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## SPOTLIGHT

# Anti-Establishment Candidates Dominate First Round of Re-Run Presidential Election in Romania

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On 4 May, in the first round of the presidential election in Romania, George Simion, the populist leader of the largest opposition party, the Eurosceptic and nationalist Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), won. He entered the second round scheduled for 18 May, when he will face Nicușor Dan, the independent mayor of Bucharest who has liberal and unequivocally pro-Western views. Simion's vote advantage after the first round is substantial, but the final outcome will be determined by Dan's ability to unite all moderate voters around his candidacy, including those supporting the reluctant parties of the current ruling grand coalition.

### Why was it necessary to repeat the presidential election?

The first round of the presidential election was held by the constitutional deadline of 24 November 2024, but on 6 December, two days before the scheduled second round, the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) invalidated the entire electoral process and ordered it to be repeated, including the re-registration of candidates. The reason cited for this was that the Romanian secret services had found blatant manipulation of social platform algorithms, in particular TikTok, along with undisclosed sources of funding for the election campaign of Călin Georgescu, the then widely unknown anti-Western isolationist. The CCR found that [he used these advantages to win unexpectedly with the best result—23% of the vote—and entered the second round](#), although pre-election polls had him with only a few percent support. After the court's ruling, the Central Electoral Office refused to register his candidacy for the re-run election this year, arguing Georgescu's inability to fulfil his constitutional role as president as a defender of democracy, and the CCR, after hearing Georgescu's appeal, upheld this decision.

### What were the results of the key candidates in the first round of the repeat election?

Simion received the highest support at 41%, compared to the 14% of the vote and fourth place in the 2024 election. Prior to the cancelled second round, he supported Georgescu conjunctively and after the CCR's decision cast himself as his political successor. Dan, who did not run in 2024, came in second with 21% of the vote. He was backed by the opposition reformist Save Romania Union (USR), which, however, could not finance his campaign as it had initially put forward its leader Elena Lasconi as its own candidate—[she received 19% of the vote and was due to face Georgescu in the second round in 2024](#). Contrary to the USR's expectations, Lasconi did not withdraw her candidacy in favour of Dan and won 3% of the vote in the re-run election. [The grand coalition of the Social Democratic Party \(PSD\), the National Liberal Party \(PNL\), and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania](#) again failed to bring its candidate into the second round. Following the embarrassing results of the leaders of these parties in the 2024 elections—Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu of PSD received 19% of the vote and Senate Speaker and former Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă of PNL received 9%—the coalition nominated a joint candidate. At the Social

# PISM SPOTLIGHT

Democrat's initiative this candidate was Crin Antonescu, the former Senate Speaker and PNL leader, who won 20% of the vote in the re-run election. Victor Ponta portrayed himself as a partner of Donald Trump's "MAGA" movement and an enemy of the establishment in Romania. Ponta, the former leader of PSD and prime minister who [stepped down in the face of public protests after the tragic fire at the Colectiv club in 2015, highlighted widespread corruption](#) and won 13% of the vote.

## What influenced the voters?

Faced with [growing radicalism in Romanian society](#) caused by disillusionment with the rule of the PSD-PNL duopoly, Simion has effectively set himself apart as the only true anti-system candidate. He asserts that he wants to restore the voice of Romanian society, alleging that the grand coalition parties stole it by violating democratic rules to block Georgescu's likely victory. Simion won unprecedented support among Romanian diaspora disillusioned with the situation at home and life abroad—they cast 10% of the total vote, including 60% for him. The diaspora also determined Dan's entry into the second round, with 25% of its votes. Meanwhile, many polls before the election indicated that Antonescu would enter the second round instead of him. However, after more than 10 years of public inactivity, Antonescu failed to rebuild his name recognition. Nor was he credible in the eyes of the PSD and PNL electorates, mutually distrustful despite the two parties' cooperation in

a grand coalition. Some polls predicted Ponta's entry into the second round. However, he squandered support by bragging about gaining Serbian citizenship for his decision as prime minister to flood villages in Romania to save Belgrade from the 2014 Danube floods.

## What will influence the outcome of the vote in the second round?

The favourite for the second round is Simion, although the voters he may additionally win over are few. He is likely to seek to further mobilise the diaspora and to court Ponta's populist and largely nationalist electorate. Dan has already announced that, given the need to defend Romania's hitherto unambiguously Euro-Atlantic orientation, he will seek the support of all pro-Western groupings. He is likely to be supported by the grand coalition, citing a sense of responsibility for the country. At the same time, this may dent his image as an anti-system candidate, shying away from collaboration with the ruling establishment. Nor is it a foregone conclusion that, for reasons of political calculation, these parties will realistically commit to campaigning for him, without which the traditionalist PSD electorate in particular may remain passive or support Simion. Indeed, the leaders of the ruling parties may judge that the presidency of a nationalist populist may pose less of a threat to their interests than cohabitation with the reform-minded Dan.