

The rejection of Romania's first female and Muslim PM leaves the Social Democrats in a difficult position

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28/12/2016

Despite winning Romania's [parliamentary election](#) on 11 December, the country's Social Democrats (PSD) had their proposed candidate for prime minister rejected by Romania's president, Klaus Iohannis. [Mihnea Stoica](#) writes that the PSD now faces a difficult situation as any attempt to remove Iohannis from office would likely prove counter-productive.



Less than three weeks ago, Romania's Social Democrats (PSD) won the country's parliamentary elections with an [unprecedented share of seats](#) – the largest for any single political party running outside of a pre-electoral coalition. With only a handful of MPs shy of a majority in Parliament, nothing seemed to be capable of standing in the way of the party's attempts to govern Romania over the next four years – where it would be able to implement its election programme '[word by word](#)', as Liviu Dragnea, the Social Democrats' leader declared.

The PSD's main rival, the National Liberal Party (PNL), was sent into disarray by the election result, with the party's leadership resigning in the aftermath. Meanwhile, a newly established party, the Save Romania Union (USR), which finished third in the election, has suffered from a period of internal turmoil following the vote, stemming from a lack of consensus over the party's core platform.

But despite this seemingly strong political position, the PSD's attempts to nominate the country's next prime minister have produced yet more drama. The party chose to put forward Sevil Shhaideh, a former Minister of Regional Development, for the post. The nomination generated [international headlines](#) as Shhaideh would have been both Romania's first female prime minister, and the first Muslim head of state in the European Union. It also came as something of a surprise as Liviu Dragnea had previously claimed during a TV appearance that the future PM would be a "[good-looking male politician](#)".

However, most of this reaction overlooked the views of Klaus Iohannis, Romania's president. The president's role in appointing the prime minister is often assumed to be little more than a formality: the procedure was constitutionally designed to function without any major turbulence. But on this occasion, things [have not](#) proceeded smoothly. In a surprising twist, Iohannis rejected the proposal of Shhaideh on 27 December, stating that "I have properly analysed the arguments for and against and I have decided not to accept this proposal".

Where now for Romania?

The refusal to accept Shhaideh's nomination was anything but a surprise in reality. For the sake of his own political survival, Iohannis was on the lookout for the perfect opportunity to prove that he is more than just a silent observer of the national political arena. This required sending a signal that he is willing to break free from his tight ceremonial roles and stretch the provisions of the constitution – which does not mention anything about the possibility for the president to decline a proposal for prime minister from a party or coalition that has won an election.

Iohannis clearly intends to become more of an [active president](#) by engaging directly in political battles, a strategy that worked well for his predecessor, Traian Băsescu, and which seems to be positively received especially by those on the right of the electorate in Romania. But there are also two major reasons in particular that may have prompted the president to make his decision in this case.

First, there is the prospect of the 2019 presidential election, where Iohannis will potentially hope to secure a second

term in office, although he has yet to declare whether he will run. This political conflict might serve as a good starting point for his ambitions. Second, by attempting to foster a leadership crisis in the PSD, he may be able to exploit vulnerabilities in the party's decision-making processes. An internally divided PSD would enable the supporters of Iohannis (chiefly the PNL and USR) to rebound in the upcoming period.

And despite the tense political situation in Romania, it is highly unlikely that Iohannis will face impeachment as a result of his actions – which the leaders of the PSD have threatened – because it represents an exhausting political process for all sides involved. Such a move would not benefit the Social Democrats. Moreover, the failure of previous impeachment processes might convince potential initiators to give pause for thought before resorting to this strategy.

All in all, initiating another major political battle would to some extent undermine the recent success of the PSD and would represent a new opportunity for the other parties to continue their electoral campaign in an effort to repair their standing with voters. As such, Dragnea and the PSD may be better served by pursuing a measured response and nominating a new candidate – any strong reaction may ultimately prove detrimental for both the PSD and Dragnea's leadership.

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