

Six months after entering the EU

Political crises deepen in Romania and Bulgaria

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Just six months after Romania's and Bulgaria's entry into the European Union (EU), it is apparent that the political situation in both countries has far from stabilised, contradicting predictions made by both politicians and the media. Indeed, the entry of these countries—supported by a general consensus within their political elites—has intensified the political crisis in both countries.

In Romania, a referendum was held on May 23 to decide the fate of President Traian Basescu after he was sacked by parliament. The parliamentary action was the culmination of a sordid conflict between the country's main political parties. The preceding months of recriminations and mudslinging among the country's parliamentarians in Bucharest developed into a political crisis that revealed that democracy in the capital is a foreign word.

The fact that Basescu was victorious in the referendum and able to retain his post has little to do with his popularity, let alone with popular support for his political programme, but rather with the fact that his political opponents are even more hated. With a turnout of 44 percent of eligible voters, approximately three quarters voted to keep Basescu in office against the wishes of the Romanian parliament.

The cause of the referendum was a long-standing conflict between Basescu and Prime Minister Calin Popescu-Tariceanu. The latter's National Liberal Party (PNL) had supported a motion of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) to remove the president from power.

The initiative had come from PSD President Mircea Geoana and, as it seems, from the country's former President, Ion Iliescu. The motion was supported by an overwhelming majority in parliament, with 322 votes.

Along with the PNL and PSD, the ultra-nationalists of the Greater Romania Party and the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) all voted in favour. These parties together invested a total of some 20 million euros in the referendum.

The background to the conflict is a bitter power struggle within the ruling elite over money, power and influence. Basescu had promoted himself as someone who would fight corruption. He adopted EU demands to reform the country's economic, political and justice systems, which are permeated with bribery and cronyism. There are currently judicial procedures underway against numerous politicians from nearly every party.

Basescu's own attitude with regard to the issues of corruption

and democracy is clear from by a cursory examination of his own political practise. In 1992, he resigned his ministerial post following allegations of corruption. He is also suspected of cooperating over many years with the former Stalinist secret police, Securitate.

His real character was demonstrated on the day of the referendum. When a reporter questioned him about the outcome of the referendum, Basescu insulted her in front of the TV cameras, calling her a "stinking gypsy."

Behind the veil of "reforming the political classes," Basescu is attempting to weaken rival political forces. The conflict between Basescu and the prime minister has continued for more than two years and is symptomatic of the conflicts that have engulfed the ruling cliques in many east European states.

The conflict between Tariceanu's PNL and Basescu's Democratic Party (PD) was preceded by the break-up of the fragile right-wing coalition government that was formed after the last federal election in 2004. At the end of 2006, the coalition government lost its majority with the exit of the Conservative Party (PC), headed by media mogul Dan Voiculescu. Without the PD, the coalition of the PNL and UDMR retained only 20 percent of the vote in parliament, thereby invalidating any claims by the government of a democratic mandate.

Basescu represents the "free market" advocates within Romania who are striving to destroy, at any price, the old insider relationships that to a large extent have their origins in the former rule of the Stalinist Romanian Communist Party. Definite business interests are at stake. Part of the substantial EU subsidies to the country are simply disappearing and are unaccounted for. The economic consequences of such corruption are hard to quantify.

More importantly, Romania, with its border on the Black Sea, is of enormous strategic and economic importance. Recently, representatives from Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Italy agreed to a new "Pan-European pipeline" that will deliver oil from the Caspian Sea via the Romanian Black Sea port of Konstanza to southern Europe.

Romania's significance has resulted in European energy companies taking a large interest in the country. The German Eon conglomerate controls more than half of the gas market in Romania. For the country's ruling elite, political power means controlling these resources.

Foreign policy has been another point of dispute. There are massive disagreements over the occupation of Iraq, where Romanian troops are currently serving as part of the “Coalition of the Willing.”

Two months ago, the Tariceanu government approved the stationing of an additional 3,000 US troops in Romania. It is envisioned that for the next 10 years, US troops will be based in Babadag on the Black Sea coast, Smirdan on the Danube River, and Cincu in the Carpathian Mountains. The air force base in Babadag has already been used over the past few years to launch operations in Iraq.

The more the war in Iraq becomes a debacle, and the more the expectations of the Romanian elite to reap the rewards of plundering the country go unfulfilled, the more this strategy is questioned. Basescu has proposed reducing troop numbers in Iraq, which would be widely seen as a step towards a complete withdrawal. Tariceanu opposes such a move.

Basescu’s victory in the referendum could spell the imminent ousting of Tariceanu. At the moment, the fragile government is only holding on out of fear over new elections, in which the PNL would suffer heavy losses.

The fact that more than half of the electorate did not even vote in the referendum demonstrates the depth of mistrust and the general opposition of the population to the Romanian political clique.

A profound gulf between the official political elite and the masses of the population is also evident in neighbouring Bulgaria. The first elections to the EU Parliament on May 20 saw a large protest vote against the established parties and their political programmes. At the same time, only 28 percent of the electorate went to the polling booths.

The elections saw a victory for Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GerB), which recorded 21.7 percent of the vote, despite the fact that it was formed only six months ago. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), headed by Prime Minister Sergej Stanischew, followed closely behind with 21.41 percent. The BSP’s coalition partner came in third position. The Turkish Minority Party (DPS) recorded 20.26 percent and the NDSW party of former Prime Minister Simeon Saksoburggotski managed only 6 percent, just enough to get representation.

The entire right-wing camp was decimated. The Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) of former Prime Minister Iwan Kostow, the Bulgarian People’s Union (BNS) and the United Democratic Forces (ODS) did not reach the 6 percent hurdle needed for representation and are now fighting for their very existence.

The central issue of the election was again a series of corruption scandals, in which several members of government are embroiled. Judicial proceedings on corruption and intimidation charges have commenced against the BSP’s economics and energy minister, Rumen Owtscharow, as well as two state secretaries.

The resentment felt towards the BSP, the former King Simeon II and the various conservative “democrats,” who have all led the country over the last 17 years deeper into crisis, was used by GerB, a party founded by the former mayor of the capital Sofia, Bojko Borissow.

In 2005, Borissow, a former police officer, was elected as mayor of Sofia, a result of the increasing opposition to the other right-

wing parties and the BSP. He was able to win the majority of his votes from the Saksoburggotski camp.

Borissow promoted himself as an honest, down-to-earth politician, and to a certain degree was able to distance himself from the quagmire of Bulgarian politics in the eyes of voters. GerB led a populist campaign against corruption and the huge levels of social inequality. Although Borissow did not openly state opposition to entry into the EU, he repeatedly demanded that more attention be given to Bulgarian’s national interests.

However, the party of the former police officer is anything but an alternative to the existing political organisations. At the time of the collapse of the Stalinist regime in 1989, Borissow was a major in the Interior Ministry and was regarded as a true believer of the regime. In the end, he used his contacts to found his own private security firm and hired former Communist Party chief Todor Schiwwow.

After Simeon II took over as prime minister in 2001, he promoted Borissow to the post of police chief in the Interior Ministry. The pair had maintained a close relationship for years. Borissow refers to himself as a “right-wing centrist” and has recruited numerous figures from the police, the former Stalinist secret police and various fractured right-wing parties to his own organisation.

Although Borissow maintains a large base of influence in Sofia, his arch-conservative programme has mainly attracted those in rural areas. His promises to implement a hard law-and-order programme and improve the economic environment for Bulgarian capital have made his party an option as a coalition partner for other parties, although all of them have so far publicly viewed GerB with scepticism.

The ultra-nationalist party National Union Attack (Attaka) received enough votes to enable it to send three representatives to the European Parliament. The party’s chairman, Volen Siderow, received enough votes to enter the second round of the presidential election held late last year and was then defeated in run-off by the BSP candidate, Georgi Parwanow. In the EU parliamentary elections, the neo-fascists won 14 percent of the vote.

While the “Socialists” and Conservatives have painted entry into the EU in the brightest of colours, disillusionment has already set in among broad layers of the population. The vast majority have failed to see any improvement in their living standards and regard the warnings from Brussels of the necessity for budgetary discipline and the implementation of “reforms” as a threat.

Attaka was the only party that openly took a critical position to the European Union and was therefore able to canalise part of the widespread antipathy to the EU in a reactionary nationalist and neo-fascist direction.



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