Romania Narrowly Avoids Putinization

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In a surprise dubbed by the Financial Times as EU’s most positive political event of the year, Klaus Werner Iohannis from the center-right Alliance of Christian Liberals (ACL) was elected Romania’s fifth president on November 16. Iohannis won the run-off vote with 54.5% after trailing in the first round more than 10% behind the favorite, PM Victor Ponta.

Iohannis ran on an anticorruption ticket, promised to cut red tape, and boost the country’s infrastructure in order to create a business friendly environment. His election motto: “Romania’s Good Craft.”

Süddeutsche Zeitung calls Iohannis “Saubermann mit Deutschen Wurzeln” (Mr. Clean with German Roots) and Deutsche Welle compares him to Obama. Iohannis hails from the tiny German minority in Transylvania and is Lutheran Protestant in a country that is 81% Eastern Christian Orthodox.

Iohannis is the most popular EU politician on social media, first to pass one million Facebook followers, surpassing even German chancellor Angela Merkel or Italian PM Matteo Renzi. Many voters invested their hopes with Iohannis, yet he has to work with a Parliament dominated by the former communists and a government headed by his opponent in the elections, Mr. Ponta.

Iohannis served 14 years as mayor of the central town of Sibiu, a city he transformed into one of Romania’s most popular tourist destinations. Sibiu was designated European Capital of Culture in 2007, along with Luxembourg.

Pont: Graft, Corruption, and Pro-Russian Foreign Policy

Victor Ponta was the candidate of the former communists reorganized as the Social Democrat Party (PSD). The media calls him Mickey Mouse for good reason: Ponta is seen as a Manchurian candidate of a Russian-style corrupt oligarchy, a “yes-man” puppet of the senior leaders of PSD: the Moscow educated Ion Iliescu, and the former PM jailed on corruption charges, Adrian Nastase. As Prime Minister, Ponta led a bitter war against the country’s acting president, Traian Basescu, in numerous attempts to undermine the independence of the judicial system.

Ponta’s 2014 presidential bid was built on an aggressive nationalistic populist campaign with such messages as “proud to be Romanian” and “we don’t want foreigners to give us orders anymore.”

Mr. Ponta advocates for a reorientation of Romania’s foreign policy eastwards, meaning a closer military relationship with China and enhanced politic and economic ties with Russia. In December 2013, he stated that “assuming all political debates, yes, I think we should rethink our relationship with Russia ... to have a pragmatic and first, economic relationship with Russia, and second, sure, political relationship, is a thing that can only benefit Romania.”
Sabotaging the Expat Vote

The Ponta cabinet feared the votes from the Romanian diaspora, and undersupplied polling stations at Romanian embassies in the EU. Polls there closed early following Romania’s time zone instead of the local time. Turin only had one polling station to serve 70,000 eligible voters who live in the city and the surrounding Piedmont area. The Stuttgart polling station lacked ballots, stamps, even ballot boxes. Other polling stations faced similar supply shortages. Voters in London, Paris, Vienna, Munich, Frankfurt, Venice, and other EU cities waited in vain for five hours in line to cast their vote in the first round, and ten to eleven hours in the second round.

“We want to vote! Down with communism!” shouted angry Romanians in front of embassies. At the request of embassy personnel, police in Paris and Turin used tear gas to disperse angry voters who did not want to leave after the polling sections closed.

Romania’s Foreign Minister, Titu Corlățean (PSD), assumed responsibility for the disastrous organization of the vote abroad and resigned the following day after the first election round. His replacement, Teodor Melescanu, took the blame for the poor organization of the diaspora vote in the second round and resigned after only eight days in office.

The Economist accused Mr. Ponta’s campaign of deliberately making it hard for better educated, cosmopolitan Romanians abroad to vote, knowing they were less likely to support him than rural, less-educated voters back home.

“It was an act of sabotage!” accused Günther Krichbaum, President of the European Affairs in the German Bundestag. “The socialist government knew that Romanians from the diaspora vote primarily for right wing parties ... [Ponta] disqualified himself from any state responsibility and has to suffer the consequences” continued the Berlin official.

Ponta offered his voters a populist justification for what happened abroad, a narrative that rivals Putin’s conspiracy theories: “They were organized, had banners prepared since the morning ... they sent buses with people around 7PM, blocked the voting polls and sent you pictures.” The pictures and videos contradict him, as none of them show any banners.

The current president, Traian Basescu, defeated his PSD counter candidate in the 2008 elections due to the diaspora vote. An estimated 3.5 million Romanians live in the EU diaspora alone. The Romanian constitution stipulates jail sentences between 6 months to 3 years to anyone that prevents “through any means” the citizens’ right to vote.

Grim PSD History in Post-Communist Romania

Despite the country’s EU and NATO membership, efforts to build a democratic state with strong and transparent institutions had been systematically undermined in the past 25 years by the PSD party.

A few months after a popular uprising removed communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu from power in 1989, students and intellectuals joined occupy-style sit-in protests against the pro-Russian policies of the new president, Ion Iliescu. Calling the protesters “fascists” and “hooligans,” Iliescu arranged for uneducated coal miners from the Jiu Valley to come to the capital on several occasions and “cleanup” the protesters. Chanting “death to intellectuals,” miners brutally ended the occupy protests, leaving more than 50 dead and thousands wounded. Mass immigration ensued. As of December 2014, Mr. Iliescu is still PSD’s honorary president.

Romania is EU’s second poorest country. It is one of EU’s most corrupt countries alongside Bulgaria and Italy.

For a moment Romania was on the path to join the nationalist populist pitfall of other EU and NATO members in the region such as Hungary, Slovakia, or Bulgaria.

Next Steps

“The people are always right ... we understood their message. The Parliament will reject the Amnesty Law,” said Mr. Ponta in his concession speech. The PSD controlled parliament had been working on an “Amnesty Law,” legislation that would commute jail sentences for politicians found guilty of corruption. The Parliament did indeed scrap the proposal two days after the elections.

Ponta gave up plans to increase the tax from the current 24% to 35% next year. Iohannis promised in the campaign to lower the tax to 19% in order to attract investors.

EuroPoint: Twenty-five years after the fall of communism, empowered, well-traveled, cosmopolitan voters tipped the balance of power in Romania. Will the country become a model of stability and development in the region?