

Macroeconomic and
Strategic Analysis

Quarterly Report
UniCredit Bank



8 July 2024



On autopilot throughout the year-long election campaign



Outlook – We expect the economy to grow by 2.4% in 2024 and by 1.3% in 2025, with the government tightening fiscal policy only after this year's elections. Domestic demand will drive growth this year, with exports likely to play a more important role in 2025. We expect inflation to miss the target in 2024-25, with the NBR cutting rates to 6.5% in 2024. We see EUR-RON moving to a 5.00-5.10 in 1Q25. The current governing coalition is likely to win another mandate in December.

The information contained in this report represents UniCredit Group's view upon Romania, as it was included in the CEE Quarterly report, distributed in June 2024. The report includes updates as of the date of the publication.

On autopilot throughout the year-long election campaign

The PSD and PNL won the local and EP elections...

Local and European-parliament (EP) elections held on 9 June were won by the ruling Social Democrats (PSD) and Liberals (PNL), which ran on a common list for the EP and won 11 and 8 MEPs, respectively. The PSD gained 3 more seats and the PNL lost 2 compared to 2019. The sovereigntist, Eurosceptic Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) will have 6 MEPs (all new), the United Right (DU) will have 3 (down from 10 in 2019), the protest, pro-Russian SOS Romania will have 2 (both new), the Hungarian Minority Party (UDMR) will have 2 and one seat will belong to an independent.

... and are likely to form the next government

Local elections confirmed the PSD and the PNL as the strongest parties, together winning over 60% of the vote for local and county councils. However, the PSD had a much stronger showing than the PNL, which leads us to believe that the two parties will run separately in the presidential elections (in November-December) and parliamentary elections (December). We see the two parties forming the next government with help from the UDMR or the AUR (or splinters from the AUR).

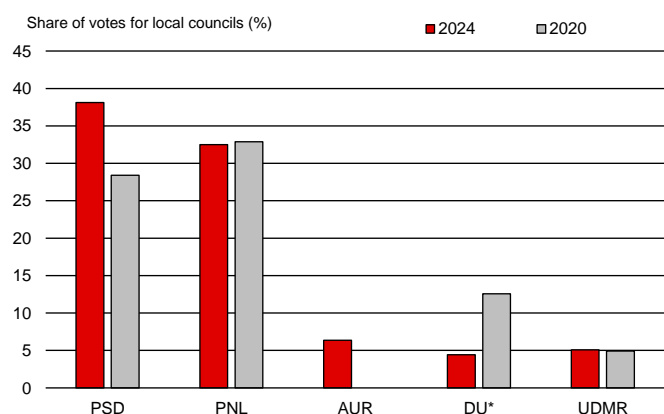
The cash budget deficit widening faster than during COVID-19

Due to parliamentary elections being held very late in the year, we now see a risk that the budget deficit could exceed 7% of GDP in 2024, unless the government cuts spending or decides to run in arrears. The latter would affect next year's efforts to limit the level of budget expenditure. The election campaign stopped any efforts to improve tax collection and the budget deficit widened to 3.3% of GDP at the end of April, larger than during the COVID-19 pandemic. The poor budget execution is explained both by larger-than-planned expenditure (which is usual in an election year) and lower-than-planned revenues (besides poor revenue collection, taxes on energy companies fell in line with international prices).

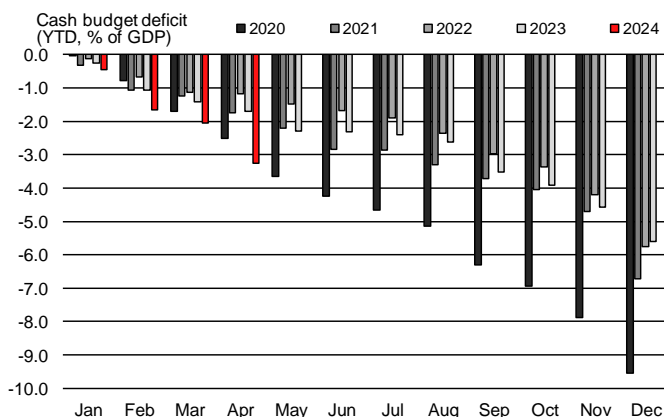
We forecast GDP growth of 2.4% in 2024

Economic growth slowed to a standstill in 1Q24, according to preliminary GDP data. However, we expect revisions to 1Q24 numbers, because they do not match the more resilient higher-frequency indicators from the real economy. Thus, we lowered our growth forecast for this year to 2.4% from 2.7% in our 2Q24 CEE Quarterly, while the 1Q24 preliminary GDP release is consistent with annual GDP growth of less than 2%. We see private consumption remaining strong this year amid positive real wage growth and large pension increases in September. Public investment might be cut towards year-end if the government tries to cap the deficit, but it is likely to remain robust in 3Q24 and might be helped by around EUR 7.5bn in RRF funds disbursed but not spent at the end of March. Rising house prices bode well for housing projects, while investment in the industrial and logistics space continues at a fast pace. We expect better demand from the EU to boost industrial production and exports in 2H24, although higher imports could reduce the positive impact on GDP growth.

PSD AND PNL WON THE LOCAL ELECTIONS



THE BUDGET DEFICIT IS WIDENING FASTER THAN IN 2020



*The votes for DU are the aggregate numbers of member parties in 2020

Source: Central Electoral Authority, Ministry of Finance, NIS, UniCredit Research

Fiscal adjustment needs higher taxes and better collection

The budget deficit will not be reduced in 2025 unless taxes increase. While Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu does not confirm that VAT will increase, at least for food and medicine, we expect a VAT rate increase (by 2pp for the main rate) and higher excise duties, property and commodities taxes. Coupled with a much smaller increase in pensions next year, this could lower the budget deficit to close to 5% of GDP in 2025, provided arrears are not too big. The tax authority ANAF will need another year to prepare its systems for a move to a progressive income tax (PIT) in 2026, which would help lower the budget deficit further towards 4% of GDP.

We forecast GDP growth of 1.3% in 2025 if taxes are increased

A raft of tax increases and much lower government transfers should slow economic growth sharply in 2025 to around 1.3%. Talks of higher PIT rates from 2026 onwards might affect wage growth differently. Sectors suffering from labor shortages with good margins are likely to raise wages above productivity and inflation. At the same time, the risk of lower tax compliance in low value-added sectors is high, unless ANAF manages to improve collection. We would expect the government to continue investing in infrastructure, partly funded through EU transfers, while private capex might rebound due to better exports and industrial production. We expect some types of services such as IT and transport (the largest contributors to value added in services), but also hospitality and tourism starting to suffer in 2025 if the PIT rise is confirmed for 2026.

The risk of a rating downgrade would become material in 2025-26 if the budget deficit does not start to correct. Romania's stock imbalances remain supportive, with both public and external debt (excluding intercompany lending) expected to be below the BBB median in 2025-26.

C/A deficit to narrow only in 2025

Weaker domestic demand should help further narrow the C/A deficit, which we expect at 7.0% of GDP this year and 5.7% of GDP in 2025. The external shortfall will be fully covered by FDI, EU funds and sovereign issuance abroad, allowing the NBR to maintain FX reserves. We expect EUR-RON to move into a 5.00-5.10 range in 1Q25, once all elections are over.

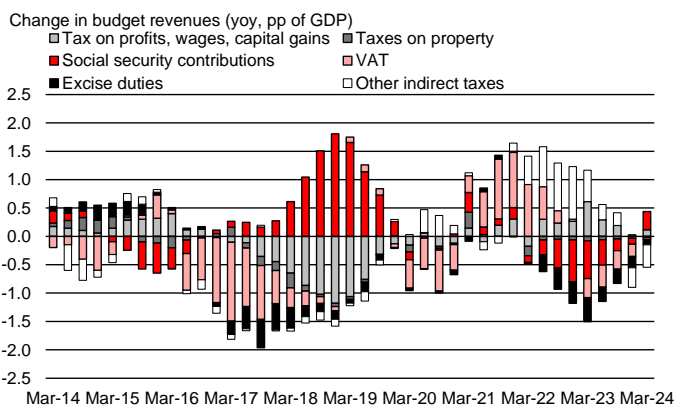
We forecast inflation above 4% for most of 2024-25

We forecast inflation to fall towards 4.6% by the end of this year, even if some of the recent decline in electricity and natural-gas prices is reversed. Higher taxes next year would fuel inflation and keep it above 4%, despite weaker consumer demand weighing on the core reading. A return inside the target range is possible in 2026 if the fiscal adjustment continues by raising the PIT.

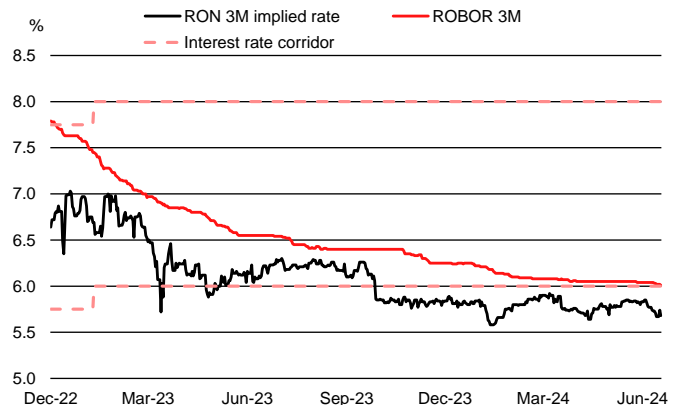
We expect interest rate cuts to 6.5% this year and 5% in 2025

With inflation probably more than 1pp lower in June than in the NBR's May forecast, there is scope to cut interest rates. However, through various official declarations this year, the NBR showed concern regarding the fiscal risks and might deliver only two cuts to 6.5% this year, especially if the central bank decides to leave a large liquidity surplus on the interbank market. Next year, the policy rate could be cut to 5%.

TAX COLLECTION IS NOT IMPROVING



THE NBR HESITATES TO LOCK IN EASING WITH CUTS



Source: NBR, Eurostat, Ministry of Finance, UniCredit Research

MACROECONOMIC DATA AND FORECASTS

	2021	2022	2023	2024F	2025F
GDP (EUR bn)	241.7	284.1	324.6	353.0	375.9
Population (mn)	19.2	19.0	19.1	19.1	19.0
GDP per capita (EUR)	12,567	14,918	17,035	18,528	19,758
Real economy, change (%)					
GDP	5.7	4.1	2.1	2.4	1.3
Private Consumption	7.2	5.8	2.8	3.7	0.9
Fixed Investment	2.9	5.9	14.4	3.3	3.0
Public Consumption	1.8	-3.3	6.0	2.9	-0.4
Exports	12.6	9.7	-1.4	2.8	4.9
Imports	14.8	9.5	-1.4	5.1	3.6
Monthly wage, nominal (EUR)	1175	1303	1489	1705	1785
Real wage, change (%)	2.0	-2.2	3.6	9.1	1.4
Unemployment rate (%)	5.6	5.6	5.6	5.4	5.6
Fiscal accounts (% of GDP)					
Budget balance	-7.2	-6.3	-6.6	-6.9	-5.3
Primary balance	-5.7	-4.2	-4.7	-5.1	-3.4
Public debt	48.5	47.5	48.8	50.9	52.7
External accounts					
Current account balance (EUR bn)	-17.5	-26.0	-22.6	-24.6	-21.6
Current account balance/GDP (%)	-7.2	-9.2	-7.0	-7.0	-5.7
Extended basic balance/GDP (%)	-1.5	-3.6	-2.9	-2.9	-1.6
Net FDI (% of GDP)	3.7	3.1	2.0	1.9	1.9
Gross foreign debt (% of GDP)	56.5	50.7	52.4	51.4	51.4
FX reserves (EUR bn)	40.5	46.6	59.8	58.7	59.8
Months of imports, goods & services	4.3	3.9	5.0	4.7	4.6
Inflation/Monetary/FX					
CPI (pavg)	5.0	13.7	10.5	5.6	4.5
CPI (eop)	8.2	16.4	6.6	4.6	4.4
Central bank inflation target	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50
Central bank reference rate (eop)	1.75	6.75	7.00	6.50	5.00
3M money market rate (Dec avg)	2.83	7.66	6.25	5.76	4.79
USDRON (eop)	4.37	4.63	4.50	4.57	4.53
EURRON (eop)	4.95	4.95	4.97	4.99	5.07
USDRON (pavg)	4.16	4.68	4.57	4.61	4.55
EURRON (pavg)	4.92	4.93	4.95	4.98	5.04

GOVERNMENT GROSS FINANCING REQUIREMENTS

EUR bn	2023	2024F	2025F
Gross financing requirement	35.1	41.6	38.8
Budget deficit	18.2	22.4	18.4
Amortization of public debt	16.9	19.2	20.4
Domestic	14.8	14.9	16.2
Bonds	10.5	7.6	8.0
Bills	1.1	3.7	4.0
Loans and retail bonds	3.1	3.7	4.2
External	2.1	4.3	4.2
Bonds and loans	1.7	3.7	3.9
IMF/EU/Other IFIs	0.4	0.6	0.3
Financing	35.1	41.6	38.8
Domestic borrowing	28.7	27.5	25.0
Bonds	20.6	19.0	18.0
Bills	3.7	4.0	3.0
Loans and retail bonds	4.4	4.5	4.0
External borrowing	12.6	13.5	13.0
Bonds	10.3	11.0	10.0
IMF/EU/Other IFIs	2.3	2.5	3.0
Fiscal reserve change (- = increase)	-6.2	0.6	0.8

GROSS EXTERNAL FINANCING REQUIREMENTS

EUR bn	2023	2024F	2025F
Gross financing requirement	58.5	63.6	60.4
C/A deficit	22.6	24.6	21.6
Amortization of medium and long term debt	14.2	15.9	15.6
Government/central bank	3.0	5.0	5.0
Banks	4.9	4.7	4.4
Corporates/Other	6.3	6.2	6.2
Amortization of short-term debt	21.7	23.1	23.3
Financing	58.5	63.6	60.4
FDI (net)	6.6	6.8	7.2
Portfolio equity, net	0.6	0.1	0.1
Medium and long-term borrowing	26.3	25.3	22.8
Government/central bank	15.0	15.6	14.1
Banks	4.4	3.7	3.1
Corporates/Other	6.9	5.9	5.6
Short-term borrowing	22.7	22.9	23.1
EU structural and cohesion funds	6.6	7.5	8.4
Change in FX reserves (- = increase)	-4.2	1.1	-1.2
Memoranda:			
Nonresident purchases of LC govt bonds	6.7	2.5	2.3
International bond issuance, net	8.6	7.3	6.1

Data Source: Eurostat, NBR, NIS, Ministry of Public Finance, UniCredit Research

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