

Romania 2004: Presidential Election - Preliminary Report



The balloon has burst

Trajan Basescu's upset victory over incumbent premier Adrian Nastase fails to dispel doubts about Romania's voting system.

Preliminary report

Confounding exit polls that suggested a neck-and-neck race for the Romanian presidency, Bucharest's mayor, Trajan Basescu, defeated incumbent prime minister, Adrian Nastase, by almost 5% in the decisive second round of voting on 12th December, 2004.

Following allegations of widespread fraud in the first round of the elections held on 28th November, monitors from the British Helsinki Human Rights Group observed the 2nd round of the Presidential elections in polling stations in Constanta, Eforie, Medgidiu and Otopeni.

The conduct of the poll everywhere was efficient. After a slow start, voter numbers increased, but the simplicity of the choice between two candidates and generally reliable lists of registered voters meant that the polling stations dealt quickly with voters. Only a handful of cases of people coming to the wrong polling station or without adequate documentation were noted.

However, one serious flaw was detected in the electoral system. Although the Central Election Commission (CEC) had withdrawn permission for Romanian voters with a valid ID to vote at any polling station anywhere in the country, it still permitted people to vote away from their registered place of residence at a considerable number of localities around Romania. Railway stations and airports provided facilities for such supplementary polling stations but they were also located in hotels and schools.

Although the BHHRG observers found the election officials at such supplementary polling stations generally efficient at dealing with the large numbers of voters presenting themselves, in reality there was no way that they could determine whether would-be voters were honest travellers or fraudsters engaged in a carousel – what Romanians call “turism electoral.”

To prevent multiple voting, the CEC required a stamped sticker recording the fact that a person had voted to be attached to the rear-side of Romanian citizen's laminated ID cards, which were required to identify a voter. This precaution was far from infallible.

A random survey suggested that surprisingly large numbers of people were on holiday or taking health cures (mud baths) on the Black Sea coast in early December, but it also revealed that a significant minority of such voters had ID cards which were blank on the reverse.

Official stamps attached to the reverse side of ID cards to indicate a person had voted in the first round, the joint presidential and parliamentary poll on 28th November, or at the local elections in June. Of course people presenting blank IDs might have decided only to vote in the decisive second round of the presidential elections, but since it was very easy to remove previous stamps and to wipe the plastic card clean it is also possible that such blank reverse-sides of ID cards indicated that an "electoral tourist" was passing through. The fact that long queues were witnessed by the observers and reported in the Romanian press growing in numbers late on polling day suggests either that a significant number of travellers only woke up to the fact that it was election day after 5pm or that some at least had not only voted early but also intended to vote as often as possible until 9pm. Both at the Gara de Nord and Otopeni airport, the bulk of the voters waiting later in the day were of student age and therefore more likely to be Basescu voters according to polling data.

Although Mr Basescu won by a wider margin than the exit polls indicated likely making any irregular votes at supplementary stations less than the difference between the two candidates, in future Romanian elections it would be important to alter the system of registering voters to prevent any possibility of "turism electoral." No-one - except organisers of any fraud - can say for certain what, if any influence, multiple voting had on the eventual outcome, but to avoid future controversies a change in the law should be made by the new parliament.