

Brown Bears in Romania

How Politics and Hunting Interests Are Threatening the Future of European Biodiversity

June 2026



About this document

This analysis was prepared by the Nature, People and Animals Party (NOA), Romania.

The analysis is based on applicable legislation, official documents, technical reports, scientific literature, court decisions, investigative journalism, media sources, public statements and other publicly available information. It also includes the observations, assessments and conclusions of the authors.

The sources used are indicated both throughout the text and in the bibliography at the end of the document.

The purpose of this document is to contribute to the debate on brown bear conservation and the management of human-bear conflicts by presenting information available to the authors and exploring its implications for conservation, public policy and coexistence.

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Introduction

In recent years, few environmental issues in Romania have generated as much controversy and public attention as the debate surrounding the brown bear.

Increasingly framed through the lenses of public safety, emergency situations and human-wildlife conflict, the debate has gradually expanded beyond the scientific sphere and into politics, the media and public discourse.

Under the banner of "prevention", Romania has progressively moved towards allowing the annual killing of hundreds of bears, including animals living in their natural habitat that have never been involved in conflicts with humans.

Yet the scientific evidence and practical experience available today raise important questions about this assumption.

Are conflicts primarily driven by the overall size of the population, or by a relatively small number of individuals?

Can the killing of bears that have never caused problems prevent future conflicts?

Have non-lethal alternatives been fully implemented and adequately evaluated?

And to what extent are political interests, scientific claims, media narratives and public perceptions influencing decisions affecting one of Europe's most emblematic protected species?

This analysis examines the developments that have shaped Romania's approach to brown bear management in recent years.

Drawing on legislation, scientific literature, official documents, media reports and practical examples, it explores the growing reliance on lethal measures, the factors influencing human-bear conflicts and the importance of prevention, coexistence and the proper application of the principles enshrined in the Habitats Directive.

Throughout these pages, one question repeatedly emerges.

Not simply how many bears Romania has.

But what humans have done - and failed to do.

Ultimately, this is not only a debate about bears.

It is also a debate about how modern societies choose to manage their relationship with nature, how scientific evidence is incorporated into public policy, and how potential tensions between human safety and biodiversity conservation should be addressed.

1. Arthur - The Case That Exposed Romania's Bear Hunting Interests

Few wild animals have attracted as much international attention as Arthur, a brown bear shot in Romania in the spring of 2021.

The case made headlines across Europe and beyond, becoming one of the most widely known episodes in the debate surrounding brown bears in Romania.

At the center of the controversy was not only the death of a large male bear, but also broader questions concerning transparency, the use of derogations and the relationship between biodiversity conservation and hunting interests.

Under Article 16 of the Habitats Directive, derogations from the protection regime may be granted under certain conditions, including for reasons of public safety and the prevention of serious damage. Such measures are intended to address conflicts involving particular animals, not to provide opportunities for trophy hunting.

Council Directive 92/43/EEC:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31992L0043>

The Arthur case became a symbol of the dangers associated with a lack of transparency and accountability in the implementation of Article 16 of the Habitats Directive.

Following the hunt, environmental organizations Agent Green and VGT alleged that the animal ultimately killed was not the bear responsible for the damage that had justified the derogation, but a large dominant male known as "Arthur", considered by campaigners to be one of Romania's largest brown bears.

Agent Green statement:

<https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-biggest-bear-shot-austria-prince>

The Washington Post summarized the controversy under the headline:

"Liechtenstein prince accused of poaching Europe's largest bear."

BBC, The Guardian, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, Reuters, The Washington Post and numerous other media outlets covered the controversy, transforming Arthur into one of the most widely known symbols of the debate surrounding trophy hunting and brown bear conservation in Europe.

BBC:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56991543>

The Guardian:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/05/liechtenstein-prince-accused-of-shooting-dead-arthur-romania-largest-bear-age-of-extinction>

Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/romania-austrian-prince-poaches-biggest-bear/31239420.html>

Reuters / Stuff:

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/world/europe/300300729/romania-investigates-case-of-bear-allegedly-killed-by-austrian-prince>

The Washington Post:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/07/arthur-bear-liechtenstein-romania/>

Digi24:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ursul-arthur-si-printul-care-l-ar-fi-ucis-au-devenit-celebri-presa-internationala-relateaza-pe-larg-despre-scandalul-din-romania-1519107>

As a result, Romania suddenly found itself at the center of an international scandal involving a protected species, trophy hunting and questions concerning the implementation of European conservation law.

The case highlighted the risk that mechanisms designed to address conflicts involving individual bears could evolve into instruments serving trophy hunting interests and be diverted towards the killing of highly prized trophy animals.

In May 2021, then **Environment Minister Tanczos Barna** publicly reacted to the scandal. He announced that foreign hunters would no longer be allowed to implement derogations and declared:

"I have stopped any possibility of bringing foreign persons to implement the removal of animals considered dangerous."

Digi24:

<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/sci-tech/natura-si-mediu/ministrul-mediului-schimba-regulile-dupa-cazul-ursului-arthur-nu-mai-pot-veni-straini-sa-vaneze-pentru-un-trofeu-1520097>

The message appeared unequivocal. Derogations intended to remove dangerous bears were not supposed to provide opportunities for trophy hunting.

Yet the years that followed would move Romania in precisely the opposite direction.

As this analysis will show, **Tanczos Barna himself would later emerge as one of the most prominent political advocates of expanding bear hunting quotas and weakening the European protection regime applicable to the species.**

Under the legislation promoted and supported in subsequent years, Romanian and foreign hunters were granted access to hundreds of bears living in their natural habitat.

What had been presented in 2021 as a scandal exposing the misuse of exceptional measures did not mark the end of trophy hunting interests.

On the contrary, rather than reinforcing the targeted character of derogations, the years that followed witnessed a shift from derogations intended for bears involved in conflicts to so-called "prevention quotas" - effectively disguised hunting quotas - allowing hunters to kill hundreds of bears every year, including many animals living in their natural habitat and with no history of conflict with humans.

The stakes extended far beyond individual animals. They concerned the integrity of one of Europe's most valuable natural heritages, the proper implementation of European nature legislation and preservation of biodiversity itself.

2. Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 - The Emergence of a New Intervention Framework

In 2021, Romania adopted Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021, creating a new framework for managing interactions between people and brown bears.

Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021: <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/257037>

Before the adoption of this ordinance, the removal of a brown bear generally relied on individual derogations issued by the Ministry of Environment under the legal framework applicable to strictly protected species.

Rather than replacing this system, Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 introduced an additional mechanism intended to facilitate interventions at the local level. The ordinance established intervention teams and enabled local authorities to react more rapidly in situations involving bears that posed a threat to human life, public safety or property.

As a result, Romania came to rely on multiple legal avenues.

Individual derogations issued by the Ministry of Environment remained available, while local authorities gained the ability to intervene directly in specific situations.

One of the features of the new framework was the introduction of a graduated intervention system based on three possible levels of response: driving the animal away; relocation; extraction through euthanasia or shooting.

In principle, lethal measures represented the final stage of the process and were intended to be used when other solutions proved ineffective or inappropriate in view of the circumstances.

Lethal measures could also be applied when the safety of individuals or their property was at risk, when a bear displayed aggressive behaviour, as well as in other similar situations.

The new framework was designed to facilitate faster interventions while allowing authorities to adapt their response to the severity of each situation.

Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 was conceived as an intervention tool rather than a mechanism for reducing the brown bear population. It focused on individual conflict situations involving bears that posed a threat to people or property.

By combining local intervention teams with the existing system of ministerial derogations, Romania already possessed multiple legal mechanisms capable of addressing dangerous bears, including through lethal means when necessary.

It provided authorities with practical tools for responding to dangerous situations without abandoning the broader legal protection afforded to the species.

Thus, by combining local intervention teams with the existing system of derogations issued by the Ministry of Environment, Romania already possessed multiple legal mechanisms capable of addressing genuinely dangerous bears, including through the use of lethal measures when necessary.

When Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 was adopted, it was conceived as a rapid intervention instrument aimed at addressing specific conflict situations.

But only three years later, however, the same ordinance would be amended through Law No. 242/2024.

The new provisions introduced so-called annual "prevention quotas", which in practice became hunting quotas, and incorporated them into a legal framework originally designed to facilitate interventions against bears that posed a genuine threat.

As a result, a mechanism originally created to address specific conflicts would increasingly become associated with trophy hunting and the killing of bears that had not been involved in conflicts.

This development would mark one of the most significant turning points in Romania's approach to brown bear management and fundamentally transform the debate in the years that followed.

3. Law No. 242/2024 and the Transformation of an Intervention Framework into a Hunting System for a Strictly Protected Species

In 2024, Romania adopted Law No. 242/2024, introducing annual so-called "prevention quotas" for brown bears.

Law No. 242/2024: <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/285830>

Rather than creating a separate legal framework, Law No. 242/2024 amended Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021, a legal instrument originally conceived to facilitate rapid interventions in specific situations involving bears that posed a threat to human life, public safety or property.

For 2024 and 2025, the legislation established an annual so-called prevention quota of 426 bears and an annual intervention quota of 55 bears.

This marked a profound change in philosophy.

Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 had been built around the logic of intervention. Its purpose was to provide authorities with practical tools for dealing with conflict situations involving particular animals.

Law No. 242/2024 introduced a different approach.

For the first time, Romanian legislation established general annual quotas for the killing of bears that were not linked to identified conflict situations or to individual animals that had caused damage or posed a threat to humans.

The structure created by Law No. 242/2024 produced a striking paradox.

For bears considered dangerous, Romanian law continued to rely on individualized mechanisms linked to concrete situations.

Emergency interventions by local authorities under Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 remained available without the need for prior ministerial approval. In parallel, the annual intervention quota of 55 bears continued to require derogations issued by the Ministry of Environment, reflecting the logic of individual interventions envisaged by the Habitats Directive.

By contrast, the much broader so-called "prevention quota" of 426 bears per year - in reality a hunting quota for a species strictly protected under European law - introduced by Law No. 242/2024, was allocated in advance through Annex No. 5 to the law.

Instead of being linked to bears causing conflicts, this "prevention" quota was made available to the entities managing the respective hunting grounds, most of them hunting associations.

Consequently, while dangerous bears remained subject to intervention procedures and individual derogations, non-dangerous bears became subject to quota-based hunting.

This represented a reversal of logic.

Bears considered dangerous continued to be managed through procedures linked to specific situations and individual animals, whereas bears with no history of conflict with humans could be shot by hunters under the annual quotas without being subject to the same conditions and safeguards applicable to interventions targeting genuinely dangerous animals.

Under the Habitats Directive, the killing of strictly protected species is generally prohibited, while derogations are allowed under certain circumstances in order to address specific situations involving particular animals.

The Directive therefore already provides mechanisms allowing interventions against dangerous bears.

However, by introducing general annual quotas allocated in advance to hunting grounds, Law No. 242/2024 transformed a legal framework originally intended to facilitate interventions into a system allowing the organized hunting of a strictly protected species.

This so-called "prevention quota" is built around trophy hunting criteria. Law No. 242/2024 introduced not only annual so-called prevention quotas, but also criteria based on CIC scores.

Under the legislation, bears harvested under the prevention quota may reach up to 400 CIC points (gold medal brown bear trophies begin at approximately 300 CIC points).

CIC scores are not indicators of dangerousness; they are hunting criteria traditionally used to assess the trophy value of animals.

A bear's CIC score reflects its trophy value, not the threat it poses to people.

Consequently, the so-called prevention quota effectively became a hunting quota structured around trophy evaluation criteria.

By introducing animals with scores of up to 400 CIC points - far above the threshold for gold medal trophies - **the legislation effectively opened the door to the hunting of some of the most valuable brown bears in Europe.**

The incorporation of trophy evaluation criteria into a system officially presented as a tool for prevention represented one of the clearest indications that the new framework was no longer centered on conflict bears or public safety, but on organized trophy hunting.

Traditionally, preventing conflicts between people and bears has meant addressing the causes of those conflicts. **Measures such as** bear-resistant containers, electric fencing, the protection of livestock and beehives, improved waste management and early warning systems are all intended to prevent encounters before they occur.

The existence of a small number of conflict bears does not justify the killing of hundreds of animals living in their natural habitat and which have never caused damage or posed a threat to humans.

Modern societies do not seek to reduce crime by imprisoning large numbers of people who have committed no offences in the hope that this might prevent future crimes. Public policies are generally expected to target actual risks rather than individuals that have done nothing wrong.

The same principle, should apply to wildlife management.

4. European Passivity and the Hunting Quota System

According to information published by Euronews Romania, the European Commission acknowledged that the annual quota system introduced by Romania raised concerns in relation to the Habitats Directive.

Euronews Romania:

<https://www.euronews.ro/articole/exclusiv-comisia-europeana-reactioneaza-in-cazul-impuscarii-de-ursi-vanatoarea-de>

*“Based on the analysis of existing knowledge, proactive measures should be prioritized to prevent conflicts with bears. Such proactive measures include preventing damage to agriculture, preventing access to waste and other human food sources, awareness campaigns to address inappropriate human behaviour (such as feeding bears), as well as emergency response teams. **Trophy hunting of bears is contrary to EU legislation, as the brown bear is a strictly protected species in the EU,**”* the European Commission stated in response to questions from Euronews Romania.

Despite these concerns, no infringement procedure has been initiated to date, no interim measures have been adopted and no visible follow-up action has taken place.

As a result, the system introduced in 2024 remained fully operational.

The consequences of this lack of response from the European Commission would become even more visible only two years later.

Rather than being reconsidered, the hunting quota system was expanded through a new legislative initiative introduced in 2025 and adopted by the Romanian Parliament in 2026.

The number of bears that could be killed each year increased from 426 to 859 animals.

The number of bears that could be legally killed under the so-called “prevention quotas” - which effectively functioned as hunting quotas for animals strictly protected under the Habitats Directive - including bears living in their natural habitat that had never been associated with conflict situations, was almost doubled, while trophy-related criteria were further expanded.

Exceptional measures gradually evolved into general annual hunting quotas applicable to a strictly protected species.

The years following 2024 represented a missed opportunity. Instead of encouraging a greater use of preventive measures, more effective waste management, the installation of electric fences and other non-lethal solutions, the absence of a significant European response was followed by a further expansion of quota-based hunting.

In this sense, the controversy surrounding Romania’s brown bear policy is no longer solely a Romanian story. It has also become a story about the limits of European environmental

governance and the consequences of inaction when problems are identified but are not followed by effective measures.

5. The Erosion of the Principle of Gradual Intervention: OUG No. 60/2025

When Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 entered into force, it introduced a new framework for managing human-bear interactions in Romania based on a gradual approach.

In principle, lethal measures represented the final stage of the process and were intended to be used when other solutions proved ineffective or unsuitable in light of the specific circumstances. At the same time, the ordinance allowed lethal interventions whenever the safety of persons or their property was endangered, when a bear became aggressive, or in other comparable situations. Thus, OUG No. 81/2021 already provided the authorities with the possibility of responding to emergency situations and potential conflict situations involving bears.

In June 2025, the Romanian Government adopted Emergency Ordinance No. 60/2025, amending OUG No. 81/2021.

OUG No. 60/2025 formally maintained the three intervention methods but introduced an exception. In cases involving bears reported within areas located within settlement boundaries, intervention teams were allowed to apply any of the methods provided by the legislation without being required to follow the original sequence of interventions.

As a result, the stepwise character of the system introduced in 2021 was significantly weakened. Although the principle of gradual intervention was not formally abandoned, the amendment substantially weakened the sequence that had originally placed lethal measures at the end of the intervention process.

At the same time, many bears enter areas located within settlement boundaries because of human-related factors, including unsecured waste, deliberate feeding and other anthropogenic food sources that make such areas attractive to wildlife. Consequently, the mere presence of a bear within such areas does not necessarily imply that the animal represents an immediate danger or that lethal measures are warranted.

The significance of OUG No. 60/2025 extended beyond a procedural modification. While Law No. 242/2024 had already shifted the focus away from individual conflict bears towards annual quotas allowing the killing of hundreds of bears, **OUG No. 60/2025 weakened one of the safeguards originally embedded in OUG No. 81/2021 and consistent with the logic underlying the Habitats Directive, namely the principle that lethal interventions should, whenever possible, follow rather than replace non-lethal measures.**

The next step would be an attempt to double the annual hunting quota, allowing the killing of up to 859 bears per year, including animals living in their natural habitat that had never been involved in conflicts with humans.

6. From 426 Hunted Bears per Year to 859 Hunted Bears per Year - The Escalation of Trophy Hunting Quotas with a New Law

Only two years later after the law 242 / 2024, Romania moved from authorizing the “preventive” killing of 426 bears per year to 859 bears per year.

In just two years, the annual hunting quota had almost doubled.

The annual intervention quota increased from 55 bears per year to 110 bears per year – so the increase affecting dangerous bears, however, remained modest compared to the spectacular expansion of the annual hunting quotas.

The new legislative initiative (Senate registration No. L43/2026; Chamber of Deputies registration No. PL-x 218/2026) was adopted by the Romanian Parliament in 2026. The project was strongly supported by lawmakers from the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR/RMDSZ), including several of its leading figures, among them former Environment Minister **Tánczos Barna**.

The legislative initiative (Senate registration No. L43/2026; Chamber of Deputies registration No. PL-x 218/2026): https://www.senat.ro/legis/lista.aspx?nr_cls=L43&an_cls=2026 .

The expansion did not concern only the number of killed bears. It concerned trophy value as well. Under Law No. 242/2024, bears included within the annual hunting quotas could reach 400 CIC points. The new legislation went even further - for certain bears allocated to hunting grounds, the previous limits were relaxed, allowing the harvesting of even larger individuals (with no CIC limit for some of the hunted bears).

The increasing importance attached to CIC scores provided further evidence that the system was becoming progressively less concerned with conflict prevention and increasingly focused on trophy hunting.

What had begun with annual quotas of 426 bears per year evolved, by 2026, into a system authorizing the killing of 859 bears per year while simultaneously expanding the possibility of harvesting some of the largest trophy bears in Europe.

The evolution from 426 bears per year to 859 bears per year suggested that the introduction of annual hunting quotas in 2024 had not represented the end point. It represented the beginning.

More bears. Bigger trophies. More opportunities for trophy hunting. Once annual hunting quotas for a strictly protected species had become politically acceptable, the pressure no longer moved towards restraint, but towards expansion.

This evolution suggested that quota-based trophy hunting was no longer being treated as an exceptional measure, but rather as a mechanism through which the prohibition on hunting strictly protected species was progressively emptied of its substance, transforming

what should have remained exceptional interventions into a system of organized trophy hunting, with potentially serious consequences for biodiversity.

7. The President's Constitutional Challenge

After Parliament adopted in 2026 the law increasing the annual hunting quota from 426 bears per year to 859 bears per year, the President of Romania referred the legislation to the Constitutional Court.

Presidential Administration:

<https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/sesizare-de-neconstitutionalitate-asupra-legii-pentru-modificarea-si-completarea-ordonantei-de-urgenta-a-guvernului-nr-81-2021-privind-aprobarea-metodelor-de-interventie-imediate-pentru-prevenirea-si-combaterea-atacurilor-exemplarelor-de-urs-brun-asupra-persoanelor-si-bunurilor-acestora-precum-si-pentru-modificarea-si-completarea-unor-acte-normative>

For the first time, concerns regarding Romania's bear policy were raised by one of the highest authorities of the Romanian state.

The President did not challenge the need to protect human life or the existence of mechanisms allowing interventions against dangerous bears. Instead, the referral questioned the almost doubling of the annual hunting quota and raised concerns regarding proportionality, scientific justification, biodiversity protection and Romania's obligations under European law.

The referral also emphasized that the brown bear is a strictly protected species under the Habitats Directive and that derogations must remain exceptional measures rather than become general management tools.

The constitutional challenge highlighted a fundamental concern.

Romania already possessed multiple mechanisms for dealing with dangerous bears.

The real issue was whether the annual killing of 859 bears per year, many of which had never caused damage or posed a threat to humans, could be reconciled with the principles governing the protection of a strictly protected species.

At the time of writing, the Constitutional Court had not yet delivered its decision.

However, the concerns raised by the President extend beyond constitutional review.

They also concern Romania's obligations under European law.

For this reason, we believe that these issues should not be examined solely by the Constitutional Court. **As guardian of the Treaties, the European Commission also has a responsibility to ensure that the system of strict protection established by the Habitats Directive is effectively applied.**

8. Romania's Bears on the Trophy Hunting Market

Within international hunting culture, the brown bear occupies a special place. The size of the animal and the characteristics of its trophy have long made the species one of the most desired forms of big game. Trophy quality is assessed through the scoring system developed by the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC). Several Romanian bears hold very high scores.

International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC): <https://www.cic-wildlife.org>

Within this cultural framework, the killing of exceptionally large bears is celebrated through medals and international rankings, turning the death of an exceptional animal into a status symbol and reducing the animal itself to a score, a trophy and a place in a ranking.

In March 2026, while the law increasing the annual hunting quota to 859 bears per year had not yet received its final vote in the Chamber of Deputies, hunting packages for the 2026 season had already appeared on international hunting websites.

Brown bear hunts in Romania:

<https://www.bookyourhunt.com/en/brown-bear-hunting-in-romania?sort=Popular>

On 20 March 2026, the Nature, People and Animals Party (NOA) publicly drew attention to this chronology.

NOA Facebook post, 20 March 2026:

<https://facebook.com/partidulnoa/posts/pfbid0UD6o3YQfETCRt2vWpxCMHAIcUqgeJm2VrRMQtL9BdXuBuuVwLNGMWESniqKC3Pt4l>

At that time, the legislative process had not yet been completed. The final vote in the Chamber of Deputies would only take place one month later, on 22 April 2026.

Yet, even before Parliament had completed the legislative process, hunting associations and commercial operators were already offering trophy hunting packages for the 2026 season, some of them already marked as sold out.

The appearance of commercial hunting offers before the completion of the legislative process suggested that the debate surrounding the new quotas extended beyond the public safety and conflict prevention arguments consistently invoked by the initiators of the law.

It also involved money, trophies and the interests surrounding the hunting of some of Romania's largest brown bears.

More broadly, it illustrated how far the system had moved from the logic of exceptional interventions aimed at addressing specific conflict situations.

As the following sections will show, the expansion of annual quotas was accompanied by the growing influence of actors with close ties to the hunting sector, raising broader questions regarding the forces shaping Romania's brown bear policy.

9. Inside the Bear Hunters' Den - The Rise Project Investigation

In 2021, the Romanian investigative journalism outlet Rise Project published an investigation entitled *“Inside the bear hunters' den”* (*“În bârlogul vâtorilor de urși”*).

Rise Project investigation:

<https://www.riseproject.ro/in-barlogul-vanatorilor-de-ursi/>

The investigation offered a rare insight into a world that usually remains largely hidden from public scrutiny. Beyond the public discourse surrounding biodiversity, conservation and human-bear conflicts, the investigation documented the existence of a network of hunters, trophy collectors and influential personalities connected by a common interest in trophy hunting.

According to Rise Project, the killing of some of Romania's largest bears had become part of an international business attracting wealthy foreign hunters prepared to pay substantial amounts for the opportunity to shoot exceptional trophies.

The investigation showed that trophy hunting in Romania was not limited to ordinary hunting activities. It involved exclusive hunting parties, prestigious international organizations, influential personalities and a market in which the value of a bear increased together with the size of its trophy.

Particular attention was given to the Safari Club International, one of the world's most influential trophy hunting organizations, whose members have included businessmen, politicians and prominent public figures. According to Rise Project, Romania had become an attractive destination for members of this international hunting community.

The investigation also highlighted the role played by the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC), an organization that promotes trophy evaluation through the CIC scoring system. The same scoring system would later become integrated into Romanian legislation through the introduction of thresholds expressed in CIC points, allowing bears to be selected according to trophy value.

Rise Project further documented the existence of luxury hunting packages, international hunting tourism and the commercial importance attached to exceptional trophies. In this system, the largest bears represented the most sought-after trophies and commanded the highest prices.

The investigation painted a picture that differed significantly from the public narrative according to which the expansion of hunting was primarily intended to address conflicts between humans and bears.

Instead, it revealed the existence of a broader ecosystem in which trophy hunting, international prestige and economic interests occupied a central place.

Several years later, the legislative changes adopted in Romania appeared to move increasingly in the same direction. Annual quotas expanded from 426 bears per year to 859 bears per year. Selection criteria based on CIC points were incorporated into the legal framework. And bears allocated to hunting associations became available to trophy hunters from Romania and abroad.

Against this background, the findings presented by Rise Project acquired even greater relevance.

What had initially appeared to be an investigation into a relatively closed world increasingly seemed to offer a glimpse into the interests and mechanisms that would later influence Romania's brown bear policy

10. The Networks Behind the Quotas

The debate surrounding Romania's brown bears is often presented as a scientific or conservation issue. However, a closer look reveals the repeated appearance of the same organizations, public figures and institutions around the same objectives: increasing hunting quotas, promoting the narrative of overpopulation and defending the continued availability of Romania's largest bears to the trophy hunting sector.

AGVPS and the Romanian hunting establishment

One of the central actors within this ecosystem is the General Association of Hunters and Fishermen in Romania (AGVPS), the country's largest hunting organization.

Official website: <https://www.agvps.ro/>

Through its affiliated associations, AGVPS is connected to a large number of hunting grounds across Romania and has long played an influential role in discussions concerning wildlife management and hunting policy.

Over the years, representatives of the organization have maintained a constant presence in debates concerning:

- large carnivores;
- hunting quotas;
- wildlife management;
- legislative reforms affecting hunting and biodiversity.

AGVPS does not operate in isolation. Over the years, its activities have intersected with political actors, senior public officials and representatives of international trophy hunting organizations, contributing to a broader network of influence.

Its congresses and public events regularly bring together decision-makers and representatives of international hunting organizations, illustrating the close connections between hunting interests

and those involved in shaping public policies affecting one of Europe's most important brown bear populations.

AGVPS 2026 Congress:

<https://facebook.com/AGVPSdinRomania/posts/pfbid0vd6udyfjSPnN6t9obFeNWPPzY9rQGxmWCpu3vhZ7Ht3mA9KRJcTNSMzWKgNy8L911>

Photographs published by AGVPS show, among others:

- **Florin Iordache, President of the Legislative Council;**
- **Adrian Năstase, former Prime Minister of Romania;**
- **Arpad Şarkany, Vice-President of the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC);**
- **George Nacov - member of the Parliament;**
- **representatives of hunting organizations and political circles.**

Another AGVPS post highlights the presence of Arpad Şarkany:

<https://web.facebook.com/AGVPSdinRomania/posts/pfbid02zS9ExxMR2RMVjNxGfkbBUWicCLDU94WeDBWhXsVLNvZXVf33brxAchUezERB3rZK1>

At another AGVPS event, George Nacov, deputy in the Romanian Parliament and vice-president of a Romanian hunting association, publicly thanked Florin Iordache for supporting the adoption of legislation concerning wildlife and hunters.

<https://facebook.com/AGVPSdinRomania/posts/pfbid02YoaGo1G6Dqphdcqua8SEMyHCDnYNYc9ruXhXnouTS77jmhBCt6kXcmPnJNF8DKRV1>

Arpad Şarkany and the international hunting world: Arpad Şarkany is vice-president of the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC), the organization behind the trophy evaluation system based on CIC points.

His name has appeared repeatedly in investigations and media reports concerning trophy hunting and wildlife management.

PressOne:

<https://pressone.ro/vanatorul-alfa-din-padurile-romaniei>

Libertatea:

<https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/comuniunea-om-natura-business-de-la-romsilva-cine-sunt-si-cat-castiga-oamenii-care-decid-soarta-padurilor-si-a-vanatului-din-romania-4418033>

Ziare.com:

<https://ziare.com/romsilva/romsilva-taieri-ilegale-impuscare-ursi-1723141>

Ovidiu Ionescu

Ovidiu Ionescu is the President of AGVPS (General Association of Hunters and Sport Fishermen of Romania), the country's largest hunting organization.

AGVPS 2026 Congress:

<https://web.facebook.com/AGVPSdinRomania/posts/pfbid0t8qczu99wSQ3ctKZYVMSu4AuSP6pT9eH5DCAJ99o9CKqm4ms443qSr7BPSKbGUSJl>

The public presentation of the national genetic bear study results from 2025 also revealed a noteworthy convergence of actors.

In 2025, Ovidiu Ionescu, the President of AGVPS, appeared alongside Environment Minister Mircea Fechet and members of the research team during the presentation of the national genetic bear study whose results would later be invoked to justify the largest bear hunting quotas in recent Romanian history.

Video recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1ZAao6lyUg>

Far from being an isolated image, the scene reflected a broader pattern that had characterized Romania's large carnivore policies for years: the repeated intersection of public authorities and organizations with a direct interest in expanding hunting quotas.

Long before the genetic study and the debate surrounding the doubling of bear hunting quotas, Romanian media had already raised questions regarding the concentration of influence surrounding the scientific and administrative processes used to justify derogations for protected species.

PressOne:

<https://pressone.ro/omul-care-a-decis-uciderea-a-1-700-de-animale-protejate-de-lege>

<https://pressone.ro/scorul-vanatorilor-trofeele-gruparii-care-decide-cat-se-impusca-in-romania>

According to these investigations, Ovidiu Ionescu occupied or had occupied positions within the Faculty of Silviculture of Transilvania University of Braşov, the former ICAS (today **INCDS - National Institute for Research and Development in Forestry "Marin Drăcea"**), the Carpathia Foundation, the National Hunting Council and hunting organizations.

Notably, INCDS would later become one of the main institutions involved in the national genetic study that was subsequently invoked to justify the doubling of Romania's annual bear hunting quota.

PressOne described what it called the "**Ionescu triad**", referring to the close links between Transilvania University, ICAS and the Carpathia Foundation. According to the investigation, this network repeatedly benefited from public contracts and European-funded projects related to wildlife management and large carnivore conservation.

The same investigation reported that Ovidiu Ionescu held positions within several forest administrations managing hunting grounds and received income from these positions, while his wife, Georgeta Ionescu, simultaneously occupied positions within Transilvania University, ICAS and the Carpathia Foundation, where she acted as project manager. Other members of the family were also involved in projects implemented through the same institutional network.

Criticism also came from within the hunting establishment itself.

In 2012, Neculai Şelaru, then General Director of AGVPS, wrote that **the "misfortune" of bears over the previous twenty years had been caused by a small number of officials and researchers who had validated population estimates, established annual extraction quotas and distributed them "subjectively"**. Referring to **the selective shooting of dominant males**, Şelaru argued that such practices resulted either from ignorance, "which is somehow excusable", or from interest, which, in his own words, **"should be regarded as an ecological crime"**. According to PressOne, these criticisms were directed at Ovidiu Ionescu.

PressOne:

<https://pressone.ro/omul-care-a-decis-uciderea-a-1-700-de-animale-protejate-de-lege>

In 2016, according to Pro TV, the Prosecutor's Office attached to the Braşov Court of Appeal opened a criminal investigation concerning the methodology used to establish hunting quotas and estimate wildlife populations.

ProTV:

<https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/inspectorul-pro/dosar-penal-la-brasov-pentru-stabilirea-modului-in-care-au-fost-acordate-cotele-de-vanatoare.html>

According to ProTV, the investigation concerned members of the same group of specialists who had previously attempted to obtain derogations for the killing of protected animals and who later drafted plans promoting the hunting of bears as a means of reducing damage caused to households.

The report also highlighted the long-standing relationship between Ovidiu Ionescu and Arpad Şarkány, one of Romania's most prominent commercial hunting operators and the owner of what he described as the oldest private hunting company in the country and one of the largest in Europe.

Interviewed by ProTV, Şarkány **openly acknowledged his close relationship with Ovidiu Ionescu** and stated that his largest partner in the commercialization of game was Romsilva. **He also described the economic value of bear trophies**, explaining that while an ordinary bear could be worth between EUR 3,000 and EUR 5,000, **exceptionally large specimens could reach EUR 35,000**.

Nearly a decade later, the same names and institutions reappeared.

In November 2025, Ovidiu Ionescu was among the authors of the report of the "Study on the Management Zoning of the Brown Bear Species in Romania", prepared within the project

"Implementation of the National Action Plan for the Conservation of the Brown Bear Population in Romania". Far from being an isolated academic exercise, **the report formed part of the broader scientific and administrative framework surrounding the management of the species at a time when Romania was moving towards the largest hunting quotas in its recent history.**

Report of the "Study on the Management Zoning of the Brown Bear Species in Romania":
<https://mmediu.ro/storage/2025/12/Raportul-sintetic-al-studiului-privind-zonarea-managementului-speciei-urs-brun.pdf>

The same names repeatedly appear across the entire chain through which wildlife policies are shaped: producing studies, participating in advisory structures, managing publicly funded projects and representing organizations with a direct interest in increasing hunting quotas.

Other actors emerged from the political sphere, particularly within the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR/RMDSZ):

Tánczos Barna, former Minister of Environment and later Deputy Prime Minister of Romania, became one of the main political promoters of increasing bear hunting quotas.

On 18 March 2026, he publicly stated that, at UDMR's initiative, the Senate had voted to double the hunting quotas and that 859 bears per year could be killed during 2026-2027.

<https://facebook.com/TanczosBarna/posts/pfbid036h3crF8zoRSVbBhVhuvycUjxidCR6sdhDK76dC5wYAGi4rCeGW2nB2NCcsdKQuEYI>

Following the President's constitutional challenge, Tánczos Barna publicly expressed hope that the Constitutional Court would uphold the law and allow its entry into force.

Such statements, made while the Constitutional Court was still examining the constitutionality of the legislation and at a time when Tánczos Barna was serving as Deputy Prime Minister of Romania, contributed to maintaining political pressure around one of the most controversial wildlife measures adopted in recent years.

<https://facebook.com/TanczosBarna/posts/pfbid0WCKhSAfzNiEVLcdrWEWjhGYC3dYwXyiNCEKJu8E2gW9ZpQQvkXzWLKvX1BnWYShJl>

Csaba Borboly, another member of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR/RMDSZ), also emerged as one of the most active political advocates for weakening the protection afforded to the brown bear at European level.

3 June 2026:

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1EGUGMaaro/>

25 February 2026:

<https://facebook.com/borbolycsaba.ro/posts/pfbid02kVmSqPy2CUepz45FEzert8G7pGdM4NBfrp6vXZdzrRHNmqFQVtDwDjQn3ZXNuktl>

3 February 2026:

<https://facebook.com/borbolycsaba.ro/posts/pfbid0zEEj6g9YEB6rmwbjv37Z1bri17FRpVrByr8YS7gXBT17TPGTJ1DzL8Zvbf8Ya8B6l>

Taken separately, these actors occupy different positions. Former Prime Ministers, Deputies, Vice Prime Ministers, Presidents of institutions, leaders of hunting associations, representatives of international trophy hunting organizations.

Yet the same names repeatedly appear around the same objectives.

Larger quotas.

The overpopulation narrative.

The genetic study that has no transparency.

Targeting European biodiversity protection.

And the continued availability of Romania's bears on the trophy hunting market.

11. The genetic study that nobody could verify: An Aggressive Estimate and a Major Transparency Problem

According to the summary report (a report, not the real study) published by the Ministry of Environment in November 2025, 4,326 genotypes were identified during the intensive monitoring campaign carried out in 2023 (page 32 of the report). On the basis of these results, an estimate of between 10,657 and 12,787 brown bears was produced. **This represented an exceptionally large extrapolation.**

Moreover, the report itself does not clearly indicate whether the 4,326 genotypes correspond to unique individuals. As a consequence, even the number of bears directly identified during the 2023 monitoring campaign remains uncertain.

Despite the importance of these findings, the datasets, metadata and detailed information necessary to independently reproduce and verify the estimate have not been made publicly available by the Ministry of Environment and the institutions involved in the project.

Nevertheless, the estimate became the principal scientific argument used to support the law adopted by Parliament in 2026, which sought to increase the annual hunting quota from 426 bears per year to 859 bears per year. Taken together, these quotas would have authorized the killing of 1,718 bears during the period 2026-2027.

This development is particularly significant because **the project was financed with European funds and concerns one of Europe's largest populations of a species that remains strictly protected under European law.**

Under normal circumstances, scientific conclusions with such far-reaching consequences would be expected to be accompanied by complete transparency and to be open to independent scrutiny and peer review.

However, the detailed datasets, metadata and other information required to reproduce and verify the estimate have not been provided.

As a consequence, one of the most important wildlife estimates in recent Romanian history cannot be independently assessed by the wider scientific community.

The issue is that an exceptionally large extrapolation, which became the principal justification for doubling the hunting quotas, was transformed into political certainty without providing the public and the scientific community with the means necessary to independently assess its robustness and reliability.

The study behind the summary report - the document published by the Ministry of Environment in November 2025 was not the study itself.

Its title clearly identifies it as a "Summary Report" ("Raport sintetic"), prepared within the project "Implementation of the National Action Plan for the Conservation of the Brown Bear Population in Romania".

Summary report:

<https://mmediu.ro/storage/2025/12/Raportul-sintetic-al-studiului-privind-analiza-probelor-genetice.pdf>

The document is unsigned and does not indicate who assumes responsibility for its contents.

More importantly, it does not explain in sufficient detail how several key results were obtained.

Instead, **the preamble** repeatedly refers to the existence of the underlying study and emphasizes that **the complete work contains information whose disclosure is restricted.**

According to the preamble, the study constitutes an "integrated technical and scientific material intended for internal institutional use and for verifications carried out by the competent authorities".

The preamble further states that the full disclosure of the study is limited by intellectual property rights and warns that the unauthorized dissemination of technical and scientific information may affect research processes, scientific validation and even lead to legal consequences.

This wording raises obvious questions. The estimate contained in the report was not used merely for internal administrative purposes. On the contrary, it became the principal scientific argument invoked to support the law adopted by Parliament in 2026, which sought to double the annual hunting quotas from 426 bears per year to 859 bears per year.

In this context, the characterization of the study as a document intended primarily for "internal institutional use" appears difficult to reconcile with the fact that its conclusions have been used

to justify decisions of major public importance concerning one of Europe's largest populations of a strictly protected species.

Rather than being subjected to the widest possible scientific scrutiny, the study appears to have been conceived primarily as an instrument for internal administrative purposes.

This situation appears particularly paradoxical.

The study does not appear to rely on proprietary algorithms or commercially sensitive industrial processes. Instead, it relies on established scientific methodologies and references to previously published literature.

Yet, instead of publishing the study itself and allowing independent researchers to evaluate its methodology and conclusions, the authorities made public only a summary report while repeatedly invoking intellectual property considerations to justify withholding the underlying work.

As a consequence, independent peer review and the reproduction of the results became practically impossible.

Taken together, the publication of an incomplete summary report, the repeated references to intellectual property restrictions, the refusal to disclose the underlying data and the subsequent legal proceedings initiated in order to obtain access to the complete documentation have fuelled concerns regarding the transparency of the entire process.

The estimate was met with criticism from several environmental organizations and specialists.

Agent Green publicly questioned the credibility of the census and criticized the lack of transparency and the impossibility of independently verifying the results.

WWF Romania expressed similar concerns and referred to what it described as a "perpetual lack of transparency and clarity".

WWF Romania: <https://wwf.ro/noutati/rezultatele-studiului-genetic-al-populatiei-de-urs-brundespre-nevoia-de-transparenta-si-rigoare-stiintifica/>

The organization called for the publication of the complete methodology, the raw data and the performance of independent genetic and statistical audits.

According to WWF Romania, important information necessary for the independent verification of the estimate remained unavailable even after the publication of the summary report.

Among the issues identified were the risk of "phantom individuals" caused by genotyping errors and the inability of independent experts to examine the statistical models and assumptions underlying the estimate.

The organization concluded that the project had been characterized by a "perpetual lack of transparency and clarity" and warned that critical decisions concerning a strictly protected species should not be based on estimates that cannot be independently scrutinized.

In an analysis published by PressOne, experts emphasized that decisions concerning human-bear conflicts should focus on prevention and coexistence and warned that scientific transparency is indispensable when population estimates are used to justify major wildlife management decisions.

PressOne:

<https://pressone.ro/preventie-nu-impuscare-cum-ar-trebui-gestionata-problema-ursilor-astfel-incat-sa-existe-cat-mai-putine-conflicte-om-animale>

In April 2026, **WWF Romania announced that the Natura 2000 Coalition Federation, of which WWF is a member, had initiated legal proceedings against the "Marin Drăcea" National Institute for Research and Development in Forestry after the institute allegedly refused to provide all the data and documents underlying the genetic study.**

WWF Romania, 7 April 2026:

<https://wwf.ro/noutati/comunicate-de-presa/wwf-romania-si-federatia-coalitia-natura-2000-auctionat-in-instanta-institutul-marin-dracea/>

WWF reiterated its request for access to the complete methodology, the raw data and the documents necessary to independently assess the robustness of the estimate.

The fact that environmental organizations found themselves compelled to resort to litigation in order to obtain access to the scientific basis underlying major wildlife management decisions illustrated the depth of the transparency concerns surrounding the project.

Questions concerning the transparency of the genetic study and the scientific basis of bear management decisions were not raised exclusively by conservation organizations and animal protection groups.

Similar concerns were also expressed by Neculai Şelaru, former executive president and long-serving director general of the General Association of Hunters and Sport Fishermen of Romania (AGVPS), a prominent figure within Romania's hunting community and the author of numerous publications on wildlife management.

In a series of public statements published in 2025 and 2026, Şelaru strongly criticized several assumptions underlying Romania's current bear policy. **His criticism extended far beyond the estimated population size itself and challenged the broader framework through which population estimates and disputed "optimal" population targets were used to justify preventive hunting quotas affecting bears with no history of conflict with humans.**

Şelaru questioned the estimated population of 10,419-12,770 bears presented in April 2025 and repeatedly called for the full disclosure of the methodology underlying the genetic study, including the number of individual genetic profiles actually identified and the methods used to extrapolate these data into the population estimates publicly presented by the authorities. **He strongly challenged the scientific basis of the extrapolation used to derive the population estimates and repeatedly called for greater transparency and independent scientific scrutiny.**

His criticism extended further to the concept of an "optimal" population of approximately 4,000 bears. Şelaru strongly challenged the scientific basis of this figure and questioned the methodologies historically used to determine optimal population levels and habitat carrying capacities. According to him, these approaches relied heavily on subjective assessments and had produced remarkably different and sometimes contradictory results over time.

Şelaru also pointed out that periods characterized by substantially higher bear densities had not necessarily been associated with the levels of conflict observed today, suggesting that factors other than population size alone should be taken into account when explaining the increase in damages and human-bear interactions. He noted that the current target of approximately 4,000 bears corresponded to a density of less than 0.6 bears per 1,000 hectares of suitable habitat, considerably lower than densities previously regarded as compatible with coexistence and comparatively low levels of damage.

In this context, Şelaru questioned the logic of using uncertain population estimates and a disputed "optimal" population as the basis for management policies involving the preventive killing of bears with no history of conflict with humans. Commenting on the previous legislative framework, **he referred to the killing of "421 innocent bears from the wild"** and argued that **the preventive killing of bears with no history of conflict with humans could not represent an effective solution to conflicts caused by specific individuals.**

The importance of these criticisms lies not only in their substance, but also in their source. They illustrate that concerns regarding the transparency of the genetic study, the reliability of the population estimates, the scientific validity of the concept of an "optimal" population and the rationale behind large preventive quotas were expressed not only by conservation organizations, but also by one of the most influential figures within Romania's hunting community.

Selaru, N. (18 April 2025). "Opinii desprinse din conferința de presă privind studiul genetic realizat asupra populației de urs din România". Public statement published on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/neculai.selaru.9/posts/pfbid02x5dq7gFSUr8FYu1jdstsTR6dFaxa9tSZqK1EtnzbaaS1BuGp5ZZM6DWNZaPjifJgl>

Selaru, N. (4 June 2026). Public statement concerning the transparency of the genetic study and the estimated bear population. Published on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/neculai.selaru.9/posts/pfbid0244AEnjHPncVrpSgJ3uAH1gdiAYQG2iokbSQGszCmEioQtdjDo4do7Nf3SHa2NCMSI>

Selaru, N. (4 June 2026). Public statement concerning bear management, hunting quotas and the structure of the brown bear population. Published on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/neculai.selaru.9/posts/pfbid03353Q7Wf6pRRf4ossKTSQQG1Qv2uSfkxzwe6zfl2PrAUjaLPDARzutEzdAZZHvnjbl>

Selaru, N. (4 June 2026). Public statement concerning hunting quotas, population structure and bear management policies. Published on Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/neculai.selaru.9/posts/pfbid0rmmpTaYvqSA6PDNjcDRQkcq9yMwAnuWkxqhnhRH6qWsu3agSD3titzE7nGWQUYTaI>

Whether the estimate of 10,657-12,787 bears is accurate or not is a question that only full transparency and independent scientific scrutiny can answer.

Nevertheless, an estimate derived from approximately 4,326 genotypes and accompanied by significant transparency concerns became the principal scientific argument used to support the law adopted by Parliament in 2026, which sought to double the annual hunting quotas from 426 bears to 859 bears per year.

In addition, the meaning of some of the figures presented in the publicly available summary report remains unclear. For example, it is not specified whether the reported 4,326 genotypes correspond to unique individuals or to genotypes identified during the reference period, making the interpretation and independent assessment of the estimate difficult.

The concerns raised do not relate solely to the magnitude of the extrapolation. Although the summary report describes the statistical models employed, the information made available to the public does not allow a complete independent assessment of the results. Metadata associated with the samples, detailed information regarding the spatial distribution and sampling intensity, as well as other elements necessary for the full reproduction of the analyses, are not publicly available.

The lack of transparency also hampers the normal process of independent scientific scrutiny and peer review that would ordinarily accompany estimates of such importance. In the absence of access to more detailed information, other researchers are unable to fully reproduce the analysis, independently assess the robustness of the models employed, or determine the extent to which alternative approaches could lead to different results.

Yet scientific uncertainty and limited transparency were transformed into political certainty, with potentially profound consequences for one of Europe's most emblematic protected species and for European biodiversity itself.

12. The Central Role of Human-Related Factors in Human-Bear Conflicts

Researchers have repeatedly identified anthropogenic food sources, urban expansion, habitat fragmentation, infrastructure, roads, tourism infrastructure and other forms of human disturbance among the factors influencing human-bear interactions.

The existence of conflicts does not, by itself, constitute evidence of overpopulation.

In 2022, Alina Cîmpoca and Mircea Voiculescu published the study:

"Patterns of Human–Brown Bear Conflict in the Urban Area of Braşov, Romania"

Cîmpoca A., Voiculescu M., Sustainability, 2022, 14(13), 7833

<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/14/13/7833>

The authors analyzed conflicts recorded between 2004 and 2018 in Braşov area, an important hotspot for human-bear interactions.

In the abstract, they observed that:

"Human-bear conflicts are increasing in number due to deforestation, urban expansion, tourism, and habitat invasion by humans."

In their conclusions, they wrote:

"The HBCs in this city were a result of the population dynamics of bears moving from the forest of the adjacent MTNR towards the city, on a background of deforestation and urban expansion and tourist infrastructure elements."

They further concluded:

"General urban expansion, as well as so-called anthropogenic attractants, are the main causes that led bears to enter the urban area."

These findings are important because they describe a combination of factors involving habitat changes, urban expansion, tourism infrastructure and anthropogenic food sources.

Human-modified landscapes and ecological traps

Similar conclusions have been reached elsewhere.

In their review entitled "*Evolutionary and ecological traps for brown bears *Ursus arctos* in human-modified landscapes*", Penteriani et al. (2018) described a number of human-related factors capable of influencing brown bear behaviour.

Among them, the authors identified:

- **food resources close to human settlements;**
- **agricultural landscapes;**
- **roads;**
- **artificial feeding sites;**
- **hunting;**
- **other forms of human activity.**

Penteriani et al., Mammal Review, 2018

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324253329_Evolutionary_and_ecological_traps_for_brown_bears_Ursus_arctos_in_human-modified_landscapes

According to the authors, these factors may create what are known as **ecological traps**, in which landscapes altered by human activities become attractive to bears despite exposing them to increased risks.

These findings suggest that interactions between humans and bears are shaped not only by the number of animals, but also by the characteristics of the landscapes in which they live.

Human disturbance and brown bear movements

More recently, Hertel et al. (2025), analysing data from 375 brown bears across Europe, found that human footprint and forest disturbance significantly affected the space use of brown bears.

Hertel et al., Global Change Biology, 2025

https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/126539/1/Global_Change_Biology_-_2025_-_Hertel_-_Human_Footprint_and_Forest_Disturbance_Reduce_Space_Use_of_Brown_Bears_Ursus_1.pdf

Their results showed that human activities and forest disturbances influence the movements and spatial behaviour of bears, further illustrating the importance of anthropogenic factors in understanding bear ecology.

Similar conclusions have also been expressed by conservation specialists working directly on human-bear conflicts in Romania.

In an interview published by PressOne in 2026, Orieta Hulea, General Director of WWF-Romania, argued that increasing hunting quotas was unlikely to solve the underlying causes of conflicts and emphasized the importance of investing in preventive measures instead.

PressOne:

<https://pressone.ro/preventie-nu-impuscare-cum-ar-trebui-gestionata-problema-ursilor-astfel-incat-sa-existe-cat-mai-putine-conflicte-om-animal>

The article highlighted a number of factors contributing to conflicts, including inadequate waste management, supplementary feeding practices, the expansion of agricultural activities close to forests and increasing human presence inside bear habitats.

The same article also referred to the experience of **Băile Tuşnad**, where preventive measures and cooperation between local authorities, WWF-Romania and local communities were associated with a substantial decline in incidents and emergency alerts.

Similar ideas had been expressed earlier by WWF-Romania.

In 2020, Cristian-Remus Papp, Head of the Wildlife Department at WWF-Romania, stressed that understanding the causes of conflicts was essential and stated:

"It is essential to recognize that we created this problem and that we are also the ones who will have to solve it."

WWF-Romania:

<https://wwf.ro/noutati/blog/actionam-responsabil-pentru-a-evita-conflictele-cu-ursii/>

According to WWF-Romania, the continuous monitoring of human-bear conflicts and the analysis of the factors that generated them are fundamental elements of bear management. The

organization also emphasized the importance of eliminating attractants and reducing habituation to human-derived food sources.

In 2024, Dr. biol. Cristian-Remus Papp, Head of the Wildlife Department at WWF-Romania, stated:

" There are several issues without which, no matter how many laws we adopt or how many bears we shoot, we will not solve human-bear conflicts in the long term. Above all, I am referring to the management of attractants, such as waste, supplementary feeding provided near settlements at feeding or bear-watching sites, or food irresponsibly offered by tourists. "

WWF-Romania:

<https://wwf.ro/noutati/gestionarea-nu-vanarea-ursilor/>

Băile Tuşnad - a Romanian example of coexistence

The experience of Băile Tuşnad provides a practical example of how conflict prevention measures may influence the frequency of interactions between humans and bears.

In recent years, WWF-Romania, local authorities and other partners implemented a series of measures aimed at reducing access to anthropogenic food sources and improving coexistence.

These measures included:

- the installation of bear-resistant waste containers;
- electric fencing and other preventive infrastructure;
- improved monitoring and intervention systems;
- education and awareness programs;
- communication measures and community involvement.

According to information presented by WWF and project partners, the number of RO-ALERT warnings reportedly decreased from approximately 237 in 2021 to around 14 in 2024.

WWF Central and Eastern Europe:

<https://wwfcee.org/news/the-smallest-town-in-romania-cracks-the-secret-to-peaceful-humanbear-coexistence/>

The experience of Băile Tuşnad is particularly noteworthy because Harghita County is generally regarded as one of the areas with the highest brown bear densities in Romania. Yet the implementation of preventive measures was associated with a substantial reduction in damage and alerts.

The idea that human-bear conflicts cannot be reduced to a simple question of numbers has also been reflected in the views expressed by specialists.

Conflict is not synonymous with overpopulation

Taken together, these studies and experiences point in the same direction.

Human-bear conflicts are a multifactorial phenomenon.

Anthropogenic food sources, urban expansion, habitat fragmentation, roads, tourism infrastructure and other forms of human activity all influence the way bears interact with people.

Consequently, the existence of conflicts cannot be regarded as evidence of overpopulation. Reducing a complex ecological phenomenon to a simple question of numbers risks overlooking the very factors that repeatedly bring bears into contact with humans.

13. Hunting and the Paradox of Conflict Reduction

The assumption that reducing bear numbers automatically leads to fewer conflicts between humans and bears is rarely accompanied by a broader discussion regarding the ecological effects of hunting itself.

Every year, hunting quotas approved in Romania allow the killing of hundreds of thousands of wild animals belonging to a large number of species, ranging from red deer, roe deer, chamois and hares to quails, Eurasian woodcocks, hazel grouse, wild ducks and wild geese. In the case of some bird species, a single hunter may shoot dozens of individuals in a single day.

An important question is whether the cumulative effects of these activities on the habitat and behaviour of brown bears have ever been rigorously evaluated.

Hunting and the landscape of fear

In the study "*Landscape of fear or landscape of food? Moose hunting triggers an antipredator response in brown bears*" (Brown et al., 2023), researchers found that the mere presence of moose hunters created what the authors described as a "landscape of fear" for brown bears.

Brown et al., 2023

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10909462/>

According to the authors:

"Our results suggest that brown bears react to both spatial and temporal variations in apparent risk during the fall: moose hunters create a landscape of fear and trigger an antipredator response in a large carnivore even if bears are not specifically targeted during the moose hunting season. Such antipredator responses might lead to indirect habitat loss and lower foraging efficiency (...)."

The study showed that bears altered their behaviour and habitat use in response to hunting activities directed at another species.

The authors warned that these behavioural responses may result in indirect habitat loss and lower foraging efficiency.

Thus, even when bears themselves are not the target of hunters, hunting activities may influence the way they use their habitat and access food resources.

The cost of fear

In 2016, Hertel et al. investigated how bears respond to hunting-related risk in the study:

"Temporal effects of hunting on foraging behavior of an apex predator: Do bears forego foraging when risk is high?"

Hertel et al., Oecologia, 2016

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00442-016-3600-7>

The authors found that:

"Bears decreased their foraging activity in the morning hours of the hunting season"

and that

"they foraged less efficiently and on poorer quality berries in the morning."

According to the researchers, bears reduced their feeding activity during periods associated with higher hunting risk and used food resources of lower quality.

The authors concluded that these changes generated:

"a measurable foraging cost"

and further warned that:

"The additive effect of reduced foraging activity, reduced forage intake, and lower quality food may result in poorer body condition upon den entry and may ultimately reduce reproductive success."

These findings suggest that hunting-related disturbances may influence not only habitat use but also food acquisition, body condition and reproductive success.

Taken together, the studies by Brown et al. and Hertel et al. suggest that hunting activities may generate cumulative effects on brown bears, regardless of whether the species itself is directly targeted. They also illustrate that hunting represents far more than the direct removal of individuals from a population and may act as a source of disturbance capable of altering behaviour, habitat use and access to resources.

These considerations become particularly relevant in Romania, where brown bears share their habitat with hunting activities directed at numerous species and where hunting pressure is present throughout much of the year.

From the perspective of a bear, hunting pressure is experienced not only through mortality, but also through the repeated intrusion of humans into its habitat. Hunters, vehicles, forest roads, off-

road access, gunshots, hunting dogs and other associated activities may constitute a persistent source of disturbance.

Because numerous species are hunted throughout much of the year, bears may be exposed to recurrent human disturbance for extended periods, even when they are not themselves the target.

Even when bears are not hunted, these activities may alter habitat use, modify behaviour, reduce foraging efficiency and generate measurable biological costs.

In the case of direct bear hunting, these indirect effects can be compounded by mortality itself and may ultimately influence access to productive feeding areas, body condition and reproductive success.

In this sense, hunting pressure should be understood not only in terms of the number of animals killed, but also as a broader ecological pressure acting upon habitat use, access to resources and the behaviour of one of Europe's most important brown bear populations.

Yet remarkably little attention has been devoted to these direct and indirect ecological costs in the Romanian debate, which has focused predominantly on the number of bears to be removed.

As a result, one of the central assumptions underlying the proposed doubling of the annual bear hunting quota, voted by the Romanian Parliament in 2026 - namely that killing hundreds of additional bears, most of which have never been involved in conflicts with humans, will reduce the frequency of those conflicts - appears to have been elevated to the status of political certainty without having first been subjected to the level of scientific scrutiny that such a far-reaching assumption would normally require.

14. The Solutions That Were Not Implemented

Before seeking to double the annual bear hunting quota from 426 to 859 bears, the Romanian state had already identified and knew a number of non-lethal measures that could prevent and manage human-bear conflicts.

Many of these measures, however, were not implemented or were simply overshadowed by proposals aimed at increasing the number of bears to be killed.

A bear rehabilitation centre that remained unfinished

One of the objectives of the European-funded project "*Implementation of the National Action Plan for the Conservation of the Brown Bear Population in Romania*" was the construction of a rehabilitation and care complex intended to host approximately one hundred bears that could no longer be safely returned to the wild.

According to a March 2025 investigation published by PressOne, despite receiving approximately €11 million in European funding, construction works had reached only around 15% almost two years after the initial deadline.

PressOne: <https://pressone.ro/exclusiv-statul-roman-incapabil-sa-si-numere-ursii-si-sa-le-construiasca-un-sanctuar-lucrarile-sunt-realizate-in-proportie-de-15>

The project was intended to provide a destination for habituated bears and other individuals that could no longer be safely released.

Subsequent reports showed that the project continued to suffer delays and remained non-operational.

Observer News: <https://observatornews.ro/eveniment/sanctuarul-pentru-ursi-din-brasov-blocat-investitie-de-10-milioane-de-euro-inca-nefinalizata-650868.html>

Thus, one of the alternatives that had already been financed with European funds was never fully implemented before Parliament sought to almost double the annual hunting quota.

Preventive measures remained unimplemented.

Many of the non-lethal measures repeatedly recommended by scientists and conservation specialists remained unimplemented.

Scientific studies, WWF-Romania and practical experience have repeatedly identified anthropogenic attractants as one of the principal drivers of human-bear conflicts.

Bear-resistant containers, electric fencing, improved waste management, rapid intervention systems and public awareness programs have all been recommended as essential components of coexistence.

Yet these measures were not implemented consistently in the country.

As a result, many communities continued to rely primarily on emergency interventions after conflicts had already occurred.

This is particularly striking because examples demonstrating the effectiveness of prevention non-lethal methods already existed - the experience of Băile Tușnad showed that preventive measures could substantially reduce incidents and emergency alerts, even in one of the regions with the highest bear densities in Romania.

WWF Central and Eastern Europe:

<https://wwfcee.org/news/the-smallest-town-in-romania-cracks-the-secret-to-peaceful-humanbear-coexistence/>

Constant human disturbance inside bear habitats

In July 2024, Dr. biol. Cristian-Remus Papp, Head of the Wildlife Department at WWF-Romania, highlighted another issue:

"Another intensely debated issue is the entry of humans into bear habitats, whether through hiking, berry and mushroom picking or off-road sports. This constant disturbance throughout the

species' range, combined with the widespread availability of attractants, causes bears to expand their territories and appear in areas where they had not previously been present."

WWF Romania: <https://wwf.ro/noutati/gestionarea-nu-vanarea-ursilor/>

These observations raise an uncomfortable question. While bears are frequently portrayed as the ones invading human space, considerably less attention has been paid to the increasing intensity of human activities inside bear habitats.

Hunting pressure and increasing pressure on natural food resources

Brown bears are omnivorous animals whose diet includes berries, forest fruits, nuts, insects, carrion and animal matter.

At the same time, Romanian forests are used for a wide range of economic, recreational and hunting activities.

According to analyses based on Romsilva data, thousands of tonnes of non-wood forest products, including berries and mushrooms, are harvested and commercialized every year.

Vasile et al., *Trends in the evolution of harvesting of non-wood forest products in Romania:*

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329963153_Trends_in_the_evolution_of_harvesting_of_non-wood_forest_products_in_Romania

Brown bears themselves depend heavily on many of these natural resources.

In addition, Romania authorizes the killing of hundreds of thousands of wild animals belonging to a large number of species every year. As omnivorous animals, bears also rely on animal-derived food resources, including carcasses and wild animals with which they share their habitat. Consequently, they coexist not only with people exploiting forest resources, but also with intensive hunting activities affecting numerous species that constitute potential food sources for bears. **By removing very large numbers of wild animals, hunting reduces the availability of animal-derived food resources and alters the ecological relationships within the habitats used by brown bears.**

As discussed in the previous section, Brown et al. (2023) demonstrated that even hunting directed at another species may create a "landscape of fear" for brown bears and trigger antipredator responses, leading to indirect habitat loss and lower foraging efficiency.

Similarly, Hertel et al. (2016) found that hunting-related risk caused bears to reduce their feeding activity, forage less efficiently and switch to lower-quality food resources, resulting in what the authors described as "**a measurable foraging cost**".

Consequently, hunting pressure does not merely remove animals from populations. It may also alter the way brown bears use their habitat and access food resources.

Increasing human use of forests through tourism, mushroom and berry harvesting, forestry activities, off-road recreation and other forms of disturbance adds further pressure on the same landscapes and resources upon which bears depend.

Yet remarkably little attention has been paid to the cumulative effects of these pressures.

At the same time, **many of the areas occupied by brown bears are characterized by the widespread presence of anthropogenic attractants, including poorly managed waste, supplementary feeding practices, agricultural crops, orchards, livestock feed and other easily accessible food sources.**

As discussed earlier, several studies and conservation specialists have identified anthropogenic attractants as one of the principal drivers of human-bear conflicts.

Consequently, **brown bears are simultaneously exposed to multiple and interacting pressures.**

On one hand, hunting-related disturbance and increasing human activities inside bear habitats may influence habitat use and feeding behaviour.

On the other hand, human settlements and anthropogenic food sources provide highly accessible and energy-rich alternatives.

These processes do not operate in isolation. Rather, they act simultaneously and may reinforce one another.

Yet, despite the obvious importance of these interactions, remarkably little attention has been paid to their cumulative effects.

To our knowledge, no rigorous assessment has been carried out in Romania regarding the combined effects of hunting pressure, increasing human disturbance inside bear habitats, competition for natural food resources and the widespread availability of anthropogenic attractants. This omission is particularly striking because access to food resources and feeding behaviour are among the most important factors shaping the ecology and movements of brown bears.

By 2026, many of the measures repeatedly recommended by scientists and conservation specialists had still not been implemented.

The rehabilitation center intended to host habituated bears remained unfinished.

Preventive infrastructure, including bear-resistant containers and electric fencing, had not been systematically deployed throughout the country.

At the same time, **human presence inside bear habitats continued to intensify through tourism, off-road recreation, mushroom and berry harvesting, forestry activities and other forms of disturbance.**

The cumulative effects of hunting pressure, increasing competition for natural food resources, recurrent disturbance and the widespread availability of anthropogenic attractants had never been rigorously evaluated.

Nor had the combined effects of these interacting pressures on the feeding behaviour, habitat use and ecology of one of Europe's largest brown bear populations become the subject of serious public debate.

In other words, many of the solutions remained unimplemented, while many of the pressures exerted by humans on bear habitats remained largely unexamined.

Yet, rather than fully implementing and evaluating these measures and pressures, the Romanian Parliament adopted a law seeking to increase the annual bear hunting quota from 426 to 859 bears.

Consequently, before asking how many additional bears should be killed, an equally important question deserves attention: **What have humans done - and what have they failed to do?**

Remarkably, this question occupied a far more modest place in the Romanian debate than the number of bears that should be removed from the population.

As a result, many of the underlying causes of conflict remained insufficiently addressed, while the answer that ultimately reached the center of political debate was the proposal to kill more bears.

The problem, therefore, was not that all alternative solutions had been implemented and had failed. Rather, many of them had never been implemented in the first place.

15. The Habitats Directive: A Framework for Coexistence, Not Inaction

The Habitats Directive is often portrayed in public debates as an obstacle preventing authorities from addressing conflicts between humans and protected species. **In reality, the opposite is true.**

The Directive does not prohibit action. Nor does it prevent interventions when public safety is at risk. Rather, it establishes a legal framework intended to ensure that lethal interventions remain individualized, scientifically justified and proportionate, **and that they do not become a substitute for preventive measures that were never implemented.**

The brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) is listed in Annex IV of the Habitats Directive and is therefore subject to the strict protection regime established by Article 12.

Council Directive 92/43/EEC: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31992L0043>

Article 12 prohibits, among other things, the deliberate killing and deliberate disturbance of protected species. At the same time, Article 16 expressly allows derogations from this protection system, including for reasons of public safety and the prevention of serious damage.

Strict protection therefore does not mean absolute protection. It means that interventions affecting protected species must satisfy certain conditions and remain exceptional.

Strict protection and derogations form a coherent system

The Court of Justice of the European Union has repeatedly emphasized that Articles 12 and 16 of the Directive form part of a coherent and integrated system.

In *Commission v United Kingdom (C-6/04)*, the Court held that Articles 12, 13 and 16 together form a coherent body of rules intended to ensure the protection of populations of the species concerned.

Case C-6/04:

<https://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-6/04>

This is important because it means that Article 16 was never intended to function as an autonomous wildlife management system.

Derogations are exceptions within a broader framework of strict protection.

Consequently, the Directive does not oppose conservation and conflict management. It integrates them.

Prevention is part of the protection system

The Court has also made clear that strict protection requires more than simply prohibiting the deliberate killing of protected species.

In *Commission v Poland (C-441/17)*, the Court held that Member States are required to adopt coherent and coordinated preventive measures capable of effectively avoiding deliberate killing or disturbance of protected species.

Case C-441/17: <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-441/17>

Thus, the logic of the Directive is not limited to reacting after conflicts occur. **Prevention itself forms part of the protection system.**

This principle is particularly relevant in the Romanian context.

As shown in previous sections, many preventive measures repeatedly recommended by scientists and conservation specialists remained unimplemented by 2026.

The rehabilitation centre for habituated bears had not been completed, preventive infrastructure had been deployed unevenly and many anthropogenic pressures inside bear habitats had never been rigorously assessed.

Far from being a bureaucratic obstacle, the Directive requires authorities to address these underlying factors before relying on lethal measures.

Derogations must be interpreted strictly

The Court has consistently held that Article 16 constitutes an exception to the system of strict protection and must therefore be interpreted strictly.

This principle was reaffirmed in *Luonnonsuojeluyhdistys Tapiola* (C-674/17), a judgment concerning large carnivores.

Case C-674/17: <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-674/17>

According to the Court, it is for the competent authority to demonstrate that the conditions required for derogations are satisfied.

The Court held that this assessment must be based on: "the best relevant scientific and technical knowledge available."

The judgment further emphasized that the burden of proof rests on the authorities and that derogations cannot be justified by general assumptions or broad policy objectives. Rather, they require a rigorous demonstration based on evidence.

Three conditions repeatedly emphasized by the Court

The case law of the Court of Justice and the text of Article 16 reveal three fundamental requirements.

- A specific and legitimate objective

Derogations cannot be based on vague notions of wildlife management or generalized assumptions.

They must pursue one of the specific objectives listed in Article 16.

This requirement ensures that interventions are linked to concrete risks rather than abstract population targets.

In Case C-342/05, the Court emphasized that derogations must be interpreted restrictively and applied in a precise and limited manner.

Case C-342/05: <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-342/05>

This approach is difficult to reconcile with mechanisms based on predetermined quotas applied collectively and independently of the circumstances of individual animals.

- No satisfactory alternative

Article 16 expressly requires that there be no satisfactory alternative before lethal measures are used.

This requirement lies at the heart of the Directive.

The European Commission's guidance on Articles 12 and 16 explains that derogations are possible only where alternative solutions are unavailable.

European Commission Guidance: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=PI_COM:C\(2021\)7301](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=PI_COM:C(2021)7301)

In practice, this means that authorities should first consider and, where appropriate, implement preventive measures such as:

- management of anthropogenic food sources;
- bear-resistant waste containers;
- electric fencing;
- improved intervention systems;
- relocation;
- public awareness and education;
- other non-lethal measures.

- **Favourable conservation status**

Article 16 further requires that derogations must not be detrimental to maintaining populations in a favourable conservation status.

This assessment cannot be reduced to the mere existence of a national population estimate.

According to Article 1(i) of the Directive, conservation status depends on a wide range of factors affecting the species, including its long-term viability and the maintenance of sufficient habitat.

Consequently, conservation status involves much more than a single numerical estimate. It also includes habitat quality, distribution and the ecological conditions necessary to ensure the long-term persistence of populations.

The Directive is not blind to conflicts

In Case C-88/19, *Alianța pentru Combaterea Abuzurilor*, the Court clarified that strict protection continues to apply even when protected animals enter areas inhabited by humans.

Case C-88/19: <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/liste.jsf?num=C-88/19>

Importantly, the judgment did not suggest that authorities are powerless in such situations. On the contrary. It confirmed that Article 16 provides the legal mechanism through which Member States may intervene when the necessary conditions are met.

Thus, the Directive does not ignore public safety.

Nor does it prevent interventions against dangerous animals.

Rather, it ensures that such interventions remain legally justified and scientifically grounded.

Existing legal instruments already allow interventions

Importantly, the legal framework applicable to brown bears in Romania does not leave authorities without instruments to address conflict situations.

The Habitats Directive itself, through Article 16, allows derogations from the strict protection regime where necessary.

These provisions are reflected in Romanian law through Government Emergency Ordinance No. 57/2007 on protected natural areas, the conservation of natural habitats and of wild flora and fauna, which transposed the Habitats Directive into national legislation.

Government Emergency Ordinance No. 57/2007:

<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/83289>

In addition, Government Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 established a specific intervention mechanism for the brown bears that are putting in risk people and property.

Government Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021:

<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/309402>

This ordinance also allows local intervention committees, under the authority of mayors and with the participation of police, gendarmerie, veterinary authorities and hunting representatives, to act in emergency situations.

Furthermore, also separate derogation procedures approved by the Ministry of Environment already exist.

Consequently, **Romanian authorities already possess two distinct legal mechanisms capable of authorizing interventions, including lethal interventions where necessary.**

In other words, the debate is not about whether dangerous bears can be removed. They can.

Nor is the debate about whether authorities can intervene to protect human life and property. They can.

The real question is different: whether the existence of conflict situations involving a relatively small number of bears justifies the adoption of legislation allowing hunters to kill up to 859 bears per year, most of which have never been involved in conflicts and live in their natural habitats.

This distinction lies at the heart of the philosophy underlying the Habitats Directive.

The purpose of strict protection is not to prevent interventions against dangerous animals. It is to prevent exceptional interventions from evolving into generalized hunting systems affecting a strictly protected species. Such systems risk altering population structure and removing individuals that play an important role in the transmission of genetic traits and the long-term functioning of populations.

Ultimately, the Directive seeks to ensure that conservation policy is not driven by the availability of hunting opportunities or trophy value, but by necessity, proportionality and the best available scientific evidence.

Seen in this light, the objective of the Habitats Directive is not to protect dangerous animals from justified interventions. It is to ensure that the killing of strictly protected animals remains the exception rather than becoming a substitute for measures that were never fully implemented, or a mechanism through which healthy animals living in their natural habitats are transformed into hunting trophies.

16. Public Opinion, Coexistence with Brown Bears and the Hidden Consensus

Recent surveys and civic initiatives offer an opportunity to better understand **how Romanians perceive wildlife and the coexistence between humans and large carnivores.**

Taken together, they suggest broad support for prevention, education and coexistence, as well as significant opposition to trophy hunting.

These findings are particularly noteworthy because they closely mirror many of the conclusions emerging from scientific studies and conservation specialists discussed in previous chapters.

Nearly 85,000 signatures against trophy hunting

One of the most visible expressions of public opposition to trophy hunting has been a petition launched through by Agent Green on the Declic platform calling for an end to trophy hunting of brown bears.

Declic: <https://campaniamea.decllic.ro/petitions/stop-vanatorii-de-trofee>

By 2026, the petition had gathered nearly 85,000 signatures. The scale of this mobilization is noteworthy. It illustrates that opposition to trophy hunting extends far beyond conservation organizations and reflects concerns shared by a significant number of citizens.

Romanians favour coexistence and prevention - research findings

In 2025, the Romanian research company DataDiggers conducted a nationally representative survey involving 1,000 respondents. The results provide a perspective on how Romanians perceive bears, wolves and coexistence with wildlife.

Full report:

https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/6708c48d59f9d9b03fa25bf1/681b4d6d95df79b20cf12152_Studiu%20DataDiggers%202025%20-%20Cum%20s%C4%83%20convie%C8%9Buim%20cu%20animalele%20s%C4%83lbatice.pdf

Summary:

<https://www.datadiggers-mr.com/in-the-news/romanians-favor-coexistence-with-wildlife-datadiggers-survey-shows>

The findings paint a picture that differs significantly from the idea that coexistence with wildlife is incompatible with public safety.

Nearly nine out of ten respondents considered wild animals important for ecosystems and expressed support for coexistence rather than confrontation.

Preventive measures, habitat protection and environmental education received strong support, indicating a broad preference for coexistence-oriented approaches to human-wildlife interactions.

By contrast, support for lethal approaches proved remarkably limited.

Respondents also demonstrated a relatively good understanding of appropriate behaviour during encounters with wildlife. For example, 53% stated that they would quietly retreat if confronted with a female bear accompanied by cubs, a response broadly consistent with expert recommendations.

Several publications discussing the study highlighted another important conclusion: Romanians overwhelmingly support coexistence, prevention and responsible behaviour.

FarAway:

<https://www.faraway.ro/coexistenta-cu-fauna-salbatica-romanii-spun-nu-conflictului-da-preventiei-si-educatiei/>

Libertatea:

<https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/studiu-cum-sa-convietuim-cu-animalele-salbatice-ce-spun-romanii-despre-interactiunea-cu-ursii-5468558>

Commenting on the results, Liviu Micu, Research & Insights Manager at DataDiggers, observed:

"These surveys show that Romanians are not looking for conflict with wildlife. They value coexistence and trust specialists to guide them toward responsible solutions. It's encouraging to see that the public understands the role of education, balanced communication and habitat protection."

Fear is often mediated rather than experienced

An interesting finding of the survey concerns the way perceptions of risk are formed.

The results suggest that perceptions of wildlife and feelings of fear are shaped not only by direct experience, but also by repeated exposure to information received through television, news websites, social media and emergency warning systems such as RO-ALERT.

In Romania, the **RO-ALERT** system sends emergency notifications directly to mobile phones in order to warn citizens about imminent threats. **While these alerts serve an important public safety purpose, repeated exposure to such messages, combined with intensive media coverage and the rapid dissemination of information through social media, may amplify perceptions of risk far beyond individual experience.**

The findings suggest that perceptions of risk are influenced less by direct encounters with bears and more by repeated exposure to media reports, social media content and emergency warnings.

Consequently, the media environment itself becomes a major factor shaping public attitudes towards brown bears.

In this sense, the way bear interactions are communicated can influence public attitudes almost as profoundly as the conflicts themselves.

A broader consensus

These findings suggest that support for coexistence and public safety are not mutually exclusive.

Measures aimed at preventing conflicts, together with habitat protection and environmental education, received strong support, indicating a broad preference for coexistence-oriented approaches to human-wildlife interactions. By contrast, support for lethal approaches proved remarkably limited.

They are also consistent with the almost 85,000 signatures gathered in support of ending trophy hunting of brown bears in Romania.

Taken together, the survey results and the civic mobilization against trophy hunting suggest that a substantial part of Romanian society distinguishes between conflict management and trophy hunting, and does not regard the latter as an appropriate response to human-bear interactions.

17. The Political Campaign Against the Bear

Throughout the last years, a remarkably consistent political narrative concerning brown bears has emerged in Romania.

At the centre of this political narrative stood leading figures of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR/RMDSZ), most notably former Minister of Environment and current Deputy Prime Minister Tánczos Barna and Csaba Borboly. Over time, they were joined by politicians from across the political spectrum, hunting associations, trophy hunting advocates and other actors with interests in the issue, all of whom increasingly turned the subject of bears into a prominent political theme.

Over the years, the solutions repeatedly advanced by these political actors remained strikingly similar. Whenever conflicts intensified, the answer proposed was the same: more bears should be killed.

This message has remained remarkably constant despite the evolution of legislation, the existence of new intervention mechanisms, the implementation of genetic studies and the repeated recommendations of scientists and conservation organizations.

Tánczos Barna

As Minister of Environment, Tánczos Barna promoted OUG 81/2021, which created a graduated intervention mechanism allowing authorities to chase away, relocate or kill dangerous bears.

The mechanism itself already provided legal instruments enabling local authorities to intervene rapidly.

At the same time, **his two-and-a-half-year tenure as Minister of Environment offered an opportunity to strengthen preventive measures** and address some of the underlying causes of human-bear conflicts.

This included improving waste management, expanding electric fencing, increasing the availability of bear-resistant waste containers, accelerating the completion of the rehabilitation centre for habituated bears, strengthening education and awareness programs, supporting local prevention initiatives and promoting coexistence measures already recommended by specialists and conservation organizations.

Yet many of these measures remained largely unimplemented.

Paradoxically, while several of the measures capable of reducing conflicts remained underdeveloped during his mandate, the debate increasingly shifted away from prevention and towards the removal of larger numbers of bears.

Rather than becoming associated with a comprehensive strategy of coexistence, former Environment Minister Tánzos Barna became one of the most prominent political advocates of larger hunting quotas and, eventually, of weakening the protection afforded to the species at European level.

This line of argument ultimately culminated in the legislation adopted by the Romanian Parliament in 2026, which sought to double the annual hunting quota from 426 to 859 bears. Tánzos Barna emerged as one of its main advocates.

Long before the most recent debates, **Csaba Borboly** had already emerged as one of the most persistent political voices advocating the killing of a large numbers of bears and challenging the European legal framework protecting the species.

The Guardian:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/oct/16/romanian-politician-calls-for-the-army-to-help-control-bear-population>

Over the following decade, and later together with Tanczos Barna, he consistently portrayed the size of the bear population as the central explanation for conflicts and promoted hunting as the principal solution.

Throughout this period, considerably less attention was devoted coexistence measures recommended by specialists.

The continuity of these messages over more than a decade suggests that they represented more than reactions to isolated incidents.

Rather, they reflected a long-standing political campaign centred on killing larger numbers of bears and, ultimately, on weakening the legal protections that have safeguarded the species for decades.

The political campaign surrounding the bear question also unfolded against the backdrop of significant economic interests associated with trophy hunting. Romania hosts some of the most valuable brown bear trophies in the world.

Investigations by RISE Project and PressOne revealed the existence of a lucrative trophy hunting industry and highlighted the central role played by prominent hunting figures such as Árpád Sárkány.

RISE Project: <https://www.riseproject.ro/in-barlogul-vanatorilor-de-ursi/>

PressOne: <https://pressone.ro/vanatorul-alfa-din-padurile-romaniei>

According to these investigations, **Romania became one of the most sought-after destinations for foreign trophy hunters.**

In 2026, ProTV reported that more than half of the bears killed under the new legislation would have qualified for gold medals according to international trophy standards.

ProTV:

<https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/vanatorii-profit-a-de-legea-impuscarii-ursilor-jumatate-din-animalele-ucise-ar-putea-castiga-medalii-de-aur-la-expozitii.html>

Thus, the debate concerning bear management cannot be understood exclusively through the lens of public safety.

Economic interests connected to trophy hunting formed part of the broader context:

<https://www.bookyourhunt.com/en/brown-bear-hunting-in-romania?sort=Popular>

Another striking feature of the political discourse was the gradual transformation of a conflict involving particular bears into a broader conflict with the species itself.

As a result, public and political attention increasingly shifted away from addressing the underlying drivers of human–bear conflicts - including anthropogenic food sources, inadequate waste management, preventive infrastructure, electric fencing, rehabilitation centres, habitat disturbance, hunting pressure, and other forms of human-induced pressure - while the public debate became increasingly dominated by claims of bear overpopulation and calls for larger hunting quotas.

As political pressure intensified, media coverage also became increasingly focused on danger, attacks and fear, contributing to a climate in which isolated incidents involving individual bears were increasingly used to portray the species as a whole as a threat.

18. The Making of Fear: Media Campaign Narratives and Political Pressure

As discussed in the previous section, the 2025 DataDiggers surveys concluded that coexistence with wildlife depends not only on preventive measures and education, but also on balanced media coverage and the responsible use of the RO-ALERT warning system.

These findings are particularly important because they suggest that people's perceptions are shaped less by direct encounters with wildlife and more by what they repeatedly see, hear and experience through television, news websites, social media and emergency warning systems.

This observation becomes especially relevant when examining the evolution of media narratives surrounding brown bears in Romania.

The language of fear

Throughout 2026, reports involving bears increasingly relied on a vocabulary dominated by fear and emergency.

As political agenda and pressure surrounding brown bear hunting intensified, media coverage increasingly focused on danger, attacks and emergency situations. Expressions such as "terrorized residents", "days of terror", "communities living in fear", "panic", "fear of leaving their homes", and references suggesting that people were "under siege" and references suggesting that the situation had become "uncontrollable" appeared repeatedly across local and national media.

In many cases, preliminary information and assumptions were presented before investigations had been completed, while uncertainty surrounding specific events received far less attention than the initial reports.

The repeated circulation of alarming content across television channels, online media and social networks contributed to the creation of a permanent sense of emergency.

Even routine bear sightings increasingly became the subject of breaking news coverage, contributing to a climate of permanent emergency and collective anxiety, in which bear interactions were increasingly perceived as signs of an escalating and seemingly uncontrollable crisis, despite the fact that human communities and bear populations have coexisted in many regions for decades.

Examples are numerous.

In May 2026, Observator News reported that residents of a village near Cluj-Napoca were "terrorized by a bear".

<https://observatornews.ro/eveniment/localnicii-dintrun-sat-de-langa-clujnapoca-terorizati-de-un-urs-se-tem-sa-iasa-din-case-654935.html>

Another report referred to the situation from Mureş under the headline "Residents of a village in Mureş are terrorized by a bear":

<https://stirileprotv.ro/divers/localnicii-unui-sat-din-mures-sunt-terorizati-de-urs-salbaticiunea-nu-se-mai-sperie-de-nimic-asa-mi-e-de-teama.html>

Similarly, the Hungarian-language publication Székelyhon referred to "The bear that kept people living in fear".

<https://szekelyhon.ro/aktualis/kilottek-az-embereket-feleleben-tarto-mehkaptarakat-osszetoro-medvet-farcadon>

Other reports described communities as being "under terror", while Cluj Teams stated that "bears had taken control of Cluj County" and that the situation was becoming "uncontrollable".

<https://clujteams.ro/locale/ursii-au-preluat-controlul-asupra-judetului-cluj-383-de-exemplare-si-tot-mai-multe-atacuri-autoritatile-admit-ca-situatia-devine-incontrolabila/>

ePitești referred to localities where " Bears are spreading terror among people!".

<https://epitesti.ro/evenimente/arges-ursii-baga-teroarea-in-oameni-localitati-sub-alerta>

Turda News framed the appearance of a female bear with cubs in terms of panic, announcing:

"PANIC IN BURU! A mother bear with cubs has shattered the peace of a village in Cluj County."

<https://turdanews.net/panica-in-buru-o-ursoaica-cu-pui-a-atacat-linistea-localitatii-din-cluj-un-pui-s-a-pierdut-iar-oamenii-filmeaza-de-la-ferestre-vin-incontinuu-de-doua-zile/>

In another case, Jurnalul de Argeș presented a bear encounter under the headline:

"Panic in the forest. She spotted a bear and gendarmes rushed to rescue her."

<https://jurnaluldearges.ro/video-panica-in-padure-a-vazut-ursul-iar-jandarmii-au-sarit-s-o-salveze-452294/>

The effect of this vocabulary is noteworthy. Conflicts involving individual animals are gradually transformed into the perception of a generalized threat associated with the species itself.

Taken together and amplified day after day across television channels, online media and social networks, such headlines contribute to the construction of a broader narrative centred on danger, panic and a sense of permanent emergency, capable of reinforcing anxiety and chronic perceptions of risk.

The multiplication of fear

The use of RO-ALERT notifications also played an important role in shaping public perception.

RO-ALERT is Romania's emergency warning system, designed to alert the population through messages sent to mobile phones about imminent threats and emergency situations. When a bear is observed in a particular area, RO-ALERT messages may be sent to large numbers of people, even in the absence of an imminent danger.

Because of its powerful impact, the system requires responsible and proportionate use. Otherwise, there is a risk that emergency warnings intended for genuinely imminent threats may gradually become instruments contributing to the amplification of fear.

In practice, however, the same incident is often amplified through multiple channels.

Following the transmission of a RO-ALERT message, news websites frequently publish articles based on the alert, Facebook pages redistribute the information, local groups share it further, and individuals continue to circulate the message.

In many cases, screenshots of RO-ALERT notifications themselves become news stories or press articles.

For example:

<https://www.radiobrasovfm.ro/stiri-din-brasov/ro-alert-privind-aparitia-unui-urs-in-municipiul-brasov-id215687.html>

<https://www.radiobrasovfm.ro/stiri-din-brasov/ro-alert-urs-pe-aleea-tiberiu-brediceanu-id215728.html>

<https://www.radiobrasovfm.ro/stiri-din-brasov/urs-semnalat-pe-o-strada-din-brasov-id215961.html>

<https://www.radiobrasovfm.ro/stiri-din-brasov/a-fost-semnalata-prezenta-unui-urs-in-harman-id216619.html>

<https://epitesti.ro/stiri/arges-s-a-emis-ro-alert-urs-acum-langa-o-institutie-importanta>

Similar examples could be found elsewhere.

"A new RO-ALERT: bear among people"

<https://epitesti.ro/evenimente/s-a-emis-inca-un-ro-alert-urs-printre-oameni-acum-intr-o-localitate-din-arges>

"Bear near people's homes"

<https://epitesti.ro/evenimente/alerta-in-arges-urs-acum-langa-casele-oamenilor>

"RO-ALERT: bear near an important institution"

and:

"Bears are spreading terror among people"

<https://epitesti.ro/evenimente/arges-ursii-baga-teroarea-in-oameni-localitati-sub-alerta>

In other cases, additional layers of emotional intensity were added.

DC News referred to a bear near the Police School in Câmpina under the headline: "The bear stormed the Police School. A RO-ALERT message was issued."

https://www.dcnews.ro/ursul-a-dat-iama-la-scoala-de-politie-din-campina-s-a-dat-mesaj-ro-alert_1056312.html

Many of these articles were subsequently redistributed on social media, where screenshots of RO-ALERT notifications themselves became posts, generating hundreds of comments and reactions.

As a result, a single event may be experienced several times: first through the RO-ALERT notification, then through news articles, social media posts, screenshots of the alert and repeated online sharing.

Each additional exposure reinforces perceptions of danger and contributes to a cumulative sense of risk.

This phenomenon illustrates why the DataDiggers study identified both balanced media coverage and the responsible use of the RO-ALERT warning system among the elements necessary for fostering coexistence between people and wildlife.

The amplification of fear is not limited to language alone

Articles concerning bears are frequently illustrated with dramatic photographs showing animals standing on their hind legs, displaying their teeth or appearing aggressive, even when such images are stock photographs or unrelated to the specific event being reported.

The same tendency has become increasingly visible on social media.

Videos filmed in forests or in the natural habitat of bears are sometimes presented as imminent threats to nearby communities. In other cases, artificial intelligence is used to generate dramatic scenes of conflict, while frightening images are associated with RO-ALERT notifications and alarming headlines.

Several examples illustrate this phenomenon.

For example, a Facebook page repeatedly used AI-generated images and scenes of conflict alongside RO-ALERT messages and fear-based language:

https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid023cAep2NqA9f9Hr5oKwKJaLkE4A5PrYj4F7gdxtVAh6y7BfFxobLWehHo4B8XzzbCl&id=61561141074970

https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02Ww8hTLqzaqDCvoL5oHBg2hqWM5jLNGtWayDvEcrSLv9ie3itXigLmJVQSAoAQjJol&id=61561141074970

https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02MHKcKzo45nhQoTUdBD8cPXFiwTfPmSWHQaRz83f4XMhHrPnqaTuLXxXdnj1yZVfsl&id=61561141074970

https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0TCMRVWEd3SKxMR2JnuoJFTP5h9cZjT44W6dYET4PVNqgi1Kxuu5orVx9gTNpSVs5l&id=61561141074970

In other cases, unrelated situations from different countries was combined with local narratives and emotionally charged language:

https://web.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0vpTuoQZJPNcQfoiB2SjG8o8eYPy4Tt5mXDuBb8ybFj4cfYnw7wZfq6SY9YWLqEeFl&id=61561141074970

Misleading presentations were not uncommon.

Monitorul de Suceava published a video accompanied by the warning:

"Attention, the presence of bears near households may lead to unfortunate events."

<https://web.facebook.com/reel/1989137961728766>

However, the footage itself showed a bear in a forest environment.

Similarly, Monitorul de Suceava described a bear as being "near houses", although the accompanying video showed the animal in its natural habitat.

<https://www.facebook.com/reel/2820254708308458>

Mesager24 presented footage under the headline:

"VIDEO - Your news: the bear, also in the forests of Chiuza!"

<https://www.facebook.com/reel/999929959293205>

Likewise, Bihor Online reported that:

"A bear was filmed running on a road in Bihor."

<https://web.facebook.com/reel/2008674706707044>

Yet the footage itself appeared to show the animal being pursued by a vehicle on a road near the forest.

False information also appeared.

In one case from Moinești, a supposed bear sighting later proved to have been generated using artificial intelligence.

<https://unupetrotus.ro/moinesti-ursul-de-pe-strada-plopilor-a-fost-o-farsa-creata-cu-inteligenta-artificiala/>

These examples represent only a small sample drawn from the large volume of similar content that circulated across news websites and social media throughout 2026, a period during which fear-based narratives and emotionally charged representations of bears became increasingly prominent.

They further demonstrate that misinformation and AI-generated content had also begun to enter the public debate surrounding bears in Romania in 2026, adding new layers of complexity to an already highly emotional and polarized discussion.

When causes are overshadowed

The conflict itself often receives extensive attention, while the human behaviours and circumstances that contributed to the event receive less visibility.

One example is the Transfăgărășan road. For years, specialists, environmental organizations and public authorities have repeatedly warned that the illegal feeding of bears by tourists has contributed to the habituation of animals and to the emergence of dangerous behaviours.

Nevertheless, in some reports and media outlets, coverage focused primarily on the attacks and the bears' reactions, while the role played by human behaviour and the circumstances preceding the event received considerably less attention.

"Incident on the Transfăgărășan: Bulgarian tourist attacked by a bear near Vidraru Dam. Authorities issued a RO-ALERT warning."

<https://sibiu100.ro/eveniment/incident-pe-transfagarasan-turist-bulgar-atacat-de-urs-langa-barajul-vidraru-autoritatile-au-emis-ro-alert/>

"Foreign tourist bitten by a bear in the Vidraru Dam area."

<https://incomod-media.ro/2026/05/27/turist-strain-muscat-de-un-urs-in-zona-barajului-vidraru/>

"Alert on the Transfăgărășan: Bulgarian tourist bitten by a bear."

<https://www.oradesibiu.ro/2026/05/27/alerta-pe-transfagarasan-turist-bulgar-muscat-de-urs/>

A similar imbalance can be observed in reports concerning localities visited by bears.

For example, media reports describing the "terror" experienced by residents of Bușteni focused primarily on fear and danger. Interestingly, images accompanying some of these reports showed bears feeding from unsecured waste containers.

<https://observatornews.ro/eveniment/teroare-continua-in-busteni-un-urs-apare-constant-in-zonele-locuite-oamenii-nu-mai-suna-la-112-pentru-ca-autoritatile-nu-pot-sa-rezolve-problema-586515.html>

More generally, considerably less attention has been devoted to anthropogenic food sources, illegal feeding, tourism pressure, habitat fragmentation, supplementary feeding practices, preventive infrastructure, electric fencing and other factors capable of influencing the frequency of human-bear interactions.

This imbalance may have important consequences.

Once causes receive less prominence within the narrative, attention naturally shifts away from prevention and increasingly towards the idea that the species itself constitutes the problem.

Timing, media pressure and the radicalization of the debate

The timing is noteworthy.

On 4 May 2026, the law adopted by the Romanian Parliament increasing the annual bear hunting quota from 426 to 859 bears was sent for promulgation.

On 21 May 2026, the President of Romania challenged the law before the Constitutional Court, arguing that it raised serious constitutional and European law concerns.

During the following weeks, media attention devoted to bear news intensified considerably. Reports emphasizing attacks, panic, danger and emergency situations occupied an increasingly prominent place in public discourse, while discussions concerning scientific uncertainty, preventive measures and successful examples of coexistence remained comparatively less visible.

The concentration of alarmist narratives during precisely this period is difficult to ignore. At the very moment when the constitutionality of the law doubling the hunting quota was being challenged, headlines centred on fear and emergency became increasingly dominant.

Through the repeated amplification of individual incidents and the constant exposure to alarmist narratives, media coverage contributed to creating a climate in which larger hunting quotas and increasingly lethal approaches became easier to promote.

As a consequence, debates progressively shifted away from coexistence and conflict prevention and towards the expansion of hunting quotas. Fear generated demands for action, while increasingly lethal proposals received greater visibility.

One of the striking paradoxes of the current debate is that, despite the long-standing recognition of many factors contributing to human-bear conflicts and the availability of preventive non-lethal measures, the consequences of failing to adequately address these issues by national and local authorities are now being used to justify annual quotas allowing the killing of up to 859 bears, including animals living in their natural habitat and having no history of conflict with humans.

Even more strikingly, the consequences of these same unresolved human-related factors are increasingly being used to support calls for weakening the Habitats Directive, a cornerstone of biodiversity conservation in the European Union.

19. The Attack on European Biodiversity Protection: When the Habitats Directive Becomes the Target

After the adoption by the Romanian Parliament of legislation seeking to increase the annual quota from 426 to 859 bears, and the constitutional challenge brought by the President of Romania, the focus of the debate shifted once again.

This time, the target became the European system of biodiversity protection itself.

In June 2026, **Tanczos Barna, one of the principal advocates of the legislation seeking to double the annual bear hunting quota** and, at that time, acting Minister of Agriculture, announced his intention to seek changes to European legislation in order to weaken the protection afforded to the brown bear, thereby using his temporary position to challenge a legal framework long regarded as one of the cornerstones of European biodiversity conservation.

HotNews:

<https://hotnews.ro/ursul-scos-de-pe-lista-speciilor-protejate-initiativa-vicepremierului-tanczos-de-modificare-a-legislatiei-ue-2270083>

ProTV:

<https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/romania-a-cerut-comisiei-europene-relaxarea-statutului-de-protectie-al-ursului-brun-pe-fondul-atacurilor-tot-mai-dese.html>

A major paradox of this evolution is that Tanczos Barna had previously served as Minister of Environment and was therefore in a position to ensure the implementation of many of the preventive measures repeatedly recommended by scientists and conservation specialists, yet many of those measures remained unimplemented.

Rather than leading to a stronger emphasis on prevention, the years that followed were marked by growing efforts to expand hunting quotas and, ultimately, by attempts to weaken the very legal framework that had protected the brown bear from political pressure, generalized killing and trophy hunting interests.

When larger quotas became controversial, protection itself became the next target.

Today, after many of the recommended preventive measures remain unimplemented, it is the Habitats Directive itself that is increasingly portrayed as the problem.

If the answer to unimplemented prevention, incomplete science and increasing human pressures is not to correct these failures, but to weaken the legal framework itself, what exactly remains of Europe's commitment to biodiversity?

20. Conclusions

Romania Already Possesses the Legal Instruments Needed to Manage Bear Conflicts

The Habitats Directive itself allows derogations for reasons of public safety and the prevention of serious damage.

At national level, Emergency Ordinance No. 81/2021 established a rapid intervention framework allowing local authorities to drive bears away, relocate them and, where necessary, eliminate them.

In addition, the Ministry of Environment may issue individual derogations for the removal of specific bears under the legal framework applicable to strictly protected species. As a result, Romania already has multiple legal mechanisms capable of addressing dangerous bears, including through lethal measures when necessary.

The issue, therefore, is not the absence of legal instruments.

The issue is the gradual transformation of mechanisms designed to address individual dangerous animals into a system allowing the trophy hunting of up to 859 bears per year, many of them living in their natural habitat and having no history of conflict with humans.

Managing dangerous bears and expanding trophy hunting are not the same thing.

Scientific Uncertainty Became Political Certainty

The doubling of the annual bear hunting quota from 426 to 859 bears per year, many of them living in their natural habitat and having no history of conflict with humans, was presented as a science-based measure. Yet the scientific basis invoked to justify the largest annual bear hunting quotas in recent Romanian history remained unavailable for independent verification.

The estimate used to support the doubling of hunting quotas was accompanied by major transparency concerns and was based on a very large extrapolation. It does not represent the actual number of bears identified, but rather an estimate derived through extrapolation, the methodology, datasets, metadata and underlying assumptions of which were not made publicly available to allow for independent scientific verification.

Only a synthetic report was released, and even that document was neither formally signed nor assumed by the persons who prepared it.

As a result, organizations such as WWF-Romania have brought legal actions against the "Marin Drăcea" National Institute for Research and Development in Forestry (INCDS) after the institute allegedly refused to provide the documents and data underlying the genetic study.

The transparency concerns surrounding the study are reinforced by the repeated presence of certain individuals and institutions across research, publicly funded projects, advisory structures and organizations with a direct interest in increasing hunting quotas.

Years before the 2026 law, Romanian investigative journalists had already raised concerns regarding what PressOne described as the "Ionescu triad": Transilvania University of Braşov, ICAS (today the "Marin Drăcea" National Institute for Research and Development in Forestry, the institution behind the genetic study invoked to justify the doubling of the hunting quota) and Carpathia Foundation.

Significantly, Ovidiu Ionescu, President of AGVPS (General Association of Hunters and Sport Fishermen of Romania), appeared alongside the Minister of Environment during the presentation of the genetic study. His name also appeared among the authors of the 2025 report on the management zoning of the brown bear species in Romania.

Scientific uncertainty became political certainty.

When estimates that cannot be independently verified become the basis for legislation allowing the killing and trophy hunting of hundreds of bears, transparency, independence and conflicts of interest become matters of public interest.

Public Safety and Trophy Hunting Are Not the Same Thing

Throughout the political debate, larger hunting quotas were presented primarily through the language of public safety and conflict prevention.

Dangerous bears and bears included in annual hunting quotas are not the same thing. Many of the animals covered by hunting quota live in forest habitats, avoid human settlements and have no history of conflict with humans. Yet under the quota system, such animals may still be killed.

A bear that has never attacked anyone and never caused damage cannot be treated as equivalent to a problem bear simply because it belongs to the same species.

No society attempts to reduce crime by imprisoning large numbers of people who have committed no offence in the hope that crime rates might decline. Public policy is expected to target actual risks, not individuals who have done nothing wrong.

The same principle should apply to the brown bear.

The incorporation of CIC trophy scores into the legal framework further exposes the nature of the system. CIC scores do not measure dangerousness. They measure trophy value.

The presence of commercial hunting offers, including offers published before the legislative process had even been completed, shows that this debate was never solely about safety. It also involved money, trophies and access to some of Europe's most valuable brown bears.

The Rise Project investigation “Inside the bear hunters' den”, the international trophy hunting market, the role of hunting organizations and the economic value attached to large bear trophies all point in the same direction.

Behind the language of prevention and public safety, Romania expanded a system of organized trophy hunting of a protected species.

The Causes of Conflicts Were Known, but Most of the Solutions Remained Unimplemented

One of the conclusions of this analysis is that the debate shifted not because coexistence measures had failed, but because many of them had never been seriously pursued in the first place.

For years, scientists, conservation specialists and public authorities have identified the principal factors contributing to human-bear conflicts: anthropogenic food sources, poor waste management, unsecured garbage containers, habitat fragmentation, roads, human disturbance inside bear habitats and the lack of preventive infrastructure.

The evidence is clear. Human-bear conflicts are not simply determined by the number of bears. They are strongly influenced by human activities and by the extent to which preventive measures are prioritized.

Yet these factors received far less political attention than population estimates and hunting quotas.

Bear-resistant containers, electric fencing, livestock and beehive protection, education and awareness programs, proper waste management and the management of anthropogenic attractants were repeatedly recommended. Most of these measures remained largely unimplemented.

The rehabilitation centre intended to host habituated or non-releasable bears also remained unfinished despite being financed through public and European funds.

At the same time, pressure inside bear habitats continued to intensify. Off-road activities, berry and mushroom picking, forestry operations, tourism infrastructure and hunting pressure all contributed to increasing disturbance in areas used by bears. The cumulative impact of these pressures was never seriously evaluated before the political debate shifted towards killing more bears.

Băile Tușnad demonstrates why prevention matters. In one of the areas most frequently associated with human-bear interactions, secured waste systems, community involvement and coexistence-oriented management were associated with a dramatic reduction in alerts and incidents.

The problem was not that prevention had failed. The problem was that prevention was never given the priority that trophy hunting received.

Coexistence with Wildlife Represents an Important Shared Value

For generations, people and large carnivores have shared the Romanian landscape. The presence of wildlife has long been part of Romania's natural and cultural heritage.

Public opinion data, civic mobilization and years of public engagement suggest that coexistence with brown bears remains an important value for many Romanians.

The DataDiggers study revealed strong support for habitat protection, environmental education and non-lethal measures aimed at preventing conflicts, indicating a broad preference for coexistence-oriented approaches to human-bear interactions.

By contrast, support for lethal approaches proved remarkably limited.

The study further highlighted that coexistence depends not only on the behavior of bears, but also on the behavior of society itself. Balanced media coverage and the responsible use of the RO-Alert system were identified among the elements necessary for maintaining coexistence between people and bears.

Public campaigns and petitions opposing trophy hunting and advocating the protection of brown bears attracted the support of large numbers of citizens. The campaign "Stop Trophy Hunting", launched on the Declic platform, gathered approximately 85,000 signatures, while subsequent attempts to expand hunting quotas also prompted sustained civic mobilization in support of bear conservation and non-lethal approaches.

Support for the protection of brown bears has found expression across many areas of Romanian society. Over the years, scientists, journalists, non-governmental organizations, grassroots

initiatives and citizens have contributed to research, public debates, litigation, awareness campaigns and civic mobilization concerning the future of the species.

This points to the existence of a broad and enduring movement in favour of biodiversity conservation, human-bear coexistence and non-lethal methods of prevention. By contrast, it also reveals a persistent opposition to the expansion of lethal measures and trophy hunting.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the values associated with the protection of brown bears remain deeply rooted within Romanian society and continue to shape the relationship that many Romanians seek to maintain with the natural world.

The Politics of Fear and the Role of Media Narratives

Fear-inducing narratives became one of the most powerful forces shaping the debate surrounding brown bears in Romania.

Conflicts involving bears are not new. For generations, human communities and large carnivores have shared the same landscape. What changed was the way these conflicts were framed, amplified and repeatedly experienced by the public.

Throughout 2026, media coverage increasingly relied on a language centred on panic, terror, danger and emergency. Expressions such as "terrorized residents", "days of terror", "communities living in fear", "panic", "under siege" and references suggesting that the situation had become "uncontrollable" appeared repeatedly across local and national media.

Through the combined effect of RO-ALERT notifications, television coverage, online media, social networks and the repeated circulation of the same events, individual incidents increasingly became part of a broader narrative centred on fear and permanent emergency.

One event or a single RO-ALERT notification could be transformed into multiple experiences of the same incident. An alert became an article. The article became a social media post. The post generated comments and redistribution. Screenshots became news. The same event was repeatedly reintroduced into the public space, each additional exposure reinforcing perceptions of danger and contributing to a climate of permanent emergency.

The timing is difficult to ignore. This process intensified during a politically sensitive period, when the law doubling the annual hunting quota was being challenged by the President before the Constitutional Court.

At the same time, discussions concerning scientific uncertainty, preventive measures and successful examples of coexistence became less visible.

As fear-inducing narratives intensified, demands for immediate action increased. Media pressure and political pressure reinforced one another, while increasingly lethal approaches gained visibility.

One of the striking paradoxes of the debate is that the consequences of long-standing failures to adequately implement preventive measures and address human-related factors contributing to

conflicts are now being used to justify the killing of more bears, including animals living in their natural habitat and with no history of conflict with humans.

In this way, the debate gradually shifted away from prevention and coexistence and towards larger hunting quotas.

Fear became a source of political pressure.

From Problem Bears to a Conflict with the Species Itself

One important transformation documented in this analysis is the shift from conflicts involving individual bears to a conflict with the species itself.

Originally, the logic of intervention was individualized. A particular bear entered a settlement. A particular bear attacked livestock. A particular bear repeatedly approached people or posed a concrete danger. Authorities could intervene.

This logic is consistent with the Habitats Directive and with the emergency intervention mechanisms established under Romanian law.

Over time, however, the debate gradually moved away from this framework. Instead of asking why particular bears entered settlements, what attractants were present, what preventive measures were missing or how specific risks could be reduced, the discussion became increasingly centred on how many bears should be killed.

Individual conflicts involving particular animals came to justify annual quotas allowing the killing of up to 859 bears across the country, including animals living in their natural habitat and with no history of conflict with humans.

Gradually, the focus shifted from problem individuals to the species itself.

This shift is deeply concerning because it blurs the distinction between individual bears that pose a concrete danger and a strictly protected species. Once that distinction begins to disappear, every bear risks being perceived as a potential problem, while the existence of a brown bear population starts to be treated not as a conservation responsibility, but as an anomaly requiring correction

This is the flawed logic that transforms targeted interventions aimed at problem bears into annual hunting quotas.

And annual hunting quotas into challenges directed against the legal protection of the species itself and biodiversity more broadly.

The Habitats Directive Is Not the Problem

The Habitats Directive did not create these problems, nor did it prevent their solutions.

This point must be stated clearly. The Directive does not prohibit intervention when public safety is at risk. It allows derogations. It allows action. It provides a legal framework for dealing with

dangerous situations while ensuring that lethal measures remain proportionate, scientifically justified and linked to concrete objectives.

Romanian law also provides emergency intervention mechanisms.

The problem was never the absence of legal instruments or the inability of authorities to act. The problem is that many of the underlying causes of conflict remained insufficiently addressed, while political pressure increased for larger hunting quotas.

Blaming the Habitats Directive reverses cause and effect.

The Directive did not leave waste unsecured. It did not prevent the installation of electric fences. It did not delay the completion of the rehabilitation centre. It did not create anthropogenic attractants. It did not encourage tourists to feed bears. It did not intensify disturbance inside bear habitats. It did not produce the lack of transparency surrounding the genetic study.

These are human and institutional failures.

Using their consequences as arguments against the Habitats Directive means turning the failures of prevention into arguments against the very legal framework designed to protect biodiversity.

The Habitats Directive is not an obstacle to coexistence. On the contrary, it is one of the few safeguards ensuring that coexistence is not gradually replaced by trophy hunting.

What Is Ultimately at Stake Is Not Only the Brown Bear, but the Future of European Biodiversity

This analysis is not only about Romania's brown bears.

It is about the way modern societies respond when protected species come into conflict with human interests, institutional failures and political pressure.

The brown bear has become the centre of a much larger debate.

On one side stands a conservation framework built on strict protection, scientific justification, proportionality, prevention and the recognition that biodiversity has a value beyond immediate human convenience.

On the other stands a political and economic logic in which the consequences of unresolved human-related factors are used to justify killing more animals, expanding trophy hunting and weakening the legal safeguards created to protect nature.

The conclusion of this analysis is clear.

Many of the problems invoked to justify larger hunting quotas were not created by the Habitats Directive. To a significant extent, they resulted from human-related factors and from the failure to fully implement measures that had long been recognised by scientists and conservation specialists.

Yet the consequences of these failures are now being used not only to justify the killing of larger numbers of bears, including animals living in their natural habitat and with no history of conflict with humans, but also to challenge the legal framework designed to protect Europe's biodiversity.

That is the real danger.

Once a strictly protected species begins to be viewed primarily through the lenses of fear, numbers and emergency, the pressure no longer stops at larger hunting quotas. It reaches the legal safeguards created to protect biodiversity itself.

If unresolved human-bear conflicts can be transformed into a justification for expanding trophy hunting and weakening the protection of a strictly protected species, the consequences may extend far beyond the brown bear.

Other protected species may face similar pressures.

Other conservation rules may be portrayed as obstacles.

Other failures of prevention may be transformed into arguments for less protection.

This is why the debate over Romania's brown bears is also a debate about the future of European biodiversity conservation.

Europe does not need less protection for biodiversity.

It needs more responsibility from the institutions and societies that claim to manage it.

Ultimately, future generations will judge us by whether we proved capable of preserving the natural heritage entrusted to us.

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