

DIRTY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS UNDER WAY IN ROMANIA



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On November 2, 2014, over 18 million Romanians are expected to directly elect a President, who has authority over external policy, secret services and represents Romania at EU summits. The figure itself reflects the incapacity of Romania's successive governments to arrive to a decent count of voters, as the latest census found that the whole population has dropped to this figure. Despite attempts to provide Romanians with some voter IDs over the years the action has never been completed, so in the absence of a realistic number of voters (it is not even known how many reside in the country) and any form of registration the elections remain open to fraud. Special legislation passed by the current Victor Ponta government allows voting in any district, which has been previously associated with high frequency of fraud.

14 candidates will be competing in Sunday's elections: **Klaus Iohannis** (Christian-Liberal Alliance formed by the National Liberal Party and the Democratic –Liberal Party, the successful mayor of Sibiu); **Victor Ponta** (Electoral Alliance formed by the National Union for the Progress of Romania the Social Democratic Party and the Conservative Party, the current Prime Minister); **Elena Udrea** (People's Movement Party, a splinter of President's Basescu former party); **Monica Macovei** (independent); **Călin Popescu Tăriceanu** (independent); **Teodor Meleșcanu** (independent); **Dan Diaconescu** (People's Party – Dan Diaconescu); **Kelemen Hunor** (Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania - DAHR); **Szilagy Zsolt** (Hungarian People's Party of Transylvania); **Corneliu Vadim Tudor** (Greater Romania Party); **Constantin Rotaru** (The Socialist Alternative Party); **William Brânză**

(Romanian Ecological Party); **Mirel Mircea Amariței** (The Prodemo Party) and **Gheorghe Funar** (independent).

The political experience and background of each of the candidates varies widely: some are running for the first time while others such as Corneliu Vadim Tudor, are in presidential race for the fifth time. A premiere brought by the current elections is the presence of two female candidates among the top 5 ranked candidates. One is however the official favorite of President Basescu, Ms. Udrea, the main reason why he ends in isolation his second mandate. Ms. Udrea is a successful businesswoman who had just divorced a husband charged in several corruption files for having allegedly presided over traffic of influence during several governments, but particularly since his wife's semi-official position. She is credited below ten percent despite official endorsement from President Traian Basescu, who discarded the other woman, ex- Minister of Justice Monica Macovei, his former associate.

Mr. Ponta is credited with 36-40%¹ of the votes in the first round, with 29²-30% to go to Mr. Iohannis. Ponta and Iohannis are expected to compete in the second round, and the social-democratic candidate is expected to win by 55% and while the center-right candidate would only obtain 45% of votes³ according to a survey conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES). But Sunday's elections may return surprises, as both polling institutes and the media are no longer trustworthy in Romania. The uses and abuses of media and public opinion polling for influence peddling and blackmail were recently documented by the Romanian Academic Society and the Coalition for a Clean Press that it created jointly with Active Watch and Center for Independent Journalism, two media watchdogs.

The situation is dire, as a number of major media organizations place the importance of journalistic integrity and the idea of an independent press second, behind the political agendas of particular direct or indirect media owners with strong political affiliations. Until his recent 10 year conviction for money laundering, former senator, president and founder of the Conservative Party (PC), Dan Voiculescu was the majority stakeholder of the Intact Trust, a vast media conglomerate that more often than not pushed his party's (and the current government's) political agenda through biased news shows. Control of the Trust now lies in the hands of his wife and daughters⁴, as he previously transferred ownership to them sensing an upcoming conviction. Another example is Romania TV, a television network whose main shareholder (Radu Mihai Tronaru) is a middleman for another active politician, Chamber of Deputies member Sebastian Ghiță (PSD), which slanders Mr. Iohannis daily (he was accused of being part of an illegal adoption gang in his youth, of being too selfish to have any children, and so on). Other news papers and TV are owned directly by political marketing companies, while others, including major brands manage their business through successive bankruptcies so that their financing becomes completely opaque⁵. Most media is financed by either

¹[http://www.b365.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2014-sondaje-ultimele-sondaje-din-campanie-cum-stau-ponta-i-
iohannis_218008.html](http://www.b365.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2014-sondaje-ultimele-sondaje-din-campanie-cum-stau-ponta-i-iohannis_218008.html)

²[http://www.b365.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2014-sondaje-ultimele-sondaje-din-campanie-cum-stau-ponta-i-
iohannis_218008.html](http://www.b365.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2014-sondaje-ultimele-sondaje-din-campanie-cum-stau-ponta-i-
iohannis_218008.html)

³[http://www.b365.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2014-sondaje-ultimele-sondaje-din-campanie-cum-stau-ponta-i-
iohannis_218008.html#sthash.SAHuUKVC.dpuf](http://www.b365.ro/alegeri-prezidentiale-2014-sondaje-ultimele-sondaje-din-campanie-cum-stau-ponta-i-
iohannis_218008.html#sthash.SAHuUKVC.dpuf)

⁴<http://romaniacurata.ro/cine-detine-presa-din-romania-cel-putin-in-acte-actionariatul-starea-presei-iii/>

⁵<http://romaniacurata.ro/cine-detine-presa-din-romania-cel-putin-in-acte-actionariatul-starea-presei-iii/>

the center left coalition or by Ms. Udrea and her business partners: anticorruption prosecutors have arrested some notorious characters besides Mr. Voiculescu in recent weeks from both camps, but for many years now politicians seem to have been the only ones to pour money into lossmaking Romanian press. Mr. Ponta used the public post company to distribute millions of flyers accusing his main counter candidate to plans a reduction in pensions, although the President has no authority over pensions. It is true that Mr. Basescu, who overstepped his constitutional mandate frequently, did preside over a governmental cut of pensions in 2011.

The state of affairs is not much different concerning public opinion polling institutions, as there are few independent ones left (established and internationally affiliated) to conduct and publish election surveys. Political polls that were announced over the summer belong, with no exception, to PR firms and media services that do not have much of the industry's market share. Many have no employees, let alone experts in the field. The market share of this past summer's political polls (only good for a candidate's presented image on television) is heavily dominated (circa 90%) by the center-left alliance. The main polls that were quoted and discussed were those produced by Mirel Palada and Bogdan Teodorescu, both of whom work for Victor Ponta, the PSD candidate. Overall, the companies that dominate the political information market and filled 100% of the public space this past summer hold a maximum of 6% of the survey market share⁶.

Analysts have also pointed out that during this electoral race, there has been a strong emphasis on negative campaigning and a complete lack of debates among the candidates⁷. Meanwhile, the campaign was centered primarily on corruption scandals and more or less direct references to ethnicity and religion. The incumbent Prime Minister Ponta brought religion and ethnicity to the forefront, especially in opposition to his main opponent Klaus Iohannis, an ethnic German who is a protestant. Among the overarching themes of Ponta's campaign was the „Proud to be Romanian”⁸ and „President who unites”⁹ as well as „President for all Romanians”. He has also granted additional financing from the state reserve budget, to the Orthodox Church during the campaign¹⁰.

Moreover, the government suspended for 45 days the law of locally elected officials to allow mayors to defect from their parties and join the government one¹¹. Over 400 local officials are said to have profited from this government ordinance, and over 200 millions euros were dedicated at the budget rectification in the fall to those who joined the government party. The opposition remained in some countries without any mayors. While such opportunism is not new, with successive majorities in the Parliament relying on defectors since 2009 it is the first time when a law was suspended to avoid organizing elections in such districts.

⁶ <http://romaniacurata.ro/exclusiv-alegeri-in-intuneric-cine-controleaza-sondarea-opinie-publice-actionari-cota-de-piata-analiza/>

⁷ <http://www.agerpres.ro/english/2014/10/30/analysts-on-the-2014-election-campaigns-from-unexciting-to-unprecedentedly-aggressive-and-mystifying-12-32-14>

⁸ <http://victorponta.ro/mandri-ca-suntem-romani-acasa-si-in-lume/>

⁹ <http://victorponta.ro/materiale/program-prezidential-victor-ponta.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-diaspora-18348519-guvernul-ponta-alocat-din-fonduri-bugetare-inca-6-000-000-lei-pentru-biserici-din-madrid-barcelona-gorj-cluj.htm>

¹¹ <http://lege5.ro/Gratuit/gqydimrsgq/ordonanta-de-urgenta-nr-55-2014-pentru-reglementarea-unor-masuri-privind-administratia-publica-locala>

The center-right candidate, the mayor of Sibiu, has meanwhile run an unusual campaign for Romania, defending his campaigners to reciprocate any negative campaign. Mr. Iohannis, a Christian democrat who tries to reunify the center-right parties has been caught in a crossfire between President Basescu, who dislikes the idea of a different leader on the right than himself, and Mr. Ponta. An administrative complaint was brought against him and manipulated to damage his campaign despite the fact that he is one of the very few mayors in Romania with a reputation of being non-corrupt. „It is quite the first time when Romanians can choose a Western type candidate, who forbids his team to engage in dirty politics and negative campaigning. Seeing the lack of scruples of Romanian politicians, however, it will need massive voter mobilization to make this unusual character a victor rather than a victim' says Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, who teaches democracy studies at Hertie School in Berlin and chairs the Romanian Academic Society. "The discretionary spending of the government, who suspended a law for 45 days so to be able to bribe mayors to pass to the government party makes the odds even more uneven”.

Polls predict that a runoff in two weeks from the first round of elections on November 2 will be necessary to establish a winner with over 50% of votes expressed. The tenure of President Basescu was marked by scandals related to his personal life, two attempts of the opposition to impeach him but also the unprecedented advance of anticorruption prosecuting agency, National Anticorruption Directorate, in bringing top level politicians to justice. There is considerable fear that a victory of the government alliance might hinder this advance, as some of its top politicians, including Mr. Ponta's father in law are currently indicted.

Source of the picture: [Hunedoara Libera](#)