

Abstention and fraud mark first round of Romanian elections

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The presidential elections, which took place last Sunday in Romania, reveal that 20 years after the fall of the despised Stalinist Ceau?escu regime the country is far removed from any sort of stability or genuine democracy.

Former naval captain and current Conservative President Traian Basescu received 32 percent of the vote. His main rival, the former foreign minister Mircea Geoana of the Social-Democratic Party (PSD), was narrowly behind with 31 percent. A runoff on December 6 will decide between the two candidates.

After the voting, Geoana and National Liberal Party (PNL) candidate Crin Antonescu, who obtained 20 percent, both signed a “pact for a way out of the crisis,” in which they propose the current mayor of the city Sibiu, Klaus Johannis, for the post of prime minister. Basescu has rejected Johannis as prime minister on two separate occasions in favor of his own choice of candidate—a figure who has no support in the Romanian parliament.

Johannis assessed the cooperation between the PSD and PNL, which up to now have been bitter enemies, as a “positive sign.” According to press reports, the leaders of the PSD and PNL have already distributed the posts in the new cabinet amongst themselves and limited Johannis’ term of office to just four months, during which time he must impose a series of unpopular measures.

The pact also includes tax reductions for enterprises, further wage cuts for public service employees and a radical pruning of all spheres of public expenditure. Broad sections of the political elite regarded Basescu as an obstacle to such painful policies and have temporarily put aside their differences in order to squeeze him out.

The political process has been paralyzed in Romania

since a vote of no confidence in the Liberal Democratic Prime Minister Emil Boc in the middle of October. The president and parliament were unable to agree on a common course, particularly with regard to economic policy. A credit of €20 billion, first agreed by the International Monetary Fund in March of this year, was suspended in November until the formation of a new government. Romania needs the IMF funds in order to cover its ballooning budget deficit.

A close race is expected in the runoff ballot and the election campaign of both candidates will be correspondingly aggressive. During the first round of the election both candidates resorted to a string of personal insults and accused one another of bearing responsibility for the country’s current political instability. None of the key political questions were addressed by either man.

The bitterly fought election campaign was looked upon largely with disdain and disillusionment by the population. Only 54 percent of the 18 million-strong electorate actually turned out to vote last Sunday and this number is probably an over estimate. The election was overshadowed by 1,300 claims of electoral fraud as well as arrests and the commencement of over 90 related criminal cases.

As is the case in neighboring Bulgaria, electoral fraud in Romania is assuming ever greater dimensions. According to reports, there were many cases of “electoral tourism”, i.e. supporters of one camp or the other toured the country to buy votes, especially in the poorer rural areas. There were also cases of multiple ballots being cast.

The lack of interest and disillusion with the entire political elite in Romania is not surprising. Basescu’s electoral success five years ago had little to do with his political opinions and far more to do with widespread

abhorrence for the PSD, the successor organization of the former Stalinist state party.

Basescu has sought to cultivate his image as a “hands-on” president who is in touch with the people. In the past five years, however, Romanians have had ample opportunity to learn that there is no real difference between the policies of the “socialist” PSD and the conservative Basescu.

Like the socialists, Basescu favored the country’s accession into the EU. Today, two years after the implementation of austerity measures dictated by the EU as a condition for entry, it is clear that there are no rewards for ordinary Romanians themselves. Hit hard by the finance crisis, unemployment and poverty are increasing rapidly in what was already one of the poorest countries in Europe.

Basescu also came to power promising to combat corruption. Today nothing remains of his promise. Corruption is rife and extends into the highest political offices. The corruption index for 2009 presented by Transparency International places Romania at the bottom of its ranking within the EU alongside Greece and Bulgaria. There have been a series of warnings from Brussels on the necessity to fight corruption, but in the event any action is taken in the name of “fighting against corruption,” it is used exclusively as a weapon against political opposition.

The population has no real choice on December 6. Basescu’s challenger Geoana is a long time PSD heavyweight, and has his origins in the leadership of the former state Stalinist party. He was active for a long time in the diplomatic service, including as an ambassador to the US and later foreign minister. The son of a general during the Ceausescu regime Geoana has a strong orientation to the US. Like his political godfather, former president Ion Iliescu, he advocates a hard and unyielding policy, particularly regarding domestic affairs.

Prior to 1989 both Basescu and Geoana are alleged to have worked for the Securitate—the feared apparatus of repression set up under Ceau?escu.

His current ally, Crin Antonescu has cultivated the image of “Mr. Clean” in Romanian politics, which only means, however, that there is so far no hard evidence of his involvement in political or financial intrigues. He suffered a debacle one year ago when his National Liberal Party slumped to 13 percent of the vote in

parliamentary elections. He is strictly oriented to western Europe and also demands an austerity course in order to fulfill the demands of the IMF and European Union.

Irrespective of who wins the second ballot the ruling elite will continue to conduct its punishing offensive against the Romanian working population. A foretaste of such a policy was provided last week.

After employees of the Bucharest subway system took strike action on November 17 in favor of a 20 percent pay increase and better working conditions, they were pilloried by leading politicians. Then, when their trade union announced its intention to continue the strike for an unlimited period, a court in Bucharest promptly ruled to ban the strike.



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