

Populism in Power? Romania 2035: Scenario Analysis of Coalition Governance, Minority Rights, and European Values

Adina-Ioana Hoza¹

Abstract

Leaving behind the last decades of intensive European integration, Romania currently faces many challenges stemming from populist nationalist movements. Movements like these have the capacity to mobilise civil society in a way that brings forth anti-EU sentiment. Research indicates that in some regions of Europe, there is a regression with respect to democracy, the rule of law, and the rights of minorities. This present study concerning the subject of populism in 2026 is structured on three forward-looking scenarios. The time horizon sought under this analysis is by the year 2035. The methodological design is based on the following distinct scenarios: a radical-right populist party enters government through a coalition with a populist presidential candidate. The analysis also includes important junctures between electoral processes, political parties' alliances within the process of coalition bargaining, as well as media narrative/media control implications. The scope of this exploration is to examine and debate upon far-right political shifts that come after major fiscal/judiciary policy changes that affect reform capacity and institutional trust. The three scenarios' outcomes are meant to show how early-warning indicators for democratic backsliding can be considered for Romanian policy makers alongside civil society and their EU partners.

Keywords

Romania, populism, scenario analysis, minority rights, rule of law, democratic backsliding.

1. Introduction

Romania maintains a competitive multiparty democracy with regular transfers of power. However, civil liberties face increasing pressure from long-established political interests resisting anti-corruption efforts (Freedom House, 2025). Romania has three simultaneous crises to consider for the period following the mid-2020s. First, the political environment is shaped by a long disturbance of distrust in most parties and institutions. Second, a polarised society and media that often

¹ PhD Student, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of European Studies, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: hoza.adina@gmail.com.

rewards anti-establishment mobilisers. Third, intensifying distributional conflict under fiscal tightening (that was meant to lower the persistently high budget deficit), which lowers its overall capacity for long-term reform or focus on other systemic issues. The period surrounding the 2024 electoral cycle accelerated these trends (Całus, 2024a). According to Antonia Colibășanu (2025), geopolitical analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute, Romania's 2025 presidential elections reflect a shift toward populist nationalism combined with institutional distrust (with further implications for democratic stability). Parliamentary elections in December 2024 ended in surprising results for both the voter base and candidates. Radical and Eurosceptic-right groups achieved higher vote counts than was ever projected. The presidential race was then annulled after the Constitutional Court cited serious irregularities. They were linked to suspect digital campaigning practices and opaque financing from Russian and other ill-intended sources. Competent authorities failed to notice these irregularities or intervene before the results of the first round of elections, thus creating a wave of suspicion and mistrust in their capabilities and intentions. In the months that followed, Romania's climate was increasingly shaped by disputes. This was happening while the international press and state allies were watching with concern. Critics said the decision to annul was over the meaning of democratic legitimacy and the boundaries of acceptable contestation (Całus, 2024b). The critics included representatives of the US administration and the MAGA movement (Całus, 2025a). By June 2025, a pro-European governing coalition was installed with a large parliamentary majority. They were tasked with restoring institutional credibility by addressing deteriorating public finances (as well as attempting to increase trust in state representatives). Ilie Bolojan served as interim (acting) president after Klaus Iohannis resigned in February 2025 (as he faced an impeachment vote). He was subsequently nominated and confirmed as prime minister in June 2025 (Plate, 2025).

Yet, the same new coalition faced a fundamental dilemma: many of the required fiscal measures expected were unpopular, therefore risked feeding the very opposition forces it sought to contain (as the far-right discourse is based on previous failures of governance). An OSW assessment (Centre for Eastern Studies) for the new cabinet emphasised the scale of the economic adjustment agenda (including tax increases and expenditure restraint), in a context of weak growth and high deficits. Political stability, in other words, reached a compromise through intensively negotiated coalition cohesion, but governance performance depended on the possibility of real reform in these detrimental circumstances. The delivery of these reforms had to be made under conditions of low societal patience (Całus, 2025c). Romanians were

expecting politicians to make amends to compensate for the election. Unfortunately, the coalition efforts did not manage to raise the feeling of trust to promising levels for pro-European parties, which currently have the majority. Polling data from June 2025 shows that, in their sample, approximately 74% of respondents distrust the state's capacity for efficient revenue allocation (MKOR, Romania's Fiscal Radiography, 2025). This finding is consistent with broader trends in institutional trust documented across post-communist Europe (MKOR, 2025; Hooghe and Triga, 2022: 367-382).

This brings the conversation towards the problems regarding the Romanian judicial system. Expert Forum's think tank analysis of Romania's justice system identifies a persistent issue of judicial independence and transparency (Expert Forum, 2025). They argue that recent justice laws were adopted through non-transparent procedures and have therefore concentrated power. This inevitably weakened public trust in the judiciary. It is a trend with significant implications for the rule of law and democratic resilience (Expert Forum, 2025). The ascension of the party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) is central to the study's argument. Scholarly work links AUR's rapid observable expansion to a combination of anti-system grievances. This includes organisational entrepreneurship and ideological resonance with national-conservative and sovereigntist frames (Pop-Eleches, 2025). Empirical studies show how the pandemic period acted as a background for populist-nationalist mobilisation. In Romania, general skepticism stemming from pandemic mismanagement was never addressed by the ruling parties' politicians accordingly (Armeanu, 2025: 582-598; Burean and Pálffy, 2024: 82-123).

In Romania, social media campaigning and influencer networks reshape electoral competitions, particularly when institutional trust is already deemed fragile (Burean and Pálffy, 2024). At the same time, research on the Romanian diaspora behavior demonstrates that radical right support can be amplified abroad (Gherghina and Giugal, 2025). This happens with voting patterns structured by the institutional context of host countries rather than by simple economic hardship explanations (Armeanu, 2025: 582-598).

Figure 1: Romania, voting intention for parliamentary elections (INSCOP Research, January 2026).



(Source: author's visualisation based on INSCOP Barometer-data)

These dynamics matter for minority rights and for Romania's relationship to the normative commitments often condensed under the label of "European values" (European Union, 2012b: Article 2). The concept refers not only to constitutional liberalism and democratic competition, but also to equality and non-discrimination, including protections for ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (European Union, 2012a, Article 21). In Romania, debates over national identity have recurrently intersected with questions concerning the Hungarian minority, Roma inclusion, and the position of newer migrant communities (Ukrainian refugees and economic migrants from Asia and the Middle East). On the day of its adoption, Romania was one of the first nations to join the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1995). The EU's focus on inclusivity should aim to go beyond multiculturalism, promoting a deeper level of integration that fosters interculturality through open dialogue between different cultural communities (Brie, 2025: 7-14). Social resilience, particularly through cultural diplomacy at EU borders and within, has been critical for fostering minority inclusion in Romania. Cross-border collaboration is seen as a method to ensure minority protections and governance reforms (Stoica, 2025: 33-43).

However, according to Christina Harward at the Institute for the Study of War, the May 2025 far-right first-round win in Romania's presidential election could "advance Kremlin objectives". These were promoting narratives and policies that diminish Romanian support for Ukraine and mirror pro-Moscow discourses to minorities (Harward, 2025). The increased presence of populist nationalism within governing coalitions may constrain the effective representation of minorities. This is not necessarily through formal exclusion, but through the reshaping of institutional practices as well as political

incentives that weaken minority inclusion mechanisms (Protsyk, Matichescu, and Chatre, 2008). In such settings, even when populists do not command a majority, their entry into coalition bargaining can shift policy agendas, rhetorical boundaries, and enforcement patterns (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI, 2025).

The following projection uses scenario analysis (Junio and Mahnken, 2013: 374-395) to clarify which plausible pathways exist, through which Romania could reach 2035 under a stress-tested political assumption: a future in which a populist actor attains executive influence through coalition participation and the presidency (UK Government Office for Science, 2024). The question is: under what conditions would coalition-based populist power translate into moderation, incremental erosion, or deeper institutional transformation, and what would each pathway mean for minority protections and Romania's anchoring in EU norms (European Commission, 2024b)?

This paper addresses a main topic in the political economy of backsliding: how do coalition constraints interact with EU conditionality to shape minority rights trajectories when populist actors enter government (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020: 814-833)? This scenario-based approach generates plausible pathways found in Romania's specific institutional configuration. Scenarios were assessed for plausibility using three criteria: (1) institutional consistency; adherence to Romania's constitutional framework and EU legal constraints; (2) behavioral realism; alignment with documented realities of coalition behavior in CEE democracies; and (3) historical precedent - analogies to trajectories in comparable cases (Hungary 2010-2024, Poland 2015-2023). Scenarios that violated constitutional "hard constraints" (e.g., hypothetical exit from EU or NATO) were excluded as implausible within the 2035 frame.

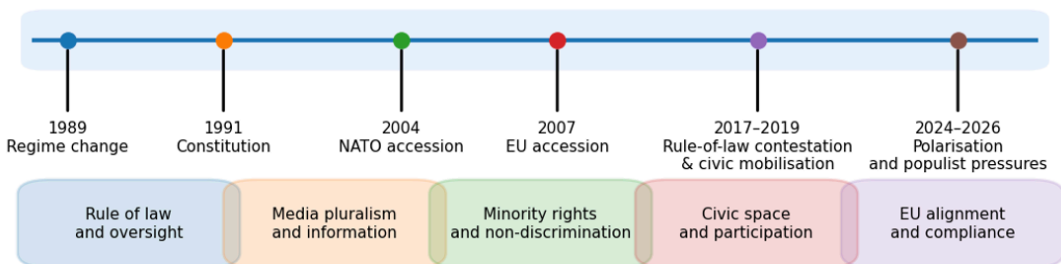
2. Concepts and Normative Framework

Populism is commonly understood as a "thin-centered ideology" that places a morally pure "people" against a corrupt "elite". They claim that politics should express the general will. In European politics, populism often becomes politically salient when it fuses with a host ideology. This is true for nativism and authoritarian preferences, producing what Mudde describes as the populist radical right. This fusion links anti-elite rhetoric to exclusionary identity claims, making minorities and "outsiders" convenient targets of blame in periods of social stress (Mudde, 2004: 541-563). The complex narratives of ethno-political identity in Eastern Europe often lead historically to friction between nationalism and European integration, as highlighted by Vintilă (2025: 141-158).

From a democratic-theory perspective, the distinctive risk posed by populists in power moves along polarised speech. We will have a governing logic that treats opposition and independent institutions as illegitimate obstacles. Müller argues that populists' anti-pluralism can become operationalised through practices such as politicising oversight bodies, narrowing the space for civic contestation, and rewriting informal norms of restraint. These moves often occur gradually, through ordinary legal instruments. They are therefore easily misread as routine politics until cumulative effects become visible (Müller, 2016, p. 41-73). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify three key behavioral warnings of rejection of democratic rules: denial of opponents' legitimacy, toleration of violence, and curtailment of civil liberties that can diagnose democratic erosion even within legal frameworks.

EU membership places Romania within overlapping normative frameworks: Treaty obligations (TEU, Article 2), fundamental rights protections (Charter Article 21), and minority-specific instruments (Council of Europe Framework Convention). It is expressed in the EU's constitutional architecture and in Council of Europe instruments to which Romania is bound by membership. Article 2 (European Union, 2012b, Article 2) of the Treaty on European Union anchors the purpose of the Union in human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. In this paper, the focus falls on the rights of persons belonging to minorities. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights prohibits discrimination. This includes grounds of all ethnic origin, religion, language, political opinion, or membership of a national minority (European Union, 2012a: Article 21). Parallel commitments exist in the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The convention establishes standards for: equality, cultural expression, and participation (Council of Europe, 1995). As an ex-communist country, Romania has come a long way in implementing minority rights policy (Ghimisi, 2020: 151-156), as well as further alignment with all EU laws and regulations.

Figure 2: Romania's gradual alignment with EU-relevant governance domains (conceptual milestones).



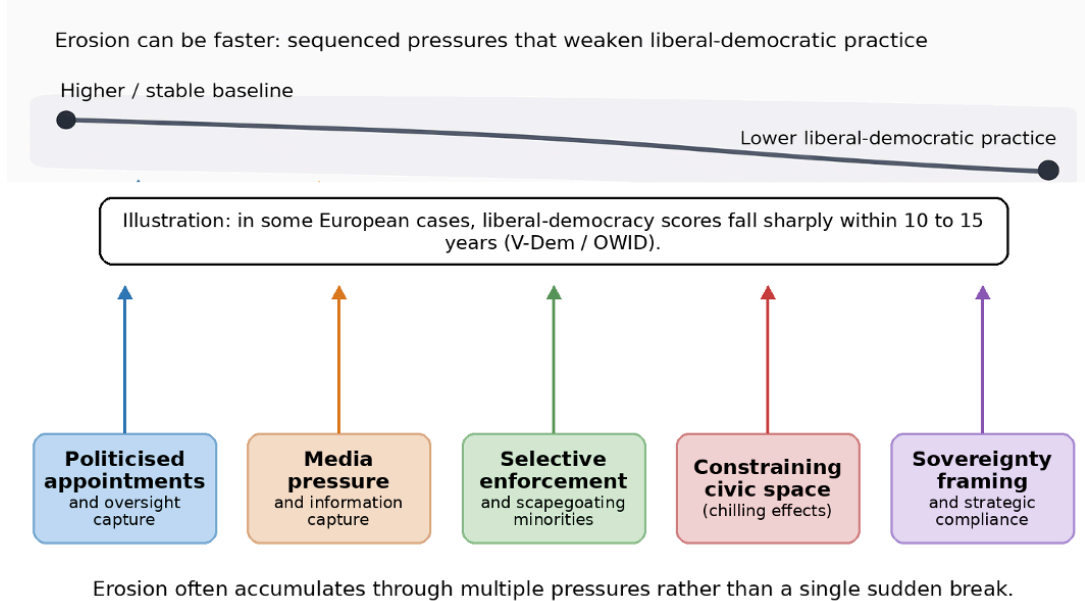
Interpretation: alignment is usually gradual. Reforms, capacity-building and learning accumulate over many years.

(Source: author's compilation based on the reforms timeline)

The figure above illustrates Romania's long-term, incremental alignment with European Union governance norms across key domains following the 1989 regime change. Rather than a linear or uniform process, alignment is shown as cumulative and uneven, shaped by constitutional reforms, accession processes (NATO in 2004; EU in 2007), and subsequent phases of consolidation and contestation. The lower band highlights governance area-rule of law, media pluralism, minority rights, civic space, and EU compliance, which developed over time through institutional reform, capacity-building, and social learning. The 2017/2019 period shows that Europeanisation is not irreversible and may involve periods of political conflict and public resistance before re-stabilisation.

The common norms of the EU are enforced by layered mechanisms. The Rule of Law Report is issued each year to monitor three specific areas: justice, anti-corruption frameworks, and media freedom. The use of conditionality in the budget and infringement proceedings can impose a financial cost over time for continued rule-of-law backsliding (European Commission, 2024a). At the level of the Council of Europe, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance is among the monitoring bodies that determine the evolving nature of discrimination and analyze the effectiveness of anti-racism policies (ECRI, 2025). The combination of these mechanisms determines the negotiating environment for Romanian governments, including coalition governments (European Union, 2020).

Figure 3: Factors Contributing to the Erosion of Liberal-Democratic Practices in Europe.



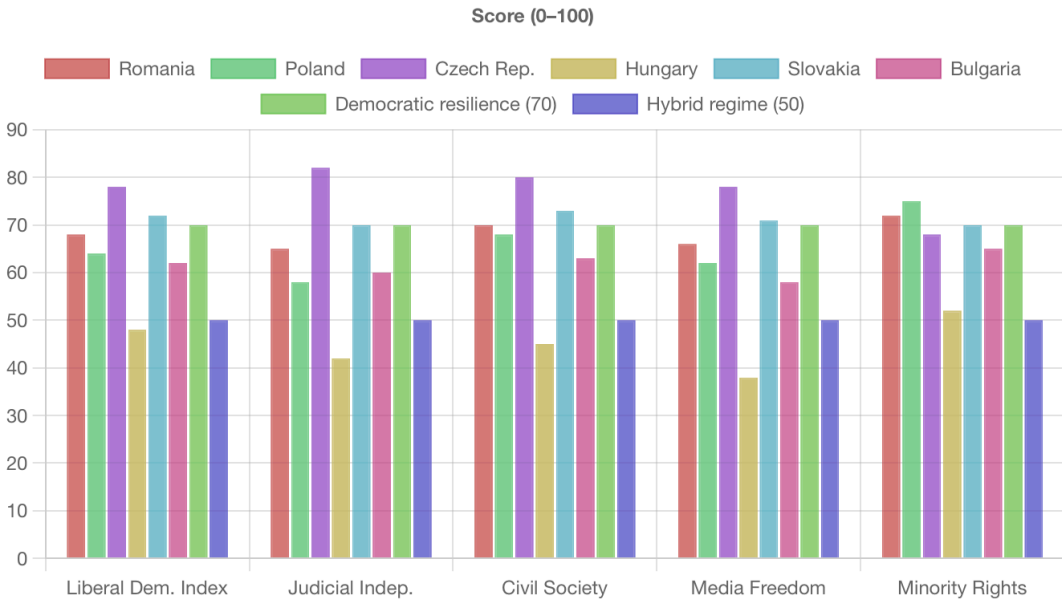
(Source: author's own elaboration based on Democracy Index, LDI)

The above is a synthesis of the principal structural factors that comparative research identifies as driving the erosion of liberal-democratic norms across European polities. Democracy Index (LDI), also shown on Our World in Data, is an illustrative benchmark. The LDI is a 0-1 index (higher = more liberal-democratic) summarizing expert-coded assessments of: free and fair elections and voting rights, freedoms of association and expression, civil liberties, and constraints on the executive (Coppedge et al., 2024). During the period from 2017 to 2019, Romania experienced a “critical juncture” in which there was an open struggle over the direction of post-accession institutional trends. Specifically, the disturbance over the rule of law took the form of an ongoing politicised battle for the independence of the judiciary and the operational capacity of anticorruption institutions. This includes the government’s use of its parliamentary majority by the PSD-led governing coalition to change substantive criminal laws and procedures. They were criticised for attempting to reconfigure the authority of prosecutors (specifically, regarding the role of the National Anticorruption Directorate, DNA) and gain additional political influence over key judicial mechanisms. The most visible of these initiatives, alongside issues with the European Union through its oversight instruments (especially the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, CVM), were the continuation of the controversy regarding Emergency Ordinance OUG 13/2017 and subsequent changes to the justice system. In this sense, these initiatives have resulted in significant external criticisms from legal and institutional entities regarding their impact on judicial independence and the constraints on executive power (Venice Commission, 2019). There was an unprecedented level of civic mobilization during this period, with very large sustained numbers of demonstrators (among the largest since 1989) and large engagement of urban constituencies, civil society, and the diaspora (Crăciun, 2017; Mitu et al., 2017), and their explicit expression of support (V-Dem Institute) through the frame of European and rule-of-law norms (constitutionalism, anticorruption, and Romania’s place in Europe). The simultaneous events surrounding institutional review and social protest reveal two important aspects of how European integration occurs (European Parliament, 2025). Firstly, it indicates that European integration is not a direct path or automatic process of success. Secondly, the process of aligning institutions may create expectations of how institutions are to behave which may lead to a more significant political conflict if institutions are perceived by government actors to veer off course. In addition, while there are instances of strong democratic resilience, institutions still possess actual vulnerabilities. Therefore, we should call this “Contestation of the Rule of Law and the Mobilisation of Civics” rather than classify this experience as only-backsliding.

The use of ethnopopulism is one way to undermine liberal democracy by using advanced techniques to build a coalition and gain power. In part, this effort is legitimised and supported through the use of a “handbook” that contains both majoritarian and ethnopopulist principles to support one another (Vachudova, 2020: 318-340). Ethnopopulists regularly change the meaning of truth and the definition of the enemies and friends of “the People.” Moreover, ethnopopulists often use violence through the use of racial stereotypes of immigrants, and the use of the public’s fear of globalisation to use state-sponsored economic systems that are neo-liberal in nature and are used against the interests of the working class. In addition, the establishment of liberal institutions has historically been met with the sudden emergence of democratic regression in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Vachudova, 2020: 318-340).

Populist entry into coalitions creates their own agenda-setting opportunities (Strøm and Müller, 1999:1-35). This can reshape policy priorities and enforcement discretion aligned with EU conditionality (budgetary, reputational, legal). This context raises the cost of overt rights violations, channeling backsliding toward less visible administrative mechanisms (Strøm and Müller, 1999: 1-35). Coalition participation can moderate radical actors through portfolio allocation and inter-party vetoes. Conversely, coalition inclusion can normalise exclusionary narratives (Caľus, 2025c), redirect administrative attention (incentivise mainstream partners to adopt harder identity frames to prevent electoral loss). In Romania’s case, where the Hungarian minority (Council of Europe, 1995) has been politically represented through UDMR participation in government, coalition dynamics are relevant for understanding how minority rights are translated from legal commitments into daily governance practice. The entry of populist parties into coalition government creates distinctive pathways. Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015) identify three of these patterns: (1) policy dilution through compromise, (2) organizational mainstreaming, and (3) selective radicalization on identity issues while moderating on economics. Evidence from European cases found in the literature suggests coalition participation can either ‘tame’ populists through responsibility or normalize their positions through legitimation, the mechanism at stake in distinguishing Romania’s scenario pathways.

Figure 4: Romania in Comparative CEE Context: Governance Indicators (2024-2025).



(Source: author's own comparative chart based on Democracy Index, LDI)

Romania's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) experienced significant fluctuations between 2016 and 2023. Romania occupies a middle position, vulnerable, yet not backsliding like Hungary. It initially declined sharply from 0.62 (2016) to 0.49 (2018) during a rule-of-law crisis marked by sustained strains on judicial independence and media freedom. Following a change of government in late 2019, the index showed a strong recovery to 0.66 (2020). However, it fell again to approximately 0.50 (2023) amid renewed democratic backsliding, growing political instability, as well as rising populist mobilisation. This pattern doesn't reflect a consistent decline, like what we saw in Hungary (V-Dem considers Hungary to be an "electoral autocracy"), nor a stable consolidation as in the Czech Republic. Instead, it represents a more cyclical back-and-forth, where Romania's democracy faces moments of contestation as well as fragility. In the present chart, the threshold of 50 represents what Carothers (2002: 5-21) identifies as the "gray zone". Regimes that combine autocratic features with democratic ones. These regimes maintain formal democratic institutions, such as elections, parliaments, and constitutions, but often restrict media freedom, weaken judicial independence, and constrain civic space. Carothers argued that most transitional countries do not fully conform to either democratic or authoritarian models. Instead, it exists in a persistent gray zone. Within this zone, regimes engage in regular elections while simultaneously maintaining practices that limit genuine political competition and civic freedoms.

3. Methodology, time Horizon, and Baseline Conditions

Junio and Mahnken (2013) explain that scenarios help explore how combinations of drivers produce qualitatively different futures (forcing explicit choices about assumptions, causal mechanisms, and early warning indicators). Public-sector foresight guidance similarly emphasises that scenarios are useful when they are anchored in observable trends but deliberately vary key uncertainties. Thus, enabling decision-makers to stress-test strategies across futures (UK Government Office for Science, 2024; Daniel and Ditych, 2024; ACAPS, 2022).

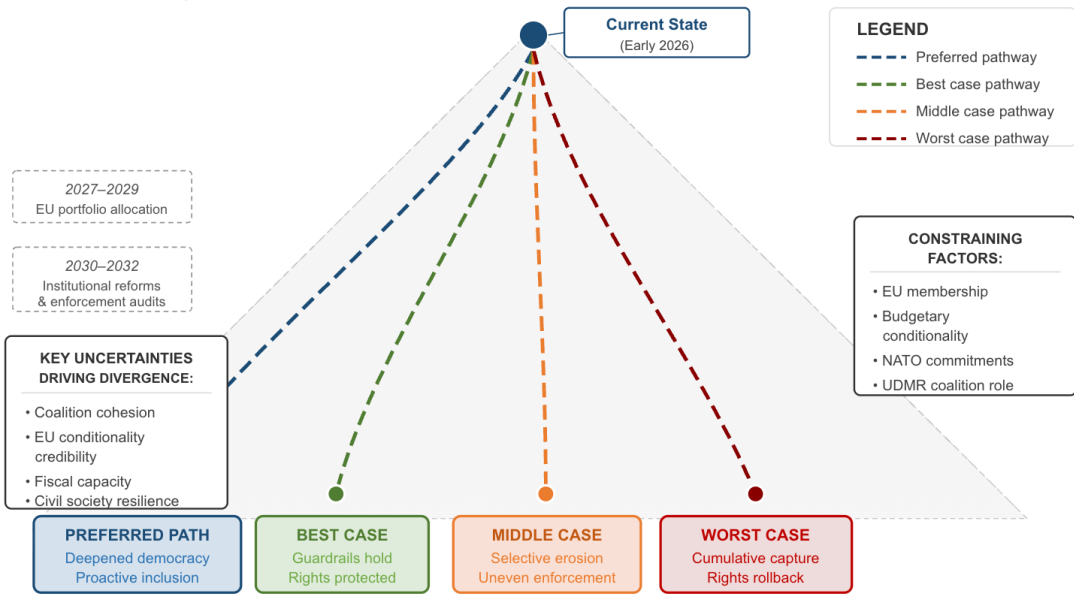
Table 1: Scenario Construction Framework.

Key Driver	Preferred Path	Best Case	Middle Case	Worst Case	Observable Indicators
Coalition Cohesion	Strong discipline, clear EU commitment, no AUR normalization	Moderate tension, sustained cooperation, cordon sanitaire maintained	Periodic crises, tactical AUR inclusion in local/regional coalitions	Breakdown, AUR permanent national coalition partner	Coalition agreement content; mid-term renegotiations; parliamentary voting discipline; ministerial stability
EU Conditionality Credibility	Consistent enforcement, budget leverage actively used, reforms accelerate	Selective enforcement, threats credible, mostly compliant behavior	Threatened but not activated, declining credibility, partial compliance	Not credible, budget released despite violations, enforcement collapsed	European Commission decisions; Council voting patterns; timing of CVM/RoL reviews; budget suspension threats vs. actions
Fiscal Capacity	Deficit reduced below 3%, sustainable reform momentum, NRRP fully absorbed	Deficit stabilized at 3-4%, limited reform space, partial NRRP implementation	Deficit persistent at 4-5%, reform stalled, NRRP renegotiated downward	Deficit exceeds 5%, sanctions triggered, NRRP suspended or terminated	Eurostat deficit/debt data; NRRP milestone completion rates; sovereign bond spreads; credit rating changes
Civil Society Resilience	Active monitoring, mass mobilization capacity, sustained watchdog effectiveness	Sustained watchdog activity, episodic mobilization, independent funding maintained	Weakened but present, reduced funding, selective intimidation tolerated	Marginalized, intimidation systematic, foreign funding criminalized	Protest frequency and scale; NGO operating environment; civic organization funding levels; media access for CSOs
Information Ecosystem	Media independence protected, fact-checking robust, diverse ownership	Mixed ownership, some partisan capture, pluralism mostly preserved	Increasing concentration, reduced plurality, rising disinformation	State/oligarch control, propaganda dominance, opposition media eliminated	Media freedom indices (RSF, FH); ownership concentration data; disinformation reach metrics; journalist harassment incidents

4. Romania 2035: Three Scenarios

The scenarios below share the same point of departure: a Romania in which the political centre is under pressure from a radical right opposition that has already demonstrated electoral competitiveness, and in which fiscal constraints continue to restrict distributive politics. Each scenario differs in how coalition bargaining, EU conditionality, and institutional veto points interact with mobilisation strategies around identity and “sovereignty”. The focal outcomes are the quality of democratic pluralism, the protection of minority rights, and Romania’s alignment with EU norms by 2035.

Figure 5: Cone of plausibility (futures cone) for Romania to 2035.



Range of Future Possibilities for Democratic Quality & Minority Rights

(Source: author’s illustration based on futures cone methodology)

The figure visualizes a widening range of future pathways from today’s conditions, distinguishing between probable, plausible, and possible trajectories, and highlighting a preferred trajectory point as a normative target (Dhami, Wicke, and Önkäl, 2022). The 'preferred' designation reflects a normative position, aligned with the EU's stated democratic commitments, and it is not part of a prediction pathway. The democratic system in Eastern Europe shows signs of decline at many levels. Romania's current political developments make it susceptible to negative consequences. Common use of emergency ordinances permits the government to avoid public debate, which in the past decade brought heavy criticism from the population (Apostolache, 2019).

The negative routes of this situation proceed through three main actions, which include the increased control of public media by political forces and the establishment of administrative pressure to restrict independent regulatory bodies. Sensationalism and populism are criticized for having increasingly “infiltrated” established media outlets, contributing to the growing suspicion of influence groups attempting to spread false or misleading narratives. For example, in the case of “România TV” news channel with high national viewership, the National Audiovisual Council (CNA) imposed in February 2026 the maximum fine for broadcasting sensationalist headlines that mischaracterized peaceful protests for justice reform (Consiliul Național al Audiovizualului-CNA, 2026)

The Romanian political establishment uses minority rights in their discourse positively or negatively as a platform for their symbolic political activities. They display their position on the matter through their public statements and their legislative initiatives. Scapegoating becomes more intense during election periods and fiscal cutbacks because enforcement agencies stop investigating hate crimes, anti-discrimination cases, and desegregation mandates. One example that made international headlines: In August 2025, Dan Tănasă, a deputy leader of the far-right party AUR, posted on his social media. He was urging Romanians to “refuse deliveries if they are not made by a Romanian” and to “stop encouraging the import of unskilled workers from Asia and Africa.” A few days later, a Nepalese food courier in Bucharest was punched in the face and told to “go back to your country” by an assailant supportive of these views (Digi24, Romanian News Outlet, 2025). This incident started a national debate about rising xenophobia and AUR’s racist speech.

The national government uses Roma communities as a rhetorical subject of protection or symbolic beneficiaries, while local authorities cut off their access to essential services. This issue becomes a main topic of discussion because far-right and populist groups restrict minority rights according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023).

Figure 6: Scenario Split Timeline: Elections, Coalition Formation, and EU Leverage.

Critical Junctures Timeline: Romania 2026–2035

Part 1: Divergence Phase (2026–2030) — Where scenarios split					
2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	Key Variable
BASELINE	JUNCTURE 1: Presidential Election	JUNCTURE 2: Coalition Reshuffling	Mid-term adjustment	JUNCTURE 3: Parliamentary Election	
Pro-EU coalition formed (June 2025). Fiscal consolidation. Iohannis resigns; Bolojan interim president. AUR at ~21% polling.	Populist president elected? Coalition re-negotiation. First budget under new govt. → Portfolio allocation decision.	Mid-term govt crisis. AUR enters coalition OR remains opposition. First EU RoL Report. → Institutional appointment cycle begins.	Policy implementation. EU portfolio allocation. Public opinion shifts.	Radical right gains or losses? Coalition stability test. EU conditionality triggered? → Trajectory clearer.	
Current state	CRITICAL DIVERGENCE	CRITICAL DIVERGENCE		CRITICAL DIVERGENCE	

Scenario pathways at each juncture:

BEST CASE	Constrained portfolios	Mainstream veto holds	AUR remains opposition	Populist losses	<i>Coalition cohesion; EU credibility</i>
MIDDLE CASE	Symbolic concessions	Populist president elected	AUR enters coalition	Populist stable	<i>Fiscal capacity; EU leverage</i>
WORST CASE	Presidential alignment w/ AUR	Justice capture begins	Institutional appointments begin	Rights rollback starts	<i>Civil society resilience</i>

(Source: author’s illustration for Scenario Split Timeline)

The figure illustrates a timeline of critical junctures for Romania from 2026 to 2035, focusing on divergence points influenced by coalition decisions and EU responses. It includes key events like elections, coalition reshuffling, and institutional changes, with three scenarios (best, middle, and worst case) that describe potential political outcomes. Each scenario is structured around three causal stages: (1) Coalition formation & portfolio allocation (2027-2029), (2) Institutional adaptation & enforcement shifts (2029-2032), and (3) Consolidated governance pattern & minority rights outcomes (2032-2035). The divergence points are coalition cohesion and EU leverage credibility.

Figure 7: Romania 2030-2035: Democratic Consolidation Dynamics and Scenario Endpoints (Pluralism, Grey-Zone, or Illiberal Consolidation).

CONSOLIDATION PHASE (2030–2032)					
Institutional changes accumulate · Minority rights enforcement patterns set · EU leverage effectiveness visible · Path despite key stressors					
2030–2031	2032	2033	2034	2035	ENDPOINT
Post-election settlement	Reforms & enforcement audits	Trajectory consolidating	Pattern entrenched	Final outcome	
Institutional changes accumulate. Minority rights enforcement patterns set. EU leverage effectiveness visible.	Reform audits by EU. Judicial independence assessed. Civil society space evaluated.	Path dependencies solidify. Reversals become harder. International perception crystallises.	Democratic quality trajectory clear. Rights & values status established.	Scenarios reach final form. Rights & values status clear.	
How each scenario consolidates:					
BEST CASE	Rights protected	EU reforms reinforced	Civic space expanded	Institutions resilient	PLURALISM SUSTAINED
MIDDLE CASE	Selective erosion	Uneven enforcement	Formal compliance only	Grey-zone patterns	GREY-ZONE DEMOCRACY
WORST CASE	Rights rollback	Judiciary captured	Media & civic space constrained	EU leverage exhausted	ILLIBERAL CONSOLIDATION
ENDPOINT: SCENARIO OUTCOMES (2035)					
BEST: Pluralism sustained		MIDDLE: Grey-zone democracy		WORST: Illiberal consolidation	
Minority rights protected. Democratic guardrails hold. Proactive EU compliance.		Selective erosion persists. Uneven enforcement. Formal but not substantive compliance.		Cumulative capture complete. Rights rolled back. Illiberal governance entrenched.	
→ Rights & values status clear by 2035					
<i>KEY INSIGHT: Scenarios diverge at critical junctures (2027, 2028, 2030) based on coalition bargaining outcomes and EU response credibility. Early decisions (portfolio allocation, judicial appointments) have cumulative effects that become harder to reverse over time.</i>					

(Source: author’s illustration for Democratic Consolidation Dynamics and Scenario Endpoints)

The following three scenarios all assume a coalition government including AUR and a populist president elected in 2026. They differ in the degree of ideological commitment, institutional resistance, and EU response. This analysis does not include European Union “Ro-exit” scenarios, which, for this study, are considered implausible given Romania's economic integration and security dependencies.

Figure 8: Scenario pathways for populism in power and democratic outcomes in Romania.

Scenario 1: Best Case		Scenario 2: Middle Case		Scenario 3: Worst Case	
<i>Democratic Resilience and Managed Pluralism</i>		<i>Competitive Illiberal Drift</i>		<i>Accelerated Illiberal Consolidation</i>	
Step	Development	Step	Development	Step	Development
1	Populists enter coalition with limited leverage	2	Selective institutional pressure via administrative discretion	3	Populist presidency with legislative predominance
2	Institutional checks remain functional	3	Media polarisation and gradual civic chilling	4	Incremental judicial and oversight capture
3	EU conditionality reinforces guardrails	4	Minority rights politicised and uneven in practice	5	Intensified information control and civil society pressure
4	Stabilisation and policy moderation	5	EU friction and strategic compliance	6	Structural democratic backsliding
<i>Populism is absorbed by institutional constraints producing limited disruption and gradual adaptation.</i>		<i>Democratic structures persist formally, while practices shift gradually toward illiberal governance.</i>		<i>A sequence of legal and institutional capture leads to entrenched illiberal governance within one decade.</i>	

(Source: author’s illustration for scenario pathways)

4.1. Best case: Guardrails and negotiated moderation

This scenario works under the assumption that democracies have proven more resilient to populism than feared (Weyland, 2021). The early 2030s will witness a populist party entering government as a coalition junior partner after it successfully uses public frustration with budget cuts and elite negotiations. A populist president uses sovereigntist themes for his campaign, but coalition members stop him from executing his plans. The mainstream partners maintain control over important economic and justice positions, while the coalition agreement requires policy execution to follow EU funding schedule requirements. The governing system operates through exchange: radical groups receive symbolic concessions for their public statements, but all changes to judicial systems and governmental monitoring organizations and constitutional frameworks are forbidden by partners who want to maintain market trust and avoid EU sanctions (Regulation EU- Euratom 2020/2092, 2020).

The protection of minority rights exists in formal terms, but enforcement agencies maintain their rights to operate independently. The UDMR coalition presence establishes a permanent veto power against any exclusionary policies (Protsyk, Maticescu, and Chatre, 2008) because EU-funded programs (e.g., Roma inclusion, Hungarian-language education) serve the material interests of coalition partners who need structural funds. The Hungarian minority continues to be represented through coalition bargaining, and policies focus on administrative delivery rather than symbolic conflict (Council of Europe, 1995). The coalition group maintains

its material benefits from EU-funded programs, which support Roma inclusion while the programs operate through targeted funding.

External monitoring reinforces these guardrails. Romanian elites consider the annual Rule of Law cycle and Council of Europe assessments to be essential for establishing their strategic reputation which exists because European Union resource access determines their ability to build infrastructure and provide social services (European Commission, Rule of Law Report, 2024a). The information ecosystem remains contentious yet counter-mobilisation and regulation gradually decrease the effectiveness of coordinated manipulation. Influencer networks and digital insurgency continue to shape campaigns but civil society and independent media develop stronger skills for quick fact-checking and for creating trustworthy explanations of complex policy trade-offs. The populist president develops a governance approach which uses performance-based conflicts to establish his agenda as standard practice throughout his term. The result is a Romania in 2035 that is “noisier” and more polarised but still broadly compatible with European rights commitments and coalition-based democratic pluralism.

4.2. Middle case: Managed erosion and selective enforcement

The populist movement achieves better coalition strength, which enables it to demand control over internal matters, educational systems, and certain parts of media policy (Müller, 2016, p. 41-73). Mainstream partners, fearing electoral collapse, accept “symbolic sovereignty” policies to obtain stability. The interior ministries grant portfolio control rights, which permit officials to enforce regulations against NGOs through increased audits and postponement of anti-discrimination decisions. This happens while the education ministry redefines curricula content by creating a new focus on national identity and alternative minority history teaching materials.

The president's office, together with radical ministers create a narrative that depicts minorities and foreign influence as threats to national rejuvenation (Calus, 2025b). Government agencies use administrative discretion to implement policy changes that follow constitutional checks through changes in funding priorities and increased inspections of specific NGOs. Local authorities receive informal government protection signals about which groups are protected (Kyriacou and Trivín, 2025). Protections for minorities exist through separate geographic areas and different administrative systems. Hungarian minority institutions encounter ongoing battles about decentralization (Protsyk et al., 2008), while Roma communities face increasing discriminatory police practices because local authorities operate under the belief that they can choose when to enforce laws (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

Some rights exist in the form of being “on the paper only”. Different areas implement rights protection according to their existing governance system, which depends on the political orientation of their prefects and inspectorates. Hungarian minority institutions encounter more frequent politically charged conflicts about their language rights and their right to operate independently. The Roma communities begin to observe a growing acceptance of police/other authorities’ discriminatory practices, together with their limited efforts to achieve social integration. The government exercises caution when it comes to actual legal violations because it increasingly uses legal procedures as a means to postpone implementation and weaken its execution. ECRI monitoring identifies persistent difficulties that exist in preventing discrimination and in controlling public statements. The Rule of Law Report identifies growing pressure on media pluralism and on checks and balances. The latest developments do not result in immediate regime transformation because they restrict equal citizenship rights (ECRI, 2025), which now exist as the major democratic safeguard in modern societies. EU leverage operates, but it becomes a bargaining tool rather than a firm constraint.

Romanian leaders learn to deliver just enough compliance to avoid major financial penalties while domestically presenting EU criticism as proof of “standing up for Romania”. Political communication reframes conditionality as external coercion, which serves to strengthen the radical right's assertion that democratic legitimacy originates solely from national elections. The country will occupy a grey area by 2035 because it will remain within the EU legal framework while facing increased political oppression against minorities and diminished European value dedication (European Union, 2012b: Article 2).

4.3 Worst case: Cumulative capture and rights rollback by stealth

The worst case arises from incremental legal changes that lead to complete control of institutions through institutional capture, according to Kyriacou and Trivín (2025). The process of reforming appointment rules for anti-corruption agencies and Constitutional Court procedures, together with media oversight bodies, develops through multiple reforms. The evidence from Hungary between 2010 and 2020 shows that ordinary legislative processes enable these developments without needing constitutional changes, according to Kelemen in "The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium" (2020: 481-499). The radical right presses its electoral success while mainstream parties collapse to create a coalition that allows populists to control critical government positions with ongoing presidential backing. Coalition partners use concessions to explain their need to protect against early elections.

The Hague Journal on the Rule of Law shows that gradual legal changes create new appointment procedures for oversight bodies while they transform public media management systems and create political biases in police enforcement activities. The research about Central and Eastern Europe shows that legal incrementalism can lead to institutional changes that allow executive power to increase when institutions have existing executive control (Kyriacou and Trivín, 2025). The radical right's principal agenda-setter, a role currently occupied by figures such as AUR leader George Simion becomes the central agenda setter for “sovereigntist renewal”, while the S.O.S. Romania milieu associated with Diana Șoșoacă continues to push boundary-breaking rhetoric that normalises exclusion. Political entrepreneurs linked to Călin Georgescu’s earlier campaign supporters (European Court of Human Rights, 2025) remain active as mobilisers and litigants. They contribute to the efforts of sustaining narratives that delegitimise courts and electoral administrators. The state starts handling this ecosystem through partisan methods (to advance the interests of a specific political party or faction over others). This leads to improper investigations and regulatory actions into other political voices. The government establishes its position through enforcement actions against journalists and the media.

The state’s response to this ecosystem becomes increasingly partisan: investigations and regulatory interventions are deployed asymmetrically, and independent watchdogs face budgetary and procedural harassment. The combination of policy reversal and intimidation methods leads to the deterioration of minority rights. The government uses typical legislative methods to limit minority organizations and civil society groups that work against discrimination instead of officially ending their European Union obligations.

The administrative barriers for funding cultural activities and providing education in minority languages have become more difficult to manage. Public figures receive greater acceptance to express hate speech, while Roma communities face increasing security measures. International monitoring detects ongoing patterns of discrimination, yet domestic enforcement bodies are becoming more political or facing resource shortages (ECRI, 2025). The anti-discrimination agencies experience budget reductions and staff members face political pressure, while hate speech prosecution numbers decrease and desegregation processes face administrative hold-ups. The CEE states that ECRI monitors face backsliding problems, which match these patterns. EU responses become sharper but also more contested. The government depends on EU funding, which exposes it to EU budget conditions, yet political leaders try to present budget limits as foreign punishment, which strengthens their sovereigntist position.

New EU-level legal protections for media and for public participation create tools for resistance. However, domestic implementation is delayed and selectively enforced (European Union, Regulation 2024/1083, 2024b). By 2035, Romania will remain formally democratic and within the EU, but its institutional “equilibrium” has shifted toward majoritarian control, reduced pluralism, and a materially weakened environment for minority equality (European Union, Directive 2024/1069, 2024).

5. Discussion: Comparative Lessons and Indicators

5.1. Comparative Positioning and Romanian Specificities

The future pathways that Romania will pursue until 2035 show similarities to European patterns but lack any automatic link to those patterns. The study of populism together with the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe demonstrates that backsliding occurs through gradual legal and administrative changes, which lead to complete institutional control (Bodnár, Webber, and Schmidtke, 2024: 219-223). Successful operations in this dynamic require three components, which include appointment authority and media restrictions and civil society limitations, and a moral framework that describes opponents as threats to national security and foreign intelligence agents (Kyriacou and Trivín, 2025). The Romanian cases map onto this template, but they also highlight that coalition politics and EU dependence can keep such dynamics partial or reversible (European Union, 2020).

Figure 8: *European values and populist radical-right governance pressures in Europe.*

European values (normative baseline)		Populist radical-right pressures (typical risks)
Rule of law and checks on power		
Independent judiciary, legality, predictable rules, accountability through oversight bodies	→	Politicised appointments, delegitimising courts/regulators, governing by exceptional procedures
Pluralism and media freedom		
Free and plural media ecosystem; transparency; protection of journalism	→	Pressure on public broadcasters, hostile rhetoric toward journalists, information capture and disinformation
Minority rights and non-discrimination		
Equal protection in law and practice; enforcement against hate speech and hate-motivated violence	→	Scapegoating and moral-panics; selective enforcement; framing minorities as outsiders to "the people"
Civic space and public participation		
Space for NGOs, watchdogs, protest and advocacy without intimidation	→	Regulatory pressure and legal threats; chilling effects (self-censorship); delegitimising civil society as "foreign agents"
EU alignment and shared standards		
Commitment to EU fundamentals and cooperative compliance with monitoring	→	Conflict framing ("sovereignty vs Brussels"); strategic compliance, weakening of EU leverage through narrative politics

(Source: author’s synthesis and visualization for European-values and Populism)

The conceptual structuring of governance domains and pressure mechanisms is informed by comparative findings on populist radical-right representation and democratic satisfaction in Europe (Haugsgjerd, Linde, and Mathisen, 2025). This figure presents a conceptual flow across five governance domains commonly assessed in EU rule-of-law monitoring and comparative democracy research: rule of law and checks on power; pluralism and media freedom; minority rights and non-discrimination; civic space and public participation; and EU alignment and shared standards. As seen in countries such as Hungary and Poland (among others), these pressures can accumulate through sequenced institutional moves rather than sudden regime rupture.

A distinctive Romanian feature is the routinised presence of minority representation within governing coalitions, particularly through UDMR. The Hungarian minority party has historically served as both a policy advocate for the Hungarian minority and a coalition stabiliser. This creates a structural veto against the most overtly exclusionary measures. Yet, it also makes minority issues a key political conversation in how coalitions are made, as well as symbolic conflict when populists seek to demonstrate strength to their voter base (Căluș, 2025b).

Patterns seen in voting constitute a distinctive Romanian variable. Gherghina and Giugal (2025) demonstrate that the latest radical-right support among emigrants is structured by host-country institutional contexts rather than economic grievance (as per the last presidential election results). This situation suggests that mobilisation operates through identity frames amplified by transnational networks. Evidence that radical right support can be substantial among emigrant voters in highly democratic host countries complicates simple explanations based on economic frustration. For early warning, changes in diaspora mobilisation infrastructure, campaign messaging targeted at emigrant communities, and shifts in voting patterns across host-country contexts should be treated as leading indicators of broader domestic realignment as proven in statistics of vote intentions (Gherghina and Giugal, 2025).

Digital campaigning interacts with the other identified analysis variables. The 2024 presidential cycle illustrated very well how contestation over digital manipulation can become a legitimacy crisis for institutions. This is regardless of the ultimate legal outcome. Research emphasises the role of influencers and platform dynamics in elections. Researchers suggest that governance responses focused only on formal legality may fail to address deeper vulnerabilities in trust and information integrity (Pop-Eleches, 2025). In the best case scenario presented, these vulnerabilities are mitigated through stronger media safeguards, transparency, or civil-society capacity; in the middle and worst cases, they are exploited to delegitimise

oversight and to justify more majoritarian governing practices (Cațus, 2024a).

The contribution of the church's influence on politics is also an important variable worth mentioning in shaping the political ideals, which is not taken into account in the present study analysis. Similar to neighboring Moldova and many other post-Soviet states in the region, the relationship between religion and state governance in Romania is noteworthy (Putină, 2025: 97-114). This factor will yet influence both cultural identity and political policies to come.

5.2. Early Warning Indicators and Signposts

Across all scenarios, the focus falls on the identification of signposts (Junio and Mahnken, 2013: 374-395). Indicators with high “diagnostic” value include: (1)the degree of portfolio control granted to radical partners; (2)repeated attempts to change appointment rules for courts or watchdogs; (3)budgetary and procedural pressure on NGOs working on discrimination; (4)politicised disputes over minority-language education; and (5)the rhetorical normalisation of exclusion by senior officials (UK Government Office for Science, 2024). A complementary set of external indicators includes the tone and content of EU Rule of Law recommendations and the intensity of Council of Europe monitoring findings, as well as any movement toward using EU budgetary conditionality (European Union, Regulation 2020/2092, 2020).

This paper addressed the minority rights in a populist governance scenario as Romania adds to its foreign population yearly. In recent years, Romania has increasingly relied on foreign workers, especially from countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India. This is an attempt to fill labour shortages, which are most likely to worsen domestically (Romanian Centre for Comparative Migration Studies, 2025). This trend has also been facilitated by recruitment agreements (European Commission, 2026) and the existing legal framework for labour migration in the EU (such as the EU-India Trade Agreement). Attitudes towards migrants are overall tolerant in Romania at present; however, the nationalist political discourse is based on “Romanians first and us versus them narratives”. Romania's growing reliance on labor migration from South Asia (Romanian Centre for Comparative Migration Studies, 2025) will test whether inclusive governance extends to new minorities or remains bounded by historical identity politics (Pogan, 2021: 303-312). Romania's refugee policy has evolved positively in response to European Union mandates and the growing socio-political framework reforms (Balsam, 2025: 81-95).

EU-funded programs have been essential in supporting Roma inclusion. These programs facilitate integration to pave the way for both

economic and social inclusion. However, the long-term success of these efforts so far is often undermined by challenges in local governance (Bergmann, 2026: 91-112). Romania must maintain the European route to receive the aid necessary to support sustainable policies for all minority groups alike. Romania's approach to governance is similar to trends seen in neighboring Hungary. Here, minority integration remains a key political issue. Ethnic identity continues to play a central role in shaping how national integration strategies are developed (Villányi, 2026: 131-151).

6. Limitations

This study relies on scenario logic. It uses secondary sources rather than original fieldwork as well as single-country depth, which limits cross-national generalisability. Future similar research should, for example, triangulate scenarios with quantitative enforcement data and extend the comparative analysis to other CEE states facing similar populist pressures nationwide. This is an exploration of potential scenarios within the particular variables considered. Other scenario exploration cases may use a more diverse range of variables in relation to other political and governance aspects to reach different conclusions within the same time horizon.

7. Conclusion

How Romania will be by 2035 will depend on how EU oversight, fiscal realities, institutional trust, and coalition politics will interact with one another. While anti-populist engagement may not lead to the reversal of democratic progress, there is still a heightened risk that there will be instability regarding policies, tension regarding issues of identity, and inconsistent application of law if populism is involved in governing. The above-mentioned frame allows for a chance to mitigate against these risks. But this is only if the mainstream political parties treat human rights and pluralism as fundamental rather than as a negotiable issue. When EU levers have a clear and well-established rationale, EU influence has the best chance to impact Romania. Romania's best-case scenario will involve preserving an independent judiciary; protecting anti-discrimination legislation, and reconceptualising EU performance measures as tools of progressive improvements. The largest threat to Romania is not abrupt constitutional violations. But rather, the gradual acceptance of the ability to use procedural shortcuts, which is more difficult to reverse. Democracy and minority rights will be safeguarded through the monitoring of the actual implementation of policies.

Bibliography

- ACAPS (2022), "Scenario-Building Methodology," Technical Brief. Geneva: ACAPS.
https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Technical_notes/202202_acaps_technical_brief_scenario_building_methodology.pdf.
- Albertazzi, Daniele, and Duncan McDonnell (2015), *Populists in Power*. London and New York: Routledge (Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy).
- Apostolache, Mihai Cristian (2019), "On the Unconstitutionality of the Emergency Ordinance Regarding the Administrative Code," *Journal of Law and Administrative Sciences* 11, no. 3. <https://jolas.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/jolas11a3.pdf>.
- Armeanu, Octavian I. (2025), "The Fast Rise of Populist Radical Right Parties: Evidence from the Alliance for the Union of Romanians," *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 3: 582–598.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.35>.
- Balsam, Abuelfutooh Sayed (2025), "Refugee Policy in Romania," *Inclusivity* 2: 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.58603/NFEV4393>.
- Bergmann, Christian (2026), "Reform Fund Linked to the Inclusion of Roma and Other Vulnerable Groups," *Inclusivity* 3: 91–112.
<https://doi.org/10.58603/CHTJ3063>.
- Bodnár, Eszter, Jeremy Webber, and Oliver Schmidtke (2024), "Special Issue of the Hague Journal on the Rule of Law on Populism, Democracy, and the Rule of Law in Central and Eastern Europe," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 16, no. 2: 219–223. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-024-00241-4>.
- Brie, Mircea (2025), "Inclusivity. Vision, Mission, Goals, and Perspectives," *Inclusivity* 1: 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.58603/XQZT9578>.
- Burean, Toma, and Tamás Pálffy (2024), "The Rise of Populism during the Pandemic: Case of AUR in Romania," *Social Change Review* 22: 82–123. <https://doi.org/10.2478/scr-2024-0004>.
- Cașus, Kamil (2024a), "Romania after the Parliamentary Election: A Shift to the Right," *OSW Analyses*. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, December 2, 2024.
<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-12-02/romania-after-parliamentary-election-a-shift-to-right>. Accessed on 22.01.2026.
- Cașus, Kamil (2024b), "Romania: Constitutional Court Annuls the Presidential Election," *OSW Analyses*. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, December 9, 2024.
<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-12-09/romania-constitutional-court-annuls-presidential-election>. Accessed on 22.01.2026.

- Caľus, Kamil (2025a), "MAGA Casts a Shadow on US-Romanian Relations," *OSW Analyses*. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, March 5, 2025. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-03-05/maga-casts-a-shadow-us-romanian-relations>. Accessed on 22.01.2026.
- Caľus, Kamil (2025b), "Romania: Coalition Crisis Resulting from the First Round of the Presidential Election," *OSW Analyses*. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, May 6, 2025. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-05-06/romania-coalition-crisis-resulting-first-round-presidential-election>. Accessed on 23.01.2026.
- Caľus, Kamil (2025c), "New Government in Romania: A Grand Coalition Facing Major Challenges," *OSW Analyses*. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, June 24, 2025. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-06-24/new-government-romania-a-grand-coalition-facing-major-challenges>. Accessed on 23.01.2026.
- Carothers, Thomas (2002), "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1: 5–21. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003>.
- Colibařanu, Antonia (2025), "Fault Lines in the East: Romania's Political Transformation and Europe's Future," *Elcano Royal Institute Analysis*, May 8, 2025. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/fault-lines-in-the-east-romania-political-transformation-and-europe-future/>, accessed on 23.01.2026.
- Consiliul Naćional al Audiovizualului (2026), *Comunicat de presă – ședinća publică a CNA din 10.02.2026*. CNA, February 10, 2026. <https://cna.ro/a-comunicat-de-presa-sedinta-publica-a-cna-din-10022026-nnlh5cq3rjm7hv8cem5jx3xa/>. Accessed on 12.02.2026.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, et al. (2024), "V-Dem Codebook V14," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://v-dem.net/documents/55/codebook.pdf>. Accessed on 22.01.2026.
- Council of Europe (1995), *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*. ETS No. 157. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/16800c10cf>.
- Crăciun, Claudiu (2017), "In Citizens We Trust: How Street Protests Became the Last Democratic Resort in Romania," *Green European Journal*, April 14, 2017. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/in-citizens-we-trust-how-street-protests-became-the-last-democratic-resort-in-romania/>.
- Daniel, Jan, and Ondřej Ditrych (2024), "Foresight in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions: Scenario-Building Methodology," RE-ENGAGE

- Project Deliverable D5.2. Brussels: Horizon Europe. https://re-engaging.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/D5.2-Scenario_Methodology_fin.pdf.
- Dhami, Mandeep K., Lars Wicke, and Dilek Önkäl (2022), "Scenario Generation and Scenario Quality Using the Cone of Plausibility," *Futures* 142: 102995. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.102995>.
- Digi24 (2025), "Tânărul care a lovit cu pumnul un livrator asiatic de mâncare și i-a spus 'Du-te înapoi în țara ta' a fost arestat pentru 30 de zile," *Digi24*, August 27, 2025. <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/tanarul-care-a-lovit-cu-pumnul-un-livrator-asiatic-de-mancare-si-i-a-spus-du-te-inapoi-in-tara-ta-a-fost-arestat-pentru-30-de-zile-3389089>. Accessed on 23.01.2026.
- European Commission (2017), "Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on Progress in Romania under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism," COM(2017) 751 final. Brussels: European Commission. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52017DC0751>.
- European Commission (2024a), "2024 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the Rule of Law Situation in Romania," Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2024) 823 final. Brussels: European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/6abcf25f-9e2d-46c0-93f0-4eebb0e10224_en.
- European Commission (2024b), "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Application of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092," COM(2024) 17. Brussels: European Commission. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52024DC0017>.
- European Commission (2026), "The EU-India Trade Agreement," Brussels: European Union. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/trade/eu-india-trade-agreement_en. Accessed on 05.02.2026.
- European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) (2025), "ECRI Report on Romania (Sixth Monitoring Cycle)," Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/romania>. Accessed on 21.01.2026.
- European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) (2019), "Romania – Opinion on Emergency Ordinances GEO No. 7 and GEO No. 12 Amending the Laws of Justice," CDL-AD(2019)014. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD%282019%29014-e>.

- European Court of Human Rights (2025), “Q&A: Decision in the Case of Călin Georgescu,” Press Q&A. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/press-q-a-calin-georgescu-eng>. Accessed on 22.01.2026.
- European Parliament (2025), *Romania’s Fiscal Situation: State-of-Play and Legal Framework*. Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Economic Governance and EMU Scrutiny Unit (EGOV) and Budgetary Support Unit (BSU), PE 773.716, October 2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/299430/Briefing_EGOV-PolDep%20REGI-BSU_Romania%20fiscal%20situation.pdf. Accessed on 11.02.2026.
- European Union (2012a), “Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,” *Official Journal of the European Union* C 326 (October 26, 2012): 391–407. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12012P021>.
- European Union (2012b), “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union,” *Official Journal of the European Union* C 326 (October 26, 2012): 13–390. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2012/art_2/oj/eng.
- European Union (2020), “Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 on a General Regime of Conditionality for the Protection of the Union Budget,” *Official Journal of the European Union* L 433I (December 22, 2020): 1–10. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2020/2092/oj/eng>.
- European Union (2024a), “Directive (EU) 2024/1069 on the Protection of Persons Who Engage in Public Participation from Manifestly Unfounded Claims or Abusive Court Proceedings (Anti-SLAPP),” *Official Journal of the European Union* L 2024/1069 (April 24, 2024): 1–18. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2024/1069/oj/eng>.
- European Union (2024b), “Regulation (EU) 2024/1083 Establishing a Common Framework for Media Services in the Internal Market (European Media Freedom Act),” *Official Journal of the European Union* L 2024/1083 (April 24, 2024): 1–66. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1083/oj/eng>.
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023), *Roma Survey 2021: Roma in 10 European Countries - Main Results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2022/roma-survey-findings>. Accessed on 03.02.2026.
- Expert Forum (2025), “The Priorities of the Romanian Justice System Yesterday and Today,” Policy Brief 230, December 15, 2025. <https://expertforum.ro/en/the-priorities-of-the-romanian-justice-system-yesterday-and-today/>. Accessed on 23.01.2026.

- Freedom House (2025), "Romania," *Freedom in the World 2025*. Washington, DC: Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/romania>. Accessed on 03.02.2026.
- Gherghina, Sergiu, and Aurelian Giugal (2025), "Cast (the Vote) Away: Why Romanian Emigrants Support the Radical Right in Home Elections," *Party Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688251387098>.
- Ghimisi, Andrei (2020), "Minority Groups in Romania during the Communist Regime," *Journal of Research and Innovation for Sustainable Society* 2, no. 2: 151–156. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347810398_MINORITY_GROUPS_IN_ROMANIA_DURING_THE_COMMUNIST_REGIME.
- Harward, Christina (2025), "Far-Right Gains in Romania Could Advance Kremlin Objectives," Institute for the Study of War, May 5, 2025. <https://www.understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/far-right-gains-in-romania-could-advance-kremlin-objectives/>. Accessed on 22.01.2026.
- Haugsgjerd, Atle Hennum, Jonas Linde, and Ruben Berge Mathisen (2025), "Populist Radical Right Party Representation and Satisfaction with Democracy in Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2601295>.
- Hooghe, Marc, and Vasiliki Triga (2022), "Political Trust in Eastern Europe," in Sonja Zmerli and Tom W.G. van der Meer (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Trust*, London: Routledge, p. 367–382.
- INSCOP Research (2026), "Barometrul Informat.ro – INSCOP Research, Ediția a VII-a – Capitolul 2: Intenție vot alegeri parlamentare." <https://www.inscop.ro/ianuarie-2026-barometrul-informat-ro-inscop-research-editia-a-vii-a-capitolul-2-intentie-vot-alegeri-parlamentare/>. accessed on 25.01.2026
- Junio, Timothy J., and Thomas G. Mahnken (2013), "Conceiving of Future War: The Promise of Scenario Analysis for International Relations," *International Studies Review* 15, no. 3: 374–395. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12061>.
- Kelemen, R. Daniel (2020), "The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium," *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 3: 481–499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1712455>.
- Kyriacou, Andreas P., and Pedro Trivín (2025), "Populism and the Rule of Law: The Importance of Institutional Legacies," *American Journal of Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12935>.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt (2018), *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown Publishing.
- Mitu, Bogdan, et al. (2017), "Romania's 2017 Anti-Corruption Protests: Causes, Development and Implications," Bournemouth University Working Paper.

https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/29647/1/romanian_protests_2017_publication_FINAL_nk.pdf.

MKOR (2025), “Fiscal X-Ray of Romania: Consumer Sentiment on Public Trust and Fiscal Policy,” independent public opinion study based on a representative sample of 1,250 Romanian adults, June 20–22, 2025. <https://mkor.eu/research/fiscal-x-ray-romania-public-trust-2025/>. Accessed on 23.01.2026.

Mudde, Cas (2004), “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4: 541–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

Müller, Jan-Werner (2016), *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Our World in Data (2024), “Liberal Democracy Index,” based on V-Dem data. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/liberal-democracy-index>. Accessed on 21.01.2026.

Plate, Katja Christina (2025), “Romania after the Election: A Difficult Equation to Solve,” Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Country Report, June 26, 2025. <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/romania-after-the-election-a-difficult-equation-to-solve>. Accessed on 23.01.2026.

Pogan, Livia (2021), “Attitudes towards Immigrants’ Integration in Romania,” *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane „C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor”* 22: 303–312.

Pop-Eleches, Grigore (2025), “The Perfect Storm: Political Alienation, Ideological Resonance, and the Role of Influencers in the 2024 Romanian Parliamentary Elections,” *East European Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2025.2524502>.

Protsyk, Oleh, Marius Matichescu, and Baptiste Chatre (2008), “Representational Consequences of Special Mechanisms for Ethnic Minority Inclusion: Evidence from Romania,” ECMI Working Paper No. 41. Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, September 2008. https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/pdf/workin_g_paper_41.pdf.

Putină, Natalia (2025), “Religion, Confessional Communities, and State–Church Relations in the Republic of Moldova,” *Inclusivity* 2: 97–114. <https://doi.org/10.58603/JDJC6772>.

Romanian Centre for Comparative Migration Studies (2025), “Romania: Exploratory Study on Labour Immigration,” published on the European Commission Migration and Home Affairs website, January 14, 2025. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/romania-exploratory-study-labour-immigration_en. Accessed on 22.01.2026.

Schimmelfennig, Frank, and Ulrich Sedelmeier (2020), “The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: The External Incentives Model

- Revisited,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 6: 814–833. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1617333>.
- Stoica, Alina (2025), “Strengthening Social Resilience Through Cultural Diplomacy at the Eastern European Union Border,” *Inclusivity* 1: 33–43. <https://doi.org/10.58603/TOZW1537>.
- Strøm, Kaare, and Wolfgang C. Müller (1999), “Political Parties and Hard Choices,” in Kaare Strøm and Wolfgang C. Müller (eds.), *Policy, Office, or Votes? How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1–35.
- UK Government Office for Science (2024), “Futures Toolkit for Policymakers and Analysts,” London: Government Office for Science. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/futures-toolkit-for-policy-makers-and-analysts>. Accessed on 21.01.2026.
- Vachudova, Milada Anna (2020), “Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 3: 318–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787163>.
- Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (n.d.), “Country Brief: Romania.” https://v-dem.net/media/publications/CB_12_Romania_v2.pdf, accessed on 20.01.2026.
- Villányi, Tamás (2026), “Cultural and Educational Integration. National and Ethnic Minorities in Hungary: Identity, Integration, and Diversity After the Regime Change,” *Inclusivity* 3: 131–151. <https://doi.org/10.58603/KKMV8886>.
- Vintilă, Pavel (2025), “The Ethnopolitical Identity of the Gagauz: Between the Russian World and European Integration,” *Inclusivity* 1: 141–158. <https://doi.org/10.58603/RXBQ3649>.
- Weyland, Kurt (2021), *Democracy’s Resilience to Populism’s Threat: Countering Global Illiberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.