

Liberal forces are expected to win the parliamentary elections in Romania on 6 December next

On 3 September last, the Romanian authorities announced that the next parliamentary elections would be held on 6 December this year. 18,981,242 people are being called to ballot and 39,238 Romanians living abroad (the United Kingdom is the country with the largest number of voters, followed by Germany, Italy, Spain and France) are expected to fulfil their civic duty. The number of candidates in these parliamentary elections totals 7,136 (there were 6,476 in the elections on 11 December 2016).

The Social Democratic Party (PSD), the main opposition party, has fought hard in recent weeks to obtain a postponement of these elections, arguing that the health situation in Romania, like all European countries, has been seriously affected by the coronavirus pandemic, accusing the government led by Ludovic Orban (National Liberal Party, PNL) of thinking only of victory, with no regard for the country's health or economy. The Social Democratic leader, Marcel Ciolacu, stressed that Romanians living abroad might be prevented from voting in some countries because of the health situation. According to the electoral law, parliamentary elections can be held up to 3 months after the end of the current legislature, i.e. until 14 March 2021. According to observations made during the local elections held in Romania on 27 September last, the pandemic had little effect on turnout.

According to the latest opinion poll carried out by the IMAS institute at the beginning of November, the National Liberal Party is expected to take the lead with 32.6% of the vote, followed by the Social Democratic Party with 21.7%. The Save Romania Union-Party of Freedom, Solidarity and Unity (USR-PLUS) is due to

take third place with 20.4% of the vote. Far behind, the People's Movement Party (PMP) is due to win 6%; the Union Pro Romania-Alliance of Liberals and Democrats, 5.2% and, finally, the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), 4.2%.

The Social Democratic Party won 1,438 town halls (but only two large cities, Craiova and Galati) and 20 regional councils in the local elections of 27 September; the National Liberal Party (PNL) won 1,237 (including Constanza, a social democratic stronghold, and Iasi) (-8) and 17 regions (+8).

However, this result did not constitute a victory for Marcel Ciolacu's PSD, which controlled half of the municipal and regional councils before the elections. Nevertheless, it remains well established in rural areas, while it lags well behind in the cities. In the main the SPD lost ground to the National Liberal Party.

In Timisoara, Dominic Fritz (USR-PLUS) caused a surprise by defeating the outgoing mayor, Nicolae Robu (PNL). Nicusor Dan, founder of the Save Romania Union (USR), supported by the PNL, won Bucharest beating Gabriela Firea (SPD). However, the Social Democratic Party won the General Council of Bucharest with 21 seats; together, the Save Romania Union and the Party for Freedom, Unity and Solidarity won 17 seats and the National Liberal Party 12.

THE OPPOSITION PARTIES

The Social Democratic Party has dominated Romanian political life since the fall of communism in 1989. It advocates an often "clientelist" welfare policy and the strengthening of the welfare state. It is based on extremely nationalist ideology and is close to the

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Orthodox Church. Thus, the Social Democrats were the only "big" party to support the change of the Constitution by the inclusion in the Basic Law of the ban on same-sex marriage in the referendum of 6 and 7 October 2018 (the others advocated abstention). Similarly, the Social Democrats have allocated considerable financial resources to Bucharest Cathedral, a decision to which the Save Romania Union was opposed. Hence, its electorate includes many elderly and rural people. The less educated and poorer voters are also closer to the PSD than to any other party.

The vote in 2017 of an amendment to the Penal Code, reducing certain prison sentences, particularly for the abuse of power and facilitating amnesties and pardons, brought thousands of Romanians to the streets, who for weeks expressed their anger against these measures impacting justice. The first government, established after the elections of 11 December 2016, led by Sorin Grindeanu (PSD) collapsed. During the previous legislature, no less than three PSD prime ministers succeeded each other at the head of Romania; Viorica Dancila, fell on 10 October 2019 following the vote of no-confidence in Parliament by 238 of the 465 deputies and senators. Without the support of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) whose ministers had resigned from the government on 26 August 2019, the Social Democrats no longer held an absolute majority in parliament. Five days later, on 15 October, President Klaus Iohannis appointed Ludovic Orban, leader of the National Liberal Party, as Prime Minister.

The PSD is promising 4.4% GDP growth over the next four years and states that, if it returns to power, the country's GDP will reach 80% of the EU average by 2024. The Social Democrats are proposing a 57% increase in the minimum wage (which would then rise to 7,010 leu or €1,445 in 2024), and a 32% pension point increase with a view to reaching the 40% increase that had been approved by parliament in the summer of 2019 but which was never achieved. They say they will double the amount of family allowances, modulate personal income taxes according to the number of children and abolish income tax for Romanians receiving the minimum wage. The Social Democrats have committed to creating one million jobs and reducing the budget

deficit to less than 3% of the GDP. Four years ago, the PSD had a similar electoral programme (promises to raise wages, pensions and investments), but it was rather difficult to translate it into reality. According to opinion polls, the PSD has lost half of its electorate in the last four years. It seems much weakened and its leaders, none of whom really stand out (Marcel Ciolacu is acting leader), no longer seem to be in tune with a country increasingly attracted by leaders who are highly qualified who have trained abroad. A cure on the opposition benches seems necessary for the party to reorganise and strengthen itself.

Two parties close to the PSD - the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats and Pro Romania - have recently merged. Calin Popescu-Tariceanu's Alliance of Liberals and Democrats has chosen to move away from the PSD by joining forces with a party led by a former social democratic leader and former Prime Minister (2012-2015), Victor Ponta, who is not on good terms with the PSD. This merger is therefore bad news for the main opposition party.

THE PARTIES IN OFFICE

"The National Liberal Party is the largest party in Romania. It is the party that the citizens trust the most and it is therefore logical that it stands alone in the elections. Only one thing is certain: we will not govern with the PSD. Our potential partners in government are our allies in the European People's Party (EPP) and the Save Romania Union-Party of Freedom, Solidarity and Unity (USR-PLUS). However, I would prefer the National Liberal Party to obtain an absolute majority." said outgoing Prime Minister Ludovic Orban. If this is not the case (and according to the opinion polls), the PNL, which is refusing any pre-election alliance, could form an alliance with the USR-PLUS and the Popular Movement Party (PMP), led by Eugen Tomac, which should give it a majority to govern. The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), led by Hunor Kelemen, would also support this governing coalition.

The Save Romania Union (USR), a liberal party led by Dan Barna, merged on 15 August with the Party of Freedom, Solidarity and Unity (PLUS), the centrist party of former Prime Minister (2015-2017) and current MEP,

Dacian Ciolos. Romania's third largest electoral force, the USR-PLUS, whose leaders are young and trained abroad, is coasting along nicely in the polls. It obtained good results in the cities in the local elections of 27 September, but nevertheless lacks a real national base.

The two liberal parties disagree over some of the reforms to be carried out. In addition, the rise of the USR-PLUS in the opinion polls can only give cause for concern to the PNL. Indeed, a high USR-PLUS result could jeopardise the reappointment of Ludovic Orban as Prime Minister. Some members of the USR-PLUS have already hinted that the party would present its own candidate for the post (in all likelihood Dacian Ciolos), which has created some additional tensions between the potential partners.

The USR-PLUS is proposing a programme entitled the "Good Governance Revolution" which emphasises six priorities (out of 40 proposals). The first is the "repair of all that the PSD has destroyed in terms of justice"; the second is the de-politicization of the education system; the third is the creation of a national fund to modernise health infrastructures (the cost would amount to €1 billion over 4 years to finance the renovation or construction of hospitals); the fourth is the reforestation of Romania and the creation of a national anti-corruption directorate for forests; the fifth is the development of industries of the future, green technologies, clean energies, digital industry 4.0, skilled labour industry and ecotourism and, finally, the sixth is broadband Internet access for all Romanians.

THE ROMANIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Romanian parliament is bicameral: it comprises the Chamber of Deputies (Camera deputatilor) and the Senate (Senatul). Both assemblies are renewed every 4 years.

The lower Chamber elected in 2016 has a total of 329 members voted in by proportional representation from lists in 43 constituencies: 41 represent the country's counties and nominate 279 deputies, while Bucharest is a constituency that nominates 29 deputies. Finally,

the latter represents Romanians abroad and elected 4 deputies by majority vote in the previous election.

Some seats are reserved for national minorities (currently 17). A national minority is entitled to a deputy seat if the citizens' organisation representing it has an elected representative on the National Council of Minorities and has won at least 5% of the average number of votes cast.

To enter the Chamber of Deputies, a political party must obtain at least 5% of the total votes cast nationally or 20% of the total votes cast in at least 4 constituencies (8% for an alliance of 2 parties, 9% for an alliance of 3 parties and 10% for an alliance of 4 or more parties). A person who wins the support of at least 0.50% of the voters in a constituency is allowed to run individually in that constituency. All voters must be at least 23 years of age to participate in parliamentary elections.

The Senate comprises 136 members, of whom 2 represent the Romanians abroad.

6 political parties won seats in parliamentary elections on 11 December 2016:

- The Social Democratic Party (PSD), led by Marcel Ciolacu (acting), has 133 MPs and 68 Senators;
- the National Liberal Party (PNL), led by outgoing Prime Minister Ludovic Orban, has 82 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 31 in the Senate;
- the Save Romania Union (USR), a liberal party created by Nicusor Dan in 2016 and led by Dan Barma, has 25 MPs and 13 Senators;
- the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), led by Hunor Kelemen, has 20 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 9 in the Senate;
- the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), chaired by Calin Popescu Tariceanu, has 21 Mps and 3 Senators;
- the Popular Movement Party (PMP), led by former President of the Republic (2004-2014) Traian Basescu and led by Eugen Tomac, has 16 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 6 in the Senate.

17 MPs represent various national minorities in the Chamber of Deputies.

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Romania also elects its President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage. Head of State, Klaus Iohannis, was re-elected to this post on 24 November 2019 with

66.09% of the vote. He came out well ahead of former Prime Minister (2018-2019) Viorica Dancila (PSD), who won 33.91% of the vote. The turnout stood at 55.07%.

Reminder of the Result of the Parliamentarians Elections of 11 December 2016 in Romania

Chamber of Deputies

Turnout: 39.46%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats (at present)
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	3 204 864	45.48	133
National Liberal Party (PNL)	1 412 377	20.04	82
Save Romania Union (USR)	625 154	8.87	25
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	435 969	6.19	20
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) (now Pro Romania)	396 386	5.62	21
Popular Movement Party (PMP)	376 891	5.35	16
National Minorities			17
Others	1 186 550	13.80	0

*12 MP non-inscrits

Source : <http://www.cdep.ro/pls/parlam/structura2015.de?idl=3>

Senate

Turnout: 39.44%

Political Parties	Number of votes cast	% of votes cast	Number of seats
Social Democratic Party (PSD)	3 221 786	45,68	68
National Liberal Party (PNL)	1 440 193	20,42	31
Save Romania Union (USR)	629 375	8,92	13
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR)	440 409	6,24	9
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)	423 728	6,01	8
Popular Movement Party (PMP)	398 791	5,65	6
Others	704 657	7,08	0

Source : <https://www.senat.ro/default.aspx?Sel=257814B4-6EF6-4452-8F1E-F5ACF5CD4C9C>

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