

**ELECTION BRIEFING NO 73
EUROPE AND THE ROMANIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION,
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Key points:

- The Social Liberal Union, the main opposition grouping, secured a clear-cut victory at 60% of the votes, thus bringing back to government the Social Democratic Party, President Basescu's most fervent opponent. The Right Romania Alliance came second with a record low of 16%, surprisingly close to one of the newest contenders the People's Party-Dan Diaconescu on 14%.
- The election turnout improved from the lowest level in 2008 (slightly above 39%), but remained relatively weak at 41.72%. Nevertheless, this was the third round of voting to take place in 2012, as the electorate had first chosen their local representatives in June and then faced a referendum on the President's impeachment in July.
- The election produced a colossal parliament, increasing its seats by 118 compared to the previous legislature, thus bringing it up to a staggering 588 MPs.
- As the first fully-fledged elections in Romania since it became an EU member state, and in the context of the Eurozone crisis, one can identify a more pronounced reference to 'Europe' in the main contenders' discourses, although yet not as a substantive campaign issue. The direct intervention of EU leaders in political life in general, and the elections in particular, in response to the actions of the Ponta government was more noteworthy.
- The campaign was remarkable in its virulence: a battle of personalities more than a debate on issues. The aggression of the Social Liberal campaign, and the lack of co-ordination and clear message in the Right Romania Alliance's strategy, was likely to have been reflected in the final results.

Background/Context

December 2012 marked Romania's second parliamentary election since its EU accession and the end of a tumultuous political year. In the 2008-12 legislature a surprising alliance between the staunchest of rivals, the Social Democratic Party and the Democratic Liberal Party, had not fared well because of the austerity measures it had implemented since taking office and the constant political strife between the governing parties. The alliance disintegrated shortly into its mandate and from May 2010, the Democratic Liberal Party governed together with the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania and the National Union for the Progress of Romania (which

originated as a splinter party from the Social Democrats). Facing domestic civil unrest and increased international scrutiny from the EU and IMF, the Emil Boc (Democratic Liberal Party) government in particular, and political parties in general, found themselves trying to balance domestic political and social concerns with international pressure to implement preventive austerity measures.

The start of 2012 saw the Democratic Liberals, the main party in the governing coalition, falling in the polls to just below 16% from the 21% lead that the party enjoyed at the end of 2011, while the Social Liberal Union (the opposition alliance between the Social Democratic Party, the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party) performed slightly better at 53.4% compared to its previous 49.2%. The deal negotiated in 2009 with the IMF and EU to secure a €20 billion loan translated into severe job losses and cuts to public wages and pensions, implemented in complete disregard for their social consequences,¹ which the electorate rebelled against. January 2012 marked what some observers hastily labelled ‘Romania’s own spring revolution’; not very surprising given the severity of the austerity measures, but un-characteristic for the passive Romanian electorate. Partly spontaneous, originating in support for the re-instatement of the former under-secretary of state for health who had resigned in protest against a proposed health bill advancing the privatisation of emergency ambulance services, and partly fuelled by the left-wing opposition, these disputes quickly escalated into anti-establishment demonstrations in 16 cities and towns across the country, dismissing all parties as liars and denouncing the Basescu ‘dictatorship’. This was the first occasion since the 1990 protests that the electorate managed to mobilise and vocalise their discontent, although overall the movement lacked the cohesiveness needed for a tangible impact. It did nevertheless raise the question of whether this discontent would be reflected in the December legislative elections, and whether the electorate would follow through at the ballot box on their threats to remove the ruling elites from office?

The events that followed only amplified this atmosphere of frustration and disillusionment with the ruling parties in particular and the political class as a whole. The electorate witnessed the fall of two governments in four months and the opposition’s takeover with the appointment of the Social Democrat leader Victor Ponta as prime minister in May 2012. In a move to rescue the image of the party in particular, and the performance of the government in general, the President appointed Mihai Ungureanu, a former Foreign Minister (2004-2007) and the head of the Secret Service (SIE), to take over from Emil Boc who had resigned at the beginning of February as a consequence of the anti-austerity protests. This second government was nevertheless short-lived, and was defeated in a parliamentary vote of no confidence with only four votes above the minimum threshold (50% plus one MP), on account of the political dissatisfaction with its economic approach to the crisis (especially privatisation plans), coupled with the opportunistic move of some members of the ruling coalition into the opposition’s camp. In a move to ensure the country’s credibility with its international partners and its commitment to carry out the reform path on which it had embarked, the President appointed Victor Ponta as Prime Minister in May, briefly after the collapse of Mr Ungureanu’s government.

Shortly after taking office Mr Ponta was involved in a plagiarism scandal that marked the beginning of a series of autocratic measures implemented to ensure his (and his party’s) continuation in government. In June 2012, the monthly magazine *Nature* published an article, quickly taken up by European broadsheets, alleging that the prime minister’s doctoral thesis had been plagiarised and providing evidence of over 100 pages reproduced from other works. Ahead of the Ministry of Education Ethics Council’s ruling on the case, its membership was abruptly

¹ The Boc government had carried out: a 25% reduction of civil servants’ pay, a 15% cut in retirement pensions, a down-sizing of 200 000 public service jobs, and a 5% increase in VAT, from 19% to 24%.

enlarged to include a majority sympathetic to the prime minister, who in the end exonerated him. The scandal would have probably ended there had it not been for the Ethics Commission of the University of Bucharest, the institution where Mr Ponta had obtained his PhD, unequivocally ruling it plagiarism. To divert attention from this matter, Mr Ponta and his main electoral ally, the leader of the Liberal Party Crin Antonescu, countered by accusing Mr Basescu of orchestrating the publication of the story and the international media of having covert interests in pursuing it.

Regardless of this incident, the animosity between the President and the Prime Minister proved that cohabitation was difficult at best or even impossible. Having declared back in February he would 'never be Basescu's prime minister', Mr Ponta proceeded to dismiss civil servants and officials considered close to the President, impeached the presidents of the two chambers of parliament, appointed a partisan ombudsman, curtailed the Constitutional Court's prerogatives to avoid the potential of parliament being over-ruled and transferred the Official Journal under government control. Domestic political analysts and NGOs, the EU Commission, the European Parliament and officials from member states (Germany, in particular) deplored the government's brutal methods and warned of their consequences for democracy, the rule of law and good governance. In response Mr Ponta and his coalition launched an aggressive anti-EU and anti-West discourse that would resurface during the election campaign as well.

Local elections held on June 10th brought about a significant victory for the Social Liberal ruling coalition who secured 36 of the 41 county councils compared to only two for the right-wing alliance. These results gave more momentum to the Social Liberal camp, who had managed to secure the political capital to force the President's overthrow. The parliament suspended President Basescu in July 2012, for the second time² in five years, but failed to secure his expulsion from office. The Constitutional Court declared the referendum on his impeachment invalid due to a turnout below the legally required 50% threshold, a ruling to which Mr Ponta acquiesced begrudgingly, but not before promising a revamp of the Constitution to address cases like this in the future.

The main parties had become obsessed with the fight between each other and neglected the daily government of the country. A study conducted by the Institute for Public Policies (IPP), published in December 2012, showed that the parliament had surrendered its legislative prerogatives to the government almost in their entirety, the latter thus becoming the main legislator in the country during the 2008-2012 term. The report estimated that 74% of the total number of adopted legislation had been initiated by the government, with the remaining 26% originating within the parliament; while on the whole only 23% of the proposals from the latter becoming laws, the remaining ones being rejected or still pending.

The political elite seemed to compete with each other to prove that rules are for those unimaginative enough to follow them, and the December 9th elections were no less controversial. Disagreement over the actual election date (later settled by the Constitutional Court) prompted a Social Liberal Union strike in parliament in February, as the Ungureanu government's proposal for merging the local and legislative elections in one ballot in November 2012 conflicted with its preference for early legislative elections one or two weeks after the local ones in June. In May 2012, the Constitutional Court invalidated the newly installed Social Liberal government's attempt to change the electoral system to a single-round first-past-the-post one without the 5%

² For an overview of the 2007 impeachment referendum, see: Ed Maxfield, 'Europe and Romania's Presidential Impeachment Referendum, May 2007', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Networks Referendum Briefing No 15*: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/-_no_37-eb-romania07.pdf.

electoral threshold, after an appeal from the Democratic Liberal Party, concerned for its own alliance's performance. However, even once these issues were clarified it remained uncertain until the very last day before the registration deadline which candidates would run on behalf of which party and what would be the final coalitions. The total number of eligible voters had also not been published in due time, which prompted President Basescu to warn about the government's pre-disposition toward electoral fraud, advising it 'not to forget about the 500 000 Romanians residing abroad as they had done at the referendum'.

The elections were framed by a political context fraught with instability and continuous hostility between the President and the Prime Minister, increasing popular distrust and international pressure. Reflecting the events of the year, polls published in November 2012 positioned the Right Romania Alliance (the Democratic Liberal-led formation) between a mere 15% and more optimistic 24%, critically close to the People's Party estimate of 10% to 15%. However, although the Social Liberal Union suffered a drop from its position at the beginning of the year, and in spite of the political events over the summer, maintained a comfortable lead scoring within the 48%-62% bracket.

The (non-)campaign

The December parliamentary election was labelled by many political observers as the most important election since 1990, as it decided not only the political and economic future of the country but also some of the parties' own survival. After the summer debacle, not only could the Social Liberal Union not afford a loss, but it needed a 60% share of the vote to ensure that it could form a majority on its own and have the certainty that President Basescu would have no alternative but to appoint Mr Ponta as prime minister, thus ensuring the continuation in government of the Social Democrats, who were determined to make a comeback. The Right Romania Alliance, and in particular the Democratic Liberal Party within it, had to make up for the disastrous results in the summer local elections, and were aiming for a 30% share of the vote, a 'good result' according to Vasile Blaga, the party's president at the time. This outcome would have given the Alliance the chance to attempt to form a parliamentary majority with smaller parliamentary parties. More importantly however the Democratic Liberals had particular concerns about the future of the party, since the local election results had already sparked severe tensions inside it and had created animosity as individuals looked for a scapegoat for their poor performance. Party leaders in particular were also concerned with the associated problem of volatile loyalties that had become apparent as party members switched sides in the interval between the local and the parliamentary elections, driven by their personal interests.

The start of the campaign, on 9 November 2012, saw 10 registered parties and 2 electoral alliances lining up to claim a seat in what was to become a gargantuan parliament. The two main contenders, the alliances of the Social Liberal Union and the Right Romania Alliance respectively, brought together the usual suspects in the Romanian party system (the Social Democratic Party, the Conservative Party and the National Liberal Party in the former, and the Democratic Liberal Party in the latter) and a couple of new entrants (the New Republic, Civic Force – both competing on the Right Romania Alliance ticket). The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania - a recurrent coalition partner during almost all of the previous governments and, therefore, a potential ally for a majority formation - generated some anxiety over its capacity to cross the 5% parliamentary threshold. In addition, the People's Party–Dan Diaconescu, founded only in 2011, made for an intriguing presence on the ballot after it had performed remarkably well in the earlier local elections.

Although hasty and ideologically in-cohesive alliances were not a novelty on the Romanian electoral scene, the 2012 configurations were particularly confusing, denoting last-minute electoral calculations and opportunism. A seemingly ill-assorted partnership between the centre-left alliance of the Social Democratic Party led by Victor Ponta and the National Union for the Progress of Romania - and, respectively, the centre-right alliance of the National Liberal Party headed by Crin Antonescu (the interim President during Basescu's impeachment procedure) and the Conservative Party - materialised as the Social Liberal Union. This formation had mobilised against the figure of President Basescu rather than around common policies and/or ideological positions. 'Divided in ideology but united in hostility,' it made no secret of its intentions as members of the alliance repeatedly referred to ousting the 'Basescu regime' with very little policy-oriented common ground to build upon.

The Right Romania Alliance, a purely electoral partnership in comparison to the political alliances within the Social Liberal Union, brought together an assortment of established parties and newly emerged formations in an effort to ensure a more cohesive support base following the failed presidential impeachment. The main opposition group, the Democratic Liberal Party led by Vasile Blaga, sought the support of the Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party led by Aurelian Pavelescu, the Civic Force Party headed by former Prime Minister Mihai Ungureanu, and the newly established New Republic led by Mihail Neamtu. However, the latter ran under the Civic Force banner in a show of solidarity from the members of the alliance as it had failed to register as a party in time for the signing of the election protocol (due to a couple of suspicious contestations before the Constitutional Court), a criterion newly introduced by the Ponta government just a few months before the elections. In response to the Social Liberal Union's approach, Pavelescu noted that the Right Romania was 'not an alliance against the Social Liberal Union, but for Romania, for Europe' and characterised its opponents as an 'untruthful and archaic political construction'.

The overarching message of both campaigns was an indictment of the opposing side's handling of the political affairs of the country and its relationship with the EU. The former opposition's message could not have been clearer: the main goal was to oust President Basescu and 'save' the country from his party's dominance, bringing it back on its 'European' course. At the same time, the Right Romania Alliance advocated a return to 'normality' - understood as democratic practices, rule of law, good governance - all of which, the Alliance claimed, had been hi-jacked under Ponta's government. The Alliance's leader, Vasile Blaga, accused the Social Liberal-led government of 'being responsible for the worst political and economic crisis since 1989' and claimed the right-wing alliance would 'put the country back on track'. Nevertheless, both campaigns lacked substance and focused on attacking candidates rather than advocating their positions on issues. The question of 'Europe' - although mostly broadly framed and discussed in terms of the implications of membership - was more prevalent in this election than in 2008,³ fuelled by concerns such as the Schengen negotiations, the financial crisis, the EU budget and the intervention of the EU elites in national politics.

The People's Party's discourse contributed little to the campaign debates. Mobilised around the figure of Dan Diaconescu and a TV station whose sole purpose for the previous four years had been to criticise whichever government was in office, the party gathered disgruntled, left-over candidates from the main parties (as late as on the last day of registration) under a nationalistic and un-realistic anti-establishment platform.

³ For an overview of the use of 'Europe' in the 2008 campaign, see: Ed Maxfield, 'Europe and Romania's parliamentary Election, 30 November 2008', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Networks Election Briefing No. 44* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-election-briefing-no-44.pdf>.

Bread and (very much) circus...

The campaign started in a markedly different fashion for each of the two major political opponents. The Right Romania Alliance took advantage of the European People's Party Congress held at the Parliament's Palace in Bucharest (after months of controversy over its location associated with the Romanian political climate) and the presence of sixteen EU heads of state and leaders (most of whom had shown support for Mr Basescu) to jump-start its campaign. The Social Liberal Union held their campaign launch event in parallel with the right-wing alliance's but, in contrast, chose the more popular National Arena Stadium as their venue and a more inclusive and spectacular event combining political speeches, concerts and refreshments. The Union capitalised on this stark difference and spun it to accentuate an alleged disconnection between citizens and the Right Alliance associated with President Basescu, who – they claimed – showed more concern for the Brussels elites rather than its own electorate.

The Social Liberal Union's campaign was carried out in the same grandiose fashion that it had started: their main message positioned the grouping rhetorically as the 'only legitimate solution' and supported it through bold accusations and grand pledges as to the future of the country and the Union's role in achieving it ('a strong Romania', 'victory year'). It also promoted alluring social and economic promises, mainly targeting the austerity-imposed deficits accrued during the previous Boc government. The prevalent message transmitted to the electorate reflected the alliance's focus on the shortcomings of the Boc government. Consequently, the main measures promoted throughout the campaign were explicitly coined as responses to the alleged poor management and inappropriate reaction of the previous government to EU/IMF crisis-related requirements. The Union promised a huge increase in the minimum salary by 71% over four years while reducing social contributions by 1% annually as of 2013, all accompanied by a system of progressive taxation comprising with rates set at 8%, 12% and 16% respectively, depending on the monthly revenue bracket. To top this off, they pledged to bring VAT down from the recently increased 24% to 19% during a four-year span, becoming fully effective by 2016. Each of these proposals specifically targeted the austerity-induced measures that the previous Boc government had adopted as part of the bailout.

The Right Romania Alliance, in turn, proposed a more modest increase in the minimum salary by 13% during its first mandate and then by an additional 18% as of January 2015 (an overall increase by approximately 33%), coupled with a reduction in the flat income tax from 16% to 12% and a lowering of social contributions by 5% before the end of 2015. Perhaps taking after European discourse to a degree, the alliance further committed itself to reduce youth unemployment (a move that echoed the efforts at EU level to address this consequence of the financial crisis) and move again to reform the healthcare system. Mr Ungureanu, the Civic Force leader, argued that while the Social Liberals proposed a 'ravaging socialism', the right wing alliance would ensure a self-sustainable and balanced market economy fit to take on a more active role within the EU.

The People's Party provided by far the most extravagant campaign promises. It criticised the performance of and the measures proposed by both the Social Liberal Union and the Right Romania Alliance while, at the same time, dismissing in overtly xenophobic rhetoric any possibility of allowing the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania to obtain a seat in the parliament. It delineated '20 simple steps' to suppress both the causes and effects of the financial crisis, most notably by lowering taxes while at the same time increasing salaries and pensions. In addition, every Romanian citizen was to receive €20,000 while, at the same time, every corrupt politician would be placed on trial for his or her actions. Corruption featured frequently in all the

parties' discourses, with some candidates promoting themselves as 'I steal less than they do' (e.g. of one of the Ecologist Party's candidates). This may have been prompted by the indictment for abuse of office in securing campaign funding of former Social Democrat Party leader Adrian Nastase in June 2012 (related to the 2004 Presidential campaign) and the continuous allegations of embezzlement, mis-management of party funding and nepotism against most party leaders and administrators in the two coalitions.

The Social Liberal Union, and especially the Social Democrats within it, also followed up on their recurring demands for constitutional change and committed themselves to a revision of the Constitution, specifically with regard to Article 103 delineating the procedure for the investiture of the prime minister. The envisaged modification would have legally obliged the President to appoint as the head of government the leader of the party with the largest number of votes cast in the general election. This provision ensured that the 2004 scenario, when President Basescu had refused to appoint the Social Democratic candidate as prime minister, would not repeat itself and that in 2013 the President would have been forced to accept the opposition's leader as prime minister should they win the election. Mr Ponta declared brazenly shortly before the start of the campaign (and after months of labelling Basescu as a 'dictator') that if the electorate granted the Social Liberals an absolute majority, this show of public support should be reflected in the choice of a prime minister. This popular backing, he argued, would be 'the best response' to the President's potential predicament over appointing a member of the opposition in this lead post, and 'he will surely respect it, since we are not a South-American dictatorship'.

Overall, the Right Romania Alliance seemed to convey a clearer running platform than the Social Liberal Union, whose persistent anti-Basescu discourse diverted attention from policy proposals, where these existed at all. However, the incoherence in some of the right wing alliance's campaign pledges and its major component party's (the Democratic Liberals) history in government reduced its credibility as a governing alternative. While just one year earlier it had implemented draconian pay cuts, their manifesto now promised salary rises that it could hardly justify in terms of their overall financial impact, especially the source of funding to cover the difference. The lack of substance of these proposals, similarly evident in the Social Liberal Union's campaign promises, damaged the Alliance's chances to appeal to its usual electorate, which was, as we shall see, reflected in its election result. Mr Basescu's public interventions in the campaign did not benefit the Alliance either. If, in the 2008 elections, his presence had managed to mobilise the electorate around his party, both his decline in popularity and the party's nearly disastrous performance in earlier local elections diminished the President's persuasiveness and fuelled his opponents' campaign.

The absence of a clearly articulated message and the superficiality of the campaign slogans also contributed to the (lack of) performance of the main parties. 'United' appeared to be the Social Liberal Union's leitmotif, although it remained quite unclear what the end point was, with slogans covering a full spectrum from united 'against injustice/the traitors/corruption' etc. The Right Romania Alliance advertised its '70% new people' while promising to 're-start Romania's heart'. These messages contributed little to the visibility of these parties: each branded itself as a panacea for the existing problems, but remained unclear what they stood for and how would they carry out their promises. On this occasion, however, the electorate seemed less inclined to buy these empty messages, and the 'who do I vote for?' question spelled with Christmas lights on a block of flats in a central Bucharest neighbourhood was quite indicative of the overall mood. However, some advertising specialists observed that the existing campaign strategies were little more than window dressing and the cards had already been dealt as the parties relied on 'other things which they settle differently, not through slogans'.

In fact, there was hardly any debate throughout the campaign, this was replaced by a ‘show and tell’ contest eased by the availability of social media. Rather than the traditional campaign, candidates posted pictures of activities they had carried out in their constituencies, and publicised events, messages and responses to the opposition on personal blogs, personal websites, or Facebook/Twitter profiles. An overtly polarised media also contributed toward the superficiality of the debates and the personalities’ power play by providing an arena for the propagation of personal attacks and an imbalanced coverage of campaign issues. The OSCE elections report expressed concern over the Romanian media’s independence, observing that, more often than not, it functioned as ‘an instrument serving political parties’ rather than an independent critic of the political class.

The role of and (mis-)uses of ‘Europe’

Although visible to a limited extent in the 2008 parliamentary elections⁴ given the proximity of accession, in 2012, five years into the country’s EU membership, one could more realistically account for the impact of the EU on national politics from the perspective of national elections. If in 2008 elections took place in the aftermath of EU accession conditionality, in 2012 one has to factor in the fiscal conditionality triggered by the EU/IMF loan deals. For the first time in national elections, therefore, one would have expected a more direct role for Europe in domestic debates in terms of concrete policy objectives.

However, little of the campaign was about concrete politics or policy, and the issues that penetrated into the public debate were quickly spun into an attack against the opposing camps’ handling of the financial crisis. Neither the candidates nor the media provided concrete, evidence-based analyses or discussion of campaign commitments. A few days before the election, the general secretary of the National Liberal Party remarked that the party was not competing with the Right Romania Alliance but they were ‘mainly fighting with Mr Traian Basescu’. Europe was thus brought into the debate artificially by means of the impact of the EU fiscal requirements endorsed by the Boc government and the support that European leaders had shown to Mr Basescu and his party during the summer impeachment campaign. In this context, the parties’ positions on austerity measures associated with the financial crisis gained some visibility in debates, particularly the question of the country’s EU membership, the capacity to absorb structural funds, EU budget negotiations, and especially Romania’s application for the Schengen free zone. Regardless, these concerns were often downgraded to performance issues and rarely did one see a debate on content that revealed a concrete party preference. Democratic Liberal Party MEP Teodor Stolojan deplored the absence of a campaign ‘focused on Romania’s problems, on what needs to happen to prevent economic problems especially’ and accused the Social Liberal Union of fuelling an artificial conflict with the President.

The parties’ electoral manifestos however did specify these preferences. The Right Romania Alliance’s platform underscored in particular: the need to improve the absorption of EU funds, Schengen membership, Eurozone membership, the banking union, and increased participation in EU decision-making (including institutional re-configuration and daily policy-making). The Social Liberal Union primarily emphasised the need to: ensure Romania’s interests in the EU budget negotiations, conclude the Co-operation and Verification Mechanism the country had been under since its accession, control the budgetary deficit and, in the longer term, prepare for the country’s presidency of the EU in 2019. These concerns, however, only made it out of print and into the public discourse in the form of direct criticism of opponents: ‘we prepared Romania

⁴ See: ‘Europe and Romania’s parliamentary Election, 30 November 2008’.

for Schengen, and the Social Liberal Union has taken us away from it' declared the Democratic Liberal Party's president Vasile Blaga referring to the performance of the Ponta government. MEP Teodor Stolojan pointed to the parties' reluctance to engage with tangible policy proposals and their reliance on artificial subjects during the campaign. He recalled the scandal over Romania's representation at the European Council, which had sparked controversy during the summer when the President and the prime minister clashed over who had the constitutional prerogative to represent the country's interests, and the debate on the exercise of the country's right to veto in relation to the EU's multi-annual budget negotiations. Although the Social Liberal Union's discourse was markedly anti-EU during the summer, directly accusing EU leaders of interfering in Romanian politics and bluntly declaring that Romania no longer wanted to be in Schengen, this rhetoric never materialised into action. Mr Ponta eventually conceded to 'stick 100 per cent with the agreements with the IMF and the European Commission. This is a *fait accompli*', which included cohabitation with the President. His more toned down interventions now objected to Mr Basescu's closeness to the EU and the Boc government's concessions to the bloc rather than the EU itself.

Results

If four years earlier the election results had been a tie between the two main contenders, the Social Democratic Party and the Democratic Liberal Party, as Table 1 shows this time around the numbers could not have been clearer. With a turnout of 41.72%, the Social Liberal Union won by a sweeping 60% (58.63% in the more powerful Chamber of Deputies and 60.1% in the Senate) compared to the Right Romania Alliance's 16% (16.5% and 16.7% respectively), a little over half of the votes that the right wing coalition had hoped to secure. The People's Party-Dan Diaconescu performed as well as the polls had suggested, scoring an impressive 14% (13.99% in Chamber, 14.65% in the Senate) for a party established just over a year before the elections. The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania made it into parliament at just over 5%, while the Greater Romania Party gathered only 1.5% of the electorate's votes.

Table 1: Results of the December 2012 Romanian parliamentary election

| | Chamber of Deputies (seats / percentage) | | | | Senate (seats / percentage) | | | |
|--|---|--------|-----------|---------------|--------------------------------|--------|-----------|---------------|
| | 2008 | | 2012 | | 2008 | | 2012 | |
| | Social Liberal Union | - | - | 273 | 58.63% | - | - | 122 |
| Social Democratic Party | 114 | 33.10% | 149 | 32.00% | 49 | 34.20% | 58 | 28.57% |
| National Liberal Party | 65 | 18.60% | 101 | 21.69% | 28 | 18.70% | 51 | 25.12% |
| Conservative Party | <i>ran w/ Social Dem</i> | | 13 | 2.79% | <i>ran w/ Social Dem</i> | | 8 | 3.94% |
| Right Romania Alliance | - | - | 56 | 16.50% | - | - | 24 | 16.70% |
| Democratic Liberal Party | 115 | 32.40% | 52 | 15.32% | 51 | 33.60% | 22 | 15.31% |
| Civic Force | - | - | 3 | 0.88% | - | - | 1 | 0.66% |
| National Peasants' Party | <i>ran w/ Nat Lib</i> | | 1 | 0.29% | <i>ran w/ Nat Lib</i> | | 1 | 0.66% |
| People's Party-Dan Diaconescu | - | - | 47 | 13.99% | - | - | 21 | 14.65% |
| Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania | 22 | 6.20% | 18 | 5.13% | 9 | 6.40% | 9 | 5.23% |
| Greater Romania Party | 0 | 3.20% | 0 | 1% | 0 | 3.60% | 0 | 1.50% |

Source: Central Electoral Bureau, 2008 and 2012, www.bec.ro

The results stayed close to what the polls had anticipated, and the surprise element originated in the sheer size of the new parliament, set at 588 MPs (an increase of 118 MPs from the previous legislature), in spite of a 2009 referendum favouring (at 89%) the reduction of the parliament's size to 300 MPs. This was a consequence of the 2008 electoral law, which provides for a mixed single-member constituency election and a county and national level re-distribution of votes system, which favoured large parties and generated super-sized representation. In addition, the controversial composition of the parliament sparked concern over its performance and the image transmitted to European partners, as some elected MPs had been prosecuted by the National Anti-corruption Directorate and around 41 MPs had switched parties ahead of the election.

The peculiarity of the Social Liberal Union's overall performance was that none of the events in the summer (Mr Ponta's plagiarism scandal, the failed presidential impeachment, the aggressiveness of replacing important offices with party loyalists) had managed to discredit the coalition. This aspect was quickly picked up by the international media, with the likes of the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (who went as far as comparing it to Hitler's performance in 1933!), the *New York Times*, *Euractiv* underlining what they had categorised as a 'mistake' that the Romanian electorate would have to live with. However, the electorate had few options to vote for an alternative party as the new entrants, apart from the People's Party who adopted a discrete nationalistic discourse, ran on common tickets with the dominant ones, which did not convey a genuine choice if one notes the relatively low election turnout.

More notable than the Social Liberals' win was the Right Romania Alliance's inability to mobilise after the local elections and regain its electoral support. The Alliance lost 50% of its vote in six months, but not to their opponent's advantage, as their numbers stayed the same. Rather, a poorly managed campaign, internal strife and corruption, contradictory discourses and political disloyalty - as the media reported instances where party members had made their way through all the exiting parties throughout subsequent elections cycles - sealed the Alliance's fate.

Implications and Future prospects

The formation of the government exposed the superficiality of the Social Liberal Union from the early post-election hours, as the media reported contradictory statements from the leaders of the main parties regarding the presence of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania in the government. Mr Ponta had announced immediately after the publication of results that he had received confirmation from the Democratic Union's president as to the party's willingness to negotiate 'a constitutional majority, a government majority and a parliamentary majority which would allow important changes and reforms in the following years'. Mr Antonescu, the Liberal Democrat leader, declared in turn that he was unaware of the talks, especially of any relating to a potential coalition, that the Union was still considering its options and was at most likely to seek some kind of 'association formula' with the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania. Eventually, the latter party was not included in the government, re-buffed under the pretext of being given a 'privileged partnership'. The National Union for the Progress of Romania did not receive any portfolios either, although it was to co-ordinate defence and national security matters from one of the three deputy prime minister positions.

The election produced not only a super-sized parliament but also a larger government as the Social Liberals struggled to reward all factions loyal to it during the campaign. Several existing ministries were divided and re-organised and others newly created (e.g. the Ministry for European Funds, Ministry for Infrastructure Projects of a National Interest and Foreign investment) to accommodate these preferences. With 3 deputy prime ministers, equally

distributed between the main coalition partners, 15 ministers and 9 delegated ministers, the government incorporated an additional six posts compared to the 2008 executive.

Portfolio allocation was, however, likely to be only the beginning of the Social Liberal Union's difficulties in government. The Alliance would have a challenging task: in reconciling the constraints of cohabitation with the diverse policy preferences and interests of its component parties, at the same time continuing to implement effectively IMF commitments and restoring the country's credibility before its European and international partners, severely affected by Mr Ponta and Mr Antonescu's political manoeuvring. Belying a reasonable governing programme, the Union's incapacity in bridging personal conflicts of interests between the leaders of the two main parties comprising it in particular, undermined its electoral success and concrete governing potential. Mr Ponta's subsequent comments pointed out that without the Social Democrat Party 'no one wins the presidency', alluding to Mr Antonescu's plans to run in the 2014 presidential poll.

Tensions were more pronounced in the right-wing camp, where the leaders of the Democratic Liberal Party had reportedly been 'waiting for the final results with their resignations on the table'. While the party's first vice-president Cezar Preda honourably resigned his office, the remaining officials continued to avoid taking responsibility for the inexcusable overall performance of the party. Vasile Blaga, the party's president, was asked to resign but refused arguing for the re-construction of the party and was instead re-elected at the party's March 2013 Convention. This caused a further fissure of the party, with different factions lining up behind the individual candidates for the presidency and strategising a breakaway from the party, exposing an organisation party in-capable of re-positioning itself after its election loss. This reminds one of the Social Democratic Party's similar position after the 2004 elections, although this party managed to recover due to strong leadership, which the Democratic Liberals appeared to fundamentally lack.

The likelihood of the component parties of the Right Romania Alliance continuing their co-operation was relatively low, as Democratic Liberal vice-president Cristian Boureanu had categorised their electoral strategy as folly - 'inventing an alliance with some parties which did not exist'- observing the party paid the price for it. This opened up the possibility of a rapprochement between the Democratic Liberals and the National Liberals, which had been hinted at during the November campaign, but the war of personalities between Mr Basescu and Mr Antonescu was a powerful impediment. However, with new factions distancing themselves from the Democratic Liberals, the choices for the National Liberals may have become more palatable. The New Republic party (which characterised itself as 'a democratic platform which brings together classic-liberal, conservative and Christian-democratic values, and which appeals to right wing citizens dissatisfied with the existing political structures'), for example, vehemently turned back on its intent to collaborate further with the Democratic Liberals, arguing they had never really been a part of the Right Romania Alliance and that only a few individuals within the party supported the alliance, only to be bitterly dissatisfied in the end. The Civic Force Party and the Christian Democratic National Peasant's Party revived the Truth and Justice (DA) alliance that had been in operation in 2004, bringing together dis-satisfied members of the former grouping. Although it claimed to have no ambitions to become a party, the Popular Movement, the Basescu-supported faction of the Democratic Liberals, did not reject this option either, claiming to target the absentee share of the electorate, the dis-satisfied population who did not have a choice at the most recent election.

The breakthrough of the People's Party may have pointed towards the emergence of a new force in the Romanian party system. However, the party had the advantage of not having been in

office at all and thus being able to capitalise on popular discontent. Its prospects of success remained uncertain, however, especially considering the history of the New Generation Party, a similar formation around the popular figure of football club owner Gigi Becali, which amalgamated with other disparate formations after Mr Becali took up his European Parliament. However, if it maintained its level of support in future elections and propose a candidate for the 2014 presidential there was a chance that it could have been the first fringe party to penetrate the party system.

As the parties proved during this campaign, everything was fair game. Parties grouped and then re-grouped in interest-driven cacophonous configurations and a frenzied pursuit of office, blurring ideological and policy divides and fragmenting the party system even more deeply. The country remained dominated by political instability, a damaged international image and daunting austerity reforms, which made it difficult to anticipate a pattern of party system stabilisation. The domestic situation may have had deeper implications for decision-making dynamics at the EU level where opposing parties' MEPs mimicked domestic animosity especially in debates over the maintenance of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. Options for a renewal of the party system, or at least its invigoration, were only likely to materialise if the newly established parties managed to mobilise and run on their own rather than as pawns in the 'grand' coalitions. However, the political climate remained heavily contested and individual egos were hard to overcome.

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This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/research/europeanpartieselectionsreferendumsnetwork>.