Frustrations and dissatisfactions of Romanians before the presidential elections

Analysis of a qualitative research conducted by IRES on request of Konrad Adenauer Foundation

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In this document, "boxes" like this can be found:

Inside each "box" is a quote from a research participant, accompanied by identifying elements. The quotes were selected based on brevity or clarity. Inside the "boxes", the additions necessary for understanding the context were introduced by the author in square brackets, i.e. [like this].

Also, in the document, certain conclusions are written in bold (i.e. **like this**) to highlight elements that are of utmost importance - significance that, upon a quick reading, might not be obvious.

Contents

General description of focus groups

The nine discussions, each involving seven participants, were held in various locations, ensuring a diverse mix in terms of geography and residential settings. This approach aimed to capture a broad spectrum of public opinion. Specifically, these discussions focused on:

Face-to-face:

- Bucharest
- 1 focus group in a large city other than Bucharest
- 1 focus group in a medium-sized municipality in Transylvania, Banat or Crișana (not Cluj-Napoca or Timișoara)
- 1 focus group in a medium-sized municipality in Moldavia (not Iași)
- 1 focus group in a medium-sized municipality in Muntenia (not Bucharest)

Online, each session included participants from multiple locations:

- Ilfov County
- Rural Muntenia - but not Ilfov
- Rural Moldavia
- Rural Transylvania - including Banat, Crișana or Maramureș

Conclusions / executive summary

- **The mood in Romania is grim, ranging from concern (large cities) to depression (medium or small towns) and even despair (rural areas).** Frustration over the poor quality of public services is extremely high, making it one of the main drivers of general dissatisfaction.

- The parliamentary elections did not confer legitimacy on the political class, which is still viewed with hostility. The upcoming presidential election will be defined by a **vote for punishment or change.**

- The perception that "**Romania is an abandoned state**" has grown significantly stronger over the past year. A key expectation from the next president is to transform the ethos of public administration.

- Compared to a year ago, the president's representative role has become more important in the public consciousness. However, the advantage of validation from the West is fading. Participants now expect **a president who will actively and consistently defend Romania's interests**.

- Conservative/anti-globalist messages resonate with only a small segment of participants. The 2025 electoral battle will primarily revolve around issued identified above. Romania remains lower on Maslow's hierarchy of needs than Western countries, where ideological debates are fundamental.

- Last year’s research concluded: "It is impossible to make a credible prediction about the outcome of an electoral contest between a representative of the current political class and a populist, dynamic candidate, given the former’s severe erosion.” Today, the picture is clearer: the political class will need a highly energetic, charismatic, and creative candidate to compete with the rise of populist nationalism.

Participant's overall attitude toward Romania and its governance

- Participants in large cities and their suburbs are alarmed by what they see as the collapse of the pro-Western consensus, leaving them confused and deeply concerned:

"We are at a turning point" (male, 20 years old, Ilfov)

"[The direction Romania is heading] could be either a positive or a less favourable one, depending on the presidential election" (female, 31 years old, big city)

- In contrast, in smaller communities, dissatisfaction prevails in urban areas, while strong frustration dominates in rural areas. Exasperation tends to increase as the size of the locality decreases and is inversely related to income levels.

"I don't want to say [let 's] start a riot, but we have nothing else to do. We have no other solutions. We need a political change. " (female, 41 years old, rural Moldavia)

"We are going from bad to worse if there is no change in government "
(female, 40 years old, rural Muntenia)

- Especially in rural areas, but also among middle-aged men, there is a prevailing perception that Romania's situation is in constant decline. The past is, consequently, glorified. For large segments of the population, nostalgia has become the primarily lens through which they view their own lives:

"Nothing is going well in this country. Year after year, things keep getting worse; we are sinking into a hole." (male, 46 years old, rural Moldavia)

"I think we would all take to the streets for a better life, and we're all tired of being told that we've been doing our best over the last 30 years. Yes, from the 50 marks minimum wage in the '90s, we've reached 300-400 euros now, but the purchasing power is much lower than it was back then."
(male, 46 years old, rural Transylvania)

Sources of frustration: standard of living

- Depending on the size of the locality, inflation is either acknowledged without much significance (in large cities), becomes a genuine concern (in small and medium-sized towns), or is the main topic of interest and emotion (in rural areas, excluding suburbs).

> "One of my parents, after 45 years of work, has a pension of 1800 lei. With the current inflation rate, it's a mess." (male, 32 years old, rural Muntenia)

> "I have four children. Until three weeks ago, with 500 lei I was able to buy enough food for three days, now with the same amount I am only able to buy enough food only for two days. And I don't put anything else in the basket." (female, 40 years old, rural Moldavia)

> " All dissatisfaction stems from earnings. If wages increased along with prices, you wouldn't feel it. We need to align wages with the European Union."
> (male, 43 years old, rural Moldavia)

> " "Frozen salaries, frozen pensions, but the prices of everything—food, fuel—have increased. So we're heading toward an economic collapse. Bills have gone up, gas, electricity. We no longer have any financial power." (female, 41 years old, rural Moldavia)

- In small and medium-sized localities in the Romanian Old Kingdom, the decline in living standards perceived by participants manifests in several ways. One of these is the desire to increase the number of jobs, which could provide higher earnings than the minimum wage currently received by the vast majority of participants in the study.

- Participants cited other indirect factors contributing to the erosion of living standards, such as variable interest loans (in urban Muntenia) or the cost of maintaining a car (in rural Romania). The latter factor particularly amplifies the impact of rising gasoline prices on the family budget.

Sources of frustration: a Romania that is not run by Romanians or for Romanians

- A widespread perception, held not only by nostalgic Romanians but also by others, is that the nation's destiny is determined by external entities. Several factors contribute to this perception, with one key element being the performance of the current president and prime minister on the international stage. The indirect effect is the rise of nationalist sentiments, such as "Romania first" or "Let's make Romania great again":

" "Everything that was achieved in 1989 has been thrown away. Everything Romania once had has been exported; we're only being led from the outside. Everything we have here is purely ornamental, just for show."
"...They don't want smart people to lead us; they want people who can be manipulated, easily controlled, who don't question anything." (Female, 41, rural Moldavia)

"[Westerners] want us to be a country of consumption, they want us to be a market for their goods." (Male, 46, rural Moldavia)

" "Those who lead us are waiting for a phone call, a directive, a line drawn by the European Union to follow, whether it's to go somewhere or to someone. They can't make decisions on their own. Never." (Male, 53, rural Transylvania)

"It's not our country anymore " (Male, 40 years old, big city)

Sources of frustration: holders of political power

- As was the case last year, there remains a noticeable gap between the political class and the people they represent. Despite the recent parliamentary elections, which saw high voter turnout, citizens consistently express that they feel unrepresented or believe that parties govern not for the people but for other interests. This sentiment seemingly leads to disengagement and pessimism, while in reality, it amplifies anti-system electoral messages:

"There would be solutions in absolutely every field. The problem is that they don't want them to be applied."
"[The political class] doesn't want us to live well. *They* only want to live well themselves."
(Male, 46, rural Moldavia)

"We, the citizens, are too insignificant to do anything unless the 'elected' want us to, with the necessary quotation marks—the parliamentarians, the senators, the president. If they allow us, then we might be able to do it, but be careful, we will only be able to do what they want, and we'll believe it's us who wanted it." (Male, 46, rural Transylvania)

- The quality of political leaders is widely criticized. There is a consistent gap between what the political class can deliver and what citizens expect, marked by a significant deficit in skill and performance:

" We have everything - we have everything! But we don't know how to manage it."
(Female, 56 years old, urban Moldavia)

"We are not governed by clear rules. I think even they [the country's leaders] no longer know what they're saying." (Female, 40, rural Moldavia)

"The direction we are heading is good, but unfortunately, those who lead us are increasingly poorly prepared. [...] The quality of our leaders is deplorable." (Male, 66, large city)

"Those who lead think only of filling their own pockets." (Male, 46 years old, rural Moldavia)

" "My opinion is that Romania is currently stagnating, and not because of external problems [...] Romania is led, not governed. 'Governed' means that, in the name of a program and surrounded by the right people, you move the country from point A to point B. 'Led' means you only promote your own interests, and we see the results on TV: mayors arrested with villas in France, hiring only your own relatives in the public sector, which leads to a decline in the quality of services." (Male, 56, urban Moldavia)

- One reason for dissatisfaction is the dire state of the budget, particularly evident in large cities but also in rural Moldavia. ("We borrow for pensions and salaries, not to build anything" — a statement made by a man and agreed upon by all participants in that discussion.) This situation reinforces the perception that politicians lack the necessary knowledge to govern the country, which becomes a strong point for opposition forces.

The state and/versus the citizens

- The state apparatus is seen as excessively politicized, which undermines both the efficiency and quality of services provided to citizens, as well as eroding trust in the status quo:

"As long as we have politically appointed members in the Constitutional Court, school principals, school inspectorates, and so on, what kind of education are we going to have?" (Female, 35, Ilfov)

" People are promoted based on completely different criteria than professionalism and end up in high positions, to the detriment of those with intellectual and professional capabilities, far surpassing the level of their superiors. I'll give you an example everyone knows: we have a prime minister who didn't even manage to get his high school diploma [...] I don't think there are any situations other than promotions based on different criteria." (Female, 48, urban Transylvania)

- Bureaucracy is perceived as excessive, with complex procedures unnecessarily complicating citizens' lives:

"[Regarding the relationship with the family physician] the path from the moment you have a problem until it is resolved, if it ever is, [is long]. Let me go to the specialist with my health card to prove my payments are up to date. The same analysis: 'Come back next month because there are no more appointments.' Then why are you taking this money from me? Just leave it to me, and when I have problems, I'll use it." (Male, 58, big city)

"You always need approval or a permit. No paper is valid without another paper. There are many things that seem absolutely absurd to me." (Male, 46, rural Transylvania)

" I lived in France for four years. What did I see? The civil servant is paid by us to help you get approval. He should receive you and help you complete the file, not say 'Go away, man.' Not try to make things harder for you." (Male, 55, urban Muntenia)

- The erosion of the quality of state employees may reflect both the nostalgia mentioned earlier and a (valid) assessment of a real phenomenon, with further research in other areas needed for clarification.:

"The requirements to join the police have decreased a lot compared to a few years ago. Now, you no longer receive the necessary training." (Female, 28, urban Muntenia)

"[At my child's kindergarten] the older teacher knew how to keep them in check, she knew how to give them orders and they listened to her and loved her, while the younger teacher was not listened to, [the children] didn't want to do anything she told them, there was always noise."
(woman, 35 years old, Ilfov)

"You have to make your will when you go to the hospital."
(male, 47 years old, urban Transylvania)

- Participants identified numerous decisions that impacted specific socio-professional or demographic groups, decisions that were made incorrectly or inappropriately, and which ultimately caused more harm than good. Single-parent families, in particular, were highlighted as a group suffering from a lack of support from the state.

" "They just cut some of our bonuses. SDSL = Saturday, Sunday, Legal Holidays. What did these people [in power] say? 'Well, we need to cut money. From where? From the police. Ok. What are we cutting?' They asked us on the streets, the ones who actually work shifts and weekends? No. They asked the people in offices who work Monday to Friday, the ones in finance and legal. They've never seen a thief in their lives, and they retire at 45. They asked them, 'Where can we cut?' 'Well, where it won't affect us—cut from weekends because we don't work weekends.' And that's how I ended up looking 60 years old even though I'm 29." (Male, 29, urban Muntenia)

"Laws are made, but they are not respected. Laws are passed without being properly thought through... the impact on people isn't considered, or they are applied unequally. For example, with the pension law, some people who worked in difficult conditions had their pensions reduced, while politicians with high pensions had theirs increased—it's the worst thing." (Male, 27, rural Muntenia)

- Regardless of their field of work, state employees are perceived by citizens as indifferent to the quality of their work and lacking empathy:

"My daughter sent me a picture of her teacher, sleeping during class. Literally."
It's intolerable." (female, 49 years old, big city)

- The need for transparency is strongly felt among the middle class and those with above-average incomes, who are acutely aware of the amounts they pay to the state in taxes:

"I have never seen a ministry publish a year-end report saying: 'We received this much money, and this is what we did with it.' [...] And everyone could see, everything would be transparent. Then, after four years, they come back and say, 'We all have to tighten our belts.' Why should I suffer if there was no transparency? What happened to the money?" (Female, 65, Ilfov)

- As a result, there is a strong need for rules, order, and discipline to counteract the existing or perceived chaos. A rare source of optimism is Ilie Bolojan, whose leadership style, past performance in Oradea/Bihor, and recent actions to reduce Senate staff have resonated positively in several focus groups.

" Someone with decision-making power needs to take decisive actions" (Female, 49 years old, big city)

"The fish rots from the head down, right? And the whole system is rotten. That's why there are problems in every state institution. Someone needs to step in, shake things up, and get to work." (Male, 43, rural Moldavia)

- The state's inefficiency in multiple areas is so striking to participants that many resort to blaming conspiracies, backroom deals, and shadowy entities for administrative failures.

"Until there was pressure to build highways, almost nothing was done. [...] There must have been other interests at play. Maybe it was deliberately left undeveloped." (Male, 55, urban Muntenia)

Justice system

- Regardless of the participants' location, the topic of justice was always introduced by men, though they did not dominate the discussion once it began:

"I believe that everything we all want can only be achieved under the umbrella of fair justice. [...] But nothing is happening in the justice system. It's like a separate kingdom. We're struggling in vain to have competent people—good professionals in agriculture, education, or any other field." (Male, 54, Ilfov)

- The justice system is perceived as deeply dysfunctional and unfair, often serving to protect the corrupt—provided they have the right political connections:

" "I don't feel protected by the state or justice, and I feel that the law is applied preferentially, with no sense of fairness or proportionality." (Female, 38, big city)

"Justice doesn't work properly. The laws are made with certain loopholes that can be exploited to benefit one side or the other." (Female, 42, big city)

Public health system

- Among participants from areas like rural Moldavia, the costs of treatments and medicines are a significant concern ("we pay in vain [CASS]") (TN: Social Health Insurance Contribution), while the lack of facilities is another source of dissatisfaction in other regions:

> " I went to the hospital with my child today. They didn't even have *a* thermometer at a fairly large hospital."
> (Female, 51 years old, Ilfov)

> "I ended up paying the nurses to stop giving me insulin injections. They didn't have a machine in the surgery department to do a simple blood sugar test, a finger-prick test. They would give me that injection four times a day without even checking my blood sugar."
> (Female, 48, urban Transylvania)

- The lack of competent doctors is a major, nationwide complaint, with participants in several focus groups stating that "the good ones have left" [abroad], and that positions outside of major cities remain unfilled due to a lack of applicants. In areas like Ilfov, this issue also extends to the private sector.

- Corruption is a widespread issue, identified by participants from across the country as a key source of dissatisfaction and frustration.:

> "I've encountered state doctors who, if they didn't stretch out their hands asking for money, wouldn't do anything. I believe that after working and paying so many taxes to the state, I shouldn't have to go to state hospitals with money I've already paid to the state, only to have to bribe the doctor to get a diagnosis. That's why I prefer private practice because I know I'm paying for the service because I chose to. [...] Especially since state salaries have increased a lot now, I don't see the reason for them to ask for extra money."
> (Female, 35, Ilfov)

Public education system

- The topic sparked significant interest among participants from large cities. They spent considerable time discussing it, focusing on both their children's education and the broader impact of flaws in the education system on the economy and society as a whole.

- Citizens are aware of the inconsistency in political projects related to the education system: "Every minister who has come to the ministry in recent years—and there have been quite a few—each one wanted to leave their mark and made a change, most of the time not for the better." (Female, 51, Ilfov); "In 30 years, I don't even want to think about how many education ministers there have been." (Female, 49, big city).

- There is inequality between schools and high schools in terms of teachers' dedication, a theme that emerged particularly in discussions in big cities and their suburbs. At times, the issue was framed in a dichotomy of citizens vs. the political class, as the following quote illustrates:

"The Romanian education system is very out of touch and the elite sends their children to private schools so they don't suffer from this." (man, 35 years old, Ilfov)

- Corruption is rampant, especially in the university system outside of major cities:

"We have state universities in our town where exams are passed with bottles of alcohol and money. In that case, there's no difference between a student who is genuinely interested and studying and one who just wants to pass." (Female, 19, urban Muntenia)

- Education regarding the use of social media is a need felt especially by the public surprised by the result of the first round of the presidential elections:

" "It's mandatory to study history in school, but real history. I feel like many people don't even know what 'legionnaire' means, or what 'communism' means. I have teenage children, and they learn very little, which is why they think all these platforms are wonderful." (Female, 47, Ilfov)

Specific regional characteristics

- Unlike the rest of the country, participants from Transylvania also cite the misuse or incorrect allocation of European funds for poorly thought-out investments as a reason for dissatisfaction:

> "Ever since I started building my house, the street has been raised by half a meter. Instead of taking the stone that was already there and reusing it, the city hall kept choosing to add stone on top of stone. The yards ended up being two steps below street level. There are people whose cars are now stuck in their yards." (male, 50 years old, rural Transylvania)

- In rural Transylvania, participants lament the lack of appeal in formal education, as well as the fact that children's role models are often influencers on TikTok and other social media platforms.

- Participants from Transylvania, in particular, expressed strong anti-statist values, showing a greater desire to reduce the state's involvement in the economy, administration, and other sectors. In contrast, participants from the rest of the country focused more on improving the quality of services, with fewer anti-statist sentiments.

- The topic of reindustrialization and reopening factories is prevalent in small towns in the Romanian Old Kingdom but absent in Transylvania.

- In the Romanian Old Kingdom, discussions often revolved around the issue of social assistance being granted to the wrong people or being provided in excessive amounts.

The next president of the country - expectations and aspirations

- • The political class, particularly those currently in power, is seen as exhausted. There is a strong desire for change, with many citizens hoping for a new figure to lead the country.

"[For the direction of the country to improve] there was an attempt to change something in the 2024 elections. An attempt was made to replace an outdated political class, to put it nicely, and everyone saw what happened." (Male, 53 years old, rural Transylvania)

"There are two camps: apolitical and the rest. Not 'extremists and the rest.'" (Male, 47 years old, urban Transylvania)

- • As in last year's research but more strongly, participants virtually unanimously described a president radically different from the current one. For example, conveying a sense of power/representation is extremely important at the moment. In the focus group in rural Moldavia, one participant's request ("the future president] should not slouch") was unanimously appreciated by discussion colleagues, with the mood in other regions and residential environments being identical:

"Let 's negotiate, let's not sit on our knees saying 'yes, sir!'" (Female, 47 years old, Ilfov)

"Selfish for the good of Romania. At any meeting, with any counterpart, let him only be interested in our good." (male, 32 years old, rural Transylvania)

"I don't know if we have the necessary resources, but let's not depend so much on other players, on other countries, let's be able to think with our own heads, not just with the heads of others (...) we will have to put Romania first, not other countries. Let’s impose ourselves, not just go [abroad] and that's it." (Female, 42 years old, big city)

- Participants want an involved, dynamic, and communicative president. This set of attributes is seen as directly related to state reform and, consequently, to moral integrity, a desire expressed throughout the country but especially in large cities and their suburbs.

"A smart man, a good orator, to come out and talk to us. I don't want him like Iohannis has been with us for these ten years." (Female, 41 years old, rural Moldavia)

"It will have to be an involved type of person. If you don't give direction, you let those under you do whatever they want." (male, 43, urban Moldavia)

"He should have the courage to name the bad things that are happening in the country and that need to be solved. Not a diplomat. He should point the finger at where the problems are."
(Female, 35 years old, Ilfov)

"He should not accept the appointment of all the incompetent and unqualified people to ministerial positions (...) New people should come, but competent ones. Not godchildren, nephews, grandparents, and whatever else the current political class might have."
(Female, 47 years old, Ilfov)

- Conservative values such as patriotism and faith in God were mentioned especially in rural Moldavia and to some extent in Muntenia.

"They brought Lidl, and all the supermarkets. We have nothing left. (...) A smart man, a good orator, to come out and talk to us. I don't want the way it was with us [Iohannis] for these ten years. He should protect our faith and traditions. I don't want anything else, gay issues, under no circumstances."
(Female, 41 years old, rural Moldavia)