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A majority electoral system is introduced in Romania

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On 22 May, the Romanian parliament adopted a new act on the electoral system. The previous proportional electoral system has been replaced with a majority system. The new act has cancelled the five per cent electoral threshold and introduced voting in single-member constituencies (one round). It will be possible to grant additional seats only to representatives of the national minorities in those constituencies where a given minority constitutes more than seven per cent of the population. The electoral system has been changed less than half a year ahead of the parliamentary election. This change was pushed through by the centre-left Social-Liberal Union (USL), which has been governing the country since early May. The union is formed by the post-Communist Social Democratic Party, the centrist National-Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. The new system was also backed by the left-of-centre National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR), which usually supports the government, independent MPs and representatives of national minorities, with the exception of the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), which abstained from voting. The new electoral system has been strongly opposed by the centre-right, pro-presidential Democratic Liberal Party (PDL), which has announced that the act will be contested at the Constitutional Court.

Commentary

- The implementation of the new electoral system is accompanied by promises that the quality of the Romanian political class will be improved, as will the public legitimacy of the parliament and MPs' contacts with voters. The idea of introducing a majority system is very popular among the Romanian public, who are disillusioned by the present political class. However, the real reasons behind the introduction of the new electoral system seem to be short-term political calculation and the desire of USL, which now governs the country, to dominate parliament. The majority electoral system will ensure the most popular grouping a better victory, and USL is currently supported by almost 60 per cent of the public. Thus, it should be expected that after the upcoming election parliament will be dominated by MPs and senators from the post-Communist PSD, the largest party in USL. The number of MPs representing national minorities will also increase. In turn, the new electoral system will weaken the groupings which enjoy moderate support and have no strong local structures. PDL will certainly be among those to suffer; it is undergoing a serious crisis in regions and lost power in April this year because some of its MPs had joined the opposition. According to forecasts, support for PDL is currently at around 15%.

- The adoption of the majority electoral system poses a direct threat to the position of President Traian Basescu. If USL gains a constitutional majority, it will be able to realise its primary political goal—launching the impeachment procedure. The president, who is in a bitter political dispute with Prime Minister Victor Ponta, may direct the new act to be reconsidered by the parliament. However, the present parliamentary majority will be able to vote for this act again. This would also be a risky political move for the president because Basescu has supported the majority electoral system on numerous occasions. The act may be still challenged by the Constitutional Court. The court in its previous judicial decisions has blocked amendments of electoral regulations on the grounds of non-compliance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission. One of these recommendations is that electoral regulations should not be changed immediately before elections.