

## **ELECTION BRIEFING NO 52 EUROPE AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN ROMANIA, NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 6 2009<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Key points:**

- On 6 December 2009, following two rounds of elections, the incumbent Traian Băsescu won a narrow victory of 50.33% over Mircea Geoană's 49.67% and was elected President for a second five-year term.
- For the first time in post-communist Romania, the votes of citizens living abroad changed the outcome of the elections.
- The campaign revealed a pre-occupation for personal attacks, monologues, and divergent discourses which replaced substantial policy debates on common ground and priorities for the country.
- During the campaign for the first round, the media played a crucial role through its biased reporting of events.
- Exit polls broadcast during election day triggered bandwagon and intimidation effects that secured the access of the first two candidates into the second round.
- The election was dominated by domestic issues, the European dimension being left aside.
- The consequences of the presidential election results were visible at the level of government in Romania. The continuity of Mr Băsescu as President implied the survival of a government that had failed a vote of confidence six weeks before the election.

In the November-December 2009 presidential election, Romanian voters had, for the first time, to choose their President without national legislative elections being organized simultaneously. The 2003 Constitution extended the presidential mandate from four to five years (Article 83), whereas parliament continued to be elected every four years (Article 63). The presidential elections were to be organized on the basis of a majority run-off electoral

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system. If no candidate received an absolute majority of votes, the two candidates receiving the most votes qualified for the second round of voting. Except for the 1990 elections, when a winner emerged in the first round, all subsequent Romanian presidential races were contested into the second round.

The 2009 presidential elections displayed a few particularities, but also similarities compared with the previous 2004 elections. Starting with the latter, Romanians witnessed a close race in the second round between the representatives of the same political parties as five years before.<sup>2</sup> The Democratic-Liberal Party supported the incumbent president Traian Băsescu, whereas the Social-Democratic Party promoted their leader Mircea Geoană. The same candidate, Traian Băsescu, won both elections obtaining a second consecutive mandate after a troubled period during which he was impeached, but received a citizens' vote of confidence in the May 2007 national referendum.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the victory came in a similar manner, after the exit-polls indicated his opponent as being the winner. When voting ended at 21.00 on Election Day (Bucharest GMT+2), the polls indicated that Social Democrats Adrian Năstase had won in 2004 and Mircea Geoană in 2008. The polling problems that led to these incorrect predictions are discussed in detail in the section on the campaign.

At the same time, three specific elements of these elections influenced the development of the campaign. First, it was the only time in post-communist Romania when elections took place in times of political instability. In October 2009, six weeks before the elections, the Social-Democratic Party left the coalition government. Such a decision came after 10 months characterized by repeated attacks on their coalition partners, the Democratic-Liberal Party, and after several open attempts to find reasons (including numerous threats) to leave the poorly performing government before the elections. As a consequence, the Social-Democratic candidate presented himself as belonging to an opposition party, able to govern in a coalition with the Liberals and thus representing an alternative to the incumbent. Second, arising from this, the two candidates who made it through to the second round not only belonged to the parties governing the country most of the time after the legislative elections in November 2008, but they were also the two most important state figures. Mircea Geoană was the President of the Senate, the Upper Chamber of the Romanian Parliament. The Constitution states that the person holding this position replaces the president in special circumstances (for example, impeachment, impossibility to govern etc). Third, Romanian diaspora voters changed the election result. Within the country's boundaries, Mircea Geoană had almost 14,500 votes more than Traian Băsescu. However, the large number of votes cast for the latter (78.86%) by Romanians abroad provided an advantage of approximately 85,000 votes for the incumbent. The final difference between the two candidates, slightly above 70,000 votes, was the narrowest margin in a Romanian presidential election. In such a context, the fraud allegations accompanying every Romanian election received special attention and cancelled votes were re-counted but without significant modifications to the final outcome.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2004, Traian Băsescu was the candidate of the Truth and Justice Alliance that included the Democratic Party (the predecessor of the Democratic-Liberal Party) as an important component. Mr Băsescu was the leader of this party and replaced the Liberal candidate Mr Stolojan after his withdrawal.

<sup>3</sup> See: Ed Maxfield, 'Europe and Romania's Presidential Impeachment Referendum, May 2007,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Referendum Briefing No 15* at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/-\\_no\\_37-eb-romania07.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/-_no_37-eb-romania07.pdf).

The importance of the Romanian 2009 presidential elections was rooted in the economic and political difficulties faced by the country in the aftermath of the 2008 legislative elections.<sup>4</sup> Two domestic issues dominated the competition. On the one hand, the government's stability was endangered as soon as half of the coalition abandoned the sinking ship. At the beginning of October 2009, Parliament passed the first ever vote of no confidence that dismissed the minority government and subsequent attempts by the President to appoint different cabinets failed. Such a situation had broader implications as Romania contracted a loan from the International Monetary Fund and all negotiations were suspended during the caretaker government (i.e. the same cabinet that had received the vote of no confidence). On the other hand, a recurrent problem in post-communist Romania, the size and the shape of the legislative assembly, was promoted by Traian Băsescu into a referendum simultaneously organized with the presidential elections. This briefing note illustrates the twisted path towards the re-election of the incumbent and argues that his election for a new term in office shaped the development of the country.

## Background

The sixth Presidential elections in post-communist Romania followed a turbulent period in country's political life. Everything started in the aftermath of the 2004 elections when the President refused to appoint a prime-minister belonging to the Social-Democratic Party, who had won the legislative elections, and instead oriented towards the leader of the National Liberal Party (Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu), the senior partner in the electoral coalition with Băsescu's party. It was the first time when the winning party was denied the right to form the government (based on the argument that the Social Democrats did not have the majority in parliament). As a result, the coalition government formed by the Truth and Justice Alliance and the Alliance of the Democratic Hungarians in Romania had to take on board the Conservative Party (which ran in an electoral coalition with the Social Democratic Party) to form a weak majority. In this context, President Băsescu publicly expressed his willingness in spring 2005 to organise early elections. His reasoning was based on the popularity of the Truth and Justice Alliance with the electorate, thus hoping to obtain a better electoral result and eliminate the "immoral solution" (in his words) of having the Conservatives in government.<sup>5</sup> The prime minister, who initially agreed with the President, took a different stance as soon as the country faced major floods and early elections were no longer considered a priority. He strengthened his later position by adopting a discourse about continuity and the implementation of long term political projects, thus ending up in an open conflict with the President. These tensions were not only visible for the entire electorate, but also became obvious between the coalition partners. As a result, in March 2007 the Democratic Party left the coalition government.

Following this exit, the impeachment procedure of President Băsescu initiated by the opposition parties for allegedly unconstitutional conduct could be put in practice (with the support of the governing Liberals). There were three main reasons to suspend the President. First, he was accused of infringing upon and substituting the authority of the government, the judicial system and Parliament. Second, he was accused of political partisanship (towards the

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<sup>4</sup> See: Ed Maxfield, 'Europe and Romania's Parliamentary Elections, 30 November 2008,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 44* at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernromania2008\\_no\\_44.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernromania2008_no_44.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> The Conservatives left the coalition in autumn 2006 following numerous arguments with the Democratic Party.

Democratic Party) and abuse of power, by crossing the constitutional line in his role as a mediator. Finally, it was considered that he manipulated and instigated public opinion against other state institutions. Although the Constitutional Court found no evidence in this respect (and its opinion was consultative), Parliament voted in favor of Mr Bănescu's impeachment. The referendum organized in May 2007 revealed a high rate of support for the President (almost 75% of the voters, on a turnout of 44.45%) who was re-installed. The President's conflict with the prime minister continued with respect to the electoral system used for the legislative elections. They supported two different electoral systems as alternatives to the PR closed-list system used until 2004. Mr Bănescu's project supported the run-off system that was also used to elect local mayors and the President, whereas the government promoted a mixed voting system with proportional representation. The President called for a referendum, organized simultaneously with the 2007 EP elections, which failed, having a turnout of only 26.5%. Despite this result, the existing electoral system is a mixture of the two proposals.

Following the 2008 legislative elections, the President decided to appoint as prime minister Emil Boc, the president of the Democratic Liberal Party which formed a coalition with the winner of the popular vote – the Social-Democratic Party. The two parties had a common ancestor, the National Salvation Front, their split occurring in 1992. Mr Boc was known for echoing President Bănescu's ideas for many years, often being considered by the national media as a 'straw man'. The effects of the global financial crisis were augmented in Romania by the implementation of the 2008 electoral promises made by all three major parties (the Democratic-Liberal, Social-Democratic and National Liberal Party) regarding the general increase of pensions and salaries. The lack of liquidities was also due to an irrational repayment to the private companies of state debts (refunding VAT); among the first 100 companies receiving debts were major contributors to the campaigns of the governing parties.

The incapacity of the government to deal with these economic problems was supplemented by visible corruption scandals and political nepotism. For example, the Minister of Youth and Sport could not justify the huge amounts of money spent to organize an event (The Youth Day). Moreover, within the activities of the event, President Bănescu's youngest daughter, Elena, an independent candidate for the European Parliament, was intensely promoted by media channels as part of the contract. Ms Bănescu was caught in the middle of a heated debate within the Democratic-Liberal Party when she was provided with a place on the party lists. The final outcome, in which she ran as independent,<sup>6</sup> was a compromise in which the President cleared his image and the Democratic-Liberal Party asked its local branches to mobilise a certain amount of votes for her candidacy.

The figure and personality of President Bănescu moved to the centre of the political debate as soon as the Social-Democrats left the government in October 2009 and parliament passed a vote of no confidence in him a few days afterwards. According to the Romanian Constitution, the President nominates a new candidate to form a cabinet which should receive a vote of confidence from the legislature. If three nominations are rejected by the legislature, then early elections must take place. The opposition parties, representing approximately 65% of the seats in parliament, expressed their public support for the mayor of Sibiu, Klaus Johannis, and argued explicitly that they would reject any other candidate. Despite all these signals,

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<sup>6</sup> See: Ed Maxfield, 'The European Parliament Election in Romania, June 7, 2009', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network European Parliament Election Briefing No. 30* at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/no\\_30\\_epernep2009romania.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/no_30_epernep2009romania.pdf).

President Băsescu appointed Lucian Croitoru, an advisor to the Governor of the National Bank of Romania, as prime minister. His cabinet was rejected in early November and a new appointment was made by Mr Băsescu, ignoring, without any explanation, the opposition's suggestion. Liviu Negoită, the new appointee, did not even get to a position where there was a parliamentary vote of confidence in him and withdrew his nomination. There were the same signals that his cabinet would receive a negative vote. Immediately after the presidential election, Mr Băsescu nominated the same prime minister defeated in the vote of confidence at the beginning of October 2009, Emil Boc, to form a new government. Taking advantage of the fact that the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania had switched from opposition to government, the new Boc cabinet obtained a vote of confidence in December 2009 by a narrow margin (30 votes above the necessary threshold). This result was possible with the help of the 18 ethnic minority representatives from the Chamber of Deputies and of the group of MPs leaving the Social-Democratic and Liberal camps after the defeat of their candidates in the presidential race. They constituted the group of independents in parliament.

Summing up, the first term in office of President Băsescu was full of controversies, disputes, contestation and contradictory declarations. The latter is best reflected in the attitude towards the loan contracted from IMF. Two months before the contract, President Băsescu explained in a public debate why he did not believe in the utility of such a step and how a loan from the IMF was out of the question. A few weeks after, not only did he praise the role of the IMF when signing the contract but also asked for another loan. His discourse often took the shape of 'us versus them', dividing society into supporters and enemies of his cause. This line of argument re-emerged in the impeachment referendum campaign when the 322 MPs who voted for his suspension were constantly associated with the forces of evil. Every vote supporting their decision was portrayed as favouring anarchy, corruption, clientelism and incompetence. A similar discourse, with less success, was used to promote the run-off electoral system in the referendum. In criticizing the PR closed list system, Mr Băsescu argued that it allowed MPs to avoid communication with the voters and to hide their negative features by getting a good position on the party list. At the same time, he also targeted the political parties with his attacks, mentioning that the existing setting favoured their authoritarian decisions over those of individual candidates. Apart from disputes with his opponents, political parties, and MPs, Mr Băsescu also displayed a general anti-institutional attitude, anti-system rhetoric, and active intervention in politics that sometimes pushed him beyond the edges of what was permitted in the Constitution. His major criticism was that the central state institutions impeded his reforms of the state; which could, in fact, only be seen in his discourse rather than actions.

## **The Electoral Campaign**

Although in every presidential election Romanian voters have a variety of choices (the average for the last decade is 12 candidates), more than 80% of the votes are cast for the first three or four candidates with any real chance of getting into the second round. The 2009 presidential elections was no exception, more than 86% of the voters chose one of the first three candidates: Traian Băsescu, Mircea Geoană, and Crin Antonescu. The third was the leader of the National-Liberal Party, replacing Călin Popescu Tăriceanu in this position after the 2008 legislative elections when the Liberals came third.

The 2009 presidential campaign began officially on 23 October 2009, one month prior to the first round. 12 candidates registered at the Central Election Bureau. Apart from the three above-mentioned political leaders, nine other candidates ran in the 22 November election: Corneliu Vadim Tudor (the leader of the Greater Romania Party), Sorin Oprescu (the Mayor of Bucharest, an independent), Kelemen Hunor (the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania), Constantin Ninel-Potârca (independent), George Becali (the leader of the New Generation Party-Christian Democratic party), Ovidiu-Cristian Iane (the Green Ecologist Party), Remus Cernea (the Green Party), Costantin Rotaru (the Socialist Alliance Party), and Eduard Gheorghe Manole (independent). None of these candidates represented a credible threat for third place in any of the opinion polls conducted before the elections. Sorin Oprescu, a former Social-Democrat who became the mayor of Bucharest as an independent, was initially considered a candidate with the potential to attract part of Mr Geoană's electorate, thus increasing Mr Antonescu's chances of getting into the second round. However, as discussed below in the section on the election results, his performance was actually quite poor.

### *Media coverage*

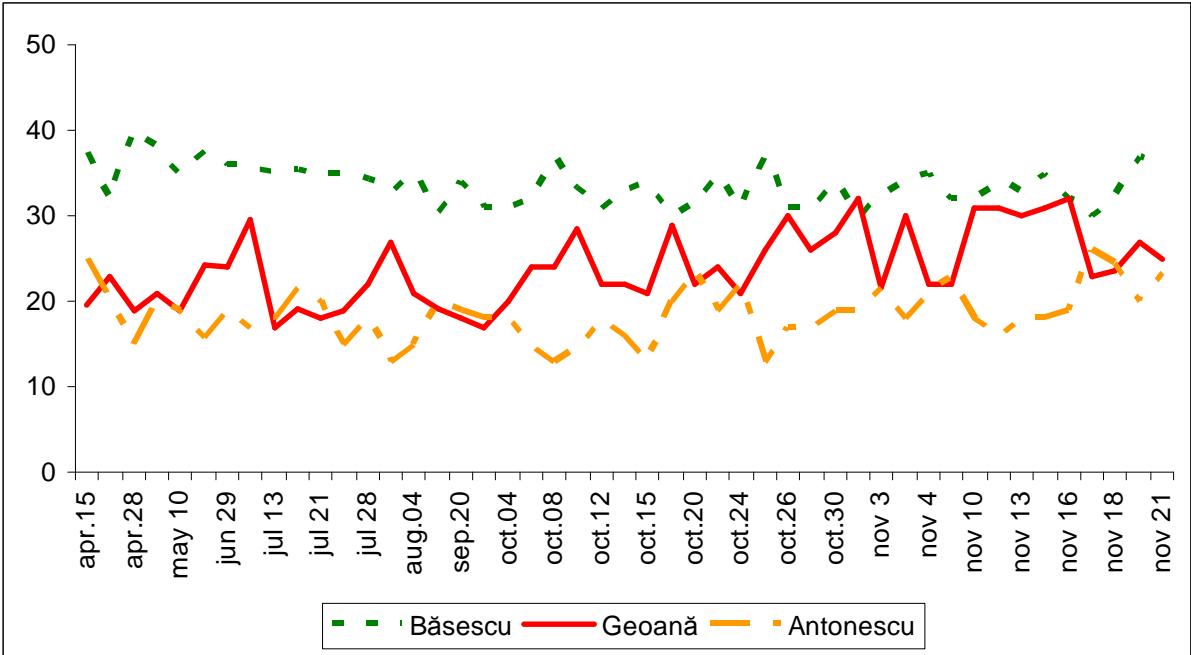
The media coverage during the campaign for the first round biased the political competition in two ways: it isolated the rest of competitors from the three major candidates, and consistently promoted the first two candidates. Throughout the entire electoral campaign, the Romanian media was marked by numerous examples of biased reporting and/or truncated information. For example, when citing opinion polls, *Realitatea TV* (Reality TV) constantly referred to the first four candidates, completely ignoring the rest. Moreover, important news portals (*hotnews.ro*) generally presented only the figures predicted by pollsters for the first three candidates, while only attaching the files with the rest of the predictions. Three debates were broadcast nationally before the first round; their structure and organisation shed light only on the three best positioned candidates. In the two most important electoral debates only the incumbent and the two main challengers had the opportunity to participate. Public television organized a separate meeting for all the candidates with less chance to get into the second round. There were other attempts to have differentiated debates, but the Social-Democratic campaign staff's strategic calculations did not make most of them possible. Mr Geoană had visible communication disadvantages when facing his opponents, being well-known for his blunders. As a result, his staff decided to avoid direct confrontations with other candidates and used two main strategies to achieve this. First, they avoided the direct debate in Cluj-Napoca and thus only Mr Băsescu and Mr Antonescu were involved. Second, they diluted the final meeting by inviting as many candidates as possible. The latter attempt failed, however, and the discussion took place two days before the polls opened only between Mr Băsescu, Mr Geoană and Mr Antonescu.

Almost every Romanian media outlet was partisan in these elections. The electoral shows were biased by the moderators who openly expressed their opinions and perceptions about issues and candidates. There were two news channels that gather the largest audiences: *Realitatea TV* and *Antena 3*. The former bounced between the Social-Democrat candidate (slightly more favoured on *Realitatea TV*) and the incumbent President – whose supporters were grouped at the *Cotidianul* newspaper and then re-organised in the virtual opinion platform, *Voxpublica* (both belonging to the same company as *Realitatea TV*). Similarly, *Antena 3* was owned by the founder of the Conservative Party, Dan Voiculescu, who had

enforced traditionally positive coverage of the Social-Democrats, the Conservatives' traditional allies since 2000. A popular show on this station (*Sinteza Zilei*) criticized the incumbent President during almost every day of his presidency. On the other hand, Mr Băsescu was openly supported and praised prior and during the campaign by TV stations such as *BITV*, *OTV* (the most successful tabloid-like television, enjoying large audiences) or *Etno TV* (a popular/folk music channel, owned by an MP from the presidential party) and newspapers such as *Evenimentul Zilei*.

*Opinion Polls: Before and During the Elections*

**Graph 1: Evolution of voting intentions for the major candidates**



Source: Author's own calculations based on 50 opinion polls from 2010.

The three major competitors announced their official candidacy at different moments in time. For Mr Băsescu and Mr Geoană there was no doubt that they were the candidates supported by the two major parties, their official announcement coming rather late in September and October. Mr Antonescu was in an uncertain situation as his candidacy depended on his ability to become the president of the Liberals at the party's spring 2009 national Congress. As this happened, his candidacy was officially launched at the beginning of May. As **Graph 1** shows, polls conducted for more than half a year revealed a few visible trends. First, despite some oscillations in the level of support for the three main candidates, the rank order was, on average, the same. There were isolated shifts in positions between candidates, but they may have been due to the sampling/probabilistic errors and reporting bias (given the party paying for the poll) that varied between pollsters. Overall, Mr Băsescu was supported the most, followed by Mr Geoană and Mr Antonescu. Second, voters did not appear to change their opinions throughout the period examined. Six months before the elections they had similar opinions to the votes that they actually cast in the election (see the next section). Third, Mr Băsescu was rarely troubled in his position on top of the preferences, but oscillations started to occur caused by the background political instability mentioned in the previous section. The relatively constant support registered until October altered due to political developments. This

was the same period when support for the Liberal candidate increased as he was the one proposing Klaus Johannis for the position of prime-minister (Johannis had a very good image due to his activities as mayor). In the months before the elections, the total declared support for the second and third candidates exceeded the support for Mr Băsescu.

The most surprising element as far as the polls were concerned took place during election day when exit polls conducted at the voting booths immediately after citizens cast their votes were made available to the public at various points during the day. With a rather stable distance between the second and third candidates, on November 22 the incumbent and main challenger could count on two benefits from this. On the one hand, they could trigger a bandwagon effect during polling day itself: people willing to vote for the third positioned candidate may have been prepared to give up or shift sides by seeing the partial results. On the other hand, the percentages in **Graph 1** show that main challenger would get a place into the second round ahead of the second challenger (Mr Antonescu). The regular exit polls could also accomplish the simple objective of avoiding a spectacular turnover of the undecided. This way, the possible emergence of an underdog effect during elections could be controlled for.

### *Campaign Issues*

The Romanian semi-presidential system does not provide policy prerogatives for the President. However, every time than an election campaign starts numerous policies are presented to the public, usually without clear specifications as to how they are to be implemented. In the 2009 elections, the context made such discourses more plausible as the challengers could portray themselves as reformers. Their explicit discourses claimed that this election was not solely to appoint a new President, but also to change a cabinet that did not perform well.

The electoral campaign was not dominated by debates and policy discussions, but focused on scandals and political attacks (for example, Mr Antonescu was accused of numerous absences in parliament, starting in 1996). The candidates were less promoters of their electoral programmes and more analysts and commentators of daily issues. The electoral campaign was characterized more by populist gestures and various promises rather than common topics of debate. Dialogue was replaced by individual monologues. During the one month long campaign, the three debates mentioned in the previous sub-section were the only opportunities for the candidates to express their ideas regarding the country's specific problems.

The incumbent had the difficult task of defending the economic and political failures of his term in office<sup>7</sup> and thus decided to shift the public attention towards an old topic: the size and the structure of the legislature. With a population of 22 million people, Romania has a parliament of more than 450 members. The reform proposed by the President implied a decrease in this number to 300 and the elimination of one Chamber as the two Chambers had similar functions. The entire campaign emphasised these issues, bringing back the anti-parliament-and-MPs discourse practiced during his term in office. Thus, the major theme of incumbent's campaign was not solutions to the economic or political crises. Whenever asked about the future government, Mr Băsescu's answers were ambiguous. The only certainty was

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<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, every public mentioning of his term in office included the achievements of the previous five years: economic growth, the Snakes Island (won in a dispute with Ukraine) and EU accession. Moreover, he always mentioned that the financial crisis had passed and economic growth would follow.



that he would not appoint Klaus Johannis, as he officially stated several times. One further component of Mr Băsescu’s campaign was represented by numerous attacks against media tycoons, called “moguls”. He repeatedly accused them of corruption, manipulation, and clientelism, blaming them for the dire situation in the country.

Mircea Geoană’s discourse followed a path evolving from a realistic evaluation of economic problems to ridiculous promises. Starting with the former, Mr Geoană supported progressive taxation and higher levels of VAT as means of increasing state revenues and avoiding wealth discrepancies among citizens. Among those falling within the category of ridiculous promises were: free medicines to old and sick people delivered to their homes by the postman, pension increases, and no job losses in the public sector. He never went beyond the promises; the fact that he simply enumerated all these benefits without explaining how they would be implemented triggered severe critiques from political competitors and the media. His experience as leader of the Social-Democrats worked against him: he often had courageous initiatives that ended as soon as they were presented in the media without implementation. Such administrative problems were complemented by a poor rhetorical style that made his campaign staff determined to keep him away from his more articulate and ideationally effective opponents.

Mr Antonescu’s campaign had as its central theme the equilibrium and stability in the relationships between public institutions. Building on the negative examples identified during Mr Băsescu’s 2004-2009 term in office, he created a model in which the President not only respected the Constitution, but also played the role of a moderator. He counterbalanced the policy proposals of his opponents by repeatedly explaining that the President had no such prerogatives in the semi-presidential setting. However, he also mentioned economic policies aimed at putting an end to the economic crisis: reducing the flat tax to 10% (from 16%), VAT to 15% (from 19%), less social welfare, and administrative cuts. Although his measures were more specific than those of the other challenger, there were also plenty of blanks to be filled in. Moreover, the economic policies of the two main challengers were antithetical. If any of them would have won the elections and their parties would have formed a new cabinet (as they said they would during the campaign), the policies of one candidate would have become redundant.

## Results

**Table 1** summarizes the results obtained by the candidates in the first round of the presidential election. The turnout was 54.37%, reaching the lowest level for presidential elections in post-communist Romania. 2.29% of the votes cast were cancelled due to mistakes made in the voting process or because the ballot paper was left blank (a protest vote promoted by the *Pro Democracy* NGO before the 2008 elections). The first three candidates were a special pool, their results being, as expected, very far from the performance of the fourth placed candidate. The sum of their votes indicated that almost 85% of the electorate supported them. The Greater Romania Party’s candidate was positioned after this leading pool, with slightly more than 5%, whereas the representative of the Hungarian minority and the mayor of Bucharest obtained results between 3% and 4%. Five candidates got below 1% of the valid votes. The race between the first two candidates was very tight, the difference being less than 1.5%. The explicit alliance made between Mr Geoană and Mr Antonescu after this first round of the elections gave the impression that the incumbent would be defeated. This expectation

was also strengthened by other candidates who asked their electorate to vote for Mr Geoană in the second round (for example, Vadim Tudor and George Becali).

**Table 1: Results of the first round of presidential election (22 November)**

Candidate	Nominating Party	Votes	Percentage
Traian Băsescu	Democratic-Liberal Party	3,153,640	32.44%
Mircea Geoană	Social-Democratic Party	3,027,838	31.15%
Crin Antonescu	National Liberal Party	1,945,831	20.02%
Corneliu Vadim Tudor	Greater Romania Party	540,380	5.56%
	Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in		
Hunor Kelemen	Romania	372,764	3.83%
Sorin Oprescu	Independent	309,764	3.18%
	New Generation Party Christian		
George Becali	Democratic	186,390	1.91%
Remus Cernea	Green Party	60,539	0.62%
Constantin Rotaru	Socialist Alliance Party	43,684	0.44%
Eduard Gheorghe Manole	Independent	34,189	0.35%
Ovidiu Cristian Iane	Green Ecologist Party	22,515	0.23%
Constantin-Ninel Potârncă	Independent	21,306	0.21%

Source: Central Electoral Bureau.

The electoral campaign between the two rounds was similar to the one before the first round. Opinion polls revealed inconclusive advantages for either candidate. The campaign was dominated by two events. First, a tape showing President Băsescu punching an 11 year-old child at a political meeting in 2004 was circulated widely in the media. In his defense, Mr Băsescu argued that the tape was a counterfeit. The impact of the tape was not dramatic: one opinion poll indicated that although half of his voters considered the tape to be real, they continued to support him anyway. Second, one debate was organized three days before the second round. Apart from the usual attacks and personal remarks, it revealed a mistake made by Mr Geoană made during the evening before when he made an inexplicable visit to a media owner; one of the “moguls” as Mr Băsescu described them. The public accusations made by Mr Băsescu during this debate could not be defended and many analysts argued that this was decisive for the second round’.

On 6 December 2009, turnout increased by approximately 5% to 58.02%, with only 1.3% of votes being cancelled. Mr Băsescu won the elections by a narrow margin, with the help of the diaspora voters, and thus obtained a second term in office. He was the first President in post-communist Romania to secure two consecutive full terms in office. In 1992, Ion Iliescu obtained a full term in office after a short term of two years, labeled by him as a 'caretaker'. The Romanian Constitution limits the possibility to occupy this position to only two terms in office.

**Table 2: Results of the second round of presidential election (6 December)**

Candidate	Nominating Party	Votes	Percentage
Traian Băsescu	Democratic-Liberal Party	5,275,808	50.33%
Mircea Geoană	Social-Democratic Party	5,205,760	49.67%

Source: Central Electoral Bureau.

## **The absence of European issues**

These were the first presidential elections held after Romania's accession to the EU in 2007. However, there were few if any references to European issues in the candidates' political programmes or public discourse. During the campaign there were remarks about the promotion of certain individuals in the European Parliament (for example: Mr Băsescu's daughter; Mr Antonescu's future wife was placed second on the party list). Apart from these anecdotal references, there was a short debate over EU accession. President Băsescu mentioned it as a success of his previous term in office. Mr Geoană contested this statement claiming that the negotiations started when he was foreign minister (2000-2004), whereas the negotiations were actually run by Vasile Pușcaș, another member of the Social-Democratic Party. Some domestic issues were discussed with reference to pressures from the EU: reform of the judicial system was brought up by all three candidates, mentioning the bad grades received by Romania in this field. Although the nomination of Dacian Cioloș as Commissioner for Agriculture in the new Barroso Commission represented a major development in the Romanian presence on the European scene, none of the candidates approached the topic. Mr Băsescu could hardly do so as in October he had stated that Romania's chances to get such an important position were very limited. Such scarce references indicate how the presidential election was focused on domestic problems, with European issues being left aside.

## **Conclusions/Future Prospects**

The main impact of the 2009 presidential election in Romania was felt on the structure of the government. The re-election of Mr Băsescu meant continuity for his party in government and a fragile majority. The same prime minister who had failed the vote of confidence in October 2009 was nominated and a similar composition of the cabinet was constituted. The economic difficulties increased reaching a dramatic level in April 2010. Without investment and clear economic ideas, the government spent the money received from the IMF loans on salaries and pensions. Therefore, the measure at hand was to increase VAT from 19% to 24% and reduce all public sector salaries by 25%. The VAT increase replaced a previous policy proposed by the government a 15% cut in all the pensions; the latter being struck down by the Constitutional Court. Such measures would probably be complemented by VAT and tax increases. Put simply, pretty much what was proposed by one opponent of the President. In this respect, the presidential election of 2009 denied any prospect of change. The continuity of the President brought a perpetuation of the insecure government which reached the lowest level of public confidence compared to its predecessors. In essence, the 2009 presidential election legitimised Mr Băsescu's behavior of controlling the government and appointing obedient prime ministers.

After an agitated term in office, President Băsescu should be prepared for another one that was likely to be similar. Although he secured the confidence of the population, he faced new challenges brought mainly by the government he supported. It was the first time in two decades when most of the citizens were discontent with the social situation and street protests occurred. Citizens did not assign the guilt for this situation on the government, but transferred it towards the President as he was the fierce supporter of the Boc cabinet. The consequence of this situation was that the pressure and conflicts moved from the political arena - where he was used to fighting with parties, institutions, and individual opponents - to the arena of

popular discontent. Without having the incentive of having to win a new term in office, Mr Băsescu's performance may alter considerably.

The prevalence of domestic over European politics was understandable in the context of presidential elections. However, it can hardly be explained why in a new member state the European issue was completely left aside. There was a huge discrepancy between the 2004 presidential election where the EU played a crucial role (as Romania failed to join the 2004 accession wave) and the 2009 election where almost no references were made. Moreover, in the policy debates and explanations for success, European models could have represented valuable food for thought (for example, the poor economic situation that the country finds itself in had parallels with the recent Greek bankruptcy).

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