

Pro- and anti-government rallies, street clashes mark political crisis in Romania

Andrei Tudora, Tina Zamfir
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A new series of protests is shaking the Social Democratic (PSD)-led government in Romania. On August 10 and 11, demonstrations took place in Bucharest and other cities.

The conflict between different factions of Romania's ruling class is increasingly taking place outside the traditional channels of bourgeois democracy, as violent street actions, secret service involvement and the use of the courts against opponents increasingly dominate political life. This is taking place under the pressure exerted by international factors.

On the one hand there is the militarization of the country as part of the drive by the NATO powers against Russia, accompanied by a growth in the power and the budget of the military and the secret services. On the other hand, the international upsurge of working class militancy has found expression in struggles by autoworkers at Ford and in the health care system.

The latest crisis is being fueled by the sharpening conflict between the US and the European Union. Since winning the 2016 general election, PSD leader Liviu Dragnea has steered the former Stalinist party, already distrusted by the European capitals, towards the Trump administration in the US.

The opposition has organized large street protests at regular intervals, placing intense pressure on the government. The PSD has been forced to replace the prime minister twice in less than two years.

The protests of the opposition have focused on the person of chief anti-corruption prosecutor Laura Codruta Kovesi, whom the PSD succeeded in removing in July of this year. Kovesi and her DNA (National Anti-Corruption Agency) have been instrumental in Romanian politics in recent years, and enjoyed the support of the EU powers as well as both the Bush and Obama administrations.

A WikiLeaks cable showed that in 2006, then-FBI Director Robert Muller advised Kovesi on the need for stepped-up wire tapping and promised increased FBI collaboration with her office. Reports have circulated in the Romanian media of the intimate ties between the DNA and the secret services. These reports, though unverified, led to the resignation of the SRI (Internal Intelligence Agency) operational director.

The PSD attempted to counter this pressure by staging its own rally in June. In front of nearly 100,000 supporters brought to the capital, PSD speakers denounced the DNA and SRI. Greetings were sent from the platform to the Trump White House, which was said to be engaged in a similar fight against the "deep state."

The Obama-appointed US ambassador issued a warning that there were aggressive mobs participating in the PSD rally. Several days later, it was officially announced that he would be replaced by New York real estate lawyer Adrian Zuckerman, whose family emigrated from Romania.

The PSD rally, despite ostensibly condemning wire tapings and political meddling by the prosecutors, failed to attract significant genuine popular support. This party is synonymous with bourgeois rule after the restoration of capitalism in the 1990s, trampling on the most basic social and democratic rights, often in tandem with the same forces it condemns today. Its government is currently involved in a historic attack on workers, having recently put into law the shifting of social contributions from the employers to the workers.

Tensions escalated between the two sides on August 10, when an anti-PSD rally turned violent. Ostensibly called as a protest of Romanian émigrés, the roughly 20,000-strong crowd was composed mostly of better-off sections of the middle classes, animated by crude

anti-communist slogans.

In scenes reminiscent of 2009 Moldova or Ukraine's Maidan riots, protesters repeatedly tried to break through police barriers to enter the government building, torched surrounding streets and broke into a nearby museum. Two riot cops were severely beaten and one of their firearms was captured.

The ensuing police crackdown was presented in the pro-EU media as an attempt by PSD leader Dragnea to stifle democratic opposition and consolidate a personal regime, akin to Turkey's Erdogan. Opposition parties and President Klaus Iohannis have requested a parliamentary inquiry into the crackdown, and a military prosecutor has been appointed to investigate. For their part, PSD leaders threatened to impeach the president for his support for the protests and suggested another pro-government rally might be called in Bucharest.

Despite mutual accusations of authoritarianism and attempted coups, both sides are careful not to touch on any issues that might arouse genuine popular opposition, such as foreign policy, health care or the social rights of workers. A few days after the latest events, Iohannis and PSD ministers shared a platform on Navy Day, where they all reiterated their commitment to the preparation of the war against Russia.

A revival of the cutthroat politics that characterized the 1930s is accompanying the return to militarism and war and growing dread in the ruling class of a resurgent working class.



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