

Romanian Democracy: Running Out of Ideas

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RADU CINPOEŞ, FEB 15 2012

Romanian politics is in a state of flux. On the 6th of February 2012, Emil Boc resigned from his position as Prime Minister of Romania, following several weeks of street protests across the country. The public rallies were sparked by the protest resignation of Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Health, Raed Arafat, a popular public figure in Romania due to his role in setting up the Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication (SMURD). He resigned in response to a controversial health reform proposal aimed – among other things – at opening the health services to competition from the private sector. The deeper, underlying reasons for the public revolt – which continued despite President Băsescu backing down, the reform proposal being scrapped and Arafat returning to office – were the austerity measures imposed by the Boc Government following the March 2009 IMF agreement.

In their most recent review of Romania's economic measures, on 6 February 2012, the IMF stated that the country met all the quantitative performance criteria for this period and that the economic programme was on course. This, however, has happened at a very high price for large sections of the population. The set of measures introduced in order to meet the conditions imposed by the IMF is controversial. On the one hand, the government pursued a reduction by 25 percent of public sector salaries and of 15 percent of the public sector pensions (the latter measure was dropped, having been found unconstitutional by the Romanian Constitutional Court), waves of redundancies and the increase of VAT from 19 to 24 percent. On the other hand, the 16 percent flat tax on personal income and corporate profit has been maintained while little headway has been made in terms of addressing the chronically inefficient tax collection system (Romania continuing to have one of the lowest tax revenues percentage of the GDP in the EU).

The appointment of former Foreign Minister (2004–2007) and former Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (2007–2012), Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu, as Prime Minister seems to be a measure aimed at damage control, especially in view of the parliamentary elections coming later this year. Ungureanu is politically independent and his decision to replace all PDL ministers from the Boc cabinet (while the other coalition partners – UDMR and UNPR – maintained their people in place) points to a desire to portray a fresh start (although there are speculations about the extent to which the 'old guard' is operating behind the young team of ministers). The new cabinet, however, is unlikely to produce significant changes of direction, being constrained by the tight leash of the IMF agreement on the one hand, and by the pressure of the upcoming elections, on the other.

Taking the above-mentioned factors into account, it is worth examining further the meaning of the January protests in terms of the broader social and political context in which they are situated. A number of points can be made about the short-term message.

First, the public dissatisfaction is – to a large extent – primarily directed at President Băsescu and his alleged dictatorial actions and patronage over a corrupt system. While Prime Minister Boc and his cabinet are seen to be part of these corrupt structures, his sacrifice does not seem to be enough to satisfy the electorate. Second, despite affecting the governing PDL much more profoundly, the protests are a broader indictment of the entire political class. The main opposition bloc – the Social Liberal Union (USL) consisting of the Social Democratic Party, the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party – was formally established in February 2011. It has yet to demonstrate its coherence and cohesion beyond the alliance of convenience brought about by harbouring deep anti-Băsescu and anti-PDL feelings. More importantly in the short term, despite some attempts to get on the protest bandwagon, the

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USL should be under no illusion that it speaks for the bitterness of the people who took to the streets.

Third, opinion polls emerging in the aftermath of the protests show support for the PDL at an all-time low hovering around low double-digits. Faring much better with just over 50 percent in the voting intentions, the USL looks a potential winner in the coming elections. However, despite the apparent success, the USL has certainly not taken advantage of the PDL's decline. In fact, support for the union has gradually declined since its formation. Additionally, its refusal to engage with the coalition parties and the choice to act as an absent opposition merely portray a picture of inability to understand the current situation and indifference towards the electorate they are supposed to be representing.

Finally, cast in this light, the protests show a more worrying picture: namely that Romanian democracy is running out of ideas. Together with their clear anti-Băscescu focus, the protests are a damning statement about the political class in general, and certainly about the parliamentary parties. However, despite the resilience and commitment of people gathering in various towns across Romania, no alternative proposals have emerged from the streets. This is emphasised further by the rather over-blown and hollow slogans 'Down with the dictator!' protesters directed at President Băscescu and the sudden boost in popularity of Michael I, the inter-war King of Romania, reminiscent of the chants of the 1989 Revolution. Recent surveys show that Michael I currently tops the polls in terms of trust in public figures with over 35 percent of the opinions cast, while various groups who advocate a change to a constitutional monarchy are cropping up especially in the new media (with an online petition for a referendum to change Romania's form of government to a constitutional monarchy having gathered around 1200 signatures).

The prospect of growing support the constitutional monarchy option is not something that can be taken seriously. Nevertheless, it reflects the growing chasm between the politicians and the electorate in Romania that could easily push people into searching for providential leaders who offer miraculous solutions. An example that should not be neglected in this context is the growth in support for the bizarre construction that is the Dan Diaconescu People's Party. The PPDD seems entirely assembled around the personality of the owner of the tabloid-type TV stations OTV and DDTV. Even without a solid infra-structure and with political pledges that look rather like a Christmas wish-list (e.g. giving €20.000 to any individual starting a business, increasing all salaries and pensions, no interest paid to banks by individuals for 12 months, etc.), the PPDD is currently much on par with the PDL in terms of people's voting intentions. All in all, Romanian politicians are in desperate need of a reality check; otherwise, a vacuum of authority and legitimacy could leave the door opened to populist radical groups willing to cash in on people's desperation.

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