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Soare, S.; Tufis, C.; Spirova, M.

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Entangled Trajectories: The 2024 Electoral Year in Bulgaria and Romania

SORINA SOARE,¹  MARIA SPIROVA²  and CLAUDIU TUFIS³ ¹University of Florence, Florence ²Leiden University, Leiden ³University of Bucharest, Bucharest

Introduction

In physics, it is well established that when photons strike a smooth mirror surface, they reflect at the same angle, producing an image that is reversed yet structurally identical to the original. A comparable, though more complex, mirroring dynamic can be observed in the 2024 electoral landscapes of Bulgaria and Romania, two states that joined the European Union (EU) in 2007 after prolonged and hesitant transitions from authoritarian rule (Baun 2000; Dimitrova 2020; Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Their accession was marked by delayed integration and the imposition of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), aimed at promoting judicial reform, combating corruption, and addressing organized crime. While the final CVM reports, Bulgaria's in 2019 and Romania's in 2022, formally concluded this chapter of conditionality-based engagement, the mechanism's legacy remains contested (Dimitrov and Plachkova 2020).

In this context, in both countries, the 2024 electoral configurations display reversed yet structurally analogous features. On the eve of the 2024 elections, Romania maintained a relatively institutionalized party system, albeit with the growing influence of far-right actors such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), alongside a constellation of smaller yet vocal parties and leaders who mobilized platforms centred on the rejection of mainstream politics, the idealization of the (ethnic) people, and the denunciation of a broad spectrum of perceived cultural, economic, and political threats. Bulgaria, by contrast, had long experienced pronounced party fragmentation and recurring institutional deadlock, often failing to form stable governments.

On this ground, Bulgaria was widely anticipated to continue along a path of political volatility, with persistent party fragmentation and further electoral cycles. The June 2024 general elections – the fourth since the 2007 enlargement – largely confirmed these expectations: Bulgaria once again failed to produce a viable governing majority, prompting the scheduling of yet another snap election in October that eventually led to complex negotiations and a government coalition in which the majority party remains Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). In contrast, Romania's 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections were initially expected to reaffirm the dominance of the traditional alliance between the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL), leaving little space for outsider candidates or emerging political movements. However, the surprise victory of Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate advocating nationalist, anti-EU, and pro-Moscow positions, in the first round of the presidential elections shattered Romania's image as a stable political arena and a reliable

pro-European member state. The situation escalated when the Romanian Constitutional Court (CCR) annulled the first-round results, citing declassified intelligence that revealed a Russian disinformation campaign actively boosted Georgescu's candidacy online. Overnight, Romania shifted from a quiet, compliant EU member to a focal point of European and transatlantic concern. The December 2024 legislative elections further unsettled the political landscape, bringing two new far-right parties into parliament and reducing the combined PSD–PNL vote share to a post-communist low of 43.0% in the Chamber of Deputies.

Ultimately, the electoral outcomes in both Romania and Bulgaria reveal striking parallels: intensifying anti-establishment sentiment, eroding public trust in traditional parties, and growing appeal of non-traditional, often *sui generis*, political actors. These two countries thus illustrate divergent paths converging on a shared crisis of democratic representation, highlighting broader uncertainties along the EU's eastern frontier. In both cases, commitment to the European project has grown increasingly ambivalent. Public scepticism toward continued support for Ukraine is rising, while traditionalist platforms, often combining pro-Russian rhetoric, appeals to conservative values, populist discourse reminiscent of “Make America Great Again,” and occasionally irredentist claims, are reshaping domestic political debates. Bulgaria and Romania reflect each other's democratic challenges in different ways but converge toward a common trajectory of democratic instability.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of the socio-political context in which the 2024 elections were organized. Next, we examine the main themes of the electoral campaigns, with particular attention to EU-related issues. We then present the electoral outcomes. The final section offers concluding reflections on the broader implications of these developments for EU politics.

I. Setting the Stage for the 2024 Elections: Bulgarian and Romanian Insights

In both Romania and Bulgaria, as across much of the EU, the 2024 Spring Eurobarometer (EP Spring Survey 2024) revealed that citizens' primary concerns centred on rising prices and the cost of living. Economic pessimism was widespread, with many anticipating further deterioration in national economies. Alongside inflation and public debt, social issues such as poverty, inequality, and the affordability of energy featured prominently. National surveys identified corruption as persistent concern, and a growing share of the population expressed anxiety over the geopolitical instability in the region. These sentiments are coherent with a higher level of political apathy illustrated by consistently low electoral participation. In Bulgaria, voter turnout has been on the decline since 2009, hovering around 50%, but since 2021 it slipped even further with about 40% of eligible voters turning out in the 2023 legislative elections. Similarly, Romania's 2020 parliamentary elections saw the lowest turnout in its post-communist history, with only 32.0% participation.

This backdrop of political disengagement and economic anxiety might look paradoxical given both countries' substantial economic progress since joining the EU. Bulgaria has maintained steady GDP growth and relatively low public debt through disciplined fiscal policy. Romania has posted some of the highest growth rates in the EU since 2010 (EP Spring Survey 2024). Yet, these macroeconomic achievements obscure persistent structural deficiencies. GDP per capita remains well below the EU average in both countries.

Despite robust growth, poverty and income inequality endure at some of the highest levels in the Union (Word Inequality Database 2023).

This pattern of economic growth without inclusive development is deeply rooted in both Romania's and Bulgaria's longstanding adherence to neoliberal economic orthodoxy, a trajectory established during the preparatory phase for EU accession and maintained consistently after their accession in 2007 (Vachudova and Hooghe 2009). Successive Romanian and Bulgarian governments, regardless of political orientation, have upheld policy frameworks centred on flat taxation, privatization, labour market liberalization, and under-investment in public services. These policies have prevalently benefited urban economic elites while exacerbating regional disparities and weakening social cohesion. In Romania, the limits of this model have become increasingly apparent: growth driven by consumption and rising public sector wages has generated fiscal strain, worsened by weak tax collection and a limited capacity for redistribution. Bulgaria, by contrast, has earned EU commendation for its fiscal prudence. In 2024, the European Commission endorsed Bulgaria's readiness to adopt the euro by January 2026, citing its compliance with key convergence criteria.

Governance deficits continue to erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions in both Romania and Bulgaria. Although EU-driven reforms have spurred modest progress in areas such as judicial independence and anti-corruption efforts, public perception remains deeply sceptical. Both countries consistently rank among the EU's worst performers on corruption indices (Corruption Perception Index 2024), reflecting persistent concerns over elite impunity, clientelism, and institutional opacity. These enduring governance failures have not only undermined trust in formal political institutions but have also created fertile ground for populist and anti-system actors.

Despite this institutional disillusionment, support for Euro-Atlantic integration remains broadly intact. EU and NATO membership continue to enjoy majority approval, though increasingly mediated by ambivalence and conditionality (Mărgărit 2020; Stoyanov and Kostadinova 2021). In particular, socio-cultural divisions have become more salient in shaping public discourse and political polarization. In Bulgaria, anxieties around Islam and perceived Turkish influence have gained traction among nationalist constituencies, while more broadly, the EU's cosmopolitan values are increasingly portrayed as threatening to national traditions and social cohesion. The derogatory concept of *Gayropa* (Stoyanov and Kostadinova 2021) encapsulates the backlash against liberal European norms, while in Romania, the large-scale mobilization of the Coalition for the Family (Mărgărit 2020) illustrates a similar dynamic of conservative resistance.

These socio-cultural cleavages have intensified and morphed in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, adding an economic dimension to identity-based contestation. Inflation surged in both countries, driven largely by energy and food prices, exacerbating existing material insecurities. Political mobilization around these grievances has intensified, as illustrated by the mass protests of Romanian and Bulgarian farmers against the EU's compensation package addressing market disruptions caused by Ukrainian agricultural imports (Bellamy 2023). Agricultural policy has become particularly contentious, frequently framed as a case of external imposition by Brussels. While both Romania and Bulgaria remain formally aligned with the Euro-Atlantic framework, segments of their populations remain receptive to pro-Russian narratives and sceptical of EU decision-making. In Bulgaria, opposition to core EU policies, including the Green Deal, migration, and

Ukraine, has grown significantly, especially among rural and socially conservative voters and some political actors.¹ Similar patterns are evident in Romania, where support for Ukraine has gradually waned, eroded by disinformation campaigns and nationalist discourse emphasizing the difficulties of ethnic Romanians in Ukrainian territory.

The erosion of democratic quality is particularly visible in electoral politics. In Romania, a long-standing pro-European consensus among mainstream parties has masked deeper discontent. As the 2024 elections approached, the Romanian system appeared procedurally functional yet substantively hollowed out. Elections are widely viewed as low-stakes affairs, institutional accountability is diluted by party fragmentation, and formal political representation remains disconnected from societal grievances. Bulgaria exhibits a parallel trajectory, albeit with greater political instability and entrepreneurialism. A somewhat stable party system existed until 2001, but since then fragmentation has been constant. No party has gained majority of seats since 2005, and since 2009, there has not been a full-term government in power. Since 2013 there have been seven caretaker cabinets, with the majority clustered in the post-2021 period. A renewed pool of political elites and challenger parties, coupled with frequent electoral cycles, have further destabilized governance and compounded public disengagement.

The instability in both countries cannot be reduced only to leadership choices or short-term electoral tactics. Instead, it must be situated within the broader landscape of post-communist structural crises: entrenched socio-economic inequalities, fragile state institutions, and prolonged disillusionment with the promises of liberal democracy. The resulting political vacuum has been increasingly occupied by nationalist rhetoric, identity politics, and anti-establishment appeals. In this light, a comparative approach to Romania and Bulgaria is not only warranted by their geographic proximity but also by their shared transitional trajectories.

Both countries emerged from communism with institutional legacies of elite continuity and ambiguous reform. While EU conditionality accelerated formal alignment with Western norms, it did not resolve underlying legitimacy deficits. Over time, the accumulation of grievances, corruption, inequality, peripheral status within the EU, has fuelled frustration with what many perceive as a second-tier membership. This sentiment has been reinforced by the prolonged delay in Schengen accession, only partially resolved in March 2024, and by perceived double standards in the treatment of Eastern European states. Against this backdrop, illiberal movements have gained traction by rejecting the perceived incongruity between EU norms and national identity. The war in Ukraine has further accentuated these tensions, compelling both governments to strike a precarious balance between external commitments and mounting domestic discontent. The intersection of structural fragility, cultural contestation, and geopolitical pressure was clearly visible in the elections in both countries in 2024.

II. Bulgaria: Yet another Round

By 2024 Bulgaria was tired of elections. In the 35 years since democratization, the country has seen 18 rounds of elections with new parties entering Parliament at almost every

¹The ambivalent position of Bulgarian President Radev on the Russia-Ukraine war became a strong concern in Brussels and Washington, leading to a re-consideration of the role of the Presidency in the Bulgarian politics system and consequent limitations on his powers to appoint caretaker cabinets (Idea 2023).

single one of them. The electoral PR system is a relatively permissive system for new entrants despite the 4% electoral threshold. The liberal system of public financing of parties since 2005 has made a clear difference for the emergence and persistence of various small parties (Casal Bértoa and Spirova 2019). Paralleled with unstable party loyalties and ambitious politicians, these have generated a constant re-shuffling in the party system, leading to high electoral volatility.

The first decade of party politics in Bulgaria was dominated by the communist–anti-communist divide, with the Bulgarian Socialists (BSP), successor to the communists, remaining relatively unreformed. At the same time, the nascent anti-communist opposition (Union of Democratic Forces, SDS) experienced chronic factionalism. Although the two big competitors dominated Bulgarian politics during the 1990s, a number of smaller political parties were constantly present in the system, the most important of these being the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) an ethnic party representing the relatively well mobilized Turkish minority (Karasimeonov 2002; Spirova 2007: 74). The second decade of party politics began with the emergence of the National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV), built around the personality of the Bulgarian ex-monarch, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The NDSV swept the 2001 elections and, in alliance with the DPS, took over the government of the country. The NDSV remained in government as a junior coalition partner in 2005–2009 but has since completely disappeared from the political landscape. In 2009, GERB emerged as the dominant political player. GERB self-identified as a Christian Democratic party, focusing on traditional values. GERB's entry into politics was comparable to that of the NDSV in 2001: it had no experience in national politics, it was supported by anti-status-quo voters, and it was led by a charismatic leader, Boyko Borissov. The third decade of party politics thus remained focused on GERB's dominance of politics and its opponents. The party remained in control of the executive until 2021 with a short interruption during 2013–2014 and its leader (and Bulgarian prime minister) Borissov remained quite popular throughout the period (Spirova and Sharenkova-Toshkova 2021).

Challengers came and went at every election but no viable political alternatives to GERB emerged. On the right, several extreme right and nationalist formations appeared, and during the Borissov III tenure (2017–2021) nationalist parties (United Patriots) were included in the governing coalition of the country. On the left, several splinters from the BSP joined the political competition but none left a lasting impact. While discontent with GERB's role in politics seemed to encourage mostly political apathy, as evidenced by the sharp decline in voter turnout,² by the end of the 2010's enough public discontent with the state capture by the party had built up for a stronger challenge to the system.

While 2020 was defined globally by the COVID–19 pandemic, in Bulgaria it also marked the most sustained wave of anti-government protests in over a decade and the beginning of a period of even higher party system and cabinet instability. The demonstrations, which paralyzed Sofia and several major cities during the summer, were directed against Prime Minister Borissov and the entrenched power structures surrounding GERB and its informal ally, DPS (Spirova 2022). The year 2021 saw three parliamentary elections held within a single calendar year, a clear reflection of the troubles the country was in. The inability to form a functioning majority after the April and July contests was rooted in the mutual political isolation of key actors: GERB, increasingly marginalized due to accusations of state capture, and BSP and DPS, whose participation in

governance remained politically unacceptable for most emerging parties. In July, There Is Such a People (ITN) - a newly formed populist party centred around the media persona of Slavi Trifonov - secured a narrow plurality but lacked both the programmatic coherence and the willingness to engage in coalition-building. Its refusal to assume the responsibilities of governance led to a failed attempt to install a minority cabinet, further deepening the institutional deadlock.

Only after the third, November 2021, elections, did a governing formula emerge, producing a precarious 4-party coalition composed of the presidentially endorsed We Continue the Change (PP), ITN, BSP, and fragments of the traditional center-right (SDS). This coalition was the great hope for the political system, as it reflected anti-corruption and Euro-Atlantic commitments, but it was structurally unstable from the outset. Conflicts generated by the members' competing political agendas were exacerbated by the onset of the Russia–Ukraine war and internal fragmentation appeared quickly. By mid-2022, the coalition had collapsed. New elections followed in late 2022, but again failed to produce a political accountable cabinet, allowing the caretaker cabinets of President Radev to continue to govern the country. Following another round of early elections in early 2023, a cabinet was agreed upon but brought its own problems. Seen as a political creation artificially cobbled together (*sglobka*) under the influence of various Western actors, the Cabinet made of GERB and PP struggled with increasing opposition and declining public image.

When the coalition collapsed in early 2024, the Bulgarian electorate had little to keep it motivated. Yet, as time demonstrated, it still had to go to the polls twice in order to see a new, politically accountable cabinet, come to power in early 2025. These two rounds of elections once again exposed the persistent challenges in Bulgarian politics: deep polarization, reflected in the growing presence of nationalist parties in Parliament, and a broader societal tension around the defense of traditional cultural, moral, and religious values. This dynamic manifests in ambivalent attitudes toward Russia, LGBTQ+ rights, and migration, issues often framed as part of a struggle to preserve cultural distinctiveness against values perceived as externally imposed, particularly from the EU. In Bulgaria's case, Russia plays a unique role in this narrative due to historical ties dating back to the country's independence, with recent years seeing a revival of pro-Russian sentiment positioned as a counterpoint to Western liberal norms. At the same time Bulgaria made progress toward its EU integration: it became a member of the Schengen Area for air and sea travel on 31 March 2024, and on land as of March 2025. It also advanced towards the goal of joining the Eurozone, although strong divisions on this issue are fuelled by nationalist and pro-Russian political actors.

The first elections of 2024 (seventh since 2021), were held on June 9, combining elections to the EP with the early elections for national parliament. In terms of turnout, this allowed the EP elections to benefit from the national elections: at 33,8% it maintained similar levels to the last 2019 EP elections (32,6%). Bulgaria sent six MEPs to the European People's Party, three to the liberal Renew Europe, three to the Europe of sovereign nations group, two to Socialists & Democrats, one to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group and, lastly, two non-affiliated MEPs. Naturally, however, the competition for

²Voter turnout in Bulgarian parliamentary elections has not been that high since 1991: from 83.9% to 38.9% in 2025. Upward reversals were the 2001 elections (66.6%) and the 2009 elections (60.6%). Interestingly, both linked to the emergence of single leader focused parties (NDSV and GERB, respectively).

the EP seats was dominated by the issues of the national elections. The Central Election Commission (CEC) required parties to submit at least 2,500 valid voter signatures to register but could use a single list for both elections. 32 parties registered and competed in the national elections for the votes of 34.4% (2268849) of the Bulgarian electorate, the lowest ever turnout in national elections.

In June 2024, seven parties crossed the electoral threshold to enter the 50th National Assembly, of which six had been in the previous parliament (see Table 1). GERB-SDS maintained its plurality position in the national assembly, the DPS emerged second, leaving PP-DB in the third place. PP-DP lost about half of the votes it had held in 2023, clearly suffering from its participation in the *sglobka* cabinet, in stark contrast to GERB which seemed to not suffer much. Nationalist and pro-Russian Vazrazhdane, the BSP and ITN generally maintained their positions from the previous legislature. The big surprise of the elections was the entry of Velichie (Greatness) in Parliament, with 4.7% of the votes, after pre-electoral polls failed to predict it passing the 4% electoral threshold. Velichie was formed around the personality of Ivelin Mihaylov, a businessman from the Varna region, who had developed a historical patriotic amusement park in the village of Neofit Rilski, near Varna. The party campaigned on patriotism, EU scepticism, and populism. Cabinet negotiations promised to be difficult and delivered on this promise, with neither GERB-SDS nor any other of the leading party factions able to secure the political support for its proposed cabinets. New early elections were scheduled for October 27, 2024.

In many ways, the October elections did not differ much from the June ones: 29 parties competed at the elections in October and nine entered the Parliament (see Table 2). Turnout was 38,9%, slightly up from June. Just as in June, no major disruptions occurred, and the Central Electoral Commission only reported some technical issues with voting machines in a small number of polling stations.

The outcome of the two 2024 elections in Bulgaria, however, provided 3 major takeaways. The first one is the repeated plurality position of GERB in the political system. Despite various allegations and open discussions of the clientelist networks that the party builds, or maybe even exactly because of them, the party continues to maintain a decisive grip on Bulgarian society and continues to deliver the vote. Its pro-EU, pro-NATO, populist and patriotic, but not nationalist positions, its persistent anti-Russian stance, and its

Table 1: Elections to the Bulgarian Parliament, June 2024.

| Party | Percentage of seats | Number of seats | Change |
|---|---------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Citizens for European Development-Union of Democratic Forces (GERB-SDS) | 24.7% | 68 | -1 |
| DPS | 17.1% | 47 | +11 |
| We Continue the Change- Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) | 14.3% | 39 | -25 |
| Revival (Vazrazhdane) | 13.8% | 38 | +1 |
| BSP | 7.1% | 19 | -4 |
| ITN | 6.0% | 16 | +5 |
| Greatness (<i>Velichie</i>) | 4.7% | 13 | +13 (new) |

Source: Central Election Commission <https://results.cik.bg/europe2024/rezultati/index.html>

Table 2: Elections to the Bulgarian Parliament, October 2024.

| Party | Percentage of seats | Number of seats | Change |
|---|---------------------|-----------------|--------|
| GERB-UDF | 27.5% | 66 | -2 |
| PP-DB | 15.0% | 36 | -3 |
| Revival (Vazrazhdane) | 13.8% | 33 | -5 |
| Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (DPS-NN) | 12.0% | 29 | -18* |
| BSP | 7.9% | 19 | 0 |
| Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (APS) | 7.9% | 19 | -28* |
| ITN | 7.5% | 17 | +1 |
| Morality, Unity, Honour (MECh) | 7.1% | 11 | +11 |
| Greatness (<i>Velichie</i>) | 4.2% | 10 | -3 |

Source: Central Election Commission <https://results.cik.bg/pe202410/rezultati/index.html> *Reflects the change from the DPS vote in June 2024. Results reflect a Constitutional court decision 33/2024.

proclivity to engage in state institutional capture and “soft decisionism” but not in open democratic backsliding, makes it a reliable partner for Brussels. It remains the one stable pole in the constant replay of electoral games in the country, solidifying its position of the “known” quantity. This makes the dismantling or even disruption of its corrupt clientelist networks in the country quite unlikely.

A second important development in the same direction is one of the reasons for the further fragmentation of Parliament: the major split in the party traditionally representing the Turkish minority DPS. Details of the split are nothing new, at least not at the surface: following a major leadership fall-out in the summer of 2024, two entities competed in October 2024: DPS-NN, led by the Delyan Peevski and the and APS, led by the founder of the party Ahmed Dogan. While the parties slightly increased their combined share of seats in Parliament, bitter personal and organizational disputes tarnished the image of the party. However, more importantly, the continued dominance of DPS-NN by Delyan Peevski bodes is a further demonstration about the importance of state capture to Bulgarian politics. He notoriously represents the fusion of political power, business interests, media control, and judicial influence in the country and for many Bulgarians, Peevski is the embodiment of the corruption problem. Still, he continues to be a most relevant political actor, signalling that true political change remains unattainable.

The third takeaway from the elections is the continued re-generation in the extreme right segment of the party system. In the 2023 elections Vazrazhdane (Revival) was the only party of openly nationalist position in Parliament, but in 2024, two parties took away from its votes and made it into Parliament: Velichie (Greatness) in June and MECh and Velichie in October. The newest entry into Parliament, Moral, Edinstvo, Chest/Morality, Unity, Honor (MECh, meaning sword in Bulgarian) is a nationalist, populist and euro-sceptic party founded earlier in 2024 by Rosen Vasilev, former MP from ITN and PP. Similar to *Velichie*, it got many votes among the younger voters, using TikTok to promote its anti-establishment messages. However, unable to fill two of the seats it won, the party faction in Parliament was disbanded and the MPs elected on its ticket became independent. The story of MECh is very typical of the new party formations in the country.

Taken together, these developments do not paint an optimistic picture of Bulgaria's politics. It remains to be seen how stable the governing coalition formed in early 2025 by GERB, BSP and ITN will be, and where it will lead the country. While progress to the Eurozone has followed entry into Schengen, social divisions in the country continue to accompany this progress making future prospects uncertain.

III. Romania's Sandwich Elections

Since joining the EU in 2007, Romania's democratic system has undergone a complex evolution, marked by both institutional consolidation and emerging structural vulnerabilities (e.g. economy, justice) (Ghinea and Ionescu 2024). Over the past 36 years, the country has held 10 regular national elections characterized by relatively stable competition between two dominant parties: PSD and PNL. Despite their ideological differences, the main post-communist mainstream parties have traditionally converged on key strategic priorities, particularly European integration and neoliberal economic policies.

A turning point in Romania's party system occurred in 2015 with the reform of party law, which significantly lowered the barriers to party registration. This liberalization opened the political arena to new entrants and led to a wave of party system fragmentation. Electoral volatility and the rise of challenger parties followed in the 2016, 2020, and 2024 elections. The effective number of electoral parties increased markedly from 3.8 in 2016 to 5.4 in 2020. A similar trend can be observed in the effective number of parliamentary parties, which rose from 3.5 (2016) to 4.3 (2020). The combined vote share of mainstream parties has steadily declined, from 90.2% in 2008 to just over 60% by 2020. Challenger (e.g. anti-corruption/anti-establishment) and far-right parties have capitalized on this erosion of traditional party dominance, moving from political marginality in 2008 to gathering over 25% of the vote in 2020. This fragmentation has rendered single-party governments impossible, necessitating fragile and often unstable coalitions, which in turn has exacerbated executive volatility and policy incoherence (Stan and Zaharia 2025).

The political agreement signed in 2021 between PSD, PNL, and UDMR fuelled this instability by implementing a rotating premiership: the PNL was to lead the government until 2023, after which a PSD prime minister would take over until the 2024 elections. While designed to ensure continuity, the arrangement has drawn public criticism and contributed to deepening political apathy and low trust in institutions, as consistently evidenced in public opinion surveys in 2023 and 2024. In this context, Romania's diaspora, estimated at 4 to 6 million citizens, has remained a critical electoral force. Since the 2009 presidential elections, when diaspora votes contributed decisively to re-elect incumbent President Traian Băsescu, this external electorate has influenced domestic political outcomes in ways that challenge traditional geographic assumptions about political power.

As Romania entered the high-stakes 2024 electoral cycle, the ruling grand coalition was strategically positioned to manage and dominate the compressed electoral calendar. For the first time since 2004, local, presidential, legislative, as well as EP elections were all scheduled within the same year. Testing their solidity through a joint list for the EP elections, PSD and PNL confirmed their control. However, they decided to field separate candidates for the presidential and parliamentary elections later in the year. Meanwhile, Bucharest's incumbent mayor, Nicușor Dan, an independent candidate previously known

as the founding leader of the 2016 born challenger party, Union Save Romania, appeared credible for re-election, a development that would gain strategic significance in the months ahead.

The EP elections also revealed the resilience and growth of far-right forces. AUR secured six seats and joined the ECR group in Brussels, marking a significant strategic success. One of AUR's leading MEPs was elected Vice-Chair of the ECR Group, while the party leader, George Simion, was appointed Executive Vice President of the ECR Party. Equally relevant was the electoral performance of SOS Romania, a party relaunched by former AUR senator Diana Œoşoacă, which won two seats in the EP, largely propelled by diaspora votes. Both AUR and SOS Romania campaigned on platforms emphasizing national sovereignty, traditional values, and opposition to perceived "globalist" influences. AUR framed its message around conservative Christianity and Romanian identity, while expressing criticism of Ukraine without adopting overtly Eurosceptic positions. Unlike other parties, SOS Romania, led by Diana Œoşoacă, openly promoted Eurosceptic views, at times even calling for Romania to leave the EU. The party also adopted a clearly pro-Russian position and supported irredentist ideas, claims over territories beyond Romania's current borders, based on historical or national arguments, in particular with regard to Ukraine. While the mainstream political parties mostly ignored the EP elections and focused on local issues, the smaller parties campaigned on European issues, which might explain part of their success in EP elections (Tufiş 2024).

The 2024 electoral strategy developed by PSD and PNL has been called the sandwich elections because of how they structured the timing of the votes. By placing the first round of the presidential election just before the December 1 legislative elections, and the presidential runoff right after (on December 8), they effectively *sandwiched* the parliamentary vote between the two rounds of the presidential race. This sequence was designed to reinforce their dominance by maintaining campaign momentum, mobilizing voters over a longer period, and allowing for strategic coordination between the two parties across both elections. One such manoeuvre involved PSD's alleged informal support for George Simion, AUR's presidential candidate, in the first round, a strategy meant to replicate the 2000 presidential run-off scenario, where Ion Iliescu defeated far-right candidate Corneliu Vadim Tudor. The expectation was that a polarizing far-right candidate would ease the path to victory for PSD's Marcel Ciolacu in the second round. However, as the poem goes, "the best-laid schemes of mice and men /Go oft awry, /And leave us nothing but grief and pain/For promised joy!" (Burns 1786). The unfolding events introduced a cascade of surprises, underscoring the unpredictability of an increasingly volatile political landscape.

The Romanian presidential elections were scheduled for 24 November, with a runoff set for 8 December. Concurrently, citizens of Bucharest were called to vote in a local referendum initiated by Mayor Nicuşor Dan. The referendum posed three questions: the first concerned the allocation of financial resources between the General City Hall and the sector administrations; the second addressed the procedure for issuing building permits; and the third proposed the implementation of a drug prevention program in schools. The initiative was framed as an attempt to increase civic participation in local governance and to clarify competencies within the capital's fragmented administrative structure.

According to the Romanian Constitution, the President is elected through a two-round majority system and may serve up to two 5-year terms. The office holds substantial powers,

particularly in the realm of foreign policy: the President serves as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, leads Romania's international diplomacy, appoints the Prime Minister (subject to parliamentary approval), may challenge legislation before the Constitutional Court, and has the authority to call consultative referenda. Fifteen candidates entered the presidential race, including four independents. In October 2024, the Constitutional Court disqualified Diana Șoșoacă from running. The ruling sparked significant controversy, marking a departure from the Court's prior jurisprudence, which had traditionally assessed candidates' eligibility on formal criteria alone. This decision introduced a substantive evaluation of compatibility with constitutional principles, setting a major legal precedent by arguing that Șoșoacă's views and actions rendered her incompatible with the office of head of state (Iancu 2025).

The presidential campaign centred largely on broad socio-economic issues, with a cross-party emphasis on maintaining low taxes and increasing public spending, particularly on pensions. The war in Ukraine also featured prominently in the debates. A notable theme, present in Romanian politics (Soare and Tufiș 2023) but rarely addressed so openly in Romanian elections, was the question of LGBTQ+ rights and the legal recognition of civil partnerships. Almost all candidates, reflecting the country's prevailing conservatism, argued that Romania is not yet prepared to take such a step. The sole exception came from the Save Romania Union (USR) candidate, who voiced support for civil partnerships. EU-related topics were largely absent from the core campaign discourse, although some candidates raised concerns regarding the defence of national interests, particularly in relation to agricultural imports and broader economic sovereignty. The campaign was overshadowed by multiple scandals that eroded public trust and shifted focus away from policy issues. These included controversies over undisclosed foreign connections, legislative transparency concerns, high-profile corruption and bribery allegations, public altercations between political figures, and the abrupt withdrawal of a major party from government.

Pre-election surveys indicated a tight race, with the candidates backed by PSD, AUR, and USR all projected as potential contenders for the second round. However, the actual outcome of the first round defied expectations. Călin Georgescu emerged as the frontrunner with 22.9% of the vote, followed by the USR candidate Elena Lasconi with 19.2%. For the first time since the 1990 presidential election, the PSD candidate failed to reach the runoff, marking a historic absence of any major party candidate in the second round.

A breakdown of the vote by constituency reveals further nuances. At the national level, Georgescu led with 21.0%, followed by the PSD's candidate, Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu in the second place and Lasconi in third place. Contrary to initial forecasts, the AUR candidate, George Simion, finished fourth with approximately 15% of the national vote. Among the diaspora, the results indicated the pervasiveness of Georgescu's success with 43.2% of the votes, followed by Lasconi with 27.0%, while Simion arrived third, with 12.0% (see Table 3). These results underscore the divergent political preferences between the diaspora and the domestic electorate, while also confirming the increasingly decisive role of the external vote in shaping national electoral outcomes. Moreover, the election reaffirmed the limited appeal of traditional high-profile politicians, those with long-standing party seniority and established visibility in central politics, highlighting a growing public appetite for outsider or non-traditional candidates.

Table 3: Results of Romanian presidential elections, 2019–2025.

| Election Round | Candidate | Party | Previous Political Role | Votes | Vote Share (%) |
|-------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 2019 1st Round | Klaus Iohannis | PNL | Incumbent President | 3,485,292 | 37.8% |
| | Viorica Dăncilă | PSD | Prime Minister, PSD President | 2,051,725 | 22.3% |
| | Dan Barna | USR PLUS Alliance | MP, USR President | 1,384,450 | 15.0% |
| | Mircea Diaconu | Independent | MEP | 815,201 | 8.9% |
| | Teodor Paleologu | Independent | N/A | 527,098 | 5.7% |
| | Turnout | — | — | — | 51.2% |
| 2019 2nd Round | Klaus Iohannis | — | — | 6,509,135 | 66.1% |
| | Viorica Dăncilă | — | — | 3,339,922 | 33.9% |
| | Turnout | — | — | — | 55.1% |
| 2024 1st Round | Călin Georgescu | Independent | N/A | 2,120,401 | 22.9% |
| | Elena Lasconi | USR | Mayor, USR President | 1,772,500 | 19.2% |
| | Marcel Ciolacu | PSD | PM, PSD President | 1,769,760 | 19.2% |
| | George Simion | AUR | MP, AUR President | 1,281,325 | 13.9% |
| | Nicolae Ciucă | PNL | MP, PNL President | 811,952 | 8.8% |
| | Turnout | — | — | — | 52.6% |
| 2024 2nd Round | Cancelled by the CCR on 6 December | | | | |
| 2025 1st Round | George Simion | AUR | MP, AUR President | 3,862,761 | 41.0% |
| | Nicușor Dan | Independent | Mayor | 1,979,767 | 21.0% |
| | Crin Antonescu | PSD + PNL | N/A | 1,892,930 | 20.0% |
| | Victor Ponta | Independent | N/A | 1,230,164 | 13.0% |
| | Turnout | — | — | — | 53.2% |
| 2025 2nd Round | Nicușor Dan | Independent | Mayor | 6,168,642 | 53.6% |
| | George Simion | AUR | MP, AUR President | 5,339,053 | 46.4% |
| | Turnout | — | — | — | 64.7% |

Source: <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/prezidentiale24112024/pv/romania/results>

Călin Georgescu was not an outsider in the conventional sense, but rather a non-traditional candidate with longstanding visibility in Romania's political landscape. Active in politics since the 1990s, Georgescu held various high-level official

appointments and was closely associated with the PSD and, more recently, the AUR party, having once been publicly proposed as its candidate for prime minister. However, AUR and Georgescu severed ties in 2022 following increasing controversy over his perceived pro-Russian stance, outspoken criticism of NATO, and alleged ideological affinities with the interwar fascist Legionary Movement, banned under Romanian law. Initially sidelined from mainstream political debates, Georgescu's candidacy gained traction through an extensive online ecosystem of conspiracy theories, encompassing anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives. His public admiration for authoritarian leaders further amplified concerns.

Shortly before the first electoral round, reports emerged of suspicious activity across social media platforms. Days later, the Romanian government declassified intelligence documents confirming that a foreign state had engaged in a coordinated cyber-influence campaign to manipulate public opinion in Georgescu's favour. On December 6, 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the presidential elections, citing substantial irregularities. Decision No. 32 came through self-referral by the Court. Paragraph 5 of the ruling notes the Court's review of five classified documents presented during the Supreme Council of National Defence meeting on 28 November, subsequently declassified by outgoing President Klaus Iohannis. Widespread confusion followed a 5 December press release from the Court, suggesting it would only review appeals filed by candidates reaching the runoff stage. This was widely interpreted as an implicit invitation for USR candidate Elena Lasconi to submit an appeal. However, Lasconi reportedly considered it strategically preferable to face Georgescu in the second round rather than challenge the legality of the process. With voting abroad already underway, the Court opted for immediate action, citing the severity of the irregularities and arguing that delaying a decision until post-election validation would have risked a constitutional crisis had Georgescu emerged victorious. The ruling sparked political uproar, with far-right group and progressive challengers like USR accusing the establishment of subverting democracy. Apart from a technical annulment in Austria, the Romanian case represents an unprecedented scenario in EU electoral history, significantly undermining the country's image as a stable, EU-aligned democracy.

What had initially appeared to be a relatively predictable electoral cycle turned into a major democratic rupture. Although EU membership was not a central campaign theme, the rise of Georgescu forced these issues to the forefront. His platform, an idiosyncratic blend of ecological nationalism, Orthodox spirituality (Trifan 2025), and sovereigntist

Table 4: Elections to the Romanian Parliament, December 2024.

| Party | Percentage of seats | Number of seats | Change |
|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|--------|
| PSD | 22.0% | 86 | -24 |
| AUR | 18.0% | 63 | +30 |
| PNL | 13.2% | 49 | -44 |
| USR* | 12.4% | 40 | -15 |
| SOS Romania | 7.4% | 28 | +28 |
| POT | 6.5% | 24 | +24 |
| UDMR | 6.3% | 22 | +1 |
| Turnout | | | 48.3% |

Notes: <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/parlamentare01122024/pv/romania/results>.

rhetoric, portrayed Romania as subjugated to the interests of Brussels and Washington. Georgescu characterized Romania as a “slave” to the EU and accused NATO of attempting to drag the country into a war with Russia. His denunciation of the Deveselu missile shield as a “diplomatic shame,” coupled with his outright rejection of NATO membership, marked a significant departure from Romania’s longstanding pro-Euro-Atlantic consensus. Central to his campaign was the call for a “great awakening” of the Romanian nation, invoking the prime ministers of Slovakia and Hungary as exemplars of national sovereignty. He further accused the Romanian state of neglecting its national interest by continuing economic and military support for Ukraine.

The Constitutional Court’s decision came just 5 days after the parliamentary elections, underscoring the political turmoil following the unexpected results of the presidential first round. In the final days of the campaign, public discourse became overwhelmingly centred on Călin Georgescu’s profile, fuelled by media revelations of a coordinated social media campaign on TikTok designed to boost his visibility. Investigations also exposed his ties to a broader network associated with Romanian fascist milieus, amplifying concerns about the rising influence of extremist actors.

In the parliamentary elections, held on 1 December, nestled between the 2 presidential rounds, 31 parties and alliances, along with 19 ethnic minority organizations, competed for the 330 seats at the Chamber of Deputies and the 136 at the Senate, with MPs elected in 43 multi-member constituencies, including the Romanian diaspora, using proportional representation on party lists. Overseas voting for the presidential elections began on Friday at 7:00 AM local time and continued until Sunday at 9:00 PM local time. This extended voting period sparked debate and was subsequently adjusted for the 2025 rerun of the presidential election, introducing a 9:00 PM Romania-time cutoff for diaspora voting. The change was justified by concerns that early publication of exit polls and rapid vote counting in Romania could influence voter behaviour abroad, encouraging strategic voting.

The key electoral issues largely mirrored the platforms of presidential candidates, emphasizing limited taxation, increased salaries, and pension hikes. Across the spectrum, the mainstream parties and USR advocated for a more proactive Romanian role within the EU and strengthened bilateral ties with the United States, albeit with varying emphases. The relationship with the Republic of Moldova featured prominently, particularly among far-right factions promoting unionist agendas. Mainstream parties and USR supported increased defence spending, while far-right groups generally expressed scepticism or outright opposition. AUR’s stance encapsulated a nationalist rhetoric centred on reclaiming national dignity and uniting around core values of family, faith, nation, and freedom, coupled with a call for peace both domestically and globally. Similarly, the Party of Young People (POT) prioritized youth, family, and entrepreneurship, with specific commitments to investing in sports and social infrastructure. SOS Romania maintained a firm anti-EU and anti-NATO discourse, reflecting its staunch sovereigntist/extremist position.

What had been a relatively subdued campaign shifted dramatically after the presidential first round, as competition for Călin Georgescu’s voter base intensified, particularly among far-right parties, while all parties reaffirmed their commitment to traditional values and a more assertive stance toward the EU. Penalized by their role in government and a series of corruption scandals, the mainstream PSD and PNL lost significant parliamentary ground, ceding 68 deputy and 30 senator seats compared to 2020 (Stan and Zaharia 2025).

In contrast, AUR, SOS Romania, and POT gained prominence, collectively securing 32.4% of votes in the Chamber (see Table 4). The PSD and PNL's loss of majority control in both chambers forced them to form a government reliant on the support of UDMR and ethnic minority deputies, reflecting a fragmented and polarized parliamentary landscape.

In the aftermath of the elections, the structural crisis of Romania's mainstream parties became unmistakable. PSD, PNL, and UDMR together garnered only 43% of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies, down sharply from 60.8% in the previous cycle. In contrast, the bloc of challenger parties, comprising the progressive USR and a reconfigured far-right axis of three sovereigntist formations, surpassed the traditional parties with a combined 44.7%, signalling a major shift in political allegiances. Electoral volatility reached a peak, marking the collapse of what was once a relatively closed and stable party system. Regionally, long-standing strongholds began to erode: PSD's dominance in the South and Southeast and PNL's control in Transylvania and Banat weakened, largely due to growing difficulties in mobilizing turnout in areas marked by entrenched socio-economic disparities, particularly in education and healthcare. The diaspora vote, especially from EU member states, reinforced this trend of anti-establishment sentiment.

Rather than signalling Euroscepticism, this vote reflected deep dissatisfaction with domestic governance, pervasive corruption, and the opacity of political elites. The electoral outcome also reflected the growing politicisation of the EU, with contestation intensifying across ideological lines. Traditionalist values gained renewed centrality, echoing a broader illiberal turn seen across post-communist Europe. This shift was accompanied by increasingly harsh Eurosceptical rhetoric, particularly among the far-right sovereigntist bloc. However, the post-election period revealed structural vulnerabilities among the new entrants: both SOS Romania and POT experienced significant defections and internal fragmentation. Despite these setbacks, AUR remained the dominant force in the far-right camp and, as of early 2025, continued to lead in national polls, though its credibility was shaken by a major internal split around co-founder Claudiu Târziu.

The reorganization of the presidential elections in May 2025, following the decision of the Central Electoral Bureau to not validate Călin Georgescu's candidacy (Buti and Radu 2023), brought the victory of Nicusor Dan, the mayor of Bucharest defeating George Simion in the runoff (Table 3). Dan's victory came at the end of a campaign increasingly framed as a referendum on Romania's future within the EU. This narrative helped mobilize significant support, culminating in 64.7 turnout in the runoff, an increase of 11.5 percentage points compared to the first round. The surge in participation, visible already during the "sandwich elections" of November and December, reflected not only growing public interest in electoral politics but also deepening political polarization. This polarization intensified in the wake of Decision No. 32 of 6 December 2024, triggering widespread street protests and fuelling contentious debates in both public and private spheres. Romania's once stable, although imperfectly functional, democracy abruptly revealed its underlying vulnerabilities.

Conclusions

The 2024 (with the 2025 follow-up) electoral cycle marked a pivotal rupture in Romanian political development and a moment of convergence with neighbouring Bulgaria's entrenched instability. Romania and Bulgaria now appear structurally convergent: both

countries grapple with the erosion of mainstream party legitimacy, the weaponization of identity politics, and deepening citizen disillusionment with the EU's promise of equitable development and governance reform.

While Bulgaria had already normalized political volatility, with 8 snap elections in 4 years, Romania experienced a sudden and dramatic shift following the unexpected first-round presidential victory of Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate aligned with anti-EU, pro-Russian, and ultra-nationalist positions. What had seemed a routine presidential contest was redefined overnight as a test of democratic resilience and institutional capacity. The 2024 elections took on the character of a "critical election" in the classic sense proposed by V.O. Key (1955), realigning the party system and revealing deep-seated fractures in voter alignments. Traditional parties, already weakened by corruption scandals and governance fatigue, suffered major losses. In contrast, a pool of far-right political parties surged in both visibility and electoral strength, capitalizing on anti-elite resentment, fatigue with the EU integration model, and pervasive socio-economic grievances. The presidential election re-run in May 2025 confirmed this shift: mainstream parties struggled to remobilize their constituencies, indicating not just a temporary disruption but a more profound recalibration of Romania's political field.

The 2 cases shed light on a broader regional trend. The electoral outcomes in both countries reflect growing fragmentation, rising populist illiberalism, and increasingly vocal Euroscepticism, across both left and right ideological registers. The geography of the vote in both states reveals that public frustration is not merely economic in nature; it reflects a perceived political failure of both post-communist transition and EU membership to deliver broad-based prosperity and reduce inequalities, particularly in access to health, education, and local infrastructure. These frustrations have been skilfully appropriated by new challenger parties. On the radical right, opposition to green transition policies, defence of national control over strategic resources, and resistance to EU market preferences for Ukrainian agricultural products have become central narratives. Although overall public opinion remains formally pro-European, criticism of the EU has become more pragmatic, more emotionally resonant, and increasingly decoupled from traditional ideological cleavages.

Elections in the mirror, Romania and Bulgaria expose the limits of post-accession EU conditionality in fostering genuine democratic consolidation. Persistent corruption, judicial inefficiencies, institutional fragility, and unresolved social inequalities continue to drive electoral volatility and illiberal contestation. This reveals not only a shared democratic crisis at the EU's Eastern periphery but also a distorted form of integration, where formal compliance conceals a progressive and constant erosion of democratic substance. Delays in Schengen accession, endemic corruption, and the marginalization of rural and peripheral regions have entrenched a sense of second-tier EU membership. The partial Schengen entry in March 2024 arrived too late to reverse widespread cynicism. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has intensified internal tensions, placing both governments at the crossroads of external commitments and domestic dissatisfaction. Within this evolving context, illiberal movements gained support not only by politicizing liberal norms, but by reinterpreting sovereignty, justice, and dignity through the prism of national tradition and scepticism toward supranational governance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence:

Claudiu Tufis, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania.

email: claudiu.tufis@unibuc.ro

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