Alliances, Ballots and Continuity

28 JUNE 2025

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18th of May: A night to remember for Romania

18th of May marks an important night for Romanians, as the polls were very close between the two finalists. The results reflected a clear victory for the centrist independent candidate Nicușor Dan, who won with 53.6% of the vote against his rival George Simion, a far-right nationalist. Why was this day and these elections more special than others? As the numbers showed, it was a night of mobilization for Romanians, with a turnout of 65%, being the highest since 1996. For many, the victory of Nicușor Dan spared the country from sliding into a far-right direction. George Simion was widely known during his campaign for his nationalist visions, his Eurosceptic

stance, and his openness toward Russia. In contrast, Nicușor Dan, a pro-EU and pro-NATO figure, was greeted on the night of his victory by hundreds of Romanians waving EU flags in the streets of Bucharest. During his speech, he promised to fight corruption and to continue supporting Romania's Euro-Atlantic direction.

Many Romanians saw these elections, just like the ones annulled in December, as a decisive moment for the future of the country and its political direction, especially when it comes to NATO and the EU. A dramatic political shift in Bucharest could have undermined Romania's role as one of NATO's key regional security players. Romania is one of the alliance's top spenders, operating F-16 fighter jets, purchasing M1 Abrams tanks from the U.S., and preparing to open one of NATO's largest air bases in the region. The country has also contributed troops to international missions, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Romania has played a crucial role in sending weapons and humanitarian aid to Kyiv. Its access to the Black Sea gives it a key logistical position in supporting Ukraine and securing NATO's eastern flank.

Nicușor Dan now hopes to facilitate the formation of a new pro-European government that aligns with his policy goals, including reducing the fiscal deficit and maintaining strong support for NATO.

Start of June, start of a new chapter for Poland

In Poland's case, the head-to-head race came down to former director of the WW2 Museum, Karol Nawrocki, and mayor of Warsaw, Rafał Trzaskowski. On one hand, Nawrocki represent the conservative wing of Polish politics, being rather sceptical of deeper EU integration, and most importantly, vehemently opposed to Ukraine joining NATO. On the other, Trzaskowski, is a centre-liberal politician, which, throughout his campaign, strongly advocated for stronger support for Ukraine, and supported a strong pro-EU stance.

Aside from these clear contentious issues, and the evident social stances associated with the afferent political leanings of each candidate, with either choice, Poland's NATO future at least looks interestingly similar. Both candidates supported increased military spending, and both candidates advocated for deeper US relations in terms of military support.

Whereas Romania, considering the result, was treading on an uncertain defence posture future, Poland, no matter the candidate elected, could have easily relied on a strong commitment on defence spending. Ultimately, Nawrocki was elected as president, the people signalling that they want a Poland which is militarily strong, American leaning, and slimly engaged in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But why was the pro-European able to lose in front of the conservative, as opposed to Romania's outcome? People thus, staunchly voiced their continued appreciator for NATO, but as opposed to the broad centre-right consensus in Europe, have responded negatively to

the idea of deeper engagement in Ukraine, and stronger European Union integration.

NATO's current challenges and the role of eastern allies

Between many challenges that NATO faces, many of them are relevant for the eastern flank, exactly where Romania and Poland are located and play essential roles. Among them is credible deterrence and defence against a revanchist Russia. Poland now hosts forward-deployed U.S. troops and is expanding its military footprint, while Romania continues to support the Black Sea missile-defence shield at Deveselu and serve as a hub for NATO logistics. Their combined presence helps anchor NATO's 'eastern posture'.

Both nations also lead in defence spending, consistently meeting or exceeding the famous 2% of GDP benchmark. At the NATO Summit in The Hague that took place between 24-25 June this year, the organization agreed to raise the target dramatically, from 2% to 5% of GDP by 2035 (3.5% for core defence, 1.5% for infrastructure, resilience and innovation). This was presented as a transformational step toward stronger collective defence, although some countries like Spain had reservations. Another topic that was discussed at the summit was the support for Ukraine, which remains a cornerstone of alliance coherence. Here, the leaders reaffirmed "ironclad" backing for Ukraine, and agreed that national contributions toward Ukraine's defence counts toward the 5% goal. Additionally, both Romania and Poland are one of the front countries in delivering humanitarian and military aid across Eastern Europe since February 2022.

Conclusion

We have thus seen how the elections in Romania and Poland have reshaped not only the national leadership and political directions of the countries, but also the broader dynamic of NATO, especially on the eastern flank. While Romania chose a pro-European president and Poland shifted to a more conservative one, the alliance now stands at a crossroads. As NATO now moves toward an increase in defence spending and deeper commitments, especially in support for Ukraine, the roles of Cotroceni Palace and Belweder Palace remain crucial. While the direction has been set, how these countries will navigate upcoming challenges (at both national and international level) and how it will maintain cohesion within the alliance is yet to be seen.