

December 2024

# country report

Country Office in Romania



## Presidential elections annulled after hybrid attack

*Katja Christina Plate*

Romania is fighting for democracy on two fronts. Firstly, against Russia's hybrid attack on the integrity of the presidential elections. And then on the familiar front against the system of clientelism and corruption, which is supported by forces that continue to prolong the power of the former communist elite. It does not help to ignore one problem in favour of the other. Romania needs a fundamentally different relationship between its institutions, politicians and citizens if it is to become a strong and resilient democracy.

Romanians have had two grueling weeks on the political rollercoaster. The ultra-nationalist Călin Georgescu unexpectedly achieved the best result in the first round of the presidential elections (24 November 2024). Both party leaders of the ruling coalition resigned after failing at the elections. As it became increasingly clear that the liberal-conservative candidate Elena Lasconi, who started the run-off election in second place, would not be able to prevail against Călin Georgescu, fear and anxiety spread among some of the population. If a President Călin Georgescu had led the country out of the EU and NATO, but instead into economic 'sovereignism', this would not only have been extremely dangerous in terms of foreign and security policy, but would also have been ruinous for the Romanian economy. However, another part of the population continued to frenetically place their hopes in Călin Georgescu. Expecting that he would finally break the clientelistic and corrupt amalgam at the centre of state power. This contrast polarised Romanian society. Numerous loud and sometimes violent arguments about the candidates could be observed in everyday life in Bucharest.

A few days after the first round of voting on 27 November 2024, the Constitutional Court called on the Supreme Electoral Authority to have the votes recounted and the Supreme Defence Council announced in a statement that there had been aggressive interference in the election process by third parties. Citizens were left stunned by this information. The Romanian

president did not address his country until days later. Following a parliamentary election on 1 December 2024, which resulted in a difficult majority situation, the Supreme Electoral Authority confirmed the first round of presidential elections on Monday (02.12.2024). On Wednesday evening (04.12.2024), at the request of journalists and civil society, the Supreme Defence Council published a package of documents supporting its statement published the previous week: Only a state actor could have prepared and implemented the massive manipulative intervention in the election campaign in favour of the candidate Călin Georgescu. The traces lead to Russia. A large number of appeals were subsequently submitted to the Constitutional Court. On the basis of the documents published on Wednesday evening, the Constitutional Court finally annulled the entire election process on Friday (6 December 2024). And it did so while the run-off election for the presidency was already underway abroad.

### No longer a fair and free election

On 6 December 2024, the Romanian Constitutional Court found that the electoral process for the election of the Romanian president was characterized by numerous irregularities and violations of electoral law throughout its entire implementation and at all stages.

The free and fair nature of the election had been compromised in favour of one candidate and to the detriment of all other candidates because the non-transparent use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence had significantly violated equality of opportunity. Due to the lack of labelling of a large amount of digital content and contributions as election advertising, Romanian electoral law had also been violated. Furthermore, the legal provisions on campaign financing had been disregarded, according to the Constitutional Court. Accordingly, because essential principles of democratic elections have been disregarded, the entire election must now be repeated. Back to square one.

The documents published by the Supreme Defence Council do indeed provide serious evidence: In the week leading up to the election, more than 85,000 cyber-attacks were recorded on election-related accounts that used advanced encryption technology. The manner of execution and the scale clearly point to a state actor. Access data to domains related to the election process had been published on Russian cybercrime platforms.

Social media, especially TikTok, was used in an aggressive, coordinated and unmarked manner in favour of the candidate Călin Georgescu in non-accordance with Romanian law. A network of 25,000 accounts was created for this purpose, which were activated in the two weeks before the election. Some accounts had already been created in 2016, but were kept dormant until activation. TikTok admitted to this network. Likewise, TikTok admitted to a network of accounts related to the Russian news portal Sputnik. The activities were coordinated from outside TikTok - via Telegram and Discord. Here, too, the nature and implementation point to a state actor.

The whole process was organised in the style of the 'Equilibrium and Verticality' influence operation. The approach mirrors the Russian 'brother next to brother' campaign in Ukraine before the Russian invasion in 2022. Micro-influencers were also used in Romania, unaware of the purpose and impact of their use. They were paid directly or covertly via intermediaries.

While Călin Georgescu stated to the Romanian electoral authorities that he had spent zero euros on his campaign, the published documents made it clear that the actual budget must have been more than one million euros. This also appears to be a violation of Romanian electoral law. In recent days, the Romanian police have also found large sums of cash and weapons during numerous searches in Călin Georgescu's circle of acquaintances, which also suggests a longer period of preparation and a broad network of criminal actors.

With its judgement, the Romanian Constitutional Court has protected the integrity of free and fair elections, even if, according to many Romanian legal experts, the chosen way to achieve this was not following the intended course. What happened in Romania could also be repeated in other EU countries. A Europe-wide discussion about new standards to safeguard fair and free elections in the digital information space must begin now. So why is not only Călin Georgescu but also his opponent Elena Lasconi protesting loudly against the Constitutional Court's decision? On 6 December 2024, Elena Lasconi even said: 'Today is the moment when the Romanian state trampled on democracy.'

## Fighting on two fronts

Romania is fighting for democracy on two fronts. Firstly, against Russia's hybrid attack. And then on the familiar front against the system of clientelism and corruption, which is supported by forces that continue to prolong the power of the former communist elite.

The Romanian Constitutional Court has made a number of decisions in the recent past that rightly raise questions about its political independence. In October 2024, for example, MEP Diana Ţoşoacă was excluded from the race for the highest state office in Romania by the Constitutional Court. Five of the nine judges justified this decision with unconstitutional statements and a political stance not suitable for a president. The argument sparked widespread and harsh criticism. Judges, legal scholars and civil society spoke of a problem with the separation of powers and abuse of power because the Constitutional Court had excluded a candidate from the race without the right to a

hearing or defence. Many suspected that the Constitutional Court's ruling was a political decision by the four judges appointed to the Constitutional Court by the social democratic PSD to help the candidate Marcel Ciolacu (PSD) win a run-off election against the national-populist George Simion (AUR). The pairing in which Marcel Ciolacu was considered to have the best chance of becoming the next Romanian President.

Based on this and a number of other controversial decisions, the Romanian population has little trust in its highest judicial authority and wonders whether the decision to annul the Elections, which was certainly correct in terms of the external influence of third parties, could also be based on other domestic political considerations. In particular, the question arises as to why Diana Șoșoacă was excluded, but not Călin Georgescu. The same reasoning as for Diana Șoșoacă would also have applied to the well-known protagonist of neo-legionary views. Did various Romanian secret services fail to recognise the danger at the same time? This would not necessarily allow citizens to sleep peacefully. Or did they recognise the danger but let it go for political reasons? All such considerations are circulating through the current debates in Romania.

Democracies need transparency in government action in order to create trust. Instead of transparency, however, there are too many cases of clientelistic leadership positions in Romania. Everyone in Romania can give examples of how membership of the right party was more decisive than professional expertise and integrity. There is too much inefficiency in government action and there are repeated examples of corruption.

The parties that have rightly been outraged by the views of the ultra-nationalist neo-legionary Călin Georgescu often have representatives with similar views in their ranks. Furthermore, the

public prosecutor's office, police and intelligence services did not take a hard line against the glorification of fascism and communism because the successor forces of the old communist dictatorship prevented it. These forces, above all the PSD, which is social democratic in name only, continue to dominate the core of state power in Romania. Broad social discourse or the establishment of a system to promote a broad civil society offering for political education has been avoided for years.

### What next for Romania

Călin Georgescu will not become Romanian president. In view of the large number of investigations that have been launched and the results of journalistic research alone, it seems unlikely that he will be allowed to stand in the next presidential election. A ticking political bomb was defused by the Constitutional Court in the countdown. Citizens, the neighbouring countries of Moldova and Ukraine, EU and NATO partners and the financial markets should now be able to breathe a sigh of relief. But unfortunately not. Because the decisive political work in Romania must now begin. Otherwise, the country will soon be facing the same problem again, even if it will then have the face of a different candidate.

It won't help to ignore Romania's fundamental systemic problems in favour of the new hybrid attack. Romania needs an entirely different relationship between its institutions, politicians and citizens if it wants to become a strong and resilient democracy.

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.**

Katja Christina Plate  
Head of KAS Office in Romania  
Department for European and International Cooperation  
[www.kas.de/rumaenien](http://www.kas.de/rumaenien)

[katja.plate@kas.de](mailto:katja.plate@kas.de)



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>