

# BEYOND THE BALLOT: UNDERSTANDING THE LASTING IMPACTS OF THE 2025 ELECTIONS

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Bucharest Mayor Nicușor Dan won Romania's presidential runoff held on May 18, securing 53.6% of the vote and defeating George Simion, the far-right leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), who garnered 46.4%. Dan's victory was driven by a high voter turnout (65%) within Romania, especially in urban centers and multi-ethnic regions such as Transylvania, where Hungarian and German minorities strongly opposed Simion's nationalist rhetoric. While Simion secured the majority of the diaspora vote - 55.86% - Dan's support at home outweighed that advantage. Notably, voters in the Republic of Moldova also backed Dan, underscoring concerns over Simion's euroscepticism and pro-Russian associations, which alienated both Chisinau and Western European allies.

This election was not only a contest between political platforms but also highlighted a broader debate about the country's future, seemingly offering a stark choice between opposing paths. The results suggest that while Dan's pro-EU stance played a key role, the vote was also deeply influenced by fears of extremism, nationalism, and political instability under a Simion presidency. Simion's image, bolstered by controversial media appearances abroad like his CNEWS interview in Paris (while refusing to discuss and participate in national media debates), alarmed both minority communities and moderate voters who feared the rise of an intolerant and unpredictable administration. The ethnic Hungarian vote in particular reflected anxiety over potential ethnic tensions, while Moldovans viewed Dan as a guarantor of continued Romanian support for their EU accession aspirations. Thus, Dan's win reflects a broader coalition of pro-European, anti-extremist voters determined to prevent a populist shift in Romania's leadership.

However, the underlying factors that propelled Nicușor Dan into a runoff against an extremist candidate are likely to persist as defining challenges in the years ahead - alongside the extent to which the political establishment can formulate and implement effective responses. The party coalition that supported Dan's opponent still controls roughly a third of the seats in Parliament, making political deadlock a real possibility. This underscores the importance of systematically examining these structural problems, as a deeper understanding of their origins and dynamics is essential for developing

sustainable policy solutions and safeguarding democratic stability. After all, the vote in Romania reflects deeper political currents shaping not just Romania, but all of Europe. Across the continent, politics is fragmenting, with nationalist, anti-establishment, and sovereignist movements gaining strength in places once considered stable.

## 1. Six Months of Turmoil: Romania's Overturned Election

The May 2025 presidential vote marked the end of a turbulent six-month period marked by intense political tension and institutional uncertainty. The turmoil can be traced back to the first round of voting on November 24, when Călin Georgescu, a relatively unknown ultra-nationalist with pro-Russian views, unexpectedly emerged as the frontrunner with around 23% of the vote. His sudden rise coincided with intelligence reports pointing to a coordinated online disinformation campaign. The situation escalated rapidly, and amid mounting security concerns, the Constitutional Court intervened and annulled the entire electoral process<sup>1</sup>.

Georgescu, who has expressed admiration for authoritarian regimes and has voiced support for Moscow, denied any wrongdoing - as did Russian officials. Nevertheless, he was barred from running in the rerun of the election. The court's decision ignited mass protests, especially from Georgescu's supporters, who saw the move as an attack on democratic legitimacy. Internationally, the ruling drew condemnation not only from Russian leaders but also from influential figures like Elon Musk and U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance, who labeled the annulment a "coup" against the will of the people<sup>2</sup>.

This sequence of events has not only thrown Romania's presidential race into disarray but also exposed the broader vulnerabilities of democratic institutions in the face of hybrid warfare, foreign interference and manipulation. The election - suspended between far-right nationalism and liberal democracy, sovereignty and external influence - has become a moment of reckoning for the country.

### 1.1. A reshaped political landscape and mounting tensions

In the wake of the annulled presidential election, Romania's political establishment moved swiftly to contain the crisis and restore a sense of stability. In an effort to stave off further gains by the far-right, Romania's traditional powerhouses - the Social Democrats (PSD), the National Liberals (PNL), and the ethnic Hungarian UDMR - formed a grand coalition. These longtime rivals united under a new electoral alliance, "Romania Forward", and agreed to back a single presidential candidate: Crin Antonescu, a veteran PNL figure and former Senate president. The decision was a strategic compromise. For the PSD, it meant swallowing a bitter pill: the party had failed to reach the presidential runoff for the first time since the fall of communism, and now it had to forgo fielding its own contender.

But until the spring presidential elections, as the political center closed ranks, the sovereignist far-right continued to gain significant momentum<sup>3</sup>. In the parliamentary elections held on December 1, 2024, three ultranationalist and hard-right parties - the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), led by George Simion and backed by Georgescu; S.O.S. Romania; and the Party of Young People - collectively secured around 35% of the seats.

1.

Reuters. 2025. "Romanian Far-Right Regroups Around Single Candidate Ahead of May Presidential Election." Reuters, March 19.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-far-right-regroups-around-single-candidate-ahead-may-presidential-2025-03-19/>

2.

Associated Press. 2025. "Romania's Decision to Annul the Election Raises Tensions Ahead of Presidential Rerun." AP News, March 19.  
<https://apnews.com/article/romania-election-presidency-europe-far-right-russia-baf335441276aa88859c010bc04da686>

3.

<https://www.roaep.ro/rezultate/>

Meanwhile, the pro-European, anti-establishment Save Romania Movement (USR) managed to win just over 12% of the seats, a noticeable drop from the nearly 15% it received in the 2020 elections. The mainstream parties also saw significant losses: the Social Democrats (PSD) received 22.5% of the vote - down 6.4 percentage points from 2020 - while the National Liberals (PNL) dropped to 13.6%, a steep decline of 11.6 percentage points. *The results underscored a broader erosion of trust in traditional parties, as voters increasingly turned to populist and nationalist alternatives.*

The dramatic rise of far-right populist movements in Romania was driven less by sudden radicalization than by deep, simmering frustrations within society. The political infighting among mainstream parties and their nepotistic, cronyst and corrupt conduct had eroded public trust, while the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic strain caused by Russia's war in Ukraine amplified public discontent. The disinformation campaign that accompanied this rise did not invent grievances - it merely exploited those already festering within Romanian society.

### 1.2. New rules, new stakes: preparing for May 2025

With tensions high and the political map redrawn, the stage was set for a high-stakes rematch of the presidential race. The new vote was scheduled for May 4, 2025, with a potential runoff on May 18. In response to mounting concerns over foreign interference, the Romanian government introduced stricter election regulations aimed at curbing malign influence. New measures included requirements for online political ads to clearly disclose their sponsors and increased pressure on social media platforms to swiftly remove disinformation. Investigations revealed that TikTok had deleted tens of thousands of fake accounts in 2024 that were promoting Călin Georgescu and content from the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Meanwhile, the European Union launched its own investigation into TikTok's role in spreading election-related misinformation.

These efforts reflect the authorities' resolve to safeguard the integrity of the upcoming May 2025 election and prevent the kind of foreign manipulation that tainted the previous vote<sup>4</sup>. Yet, despite these interventions, the annulment of the 2024 election has apparently grown Romanian society's polarization. Street protests and widespread skepticism toward both judicial and political institutions have revealed a nation grappling with distrust on all sides<sup>5</sup>.

The Romanian authorities' decision to close presidential voting at 9:00 PM Bucharest time for all voting locations abroad (while the vote would start earlier in these locations) was framed as a measure to protect the integrity of the electoral process and guard against malign influence. Authorities argued that limiting the voting window would reduce the risk of last-minute disinformation campaigns and allow for better oversight and quicker identification of any irregularities<sup>6</sup>. This is referring to the timing of the exit polls - released as soon as polls close in Romania, at 9:00 PM. At previous times, voters still waiting in line or voting abroad became indirectly influenced by early projections of who was likely to make it to the second round. This dynamic played a crucial role in the annulled 2024 election, when the USR candidate surged unexpectedly into the runoff due to votes from abroad, edging out the PSD contender and marking the first time since 1989 that the Social Democrats failed to reach the second round.

4.  
Permanent Electoral Authority. 2015. \*Law No. 208/2015 on the Election of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, and the Organization and Functioning of the Permanent Electoral Authority\*. Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, No. 553, July 24.  
<https://www.roaep.ro/legislatie/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Law-no.-208.pdf>

5.  
Associated Press. 2025. "Romania's Georgescu Emerges as Far-Right Presidential Contender." AP News, September 2.  
<https://apnews.com/article/romania-georgescu-election-d0541a5bc20ddf7be0689d1813f9495c>

6.  
Reuters. 2025. "Romania Confirms Date, Tightens Rules for Presidential Election Rerun." Reuters, January 16.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romania-confirms-date-tightens-rules-presidential-election-rerun-2025-01-16/>

7.

Dumitrescu, Radu. 2025.  
"Romanian Executive Under  
Fire for Changes in Electoral  
Rules Targeting Social Media  
Platforms and Diaspora."  
\*Romania Business Insider\*,  
January 16.  
<https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-changes-electoral-rules-social-media-platforms-diaspora-2025>

Critics argued that the 9:00 PM cutoff disproportionately favors mainstream candidates by curbing the electoral influence of the Romanian diaspora, which tends to vote later due to time zone differences and is generally more supportive of anti-establishment or reformist candidates<sup>7</sup>. As a result, the rule has been seen by some as a calculated move to insulate the political status quo from the disruptive potential of non-traditional challengers and external voter blocs.

All this only increased pressures, highlighting the tense and divided atmosphere for the May 2025 presidential election - widely regarded as a pivotal test of Romania's democratic resilience and its broader geopolitical direction. The campaign has since December become a defining moment not only for Romania's domestic trajectory but also for its place in the world - centered on debates over NATO, the EU, and how to navigate the country's complex relationship with Russia and the United States.

## 2. Volatile Elections, Deeper Trends

Eleven candidates qualified for the May 4, 2025 first-round ballot of which four have emerged as the clear front-runners by April 2025: Nicușor Dan (independent, backed by the USR), George Simion (backed by the far-right coalition AUR-POT-SOS), Crin Antonescu (backed by the mainstream PSD-PNL-UDMR alliance), and Victor Ponta (independent, former PSD prime minister). Analyzing the political platforms of the four candidates within the specific context of the current elections - while taking into account both external and internal challenges of the past decades - reveals several factors that reflect deeper societal issues. These challenges are rooted in long-standing trends within Romanian society, which have become increasingly pronounced and visible during this electoral season, and are likely to shape the country's political and social landscape for years to come.

These underlying societal dynamics are also reflected in the shifting public sentiment captured by polling data. First, it has to be noted that, in the context of the spring elections, polling has been highly volatile and varied significantly between sources. No poll has indicated a first-round victory for Georgescu in the 2024 presidential race and polls didn't call the winners of the first round of elections in spring 2025 either. In fact, During Romania's 2025 presidential election, exit polls were hindered by a high refusal rate, especially among supporters of far-right candidate George Simion, who distrusted the media and electoral institutions. This reluctance led to gaps between poll predictions and actual results. The challenge was further compounded by the diaspora vote, which exit polls do not capture, making it harder to accurately assess voter sentiment<sup>8</sup>. While this contributed to an atmosphere of heightened political uncertainty, several consistent trends have emerged from previous surveys and social barometers allowing us to better understand the current electoral landscape.

8.

Ionescu, Maria. 2025.  
"Rezultate Exit-Poll Alegeri  
Prezidențiale 2025: Fenomenul  
Masiv din Secțiile de Votare  
Care, în Noiembrie, a Fost  
Corelat cu Votul de Protest."  
\*HotNews.ro\*, May 4.  
<https://hotnews.ro/rezultate-exit-poll-alegeri-prezidentiale-2025-fenomenul-masiv-din-sectiile-de-votare-care-in-noiembrie-a-fost-corelat-cu-votul-de-protest-1963795>

### 2.1. The Rise of Anti Establishment Nationalism

Perhaps the most evident of these is the rising anti-establishment sentiment among voters. This trend is neither new nor surprising in Romania, a young democracy still grappling with the legacy of its authoritarian past. Until 1990, Romania endured a uniquely repressive version of communism, modeled after

North Korea, under Nicolae Ceaușescu. His regime was not only cut off from the West but also increasingly isolated from other Eastern Bloc countries. The system actively cultivated distrust - citizens could not trust the political elite, nor even their neighbors, as the infamous Securitate (secret police) was believed to be watching everyone. Corruption and clientelism were also deeply entrenched; with the economy in ruin, people relied on personal connections and informal networks just to access basic necessities like food. This pervasive atmosphere of suspicion, fear, and scarcity has left deep institutional and social scars. As a result, Romanians are still in the process of both understanding and constructing democratic institutions and practices - a task made even more difficult by this inherited distrust and the absence of a shared political culture grounded in transparency and accountability.

9.

Colibășanu, Antonia. 2025. \*Achtung Einsturzgefahr! - Baustellen der Demokratie in Rumänien\*. Bucharest: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. <https://www.kas.de/ro/web/ru/maenien/titlu-unic/detail/-/content/atentie-cade-democratie-2>

A functioning political debate is essential to Romania's democratic build-up process, yet it remains one of the least developed features of Romania's political system<sup>9</sup>. Political parties, heavily funded through the state budget for both operational costs and electoral campaigns, have had little incentive to develop meaningful channels of communication with their constituents. Instead, resources have often been directed toward controlling media narratives - through the purchase of media appearances and the cultivation of sympathetic journalists and analysts - thereby widening the gap between political elites and the general public.

This disconnect, compounded by widespread perceptions of corruption, nepotism, and cronyism among the political class, has led many Romanians to view today's elites as little different from those of the former Communist Party - even decades after the Cold War ended. As a result, support has grown for anti-establishment populist movements that promise, though rarely deliver, the kind of transformative change that many hoped for in December 1989 when Ceaușescu's regime was overthrown: a merit-based society and a political foundation for individual prosperity.

## 2.2. Populism in Romania: A Short Historical Overview

The first populist movement in post-communist Romania, though influenced by nationalism, also supported Romania's pro-European and pro-Atlanticist orientation, with the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare) backing the country's commitment to EU and NATO integration. A more successful and enduring wave of populism emerged later with the rise of former President Traian Băsescu, who won the 2004 election by campaigning on an anti-corruption platform<sup>10</sup>. He consistently presented himself as an outsider, a strong leader fighting against a corrupt "political oligarchy."

In 2012, as the effects of the global economic crisis began to be felt domestically, the People's Party - Dan Diaconescu (PPDD), led by a television personality with no coherent ideology beyond anti-elitism, won seats in Parliament. By 2016, populism in Romania began to take on a reformist, pro-European character with the emergence of the Save Romania Union (USR). The party was founded by members of the technocratic government led by Dacian Cioloș, following the success of Nicușor Dan - the Save Bucharest Union candidate - in the 2016 Bucharest mayoral elections. USR has demonstrated a degree of resilience, succeeding in three consecutive electoral cycles and maintaining a strong presence in both the national and European Parliaments<sup>11</sup>.

10.

Dragoman, Dragoș, and Camil Ungureanu. 2017. "The Faces of Populism in Post-Communist Romania." \*CIDOB\*, April. <https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/faces-populism-post-communist-romania>

11.

Stan, Lavinia. 2020. "Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Romania: The Politics of Memory." *East European Politics and Societies*, 34(4): 1001–1025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1781540>



12.

NPR. 2024. "Romania's Far-Right Populist Candidate Gains Momentum Ahead of Presidential Election." *NPR*, November 25.

<https://www.npr.org/2024/11/25/g-s1-35685/romania-far-right-populist-presidential-election>

13.

Stan, Lavinia. 2025. "Populism and Transitional Justice in Romania: The Case of Calin Georgescu." *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 39(3): 763–787.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X251322721>

14.

GlobalFocus. 2024. "Youth Radicalisation in Romania: How Far-Right Actors Target Romanian Youth Ahead of the 2024 Elections." \*GlobalFocus Center\*, February 13.

<https://www.global-focus.eu/2024/02/youth-radicalisation-in-romania-how-far-right-actors-target-romanian-youth-ahead-of-the-2024-elections/>

15.

Soare, Sorina Christina. 2024. "Romania's Radical Right Populism Reflects Deep-Rooted Socio-Economic Frustrations." *European Center for Populism Studies*, November 28.

<https://www.populismstudies.org/professor-soare-romania-radical-right-populism-reflects-deep-rooted-socio-economic-frustrations/>

16.

Timu, Andra. 2025. "Romanian Ex-PM Risks Upending Bid to Block Far-Right Candidate." *Bloomberg*, March 4.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-03-04/romanian-ex-pm-risks-upending-bid-to-block-far-right-candidate>

The latest wave of populism, however, has taken a more radical and nationalist turn. It is now embodied by far-right extremist parties such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), S.O.S. Romania (SOS), and the Party of Young People (POT). Their rise was catalyzed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with AUR and SOS collectively securing 20% of the vote in the European Parliament elections. Together with POT, they achieved 33% in the national parliamentary elections. In the most recent presidential contest, the far-right populist agenda garnered 36% of the vote, considering the votes of all nationalist contenders<sup>12</sup>.

### 2.3. Extremism on the Rise: But What Kind?

Although Georgescu, the leading far-right candidate in the previous election, is now barred from running and hasn't endorsed a successor, polls showing George Simion of AUR in the lead suggest that nationalist-populist rhetoric remains strong. Several other candidates have adopted similar platforms, including former Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who is running on a Trump-style, left-leaning nationalist message aimed at a different segment of the electorate. Rather than fading, this political current appears deeply embedded and set to shape Romania's political future.

The far-right draws its strength from a mix of younger voters, the rural and small-town populace, and the diaspora working class<sup>13</sup>. Counterintuitively, according to polls, Simion – like Georgescu, is very popular among many 18–35 year-olds, especially males, who are disillusioned with mainstream politics and attracted to AUR's rebellious, patriotic messaging<sup>14</sup>. This youth appeal was evident in the 2024 first round, where students and unemployed youth in economically depressed areas turned out for the far-right in notable numbers. Simion also has resonated with rural voters in Moldavia and Wallachia – regions that traditionally leaned toward the social-democrat (PSD) party but have high poverty and outward migration, breeding frustration that Simion taps into.

Additionally, Simion is exceptionally popular among the diaspora in Western Europe<sup>15</sup>. Many Romanians abroad (especially in Italy, Spain, UK) are younger working-class emigrants; AUR targeted them aggressively online, and Simion's nationalist message – including promises to help them return home – struck a chord. In 2019 and 2020, diaspora voters were anti-PSD and pro-reform; by 2024/25, a chunk of that vote has swung to AUR, reflecting anger that even reformists didn't change much.

Simion also appeals to social conservatives and religious voters – while other candidates are also Orthodox, Simion's alignment with church-linked rhetoric (family values, etc.) gives him an edge among very devout voters except perhaps those strongly loyal to PSD's old guard. Socioeconomically, Simion's base skews lower-income and lower-educated, though he also has some educated followers who are ultra-nationalist or anti-vaccine types. Kremlin-aligned narratives during the pandemic and the Ukraine war have also played a role in shaping parts of his base.

The other high-profile anti-establishment nationalist, former PM Victor Ponta appealed to a hybrid constituency: part of it overlapped with PSD's base, part with the nationalist crowd. By presenting himself as a more polished and pragmatic nationalist - complete with slogans like "Make Romania Great Again" - Ponta offered a less confrontational version of the same populist wave<sup>16</sup>.

Following Georgescu's disqualification, some pro-Russia or hard-right voters initially drifted toward Ponta before Simion reabsorbed much of that electorate.

Another noteworthy group within this ecosystem is the so-called "patriotic left" - voters who are socially conservative, harbor nostalgia for aspects of the communist era, and support a stronger economic role for the state, without embracing far-right ideology. These voters often romanticize the stability of the communist years: secure employment, low-cost housing, and national self-sufficiency. This nostalgia tends to overlook the coercive nature of that era - where jobs and housing were assigned, not chosen, and economic self-reliance meant near-autarky and mandatory exports. In today's climate of economic uncertainty, it's not surprising that such nostalgic sentiments are resurfacing. A recent INSCOOP poll found that over 56% of respondents believe Romania would be better off with more state-owned enterprises, while only 38.7% expressed confidence in private companies as drivers of growth<sup>17</sup>.

**17.**

INSCOP Research. 2025. *Sondaj realizat de INSCOP Research la comanda Funky Citizens: Mania între național și european*. Bucharest: INSCOP Research. <https://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/21.01.2025-Raport-final-INSCOP-Funky-Citizens.pdf>

Given the bleak economic outlook for the coming months and years - marked by potential inflation, stagnating wages, and continued uncertainty - as well as the visible shift in U.S. policy toward protecting its own industries and reshoring strategic supply chains, economic nationalism is likely to remain a central issue in Romania's political debate. The American embrace of protectionist measures, particularly under the Trump and Biden administrations (since 2016), has served as both a justification and an inspiration for those Romanian politicians advocating for more state control, domestic industry support, and limits on foreign ownership. Fueled by a mix of public frustration and nostalgia for the perceived stability of the past, this economic nationalism is set to endure, no matter who ultimately wins the presidency.

At the same time, Romania's drift toward economic nationalism must be seen in the context of a fragmenting global order. The post-Cold War vision of a cohesive, rules-based international system is steadily eroding, replaced by a more transactional and competitive global environment. Traditional champions of free trade, such as the United States and parts of Europe, have increasingly embraced policies aimed at domestic economic resilience, strategic autonomy, and industrial self-sufficiency. Trump's recent proposals to impose universal tariffs - on both allies and competitors - reflect a growing focus on economic security, a concept that is currently being redefined by the world's most important economic power and, more important in the context of Romanian elections, the country's key strategic partner in defense and security.

As multilateral institutions struggle to remain relevant, national governments are increasingly focusing on self-reliance, sovereignty, and economic security. For Romania, a country at the crossroads of major geopolitical fault lines, this fragmentation poses a critical dilemma: how to maintain a commitment to European integration and Atlantic solidarity while responding to the domestic political demand for greater national control. Therefore, the 2025 elections were not just about who governs Romania; they are a reflection of how Eastern European sovereignist politicians understand how to navigate a world that is becoming more fractured, less cooperative, and more driven by national rather than collective interests.

For the far-right candidate George Simion, the answer was apparently simple: he wanted to showcase an alliance with the conservative camp challenging the

18.

National Bank of Romania.  
2023. *Investițiile străine directe în România – Raport anual*  
2023. Bucharest: National Bank of Romania.  
<https://www.bnro.ro/Investitiile-straine-directe-in-Romania---Raport-anual-2023-28393.aspx>

19.

PeScurt.ro. 2025. "Victor Ponta: Fără Bani Europeni, Șanse Zero pentru România – Critici la Adresa PSD." *PeScurt.ro*, March 1. <https://pescurt.ro/stiri-politica/victor-ponta-fara-bani-europeni-sanse-zero-pentru-romania-critici-la-adresa-psd>

EU policies while saying the US is the only partner that matters, considering its military might and economic force. While economic ties between the United States and Romania have deepened over the past decade, as shown in central bank investment reports<sup>18</sup>, European funding remains not only the first source of foreign investment but also the primary driver of Romania's infrastructure development. These funds are essential not only for economic growth but also for improving military mobility. In this context, Romania's integration into the European market stands out as its most critical economic interdependence - far surpassing any other. For former Prime Minister Victor Ponta, things were more nuanced: before the May 18 runoff, he criticized Simion's stance and acknowledged the importance of the EU funding<sup>19</sup> for Romania's economy. However, the recent elections marked the first time Romania's position within the EU was openly questioned - despite no candidate, including Simion, explicitly advocating for a Roexit.

### 3. The Rise of Security Issues in Political Debate

In fact, this election marked the first time foreign policy themes were brought into the national debate with relative openness. Until now, such topics had been largely absent from Romanian electoral campaigns, where a broad consensus prevailed - major parties consistently presented themselves as pro-NATO, pro-EU, and aligned with Romania's Western trajectory. Political discourse traditionally focused on domestic issues such as corruption, economic development, and social welfare, leaving foreign affairs largely untouched.

In 2024, however, the rise of sovereignist movements has introduced new themes on the agenda. Some candidates now question aspects of Romania's integration into Western structures, subtly (or openly) suggesting that more "independence" or "neutrality" should be considered. This is far from indicating the electorate may start to reject NATO or the EU but signals the beginning of a more contested and nuanced foreign policy debate.

#### 3.1. On foreign influence and interference

This emerging debate is closely tied to concerns over alleged foreign interference, which ultimately led to the annulment of the second round of the elections. Much has been said about Russian interference in Romania's 2024 elections, particularly through disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting the democratic process and promoting extremist candidates. Yet, what has received comparatively less attention - but is equally consequential - is the American influence, especially after the annulment of the presidential elections in December. High-profile American politicians, particularly those aligned with President Donald Trump, echoed some of the Russian narratives by suggesting that the annulment of Romania's initial 2024 election round constituted a "Western coup" (or European coup)<sup>20</sup>. This external validation of Kremlin talking points complicated Romania's internal discourse and blurred the traditionally clear lines between "pro-Western" and "anti-Western" stances. Additionally, Trump's campaigning style-centered around nationalism, sovereignty, and distrust of international organizations - has been eagerly copied by several Romanian candidates and influenced others, further changing the tone and substance of the political debate.

20.

Reuters. 2025. "Elon Musk Ramps Up Romanian Election Row, Branding Chief Judge 'Tyrant'." *Reuters*, February 20. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/elon-musk-ramps-up-romanian-election-row-branding-chief-judge-tyrant-2025-02-20/>



21.

INSCOP Research. 2025. *Survey Report Commissioned by Funky Citizens: Romania Between National and European in the Era of Disinformation. Economic Patriotism, Values and Conspiracies*. Bucharest: INSCOP Research. <https://www.inscop.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/28.01.2025-Survey-Report-INSCOP-Funky-Citizens-EN.pdf>

22.

Lupîtu, Robert. 2025. "Sondaj INSCOP: Peste 75% dintre români se opun ieșirii României din UE, iar 80% sunt împotriva ieșirii din NATO." *CaleaEuropeana.ro*, March 18. <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/sondaj-inscop-pest-75-dintre-romani-se-opun-iesirii-romaniei-din-ue-iar-80-sunt-impotriva-iesirii-din-nato>

23.

GlobalFocus and Graphika. 2021. *Influence of Pro-Kremlin Public Pages in Bulgaria's and Romania's Facebook Ecosystem*. Bucharest: GlobalFocus Center. <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Influence-of-pro-Kremlin-public-pages-in-Bulgarias-and-Romania%E2%80%99s-Facebook-ecosystem-ver3-web.pdf>

24.

GlobalFocus Center. 2023. *Pro-Russian Voices Legitimised in the Context of Romanian-Ukrainian Tensions on Minorities in Bukovina: Case Study*. Bucharest: GlobalFocus Center. <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Pro-Russian-voices-legitimised-in-the-context-of-Romanian-Ukrainian-tensions-on-minorities-in-Bukovina.pdf>

At the same time, Romanians have consistently ranked among the most pro-European and pro-NATO populations in the EU, according to Eurobarometers and national social barometers. A December 2024 survey by INSCOP Research revealed that 88.1% of Romanians oppose leaving the European Union, and an equal percentage oppose exiting NATO. Trust in NATO stands at nearly 70%, while confidence in the EU is at 66.8%, both showing significant increases from previous years. They are also distrustful of Russia - according to the same December 2024 INSCOP survey, only 5.9% of respondents stated they trust Russia, down from 18% in January 2022. The same INSCOP survey indicated that 59.1% of Romanians express high trust in the United States, up from 50% in January 2022<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, over 80% of respondents believe that the U.S. and the EU have a generally positive influence on Romania. Another survey done in March 2025 reinforces these findings<sup>22</sup>.

### 3.2. Voters demand stronger (better?) representation abroad

Therefore, the deep-rooted Euro-Atlantic orientation of the Romanian public has security concerns intersect with issues of national identity and political allegiance in specific ways. Russian influence operations in Romania (including those around the 2024 elections) deliberately avoided promoting overtly pro-Russian or explicitly anti-Western narratives, recognizing that such messages would find little traction among a Romanian electorate that remains strongly pro-EU, pro-NATO, and broadly supportive of the Transatlantic alliance, as consistently shown by numerous polls and social barometers. Instead, Russia has focused on **amplifying sovereignist and anti-establishment themes** that undermined trust in Romania's institutions and its mainstream political elite - a trust that has already been eroding<sup>23</sup>. These themes included fueling socio-economic grievances, criticizing EU economic policies, spreading anti-vaccine propaganda, and highlighting the perceived failures of the political class in managing the COVID-19 pandemic and conspiracy theories - all intended to deepen public disillusionment.

Another key theme in Russian interest to exploit was the dissatisfaction with the way Romanian authorities handled the war in Ukraine. Given the political elite's limited effort to properly inform the public about the war's stakes and Romania's strategic interests, narratives emerged that either denied the war's reality-portraying it as a Western media fabrication - or accused Romanian leaders of mismanaging national interests by blindly following Western directives<sup>24</sup>.

Such messaging resonated with segments of the population already skeptical of mainstream institutions. By amplifying these sovereignist critiques, Russia's goal is not turning Romanians against the West directly, but at **weakening public confidence in the domestic political system** and state institutions, further exploiting the widespread belief that the country's leadership fails to genuinely represent the electorate's concerns: after all, trust in the national political elite, the parliament and the government has traditionally been lower than trust in the EU, for instance.

### 3.3. Foreign Policy Enters the Electoral Arena

As discussions about the future of Ukraine, the resilience of the Transatlantic alliance, and the broader architecture of European security have become increasingly urgent, Romanian voters are demonstrating a new sensitivity to foreign policy questions - one that is no longer confined to diplomatic elites but

is now visible in public discourse and electoral campaigns. During the electoral campaign leading up to December 2024, sovereignist candidates largely focused on advocating for a stronger, more nationalist voice within the European Union and criticizing the Romanian leadership's perceived subservience to Brussels. Criticism of NATO, however, was minimal to nonexistent.

Since December 2024, the top presidential candidates have been more vocal on foreign policy issues, though often clumsily approaching them. George Simion has advocated for a "sovereignist" foreign policy, emphasizing that Romania should avoid "being dragged" into conflicts like Ukraine's war. At the same time, during the launch of his presidential campaign, George Simion was joined by Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party, signaling an alignment with broader Central and Eastern European nationalist and sovereigntist movements<sup>25</sup>. Victor Ponta has called for a recalibration of Romania's Western commitments to prioritize national economic interests, often invoking nostalgic references to Romania's independent foreign policy during the Cold War's early years. While endorsing Romania's membership within NATO and the EU, he says that he would "bargain hard" within them, mimicking the Trumpist style of transactionalist nationalist<sup>26</sup>.

Meanwhile, more moderate candidates – Crin Antonescu and Nicușor Dan continued to affirm Romania's loyalty to NATO and the EU, but often struggled to articulate clear positions on major issues like military spending, relations with Ukraine, or the future shape of European defense cooperation and appeared to want to keep these topics secondary for their campaign. Nicușor Dan listed some concrete proposals like growing the defense spending from 2.5% to 3.5% until 2030 or supporting the development of the Kogălniceanu air base into a major NATO hub<sup>27</sup>. He has also spoke – before the May 18 runoff about plans to grow defense investment and grow the country's resilience. This signals his receptiveness to public concerns about the country's international stance, and he seems to understand the need for better communication on matters of strategic importance, considering the physical closeness of the Russian threat for the population.

His apparent cautiousness is, however, not surprising: Romanian politicians have little experience or practice in articulating foreign policy agendas for public debate. For decades, foreign affairs were considered the exclusive domain of technocrats and diplomats, largely insulated from electoral pressures. As a result, most political leaders today are unprepared to offer detailed, strategic visions on security and international relations. They seemed to be improvising rather than proposing, aware that voters are paying more attention but without the necessary intellectual or ideological frameworks to guide their messaging.

Of all the candidates, the now elected president Nicușor Dan arguably had the strongest "excuse" for his initially limited public communication skills on foreign affairs matters - and the greatest potential to improve quickly. A former international mathematics olympian, Dan won two gold medals and later went to study mathematics at the Paris-based École Normale Supérieure and earned a doctorate from the Université Sorbonne Paris Nord. Just before the election, he demonstrated fluency in both English and French during a diplomatic exchange with French President Emmanuel Macron, signaling to voters that he could represent Romania effectively on the international stage. Following the negative impact of George Simion's controversial interview in Paris, Dan's calm

25.

Simion, George. 2025. "Sprijinul Partenerilor Noștri Externi Mă Onorează – Apreciez The Support of Our External Partners Honors Me. Thank You!" *GeorgeSimion.ro*, August 27.

<https://georgesimion.ro/sprijinul-partenerilor-nostri-externi-ma-onoreaza-apreciez-the-support-of-our-external-partners-honors-me-thank-you/>

26.

Sandrina, Ilie. 2025. "Victor Ponta Revine Spectaculos: Strategia MAGA Îl Propulsează Direct în Lupta pentru Cotroceni." *Capital*, April 15.

<https://www.capital.ro/victor-ponta-revine-spectaculos-strategia-maga-il-propulseaza-direct-in-lupta-pentru-cotroceni.html>

27.

Reuters. 2025. "Romanian Centrist Presidency Candidate Wants to Spend More on Defence to Keep Western Backing." *Reuters*, April 24.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-centrist-presidency-candidate-wants-spend-more-defence-keep-backing-2025-04-24/>

demeanor, credible communication, and openness to media engagement likely played a key role in reassuring the public and securing his victory.

Since taking office on May 18, 2025, President Nicușor Dan has pursued a foreign policy agenda centered on reinforcing Romania's alignment with the West and consolidating its role within NATO and the European Union. Just after his electoral victory, French President Emmanuel Macron became the first foreign leader to publicly congratulate Dan, emphasizing France's continued support for Romania's democratic path and European commitment. In their phone call, Dan assured Macron that Romania would remain a reliable EU partner<sup>28</sup>.

Just nine days later, on May 27, Dan held a phone conversation with U.S. President Donald Trump, during which both leaders reaffirmed the importance of the U.S.–Romania strategic partnership and committed to deepening transatlantic ties<sup>29</sup>. These early diplomatic gestures signaled strong alignment with Western allies, later reaffirmed at the NATO summit in The Hague<sup>30</sup>, where Dan met Macron in person and endorsed Romania's increase in defense spending to 5% of GDP during the next years - highlighting his administration's intent to bolster NATO readiness and regional deterrence.

Equally important has been Dan's emphasis on regional partnerships and EU integration. His first official foreign visit took place in Chișinău, where he voiced firm support for Moldova's EU aspirations and pledged Romanian backing through infrastructure and business initiatives. Dan has consistently framed Romania's future as part of a stronger, more autonomous Europe, echoing Macron's own language on EU sovereignty and strategic independence. He has also reiterated Romania's support for Ukraine, both in bilateral meetings and multilateral forums, arguing that Ukraine's resilience is essential to the security of NATO's eastern flank. While we are still within Dan's first 100 days in office, the trajectory so far is positive and suggests a clear willingness to better communicate with the public on matters of security and foreign affairs.

## Conclusions

The 2024–2025 election season has been one of the longest and most tense in Romania's recent history, but it also marks a turning point: security and foreign policy have entered the political mainstream. Both voters and politicians are only beginning to confront what this shift truly means for the country's future. This development, shaped by trends that have taken root over the past decade, underscores Romania's enduring role as a strategic borderland-positioned on the eastern frontier of both NATO and the European Union.

In this context, it is only natural that questions of security, foreign relations, and Romania's place within the broader Euro-Atlantic community have become politically sensitive issues and key points of debate during the campaign. However, as political leaders struggle to address these topics effectively and Romanian society itself is still learning how to engage in substantive debate on foreign policy, one thing is clear: the space for external influence and interference is likely to expand in the coming years, regardless of the outcome of the current presidential elections.

28.

Lupițu, Robert. 2025. "Macron, Primul Lider European Care l-a Sunat pe Nicușor Dan după Alegerea ca Președinte: În Pofida Încercărilor de Manipulare, Românii au Ales Democrația, Statul de Drept și Uniunea Europeană." *Calea Europeană.ro*, May 19. <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/macron-primul-lider-european-care-l-a-sunat-pe-nicusor-dan-dupa-alegerea-ca-presedinte-in-pofida-incercarilor-de-manipulare-romanii-au-ales-democratia-statul-de-drept-si-uniunea-europeana/>

29.

Grădinaru, Anca, and Ovidiu Cornea. 2025. "Nicușor Dan Confirmă că a Vorbit la Telefon cu Donald Trump. Liderul SUA l-ar fi Invitat la Casa Albă." *Europa Liberă România*, May 28. <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/donald-trump-nicusor-dan-convorbire-telefonica-invitatie-in-sua/33427238.html>

30.

Administrația Prezidențială. 2025. "Participarea Președintelui României, Nicușor Dan, la Summitul NATO de la Haga, Regatul Țărilor de Jos, 24–25 Iunie 2025." *Presidency.ro*, June 25. <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/participarea-presedintelui-romaniei-nicusor-dan-la-summitul-nato-de-la-haga-regatul-tarilor-de-jos-24-25-iunie-2025>

The growing anti-establishment sentiment in Romania - now coupled with nationalist and sovereignist populism, inspired in part by the American Trumpist conservative platform - highlights a new challenge for understanding how European politics may evolve. Romania, as a borderland state, serves as a warning: political trends do not remain confined within national boundaries. Electoral campaigns increasingly inspire one another across borders, and political influencers - both domestic and foreign - carefully study which messages succeed, adapting them for their own agendas and advantage. Sovereignist and nationalist rhetoric, once marginal in Romania, has now entered the mainstream, blending domestic grievances with broader narratives about sovereignty, independence from Western institutions, and skepticism toward the established political order.

While much has been written and discussed about Russian interference - and while fears about Russia's intentions to test NATO's resolve in Eastern Europe are justified - it is important to remember that destabilization need not come solely through direct confrontation. Russia, and other strategic competitors to Europe, often pursue a more subtle, yet equally destructive goal: fostering internal instability within European states. Fragmented societies, rising populism, extremism and weakened political consensus all serve to undermine European unity and resilience.

For borderland states like Romania, this risk is especially dramatic. But ultimately, the threat affects the entire continent, because the strength of Europe as a whole depends on the stability and resilience of each individual member state. An unstable Romania weakens the collective strength of Europe, just as instability elsewhere would. Understanding this dynamic and responding with both political maturity and strategic foresight, will be crucial - not just for Romania's future, but for the future of Europe itself.

## **Notes on Romanian public attitudes towards the war in Ukraine**

### **Eurobarometers**

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine-20231027.pdf>

Eurobarometer 91.1 (Spring 2019): This survey includes questions on foreign policy and international relations, which may provide context for understanding attitudes towards Eastern Europe and Russia.  
<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2253>

Eurobarometer 96.1 (Spring 2022): Conducted shortly after the onset of the war in Ukraine, this survey includes questions on citizens' concerns and perceptions of EU actions in response to the conflict.  
<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2792>

## GLOBSEC Trends 2024

- Public Perception: In 2024, 55% of Romanians identified Russia as the primary aggressor in the war, a 10 percentage point decrease from the previous year. This shift suggests a growing influence of narratives that attribute blame to Ukraine or the West.
- Support for Ukraine's EU and NATO Membership: Despite the blame shift, support for Ukraine's integration into Western institutions remains strong, with a majority of Romanians favoring Ukraine's membership in the EU, NATO, or both.

<https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/public-attitudes-romania-staying-west-some-doubts> - <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Public%20Attitudes%20in%20Romania.pdf>

**Proofed by:** Florent Parmentier

**Layout:** Marilyn Augé

**Director of note publication:** Anne Muxel

If citing this paper: COLIBASANU (Antonia) « Beyond The Ballot: Understanding the Lasting Impacts of the 2025 Elections », *Sciences Po CEVIPOF*, September 2025, 13 p.

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