

POLITICS

WARNING

Time For a Reshuffle

The summer holiday of the Romanian Parliament ended a season of growing popular discontent. Scandals of corruption involving the Ministry of Labor, the apparent inability

**Fig. 1. Public mood on life and government**

Indicators	%
Country headed in wrong direction	62
Worse off than a year ago	45
Government able to handle problems	32
Most politicians are corrupt	76

of justice to prosecute effectively cases of grand financial corruption while trying to bail out banks and bankers overwhelmingly considered as corrupt have contributed to growing skepticism that the government can handle things. Most Romanians remain skeptical about NATO integration and the number of people considering that the country is heading in the wrong

direction and that they fare worse than a year ago has grown. There is a strong correlation between those who perceive that the direction is wrong and their life worse off, and the trust that the government can handle things. The model elaborated in EWR 3/2002 is again confirmed. The main causes leading to the growing perception that the government is not good enough are the popular feeling that the fight against corruption has gone amiss and that people fare worse compared to a year ago. Educated Romanians are the most disappointed. The decrease of trust in government, starting with last November, has been steady at about 2.5 % per month. The number of people seeing the government as

**Fig. 2. Top of distrust in political institutions**

In your view, do these institutions work in the public interest presently?	Yes	No
Political parties	8	80
Parliament	17	77
Government	23	72
Presidency	36	54
Local government	52	44

unfit has risen sharply since then, reaching presently 54%, that is to say a large majority for the skeptics over the trustful.

The discontent with government's performance also shapes the trust in all political institutions. Romanians are especially distrustful towards Parliament and political parties, perceived as not working in the public interest. The only government institution faring comparatively better is local government, which has evolved through years to enjoy considerable trust. The novelty is the decline in public trust of the Presidency, once the most popular institution of the state. This decline is due to respondents tying the fortunes of government, Parliament and Presidency together. Building an index of trust in government out of these three items produces indeed a strong factor<sup>6</sup>.

The model explaining distrust for this factor is close to the model explaining perception of government performance only, presented in EWR3/2002. A minority believes the government to be competent enough, but not acting in the public interest. Another determinant of distrust is the perception of a conflict between employees and employers. There is growing resentment against managers and 'nouveaux riches'. Romanians blame their 'Latin-American' type of transition, with growing social disparities and predatory elites, on those who govern, but specially on MPs and political parties, perceived as selfish, corrupt and incompetent.

**Fig. 3. Explanatory model of trust in Government**

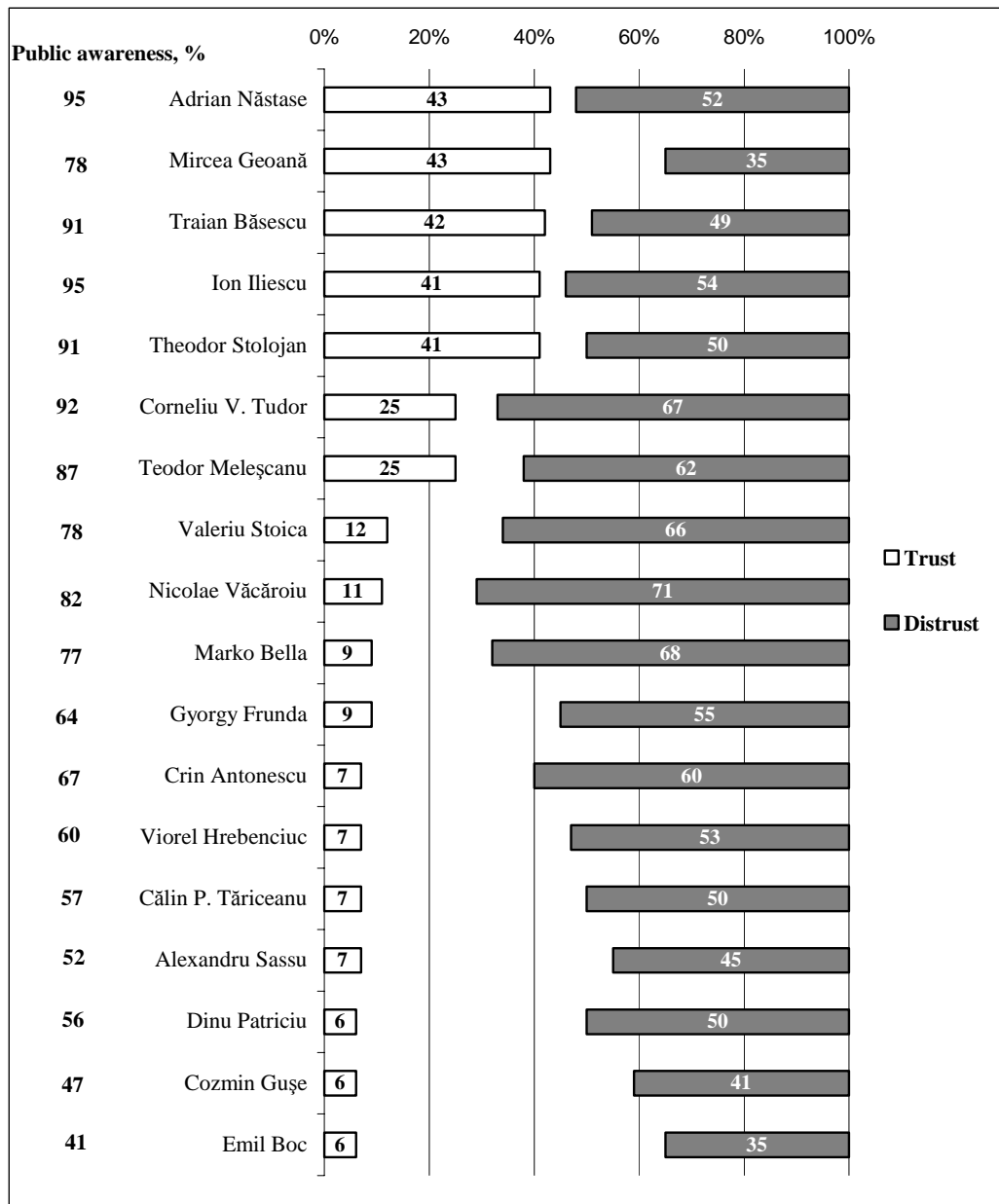
<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Regression Coefficients (Standard Error)</b>
Subjective well-being	-0.260 (0.035) ***
Evaluation of the Government's fight against corruption	-0.162 (0.025) ***
Income	-0.000 (0.000)
Town Size	-0.018 (0.017)
Age	0.076 (0.041)
Education	0.041 (0.014) **
Country headed wrong direction	-0.093 (0.015) ***
Conflict between employers and employees	0.160 (0.058) **
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	14.7

*Dependent Variable: Factor score of trust in Government, Parliament and President. Level of significance: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001 (strongest correlation)*

<sup>6</sup> Principal component analysis, KMO=0.72%.

If institutions fare poorly, do individual politicians fare better? Hardly so. Only Mircea Geoana, the Foreign Affairs Minister, enjoys a positive balance between distrust and trust, but this is traditionally the situation for Ministers of Foreign Affairs, who escape the blame for domestic problems. As the invitation to join NATO seems more and more a certainty, it is likely that Geoana will score even higher in terms of public confidence. It is doubtful that NATO accession will benefit much to the Prime Minister, who carries the burden of price increases in energy and gasoline, and even less so to the Defense Minister, Mircea Ioan Pascu, who slipped a threat to the domestic press that made him the public enemy number one in the government, for the media.

**Fig.4. Public confidence in Romanian politicians**



The Prime Minister is doing nevertheless quite well in such an environment of distrust. He is seen as the main possible successor to President Iliescu, enjoying 32% direct preference. As the frequency of Nastase's showings in the media is already very high, there is little he can do, however, to grow further from now on. The difference between the high score of PSD (46 % options) and the relatively little score of Nastase as a potential presidential candidate is explained by the 46 % voters of PSD who are still undecided. It will not be easy to gain the confidence of those.

The public opinion has not yet been won over by the new generation of politicians. Cozmin Guse and Emil Boc have increased considerably in public awareness, but the distrust exceeds the trust from afar. They seem unlikely to become favorites of the public opinion in the near future. Far better known politicians fare even poorer, with a high rate of awareness and a high rate of distrust as well. The list includes characters as diverse as Vadim Tudor, Nicolae Vacaroiu, Valeriu Stoica and Dinu Patriciu.

What can a Prime Minister do in such circumstances, when personally rated with a good performance by observers, but running a government, which has begun to decline? There is one evident option: a reshuffle of the government. The performance of government members has been very uneven, and those who carry most unpopularity should leave in order to protect the Prime Minister from further erosion. There are some likely candidates, whose departure would give great satisfaction to the media and public, but also ministers who simply have done nothing remarkable so far should be reexamined. Multiplying institutional structures to bypass conservative ministers works poorly, and the price paid in the public opinion is the same. So the time is ripe to cut the liable and the ineffective.

## WARNING

### Greater Romania Party Perceived as Main Political Alternative

Bad season for the government? Figures for the opposition are even worse. The parties from the former government coalition have further shrunk to the point that the National Peasants are hard to be noticed with just 2% of preference. Scandal plagued both the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, leading to the departure of Liberal leader Valeriu Stoica, the main artisan of the party's entrance into the Parliament in 2000, and his replacement with Theodor Stolojan, a representative of the business lobby, formerly tied with President Iliescu, and the most popular former Prime Minister of Romania to-date.

**Fig 5. Party preference trends since 2000 elections**

	<b>Elections 2000</b>	<b>March 2001</b>	<b>June 2001</b>	<b>October 2001</b>	<b>January 2002</b>	<b>March 2002</b>	<b>July 2002</b>
PSD	36,9	56	50	60	47	47	46
PRM	20,2	15	17	14	16	16	19
PNL	7,2	11	9	8	11	11	9
PD	7,3	6	9	8	11	12	11
UDMR	6,9	6	7	6	7	7	7
PNȚCD	5,3	3	3	2	3	2	2
PUR	**	**	1	**	2	2	3
UFD	***	-	1	1	1	1	2
ApR	4,2	-	2	-	*	*	*
Other	12,1	3	1	1	2	2	3

*\*included in PNL \*\*included in PSD \*\*\* included in PNȚCD (CDR 2000 in elections)*

*1 – average between the two Chambers, source Central Electoral Office*

If Mr. Stolojan wins the race for the Presidency of National Liberals, his victory would mean the total conquest of main political positions by National Salvation Front characters, now equally distributed between opposition and government. Stolojan's recruitment was a maneuver of Stoica, who practiced widely what the Italians call "transformismo" as main political strategy. For instance, he recruited party candidates after polling to see who are the most popular in a town or region, liberals or not. Furthermore, he cared little if they had been members of another party or of many other parties. In Sinaia, for instance, the 1996-2000 Mayor was a former Communist apparatchik, who then won elections running as an independent, then moved to the Liberals when they were in government, to eventually end up at PUR, the minor coalition party in the current government. Stoica also recruited highly controversial characters from other parties, or people reputed for changing parties just in order to keep their positions. Ironically, this is how he has come not to be able to rely on local branches of his party.

While Stolojan fares better in polls than Stoica, having however a high rate of distrust combined with high awareness, the combination which does not lead to much promise, the party is not doing so well. Not only it has contracted from 11% to 9 % after the scandal, but even fewer people see it as an alternative to government. Only 24% of Romanians see an alternative to the current government in the present political offer, and most of those prefer Greater Romania Party (37%) only 17% trusting the Democrats, and 11% the Liberals to run the country. Out of 24%, these percentages are not impressive at all. An alliance of

**Fig. 6. A few good men**

<b>Presidential favorites</b>	<b>% of vote</b>
Adrian Nastase	32
C. Vadim Tudor	22
Traian Basescu	16
Teodor Stolojan	14
Mircea Geoana	6

the last two would be trusted to govern by an additional 7%, and a new party is expected by 4% of the Romanians.

When polling separately the projected coalition between Liberals and Democrats, the enthusiasm is mild to low. Most people feel that this would not make any difference, as they trust these parties neither separately, nor together. Stoica has collected many Democrats one by one in the last years, as well as National Peasants who defected. Despite this, however, PNL did not manage to produce any new idea or frontline

**Fig. 7. Coalition between Liberals and Democrats is a good idea**

	%
Don't know	24.7
Good	16.2
Somewhat	16.7
Bad	19.5
Changes nothing anyway	22.8

character, and it is precisely this novelty and freshness of people and discourse that the public is seeking, *an alternative style rather than an alternative government*. This is shown in the large number of undecided in both presidential and party preference, the largest group in the sample.

Meanwhile, Greater Romania Party has grown another 3% and its leader consolidated firmly in the second position after Nastase. The preference for Vadim Tudor comes mainly from capitals of *comune*, Romania's rural administrative units, reuniting a few villages.

The *comune* and small towns were the place of massive social engineering in communist times, subjected to forced urbanization under an ambitious plan meant to turn 600 of them into towns by the end of century. This campaign led to the creation of non-viable industries, which subsequently collapsed, and important and irreversible changes to people's life style. 38% of Tudor's voters come from *comune*, and an additional 26% from villages. This explains why in models determining the main causes of the vote for Tudor *the residence in rural areas becomes for the first time a determinant*, along with age and gender. Men continue to be considerably more attracted by Tudor than women, but the older group was traditionally Mr. Iliescu's. 37% of the voters are undecided with regards to a presidential candidate, while 46% are undecided concerning a favorite party. This large number explains why PSD still scores so high. The undecided are recruited from various categories, villagers, the poor and the better educated alike.

**Fig. 8. Town size by President preference, %**

	Nastase	Tudor	Stolojan	Basescu
Cities over 200,000	33.7	13.1	16.0	15.4
100-200,000	23.0	18.9	17.6	16.2
30-100,000	30.6	16.1	27.4	12.9
Towns smaller than 30,000	26.8	19.7	15.5	19.7
Communes	35.9	34.7	8.2	12.4
Villages	39.5	24.3	9.2	19.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>33.4</b>	<b>22.3</b>	<b>13.8</b>	<b>15.8</b>

(Legend: figures to be read in row, not column. Differences up to 100 % are other candidates)

Overall, the only political gains in recent months are Tudor's and his party's, and it is worrisome that after the disappearance of Ion Iliescu, the politician who seems to collect from rural areas most is Vadim Tudor. Nastase is leading in absolute figures when breaking the preference by town at every category, but Tudor is close to him in *commune* centers. The pattern described above triggers a warning, as it is clear that Greater Romania Party is the best positioned to be the second party in the next elections as well. And if the government passively assists to its erosion, it may even come to worse.