

In Romania's elections, the Social-Liberal Union is likely to be the clear winner. But, President Băsescu may yet block Victor Ponta from returning as Prime Minister.

by Blog Admin

Romanians go to the polls on Sunday for the country's parliamentary elections. While the incumbent Prime Minister, Victor Ponta's Social Liberal Union is widely tipped to win the election, [Clara Volintiru](#) writes that the president Traian Băsescu may yet be able to block Ponta from returning to office.



Romanians go to the polls tomorrow, and by all signs—local election scores this spring and opinion polls – the Social Liberal Union (USL) will score around 60% of votes. Thus, while this electoral cycle demonstrates a clear-cut distribution of party preferences, as well as a clear winner (as opposed to the very close election of 2008) there is still very much confusion underneath the surface. On one hand, there is the question of how much better the new governing elites will be, after several cycles of disillusion, given pervasive corruption, wastefulness and clientelism. On the other hand, there is confusion surrounding the outcome of the post-election procedures: the investiture of the prime minister and his relationship with the standing president, Traian Băsescu.

An often mentioned, emblematic character from the Romanian literature is the “tormented citizen”, who is caught up in political intrigue without understanding the events and in his attempts to make up his mind asks an exasperated: “Who should I vote for?”. Within the conflict ridden political environment, many Romanians resemble this character, as over 40% of respondents in a recent [survey](#) do not know who are the candidates in their constituencies.

According to the [Global Corruption Barometer](#) assembled by Transparency International, political parties and the Parliament are consistently among the less trusted institutions in Romania over the past decade. This in turn has resulted in low turnout rates, and [popular disenchantment with the political process](#). That is why political parties have done their best to put forward any electorally captivating figure— from some lacking previous political experience (leaders of the civil society, academics, journalists, actors, popular entrepreneurs), to political icons (former prime ministers, party presidents and members of previous cabinets).



Romanian President Traian Basescu Credit: Lucian Crusoveanu (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

Showcasing such a vast array of candidate profiles has an upside and a downside. On the upside, parties manage to portray two apparent contradictory suggestions: a sense of renewal (a big theme for all parties this season), and a sense of professional consistency. Still, disregarding whether this mixed portrayal is convincing or not, it is obvious that the heterogeneity of the new Parliament will pose organizational challenges for the future cabinet. Thus, on the downside, the extent of the alliances that have cemented the [two main competing political poles](#), have a high risk of volatility and defection. This perspective is also supported by the fact that [party switching has doubled](#) over the past mandate, as parliamentarians have often changed parties, sometimes more than once. In sum, there is much confusion surrounding the identity, political allegiance, and accountability of candidates. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that the electorate is beginning to lose track and interest of who is who on each side of the political game.

Regarding post-election scenarios, there are different possible outcomes. The obvious one is that the majority backed Prime Minister Victor Ponta of the USL continues in office, and president Basescu's allies remain in opposition. But there are still several procedural moves at the president's disposal.

Despite being proven massively unpopular by this summer's [referendum](#), Traian Basescu remains in office and holds the exclusive, but not discretionary, prerogative of appointing the Prime Minister. In other words, he cannot legally choose who the Prime Minister should be, but he can choose who the Prime Minister shouldn't be, by rejecting the majority's proposition. This scenario played out in 2009, when he achieved his goal, by ultimately conjuring a slim majority coalition to support his close ally Emil Boc's return to office. He did this through political defections, which is why this phenomenon remains an important risk factor for this legislature too. But, this would be a risky path, as such actions would probably move the spotlight on [challenges to the constitutional process](#) and the state of democracy in Romania, away from the Ponta's attempts to manipulate the referendum law, onto president Basescu's attempts to bend electoral will.

In conclusion, while the results of the Sunday elections won't be a surprise for anyone, what happens next is much harder to predict. A US State Department document noted at the eve of Romania's democracy stated: "a definitive version in the conspiracy laden environment of Romanian politics may never emerge (...) anything is possible". Two decades later, we are still unable to construct and reconstruct definitive versions of the imaginative political game in this country.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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