

## Romania, TikTok, and why we should be concerned



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Calin Georgescu was not a household name in Romania and elsewhere until the current election cycle. Even as a candidate, he was not a promising one as polls conducted on the eve of the elections predicted he would gain 5% of the votes, a result that would have left him far behind his other opponents. In reality, however, Georgescu did not only win approximately 22.9% of the votes, he also positioned himself as the leading candidate and will advance to the December 8 runoff against a more mainstream candidate who won around 19% of the votes.

Georgescu's clear lead worries many in Romania, as well as in Europe more broadly, as he is a known supporter of President Vladimir Putin, denied the existence of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and is a supporter of rethinking and reevaluating Romania's role and participation in NATO, the strongest military alliance in the world. His achievement should also worry European Jewry and the State of Israel as he is a fan of Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator and Nazi collaborator, which Georgescu called a "martyr" who did "good deeds."

These opinions gained traction in the popular social media app TikTok, the most used platform in Romania. Unrelated to Georgescu, but very much in line with some of his positions, TikTok failed in the past to monitor and remove Nazi videos from the platform, at some point numbering 73K videos. The app's algorithm, a company secret, is said to have expanded the exposure of 200 Nazi-supporting accounts, gaining millions of views. Some 50 Nazi videos that were reported were classified by the company as not violating its community guidelines.

However, the candidate's antisemitic remarks were not the main concern regarding his campaign. The rapid increase in the number of Georgescu's TikTok followers and the pattern of their engagement with his posts raised suspicions of inauthenticity as experts claimed that he deployed a large number of bots. Furthermore, the network of influencers advocating for him raised further concerns about the lack of transparency about his payments to those influencers, and the lack of proper identification as members of a political campaign, as required. Some even blame the Chinese-controlled app for not designating Georgescu as a political figure, lifting certain limitations on his content and profile.

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