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# country report

Country Office in Romania



## Romania has voted: Cementing the status quo

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2024 is also a super election year in Romania. The European and local elections kicked off on June 9, 2024. These showed: the status quo got cemented with the elections. Despite a very high level of political frustration in the country, the major parties in the Romanian ruling coalition managed to secure a clear majority of almost 50% for their joint electoral list in the European elections. The coalition parties also clearly win the local elections. However, it is also clear that the decisive position of power in the country will not be at stake until the presidential elections in September.

### A look at the figures

The elections to the European Parliament on June 9, 2024 produced the following results<sup>1</sup> for Romania:

**Electoral list PSD-PNL** ("Partidul Social Democrat", i. e. Social Democratic Party and "Partidul Național Liberal", i.e. National Liberal Party): **48,5%**;

**AUR** ("Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor", Alliance for the Unity of Romanians): **14,9%**;

**ADU** ("Alianța Dreapta Unită", electoral list "United Right" consisting of "Uniunea Salvați România", "Partidul Mișcarea Populară", and "Forța Dreptei"): **8,7%**;

**UDMR/RMDSZ** ("Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România", Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania): **6,5%**;

**REPER** ("Reînnoim Proiectul European al României", i.e. "We renew Romania's European project"): **3,7%**;

**SOS** ("SOS România", i.e. SOS Romania): **5%**;

**Nicolae Ștefănuță** (independent): **3%**;

### Other parties: 9,4%

Romanian voters will send 33 representatives to the European Parliament. These are distributed across the parties and electoral alliances as follows:

**S&D - 11 seats**, all PSD (2019: 9 seats, of which 8 PSD, 1 Pro Romania)

**EPP - 11 seats**, of which 8 PNL, 2 UDMR, 1 ADU (2019: 14 seats, of which 10 PNL, 2 PMP, 2 UDMR)

**Renew Europe - 2 seats**, all USR (2019: 7, of which 5 REPER, 1 Ind.)

**ECR - 1 seat**, AUR (2019: 1, of which 1 PNCR)

**Greens/EFA** – 1 seat, Nicolae Ștefănuță (2019: none)

**Other/non-attached - 7 seats**, of which 5 AUR, 2 SOS (2019: 1, of which AUR 1)

**Voter turnout was 52%**, slightly higher than in 2019, when 49.02% took part in the election to the European Parliament. 32.44% in 2014 and 27.67% in 2009.

### A look behind the figures

A special feature of this year's European elections were the electoral alliances that were formed across the European party families: not only the relatively small parties USR (belonging to the 'Renew Europe' group), PMP (belonging to the

EPP) and the 'Forța Dreptei' (no group affiliation yet) united in the 'Electoral List United Rights' (ADU). The PSD, which belongs to the group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D), and the PNL (Partidul Național Liberal, Eng. "National Liberal Party"), which belongs to the

<sup>1</sup><https://alegeri.hotnews.ro/>, accessed on 20.06.2024

group of the European People's Party (EPP), ran together on an electoral list. A politically truly daring constellation. They presented their candidates (almost consistently) using the zipper system. In 2019, the PNL received 10 seats (27% of the votes) and the PSD 8 seats (22.5% of the votes) in the European Parliament. Together, the parties would have had 49.5% at the time. Almost exactly the same result that the PSD and PSD achieved this year: 49.3%. In 2024, however the balance of power has reversed: the PSD received now 11 seats and the PNL 8. How did this result come about?

After the collapse of the liberal-conservative government (PNL-USRPlus-UDMR) in autumn 2021, the national liberal EPP partner party PNL entered a grand coalition with the social democratic PSD at the initiative of Romanian President Klaus Iohannis. Many PNL voters saw this step as a betrayal, as the PNL had for years made a name for itself as a political force against the PSD, which was marked by corruption scandals and clientelism. When the PSD and PNL announced, based on electoral tactical considerations, that they would run on a joint list for the European elections, the political profile of the PNL merged further with the PSD for many voters. While the PSD is predominantly voted for by voters who have come to terms with its image as a corrupt and clientelistic party, the alliance with the PSD noticeably damaged the PNL electorate.

In the short term, the PNL leadership hoped that the alliance would give them more seats in the European Parliament than if they had run separately. This calculation worked. It is quite possible that the PNL would have received even fewer seats without the zip list. In the medium and long term, however, this tactical consideration will become a problem for the PNL: the costs at the ballot box for breaking away from the PSD will become ever higher the longer the PNL remains in alliance with the PSD.

The Romanian opposition is currently fragmented and therefore too weak to prevail against the strong PSD-PNL alliance. AUR is at 15%, SOS Romania at 5% and ADU at 8.7% in the European elections. In the local elections, the

opposition parties were only able to win a few mayorships or majorities in city councils. This strong result secures the party chairmanship for PNL leader Nicolae Ciucă. If there have been critical voices against him here and there, internal party opponents will now have to postpone their palace revolt. PSD chairman Marcel Ciolacu was also strengthened and was able to get rid of an internal opponent in the form of Gabriela Firea, who was sent to Brussels.

Of the two other Romanian EPP partner parties, the UDMR was able to secure its two seats, but the PMP only received one instead of two seats in the European Parliament. As in other EU countries, the Renew partner parties lost significantly: only the USR contributed 2 seats to the group. Since the USR also performed poorly in the local elections, personnel consequences are already becoming apparent in the party leadership: party president Drulă already resigned.

The Romanian right-wing populist camp ended up with a worrying 15% of the votes for AUR and 5% of the votes for SOS Romania. High figures for AUR, but significantly less than had been feared based on poll results. Currently, AUR is counted as having 1 seat in the ECR and 6 seats among the independents in the European Parliament. SOS Romania received two seats.

## A look behind the scenes

Because it was feared that the deeply politically frustrated Romanian voters would not even turn up for the European elections, the local elections were brought forward at relatively short notice to the date of the European elections. This strategy is probably responsible not only for the relatively high voter turnout - by Romanian standards - but also for the good performance of the electoral alliance of PSD and PNL.

The question of who will become mayor is crucial for the development of the concrete living conditions on the ground in Romania. Accordingly, it was to be expected that the merging of the two elections would increase voter turnout. Since both PNL and PSD have their political centres of power in the municipalities,

Bucharest deliberately relied on the voters to "vote through". In other words, the party whose mayor is elected will also be "stamped" in the European elections. In this way, despite the high level of political dissatisfaction and frustration in the country, a protest vote or a lesson vote in the European elections was to be avoided. A calculation that worked. In addition, the current PSD-PNL coalition government has also secured a stable power base at the local level, which could be decisive in view of the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections.

The diaspora (Romanian citizens abroad) was not a "game changer" this time: While in 2019 around 371,000 Romanians cast their votes in 441 polling stations abroad, this time only 214,000 Romanians voted in 915 polling stations abroad. Voter turnout in the diaspora in the 2024 European elections was only 55% of the turnout in 2019. However, a higher turnout of the diaspora in the presidential elections is to be expected.

For the architecture of political power in Romania, the local elections, which also took place on June 9, played a clearly greater role than the European elections. The final results of the vote counts are still some time away. However, the current figures indicate that much has remained the same at the local level too. Although the well-known mayors of the USR held on in Bucharest and Timisoara, the PSD and PNL forces also prevailed in large areas of the country. In many towns and districts of the country, the PSD-PNL coalition, which often campaigned together at the local level, has proven to be too powerful for the opposition.

Unfortunately, there are reports of significant irregularities in the election process again from Romania. There are already allegations that the "old recipes of the 1990s" are being used again and votes were being solicited with goods and money. On election day, some campaigning was still carried out by text messages or posters, which the law expressly prohibits. In one village

in the Ilt district, voter turnout is said to have been 240%, but this can be explained in part by the fact that voting is permitted in all polling stations regardless of one's usual place of residence (European elections). Polling stations were often hopelessly overcrowded. These allegations will have to be closely examined and followed up in the next few days. Overall, however, no massive election manipulation is expected to be detected, as independent observers<sup>2</sup> report.

## A look into the future

After the election is before the election: In September 2024, Romanians will elect a new president. The current President Klaus Iohannis is in his second term and cannot run again. He had already thrown his hat into the ring as future NATO Secretary General but was unable to secure sufficient support from partner countries. It is said that Klaus Iohannis now wants to become President of the European Council. Due to Brussels' political arithmetic, it may also be the post of EU Commissioner combined with the title of Vice President of the European Commission.

The question of the future Romanian EU Commissioner could then be resolved just as quickly. In any case, it seems clear that the current Romanian Commissioner for Transport, Adina Vălean (PNL), will no longer be nominated as Commissioner. Vălean did not make any major mistakes, but there were no notable initiatives in her portfolio. Since it is not usual for an EU country to be given the same portfolio in the European Commission twice in a row, Romania has expressed interest in the Enlargement Commissioner's portfolio. Romania is not only a direct neighbour of both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, but is also very familiar with the situation of the candidate countries in the Western Balkans. A Romanian Enlargement Commissioner would be a very good strategic choice for both Romania and the European Union.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://votcorect.ro/euro-locale-2024/2024/06/10/concluzii-preliminare-9iunie/>, accessed on 11.06.2024

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, European content and debates were missing from the 2024 European election campaign in Romania. The local elections have completely displaced the European elections in public. The PSD-PNL electoral alliance relied on local faces, local development and "government stability". The big questions about Ukraine, the shortage of skilled workers, the use of EU funds or energy and climate policy fell by the wayside. While Western Europe is shaken and migration

policy is pushing many other important issues to the sidelines, Romania seems to be in a better position. However, given the lack of a shift to the right in Romania, the country should not be portrayed as a model student. Appearances are deceptive. The democratic bar has been lowered at all political levels in Romania for years: Let us not forget that many mayors were elected in a single ballot due to the changed electoral law, sometimes with no more than 10-15% of the eligible voters. In almost 200 localities there was only one mayoral candidate. Little political competition and a very superficial political debate point to Romania's democratic homework.

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