

Referendum fails to oust Romanian president

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In a referendum held July 29, over 7 million people voted to oust Romania's incumbent conservative President Traian Basescu, who had called for a boycott of the vote, representing 87.5 percent of the votes cast.

However, the number of voters in the referendum fell short of the 50 percent+1 required for the referendum to be considered valid. According to the Central Electoral Bureau, only 46 percent of those registered turned out on the day of the vote.

The Romanian Constitutional Court, the body ultimately responsible for validating the result, delayed its final decision until September 12, following a complaint lodged by the Social Liberal Union (USL) regarding the total number of registered voters in Romania. The court claimed to have received conflicting data from various government institutions. Basescu will therefore not return to office until that date, with USL-backed Crin Antonescu serving as interim president.

The referendum was called amid escalating popular opposition to social cuts dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU), to which Basescu was strongly associated. These cuts are some of the harshest in Europe.

They included the cutting of all public salaries by 25 percent, pension cuts, the increase of the VAT tax from 19 to 24 percent, the cutting of social benefits, and layoffs of hundreds of thousands of public sector employees. Basescu's close political involvement with the government's measures was even acknowledged by the Constitutional Court. In its motivation for the holding of the referendum, it declared that he encroached on the prime minister's prerogatives.

The previous conservative government of Prime Minister Emil Boc was forced to resign amid mass protests against cuts, particularly moves to privatize health care, in January in Bucharest.

The low turnout in the current referendum testified to

popular rejection of the policies of the new social-democratic prime minister, Victor Ponta of the USL. Since taking office, he has continued the policies of Basescu and the conservatives. Ponta stated that he intends to meet all the requirements of the IMF program, including the deficit target.

Ponta's government has done everything in its power to reassure financial markets that they will continue to enforce the IMF and EU diktats. This included repeated calls for political stability, the naming of ministers close to Basescu and the conservatives, and the sacking of ministers criticized in the conservative press.

On July 25, he declared that he wished to renew the IMF agreement for two years. A few days before a delegation of the IMF, the European Commission and the World Bank was to arrive in Romania, Finance Minister Florin Georgescu said that a new agreement was a "strategic decision" that will give "a certification, a guarantee from the international financial markets."

Privatization of state-owned companies continued, with a new selling of shares in the National Energy Company announced by Georgescu at a press conference held on July 31. At the same press conference, he said that the USL was not even considering the introduction of progressive taxation.

After having criticized the conservative government education policies, especially the introduction of video and police surveillance at the National Baccalaureate Examination, the USL maintained this measure. As a result, only 44 percent of the students graduated—the lowest rate in the history of the exam. These results are comparable only to last year's results, when the conservative government first introduced the surveillance.

In an interview with Radio France International in May, Ecaterina Andronescu declared that "video surveillance is designed to humiliate teachers." After

serving office as education minister in Ponta's government, she decided to keep the video cameras, arguing that they are "only a measure for combating fraud".

The hardest hit were technical high schools in poorer areas, where most of the students did not graduate. Thousands of students were left without the prospect of higher education and unable to find a job, forced to depend on meager unemployment benefits or take day jobs. These high schools were also the ones that receive the least financing from the state, according to the new regulations for increasing competitiveness in the education system that were enacted by the conservatives and continued by Andronescu and the USL.

The USL's falling out with Basescu came only after a bitter row over who should represent Romania at the EU summit held in Brussels on June 27-28.

Basescu's campaign staunchly defended the cuts and repeatedly suggested that Romania would be marginalized in the European Union if he were dismissed. He was strongly supported by the EU leaders, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel intervening to call his suspension a "breach of the rule of law unacceptable in a EU member state."

European Commission President José Manuel Barroso said that "events in Romania undermined the EU's trust in the justice system in this country."

The results of Sunday's vote showed a rejection of the policies of the Ponta government as much as the deep resentment towards Traian Basescu and the conservatives. Basescu himself said, "I didn't win. They didn't win."

He called for the unity of the main bourgeois parties, pledging "to dedicate the rest of his presidential mandate to bridging the fissure in Romanian society."

Regardless of the outcome of this political crisis, attacks on workers' living standards will continue, and workers will come into conflict with the USL government.

Crin Antonecu, the USL-backed interim president, admitted that the referendum was a way to let off steam. He said, "If this referendum did not take place, if this suspension did not take place, we even risked social violence this fall, with another level of intensity and violence than in January."



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