



A Unique Vision

An Interview with **The Honorable Sorin Mircea Oprescu, Mayor of Bucharest, Romania**

EDITORS' NOTE Sorin Mircea Oprescu is a Romanian independent politician and medical doctor currently serving as Mayor of Bucharest. He was a senator representing the Social Democratic Party from 2000 until April 2008, and served as the Vice President of the Senate Committee for Public Health. He resigned from the Senate in June 2008. In February 2006, Oprescu also became the President of the Social Democratic Party's Bucharest branch, a position from which he stepped down upon quitting the party in April 2008. He became a Ph. D. in medical sciences in 1981 and has since published more than 135 papers, course book, and books of practical works in Romania and abroad. He has been the manager of Emergency University Hospital Bucharest and of Elias Hospital.

How was Bucharest effected by the recession and how did you align the austerity policies with the necessity to support further investments needed by the city?

We chose to prioritize and direct available funds in two directions I consider essential for a European capital: investment in infrastructure and public services development. The Basarab Overpass contributed to business growth and attracted investors to Romania. Thus, investments in infrastructure became a development engine for the city, as well as a multiplier of its wealth. Wealth was redirected towards the city's inhabitants by increasing the quality of health and education public services, as well as by supporting those badly affected by the recession – pensioners and young families hit by the economic crisis.

How do you see the future of reform in the area of utilities, infrastructure projects, and health services? What are your priorities in these sectors?

Since I was elected, I made quality of life a priority for Bucharest and its residents. That means ensuring quality public services, be it health, education, joint transportation, or a central heating system. I still cannot declare myself satisfied yet but we are on the right track. We took over and now manage 20 hospital units and have invested in the rehabilitation of buildings and renewal of medical equipment so that more Bucharest residents can benefit from the highest standards in medical care. Just recently, we opened a new section of Filantropia Hospital for investigating rare pregnancy-related anomalies. In terms of school network, we have an optimistic perspective, especially since we managed to revive a funding

source from the European Investment Bank. Also, there is an ongoing program for the construction of 13 nurseries and 20 kindergartens. Joint transportation services have improved considerably due to the fact that the automotive fleet was completely renewed. However, my greatest grief is related to the heating system and the “black hole” in the city's budget represented by the public provider, RADET. I hope the future majority in the City Hall General Council, which will result after the 2012 elections, will better understand the importance of supporting the reform of this urgent issue on the agenda of Bucharest residents.

Related to the infrastructure, what role might municipal bonds, investment funds, and public/private partnerships play in diversifying the city's options?



The Hon. Sorin Mircea Oprescu with The Hon. Michael Bloomberg, Mayor of New York City

The city needs investments to continue and support from the private sector is essential. We have completed several major infrastructure projects in Bucharest and we have a significant number of ongoing projects. Many of these, such as parking in the downtown area, need to be achieved through public/private partnerships in order to overcome budgetary restrictions and develop the city while ensuring the necessary funds for Bucharest residents to enjoy quality public services at a level comparable to that of any other European capital.

Bucharest had the highest growth in 2011 among the best European cities to conduct business in, up eight places from position 35 to 27 in a study by Cushman & Wakefield.

How do you explain this increase and what should the General Mayor's office focus on in the future in order to increase the city's attractiveness to investors?

I have the political will, determination, and the necessary institutional levers in order to put Bucharest's agenda first. So we can develop the city even in times of recession. The secret to Bucharest's increasing attractiveness to investors is related to the development model we are putting into practice and the amenities we intend to offer. In order to attract investors and propose public/private partnerships, we have to guarantee that projects will be completed without being effected by petty political interests and confrontations, and by the electoral cycle. On the other hand, it's high time we drastically reduced excessive bureaucracy, which everybody complained about, including American business representatives with whom I met recently during my visit to New York. And I will persuade the General Council that it is necessary to take steps in this direction too and to work with private sector companies in the IT, banking, and city management fields to increase efficiency, reduce waste, and open Bucharest to future investments.

Despite its potential, Romania's capital city is not a tourist destination but a business destination. Can Bucharest still hope to become 'Little Paris' once again?

We are still behind, but we are recovering quickly. In the past three and a half years, we have taken important steps to make ourselves worthy of the “Little Paris” label again, as Bucharest was once known in the interwar period. The Historic Center of the city has been revived over the past few years and it is slowly becoming the commercial and cultural heart of Bucharest again. And things can only get better once the street infrastructure and the rehabilitation of the first monument buildings in the area are completed.

However, I am interested in the entire city and how we can make it more attractive to tourists as well as residents – a modern European metropolis – which has led to our designing a new Integrated Development Plan, an ambitious set of objectives for development of the capital city, stretching over the next 20 to 25 years. These include redefining the urban identity of downtown Bucharest, the recovery of public spaces, and the urban regeneration of run-down neighborhoods.

There was a strong public and political debate this year in Romania on the new Law of the City of Bucharest. Is such an approach necessary and, if so, what should it represent for Bucharest and its residents?

Yes, we need a unified vision. Bucharest is a development pole and its model must be integrated with the surrounding areas. And in the coming years, we will have to put into practice such a vision. It shouldn't be politicized. It must take into account only administrative aspects because, otherwise, we risk it being completely useless and a brake rather than a stimulus for development.

Many of the new EU member states like Romania have been effected by justice-related issues, like corruption and public administration reform. What lessons would you like to see learned and solutions applied by the Romanian authorities in these areas?

It's clear that politics complicates matters when it comes to justice or administration – that is why I decided to run for mayor again as an independent. But we do have a lot to learn from EU member states' experience and I hope we will have the wisdom and vision to choose the right solution. Maybe we will see the day when we get out of the European Commission's Justice Cooperation and Verification mechanism and join the Schengen area.

What are the challenges of the 21st century that Bucharest and other world capitals must face?

In the case of large urban agglomerations, the risks and challenges and their solutions are always multiple and interdependent. It is paramount that we adopt a unitary strategic approach focused on the future of Bucharest as we want it to be. One of these challenges is tied to pollution and the 'clean cities' debate. We have made significant progress towards establishing a greener city and there are numerous projects unfolding. The City Council has approved two projects: the urban rehabilitation of the Dâmbovița River and the introduction of green roof terraces. We have made a priority out of raising the overall green areas in Bucharest. After two and a half years of efforts in this direction, the Green Census shows that we have managed to surpass the 20 square-meter-per-inhabitant threshold, currently holding steady at around 23.21. We intend to connect Bucharest to the latest energy-saving technologies available by cutting energy consumption, increasing energy efficiency, and using renewable resources. Green energy (renewable, zero-emissions) is not only a tool to stave off the effects of pollution, but a way of life. Another issue facing major cities today is overpopulation, with serious repercussions on the quality of life and traffic. The solution is to develop infrastructure, which is why we have launched a series of projects aimed at widening the main streets and building overpasses, a ring road, and parking spaces.

You recently attended the New York Conference of Mayors, hosted by Mayor Bloomberg. What were the main topics of discussion and what solutions were proposed for cities of Bucharest's size? Are there any evolutions that Bucharest needs to share with other cities or is it more about importing ideas?

Aside from the administrative seminar held by the New York City Municipality, we also had a series of meetings with members of the local administration, stakeholders in the health care sector, and representatives of the business community. We managed to strengthen our partnership with IBM on how to make Bucharest a more efficient and smarter city through the Executive Service Corps initiative – using the expertise of global executives to help find solutions for complex problems facing cities like Bucharest, in areas such as enabling technology, workforce development, and operational execution. We also met with the leadership of AECOM to discuss how to develop a vision of the city for the future, as well as the CEO of Deutsche Bank Americas, with whom I discussed a possible €800-million loan for the municipality.

In terms of importing or exporting ideas, I believe anyone anytime can learn something from others. Bucharest is still trying to breach the gap created by years of political deadlock, and focuses less on the paternity of good ideas and more on their local adaptation and implementation. The Basarab Overpass is the best example of this approach. For me, it did not matter that the project was initiated by someone else; what mattered was that I overcame the political deadlock and finished the job, to the benefit of Bucharest.

Based on the experience gathered during your visit to New York, what is the anticipated level of collaboration between Bucharest's Administration and central authorities in the future? Are you satisfied with the current situation? What are the issues that need to be addressed immediately?

Things would improve significantly if there were no red tape and politics to contend with, and if deregulation finally goes past the declarative stage. We have been discussing the implementation of deregulation, but it's not entirely realistic. We asked the Government of Romania to be fair to Bucharest residents. I understand there are difficulties in securing funds for the state budget and that they need to cut the budget of local communities, but we hoped they would not hinder us in supporting the people.

How can Bucharest help secure Romania's position in the EU and strengthen the country's regional profile?

It already does so by acting as a regional development hub and attracting investors through modernization and offering more opportunities to its residents. Bucharest is a city that is an excellent example of "unity through diversity"; we could act as a model for the European Union, which has been the victim of centrifugal diversity lately. Bucharest is starting to build an international image for itself, a Romanian model to follow – one that is much closer to reality. For example, the George Enescu Festival, a major event on the international cultural agenda, has established Romania's capital city as a solid destination both in Europe and the world. We hosted the NATO Summit in 2008 and are preparing to become a host for international sporting events, including a FIFA championship in the future. Ours is a city that reclaims its history in an attempt to rebuild its reputation and build a brand for the future. It offers residents more reasons to be proud of their city.

You were among the first to announce candidature for City Hall in 2012. What are your campaign points and which projects should Bucharest be focused on?

It takes a lot of work and dedication, even stubbornness at times, but I have shown that projects can get done. Bucharest is decades ahead of where it was in 2008. Even in the current economic climate, with a City Council that has not always stayed true to the interests of its constituency, we have managed to complete some crucial projects for the city. At the same time, we did not forget about the people. We did not ignore the social dimension of local government. As a surgeon, I'm guided by the necessity to act quickly to operate, but also to act wisely to save lives. Projects are numerous for the next mandate. What matters is to complete those already in development, like the Uranus Boulevard, the Independent, ei Bay-Ciurel-A1 connection, a veritable West exit; closing the median city ring, a new conventions center, several parking lots, kindergartens, and day-care centers. My ambition is to transform the city and bring it closer to its European counterparts. Bucharest has a lot to compensate for after years of political wrangling and incompetence. The road ahead is not an easy one, but I will not give up.

What teachings do you draw upon from your experience in the private sector, health care, and Parliament, when making an administrative decision under the current economic context, with issues like EU integration and globalization?

Beyond that experience, there is common sense and a proper education. I never forgot, as a medic, MP, or civil servant, that the most important thing is to stay close to the people, to consider their suffering, and heed to their needs. My entire life, I was close to the people, working alongside them, regardless of whether I was a medic or politician. I will continue to be there for them. The people of Bucharest see me around the city, because I don't hide behind a desk. In addition, I have established a social dialogue, which assists with the decision-making process.

What policies do you intend to enforce in the future? Have you considered joining a political party or do you still intend to run as an independent candidate?

My candidacy will be independent, with political support from the Social Liberal Union (USL). My statute will continue to be that of an independent representative. My party is the people of Bucharest. For too long, Bucharest has been the victim of political wrangling. People are tired of empty promises and excuses. My only ambition for the elections is to finalize the projects already underway and those being prepared. I will work with anyone willing to support my projects, of which Bucharest has much need. My collaboration with USL is not political; it is based on a program for Bucharest. A city like Bucharest cannot be governed by a single person – it takes a team. We need to have a majority in the council to support our projects for the city. At the moment, USL seems to be the party capable of securing that majority, based on the latest polls. Their interests coincide with those of the people of Bucharest, which is to have a stable political environment in which to complete more projects. ●