

Romanians Lean Leftwards

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Romanian voters are hoping former communists will turn round their ailing economy

Romania's general election this weekend could determine whether the country fulfils its goal of joining the European Union or falls into the economic and political stagnation of the early post-communist years.

The country's 18 million voters will select a new bicameral parliament and president in Sunday's ballot. All the opinion polls suggest that most of the electorate will back candidates who offer them stability, order and slow but effective reforms.

The signs are that Romanians will ditch the governing centrists - whose infighting has undermined efforts to overhaul the economy - in favour of leftists.

Ex-president Ion Iliescu's Party of Social Democracy, PDSR, is expected to poll around 40 per cent of the vote, which will probably be enough for it to form a coalition government. Iliescu, Romania's first post-communist president, is enjoying the same level of support and is likely to be voted back into power.

Some analysts believe the leftists' revival could stymie the country's bid to join the EU, as they would be reluctant to introduce the sort of structural reforms needed for membership.

A recent EU report indicated that Romania is well behind other eastern European countries looking to join the union, largely because of its failure to establish the foundations for a successful market economy.

Despite international reservations over his leadership credentials, Iliescu, 70, is seen by pensioners, farmers and most workers as a politician capable of bringing about economic recovery.

He and his party were voted out of office in 1996 because they were seen as corrupt and poorly equipped to deal with the dreadful economic legacy left by communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

Iliescu now claims to be "strongly attached to a market economy", but some suspect that this is mostly for international consumption.

Corneliu Vadim Tudor, the leader of ultra-nationalist Greater Romania Party, PRM, has surprisingly emerged in the last few weeks as Iliescu's main challenger, trailing him by around 20 per cent in opinion polls.

Formerly Ceausescu's court poet, Tudor, 51, owns two weeklies denounced by Jewish community leaders as anti-Semitic. He was a senator in Romania's parliament in 1992 and 1996 and also ran in presidential elections four years ago when got less than 4 per cent of the vote.

Tudor describes himself as a Romanian version of "George W Bush" as, like the US Republican candidate, he stresses the need for law and order.

Profiting from a last-minute resurgence of nationalist sentiment among the electorate, PRM is expected to capture around 20 per cent of the vote, almost double its anticipated tally a month ago.

National Liberal Party, PNL, presidential candidate Theodor Stolojan, 57, has a very strong background in economics. A graduate of the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, he's a former prime minister and senior economist with the World Bank.

Stolojan's main asset is his undisputed economic expertise and connections with international financial organisations.

Benefiting from a dynamic electoral campaign, Stolojan has steadily risen in the opinion polls and for a long period was seen as the candidate most likely to give Iliescu a run for his money. Latest surveys however put him and his party in third place.

Although running in the presidential race as an independent, Mugur Isarescu benefits from the support of CDR 2000, an alliance of parties which includes the Christian-Democrats, PNTCD, the Union of Forces of the Right, UFD, and two other small parties.

Isarescu, 51, noted for his knowledge of the banking sector, was last year appointed caretaker prime minister by the present ruling coalition. He's criticised for being slow to react to crises and his enthusiasm for Western European values.

Isarescu is mainly supported by young professionals and intellectuals but currently struggles to get much more than 10 per cent of the vote - around the same as CDR 2000, part of the center-right coalition which won elections four years ago, who may not make it into parliament after Sunday elections.

Foreign Minister Petre Roman is another presidential candidate. Erstwhile Iliescu ally, Roman, 54, contested the 1996 leadership battle, winning 22 per cent of the vote. He's currently standing in fifth place.

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