



Commentary

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Commentary #4

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The Stakes of Romania's 2025 Presidential Election for Europe's Future

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On May 18, 2025, the almost half-year marathon of the Romanian presidential elections, which the whole of Europe was watching with great interest, ended with the victory of a pro-European candidate, Nicușor Dan—a former Mayor of Bucharest and civil society advocate. What made the contest so critical was the looming possibility of a far-right political takeover in a traditionally strong pro-European country. In the context of rising far-(right and left) extremism across the continent, such a shift in Romania would have delivered a severe geopolitical blow—not only to the EU but to the entire eastern flank of Europe. It would have weakened democratic institutions, undermined the rule of law, and emboldened authoritarian regimes, especially Russia, in their efforts to destabilise the region.

The initial election vote, held on November 24, 2024, was annulled by Romania's Constitutional Court based on credible evidence of Kremlin interference, campaign finance violations, and serious procedural irregularities. The decision to annul the entire election and mandate a re-run was extraordinary, underscoring both the magnitude of the threat and the robustness of Romania's constitutional safeguards. Călin Georgescu, a pro-Russian, ultranationalist candidate previously seen as a front-runner, was later disqualified from the re-run due to violations of campaign law and proven links to disinformation networks.

This unprecedented situation became a critical test of Romania's democratic resilience. Civil society, the media, and judicial institutions played essential roles in defending the rule of law and restoring trust in the electoral process. The successful reorganisation and conduct of new elections—culminating in a pro-European outcome—reaffirmed Romania's place among the EU's most committed democracies.

With an unprecedentedly high 64% turnout in the second round, the Romanian electorate clearly understood the stakes. By electing pro-European candidate Nicușor Dan, they sent a clear message: this was not just a presidential vote but a generational choice about the country's future direction.

The victory of a pro-European candidate confirms that Romanian citizens continue to support liberal democracy, the EU, and transatlantic cooperation. Amid growing populist movements and anti-EU rhetoric across the continent, this outcome is a resounding rejection of extremism and a clear endorsement of Romania's European path.

Implication for the Region

Strategically located on NATO and the EU's eastern flank, Romania is vital to Europe's security. As a neighbour to Ukraine and Moldova and a key Black Sea power, Romania plays a frontline role in resisting Russian hybrid warfare and authoritarian influence. Its domestic stability and pro-European orientation directly impact the broader region's resilience.

Romania's electoral outcome carries symbolic and strategic weight far beyond its borders. Amid Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine and persistent hybrid threats in Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, the vote represents a democratic breakthrough and a strategic reassurance.

The result resonates deeply in Moldova, where historical and cultural ties with Romania run deep. In the second round, 88% of Moldovan-based voters with Romanian citizenship backed the pro-European candidate—a clear indication of support for continued alignment with European values and integration.

For Ukraine, Romania's electoral outcome offers a crucial signal. Romania has supported Ukraine throughout the war, advocating for military aid and humanitarian assistance. A win by far-right candidate George-Nicolae Simeon, who had pledged to scale back support for Ukraine, would have sent a dangerous signal to both Kyiv and the Kremlin.

In Georgia and Armenia, both fighting with internal political tensions and external pressure, Romania's democratic consolidation is a source of encouragement. It demonstrates that electoral integrity and civic engagement can prevail even during foreign interference and manipulation.

Implications for EU Policy

At the same time, Romania's election serves as both validation and a strategic wake-up call for EU institutions and member states. It affirms that the European project still holds appeal. However, it also highlights the need for the EU to be more assertive in supporting fragile democracies.

Romania's renewed democratic mandate gives Brussels a unique opportunity. As a country with historical and geopolitical ties to Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, Romania is well-placed to serve as a bridge between the EU and its eastern neighbourhood. The EU should actively support Romania in assuming this leadership role, particularly within the Eastern Partnership and broader EU foreign policy frameworks.

Additionally, democracies under threat from disinformation and foreign interference must be reinforced—through greater investment in independent media, rule-of-law institutions, cybersecurity, and electoral integrity. The EU must back those who choose the European path with words and robust, strategic action.

A Cautious Celebration

While Romania's presidential election is a welcome victory for democracy, it is too early to celebrate wholeheartedly. Didn't the defeated candidate, Simeone, ought to reassure his supporters, declaring that "this is just the beginning". The rise of nationalist movements continues across Europe and the world. On the same day Romanians reaffirmed their pro-European path, elections in Portugal saw a far-right party come second, marking its most significant success in recent years. The *fars* are no longer confined to Hungary or Slovakia; they are advancing in Germany, Austria, France, and beyond.

This parallel trend serves as a stark reminder that democratic gains remain fragile. The forces of authoritarianism and extremism are evolving, learning, and expanding. As such, Romania's example must not lead to satisfaction but rather galvanise a more strategic and coordinated effort across the EU to confront radical populism, disinformation, and political manipulation. Safeguarding democracy requires more than momentary victories—it demands vigilance, unity, and a renewed commitment to the values that define the European project.

EU institutions, national governments, and civil society must act with urgency. This means doubling support for independent media, civic education, and fact-based public discourse. It requires investing in democratic resilience—strengthening electoral systems, protecting civil liberties, and countering the root causes of extremism. This is especially vital in countries where governments actively attempt to silence civil society and restrict democratic space, as is currently the case in Georgia. In such contexts, European support must be principled and proactive—backing local democratic actors, standing up to authoritarian backsliding, and ensuring that the promise of European integration remains real and within reach.



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