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Romania's Presidential Election: a Battle of Good versus Evil?

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Summary

Demonstrations, interference by the secret services, ten million dollars in cash in a safe, the annulment of the first round and its repetition six months later - this is what the presidential elections in Romania looked like. Unlike the previous ones, this time it made the front pages of the world's media. In the Czech Republic, two camps quickly emerged in response to the Romanian electoral turmoil. One side points to the problematic actions of Romanian state institutions, which it describes as undemocratic interference in free political competition and discrimination against critical voices against the EU and the West. The other side highlights the substandard election campaign of the first-round winner Călin Georgescu, the misuse of funds of unclear origin and the deliberate use of the TikTok platform for political influence. As is often the case, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. This text looks at the circumstances that led to the cancellation of the first round, and presents the key arguments of both sides.

Key Takeaways

- The presidential election was marred by the annulment of the first round due to non-transparent campaigning and misuse of social media. The Constitutional Court's decision has called into question citizens' trust in democratic processes and sparked demonstrations.
- Traditional parties (PSD, PNL) lost support during the super-election year, while the new far-right party AUR gained significantly. This trend points to the growing demand of the electorate for radical change and rejection of the established political elites in Romania.
- The Romanian elections reflect the more widespread problems of European politics - the growing influence of social networks, the polarization of society and the rise of populist movements. The situation in Romania may be a warning of the possible destabilization of democratic processes in other countries.

Choosing everything and everyone at once

The electoral marathon that started a year ago is over in Romania. The presidential elections, originally scheduled for November 24th and December 8th, were supposed to be the culmination of a super-election year. Already on June 9th, regional and local elections were held alongside the European Parliament elections. The parliamentary elections (for the lower house and the Senate) were to follow in the autumn and were to take place between the first and second rounds of the presidential elections. A wet dream for every political scientist and commentator, a nightmare for the organizers.

The Romanian electorate has thus decided on new representation at all levels - from mayors to regional representatives to MEPs and the president - in just one year. The cancellation of the presidential elections should therefore not be seen as an isolated act, but as part of a broader process, of which the events of the super-election year and the sharp realignment of electoral support from established parties towards new formations contributed significantly.

During the European elections, it became clear that the grand coalition between the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL) and the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD), while allowing the two parties to form a government, is gradually weakening their electoral performance. In 2019, when PNL and PSD were still running separately, they together won 23 of the 33 seats intended for Romanian representatives in the European Parliament. In 2024, the number was down to 19 seats. At the expense of the ruling parties, the electoral alliance led by the far-right AUR (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor), supplemented by other smaller right-wing entities, has strengthened. (For more on AUR, see below.)

The following local and regional elections produced a similar result. In Romania, regional and municipal representatives are elected simultaneously and directly. Thus, parties compete not only for representation in local and regional bodies (similar to county and municipal councils), but also for directly elected governors (Președinți CJ) and mayors. There were no significant surprises in the election of the governors - the PSD won 25 seats, 5 more than in 2020, while the PNL weakened from 17 to 12 governors. The rest went to UDMR/RMDSZ (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România in Romanian, Româniai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség in Hungarian), which represents the Hungarian minority and draws on its strong concentration of voters in the central and north-western regions of the country.

At the regional level, however, the changes in sentiment were more pronounced. The PSD was the strongest, gaining 188 more regional councilors than in 2020. The PNL weakened by 53 seats. The new AUR party made a sharp rise with a gain of 159 seats.

At the municipal level, we are seeing a similar trend. The PSD gained the most directly elected mayors (1677 out of 3180, 315 more than in 2020). The PNL has lost about 100 mayors, and its retreat has been accompanied by the rise of the AUR: from just 3 mayors in 2020, the AUR now leads 30 municipalities, and its representation in local councils has risen from 73 to 3,509 seats.

The results of the spring elections clearly indicated a change in voter preferences. The PSD - the social democratic party that has been in government most often since 1989 - may not be experiencing its strongest period, but it is still managing to hold its ground, at the expense of its governing partner. Much worse is the PNL - a right-wing, pro-European liberal party that has been struggling for several years with an identity crisis, frequent leadership changes and a loss of confidence that has led to its weakening at almost every level.

It should not be forgotten that the consequences of the political crisis of 2021, when the centre-right government formed by the PNL and the Union for the Salvation of Romania (Uniunea Salvați România, USR) collapsed due to internal political disputes, are still reverberating in Romania. At that time, the PNL split, the popular Ludovic Orban left its leadership and, after two unsuccessful attempts to form a government, a grand coalition was formed between the PNL, the PSD and the UDMR/RMDSZ under the leadership of Nicolae Ionel Ciuca (PNL). While this move allowed for the formation of a stable government, the merger of previously antagonistic parties opened space for new, protest-oriented political formations.

AUR enters the scene

Other political forces were able to take advantage of the limited conflict between the PNL and the PSD. One of them was the relatively marginal party AUR - Alliance for the Unification of Romanians - back in 2020. In Romanian, this name also means “gold”. AUR was formed in 2019 around George Simion, a hard anti-communist activist and right-winger who had been politically active since 2004. He has long been critical of corruption, the political situation in the country and the incomplete reckoning with the communist past and the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

The second strong theme that Simion emphasized is the unification of Romania with Moldova - a territory that is historically inhabited mainly by Romanian-speaking people and was part of the so-called Greater Romania in 1918-1940. However, the Moldovan government has reacted negatively to these positions and Simion has been repeatedly banned from entering Moldova, the latest of which is valid until 2028.

For Simion, the covid pandemic came as a blessing, which activated citizens who already did not trust the state and state institutions much before the pandemic. The second blessing came in 2021 with the political crisis and the power pact between previously opposing political forces. This situation allowed Simion, as the main figure of the Romanian anti-establishment, to situate himself as the head of the disaffected Romanians.

His political program offered an attractive mix of anti-communism and anti-Marxism, the idea of unification with Moldova, support for traditional values, patriotism and Orthodoxy, a sharply critical stance on European integration, and rejection of the so-called “woke” agenda - from gender quotas to homosexual unions. This has earned AUR the label of a far-right, even fascist party. In 2024, it made significant gains - in regions, municipal councils and the European Parliament.

In the European Parliament, the AUR eventually joined the Eurosceptic faction of the ECR, which includes the Czech ODS. However, AUR representatives face accusations of anti-Ukrainian attitudes, because their nationalist demands do not stop at Moldova. Claudiu Târziu, one of the leaders of the AUR, for example, has said that Romania should “reunite” with Moldova as well as with the Ukrainian border regions - Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and Transcarpathia:

"Bessarabia must return home. Northern Bukovina must not be forgotten, southern Bessarabia... Transcarpathia, everything that was and is part of the Romanian nation, must return to its national borders." (Fornusek, 2024).

This position is not far from Vladimir Putin's views on “historical territories”, which gives the alliance of ODS and AUR at the European level a particularly piquant edge.

Autumn elections and the crisis

While Romanian nationalist movements were growing, the presidential elections came. An important moment came just before the first round, especially in the way the candidates executed their campaigns. On November 24th, the vote was won by the not very well-known Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate whose views were very close to those of George Simion (see Table 1 below), with 22.94%. This was a surprise, as Georgescu was considered more of an outsider, still in 6th place in the pre-election polls a week before the election with 6.2% (Atlstel, 2024). Elena Lasconi (USR) came second with 19.18% and the widely popular Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu (PSD) came third with 19.15%. Simion, who targeted the same voters as Georgescu, came fourth with 13.86%.

The results were a wake-up call, especially for the ruling grand coalition of the PSD and PNL. The two leading candidates of the first round went down in flames. The PNL candidate and former Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă came in fifth with 8.79%. Both presidents of the main governing parties resigned their posts in response to the setback. The surprise of Georgescu's victory somewhat masked the fact that the distribution of support for the second round slightly favored the runner-up, Elena Lasconi. It was expected that both the defeated PSD candidate Ciolacu, the PNL candidate Ciucă, and others would back Lasconi during the second round.

A week after the first round of presidential elections, parliamentary elections were held. In Romania, the lower and upper houses are elected at the same time, so there were 331 seats in the lower house and 136 in the Senate. The results confirmed the trend of the European and regional elections. The ruling PSD and PNL bled and strengthened Simion's AUR and new smaller formations of S.O.S. entered the parliament. Romania (28 in the lower house, 12 Senate seats) and the Party for Young People (Partidul Oamenilor Tineri, POT; 24 and 7 seats respectively).

After the elections, a very broad coalition “against the extremists” was quickly formed, consisting of the previous ruling PSD and PNL with the USR and the UDMR/RMDSZ, i.e. the unsuccessful parties and the Hungarians against the others. The coalition quickly agreed to support USR President Elena Lasconi in the second round against Georgescu. But on December 6th the Constitutional Court annulled the first round, leading to a series of unfortunate events.

Court decision and the first round for the second time

On November 28th, the Constitutional Court decided to recount all the ballots cast in the first round, and on December 2nd it confirmed the results of the first round and confirmed the second round on December 8th. On December 6th, however, the court annulled the election results because of the declassification and publication of Romanian intelligence information on December 4th, 2024, by President Klaus Iohannis (Ruling No. 32). And this is important.

In Europe, we have seen several recent elections cancelled and repeated. As an example, the 2010 parliamentary elections in Iceland were annulled by the Supreme Court due to a series of errors committed by the state organizations in the preparatory phase (ballot paper numbers were not random, the use of inappropriate ballot screens that contravened legal requirements, etc.). Another case is the 2016 Austrian presidential elections, when the Constitutional Court annulled the second round held on May 22nd following a complaint by FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache. The reason was the non-standard counting of votes, which contradicted electoral rules. It is important to note, however, that these cases concerned the pre-election or post-election phase of the electoral process; in the case of Romania, the court was reacting to the format of the pre-election campaign.

The decision was based on interference via social media and the dysfunctional use of digital technology and artificial intelligence to the advantage of one of the candidates. The shortcoming is thus not directly related to the electoral process itself, but to the non-transparent influence on voters (Venice Commission, 2025: 6).

The court's decision caused strong emotions. Naturally, the winner of the annulled election, Călin Georgescu, was not spared criticism, but also the runner-up, Elena Lasconi, who was more likely to win than her opponent. "God, the Romanian people, truth and the law will prevail and find them guilty of destroying our democracy (...) We have all seen how Putin laughed at what the political power in Bucharest has done with these elections", declared the USR leader (Paternoster, Brezar, 2024). Demonstrations broke out in Bucharest and other cities.

On February 26th, 2025, Romanian prosecutors opened a criminal investigation into Georgescu for various alleged offences, including campaign finance abuse, support for fascist groups and "inciting to commit acts against the constitutional order". On the same day, Georgescu was detained by police as he was about to register his candidacy for the 2025 presidential elections. Prosecutors ordered Georgescu not to appear in the media or create any new social media accounts for the next 60 days. These bans were due to expire a week before the presidential election on May 4th, 2025 (Paun, 2025). On March 7th, 2025, Georgescu filed his candidacy for the 2025 presidential election, and on March 9th the Romanian Central Electoral Office (BEC) rejected Georgescu's candidacy. At the time of his disqualification, Georgescu was leading in the polls with around 40% of the vote in the first round.

The frontrunner quickly became the politically aligned George Simion, who sensed a chance to be elected. Supported by Georgescu in the first re-run on 4 May 2025, he won a promising 40.96%. Nicușor Dan - the mayor of Bucharest - came second with 20.99%. By a small margin, the government candidate Crin Antonescu came third with 20.07%, and the independent Victor Ponta fourth with 13.04%. Surprisingly, Elena Lasconi did not even get 2% in the rerun elections. Thanks to the vast mobilization of all the government parties (more than 2 million new voters between the first and second rounds) and thanks to the support from the non-advancing candidates, Nicușor Dan finally won the second round with 53.6% of the vote (see table 1 below).

Democratic bans

The super-election year is over in Romania. However, the celebratory comments (e.g. Cemper, 2025) about the victory of democracy are more about lying to ourselves and picking the facts we like. The situation in Romania is now such that the already low trust of ordinary Romanians in the state and its institutions has suffered another crushing blow. Evil tongues say that the cancellation of the first round was not so much due to Georgescu's miraculous campaign, but rather to the fact that Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu did not make it to the second round.

Be that as it may, the current governing coalition is built on parties that significantly weakened in all the 2024 elections and whose presidential candidates did not even make it to the second round. This situation can only result in one outcome in 4 years: AUR, thanks to its opposition criticism of everything and everyone, will be significantly stronger and will be able to govern.

We must also reflect on the advisability of cancelling elections because of non-standard election campaigns and the use of new instruments. The fact that a specific system has emerged that has been very successful in promoting a specific candidate is simply a fact that cannot be disputed. On the other hand, the link between a successful (or substandard) campaign and its impact on specific voters and overall electoral results is not entirely clear and raises questions. For example, how many voters were so influenced by the campaign that they turned out in droves to vote for Georgescu instead

of their candidate? Is it at all possible that the 1 million EUR invested in influencers and social media advertising could have had such an impact on the elections that they had to be repeated in such a fundamental and irreparable way? And was not the surprising victory of the radical right-wing candidate rather due to the demand for radical change from a large part of Romanian society, and would his victory in the first round have come anyway? And was it really Georgescu who was behind the abuse of TikTok, and not his political rivals in the PNL who were so intent on discrediting him, as investigative journalists suggest? (Goury-Laffont, 2024) These are all pertinent questions to which the European public must seek answers.

The chances that similar campaigns and manipulations will occur in other states are quite high. The question is whether we should take the actions of state institutions in Romania as a deterrent rather than a model worthy of emulation.

Table 1: Results of the presidential elections in Romania in 2024 and 2025

candidate	party affiliation	2024 (annulled)		2025			
		1st round votes	votes [%]	1st round votes	votes [%]	2nd round votes	votes [%]
George Simion	Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR)	1,281,325	13.86	3,862,761	40.96	5,339,053	46.4
Nicușor Dan	independent	none	none	1,979,767	20.99	6,168,642	53.6
Crin Antonescu	Alianța Electorală România Înainte (PSD+PNL+UDMR)	none	none	1,892,930	20.07		
Victor Ponta	independent	none	none	1,230,164	13.04		
Elena Lasconi	Uniunea Salvați România (USR)	1,772,500	19.18	252,721	1.02		
Lavinia Șandru	Partidul Umanist Social Liberal (PPU-SL)	none	none	60,682	0.64		
Daniel Funeriu	independent	none	none	49,604	0.53		
Cristian Terheș	Partidul Național Conservator Român (PNCR)	95,782	1.04	36,445	0.39		
Sebastian Popescu	Partidul Noua Românie (PNR)	14,683	0.16	25,994	0.28		
John Ion Banu	independent	none	none	22,020	0.23		
Silviu Predoiu	Partidul Liga Acțiunii Naționale (PLAN)	11,246	0.12	17,186	0.18		
Călin Georgescu	independent	2,120,401	22.94	none	none		
Marcel Ciolacu	Partidul Social Democrat (PSD)	1,769,760	19.15	none	none		
Nicolae Ciucă	Partidul Național Liberal (PNL)	811,952	8.79	none	none		
Mircea Geoană	independent	583,898	6.32	none	none		
Hunor Kelemen	Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (UMDR)	416,353	4.50	none	none		
Cristian Diaconescu	independent	286,842	3.10	none	none		
Ana Birchall	independent	42,853	0.46	none	none		
Ludovic Orban*	Forța Dreptei (FD)	20,089	0.22	none	none		
Alexandra Păcuraru	Alternativa pentru Demnitate Națională (ADN)	14,502	0.16	none	none		
valid votes		9,242,186	97.64	9,430,274	98.52	11,507,695	98.85
invalid votes		223,071	2.36	141,466	1.01	134,171	1.01
total votes cast		9,465,257	100.00	9,571,740	100.00	11,641,866	100.00
eligible votes/voter turnout		18,008,480	52.56	17,988,031	53.21	17,988,218	64.72

* Orban withdrew his candidacy shortly before the first round and supported Elena Laconi, but he remained on the ballot

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