

FROM DEPENDENCY TO AUTONOMY: TRUMP'S RHETORIC AND ROMANIA'S CIVIL-MILITARY COOPERATION

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Abstract: *The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 has introduced a level of transatlantic strategic uncertainty without precedent in the post-Cold War era. His administration's conditional reading of Article 5, its bilateral diplomatic outreach toward Moscow conducted outside established NATO channels, and its explicit demands for allied defence spending well above the 2% of GDP threshold have collectively disrupted planning assumptions that European governments had treated as fixed for decades. For Romania — a NATO member bordering Ukraine, hosting the Aegis Ashore missile defence system at Deveselu and multinational forces at Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base — these developments demanded an institutional response, not merely a diplomatic one. This article argues that Trump's rhetoric has paradoxically catalysed a positive transformation in Romania's civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) mechanisms, accelerating a shift from strategic dependency on the U.S. security umbrella toward a more autonomous, whole-of-society defence posture. Drawing on the Copenhagen School's societal security framework and NATO's CIMIC doctrine (AJP-3.4.9), the study analyses defence budget trajectories, legislative developments, and CIMIC exercise patterns observed between January 2025 and April 2026. A four-stage Reactive Resilience Consolidation Model (RRCM) is proposed alongside a critical assessment of its limits.*

Keywords: societal security, civil-military cooperation, Romania, NATO Eastern Flank, strategic autonomy

1. Introduction

There is a certain uncomfortable irony in the observation that NATO's most disruptive member-state ally may have done more to accelerate Eastern European defence integration than a decade of summit communiqués. Since January 2025, Romania has seen its defence budget approach 2.50% of GDP — a remarkable reversal from the 1.61% recorded in 2023, the lowest figure since 2017 — alongside intensified civil-military exercises, expanded public resilience campaigns, and deeper interagency coordination frameworks, mirroring the broader European institutional response [1, 3, 4].

Trump's second presidency has not dismantled NATO. What it has dismantled is

the comfortable assumption, quietly maintained by many allied governments for decades, that American deterrence would remain unconditional and automatic regardless of the political weather in Washington. For Romania, neighbouring an active war zone, this assumption was always more precarious than for allies further west. What the new U.S. administration added was explicit uncertainty about reinforcement timelines and political willingness — the two variables on which any credible defence plan ultimately depends.

The institutional response has been instructive. Rather than retreating into diplomatic ambiguity or allowing public anxiety to erode political will, Romanian defence and security institutions have moved

to deepen the structural connections between the armed forces and the broader civilian society they defend. This article examines that process: what drove it, what form it has taken, what it reveals about the relationship between external pressure and internal resilience, and — critically — where its limits lie.

Section 2 establishes the conceptual framework. Section 3 analyses the impact of the Trump administration's posture on NATO's Eastern Flank. Section 4 traces Romania's CIMIC developments under strategic pressure. Section 5 proposes and critically assesses the RRCM. Section 6 draws conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Societal security and resilience

The Copenhagen School's most enduring contribution to security studies is its insistence that security cannot be reduced to military force and territorial integrity. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde identified five analytically distinct security sectors — military, political, economic, societal, and environmental — each governed by its own logic of threat and referent object [5]. The societal sector takes collective identity as its foundational reference point: a community faces existential threat when the shared practices, values, and meanings that sustain its coherence are systematically undermined. Wæver's securitization theory adds a further analytical tool: through speech acts, political actors construct referent objects as facing existential threats, thereby unlocking emergency measures beyond normal political procedures [14]. Applied here, Trump's repeated questioning of NATO's Article 5 commitment functioned as an involuntary securitization of allied dependency — compelling European governments to treat that dependency as a problem requiring urgent institutional response rather than a stable background condition.

Resilience is the operational core of societal security: the dynamic capacity of a social

system to absorb shocks, adapt under adversity, and recover essential functions without losing fundamental character. NATO's Baseline Requirements for National Resilience formalize this insight by requiring allies to maintain continuity of government, essential services, and civil support to military operations under conditions of severe disruption [6, 7].

2.2. Civil-military cooperation: from expeditionary to homeland

NATO's AJP-3.4.9 defines CIMIC as the coordination and cooperation, in support of the mission, between the NATO commander and civil actors — local populations, national authorities, and international and non-governmental organizations [8]. For most of the post-Cold War period, this was operationalized exclusively in overseas contexts. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally altered this calculus [9]. A continental war involving systematic strikes on civilian infrastructure, mass population displacement, and the weaponization of energy supply has made homeland CIMIC an operational priority. For Romania, this carries particular weight: the country has simultaneously managed refugee inflows of over 11 million border crossings recorded by February 2025 [18], maintained a credible deterrence posture, and defended an information environment actively targeted by adversarial influence operations.

3. The Trump Factor: Strategic Uncertainty on the Eastern Flank

Trump's first administration (2017–2021) introduced a transactional logic into U.S. alliance management without meaningful post-1945 precedent [10]. The second term brought something qualitatively different: concrete diplomatic moves toward bilateral engagement with Moscow conducted outside the NATO consultation framework, early signals of conditional support for Ukraine, and ambiguous statements about the circumstances under which Article 5 guarantees would actually be honoured [10]. Analysts noted that this transactional

approach also carried unintended costs for the American defence industrial sector itself [2]. For Romania and the broader Eastern Flank, these developments produced what this article terms a strategic clarification shock: a forced acknowledgement that planning assumptions built on automatic U.S. intervention may no longer be operationally reliable. Public support for NATO membership has remained high — above 70% in the most recent Pew Research surveys across Eastern Europe, recorded in 2024 [11] — but confidence in the unconditional nature of allied guarantees has declined. Russian-aligned media ecosystems

have amplified Trump's statements into narratives of NATO's dissolution, requiring sustained counter-messaging efforts [12]. Yet the same shock has created political enabling conditions for decisions previously trapped in institutional inertia. Romania's defence expenditure trajectory is illustrated in Figure 1. Romania's 2023 figure of 1.61% represented a budget execution shortfall rather than a policy shift; the subsequent recovery to an estimated 2.45% in 2024 — driven by Russia's continuing war and the anticipation of Trump's return — preceded his January 2025 inauguration. Trump's second term then reinforced and accelerated a process already under way.

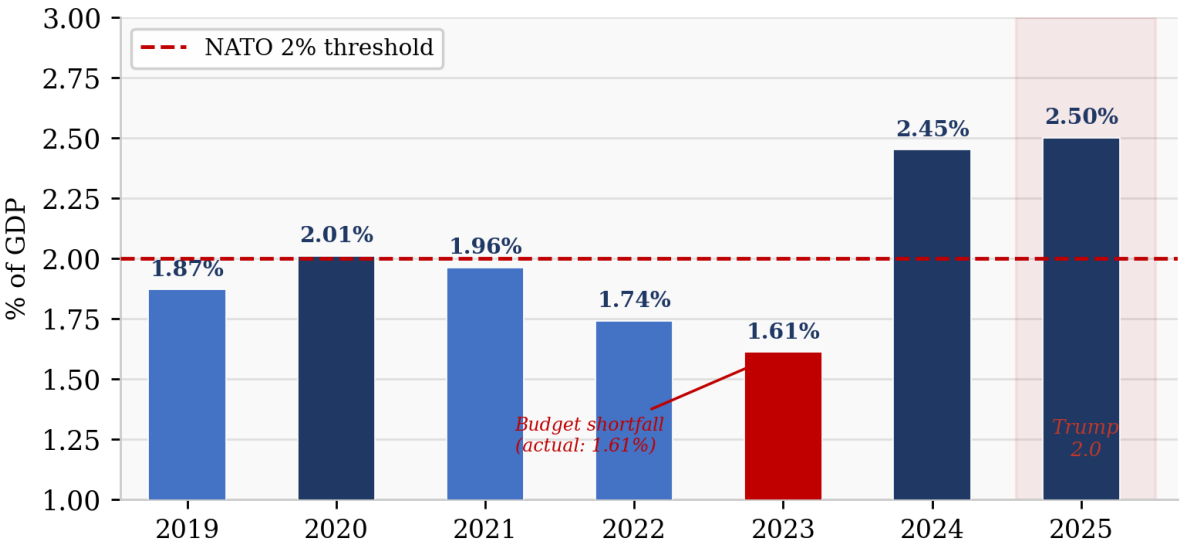


Figure 1: Romania's Defence Expenditure as % of GDP (2019–2025)
Source: NATO, Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025), June 2025 [3]. Figures for 2024 and 2025 are NATO estimates.

4. Romania's CIMIC Response: Institutional Evolution Under Pressure
4.1. The institutional baseline
Romania's civil-military coordination architecture rests on several overlapping frameworks. The National System for Emergency Situations Management (SNMSU), established by Government Emergency Ordinance 21/2004 [13], integrates prefectural civil protection authorities, the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (IGSU), and military units under a shared operational logic. The Supreme Council of National Defence

(CSAT) ensures strategic-level coherence, while Romania's National Defence Strategy 2020–2024 established whole-of-society resilience as a core national security objective [4]; a successor strategy was under consultation as of early 2026. In practice, this architecture has performed adequately in natural disaster response and in managing the humanitarian dimensions of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Its limitations become apparent in scenarios involving prolonged conventional conflict — precisely the scenarios that current strategic pressure is forcing onto the institutional agenda.

4.2. Measurable changes since January 2025

Several developments are publicly documented. According to Romania's National Defence Strategy framework [4], civil-military preparedness exercises are a core commitment; since January 2025, available reporting indicates that exercise scenarios have increasingly incorporated conventional conflict assumptions alongside the traditional natural disaster templates. The Land Forces Academy in Sibiu — the institution within which this research is situated — has begun integrating civil-military cooperation themes into officer development programmes, reflecting an institutional recognition that contemporary Romanian officers must possess interagency

competencies alongside traditional military skills.

The 'Be Prepared!' public awareness campaign, jointly coordinated by the Ministry of National Defence and IGSU, has undergone significant substantive expansion. Updated materials address prolonged utility disruption, shelter-in-place protocols relevant to armed conflict, and the active responsibilities of citizens in supporting military operations on national territory. This shift — from protective reassurance toward active preparation — represents a meaningful change in underlying communication philosophy. The CIMIC stakeholder integration framework is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. CIMIC Stakeholder Integration Framework — Romania

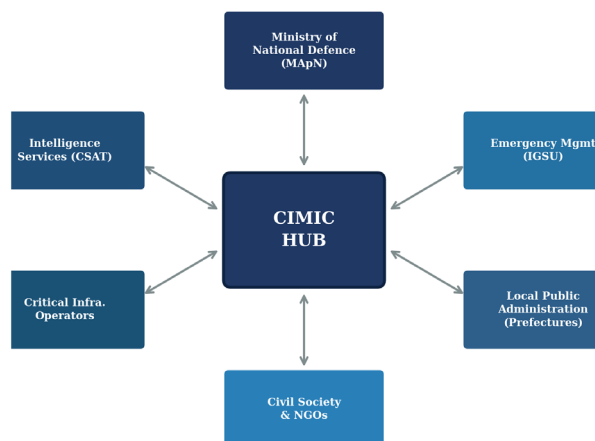


Figure 2. CIMIC Stakeholder Integration Framework — Romania

Source: Author's elaboration based on AJP-3.4.9 [8] and G.E.O. 21/2004 [13].

5. The Reactive Resilience Consolidation Model

5.1. Model structure and logic

The relationship between external strategic pressure and internal institutional consolidation is neither automatic nor linear. Many states facing comparable pressures have responded with political paralysis or institutional rivalry rather than coordinated mobilization. This article proposes the RRCM, illustrated in Figure 3. The model posits that external strategic pressure, when mediated by adequate institutional conditions, moves through four sequential

stages: (1) Threat Perception Amplification — external uncertainty raises awareness of existing defence gaps beyond the threshold that peacetime inertia permits; (2) Institutional Activation — coordination frameworks are mobilized, expanded, and where necessary reformed; (3) Resource Reallocation — increased defence investment and organizational capacity follow; and (4) Societal Integration — deeper civil-military linkages produce a more autonomous national defence posture. The four-stage structure reflects a logic of conditional dependency: resource

reallocation without prior institutional activation produces expenditure without capability; societal integration without prior investment remains aspirational. A feedback mechanism is also incorporated: societal

integration, once achieved, reinforces resilience by building a better-informed public less susceptible to destabilizing narratives.

Figure 3. The Reactive Resilience Consolidation Model (RRCM)

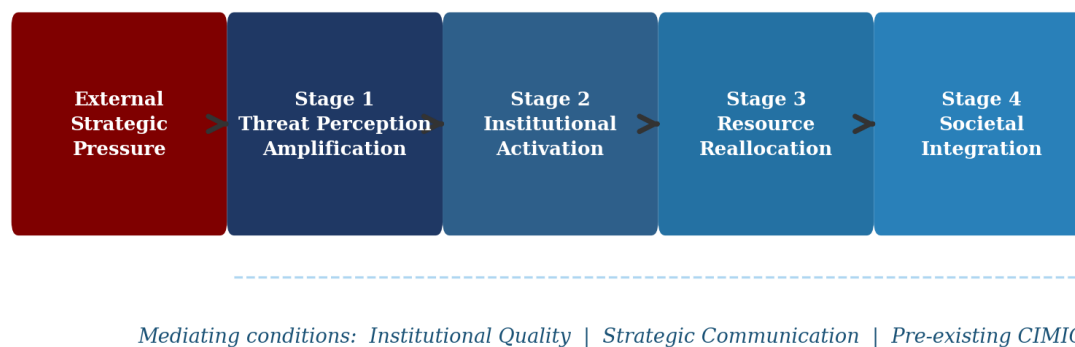


Figure 3: The Reactive Resilience Consolidation Model (RRCM)

Source: Author's elaboration.

5.2. Critical assessment and limits

The RRCM describes a conditional pathway, not a universal law. Three structural limits deserve acknowledgement. First, the mediating conditions are unevenly distributed. Public trust in institutions — a prerequisite for whole-of-society mobilization — has historically been among the lowest in the European Union [16], making the model inherently more fragile in contexts of weak institutions. Second, there is a documented risk of resilience fatigue: sustained strategic pressure may eventually normalize the threat and reduce the political urgency driving initial consolidation. Finnish and Swedish experience demonstrates that maintaining public and institutional engagement over multi-year periods requires continuous narrative renewal [17]. Third, RAND wargaming research on NATO's Eastern Flank consistently shows that military capability gaps can be overcome only when

conventional force investments are paired with adequate civilian support structures — a finding that reinforces the case for robust civil-military integration [15].

6. Conclusions

The argument advanced in this article resists both optimism and pessimism about the current transatlantic moment. Trump's return has introduced genuine turbulence into NATO's alliance management — the risks for Ukraine, for extended deterrence credibility, and for allied cohesion are real and should not be minimized. And yet the evidence from Romania between January 2025 and April 2026 consistently suggests that strategic uncertainty, when mediated by adequate institutional conditions, can function as a catalyst for the kind of whole-of-society resilience that decades of comfortable deterrence had made politically difficult to build.

Defence budgets have recovered sharply —

from a low of 1.61% of GDP in 2023 to an estimated 2.45% in 2024 and 2.50% in 2025. Interagency coordination has deepened. Public communication about civil preparedness has become more honest and more demanding of citizens. The Land Forces Academy is embedding civil-military cooperation into the formation of Romania's next generation of officers. Whether these changes prove structurally durable depends on decisions not yet made — the RRCM suggests that durability depends on the depth of societal integration achieved before the pressure modulates, making the current window particularly consequential. Four policy implications follow. First, CIMIC module integration at the Land Forces Academy should be formalized as a permanent curriculum component. Second, the 'Be Prepared!' campaign should develop longitudinal measurement instruments to assess genuine improvements in public preparedness literacy. Third, the persistent

capacity gap between metropolitan and rural civil protection structures requires targeted investment. Fourth, Romania's experience should be shared systematically through NATO resilience frameworks so that the RRCM and its enabling conditions can be tested and refined against allied experience across the Eastern Flank.

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