

Romania: Election Rhetoric Falls Flat

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Voters have little belief in ambitious pledges of main players in upcoming election.

The main contenders in this month's general elections are promising to tackle corruption and raise living standards, but voters say they've heard it all before.

The ruling Social Democratic Party, PSD, and its main rival the centrist Justice and Truth Alliance, DA, are running neck-and-neck in the run-up to the November 28 parliamentary and presidential ballot, though few believe that either party if elected will deliver on its pledges, analysts say.

While little is expected of the election winner, the latter may struggle to deal with inflated public expectation of European Union membership in three years' time.

"If the ex-communists in the ruling Social Democracy Party win, there's likely to be a new period of indecision, similar to that of the early Nineties," Sorin Ionita, executive director of the Romania Academic Society, SAR, told IWPR.

"The only difference this time will be that we will not be stuck at the starting line but somewhere along the way to Europe."

The PSD, which has ruled Romania for most of the post-communist era, has come under regular criticism from Brussels for presiding over an era of corruption and poor progress on human rights.

At the same time, many people are increasingly impatient with average monthly salaries of 150 US dollars, blaming the country's ills on official toleration of graft.

The Social Democrats, whose main achievements are pulling the economy out of recession and completing the bulk of the preparatory work for joining the EU, face a tough challenge from the DA.

Opinion polls show leftists and centrists running virtually neck-and-neck, with the ultra-nationalist Greater Romania Party coming third.

While all the parties claim a fairly similar pro-European agenda, Ionita suggests that the time has come for a change of government, "When you have the same group of people in power for 11 out of the 15 years of transition, with a corrupt political class and a weak judiciary, rotation of power becomes necessary simply for the sake of health of society."

The PSD admits that problems remain but promises results if it wins another four-year term. Prime Minister Adrian Nastase, who runs for president in the simultaneous November 28 vote, has pledged to double salaries and pensions by 2008 if the Social Democrats are returned.

He has also promised to lure increased foreign investment and speed up reforms to meet EU requirements.

For its part, the opposition alliance has pledged to almost triple the average wage over the next four years. Its leader, Bucharest's outspoken mayor, Traian Basescu, has promised also to rid Romania of its culture of corruption and nepotism.

Basescu wants to revamp Romania's overall EU strategy, speeding up reforms at home instead of trusting in the willingness of European governments to turn a blind eye to Romania's problems.

Politicians' promises, however, ring a little hollow for Doina Petrescu, 63, a pensioner living on less than 100 US dollars per month. "I'll probably vote but I don't think it will change anything," Petrescu said. "Whoever comes to power, they will do things for themselves. I don't give a pin for their promises."

Such views are common among the almost one-third of Romania's 21 million population estimated to live below the poverty line.

"Corruption and poverty were top issues in these elections, but despite the many promises the parties have made, nobody took them seriously," Ovidiu Nahoi, an independent analyst, told IWPR.

He said the outcome of the elections is in the hands of floating, undecided, voters.

Nahoi worries how the next government will manage the situation after Romania joins the EU, when it will face a battle to defuse inflated public expectations.

"Most people believe EU entry will instantly bring higher wages," he said, "but the bitter truth is that once Romania joins the club it must deliver on reform pledges, and that will mean job losses, tight fiscal policies and competition in the free market."

Romania is currently scheduled to join the EU in 2007 alongside neighbouring Bulgaria. But while the government in Sofia has already completed membership talks, Bucharest still has three negotiation chapters to close by the end of this year.

The EU and Romania are expected to clinch a deal on environmental policies by the end of this month. Agreements on the remaining, more difficult, areas of competition, justice and home affairs may not come before December.

Home affairs involves border controls and anti-corruption measures. Several European states still fear Romania may become a gateway for illegal immigrants, smuggling and organised crime, unless it tightens borders and overhauls its judiciary.

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