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## SPOTLIGHT

# Dan Victorious in Presidential Election in Romania

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On 18 May, the independent candidate Nicușor Dan, a centrist and the pro-Western mayor of Bucharest, won in the second round of the presidential election in Romania. He defeated George Simion, the leader of the nationalist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), who, after last November's annulled election, had set himself out as the political successor to Călin Georgescu, an extreme isolationist who was not allowed to run again. Dan's victory means that the country's unambiguously Euro-Atlantic orientation will be maintained. This is a favourable situation for Poland, as Romania will remain a key partner on the Eastern Flank of NATO and in the European Union.

### What were the results?

Dan won 54% of the vote against 46% for Simion (21% and 41%, respectively in the first round). Crucial to Dan's victory was the unification under his candidacy of moderate voters who feared a victory for the anti-European nationalist. Dan was supported by [the co-ruling National Liberal Party \(PNL\) and the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania \(UDMR\)—their common candidate lost in the first round—](#)as well as the opposition Save Romania Union (USR). This grouping helped to activate voters who had not voted in the previous round. Turnout rose from 53% to almost 65%, the highest since 2000. The mobilisation also extended to the previously passive pro-European part of the diaspora. As a whole, it cast 1.6 million votes (14% of all votes), including 55% for Simion, but a drop compared to 60% in the first round. Part of the reason for this was the support of Dan by President Maia Sandu. In Moldova, Dan won 88% of the 158,000 diaspora votes (about 1 million Moldovans also have Romanian citizenship). At the end of the campaign, Simion also discouraged some voters by threatening his opponents and announcing he would try to dismiss a half million government employees, describing them as "parasites".

### Who is the president-elect?

Dan, a mathematician by education, has the image of a pragmatic reformist fighting the ills of Romanian political life, in particular corruption, nepotism, and incompetence. He gained popularity as a civic activist when he successfully opposed real estate abuses in Bucharest. The urban movement he founded evolved into the centrist USR, which has been in parliament since the 2016 elections. Having moderately conservative views in the moral sphere, Dan resigned his leadership in the face of the party's unequivocal opposition to the 2017 referendum on the inclusion of a traditional definition of the family in the constitution. In 2020 and 2024, as an independent, though supported by USR, he was elected mayor of Bucharest. In this position, he reduced the capital's debt and began a general modernisation.

### What are the prerogatives of the president?

The constitution gives the president the dominant role in foreign and defence policy, which he directs as the head of the Supreme Council of National Defence, a specialised body that also includes the prime minister, key ministers, chiefs of the army, and the secret services. The president represents Romania at international summits and European Council meetings. The government's powers in these spheres are limited to day-to-day management, and actions should be

# PISM SPOTLIGHT

coordinated with the head of state. The constitution gives the president little power in the domestic sphere, however, including no legislative initiative and a veto with only suspensive power. Despite this, the president's position in the system is strong due to direct elections and political tradition allowing an active role in party disputes.

## What will Dan's likely foreign and security policy be?

Dan, unlike the Eurosceptic Simion, favours Romania remaining in the mainstream of EU integration and maintaining good relations with Germany and France. He supports the EU's ReArm programme, in which he sees an opportunity for domestic industry, and he wants to increase Romania's arms expenditure from 2.5% to 3.5% of GDP. At the same time, he sees a close bilateral alliance with the U.S. and NATO membership as pillars of Romania's security. He advocates technological development in cooperation with Western democracies and Japan, South Korea and Australia, but with autonomy from China. Unlike Simion, he declares unconditional maintenance of multidimensional support for Ukraine, but excludes the participation of the Romanian army in a possible peacekeeping mission on its territory. He considers comprehensive support for the European integration of Moldova, which he sees as part of the Romanian national community, as a strategic priority for

Romania. Simion, as a [unionist](#) announced his will to suspend [support for it](#), accusing President Sandu of being anti-Romanian.

## What are the likely domestic policy implications of Dan's election?

The election of a new head of state will bring an end to an escalating political crisis. [In February 2025, President Klaus Iohannis unexpectedly stepped down](#) and his duties are being carried out by Senate Speaker Ilie Bolojan of PNL. The day after the joint candidate of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), PNL, and UDMR lost in the first round of the presidential election, Social Democratic Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu resigned and announced his party's exit from the grand coalition. Probably with a view of Simion's possible victory in the second round, he wanted to open up the possibility for his party to form a government with the AUR and the nationalist Party of Young People. Once the election is settled, PSD will probably be willing to reconstitute a cabinet with PNL and UDMR. Dan, as president, may push to expand it with USR and, in line with his announcement, appoint the popular and efficient Bolojan as prime minister, which would weaken the Social Democrats' position in the grand coalition.