

Fault lines in the East: Romania's political transformation and Europe's future

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Theme

Romania's 2025 presidential elections reflect the country's broader shift towards populist nationalism and institutional distrust, with important implications for regional stability and European unity.

Summary

George Simion's solid performance in the first round of [Romania's presidential election](#) reflects the growing anti-establishment sentiment following the annulled 2024 elections. The country has been experiencing deep political divisions for years, marked by populist nationalism, institutional distrust and foreign interference. Despite Romania's pro-EU and NATO orientation, disillusionment with mainstream parties has fuelled the far-right's ascent. Foreign policy has emerged as a contested domain amid US and Russian influence. The outcome will influence not only Romania's governance and regional stability but also the EU's eastern cohesion, particularly in Moldova and Poland, as nationalist-populist rhetoric gains traction across Europe during a period of geopolitical uncertainty and democratic fragility.

Analysis

Romania held the first round of its presidential election on Sunday, 4 May 2025, and the results mark a significant moment in the country's political life. George Simion, leader of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), won with 40.69% of the vote. While George Simion's strong performance in the first round of Romania's presidential election may come as a shock to many observers, it was, in fact, a foreseeable outcome given the political turbulence following the annulled November 2024 elections and the deep-rooted structural issues facing the country.

The controversy and debates surrounding the Constitutional Court's decision to annul the previous vote over foreign interference and electoral irregularities significantly undermined public confidence in democratic institutions. This, combined with widespread dissatisfaction over economic stagnation and a perceived disconnection between the political elite and ordinary citizens, created fertile ground for growth in anti-establishment rhetoric. Simion's nationalist and populist message capitalised on this environment, resonating with voters who feel left behind by Romania's post-EU accession trajectory and increasingly sceptical of traditional parties and Western alignments.

1. The annulled 2024 election and its ripple effects

The presidential election of November 2024 became a flashpoint for these tensions when, in an unprecedented move, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the election results amid serious allegations of foreign interference. The decision did more than create a political crisis, it highlighted the vulnerability of even firmly pro-European states to external manipulation and internal fragmentation.

In what should have been the first round of voting, on 24 November, a relatively obscure ultra-nationalist candidate, Călin Georgescu, surged to the lead with approximately 23% of the vote. His sudden rise was accompanied by intelligence reports indicating a coordinated online disinformation campaign. The implications were serious enough that, just two days before the scheduled run-off, [the Constitutional Court intervened and nullified](#) the election results entirely.

Georgescu, a far-right figure with pro-Russian leanings, denied any wrongdoing, as did the Kremlin. Nevertheless, he was barred from standing in the re-run of the election. The annulment ignited mass protests, particularly among Georgescu's supporters, who viewed the court's decision as a blow to democratic legitimacy. The controversy also resonated internationally, with [figures such as Elon Musk and US Senator J.D. Vance joining Russian officials](#) in condemning the court's action as a 'coup' against the popular will.

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 run-off for the first time since the fall of communism, and now it had to forgo fielding its own contender.

As the political centre closed ranks, the far-right continued to [gain significant momentum](#). In the parliamentary elections held on 1 December 2024, three ultranationalist and hard-right parties –the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), led by George Simion and backed by Georgescu; SOS Romania; and the Party of Young People– collectively secured around 35% of the seats.

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.

With tensions high and the political map redrawn, the stage was set for a high-stakes rematch of the presidential race. In response to mounting concerns over foreign interference, the Romanian government introduced [stricter election regulations](#) aimed at curbing malign influence. Yet despite these interventions, the annulment of the 2024 election has left Romanian society deeply polarised. [Large street protests and widespread scepticism](#) towards both judicial and political institutions have revealed a nation grappling with distrust on all sides.

The Romanian authorities recently decided to close all overseas polling stations at 9:00pm Bucharest time, aligning them with domestic voting hours. Framed as a measure to protect electoral integrity and prevent last-minute disinformation, the change also ensures exit polls are released only after all votes are cast. The move responds to the annulled 2024 election, where early projections influenced voters abroad, contributing to a surprise run-off result. [Critics argued](#) the new rule limits the diaspora's influence – typically more reformist and anti-establishment– thus favouring mainstream candidates and preserving the political status quo.

2. The deeper forces behind the vote

Eleven candidates qualified for the first round of Romania's presidential election on 4 May 2025, with four emerging as front-runners by April: Crin Antonescu, Nicușor Dan, Victor Ponta and George Simion (in alphabetical order). George Simion and Nicușor Dan advanced to the run-off, set for 18 May. Leading up to the vote, polling was highly volatile, and on election day, exit pollsters reported a significant number of voters declined to share their choices. This contributed to a gap between pre-election estimates –which placed, for instance, George Simion at around 30%– while the final result had him at over 40%. Still, consistent patterns from earlier polls, surveys and social barometers remain relevant and continue to shape the broader electoral dynamics.

2.1. *The roots of anti-establishment nationalism*

One of the most visible trends shaping Romanian politics today is the growing anti-establishment sentiment among voters. This is neither new nor unexpected in a country still dealing with the legacy of its authoritarian past. Until 1990, Romania endured an exceptionally repressive communist regime under Nicolae Ceaușescu –one that was not only isolated from the West, but eventually from the rest of the Eastern Bloc as well–. Ceaușescu's system thrived on fear and distrust, with the Securitate secret police fostering suspicion even among neighbours. Corruption and clientelism were deeply rooted, and with a crumbling economy, survival often depended on informal networks and personal connections. These experiences have left lasting institutional and social scars. Romanians are still navigating the difficult path of building democratic institutions and a culture of transparency, challenges made harder by the lingering distrust and the absence of a stable, shared democratic tradition.

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. Romanian political parties, generously funded by the state for both operations and campaigns, have had little motivation to build genuine connections with voters. Instead, significant resources have been channelled into shaping media narratives –buying airtime and

cultivating ties with sympathetic journalists and commentators— further widening the gap between political elites and the public. At the same time, civil society remains in its early stages of development, with few independent political foundations or think tanks.

Widespread perceptions of corruption and cronyism have left many Romanians seeing today's political elites as barely different from the old communist leadership. This disillusionment has fuelled support for anti-establishment populist movements that promise –though seldom deliver– the merit-based, prosperous society many hoped for after the 1989 revolution.

Post-communist Romania's first populist wave, led by the nationalist Greater Romania Party, still supported EU and NATO integration. A more lasting form emerged with Traian Băsescu, who won the 2004 presidency by positioning himself as an anti-corruption outsider [fighting a corrupt political elite](#). In 2012, amid economic hardship, the populist PPDD party gained seats despite lacking a clear ideology beyond anti-elitism. By 2016, populism took a reformist, pro-European turn with the rise of USR, which has since [maintained steady electoral success](#). More recently, a radical nationalist wave has gained ground through parties like AUR, SOS and POT –fuelled by COVID-era discontent– collectively securing over 30% in national (December 2024) and European (June 2024) elections and over 40% in the latest presidential race.

2.2. Extremism rising, but along which lines?

Although Călin Georgescu, the leading far-right candidate in the previous election, was barred from running, he signalled support for George Simion by appearing alongside him at the polls on election day –an implicit endorsement of AUR's nationalist-populist agenda–. Other candidates also embraced similar messages, including the former Prime Minister Victor Ponta, who campaigned on a left-leaning nationalist platform targeting a different voter base. Rather than fading away, this wave of political extremism is becoming entrenched, shaped by both local dynamics and the influence of Trump-style rhetoric, strategy and populist appeal.

The far-right in Romania [draws support](#) from a diverse but frustrated coalition with the way politics have ran the country during the last few decades: young voters, rural and small-town populations and segments of the working-class diaspora. Despite expectations, George Simion –like Georgescu before him– enjoys a strong backing among 18-35 year-old men, especially those disillusioned with mainstream politics and drawn to AUR's rebellious, patriotic tone. Simion also resonates in rural regions like Western Moldavia and Wallachia, traditional PSD strongholds now marked by poverty and migration, where his populist message finds fertile ground.

George Simion has built a strong support among Romania's Western European [diaspora](#), especially younger, working-class emigrants in countries like Italy, Spain and the UK. Disillusioned with centrist parties like the USR, which failed to deliver meaningful reforms, many former reformist voters have shifted towards AUR. Simion's nationalist message and promises to aid returnees resonate deeply, especially as AUR has effectively mobilised diaspora support through targeted social media campaigns. In

contrast, USSR's technocratic style and perceived disconnection from everyday struggles have led to a decline in its influence abroad.

Simion appeals strongly to social conservatives and religious voters; although other candidates are Orthodox, his embrace of church-linked rhetoric –emphasising family values and tradition– gives him an advantage among the deeply devout, aside from those still loyal to the PSD's old guard. His core support tends to be lower-income and less formally educated, though it also includes educated ultranationalists and anti-vaccine sympathisers. During the pandemic and the Ukraine war, Kremlin-aligned narratives gained traction among parts of his base, leading to speculation –alongside Georgescu– that he had Moscow's backing. Simion has also adopted Trump-style messaging, particularly around religion and anti-LGBT themes, reinforcing his image as Romania's most prominent pro-Trump figure.

The Former Prime Minister Victor Ponta, another prominent anti-establishment nationalist, appealed to a hybrid electorate, drawing support both from the PSD's traditional base and from nationalist voters. Positioning himself as a more polished and pragmatic alternative, he embraced slogans like 'Make Romania Great Again', offering a [softer version](#) of the populist nationalist wave. After Georgescu's disqualification, some pro-Russia and hard-right voters initially turned to Ponta, though it now appears likely that Simion will reclaim much of that support.

Another influential group fuelling the nationalist-populist wave is the so-called '[patriotic left](#)', socially conservative voters who romanticise aspects of the communist era while supporting a stronger state role in the economy, without aligning fully with far-right ideology. They often idealise the perceived stability of the past –guaranteed jobs, affordable housing and national self-sufficiency– while overlooking the authoritarian realities of centralised control and forced economic isolation. In today's climate of economic uncertainty, such nostalgia is resurging. A recent INSCOOP poll shows that over 56% of respondents favour more state-owned enterprises, while just 38.7% trust private companies to drive growth –sentiments that nationalist populists have been quick to harness–.

With Romania facing a bleak economic outlook –characterised by potential inflation, stagnant wages and ongoing uncertainty–, economic nationalism is poised to remain a dominant theme in the political landscape. The [visible shift in US policy](#) towards protecting domestic industries and re-shoring supply chains, seen under both the Trump and Biden Administrations since 2016, has provided Romanian politicians with both a model and a justification for pushing similar measures. Calls for increased state control, support for local industry and restrictions on foreign ownership have gained traction, driven by public frustration and nostalgia for the perceived economic stability of earlier decades. Regardless of who wins the presidency, this strain of economic nationalism is unlikely to fade. This is especially significant since foreign policy issues are expected to become a central focus in the days leading up to the 18 May run-off.

3. Foreign pressure and fog: the unclear fight over Romania's foreign policy

Until recently, foreign policy played a minimal role in Romania's election campaigns, with a broad consensus among major parties in favour of NATO, the EU and the country's pro-Western orientation. Political discourse focused almost entirely on domestic issues like corruption, economic development and social welfare. However, the rise of sovereignist movements in 2024 has shifted the narrative. Some candidates have begun to question elements of Romania's integration into Western alliances, calling for greater 'independence' or even 'neutrality'. While this does not signal a rejection of NATO or the EU, it marks the emergence of a more contested and complex foreign policy debate.

3.1. Foreign players in Romania's election

The emerging foreign policy debate in Romania is increasingly shaped by concerns over foreign interference –both from Russia and the US– that played a pivotal role in the annulment of the 2024 presidential elections. While much attention has focused on Russian disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining trust in democratic institutions and promoting extremist candidates, far less scrutiny has been given to the influence – and at times, interference– of the US. Following the annulment of the December 2024 elections, prominent US figures, especially those aligned with Donald Trump, including the US Vice President J.D. Vance amplified narratives framing the decision as a '[Western coup](#)'.

Tensions were further inflamed by the US Embassy's increasingly visible role in domestic affairs, which some interpreted as overreach. These concerns peaked when, on the eve of the election, the US government abruptly announced Romania's exclusion from the [Visa Waiver Program](#) –a long-standing goal of Romanian diplomacy–. Coming just 24 hours before the vote, the move was widely seen as a diplomatic snub and a failure of mainstream Romanian politics to maintain a stable and productive relationship with Washington. Together, these developments have fuelled the narrative –championed by nationalist-populist candidates– that Romania needs a more assertive foreign policy. The apparent endorsement of Kremlin-style narratives by the US Administration has disrupted Romania's internal political discourse, blurring the once-clear distinction between 'pro-Western' and 'anti-Western' positions.

While the nationalist populist rhetoric was planned to diminish the pro-EU feelings among the public, Romanians remain among the most strongly pro-European and pro-NATO populations in the EU. Eurobarometer data and national surveys consistently reflect this trend. A [December 2024 INSCOP](#) survey found that 88.1% of Romanians oppose leaving the EU, with the same percentage against exiting NATO. Trust in NATO stands at nearly 70%, and confidence in the EU at 66.8% –both marking significant increases compared with previous years–. Distrust towards Russia is also widespread: only 5.9% of respondents said they trust Russia, a sharp drop from 18% in January 2022. Meanwhile, trust in the US rose to 59.1%, up from 50% in early 2022, with over 80% of respondents viewing both the US and the EU as having a positive influence on Romania. A [March 2025 INSCOP poll](#) confirmed these attitudes, showing continued strong public support for Romania's Western alliances.

3.2. *The better voice beyond the borders*

Romania's deeply rooted Euro-Atlantic orientation means that security concerns are closely intertwined with national identity and political loyalty. Aware of this dynamic, Russian influence operations –particularly around the 2024 elections– have deliberately avoided promoting overtly pro-Russian or explicitly anti-Western narratives, knowing such messages would have little traction among a public that remains strongly pro-EU, pro-NATO and firmly aligned with the Transatlantic alliance, as confirmed by consistent polling.

Even George Simion, despite his nationalist rhetoric, acknowledged these realities. In a recorded message at the end of election day on 4 May, he explicitly stated that he is not anti-NATO or anti-EU –an admission likely driven by the understanding that any suggestion otherwise would cost him votes–. For most Romanians, the threat posed by Russia remains the overriding concern, and any political figure perceived as sympathetic to Moscow risks alienating the majority of the electorate.

Instead of promoting overtly pro-Russian messages, the Kremlin has focused on amplifying sovereignist and [anti-establishment narratives](#) that erode trust in Romania's already weakened institutions. These include stoking socio-economic grievances, attacking EU policies, spreading anti-vaccine misinformation and blaming the political elite for mishandling the COVID-19 crisis. Russia has also exploited dissatisfaction with how Romanian [authorities managed the response to the war in Ukraine](#), capitalising on poor public communication to push claims that the conflict is either exaggerated or that Romania is blindly following Western orders. The goal is not to turn Romanians directly against the West, but to deepen disillusionment with domestic leadership and reinforce the belief that the political elite fails to represent the people –a belief reflected in consistently low trust in national institutions compared with the EU–.

3.3. *Foreign policy as the campaign spotlight*

As debates over Ukraine, European security and the future of the Transatlantic alliance intensify, Romanian voters are showing heightened interest in foreign policy –no longer the exclusive realm of diplomats but now a visible issue in campaigns and public discourse–. In the lead-up to the annulled December 2024 elections, sovereignist candidates pushed for a stronger nationalist stance within the EU and criticised Romania's perceived obedience to Brussels, though NATO criticism remained minimal.

George Simion continues to promote a sovereignist foreign policy, warning against Romania being 'dragged' into foreign conflicts like the Ukraine war. His alignment with Central and Eastern European nationalist movements was underscored by the presence of [Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński at his campaign launch](#). Meanwhile, Nicușor Dan affirms Romania's commitment to NATO and the EU, proposing increased defence spending and expanding the Kogălniceanu air base into a [major NATO hub](#). However, he is a technocrat with limited international exposure who leans on cautious lines delivered by former establishment advisers, which makes for an often standard response without demonstrating deeper knowledge of foreign policy. Simion, by contrast, inherits Georgescu's vague and Kremlin-aligned platform, which benefits from ambiguity. This demonstrates the reasoning behind the Kremlin's support for his stance. For Russia, a

strategically unclear Romania serves its broader aim of undermining EU unity and weakening Western cohesion.

4. Beyond the borders: how Romania's vote shapes the region

The most immediate outcome of Romania's 2025 presidential election, whoever the winner may be, is the onset of political instability. With the mainstream coalition holding only a fragile parliamentary majority –and both George Simion and Nicușor Dan declaring they cannot work with the current government– early elections are increasingly likely. This would plunge Romania into another round of campaigning and institutional uncertainty, compounding its already fragile economic outlook.

This instability comes at a crucial moment, as the war in Ukraine enters a decisive phase. While neither candidate publicly endorses pro-Russian positions –knowing such a stance would cost them politically –their push for political upheaval through early elections indirectly serves Russian interests. Leadership vacuums, policy delays and weakened executive focus would all slow Romania's ability to support Ukraine, coordinate with NATO and contribute meaningfully to regional security. At home, this disruption will stall much-needed economic reforms, prolong uncertainty and further damage investor confidence.

Beyond its domestic implications, the aftermath of Romania's elections sends a powerful signal across Europe. A strong showing by nationalist-populist forces not only emboldens similar movements in other EU states but also contributes to a broader sense of volatility along the Eastern flank. At a time when Western unity is essential, Romania's internal turbulence risks weakening the resilience of the EU-NATO containment line and undermining collective efforts to counter Russian influence in the region.

The outcome of Romania's 2025 presidential election is particularly echoing in [Poland](#) and [Moldova](#) –two states where domestic politics and strategic orientation are tightly linked to the broader European order–. As Poland heads into its own presidential race, Romania's shift towards nationalist-populist politics could embolden similar forces there, especially those pushing for stronger national sovereignty and challenging EU authority.

A potential victory for George Simion –who channels anti-establishment rhetoric while claiming support for NATO and the EU– parallels the messaging of Poland's right-wing, especially factions within Law and Justice (PiS). His rise may embolden Polish politicians who frame themselves as defenders of national interest against Brussels, reinforcing EU scepticism even within traditionally pro-NATO circles.

In Moldova, however, the impact is likely to be far more dramatic. Moldova's political landscape is far more fragile, and the country's path toward EU accession is more precarious. For years, Romania has served as Moldova's key strategic ally –not through overt declarations, but through consistent support for security cooperation, energy resilience and diplomatic backing in EU forums–. Bucharest has quietly facilitated defence coordination and economic aid, especially in the face of Russian hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns. Moldova's pro-Western leadership has relied heavily on this partnership, both symbolically and practically, as a stabilising force.

A shift in tone from Bucharest –even limited to criticism of the EU– could seriously undermine Moldova's pro-European leadership, especially ahead of its upcoming elections. Pro-Western forces in Chişinău are already under pressure from economic hardship and growing public frustration with slow reforms. If Romania, long seen as Moldova's key ally and advocate for EU integration, is perceived as stepping back or becoming ambivalent, it would deliver both a psychological and strategic blow to Moldova's Western path. In contrast to Romania, pro-Russian parties in Moldova operate openly, backed by Kremlin-linked media and funding. Any nationalist or Euro-sceptic rhetoric from the next Romanian President would likely embolden these factions and intensify polarisation.

Conclusions

Romania's election is more than a national decision –it sends a regional signal that could either reinforce or undermine fragile democracies across Eastern Europe–. The final outcome will shape not only Romania's path, but also have an impact on neighbouring countries, the unity of the EU and the strength of NATO's eastern flank. At a time that calls for stability, leadership and strategic coordination, continued political uncertainty in Bucharest risks becoming a weak link in the West's defences. Yet this is happening just as the West itself is undergoing a period of internal restructuring and recalibration.