

Romanians Are Not as Passive as We Thought

Even the “far right” was asleep at the switch.

by [Stephen Baskerville](#) (December 2024)



Calin Georgescu

The first-round result in Romania’s presidential election has shocked the European political class. Calin Georgescu, a candidate from the “extreme right,” who was ignored in pre-election news broadcasts or polls, just won first place with 23% of the vote. The candidate favored by the media (and pollsters), current Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu, came in third with 19% rather than the predicted 26%. In the second round, Georgescu will compete with another media favorite,

Elena Lasconi, variously described as “liberal” and “center-right” (ideological labels are flexible in Romania) and an “ardent backer of Romania’s membership in NATO and the EU, as well as a vocal supporter of Ukraine” (in the description of Radio Free Europe).

Romania has long been known as a traditionalist and Christian country, like most of East-Central Europe. Governments in Hungary, Slovakia, and Serbia reflect their populations’ preferences, but many assume that Romanians are too passive and apathetic about politics to challenge the Western-dominated liberal elites in the government, media, universities, think tanks—and polling firms. It turns out that our image of Romanian passivity reflects the preferences of those elites themselves.

The image is reinforced by incumbent President Klaus Iohannis, an obedient servant of NATO and the European Union who reliably supports the Ukrainian government according to instructions but who also avoids a profile on the war or much of anything else. Epitomizing today’s European politicians-on-the-make, who disdain their own people as they chase after European sinecures, he demeaned himself in the eyes of many Romanians earlier this year by openly—and unsuccessfully—angling for the post of NATO Secretary General. In this election, the candidate from Iohannis’ National Liberal Party (PNL) scored below 9%.

Even the party usually dismissed as “extreme right” by the media, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), was caught off-guard. The big unknown had been whether AUR would qualify for the second round against Ciolacu. In the event, neither qualified. Led by George Simion, AUR espouses a nationalism advocating reunification with the Romanian-speaking (but partially Russified) Republic of Moldova, an agenda that neither country wants and that serious analysts understand is both unlikely and undesirable.

AUR also distances itself from the dissenting politics of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, reflecting long-standing friction over the Hungarian-speaking minority in Transylvania. Georgescu, by contrast, expresses admiration for Hungary. He invokes peculiar new-age rhetoric and seems to have built his career pushing fashionable trends like “sustainable development” at the United Nations and similar places, but his “nationalism” hardly seems xenophobic or belligerent.

Contrary to the media narrative, Georgescu did not “emerge from nowhere.” (He held prominent positions in AUR.) He was quite deliberately ignored by the media and polling firms. As recently as October, pollster Inscop listed him under “other” with less than 0.4% support (as reported in Reuters). Earlier this month, it ranked him 6th with 5.4%.

His following was apparently built entirely through TikTok, at almost no cost, and it is overwhelmingly young. One “takeaway” from this election is therefore that the mainstream media’s monopoly of information still works in places like Romania. Informed and connected Romanians—including some who sympathize with Georgescu’s views—have either never heard of him or paid no attention. On the other hand, the shift to social media for political information among the young has gone further than most of us realized.

Equally striking is that Georgescu polled a huge 43% among Romania’s important diaspora. The “mainstream” candidates competed fiercely for the diaspora vote, because it is large, young, affluent, educated, and informed politically. Their mistake was to assume that it is also liberal-left.

The last time the diaspora mobilized for a political cause was a few years ago, when Norway’s feminist child-protection gendarmerie seized the children of a Romanian couple for the “abuse” of raising them as Christians. All five children were put up for adoption in separate homes. Romanians amassed such

determined protests at Norwegian embassies all over the world that they succeeded in getting all the children returned to their parents.

Significantly, Romania does not really have a left. The Socialist PSD, who succeeded the former regime's Communists and have dominated Romanian politics since that regime collapsed, are socially moderate and in some regions even the favorite among traditionalists. But the PSD/PNL duopoly will certainly close ranks in an effort to exclude Georgescu from office, much as the center-left did in France with Marine Le Pen. (Romania's political culture, like its electoral system, is strongly influenced by France.) Whether they succeed will depend in part on the parliamentary elections on Sunday.

But AUR's failure makes clear a larger "takeaway": This election was foremost about the war in Ukraine (plus some Euroscepticism). Though identified with Germany's AfD, AUR has refrained from vocal criticism of the war. One high party official told me early on that AUR fears being identified as "pro-Russian."

This fear in fact led them to expel Georgescu when he became too outspoken. He has called for ending aid to Ukraine's government, and he expresses doubts about NATO's reliability to defend its member states. He said that the election result shows that Romanians had "cried out for peace."

The runoff in two weeks will be a clear referendum on the war, with the two candidates' positions at polar opposites. The result could be pivotal, because of Romania's strategic importance and because Romania's president has important powers in foreign and security policy, as well as judicial appointments.

Georgescu's appearance on the political scene comes as hostility between Russia and the West reaches its [most dangerous point ever](#), surpassing even the Cuban Missile

Crisis. “We are closer today than we have ever been ... to nuclear weapons being used,” respected [commentators](#) now believe. “We are literally at the threshold of a nuclear war.”

Yet under the feckless Iohannis and the diffident AUR, Romania has been conspicuously both silent and ignored in discussions about a horrendous war so close that drone debris regularly falls on Romanian soil, and Russia has declared that NATO bases supplying the war from Romania are fair game for Russian attack.

Georgescu’s election and diminished Romanian support would further strain the Biden administration’s efforts to prolong the war (and even escalate it) past Trump’s inauguration and lock his presidency into open-ended military commitments.

Romania may finally be finding its voice, and it could even be decisive.

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