Romania political briefing:
Political adjustments in the view of the next elections
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The actual Prime Minister of Romania, Nicolae Ciucă, was recently elected the president of the National Liberal Party (NLP), after the resignation of the actual president, only six months after his appointment. The party accused several internal tensions and the need to become stronger in the view of the 2024 elections. A new party was launched on the political arena, whose president is Viorica Dăncilă, the former prime minister from the part of the Social Democrat Party (SDP). It seems to be a good time for political changes that will have time to take shape and develop in the next two years.

NLP members gathered in an Extraordinary Congress only six months after the last one for the election of a new president, after Florin Cîțu resigned from the party leadership. Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă, the only candidate for this position, became the party’s new president, with a score of 1060 votes out of 1,120 votes. No vote was against, as the remaining 60 votes were annulled. The new NLP Executive Bureau is due to be elected to a National Council in May. Several voices criticized the lack of other candidates. Some of the leaders, however, said that, in normal times, there would have been more candidacies for the party leadership, but Romania is going through difficult times, so the NLP needs a leader like Nicolae Ciucă. He was the Minister of National Defence in the Government of Ludovic Orban, but also in the one led by Florin Cîțu. Also, in December 2020, Nicolae Ciucă secured his position as interim prime minister, after Ludovic Orban resigned following the NLP’s poor result in the parliamentary elections. Ciucă was the Chief of the Romanian General Staff, the highest rank in the army. Nicolae Ciucă, a career military man, was noted for his presence at numerous military missions abroad, such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Bosnia.

For participating in the elections, the Executive Bureau of the Liberals has established a derogation from the party’s status regarding seniority, so that Nicolae Ciucă can run for president. The NLP statute stipulates that any member of the party can run for president after having at least 5 years of activity inside the party, but Nicolae Ciucă joined the party in October 2020. However, such exceptions were made in the past for other candidates, too. The Prime Minister ran for president of the NLP with the motion entitled “United for a stable and strong Romania”. In the document, Ciucă emphasized the need for the development and modernization of the country, provided arguments for a strong Romania, stated the foundations of rebuilding
trust, the need to have the citizen at the centre of NLP’s concerns, the reconnection to professionalism, elites and meritocracy, and the challenges of governing a grand coalition. Other objectives in the document aim at a healthy economy, based on investments and free initiative, the consolidation of Romania’s presence in the European Union, the support that should be provided for diaspora, and the efficiency of party mechanisms. Nicolae Ciucă also admitted the fact that he is not a member with experience in the party, but he will count on his colleagues for a good leadership. However, at this point, even though he is a NLP senator, Nicolae Ciucă is not associated as an image with the party. NLP should also take into account the proposal for a President at the elections in 2024, and in the actual context, it is not sure if Nicolae Ciucă would have the party’s support in this direction. Analysts consider that the main criterion for which he was elected at the head of the government was the geo-strategic one.

The actual situation appeared after Florin Cîțu announced his resignation from the position of NLP president, following some internal pressures from his own party. He was accused of attacking the government around the liberal prime minister by criticizing own colleagues in public without prior discussion within political organizations. In addition, he took distance from the Prime Minister Ciucă, by not inviting him in the negotiations for the formation of the government and did not consult with local organizations in making decisions and for appointments to certain political positions. He was also reluctant in collaborating with SDP in the coalition. The dissatisfaction in the party started a few months after Florin Cîțu won the position of NLP president on September 25, 2021, in a Congress in which he defeated the previous president Ludovic Orban. However, in the meantime, the trust he received was lost.

The actual orientation of NLP is that the coalition with SDP should continue. One of the vice-presidents stated that the parties that make up the current ruling coalition must have common goals, but the NLP’s mission is to coagulate right-wing political forces over the next two years to prepare for the 2024 electoral year. Therefore, some mandatory steps are needed. The party needs to become more dynamic, both in dialogue and internal debate, in the development of public policies, and in the promotion of meritocracy and performance. The new leadership is seen as being able to enhance this direction for the party.

At the end of March, NLP also approved the merger protocol with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), a party which was founded in June 2015 by one of the former NLP leaders. ALDE was for a period in opposition with NLP, but after that, its importance on the political arena decreased. NLP justified this action by stating that from the very beginning, the party assumed an integrative role for all right-wing parties. The views of the two parties were
harmonized during the talks, while establishing common goals. The merger between NLP and ALDE aims at the post-crisis stabilization and development of Romania, by implementing the liberal measures that Romanians expect, primarily in the economic field.

In the meantime, a new political party was launched in January 2022. The party Nation People Together (NPT) is a newly formed party, run by young intellectuals who were never involved in politics so far. The party defines itself as centre-left, with an emphasis on environmental and entrepreneurship issues, but also with nationalist accents, as already seen in the speeches of the members. Viorica Dăncilă, the former prime minister and president of SDP, was elected president of the NPT party with 247 votes out of 251. After a period in which she stayed away from political life, Dăncilă announced that she was leaving SDP for the NPT party. Dăncilă has received the proposal to enter the party in February 2022, the reason being that NPT wanted to benefit from a person with political experience. Thus, the former prime minister became the most well-known member of this party.

Viorica Dăncilă explained that she returned to political life, joining a new political project, because in the last two and a half years the course of the country has changed in a “brutal” way. In her speech, Viorica Dăncilă indicated that she would have continued to remain outside the political arena if Romania was on the right track, with a better standard of living for the citizens, with a solid presence in external affairs, but in the actual situation, she saw no solidarity or projects to provide solutions to current challenges. She also criticized the way the COVID-19 pandemic was managed, the large and unjustified loans at the time, the lack of immediate decisions with a positive impact and the agreements between some power parties considered to have a negative impact on the country and the population. The former prime minister believes that nothing justifies such a large drop in living standards in the last two years. Under these circumstances, Dăncilă stated that the new party will set the tone for change in Romanian politics and it will grow as an important party in Romania.

Although former Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă spent 26 years in the party, being the SDP president between 2018-2019, a member of the European Parliament for three terms, and also a prime minister, she said it is not the time for SDP members to join the NPT Party, arguing that the way the Social Democrats are leading Romania at the moment is not beneficial for the country, as the SDP members act as mere observers. In fact, she also referred to a “betrayal” and the lack of involvement of former SDP colleagues in her presidential election campaign. She said her new party would run in all 2024 elections – for the European Parliament, the local administration, the Parliament and Presidency.
The analysts’ opinion is that the actual political parties do not have the capacity to create leadership, therefore external solutions are promoted. The standard political career does not allow those who have enough value to impose themselves. In fact, the lack of a substantial organizational culture, compromise and circumstances have paved the way for current political leaders to be at the head of the hierarchy. A thing is clear: political parties have started their preparations in the view of the elections in 2024 and changes on the political arena will continue to appear.