



## **Likely Kremlin-Backed Election Interference Against Romania Threatens Bucharest's Continued Support for Ukraine and NATO**

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**Key Takeaway:** A pro-Russian and anti-Western candidate unexpectedly won the first round of the Romanian presidential election on November 24 due to likely Russian electoral interference and an effective large-scale TikTok influence campaign. Far-right Romanian political parties also made significant gains in the December 1 Romanian parliamentary elections. The Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the results of the first round of the presidential election on December 6 following the declassification of Romanian intelligence documents outlining — likely Russian — electoral interference. The Kremlin stands to benefit from the possible election of a pro-Russian Romanian president and the far-right's increased power in parliament, as these politicians have expressed the intent to end Romania's continued economic and military support for Ukraine as well as to deprioritize Romania's cooperation with NATO. Four pro-Western political parties have formed a coalition in parliament, and the coalition's ability to establish and maintain a pro-Western parliamentary bloc will likely be critical to continuing Romania's economic and military support for Ukraine, as well as to ensuring Romania's continued cooperation with NATO.



**Pro-Russian ultranationalist Calin Georgescu unexpectedly won the most votes in the first round of the Romanian presidential election on November 24, which the Romanian Constitutional Court has since annulled.** Georgescu and Lasconi won 22.94 and 19.17 percent of the vote, respectively, but neither won the

required majority to win in the first round (50 percent plus one).[1] Georgescu ran as an independent candidate, and opinion polls conducted in November 2024 notably showed only roughly five-to-ten percent of respondents supporting Georgescu.[2] Georgescu unexpectedly knocked out current Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu from the second round after Ciolacu received 19.5 percent of the vote – the first time in Romania's post-Communist history that a member of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) has not won in the first round or participated in the second round.[3] George Simion, the president of the ultranationalist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) political party who came in fourth place in the first round with 13.86 percent, endorsed Georgescu in the second round.[4] The Romanian Constitutional Court on December 6 decided to annul the "entire" presidential electoral process that started on November 24 and that the election will resume at a yet-to-be determined date.[5]

**Georgescu has explicitly expressed views opposing Ukraine, NATO, and the European Union (EU) since winning the first round of the election.** Georgescu stated in an interview with *Reuters* published on December 4 that it is "impossible" for him to agree to continue Romania's support for Ukraine.[6] *Reuters* reported that Georgescu stated that the US Aegis ballistic missile defense system stationed in Romania and the NATO battlegroup deployed to Romanian territory are "not among his priorities." Georgescu stated that NATO member states' pledge to spend two percent of their GDPs on defense each year is "ultra-secondary" and that he is "not even interested," as Romania "has an obligation to no one." Georgescu also appeared to criticize the EU, questioning if European funds have helped Romania and implying that Romania could find investors elsewhere in the world.

Georgescu has promoted similar views in recent years, including those that mirror longstanding Kremlin narratives about Ukraine. Georgescu has praised Russian President Vladimir Putin's leadership and "wisdom" and claimed in 2022 that Ukraine is an "invented state." [7] Georgescu has called for Romania to build closer relations with Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and claimed that NATO is the "world's weakest alliance" that would not defend its member states against an attack.[8] Georgescu called the US Aegis system in Romania a "shame of diplomacy" in 2021.[9] Georgescu was previously a member of the ultranationalist AUR party but left in 2022 after the party criticized his pro-Russian and anti-NATO views.[10]

### **The Role of Social Media and Russian Interference**

**Georgescu led the first round of voting in large part due to a successful social media campaign on TikTok and other platforms in the lead up to the vote.** Romanian intelligence services stated in documents declassified on December 4 that Georgescu's campaign used thousands of accounts on TikTok to spread content and used a channel on Telegram to coordinate and disseminate instructions to the TikTok accounts.[11] A TikTok official reportedly stated on December 3 to the European Parliament that TikTok had removed 66,000 fake accounts and 10 million fake followers from the platform before the first round of the election.[12] The TikTok official also stated that TikTok removed "networks" of hundreds of thousands of accounts in the days after the first round. Georgescu's campaign, despite declaring zero campaign expenses to Romanian authorities, paid Romanian TikTok influencers to spread his content, with the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) reporting that a Romanian TikTok influencer paid

other TikTok accounts \$381,000 between October 24 and November 24 to promote Georgescu-related content.[13] It is unclear if the Georgescu campaign will be able to benefit from similar social media operations and tactics in the next set of elections as Romanian and TikTok authorities take efforts to remove the accounts related to Georgescu's campaign and enforce TikTok regulations about political content. The likely Kremlin-linked actors who interfered in the Romanian elections to support the Georgescu campaign may try to increasingly use other social media platforms, such as Telegram, in the new election campaign.

**Romanian intelligence found that Russia conducted influence campaigns to interfere in Romanian elections.** Romania's Foreign Intelligence Service (SIE) stated in the recently declassified documents that Russia's electoral interference efforts in the West have "increased in intensity with an increasingly complex modus operandi," including an extensive use of propaganda and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated content spread on the internet following the identification of vulnerabilities in governments of target states.[14] The SIE stated that Romania is a priority target of Russia's "hostile actions" aimed at influencing Romanian society and elections and that Russia created "extensive" networks of social media channels to promote far-right, pro-Russian content. TikTok officials recently reported that one of the "networks" of accounts targeting Romanian and Moldovan users was affiliated with Russian state-owned propaganda outlet *Sputnik*. [15] Romanian investigative outlet *Snoop* also recently reported that AdNow, a digital advertising company reportedly tied to the Kremlin, directed at least two million euros between 2016 and 2024 to far-right Romanian media and influencers that promoted narratives similar to those that Georgescu featured in his campaign.[16]

**Russia likely also targeted Romanian election infrastructure with thousands of cyberattacks.** The SIE reported that Russia is targeting Romania with "aggressive" hybrid actions, including cyberattacks, information leaks, and sabotage.[17] The Romanian Information Service found that cybercrime platforms of Russian origin published access credentials to official Romanian electoral websites that unspecified actors obtained using sophisticated methods. The Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority also suffered over 85,000 cyberattacks trying to gain access to the website's databases before, on, and after election day, and the Romanian Information Service assessed that the responsible party was a state actor with considerable resources. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov denied accusations of Russian election interference on November 29, claiming that Russia does not "generally have the habit of interfering in elections in other countries." [18]

**Georgescu campaign's social media operations and tactics mirrored previous Kremlin influence campaigns in Moldova.** The Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI) stated in the recently declassified documents that Georgescu campaign's employed influence operations and tactics similar to those that likely Russian-linked actors used to influence the recent Moldovan presidential election, with pro-Georgescu posts containing text similar to that which Romanian influencers used to promote Moldovan presidential candidate Alexander Stoinanoglo.[19] Non-political Romanian influencers also reportedly posted videos in support of Stoinanoglo before the second round of the Moldovan presidential election, as Romanian influencers did for Georgescu.[20] Kremlin-affiliated Moldovan opposition politician Ilan Shor reportedly

orchestrated a widescale effort to use funding from Russian state owned Promsvyazbank to recruit Moldovans to campaign on Telegram and attend protests against Moldovan President Maia Sandu and the EU referendum.[21]

### **Recent Romanian Parliamentary Elections and Far-Right Gains**

**Romania also held parliamentary elections on December 1, and far-right Romanian political parties made significant gains.** The center-left PSD party, which currently holds the most seats in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, won 22.3 percent of the Senate and 21.96 percent of the Chamber.[22] The far-right nationalist AUR party came in second, with 18.3 percent of the Senate and 18.01 percent of the Chamber – a notable increase from the roughly nine percent AUR won in both houses in the 2020 parliamentary elections.[23] The center-right National Liberal Party (PNL), which is part of the current governing coalition with the PSD party, won 14.28 percent in the Senate and 13.2 percent in the Chamber. Lasconi's reformist Save Romania Union (USR) party won 12.26 percent in the Senate and 12.4 percent in the Chamber. The far-right SOS Romania (SOS RO) and Party of Young People (POT) parties won roughly seven and six percent in both houses, respectively. The SOS RO and POT parties only formed in 2021 and 2023, respectively, but still passed the five percent threshold to enter the 2024 parliament. The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), which represents the Hungarian minority, won roughly six percent in both houses. The Romanian Constitutional Court's December 6 annulment of the first round of Romanian presidential elections does not annul the Romanian parliamentary election results.[24]

**The Romanian far-right parties that will enter the 2024 parliament have promoted Kremlin-friendly platforms and likely also benefited from the social media influence campaign in support of Georgescu.** Romanian intelligence services reported that TikTok identified a large-scale campaign to promote POT, which supported Georgescu's presidential campaign, in the last two weeks prior to the parliamentary election.[25] SOS RO President and Senator Diana Sosoaca, who has rhetorically attacked NATO and the EU in the past, submitted a bill to the Senate in 2023 calling for Romania to annex parts of Ukraine that used to be part of Romania in the interwar years – mirroring Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev's calls for parts of Ukraine to go to Romania, Hungary, and Poland.[26] AUR President George Simion stated on November 20 that AUR would not send military aid to Ukraine but would continue humanitarian support.[27] Simion also stated that AUR would support Ukraine's EU bid but is against Ukrainian NATO membership. Moldova has banned Simion from entering the county, and Simion has called Moldova an "artificial state." [28] Ukraine has also banned Simion due to his "anti-Ukrainian activities" that "deny the legitimacy of Ukraine's state borders." [29] Moldovan outlet *Digi24* reported on November 14 that its sources stated that Romania's Foreign Intelligence Service requested that Ukraine and Moldova assist investigations into Simion's alleged meetings with Russian intelligence services.[30]

**Four pro-Western Romanian parties formed a coalition on December 4, but it is unclear if the parties will be able to maintain unity within the coalition to counter the far-right's significant gains.** The PSD, PNL, USR, and UDMR parties and the national minorities formed a coalition on December 4 to "reaffirm Romania's European and Euro-Atlantic path." [31] (The Chamber of Deputies includes

representatives of the Romanian ethnic minorities, which can hold a maximum of 18 seats.[32]) The four parties collectively won just over 50 percent of the vote in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, but Romanian election authorities have yet to announce how many seats these parties will secure. The coalition may struggle to collaborate and govern efficiently, as they have been critical of each other in the past and previous attempts to form and maintain coalitions have failed.[33] AUR and SOS RO officials have called for AUR, SOS RO, and POT, which collectively won roughly 30 percent in the two parliamentary houses, to form a minority coalition.[34]

### **The Kremlin could benefit from the Romanian elections**

**The election of a pro-Russian president in NATO and EU member Romania could benefit multiple long-term Kremlin objectives.** The president, who serves for a term of five years, appoints the Prime Minister from the parliamentary majority and the heads of Romania's intelligence services, but the parliament must subsequently confirm the appointments.[35] The president can send laws back to the parliament for "reconsideration" but only once, and the parliament is not required to then amend the law.[36] The president also represents Romania in the European Council. The Romanian parliament holds considerably more power than the president, and the pro-Western parliamentary coalition – should it remain united and able to govern effectively – would likely be able to continue most of Romania's pro-Western and pro-Ukraine policies. A pro-Russian president and a pro-Western parliamentary coalition, however, could lead to political uncertainty and instability in Romania that could stall Romania's pro-Western initiatives and benefit Russia's efforts to destabilize NATO, the EU, and Ukraine's defense against Russia's invasion. Russia could also try to exploit differences between the four coalition parties to prevent the coalition from gaining the votes necessary to pass laws that are not in the Kremlin's interest.

**Romania's continued support for Ukraine's defense and grain corridor is at risk.** Georgescu stated on December 4 that he will block continued Ukrainian grain exports through Romania.[37] Romania's Constanta port on the Black Sea is critical for Ukraine's grain corridor, with about 40 percent of the 36 million metric tons of grain that passed through Constanta in 2023 having come from Ukraine.[38] Current Romanian President Klaus Iohannis signed a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine in July 2024, and Romania has played a significant role in supplying Ukraine with military assistance, including a Patriot air defense system.[39] Majorities in both houses of Romania's parliament approved the law to donate Romania's Patriot system to Ukraine and plans to train Ukrainian soldiers in central Romania, and it is unclear what impact - if any - Georgescu's stated desire to end Romanian support for Ukraine will have on the parliament's future policy decisions.[40] Romania has also hosted Ukrainian F-16 pilots-in-training at Romania's Fetesti Air Base since September 2024.[41]

**The election of an anti-NATO Romanian president could undermine NATO defense planning and the expansion of the European defense industrial base.** Romania's strategic importance to NATO has only grown since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. NATO deployed four battlegroups to Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia in March 2022 after having deployed forces to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in 2016.[42] NATO is currently building what will be its largest base near Constanta in southeastern Romania.[43] Romanian presidential support for NATO is key

for NATO's ability to operate on Romanian territory. Current Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, for example, announced to the parliament in February 2024 that he had authorized NATO to deploy forces on Romanian territory in the event of a "major security crisis" that could affect Romania's independence and sovereignty.[44] The Romanian president is the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, and Georgescu's recent anti-NATO statements that Romania "has an obligation to no one" suggest that he may not deploy Romanian forces to assist other NATO member states in the event of an attack. Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to pursue his longstanding goal of breaking NATO unity, and a pro-Russian Romanian president that decreases Romania's reliability as a NATO member and hinders NATO's ability to operate in the country could greatly benefit this Kremlin objective.[45] Ciolacu also announced in March 2024 plans for Romania to host a new gunpower factory built by German arms manufacture Rheinmetall – an important investment to augment NATO's defense industrial base in the face of the current global gunpower shortage.[46]

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