



**ROMANIA AFTER THE FIRST ROUND OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS:
A stable country or Europe's
next trouble spot?**

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Cover: George Simion, source: George Simion Facebook page, Nicușor Dan, source: Nicușor Dan Facebook page

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Sovereigntist candidate George Simion scored a decisive victory in the first round of Romania's presidential election, held on Sunday, May 4, securing 40.96% of the vote (3,862,761 votes). He will face off in the second round, on May 18, against the current Mayor of Bucharest, Nicusor Dan, who placed second with 20.99% (1,979,767 votes). Dan narrowly surpassed the governing coalition's candidate, Crin Antonescu, who came in third with 20.07% (1,892,930 votes).



Source: George Simion Facebook



Source: Nicusor Dan Facebook

George Simion achieved an exemplary mobilization in the diaspora, where voter turnout reached a record high of nearly one million votes. This gave the diaspora vote significant weight in the national total. Simion won the diaspora vote by a wide margin with 61%, scoring between 50% and 73% in countries such as Italy, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain. Nicușor Dan placed second in the diaspora, while Crin Antonescu lagged far behind. In Romania, George Simion won in the vast majority of counties (35), with the exceptions being the capital city Bucharest and Cluj County, both won by Nicușor Dan. Simion also lost in Harghita, Covasna, and Satu Mare—counties with significant Hungarian ethnic populations—where Crin Antonescu emerged victorious. The Hungarian minority party is a member of the current governing coalition. Additionally, Antonescu won in Bihor County, the birthplace of interim President Ilie Bolojan, who publicly declared his support for Antonescu.

Former Social Democrat Prime Minister Victor Ponta finished in fourth place, securing 13% of the vote (1.23 million votes). Embracing a sovereigntist and populist rhetoric, Ponta performed well particularly in several counties that have traditionally been strongholds of his former party. In effect, the vote share won by Victor Ponta contributed decisively to the defeat of the current governing coalition's candidate, Crin Antonescu.

The causes behind this result are numerous and trace back to the pandemic period, when George Simion emerged as a populist, anti-vaccine, and anti-establishment political figure. The poor communication from authorities at that time, followed by continued silence after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, when former president Klaus Iohannis imposed a blackout on information regarding Romania's substantial, primarily military, support, fueled the rise of Simion and other politicians with anti-Western, Eurosceptic, and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. As a result, a highly vocal minority—often aggressive in tone and frequently echoing Russian-inspired narratives—managed to dominate and occupy the public discourse. Moreover, the erosion of traditional parties, the arrogance displayed by some political leaders, and various corruption scandals have transformed public discontent into genuine anger toward the traditional political system. This discontent has mobilized previously apathetic individuals, both in Romania and abroad, who felt marginalized and saw themselves as victims of the political establishment.

The resignation of President Klaus Iohannis on February 10—intended to avoid suspension by a now-hostile Parliament—marked yet another unprecedented moment in Romania, following the annulment of a round of the presidential election. Iohannis's resignation only partially quelled public dissatisfaction, which then shifted toward Social Democrat Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu and the government's performance. In 2024, Romania recorded the highest budget deficit in the European Union, 9.3%, and performed poorly in absorbing EU funds under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. With a fragile parliamentary majority and the current government having been confirmed with just 240 votes, barely above the required 233, it is unlikely that Prime Minister Ciolacu's Cabinet will survive a motion of no confidence, which the opposition is expected to file should George Simion win the presidency. As such, the failure of these elections will be politically attributed to Marcel Ciolacu, who will most likely step down from both his position as Prime Minister and as leader of the Social Democratic Party. Economic analysts predict that, following the election, the government will be forced to raise taxes to address the deficit. However, a victory by George Simion could trigger a harsh response from financial markets, further complicating Romania's efforts to borrow on international markets to manage the budget shortfall.

The next president will also face major security challenges stemming from Russia's aggression in Ukraine. From this perspective, Nicușor Dan is considered a predictable actor, having committed to allocating 3.5% of GDP to defense, continuing support for Ukraine, and strengthening Romania's role within NATO and the EU.¹ By contrast, George Simion will most likely halt all aid to Ukraine, complicate the transit of Ukrainian grain exports through Romania, and may put an end to the presence of Ukrainian pilots training in Romania on F-16 aircraft.² As head of the Supreme Council of National Defense, the President holds the authority to block any initiative related to defense,

¹ Cornelia Mazilu, "Nicușor Dan propune o alianță a României cu marile puteri europene și o creștere treptată a cheltuielilor militare", *Adevărul*, 13 April 2025, <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/evenimente/nicusor-dan-propune-o-alianta-a-romaniei-cu-marile-2421737.html>.

² "Nick Thorpe, "I Am Young and Restless," Nick Thorpe, 3 May 2025. <https://nickthorpe.substack.com/p/i-am-young-and-restless>.

security, or foreign policy. Moreover, it is important to note that Simion is currently banned from entering both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, which will severely hinder bilateral relations with these neighboring states. If, as president, George Simion advocates for reducing Romania's economic and political support for the Republic of Moldova, such a stance could influence the outcome of Moldova's own parliamentary elections, possibly leading to a coalition that would block the country's EU accession, a scenario that would serve Russian interests.

George Simion has not clarified his position on Europe's defense initiatives or whether he intends to increase military spending—a commitment also demanded by the Trump administration. His statements on these matters have remained vague, limited to general affirmations such as “NATO is important for Romania's security.”³ Like many other populist and far-right leaders across Europe, Simion identifies as pro-Trump and has made several trips to the United States to build ties with MAGA-aligned circles. This effort to align himself with the White House is likely to translate into an aggressive stance toward the European Union and the European Commission, which he has described as “a new Soviet Union with its commissioners from Brussels.”⁴ Such rhetoric and positioning are expected to significantly worsen Romania's relationship with the EU. Simion's political style more closely resembles that of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico than that of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, suggesting a confrontational, nationalist approach with potential economic and diplomatic consequences for Romania.

Romania's economy depends heavily on EU funding, so any deterioration in relations with the European Commission could force the new President to seek alternative sources of financing, including, in extremis, from China. Simion's alignment with the current Trump administration is rooted primarily in shared ideological ground, and selective cooperation or even U.S. concessions might follow as signs of support, such as the potential reintegration of Romania into the Visa Waiver Program. During the electoral campaign, it is expected that U.S. officials may openly express support for Simion and adopt a critical stance toward Nicușor Dan, framing the contest as one between sovereigntism and globalism. Until Friday, May 2, just two days before the election, the U.S. administration had not signaled support for any candidate. However, on that day, it announced Romania's removal from the list of countries eligible for the Visa Waiver Program. Although Romania technically meets all the criteria, the decision was widely interpreted as a political gesture. Even if this move did not directly influence the election outcome, it indirectly benefited Simion, who had previously warned that one possible U.S. response to the annulment of the November elections could involve complications with visa arrangements.

In the final days of the campaign, Simion attempted to soften accusations of being pro-Russian by issuing statements critical of Russia, labeling it “the greatest threat to

³ “George Simion: NATO este singura alianță militară posibilă pentru România,” *Gândul*, 17 April 2025, <https://www.gandul.ro/ai-aflat/george-simion-nato-este-singura-alianta-militara-posibila-pentru-romania-20491979>.

⁴ “Simion atacă ‘noua Uniune Sovietică de la Bruxelles’: ‘Cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu îi oprim pe toți, de la Juncker la Ursula von der Leyen,’” *Digi24*, 17 February 2024. <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/simion-ataca-noua-uniune-sovietica-de-la-bruxelles-cu-ajutorul-lui-dumnezeu-ii-oprim-pe-toti-de-la-juncker-la-ursula-von-der-leyen-2691283>.

Romania."⁵ However, his presence on election day alongside Călin Georgescu effectively endorsed Georgescu's well-known pro-Russia and anti-NATO views, undermining Simion's last-minute repositioning and casting doubt on the sincerity of his shift in rhetoric.

If elected President, George Simion will most likely attempt to trigger early parliamentary elections in order to bring his party to power by winning them. However, the constitutional mechanism for calling early elections in Romania is cumbersome, requiring the rejection by Parliament of two consecutive prime ministerial nominations and the agreement of the presidents of both chambers of Parliament. Still, Simion does have several levers at his disposal. Firstly, he is expected to apply pressure through street protests and the use of referendums, a tool the President can initiate after consulting Parliament, whose opinion is only advisory. Secondly, Simion could work to undermine the government's credibility by attending cabinet meetings and publicly criticizing its economic measures, thereby increasing public dissatisfaction and further delegitimizing the current administration.

The next two weeks will be extremely tense politically in Romania, marking an intense struggle ahead of a vote with profound implications for the country's future. Nicușor Dan could win through a massive mobilization of voters who abstained in the first round and are now alarmed by the current outcome. A similar scenario occurred in 2014, when Klaus Iohannis placed second in the first round with 30.38%, while the then-Prime Minister Victor Ponta led with 40.40%, only for Iohannis to win the second round with 54.43% and over one million additional votes. This is not a conventional competition between two candidates, but a confrontation between two fundamentally different visions for Romania's strategic orientation—one that could either lead to the country's isolation within the EU and its inclusion among the bloc's problem states, or one that ensures Romania remains a stable, predictable member of both the EU and NATO. One thing is certain: the potential instability facing Romania would benefit neither the EU, nor the United States, nor NATO, but solely Russia, which would register yet another success in its strategy of sowing discord and chaos within the EU and NATO spheres.

Aleksandr Dugin: "who will be quicker to develop a model for the disintegration and chaoticization of societies other than their own, will be the winner in this complex game of construction of new international relations, new societies and a new philosophy of life. Chaos is a multipurpose weapon" (2012).⁶

⁵ Nick Thorpe, "I Am Young and Restless," Nick Thorpe, 3 May 2025.

⁶ Aleksandr Dugin, 2012, https://vk.com/video-30591943_161456386

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