

SUSPENDED ROMANIAN PRESIDENT EYES RETURN TO OFFICE

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Concerns about endemic corruption and judicial independence dominated the accession negotiations of the two Balkan countries up until the two countries joined the EU on 1 January.

By Christopher Condon in Bucharest - FINANCIAL TIMES

Traian Basescu, Romania's suspended president, will today seek to return to office following an impeachment referendum that has focused concerns about his country's ability to fulfil promises it made when it joined the European Union at the start of this year.

While the populist president is expected to win today's vote, few observers believe a victory for Mr Basescu will stem the growing sense in Brussels and other EU capitals that political turmoil and a failure to continue fighting corruption in Romania and neighbouring Bulgaria have exposed the EU's enlargement process as badly flawed.

These issues are set to heighten enlargement fatigue in the EU's most powerful countries, threatening to set back the membership prospects of Croatia and other south-east European countries working to fulfil entry requirements.

This week, Franco Frattini, the EU's justice commissioner, said he would consider recommending the use of penalty mechanisms in Romania's accession treaty, known as safeguard clauses. The Commission could suspend the recognition of Romanian courtcases in other EU countries, a step that would damage cross-border business. Mr Frattini has been under pressure from British and French officials who recently accused him of being too soft with Romania and Bulgaria over "serious" corruption. Concerns about endemic corruption and judicial independence dominated the accession negotiations of the two Balkan countries up until the two countries joined the EU on 1 January.

The Commission will produce progress reports on the two countries next month and decide in July whether to continue a special monitoring programme and, if serious problems are reported, whether to invoke safeguard clauses.

Romania made substantial progress on judicial reforms, anti-corruption and other key areas up to its accession under a coalition government formed by Mr Basescu's Democrat party and the National Liberal party.

Mr Basescu was particularly energetic in pushing an anti-corruption agenda. But the coalition began to crumble soon after the accession celebrations ended and collapsed in March when Calin Tariceanu, the

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Liberal prime minister, sacked all the Democrats in his cabinet.

Many observers believe the split was prompted by Mr Basescu's tempestuous style and resistance in the Liberal party to anti-corruption efforts that threatened its members and supporters.

Few analysts, however, paint Mr Basescu as an innocent enemy of sleaze. Anti-corruption efforts have been conspicuously aimed at the president's political foes. Politicians and businessmen considered close to Mr Basescu have not been targeted.

Parliament suspended Mr Basescu on April 19, charging him with abuses of office, including using secret services to spy on cabinet members and politicians.

Bogdan Teodorescu, director of Institute Pro, a think-tank, said Mr Basescu launched a real anti-corruption drive, but also appeared to have abused his authority.

"He wanted to fight corruption through political power instead of building institutions based on law," he said.

The Liberals now head a minority government backed temporarily by the opposition Social Democrats, who ran what was considered a deeply corrupt government from 2000 to 2004. Adrian Nastase, their former prime minister, is awaiting trial on charges of accepting bribes, blackmail and influence peddling.