

Mass protests bring down Romanian government

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The Romanian government resigned on Monday, in the wake of mass protests against its austerity measures over the past three weeks.

Prime Minister Emil Boc explained his resignation in a televised cabinet meeting by saying he wanted to diffuse social tensions without compromising his unpopular austerity measures. “I took this decision to release the tension in the country's political and social situation, but also in order not to lose what Romanians have won.”

President Traian Basescu immediately appointed former justice minister Catalin Predoiu as acting prime minister. The 43-year-old Predoiu is a non-affiliated politician who first took office in 2008 as a member of the National Liberal Party (PNL). Following the election of Emil Boc of the Liberal Democrats (PDL) in December 2008, a new government was formed, and the National Liberals went into opposition. Predoiu stayed on as justice minister and resigned from his party. He played a key role in the relations with the European Union, which Romania joined in 2007.

It remains unclear whether Predoiu will lead the government until the general election scheduled in November or if elections will be called early. There is discussion about the formation of a “technocrat” regime similar to those already established in Greece and Italy.

In its three-and-a-half year tenure, the Boc government has implemented the harshest austerity measures in all of Europe. Although the average wage in Romania is only €350 a month, the government cut public service salaries by 25 percent and increased the

value added tax from 19 to 24 percent. Over 200,000 public service employees have lost their jobs since 2009.

In 2009, Boc worked closely with the European Union and the International Monetary Fund imposing the required cuts. These were the conditions demanded for the €20 billion loan that the country required in order to weather the international financial crisis.

The IMF is confident that Boc's austerity program will be continued after his resignation. The IMF representative in Bucharest, Jeffrey Franks, told Reuters that he did not expect that the IMF agreement would be affected by the change in government.

“I see no reason necessarily for this to have a material effect on the aid agreement,” Franks said. “We have every expectation the agreement will continue.”

Crucial to Frank's conviction is the fact that all of the country's opposition parties and trade unions support in principle the deals struck with the IMF. This is also the reason why popular outrage over the harsh austerity measures found no outlet for a long time. The unions have betrayed every labour dispute in recent years, organising sporadic toothless protests aimed at letting off steam.

The situation changed in January following the resignation of Deputy Health Minister Raed Arafat. On national television, President Basescu had called Arafat a “liar” and “enemy of private health care” because he opposed the privatization and extensive destruction of the health system.

Solidarity demonstrations for Arafat developed rapidly into protests against the entire program of austerity. These protests took place largely outside of the control of opposition parties and trade unions, and spread across the country. The government's attempt to intimidate demonstrators with brutal police operations, water cannons, tear gas, arrests and fines, had no effect. The reinstatement of Arafat and the dismissal of Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschim, who denounced the demonstrators as a “violent and rude rabble,” also failed to ease tensions.

The resignation of Boc once again shifts attention to the opposition parties, in particular the chairman of the PNL, Crin Antonescu. Antonescu has called for an early election and accused the Boc government of being the most “corrupt, incompetent and lying” since the fall of the former Stalinist regime in 1989.

Similar declarations were forthcoming from Victor Ponta, leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which has joined with the PNL and Conservative Parties (PC) to form the opposition alliance—the Social Liberal Union (USL). Ponta declared that the USL now will carry out “responsible solutions and after early elections a government different from those in recent years.”

The Social Democrats and National Liberals are both establishment parties, which have already spent long periods in government. Their policies were virtually the same as those of the Liberal Democrats, with whom they formed a coalition for some time.

The Romanian parties are largely interchangeable. They often split, then reform and rejoin under different names. They embody a narrow elite, which during the past twenty years has divided the spoils from the privatisation of former state property. They have benefited from EU funds, while slashing spending for education, health care, pensions and wages.

This is clear to many who took to the streets in recent weeks. The protests were directed “against the entire political class, against the system” as Boc admitted to the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation. “The depth of the crisis of political confidence is demonstrated by

polls which show that the popularity ratings of all politicians have fallen dramatically. No one has a rating of more than 25 percent. Experts wonder how Romanian politics can recover from this crisis.”

This general distrust of the established parties, however, lacks any clear perspective. Romanian workers can only defend their interests if they unite with workers across Europe who face the same attacks, on the basis of a socialist program that places social needs above the profit interests of the banks and the wealthy.



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