October 2026

country report

Country Office Romania

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Opposition as an Opportunity – Not Just for the PNL

Luca Niculescu became Romania's new Prime Minister with the support of PSD, PNL and UDMR. Following the vote, PNL moved into opposition - an opportunity both for the party and for Romania's political system.

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The appointment of Luca Niculescu ends a government crisis that had lasted for more than five months in Bucharest. Following the no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan's government on 5th of May 2026, Romania's political landscape was gripped by bitter infighting. It was only in October that the fourth candidate nominated by President Nicușor Dan managed to secure a majority among deputies and senators. The new government brings some relief to the current members of parliament: snap elections are off the table. The prospect of a government dominated by the right-wing populist AUR, currently the leading force in opinion polls, has receded. Likewise, the impeachment proceedings against President Nicușor Dan, announced by AUR, appear to have little chance of success. The decisive factor in resolving the painfully prolonged government crisis was the National Liberal Party (PNL), led by Ilie Bolojan. The party had announced that it would support Niculescu's more or less "technocratic" government before moving into opposition.

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The parliamentary vote on the 20th of October 2026 had become a formality. In the secret ballot in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, Niculescu received 280 votes in favour, comfortably exceeding the 233 required. As announced, he was backed by the Social Democratic Party (PSD), the PNL, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), the parliamentary group representing national minorities, as well as independent MPs and smaller political groups.

The AUR (ECR) and the USR (Renew) voted against Niculescu. A moderate without party affiliation, he previously worked as a journalist and later served as Romania's ambassador to Paris. Before being appointed prime minister, he was a state secretary at the Foreign Ministry, where he was responsible for Romania's accession to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). From the PNL's perspective, too, he is a credible and capable choice as prime minister.

The PNL's dilemma

Ilie Bolojan's PNL faced a dilemma. Given the distribution of seats in the Romanian Parliament, neither of the two political camps - the PSD on one side and the PNL, most recently in coalition with the USR, on the other - had a realistic chance of forming its own government without the support of the AUR. It therefore came as little surprise that the third candidate nominated by President Dan, Siegfried Mureșan, a Member of the European Parliament and PNL vice-president, also failed to secure the votes needed to form a government.

The alternatives were stark: reject the PSD and risk early elections with an uncertain outcome, or act in the national interest by supporting a PSD-dominated government and subsequently moving into opposition. The PNL chose the responsible, but bitter, option.

PSD ministers cast a shadow over the new government

Luca Niculescu's new government has some bright spots, but political observers see considerably more cause for concern. The reception given to cabinet members described as "independent" has been largely positive. Among the ministers enjoying the greatest public confidence is Alexandru Nazare, who is close to the PNL and has retained his position as finance minister under both the previous and the new governments. Expectations are high that he will continue to act as a bulwark for sound public finances. The new foreign minister, Sebastian-Dănuț Neculăescu, is a career diplomat and seen as experienced professional. Sorin Costreie, the minister responsible for education and research, is also considered a good appointment across party lines.

The assessment is markedly different for many of the PSD's eleven ministers. Marian Neacșu, the interior minister and deputy prime minister, is regarded by many as the most controversial figure in the cabinet. In previous years, he was convicted in a final court ruling over a conflict of interest, a case that has repeatedly made his appointment to senior public office politically contentious. He is associated with the PSD's traditional power centre and is seen by critics as a symbol of the party's old guard. His return to senior positions has drawn repeated criticism from the opposition, the media and civil society organisations. Florin Barbu, the agriculture minister; Radu Oprea, the defence minister; and Daniel Zamfir, the economy minister, have also faced widespread distrust. The accusations levelled against them include political opportunism, patronage and a lack of professional competence.

Political dilemmas

It would be unrealistic to expect Luca Niculescu to govern without major disruption until the next

parliamentary elections, scheduled for the winter of 2028. The PNL is likely to support government initiatives in Parliament only if the austerity policies that became Bolojan's hallmark continue. But this would deprive the PSD, at least in part, of its ability to distribute financial benefits to its political clientele - above all, the majority of the country's mayors and many public-sector employees.

The PSD, which spent a long time trying to avoid taking direct responsibility for governing, could once again be tempted to rely on AUR votes. For the independent ministers, that would be a difficult compromise to accept. Moreover, the AUR would attach conditions to its support that most other MPs would find unacceptable or difficult to endorse. In short, after an initial period of relief, turbulent times are likely to lie ahead.

For the PNL, however, opposition offers an opportunity to address its internal problems. The party starts from a position of considerable strength at the local level: roughly one-third of Romania's mayors belong to the National Liberals. Many of them, however, expect financial support from Bucharest, just as PSD mayors do. From opposition, securing such resources will be more difficult. The divisions already visible within the party - particularly among the group of party officials labelled "putschists" - pose a serious threat to its internal cohesion.

The challenge: becoming a people's party

Many Romanian voters also regard the PNL as part of the old PSD–PNL power-sharing arrangement, in which retaining power mattered more than remaining faithful to political principles. The two parties governed together for almost five years. The PNL will have to work hard to shed this image for good. It must also reconnect its name with a clear and credible set of values. After years spent operating at the levers of political power, the party needs to develop a vision for Romania's future and the lives of its citizens. That will require a new political language, too. The PNL is a party rooted in the liberal middle class, particularly in urban areas. In poorer and rural regions, however, it lacks both visibility and credibility. Ordinary people do not see the party as representing their interests. The same is true of parts of the Romanian diaspora whose members emigrated to Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom or Germany because they saw no prospects for themselves at home. At present, it is above all the AUR that taps into their frustrations through its political narratives.

The PNL could rebuild public trust by bringing national identity into a broader European framework and placing greater emphasis on the social dimension of liberalism. Its conduct in opposition will also help determine whether it can reshape the political landscape ahead of the 2028 parliamentary elections.

By breaking with the PSD and leaving the former power-sharing arrangement behind, the PNL has gained another opportunity. Romania now has a credible political party that could pursue a constructive and responsible opposition agenda. Together with the USR (Renew), which appeals to different voter groups, the PNL could form a two-party opposition bloc committed to strong institutions and responsible policymaking within a united Europe.

A judiciary on the wrong track

Meanwhile, fundamental structural problems in Romania's constitutional and institutional framework remain unresolved. Parts of the judiciary appear to have evolved into power structures operating with insufficient oversight. Political decisions have, for example, enabled judges to effectively determine their own salaries. The issue has now attracted the attention of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which

rejected a complaint brought by five former judges seeking payment of outstanding salary claims. The court pointed to the "risk of a conflict of interest on the part of judges".[1]

The Bolojan government had sought to address, in particular, the problem of judges retiring at a very early age and receiving excessive pensions. The PSD's role in bringing down the Bolojan government may also have been motivated by a desire to retain the support of sections of the judiciary that, through procedural manoeuvres, have helped secure impunity for political allies who obtained benefits at the state's expense. Alongside patronage networks within parts of both the PSD and the PNL, the judiciary has become a weak point in Romania's political system. Other warning signs include the removal of Dominic Fritz as mayor of Timișoara following the Constitutional Court's controversial endorsement of the retroactive application of the integrity law in a 5–3 ruling, as well as what appears to be a questionable corruption case against Bucharest Mayor Ciprian Ciucu, who is now under judicial supervision. These cases point to an excessive concentration of power within the judicial apparatus. Lia Savonea, president of Romania's High Court of Cassation and Justice (ÎCCJ), the country's highest court, and a member of the Superior Council of Magistracy (CSM), the self-governing body of the Romanian judiciary, appears to have played a decisive role. In June 2026, the CSM also published a "blacklist" of individuals, NGOs and media outlets deemed "unfriendly" towards the judiciary. Such a step would be unthinkable in Germany.

The declining predictability of court rulings is also seen in some quarters as a threat to investment security in Romania. If business sentiment becomes more critical, fiscal consolidation would face an additional challenge.

The unclear role of intelligence services

Another institutional vulnerability concerns the democratic oversight of Romania's intelligence services. President Dan has yet to appoint a new head of the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI). In August, he said he would postpone the decision until a new government was in office. On the very day of the parliamentary vote on the new government, the SRI publicly rejected comments made by former Prime Minister Ludovic Orban in a Facebook post. Orban had suggested in a television appearance that the domestic intelligence service might be exerting political influence.[2]

The fact that a public agency would contradict an active politician in an unsigned post, so without identifying its author, illustrates how unclear democratic oversight of the domestic intelligence service remains. The SRI receives funding equivalent to nearly one per cent of Romania's total state budget. Per capita, this gives it substantially greater resources than Germany's Federal Intelligence Service (BND), Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Military Counterintelligence Service (MAD) combined.[3]

Institutional crisis of confidence

[1] See https://www.presshub.ro/cedo-critica-mecanismul-prin-care-magistratii-si-au-majorat-salariile-in-instanta-judecatorii-europeni-observa-conflictul-de-interese-si-spune-ca-statul-nu-trebuie-sa-plateasca-imediat-toate-restante-421830/ (accessed on Oct. 24th 2026)

[2] See https://www.facebook.com/100069083474722/posts/1434487425530693/?rdid=kBscxSyHBgIfpqew (accessed on Oct.24th 2026)

[3] See https://sri.ro/assets/files/bugete/Buget_SRI_2026.pdf and https://www.das-parlament.de/wirtschaft/haushalt/mehr-geld-fuer-

During the prolonged government crisis, President Nicușor Dan has suffered a particularly significant loss of public trust. Some of his former supporters accuse him of abandoning his anti-corruption principles and aligning himself with the PSD. The president, the judiciary, political parties and intelligence services are all at the centre of a profound crisis of public confidence in Romania's state and democratic institutions. Many Romanians are asking where the real centres of power lie.

A statement from March 2026, attributed to Kimberly Guilfoyle, then the US ambassador to Greece, attracted considerable attention several weeks ago. According to reports by *The Wall Street Journal*, she allegedly said, in reference to the impending fall of Ilie Bolojan's government: "We can do this to any country we want. We can do this here, too."[4]

The remarks were interpreted as suggesting that the United States had influenced the fall of the Romanian government, or that it could bring down governments in other countries. The first ambassador received by newly appointed Prime Minister Luca Niculescu at the Government Palace on Victory Square was Darryl Nirenberg, the US ambassador to Romania.[5]

The new government also has a role to play in restoring public confidence through transparency, reliability and an effective separation of powers. Whether it can succeed under the current political arrangements remains an open question.

Closer coordination between the PNL and USR in opposition could, on the one hand, help support reform-minded members of the government. On the other, the National Liberals in particular have an opportunity to rebuild their credibility among Romanian voters by establishing themselves as defenders of stronger democratic institutions and sustainable reforms.

nachrichtendienste-und-bundestag (accessed on Oct. 25th 2026)

[4] See https://www.romaniajournal.ro/politics/wsj-us-envoy-in-greece-made-remark-before-bolojan-fall/ (accessed on Oct. 25th)

[5] See https://tvrinfo.ro/premierul-luca-niculescu-intalnire-cu-ambasadorul-sua-in-romania-relatia-cu-statele-unite-reprezinta-o-prioritate-fundamentala/ (accessed on Oct. 25th)

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