

Election result intensifies Romania's domestic crisis

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President Traian Basescu and the opposition parties in Romania are currently engaged in a bitter conflict following the razor-thin victory for the former in the second round of the presidential elections December 6. The power struggle will only intensify the country's two-month-long cabinet crisis.

The conservative Basescu won a surprising 50.33 percent of the vote, while his social democratic rival Mircea Geoana followed narrowly behind with 49.66 percent (5,275,808 votes to 5,205,760). All the opinion polls had predicted a victory for Geoana, after Crin Antonescu of the National Liberal Party (PNL), a candidate in the first round of the presidential elections, threw his support to Geoana. Geoana is appealing the result to the election authorities and the Supreme Constitutional Court and demanding a recount.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) declared that, as far as its initial reports indicated, the election met democratic standards. However, according to representatives of Geoana's Social Democratic Party (PSD), more than 130,000 ballots had been disqualified. The difference between the two candidates was approximately 70,000 votes.

The Romanian interior ministry announced that 200 irregularities had been reported in the course of the balloting and that two individuals had been arrested on suspicion of buying votes. Cristian Parvulescu, from the Pro-Democracy Association, expressed his conviction that vote-buying in the election was a widespread phenomenon. Numerous cases of electoral fraud—allegedly by all camps—came to light following the first round of the presidential election held November 22.

The current dispute has dispelled the hopes of Romanian and international financial circles that an end

to the country's internal political crisis is in sight. The prolonged crisis continues to place at risk a loan promised the impoverished country by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Romania has been without an effective government since the removal of the regime led by the Democratic Liberal Prime Minister Emil Boc following a vote of no confidence in mid-October. In the wake of the Boc government's resignation, the country's parliament and president were unable to agree on a successor administration. Then, at the beginning of November, a loan of €20 billion pledged by the IMF in March was suspended until a viable new government could be assembled. Romania desperately needs the IMF funds to cover its budget deficit.

Vivien Ashton, an adviser to the Bucharest stock exchange, expressed her concerns to the Associated Press about the negative impact of the crisis on investors: "In the eyes of advanced European democracies, vote rigging is the ultimate form of corruption because it indicates that the leadership is corrupt from top to bottom. It reinforces foreign views that the big business barons have absolute control of the Romanian political system and take no regard of what way the economy is heading. That is bad for business growth; no one wants to invest in such a climate."

Prior to the elections the PSD and the neo-liberal PNL had forged an alliance proposing the mayor of Sibiu, Klaus Johannis, as new head of government. The proposal was vetoed by Basescu, who put forward his own candidate, who, in turn, was rejected by parliament.

Johannis belongs to a small party of the German minority in Romania and is little known to the public at large. Contrary to most Romanian politicians, however, Johannis has a reputation for being relatively honest.

The PSD and PNL had reached an agreement whereby Johannis would remain in office only a few months so the government could implement unpopular austerity measures demanded by the IMF. Amongst the planned measures are wage cuts, tax increases and radical budget cuts.

In any event a government led or tolerated by Basescu would take a similar path. The Boc regime has already slashed the salaries of public service workers by over 20 percent and carried out a series of other antisocial policies.

Romania has experienced a 9 percent decline in economic output this year alone. Its ongoing and all-sided crisis, characterized by growing unemployment, declining wages, a lack of any social welfare protection, and a venal political elite thoroughly remote from the needs of the population, is a formula for violent social conflict in the months to come.

The US think tank Stratfor recently expressed its own fears in this regard. "Increased unrest is highly probable. The recession, combined with a high degree of economic uncertainty, will motivate many to take to the streets," Stratfor commented.

Prior to the recent election, President Basescu and those around him had already been busy channeling social discontent along reactionary lines, calling on right-wing youth, for example, to demonstrate against the PSD and its allegedly "communist" policies.

Several hundred extreme right-wingers intervened during an election meeting held by Geoana in the town of Timisoara. The mob carried Romanian flags, chanted neo-fascist slogans, and tore up PSD election posters. A crowd of 500 ultra-right demonstrators also assembled in the Romanian capital of Bucharest, carrying banners that read "No more Communism" and "Long live Romania."

These protests were stirred up by elements close to the government. Both presidential adviser Sebastian Lazaroiu and the designate education secretary Daniel Funeriu attended the Bucharest demonstration.

With Basescu at odds with the country's bourgeois parties, he is increasingly turning towards openly fascist organizations. His candidacy in the presidential election was supported by both the New Generation Party (PNG) and the Great Romania Party (PRM) led by Vadim Tudor. The PNG recently called for the setting up of ghettos for homosexuals and the

anti-Semitic PRM demands that Romania annex parts of Moldava, Bulgaria and Ukraine.

The mobilization of such lumpen social elements is not new in Eastern Europe. In 2006 the conservative opposition in Hungary organized anti-government demonstrations in which ultra-right layers played a leading role. Also, in neighboring Moldava, neo fascist, pro-Western forces organized protests last spring against the country's nominal "Communist Party" government.



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