

Romania's Shock Election Puts NATO's Eastern Flank in Play

by Antonia Colibasanu - November 26, 2024

The first casualty of Romania's presidential election was the opinion polls – none of which proved accurate. The second might be the country's post-communist ideals, including its pro-Western orientation. Independent candidate Calin Georgescu emerged as the surprise leader after the first round of voting, held on Nov. 24. With 22.9 percent of the vote, the nationalist-populist Georgescu finished ahead of pro-Western candidates Elena Lasconi and Marcel Ciolacu, the current prime minister, who both won around 19 percent. (Lasconi narrowly won second place and will advance to the runoff with Georgescu on Dec. 8.) The stunning results fit with a larger trend in European politics over the past decade in which disaffected voters reject mainstream parties in favor of candidates who endorse unorthodox, even taboo, ideas.

A member of NATO and the EU, Romania is by European standards fairly large and populous but not wealthy. What makes the outcome of this election significant, however, is its location. At a time when Russia is directly at war with Ukraine and indirectly battling NATO, Romania is the only country besides Russia that borders both the Black Sea and Ukraine, giving it a pivotal role in ensuring the stability of Europe's eastern borders. Critical energy and trade routes run through it on their way to Western Europe. It hosts significant U.S. military assets – the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base and Deveselu military base, which until recently hosted Washington's only Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense system in Europe – and cooperates closely with the U.S. in intelligence sharing and counterterrorism. It is also a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe, supporting efforts to engage with post-Soviet countries, stabilize Moldova and reinforce Ukraine. A political realignment in Romania could significantly affect NATO's capacity to address regional security challenges.

In the Romanian political system, presidents share power with the parliament. They nominate the prime minister (as well as other positions, such as the heads of the domestic and foreign intelligence services), but the parliament must approve their choice. The Romanian president also oversees foreign policy and national security, chairs the Supreme Council of National Defense and may lead government meetings on matters within their constitutional purview. Therefore, Romania's parliamentary elections on Dec. 1 could be decisive.

Having worked in public administration since 1991, Georgescu is no stranger to Romanian politics. His name surfaced as a potential technocratic prime minister in 2011 and 2012, and again in 2020, when he joined the populist, ultranationalist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). However, the AUR parted ways with Georgescu in 2022 after he made a series of controversial remarks defending Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the leader of Romania's Iron Guard, a far-right, ultranationalist and fascist movement during the interwar period, and Ion Antonescu, a convicted war criminal who was executed in 1946. Rather than align with another political party, Georgescu chose to run in the 2024 elections as an independent.

Georgescu's campaign centers on a critique of Romania's 35-year post-communist history, which he says has failed to benefit ordinary Romanians. He taps into a nostalgia that downplays communism's failures in favor of other aspects, like stable jobs, affordable housing and security, while ignoring the fact that these were state-enforced policies and accompanied by heavy policing and an omnipresent intelligence apparatus. His speeches have a mystical tone, and he frequently references Christianity and traditional values, positioning them as central to Romania's unique identity. He strongly opposes NATO, claiming that the alliance does not provide Romania with genuine security, and he has called the U.S. missile defense system at the Deveselu military base a "diplomatic embarrassment." He argues that Romania should break free of Western influence and propaganda, understand Russia's "wisdom" and foster peace in the region.

Fueling Georgescu's surprising electoral success was an intensive social media campaign in the final two weeks of the race. His anti-establishment nationalist and populist message was particularly effective on TikTok, a platform popular among younger cohorts and disillusioned voters. Given Russia's history of supporting movements like Georgescu's, especially through social media influence, as well as the fact that Russian media were among the first to predict his advance to the second round, some observers have speculated about potential Russian involvement in his campaign's success. But while Russia welcomes his foreign policy views, the deeper reasons for his appeal lie in his skillful leveraging of Romanians' growing dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties and his nostalgia for the perceived stability and security of the communist era.

Georgescu's main challenger, Elena Lasconi, also centered her campaign on anti-mainstream narratives, but she advocates progressive reforms aimed at greater social inclusion. Her platform emphasizes strengthening democratic institutions, fighting corruption and ensuring equal opportunities for all Romanians. Following the announcement of the first-round election results, she reaffirmed her commitment to Romania's pro-Western orientation, arguing that memberships in NATO and the European Union are important for safeguarding the country's security.

The strong performance of anti-establishment candidates in the first round of Romania's presidential race reflects a growing appetite for political change – an encouraging sign for nationalist and populist parties ahead of parliamentary elections on Dec. 1. At the same time, the campaign and its results highlight Romania's deepening polarization. Georgescu's and Lasconi's campaigns offer Romanians a stark choice between maintaining their country's pro-Western direction or pivoting toward isolationism or even Russia. Whether Romanian voters will endorse a shift in the country's foreign policy will be decided in the next two weeks.

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