidence of a coordinated propaganda campaign that had manipulated the electoral process. This campaign involved the use of social media platforms such as *TikTok* to amplify the message of far-right, pro-Russian, and anti-EU/NATO candidate Călin Georgescu through fake accounts, bots, and paid influencers. The released evidence specifically pointed to Russia as the hostile state behind the campaign.

In retrospect, it would be a disservice to define the events in Romania merely as Russian disinformation spread via social media. The efforts showed a far more cunning and dangerous strategy, which can be termed *cybernostalgia*. This ranged from seemingly innocent videos showcasing folklore and traditional cuisine to dreaming about a landgrab and seeking to restore a 'Greater Romania' at the expense of Moldova and Ukraine. As a new addition to the Kremlin's already extensive toolbox, *cybernostalgia* is quickly emerging as a gamechanger with tangible offline consequences across Europe.

## Key points:

1. The 2024 Romanian elections were marked by a large-scale campaign combining sentimental online content with coordinated cyberattacks, subtly spreading disinformation, fostering social divisions, and undermining trust in democratic institutions.
2. *Cybernostalgia* has become a powerful new tool of Russian geopolitical influence, with the potential to affect elections across Europe in the coming months.
3. While the European Union (EU) invests in expanding digital literacy, moderating online content, and regulating big tech, specific attention and action are warranted to counter *cybernostalgia*.

Why does the past tense overpower the present? Why is *cybernostalgia* largely under the moderation radar? How can it be detected, and what (technical) measures can be implemented to counter it? The first part of this brief discusses the concept of *cybernostalgia*. The second part assesses its impact on Romanian politics and society, as well as the broader European response to the events that occurred during the elections. The concluding section outlines a set of recommendations for European countries and EU institutions to address *cybernostalgia*'s three defining characteristics: *familiarity* (creating digital spaces that evoke nostalgia), *asymmetry* (the dominance of personal narratives over institutional ones), and *evolving technology* (providing the means). The authors argue for the following:

*First*, acknowledge *cybernostalgia* as distinct from disinformation.

*Second*, prepare for and remain vigilant during upcoming elections in Europe.

*Third*, build capacity to monitor and respond to potential threats. More specifically:

- Work with platforms to enhance the credibility of online information.
- Monitor micro-influencers and algorithmic hijacking.
- Focus regulatory efforts on platforms' technical choices.
- Invest in counternarratives.
- Track links between cyberattacks and online narrative shifts.

### Longing for a 'past perfect'

*Bunica* (grandmother) Lucretia has put her feet up in her modest Romanian rural home. For once, she is not giving her 350,000 *TikTok* followers gardening tips or cooking demonstrations for cabbage rolls and pickle preserves. Instead, the senior content creator has taken off her traditional headscarf and is directly addressing the camera to explain who she thinks should become the next president. Her monologue seems to follow a script used by many other Romanian influencers: 'The future president should be a serious person, with a bit of a fear of God, who has proven his qualities through actions, not words'. Without mentioning the name of controversial right-wing candidate Călin Georgescu, hashtags supporting him are tagged onto her video. Soon, many followers praise the candidate in her timeline.

The first round of the 2024 presidential elections saw many online *Bunicas* speaking out and introduced other Romanian archetypes as political influencers. There were the traditional housewives preaching family values against a background of historic Eastern Orthodox icons. There were the beauty influencers discussing politics while applying their '#SlavicDoll' make-up. There were protective strongmen riding horses, and there were hard-working expatriates describing why the West makes them unhappy.

While the portrayed personas appeared to differ in socio-economic background, their messages were united in anti-European, anti-NATO, nationalistic, conservative, and Christian sentiments. The political messages stood out against the usual content provided by the accounts and were only uploaded in the run-up to the Romanian presidential elections. The storylines referred to the 'good ol' days in Romania's past – days in which Romania was 'great'. The content was aimed at three main groups: reactionaries angry with the current government;

religious people concerned about the loss of traditional values; and proponents of local decision-making over EU and NATO agreements.<sup>1</sup>

## Nostalgia

The original term 'nostalgia' ties two Greek words together: 'nostos', meaning 'return home', and 'algos', meaning 'pain' or 'suffering'. Once seen as a bourgeois psychological condition resembling what the Germans call Heimweh (home pain), over time nostalgia has detached itself from a longing for a known or existing home to a more sentimental yearning for an idealised one.

Nostalgia can be defined as history without guilt.<sup>1</sup> Modern nostalgia comes with many names – bellicose nationalism, aggressive revisionism, golden pages of history, commercialized archaeology, and cultural hangover. With its many facets, nostalgia is a powerful driving force in politics. It has had a strong influence on the American MAGA movement and has been instrumental in cementing nationalist movements in countries such as Greece (where the idea of Greater Greece was embraced by the Golden Dawn party) and Italy (where the Brothers of Italy stepped up as the rightful heirs of the Roman Empire). A 2023 study of 1,650 election manifestos published by parties across 24 European democracies between 1946 and 2018 found that, on average, about 10 per cent of a party manifesto is dedicated to discussing the past,<sup>2</sup> thereby confirming the contradiction that while nostalgia rebels against the modern idea of time, history, and progress, it nevertheless forms an important part of pledges for future plans.

## Cybernostalgia as a triptych

As sentimental and guiltless time travel, nostalgia has always been part of political discourse, naturally following the societal tension between progress and tradition. Yet the events in Romania have seen nostalgia catapulted to the political frontline. Whilst 'traditional' nostalgia feeds a desire that is not actually attainable, cyberspace has given it a virtual home, where time, place, and social interactions can be reimaged, and sentiments amplified and intensified. Romania introduced a combined force of nostalgic narratives, coordinated social media takeover, and technological interference in public infrastructure, showcasing the determining role of *cybernostalgia*.

*Cybernostalgia* can be defined as a sentiment shared online toward an envisioned better society, often rooted in historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and political systems of the past. It is characterised by the *familiarity* of online communities, the *asymmetry* of interaction, and the use of *evolving technology* that supports its influence.

1. Claudiu Zamfir, 'Cum a adunat Călin Georgescu voturi pe TikTok și de ce „a rămas sub radar pentru mulți dintre noi” – explicațiile unui consultant în marketing digital', StartupCafe, 25 November 2024. Available at <https://www.startupcafe.ro/smart-tech/cum-aduna-calin-georgescu-voturi-tiktok-ramas-sub-radar-explicatii-consultant-marketing> (accessed on 1 February 2025).

I. Svetlana Boym, *The future of nostalgia*, Basic Books, 2002, p. 113. Retrieved from [https://moodle.studiumdigitale.uni-frankfurt.de/moodle/pluginfile.php/563921/mod\\_resource/content/1/Boym\\_The%20Future%20of%20Nostalgia%20%282002%29.pdf](https://moodle.studiumdigitale.uni-frankfurt.de/moodle/pluginfile.php/563921/mod_resource/content/1/Boym_The%20Future%20of%20Nostalgia%20%282002%29.pdf) (accessed on 12 February 2025).

II. Stefan. Müller, 'The temporal focus of campaign communication', *The Journal of Politics*, 82(2), 2020, 520–536. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1086/715165> (accessed on 13 February 2025).

## *Familiarity*

When the World Wide Web was introduced in 1989 as a universally-linked information system, many – particularly technologists, academics, and digital idealists – held strong hopes that it would break down barriers, borders, and cultural differences.

Confidence in the web's promise began to wane in the mid-2000s, as it became clear that the web could also reinforce divisions, enable control, and serve corporate or state interests. Some argued that the increased digitisation of our lives created an opposite effect: a stronger search for 'home' and a heightened willingness to sacrifice in order to reach it.<sup>2</sup> In addition to physical homes, people now create their customised (cyber)spaces, where they selectively choose information, connections, and communities.

According to *Reuters*,<sup>3</sup> 66 per cent of Romanians get their news from online sources, and up to 44 per cent specifically from social media. This was leveraged by presidential candidate Călin Georgescu, who became the most active online politician in the country. Despite running an officially non-existent campaign (declared as unbudgeted) and lacking traditional promotion (such as billboards or flyers), Georgescu rose in the polls by connecting with voters exclusively through social media, as many Romanians admitted to never having seen him in real life.

To increase familiarity, various Romanian influencers promoted Georgescu as a strong father figure in their coordinated content. *TikTok* posts showing his masculine judo workouts, ice baths, and horseback riding soon amassed millions of likes. Posts about his church visits were equally popular. Georgescu's fanbase was not limited to well-known influencers; leading up to the 2024 elections, Romania also saw a sudden mobilisation of micro-influencers and social media sleeper cells. Before sharing nostalgic content in support of Georgescu, many of these accounts had either been dormant or had previously posted advertisements for cryptocurrencies or dietary supplements, giving the impression that the accounts had been hacked. According to *Context*, a Romanian investigative outlet and partner of the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, in the seven days before the elections, the number of *TikTok* subscribers tripled, and content with the hashtag #calinggeorgescu reached 73.2 million views.<sup>4</sup> After the election was annulled, the hashtag #diaspora went viral in content supporting Georgescu. The same accounts that had previously shared content about living traditionally within Romania now pretended to be disgruntled expatriates supporting Georgescu from abroad.

In all this social media activity, influencers did not come across as advertisers, but as familiar friends. 'They are in the bathroom with you, they are holding your hand when you break

2. Shoshana Zuboff, 'Surveillance capitalism is an assault on human autonomy', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/04/shoshana-zuboff-surveillance-capitalism-assault-human-automomy-digital-privacy> (accessed on 13 February 2025).

3. Nic Newman, Richard Fletche, and others, *Digital News Report 2024* (Interactive report), Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024. Available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/interactive> (accessed on 13 March 2025).

4. Matei Roșca, 'EXCLUSIV Operațiunea Georgescu pe X, Telegram și Facebook. Urcat în algoritmi de conturi rusești cu sute de mii de urmăritori: 'În promovarea lui au fost implicate rețele specializate în destabilizarea democrațiilor'', *Context.ro*, 29 November 2024. Retrieved from <https://context.ro/exclusiv-operatiunea-georgescu-pe-x-telegram-si-facebook-urcat-in-algoritmi-de-conturi-rusesti-cu-sute-de-mii-de-urmaritori-in-promovarea-lui-au-fost-implicate-retele-specializate-in-desta/> (accessed 1 March 2025).

up with your boyfriend, they are helping you make dinner for your kids. You have a real parasocial relationship'.<sup>5</sup>

### *Asymmetry*

A second element of *cybernostalgia* is the asymmetry of online communication. On average, each person spends one to two hours a day online, creating an opportunity to reach people frequently throughout the day in a way that feels familiar. Personal accounts are more popular than institutional ones, with individual credibility often outperforming official communication. This leads to a communication asymmetry, where influencers attract more attention than the personal or managed accounts of politicians.

Given social media algorithms' propensity to promote adversarial, controversial, and populist content, posts presenting facts or analysis often remain invisible. Similarly, there is no structured mechanism to cooperate with moderate voices to balance the scales on available information. Instead, we can measure the peak in paid messaging but cannot respond to it effectively. Due to this imbalance, *cybernostalgia* spreads through high volumes of posts and reshares, using existing user networks to distribute coordinated messages.

Documents declassified by the Romanian Security Council listed examples of linked accounts, recommendation algorithms, and paid promotions funded by Russia.<sup>6</sup> A total of 797 *TikTok* accounts were identified as actively spreading false content, some dating back to 2016 – the year the app was launched. According to a recent investigation, at least 130 influencers were hired through an online platform, receiving clear instructions on paid content creation.<sup>7</sup> These influencers were contracted to avoid directly tagging content as political or electoral, thereby bypassing legal restrictions. Instead – as seen in the *Bunica* video – references to the candidate were made through suggestive hashtags and in the comment sections.

The accounts avoided shared technical resources (e.g., IP addresses), making it difficult to detect automated activity (bots). Telegram was used for coordination. One channel, *Propagator*, managed content strategies and user engagement, linking *TikTok* content creators with campaign narratives. Researchers at *CheckFirst* found evidence of a large-scale advertising campaign involving 3,640 political ads that collectively reached an audience of 148 million.<sup>8</sup> These messages were spread alongside accounts impersonating Romanian state institutions (such as the Romanian anti-terrorist brigade), lending a false sense of credibility to the campaign. *TikTok* videos falsely associated with law enforcement imagery were shared to project institutional endorsement.

5. Anna Silman, 'Now comes the "womansphere": The anti-feminist media telling women to be thin, fertile and Republican', *The Guardian*, 24 April 2025. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/24/womansphere-conservative-women> (accessed 24 April 2025).

6. RFE/RL's Romanian Service, 'Romanian elections targeted by "aggressive hybrid Russian action", declassified documents show', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 December 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-russia-election-interference-tiktok/33227010.html> (accessed 12 January 2025).

7. Mirela Neag, Catalin Tolontan, and others, 'ANAF a descoperit că PNL a plătit o campanie care l-a promovat masiv pe Călin Georgescu pe TikTok', *Snoop.ro*, 20 December 2024. Available at <https://snoop.ro/anaf-a-descoperit-ca-pnl-a-platit-o-campanie-care-l-a-promovat-masiv-pe-calin-georgescu-pe-tiktok/> (accessed 12 January 2025).

8. Guillaume Kuster, 'Research Note: Meta's Role in Romania's 2024 Presidential Election', *CheckFirst*, 9 December 2024. Available at <https://checkfirst.network/research-note-metas-role-in-romanias-2024-presidential-election/> (accessed 13 January 2025).

### *Evolving technology*

While digital technologies were already being used to amplify familiarity and create communication asymmetry, *cybernostalgia* consists of a third critical element: the proactive use of new and evolving technologies to further support its influence. Digital content supporting political campaigns has become a prime example of technological tools being used to reconstruct visions of the past. The cyber domain has proven ideal for creating false references.<sup>9</sup> Images, texts, sounds, and videos that are ‘hitting home’ are generated faster, cheaper, and more realistically than ever before. Because this output heavily relies on evolving AI tools that scrape existing content, it often reinforces stereotypes, clichés, and prejudices. In other words, technological progress is not curing nostalgia – it is exacerbating it.

According to the Romanian National Security Council, cyberattacks and hybrid tactics were used to prioritise and spread cybernostalgic content. While this content circulated online, the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) disclosed that it had identified over 85,000 digital attacks aimed at exploiting system vulnerabilities – particularly targeting IT and communication systems supporting the electoral process. In their declassified reports, the SRI revealed that access credentials for platforms such as bec.ro (the official election website), roaep.ro (the election authority site), and registrulelectoral.ro (the voter registration site) had been published on cybercrime platforms linked to Russia. The investigation found that data exfiltration occurred through two methods: the exploitation of legitimate user credentials and breaches of a training server.

These attacks targeted systems essential for managing voter attendance, ballot counting, and video monitoring of the electoral process. Systems displaying voter turnout statistics and managing electoral data were also affected. Although no direct manipulation of electoral results was identified, the exposed vulnerabilities further eroded public trust in Romanian political institutions, thereby indirectly reinforcing the campaign message that the country’s leadership was corrupt and its electoral integrity compromised.

### **Impact on Romania**

On 6 December 2024, the Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the country’s elections, buying the authorities time to organise a rerun in May 2025. Although the government presented the annulment as a victory against foreign political interference, many Romanian voters expressed their discontent. Thousands joined anti-government protests, and polls conducted since the annulment have shown even greater support for Călin Georgescu than in the original vote. As President Klaus Iohannis faced impeachment threats from right-wing parties for remaining in office after the election’s cancellation, he resigned, plunging the country into further turmoil.

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9. Cristina Manu, ‘Romania in 2024: Top fake news & disinformation narratives debunked by Veridica’, Veridica, 2 January 2024. Available at <https://www.veridica.ro/en/fake-news-disinformation-propaganda/romania-in-2024-top-fake-news-disinformation-narratives-debunked-by-veridica> (accessed 9 February 2025).

What began as a scripted vision of relatable characters evolved into a wave of public support for an ostensibly pro-Russian candidate who has since expressed increasingly extreme views. Georgescu, a non-partisan agronomist, originally positioned himself as an admirer of Vladimir Putin and a critic of NATO. In an interview in January 2025, however, he escalated his stance by claiming that neighbouring Ukraine was a fictional state.<sup>10</sup> He further suggested the potential return of Romanian lands currently within Ukraine to (re)create a pan-nationalist Greater Romania. Georgescu also praised the Legionary Movement (known as the Iron Guard) – a far-right, ultranationalist, and fascist movement in interwar Romania noted for its aim to reunite all Romanian-speaking territories (foremost Moldova) into a single nation-state.<sup>11</sup> Talk of partitioning Ukraine and annexing Moldova has alarmed broader European political circles. When pressed on the issue, Georgescu dismissed the idea as ‘purely theoretical’, but added, ‘it is good to be prepared for anything’.<sup>12</sup>

The Romanian *cybernostalgia* campaign offered a blueprint: social media-driven influence operations combined with escalating cyberattacks on voting infrastructure. Many of the campaign’s archetypal characters could easily be transplanted into other cultural contexts, exploiting traditional community stereotypes. While ‘theoretically’ discussing plans for Greater Romania, Georgescu even suggested that Poland might reclaim the Ukrainian city of Lviv. At the same time, the Russian Ministry of Defence pushed narratives claiming that Poland and Romania were conspiring to partition Ukraine, that EU countries are globalist puppets, and that the Kremlin has a historical right to expand its empire.<sup>13</sup>

One might ask ‘who is buying this?’ and easily dismiss the dangers of past clichés fuelled by new technologies. But in reality, the nostalgic positivity of home-like imagery – grandmothers with family recipes, glamorous self-care routines, or a protective neighbour watching over the communal parking space – is difficult to dismiss. These are unequivocally positive characters until they are co-opted to deliver paid political messaging. The OSCE highlighted these concerns in its preliminary findings on the integrity of Romania’s presidential elections: ‘The campaign mostly took place online, and inauthentic behaviour by candidates was a challenge that neither the authorities nor the online platforms themselves did enough to address, despite recent, notable attempts to tackle such problems more effectively’.<sup>14</sup>

For the second round of elections in May 2025, Georgescu was banned from running on legal grounds. However, the underlying reasons for his rise – including *cybernostalgia* – remain unaddressed. Georgescu has thrown his support behind George Simion, whose campaign

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10. Catalina Mihai, ‘Romania’s former pro-Russian candidate under fire over Ukrainian land claims call’, Euractiv, 31 January 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/romaniyas-former-pro-russian-candidate-under-fire-over-ukrainian-land-claims-call/> (accessed 3 March 2025).

11. Călin Georgescu, ‘The Legionary Movement was the strongest essence and expression of health and will of the Romanian people. It was unique’ / ‘The true history has not been written yet, but it will be’ / ‘Romania is a weak, poor, and backward state’, G4Media.ro, 28 November 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.g4media.ro/calin-georgescu-the-legionary-movement-was-the-strongest-essence-and-expression-of-health-and-will-of-the-romanian-people-it-was-unique-the-true-history-has-not-been-written-yet-but-it-will.html> (accessed 28 April 2025).

12. Ibid.

13. EUvsDisinfo, ‘The Kremlin prepares for the Polish EU presidency’, 30 December 2024. Available at <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-kremlin-prepares-for-the-polish-eu-presidency/> (accessed 30 December 2024)

14. OSCE, International Election Observation Mission, ‘Romania – Repeat Presidential Election’, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, 4 May 2025.

is also rooted in anti-establishment, nationalist ideology, opposition to the EU, and resistance to supporting Ukraine. In short: different face, same agenda.

## European response

With the abundance of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and outright falsehoods overflowing the cyber domain, little attention has been paid to the more subtle – or sometimes subliminal – influence of *cybernostalgia*. In response to the events in Romania, European authorities have turned against social media companies for not doing enough to prevent Georgescu's sudden rise. In December 2024, the EU opened formal proceedings against *TikTok* for a suspected breach of the Digital Services Act (DSA), specifically regarding its obligation to properly assess and mitigate systemic risks linked to election integrity.<sup>15</sup> While these proceedings may provide some leverage over *TikTok*'s recommender systems – particularly regarding the risks of coordinated inauthentic manipulation and automated exploitation – it remains difficult to hold the platform accountable for cybernostalgic content. *Bunica* does not blatantly violate community guidelines.

If the EU assumes the role of 'moderator', it risks reinforcing the very distrust that the Romanian *cybernostalgia* campaign is spreading. For many Romanians, a moderator is not seen as impartial: the EU is perceived as enforcing peace at any cost, promoting a specific vision of democracy and digital community, and, most importantly, reserving the final say. The notion of moderating content therefore clashes with the sentiment among many supporters of Georgescu and now Simion: that these candidates 'tell it like it is'.

## How to prepare and respond

Going forward, the question is no longer whether there will be cybernostalgic interference, but how to effectively diminish its return. Based on the events in Romania, there are several key areas to watch:

*First, acknowledge cybernostalgia as distinct from disinformation*

*Cybernostalgia* should be treated as a separate category within digital governance frameworks. It operates through sentiment and cultural resonance – not merely through lies or fake news – and requires a different mitigation strategy, more akin to counterpropaganda or cultural response than simple debunking. For instance, it is worth investigating whether targeted digital literacy efforts for young Romanians would actually strengthen societal resilience against *cybernostalgia*. While existing digital literacy programmes primarily focus on identifying falsehoods, they often neglect the emotional and cultural factors that make such content compelling. These underlying elements, however, are precisely where counter-narratives must begin. Since the asymmetry of cybernostalgia ensures that no content can be fully 'un-viral', its influence can only be offset by generating new, resonant content.

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15. European Commission, 'Commission opens formal proceedings against TikTok on election risks under the Digital Services Act', 17 December 2024. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_24\\_6487](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_6487) European Commission+6 (accessed 30 December 2024).

*Second, prepare and be vigilant for upcoming elections in Europe*

After the surprise result in Romania's presidential election, where Georgescu appeared to emerge from nowhere to win the first round, European countries must recognise that the Kremlin may have added a powerful new tool to its already extensive box. Parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled this year in EU member states such as Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Poland, as well as in (potentially more vulnerable) European countries like Kosovo and Moldova. Many candidates in these elections are expected to support Ukraine and maintain a tough stance toward Russia.

Given the enormous impact of *cybernostalgia* in Romania, countries would be wise to pay attention to the 'pickle-wielding' folkloric archetypes of their own cultures. This applies not only to national authorities but also to international election observers, such as the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, as well as to election observation methodology of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

*Third, build capacity to monitor, and engage on potential threats*

As *cybernostalgia* embraces new technologies, so must the countermeasures. Shifting focus from content to the technical processes that drive its spread gives governments, civil society, and social media platforms a more objective and less disputed standard. Technology does not lie – politicians do. Bots can be detected, as can anonymous accounts and patterns in algorithmic take-overs. Albeit sometimes difficult, investigators can increasingly distinguish between AI-generated and AI-refined content. Money transfers and crypto trails often leave digital footprints that can expose paid content or influence operations. Cross-platform content that inserts political messaging into closed groups can be uncovered. And cyberattacks on election infrastructure can frequently be linked to concurrent online manipulation.

As part of this approach, European countries could:

*Work with platforms to enhance the credibility of online information*

To increase the credibility of online information and discourage manipulation, one could introduce measures to improve transparency such as tagging content origin (e.g. 'state-funded media', 'cultural commentary', 'AI-generated') to help users better assess intent and reliability. Include expandable metadata or a 'storyline' view for viral posts, tracing how messages evolved – similar to scientific citation trails. *Cybernostalgia* exploits the inherent asymmetry of online storytelling: personal anecdotes and fragmented memories easily outperform polished institutional messages. Traditional authorities (governments, EU bodies, mainstream media) are structurally disadvantaged in online ecosystems. Institutions must move beyond officialdom and engage in supporting local objective voices rather than rely solely on top-down communication. Fund neutral organisations to curate 'narrative maps' or thematic explainers that contextualise trending content emotionally and politically.

### *Monitor micro-influencers and algorithmic hijacking*

Track sudden shifts in influencer behaviour or identity. For example, crypto sellers turned cultural critics or herbal tea vendors suddenly reminiscing about Soviet pensions should be flagged for further scrutiny. Enforce community standards or request de-ranking where applicable. Transparency around algorithmic amplification patterns and clear data-sharing from platforms are essential.

### *Focus regulatory efforts on platforms' technical choices*

Rather than debating whether nostalgia qualifies as political advertising, focus on regulating automated behaviour, bot networks, and inauthentic coordination. It is easier – and more enforceable – to prove algorithmic manipulation than to define techno-propaganda disguised as grandma's soup recipe.

### *Invest in counternarratives*

To reduce the momentum of viral content, deploy strategic counternarratives that challenge, reframe, or redirect public attention. In the case of elections, there is no countercampaign, as countries struggle to conduct elections without parties benefiting from external support. *Cybernostalgia* derives its power not from factual accuracy, but from emotional authenticity. Undermining its credibility while maintaining audience engagement is difficult, but possible. Humour, satire, and unexpected angles often prove effective.

### *Track links between cyberattacks and online narrative shifts*

As seen in Romania, *cybernostalgia* coincided with targeted cyberattacks. Online nostalgia surges that question electoral integrity should be treated as potential precursors – or camouflage – for real-world cyber operations. Coordination between digital intelligence and social infrastructure threat assessments is essential. Shared alert criteria for sudden upticks in nostalgic content that align with known interference patterns should be developed. A rise in cyberattacks on government infrastructure and communications can enhance the effectiveness of online campaigns, providing a ready-made narrative to fill in the gaps.

## **Living in a 'present tense'**

Based on current polling and political dynamics, George Simion appears poised to win Romania's presidential runoff on 18 May 2025. His platform emphasises national sovereignty, opposition to EU leadership, and resistance to military aid for Ukraine – aligning with populist and anti-globalist sentiments. In addition, he vows to bring back banned presidential contender Călin Georgescu as prime minister in a new government. Simion's rise reflects widespread anti-establishment sentiment, driven by economic challenges and distrust in traditional political elites.

Simion's potential victory should also be viewed through the lens of *cybernostalgia* – the digital revival of nationalist memory and idealised pasts that resonate deeply with disenfranchised voters. His party's rise has been fuelled not only by economic grievances, but also by online campaigns tapping into cultural myths, historical grievances, and revisionist portrayals of Romania's communist and interwar eras. These narratives circulate widely on social media platforms, often outpacing traditional media in both reach and emotional impact. For policymakers, this underscores the need to treat nostalgia-driven digital movements not only as cultural phenomena, but as vectors of influence operations.

*Cybernostalgia* is a strategic campaign tool designed to emotionally reframe geopolitical influence. It calls for responses that are not only technologically savvy, but also culturally fluent, socially viral, and locally rooted. Its decentralised nature – relying on myths, memes, and micro-influencers – makes it difficult to counter. Yet, it can be addressed by targeting its core elements: *familiarity*, *asymmetry*, and *evolving technology*. Doing so may help shift the public gaze from the past perfect to the present tense – prompting a search for accountability and transparency over boosted narratives of a glorified past.

## Volten Briefs

Peter Volten established CESS in 1993. Peter was a staunch supporter of European unity and strong Transatlantic ties. He sought to contribute to peace and security in Europe by reaching out to people that had lived under authoritarian rule. A mission that remains very relevant today. Peter passed away in December 2022. This series of policy briefs is dedicated to him.



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