

Romania's local elections: Why has the 'old guard' done so well?

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The fall of Victor Ponta's PSD government in November 2015 was supposed to usher in a new era of politics for Romania. However, local elections held on 5 June resulted in victories for the PSD across the country, including in Bucharest, with several politicians who are either under investigation, or even (in one case) currently in jail, being elected. [Daniel Brett](#) assesses how and why the 'old guard' did so well in the vote and what the results tell us about politics and corruption issues in Romania.



Local elections in eastern Europe rarely generate much attention. Normally turnout is low, the party machines move into action and the status quo is preserved. Local elections on 5 June in Romania represented a potential break from this pattern. Eighteen months after Klaus Iohannis won the country's [presidential election](#), and six months after [protests](#) that brought down Victor Ponta's PSD government following a tragic fire at the Colectiv Club in Bucharest, not to mention numerous other corruption scandals, this was the first opportunity for the public to vote. There was optimism that new candidates could potentially break through and meaningful political change could begin. Moreover, it would start at the bottom in local politics, giving a base from where further inroads could be made into what is widely regarded as a corrupt and self-serving political system.

However, such hopes proved unfounded. Candidates for the old parties – many of whom have [corruption cases](#) hanging over their heads, or are [deeply divisive](#) individuals – won. The PSD, the party most [widely associated](#) with the 'old system', dominated and even made gains. The results have been greeted as 'a vote for corruption': the satirical [Times New Roman](#) responded that the country's National Anticorruption Directorate will not have enough prison cells to put all the mayors.

For others the response has been one of anger or despair, blaming 'Antena 3 (the Romanian TV channel) watching pensioners in the blocks' and those who did not vote for the results. Turnout was 48.8%, down from 64.1% in the second round of the presidential election, and a mere 33% in Bucharest. From 11.6 million votes cast in the presidential election to 7.6 million votes cast in these elections.

This has been taken as evidence that, even after the recent tragedies and scandals, change is ultimately impossible because the power and effectiveness of corrupt politicians and their networks are so entrenched. After the optimism that change was possible following Victor Ponta's resignation, is this a return to business as usual? Why have the Romanian electorate chosen to support the PSD despite its reputation and the events of the last six months?

Romanian local elections 2016 – interactive map of results. From hotnews.maps.arcgis.com

Waiting for the revolution that has never come

The mass mobilisation following the Colectiv fire against the corruption that allowed the unsafe club to operate was seen as Romania finally getting the revolution that had been stolen from it in 1989. It seemed that the hold of corrupt politicians and networks was being broken and a new era of politics would be ushered in. But this euphoria has quickly dissipated.

The meetings between Iohannis and activists from civil society produced nothing by way of results. As one Colectiv protester commented: 'For the first two days we were marching: it felt like we, and the country, were moving at last. On the third day we stopped and stayed where we were. We were no longer moving and then we went home.' Following Ponta's resignation, a technocratic government led by former EU agriculture commissioner Dacian Cioloș

was appointed. The new PM has immediately strived to appoint ministers from outside the system, and yet, although stylistically Cioloş is different from Ponta, the majority of policies has remained the same, albeit some unpopular measures have been dropped.

Political peace and Iohannis' missed opportunities

Since 2004 (apart from a brief period between 2008 and 2011) the President and Prime Minister have been from different parties. Unable to win the Presidency since 2004, the PSD has remained the largest parliamentary party and, in alliance with other parties, has waged an internecine campaign to protect their power. This culminated in two failed attempts to impeach the President, alongside the undermining of anti-corruption efforts and manipulation of electoral rules.

The Cioloş government has represented a period of calm and stability. In contrast to the often frenetic, confrontational styles of previous presidents, Iohannis' understated style represents a welcome change. However, when it comes to action, he is often ineffective, unwilling to take advantage of opportunities to break with the old system. This is seen in some of his appointments including Dan Mihalache, who was taken on as an [advisor](#) after being a former advisor to PSD Prime Minister Adrian Năstase, who has been convicted of corruption on three occasions. Mihalache has recently been appointed the new Romanian ambassador in [London](#), which shows that high office is still given as a [reward](#) rather than on merit. (Though some have remarked that Mihalache's appointment to London could be out of a desire to be rid of him).

Many feel let down by Iohannis: the belief that he might be able to be the political figurehead of renovation has been replaced by the sense that he is either incapable or unwilling to instigate meaningful change. Disillusionment may explain the low turnout as people concluded they had no one to vote for, so stayed at home. Iohannis' own apathy was illustrated by his decisions to [vote after 6pm](#).

And the fall of the Ponta government has not brought corruption cases to an end. It was discovered that the [company](#) supplying disinfectant to hospitals had not only been overcharging hospitals, but had also been diluting the disinfectant by as much as 10 times. Anger has surged against both the company and the lack of oversight by the Health Ministry. It is significant that it was not discovered by the ministry but instead by an investigative journalist. This and the Colectiv scandal prompted such anger because in contrast to 'traditional' corruption, those getting rich do so by playing fast and loose with the health of other people.

Reactionary backlash

There has also been a reactionary backlash since the Colectiv fire. The Orthodox Church, which pays no tax but receives money from the authorities for what are often regarded as vanity projects, was heavily criticised immediately after the fire but has [continued its previous behaviour](#). The church has responded by portraying itself as a [victim](#) and attacking its critics. To re-assert itself it has been flexing its muscles by building on fears over LGBT rights.

The Church supported a [petition](#) which gained over 3 million signatures to attempt to have the constitution amended to ban same sex marriage – in a similar way as achieved by Croatian pressure groups close to the Church in 2013. Just like in Croatia, this is a somewhat quixotic move as same sex marriage is already banned under the civil code; however, it is more about the church demonstrating its power after a period on the defensive.

Meanwhile in parliament the PSD has been seeking to [undermine](#) anti-corruption moves. Năstase's continued involvement demonstrates that in Romania a corruption conviction is no barrier to public life. The Romanian Parliament also decided to change the local elections from two rounds (as used previously and in presidential elections) to a single round. This favours the PSD as in two-round elections the party would often win the first round, but lose the second with anti-PSD opposition figures uniting behind a leading centre right and anti-PSD candidate. Single round elections favour the PSD as it is the largest party. There is no left-wing alternative to the PSD, while

the centre right is fractured. In the Bucharest mayoral elections, the PSD's Gabriela Firea won with 42.9% of the vote with the remaining 56.1% of the vote split between other parties.

New parties and barriers to change

In the immediate aftermath of Ponta's resignation there were many **promised** new movements that came to nothing. New parties face obstacles that make a breakthrough difficult. Politics is still very 'hands on' and dependent upon having a large grassroots party organisation. The most popular television stations, such as Antena 3, are closely affiliated to established parties, and thus they either ignore new entrants, or are openly hostile. Without television exposure or party organisation it is difficult for new parties to get their message across. Previous new parties have all come from the extreme right and were embraced by the media, because their often outlandish behaviour made for good copy and provided plenty of content.

The main new party to emerge was *Uniunea Salvați Bucureștiul* (Union to Save Bucharest – USB) led by the activist Nicușor Dan. Dan made his name opposing what he saw as the rapacious development and destruction of Bucharest and its few green spaces. In 2006 he set up the NGO *Asociația "Salvați Bucureștiul"* (Save Bucharest Association). In the 2012 Bucharest Mayoral elections he stood as an independent, gaining 8.48% of the vote. His profile rose in the aftermath of the Collectiv fire as a longtime critic of the system.



Supporters of the independent mayoral candidate and anti-corruption activist Nicușor Dan in the 2012 local elections, campaigning in the centre of Bucharest. Credits: [Bogdan](#) / Wikimedia Commons

While for many Dan represented a breath of fresh air, others were critical. During the local election campaign, he was attacked for making statements that were construed as **racist** (quickly withdrawn by Dan) and **homophobic** (an article written in 2000). It was suggested that USB was merely a different strand of the Bucharest elite wanting a slice of the pie and having no interest in the lives of ordinary people. Those on the right such as Marian Preda (formerly of Elena Udrea's PMP) accused him of a conflict of interest, while Șerban Marinescu of the extreme neo-liberal M10 party argued he was 'anti-urban' and had '**radicalised**' people against development.

USB made extensive use of social media but it was excluded by the traditional media, meaning that many,

especially older voters, were unaware of the party. If one were to ask pensioners in the working class districts of Bucharest if they would vote for Nicușor Dan, the response is likely to be 'who?', whereas Firea, thanks to her career as a journalist, was already well known to the electorate.

Meanwhile, the activist, intellectual left remains steadfastly on the sidelines. It revels in the moral superiority of uncompromising opposition to the system. Quick to criticise those who engage with the system, but refusing to do so itself, preferring instead ideological and theoretical purity, over concrete gains that may necessitate compromise.

The mayoral campaign in Bucharest

Firea and the PSD ran a low-key campaign in Bucharest. Perhaps learning the lessons of the 2014 presidential election where Ponta's confrontational style alienated a lot of voters and mobilised opposition against him, Firea, who has an equally [toxic personality](#), stemming from her career as a journalist on Antena 3 and as a [spokeswoman for Ponta](#), was kept largely under-wraps. Her TV appearances were mostly on Antena 3, and she actively avoided the [aggressive attacks](#) that are associated with her.

The [National Liberal Party](#) (PNL) ran an incompetent campaign in the capital. Cătălin Predoiu was the party's [fourth choice](#) for candidate after the previous three [withdrew](#). The controversy over the selection of [Marian Munteanu](#), a former student leader who had links to both the far right and also faced allegations of being a Securitate informer, followed on the back of the withdrawal of the [unpleasant](#) (controversial) Ludovic Orban after he was charged with [corruption offences](#). This destroyed the credibility of the PNL.

The centre right is further complicated by the presence of other smaller parties such as ALDE and PMP, which are remnants of splits within the PNL and the former PD-L, too small to be elected but large enough to take away votes from either the PNL or USB. In some areas ALDE aligned itself with the PSD mirroring their parliamentary relationship.

Results

Gabriela Firea's victory in the mayoral elections in [Bucharest](#) was the [headline story](#) of the night, alongside the victory of former Prime Minister Emil Boc of the PNL in Cluj and the re-election in [Craiova](#) and Brasov of mayors accused of corruption and in [Baia Mare of a mayor currently in prison](#). The PSD won 5 of the 6 sector mayoral competitions.

[Nationally](#) the elections mean that the PSD has 1,669 mayors and 16,556 local councillors, while the PNL has 1,059 mayors and 13,082 councillors, while the Hungarian UDMR has 195 mayors and 2295 councillors. Some 53 [independent](#) candidates also won, although the title of independent can be deceptive. USB came second in 3 of the 6 sectors of Bucharest, and won 25% of the vote across the city, giving it a powerful voice on the city council (the PSD won 40% giving no party overall control). Nicușor Dan won 30.52% of the vote and came second in the mayoral election; he has subsequently declined to be Firea's deputy.

Initial results pointed to USB making a surprise breakthrough in Sector 1 of Bucharest with its candidate [Clotilde Armand](#) leading. However, this was [shortlived](#) as results confirmed victory for the PSD's candidate. Subsequent to that there have been accusations of [intimidation](#) of election observers, and some 250,000 [missing ballots](#) across Bucharest. In response to the controversy, the old Firea has [re-appeared](#), telling the USB to accept the result, which points to her style of leadership and the kind of politics Bucharest can expect for the next four years.

Long term problems for the PSD, PNL and Romanian democracy

The [western media](#) has made much of the mayors who were elected despite [criminal cases](#) hanging over their heads. There is a paradox here. Corruption and local politics go hand in hand with one another. For an up and coming member of the elite, a local powerbase and patronage network is vital. Why would people vote for such politicians? [Evidence](#) is increasingly showing that voters don't care how services are provided – free market, state or

corrupt, as long as they are provided. Thus a mayor who is corrupt but effective in providing services will be willingly re-elected. In Sector 4, where the Colectiv fire took place, it was only complaints from victims and families that prevented Cristian Popescu-Piedone from running again for mayor.

The PSD's reputation for illiberalism, authoritarianism and corruption renders it toxic to many voters. However, it retains a sizable core electoral support base, who can be relied upon to vote. The PSD will always do well in elections where there is a low turnout. This is the root of the PSD's problem. It is deeply dependent upon local barons for financial and electoral support in national elections.

These figures will be happy with this election result as it secures local power for them. On the other hand, the toxicity of such individuals and the corruption associated with their politics makes it difficult for the PSD to win the presidency. To de-toxify, the PSD needs to break from the barons it is currently dependent on. However, few are willing to do this and as Dr Radu Cinpoș of Kingston University has [highlighted](#), 'when Ion Iliescu is the only person in the party who is making sense, then you have a problem'.

Firea's early moves as Mayor reflect a populist approach. Her solution to the traffic problems in Bucharest is to make the [buses free](#). This ignores that the problem is not the price of bus tickets, but rather the poor infrastructure and conditions of travel: over-crowding, buses not running on time, no dedicated bus lanes, and a lack of air conditioning – given that almost half the year Bucharest is likely to have temperatures over 30 degrees Celsius.

The PNL as the main rivals to the PSD also face a problem with their own corruption issues and internal divisions. Furthermore, they cannot continue to simply rely on 'not being the PSD' in order to win elections. They too have issues with toxic political personalities that need to be dealt with.

The USB face a different problem. Despite the success of the movement, it faces the difficulty of sustaining support for the next four years. There is the likelihood that some will become disenchanted feeling that there is simply no point in trying. However, their position on the city council now provides USB with a platform through which they can increase their recognition among the Bucharest electorate. If USB are to make a breakthrough then they need to find a way to reach the voters who are not connected to social media, both in terms of physically getting the message to those voters but also developing policies that will appeal to them.

While there are alternative movements in Bucharest, this cannot be said for the rest of the country. Politics remains in the hands of the established parties and elites. Turnout was down from both the 2014 presidential elections and the 2012 local elections, reflecting general apathy and alienation from the system.

There is a growing sense of two Romanias: in elections such as this, where the diaspora is not involved and turnout is low, power rests more in the hands of often older, less educated voters, leading to an electoral map dominated by the PSD. In Presidential elections, where the diaspora is able to participate fully and turnout especially in the cities is higher, the map changes colour. Thus a fault-line emerges between politics at a local level in the hands of one party, while the highest political office is in the hands of another, due less to switching between parties but rather mobilisation.

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