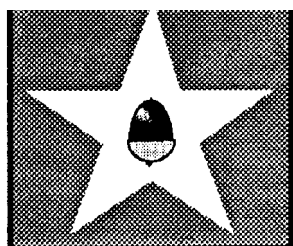


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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A Future Return to the Past?**

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Summary

On 26 November 2000 Romania holds parliamentary and presidential elections. The plethora of parties has not been conducive to government stability, and the indications are that the ex-communist former president Ion Iliescu will return to power, possibly after a second ballot on 10 December. This paper examines the presidential candidates and the parties contending the parliamentary elections. The main parties and personalities are listed in an Annex at the end of the paper.

Introduction

There is no doubt that Romania's November 1996 parliamentary and presidential elections marked an historic turning point in this country's political culture and social development: the Romanians brought about the first democratically elected, reform-orientated and resolutely pro-Western government in the last 60 years. In the process, the Romanians ended almost seven years of rule of the Moscow-educated President Ion Iliescu and his Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR), successors of the former communist regime. The November 1996 elections' results were hailed both at home and in the West as a new beginning for Romania, "a return to normalcy", and a new chance to catch up with its former communist allies in Central Europe. These elections were also considered to be an historic event by the democratic forces, from East and West alike, because the Romanian electorate had chosen to eliminate the legacy of the so-called "red coalition" which ruled Romania, officially and unofficially, since December 1989's "Romanian revolution". The post-communist "red coalition" was formed by the PDSR with the help of other former communist nomenklatura and Securitate officials united together either into the ultra-nationalist Party of Romanian National Unity (PUNR) or the extreme-nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM).

Unfortunately, the Romanian people's expectations in the winners of the November 1996 elections - the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR) and President Emil Constantinescu, an academic who seemed to symbolise a break with the communist past - were soon to be evaporated. Indeed, the new ruling CDR coalition (a centre-right grouping formed on one hand, on the backbone of two "historical parties", the National Peasant Christian Democratic Party (PNT CD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL), and on the other, by the reform-oriented Democratic Party (PD) and other smaller

democratic parties) proved unable to meet the expectations mainly because of its lack of experience. Moreover, the democratic coalition's reservation in implementing radical economic and social reforms, combined with never ending political infighting within the different factions of the government, and the hostility of the administration to change, threw Romanian society into a deep economic and moral crisis. The CDR's decision to introduce into the new government representatives of the ethnic Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR) did not help either, as strong nationalist sentiments were running high not only in the ultra-nationalist parties of the opposition but within the parties that formed the coalition as well.¹

However, it should be emphasised that since the 1996 elections, Romania did manage to start the process of socio-political democratisation and economic-financial restructuring, while foreign affairs and national security policy were focused on NATO and European Union (EU) integration. But in spite of positive efforts on these directions, Romania's prospects for integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures are still far from obvious. This is because the political process in Romania after 1996 was compounded more than in other former communist states by the complexities of transition from a communist authoritarian state to a democratic society and a free market economy. The large number of political parties in the CDR rendered the democratic workings of the cabinet immobile and political instability became the hallmark of Constantinescu's administration. Disagreements within the ruling coalition resulted in the dismissal of two Premiers - Victor Ciorbea at the close of 1998 and Radu Vasile in Christmas 1999. These dismissals reflected not only a lack of confidence amongst the individual coalition members but also the level of instability within the government itself, which resulted in a negative response within the electorate.

It is true that Romania has immense potential. With a well-educated population of 22.6 million, it is one of the largest of the former East European Communist nations, it has a large agricultural base, and it has the potential for strong industrial growth. But somewhere things are going wrong. Although there are some positive developments, the present situation in Romania could be described as depressing. Political developments seem to be one of Romania's few strong points. Indeed, Romania is committed to democracy and the rule of law, with well-established democratic institutions. The structure is in place, but, unfortunately, the decision-making process is fraught with the complexities of transition. The fragility of a multi-party ruling coalition showed in 1999 when the government lost its majority in the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament. The government has therefore had to rely on emergency ordinances to pass essential reforming legislation.

Political instability and lack of radical reforms, however, were not purely the domain of inefficient politicians and systems. The communist legacy and nationalism rooted in the regional composition of Romanian society have also had a detrimental effect on the mentality and working of the coalition government. Present day Romania is a country that has been pieced

together throughout the 1900s from parts of empires that preceded it. As a result, Romania is composed of numerous regionalised ethnic groups with vastly differing histories and interests, which 50 years of communism did not manage to attenuate. As a nation, Romania itself is relatively new and so the collective myth of a Romanian national identity is still linked with authoritarian communism and the separate ethnic identities previously held. The relatively short history of the Romanian nation has brought together various ethnic groups and regions within one national boundary, yet regionalised voting has added to the plethora of parties that undermined national considerations. As a result, transition in Romania has proved to be a long, arduous process necessitating the development of all areas of Romanian society and will inevitably lead to periods of instability before a unique Romanian system can be advanced.²

In this general context, nobody should be surprised at the prospect of Romania's return to a not so distant past after the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 26 November 2000. But this prospect poses a real danger to both the incipient democratic reforms in Romania, and to this country's place in the future European architecture. Disappointed by the Constantinescu administration of the past four years, the Romanians seem to be prepared to return to the ex-communist Left again. So far, most of the polls have indicated that the left-leaning parties and the former communist leader Ion Iliescu would return to power. Such a shift has already been witnessed in the 2000 local elections, when Iliescu's PDSR won 27 percent of the overall vote. Iliescu would have insured a straightforward return to power if the incumbent President, Emil Constantinescu, had not given up the presidential contest in July, in a surprising move especially by Romania's political standards. The people took it as an acknowledgement of his administration's failure over the past four years. So far most of the candidates for president remain anchored in the past, and their political programmes are nothing more than a criticism of previous governments.

But regardless of all predictions and what the future may hold, it is absolutely clear that the Romanian electorate has never been more disappointed than now. The political stage is busier than ever. Coalitions are made on a daily basis, inter- and intra-party infighting is reaching paroxysm, while corruption scandals and disinformation involving more or less all the protagonists of this November's elections are mushrooming. On the other hand, biased and even pirate opinion polls on electoral orientation paid mainly by Romania's new oligarchy have given birth to various interpretations, not only by political parties and leaders but by the electorate as well. Obviously, the parties and presidential candidates with favourable forecasts tend to exaggerate their meaning while political forces disadvantaged by the poll results, criticise them harshly and regard them as attempts to manipulate the voters.

The Candidates for President ...

Ion Iliescu was the first President after the 1989 revolution and remained in the post for seven years, thus becoming the most important decision-maker and policy-builder within the new democratic setting of Romania. Still a leftist at heart and also in his statements, Iliescu played the card of populism and won not only two presidential terms, but also survived as the leader of the opposition. During his administration, the privatisation process was sacrificed for electoral reasons, and as a result, Ceausescu's megalomaniac industrial complex was paid to remain bankrupt. Nationalism was another ace up his sleeve, diverting attention from flourishing corruption and the newly born Mafia-style structures towards the Hungarian minority and Roma. The result was a considerable slow-down of the democratisation process that, in turn, delayed Romania's integration into NATO and the European Union. To nobody's surprise, Iliescu maintains in the 2000 election campaign the same political mantra as benefited him in the 1990s: *"An ordinary man for people's needs."*³ He rejected from the start calls to invalidate his presidential campaign based on the constitutional provision that a president was not allowed to have more than two mandates. In his interpretation, he only had one mandate, as the constitution had been initiated and approved during his first mandate. He is so far the most likely politician to win the first round of the presidential race and, if the centre-right remains divided, may become president for a third term.

The incumbent President **Emil Constantinescu**'s decision not to seek re-election was indeed surprising but not unexpected. Constantinescu made the announcement on national television on 17 July, less than three weeks after he declared he would seek a second mandate. So far his decision has remained a mystery. On one hand, undocumented rumours were launched in Bucharest that Constantinescu was blackmailed to withdraw from the presidential race by forces connected with Iliescu and former Securitate officials who managed to secretly video-tape the incumbent's sexual promiscuity, and to document some corrupt financial operations linked to his family. On the other hand, other interested parties are presenting the withdrawal as a unique gesture of morality from an intellectual fed up with the corruption within Romania's political elite. The more plausible reason for his refusal to stand for a second mandate could be his slim chance of being re-elected. Indeed, for months Constantinescu was trailing Iliescu in the opinion polls. The gap between Iliescu and Constantinescu seemed too large to close, unless the incumbent could count on the support of all those who voted for "anyone but Iliescu", which was not the case. His candidacy was only endorsed by PNTCD and the Union of Rightist Forces (UFD) which even picked a "running mate" for Constantinescu - Prime Minister Mugur Isarescu - who, though politically independent, was their choice for premier. However, regardless of whether one chooses to view Constantinescu's slamming of the political door as a gesture of a frustrated politician or of a desperate honest man, it should not be forgotten that no other politician in Romania has voluntarily quit. And as political analyst Michael Shafir pointed out, those who remained in the race *"would find it hard to explain*

why they, rather than Emil Constantinescu, should continue to pursue their electoral ambitions."⁴

One of them is **Theodor Stolojan**, a former Prime Minister during the Iliescu regime, and now the Liberal Party's candidate. As one of Iliescu's prime ministers (1991-1992), he had direct control over the administrative structures and over the privatisation process. Received with enthusiasm, Stolojan was initially perceived as a technocrat who had the know-how to quickly repair what 45 years of Communism had damaged. But his contribution to the restoration of responsible democratic capitalism was more than disappointing. As a result, he left the post of prime minister to become a World Bank representative. At the start of the electoral campaign, Theodor Stolojan was trying to get as many votes as possible by using an idea seemingly stolen from Iliescu's political vocabulary: *"The situation in Romania was better before 1997."*⁵ However, based on support from the Liberals and other centre-left formations, Stolojan has a good chance to become the second choice after the first presidential ballot and to challenge Iliescu in the second ballot, on 10 December.

Another former Prime Minister, **Petre Roman**, the son of a well-known former communist activist, is certainly a cultivated and charismatic leader. Running for the presidency as the leader of the Democratic Party, Roman was also associated with and grappled the same ghosts as Ion Iliescu. Romania's first Prime Minister after 1989, Roman was Iliescu's partner for a short time. Quite different in their approaches and objectives, they quickly separated, and Roman resigned from his positions in the government and Iliescu's party, creating his own party, the Democratic Party. Roman's party became an important partner for the present CDR coalition. In his present role as Foreign Minister, Roman has become more concerned with his image abroad, but there is no doubt that his name is linked to the economic depression during the past four years as well as to the mistakes of Iliescu's first term in office. Yet he called his former colleague an *"outdated Communist."*⁶

Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the presidential candidate of the ultra-nationalistic Greater Romania Party, has held onto the same aggressive tone of chauvinism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia that his party has always stood for. In spite of this attitude, or probably because of it, CV Tudor's popularity and PRM influence in Romania have become increasingly apparent since 1996, when both the leader and the party did better than in 1992, garnering 4.7% in the presidential election and 4.5% in the parliamentary election. With 19 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 8 Senators, in the last 4 years Tudor has managed to increase his personal influence and his party's grip on the Romanian political scene. After the other Romanian nationalist party, PUNR, finally expelled its extreme-nationalist leader and mayor of Cluj, Gheorghe Funar, in March 1998, CV Tudor invited Funar to join the PRM as its secretary-general and in October 1998 Funar accepted the offer. The new tandem was able not only to attract sufficient public support for Tudor's

presidential campaign but also to advance his chances in a possible run-off of the presidential race.⁷

Teodor Melescanu, the leader of the newly created Alliance for Romania Party (ApR), was also a member of the government during Iliescu's regime and a former member of Iliescu's party, from which his party split in 1996. He relies on a programme referred to as "The Third Way," which is a combination of various economic and political issues, many of them toying with populist themes. He also refers to the past when presenting his programme.⁸

Gyoergy Frunda, nominated by the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, entered the elections only to raise the percentage vote for his party. The UDMR traditionally gains roughly 7% of the vote, which is directly aligned to the percentage of ethnic Hungarians living in Romania. At present, UDMR is a member of the ruling coalition. In order to retain the same degree of involvement in the future governance of Romania and to be able to negotiate ethnic Hungarians' demands with the future government, irrespective of its colour, a candidate that appealed to a wider audience was deemed necessary. Frunda was chosen to fill this role. But Frunda's candidacy will split the centre-right forces in Romania, and if he does not withdraw before the election, Iliescu could win the presidential race even in the first ballot.⁹

The last important candidate, but not the least, is **Mugur Isarescu**, who was invited by an almost unanimous parliamentary vote to become Prime Minister when Radu Vasile was forced to step down last Christmas. Formerly the Governor of the National Bank of Romania, Isarescu has worked under both the Iliescu administration and the present Constantinescu government. Quite charismatic, with a clear discourse and an image as a skilled technocrat, Isarescu has, so far, the greatest chance of attracting the votes of the dissatisfied electorate. Moreover, Isarescu has managed to acquire a favourable stature internationally. As Governor of the Romanian National Bank, Isarescu kept clear of the widespread corruption, while at the same time maintaining important contacts with the IMF and the World Bank. Isarescu has never directly been involved in any political party and his refusal to sign on as a candidate for any given party brought him a bonus in the eyes of the electorate, who perceive all parties as inevitably linked with the governmental failings of the past. Prime Minister Isarescu formally announced his candidature for the presidency only hours before the campaign started. He said: *"It hasn't been an easy decision to make for me, but I've taken it after a long reflection and now I can say I'm ready."*¹⁰ Isarescu is to have no party allegiance. He is standing on a platform that promises to maintain Romania's economic recovery and to continue to seek integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions. In a low-key start to his campaign, Isarescu appeared alone, without the trappings that have been associated with other candidates. He concluded: *"I am running because I nurture a belief in the Romanian people's chances, in their qualities and particular intelligence, in their right to a decent life."*¹¹

Mugur Isarescu has never looked to the past, bringing the people a programme that at first sight seems coherent and pragmatic. The six chapters in his program are: "middle class and economy," "the Romanian intelligentsia," "the new economy," "Romania's image in the world," "the village" and "the security of the citizen." In a "normal" democracy, Isarescu would win easily. He has proven during his year in office that he can take the country out of the economic and political recession in which it is mired. This is clear from a comparison of his governance with that of two other candidates, Roman and Stolojan. Between 1990 and 1992, when first Roman and then Stolojan led the government, Romania fell into a period of political isolationism. However, between 1999 and 2000, during Isarescu's premiership, the country started its negotiations with the EU and advanced in its bid to NATO integration. Moreover, Isarescu is an appropriate leader to negotiate a political coalition after the elections, because he is an independent politician, not suppressed or biased by internal party rules.

... And the Contenders for the Parliamentary Elections

When President Emil Constantinescu announced his decision to step down from the presidential race in early July, something that should have happened a long time ago was forced into being: the political stage had to reshape itself. Mass disappointment and frustration with the lack of accountability on the part of politicians has become evident over the recent months when scandal upon scandal hit the headlines. Responsibility remained anonymous. The thirst for power, or rather the long acquired habit of not paying attention to the public, has left badly needed political reform waiting. Still the options do remain limited, as the political parties are more interested in fighting each other rather than fighting for democracy and the people. And indeed, the Romanian people have a crucial decision to make in the coming November elections: whether to slip back to the Left and out of the European Union and NATO or to remain with the "in" crowd. The Romanians can prove that they understand this dichotomy. They did it once before in 1996, when their vote stopped the communists from burying the country further in its miserable past. Besides the winning of power, the November 2000 elections have a much bigger stake for most political leaders and could save or compromise their political career. The Romanian public has developed an extremely powerful sense of the need for change and the political parties have less and less room to ignore this. Although it has not even reached its maturity, the Romanian political class has become extremely worn out. Its lack of popularity will cause the political parties to change the leaders that have maintained themselves at the helm of the parties since most of them were set up. This is the most comfortable solution the parties seem willing to resort to, although the change of leaders will not solve in any way the parties' structure and identity problems - a young man for instance has the opportunity to be promoted in the party only if he flatters his leaders.

Romania's Liberal Party (PNL), the power-making force behind this year's elections, is an interesting party from the leadership's point of view and the way in which it influences party policy. In some respects, the PNL's evolution since its rebirth in 1990 is quite remarkable. Marked by bitter infighting and dissent, the liberal movement initially failed to unite and in the 1992 general elections scored less than the 3% threshold required at that time to gain parliamentary representation. By 1996, however, the party had largely achieved internal unity and, in alliance with the PNTCD within the Democratic Convention of Romania, won the ballot and became the main partner in the government coalition. After 1998, as the CDR's popularity waned and the PNL's public image improved, the Liberals asked for equal representation within the CDR leadership and on its parliamentary election lists. When the PNTCD refused to give up its position in power, the PNL started to explore other possibilities. At present, the PNL Mircea Ionescu Quintus is still the Chairman but in name only because Valeriu Stoica, currently the Minister of Justice, has taken over the party leadership gradually in the last two years and his lust for power is beyond measure. This unofficial take-over has radically changed PNL policy: up to Quintus, PNL carried out a traditionalist policy, being faithful to the ruling PNTCD coalition; after Stoica powerfully took over the reins, PNL abandoned its traditional right wing ally and headed towards the parties on the left. And indeed, with unexpected success in the June local elections, PNL decided to divorce the CDR and to run on separate lists.

However, the dilemma faced by the PNL leadership was how to avoid, in the electorate's eyes, sharing responsibility for the country's gloomy economic performance and the failure of its post-1996 cabinets to implement reform while remaining credible to its electorate. In order to build a new image, PNL started to cultivate the opposition parties. After negotiations with Melescanu's Alliance for Romania (ApR) for a central-left coalition failed, PNL started to look for a coalition with another left party - this time Iliescu's PDSR - with which it will not be embarrassed to accede to power. Although he has denied any agreement with PDSR in this respect, Stoica does not attack this party the way he does his colleagues in power, PNTCD and PD. However, PNL's rapprochement with the left led to internal conflicts and the decision of a few outstanding dissidents to leave the party, but this has not affected Stoica's allegedly pragmatic position. Indeed, after debunking the old leadership of Liberals from 1945, imprisoned by the communists, Valeriu Stoica tested his power within the party by confronting Finance Minister Decebal Traian Remes. The latter's decision to support the present Prime Minister, Mugur Isarescu, for the presidency caused an explosion of anger amongst the Liberals who were determined, under Stoica's leadership, and without any credible candidate for presidency within the party, to throw themselves in the presidential fight supporting former Prime Minister Theodor Stolojan.

But as Stolojan shares responsibility for the economic and democratic failures of the Iliescu regime to which he was connected, he may be unable to win sufficient votes for the second presidential ballot. Thus, without

considering the full range of developments on the political scene, the Liberals may kick themselves for having rushed into adopting a tactic that could turn out to be a political disaster. Running on their own and supporting Stolojan in the first presidential race, with an undecided, depressed and frustrated electorate, could actually help the success of the former president Ion Iliescu and his PDSR party. But the results in the presidential and parliamentary elections seem to be irrelevant for Valeriu Stoica, whose main aim is to become de jure PNL leader. As a result, the only problem threatening PNL's future is *"the very vanity, schemes and plots created by Stoica to gain ground"*, which are probably going to destroy at the end of the day the foundation of the Liberal movement in Romania.¹²

The present ruling coalition, the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR) will not take part in the forthcoming election because this grouping of parties is not enjoying the same support as in 1996 when it won the elections. This is partly as a result of its failure to stop corruption and to redress the economic situation, and partly because of its lack of cohesion and common strategy. Still anchored in its pre-1995 prestige, the senior partner in the coalition, the National Christian Democratic Peasant Party did not understand the need for a younger and more active generation of leaders. And to nobody's surprise, disagreements between the coalition partners, and the refusal of PNL to support the coalition, have led to its dissolution. However, the ruling PNTCD has been able to establish a new coalition called **CDR 2000**. The new alliance is composed of the PNTCD, the Romanian Ecological Federation, the Union of Rightist Forces and the Christian Democratic National Alliance. But the PNTCD and the newly created CDR 2000 do not even have a presidential candidate and so far even their chances to sit in Parliament are seriously under question. The almost certain failure to remain a major player in the next Romanian legislature will probably lead to the changing of the party leadership but this will be a blessing for Chairman Ion Diaconescu. PNTCD has no leader to replace Diaconescu who, although quite old and bored by politics, has succeeded in maintaining a more or less united party which after the death of its senior leader, Corneliu Coposu, had become fragmented and confused, without a clear identity.¹³

But how big a price the parties in Romania will have to pay for the changing or maintenance of their leaders remains to be seen. The most stressed by the threat of change, seemingly, is Petre Roman who is running for president on behalf of the **Democratic Party** (PD) with a much lower chance of winning the elections this year than he had four years ago. Roman is maybe the most tired party leader in Romania although his electoral slogan is "I can!" Permanently harassing journalists visibly irritate him. His electoral message is deprived of any imagination; it is incoherent and melodramatic. The causes of Petre Roman's fragile position are numerous, of long standing and in general all of them have a connection with the vanity and rancour which characterise the PD leader. As a result, Roman's presidential campaign is visibly poorer than that of his party for the parliamentary elections. Here the star is Traian Basescu, whose influence in the

Democratic Party has considerably increased after his amazing victory in the June local elections for Bucharest. Such a situation has taken place silently, subtly and it gives serious headaches to Roman, with whom the party has identified so far. The Mayor of Bucharest has actually become the idol of young PD members, although he has a rather brutal way of speaking and is in general hard to contradict. Basescu and Roman are not necessarily in conflict for the time being, but if Roman registers poor results in the presidential elections, more than certainly his party will hold him responsible at a certain moment, not necessarily now. It is much too early to say what will happen to Roman, but if he wants to remain at the PD helm, the price to be paid by his party will be extremely high.¹⁴

Even if they lose the presidential elections, the **Party of Social Democracy in Romania** (PDSR) does not give any signal for the time being that it intends to punish Ion Iliescu. Although it is well hidden, a latent conflict has been registered at the top of the party for several years, between president Ion Iliescu and the first vice president, Adrian Nastase. The latter holds control over the subsidiaries in the territory but nobody intends to attack Ion Iliescu now when the party is on the crest of the wave, because nobody in PDSR has the necessary charisma and force to replace him. And for the time being Iliescu and the PDSR are lucky, enjoying the benefits of relatively stable support in the context of a divided and crumbling ruling coalition. Thus, the PDSR will "get rid" of Iliescu only if he quits, and that could happen only if he loses the presidential race in the second round.

Although very different in terms of structure, ideologies and programmes, the ethnic **Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania** (UDMR) and the **Greater Romania Party** (PRM) benefit from the best chance to maintain their current leaderships. UDMR president Marko Bela will probably remain, as he has succeeded in the 10 years of UDMR's existence in securing an efficient and moderate leadership of the Union. Neither will PRM leader CV Tudor be changed because his party exists only through its leader's actions.

Teodor Melescanu is another example of failed politician, mainly because he considers the party and politics a personal affair. An uninteresting candidate, Melescanu has practically no chance of winning the presidential elections. The **Alliance for Romania** (ApR) candidate has promised that he would quit the party leadership if he does not win the presidential elections, but this decision might prove to be fatal for his party whose existence directly depends on Melescanu. ApR is an insignificant party in Romanian political life, so any spectacular change that might take place is not likely to create any waves outside the party.

The next task of the political parties is to prepare their candidate priority lists for the electoral districts. Already conflict abounds, as current members of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are faced with the possibility of losing their seats as a result of their position on the list. The root cause of problems in all the parties seems to be the overriding of selections made at local party level by the national party organisation to

ensure that key candidates are appointed. There are reports of resignations from party membership, closing down of local branches not prepared to accept a national decision and harsh, inflammatory words.

The Dream of "Continuity" ...?

The parliamentary and presidential electoral campaign officially began on 12 October, 45 days before polling takes place. The campaign will end on 23 November, leaving three clear days before polling begins at seven AM on 26 November. According to the electoral system based on Romania's 1991 Constitution, the parliament is elected for a four-year term and has two chambers. The lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, has 343 seats. The upper house, the Senate, has 143. Former officers of the Securitate, the secret police of executed Communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu and officials convicted of acts of repression and abuses of power under the Communist regime are barred from parliament. The election is based on proportional representation, the so-called "core list" or party list system, virtually identical to that used in the UK to elect members of the European Parliament. Executive power rests with the president, who may serve a maximum of two four-year terms. The president appoints the prime minister, who in turn appoints the Council of Ministers. However, the president-nominated prime minister and his government must be approved by both houses of parliament in a joint session.

In order to limit the number of political parties in the parliament, this year, the voting threshold for parliamentary seats was increased from 3% to 5%. As a result, it can be expected that no more than six parties and one coalition will be able to obtain the necessary votes to gain seats in the new parliament. The four leading contenders in the presidential election, out of 12 candidates approved by the Constitutional Court, are Ion Iliescu, Theodor Stolojan, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, and the independent candidate Mugur Isarescu. If in the first presidential round none of the candidates obtains over 50% of votes, a second ballot will be held on 10 December, in which the president would be chosen from the two best placed candidates.

By and large, the electorate is convinced that Romania has not experienced any marked improvement during the past two years. It is clear that Romanians feel Constantinescu's regime did not improve their economic situation. They have forgotten that Iliescu and the communists who ruled the country for six years ruined the economy completely prior to Constantinescu's victory in the 1996 elections. A large part of the population was left to sink in the rotten populism that many of the candidates display. Nationalism, chauvinism, xenophobia - sentiments revived by the PDSR's ex-communists and PRM's ultra-nationalists - made the ordinary people feel more comfortable in the isolationism which threatens to return to Romania. The slogan, "We don't sell the country" is more powerful than ever. Instead of praising the efforts Romania has made towards joining the EU and NATO, the average Romanian citizen feels that

he should listen once more to the nationalists-communists' demagogy, whose promises were long enshrined in his thoughts by the propaganda machine. Trying to avoid the question, Iliescu said, *"We will enter the Euro-Atlantic structure, but only with dignity."*¹⁵

But beyond the direct confrontation carried out by the main actors of this election through the media, beyond the official declarations and the political in-fighting, the electoral campaign is also carried out on the invisible front of the opinion polls. Both camps, the parties in power and in opposition, have understood the importance of the opinion poll and have made use of it not only to discover the real situation of the ratio of forces but also as a weapon to influence the electorate in a certain direction. Indeed, almost every party that matters on the Romanian political scene has resorted to a qualified body and has "self assessed" in one way or another its influence on the electorate. And since those who pay are usually rewarded, the poll makers have deliberately disguised the results before releasing them.¹⁶

Because of this confusing situation, two weeks before the parliamentary election it is still difficult to make a final assessment. However, three possible scenarios can be imagined.¹⁷ In the **first scenario**, it is quite possible that the main opposition party, Iliescu's PDSR, obtains around 45% of the votes, some 20% more than in the local elections of June 2000. If the extreme nationalists of PRM obtain over 10% of the votes as expected, Romania could have a PDSR government with the implicit support of PRM. PDSR would not risk its image abroad by making a government with PRM nationalist forces, but there is no doubt that PRM would support and vote according to PDSR's wishes. In case PDSR does not obtain, in the worst possible scenario, over 50% of the votes to form a mono-block government, Iliescu needs another party, one able to give him credibility, to be internationally recognised and appreciated. And here there are two options: either Stoica's Liberal Party, or the ethnic UDMR party, ready to compromise in exchange for more rights for the ethnic Hungarians in Romania.¹⁸ In spite of UDMR's rejection of such a coalition, it is possible that both these parties will join Iliescu in the government and in this way realise "the PDSR dream". But what will be the consequences of a PDSR majority government or of such a "marriage of convenience" for Romania? It could be expected that the Liberal Party, if accepted in government, would jeopardise a long-term relationship, and in less than two years we could see once again a minority government, political instability, economic stagnation, social disturbance and even new elections. The international consequences are also very clear: lack of investment, isolationism, and postponement of Romania's integration in Euro-Atlantic structures. In other words, a very depressing situation for Romania, and a dangerous scenario.

The **second scenario**, of a "**large coalition**", is more productive for Romania. All parties could expect to obtain the same percentage as in the June local elections. Thus, the PDSR opposition could obtain some 30% and PRM some 10%, which means they could have together around 40%. CDR 2000 could win 20%, PD and PNL some 10%, ApR around 8% and UDMR its

usual 7% of the votes. Other parties which could obtain together around 10% are unlikely to gain seats in the new parliament because they are unable to meet the 5% threshold. If this scenario prevails, Mugur Isarescu will automatically be supported in the second round of the presidential elections by all the latter parties, which are actually at the centre and right of the political spectrum. This is very important, because according to the Romanian Constitution the President is the one to nominate the new prime minister, based on the number of seats of political parties in parliament. And a prime minister from CDR 2000, supported by a "large coalition" in the parliament, with a majority of up to 60% through redistribution of below threshold votes, would in theory be able to govern safely on the road to democratisation and reform, But are the parties of this "large coalition" prepared to go ahead with reforms and to stop their in-fighting? This is very difficult to foresee, but the lesson of never-ending conflicts during Constantinescu's 1996-2000 administration could represent a starting point in finding a collaborative way. Such a "large coalition" would be very much approved by the western democracies, interested more than ever to have a stable and reform-minded Romania near the border with a more apprehensive Russia.

The **third scenario** is that of "**continuity**" in government of the same groupings of parties with more or less the same distribution of votes in the parliament. In such a case the present CDR 2000 coalition could receive more votes than in the June local elections, and the structure of the parliament could be as follows: CDR 2000 - 22%, PD - 13%, PNL - 12%, UDMR - 8%, a total of 55%. The other parliamentary parties could obtain a maximum of 40% (PDSR - 25%, PRM - 10%, and ApR - 5%) in line with the local elections. Through vote redistribution, the democratic forces' majority in parliament could reach some 60%. But how stable will such a "continuity" government be after years of reverse fortune? Once again it is difficult to anticipate the outcome, but each of these parties is aware of one thing. After so many years of uncertainty, a stable political situation in Romania could be the signal for foreign capital investment and the start of economic growth. There is much at stake here and there is a good chance that a future government will pursue the dream of continuity not in inter-party in-fighting but in stability and security for Romania.

Or Victory for Iliescu and a Return to the Past ...?

However, so far Iliescu seems to be very relaxed. If we rely upon opinion polls, he looks like the winner of the first presidential ballot, while his PDSR party is likely to win the majority of seats in the parliament. According to recent opinion polls, Iliescu will get around 40% of the votes, while the other six candidates are estimated to win between 5 and 15%. However, a late initiative of more than 100 Romanian intellectuals asked recently for negotiations to be started among Gyoergy Frunda, Mugur Isarescu, Theodor Stolojan and Petre Roman, so that only one candidate runs in the first presidential contest. As such an understanding seems unlikely, the hard

fight will be in the second round, when Iliescu will have to face one of Isarescu, Stolojan, CV Tudor, or maybe even Roman, although Roman's chances are quite remote. At present, opposition to Iliescu is divided between Isarescu and Stolojan, while the ultra-nationalist CV Tudor is gaining in popularity daily. And there is no doubt that Iliescu may have some reason to fear it; his fate very much depends upon the horse-trading between the other presidential candidates and the results of the parliamentary election.

This is because Mugur Isarescu, although an independent, seems to be a powerful alternative, especially for centre-right and undecided electors. Moreover, the media and some opinion polls are indicating that an Iliescu-Isarescu contest in the second round of the presidential election will vindicate the present CDR 2000 coalition and the PNTCD, which are behind the Isarescu candidature. His determination not to accept any political compromise and his international image as a skilful technocrat able to promote EU and NATO integration are important cards. If Prime Minister Isarescu beats Stolojan and Tudor in the first presidential ballot, where will their votes go in the second?

Tudor's Greater Romania Party and other extreme-nationalist and ex-communist formations will support Ion Iliescu in the run-off. That will give Iliescu up to 10% more votes, but that may not be enough to obtain the over 50% necessary to be elected president. At that moment, Stolojan and his supportive Liberal Party could play their cards right. Iliescu could ask Stolojan to be his prime minister, while PNL leader Vasile Stoica could be convinced to support Iliescu in exchange for some minor ministerial positions. In this case Romania will return to the former communist-nationalist forces supported by opportunist politicians ready to do anything to remain in power. However, this option has been officially rejected by Valeriu Stoica's PNL,¹⁹ and if the centre-right forces manage to unite at the last minute around Mugur Isarescu, there could be a good chance for the present premier to accede to the presidential office. The major problem then is to what extent Mugur Isarescu would be able to operate and to keep a democratic balance in the new Romanian political scene in which Iliescu's "PDSR dream" and the extreme-nationalists call the shots in the parliament. This is a crucial question for Romania's next four years of transition, and on the way in which it will be solved will depend this country's future in Europe.

Another possible scenario is if Stolojan becomes the runner-up presidential candidate and obtains the same kind of support as Isarescu from the centre-right formations. Although this possibility can not be ruled out, its outcome could be less favourable to the Romanian people because under a pseudo-democrat president and a nationalist-communist parliament, Romania's future will be a return to the ambiguous past. But the worst possible scenario, which also can not be ruled out, is for ultra-nationalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor to be the runner-up in the final contest with Iliescu. This would throw the Romanian electorate into crisis, and many would abstain from voting in the second round. In this case, Iliescu could obtain the

majority of votes. And what will a PDSR government and a re-born Ion Iliescu presidency mean for Romania? It is not difficult to guess: a reversal of the democratic changes managed by Constantinescu's administration in the last four years.

Conclusion

For the time being all the actors involved in Romania's November 2000 presidential and parliamentary elections are waiting for the dust of the first round of elections to settle. They all are poised to jump at the right moment once they see where victory lies. Unfortunately, without the participants' clear-cut positions prior to the elections any precise prediction of Romania's future is difficult to make. Opinion polls may give an impression of immediate trends but they do not catch the deep disappointment Romanians express when discussing politics. Corruption and poverty, a constantly depreciating currency and the politicians' lack of responsibility, a mentality deeply rooted within communist passivity and the depressing economic situation are much closer to the Romanians than intellectual debates and promises of European integration. However, it is not yet a question of going back to the old ex-communist regime. But for the moment there are only two possible scenarios for the upcoming elections: either Iliescu and his party will take all or Iliescu will lose, but his party will maintain control in the parliament. For Romania, the second case is the better of two bad solutions. And if the current Prime Minister Mugur Isarescu manages to win the presidential contest, there will remain at least a hope that lasting reform can be realised in Romania.

OPINION POLL ON PARTIES

A poll carried out by the Transylvania Metromedia Institute, reported by the Romanian news agency Mediafax on 10th November showed the popularity of the top eight political parties in percentages as follows:

1. Social Democracy Party of Romania (PDSR)	45.8
2. Greater Romania Party (PRM)	11.0
3. National Liberal Party (PNL)	10.3
4. Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR)	7.0
5. Democratic Convention of Romania 2000 (CDR 2000)	6.8
6. Democratic Party (PD)	6.0
7. Alliance for Romania party (ApR)	4.8
8. National Alliance (comprising the Romanian National Unity, PUNR, and the Romanian National Party, the PNR)	1.1

PARTIES IN PARLIAMENT AFTER 1996 ELECTIONS

In Government:	% of seats
Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR)	53
Social Democratic Union (USD) comprising Democratic Party (PD) plus Social Democratic Party of Romania (PSDR)	23
Hungarian Democratic Party of Romania (UDMR)	11
In Opposition:	
Social Democracy Party of Romania (PDSR)	41
Greater Romania Party (PRM)	7
Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR)	7

MAIN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

	Metromedia Opinion Poll 10 November 2000, %
Ion Iliescu – Social Democracy Party of Romania (PDSR)	50.9
Constantin Mugur Isarescu, independent	12.5
Theodor Dumitru Stolojan – National Liberal Party (PNL)	15.9
Corneliu Vadim Tudor - Greater Romania Party (PRM)	11.1
Petre Roman - Democratic Party (DP)	4.7
Gyoergy Frunda - Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR)	5.3
Teodor Viorel Melescanu - Alliance for Romania (ApR)	3.6

PROFILES

Ion Iliescu: Aged 70. Former president, elected in 1990 for two years and again in 1992 for a full four-year term. Chairman of the main opposition party, (PDSR). Iliescu is well ahead of other candidates in opinion polls but may not do well enough to win outright in the first round.

Mugur Isarescu: Aged 51. Current prime minister, perceived as a “technocrat”. Pledged to stand for president as an independent. However, the media and public opinion perceive him as the candidate of the current ruling Democratic Convention of Romania 2000 (CDR 2000), more specifically of the main ruling party, the Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party (PNT-CD). The PNT-CD has no official candidate of its own since incumbent President Emil Constantinescu, who was its successful candidate in the 1996 election, announced his intention not to seek re-election.

Theodor Stolojan: Aged 57. Romanian prime minister in 1991-92. Later worked for the World Bank. Also perceived as a “technocrat”. Used to be politically independent but has announced he is to stand for president as the candidate of the National Liberal Party (PNL).

Corneliu Vadim Tudor: Aged 51. A senator, chairman of the right-wing nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM).

Petre Roman: Aged 54. Current Romanian foreign minister. Also chairman of the Democratic Party (PD).

Gyoergy Frunda: Aged 49. A senator of the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR).

Teodor Melescanu: Aged 59. Former Romanian foreign minister under Iliescu. Left Iliescu's PDSR after 1996 elections and set up the Alliance for Romania party (ApR), whose presidential candidate he is.

Endnotes

- ¹ For a detailed presentation of post-November 1996 Politics in Romania refer to Baleanu, V G, *Romania at a Historic Crossroads*, CSRC, June 1998.
- ² See Lovatt C, "Theoretical Consequences of Western Assistance in Romania" in *Central European Review*, Vol 2, No 11, 20 March 2000.
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- ⁶ Bogdan C, "A party for a President", in *Ora Noua*, 15 November 2000, at www.nineoclock.ro
- ⁷ A detailed account of PRM and PUNR's post-communist history can be found in Shafir M, "Radical Continuity in Romania: The Greater Romania Party" in *East European Perspectives*, Vol 2, No 16, 16 August 2000.
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- ⁹ For details on the present situation of ethnic Hungarians in Romania see Dumitrica D, *Destructive Discourse*, (Prague: CER, October 2000).
- ¹⁰ *Monitorul*, 13 October 2000, at www.monitorul.ro
- ¹¹ *Ora Noua*, 12 October 2000, at www.nineoclock.ro
- ¹² Mato Z I, "Romania's Liberal Party Seeks to Stay in Power at all Costs", *RFE/RL Newslines*, 30 August 2000.
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- ¹⁴ Bazu M, "We need to vote for democracy" in *Romania Libera*, No 3227, 28 October 2000, p3.
- ¹⁵ Dumitrica D, "Romania prepares for the big electoral show", in *Central European Review*, Vol 2, No 30, 11 September 2000, p3.
- ¹⁶ For a full presentation of the use of the opinion poll in Romania during the electoral campaign see Dutu M, "Erosion of opinion polls" in *Ora Noua*, 14 November 2000 at www.nineoclock.ro
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- ¹⁸ Bogdan C, "Between specific claims and general interest", in *Ora Noua*, 14 November 2000, at www.nineoclock.ro
- ¹⁹ Barligea B, "Centre-right forces can still win the presidential elections thinks Valeriu Stoica" in *Ora Noua*, 10 November 2000, at www.nineoclock.ro

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