

Romania trapped between the referendum and criticism from the EU

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A referendum on the impeachment of President Traian Basescu will be held on 29 July in Romania. On 18 July, under pressure from the EU, the parliament changed the rules for holding the referendum and introduced a 50 per cent turnout requirement in order for the vote to be binding. The president may avoid being impeached as the referendum can be found to be invalid due to insufficient turnout. Although 68% of the voters have declared that they will vote for the impeachment, since this is the summer holiday season, turnout may still be much lower than the usual level of between 54% and 58%.

Representatives of the European Commission and EU member states have sharply criticised the personnel senior officials reshuffle and the legislative and procedural changes made in July this year by Victor Ponta's government, which were to facilitate the removal of President Basescu from power. The European Commission has also formulated eleven requirements which it expects the Romanian government to meet. These include introducing transparent rules for the nomination of senior officials, ceasing the questioning of court decisions and respecting the Constitutional Court's decisions. The European Commission also published on 18 July a highly critical semi-annual report as part of the EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), which monitors Romania's progress in judicial reform and combating corruption and organised crime. The European Commission stated that the government's actions were contrary to the principles of the democratic rule of law and undermined the independence of the judiciary, and that the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism still had to apply.

Commentary

- The government coalition is now more focused on the struggle for high turnout than on meeting EU requirements. Amendments to the referendum act are the only changes which have so far been introduced, since disregarding the recommendations concerning this issue would mean open confrontation with the European Commission. The parliament – contrary to the European Commission's expectations – decided however to approve of the restrictions of the Constitutional Court's competences introduced under the governmental decree.

- In its efforts to ensure sufficient turnout, the government has decided to increase the number of polling stations abroad and at sea resorts, and has extended their operation time. The broadly publicised and highly emotional campaign is focused on accusing the president of reinforcing corruption links in the country and betraying the national interests. It is aimed at mobilising the electorate to take part in the vote. To add fuel to these accusations, the governing party filed a report stating that the president, the former centre-right prime ministers and opposition MPs had committed a crime, namely defamation of the state. Sharing an opinion about the situation in Romania was labelled as “spreading false information which is putting at threat the national security and stability of the Romanian economy.”
- The government is assuming that when Traian Basescu is removed from power, it will still be possible to improve relations with EU member states and the European Commission, and to develop a better image for Romania on the international arena. However, this strategy will be doomed to failure should the referendum be invalid. If this is the case, a further escalation of the political crisis in Romania can be expected, which will continue at least until the parliamentary elections scheduled for this autumn, and relations between Bucharest and Brussels will remain bad. The unprecedented struggle between the government and the president has undermined Romania’s credibility among the international community and has also had a detrimental effect on the stability of its democratic institutions.