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The Diaspora Paradox and the Transformation of Expatriate Politics

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Is Romania's diaspora the sleeping giant we refuse to understand, or a mirror reflecting our political failures? With approximately 4.5 million citizens, nearly 20% of Romania's population residing abroad, this massive exodus represents one of the most significant demographic shifts in post-communist Europe. Yet Romania's political establishment continues to view these citizens through reductive lenses that fail to capture their diverse realities. The convenient narrative of a uniformly educated, pro-European diaspora has always been more myth than reality. Early emigration waves may have consisted primarily of professionals seeking opportunities abroad, but subsequent waves, particularly following the 2008 financial crisis, increasingly comprised labour migrants seeking employment in construction, agriculture, and service sectors. This created a parallel community that shares national origin but occupies dramatically different positions within their host societies.

The 2025 Romanian presidential election delivered what established media outlets breathlessly called a "political earthquake" with 58% of diaspora votes supporting far-right nationalist candidate George Simion. Yet political strategists, wedded to outdated stereotypes of a prosperous, pro-EU expatriate, missed the seismic rift forming beneath their feet. The diaspora's relationship to Romanian politics has historically been characterised by an external homeland nationalism, maintaining their political and cultural ties despite physical absence. Until recently, this manifested primarily through support for liberal, pro-European parties, with diaspora voters consistently backing candidates championing institutional reform and Western integration.

However, in the 2024 Romanian presidential elections, Călin Georgescu, a far-right, pro-Russian candidate, garnered significant support from the diaspora, particularly among labour migrants in Western Europe. Romanian communities in agricultural regions of Spain and Italy showed nationalist support exceeding 70%, while urban professional enclaves maintained higher rates of liberal voting. Yet even these professional communities showed significant shifts rightward. Why then did parties insist on treating migrants as a monolith? The data were clear. Did anyone ask why? The far-right surge did not materialise out of thin air.

George Simion's appeal to diaspora voters wasn't just savvy digital marketing. It was a deliberate political reckoning. He recognised the Romanian diaspora not as a fringe electorate, but as a politically orphaned majority-in-waiting. His campaign deployed a style of "calculated authenticity," cutting through the noise with emotional directness on platforms like Facebook and TikTok. Ignoring legacy media entirely, Simion addressed long-simmering grievances, such as economic exploitation, cultural alienation, and the invisibility of migrant sacrifice with striking clarity, promising houses for "1 leu" for the youth and diaspora.

Meanwhile, traditional parties, absent from these digital arenas, ceded the narrative battlefield, leaving a tactical vacuum that Simion filled with pointed authenticity. But emotional resonance wasn't enough. His campaign saturated YouTube with geo-targeted ads: short, hard-hitting, and localised to diaspora-heavy countries. These clips blended raw testimony with nationalist calls to action and hit unusually high view-through rates. On TikTok, Simion leaned into youth-driven ecosystems. His team collaborated with micro-influencers who stitched together daily migrant struggles with political messaging under #Suveranitate (Sovereignty). These short-form videos didn't just inform, they built community, going viral through private WhatsApp groups and Facebook chats. YouTube built the story. TikTok

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spread the fire. Together, they formed a digital machine tuned to diaspora rhythms, echoing a sentiment too long ignored: you matter, and you've been lied to.

The surge in nationalist voting among Romania's diaspora reflects a phenomenon too significant to dismiss as simple populist manipulation, with 68% of Romanian emigrants working in positions below their formal qualifications, pointing to profound status dissonance that liberal politics has failed to address. The striking correlation between occupational downgrading and nationalist voting revealed the need for serious attention. Romanian professionals in healthcare, technology, and academia maintained traditional pro-European voting preferences of approximately 74%, while labour migrants overwhelmingly supported anti-establishment candidates.

It increasingly suggests that what drives nationalist sentiment is not absolute education level but rather the perceived return on educational investment. When education fails to deliver promised social mobility, particularly in transnational contexts where credentials often don't transfer, the resulting dissonance creates receptivity to political narratives that validate that dissonance while offering alternative sources of status. Thus, support for nationalist candidates was strongest among those experiencing the greatest gap between educational investment and employment outcomes.

Yet, why doesn't every diaspora facing downgrading react the same way? Comparative studies of Polish and Ukrainian communities show professional frustration without wholesale nationalist revolt. The difference? Messaging tailored to the wounds of Romanian labourers abroad. When mainstream parties parrot platitudes about "European values", do they truly address the migrant's lived experience, or simply recite talking points? Perhaps nothing has fuelled diaspora nationalism more effectively than the Romanian establishment's contemptuous response to it. When commentator Mircea Badea characterised diaspora voters as "pleava societății" (the chaff of society), a term implying they represent the least educated and most manipulable segment of Romanian society on national television, did he imagine this would diminish nationalist sentiment?

This contempt was not isolated. Former president Traian Băsescu's assertion that diaspora voters "live comfortably in Western democracies while voting to push Romania toward Putin's orbit" displayed stunning ignorance of labour migrants' actual living conditions. This rhetoric reveals not just tactical error but profound disconnection from citizens' lived realities. It isn't merely a tactical error but reflects fundamental divisions regarding whose experiences constitute valid political knowledge. When establishment figures dismiss diaspora nationalism as manipulation or ignorance, aren't they performing precisely the elitism that nationalist rhetoric critiques?

Does contempt silence or inflame? It inflames. Every insult lobbed at migrants validated Simion's claim: the political class sees us as pawns or nuisances. In responding with derision instead of dialogue, elites handed nationalists the moral high ground.

The most fascinating aspect of diaspora nationalism's emergence is the reclamation of the "pleava societății" slur, which even turned into a shop. Social media campaigns transformed this slur into a rallying cry, a powerful identity marker through hashtags like #PleavaVotează (The Chaff Votes) and #SuntemPleava (We Are The Chaff), generating hundreds of thousands of engagements. When citizens proudly declare themselves "chaff," what does this reveal about the failure of conventional political language? George Simion and Călin Georgescu exploited this reclamation and transformed material marginalisation into moral superiority. Diaspora citizens created videos and digital content that visually juxtaposed elite contempt with images of Romanian workers performing essential but low-status jobs throughout Europe. This performative resignification underscores a truth politicians often ignore: political power grows when people reclaim narratives once used to silence them.

Romania's diaspora politics challenges simplistic binaries of ignorance versus authenticity. The 2025 election didn't just reflect a temporary shift, it revealed a deeper transformation in how diaspora communities engage with authority, identity, and political belonging. The reclaiming of "pleava" as a political identity forces us to ask: whose knowledge counts in democracy? If anti-elite sentiment stems not from ignorance but from long-standing epistemic exclusion, can democracy endure without rethinking its relationship to expertise? Perhaps the most important question is whether Romania's political establishment possesses the capacity for self-reflection necessary to address this

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challenge. Can traditional parties engage meaningfully with diaspora grievances without simply dismissing them as manipulation? Can liberal politics offer compelling answers to questions of identity and belonging that nationalist rhetoric currently monopolises?

The diaspora paradox thus reveals not the failure of democratic values but rather their contested application across socioeconomic and national boundaries, a contestation that lies at the heart of democratic politics itself. Understanding this process requires moving beyond simple binaries of enlightenment versus ignorance to engage with the complex interplay of structure, agency, and identity that shapes political mobilisation in an age of transnational movement and digital connection. Does democracy require only ballots, or also respect for the knowledge and experience of citizens, wherever they reside? The 2025 presidential vote was not an anomaly but a symptom: epistemic exclusion breeds political extremism.

About the author:

Mihaela-Georgiana Mihăilescu is a PhD researcher at the University of Bath focused on internet politics, with a particular interest in political memes and the role of meme creators in shaping public discourse. Her work explores the intersection of digital culture and political engagement, uncovering how memes serve as tools for influence, narrative-building, and fostering online communities.