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country report

Country Office in Romania



Romania has voted: A resounding slap in the face for the ruling parties

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Completely unexpectedly, the pro-Russian right-wing extremist Călin Georgescu is the first-placed candidate in the run-off election for the Romanian presidency. He is competing against the liberal Elena Lasconi (USR), who narrowly beat the third-placed Social Democrat Marcel Ciolacu (19.15%) with 19.18%. With their vote, Romanian voters have delivered a resounding political slap in the face to the leaders of the current governing coalition (PSD-PNL). With potentially devastating consequences for the country's political future and possible repercussions for European security and the defense capabilities of NATO's eastern flank.

A look at the figures

The first round of the presidential elections in Romania on Sunday, 24.11.2024 produced the following provisional results:

Călin Georgescu (Independent candidate): **22,94%**;

Elena-Valerica Lasconi (Uniunea Salvați România, USR, Association for the Salvation of Romania): **19.18%**;

Ion-Marcel Ciolacu (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD, Social Democratic Party): **19,15%**;

George-Nicolae Simion (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, AUR, Alliance for the Unity of Romanians): **13.86%**;

Nicolae-Ionel Ciucă (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL, National Liberal Party): **8,79%**;

Mircea-Dan Geogană (Independent candidate): **6.32%**;

Hunor Kelemen (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România, UDMR, Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania): **4.50%**;

Cristian Diaconescu (Independent candidate): **3,10%**;

Cristian Vasile Terheș (Partidul Național Conservator Român: **1,04%**

Ana Birchall (Independent candidate): **0.46%**;

Ludovic Orban (Forța Dreptei, FD, German right-wing force): **0.22%**.

Sebastian-Constantin Popescu (Partidul Noua Românie): **0.16%**;

Alexandra-Beatrice Bertalan-Păcuraru (Alternativa pentru Demnitate Națională): **0.16%**;

Silviu Predoiu (Partidul Liga Acțiunii Naționale): **0.12%**;

Voter turnout was 52.56%, slightly higher than in 2019, when 48.26% of eligible voters took part in the first round of the presidential election.

A look at the candidates for the second round

In the second round of the presidential elections on December 8, 2024, the right-wing extremist Călin Georgescu and the liberal Elena Lasconi

from the party "Association for the Salvation of Romania" (rum. "Uniunea Salvați România", USR for short) will be competing against each other. Let's take a closer look at the candidates below.

Călin Georgescu, a 62-year-old agronomist and veterinarian, has made a career in the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as a UN special rapporteur. However, anyone hoping for an open-minded spirit will be disappointed: Călin Georgescu's views follow those of the Romanian fascists known as "legionnaires". He published videos in which he openly admired Romania's fascist leaders from the Second World War and those responsible for the Holocaust. The Romanian public prosecutor's office is investigating him for glorifying fascist war crimes. Due to his extremist statements, he was even forced out of the national-populist AUR party, where he was considered a candidate for prime minister for a time.

Călin Georgescu follows Russian narratives and has repeatedly been unable to bring himself to condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine in election campaign debates. His rhetoric is often anti-European and anti-NATO, which brings him into conflict with the predominantly strongly pro-Western tendencies of Romanian politics. Călin Georgescu has repeatedly criticized the NATO presence in Romania. As the President of Romania determines foreign and defense policy and is involved in appointing the heads of the intelligence services, there is also a lot at stake for the EU and NATO if Călin Georgescu is elected.

The completely surprising rise of Călin Georgescu reflects the enormous dissatisfaction of many Romanians with the political status quo. Călin Georgescu's socially conservative voters were for a long time only a small segment that last represented a significant force in the 2000 elections. The national-populist parties AUR and "S.O.S România" appeared to siphon off this voter potential in recent years. In the slipstream of George Simion (AUR), who was much more present in the media, Călin Georgescu ran a very intensive TikTok election campaign as an independent candidate. However, he also had strong support from the Romanian Orthodox

Church, in whose churches and monasteries leaflets for him had been distributed for a long time.

Călin Georgescu was not even among the top five candidates in any of the presidential election polls. Although Romania is known for the inaccuracy of election polls, the fact that a candidate more than doubled his most optimistic poll results and even outperformed the post-election poll by almost 7 percentage points is more than astonishing. The political shock at the result on the morning after the election is correspondingly deep.

PSD leader Marcel Ciolacu also performed unexpectedly poorly. All polls and the post-election survey indicated that he would certainly come first in the first round of the presidential elections. Now he has even been pushed into third place by Elena Lasconi.

The 52-year-old **Elena-Valerica Lasconi** has only been the chairwoman of the liberal USR since June 2024. Her candidacy as a candidate for the presidency was long ridiculed and in a number of interviews and appearances it was clear that she lacked a firm grasp of foreign and security policy issues in particular. As a former journalist who became known as the mayor of Câmpulung Muscel, Lasconi is a strong advocate of transparency, the fight against corruption and social justice. She emphasizes the need to remove political influences from the health and education sectors. But she also advocated an increase in defense spending to support Ukraine.

By Romanian standards, Elena Lasconi's political career has been relatively free of scandal. Although the European Public Prosecutor's Office is currently investigating allegations of corruption in connection with an EU-funded project in Câmpulung, the general assessment is that Elena Lasconi has a determined will to reform in order to tackle the deep-rooted clientelism and corruption problems in Romania. A point that is of great importance to many Romanians and explains why she received more than 35% of the votes cast in Bucharest. In the countryside, however, it performed poorly. Many traditional voter milieus in Romania reject a woman as

president. Especially a liberal and reform-oriented politician. The strong urban-rural polarization will be the big challenge for Elena Lasconi's campaign for the second round. She needs to make strong gains among rural voters in order to beat Călin Georgescu.

As a possible future president, Elena Lasconi would in all likelihood continue Romania's classic pro-European and pro-NATO policy. There would also be no negative impact on German-Romanian relations. A Lasconi presidency could lead Romania into a phase of political renewal towards a strengthening of democratic institutions and processes. It is currently unclear whether Elena Lasconi has enough political capital and power awareness to break through the strong political interest cartels to maintain the status quo.

A look behind the scenes

The clear losers of the election are Marcel Ciolacu, leader of the social democratic PSD, and Nicolae Ciucă, leader of the national liberal PNL. The ruling PSD-PNL coalition partners' original plan was presumably as follows: Marcel Ciolacu and Nicolae Ciucă reach the second round of the presidential elections. There, voters opt for the national-liberal candidate, following the Romanian tradition of never electing a social democrat as president. In the parliamentary elections on the weekend after the elections, the PNL receives a bonus from the voters to give the president a strong "backing" in parliament. Nevertheless, the PSD emerges from the election as the strongest force. The voting ratios are sufficient for both parties together to have a good majority for the continuation of the grand coalition and Marcel Ciolacu remains Prime Minister.

Then, however, the campaign for Nicolae Ciucă never really took off: His election posters, which had already been put up across the country in early 2024, became the subject of numerous political memes. The coalition with the PSD had permanently damaged the liberal voter base. The declaration that he would remain in government in order to prevent the worst of PSD corruption from this position was not perceived as credible.

Nicolae Ciucă was also perceived as being too dependent on the previous president, Klaus Iohannis, with whom most Romanians feel deeply disappointed.

By the summer at the latest, it became clear that Nicolae Ciucă would not make it into the run-off. In addition, Marcel Ciolacu seemed to be getting more and more comfortable with the idea of becoming president himself. In order to allay voters' concerns about the PSD being too powerful, he announced that he would definitely appoint a non-PSD prime minister. In order to increase his own chances of winning the office, it was now important for Marcel Ciolacu to run against George Simion in the second round if possible. It was calculated that against a right-wing populist with a problematic foreign, European and security policy agenda, the PSD core electorate could be significantly expanded in a second round. Accordingly, there were a number of manoeuvres that initially caused George Simion's poll ratings to rise significantly. These included the Romanian Constitutional Court's ban on the national-populist candidate Diana Șoșoacă and the Romanian secret service's "clearance certificate" for George Simion.

Most voters did not fail to notice that the Bucharest political elite had drawn up a script for the presidential election. The alignment towards George Simion as Marcel Ciolacu's "preferred opponent" was also noticed. Many feel disregarded as "voting cattle", who were practically forced to put their voting stamp on the paper in the "right" place by political dodges. The thwarting of this script is likely to have motivated many of the deeply politically frustrated voters to vote for Călin Georgescu on election day. Many even to the point that they did not care about the foreseeably disastrous political consequences of their vote.

However, it should also not be ignored that far-right fascist attitudes have been gaining a foothold in Romania for years. These are now clearly recognizable among students at universities. The blatant lack of political education, media education and knowledge of history is the catalyst for this development.

A look into the future

There is no time to catch your breath: Next Sunday, on December 1, 2024, voters will have to elect a new parliament and on the following Sunday, December 8, 2024, the run-off election for the presidency will take place.

National-populist forces such as AUR and S.O.S România will now become more radicalized on the far right in the last week before the parliamentary elections in order to benefit from the momentum that the strong election result for Călin Georgescu will bring. Even if Călin Georgescu does not ultimately win the presidential election in the second round, a stronger presence of AUR and S.O.S România in the Romanian parliament will have a noticeable impact on various policy areas. As a result, it is likely to become more difficult to find majorities to support Ukraine and maintain a constructive EU course.

Elena Lasconi's USR will benefit from the fact that its leader has made it into the second round of

the presidential elections and that many voters on the center-right spectrum are afraid of a parliament dominated by the far right. The center-right forces have no choice but to throw their weight behind Elena Lasconi in the second round of the presidential elections. The national-liberal PNL will suffer, as it is unlikely to succeed in finding a convincing new leader in the few days until the parliamentary elections.

The PSD will also use all the power of its regional structures to achieve a strong result in the parliamentary elections. Will it be enough? Presumably the PSD will remain as the sorcerer's apprentice who laments: "The ghosts I called / I can't get rid of now".

¹ <https://alegeri.g4media.ro/rezultate-prezidentiale-2024/> - accessed on 25.11.2024 at 11.00 am. The final results will be updated once they have been received.

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