

Mass opposition to austerity deepens power struggle in Romanian ruling elite

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The Romanian ruling class is undergoing a fierce political crisis, after mass protests at the start of the year brought down the conservative government of Prime Minister Emil Boc.

The Boc administration has implemented devastating austerity measures, slashing public sector wages by 25 percent and pensions by 15 percent. The most recent development is the referendum to depose President Traian Basescu, due to take place on July 29.

The conflict between the conservative president Basescu, supported by the Liberal Democrats (PDL), and the Social Democrat-National Liberal Union (USL), led by social democratic prime minister Victor Ponta, sharpened over who should represent Romania at the EU summit held in Brussels on June 27-28. Basescu is a staunch supporter of the austerity programme, taking it upon himself to be the first to announce cuts from the Presidential Palace and to preside over the Boc government's meetings.

Before the summit, he declared that he is one of those leaders who viewed German chancellor Angela Merkel's fiscal pact as the solution for the future.

For his part, Prime Minister Victor Ponta lined up with French president Hollande and declared: "All lucid politicians favour growth, as much as they favour healthy public finances. Both can be realised if we rationalise spending, invest available resources wisely and combat fiscal evasion."

Despite its rhetoric about "growth," the Ponta administration is a government of austerity. It has pledged to fully comply with the IMF agreement, privatise state-owned companies and raise gas and electricity prices. Its health care law is essentially the same as that proposed by Boc—which triggered the mass protests and opened the door to full privatisation of the health care system. It is committed to continuing

sackings in the public sector and maintaining poverty wages.

Ponta was eventually able to participate at the EU June summit with the parliament's approval, despite a Romanian Constitutional Court ruling in favour of Basescu.

Upon returning from the summit, Ponta initiated proceedings to suspend the president. These included changing the presidents of the two chambers of parliament, revoking the People's Attorney, placing the Official Monitor under government jurisdiction, modifying the referendum law and stripping the Romanian Constitutional Court of some of its powers.

The conservatives cited these measures and the haste with which they were implemented as evidence that a "coup d'état" had occurred.

Romania's political parties have repeatedly made clear that they view the institutions erected after the 1990s as nothing more than tools to achieve their various political ends.

The referendum law itself has been modified several times in the last few years depending on who held a parliamentary majority. After the failed 2007 referendum to depose President Basescu, the PDL majority modified the law making any future attempts more difficult by imposing a 50%+1 yes vote. This July, the USL government tried to overturn the modification but the Romanian Constitutional Court decided instead to accept the 50%+1 mandatory quorum.

The European Union has intervened strongly on the side of the conservatives. European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso and European Council president Herman van Rompuy publicly voiced their "concern" about political developments in Romania.

German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said

that Berlin had “serious doubts about the legitimacy” of the measures taken to suspend the Romanian president.

The European Commission’s July report on the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification stated that the Romanian government’s recent actions have “generated serious doubts about its engagement to respect the rule of law or the understanding of what the rule of law means in a democratic pluralist system.”

The EU’s intervention breathed new life into the campaign of the conservative PDL, which had suffered a crushing defeat in local elections held this year. It has allowed the PDL to posture as defenders of democracy and accuse the USL of taking the country out of the EU.

The election has turned into a political quagmire, with warring accusations against personalities in both major bourgeois parties. President Basescu was accused of illegally using special secret service phone lines from his campaign office. Separate commissions were set up and gave contradictory assessments on Ponta’s alleged plagiarism, and a USL mayor was accused of throwing a “flame of democracy” into the Danube.

On his Facebook page, former conservative finance minister Ionut Popescu posted a friend’s comment on USL sympathisers in her company: “I have identified, amongst my employees, 17 USL sympathisers. I respected their opinion which did not prevent me from handing them their layoff notices, to cut some of their appetite for restoration.... If they promote some sort of fool’s solidarity, let them go to their leaders and ask for social protection.”

A high point in this campaign was a lengthy interview with President Basescu, in which he suggested he would ask his supporters to boycott the referendum. He said that he was confident that in this way, he will return to the Presidential Palace and insure the political stability necessary to go through the crisis “that is just beginning”.

He also stated that once he returns, the members of parliament who voted to suspend him will have to “face the consequences of their actions,” and that it has been proven that in a time when unity and stability are required, “democracy can be utilised destructively”. He blamed media outlets close to his political rivals for “manipulating the population,” reiterating his conviction that the press should be considered a “threat to national security”.

Faced with rising working class opposition, all sections of the Romanian bourgeoisie have nothing to offer in the way of an answer to the economic crisis except more austerity measures and a further descent into poverty for the working masses.



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