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Authoritarian Drift and Social Media's Impact on Romanian Youth During the 2024 European Elections

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Abstract

This article examines the growing susceptibility of young Romanians to authoritarian leadership models in the aftermath of the 2024 European elections. While youth are often seen as champions of democratic renewal, recent data point to a significant erosion of democratic commitment, shaped by institutional distrust and emotionally charged media environments. This concern is heightened by Romania's political developments in 2024, which saw the doubling of extremist representation in the European Parliament and the annulment of the first round of presidential elections due to alleged irregularities and social media interference. Drawing on a media-centered theoretical framework and original survey data, the study finds that 74% of respondents support the idea of a strong leader unconcerned with parliamentary procedures. Socio-demographic factors, such as gender, education, income, and urban–rural residence, significantly influence these attitudes, with lower education and income levels correlating with stronger authoritarian support. Media consumption patterns also emerge as critical determinants: reliance on social media and traditional media (TV and radio) is associated with heightened authoritarian inclinations, while online press consumption fosters greater democratic resilience. Platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp appear to amplify affective and symbolic political expression, even among those who primarily rely on traditional media sources. Furthermore, institutional trust proves to be domain-specific; lower trust in security, religious, and educational institutions predicts higher support for authoritarian leadership. Rather than reflecting mere apathy, youth disengagement reveals complex interactions between media ecosystems, emotional political communication, and institutional skepticism. This study contributes to existing research by focusing on an understudied demographic (Romanian youth) during a volatile electoral moment. It combines nationally representative survey data with a media-centered analytical lens to examine how platform-specific information environments shape authoritarian attitudes.

1. Democratic Disillusionment and Post-Authoritarian Vulnerability

In recent years, a growing body of research has highlighted a paradox at the heart of democratic life: although young people are more connected, informed, and digitally engaged than ever before, their commitment to democratic norms appears increasingly tenuous. Early studies (e.g., Boulianne, 2009; Kahne et al., 2015; Shirky, 2011) suggested that digital technologies could foster civic engagement and democratic participation by facilitating access to information, encouraging deliberation, and amplifying marginalized voices. Research by Loader et al. (2014) emphasized the rise of a "networked young citizen," shaped by participatory digital cultures that potentially strengthen democratic involvement. Optimistic views of digital media as catalysts for democratic revitalization have been further articulated in the concept of "disintermediation" brought by Web 2.0 technologies. According to Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernandes (2019), the emergence of new digital environments allowed ordinary users to bypass traditional gatekeepers in political communication, enabling more direct, participatory, and horizontal interactions between citizens and institutions.

However, more recent analyses paint a more complex and ambivalent picture. Scholars such as Inglehart and Norris (2016) have interpreted the shifting attitudes of younger generations as part of a broader cultural backlash, rooted in perceptions of institutional inefficiency, economic insecurity, and a widening disconnection between democratic ideals and lived realities. This growing ambivalence is further evidenced by global surveys. The Open Society Barometer (Open Society Foundations, 2023), for instance, shows that only 57% of individuals aged 18–35 believe democracy is preferable to any other form of government, compared to 71% of those over 56. Even more strikingly, 35% of younger respondents express support for a strong leader who bypasses democratic institutions, while 42% are sympathetic to the idea of military rule. These findings, echoed in the work of Foa et al. (2020), suggest not an outright rejection of democracy, but rather a deepening disillusionment with its perceived ability to ensure justice, stability, and responsiveness. The evolving perception of democracy among youth also intersects with the ongoing academic debate on populism's role within democratic regimes. Building on the foundational work of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) and summarizing key strands in the scholarly literature, Ștefănel (2016) argues that, under certain conditions, populism should not be viewed solely as a threat to democracy, but also as a potential corrective to liberal democratic practices, particularly when it channels popular discontent into demands for greater accountability and reconfigures institutional legitimacy. In this view, populism may emerge not necessarily in opposition to democracy, but as a response to its unfulfilled promises, especially in contexts marked by political alienation and systemic distrust. While growing disillusionment with democracy is evident across many consolidated democracies, it appears particularly acute in post-authoritarian societies such as those in Central and Eastern Europe. In these contexts, democratic norms are still relatively recent, and institutional trust remains persistently low (Ekiert & Hanson, 2003; Hutcheson & Korosteleva, 2005). The transition following the fall of communism, though initially marked by institutional reforms and aspirations toward European integration, has often been slow, uneven, and contradictory. Structural vulnerabilities—such as a fragile rule of law, endemic clientelism, low civic participation, and widespread

distrust in public institutions—have persisted into the present. These conditions have created fertile ground for the weakening of democratic commitment and the reemergence of authoritarian predispositions, particularly among those disillusioned with the promises of post-communist reform.

More recently, this disaffection has been capitalized on by populist and illiberal actors, who offer emotionally charged, simplified narratives that speak to the frustrations of disillusioned citizens, particularly among younger generations (Filipova, 2024; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Jakli, 2024). As Foa et al. (2020) note, young people in post-communist countries have, until recently, expressed greater satisfaction with democratic governance than earlier generations. However, the durability of this trend remains uncertain. As newer generations come of age—those born after the transitional euphoria of the 1990s and raised in households shaped by economic instability and democratic disillusionment—their outlook may diverge significantly. No longer anchored in personal or familial memory of communism, these young people evaluate democracy less through historical contrast and more through present-day frustrations. In this shifting context, a delayed but potentially significant erosion of democratic support may begin to mirror trends observed in more established democracies.

This study uses a single-item measure of authoritarian preferences: the agreement with the statement that "Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with parliament or elections." Although multidimensional indices are often recommended to capture the psychological roots of authoritarianism (e.g., Feldman, 2003; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011), this item reflects an increasingly prevalent form of pragmatic authoritarianism: a readiness to suspend institutional procedures in favor of a centralized and efficient decision-making. In post-communist societies marked by political volatility and institutional distrust, such formulations resonate strongly with public perceptions. As Vráblíková (2021) and Ruth-Lovell and Grahn (2023) suggest, this type of preference is not merely a cognitive shortcut but an expression of political disillusionment that correlates with populist attitudes and affective polarization. For the purposes of this article, which focuses on observable political orientations in a volatile electoral context, this direct measure offers a high level of face validity, empirical comparability, and analytical clarity.

2. Media and Populist Narratives in Romania

Romania fits within this broader regional pattern, while reflecting specific national dynamics. Although democratic institutions have been in place since the 1990s, persistent issues, such as political corruption, weak rule of law, and volatile party systems, have contributed to a widespread sense of distrust. Survey data from the Open Society Barometer (Open Society Foundations, 2023) indicate that Romanian youth show lower levels of trust in elected officials and political parties than older generations and are more inclined to believe that a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections might be beneficial. The Romanian media system itself has become a structural contributor to democratic backsliding. As Negrea-Busuioc et al. (2019) argue, the politicization of editorial content and the strategic use of media platforms by political elites have weakened public discourse and democratic accountability.

These tendencies are intensified by the rise of populist actors such as George Simion, whose digital presence exemplifies a shift toward spectacularized populist performances. As shown by Grapă and Mogoș (2023), Simion leverages polarisation, celebrity populism, and religious-nationalist symbolism to construct a charismatic persona that appeals especially to diaspora voters and younger audiences. His mediatized

performance is grounded in emotionally charged imagery, Orthodox iconography, and anti-EU rhetoric—all elements that resonate within a media ecosystem predisposed to polarizing content. This phenomenon reflects broader theoretical concerns about the nature of populism itself. Populism cannot be understood as inherently anti-democratic or uniformly threatening; rather, its relationship with democracy is profoundly ambivalent. Depending on the institutional context, populism may either erode or invigorate democratic processes by emphasizing popular sovereignty, bypassing intermediary institutions, and reshaping public discourse. In the Romanian case, such ambivalence is reflected in the dual dynamics of radical contestation and charismatic appeal observable in figures like Simion.

Paradoxically, while radical right actors openly instrumentalize public discontent to challenge European integration, mainstream political and media actors in Romania have employed strategies of discursive moderation. As Ștefănel et al. (2023) demonstrate, during the Schengen accession crisis, the dominant public discourse minimized Eurosceptic framings, opting instead for a rhetoric of institutional disappointment and procedural injustice. While such narratives may defuse overt backlash, they also risk cultivating a climate of ambiguity, particularly for younger audiences whose attitudes toward the EU are increasingly shaped by current frustrations rather than historical aspirations.

3. Reframing Disengagement Through a Media-Centered Lens

A media-centered approach to democratic disengagement seeks to understand how mediated experiences of politics shape youth perceptions of institutions and leadership. Unlike conventional accounts that emphasize structural or generational variables, this perspective draws attention to how the content, format, and emotional tone of political communication influence the civic dispositions of young people. In recent years, political communication scholars have increasingly acknowledged the role of affective media environments in shaping democratic imaginaries, especially among digital-native cohorts (Papacharissi, 2015; Waisbord, 2018).

Traditional models of democratic participation assume a relatively stable distinction between institutional politics and mediated discourse. However, as van Dijck et al. (2018) argue, the platformization of public communication has disrupted this dichotomy. Social media platforms, while enabling unprecedented access to political information, also promote formats that favor visibility, emotional expressiveness, and virality over rational argumentation. In this ecosystem, political messages compete for attention not on the basis of content quality, but on their capacity to trigger affective responses (Tufekci, 2015).

For young people whose political socialization occurs predominantly online, these dynamics have significant consequences. Research has shown that youth interpret and recontextualize political information within peer-driven, culturally coded environments such as meme cultures, influencer commentary, and visual storytelling (Highfield, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2016). Rather than engaging in deliberation in the Habermasian sense, they often participate through expressive and symbolic practices, such as liking, sharing, and remixing, that signal identity rather than policy preferences (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Moffitt, 2016).

This form of participation, though frequent, may not necessarily reinforce democratic norms. On the contrary, the dominance of spectacle and identity performance risks reinforcing a conception of politics as entertainment or confrontation, where legitimacy stems from authenticity, charisma, or symbolic defiance

rather than institutional accountability (Corner & Pels, 2003; Enli, 2017). These trends are especially salient in populist communication strategies, where political figures adopt media-savvy personas and cultivate parasocial relations with followers, often bypassing traditional deliberative institutions (Krämer, 2014; Laclau, 2005).

Recent research by Casas-Mas et al. (2024) reinforces this argument by empirically analyzing over two million tweets from the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections. Their findings reveal that the vast majority of political expressions on platforms like X (previously Twitter) lack argumentation and are primarily affective in nature—what the authors term "participation based on Boos and Hurrahs" (Casas-Mas et al., 2024, p. 2). This emotivist mode of digital engagement, characterized by emotionally charged statements of support or rejection, aligns with the theoretical concerns raised by Papacharissi (2015) and Waisbord (2018). It suggests a communicative environment where political expression is driven less by reasoned deliberation and more by affective alignment, sentiment reinforcement, and symbolic positioning.

In the Romanian context, these dynamics are exemplified by actors such as Simion, whose mediatized performances—combining nationalist, religious, and anti-establishment themes—resonate with youth disillusioned by elite politics. As Grapă and Mogoș (2023) argue, Simion's success on platforms like Facebook and TikTok is not merely a matter of outreach but of stylistic adaptation: he aligns his message with the expectations of digital culture, privileging immediacy, affect, and symbolic disruption.

Furthermore, the epistemological authority of institutions is undermined when political information circulates primarily in emotionally charged and epistemically unstable environments. When truth claims become subordinate to narrative coherence or emotional resonance, trust in democratic procedures may erode, even if engagement appears to increase (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In such a context, what Papacharissi (2015) calls "affective publics" emerge: communities not bound by shared rational deliberation, but by collective sentiment, often organized around outrage, irony, or ressentiment.

While some scholars see expressive engagement as a form of democratic innovation (Theocharis et al., 2015), others warn that it may contribute to polarization, fragmentation, and disengagement from formal politics (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). The ambiguity lies in the nature of participation itself: practices like commenting, sharing, or reacting may signal political interest but can also mask a deeper cynicism or alienation from the democratic process. This ambivalence is particularly relevant in the Romanian case, where youth report high levels of social media use for political information but simultaneously exhibit low trust in political institutions (Open Society Foundations, 2023).

The media-centered framework proposed here thus avoids moralistic readings of youth disengagement, as either apathy or immaturity, and instead emphasizes the complex interplay between media environments, political meaning-making, and democratic orientation. It invites scholars and practitioners alike to examine not only how much youth engage with politics, but also how they interpret, experience, and emotionally process democratic content. As Couldry and Hepp (2017) suggest, the very texture of democracy is being reshaped by communicative infrastructures, requiring a rethinking of both civic education and institutional responsiveness.

These dynamics align with existing research that conceptualizes social media as catalyzing a process of deliberative disintegration, whereby algorithmic amplification and affective resonance replace reasoned

debate with symbolic affirmation and antagonistic performance (Ștefănel, 2025). While this mechanism has been explored in the context of elite–citizen dynamics during the 2024 local elections in Bucharest (see Ștefănel, 2025), the present study extends this line of inquiry by examining how similar dynamics manifest in youth political orientations. The patterns observed—marked by expressive intensity, symbolic affirmation, and limited argumentative depth—suggest that the challenge is not disengagement per se, but a transformation in how young citizens experience and enact political communication. Engagement remains frequent and emotionally charged, yet it often bypasses deliberative norms, privileging identity performance over argumentative substance. These tendencies are particularly salient on social media platforms, where algorithmic visibility amplifies resonance rather than rationality, thereby reshaping the contours of youth political agency in the digital public sphere.

These findings echo and extend existing concerns in the literature. Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics captures the emotional structuring of engagement, while Sunstein's (2017) warnings about fragmented informational spheres remain relevant. However, what this study suggests is not only that deliberation is absent, but that the very communicative logics of contemporary media ecosystems actively erode deliberative capacity. Deliberative disintegration, as it emerges from the Romanian context analyzed here, describes a cumulative breakdown in the cultural and cognitive prerequisites for democratic dialogue—one that is not imposed from above, but performed and reproduced from within everyday media practices.

4. Methodology: Investigating Youth Attitudes in the Romanian Context

To empirically explore the processes outlined in this article's media-centered framework, the present study adopts a quantitative research design grounded in survey data. The goal is to test the proposition that the erosion of democratic commitment among young people is shaped not only by structural institutional mistrust, but also by their mediated experiences of political life—in particular, how they consume political information and frame legitimacy in relation to digital media content. This aligns with the broader theoretical framework articulated in the article, which posits that young people's attitudes toward democracy are shaped not only by economic or institutional factors, but also by media framing and affect-driven information environments (Papacharissi, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018).

The theoretical sections of the article argue that young people's disengagement is not reducible to apathy or misinformation, but emerges at the intersection of structural distrust and emotionalized media representations of politics. These dynamics are linked to broader patterns of political cynicism, support for non-democratic alternatives, and a shift in the perception of what constitutes legitimate leadership. The methodology thus seeks to empirically assess how these processes are reflected in the actual political attitudes and behaviors of Romanian youth.

For this purpose, the empirical analysis relies exclusively on the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) survey, Tineretul român în anul electoral 2024, which provides a representative snapshot of the Romanian youth population (ages 18–29). The dataset includes key indicators on trust in democratic institutions, preferences for authoritarian leadership models, political disaffection, and media consumption habits. The study was based on a simple random sample of 800 respondents aged 18–35, with a maximum margin of error of ±3.5%. Data were collected between March 9 and 14, 2024, using computer-assisted

telephone interviewing. The research was conducted pro bono for the Tinerii Votează initiative under IRES's social responsibility program.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: What are the patterns of association between media consumption, institutional trust, and authoritarian preferences among Romanian youth? Rather than estimating causal effects, the study explores these relationships descriptively, identifying key associations in the context of the 2024 European elections. Based on this research question, two testable hypotheses are formulated:

> H1: Romanian youth who rely predominantly on social media as a source of political information are more likely to express support for non-deliberative, centralized leadership models.

> H2: Lower trust in democratic institutions among Romanian youth is associated with higher levels of support for authoritarian leadership.

To operationalize these hypotheses the following variables from the IRES dataset were used:

- Institutional trust was measured through Likert scale items assessing trust in parliament, government, judiciary, and the EU.
- Preference for authoritarian leadership was captured through agreement with the statement "Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections" (Variable III7_6). While this item has a deliberately blunt formulation, it has been widely used in empirical research as a proxy for anti-democratic attitudes or authoritarian predispositions—precisely because of its resonance with illiberal political imaginaries. Similar items have been employed in large-scale international surveys such as the World Values Survey (e.g., Welzel & Inglehart, 2009), the European Social Survey (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and the Global Satisfaction with Democracy study (Foa et al., 2020). The item captures support for a style of leadership that bypasses representative institutions—an essential feature of authoritarian preference—while allowing for comparative analysis across cases and contexts.
- Media consumption habits were assessed through self-reported primary sources of political information, including television, social media, online press, and interpersonal communication.

This operationalization allows for a descriptive analysis of how institutional trust and media environments relate to authoritarian attitudes among Romanian youth. By focusing on specific institutions rather than generalized political trust, the study aims to more precisely identify the domains of institutional skepticism that may be associated with democratic disillusionment.

While key socio-demographic variables such as gender, education, income level, and urban/rural residence are examined descriptively, the study does not employ multivariate models. The analysis focuses on bivariate associations—such as group comparisons and rank-order correlations—to explore patterns linking institutional trust, media consumption, and authoritarian preferences.

All analyses were conducted using *R*, employing packages such as tidyverse, car, and ggplot2. Preprocessing steps included the normalization of response scales, categorical recoding, and verification of missing data.

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of this research, findings are interpreted as indicative associations rather than as evidence of causal relationships.

5. Findings: Patterns of Authoritarian Support and Media Influence Among Romanian Youth

Although young people are often perceived as committed to democratic values, Figure 1 reveals a striking openness to authoritarian alternatives. A total of 74.37% of Romanian youth agree (either strongly or somewhat) with the statement that the country needs a strong leader unconcerned with Parliament or elections, while only 4.12% express strong disagreement. These findings reflect broader patterns identified in recent theoretical accounts, including Inglehart and Norris's (2016) analysis and research reports such as Foa et al.'s (2020) on declining democratic support.
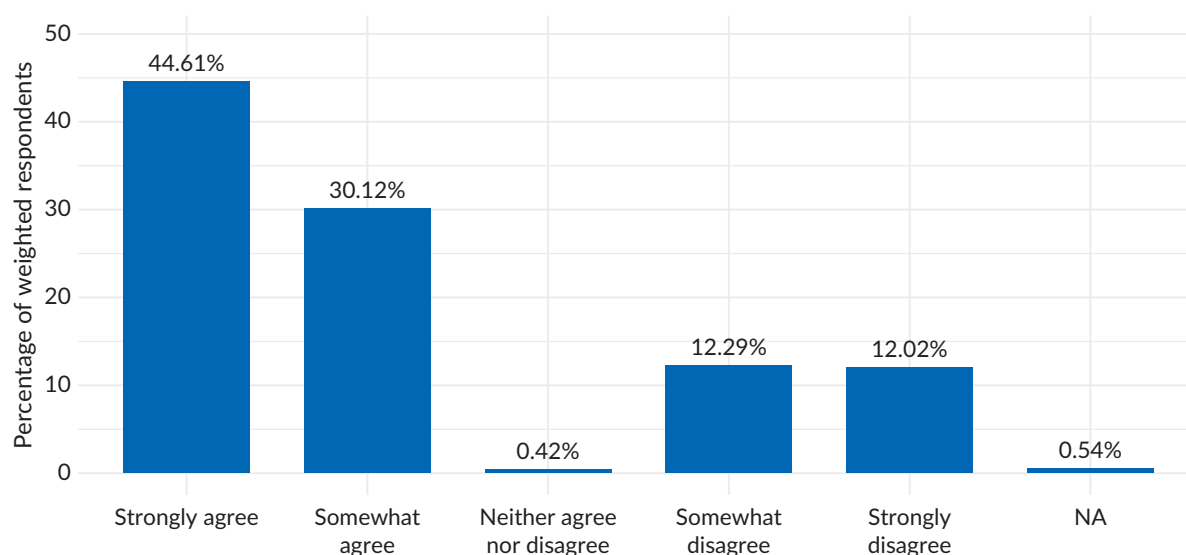

Figure 1. Attitudes toward authoritarian leadership: To what extent do you agree with the statement "Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections." Source: IRES (2024).

To better understand the socio-demographic determinants of support for authoritarian leadership among youth, I conducted a series of chi-squared analyses across gender, residential environment, educational attainment, and income level. The analysis reveals that these socio-demographics shape young people's support for authoritarian leadership in Romania. Across all the tests, statistically significant differences emerge.

Gender differences are evident in the extent of support for authoritarian alternatives. Women are more likely than men to strongly agree with the need for a strong leader unconcerned with democratic constraints (52.37% vs. 38.75%), while men show a higher tendency to strongly disagree (15.15% vs. 8.63%). These patterns suggest that female respondents are somewhat more susceptible to authoritarian appeals, whereas male respondents display a slightly higher propensity to reject authoritarianism outright.

Residential context also plays a role in shaping these attitudes. Rural youth exhibit higher levels of strong agreement with authoritarian leadership (48.92%) compared to their urban counterparts (42.02%), while

urban youth are more likely to somewhat agree (33.24% vs. 26.79%). Although opposition is relatively balanced across the two groups, urban respondents who disagree tend to express stronger forms of dissent. The statistically significant differences observed (χ^2 = 10.82, p = 0.013) point to variations in intensity rather than direction: urban youth exhibit more moderate support but stronger opposition, whereas rural youth express stronger support and more moderate dissent.

Educational attainment emerges as a particularly powerful factor. Strong agreement is highest among youth with low education (55.37%), declining among medium-educated (44.21%) and highly educated (35.81%) respondents. Opposition to authoritarian leadership increases with education, with 18.51% of highly educated respondents somewhat disagreeing and 15.22% strongly disagreeing with the statement. The binary chi-squared test further confirms these differences (χ^2 = 14.08, p = 0.00088), underscoring that higher education fosters more critical and democratic attitudes among young people.

Income level similarly differentiates support for authoritarianism. Strong agreement is more common among lower-income youth, particularly those earning up to 4,000 RON monthly (49.91% and 49.01%, respectively), compared to 34.38% among those earning between 4,001 and 6,000 RON and 35.40% among those earning over 6,001 RON. Higher-income youth are also more likely to oppose authoritarian leadership: 17.83% somewhat disagree and 22.85% strongly disagree among respondents earning over 6,001 RON. The statistically significant differences (χ^2 = 18.33, p = 0.0026) highlight that greater economic resources are associated with more critical political orientations.

In contrast to these socio-demographic factors, age does not appear to meaningfully differentiate levels of authoritarian support within the youth cohort. A Spearman correlation between respondents' age (in completed years) and agreement with the authoritarian leadership statement (Variable III7_6) reveals a very weak and statistically non-significant association (ρ = −0.023, p = 0.518). While there is a slight tendency for younger respondents to express stronger agreement, the effect size is negligible. This finding suggests that among individuals aged 18 to 35, authoritarian predispositions are not systematically shaped by age differences per se, but rather by other structural and perceptual factors such as gender, education, residence, and income, as illustrated in Figure 2.
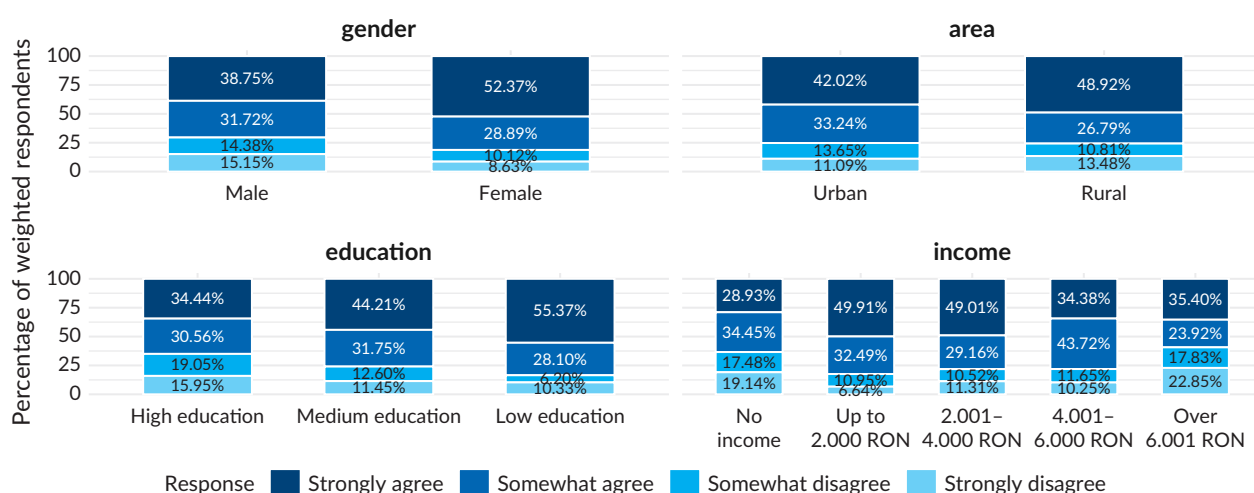

Figure 2. Support for authoritarian leadership by socio-demographic values: Stacked distribution of responses for "Romania needs a strong leader who does not bother with Parliament or elections." Source: IRES (2024).

Overall, these findings reveal that support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth is not uniform but varies systematically across gender, residential environment, education, and income. Higher education and income levels appear to be associated with greater democratic resilience, while lower education and income levels correlate with stronger endorsement of authoritarian alternatives. These socio-demographic patterns highlight critical vulnerabilities in the democratic engagement of younger generations in Romania.

Building on these initial findings, we sought to further explore the informational environments shaping political attitudes among youth. Specifically, we examined their primary sources of political information in order to test H1, which posits that a predominant reliance on social media is associated with greater support for strong, centralized leadership. Figure 3 shows that social media has become the dominant source of political information among Romanian youth, with 46.86% identifying it as their primary channel. Online press follows at 30.32%, while traditional media such as television (20.22%) and radio (2.60%) are used far less frequently. These findings illustrate a clear generational shift toward digital platforms, where political information is accessed in more personalized, immediate, and peer-driven environments, underscoring the transformative impact of social media on political communication habits among Romanian youth.
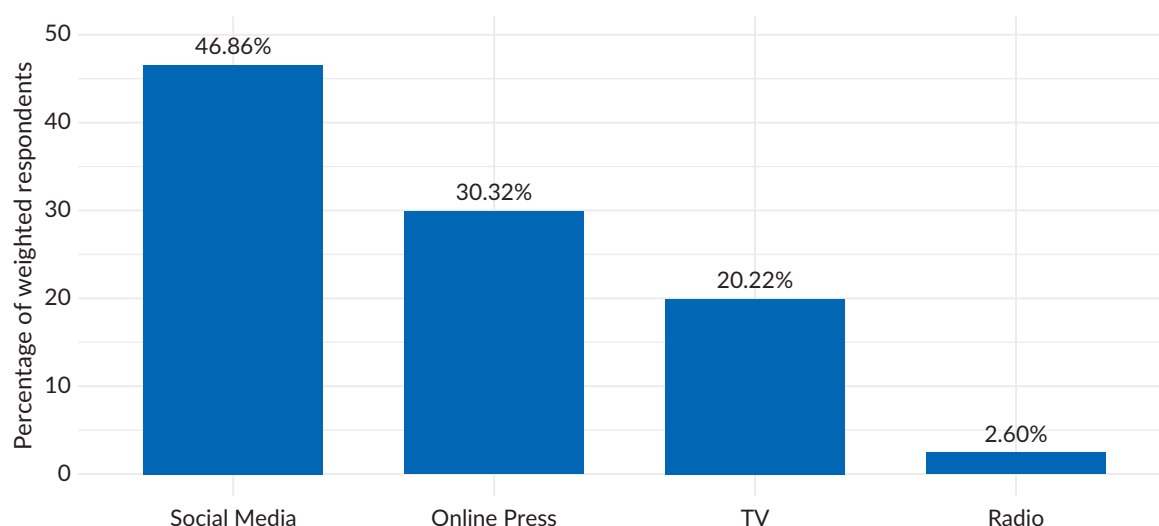

Figure 3. Primary sources of political information among Romanian youth. Source: IRES (2024).

Figure 4 examines how Romanian youth's support for authoritarian leadership varies according to their primary source of political information. For analytical clarity, media sources were grouped into three categories: social media, online press, and traditional media, the latter comprising television and radio. Importantly, the number of respondents relying on traditional media is substantially lower compared to those using social media or online press, reflecting broader generational shifts away from traditional information channels.

The chi-squared test confirms that differences between groups are statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 44.53$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a strong association between media consumption patterns and political attitudes.

Among youth who primarily rely on social media for political information, 51.97% strongly agree with the statement that Romania needs a strong leader unconcerned with democratic institutions, and an additional 27.89% somewhat agree. Thus, nearly 80% of social media consumers express some level of support for authoritarian leadership. Opposition within this group remains modest: only 7.33% strongly disagree, while 12.81% somewhat disagree.
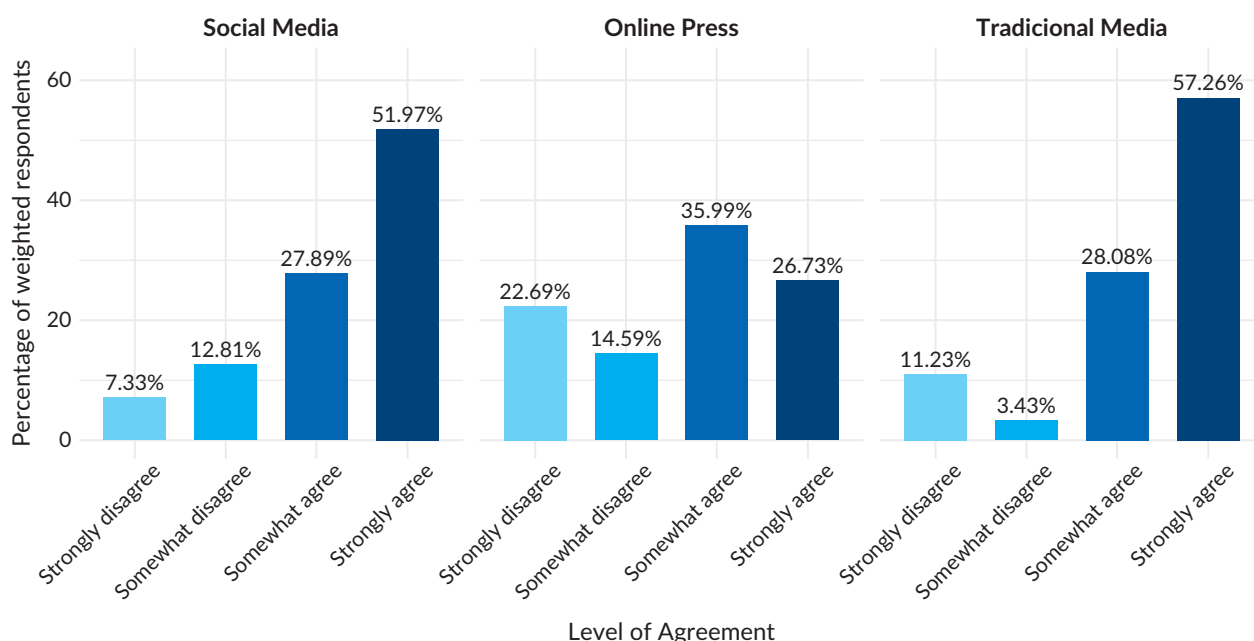
Figure 4. Differences in support for authoritarian leadership by primary media source. Source: IRES (2024).

By comparison, respondents who favor online press display a more balanced distribution of attitudes. Only 26.73% strongly agree with the authoritarian statement, while 35.99% somewhat agree. Notably, opposition is stronger among online press users compared to social media users: 22.69% strongly disagree and 14.59% somewhat disagree. These figures suggest that those who consume political information through professional online news outlets are comparatively more critical of authoritarian alternatives.

Youth who rely on traditional media (TV and radio) show the highest level of strong agreement with authoritarian leadership, at 57.26%, exceeding even the social media group. However, this subgroup is much smaller in size, reflecting the diminished role of traditional media among younger generations. Only 11.23% of traditional media consumers strongly disagree with the need for a strong leader, and 3.43% somewhat disagree, indicating both stronger authoritarian inclinations and weaker opposition within this group.

Overall, the findings reveal a complex pattern: although reliance on traditional media is associated with the strongest support for authoritarian leadership, the largest cohorts—those consuming information via social media and online press—display more heterogeneous attitudes. The data suggest that political information environments shape not only the direction but also the intensity of political attitudes among Romanian youth, highlighting the transformative influence of media ecosystems on democratic engagement.

As an exploratory addition, an ordinal regression was estimated to complement the bivariate comparisons. The results align with the descriptive findings: respondents who obtain political information primarily from the online press appear significantly less likely to express strong support for centralized, non-democratic leadership than those relying on social media (coefficient = −0.772, odds ratio = 0.462, $p < 0.001$). While not intended as a causal model, this result suggests that professional journalistic environments may be associated with more democratic orientations among young people.

Similarly, the regression model indicates that respondents who rely on traditional media (television and radio) exhibit a higher likelihood of supporting authoritarian leadership compared to social media users (coefficient = 0.427, odds ratio = 1.53, p = 0.048). Although this group is relatively small within the sample, the result reflects a tendency toward stronger endorsement of centralized leadership. While no causal claims can be made, the finding may point to the role of conventional broadcasting formats in sustaining hierarchical and less deliberative political preferences.

This tendency may be partially shaped by demographic characteristics, such as age, educational attainment, or habitual media use, but it also resonates with insights from recent media studies. Studies on media hybridization and platformization (Chadwick, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018) suggest that traditional broadcasters increasingly adopt stylistic elements typical of digital platforms, including emotionally charged, personality-driven, and conflict-oriented formats. Such convergence may contribute to reinforcing affective and hierarchical political attitudes, even among audiences with lower digital exposure. While these interpretations remain tentative, they offer a possible lens through which to understand the alignment between traditional media use and support for authoritarian models observed in the data.

Taken together, these observations provide additional context for interpreting the model's structure and outcomes, particularly the gradations of agreement captured across the response categories. The cut-points (thresholds) of the model further validate the ordinal structure of the response variable. Significant separations between categories—particularly between *strongly disagree* and *somewhat disagree* (coefficient = −2.12, odds ratio = 0.12, 95% CI: [0.09, 0.16], p < 0.001)—confirm that attitudes toward authoritarianism are meaningfully distributed across the response scale, with clear gradations of agreement and disagreement.

Figure 5 offers a visual summary of the estimated odds ratios, distinguishing between the media types and the model's internal thresholds. Consistent with the statistical outputs, the figure illustrates that respondents who rely on online press are less likely to express strong support for authoritarian leadership, while those relying on traditional media show a moderate increase in such preferences. These visual patterns reinforce the descriptive associations discussed earlier, without implying direct causality.
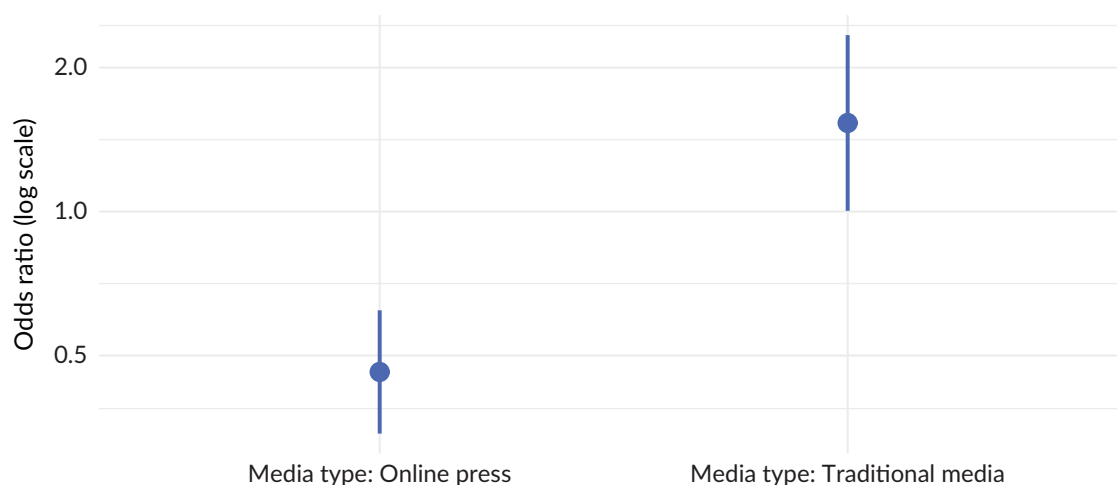

Figure 5. Odds ratios for support for authoritarian leadership by media type (reference group: social media users). Source: IRES (2024).

Beyond aggregated media categories, a closer examination of platform-specific patterns offers additional insight into how different social media environments may shape political attitudes among youth.

Overall, these findings, considered as a whole, suggest that the informational environment is meaningfully associated with variations in political attitudes among Romanian youth. Respondents who primarily consume political news via professional online press exhibit comparatively lower levels of support for authoritarian leadership, while those relying on traditional media show a higher tendency to endorse such preferences. Although both traditional and social media are linked to increased support for strong, centralized leadership, the underlying dynamics appear distinct. Traditional media may reinforce hierarchical conceptions of authority through centralized, top-down formats, whereas social media environments facilitate affect-driven and symbolic engagement that often bypasses deliberative norms, privileging emotional resonance and identity signaling over institutional accountability.

While these patterns do not imply causation, they are consistent with H1: Romanian youth who rely predominantly on social media as a source of political information are more likely to express support for non-deliberative, centralized leadership models.

A more granular look at platform-specific patterns of social media use reveals important nuances in the informational behavior of Romanian youth. Facebook and Instagram emerge as the most commonly used platforms across all groups, regardless of respondents' primary political information source. Among those who primarily rely on online press, 19.24% also report using Facebook, and 21.01% use Instagram. Within the group of social media-first users, Facebook accounts for 25.49% and Instagram for 21.70% of usage, underscoring their centrality in youth political communication ecosystems.

Notably, even among respondents whose primary source of political information is traditional media (TV and radio), social media remains widely used: 32.08% report using Facebook, 16.60% use Instagram, and 20.75% use WhatsApp. These figures suggest that social platforms function as complementary rather than exclusive sources, cutting across media repertoires.

When disaggregating attitudes toward authoritarian leadership by platform, certain differences become visible (Figure 6). Higher proportions of strong agreement with the authoritarian statement are observed among users of TikTok (43.30%), Facebook (41.92%), and WhatsApp (40.51%). YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram users display slightly lower, but still notable, levels of strong agreement. By contrast, X users report the lowest rate of strong agreement (26.83%), indicating a comparatively more critical orientation within this user group. While these differences should be interpreted cautiously, they point to the potential influence of platform cultures and content dynamics on political predispositions.

Overall, the findings suggest that the relationship between social media use and political attitudes among Romanian youth extends beyond the designation of a primary news source. Even respondents who report relying chiefly on traditional media appear deeply embedded in digital ecosystems, where platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp remain influential. This underscores the need to assess not only where political information is accessed, but also how different platforms shape the affective and symbolic character of that engagement.
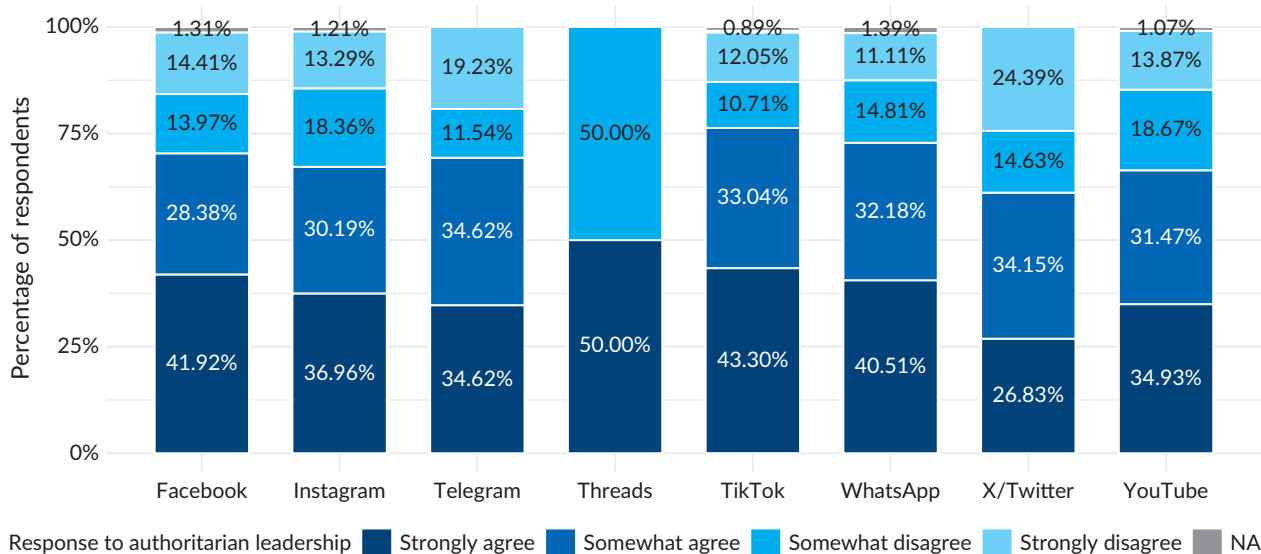
Figure 6. Support for authoritarian leadership by social media platforms. Source: IRES (2024).

Platform-specific patterns reveal a potential shift in the nature of youth political involvement—from deliberative engagement toward emotionally charged and symbolic forms of expression. In particular, environments such as TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp appear to privilege expressive intensity over argumentative depth, with political visibility often substituting for dialogic exchange. These tendencies resonate with the broader concept of deliberative disintegration, where platform logics may erode the cognitive and normative foundations of democratic deliberation.

To explore how institutional trust relates to support for authoritarian leadership, and to examine Hypothesis H2, which posits that lower trust in democratic institutions is associated with stronger authoritarian preferences, a composite operationalization of institutional trust was developed using the IRES dataset. The survey included 14 items (II1_1 to II1_14) measuring trust in various institutions, which were grouped into six conceptually distinct categories based on functional and societal roles.

Domestic political institutions comprise the parliament, government, presidency, and political parties, reflecting key structures of national governance. Security institutions include the secret services, the army, and the police, responsible for national defense and public order. The civil society and media category captures the press and NGOs, actors central to civic participation and informational transparency.

Religious and educational institutions—represented by the Church and the University environment—form another group, associated with value formation and cultural reproduction. Trust in economic institutions is measured via perceptions of large commercial companies, while international institutions encompass the EU and NATO as markers of integration and external security.

For each group, a composite index was computed by averaging inverted trust scores, such that higher values reflect greater trust. This approach enables a differentiated and conceptually grounded exploration of how specific trust domains relate to authoritarian attitudes.

The results offer partial support for H2. Statistically significant but modest negative associations were found between support for authoritarian leadership and trust in both security institutions and religious/educational institutions. These weak correlations are consistent with the complexity of political attitudes and suggest that low trust in particular sectors may coincide with greater openness to centralized, non-deliberative leadership. Other trust domains, such as economic and international institutions, showed weak or non-significant relationships, pointing toward a more nuanced constellation of influences.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the Spearman's correlation analysis conducted in relation to H2, which explores associations between levels of institutional trust and support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth. The analysis indicates that lower trust in security institutions, as well as in religious and educational institutions, is associated with a greater likelihood of endorsing centralized, non-democratic leadership. While these associations are statistically significant, their strength is relatively weak—an outcome consistent with the complexity and multidimensionality of political attitudes. In contrast, trust in political institutions, civil society, and international organizations shows very weak positive associations with democratic orientations, while trust in economic institutions does not display a statistically significant relationship.

Table 1. Correlational analysis of institutional trust and authoritarian leadership support among Romanian youth (Spearman's rho).

Indicator	ρ (Spearman's rho)	p-value	Interpretation
Trust in political institutions	0.07	0.0413	Positive, very weak, and statistically significant
Trust in security institutions	−0.12	0.0005	Negative, weak, and statistically significant
Trust in civil society and media	0.10	0.0033	Positive, very weak, and statistically significant
Trust in religious and educational institutions	−0.11	0.0016	Negative, weak, and statistically significant
Trust in economic institutions	0.05	0.1844	Positive and not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$)
Trust in international institutions	0.09	0.0108	Positive, very weak, and statistically significant

Figure 7 provides a visual representation of Spearman's correlations between various domains of institutional trust and support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth. The strongest associations—though still weak in magnitude—are observed concerning trust in security institutions and in religious and educational institutions, where lower levels of trust correspond to higher support for authoritarian models of governance. These results offer additional support for H2. Positive but very weak correlations are also found for trust in political, civil society, and international institutions, while trust in economic institutions does not exhibit a statistically significant relationship. The overall pattern reflects the complexity of political attitudes and the differentiated role that various institutions play in shaping youth perceptions.

To explore how authoritarian preferences vary across political orientations, a Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted, followed by Dunn post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni correction. The results indicate
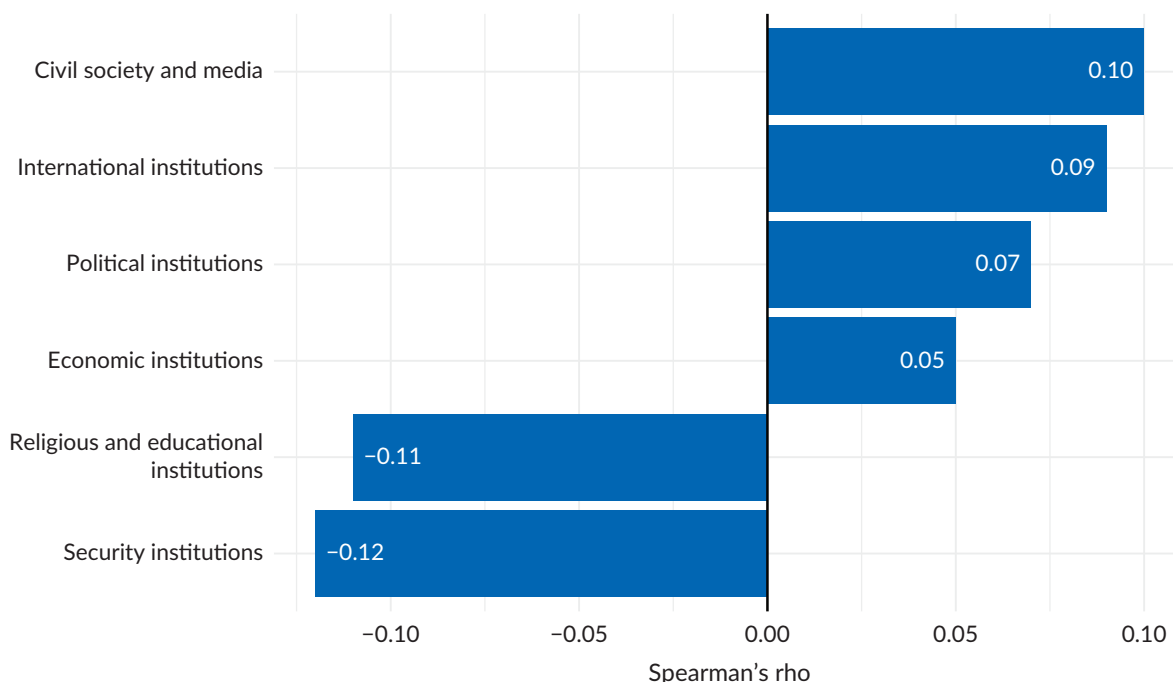
Figure 7. Spearman's correlations of institutional trust for the question: To what extent do you trust the following institutions? Source: IRES (2024).

statistically significant differences in responses to item III7_6 based on declared vote intention in the 2024 European elections ($\chi^2 = 22.89$, $df = 5$, $p = 0.00035$).

One notable observation is that respondents who support the governing Social-Democrat Party and National Liberal Party (PSD-PNL) alliance do not differ significantly in authoritarian attitudes from those intending to vote for Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) or SOS România—parties commonly characterized as populist, radical right, or anti-system. This finding challenges conventional assumptions about a clear divide between mainstream and extremist electorates, suggesting that support for centralized, non-deliberative leadership may cut across ideological lines.

Although the PSD-PNL alliance occupies a central position in institutional politics—alongside Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), the ethnic-conservative party representing Romania's Hungarian minority—its electorate shows similarities in authoritarian orientation with those of populist or radical contenders. By contrast, clearer differences are observed when PSD-PNL is compared with voters who support parties aligned with civic liberalism or moderate conservatism. For example, comparisons with Renewing Romania's European Project Party (REPER; $z = -3.54$, $p.$adj $= 0.0083$) and United Right (DU; $z = -3.49$, $p.$adj $= 0.0099$) point to a lower inclination toward authoritarian preferences among the latter groups. The difference with PRO România is marginal and statistically non-significant ($z = -2.17$, $p.$adj $= 0.6263$), potentially reflecting ideological ambiguity or shared populist cues. No significant difference is observed between PSD-PNL and UDMR ($z = -0.78$, $p.$adj $= 1.0000$), which may be consistent with their political proximity and overlapping conservative leanings.

Among radical parties, expected contrasts with more democratic formations are evident. Both AUR and SOS România differ significantly from REPER and United Right ($p.$adj < 0.001), confirming a broader ideological

distance. However, comparisons with PRO România and UDMR yield non-significant results, suggesting a potential convergence of authoritarian predispositions among electorates that span the far-right, soft populist, and ethnically conservative spectrum.

In the case of SOS România, the comparison with REPER reveals a statistically significant difference (p.adj = 0.036), whereas no significant difference is found in relation to Dreapta Unită (p.adj = 0.231), PRO România, or UDMR. These patterns may reflect a broader reservoir of authoritarian sentiment among electorates that are more distant from liberal democratic norms, regardless of their position on the traditional ideological axis (Figure 8).
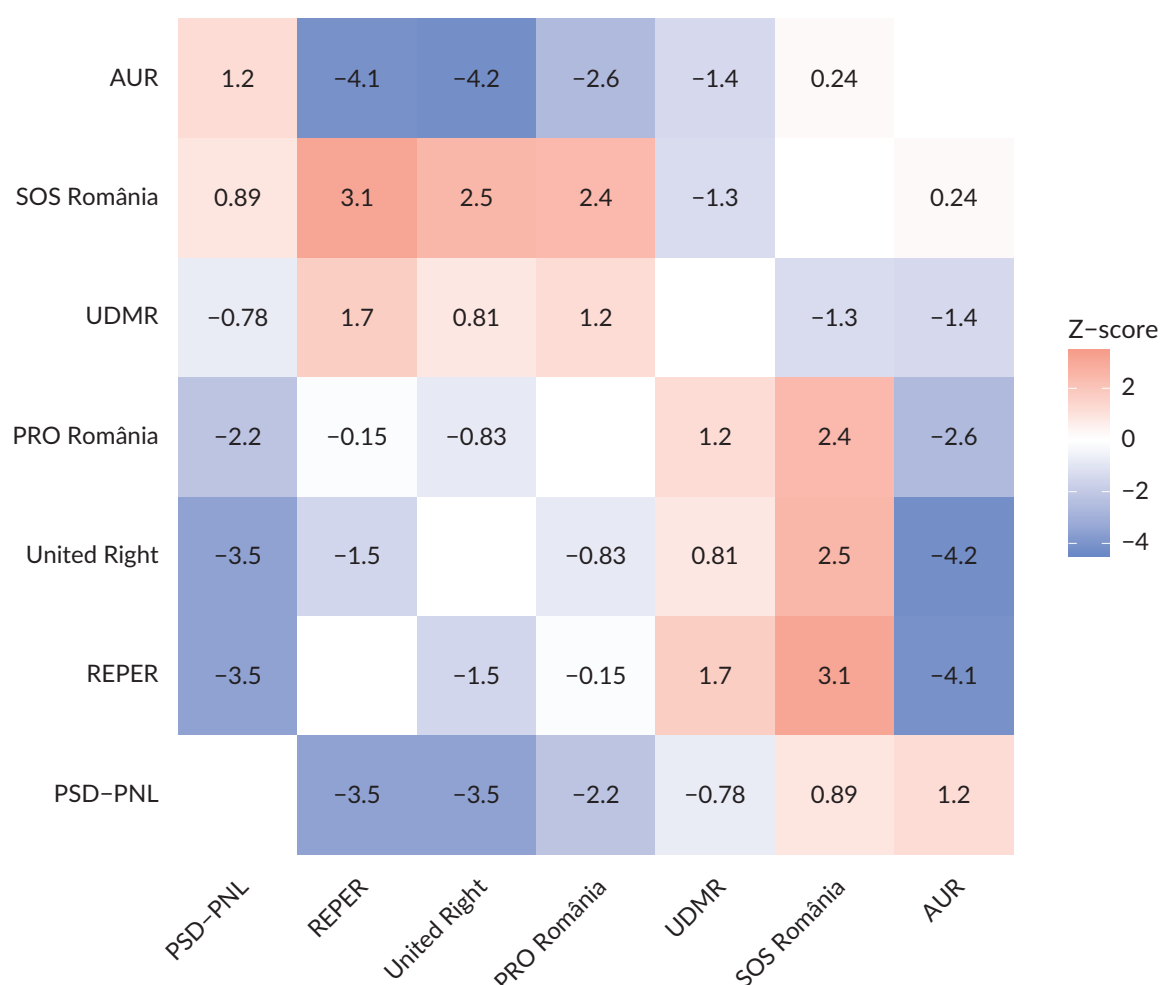

Figure 8. Post-hoc comparisons of authoritarian attitudes (Z scores).

Taken together, these findings indicate that authoritarian attitudes among Romanian youth are not limited to supporters of radical or anti-system parties, but are also present among voters aligned with mainstream governing formations. This pattern suggests that preferences for strong, centralized leadership may transcend conventional ideological boundaries, complicating the distinction between centrist democratic affiliation and populist dissatisfaction. In the context of post-communist societies—where institutional distrust, weak partisan attachments, and pragmatic electoral behavior are common—such overlaps may reflect broader patterns of democratic ambivalence rather than clear-cut ideological divisions.

6. Limitations

This study offers a descriptive account of the associations between media consumption, institutional trust, and support for authoritarian leadership among Romanian youth in the immediate pre-election period of the 2024 European Parliament elections—a moment of heightened political attention and narrative polarization. Rather than a limitation, this context represents a central analytical focus, allowing for the observation of how democratic disillusionment and authoritarian predispositions take shape under electoral pressure. Nonetheless, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference and cannot determine temporal directionality between media use, trust, and attitudes. The use of self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracies. Additionally, while composite indices improved conceptual clarity, they may have obscured important differences between individual institutions within each category. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal or mixed-method approaches, combining survey data with content analysis or digital trace evidence to better understand the evolving relationship between media ecosystems, institutional legitimacy, and youth political orientations.

7. Discussion

Despite its methodological limitations, this study provides meaningful insights into the relationship between mediated political environments, institutional trust, and authoritarian predispositions among Romanian youth. The findings underscore the importance of examining the affective and symbolic dimensions of political communication, particularly in contexts shaped by emotional resonance, algorithmic amplification, and disinformation. Rather than signaling disengagement, youth preferences for strong, non-deliberative leadership appear linked to deeper transformations in how political agency is expressed and understood.

These dynamics must be interpreted within the specific context of Romania's 2024 electoral cycle. Conducted in the immediate pre-election period, the study captures a moment of intensified political attention, heightened narrative contestation, and institutional uncertainty. The doubling of extremist representation in the European Parliament and the annulment of the first round of the Romanian presidential election—amid documented irregularities and politicized use of digital platforms—have brought renewed public concern over democratic resilience.

These developments unfolded within a broader digital media environment that is reshaping the logic of political communication. While digital platforms offer new opportunities for civic engagement, they also facilitate the spread of populist rhetoric, grievance narratives, and polarizing content. By circumventing traditional gatekeeping structures, they enable direct, emotionally charged appeals that weaken deliberative norms and fragment the public sphere.

Although these tendencies reflect broader global trends, the Romanian case illustrates how post-communist legacies—centralized governance, unmet expectations of democratic reform, and persistent structural inequalities—can converge to amplify institutional mistrust. For many young citizens socialized in such a climate, the appeal of decisive, unmediated leadership may feel more concrete than the proceduralism of liberal democracy.

Similar dynamics have been observed internationally. In the 2024 US presidential election, for example, populist discourse—amplified through alternative platforms like Truth Social—mobilized frustration and deepened skepticism toward institutional legitimacy. Within this wider perspective, Romania mirrors a broader European and global pattern in which the convergence of digital media logics and populist mobilization challenges not only democratic practices, but also the very foundations of a shared deliberative public sphere.

Although this article focuses on the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections, the dynamics it identifies—particularly among Romanian youth—are unlikely to be confined to a single electoral episode. The algorithmically segmented and affect-driven nature of digital engagement continues to shape how young people relate to political institutions and democratic norms. These concerns were further accentuated during the November 2024 presidential election, when chaotic information flows and contested legitimacy brought renewed attention to the risks of digital polarization. While a detailed examination of that electoral event exceeds the scope of this article, it points to a valuable direction for future research.

To advance this inquiry, future studies could adopt a triangulated methodological approach that links attitudinal survey data with content analysis of platform-specific political discourse and engagement dynamics. Such an approach would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how digital infrastructures mediate the relationship between symbolic communication and democratic commitment.

Finally, these challenges underscore the urgent need to invest in media literacy and civic education tailored to the realities of digital political life. Equipping young citizens with the tools to critically navigate emotionally saturated and selectively curated information flows is essential to counteract the normalization of authoritarian preferences. Initiatives that promote deliberation, pluralism, and institutional trust may serve as necessary counterweights to the affective and fragmented communication environments increasingly shaping youth political experience.

8. Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that democratic disillusionment among Romanian youth is not merely the result of apathy or disengagement, but reflects deeper structural and communicative transformations. Institutional skepticism, emotionally charged media environments, and the symbolic logic of digital political communication have contributed to a redefinition of how young people relate to democratic norms. Rather than rejecting democracy outright, many appear drawn to non-deliberative models of leadership that promise clarity, efficiency, and directness—often at the expense of institutional accountability.

This shift must be understood within the broader process of deliberative disintegration (Ștefănel, 2025), in which the conditions for reasoned public dialogue erode under the pressure of affective, fragmented, and performance-driven media ecosystems. As digital platforms amplify emotional content and reward visibility over substance, traditional spaces for democratic deliberation are increasingly replaced by confrontational, identity-based forms of expression. These dynamics do not eliminate political engagement among youth but reconfigure it in ways that may weaken democratic resilience.

Responding to this challenge requires a multifaceted approach. Critical media literacy and civic education must be adapted to reflect the realities of platform-based political communication. Institutions, educators, and civil society actors need to create spaces for constructive engagement that move beyond spectacle and polarization. Transparent, accountable, and dialogic political communication is essential if young citizens are to be reconnected with democratic values in a meaningful way.

As Europe confronts the consequences of rising nationalism, populism, and societal polarization, understanding how youth attitudes are shaped by evolving media infrastructures becomes not just a matter of academic inquiry but a democratic imperative. The resilience of democratic institutions will increasingly depend on the ability to engage younger generations in political processes that are both inclusive and responsive to the communicative logics of the digital age.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used to refine the grammar and enhance existing *R* scripts for statistical analysis and data visualization.

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