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## **PONTA COMEBACK ALARMS ROMANIA'S RULING PARTY**

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Romanias former prime minister, Victor Ponta, is returning to the front lines of the countrys political scene after being acquitted of corruption charges at the beginning of May. His new faction, Pro Romania, has also started recruiting prominent Social Democrat MPs, much to the concern of the ruling party leadership.

Several MPs, including two ministers, last week resigned from the party and joined Ponta's new political faction.

Analyst say that by attracting a number of MPs from the ruling coalition, Pontas comeback might pose serious problems for the ruling party, at a time when the opposition is collecting votes to submit an impeachment motion against Viorica Dancilas cabinet.

Ponta, 45, who was prime minister from 2012 to 2015, has been at odds with party boss Liviu Dragnea since a cabinet crisis in June 2017, when the Social Democrat leadership impeached its own PM, Sorin Grindeanu.

After Ponta supported Grindeanu, who had accused Dragnea of ruling the party with an iron fist, they were both excluded from the party.

Dragnea became head of the Social Democratic Party in 2015 after Ponta resigned, when anti-graft prosecutors started investigating him and his law firm associate, former Senator Dan Sova, for alleged bribery and forgery in a case involving energy transactions.

In November 2015, Ponta resigned also as prime minister, following a wave of anti-corruption protests triggered by a fire that killed 65 during a concert in a rock club.

He was reelected as an MP on the Social Democrat Party's lists in December 2016.

Three months after being excluded from his old party, he established Pro Romania, together with the former vice-president of the Alliance of the Liberals and Democrats, ALDE, Daniel Constantin. The party received accreditation on February 20.

Constantin said at the time that their main goal was the 2019 elections for the European Parliament.

Three prominent Social Democrat MPs quit the party late last week and said that they would join Pro Romania.

Former Health Minister Nicolae Banicioiu, who resigned on Friday, said many Social Democrats are unhappy with the current leadership and are negotiating switching camps.

Many people expected much more from the party, Banicioiu told Antena 3 television on Friday.

On Wednesday, another former minister, Mircea Titus Dobre, also joined Pontas party, days after two other MPs had taken the same step, prompting several Social Democrat leaders to call the departing politicians traitors.

These deserters are betraying the citizens vote, Social Democrat Vice-president Mihai Fifor said on Thursday.

The head of the party's womens organization, Rovana Plumb, also lashed out on Thursday. No betrayal will prevent us from implementing our governance program, her statement read.

Ponta said on Wednesday that his goal was to gather at least 10 MPs, the minimum needed to set up a new parliamentary group.

Analysts say Pontas comeback occurs at a difficult time for the Social Democrat leadership, and especially for Dragnea.

The Liberals, the largest opposition group, are busy seeking allies to file an impeachment motion against Dancilas cabinet, after several policy blunders in past months. Pontas new group might mean the Social Democrats lose their majority.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court is set to rule on Tuesday in Dragneas second graft trial, which will further affect his political standing.

Ioana Ene Dogioiu, senior editor of Ziare.com, explained on Friday in an editorial that the Social Democrats face serious problems in terms of their popularity because of the poor performance of Dancilas cabinet.

That is why, she says, Ponta is now able to takes bites from the party. The PSD has always been labeled as problematic in terms of integrity, she pointed out.

But they have never before been deemed incompetent ✱ Social Democrat MPs have been feared, hated, but never looked down upon, Dogioiu noted.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/romania-s-ex-pm-ponta-seeks-political-comeback-05-25-2018>

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