

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 30 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN ROMANIA, JUNE 7 2009

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Key points:

- The Social Democrats topped the poll in Romania's elections to the European parliament (EP), winning 31% of the vote and 11 of the 33 seats.
- The Democrat Liberals won just under 30% of the vote and 10 seats.
- Elena Basescu, daughter of Romania's president Traian Basescu, was elected as an independent but immediately re-joined the Democrat Liberals
- The ultra-nationalist Greater Romania Party re-emerged as a force in Romanian politics, electing 3 MEPs and winning over 8% of the vote.
- Five National Liberals and three representatives of the Democratic Union of Hungarians were returned.
- The number of Romanian MEPs sitting as part of the European People's Party group (EPP) fell from 18 to 14. Eleven are now part of the Party of European Socialist (PES) group (up from ten) and five will join the liberal alliance, ALDE (down from six).
- The election was dominated by domestic issues in the run up to November's national presidential poll, but the impact of the economic crisis and the situation in the Black Sea region gave the election a wider focus too

Weary Romanian voters reached the penultimate leg of a two-and-a-half year electoral marathon on June 7 2009. The EP elections marked, for some, a sixth visit to the polls since a presidential impeachment referendum of May 2007.¹ They face the prospect of

¹ 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.

two further rounds of voting in the presidential election in November 2009, which will finally settle the question of state president Traian Basescu's legitimacy to govern until 2014. In those circumstances it is perhaps not surprising that turnout fell to 27.7%, down from 39.2% in the national parliamentary election of November 2008 and 29.5% in the European Parliament elections of November 2007.²

As Table 1 shows, the 2009 EP elections produced results similar to the domestic parliamentary poll of November 2008,³ with one particularly significant difference – the re-emergence of the ultra-nationalist Greater Romania Party as an electoral force. The Greater Romanian Party had lost its domestic parliamentary representation in the 2008 election but its demise was clearly short-lived. Re-united with other elements of the nationalist right, the party won 8.7% of the vote, electing three MEPs.

The other notable winners were independent candidate Elena Basescu (daughter of Traian Basescu) and the Democratic Union of Hungarians who lifted their vote far enough above their traditional 6% tally to win three seats. Romania was clearly doing its best to join the European mainstream in at least one sense: plumping for smaller parties as a protest against domestic 'politics as usual'.

European issues in the broadest sense had some salience in the campaign, particularly: enduring tensions with Italy over treatment of Romanian nationals there, concerns over the political future of the Black Sea region in the wake of the Russian/Georgian tension and the Moldovan elections, and the fall out from the international economic crash. The EU played at least some role in each of these issues either as mediator or source of support. Domestic politics, though, and in particular the looming presidential poll, dominated a relatively quiet campaign.

Table 1: Results of the European Parliament elections in Romania, 7 June 2009

Party	Votes	% of poll	Seats won
Social Democrat/Conservative Alliance*	1,504,218	31.1	11
Democrat Liberal Party	1,438,000	29.7	10
National Liberal Party	702,974	14.5	5
Democratic Union of Hungarians	431,739	8.9	3
Greater Romania Party	419,094	8.7	3
Elena Basescu	204,280	4.2	1
National Peasant Party	70,428	1.5	0
Pavel Abraham	49,864	1.0	0
Civic Force	19,436	0.4	0

* The Social Democrats ran a joint list with the Conservative Party as they had in the 2008 parliamentary elections. One of the eleven MEPs elected by the Alliance is a Conservative (eighth on the list)

² The official results can be found at www.bec2009pe.ro.

³ 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.

Background

Romania held its first round of elections to the EP in November 2007, eleven months after accession.⁴ Those elections were a major success for President Basescu's allies with his Democrat Party topping the poll and winning 13 of the 35 seats (Romania's allocation of seats has since been reduced by two). Supporters of Basescu in the form of the smaller Liberal Democrat Party won a further three seats. The National Liberals, former allies of the Democrats, polled a disappointing 13% of the vote, electing 6 MEPs.

The main centre-left party, the Social Democrats, won 29% of the vote in November 2007 and elected ten MEPs. The nationalist Greater Romania Party gained just 4% of the vote, falling below the threshold for representation and thus losing all of its MEPs who had sat as appointed representatives since accession (and as observers before that).

Politics between this historic first election to the EP and the second poll on June 7 2009 was dominated at first by the fate of the national government (the National Liberals had continued to lead a minority government since the split with Basescu and the Democrat Party) and then by the impact of the global recession and tensions in the Black Sea region.

For elections to the EP, Romania is treated as a single electoral constituency with MEPs elected from closed party lists using the D'Hondt method of allocation. A 5% vote threshold operates for parties to gain representation with a lower threshold (effectively 3% of votes cast) applying to independents.⁵ The official campaign period began on 8 May and the election law obliged parties to cease campaigning at 7am on June 6.

Six parties and one electoral alliance nominated candidates together with two independents (compared to thirteen parties and one independent who contested the elections in November 2007):

The Social Democrat/Conservative Alliance: The Social Democrat Party has its roots in the former ruling Communist Party and is now the unchallenged standard bearer of the Romanian left. In its early years it was criticised for making only a half-hearted commitment to full democratic norms but it has become one of central Europe's most successful communist successor parties. It has claimed the most votes in all but one of the parliamentary elections since the fall of Communism. It also has a large and influential local government base. The Conservative Party is a much smaller entity with close ties to the Social Democrats going back to the late 1990s. It is valued less for its electoral base than for the access it brings to the media holdings of the party's founder, Dan Voiculescu. The Social Democrats are members of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and while

⁴ See: Ed Maxfield, 'The European Elections in Romania, November 25 2007,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network European Election Briefing No 25* at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epnep_eb24_-_2007romania.pdf.

⁵ The relevant electoral law is also available at www.bec2009pe.ro with the key legislation appearing in Official Monitors number 28 of 2007 and 146 of 2009.

the Conservative Party had been affiliated to ALDE it is expected that all of the Alliance's MEPs will sit in the PES group.

The Democrat Liberal Party: The Democrat Party started life as a reformist breakaway on the communist-successor left but has evolved into Romania's main centre-right formation. Its titular leader is current Prime Minister Emil Boc but national president Traian Basescu dominates the party. The Democrat Party fought the 2004 national elections as one half of an electoral alliance with the National Liberal Party. Basescu narrowly won the presidential election and the alliance formed a coalition government. The alliance collapsed, though, when relations between Basescu and the (National Liberal) prime minister broke down soon after the elections. The Democrat Liberal Party was formed by the merger of the Democrat Party and the Liberal Democrats, supporters of Basescu who had broken away from the National Liberals. The Democrat Liberals are members of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP).

The National Liberal Party: The National Liberals are a reincarnation of a pre-communist party that dominated Romanian politics in the late nineteenth century. The party is now widely seen as representing middle class, and particularly business, interests. It continued to lead a minority government after the split with the Democrats, right up to the elections of 2008 when it went into opposition after polling 18% of the vote in the parliamentary elections. National Liberal MEPs are members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group.

The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania: Romania's ethnic Hungarian minority have showed remarkable cohesion in its voting habits supporting, en bloc, the Democratic Union at every election to the national parliament since 1990. The 2007 European Parliament elections exposed a serious breach in this unity when prominent bishop Laszlo Tokes ran and was elected as an independent MEP but the subsequent local and parliamentary elections confirmed the Democratic Union's resilience. The two Democratic Union MEPs elected in 2007 joined the EPP group but after his membership of the EPP was vetoed, Tokes sat with the Greens in the European Free Alliance.

The Greater Romania Party: Romania's ultra-nationalists gained international prominence after the general election of 2000. The party finished second in those elections and its eccentric leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, made it through to the run-off ballot for the presidency with the Social Democrat candidate. The party was unable to sustain its support, however, and after the parliamentary elections of 2008 it seemed to be fading from the political scene.

Elena Basescu: The youngest daughter of Romania's president announced early in the year that she would run as an independent candidate for the European Parliament in order to avoid accusations of nepotism within the Democrat Liberal Party. At the same time, she made it clear that, if elected, she would seek to rejoin the Democrat Liberals. The twenty nine year old former model's campaign attracted a good deal of attention but she also faced questions about her suitability for the role given her lack of previous involvement in politics.

Two parties and one independent failed to secure representation in the EP. The **National Peasant Party** was the leading party in the 1996–2000 governing coalition but it performed so badly at the end of its term that it failed to re-enter the national parliament. Despite an illustrious pre-communist history it has been on the fringes of politics ever since. **Civic Force** is a new party professing a centre-right ideology, which has made no significant impact, thus far, on the political scene. **Pavel Abraham** is a former chief of police who ran as the ‘only true independent’ and focused his campaign on issues relating to law and order.

The campaign

The election campaign began almost as soon as the parliamentary elections were finished and a new government in place. The complexion of the government itself was a considerable surprise since the two largest parties – the Democrat Liberals and the Social Democrats – came together to form a coalition. Since the leader of the Social Democrats was likely to be a leading contender for the presidency in November 2009, there have been constant tensions within the coalition since its formation. Aside from the manoeuvrings within the coalition, three major issues dominated the political landscape in the first half of the year, each of which had an international, and potentially an EU, angle to them.

The impact of the global recession deepened as 2009 progressed. During January the government announced a freeze on public sector recruitment, major motor manufacturers Ford and Renault received guarantees of support to continue their Romanian operations and public sector salary and pension payment freezes were discussed. After posting impressive growth figures in preceding years, estimates now began to predict the economy going into reverse and in March the government secured a Euro 20 billion loan guarantee from the International Monetary Fund.

Substantial economic migration had also resulted from EU accession and the political consequences had not been slow to follow. Tensions with Italy, in particular, had grown up over the treatment of Romanian nationals living in the country where the media and populist politicians had focused on crimes committed by migrant workers. The EU (and the Vatican) had been drawn into the dispute after vigilante groups began patrolling city streets and the Berlusconi government proposed tough new legislation. Spain was the other EU country which attracted large-scale migration from Romania and here the problem was a different one: the collapse in the Spanish building boom left thousands of migrant workers out of work, ending their transfers of Euros back into the Romanian economy and ultimately leading to large numbers returning home to seek work in Romania.

The third major international development was concerns over the role of Russia. The conflict between Russia and Georgia during August 2008 had raised concerns across the former Soviet Bloc. Concerns about Russian intentions in the region – and its willingness

to use its economic power to control neighbouring states – were increased by the gas pipeline dispute with the Ukraine at the turn of the year. The final part of the story came in April 2009 after close-fought elections in the Republic of Moldova led to violent protests in the capital Chisinau. The Moldovan population is divided between ethnic Russians and ethnic Romanians and the pro-Russian government blamed Romania for inciting the violent protests, which followed the elections.

Despite the significance of these issues, there appeared to be little partisan benefit to be gained or lost from any of them. Polling in early May found that more than 80% of people felt that the employment and general economic situation in Romania was likely to get worse in the coming year and showed a general drop in faith in leading figures in the domestic government.⁶ Yet, despite the National Liberals focusing on their own economic record in government, the main opposition party gained little visible benefit from the economic situation. The government and president played an active role in trying to resolve tensions with Italy and with Russia but, with the government formed of the two main parties on the centre left and the centre right, there was again limited scope for partisan differentiation among the mainstream parties. It is possible that all three issues played some role in the revival of the Greater Romania since they touch on aspects of national self-confidence and independence. Unfortunately, though, pollsters have not explored this.

Selection of candidates for the election generated a good deal of news coverage and caused controversy in all the parties that had secured representation in the 2007 elections. For the Democrat Liberals it was clear that the party was unlikely to get close to electing the 16 members who had won places as Democrats or Liberal Democrats in 2007. Five of their MEP group left the parliament following the November 2008 elections either to become government ministers or to take up seats in the national parliament (a sixth member resigned in February 2009). The list was headed by one-time prime minister, Theodor Stolojan, and the party achieved a minor coup by placing popular former justice minister, human rights activist and anti-corruption campaigner Monica Macovei second on the list. In the end, only half of the party's top ten candidates were serving MEPs while the major source of controversy within the party, the status of Elena Basescu, was solved by her opting to run as an independent.

The principle difficulty faced by the Social Democrats over their candidate selection was the status of another prominent woman politician. Lavinia Sandru was elected as a Member of Parliament in 2004 for the Democrats but had left the party to co-found the National Initiative Party. In 2008 she had been the only Member of the Romanian parliament to vote against ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. In 2009, the founder of the National Initiative Party brokered a deal with the Social Democrats, which would have seen Sandru run on that party's list of candidates for the EP. Former state president Ion

⁶ In Insomar's Barometer, 83.7% said the employment situation would get worse in the coming year while 83.0% said the general economic situation would worsen. Here was, though, greater optimism in relation to respondents' own personal and family situations. Support for the President, the Prime Minister and the leader of the Social Democrats (second party in the coalition government) all showed sharp falls since the beginning of the year. See: www.insomar.ro/barometre/2009_04_barometru_social_politic_INSOMAR.pdf

Iliescu, who retains enormous influence within the Social Democrats, objected strongly and threatened to leave the party if she was chosen as a candidate resulting in her eventual withdrawal. Once the list was established, the top seven places were occupied by incumbent MEPs including former (Democrat) foreign minister Adrian Severin who headed the list.

In the wake of their defeat in the parliamentary elections, the National Liberals chose a new party leader in March 2009 with the selection of their EP candidates list being deferred until after the new leadership team was installed. The biggest surprise was that former national finance minister Daniel Daianu, never one to feel tightly bound by the party line, was dropped from the candidate list entirely because of insurmountable differences over economic policy. Former foreign minister Adrian Ciorianu (who served as an appointed MEP before the 2007 elections) refused a place on the list which he felt was not likely to secure him election. Another sitting MEP was dropped to an unelectable place, but four of the top five places were retained by incumbents.

The Democratic Union of Hungarians surprised many observers by bringing Laszlo Tokes into the fold and placing him at the top of their list ahead of their two incumbents. At the other end of the spectrum, the Greater Romania Party chose Vadim Tudor as its lead candidate and George Becali in second place. Becali is best known in Romania as the owner of Steaua Bucharest football club and for his outspoken views on race, women and homosexuality. He led his own party from 2004 but after a string of disappointing election results, which largely succeeded only in splitting the ultra-nationalist vote, he buried his (very public) differences with Tudor to join the Greater Romania list.

The Social Democrat/Conservative election manifesto proposed 'European politics in the service of Romania' and set out five priorities for the period 2009 – 2014:

- Getting Romania out of the economic crisis
- Modernising rural areas and agriculture
- Increasing access to quality health care and education
- Obtaining full rights for Romanians in Europe
- Achieving real equality between men and women

The overall theme of the Social Democrat proposals was two fold: to highlight the marginalisation of Romania within Europe, and the consequent loss of rights for Romanian citizens within the Union; and to emphasise the need for collective action to tackle the economic crisis and to improve domestic services (via a strengthening of Europe's social pillar.)

The Democrat Liberal manifesto also gave top billing to measures to tackle the economic crisis. The party placed less emphasis on 'social Europe' and included detail of its domestic plans for the economy along side pledges for action in the EP. Its priorities included more effective use of structural funds which would include extension of Internet provision and investment in energy infrastructure. The manifesto also called for measures to accelerate the completion of the single market, to improve oversight of the financial sector, and for better economic co-ordination between the member states. The Democrat

Liberals gave prominence to justice reform proposals and to measures aimed at increasing EU support for Moldova. The party also pledged to work towards Romanian adoption of the Euro by 2014 and included commitments to improve budgetary and administrative efficiency in the EU.

The National Liberals, campaigning under the slogan, 'Europe is liberal', promoted the benefits of free movement of goods, services and people and called for an end to discrimination on the basis of nationality, religion or gender. As well as making familiar calls for Romanian citizens to gain the full benefits of membership of the Union, better use of structural funds and more support for Moldova, the National Liberals gave more prominence to measures aimed at tackling climate change than either the Social Democrats or the Democrat Liberals.

As the campaign began there was a brief flurry of media interest in the recruitment of advisers from Barack Obama's US campaign. But it was clear that all three main parties were preserving resources for the presidential campaign in the autumn. Some of the lead candidates made an effort to use new technology to engage with voters – National Liberal Renate Weber, for example, made regular use of Facebook (although with 400 'friends' from an electorate of 18 million it is not clear how effective a tool it was). The parties generally stuck with tried and tested themes aimed at appealing to their core constituencies. And, as in previous elections, they tended to focus on personal attacks on opponents as much as on policy concerns.

The results

As **Table 1** shows, in line with the local council and parliamentary elections held in 2008, the EP vote saw a close finish between the Social Democrats on the left and the Democrat Liberals on the centre right. The Democrat Liberals irritated their opponents by adding Elena Basescu's tally to their vote in order to claim the result as a poll win for themselves. But, in truth, it was another in a series of disappointing results for the Democrat Liberals who, two years earlier, had been running at over 40% of the vote in opinion polls.

European People's Party representation fell from 18 MEPs to 14 (assuming that Laszlo Tokes reverts to the European People's Party group following his election on the Democratic Union of Hungarians' ticket). The European Socialists gained one seat thanks to the Social Democrats' tally of eleven. And the ALDE group saw its representation cut by one to five. The Greater Romania Party had helped to set up the Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty group in 2007 but the group had already collapsed by the time the party lost its seats in the Parliament. It remains to be seen what the Greater Romania Party's three new MEPs do in terms of group affiliation.

Turnout fell to 27.7%, the lowest participation rate in a nation-wide election in Romania since the fall of Communism, down 2% on the EP elections held in November 2007 and,

as **Table 2** shows, lower than all but three of the ten Central and East European Member States.

Table 2: % Turnout in Central and East European Member States, 2009 elections to the European Parliament

BG	CZ	EE	LT	LV	HU	PL	RO	SLO	SK	EU27
38.9	28.2	43.9	53.1	20.9	36.3	24.5	27.7	28.3	19.6	43.2

Source: http://www.elections2009-results.eu/en/turnout_en.html

Among the winners, the Greater Romania Party saw its vote increase surprisingly strongly in the capital Bucharest. This may reflect the assimilation of votes from Becali's heartland but the party made gains elsewhere too reflecting a growing discontent with the performance of the incumbent political class. Those looking for signs that the Democratic Union of Hungarians are breaking out of their traditional ethnic strongholds will have been disappointed. The increases in their vote came in counties where the Hungarian communities are most concentrated and the party seems to have benefited mainly from differential turnout among this group of voters.

The three largest parties all experienced disappointing results in some of their stronger areas, suggesting that voter loyalty in Romania is not yet consolidated. The National Liberals saw particularly disappointing results in Timis County and in the suburban districts of Bucharest, which had previously shown strong support for the party. Former Social Democrat presidential candidate, Adrian Nastase, raised concerns that his party was showing signs of slipping back in its rural strongholds. And the Democrat Liberals warned of radical changes in party management teams in counties where they failed to perform as well as expected.

Europe and the future

Romania consistently records among the highest approval ratings for the European Union among member states. As such there is little incentive for parties to adopt Eurosceptic positions. The Greater Romania Party comes closest with its declaration in favour of a 'Europe of Nations' but there is nothing comparable to the Eurosceptic parties that have begun to appear in other recent joiners.

The differentiation that did exist on European issues between the parties tended to focus more on the strategies of domestic politicians to win a greater role for Romania within the EU. The Social Democrats were most explicit in their criticism that Romania had failed, thus far, to do what it could to win friends and influence in the EU. All three main parties claimed that structural funds should be more efficiently distributed while the National Liberals and Democrat Liberals were more willing to talk about the benefits of open markets than the Social Democrats who focused on 'social Europe'.

Opinion polls published during the campaign period offered few clues to views on pan-European issues. Instead they concentrated on trying to determine levels of support for

the various presidential contenders ahead of the autumn poll. One poll taken in the spring of 2009 showed that more than three times as many Romanians felt the country had gained from EU membership compared to those who thought it had lost out.⁷ The regular Eurobarometer poll taken at the beginning of 2009 indicated that 58% of Romanians wanted the EP to have a greater role than it does currently, compared to 48% across the EU27. Yet, at the same time, only 39% of Romanians felt they would be better protected from the effects of the recession if economic measures were co-ordinated across the EU than if the Romanian government acted alone (compared to 61% across the EU27) - indicating latent doubts about the willingness of Romania's larger neighbours to take the country's interests into account.⁸

On the campaign trail, President Basescu complained about possible attempts to link EU loans to an acceleration of domestic judicial reforms while both Romania and Moldova tried to bring the EU into the dispute over the outcome of the Moldovan elections. And while Social Democrat MEPs caused a minor diplomatic storm by appearing to accuse the Justice Commissioner of corruption, Severin was quick to claim that it was a misunderstanding of what he said. Thus, Romanian politicians continue to adopt rhetoric around specific issues of national interest without developing stridently independent or anti-EU themes. Most of the political class are in favour of a further expansion of the EU to include the former Yugoslav state, no doubt with the potential for future alliance-building in mind. Whether Eurosceptic sentiments will grow if Romanian voters continue to be excluded from full membership rights (ie if some of the other member states retain opt-outs on the free movement of labour), or if they fail to see direct economic benefits from membership, remains to be seen. What is clear is that all the Romanian parties carry sufficiently light ideological baggage that they could begin to adopt such narratives if they perceive an electoral benefit to be developing.

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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/1-4-2.html>.

⁷ Insomar's Barometer showed 61.7% felt that the country had gained, 19.7% thought it had lost from EU membership. See: www.insomar.ro/barometre/2009_04_barometru_social_politic_INSOMAR.pdf.

⁸ See: *Europeans and the 2009 European Elections*, Eurobarometer 71, European Parliament, Brussels