FINANCIAL TIMES

Last updated: July 6, 2012 9:36 pm

Romania president faces impeachment poll

By Neil Buckley, East Europe Editor

Romania's parliament voted on Friday to suspend the president and triggered a national referendum to impeach him, in an escalating power struggle that has raised international concerns about democracy and rule of law in the country.

The suspension vote followed days of tensions in the Balkan state, which joined the EU in 2007, as Victor Ponta, the prime minister and his leftwing USL coalition challenged the powers of Traian Basescu, the president.

The prime minister and his party say Mr Basescu, supposed to be neutral under Romania's constitution, has exceeded his authority, interfered in politics, and acted in a party political way.

But Mr Basescu and opponents of Mr Ponta accused the prime minister of trampling on the constitution to launch the impeachment process.

José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, demanded earlier on Friday that Romania respect the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law, after the country's constitutional court said Mr Ponta was trying to undermine it.

Developments in Romania since Mr Ponta became premier in May have drawn comparisons with efforts by Viktor Orbán, prime minister of neighbouring Hungary to entrench his party in power.

Romanian MPs voted overwhelmingly 256-114 to suspend the president, meaning a referendum will be held on July 29 on whether to remove Mr Basescu, head of state since 2004, from office.

That will require only a simple majority of those who vote, after Mr Ponta used an emergency decree to change a previous rule requiring a majority of all registered voters.

Analysts expect the referendum to be carried. That would leave Crin Antonescu, leader of the other party in the USL coalition who this week became head of Romania's senate or upper house, as interim president.

Romania's currency fell to a record low against the euro on Friday amid the political turmoil, which has paralysed decision-making and raised concerns over the future of a €5bn precautionary credit facility with the International Monetary Fund.

Romania had to seek a €20bn IMF and EU bailout during the 2009 financial crisis, and then implemented some of Europe's toughest austerity measures, including slashing public sector wages 25 per cent and benefits 15 per cent.

The centre-right government of Emil Boc survived 10 no-confidence motions during the austerity programme before being toppled after street protests in January. It was followed by another shortlived centre-right government, which was replaced in May by one from the opposing social democrat-liberal coalition headed by Mr Ponta.

Mr Basescu accused Mr Ponta's government on Friday of "shattering the rule of law in an attempt to put the law at the USL's disposal".

"I believe this is a mistake and what you have been doing will have long-time consequences," he added, according to local news agencies. Mr Basescu denied exceeding his authority, saying he had taken "full responsibility as head of state" at a time of "terrible" economic crisis.

Speaking for the ruling coalition, Mr Antonescu countered that it was carrying out "not a *coup d'état*" but a "very democratic, constitutional and parliamentary exercise".

But Sorin Ionita, a political analyst at the Expert Forum think-tank in Bucharest, said the government had "dismantled [democratic] institutions".

He added: "What has happened, especially in the last week, is a series of clearly unconstitutional steps were taken by the government, by executive decree."

Expert Forum and other think-tanks have warned of a "Fidesz-isation" of Romania, a reference to Mr Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary.

Mr Basescu was previously suspended in 2007 but survived an impeachment referendum. His popularity has waned since then, however, amid Romania's austerity programme and allegations of cronyism.

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