



## Surprise Winners Move to Second Round of Romania's Presidential Election

Jakub Pieńkowski

On 24 November, after the first round of the presidential election in Romania, the far-right candidate Călin Georgescu, who until now had been mostly unknown, is leading unexpectedly. In the second round on 8 December, he will face another surprise contender, the pro-Western Elena Lasconi, the leader of the opposition centre-right Union Save Romania (USR). In the Romanian constitutional system, the president has limited prerogatives in domestic politics, but is the main creator of foreign and security policy. The election of Georgescu to office would arguably undermine Romania's unequivocally Euro-Atlantic and pro-Ukrainian stance, which coincides with Polish interests.

### What are Georgescu's views?

Georgescu won 23% of the vote in the first round, despite pre-election polls giving him between 4.5% and 10.5%. By campaigning mainly on Tik-Tok, he won over previously passive young voters and the diaspora, with support among them as high as 43%. He is presenting himself as a leader seeking only the Romanian national interest. He appeals to arguments of dignity and nationalist sentiments, with past praise for the fascist and anti-Semitic Iron Guard and the WWII regime of Ion Antonescu. He questions Romania's EU membership and the value of NATO security guarantees. He sees the war in Ukraine as a conspiracy between arms companies and the United States, and justifies Russian leader Vladimir Putin's actions on the basis of his "love for Russia", although he avoids explicitly pro-Russian statements. He sympathises with anti-globalisation, [anti-vaccine](#) views and other conspiracy theories.

### Who is Lasconi and what are her positions?

Lasconi gained just over 19% of the vote in the first round. She has little political experience, in charge of the USR since 2019 (which had polled around 12% before the parliamentary elections) and mayor of the town of Câmpulung, population 27,000, in Wallachia since 2020.

Earlier, she was a journalist for the popular Pro TV. Her campaign was mainly directed against the incumbent establishment, dominated by the [Social Democratic Party \(PSD\) and the National Liberal Party \(PNL\)](#) that make up the current ruling coalition. She accused them of squandering Romania's opportunities for thorough economic and social modernisation and of tolerating structural corruption. She is unequivocally in favour of tightening [Romania's Euro-Atlantic ties](#) and [supporting Ukraine](#), but has repeatedly demonstrated poor international policy orientation in the campaign.

### How will the first round results affect the general election on 1 December?

Incumbent Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu's defeat was a surprise. He was the favourite in the polls, but he won only 19% of the vote, with 3,000 fewer ballots than Lasconi, and is the first Social Democrat candidate not to enter the second round. PNL leader Nicolae Ciucă also fell far short of expectations with just 9% of the vote. Both subsequently stepped down from their party positions, which, with a week left until the parliamentary elections, leaves no chance to restore these parties' confidence. In the case of the Liberals, the result is linked in part to a perception of corruption, as it entered into a coalition with [the PSD, which has been identified with an embezzlement scandal](#). They were also

## PISM SPOTLIGHT

harmed by the PNL-associated [President Klaus Iohannis](#), whose image as a schemer and man of lavish tastes has tainted the end of his second term. Although PSD and PNL announced their intention to continue co-governing after the parliamentary elections, their level of support—sitting at 29%-31% and 13%-20%, respectively, according to November polls—may be affected by the poor results in the first round. On the other hand, the extreme and nationalist electorate of the [Alliance for the Union of Romanians \(AUR\) and S.O.S. România](#) (around 15%-20% and 5%-10%, respectively, in the polls) may be more motivated than ever, but even the prospect of a high result will not induce their leaders to overcome long-standing resentments and cooperate on a permanent basis.

### **What could determine the final outcome of the presidential election?**

Georgescu can count on a significant share of voters for George Simion, the [leader of AUR](#), who received 14% in the

first round after attempting to soften his image by emphasising support for Romania's membership of NATO and the EU. The party's leadership are supporting Georgescu in the second round, after having broken with him in 2022 to avoid association with his Iron Guard comments. The leading candidate is also supported by Diana Șoșoacă of S.O.S., although most of her voters had already voted for him after she was barred from the elections by the Constitutional Court. Online bots and trolls (the sources of their funding is unclear) previously supporting her are now working for him. Lasconi's chance for victory may lie in an ad hoc rallying to her of moderate voters across ideological divides—represented by, in addition to Ciolacu and Ciucă, also former NATO deputy secretary-general Mircea Geoană (6%), the leader of the party of Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania Hunor Kelemen (4.5%), and the former Foreign Minister Christian Diaconescu (3%)—fearing a takeover of the state by the far-right that would change Romania's unambiguously pro-Western orientation.