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Romania's election year amid a far-right momentum

The growing strength of right-wing radical parties could destabilise not only Romania's domestic politics but also pan-European politics

Romania has a crucial election year ahead, with four key campaigns scheduled. Starting with the European elections in June, followed by parliamentary and local elections in the autumn and, lastly, the presidential elections planned for December.

While the election race has not yet officially begun, party strategists are already mulling over the formation of the election calendar. The main opponents are currently discussing three possible scenarios: conducting local elections at the same time as the first round of the presidential elections, conducting the first round of the presidential elections at the same time as the parliamentary campaign, or conducting all three separately. One strong argument in favour of the first two options is that they have the potential to increase voter turnout. However, these two scenarios might also play out in favour of one or other of the political parties – something the dominant political forces are unlikely to accept.

At the moment, the country's political arena is controlled by two main parties – the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL). Historically, support for these two parties has ranged from 20 to 30 per cent. In the last few years, however, Romania has seen new far-right political groups gain influence. One such party – the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) – might even win around 18 per cent of the vote in the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament.

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According to recent polls, the PSD is ahead of the president's centre-right Liberals, both in the parliamentary and presidential race, although the PNL could still narrow the gap. The main challenge for the dominant parties, therefore, is to shift the balance in their favour and gain several critical mandates, which could be crucial

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for coalition building in the future.

Locally, the two parties are also relatively equally represented: both the PSD and the PNL have up to 14 000 mandates, including mayors and local and district politicians. In fact, the local elections will set the tone for the larger political debate at national level and gauge the mood of the electorate.

The most predictable election will be the presidential. The incumbent president Klaus Iohannis, leader of the PNL, is coming to the end of his second term. Although no politicians have yet officially announced their intention to run for office, the opinion polls are already showing clear favourites. According to preliminary polling information, the frontrunner among the voters is the current NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană (leader of the PSD from 2005 to 2010), followed by another Social Democrat, the current Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu. Also among the top three is the leader of the far-right AUR George Simion.

Foreign policy priorities of the right

It is quite clear that Romania will continue to pursue a foreign policy oriented towards the US, given that the strategic partnership between the two countries is essential to regional security. However, the rhetoric of far-right projects co-operating with the Russian Federation is aimed at undermining trust in the United States and collective security within NATO. This is especially evident in narratives about Romania's loss of sovereignty and about unfounded hopes of protection in the event of any threat from Russia. Thus, after debris from another Russian drone was found on Romanian territory, far-right politicians were quick to claim that NATO's lack of reaction to the incident showed that Romania's strategic partners had abandoned it – something the far-right had allegedly warned would happen.

The farmers' protests that broke out in early 2024, accompanied by attempts on the part of AUR and its partners to use the unrest to their advantage, are also a vivid example of a whole gamut of geopolitical factors and will impact both the European and the national election campaigns.

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To a great extent, Romania's foreign policy is defined by relations with the neighbouring Republic of Moldova, which is part of a common Romanian-speaking cultural space. Considering the fact that the challenges to

radical parties and Russia's role in supporting them.

Moldova's national security are largely the result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is both anticipated and indeed likely that the trilateral strategic partnership between Romania, Moldova and Ukraine will be strengthened. If we recall, during Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's recent visit to Bucharest, the two presidents already stated their intention to build a strategic partnership between Romania and Ukraine, which could be seen as the first step towards reinforcing Bucharest's position on NATO's eastern flank. But this is not a subject of discussion between the PSD and PNL.

That said, we must not overlook the pan-European trend toward growing popularity of far-right parties. The national elections are set to take place after the European campaign, which in Romania is slated for 9 June. In this context, it is important to note the rising support for far-right parties, such as AUR and SOS, which have a realistic prospect of getting into the European Parliament. George Simion and his AUR got into parliament in 2020, positioning themselves as patriots and unionists. But in practice, Simion's 'patriotism' is directed against NATO and the EU, and also against support for Chisinau. The leader of SOS is member of the Romanian senate Diana Șoșoacă, who openly consults with the Russian embassy, advocates revanchism undermining Ukraine's territorial integrity and, what is particularly remarkable, closed one of her speeches in a parliamentary session with the phrase 'glory to Moscow!'

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In the last three years, AUR has doubled its strength. The Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine enabled them to promote an irrational and emotional domestic agenda. Romania has underestimated the risks associated with the growing popularity of radical parties and Russia's role in supporting them. Now, AUR and SOS might destabilise not only the country's domestic policy but also the pan-European agenda.

During the course of their election preparation, the current administration has managed to capitalise on support for Ukraine, turning it into a profitable political slogan. The Romanian media tends to argue that support for Ukraine must be continued *en route* to EU and NATO membership – an opportunity for Romania to discard its status as a

NATO-EU border country. The euroscepticism and demonisation of NATO broadcasted by the far-right parties may intensify should they see a real increase in their support.

How Romania's election year will end is difficult to predict with any accuracy. It is clear that a domestic political crisis is unlikely. The main concern remains the rise of the right-wing radical parties. The AUR and SOS are the major conduits of Russian influence in Romania and their increasing strength will represent a commensurate threat to bilateral projects with Ukraine and any related European initiatives. Moreover, Romania's far-right might bolster radical sentiment in the European Parliament, which could also have negative consequences at the EU level.



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