

Romanian President Traian Basescu avoids impeachment once again

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Results

Five years after 17th April 2007, when the first referendum on his impeachment as head of State took place, Traian Basescu, President of the Republic of Romania again emerged victorious in the battle that opposed him, this time round, against Prime Minister Victor Ponta (Social Democratic Party, PSD). A majority of Romanians who were called to vote for or against the impeachment of the Head of State indeed stayed away from the ballot boxes on 29th July. Only 46.13% of them turned out to vote whilst turn out of at least half of those registered was necessary for the consultation to be deemed valid. The government made an attempt to abolish this threshold that has been part of the electoral law since 2010, before being reprimanded by the European Commission and other Western leaderships. Victor Ponta did do everything he could however to achieve the minimum turnout threshold by leaving the polling stations open for four hours more than is the custom (7am to 11pm) and by opening fifty other stations in hotels and restaurants on the shores of the Black Sea where some Romanians spend their holidays.

"The Romanians have rejected the coup d'Etat launched by the 256 MPs and led by Prime Minister Victor Ponta and interim President Crin Antonescu. The Romanians have decided on their future by invalidating this referendum," declared the President of the Republic Traian Basescu after the announcement of the results. *"The real question is: do we want to stay in the EU or fall into the hands of a clique of politicians and businessmen who want to control the country and its judiciary system?"* asked the head of State during the campaign. *"The issue at stake in this election is not my seat of President of the Republic but European Romania. It is my hope that the Romanians will set aside economic issues and defend European Romania,"* he repeated.

Traian Basescu was suspended on 6th July last by Parliament. The Social Liberal Union (USL), the coalition in office, which brings together the Social Democratic Party (PSD) led by Victor Ponta, the National Liberal Party (PNL) led by Crin Antonescu and the Conservative Party (PC) led by Daniel Constantin, who accused President Basescu of having *"impeded the separation of power and the independence of the judiciary,"* and of having *"diminished democracy"* by imposing austerity measures that have *"impoverished the population"*.

"Whatever the final turnout is no politician can deny the will of millions of voters without cutting himself off from reality," declared Prime Minister Ponta. Traian Basescu's return to the Cotroceni Palace (the residence of the Romanian Head of State) and his cohabitation with the Prime Minister does raise a great number of questions however.

"The crisis will get worse and it will be a catastrophe for Romania because Traian Basescu will not stop there. He will try to renew the measures that he has already introduced – income tax, wage cuts and reductions in retirement pensions," declared the Prime Minister as he tried to play on the President's low popularity rate and frighten the electorate.

Many analysts believe however that with the referendum on the Head of State's impeachment, the government intended to increase its power over the country in a bid to avoid a series of trials that have been called as part of an anti-corruption campaign, as for example, that of Adrian Nastase (PSD) Prime Minister between 2000 and 2004 and mentor of the present head of government, who was sentenced to prison for the embezzlement of more than one million € in public money on 20th June last by the High Court – a first in the country involving a high ranking personality.

Referendum in Romania 29th July 2012

And so the referendum on 29th July has in no way ended the Romanian political crisis. President Basescu will return to the Presidency of the Republic but the tension between him and the Prime Minister is so great that it begs the question of whether the two men are able to cohabit and act for the good of the country.

The Romanians will again be called to vote on 28th November for the parliamentary elections.

Bucharest will also have to provide answers to the 11 requests made mid-July by the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso. Brussels criticised the infringements made to the rule of law undertaken by Victor Ponta's government and asked the latter to repeal the two emergency decisions it had made (regarding the modification of the referen-

dum laws and on the reduction of the powers of the Constitutional Court, which can no longer challenge the Parliament's decisions), to appoint an independent ombudsman (the latter, who is the only one able to challenge the decisions made by the government in Romania, was replaced), to strengthen the country's judiciary, to step up the fight to counter corruption and to restore the powers of the Constitutional Court.

Victor Ponta has promised to respond rapidly to the European Commission. "We shall look at the laws and their implementation, not just the letters (written by Victor Ponta on 16th July last and addressed to Mr Barroso)" warned the Commission's Vice President responsible for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, Vivian Reding.

The Constitutional Referendum Results of 29th July 2012 in Romania

Turnout: 46.13%

Question submitted to referendum	% of yes votes won	% of no votes won
Do you support the impeachment of the President of the Republic Traian Basescu ?	87,55	11,12

Source : <http://www.becreferendum2012.ro/DOCUMENTE%20BEC/Rezultate%20partiale/ora%2010.00.pdf>

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