

# Protests continue against corruption in Romania

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Tens of thousands have been taking to the streets each day in Romania to protest against a relaxation of anti-corruption laws.

On Tuesday evening, the government used an emergency decree to implement legal changes protecting corrupt politicians from prosecution. It also submitted a law to parliament that would grant amnesty to criminals who have been sentenced to less than five years in prison. As a result, several politicians sitting in prison for corruption will benefit.

There were fierce protests on Wednesday in the capital Bucharest and 55 other cities. According to the police, some 250,000 people participated in the demonstrations, while others put the figure at 300,000. The protests continued on Thursday and Friday. According to participants, the protests will continue for 10 days. The new regulations will then come into force, if the government does not retreat.

Corruption is endemic in Romanian politics. Many leading politicians are under investigation, have criminal records or are in custody. According to the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA), there are currently 2,150 facing charges of misconduct in office. Those affected include not only the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD), but also all the other bourgeois parties.

The protests are only superficially about corruption, which is seen especially by younger representatives of the middle class as an obstacle to their own social advancement. Behind this is a power struggle within the ruling elite that has been raging for years over foreign policy orientation and the allocation of sinecures.

NATO member Romania, with its proximity to Russia and border with Ukraine and the Black Sea, plays a key role in the efforts of the United States to

encircle Russia militarily. It is the location of the US missile defence shield and is striving—together with Bulgaria and Turkey—to establish a permanent NATO fleet in the Black Sea, the most important base of the Russian Navy.

Tensions between the US and Europe always find a direct echo in Romanian domestic politics. With the intensification of tensions as a result of the new administration of Donald Trump, the trench warfare in Romania is taking on more aggressive forms. This is the main reason for the flare-up of the protests.

It is significant that the European Union is openly standing behind the demonstrations. In a joint statement, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and his deputy Frans Timmermans expressed their “deep concern about the recent developments in Romania.” They demanded: “The fight against corruption must be taken forward, not be undone.”

The spokesman for the German Foreign Ministry, Martin Schaefer, also explained that the Romanian government’s decree was “not a good and proper sign.”

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis has openly sided against the government’s plans. On the very night the government agreed the legislative change, he wrote on his Facebook page that it was a “day of mourning for the rule of law,” which had received a “powerful blow by the opponents of justice, equity and the fight against corruption.” Iohannis described it as his mission to restore the rule of law.

On January 22, when the first plans about the law change were leaked, the president had participated in street protests against them. As a result, the PSD chairman, Liviu Dragnea, accused him of wanting to take part in a coup.

Johannis, regarded as a follower of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, was elected as president of Romania at the end of 2014. The most important opposition candidate was the then Prime Minister Victor Ponta of the PSD. A year later, Ponta resigned following a wave of protests, which bear a great similarity with the current ones.

At the time, the WSWS characterized the protests as follows: “The demonstrations, styled in the media as a ‘popular revolution,’ represent the efforts of the imperialist powers and local elites to cultivate a layer of the upper middle class as a constituency for their policies of war and austerity.”

Johannis utilised Ponta’s resignation to install a technocrat government under the non-party former European commissioner Dacian Ciolos, who was responsible for ruthlessly implementing Brussels’ austerity diktats.

The consequences for the working class were devastating. More than 25 years after the fall of the Stalinist Ceausescu regime and 10 years after Romania’s accession to the EU, it remains the poorhouse of Europe. According to the EU Social Justice Report by the Bertelsmann Foundation, it stands in 27th place. Only Greece is worse. The average wage is €400 (US\$430) a month; 40 percent of the population and 48 percent of young people under 18 are at risk of poverty; 28 percent of the population suffer from severe material deprivation.

In the end, the policies of the Ciolos government were so hated that the PSD won over 45 percent of the vote in early elections last December. However, turnout was below 40 percent. At the beginning of this year, the PSD formed a new government under Sorin Grindeanu, which is now the focus of the protests.

Since the fall of Ceausescu, the PSD and its predecessor organization have been reliable pillars of capitalist rule in Romania. Closely associated with the trade unions, it supported ferocious attacks on the working class, the privatization of state enterprises and accession to NATO and the European Union. The successor organization of the former Stalinist state party, it always encountered a certain mistrust from Washington, Brussels and Berlin. The accusation of corruption has always been a synonym for the suspicion it was being influenced by Moscow.

Now that the conflicts between Brussels and

Washington are escalating, the PSD is trying to curry favour with the Trump administration. Party chairman Liviu Dragnea and premier Grindeanu have publicly boasted that they participated in a private dinner during Donald Trump’s inauguration, at which the new president was present.

Dragnea published photos on Facebook, claiming he told Trump he wanted to take the strategic partnership between Romania and the US to a new level. Trump replied, “We will make it happen! Romania is important for us!”

They also met with Michael Flynn, national security adviser, and discussed “the excellent perspectives of the strategic partnership between Romania and the United States.” He had assured Flynn that the new government would respect Romania’s commitment to allocate 2 percent of GDP to defence.

President Johannis responded immediately. His office issued a statement saying that the Romanian ambassador to the US was the country’s only official representative at the inauguration ceremony. “Delegations made of representatives of some institutions or political parties, who take part in events organized in the margins of the official inauguration ceremonies, do not represent the Romanian state.”



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