Romania after the election

Brigitte Fehlau
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Eleven years after the fall of the Stalinist Ceausescu regime, the stench of fascism today hangs threateningly over Romania.

Last Sunday, December 10, a run-off election was held for the Romanian presidency between the former Stalinist and ex-president Ion Iliescu, and the ultra-nationalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor, founder and chairman of the "Greater Romania Party" (PRM). Iliescu won the second round with approximately 67 percent of the vote. Tudor, who regards himself as a fascist, gained a fraction over 33 percent.

Tudor won votes not only from large sections of the police and army, but also many young people predominantly from poor and rundown areas of Romania were attracted by his right-wing extremist slogans.

The run-off was necessary after Iliescu failed to win a majority in the first round, beating Tudor by just 8 percent. Tudor won over 28 percent of the vote in the first round—just behind Iliescu's 37 percent—instead of the 18 percent forecast. In parliamentary elections held at the same time, 20 percent voted for Tudor and his PRM, while 37 percent voted for the PDSR (Romanian Social Democratic Party) founded by Iliescu at the beginning of the 1990s.

The "Democratic Convention of Romania" alliance (CDR) under former president Emil Constantinescu, which had governed since 1996, suffered a devastating defeat. It gained only 5 percent of the vote, failing to qualify for any seats in the new parliament.

The reaction in the Western media to the first ballot ran from deprecating remarks about the Romanian population, said to be incapable of acting democratically, up to unconcealed demands for a hard-line policy.

The *Institute for War & Peace Reporting* (supported by the European Commission, as well as British and American foundations) commented on December 1, “People are enthusiastic about the prospect of European Union membership, but clearly ill-informed or unwilling to accept the tough conditions membership requires.”

The on-line magazine *Central Europe Review* wrote December 4, that the Romanian population perhaps deserved Tudor: “In Hitleresque fashion, the PRM could dismantle the democratic procedures that Romanians have fought hard to secure. But this is perhaps exactly what Romania needs and wants. One positive aspect of Hitler's rule was that he managed to reduce inflation and unemployment and raise general prosperity levels—isn't this what Romanians desire?”

How much the Western commentators were expecting an authoritarian regime is shown in a report by the American news broadcaster CNN on the result of the ballot on December 10: "Though he espouses democracy, Iliescu has indicated he will not promote the rapid and painful economic reforms that Romania needs to improve its laggard economy and join the European Union."

Ion Iliescu held power between 1990 and 1996. After the fall of the Stalinist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1989, he played a key role in bringing widespread workers' unrest under control and preserving the old power structures. In the 1980s Iliescu, himself an "adopted son" of Ceausescu, belonged to the powerful inner circle around the dictator. Iliescu founded the "National Salvation Front," which won the parliamentary and presidential elections in May 1990 and he was elected president in 1992. Meanwhile, the bureaucratic apparatus of the old regime remained. Numerous prominent politicians from Ceausescu's periphery held minister posts in the new government. There was no settling of accounts with the hated and feared secret police, the *Securitate*.

When Iliescu implemented the first privatisations of state enterprises and drastic spending cuts, he encountered violent resistance from the population. There were countless demonstrations and strikes against low wages, inflation and unemployment. In 1993 the government cut the subsidies for goods and services and thereby provoked an even greater strike movement. In 1994 two million workers took part in a general strike.

The disappointment of the general population in the years immediately following Ceausescu's downfall led to the victory in 1996 of an opposition alliance of Christian Democrats, national liberals and Social Democrats, under the leadership of the rightwing liberal Emil Constantinescu. His government was celebrated in the Western media as being the "real” turn away from Ceausescu. Constantinescu aimed to denationalise the state enterprises even more rapidly and to fulfil all the demands of the IMF for harsher attacks on living conditions. On this basis, the European Union (EU) accepted Romania as a candidate for admission as part of the enlargement eastwards. Romania also requested NATO membership.

In the following years, black market gangsters were able to enrich themselves without restraint and all kinds of dubious businesses grew in Romania, as in other Eastern European countries and Russia, while the majority of working class families sank ever deeper into poverty.

In order to keep social opposition in check, the CDR government systematically encouraged nationalist tendencies. It not only enabled King Michael, who had been deposed in 1948, to return to Romania, but also gave the right-wing extremists around Tudor ever-greater leeway.

Moreover, the decision of the Constantinescu government to support NATO's war in Kosovo delivered new voters for Tudor's party. The bombardment of neighbouring Serbia, whereby some dud bombs also landed in Romania, strongly set back the country's economic development and provided grist for the mill for the nationalists. The "corrupt and aggressive political climate in the country", with which Constantinescu justified his resignation as a presidential candidate, had been created by his government.

Oppressive poverty and corruption today dominate Romania. After Poland it is the most populous, but at the same time the poorest of the 12 EU entry candidates. In the last four years alone the gross national

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product per capita has fallen by almost 10 percent. Forty-five percent of the population lives below the poverty line. The average monthly salary is approximately $100, while inflation runs at 43 percent. Heating, electricity and water have become too expensive for many. There are almost daily demonstrations and protests by workers from run down state enterprises that have not received any wages for months.

The country's judiciary and police are consumed by bribery. Whether one receives the necessary treatment in hospital or gains good marks in school is all determined by what you pay.

In this year alone, one million savers and their families have lost $240 million in the bankruptcy of an Investment fund, for which the conservative government under Constantinescu is largely responsible.

At the same time, the IMF and the EU have stepped up their pressure on the country, stressing that privatisation has to be accelerated. Only a third of the economy has been denationalised, which is not considered enough by a long chalk. An IMF credit of over $540 million expires in February 2001, although the Romanian government has only received $190 million. The grant of further tranches has been made dependent on repayment of arrears and a faster privatisation policy.

For years, investors from Western Europe, the US, South Korea, and in particular Germany, have used the extremely low Romanian wages to establish cheap manufacturing plants. Germany is now Romania's most important business partner.

Amidst this political climate and social misery, the right-wing extremist Vadim Tudor portrays himself as the advocate of the hungry and desperate. He was once Ceausescu's court poet and an officer in the feared *Securitate*. He now inscribes the fight against the "traitors of the Romanian nation" upon his banner. He whips up sentiments against the Hungarian minority in the country, and against Jews, Roma and Sinti. He rails against the Mafia, which he promises to eradicate "root and branch". He makes no secret about his admiration for the "patriot Nicolae Ceausescu" and surrounds himself with ex-officers of the *Securitate*.

He demagogically exploits the displeasure in the population with widespread corruption and social misery, in order to channel it in his direction. In the election campaign he promised to clear up the gangster element in the economy and to lower prices for food and alcohol.

Tudor's intentions are clearly for a dictatorial regime. He repeatedly stressed, "that Romania can only be governed with the machine gun" and that all the "gangsters" and "enemies of Romania" would be sentenced during show trials.

Immediately after Ceausescu's fall, he created the party and newspaper called "Greater Romania". His motto is: "Romania must regain its old size."

This is a direct reference to the military dictatorship of Marshal Antonescu, who was a close ally of Hitler between 1940 and 1944. At this time, following the example of Hitler's Germany, Jews and gypsies were cruelly hunted down in Romania. Hundreds of thousands were slaughtered, their heads cut off and impaled on poles, or their bodies hung on butchers' hooks in the slaughterhouse. Even Goebbels is supposed to have been shocked by the brutality of the Romanian fascists.

The demand for a rehabilitation of the fascist dictator Antonescus and his henchmen is not only being made by Tudor's party. The chief public prosecutor's office has already rehabilitated hundreds of representatives of the fascist regime, including most recently in 1999, Ion Gigurtu, the Minister responsible for the introduction of the 1940 race laws in Romania.

In 1991, under Iliescu, the Romanian parliament held a minute's silence in honour of Antonescu. In 1999 this became an extended celebration under the government of Constantinescu. Some roads and public squares carry the names of fascist officers, and in June this year a military cemetery was renamed "Marshal Antonescu".

Despite a low turnout, the election of Iliescu shows that Tudor only enjoys minority support in the population and that the high number of votes for him in the first ballot represented above all a protest against official politics. But the danger of a rightwing dictatorship is far from banished.

During his first period in office, Iliescu temporarily formed a coalition with Tudor, and is still prepared to cooperate closely with the right-wing extremists. Immediately after his victory, Iliescu explained that his government would continue with Constantinescu's policy. EU membership will be the "first priority" for his government. He intends to conclude negotiations over a new IMF credit by March 2001, which will mean new cuts in social spending.

The composition of the future PDSR government already represents a warning to workers. The new government programme and personnel clearly bear the stamp of the IMF. The designated head of the government and deputy chairmen of the PDSR, Adrian Nastase, has brought two young technocrats from Washington and placed them in key positions. Mihai Tanasescu, Romania's representative at the World Bank is to become Finance Minister and Mircea Geoana, previously ambassador in Washington, will be Foreign and Trade Minister. Hildegard Puwak, who will be responsible for EU integration, was a member of Constantinescu's official delegation in the EU's recent summit in Nice.

More than a decade after the fall of Ceausescu's hated Stalinist dictatorship the same phenomena which can be observed throughout Eastern Europe is shown clearly in Romania—the market reforms under the dictates of the EU and the IMF have had devastating social effects and are incompatible with democratic structures.

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