



# ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2024

## BACKGROUND

Romania will hold a two-round presidential election on **November 24** and **December 8**, set against a backdrop of political polarization, rising nationalism, and fragmented alliances. These elections mark the end of President Klaus Iohannis's two terms in office, closing a decade of center-right leadership. The race is competitive, with fourteen candidates, including frontrunners Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), and George Simion of the Alliance of the Union of Romanians (AUR), competing for power. The outcome will shape the political landscape, especially as the country's parliamentary elections are taking place on December 1, which could alter Romania's ruling coalition.

The current government is a bipartisan coalition formed in 2021 between traditional adversaries, center-right PNL and center-left PSD. It has faced criticisms due to internal divisions and ineffective policy implementation. Key issues have included the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in one of the highest death tolls in Europe. Widespread frustration has led voters to gravitate to radical figures such as Simion, who present an alternative to the political status quo.

The presidential elections will not only determine Romania's domestic political landscape, but also its geopolitical standing. As a southeastern economic hub and member of the European Union (EU), the outcome could impact future commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its continued support to Ukraine in the ongoing war with Russia. The result could either reinforce Romania's pro-European trajectory or precipitate a shift toward Euroscepticism, making these elections highly significant.

## WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

**Romanian Nationalism & the AUR:** Formed in 2019, the AUR has rapidly evolved into Romania's fourth-largest party, uniting radical populist and far-right factions under its umbrella. AUR has leveraged the concept of a "Great Romania" in its political ascent, echoing the ideological underpinnings of Romania's historical fascist movements, such as the interwar Legionary Movement. AUR has utilized xenophobic and ethnonationalist rhetoric to promote a vision of Romanian national identity as incompatible with European integration, capitalizing on Romania's support for Ukraine and alignment with EU priorities to mobilize voters. The push for the unification of Romania with Moldova is its most contentious platform, highlighting concerns about the erosion of Moldova's sovereignty, especially as the EU prioritizes territorial integrity. If AUR policies gain traction with a Simion victory, this could impact the previous support that Romania has provided in Moldova's EU accession pursuits, ultimately facilitating Russian expansion efforts.

**EU Relations & NATO:** Romania has positioned itself as key regional bulwark to Russian aggression through hosting NATO's largest European air base at

## KEY INDIVIDUALS

**Marcel Ciolacu:** Pro-NATO and pro-European Union (EU) Leader of Romania's largest party, the center-left Social Democrats (PSD) and current prime minister.

**George Simion:** Leader of the ultra-nationalist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). He is seeking to halt military aid to Ukraine and strengthen Romanian sovereignty vis-à-vis the EU.

**Elena Lasconi:** Pro-EU leader of the center-right Save Romania Union (USR) party, with a platform centered on governance reform and anti-corruption.

**Mircea Geoană:** Former NATO Deputy Secretary General and ex-Social Democrat leader, running independently.

**Nicolae Ciucă:** Center-right National Liberal Party leader (PNL) and former Prime Minister.

**Diana Șoșoacă:** Leader of ultra-nationalist S.O.S. România. She was formerly in the AUR and was recently barred from the presidential race.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

**January 2024:** Farmers' protests erupted in response to EU measures to create "solidarity corridors" to support Ukraine's income, these were exploited by far-right groups to fuel anti-EU sentiment.

**February 2024:** The Moldovan government renewed its five-year ban on George Simion entering the country.

**July 2024:** Romania and Ukraine signed a ten-year security agreement that solidifies their defense partnership. This agreement enhances bilateral cooperation on military training, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises.



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Mihail Kogălniceanu, its decade-long security pact with Ukraine, and increasing its defense budget by 45 percent from the previous year. While AUR officially supports Romania's NATO membership, its leaders have expressed skepticism about military support for Ukraine and have engaged in rhetoric that could destabilize Romania's relationships with Western allies through pursuing a more isolationist trajectory. Conversely, a move towards pro-NATO candidates, such as Ciolacu and Ciucă, would likely ensure continued support for military initiatives aimed at countering Russian threats, reinforcing Romania's central role in broader Euro-Atlantic security efforts, including boosting NATO's position in the Black Sea Region.

**Political Fragmentation & Domestic Stability:** The saturated field of candidates in Romania's upcoming race has fragmented voter bases. Competition among center-right candidates has splintered traditional party support and created an opportunity for the AUR to strengthen its base ahead of the parliamentary elections. There has also been a shift evidenced from disillusioned right-wing PNL voters to AUR, prompted by the PNL-PSD coalitions dysfunction. A stronger AUR presence in parliament could lead to a more fractured legislative environment, making it difficult to pass crucial reforms and align with EU directives on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, judicial independence and Romania's widening budget deficit. Greater polarization on these issues could lead to political gridlock, ultimately deepening the existing socioeconomic concerns that populist groups have leveraged to expand their influence. This dynamic is cyclical in nature, where discontent intensifies support for extreme movements.

**September 2024:** The Romanian government approved the transfer of a Patriot surface-to-air missile system to Ukraine, underscoring Romania's commitment to supporting Ukraine.

**October 2024:** Diana Șoșoacă was disqualified from the election by Romania's Constitutional Court for her anti-Semitic and anti-Western statements. The decision highlighted concerns about judicial impartiality and has consolidated radical right support behind Simion.

**November 2024:** Social media manipulation to discredit opponents was uncovered, according to analysis by the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI).

**November 2024:** Ludovic Orban, a center-right presidential candidate, withdrew from the race to support reformist leader Elena Lasconi (USR). This move was aimed at consolidating center-right forces under a single candidate.

## KEY POSSIBLE OUTCOMES RECENT POLLS

**A Ciolacu Victory:** Cicolacu's leadership would ensure continued support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Moreover, his presidency could stabilize Romania's political landscape by promoting cooperation between PSD and PNL, which share key foreign policy priorities. It would also reassure EU partners and NATO allies of Romania's commitment as a reliable security partner in Eastern Europe amid Russian aggression.

**A Simion Victory:** If Simion wins, there could be a shift towards nationalism and isolationism. AUR's rise reflects public frustration with traditional parties like PSD and PNL, seen as corrupt and ineffective. This fragmentation could complicate governance, strain Romania's EU relations, and create tensions with neighboring countries like Moldova and Ukraine, undermining regional stability.

**Center-Right Alternative:** Center-right candidates such as Ciucă (PNL) and Lasconi (USR) have diluted their influence by splitting the center-right electorate. Should either manage to unify the voter base, this would result in the balancing of Romania's commitment to pro-European policies with a focus on institutional reforms, potentially countering AUR's nationalist agenda and encouraging constructive dialogue on EU integration.

### Presidential Election Poll: Voter Intention (%)

- Marcel Ciolacu (PSD): 25.3%
- George Simion (AUR): 19.1%
- Elena Lasconi (USR): 14.3%
- Mircea Geoană (Independent): 13.3%
- Nicolae Ciucă (PNL): 9.1%

*Survey of 1,100 individuals between November 7- 12, 2024 (Source: INSCOP)*

TOPIC EXPERTS: NIKKIE LYUBARSKY