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ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL VOTE: CHANGES OR NO CHANGE AT ALL?

Michał Torz

Warsaw Institute

The past six months brought a few twists and turns in Romanian politics. Incidents like the Social Democratic Party's (PSD) tied vote in the European elections, a jail sentence for a former leader of this post-communist party, followed by the fall of the cabinet and the establishment of the interim government unleashed what could be referred to as a crisis within the group's ranks. Therefore it is hardly surprising to see Klaus Iohannis of the National Liberal Party (PNL) winning another term in the November presidential election. Yet the battle for everything will take place next year, on the occasion of the general vote whose final results will probably remain the big unknown until the very end.

- **Romania's incumbent president Klaus Iohannis was a favorite in the presidential race. Although he scored much lower than expected, his challenger, Viorica Dancila, faced a more significant negative electorate. Thus the outcome was predictable from the very beginning.**
- **Many Romanian politicians saw the presidential vote as a public popularity poll ahead of next years' general elections. The coming months may see various alliances being formed in a bid to guarantee better results. What is likely to happen is that there will emerge a "democratic" bloc against the PSD.**
- **Romania's governing Social Democratic Party had for months been in crisis that reached its apex with the fall of Viorica Dancila's government in August this year. The country's beleaguered prime minister is getting weaker, while a fierce battle in the presidential runoff and a good result in the second turn appeared what could be named as a decisive factor for her political future.**
- **Also, Romania has had a new transitional government led by Ludovic Orban of the opposition National Liberal Party. Backed by a parliamentary majority, Orban's minority government gives him little room for manoeuvre, though. His cabinet may encounter major obstacles throughout the whole year before the next elections.**
- **What may happen next to the PSD is not a foregone conclusion. Romania's Social Democrats have many times showed that they are capable of overcoming tougher challenges. Now the time has come to revisit their structures. What Romania's post-communist can do should not be underestimated, as was the case during the previous term in office.**

SOURCE: ALEKSANDER DRAGNES/FLICKR

The first round of a presidential election in Bucharest took place on November 10, 2019, with fourteen candidates vying for the presidency. Klaus Iohannis won a new term in office, receiving 37.82 percent of all votes, with voter turnout standing at 51.18 percent. Romania's former prime minister and LSD leader Viorica Dancila came second. Final results were published two weeks later, on November 24, 2019. The first exit polls found that Klaus Iohannis won a comfortable victory. He ultimately emerged victorious, scooping up 66.09 percent of all votes while his main rival, Viorica Dancila, garnered 33.91 percent in the polls, which had a 54.86 percent turnout rate.

From the very beginning, Klaus Iohannis showed that he was poised to win the electoral runoff. But it is hardly surprising.
A Transylvania-born ethnic German and former mayor of the city of Sibiu, Iohannis comes as a symbol of peace and the rule of law in Romania, a country affected by political conflicts. He took an active part in protests against changes made to Romania's judicial legislation when crowds took to the streets across the country. Iohannis actively contributed to the establishment of the Bucharest Nine (B9) or the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. He did not drag his feet over the dismissal of Laura Kovesi from the position of the chief prosecutor of the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA). Although he scolded the government's actions and backed the official by all means possible (Kovesi has become famous for her ruthless crackdown on corruption in a move that irked many Romanian politicians), he signed decree removing Romania's top anti-graft prosecutor

In the second round of the vote, Klaus Iohannis won support of 66.09 percent of voters and got a strong mandate to govern the country.

SOURCE: PRESIDENCY.RO

from office, as stipulated by the Romanian law. There are many examples like these, yet suffice it to say that Klaus Iohannis comes as somewhat an outlandish figure on the Romanian political stage, and his fellow compatriots yet again proved that his down to earth presidency is right what they yearn for. Having garnered 66.09 percent of the vote in the second round of the presidential election, Iohannis got a strong mandate to govern the country.

The first round or popularity poll?

The electoral triumph was a must for Klaus Iohannic, while Viorica Dancila had to convince the public that she was capable of mustering support of her electorate. The remaining candidates risked little, seeing their presidential bid as a public poll ahead of the country's next year's parliamentary vote. Now the time has come to analyze the latest results and to assess their chance to run independently. The first round of the presidential runoff brought some unexpected news. What seems as a total surprise was the result obtained by Klaus Iohannis. With his 37.8 percent support, thus below 45 percent, he was poised to win according to pre-election polls. On the other hand, Romania's former prime minister and PSD leader Viorica Dancila scored quite well. Though her 22.26 percent result is half as much as what her party got in 2016, it is worthwhile to bear in mind how shaky and unstable the PSD's current situation is. Also, some polls saw Dancila receiving no more than eight percent of the vote. When it comes to other examples of post-election surprises, USR-PLUS's Dan Barna lagged behind his opponents in what gave his party a somewhat bitter jolt. It is worth mentioning that the USR stands for the Union of Salvation of Romania, a country's

For Klaus Iohannis, the electoral triumph was a must while Viorica Dancila had to convince the public that she was capable of mustering support of her electorate. The remaining candidates, for their part, saw the presidential bid as a public poll ahead of the country's next year's parliamentary vote.

anti-system party, while members of Romania's PLUS party hold links to Dacian Cioloș, who between 2015 and 2016 played the role of an interim prime minister. Many experts wanted to see him as a dark horse to the front-runner in the presidential runoff, some of them said he was likely to enter the second round, both of which were nothing but merely naive claims, and Barna got no more than 15 percent of the vote despite a very intense campaign. There has been a marked decline in the parties' results in comparison to how they scored in the European Parliament elections.
Interestingly, in fourth place came Mircea Diaconu, who enjoyed support from Pro Romania and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE). What is intriguing is that the former party consists mainly of former PSD members who felt bitter about the policy pursued by Liviu Dragnea. The ALDE until August served as a coalition partner for the PSD. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats officially pulled out of the government amidst its failure to implement the agenda, though it might have sought to highlight its independent stance right ahead of the vote. But the situation is now completely different: Liviu Dragnea is in jail and the PSD-led government collapsed. So one may venture the assertion that both Pro Romania and the ALDE have more in common with the PSD that with the center-right opposition that governed the country not long ago. What will this bring? Will at least some of Romania's politicians declare themselves ready to bury the hatchet and run together in elections? Or maybe the parties will run separately, eventually getting closer if confronted with the feasibility to seize authority over the country? There is a great potential for Mircea Diaconu, who got an 8.85 percent result in the vote, to both stand as an independent candidate at the next election and to build a wider electoral bloc.

Romania is gearing towards a general election next year, while the next few months may bring many twists and turns in its domestic policy. From time to time, insinuations will appear in Romanian media outlets as to who will campaign together against whom. Romania's current transitional government is led by Ludovic Orban of the National Liberal Party in what could, paradoxically, be a bad deal for the country's right-wing. It is true that the majority of parties in the parliament voted in favor of the cabinet line-up, but the closer the elections, the more considerable efforts they will make to win more votes. Criticism of the government is therefore inevitable, and this is not only from the PSD. What stands out as the sole sensible solution is to form a broad „democratic bloc," a somewhat challenging task, as shown by experience.

SOURCE: GOV.RO

Not that easy to get rid of the PSD

It is worth saying that the PSD appears bullet-proof despite all the crises it has gone through. The party originates in the bygone era of the past while enjoying the most solid structures across the country. There have recently been reshuffles within the party structures. First of all, Viorica Dancila resigned as the party's chairwoman; with the latest presidential runoff seen as a matter of political life or death, her 33.91 percent result is too modest to allow her to stay in power. A number of senior officials holding ties to the previous cabinet were also relieved from their duties. In February, the party will hold a congress to elect new leadership. By that time, the PSD will see its members playing political games that are likely to reveal what strategy the group may pursue prior to the next year's vote. There are a lot of possibilities here.

The PSD has survived many crises until now. Now it is too soon to forecast the party's collapse. The group enjoys solid structures throughout the country and can count on its ever-faithful electorate. Ultimately, the PSD may even win the next year's elections.

Dancila is currently not poised to reclaim the 34 percent result she had obtained in a one to one battle. There will be an even greater political fragmentation in the next year's general elections – suffice is to point out that as many as twelve candidates ran for office in the first round, and many parties have an appetite to field their people in the parliament. But the results obtained by Dancila (PSD) and Diaconu (PRO/ALDE) show that Romania's left parties can count on up to 30 percent support from the very beginning. With high political fragmentation of opponents, these may be the ones to form a new coalition government in the future. After the PSD's much-hated Liviu Dragnea was sent to jail in May for corruption and abuse of power, while his party fellow Viorica Dancila resigned as chairwoman of the party after she suffered an electoral setback in the second round, there emerged a chance for reconciliation. Indeed, old disputes will long remain unsettled, but Romania's left-wing parties, as broadly conceived, will perhaps soon realize that there is more that unites them than divides, and a whole year is a lot of time to convince voters to back a project like that.

As history has taught us, this is not a political fiction. Suffice it to recall what happened in late 2015. A year after Klaus Iohannis won his first term, Victor Ponta, his PSD rival, was appointed prime minister whose government later fell unexpectedly and violently. In late October, a blaze took hold in the Colectiv nightclub in Bucharest, killing 65 young people and injuring dozens. Shortly after, throngs of protesters took to the streets to protest against... corruption. As it turned out, the venue's owners did not obtain adequate permits, nor did they meet fire safety regulations. And yet the nightclub remained open due to its owners' links to city hall officials. Sometime later, Victor Ponta resigned amid internal strains while Dacian Ciolos was nominated interim prime minister. In his year-long tenure, he passed some liberal economic reforms, albeit he was unable to conduct what could be seen as significant changes. A year later, in late 2016, this was, to everyone's surprise, the PSD that returned to power, winning the general elections. Although no violent incident was behind the fall of the government, there are too many analogies floating around Romania's current situation.

It is, however, only one of the possible scenarios. It is worth remembering that both the National Liberal Party and the country's right-wing parties have a couple of tricks up their sleeve. That is by the mere fact that their president was elected for next term after having proved that it was possible to pursue a European-level policy in Romania. These are both the right and center-affiliated blocs that have emerged as an obvious choice for hundreds of thousands of protestors

Romania's right-wing parties have a couple of tricks up their sleeve, including its president's next term in office or the country's successful presidency of the Council of the European Union. But they may need to form a broader coalition to expand their influence on the country's political stage.

SOURCE: PRESIDENCY.RO

that rallied across Romania to express their discontent over the hardships of living in a poor and corrupt country. Also, these political groups are the guarantee that Romania will be seen as a partner in its relations with the European Union. Though the previous cabinet performed well throughout the country's rotating six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union, these were its numerous clashes with European institutions that eventually surged to the foreground.

What will Romania look like after 2020?

These are just some insights into Romania's recent elections and what is currently taking place in the country's domestic politics. The fact is that nothing is set in stone just yet. Therefore next year may see a new government being formed with the PSD at its very core. Perhaps Ludovic Orban will still serve as Romania's prime minister, though this time tasked with forming a far broader coalition, or maybe we will witness a way different scenario. Lawmakers may face a bitter battle for the leadership, especially given considerable political fragmentation, with six parties in the Romanian parliament. One is certain that both political factions must make efforts to ally, as their lone struggle is doomed to fail. A key data here is how Romanian parties scored in the European elections in May 2019. The PNL won 27 percent of votes, followed by the PSD by 22.5 percent. The alliance formed by the USR

and PLUS parties obtained the third-highest score (22.36 percent). ALDE's 4.11 percent result gave food for thought to the party's officials as they fielded the joint candidate for the presidential runoff who eventually got 6.44 percent of the vote. Similar tendencies are likely to reemerge shortly.

At first glance, the outcomes of the next year's vote will not matter much for Romania's partners abroad. Admittedly, the PSD is unlikely to continue its confrontational course towards the European Union. The remaining parties, for their part, will push for deepening ties with NATO. But the devil is in the detail, as illustrated by the issue of the Cernavodă nuclear power plant. Interestingly, its history dates back to the communist era, when the facility was designed jointly with Canada, unlike in other countries of the Eastern Bloc that adapted Soviet technology.

The history is now likely to kind of repeat itself as Romania intends to build two new reactors in partnership with China, to a great surprise of many. In May, Bucharest and Beijing reached a preliminary agreement on the construction and operation of two new reactors at the nuclear plant, a deal that was of course not to the liking of the United States. In August, the United States added China's largest state-owned nuclear company, China General Nuclear Power (CNG), to a blacklist of entities that pose a threat to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests. Shortly after, Klaus Iohannis met with President Donald Trump, and nuclear was high on their meeting's agenda. This would be doubtful to assume that it was just a coincidence.

Recent reshuffles in Romanian politics seemingly have little impact on what is going on across the region. However, in practice, these may affect the military and energy security in Central and Eastern Europe.

There is now an ever-increasing consensus over the extraction and transit of natural gas, while the United States sees Romania as a transit country that allows for the trade of U.S.-sourced raw material. This means to be supported not only by the construction of a pipeline connecting Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria (BRUA). Next year will be marked by the completion of the Iasi-Ungheni gas transmission pipeline that could enable the Republic of Moldova to become less reliant on gas supplies from Russia. Romania imports less than 10 percent of its gas needs from Russia, with the remaining 90 percent produced locally, but there is no reason for the pipeline network not to pump also U.S.-sourced gas to both Moldova and Ukraine.

Recent reshuffles in Romanian politics seemingly have little impact on what is going on across the region. However, in practice, these may affect the military and energy security in Central and Eastern Europe. Greater rapprochement with the United States over energy-related issues is beneficial for the countries of the

region, a phenomenon that allows for even bigger independence of Russian influence while paving Washington's way for sealing favorable deals. The new arrangements will probably include military hardware and the U.S. Army's further involvement in the region. It is a good omen for those in favor of building a sustainable project that could bring together countries along the Adriatic-Baltic-Black Sea corridor. ■

Author:
Michał Torz - an archeologist by education, a graduate of the University of Wrocław. He works as a journalist at a regional branch of Polish TV broadcaster Telewizja Polska (TVP) in Wrocław. Earlier he published his articles in the Gazeta Polska Codziennie daily. The founder of the www.wRumunii.pl website, an author of two guides to Romania. His articles on Romania were published in the „Angora" weekly and the „Archeologia Żywa" monthly. An expert at the Warsaw Institute and the head of the Romania Monitor project.

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Warsaw Institute
Wilcza St. 9, 00-538 Warsaw, Poland
+48 22 417 63 15
office@warsawinstitute.org