

Demonstrations spread in Romania against austerity policies

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Last weekend Romania witnessed some of the biggest and most violent demonstrations since the overthrow of the country's Stalinist regime over two decades ago.

The protests were triggered by the resignation last week of Deputy Health Minister Raed Arafat. For many years Arafat played a leading role in developing the Romanian health care system, but on January 9 he was denounced on public television as a "liar," a "leftist" and an "enemy of private health care" by Romanian President Traian Basescu. This outburst was directed at Arafat's criticisms of the latest attempts by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Emil Boc to privatize broad sections of the health system.

Following protests in the center of Bucharest on Thursday, Basescu announced on Friday that he was prepared to scrap the proposed health "reforms." Despite the president's promise, protests quickly spread to other towns and cities throughout the country. It rapidly became clear that the protests were not merely limited to opposition to the health service cuts. Demonstrators opposed the entire austerity program introduced by the government and called for the resignation of the president and the government.

On Saturday protesters carrying signs reading "Liberty" and "Down with President Basescu" clashed with police in Bucharest's University Square. Seventeen people were injured.

When demonstrators returned to the city square on Sunday, they were met by large contingents of police who fired water cannon and tear gas at protesters. According to official sources, nearly 250 people were fined for disturbing the peace and 36 arrested. By the end of the weekend, a total of 59 people had reportedly been injured in the protests, with 26 hospitalized.

Protests also took place on Sunday in 40 other Romanian towns and cities, including Cluj, Timisoara,

Brasov and Arad—where demonstrators called for the resignation of the government and Basescu.

Acknowledging that protesters were motivated by opposition to his program of social cuts, Boc declared: "The violence is unacceptable. I ask Romanians to understand that the government took those austerity measures in order to avoid a crisis."

While the protests largely took place on a spontaneous basis, established "opposition" parties, such as the free market National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD), quickly sought to exploit the protests for their own purposes. Both parties declared their support for the protests, calling for the "suspension of the president" and early elections. Members of the far-right *Noua dreapta* also sought to infiltrate the protests.

Media outlets linked to right-wing opposition parties also played a role in the protests. OTV, the TV station of the recently-founded People's Party and *Antena 3*, the news TV station of the Conservative Party, both called for people to leave their homes and participate in anti-regime demonstrations.

No credence should be given to the populist calls of support for the latest protests by the "opposition" parties. Both the PNL and PSD have supported austerity measures in the past. As part of the coalition government elected in 2004, the PNL introduced the 16 percent flat tax which turned Romania into a paradise for international firms seeking a cheap economic platform in Eastern Europe.

As for the Social Democratic Party, it played the main role in the restoration of capitalism after the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. Drawing many of its leading cadre from the former Stalinist ruling party, the PSD governed Romania from 1992 to 1996, and again from 2000 to 2004. After parliamentary elections in

2008, the PSD was also the original coalition partner of the current prime minister, Emil Boc (Democratic Liberal Party, PD-L). It was a signatory to Boc's deal with the IMF in 2009.

Former Communist Party stalwart Ion Iliescu occupied the post of President of the Republic as a PSD member from 1990 to 1996, and 2000 to 2004. He remains the PSD's honorary president.

Over this period, Romania developed into one of the most socially unequal nations in Europe. According to the Gini coefficient, which measures social inequality, Romania ranks alongside Hungary for wealth disparity, and is only exceeded in the region by Poland and Croatia.

While a tiny elite has profited handsomely, new statistics from *Econtext* published in January reveal that Romania occupies second place in the European Union in terms of the percentage of people living in poverty—41.4 percent. According to *Econtext*, this total includes two million pensioners living on less than 100 euros a month. Only neighboring Bulgaria, where 41.6 percent of the population is condemned to poverty, is considered to have lower living standards.

In exchange for a loan of 20 billion euros in 2009, the International Monetary Fund and the European Union are demanding even more austerity measures. The Boc government already cut salaries in the public sector by 25 percent, and pensions by 15 percent in 2010. Now, as a number of major Western companies shift operations out of Romania to set up in even cheaper locations, Boc is proposing fresh cuts to education, culture and health budgets in 2012.

A government decision from March 31, 2011 led to the closure of 67 hospitals, affecting the jobs of 670 doctors and over 2,000 other medical assistants. The government justified its latest proposals for wide-scale privatisation of the country's remaining hospitals, ambulances and the health industry by arguing that the health system is the "black hole" for the state budget. These measures will hit workers and the poor hardest, denying them their right to adequate treatment.

The disastrous social conditions and rising popular anger in Romania mean that further protests are inevitable. Last weekend's protests in Romania come on the heels of mass demonstrations in Hungary and a growing wave of social protests throughout Eastern

Europe.



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