



## An Analysis of the 2024 Romanian Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

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### Abstract

The presidential and parliamentary elections held in Romania in late 2024 caused a major political crisis, with uncertainty coming to the fore due to the unexpectedly large success of the far-right candidate Călin Georgescu in the first round of the presidential elections and the lower-than-expected performance of the two mainstream political formations in the country, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL). As if this was not enough, the cancellation and postponement of the elections by the Romanian Constitutional Court due to allegations of Russian interference in the elections increased uncertainty and democratic concerns in the country. Nevertheless, the parliamentary elections held at the end of the year were held without incident and a new government was formed democratically. In this study, the Romanian political system and the elections that were held in 2024 will be analyzed. To do that, the author will first provide some background and statistical information about Romania for readers who are not familiar with the topic.

**Keywords:** *Romania, Romanian political system, Marcel Ciolacu, Semi-Presidency.*

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## **2024 Romanya Cumhurbaşkanlığı ve Parlamento Seçimlerine Dair Bir Analiz**

### **Öz**

Romanya’da 2024 yılı sonlarında düzenlenen Cumhurbaşkanlığı ve parlamento seçimleri önemli bir siyasi krize neden olmuş; Cumhurbaşkanlığı ilk tur sonucunda aşırı sağcı aday Călin Georgescu’nun beklenmedik büyük başarısı ve ülkedeki iki ana akım siyasal oluşum olan Sosyal Demokrat Parti (PSD) ve Ulusal Liberal Parti’nin (PNL) beklentilerin altında kalması nedeniyle belirsizlik ön plana çıkmıştır. Bu yetmezmiş gibi, Romanya Anayasa Mahkemesi tarafından Rusya’nın seçime müdahil olduğu yönündeki iddialar nedeniyle seçimlerin iptal edilerek ertelenmesi ülkedeki belirsizlik ve demokratik endişeleri arttırmıştır. Buna karşın, yine yıl sonunda düzenlenen parlamento seçimleri olaysız atlatılmış ve yeni hükümet demokratik şekilde kurulabilmiştir. Bu çalışmada, Rumen siyasal sistemi ve 2024 yılı içerisinde düzenlenen seçimler analiz edilecektir. Bunu yapmak için, yazar, öncelikle konuya aşina olmayan okuyucular için Romanya hakkında bazı arka plan bilgileri ve istatistiksel veriler sunacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Romanya, Rumen siyasal sistemi, Marcel Ciolacu, Yarı-Başkanlık.*

## **Introduction**

Romania, one of the neighboring states to Türkiye (Turkey) via the Black Sea, started to develop rapidly after the overthrow of the communist regime during the highly problematic 1947-89 period with the revolution in 1989, and as a result, it became an important part of the Western political and economic order today by becoming a member of NATO in 2004 and the European Union (EU) in 2007.

However, the semi-presidential system, which has been institutionalized in Romania over time (Verheijen, 2003), coupled with the socio-economic problems the country has been experiencing, has led to difficult processes where public reactions have surfaced from time to time. In this context, the Romanian presidential and parliamentary elections of 2024 in particular were an interesting case in point, with the first round of the presidential elections held at the end of the year with unexpectedly surprising results being annulled by the Romanian Constitutional Court in the following days on the basis of allegations of Russian interference in the election. The presidential election in Romania will be repeated in 2025 and it remains unclear what kind of executive will emerge after the parliamentary elections.

After providing basic information about Romania and the Romanian political system, this article will analyze the 2024 Romanian presidential election, which was canceled after the first round, and the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections, which were successfully completed, and evaluate the political picture in the country.

## **Romania in Numbers**

A medium-sized state of 238,391 square kilometers in Southeastern Europe, Romania is an important and influential state with a population of over 18 million (19 million according to some recent data) (The World Fact Book) (65<sup>th</sup> in the world) and an economy of 380 million dollars (41<sup>st</sup> in the world) (IMF/a). Having succeeded in

raising its average annual per capita income to over 20,000 dollars after becoming a member of the European Union (IMF/b), Romania is now also a developed country that has exceeded the middle-income trap and average income level.

**Figure I.** Romania map



Romania, whose capital is Bucharest with a population of 1.7 million, borders Serbia and Bulgaria to the south, Hungary to the west, Ukraine to the north and Moldova to the east. In this sense, Romania, as can be seen on the map, is currently positioned in a critical geography in the middle of the geopolitical struggle between the European Union (EU) and the Russian Federation (Russia), between geopolitically valuable countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Hungary, and Serbia.

Romania's population is made up of 89.3 percent Romanians, 6 percent Hungarians, and 3.4 percent Romanians or Gypsies (The World Fact Book). Religiously, the country is 85 percent Orthodox Christians and 4.5 percent Catholic Christians (The World Fact Book). In terms of linguistic segments, Romanian is the mother tongue of the vast majority, 91.6 percent, and other languages such

as Hungarian (6.3 percent), and Romani (1.2 percent) are also spoken in Romania (The World Fact Book). In this context, Romania displays the appearance of an established nation-state rising on three core identities or values: Romanianness, Orthodoxy, and Romanian language.

Romania, which has a relatively long diplomatic representation dating back to 1878, is an active state in diplomacy and is a member of many international organizations. To list the most important ones; Romania has been a member of the United Nations (UN) since 1955, NATO since 2004, and the EU since 2007. Besides, Romania is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Bank for Investment and Reconstruction (EBRD), and the International Organization of the Francophonie (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışışleri Bakanlığı). It also became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 and is a candidate member of the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) since 2022. In addition, Romania, whose official currency has been the ley (RON) since the 1860s, is expected to switch to the euro in the near future. Romania is also included in the Schengen area as of 2024. In this sense, Romania, despite its communist past and the widespread Orthodox Christian religious affiliation of its people (which is not the case in many Western states), appears to be a good ally for the United States (U.S.) and the EU and a state that builds its future within the Western world (Örmeci, 2024/a).

The most important components of Romania's \$380 million advanced economy in terms of exports are parts and components for road vehicles, automobiles, insulated wires, cables and other electrical conductors, fiber optic cables consisting of individually coated fibers, electrical control, distribution tables, panels, consoles, cabinets, other bearings and digital control devices, and corn (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışışleri Bakanlığı). Romania's main import

products are parts and components for road vehicles, medicines (dosed) for use in treatment or prevention, crude oil (petroleum oils and oils from bituminous minerals), automobiles, and petroleum oils and oils from bituminous minerals (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı). Romania's main trading partners on the other hand are Germany, Italy, France, Hungary, Türkiye, Poland, and Russia (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı).

### **Romania's Recent History and Political System**

To briefly summarize Romania's recent history; Romania, which separated from the Ottoman Empire in 1877 and became an independent state, was first ruled by monarchy as a Kingdom between 1881 and 1947, and then the communist Republican regime was established in the country with the influence of the Soviet Union (USSR) after the Second World War (İnsamer). Nicolae Ceausescu, who ruled the country between 1965 and 1989 during the communist period, stands out as an important political figure in the country's history (Britannica). However, after the overthrow of Ceausescu, he and his wife were tried and executed, which caused deep wounds in the politics of this country. Romania, which became a democracy in the new period after Ceausescu, is governed by the 1991 constitution (with important amendments during the EU harmonization process), which was modeled on the French 5<sup>th</sup> Republic and envisages a semi-presidential system (Örmeci, 2014). Romania joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007.

Romania's current political system is more of a semi-presidential system. In this system, the Prime Minister, who is the head of government, is the main executive official, while the President, whose powers are more symbolic and who is directly elected by popular vote, has important powers such as contribution to foreign policy and appointing the Prime Minister. The President is elected every 5 years and can serve for two terms. The Prime Minister is elected by a bicameral parliament. Romania's legislature is a

bicameral parliament consisting of the 329-seat Chamber of Deputies and the 136-seat Senate (Însamer). Its members are elected every 4 years via democratic elections by proportional representation (PR) method.

The country's first President after the communist regime was Ion Iliescu (1990-96), followed by Emil Constantinescu (1996-2000), then Ion Iliescu again (2000-04), Traian Băsescu (2004-14), and finally German-born Klaus Iohannis (2014-24). The previous Presidential election in the country was held in 2019 and Iohannis, the candidate of the center-right leaning National Liberal Party (PNL), was elected President once again.

The PNL is one of the two strongest parties in the country, along with the center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD). Indeed, in the last parliamentary elections held in 2020, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) led by Marcel Ciolacu came first with close to 30 % of the vote, the National Liberal Party (PNL) led by Ludovic Orban came second with 25 %, and the Union for the Liberation of Romania (USR-PLUS) led by Dan Barna and Dacian Cioloş came third with 16 % (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı). Following the previous parliamentary election, PNL and USR-PLUS formed a coalition government with the Democratic Union of Romanian Hungarians (UDMR) -a political party which aims to represent the significant Hungarian minority in Romania- led by Hunor Kelemen, and Florin Cîțu became Prime Minister. In 2021, the coalition government fell in a vote of no confidence and PNL formed a new coalition government with UDMR and this time with PSD, with Nicolae Ciucă as Prime Minister. From mid-2023 until the 2024 general elections, the PSD-PNL coalition stayed in power, with PSD's Marcel Ciolacu ruling as the country's Prime Minister (Örmeci, 2024/a).

## 2024 Parliamentary Elections

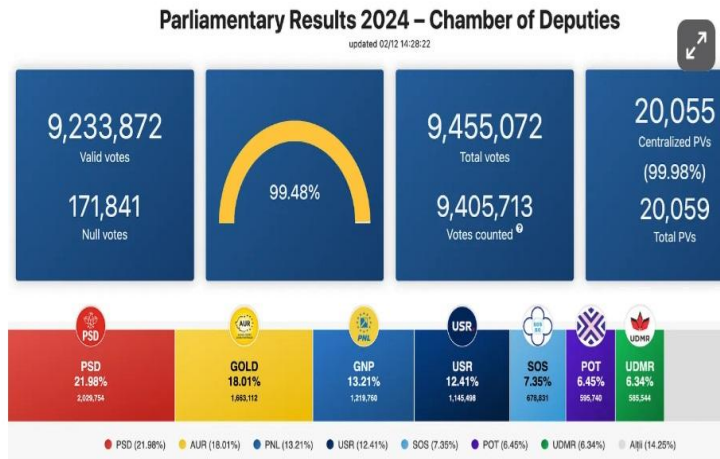
Romania, an important neighbor of Türkiye in the Balkans via the Black Sea, spent 2024 as an “election year”. In Romania, which is governed by a semi-presidential system, the Presidential election and the government formed according to the arithmetic of the parliamentary election results are also of great importance. In that sense, parliamentary elections that were held on December 1, 2024, were critical for the political future of the country.

As a result of the elections held on Sunday, December 1, 2024, where the turnout rate exceeded 48 percent, according to the election results, the ruling PSD, which failed to show the necessary performance in the Presidential election, will continue to be the strongest party in the country with around 22 percent of the votes (*G4media*, 2024). The pro-EU social democratic party will thus maintain its power in the country and preserve the pro-Western establishment in the country, even if it loses the Presidency to far-right or center/liberal forces.

However, after the first round of the presidential elections, the results of the parliamentary elections show that the rise of the far-right in Romania is not a coincidence, but a serious sociological phenomenon. In fact, the AUR party led by George Simion is now the second largest (strongest) political party in the country with around 18 percent of the vote. The long-established center-right PNL party will also maintain its power in the country partially with 13.2 percent of the vote and will continue as the third largest party (*G4media*, 2024). Led by Elena Lasconi, the liberal and pro-European political party USR on the other hand, is in fourth place with 12.4 percent of the vote (*G4media*, 2024).



**Figure II.** 2024 Romanian parliamentary election's results  
(Andelman, 2024)



In this sense, with these results, the formation of a centrist and pro-Brussels coalition government excluding the far-right AUR party with the participation of two or more centrist political parties became a plausible possibility in the new political period in Romania. However, it is difficult to predict what might happen in the near future, since the country continues to stay as one of the most vulnerable countries to Russian influence in the EU, which is going through a very unstable period due to the recent Russia-Ukraine War and the risks to European security that have reached the dimension of nuclear war substantiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin's warnings.

Finally, following the parliamentary elections and the cancellation of the first round of controversial presidential election, the PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu formed the new coalition government with the National Liberal Party (PNL) and Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). According to the coalition agreement, the PSD will control 8 ministries, and 6 ministries will

be overseen by the PNL while the remaining two cabinet posts will be taken up by the UDMR (*Euronews*, 2024). In that way, Ciolacu, who failed at the presidential election's first round, kept his post as Prime Minister. "It will not be an easy mandate for the future government. We are aware that we are in the midst of a deep political crisis. It is also a crisis of trust, and this coalition aims to regain the trust of citizens, the trust of the people.", Ciolacu said following the formation of the new coalition government (*Euronews*, 2024). In addition, following the elections, Ilie Bolojan became the President of the Senate of Romania and Ciprian-Constantin Șerban became President of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania.

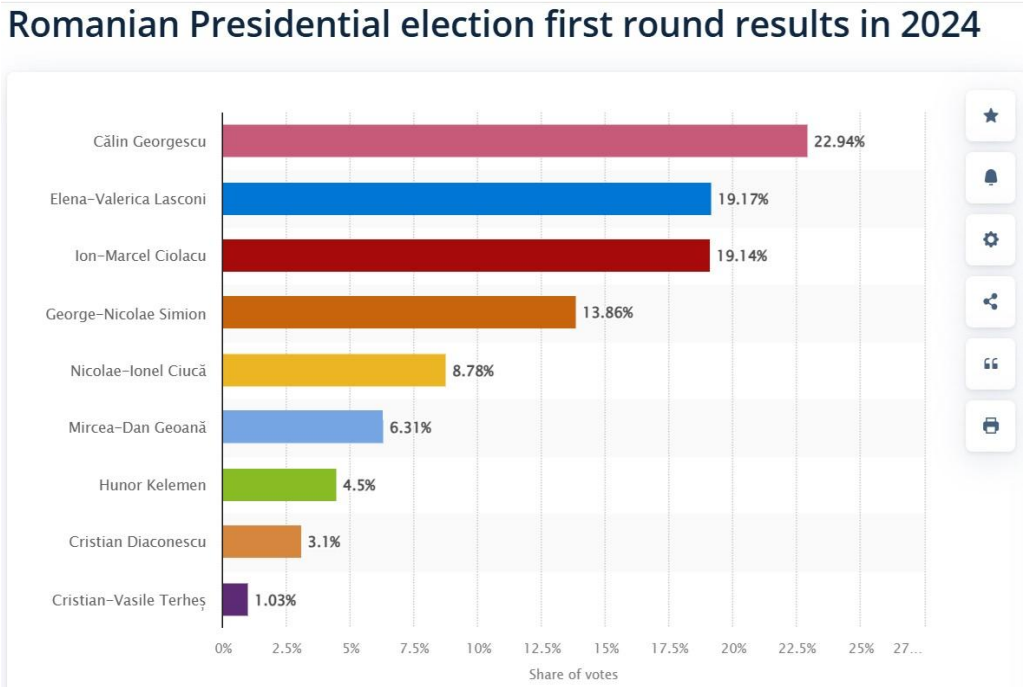
## **2024 Presidential Elections**

On November 24, 2024, in the first round of Romania's presidential elections, the polls and the general opinion of political commentators representing the country's established establishment is that George Simion, the leader and presidential candidate of the far-right ultranationalist Alliance of Romanian Unity (AUR), may reach the second round with a surprisingly high number of votes in the first round due to his recent rise in popularity. However, it was expected that Marcel Ciolacu, the presidential candidate of the center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the current Prime Minister, would somehow manage to get himself into the second round and would be comfortably elected President in the second round with the support of pro-European Union (EU) media and circles. It was already known that Romania's general pattern after the Cold War and communist rule was that the country had always been ruled by the center-left PSD and the center-right National Liberal Party-PNL or centrist coalitions led by them (Örmeci, 2024/b).

However, the first-round results from Romania, beyond all the polls and interpretations, have thrown up new and very different surprises and uncertainties. Indeed, while the far-right candidate George Simion did indeed increase its share of the vote to around 14 percent

(13.86 percent), the bigger surprise came from Călin Georgescu, who ran as an independent candidate in this election, despite having previously been a member of the AUR party (*Agerpres*, 2024/a). Georgescu, who has been criticized as a far-right and pro-Russian politician, and particularly harsh in his criticism of the Western alliance and NATO (Henley, 2024), finished first with around 23 percent of the vote (22.94 percent), by making one of the biggest surprises in Romanian political history (*Agerpres*, 2024/a). The most interesting event was the elimination of PSD presidential candidate and Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu, who was expected to somehow finish in the top two in the first round and then be re-elected in the second round against the far-right, with 19.15 percent of the vote, finishing third in the first round (*Agerpres*, 2024/a). Although Ciolacu resigned from the PSD Presidency after the defeat (Romania-Insider, 2024), thinking that his party would be able to recover in this way before the critical parliamentary elections on December 1, 2024, it can be argued that the problem is actually the dissatisfaction of the Romanian people with the country's current political system and economic situation, rather than a reaction against his personality (Örmeci, 2024/b).

**Figure III.** 2024 Romanian presidential election first-round results  
(Statista, 2024)



The party/leader who pulled off a big surprise and outpaced the social democrats, one of the two major entrenched forces in the country, along with the center-right leaning National Liberal Party (PNL), was the liberal Union to Save Romania (USR) party and its leader and presidential candidate Elena Lasconi. Although Ciolacu was the second-ranked candidate after Georgescu on election night and in the early morning hours of the next day (*AlJazeera*, 2024), as a result of the votes of the Romanian diaspora, especially from Moldova, Lasconi managed to increase her share of the vote to 19.18 percent, beating Ciolacu by some 3,000 votes and putting her into the second round. Nicolae Ciuca, the center-right PNL candidate, failed with 8.79 percent of the vote.

After the results of the elections in Romania were announced, there was an atmosphere of surprise and uncertainty in the country. While

Călin Georgescu, who suddenly became the favorite candidate after the first round results, declared in his statements to his country's media outlets that he is not a far-right/fascist leader and that he is just a patriot who loves his country (*Agerpres*, 2024/b), pro-EU liberal circles in the country started to organize regular protests against Georgescu, whom they consider as a fascist and dictatorial politician (*Agerpres*, 2024/e).

As if this atmosphere of tension in the country was not enough, in the following days, a decision taken by the Constitutional Court, the highest judicial authority in the country, put the elections in an even more uncertain position. The Constitutional Court of Romania, which evaluated the very small difference in votes between the second and third candidate and the allegations of external interference in the election, decided to recount the votes and ruled that this could only be done after the parliamentary elections on December 1 (*Agerpres*, 2024/c).

Romania's High Council for National Security, which convened urgently, also issued a statement on various external interventions and cyber-attacks on the electoral process in the country. In the statement, Russia was blamed as the interfering foreign state, while the Chinese internet platform TikTok was criticized for using algorithms to spread propaganda in favor of certain candidates (namely Georgescu) (*Agerpres*, 2024/d).

Finally, on 6 December, Romanian Constitutional Court decided that an orchestrated online campaign, primarily on TikTok, manipulated voter behavior and inflated polling in the 24 November poll. The Court gave its verdict for the cancellation of the election (Wilson, 2024). In that sense, allegations of Russian and Chinese interference into election resulted in the cancellation and postponement of presidential election. The elections will be hold on May 4, 2025 (first round) and if necessary, on May 18, 2025 (Romania-Insider, 2025). Meanwhile, George Simion, the leader of the far-right populist party

AUR, said that he does not believe the presidential elections will be held on May 4 and 18, as decided by the governing coalition, “until he sees the government decision” (*Agerpres*, 2025).

Although the electoral procedures are not declared by the government, it is expected that Călin Georgescu and George Simeon will become presidential candidates again. While the candidacy of liberal USR leader Elena Lasconi seems almost certain, PNL and PSD will probably change their candidates after their failure in the annulled elections.

The controversial presidential election in Romania in 2024 proved that the ongoing geopolitical struggle between the collective West and Russia and China axis negatively affects the country’s stability, making it vulnerable to social divisions. In that sense, a more harmonious global system which facilitates international trade and supports the implementation of existing international law might be more advantageous for medium-size countries like Romania since the country possesses strong ties with former communist countries as well.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, despite Romania’s growing strategic importance for the United States (U.S.) in the recent NATO-Russia tensions, the strained relations with Russia have led to a distinctly chaotic environment in the country’s politics in recent months. In this context, the overwhelming success of the pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu in the first round of the 2024 presidential election is, in my opinion, a sign of popular dissatisfaction with the current system and the EU’s recent loss of legitimacy within the country. This shows that the European dream -at least in Romania- has recently begun to fade. Electoral results in Moldova also proves that the support for the EU is diminishing recently. To reverse this process, Brussels must recover from its economic and diplomatic weakness and strengthen pro-European ideals such as democracy,

human rights, free-market economy, development, borderless Europe, and better social rights.

With the Constitutional Court's decision, the Romanian presidential election was postponed to May 2025, while the candidates could be different from the earlier electoral process. While the verdict delayed the crisis for a while, the rapid rise of far-right in the country with the AUR party leader George Simion and independent NATO-skeptic candidate Călin Georgescu continues. In that sense, a normalization is expected in the country with the support of EU in the coming months since the country's geopolitical positioning is constantly on the rise with the ongoing expansion of the Mihail Kogalniceanu military base.

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