



The Presidential Elections in Romania: Turning Point or Stalemate?

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On December 6th, 2009 at 9 pm, the Central Electoral Bureau (BEC) began the count of the ballots for the second round of the presidential elections. By midnight both candidates, Mr. Mircea Geoană, president of the Social Democratic Party, PSD, (the heir of the National Salvation Front, FSN, the main successor political organization in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 Revolution) and the standing president of the country, Mr. Traian Băsescu, proclaimed their victory. By 2 pm next day, BEC officially announced, based on its final count, the victory of the second by a slight margin of 0.67%. Almost immediately, PSD decided to challenge the result at the Constitutional Court, claiming fraud. It all happened in a highly divided country with an extremely polarized domestic political spectrum within the context of an ever-deepening structural crisis. The obvious question is "Will the conclusion of the presidential elections bring stability or accentuate Romania's current predicament?" But should the urgency of a resolution to the present situation cloud the very reason why such bleak picture looms? At the root of the present state of affairs lies one fundamental issue: the reform of the post-1989 system, what Vladimir Tismaneanu coined as "the Iliescu system."

It is no secret that contemporary Romania was built on shaky foundations. The dubious, unclarified circumstances of the violent revolution of 1989, the blatant communist party and Securitate origins of the successor elites, and the dominance of the paracapitalist entrepreneurs over the economy formed a context that seriously hampered postcommunist pluralism, the resurgent civil society, and the nascent open market. Ion Iliescu, Romania's first post-communist president (1990-1996) and former high-ranked nomenklatura member, had no qualms in telling things by their name. He defined the new system an "original democracy." Moreover, one crucial feature of this specific environment was the recurrence of rage movements in the form of successive, violent 'invasions' of the country's capital city by miners. During his first two terms, Mr. Iliescu managed to consolidate his power by means of political violence and amnesia about the communist past.

The first postcommunist alternation in power, the 1996 electoral victory of Emil Constantinescu and of the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR), took place within a highly fragmented society where the values of democratic citizenship and of accountable governance gained only an uncertain foothold. Rampant corruption, state inefficiency, gutted private initiative, the weakness of civic action, and state-



N°10 | decembre 2009

sponsored amnesia about the totalitarian experience made up the balance sheet of the first six years of transition in Romania. Matters were made worse by the Constantinescu administration's inability to fulfill its ambitious reform plan. It relied upon the support of a broad but unstable coalition of parties: the national liberals (PNL), the Christian-democrats (PNT-CD), the democrats (PD), and the ethnic Hungarians (UDMR). The backlash for the failure of this highly touted alliance came during the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2000. Ion Iliescu and his party, PSD, won another term. Their main contender was Corneliu Vadim Tudor and his Greater Romania Party (PRM), entities of xenophobic, anti-Western, ultranationalist coloring - a sign of the danger lurking in the shadows of Romania's murky transition. The new prime-minister was Mr. Adrian Năstase, of PSD, a politician with obvious authoritarian appetites. The new administration represented the institutionalization of a political system dominated by one large, catch-all party. The Iliescu-Năstase tandem signaled the move from the unsettledness of earlier mobilizational, anarchical politics to a Mexicanization of the country (to use another Vladimir Tismaneanu's coinage).

Four years later, the elections of 2004 showed the fundamental rift within the population: the "DA Alliance" (PNL and PD) and Traian Băsescu (its presidential candidate) won by only a slim margin against PSD and its candidate (*déjà vu* 2009). The "Iliescu system", defined by the principle of stability without reform, did establish a critical mass of supporters, of people willing to sacrifice accountability for perceived social security. Even on the winning side, within the "DA Alliance", an influential wing of the liberal party funded and controlled by Dinu Patriciu (one of the profiteers of state corruption in Romania, a media and oil tycoon), exerted intense pressure for a cohabitation with PSD and its losing candidate, Mr. Năstase. Despite the apparent, initial success, that is, the rejection by the electorate of the one, big-party system, the resilience of the latter soon became apparent.

Two initiatives of President Traian Băsescu brought things to their boiling point, ultimately causing the unraveling of the "DA Alliance". The first was the anti-corruption campaign spearhead by the Minister of Justice, Monica Macovei (at the time politically unaffiliated, coming from the ranks of the civil society, a highly appreciated representative of the Romania government in Bruxelles). The second was the creation of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship (PCACD, chaired by University of Maryland based professor, Mr. Vladimir Tismaneanu). The 18th of December, 2006 condemnation of the communist regime in Romania, based on the PCACD Report, as illegitimate and criminal, was the last moment of apparent solidarity among the victors of 2004. It was also the first salvo in what the following months revealed as an open, all-out offensive of the entrenched political, economic, and cultural forces consecrated and fostered by the "Iliescu system".



Papiers d'actualité

N°10 | décembre 2009

Traian Băsescu was by no means a victim of so-called "state socialism" (he never claimed otherwise) and he was indeed one of the political children of the FSN. But his support for anti-corruption initiatives, institutional reform and of politics of remembrance clearly indicated for both his friends and foes that he had broken with his past and implicitly with the system that earlier promoted him. The political alliance that backed his 2009 rival in the presidential elections, Mr. Geoană, shaped up in 2007, when Traian Băsescu's orientation became clear to his rivals. The PNL, PSD, PRM, and UDMR (the so-called "alliance of the 322" by the number of MPs involved) voted for president Băsescu's impeachment. Their claim was that he had violated the country's Constitution, despite a decision of the Constitutional Court to the contrary. By that time, the PNL had already broken with its ally, the PD (which later merged with a splinter of PNL into the Liberal Democratic Party, PDL). PNL formed a minority government, which consistently benefited from PSD's support. Nevertheless, Traian Băsescu won by a landslide the referendum for its reinstatement in the presidential seat.

What followed, from 2007 until 2009, were a series of conflicts between the president and the PSD-led majority in the Parliament. The 2008 parliamentary elections brought no reprieve to this situation. A national union government between PDL and PSD came to life. It collapsed, however, in the context of accusations against the acting Minister of Internal Affairs (of PSD), who allegedly misappropriated the archive of the special unit of the security forces in order to use the material for political blackmail. Once the PSD rescinded its ministers from the cabinet, the alliance of the 2007 impeachment was resuscitated. Its purpose was now two-fold: President Traian Băsescu's political obliteration (to paraphrase one of Iliescu's public statements); and the creation of a cabinet endorsed by a majority in Parliament headed by an independent politician, Mr. Klaus Johannis (mayor of Sibiu). By December 6, 2009, the date of the second round of the elections, the acting president was opposed by an alliance made up of *all* major political parties in Romania with the exception of PDL, the party supporting his re-election. I wish to emphasize that the latter is by no means a catch-all political formation like PSD was in 1992, 1996, 2000, or 2004. It is, however, plagued, like all parties in Romania, by two fundamental ailments: the influence of 'barons' involved in highly questionable business enterprises and the practice of politicizing state administration.

The above mentioned coalition was, and still is (at least until a new government is instated), an extremely heterogeneous combination of trans-party interest groups comprising both politicians and profiteering individuals now among the country's richest men in Forbes-like rankings (e.g., Dinu Patriciu, Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, Dan Voiculescu). This amalgamation is fundamentally an anti-Traian Băsescu venture. It enjoys a quasi-monopoly of the media, which subsequently has tremendously negative consequences on public opinion formation. It proclaimed itself a project of national reconciliation. Nevertheless, behind its front-men (Mircea Geoană, Klaus Johannis, and



Papiers d'actualité

N°10 | décembre 2009

Crin Antonescu - the PNL presidential candidate) lie old faces: Ion Iliescu, Adrian Năstase, and Victor Hrebenciuc (the mastermind of the PSD survival and continued relevance despite the defeats of 1996 and 2004).

The constant mass-media mudslinging of Traian Băsescu and of his supporters (denounced, after the second round of elections, in an official statement by the OSCE mission of observers) reached a level of intensity similar only to that of the early 1990s. At the time, the FSN, just like the current alliance, was jealously protecting its monopoly over public opinion. During the campaign between the two rounds of the 2009 presidential elections, one event was exemplary for the degree to which the electorate was manipulated by partisan TV stations: the misrepresentation of a non-party, grass-root, peaceful demonstration of protest in Timișoara. On December 1st (Romania's national day), PSD signed, in Timișoara, an agreement with a remnant of the Peasant Party (Christian-democrat), its most bitter rival between 1990 and 2000, and a protocol for government with PNL (and its prime-minister nominee, Mr. Johannis). The two documents proclaimed a new beginning in Romanian politics. However, the population of Timișoara (there were indeed thousands of people present) protested against the drafting of these agreements in the city which, by human sacrifice, rejected communist rule, only to see its efforts high-jacked by the National Salvation Front. The leader of FSN at the time was Ion Iliescu, now currently the honorary president of PSD. This party and its presidential candidate failed to convince the emblematic city of postcommunist Romania of its post-FSN, democratic credentials. To make matters worse, Mr. Geoană did not revoke a resolution unanimously adopted by PSD, in December 2006, which condemned president Băsescu's condemnation of the communist regime.

Upon final vote, the main struggle in the Romanian elections was between the representatives of a regime increasingly looking like a variety of "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way) and those still convinced of the necessity to continue by now grievously stuttering reforms. Despite Traian Băsescu's win against all odds, two factors spell gloom over the future. On the one hand, the rift within the population (almost 50-50) reconfirms the sharp antagonism of values already manifested in earlier elections, especially those of 1996 and 2004. In both cases, their result was an unstable and incoherent political majority that ultimately proved incapable to bring about enough positive changes in order to convince the voting population of a definitive departure from the 'Iliescu system'. To the contrary, practices of all parties involved in government since 2004 showed that the structural malaises of Romania's "original democracy" had hardly receded.

On the other hand, the party and personnel combinations upon which a new government can be based are not significantly different of those from a week ago or eight months ago, for that matter. The parties and people are the same. A clear, non-ideological project of far-reaching reform in Romania exists in the form of the reports of the six non-partisan commissions created during President Băsescu's prior term: on health,



N°10 | decembre 2009

communist past, education, demography and social problems, cultural heritage, and on the constitutional regime. But "the Iliescu system" cannot be overcome without the political will of its very own offsprings. It remains to be seen if the current, unprecedented crisis will finally convince the political class in Romania that there are only two ways to go: either forward or tumbling backwards into illiberal European irrelevance. Stagnation cannot be sold as stability anymore

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Papiers d'actualité

N°10 | décembre 2009