

THE NEGATIVE PERCEPTION ON QUALITY OF LIFE AND POPULISM SUPPORT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA IN 2025

NIȚOI DANIEL

RESEARCHER III, RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR QUALITY OF LIFE, ROMANIAN ACADEMY,
BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

e-mail: daniel.nitoi@iccv.ro, ORCID ID 0009-0007-1306-7932

BAKHAYA ALEXANDRU

ACADEMY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES, BUCHAREST, ROMANIA BAKHAYA

e-mail: alexandru21@stud.ase.ro

Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between the negative perception on the quality of life and the rise of contemporary populism, using as a case study the presidential elections in Romania in 2025. Starting from the premise that subjective assessments of living standards influence electoral behavior, it analyzes the extent to which individual dissatisfaction has favored support for parties and leaders with populist discourse. The analysis integrates electoral data, opinion polls and the dynamics of campaign discourse, and the results indicate that electorate segments that expressed a high degree of socio-economic dissatisfaction and distrust in institutions showed a stronger predisposition to support populist parties and leaders. At the same time, the conclusions suggest that the rise of populism in Romania in the post-pandemic period cannot be explained exclusively by ideological factors or campaign strategies, but must be understood in correlation with the dynamics of perceptions of quality of life and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions.

Keywords: quality of life, contemporary populism, institutional trust, subjective perceptions of well-being, elections, well-being, democracy

Clasificare JEL : M40, M41

1. Introduction and context of the study

The first quarter of the 21st century was characterized by a succession of unpredictable events with global effects and impact on the stability and optimal conduct of social activities. The spectrum of these events is wide and diverse, each of them having the potential to generate political, social, economic, cultural, demographic tensions and so on. Some of the most relevant topics of public interest, which have also provoked heated debates in academia in recent decades, have targeted the phenomenon of the rise of populism, as well as the profound transformations brought to the quality of life, all in the context of the contemporary political, economic and social changes mentioned.

The relevance of researching of contemporary populism in recent decades derives from the fact that it represents a political phenomenon with an increasingly visible impact at global level, manifesting itself by increasing the influence of leaders, parties and movements that mobilize political, social and economic discontent and affect the institutional stability and functioning of liberal democratic systems. On the European continent, the rise of populism has been extremely pronounced in recent decades, with significant variations depending on the socio-economic and political context of each state, and for the specific area of Central and Eastern Europe, the phenomenon is particularly relevant due, among other things, to the post-communist transition, the

fundamental economic transformations and the tensions generated by European integration. The concept of quality of life is one of the central themes of contemporary research, whose relevance in the 21st century is accentuated by accelerated social, economic and technological transformations, as well as new global challenges. An analysis of the quality of life generally involves taking into account a complex set of objective and subjective factors, covering material conditions of existence, access to resources, the functioning of institutions, the level of social well-being and individual perceptions of satisfaction and safety. In this context, the study of quality of life becomes essential for understanding how public policies, socio-economic reality and political changes influence the daily experience of individuals, as well as the cohesion of contemporary societies.

Next, the two concepts outlined will occupy a central position in this paper, which aims to analyze the relationship between the negative perception felt by citizens on the quality of life and the support of populist political options. This raises the question of whether citizens who perceive a deterioration in their quality of life are more likely to support populist leaders, parties and movements. We aim to discover real and reasoned answers in this study and to capture the relationships between a negative perception of citizens on the quality of life and the support of populist attitudes through a contextual analysis of the 2025 presidential elections in Romania. More specifically, 2025 is used as a reference year for observing citizens' subjective assessments of the felt quality of the will. We will then follow up to what extent the presence of negative perceptions contributed to the intention to support and to the actual support of populist tendencies in the 2025 presidential elections.

From the point of view of research design, the paper falls into the category of descriptive research, with the objective of describing and contextualizing the relationship between quality of life and the support of populism, and we will focus on identifying trends and interpreting the social and political meanings associated with them. We will therefore use mixed methodological approaches, combining both quantitative and qualitative research tools in a complementary manner. Specifically, from the register of quantitative research methods we will refer to the secondary analysis of data, through which we will track the collection and systematization of existing data from surveys or statistics, taking into account different quality of life indicators such as the standard of living, the general assessment of satisfaction with one's own life or access to certain types of public services. This study uses secondary data analysis to describe general trends in quality of life and the level of support for populism, without resorting to inferential statistical analyses. On the other hand, in the category of qualitative research methods, this approach uses content analysis, a method through which elements of speech, public statements and other electoral campaign materials related to the 2025 presidential elections are examined. The analysis aims to identify recurring themes, discursive strategies and narrative framework used by political actors in order to highlight how electoral messages are constructed and communicated. Also specific to the topic addressed, the usefulness of content analysis lies in the fact that it captures how the dimensions of quality of life are articulated in populist discourse.

The work is structured in three parts. The first two parts concern the theoretical framework itself, where the main concepts used in the paper are defined. The first part will cover the theoretical framing of the concept of quality of life, a concept with a high degree of complexity in the sphere of social sciences, and which in turn integrates a series of notions that require further theoretical delimitations and explanations. Therefore, the aim pursued in this section, and more generally in the theoretical part, is to operationalise the concepts in order to ensure clarity and coherence of the research approach. The second part focuses on the theorizing of contemporary populism and its central concepts, where both its conceptual delimitation is aimed as rigorous as possible, but also the delivery of a definition capable of reflecting and embedding the realities of Central and Eastern European societies in the post-89 period, thus providing an adequate theoretical and analytical framework for the analysis of the phenomenon in the Romanian context. The

analysis also implicitly captures the ways populism manifests within political systems and involves its relationship with liberal democracy. Finally, the last section is devoted to the actual analysis of the electoral elections for the presidential elections in Romania in 2025, identifying in this context the populist elements of candidates' speeches and strategies, but also the public perceptions expressed by citizens during the reference period on different dimensions of quality of life, the purpose being to reflect on how subjective assessments of quality of life influence political positioning.

2. Quality of life: Social concepts and implications

The roots of the concept of quality of life can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century and Romania was the second country to take over this concept and launch a quality of life assessment program, after the United States of America, since the 1970s (Nițoi, 2025:50 apud. Zamfir, 1984). After 1989, the *Quality of Life Research Institute* conducted 13 national assessments of the mood of the population.(Nițoi, 2025:50). The term *quality of life* became established in the social sciences in the second half of the last century, but since the beginning of this century there has been a constant concern on the part of states and various organizations for the collection of data on topics such as social trends or social change. Therefore, various materials in the form of social analysis reports will be published during this period, and the data collected are grouped together and cover mainly the following areas: income, education, consumption, medical services or housing conditions (Bognar, 2005). Even if the concept, in its current form and meaning, will enter into academic use after the second half of the previous century, we can speak of a first attestation of the concept in the 1920s, used strictly in the economic field and introduced by A.C. Pigou in his work *"The Economics of Welfare"* (Pigou, 1920). The work does not focus on quality of life, but Pigou discusses the constitutive elements of the concept, their impact on quality of life, but also the ways available for their control (Lakomý,2022). The development and maturation of the concept took a slow and theoretically precarious course until the end of the Second World War, at which time the World Health Organization (WHO) decided to extend the concept of 'health' to include elements related to the psychological and social well-being of individuals, thus marking the start of research on quality of life and the widespread adoption of the concept (Hoinaru et. al, 2021; Lakomy, 2022). For example, in the post-war years, especially after the 1960s, efforts to collect data and publish analyses based on social indicators of quality of life will become much more systematic and complex (Bognar, 2005).

Quality of life is a multidimensional and multidisciplinary concept that goes beyond the mere assessment of material well-being and includes social, psychological and cultural aspects of human experience. At the same time, its assessment and conceptualization remain centered within sociology, which provides the main theoretical framework for analyzing the interaction between social conditions and the well-being of the individual.

If we narrow down the multidisciplinary area of the concept and focus on it from an exclusively sociological perspective, it can be observed that the analysis of living conditions, at least in the North American space, dates back to 1918, even if the explicit term quality of life was not used at that time. However, the operationalization of the umbrella concept - living conditions - was achieved through indicators that are still today essential components of measuring the quality of life in contemporary societies, such as social status, socio-economic status or standard of living (Ferris, 2004). The 1940s gave new impetus to sociological research on the quality of life, where several authors began to develop new dimensions and introduce various related concepts. For example, Cottan and Mangus (1942) devised an operationalization of the standard of living by reference to the standard of living, social participation and social adaptation.

Thus, based on these concepts and trying to capture the satisfaction of citizens, the authors resorted to the use of a five-step scale that measured the perception of respondents according to different proposed variables such as: living conditions, community services, social and recreational

activities, state of health, etc. (Cottam, 1942) The pioneering contributions of these researchers favoured the development and consolidation of the concept in the second half of the 20th century. At the same time, the scale for assessing respondents' satisfaction with the main activities and groups, proposed by Cottam and Mangus, was a methodological benchmark for the 1970s research in the field of social psychology, conducted by Campbell, Converse and Rogers (1976), as well as Andrews and Withey (1967).

Beginning with this period, the measurement of quality of life began to be introduced in sociological surveys in the 1970s, and in the 1980s sociological research on quality of life was consolidated (Ferris, 2004:42). Another example is *Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who in 1972 'invented' the term Gross Domestic Happiness Indicator, and introduced to the country of Buthan for the first time, with the help of the Bhutan Study Centre, through Karma Ura, the first reports and surveys to take the happiness indicator into account in measuring a country's prosperity.* (Nițoi, 2025:112)

At the end of this excursion that followed the evolution of the concept of quality of life, from its origins to the consolidation of its role in sociological research, it is necessary to present a definition of the concept, which will be maintained as a reference throughout the work. The approach is not a simple one, because the frequency with which *the phrase quality of life* is used, both in vernacular language and in various contexts, hinders a proper understanding of the concept. In addition, any definition of the concept, however comprehensive it may be, faces theoretical difficulties, as it belongs to and is claimed by numerous disciplines of the social sciences, each with its own traditions and methodological perspectives (Precupețu, 2019). In an attempt to diminish the confusions and ambiguities associated with the concept, we will take from the literature a minimal but contextually appropriate definition, and we will consider quality of life as the reflection of the well-being of individuals within a given society, while expressing and indicating the extent to which their life can be considered satisfactory (Preoccupation, 2019:203). It should be noted that any analysis of the quality of life takes into account both the relationship of the individual with the community and the society in which he lives, as well as aspects of the quality of society as a whole, such as the quality of public services (Trasca et al., 2019). Given that the analysis will focus on perceptions of quality of life, it is important to note that these perceptions depend significantly on the objective situations in which individuals live, the circumstances of individual life, but also on the social context. (Vargas et al., 2022). Thus, quality of life is influenced by structural factors, such as economy, politics, education, health or working conditions, which shape the context of individual life. At the same time, perceptions of life integrate personal values, expectations and standards, and people evaluate their own situation compared to that of reference groups, such as friends, neighbors or acquaintances (Precupețu, 2019:203-204).

3. Contemporary populism. Who is contributing to his ascension?

Ever since the first attempts at theorizing contemporary populism, including the volume coordinated by Ionescu and Gellner (1969), the question has been raised as to whether populism should be considered an ideology, or a political movement, or, why not, both (Ionescu, 1969:3-4). Subsequently, populism was associated with a number of attributes, ranging from discursive style or political program, to mood. These attributes come essentially from the different theoretical perspectives offered to the populist phenomenon. Thus, depending on the angle of reporting, but also to encompass the complexity of populism, its study focuses on: actors (people, elites, charismatic leader), action (mobilisation and strategic leadership), style (moralist, dichotomic or majorityist), political consequences (polarisation, social homogenisation), normative implications (threat or remedy to democracy) or field (old-new populism; left – right; democratic – non-democratic) (Pappas, 2016:6). In as simple a manner as possible, we can understand populism as an appeal to the people, from political leaders or parties, against the current power structure and dominant ideas and values in a society (Canovan, 1999:3). However, this definition does not

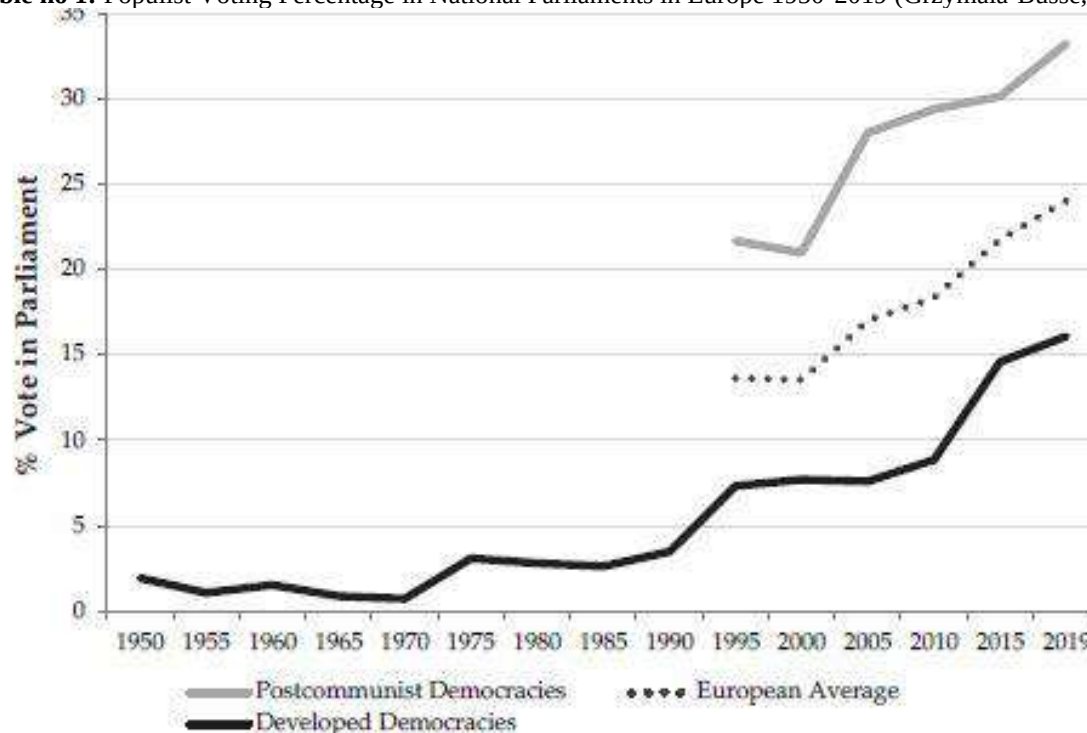
capture precisely the defining characteristics through which current populisms manifest themselves, because the simple appeal to the people to challenge the existing order can mean both demagoguery and opportunism. For example, during an election campaign, there are many parties that want to get electoral support from citizens by using persuasion techniques or unfounded promises, such as lowering taxes or offering financial advantages without additional costs, but we cannot classify all these parties as belonging to the populist spectrum.

For the quality of the analytical approach it is necessary to establish a definition of contemporary populism, which will be applied throughout the research and which must encompass the diversity of forms in which this phenomenon manifests itself. This is not an easy undertaking because there are a multitude of definitions of populism, but none of them can claim to cover the full extent of this global phenomenon. Pierre Taguieff, through an analysis that aims to determine how and how the concept of populism can be used in the social sciences (Taguieff, 1995), will come to the conclusion that populism is and can be comparable to democracy, understood both as an ideal and as a form of government, but also to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. For this reason, he considers that *"populism is a dimension of political action, capable of merging with all forms of movements and all types of government. [...] Whether it is a size or a style instead of an ideology or a form of mobilization, populism is so elastic and indeterminate that it discourages all attempts to give it a rigorous definition"* (Taguieff, 1995:25). Perhaps the best known and I would like to say that the most widely used work on populism is that of Mudde in 2004, with an addition in 2007: *Populism is a thin ideology that believes that society can be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: The "virtuous people" and the "corrupt elite" who argue that politics should be the expression of the "general will"* (Mudde, 2004:545 and 2007:23) *of the people*. However, this definition, like many others, fails to fully capture all the features of this complex concept. Taking into account the aspects discussed above, in this study I will opt for an extensive definition of populism, which at the same time I consider to be able to respond adequately to the theoretical requirements, but especially to the empirical ones, especially for the populist expressions in Central and Eastern Europe. Borrowing the definition proposed by Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008), we will consider populism as *"an ideology that opposes a virtuous and homogeneous people to a group of elites and dangerous 'entities' which, together, are presented as responsible for depriving or attempting to deprive the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice"* (McDonnell, 2008:3).

Several possible interrelated causes have been identified in the literature that claim to explain why the Central and Eastern European region became in post-communism a fertile ground for the emergence of populist formations. First, one of the most frequently invoked arguments is that of the communist legacy and the constraining nature of the political trajectories adopted in the post-communist period, often under the influence of external pressures. This context has not fostered confidence-building in political institutions. The Euroscepticism manifested by the states in the region is, to a large extent, rooted in this reality. Second, the precarious economic situation and social tensions in times of crisis have contributed to a climate of instability, amplifying the vulnerabilities of post-communist societies. Third, as a recent factor, the refugee crisis has been an additional tension factor for Central and Eastern European states, with difficulties in managing it favouring the rise of nationalist parties, often characterised by xenophobic discourse and anti-EU stances (Kukovic, 2022:4). Statistical data and empirical reality in Central and Eastern Europe undoubtedly capture the exponential rise of populism in the post-communist decades. Moreover, it seems that populism in Eastern Europe manages to eliminate even traditional political competitors from the political scene with relative ease. For example, at the level of 2017, in Central and Eastern Europe, populist parties were in power in seven states: Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia and Bulgaria were minor coalition partners in two other states, and in three they dominated the opposition. The scale that populism has experienced in Central and Eastern Europe can be seen, over time, by increasing the percentages of populist parties in national

elections. Thus, while in 2000, populist parties won an average of 9.2% of the total votes, in 2017 the percentage tripled to 31.6%. In 2000, there were only two states where populist parties received about 20% of the vote, and in 2017, there were ten such states. The case of Poland is telling, where in 2000 the percentages of populist parties amounted to 0.1% of the votes, and since 2005, PiS has managed to gather in each election at least 25% of the votes. Not only the percentages of populist parties increased considerably, but also the populist parties themselves, in 2000 there were 12 parties from Central and Eastern Europe that entered the electoral competition, while in 2017 their number reached 28 (Eiermann, 2017:7-8). In the attached chart we can see the upward slope that populism has taken and the percentage of populist votes in national parliaments over several decades, both in Western Europe and in Central and Eastern Europe.

Table no 1: Populist Voting Percentage in National Parliaments in Europe 1950-2019 (Grzymala-Busse, 2019:37)



Broadly speaking, this is the picture offered by the political parties of Central and Eastern Europe. Against such a background, characterized by weakly institutionalized parties and party systems, in which traditional parties fail to meet the needs of the electorate and maintain fragile connections with citizens in constituencies, and their legitimacy is reflected in the low level of trust of the population, populism has strengthened its position.

4. Quality of life dimensions and populist tendencies in the post-pandemic period and in the 2025 presidential election in Romania

After 2020, populism in Romania entered a new stage of visibility and political consolidation, amid a series of overlapping crises, both pandemic, economic or social, and geopolitical. If populist manifestations existed before, the post-2020 period marked an intensification of anti-establishment, anti-elite and sovereignist discourses, articulated especially around dissatisfaction with the sanitary restrictions of the pandemic, with the traditional political class and with the European institutions. In a climate characterised by intense polarisation, institutional mistrust and the expansion of political communication online, populist actors have managed to capitalise on social frustrations and turn diffuse discontent into significant electoral capital. Thus, the beginnings of this new phase of Romanian populism are closely linked to the dynamics of recent crises and the reconfiguration

of the relationship between citizens, parties and the public space. According to a recent research that aimed to understand the electoral support for populist-nationalist parties in Romania, the systemic nature of corruption was highlighted as a main factor that contributed to the significant erosion of public trust in the leaders of traditional parties, generating a favorable context for the affirmation of populist parties such as AUR and SOS Romania. Their speech, centered on attributing responsibility for economic and social difficulties to Western influences and the institutions of the European Union, is doubled by the building of an image of integrity and authenticity of their leaders. This discursive combination finds receptivity among an electorate disillusioned with the traditional political class (Botan, 2025:114-115).

Of particular importance for the present analysis is the populism manifested by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians - AUR and its leader, candidate of the party in the presidential elections, during which he obtained the qualification in the second round of the elections. AUR is a populist party that builds its discourse, in a classic way, in opposition to the corrupt elite and on behalf of the people. The party made effective use of the media, in particular social networks, to criticise the government, and in the 2020 election campaign exploited grievances over pandemic restrictions, rising energy costs and economic insecurity, promising far-reaching reforms. The leader gained visibility through his anti-mask, anti-quarantine and anti-vaccination positions, themes that polarized society during the pandemic period. Ideologically, the AUR promotes a pronounced sovereignty, upholding traditional values, a strong authority and Christianity, and its political orientation with authoritarian accents is reflected both in the leader's aggressive discourse and in the radical protests of his supporters (Armeanu, 2025:588).

5. Quality of life in Romania: 2024-2025

The quality of life situation in Romania has registered, at least in recent years, mixed developments, which translate into both progress and important challenges. According to the Social Progress Index, Romania slightly improved its overall score in 2024, remaining 45th globally, but registering declines in both basic needs and overall well-being. For example, the Romanian state has made progress in areas related to personal freedom, nutrition and medical care, access to information and communications or housing, but has decreased or stagnated in chapters such as health, basic education and water and sanitation services according to Socialprogress.org. This topic is extensively researched by Deloitte in 2025.

The public services that a state manages to provide directly influence the quality of life that citizens perceive. In recent years, there has been a widespread trend whereby citizens have created high expectations for public services. However, in many situations, these expectations are not fully met, which leads to a decrease in the level of satisfaction of the beneficiary citizens with the services provided by the State. For Romania, the available data place citizens' perception of the quality of public services below the EU average, and the largest differences are observed by branches of health services, childcare or social housing. The causes of poor assessment of public services and a negative perception of quality of life can be found significantly in trust in public institutions. For example, citizens give low levels of trust to public institutions, both in terms of trust in the Government and in local public authorities. This is also reflected in the low perceived quality of public services (Petrescu, 2020:279).

In this context, it is not surprising that in 2024, in a survey based on an opinion poll conducted during the presidential elections at the end of the year, 68% of respondents said they were pessimistic about the future of the country. Also, the study identifies corruption and fear of war as the main concerns of Romanians, 60% of respondents place the topic of corruption as a central issue, and the fear of war is mentioned in 29% of the answers. Regarding the financial situation, only 18% of Romanians consider that the financial situation of their family has improved compared to the previous year, a percentage that is extremely low and reflects a generalized pessimism regarding both the present situation and the future prospects (MKOR, 2024).

Even though Eurostat data showed that in 2024, Romanians reported an average life satisfaction score of 7.7 points out of 10, placing Romania second in the EU after Finland (Ernst, 2026), according to Eurobarometer 101 data from 2024, Romanian citizens are among the Europeans most dissatisfied with their own lives, even compared to residents of other Eastern European countries. In addition to their dissatisfaction with the present, Romanians are also pessimistic about the future, with about 31% of them anticipating a deterioration in living conditions in 2025. The main current problems reported by Romanian citizens concern price increases and the economic situation. Thus, about 43% of respondents identify price dynamics as the most serious problem, and 27% believe that improving the economic situation should be a major national concern (Dumitrescu, 2025). An overview of citizens' perception of quality of life and the level of trust in political and social institutions is faithfully reflected and can be inferred from the results of national barometers. For example, an INSCOP Barometer conducted in mid-2025 reveals a deeply eroded perception of meritocracy in Romania, with over 74% of respondents considering that success depends more on relationships and connections than on real skills. The results point to a heightened crisis of trust in social and institutional mechanisms, accompanied by a widespread sense of systemic blockage as almost 73% of participants believe that the current socio-political system deliberately limits social mobility. The state is perceived as primarily responsible for individual failures, and almost 59% of respondents believe that others have been unfairly supported while they have been ignored¹.

As a subjective assessment of the quality of life in 2025, according to a national survey conducted by IRES, which analyzed citizens' perception of personal life and well-being in 2025, 68% of Romanians appreciate that they had a good or very good year at personal level, although 63% of them consider that the year was difficult for the country, perceived as one of resistance rather than progress. The IRES survey shows that, although most citizens manage to cope with personal and family challenges, the perception of Romania's general direction is profoundly negative. Rising stress, economic pressures, social and political polarisation, and declining trust in institutions are shaping a social climate dominated by forced adaptation and scepticism, and public policies are critically assessed not only for their effects but also for their lack of transparency, fairness and communication.²

6. 2025 presidential election poll

The voting intentions expressed during the pre-election period provide a snapshot of the political climate and highlight the main directions perceived by the electorate. Based on a study that aimed to track the voting intentions of the population in the run-up to the elections (March-April 2025), the conclusions point to a political orientation strongly influenced by economic perceptions. Thus, dissatisfaction with the individual financial situation and the evolution of the national economy correlates with an increased tendency to support parties or candidates perceived as an alternative to the current government. There is also a higher predisposition to populist or anti-establishment policy choices among respondents expressing a heightened level of economic pessimism and a lack of trust in institutions³.

¹ BAROMETR INSCOP Research 2nd Edition: Chapter 9: Social values. Lost trust, JULY 2025 available at <https://www.inscop.ro/July-2025-barometer-informat-ro-inscop-research-edition-a-ii-a-chapter-9-social-values-trust-lost/>.

² The National Survey. Romanians in 2025", December 2025, <https://ires.ro/article/471/romanii-in-year-2025>.

³ MKOR, "Independent Consumer Sentiment Study 2025 - Presidential Elections Romania March - April 2025 (Public Report)", available at <https://hotnews.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Raport-Consumer-Sentiment-Elections-Presidential-March-April-2025-MKOR.pdf>.

Polls conducted during the election campaign indicated that the AUR leader and candidate in the presidential election came first in the electorate's⁴ preferences. His strong populist electoral speech focused on promoting 'Romania first' policies, supporting a close alignment with the Trump administration. He said his privileged relationship with the US administration positioned him as the only candidate capable of preventing a possible withdrawal of US troops from Romania. On the subject of the war in Ukraine, he claimed that he would make public information on Romania's contribution to the war effort in Ukraine, which he considers supported at the expense of child allowances and pensions. Although he was present at the first televised debate on 28 April 2025, he left the event before its start, citing opposition to the exclusion of the controversial candidate, Calin Georgescu⁵.

Following the results of the first round, the AUR leader ranked first, obtaining 41% of the votes, with a significant advance over the second-placed candidate, Nicusor Dan, who managed to get 21% of the total votes cast. After the elections, Simion stated that the vote expressed reflected the will of the Romanian people, which he characterised as 'a victory of Romanian dignity, of those who have not lost hope and who continue to believe in a free, respected and sovereign Romania' (Diaconescu, 2025). The performance of the AUR leader in the first round, materialized in obtaining 41% of the votes, exceeds the significance of a simple electoral result and reflects the accumulation of structural tensions in the Romanian society. Its rise is explained by the consolidation of a strong anti-establishment trend, fuelled by the discontent generated by the cancellation of the presidential elections in December 2024 and the perception of persistent institutional instability. Its success is not the expression of an ideological choice, but the result of the erosion of trust in traditional parties, the poor management of major crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine, and the inability of democratic opposition forces to offer a credible alternative. In this context, the vote given to Simion after the first round appears as a manifestation of accumulated frustration, social disillusionment and discontent with unresolved socio-economic inequalities (Tufiş, 2025).

The context of the second round was marked by a televised debate between the two candidates on 8 May 2025. On this occasion, Simion defined his position on the war in Ukraine as one of neutrality, rejecting the escalation of the conflict and the continuation of military support, a position he said he maintains in full consonance with the Trump administration. He also stated that, in the event of a vote in the European Council, he would act exclusively according to Romania's national interests, without prioritising other states. Asked if Romania could block support to Ukraine, he said state financial resources should be directed primarily to Romanian citizens, not to other states. At the same time, he invoked the need to respect the rights of the Romanian minority in Ukraine and said that Romania should be compensated for its contribution to Kiev's support effort. His speech at Euronews on 8 May 2025 also included critical references to the presence of non-EU citizens in Romania, advocating for a 'Europe of Nations' based on Christian values.

Nicusor Dan was elected president in the second round, obtaining 53.6% of the votes, while Simion garnered 46.4%. Voter turnout in the second round reached 64.7% of all registered voters, marking a significant increase from 53.2% in the first round according to the Permanent Electoral Authority. Over the course of two weeks, Nicusor Dan recovered a gap of about 20% compared to George Simion, managing to win the second round with an advance of seven percentage points. Although Simion has presented himself as an anti-establishment candidate, his political profile and support indicate his integration into the logic of the establishment, with the AUR becoming the second force in parliamentary representation. His electoral strategy had a strong populist character,

⁴ Cokelaere, Hanne, Păun, Carmen, 'Romanian centrists drop own candidate candidate to support pro-EU Bucharest mayor', April 2025 available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/romanian-liberals-abandon-election-candidate-rally-behind-bucharest-mayor/>.

⁵ Fella, Stefano, 'Research Briefing: Romania: the 2025 Presidential election', House of Commons Library, 2025, p.29.

avoiding debates and interviews on topics focused on public policies, focusing instead on communication through social networks, slogans and populist rhetoric. This approach, based on extensive promises and theatrical discourses, was also illustrated by the initiative on low-cost housing for supporters, which later proved to be an electoral marketing tool. The episode highlighted the discrepancy between the electoral rhetoric and the feasibility of the commitments undertaken (Branea, 2025).

7. Conclusions

On 18 May 2025, Romania narrowly avoided a slide towards an illiberal regime. The difference in voting was closer than the seriousness of the threat would have suggested. Although the result strengthened Romania's European orientation, it also highlighted the extent of support for the far right, as well as the fragility of institutions aimed at limiting such trends. However, the situation remains far from stable. According to a national barometer conducted by INSCOP between 26-30 May 2025, the perceptions of the population regarding the correctness of the conduct of the presidential elections reflect a pronounced polarization of the vote. Thus, about 90% of PNL and USR voters consider that the election was organized correctly, while about 90% of AUR supporters consider that the elections were conducted rather incorrectly. These differences reflect the structure of the electoral pools of the main candidates and highlight the persistence of a deep polarisation in Romanian society.⁶ At the same time, the situation highlights the harmful impact of the wave of disinformation aimed at discrediting the democratic process and highlights the need for consistent efforts to build trust in democratic institutions at the level of society.

The conclusions drawn from the analysis of the 2025 presidential elections in Romania highlight a significant correlation between the negative perception of quality of life and the support given to populist leaders and parties. Dissatisfaction with economic conditions, rising prices, financial instability, as well as a sense of inequity and lack of prospects in society, have created favourable ground for mobilising citizens who perceive public institutions as inefficient or inaccessible. In this context, contemporary populism has provided a form of representation and expression of frustration, channeling individual discontent towards political choices that promise radical change, a reaffirmation of national sovereignty or identity. The election results show that leaders like George Simion managed to capitalize on these tensions through anti-establishment discourse and social media-focused communication, memorable slogans and spectacular promises, even though they often proved difficult to implement or only symbolic. This populist strategy has been particularly appealing to citizens who feel marginalised, neglected by public policies or distrustful of the effectiveness of traditional democratic mechanisms. At the same time, the scores obtained in the second round show that, although Romania has maintained its European orientation, support for the far right remains significant, which indicates both the fragility of democratic institutions in channelling discontent and the magnitude of the populist wave. Moreover, the analysis of opinion polls and electoral perceptions reveals that social polarisation and politics are closely linked to the quality of life perceived by citizens. AUR voters, largely dissatisfied with economic conditions and the quality of public services, were more likely to support a populist candidate who promises quick, even symbolic, solutions to their problems. This trend underscores how socio-economic discontent not only translates into civic protest, but can be channelled directly into electoral support for forces challenging the traditional political order and existing institutions.

Overall, the case of the 2025 Romanian presidential election illustrates how populism can thrive in the context of a pervasive negative perception of quality of life and chronic mistrust of public institutions. Individual dissatisfaction, fuelled by difficult economic experiences, political polarisation and anti-establishment rhetoric, thus becomes a catalyst for electoral change, turning

⁶INSCOP BAROMETR: Correctness of the 2025 presidential election, JUNE 2025, available at <https://www.inscop.ro/June-2025-barometer-informat-ro-inscop-research-correctness-elections-presidential-from-2025/>.

the dissatisfied population into a key group to ensure the success of populist leaders. In conclusion, the analysis of the 2025 presidential elections confirms that support for populism is closely correlated not only with socio-economic discontent, but also with the perception of deteriorating quality of life. Negative assessments of living standards, access to public services, professional opportunities and individual economic security have helped to steer part of the electorate towards policy options that promise rapid and radical change. In this context, the consolidation of democracy and institutions cannot be reduced to structural interventions or institutional reforms, but must include coherent policies aimed at concretely improving the quality of life, reducing economic vulnerabilities and diminishing the perception of inequity. Only by linking institutional performance to the well-being actually felt by citizens can the attractiveness of populist discourse be diminished and trust in the democratic regime re-strengthened.

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