

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 24 ROMANIA'S ELECTIONS TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, NOVEMBER 25TH 2007

Ed Maxfield
Sussex European Institute
University of Sussex
Email: e.r.maxfield@sussex.ac.uk

Key points:

- Romania went to the polls for its first ever elections to the European Parliament in November 2007, eleven months after EU accession.
- The elections were won by the Democratic Party of President Traian Basescu. The Social Democrats finished in second place and the National Liberals of prime minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu were relegated to third.
- The results were a major defeat for the nationalist right with the Greater Romania Party collapsing to below the 5% electoral threshold.
- Nineteen of Romania's MEPs will join the European People's Party group in the EP, including Laszlo Tokes, spark of the 1989 revolution who ran as an independent. 10 MEPs will join the socialist grouping and 6 the liberals.
- European issues were prominent in the campaign, particularly the status of Romanians living elsewhere in Europe. But with the parties clustering in the centre ground and all presenting themselves as pro-European, the main lines of differentiation were domestic.

The elections to the European Parliament on November 25th 2007 scored a number of firsts for Romanian politics. It was, of course, the first time Romanians had elected Members of the European Parliament, a little under a year since accession to the European Union. It was the first time Romania's politicians had experienced a genuine 'mid term' poll.¹ It was also the first electoral test for a series of political parties: the Conservatives; the Liberal Democrats; the New Initiative Party; and the New Generation Party. It also marked a further contest in the on-going battle between

¹ Until now, presidential, parliamentary and local elections have taken place on four-year cycles with local polls in the spring and the national elections in the autumn. The EP elections were the first time since 1989 that a national election had taken place outside of this 'election year' format.

the President – Traian Basescu – and his erstwhile collaborator, the prime minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu.

This dual significance – domestic and European – inevitably meant that the campaign failed to focus exclusively on European issues despite the proximity of accession. The differentiation between parties on European issues was largely limited to varying degrees of enthusiasm for EU membership. Indeed, the extent to which the campaign was dominated by domestic political duals has been blamed for the disappointing turnout of voters.

This survey begins with a brief description of the parties contesting the poll. The elections mark another step in the process of consolidation that the Romanian party system has experienced since 1989. The election was shaped by the party battle as politicians sought to assess the landscape ahead of parliamentary elections in November 2008. The second part of the report examines the campaign itself and the third gives details of the results. The concluding comments seek to draw out the lessons of the campaign both for Romania's position in Europe and for the domestic political scene.

The parties

Thirteen parties and one independent candidate contested the elections. The *Democratic Party* (Partidul Democrat – PD) is a descendent of the National Salvation Front. Led initially by reformist prime minister Petre Roman, the party is now dominated by Romanian President, Traian Basescu. After seizing the party leadership from Roman, Basescu took the Democrats into an electoral alliance with the National Liberals (Partidul National Liberal - PNL) and ultimately converted his party from social democracy to a 'popular party' doctrine on the centre-right. Basescu graduated from the mayoralty of the Romanian capital, Bucharest, to the Presidency in 2004 and then formally relinquished the leadership of the Democrats. A restless pursuit of his agenda, though, resulted in a rapid deterioration in relations with the National Liberals prompting the Democrats eventually to quit the government at the parliamentary level and to go into opposition. The Democrats are affiliated to the main European centre-right formation, the *European People's Party (EPP)*.

The *Social Democratic Party* (Partidul Social Democrat – PSD) is Romania's most successful and well-established party. The party is a direct descendent of the National Salvation Front which came to power in December 1989 after engineering the fall of Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. The party is now accepted as part of the European centre-left mainstream and is affiliated to the *Party of European Socialists (PES)*. The Social Democrats returned to power at national level in 2000 but since their narrow defeat in 2004 have faced internal power struggles and corruption scandals.

The *National Liberal Party* is one of Romania's 'historic' parties having dominated the country's politics for much of the pre-Communist era. Re-formed in 1990, the party has performed the function of coalition partner or tacit government prop a number of times since then. The National Liberals entered power in again in 2004 following Basescu's presidential election victory – National Liberal leader Calin Popescu Tariceanu taking the position of prime minister. Following the collapse of

the alliance with the Democrats, the National Liberals retain power as a minority government. The party is a member of Liberal International and the *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)*.

The *Liberal Democratic Party* (Partidul Liberal Democrat) was formed by dissident Liberals following the collapse of the coalition with the Democrats. The Liberal Democrats are led by former prime minister Teodor Stolojan who has close links with President Basescu. The Liberal Democrats adopted a centre-right political programme and affiliated to the EPP.

The *Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania* (Uniunea Democrata Maghiara din Romania – UDMR) is the principal political voice of Romania's Hungarian minority. Ever-present in parliament since 1990, it has been a coalition pivot at national level since 1996. Its success has been secured by virtue of a near monopoly of votes among the ethnic Hungarian community. It is also affiliated to the EPP.

The *New Generation Party* (Partidul Noua Generatie Crestin Democrat – PNG) is led by soccer magnate Gica Becali. The owner of Steaua Bucharest Football Club took over the running of the party in 2004 and took it to a position where for a time it challenged the Social Democrats for second spot in the polls. The New Generation Party is positioned on the Christian nationalist right of politics and is not currently affiliated to an international grouping.

The *Greater Romania Party* (Partidul Romania Mare – PRM) caused a sensation in 2000 when its eccentric leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor gained second place in the presidential elections. The party is both nationalist (advocating a return to Romania's post 1918 boundaries and consistently attacking the influence and intentions of Romania's ethnic Hungarian minority) and 'anti-system' (Tudor promised a period of dictatorship if he won the presidential election in 2000). Since the high water mark of 2000, though, the party has been in decline as the economy has strengthened and the country has entered more firmly into the European political mainstream. The Greater Romania Party helped to form the *Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty (ITS)* group in the European Parliament with other far-right parties but left the group less than a year later.

The *Conservative Party* (Partidul Conservator - PC) started life as the Humanist Party, a political vehicle for media magnate Dan Voiculescu. It ran on a joint electoral ticket with the Social Democrats in 2004 but, following Basescu's unexpected victory in the presidential run-off, the party jumped ship to enter a coalition government with the Democrats, the National Liberals and the UDMR. The party subsequently adopted a nationalist, conservative-Christian ideology but, oddly, is affiliated to the ALDE.

The *National Initiative Party* (Partidul Initiativa Nationala – PIN) was formed as a breakaway from the Democrats in 2005 and professes a doctrine of 'pragmatic nationalism', although its programme is largely indistinguishable from less pragmatic nationalists.

The *National Peasant Party* (Partidul National Taranesc Crestin Democrat - PNTCD) is the second of Romania's surviving 'historic' parties. It led the coalition government from 1996 to 2000 but fell below the threshold for parliamentary representation at the

end of that period. It remains an extra-parliamentary party with, nonetheless, pockets of loyal support in Bucharest and parts of Transylvania. It is a member of the EPP.

A number of other smaller parties also contested the election. The *Roma Party* (Partida Romilor Pro-Europa) is the party of the country's Roma minority. The *Socialist Alliance Party* (Partidul Alianta Socialista - PAS) is the current incarnation of the former Romanian Communist Party. The party is a member of the *European Left* formation of radical left parties. The *Green Party* (Partidul Verde) is an ecologist party and a member of the European Green Movement.

The single independent candidate was *Laszlo Tokes*. Tokes gained international prominence as the spark of the 1989 Romanian revolution. Popular protest greeted the Communist authorities' decision to remove him from his Timisoara church – a revolt that spread and eventually consumed the regime. Tokes has engaged in a long-running dispute with the leadership of the Hungarian Democratic Union and launched his campaign on a radical platform of autonomy for Transylvania's ethnic Hungarian communities.

The campaign

The main dividing lines of Romanian politics since 1989 have been: attitudes towards the country's communist past; nationalism and the position of minorities; management of the economy; and efforts to tackle corruption. These have been leavened by contests between dominant political personalities such as Ion Iliescu, Roman and Basescu. The EP election may have marked a further evolution towards a 'post-transition' landscape with consolidation of the party system along a more clearly defined left-right-liberal centre spectrum.

The campaign officially started on October 26th and the dispute between the prime minister and the President formed the domestic back-drop to the contest. The election campaign had effectively been running for a year due to the expectation of early parliamentary elections. The EP poll itself had been delayed by the government since May. The political focus on the President had reached a peak in the spring with a failed attempt at impeachment.² This dispute had the effect of personalising the contest and of crowding out the voices of the smaller parties.

The party campaigns were widely viewed by the press as low key and lack-lustre. Posters, public meetings and TV adverts were less numerous than in previous election campaigns. The concentration on inward looking issues of concern to the political classes, such as electoral reform or the dispute between the President and political class, doubtless contributed to the lack of public engagement.

President Basescu decided to focus his own attention on the continuing effort to secure reform of Romania's electoral system (begun as retaliation for the impeachment campaign). A referendum on the introduction of a new voting system was called for the same day as the EP elections. The referendum campaign failed to

² 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.

ignite and failed to provide the Democrats' greatest asset – the President – with an effective platform to influence the course of the election. The reform proposal fell due to the low turnout.

The once dominant issues of nationalism and the position of ethnic minorities rarely ignited during the campaign. In an effort to see off the challenge of Laszlo Tokes, the Hungarian Democratic Union adopted a more radical tone to its campaign. The Romanian nationalist right responded with an effort to re-ignite the issues which had brought it success in the early post-communist years. The Greater Romania Party accused the Hungarian Union of breaching the constitution with its campaign and the Conservatives attacked along similar lines.

The role of Europe

The divisions between the main parties over Europe were small. A Romanian Academic Society study of party positions on Europe found a clustering in the centre and all being pro-European.³ Yet, European issues did play a notable role in the campaign. Principal among them was the status of Romanian citizens in other EU states, particularly the Italian government's policies towards Romanian migrant workers. The Social Democrats had initiated a motion in the EP regarding the enforcement of provisions relating to the freedom of movement in EU directives.⁴ The motion, which was passed by the EP, was aimed at Italy. The Italian government decree, which permitted deportation of foreign nationals deemed a threat to public safety, led to the removal of a number of Romanian migrants and severely damaged relations between the two countries. However, it brought little partisan advantage within the context of the Romanian elections.

The prime minister attempted to gain some European limelight by securing agreements with Hungary over the opening of the Hungarian labour market and on the construction of a high speed rail link from Budapest to the Romanian coast. President Basescu ventured on to the European agenda by enthusiastically backing the ratification of the EU reform treaty. Neither initiative appeared to make a significant impact on the campaign.

Under the slogan, "Ready for Europe", the Democrats presented their team of candidates as young, honest and experienced. Their choice of key messages focused on the potential for European solutions to domestic problems such as poverty, rural development, transport and education. The party emphasised the benefits of its membership of the EPP, the largest grouping in the EP.

The National Liberals chose to concentrate on the notion of promoting liberal values. The party adopted democracy, stability, a functioning market and the rule of law as its watch-words. It emphasised the need to reform Europe to make the EU more transparent, efficient and responsive to its citizens.

³ See: www.sar.org.ro. The survey is somewhat compromised by its failure to include parties on the nationalist right.

⁴ Appointed members from Romania sat in the EP prior to the November elections.

The Social Democrats campaigned on the slogan, “Romania Strong and Fair”. The party emphasised the need for measures to promote investment in the economy to boost jobs and to tackle poverty. It called for new standards of quality in food production to boost agricultural sales. But, like the Democrats, its key pledges sought European angles for improvement of domestic public services, notably pensions, schools and hospitals.

The Liberal Democrats focused heavily on the personality of party leader Teodor Stolojan. Their programme led on vague commitments to monitor and support the allocation of EU funds in Romania and to promote the interests of Romania within the Union. The party also pledged: to prepare Romania for membership of the Euro; to join Schengen; and to press for Moldova’s membership of the EU.

Euroscepticism was hard to find in the campaign, although the National Initiative Party pledged a referendum on the EU reform treaty and the National Peasants opted for the slogan, “Remain Romanian in Europe”.⁵

The results

Romania was allotted 35 seats in the EP who were elected from a single, national list. To qualify for seats, parties had to exceed a 5% vote threshold.

As **Table 1** shows, on a turnout of just 24.96%, the Democrats won a clear plurality of votes and, in total, five parties and independent candidate Laszlo Tokes crossed the threshold to win seats in the EP. Nineteen MEPs will join the EPP group in the European Parliament, 10 will join the PES and 6 will join the ELDR group.⁶

Table 1: Results of the Romanian election the European Parliament, November 2007

Party	Votes	%	Seats won
Democrat Party (PD)	1,476,105	28.8	13
Social Democrats (PSD)	1,184,558	23.1	10
National Liberals (PNL)	688,859	13.5	6
Liberal Democrats (PLD)	398,901	7.8	3
Hungarian Democratic Union (UDMR)	282,929	5.5	2
Laszlo Tokes (Independent)	176,533	3.4	1
New Generation Party (PNG)	248,863	4.9	0
Greater Romania Party (PRM)	212,596	4.2	0
Conservative Party (PC)	150,385	2.9	0
National Initiative Party (PIN)	124,829	2.4	0
National Peasants (PNTCD)	71,001	1.4	0
Roma Party (PRPE)	58,903	1.1	0
Socialist Alliance (PAS)	28,484	0.6	0
Green Party (VERDE)	19,820	0.4	0
	5,122,226	100.0	35

⁵ In Romanian the slogan is “Raman Roman in Europa”, both neat alliteration and a double meaning referring to Romania’s longstanding place in Europe.

⁶ Laszlo Tokes was admitted to the EPP group after his election.

Source: www.europarl.europa.eu ;and www.bec2007pe.ro

The results were a victory for President Basescu. In addition to the Democrats topping the poll, their Liberal Democrat allies did better than many had expected by gaining almost 8% of the vote and electing 3 MEPs. In many of the areas that polled most strongly for the Truth and Justice Alliance⁷ in 2004, the Democrats alone matched or exceeded the Alliance's percentage vote. The disappointing results for almost all of his opponents will doubtless have been just as satisfying for the President. The party's total vote of under 30%, though, disappointed leaders of the party, who were aiming for a score of around 40%. And the strong performance of the Liberal Democrats could well have caused further headaches for the Democrats as the two parties continued negotiations to merge.

The governing National Liberals polled less than half the percentage vote won by the Alliance in 2004. Their results were especially poor in urban and economically developed counties which they might have considered natural constituencies (the party polled less than its national average in counties such as Brasov, Sibiu, Timis, Prahova and in the capital Bucharest.) They did, though, secure a better result than opinion polls had been suggesting and survive to fight another day.

Instead of showing recovery from their post-2004 election troubles, the Social Democrats lost over a third of the support they had won just three years before. The troubles of party leader Mircea Geoana are unlikely to recede, but he was at least able to focus the blame for poor results in some counties on his opponents within the party.

However, the biggest shocks were for the nationalist right. Corneliu Vadim Tudor quit parliament and resigned his leading party role following the disastrous results for the Greater Romania Party. The party slumped to just 4.2% of the vote, thus failing to elect a single MEP. The extent of the party's collapse is illustrated even more clearly by its failing to poll more than 8.3% in any county, thus losing its centres of support in the north and east of the country.

The results were also a set-back for the New Generation Party which had registered percentage support in the mid-teens in opinion polls earlier in the year. The future of the party will doubtless depend on the whim of its leader Gica Becali. For the New Initiative Party, the only salvation would appear to be to find itself a larger political party to ally with. Equally, the Conservative Party seems to have been cut adrift by the results. Voiculescu quit as party leader after the election and it remains to be seen whether the larger parties will rescue the Conservatives via an alliance if the benefit of access to the former leader's media outlets was not part of the deal. Among the other smaller parties, none showed the prospect of breaking into the parliamentary scene in November 2008 and are left to promote their distinctive themes from the margins of Romanian politics.

The future

The impact on Romania's role in Europe

⁷ The joint slate run by the Democrats and National Liberals in the 2004 parliamentary election.

The results clearly provide a boost to the EPP group in the European Parliament with the election of nineteen new members. The cohort of new MEPs is also relatively young with over 40% of them being under the age of 40. The National Liberal group will also have a significant role to play in the parliamentary liberal group as its six members make it one of the larger national blocs in the group. With a number of the newly elected MEPs promising to highlight the status of Romanians living outside of Romania, relations with Italy and Spain in particular are likely to be of continued importance. The voters' rejection of the far right is likely to be welcomed by Europe's political elite and Romania's image within the Union may improve as a consequence.

The domestic party system

Despite the unexpectedly strong showing for the Liberal Democrats, the party continued with the project of merging with the Democrats. The formation of the Democratic Liberal Party (Partidul Democrat Liberal, PD-L) was announced in December 2007. A poll published soon after the EP elections showed the Democratic Liberal Party consolidating its lead and within sight of a parliamentary majority if its ratings can be sustained.

The dangers facing the Hungarian Union are real. Its tally of under 300,000 votes is probably a quarter of a million short of what it will need to cross the electoral threshold at the parliamentary elections. If a breakaway party led by Tokes enters the fray the prospects for the Union look bleak – the independent candidate heavily out-pollled the Union in the ethnic Hungarian strongholds of Covasna and Harghita counties. Of course, should the Union lose its voice on the national stage it could prompt a further reorientation of Romanian politics away from the nationalities cleavage.

Despite securing less than a quarter of the vote, the Social Democrats have reasons to look confidently to the future. In a BBC interview after the elections, Geoana pointed out that the party's vote was significantly above their recent poll ratings. They retain a powerful position in parliament while the National Liberals continue to govern in a minority. Their strong base in local government remains intact (at least until May 2008) and they appear to have retained the support of a loyal constituency, polling well in the north east and south of the country. Most significantly, perhaps, having out-pollled the National Liberals and seen off the threat from the nationalist right, they are well placed to become the focus of opposition to the divisive personality of President Basescu. All of this, of course, relies on the party being patient and disciplined, not characteristics often displayed among Romania's political class.

The National Liberals themselves are left in an awkward position. They continue to govern at a national level but the results consigned them firmly to third place. The strength of popular support for the Democratic Liberal Party and the organisational foundations of the Social Democrats make the task of over-hauling either before the next parliamentary elections seem considerable. Thus they face the prospect of swapping the lead role in government for at best a junior coalition position or at worst that of second string in the opposition.

The collapse of the far right appears to have created a field of battle which is more akin to the west European model with an established party on each of the centre left, the centre right and the liberal centre. However, the continuing lack of societal roots for Romanian parties and the enduring dominance of personalities should counsel caution in predicting a new stability in the country's party system.

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/1-4-2.html>.