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Romanian politics

Oh, brother

Traian Basescu is ending his presidency amid a corruption scandal

Jun 28th 2014 | BUCHAREST | From the print edition

THERE is no shortage of drama and intrigue in Romanian politics. Traian Basescu, a former sea captain, was elected in December 2004 after an anti-corruption campaign that deliberately echoed Ukraine's Orange revolution at the same time. On June 19th, in tears, he said: "Between the need to ensure an independent justice system and the natural reflex of protecting your brother, I choose justice." His younger brother, Mircea, had been put in preventive custody after being accused of taking a €250,000 (\$340,000) bribe from a convicted criminal, Sandu Anghel, who hoped that a president's brother might help to get him out of an eight-year prison sentence for stabbing his nephew.

Mircea Basescu claims that he is the victim of blackmail and that he never approached the president about the case. The president blames his brother for mingling with the "wrong people" and insists he did not take any money and never intervened in favour of anyone with legal problems. Mircea Basescu, who owns a meat-import business in the port of Constanta at the Black Sea, in 2010 became the godfather of one of Mr Anghel's granddaughters. He claims that this was a "purely Christian thing to do". Mr Anghel is an illiterate local gangster from Constanta who made his fortune selling scrap metal from stolen railway tracks and other installations left in decay after the fall of communism.

The scandal comes just five months before presidential elections in which Mr Basescu cannot run again. It is a final blow to a scattered centre-right and a boon to the Social Democratic prime minister, Victor Ponta, who now hopes to become president himself. Mr Ponta and his allies have called on Mr Basescu to step down early in order to preserve the independence of the judiciary. "I think that not only Traian Basescu, but any president in a European country, faced with such a situation, should resign immediately in order to dispel any doubts that from his position he can influence the probe," he said.

Yet at least for now, Mr Basescu refuses to quit, since there is no evidence of his intervening in the Anghel case. His election in 2004 was based not just on his popular stand against corruption, but also on hopes that he would help to shepherd Romania into the European Union, which it joined three years later. His nemesis and predecessor, Adrian Nastase, was put behind bars for corruption, along with many other ministers, MPs and judges caught red-handed.

Yet his rivals and opponents have always accused Mr Basescu of going only after political enemies, turning a blind eye to corruption in his own party ranks. Laura Stefan from Expert Forum, a Bucharest-based think-tank, says the Anghel case shows that justice is



Alamy Left or right in Bucharest

finally working independently, since even the president's brother is being put behind bars. "Surely this is no pleasant situation. Many politicians would choose differently and rather back their friends and relatives," she says. She is sceptical that the case will be a big issue in the presidential election.

"The Social Democrats are riding high in opinion polls, they don't need this agenda. Mr Ponta basically has no counter-candidate," says Ms Stefan. Opinion polls put Mr Ponta at over 45-51% in voters' preference. The economy is improving, as is the country's ability to absorb EU funds. The recent arrest of a media-owning businessman has stirred concerns over freedom of the press, but to many voters it (like the arrest of Mircea Basescu) is a welcome sign of an improving judicial system.

An attempt to reunite parts of the centre-right, with the Liberal Democrats joining forces with the Liberals, formerly allies of Mr Ponta's, may be the only real threat. This group wants to put Klaus Johannis, an ethnic German who is mayor of the Transylvanian city of Sibiu, forward against Mr Ponta. Mr Johannis has done some controversial property deals, but he is the country's second-most popular politician. Even so, at around 23-26%, he is far behind Mr Ponta, who looks almost certain to succeed the sea captain in the winter.

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