



PISM

POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 112 (1358), 7 August 2019 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Patrycja Sasnal • Rafał Tarnogórski

Sebastian Płóciennik • Justyna Szczudlik • Daniel Szeligowski
Jolanta Szymańska • Marcin Terlikowski • Szymon Zaręba • Tomasz Żornaczuk

Romania's Political Scene at the Start of the Presidential Campaign

Jakub Pieńkowski

In July, the main Romanian political parties nominated candidates for the November presidential election but the leaders of the ruling coalition have not agreed on a common candidate. The Social Democratic Party (PSD) nominated Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă, the successor of convicted chairman Liviu Dragnea, but the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) chose Speaker of the Senate Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu. This reduces the ruling coalition's chance of defeating President Klaus Iohannis. His re-election would likely result in the continuation of Romania's foreign policy, with the alliance with Poland an important element of it.

Political Changes in Romania. May's elections to the European Parliament (EP) confirmed a loss of a significant portion of the electorate of ruling coalition PSD-ALDE. The National Liberal Party (PNL) won overall with 27% of the votes. On the other hand, PSD, which in the parliamentary elections in 2016 received 45%, this time collected only 22%, the same as the centrist alliance of the Save Romania Union and the Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (USR+PLUS). Coalition partner ALDE did not even exceed the 5% threshold, with 6% obtained by PRO România, a gathering composed of former Dragnea PSD activists, headed by former Prime Minister Victor Ponta.

The results stemmed from the coalition's amendments of the criminal and judicial laws. Those changes resulted in protests, ongoing since 2017 and the largest in Romania since the fall of communism. The demonstrators argue that the changes have paralysed the anti-corruption system and let Dragnea, the chairman of PSD who, behind the scenes, controlled the government, to avoid prison. Just one day after the European elections, though, he was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for abuse of power.

Changes in PSD and in the Government. The election defeat and imprisonment of the party's leader led to a casting in the PSD. A faction dissatisfied with Dragnea's methods, though not his goals, recalled party activists most devoted to him from their roles in the party and nominated as chairman Prime Minister Dăncilă, who had had no base in the party. To regain public trust, the PM publicly distanced herself from the party's former leader. However, the PSD leadership's reluctance to make fundamental changes is proved by the marginalisation of opponents to Dragnea's policies.

Also, the changes in the government are not a new opening but reflect competition inside PSD and the coalition. Dăncilă dismissed Dragnea's trusted minister of internal affairs, Carmen Dan, who was blamed by the public for the lack of police investigations against the PM and for gendarmerie brutality against demonstrators. She also dismissed, despite ALDE resistance, the head of diplomacy, Teodor Meleșcanu, who raised the ire of the 2.5-million-strong Romanian diaspora over how poorly the EP elections outside Romania were organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Dăncilă declares her government's goal is to lead a more partnership-based dialogue within the EU and she has abandoned the Dragnea-style rhetoric of accusing EU institutions of violating the state's sovereignty, mainly for criticizing Romania as violating the rule of law. However, her declarations about fighting corruption contrast with her

refusal to support Laura Codruța Kövesi for the post of director of the European Public Prosecutor's Office. Dăncilă explained this by accusing Kövesi of abuse as the former head of the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA). In fact, the charges were formulated by the coalition to remove Kövesi from DNA because it was conducting several dozen investigations against PSD and ALDE politicians.

Coalition without a Common Candidate. The political programme, including the dialogue with EU institutions, is treated as a secondary priority by the coalition. This is proved by the tensions over personnel issues ahead of the November presidential election. ALDE's chairman and Speaker of the Senate Popescu-Tăriceanu expected to be nominated as the joint coalition candidate, supported by Dragnea. However, after Dragnea was sentenced and ALDE defeated in the EP elections, PSD decided to nominate its own candidate. In response, Popescu-Tăriceanu threatened to pull ALDE from the coalition and announced he would stand for election. In August, an IMAS survey found he would win 14% of the votes.

The PSD leadership put through Dăncilă as the party's candidate. Under pressure, Gabriela Firea, the popular mayor of Bucharest from the PSD faction opposed to Dragnea, withdrew from the fight for the party's nomination. However, Dăncilă is polling at just 7.5%, resulting in a declaration that her government will resign if she does not enter the second round of the elections. The main aim of her campaign appears to be to mobilise PSD before the parliamentary and local elections in 2020, which will decide whether it remains in power in Romania.

Both coalition leaders are seeking support from PRO România, which has not nominated its own candidate. Ponta preferred Popescu-Tăriceanu as the candidate of the centre-left, and he has hesitated to support Dăncilă. Although he counts on PSD's return to power, he is afraid of compromising PRO România or splitting it.

Iohannis Mobilises the Electorate. The imprisonment of Dragnea and PNL's victory in the EP elections have reinforced President Iohannis's hold on office. The party nominated him in 2014, and with its support as early as June 2018, he announced his intention to stand for re-election. He is the favourite in the elections, supported by 42% of poll respondents.

Iohannis demands a more effective fight against corruption and an end to the manipulation of the criminal and judicial laws. He accuses the government not only of destroying the rule of law but also the country's foundations of membership in the EU. However, the president is no longer the undisputed leader of the public's resistance to the government. Dan Barna, the leader of USR+PLUS is gaining popularity. In July, he announced his candidature for president. Currently, he is supported by 9.5% of respondents. He states he wants to renew Romanian political life and accuses Iohannis of belonging to the establishment. In turn, Iohannis is trying to gather the centre-right electorate. A consultative referendum—initiated by the president and carried out together with the EP elections—found that 85% support a prohibition on amnesty or pardons for those convicted of corruption and oppose amendments to the criminal or judicial laws by use of urgent government decrees, used by the coalition to make the changes.

In June, the president, wanting to confirm his own position, appealed to all parties to join a "pact to strengthen Romania's European way". Its participants pledged to implement the referendum's results, as well as to review and amend the criminal and judicial laws in accordance with the recommendations of the European Commission, the Venice Commission, and the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) of the Council of Europe. The pact was signed by all parliamentary parties except PSD, which asked for further work on the document, and by ALDE, which accused Iohannis of abusing the law. Interestingly, in July the Constitutional Court considered unconstitutional the PNL-USR draft constitutional ban on amnesty and pardons for corruption crimes, but confirmed the validity of the referendum and allowed such prohibitions to be introduced by a regular act.

Conclusions. The example of Romania shows that the weakening of the rule of law by the authorities can spur a public reaction and influence election results. The ruling coalition's loss of a significant portion of its electorate in the EP vote is even more evident now in the polls ahead of the presidential election. The lack of a common candidate weakens the coalition's chance to defeat Iohannis. PSD, ALDE, and PRO România may unite if one of the centre-left candidates enters the second round but current polls indicate the possible defeat of both coalition leaders in the first round, with Iohannis and Barna going through. This may lead to Prime Minister Dăncilă's resignation but it is unlikely the coalition will be broken. ALDE probably will not exit because its position is very weak while PSD, although it would be able to form a minority cabinet thanks to support from deputies of national minorities, likely prefers leading a majority government because it would facilitate its campaign for the double elections (parliamentary and local) in 2020.

Iohannis is likely to win the November elections because he has been the leader of the public resistance against the changes to anti-corruption laws. His expected re-election—apart from consolidating Romania's position in the EU—would bring the continuation of Romanian foreign and defence policy because the president is its main driver. The Romanian threat assessment is very similar to Poland's, namely on Russia, and on the importance of military cooperation with the U.S. and within NATO. So far, Iohannis has cooperated with Poland, for example, striving to strengthen the Alliance's Eastern Flank and supporting the Three Seas Initiative.

The abandonment of Dragnea's confrontational rhetoric may improve relations between Dăncilă's cabinet and EU institutions and member states critical of the changes in Romania. Improvement in the international image and credibility of the Romanian authorities would be favourable to Poland as this would facilitate lobbying for solutions desired by both countries within the EU and NATO. However, it also may mean that the Romanian government will be less inclined to support Poland in disputes with the EU related to the ongoing Article 7 procedure.