

## Victor Ponta's surprise defeat in Romania's presidential elections could add more volatility to the country's turbulent party system



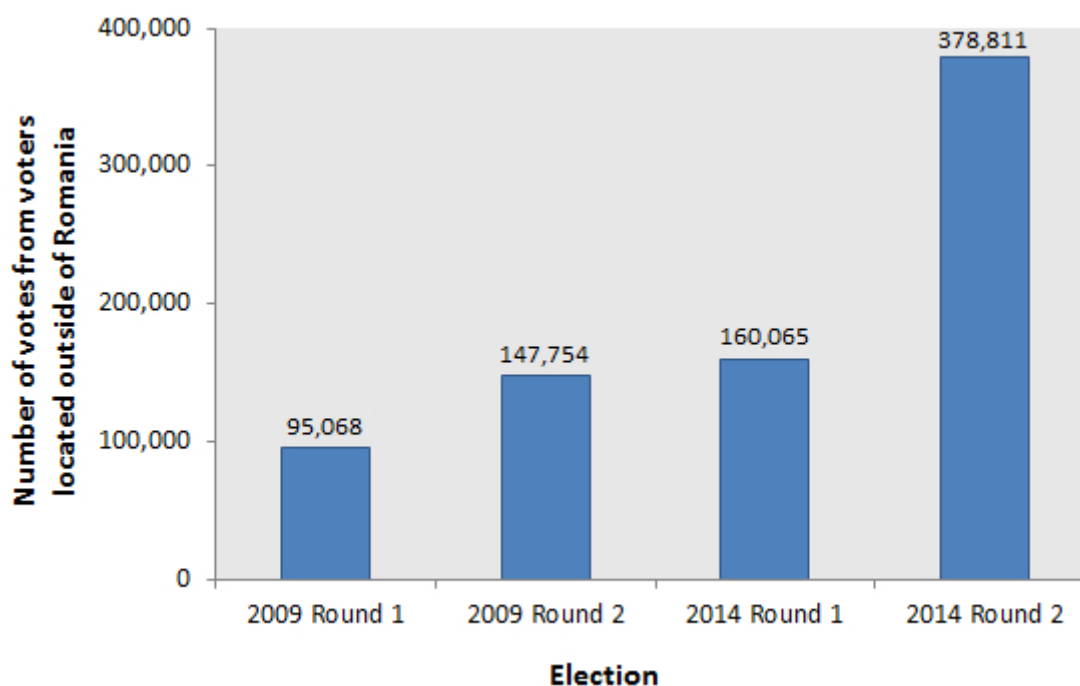
Romania held presidential elections on 2 and 16 November, with the country's Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, being defeated in the second round by Klaus Iohannis. **Daniel Brett** and **Ellie Knott** write that while the result came as a surprise for many observers, it reflected wider dissatisfaction with Ponta's Social Democratic Party among the electorate. They note that Romanian politics is

likely to remain highly volatile in the short-term if the anti-corruption and reform efforts advocated by Iohannis come into conflict with the country's vested interests.

This weekend's presidential elections in Romania produced a result that has taken many observers in Romania and the West by surprise. The incumbent Prime Minister, Victor Ponta of the **Social Democratic Party** (PSD), was defeated by Sibiu mayor (and ethnic Saxon) Klaus Iohannis of the **Christian-Liberal Alliance** (ACL). Iohannis' victory was convincing (early polls put it around 55 per cent) and shocking as many of those observers on the morning of the election were predicting an easy and decisive win for Ponta, putting Ponta up to 8-10 per cent **ahead** of Iohannis.

Turnout was high: about **64 per cent** of eligible Romanians voted in the second round on Sunday, compared to 57 per cent in the first round and an average of **53-57 per cent** in elections since 2000. The Romanian diaspora were particularly mobilised to vote, with over twice as many voting in the second round as the first and echoing the trend from 2009, when the turnout of Romanians abroad voting **doubled**, as shown in Chart 1.

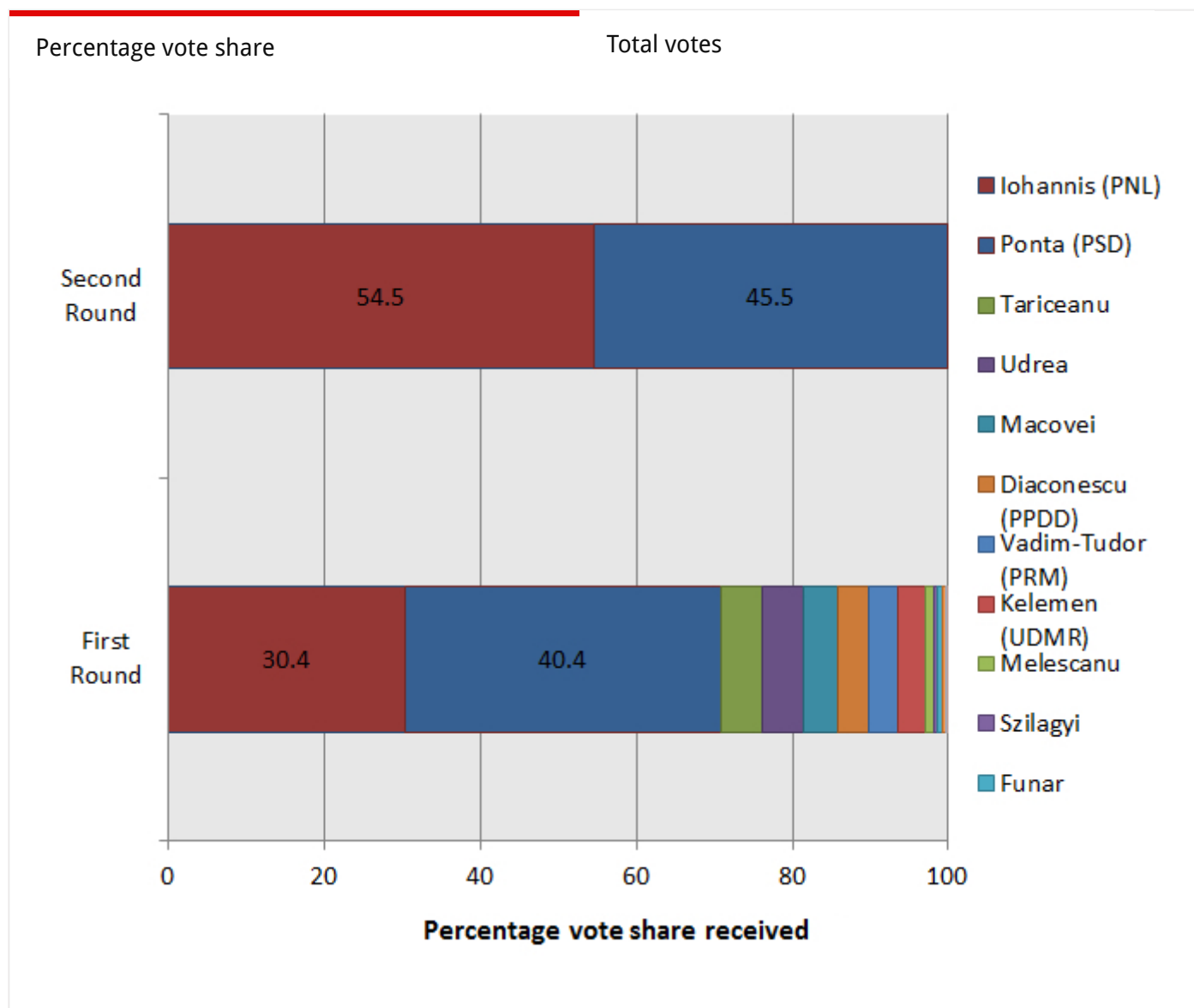
**Chart 1: Number of Romanians from outside of Romania voting in the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections**



Note: For full figures see [here](#) and [here](#).

Between the first and second round, not only did turnout increase, pushing the numbers of both Ponta and Iohannis up, but Iohannis was able to consolidate gains from the other eliminated candidates, as shown in Chart 2. Ponta was only able to increase his vote share by 5 per cent, while Iohannis was able to increase his vote share by 25 per cent (from 30 per cent to 55 per cent). Iohannis also more than doubled the total number of votes received, essentially sweeping up the votes from the other eliminated candidates.

**Chart 2: Total number of votes and percentage vote share received by each candidate in the 2014 Romanian presidential elections**



*Note:* Click on the tabs to cycle between the percentage vote share received by each candidate and the raw number of votes. For more information on the parties see: [National Liberal Party \(PNL\)](#), [Social Democratic Party \(PSD\)](#), [People's Party – Dan Diaconescu \(PPDD\)](#), [Greater Romania Party \(PRM\)](#), [Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania \(UDMR\)](#). The Christian-Liberal Alliance under which Iohannis stood is a precursor to a merger between the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the [Democratic Liberal Party \(PDL\)](#).

### Why did Iohannis win and why did no one see the victory coming?

Ponta became leader of the PSD after Mircea Geoana was defeated by Traian Băsescu (the Romanian president from 2004 until 2014) in the 2009 elections. As leader of the PSD, the party occupied a strong position with a large, disciplined, well-developed and organised party infrastructure at the grassroots level across Romania. His task to be elected should therefore have been straightforward.

As Prime Minister, Ponta had manoeuvred the PSD into a position whereby they control key state institutions overseeing the running of the election. He was able to maintain a prominent media profile, aided by the vociferous support of several television stations. The PSD also controlled the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, under **Titus Corlăţean**, thereby controlling the allocation of voting facilities abroad. Romanian diaspora had consistently supported opponents of the PSD and were key in securing **Băsescu's victory in 2009**, even though the PSD/Geoana won the domestic vote.

By comparison, Iohannis had to overcome an implosion and fracturing of the centre-right parties, as well as his regional rather than national profile, his lack of charisma and his ethnicity, all of which seemed to provide barriers to his election. Moreover, the elections saw the highest number of candidates standing in the first round (14) since 1992. This included four centre-right candidates – Iohannis, Elena Udrea, Monica Macovei and Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu – who originated from within the same parties (the **Democratic Liberal Party** and **National Liberal Party**) but decided to run separately after a series of vicious internal conflicts which have split both parties' electorates.

Ponta was able to win the first round convincingly with over 40 per cent of the vote, leaving him in a position where he only needed to gain just over 10 per cent from the rest of the electorate, with around 30 per cent of the first round vote having gone to eliminated candidates. Alternatively he could assume that the supporters of the defeated candidates would stay at home in the second round, something that seemed likely given the internecine warfare that has plagued the centre-right in recent years.

However the PSD's strength also rendered it toxic to many Romanian voters. As a successor of the **National Salvation Front** (FSN), who seized power from the Romanian Communist party in 1989, the PSD served as a reminder of Romania's authoritarian past and intolerant tendencies. This was not helped by the way the party had behaved in government. Ponta did nothing to remove the toxicity surrounding himself and the PSD during the campaign.

Ponta's campaign served to reinforce the view that it was the same old PSD, with a populist spin openly advocating the **'second great unification'** of Romania and Moldova by 2018. This is nothing new: Băsescu and his predecessors have all invoked the nationalist reunification card to inspire votes, both at home and among Romanian citizens in Moldova (of whom 36,000 voted in the second round, twice that of 2009). However, it had never been articulated by these politicians with a specific timetable, nor did they make it a central plank of their discourse.



Romanian voters in Munich, Credit: Madalina Rosca (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

In addition, Ponta made slurs against Iohannis on the basis that he was 'not a true Romanian', given he belonged to an ethnic minority. Ponta sought to exploit religious identity as a marker of difference between himself and the Protestant Iohannis and to use it to mobilise the Orthodox rural population, with him frequently appearing alongside members of the Orthodox Church. The Church in return backed Ponta and told voters to support his campaign. Similarly, attempts to give voters material gifts were also seen as a transparent attempt to buy votes. This strategy largely failed, however, with one example seeing PSD supporters, who were openly campaigning in an Orthodox Church with the support of a Priest in Paris, being heckled in a video that then went **viral**.

These populist appeals had the opposite of the desired effect. Ponta was seen as crude, unreliable and opportunistic, rather than astute. They failed to change the negative perception of the PSD among wider Romanian society. As the satirical website **Times New Roman** argued,

Ponta achieved something no one thought possible: to make himself more hated than Adrian Năstase (Romania's Prime Minister from 2000-2004). Anger and fear over what the country might become under Ponta served to galvanise Romanian civil society and in turn to mobilise the electorate to go out and vote.

Last, the first round of the elections did not go according to plan, with many of the large Romanian diaspora finding it impossible to vote as huge queues appeared outside embassies, while official bureaucracy slowed the process to a crawl. After waiting for several hours to vote, thousands were turned away as the polling station doors were closed at 9pm sharp. **Near riots** followed and the police were called in London and Paris.

### Where does this leave Romania?

Restricting the rights of people to vote has a pertinent message in Central and Eastern Europe given the anniversary of 25 years since the fall of Communism. Romanian voters in Munich took their toothbrushes to the queue to ensure they could vote the next day. Crowds gathered in central Bucharest holding flags with a hole removed, exactly as they had done during the fall of Communism and the Ceausescu regime at the end of 1989.

Hence, with an 'emerging pattern of **soft semi-authoritarian rule** in Central and Southeast Europe', most strikingly in Hungary and potentially also in Macedonia, there is perhaps a sigh of relief among other EU member-states that elections still matter. As **Florian Bieber** argues, while these semi-authoritarian politicians, like Victor Ponta and Viktor Orban, are able to 'manipulate and use state resources to their advantage, they still have to win on election day'.

Politicians still have to be able to appeal to their electorates, at home and abroad, to legitimise their right to govern because voters are listening and responding to the choices made by those in power. In political science, there has been a long debate about the relative merits of **presidentialism vs. parliamentary systems**, leading to the conclusion that it is perhaps presidential systems that allow more authoritarian tendencies to remain by concentrating a large degree of power in a single office. However elections demonstrate that not all candidates that are capable of manipulating the office of prime minister, and benefit from the electoral geography of parliamentary elections, can foster enough public support to be elected president by a majority of the electorate.

Iohannis nevertheless has a lot of work to do to live up to the **expectations** of those who voted him into office. He will inherit a regime that saw two attempted impeachment referendums, multiple coalitions and a fracturing of the centre-right. He has **vowed to resign** should an attempt to impeach him be called, yet the promises made out of office, as Ukraine's new President Petro Poroshenko is fast learning, are nothing compared to the decisions and favours you make once in office. His plans to reduce the size of parliament as well as his desire to reject the political amnesty law for corrupt politicians is likely to put him on a collision course with powerful vested interests who will resist any efforts to reign in their power, leading to more conflict and political instability.

The political landscape remains difficult to predict; whether Iohannis can create a stable party organisation to support him or whether he will have to depend on the goodwill of the fractious centre-right remains to be seen. Similarly, it is impossible to anticipate how the PSD will react to this defeat and whether the popular mobilisation witnessed during the election, despite a general lack of choice in terms of economic programmes, will lead to the creation of a new left alternative.

It is likely that parliamentary politics will remain highly volatile in the short term, especially if anti-corruption and reform efforts threaten established vested interests. Just as cases elsewhere in the region, such as Ukraine, demonstrate: it's one thing to win an election, it's another thing to govern and meet the expectations of the electorate.

*Daniel Brett and Ellie Knott will be contributing to an event held on 1 December by LSEE – Research on South Eastern Europe (in collaboration with the **Romanian-Moldovan Research***

*Group) on the 2014 Romanian presidential elections. For more information on the event, see [here](#).*

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*Note: This article was cross-posted at the [LSEE blog](#) and gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image: Victor Ponta, Credit: Partidul Social Democrat (CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

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