

Romanians Relieved at Tudor Defeat

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Romanians voters rally to fend off ultra-nationalist's presidential challenge.

Ion Iliescu's triumph in the December 10 presidential election run-off was greeted with sighs of relief in Romania and abroad.

The vote had been billed as a choice between moving forwards on European Union integration or backwards into isolation and xenophobia.

Iliescu's opponent, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, had shocked observers by securing a place in the second round on the back of a campaign characterised by anti-corruption rhetoric and abusive remarks about Jews, Gypsies and ethnic Hungarians.

In the end, Iliescu, a former high-ranking communist educated in the Soviet Union, won by a landslide, taking just under 67 per cent of the vote against Tudor's 33 per cent.

Turnout, however, was low - only 57.5 per cent, down 20 per cent from the 1996 elections. Voter disillusionment with politics, and the two candidates on offer, was a major factor.

Tudor, leader of the extreme nationalist Greater Romania Party, PRM, was a sycophant of former Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu. He has often been compared to Russia's Vladimir Zhirinovsky or France's Jean-Marie Le Pen.

He promised to rid Romania of criminals and minorities, by force, threatening "mass executions" of corrupt officials caught robbing the country.

Political analysts are still trying to understand Tudor's meteoric rise from 3 per cent of the vote in 1996 to 33 per cent in 2000. PRM won a fifth of the seats in the Romanian parliament.

"The truth is that today in Romania 70 per cent of voters think we have minorities who represent a threat to the state," said Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, a political analyst from the Romanian Academic Society. "Tudor was the choice of mainly male voters, men frustrated by their social situation. They are poor people who believe in paranoid conspiracy theories, which blame the country's problems on minorities or the West."

But Tudor's popularity also reflects the failure of successive governments to effectively deal with Romania's deep-rooted economic problems. Iliescu, president from 1990-1996, must share some of that responsibility.

Nonetheless, Iliescu, 70, used his charisma, charm and energy, to persuade Romanians that he is the man to turn around their ailing economy. He was helped by the fact that the majority of Romanians still seem to believe that communism was a good idea.

He ran a populist campaign in the first round aimed at rallying left-wing voters. Once victory was within his

grasp, however, he tempered his message pledging to continue the economic and social reforms needed to secure membership of the EU.

Iliescu was Romania's first democratically elected president following the overthrow of the Ceausescu regime. He was re-elected in 1992, but in 1996 lost out to the centre-right coalition candidate Emil Constantinescu.

Always the favourite of the rural poor and pensioners, Iliescu attracted support from unexpected quarters for the run-off against Tudor. Alarmed at the prospect of a far-right president, leading centre-right politicians, civil rights groups and media organisations - all of whom had denounced Iliescu for his communist past and previous presidential record - rallied round calling on their supporters to back "the lesser evil".

In his victory speech, Iliescu promised to continue with reforms set in place by the outgoing centre-right government, to tackle widespread poverty and to root out corruption.

"We promise to accelerate the process of Romania's dignified integration into the European Union and NATO," he told hundreds of supporters. "As head of state I will make sure this promise becomes reality."

To stand any chance of achieving these goals, Iliescu's leftist Party of Social Democracy, PDSR, must inject a sense of hope into Romania.

"The first six months will be a tough test for us," one senior PDSR official said. The party won 44 per cent of the parliamentary vote. Iliescu has nominated the leader of the PDSR executive, Adrian Nastase, as prime minister-elect and has asked him to form a minority government.

The PDSR has ruled out a coalition with Tudor's PRM, which leaves the new government reliant on the backing of opposition centrists in parliament. Analysts predict difficult times ahead.

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