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Romania: the radical right's unexpected success in the first round of the presidential election

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The far-right populist Călin Georgescu unexpectedly won the first round of the presidential election in Romania on 24 November, contrary to all forecasts and exit polls. Georgescu was running as a formally independent candidate, although affiliated with the conservative-nationalist and Eurosceptic Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), and secured 22.95% of the vote. Elena Lasconi, leader of the opposition centre-right Save Romania Union (USR), finished second with 19.17%. Marcel Ciolacu, the incumbent Prime Minister and leader of the co-governing post-communist Social Democratic Party (PSD), place third with 19.15% , despite being expected to lead the race.

The subsequent positions were taken by George Simion, leader of the nationalist AUR (13.87%); Nicolae Ciucă, former Prime Minister and leader of the co-governing centre-right National Liberal Party (PNL) (8.79%); former NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană (6.32%); Hunor Kelemen, leader of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) (4.51%); and former Foreign Minister Cristian Diaconescu (3.1%). Voter turnout stood at 52.55%.

Călin Georgescu is a nationalist who regards Marshal Ion Antonescu (leader of fascist Romania during World War II) and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (founder of the fascist Iron Guard) as national heroes. He opposes European integration, referring to the EU as a "failed project", and is critical of initiatives such as Romania's participation in the construction of the American missile defence shield on its territory. In his narrative, he employs anti-globalist slogans and claims that the war in Ukraine is "fought in the interests of American weapon manufacturers".

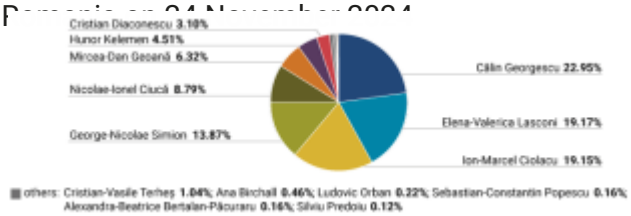
Commentary

- **Georgescu's success was a significant surprise**, demonstrating that both pre-election and exit polls were incorrect. Forecasts before the election had predicted that Georgescu might secure around 4–10% of the vote, placing him in fifth or sixth position. By contrast, the result achieved by Prime Minister Ciolacu, who had consistently led public opinion polls, with an expected support level ranging between 25–30%, turned out to be significantly weaker.
- **The results secured by Georgescu and Lasconi indicate that the Romanian public is increasingly dissatisfied with the mainstream political scene, long dominated by the PSD and PNL.** Thus, for the first time, neither party will have a representative in the

presidential runoff. Georgescu, a professor at a Bucharest university with limited political experience, had not been widely known until recently. He has rarely appeared in the media, except in connection with his collaboration with AUR, which proposed him as a candidate for prime minister in 2020, though this was merely a symbolic move. His recognition surged in recent months due to an intensive social media campaign, particularly on TikTok. Many voters backed this independent, radical, and uncompromising candidate with nationalist and dignity-focused rhetoric to manifest their opposition to the political establishment that has dominated the system for decades.

- **Georgescu garnered his highest support abroad, with over 43% of the diaspora voting for him.** Domestically, his best results were recorded in regions traditionally supportive of the centre-right PNL, such as Transylvania, Bukovina, and the Ilfov district surrounding Bucharest.
- **Lasconi is a pro-European politician representing centrist-liberal views, with limited political experience.** For many years, she worked as a television presenter and, since 2020, she has served as the mayor of a small town in central Romania. She rose to national prominence only this year when she assumed leadership of the opposition Save Romania Union (USR), a party currently polling at around 12% support.
- **The runoff is anticipated to be closely contested, with its outcome difficult to predict.** Georgescu is likely to win, as he may attract votes from Simion's supporters and even a section of the PNL electorate. However, voters opposed to radical candidates, irrespective of their political leanings, are likely to rally around Lasconi, though this may not be sufficient to secure her success. The PSD and PNL are faced with a dilemma: they do not want Georgescu to win, but openly supporting Lasconi could damage their image ahead of the parliamentary elections on 1 December. Georgescu's success will undoubtedly bolster the standing of radical and Eurosceptic groups, such as AUR and SOS Romania, ahead of the parliamentary elections, with these parties collectively projected to secure over 20% of the vote, according to polls.

Chart. The results achieved by the candidates in the first round of the presidential election in Romania on 24 November 2024



Source: Alegeri prezidențiale – Tur 1, 24 Noiembrie 2024, Permanent Electoral Authority, roaep.ro.