

Romanian elite erupts in sordid infighting

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The Romanian ruling class has offered a sordid spectacle of factional infighting in recent months, reaching a high point July 6 when parliament voted to suspend President Traian Băsescu. A referendum on the issue will be held July 29.

Faced with the greatest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s and mass protests against austerity that broke out in January, the Romanian ruling elite is struggling to form a stable government that can impose the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU).

After the government of Prime Minister Emil Boc was forced to resign in February following the anti-austerity protests and a miners' strike in the coal mining region of Valea Jiului, Boc's conservative Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) attempted to form another government around a new prime-minister, former Communist Youth leader and then acting secret service director, Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu.

Less than three months later, a no confidence vote initiated by the opposition parties—the former Stalinist Social Democrats and the pro-market National Liberals, which formed the Social Liberal Union (USL)—gathered the necessary support in parliament to depose the Ungureanu government. President Băsescu was forced in the beginning of May to appoint the Social Democrat leader Victor Ponta as new head of government.

Riding on a wave of popular rejection of the conservatives, who were firmly associated with the IMF-backed cuts, the USL swept the local elections held June 10. Prime Minister Ponta essentially continued the former government's policies by implementing the austerity program agreed with the IMF. Although he appointed former secretary of state and champion of the health care "reform", Vasile Cepoi, as the new health care minister, and maintained the criminalization of teachers through video and police surveillance of the national baccalaureate exams, the right-wing press and Băsescu began a sustained campaign of attacks on the new government. Four ministers were forced to resign in a single month as a result of various allegations of plagiarism, curriculum vitae inaccuracies or other claims of past misdeeds.

This period coincided with the definitive sentencing of the former prime minister and prominent Social Democratic leader, Adrian Nastase, in a high-profile case dating from 2009, in which he was accused of illegally funding his presidential election campaign in 2004, a campaign that he eventually lost to Băsescu.

The Romanian presidential election in 2004 was marked by accusations of vote rigging by both principal blocs and eventually the pro-US candidate Băsescu managed to sway it in his favor by threatening the election committee with a Ukrainian-style "Orange Revolution".

The drawn-out trial ended with a two-year prison sentence for Nastase, despite numerous irregularities such as the appointment to the Supreme Court of a high-ranking clerk working for the prosecutor responsible for charging Nastase, or the hearing of only five witnesses for the defense as opposed to 970 for the prosecution. The court itself admitted in its judgement that there was no direct evidence to convict Nastase and that none of the witnesses implicated him. All this points to a politically motivated decision—a fact repeatedly alleged by Nastase and his lawyers. When police arrived at his house to take him into custody, Nastase tried to commit suicide by shooting himself and was then rushed to a public hospital to receive emergency medical treatment.

After a conservative member of the European Parliament, Monica Macovei, publicly expressed doubts about Nastase's diagnosis, the general prosecutor, Laura Codruta Kovesi, stated without making any medical inquiry that she disagreed with the opinion of Nastase's doctors and that his status did not prevent him from being transferred to a prison hospital.

Serban Bradisteanu, chief of the hospital's cardiovascular department, former Social Democratic senator and one of the doctors in charge of Nastase's case, was promptly called to the prosecutor's office, interrogated for six hours and charged with aiding the criminal. It came to light that Bradisteanu's phone had been tapped for three days and that he gave Nastase's family a different assessment about his health than he did to police. That evening he signed Nastase's discharge from the public hospital.

The Romanian College of Physicians lodged a formal complaint against the general prosecutor complaining of a "violation of the patient's rights, intervention in the doctor-patient and doctor-patient's family relations and questioning a diagnosis in the absence of a medical expertise", sufficient to arouse suspicions of "grave violations of human rights".

Nastase played an important part in the restoration of capitalism in Romania and is a representative figure for a layer of former Stalinist bureaucrats who enriched themselves through the plundering of state assets. As prime minister (December 2000 to

December 2004), Nastase presided over massive privatizations and drastic austerity measures that were preconditions for Romania joining the European Union. He was involved in numerous corruption scandals and is renowned for his arrogance and for flaunting his considerable personal wealth. Nevertheless, his conviction points to an erosion of democratic rights in Romania and the increasing use of the courts as a tool for attacking political enemies.

Nastase's attempted suicide as well as the alleged attempt by the Social Democratic Party to keep him out of prison were taken up by the Liberal Democrats and used as part of a right-wing campaign designed to whip up anti-communist hysteria. Another theme used in this campaign was Ponta's alleged plagiarism of his doctoral dissertation and the hastily adopted legislative and administrative changes for suspending President Basescu, which were termed a "coup d'état".

Supporters of the conservatives were called to take to the streets to "defend democracy" and the rule of law. Wearing white instead of their traditional orange, they called for the resignation of the "thief" prime minister, Ponta, who was accused of leading a "Bolshevik invasion", and carried placards portraying the latter as Lenin. Scuffles broke out between the right-wing demonstrators and those calling for Basescu's resignation.

This campaign received international support, in particular from German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is aligned with the Romanian Liberal Democrats in the European People's Party. After the Romanian parliament voted to suspend Basescu, she declared that it was "unacceptable" for a member of the European Union to "violate basic principles of the rule of law" and threatened Romania with sanctions by the EU.

A host of petty-bourgeois protest groups present in University Square during the January anti-austerity protests reassembled in recent days. The Green Movement; one of its recent split-offs led by Claudiu Craciun (who gave a speech at the European Parliament on February 1, presenting himself as a simple protester from Romania); the Romanian Academic Society; and an assortment of other NGOs and pressure groups have tried to direct popular opposition into safe channels. They claim that by "occupying a public space" and addressing single issues, "citizens" can pressure the main bourgeois parties to change course.

Those who hadn't joined the USL coalition government—like Victor Alistar, leader of Transparency International Romania, who was proposed as delegate minister for governmental strategies and civil society, and Remus Cernea, president of the Green Movement, who became personal adviser to the prime minister—now joined the conservatives in calling for Ponta's resignation.

Pseudo-left outfits—such as CriticAtac, the Group for Social Action (GAS), Anti-Capitalist Fight—are working to prevent the

independent organization of the working class by promoting "civil society" and toothless protests.

In an article on the CriticAtac web site, Victoria Stoiciu tried to justify their association with the conservative rally by saying that "for now this is the political framework within which we are constrained to move and protest: even when you are above all things you still unwillingly tip the balance in favor of one of the two evils". These movements speak for a better-off section of the Romanian middle class and are not trying to challenge the existing political establishment, but rather to carve out a better position for themselves within it.

The Social Democrats and the Liberals are both big business parties and represent a section of the Romanian bourgeoisie that came to the conclusion that Traian Basescu and the PDL had provoked too much popular resentment and were no longer able to impose the drastic austerity measures demanded by the IMF and the European Union.

The Social Democrats were in government with the PDL in 2009 when the deal with the IMF was agreed upon and the Liberals, who formed the government from 2000 to 2008, introduced the flat tax and promoted Romania as a cheap labor market in Eastern Europe.

Ponta has already signaled his commitment to the austerity program. An 8 percent increase in salaries was agreed with the IMF only after reassurances were given that public employment reductions will continue in order to keep the public sector wage bill at 6.7 percent of GDP, the same value it had in 2011. The government's letter of intent to the IMF outlines a deepening of the austerity program. This program includes creating the legal framework for the privatization of health care, privatizing the remaining state-owned enterprises and increasing gas and electricity prices.



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