

Romania: the ruling coalition's disintegration and the game Ponta plays

Kamil Całus

On 26 August, Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, the president of the Senate and leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), announced that his party was withdrawing from its agreement with the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and going into opposition. Explaining the reasons for the breakup of the coalition, Tăriceanu highlighted the differences between the groups' programmes and their failure to agree on a budget. He announced that he would no longer run for the presidency in the November elections, and declared that his party, in consultation with the PRO Romania party (led by Victor Ponta, the former Prime Minister and leader of the PSD), would support a joint independent candidate, the actor and former MEP Mircea Diaconu. Furthermore, he did not rule out forming a political alliance with Ponta's group. Premier Viorica Dăncilă (the PSD's leader) said the decision by ALDE was incomprehensible, adding that the government should not consider resigning.

Commentary

- Despite the declarations made by ALDE's leader, the real cause of the coalition's collapse is the parties' inability to agree on a common candidate for the presidential election scheduled for this November. ALDE had lobbied for Tăriceanu himself (he has the highest support among the ruling coalition's leaders, at around 14%); however, on 23 July the Social Democrats decided that the PSD's leader Dăncilă would represent them in the race for president (although his ratings are only 7-8%). At the same time, from the perspective of ALDE (which enjoys the stable support of 8-10% of the electorate), abandoning the unpopular coalition would be a skilful bit of political surgery which should strengthen the party's position before the parliamentary elections. Relations between the coalition partners deteriorated after Liviu Dragnea was removed from the post of leader of the Social Democrats, after he was convicted of corruption in May this year. This destabilised the PSD and intensified the pressure coming from ALDE.
- The most likely scenario appears to be the fall of Dăncilă's government. Representatives from the largest opposition group, the National Liberal Party (PNL), have made statements demanding the resignation of the government and early elections. A vote of no confidence could take place at the beginning of October, but it will probably not happen before the presidential elections scheduled for 10 November. The PNL, which supports the re-election of President Klaus Iohannis, will probably hold back from putting

forward such a motion, to avoid a situation in which Iohannis would have to devote time and attention to coalition negotiations during an important period of the election campaign.

- Victor Ponta will have a key influence on how the situation develops. He urged ALDE to leave the coalition, and is trying to exploit the situation to ensure his party takes some seats in the next government. In this way he has let the PNL know that he is willing to support the dismissal of Dăncilă's government (without the votes of his party, the motion of no confidence will fail), if that means his party will participate in a government formed by the PNL. At the same time, however, he has declared he will be ready to support the PSD if the party makes certain concessions (including Dăncilă's withdrawal from the presidential elections and his resignation from the post of prime minister).

