

## Posturing by Romania's political parties ahead of December elections shows that they are not just competing for power, but for their own survival.

by Blog Admin

*This month has seen massive rallies for Romania's political parties ahead of parliamentary elections in December, with the European People's Party holding its congress and the ruling USL alliance hosting an 80,000 strong rally. [Clara Volintiru](#) looks at this political posturing between the rival factions of the President and Prime Minister, and argues that these rallies ignore the general political disenchantment of most Romanians, and that there is a real risk of significant voter apathy come the December elections.*



The 17<sup>th</sup> of October was a busy day for the main political parties in Romania, as each put on a show of gargantuan proportions, proving one more time their flair for the dramatic. As the political competition intensifies before the upcoming parliamentary elections on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December, each political front pulled out extravagant productions, meant to boost their image both at home and abroad.

In the Palace of the Parliament – the world's largest civilian building and the most expensive administrative one, the European People's Party (EPP) – the European Parliament's most influential party, held its 21<sup>st</sup> Congress. This choice manifested very clearly their support for the President Traian Basescu's Liberal Democratic Party (PD-L). The PD-L needed a boost, as it has been greatly strained during the past 9 months. Their downfall started with the street protests at the beginning of the year and has continued with the gradual loss of power: for the government – with the April Parliamentary vote of no confidence, for Mihai Razvan



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Ungureanu's cabinet, the replacement of the highly contested Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies – Roberta Anastase, the replacement of the Speaker of the Upper Chamber – Vasile Blaga, and finally, the narrowly survived referendum to impeach president Basescu, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July.

PD-L was equally hit by the losses of the local elections this spring, where it managed to retain less than half of all positions won in 2008. In terms of county council presidents for example, PD-L held on to only 2 positions out of the 14 it had previously. This was a somewhat unexpected outcome, as the PD-L governments have channeled substantial funds to the mayors and county councils affiliated to their party. Sanctioned by the infringement motion, Mihai Ungureanu's decision 255 allocated more than 95 per cent of the government's Reserve Fund to mayors of the ruling coalition parties – PD-L, UDMR, UNPR, and ethnic minorities. These funds were meant to increase the local standing of party bosses, who in turn, ran under a multitude of different logos, colors and party names, in the attempt to distance themselves from the sinking PD-L.

In response to the fall in polls, the Liberal Democrats now face the coming parliamentary elections under a

new brand – the Right Romania Alliance (ARD). It contains three parties – PD-L, the historic Christian-Democratic National Peasants' Party (PNTCD), and the newly formed Civilian Power (PFC) led by the former prime minister Mihai Razvan Ungureanu. It aims at mobilizing the center-right electorate of young professionals, highly preoccupied with the dangers of political instability, depreciating national currency – the Leu, and [damaged reputation internationally, both in the eyes of foreign investors, and the EU](#). They accuse the Social Democrats of governing ineffectively and of unconstitutional acts – mostly surrounding the impeachment of president Basescu. Fueled by the international community concern that prime minister's Ponta's actions undermine the rule of law, the ARD will capitalize on the apolitical civil society and the pro-European electorate, especially those living abroad (estimated between 1.5 and 3 million). They were the intended audience of the EPP Congress, along with European Commission President Barroso and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in Bucharest.

On the other side, the ruling alliance USL, comprising the Social Democrats (PSD), the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Conservatives (PC) have struggled to make a demonstration of their strength as well. They launched their parliamentary candidates on the newly built National Arena Stadium, at a *miting* of 80.000 people (meeting). It was an event intended to overshadow the Congress, and to contrast it at the same time. While the European leaders gathered at the Parliament to discuss international and party affairs, the masses gathered at the stadium to cheer on populist speeches. Indeed, one may have easily been confused as to which was the true venue of populist politics. Their intended message was that the USL is legitimated by the masses, and the previous accusations of '*coup d'etat*' were nothing more than instigations by a losing political party.

For most of their supporters, the USL's mass event – the first of this magnitude in the democratic years of Romania, was a source of pride, a testimony of their organizational strength and territorial base. Still, for more moderate Romanians it was an unfortunate reminder of the communist manifestations of the national holiday of 23<sup>rd</sup> of August. In addition to this, the main focus of the Olympic style parade of candidates wasn't the public, but the party leaders, for which, it seemed, the whole demonstration took place. It suggestively portrayed the strength of the party center in this political organization. The concentration of power is confirmed by imposition of candidates from the center. A lot of the former allies of president Basescu found refuge on the lists of the USL, in exchange for their support on the impeachment motion of the government, back in April.

Both events served as a confirmation of how political strategies have escalated, and how high the stakes are at this coming election, when political parties are not competing for power, but for survival. Both events seemed disproportionately spectacular, and alas, detached from the real problems of the second poorest population in the EU. The polls suggest that the public opinion is behind the USL, at the moment, but this doesn't mean the results of the December voting can be accurately predicted. The greatest risk ahead for Romanians is a continuation of the political standoff between the President's political pole and the Prime Minister's. The probability of this scenario is supported by the disenchantment of the Romanian electorate, growing increasingly convinced that all politicians are the same. If this generalized perception keeps voters away from the polls in December, the referendum's numbing uncertainty will be replicated. This will further push the country in crisis, with long-lasting damages for the economy and the governing process.

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*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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