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# Campaign to oust the President at risk of running into the sand

Romania  
Sean Hillen Doi Mai

Goat sausages sizzling on barbecues, trombones blaring out old classics at the Freedom Jazz Festival and holiday-makers sipping rum cocktails on beachside terraces might not seem the stuff of a nation in crisis. But that is what Romania's ruling coalition, bent on removing President Basescu in a referendum on Sunday, would have the people of Europe's second-poorest country believe.

In the new European Union states, the transition towards a settled constitutional order all too often descends into personal feuds, something that has affected Romania, Bulgaria and even Hungary. Mr Basescu's opponents, the Social Liberal Union (USL), came to power in May and have accused him of overstepping his powers and pushed for his impeachment. The Romanian parliament voted this month to suspend him for 30 days.

The passion may be largely confined to a score-settling political class. Ordinary people are impatient with the infighting and the USL coalition worries that its impeachment attempts may fail to muster the nine million voters — 50 per cent of the electorate — required to carry the hurried referendum. Mobile voting boxes are being delivered to restaurants and cafes to catch holidaymakers.

"This is a pantomime, people are sick



Victor Ponta, the Prime Minister, has angered Brussels

of it," said Ana Rata as she stood outside the Limanu town hall with her granddaughter, Delia. "These politicians should take their responsibilities seriously and work together for the people instead of spending time pulling each other apart. The longer this goes on, the worse it becomes for ordinary folk. My pension has already been reduced under current cutbacks."

The EU is becoming increasingly worried that Romania's democratic progress since the violent 1989 revolution may be at risk. Victor Ponta, the Prime Minister, has come in for criticism from Brussels after curbs on the powers of the Constitutional Court and the replacement of Senate and House speakers and the People's Ombudsman in recent weeks. The 39-year-old socialist leader has also tightened his grip on state television.

As a result, Romania's attempt to join the Schengen Area with its associated border privileges may be delayed, although its provisional EU status should be maintained. To add to the political turmoil, Mr Ponta faces embarrassment over charges that he plagiarised his doctoral thesis, and his adviser Adrian Nastase, a former Prime Minister, was imprisoned a few weeks ago for corruption.



Protesters in Craiova show their colours before Sunday's referendum with placards reading "Down Basescu". The President is accused of exceeding his powers

## Poland set example worth copying

Roger Boyes  
Commentary

The European Union has always had an aspirational component. It wanted to avoid a new war, and it aimed to close the gulf between the prosperous northwest of the continent and the impoverished southeast.

So the rules were bent when Greece joined the euro. And Romania and Bulgaria were admitted to the EU not because anyone truly believed they were fully fledged democracies but because they seemed to be governed in a responsible enough manner for people to believe in their continuing commitment to reform. Seen from Brussels, they were a work in progress. Now work has

stopped and great swaths of southeastern Europe seem to have gone on a year-long tea break. When Bucharest and Sofia signed up in 2007, the governments believed that they had been rewarded for good behaviour and could now get on with the real business of power — the accumulation of personal wealth.

When I last interviewed President Basescu, in a private villa because he had been turfed out of the presidential palace, he was convinced that he had been pushed aside because of his opposition to political corruption. He still thinks the same way.

But the underlying problem is that neither Romania nor Bulgaria has been able to develop a

culture of political discourse. The European Commission can, and does, shake a big stick and warn of punishment if the countries do not move faster towards an independent judiciary or stop the spillover of criminal gangs into the political process. The credibility of these Western prefects, though, is less than convincing.

The way forward is regional pressure and advice from successful new entrants such as Poland.

Victor Ponta, the Romanian Prime Minister, has cracked down on directors investigating the communist past, and has shielded ex-communists. Poland has shown that if you open up the old police files, some corrupt networks fall away, allergic as they are to sunlight. Romania could do with a bit more of that exposure, with some transparency and, throughout the system, checks and balances.

Tratan Basescu has stressed his opposition to corruption

political chaos. "The referendum is an attack by this Government on the Romanian people and on the basic tenets of democracy itself," President Basescu said. "Their act simply reflects their greed for power at all costs. But right will prevail and come next week I will be back at Cotroceni Palace doing what is best for my country."

Mr Ponta hit back, calling his adversary "an inefficient and ruthless president who has gone beyond his constitutional powers of appointment".

The charismatic Mr Basescu, 60, is a former sea captain and Mayor of Bucharest nicknamed "the Houdini of the Balkans". He has thwarted many ambushes by opponents. He was impeached in 2007 midway through his first term but within a month was voted back into office. He swept the 2009 elections and is more popular than the interim President, Cn Anulescu, who was appointed two weeks ago.

Whatever the referendum result, people appear to want a return to normality. The currency, the leu, has hit a record low amid concern over the funding that Romania receives to help it to catch up with other EU members.

Ana Rata hopes that the EU money will keep flowing. The street outside her home is pebbled, but tarmac has been promised.



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## Campaign to oust the Romanian President at risk of running into the sand



Protesters in Craiova show their colours before Sunday's referendum with placards reading "Down Basescu" Radu Sighet / Reuters

Sean Hillen Doi Mai

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The overall impression is one of political chaos. “The referendum is an attack by this Government on the Romanian people and on the basic tenets of democracy itself,” President Basescu said. “Their act simply reflects their greed for power at all costs. But right will prevail and come next week I will be back at Cotroceni Palace doing what is best for my country.”

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