

## Romanians vote to impeach president

Sunday, 29 July 2012

Romanians voted on Sunday on whether to impeach their unpopular president, Traian Basescu, after a government campaign to remove him that has drawn international criticism of its methods and raised doubts about the country's IMF aid deal.

Prime Minister Victor Ponta's leftist Social Liberal Union (USL) has suspended Basescu and its drive to unseat him has brought a stern dressing-down from Brussels, which accused him of undermining the rule of law and intimidating judges.

Ponta's government took office in May and is holding the referendum to seek popular backing for the impeachment of Basescu for overstepping his powers. He is unpopular for backing austerity and for perceptions of cronyism.

Opinion polls show that some 65 percent of Romanians want to remove the former sea captain from office, but the opposition has called for a boycott of the vote and the USL is struggling to get the turnout of over 50 percent needed for a valid vote.

"I am not a fan of Basescu but I will not vote because I do not approve of the way the government stepped on laws to have their way," said Dan Popescu, a 52-year-old Bucharest pensioner.

Many people are on holiday and the temperature is expected to hit 39 Celcius, prompting the government to set up extra polling stations, many of them at seaside restaurants and hotels, to make it easier to vote.

After three hours of voting, the election bureau said turnout was 9.1 percent by 10 a.m. (3 a.m. EDT), suggesting it could be very close to 50 percent by the time polls close at 11 p.m.

Basescu and his allies, the opposition Democrat Liberal Party (PDL), asked their supporters to boycott the referendum.

The suspended president initially urged Romanians to vote against what he called a coup d'etat, but his stance shifted this week when he and his PDL allies said they were concerned about the possibility of electoral fraud.