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Romania

# Romania's protests - from social justice to class politics

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**Romania was swept at the beginning of February 2017 with the “largest protests since the fall of communism”. The protests were widely covered in the Western press, which generally took the liberal line that the protests represented the Romanian people’s struggle for “democracy” against the widespread “local corruption”, prompted by the scandalous attempt of the current government to “decriminalize corruption”. An undertow of the same interpretation looked at the protests as a democratic revival of the struggles against communist totalitarianism from 1989.**

From the outset I have to insist that the direct line drawn between the December 1989 Revolution and the protests of February 2017, as well as the accompanying comparisons to Ceaușescu [2] are just sensationalist titles which are falsifying history. They reflect the Western erasure of the catastrophic history of post-socialist Eastern Europe, as well as the ongoing self-colonization of the Romanian middle-class, pandering to Western preconceptions. Equally false is the claim that the February protests have been “the first mass social movement in Romania after 1989”. The 2012 popular protests had spread at national level in more than 60 cities and, as opposed to the current protests, were focused on concrete social problems, struggling against the neoliberal cuts in wages, pensions, the health and education systems. Equally important is to analyse the internal dynamics of the protest movement, as opposed to projecting judgments from the outside. While the current protests have started as popular indignation against a furtive decision of the current social-democrat government, on the background of the widespread discontent with the ongoing production of poverty and social division, they have been increasingly taken over by the right-leaning middle-class, which has currently no party representation.

## The truth about anticorruption

The Romanian campaign against corruption has provided an important background of the protests. While the struggle against corruption is a good idea, we have to observe it in its particular institutional history and politico-social context.

The Romanian anticorruption campaign was much lauded and became a feature about “Romania” and the region in the Western press; in one typical report Bulgaria was said to be “ten years behind” Romania, in the Eurocentric timeline to civilization [3]. However, the rise of the National Directorate of Anticorruptio (NDA), the state institution capacitated with the fight against corruption, coincided with the end of the popular illusions with the European dream and the post-socialist transition to capitalism, after the brutal period of primitive accumulation of the 1990s-2000s. The Romanian economy presents now monopolies or quasi-monopolies in almost every economical sector as well as at regional levels. The transition to capitalism meant for Romania massive losses of state wealth (through fire-sale privatizations and deindustrialization), human capital (migrant work), and a massive production of poverty and inequality. 40% of the population is “at risk of poverty or social exclusion”, while 29% are estimated to be “severely materially deprived” [4]. Within EU, the gap between the poor and the rich is the biggest in Romania [5]. As a consequence, it has become very hard to sustain, like in the 1990s and 2000s, that capitalism is the “natural environment of democracy”. After 28 years of transition to capitalism, one cannot argue easily that capitalism will bring a prosperous future anytime soon. Consequently, for the Eurocentric and Capitalocentric-oriented classes, to blame are the local perversions of the Western model: the “savage” or “Balkan” capitalism, tainted by corruption and inefficiency. In the local public sphere, very much dominated by the ideology of anticommunism and by Western mimetism, the “communists” (who stand for anybody from the “left”) and the poor (the local inferior people, racialized) are to blame for the underdevelopment and the corruption of the transition to the capitalist civilization.

Romania's anticorruption campaign raised to prominence in 2013, after the anti-neoliberal protests of 2012, under the new lead of the NDA. In 2014, NDA proudly reported the highest ever number of investigated high-ranked officials. This state institution had been created through a governmental executive order (no.43) in 2002, but acquired its current name and extended powers through another executive order (no.134 from 2005), under the decade-long right-wing presidency of Traian Băsescu (2004-2014). Băsescu also brought together the NDA with the intelligence services by deciding in the Supreme Council of National Defence (17/28.02.2005) that corruption is to be considered a "threat to the national security". The number of arrests made by NDA increased from 360 in 2006 to a whopping 1258 in 2015, including a former prime-minister, five ministers, 67 MPs, 97 mayors and vice-mayors, and 32 directors of state-owned companies. The rate of condemnation reached 90% [6].

What hardly transpired in the liberal Western press was that the anticorruption campaign was based on denunciations and pressure exerted with the active but shadowy involvement of the Romanian Intelligence Service (RIS). The campaign took the form of an internal struggle between groups of private interests, which was articulated through an open conflict between different state apparatuses. Thus, NDA mainly focused on public officers and state-owned companies, prosecuting with extremely high conviction rates. In spite of a few spectacular cases (involving for instance Microsoft in 2014 [7]), the NDA was much less effective in bringing to discussion the corruption of the private sector, although it arguably brought to public visibility the fact that the corruption of the state comes mainly from the direction of private capital. If a capitalist businessman denounced a bribe-taking public officer, this had consequences mostly for the latter. In the process, the close collaboration of NDA with RIS, the main Romanian intelligence service, led to an unprecedented rise in power of these two agencies. At one point even former president Băsescu, who created this autonomous concentration of power within the state, accused the NDA of acting unconstitutionally and against human rights. As a consequence, even the Western press started to temper its enthusiasm and caught up with the abuses of anticorruption: New York Times talked in condescending terms about "Romania's anti-corruption mania" [8]; The Guardian cautioned on a high tone that the anticorruption campaign was now "weakening democracy" [9]; the Financial Times argued that the "fetish of anticorruption" is basically bad for business [10]. Within Romania, the increasing public disclosure of the abuses of NDA and RIS led to the President Iohannis (moderate right-wing) having to admit that the involvement of RIS was outside the bounds of the constitution [11], and to fire the top RIS general Florian Coldea.

In conclusion, the anti-corruption campaign has been a form of internal critique which appeared precisely when the injustices of capitalism have become too obvious. It never questioned the general paradigm of the transition and never asked for systemic change. The anti-corruption campaign has been the ideological answer of Eurocentric liberalism to the popular demand for social justice and the emerging consciousness that the post-socialist transition has been a social catastrophe. The anticorruption campaign was only ever meant to "clean the system" and kept on falling back to the vocabulary of "setbacks", "inefficiency", as Eastern Europe was still "catching up". Within Romania, the anti-corruption campaign represented the success story of an internal civilizing mission, which was acceptable as long as it represented the only stately preoccupation with social justice. In reality it also brought an unprecedented reorganisation of power within the state apparatuses, as the secretive collaboration between NDA and RIS was instrumental in the struggle between different interest groups and accentuated the internal fragmentation of the post-socialist state under capitalism.

## The recent popular protests in Romania

Notwithstanding the internal struggles for power and external pressures, the rise in power of the Romanian anticorruption agency has come on the social background of an increasing public demand for social justice. Here, before admiring the impressive numbers of protesters from February 2017, it is important to underline that Romania already had a strong track record of popular protests with significant consequences in recent history.

Thus, the anti-neoliberal popular protests from 2012 lead to the demise of the neoliberal Prime-minister Boc (2008-2012) and the eventual exit of President B?escu (2004-2014), who has arguably been the most important figure of right-wing politics of the post-socialist transition. Most importantly, the protests of 2012 marked a nominal change of the local political sphere from the right to the left, which has not been fully accepted until the present. After 2012, the right was forced to soften its neoliberal radicalism and even to borrow from the themes and vocabulary of the left. Of course, the official “left” was represented by the Social-Democrat Party, which ran center-left and center-right policies but relied traditionally on a significant electoral base amongst the poor and disenfranchised. Nevertheless, the 2012 protests were the first state-wide protests after 1989 that articulated the general discontent of the population with the direction of the post-socialist transition to capitalism. More than two decades after 1989, a new historical consciousness seemed to take shape, fueled by the subjective feeling of having been cheated and robbed in the transition, as well as by the objective perception of the plunder of the considerable wealth of the former communist state.

One year later, in September 2013, popular protests flared up again, with mobilizations across the country and amongst the migrant workers abroad, united against the gold mining project at Ro?ia Montana. The resulting “Uni?i Salv?m” movement also articulated protests against an amnesty project and featured prominently the slogan “Nu corpora?ia face legislatia!” (The Corporation Does Not Make The Legislation). However, as opposed to 2012, the protest movements of 2013 were marked by the clear rise of the middle-class and a change in tone and direction. The protest signs tended to be less confrontational, more “funny and smart”, more metaphorical, and the chants fell often into anti-communist and ethno-nationalist tropes. Yet the protests succeeded in stopping the gold mine project at Ro?ia Montana, which was declared “closed” by the then prime-minister Ponta (social-democrat), leading also to a fall in the stocks of the Canadian Gabriel Resources corporation. However, when in October 2013 a rural revolt erupted in Punge?ti against another extractivist project, the urban middle-classes of the Uni?i Salv?m movement failed to react to the same extent. Moreover, the movement failed to counter the new discourse which distinguished the “bad capitalists” at Ro?ia Montana from the good capitalists at Punge?ti (Chevron, “real professionals”). The police declared an emergency situation in the region, the Punge?ti revolt was silenced, and Chevron announced in December that it resumed work. I would suggest that the obvious contradiction lead informally to the dissolution of the movement. Nevertheless, the movement and associated developments did lead eventually to the formation of the newest political party with parliamentary representation in Romania (USR), which currently includes MPs with a background in social protests.

In November 2014, right-leaning mobilizations in the last two weeks leading to the presidential elections determined the surprise victory of Klaus Iohannis against the social-democrat candidate Ponta, who remained, however, prime-minister. One year later, in November 2015, after the tragic fire at Colectiv Club on October 30 2015, Bucharest witnessed once again massive demonstrations – featuring predominantly the urban middle class. Corruption was blamed for the tragedy and the protests lead to the resignation of the weakened prime-minister Ponta, accused of ...plagiarism. A provisional government of “technocrats” was installed in November 2015 – mostly bureaucrats with careers in EU apparatuses and Western development agencies. Finally, the general elections of 2016 brought a clear electoral victory of the social-democrats and promised the first period of governing stability since 2012.

It can be argued that from 2012 to 2017, as the political sphere nominally switched to the left, Romania dealt with an ongoing situation of governmental instability. In 2012 Romania had three different acting prime-ministers; the same in 2015; between 2012-2014, the “social-democrat” Ponta lead three different governments, under strong internal and external pressures. At the end, Ponta was forced to resign. The following technocrat government of Ciolo? (2015-2016, right-leaning) was mainly responsible with keeping the state afloat, but also conceived a “plan for ending poverty”, which did address the general public concern and promised implicitly a more humane revival of the moderate right-wing [12]. Let's also recall shortly that during the same period, in neighboring Ukraine, the local popular protests were stifled by the overarching geopolitical moves of the West and Russia. The Bucharest protests were rather indifferent or to the fact that a convoy with hundreds of US armoured tanks (!) were just crossing the country and were deployed on the Eastern border of Romania. At the non-socialist end of the transition to “capitalism

and democracy”, Eastern Europe has disappeared as a political entity, becoming simply a geopolitical borderline between the West and Russia and a mirror used to reflect the Western face. Yet, during the time of the Obama administration, Eastern Europe has become one of the “conflict regions” of the world where capitalist oligarchs and elite nationalists assume political power.

The return of ethno-nationalists in Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria certainly show a systemic disillusionment with the liberal European dream. The anticorruption campaign that became so prominent in the Romanian state seemed to keep alive a pro-Western, moderately right-leaning struggle for liberal democracy. When seen from the standpoint of Eastern Europe, the Romanian anticorruption campaign actually belongs to the same right-wing register as the contemporary ethno-nationalism of Hungary and Poland. Finally, in 2017, after a new nominal switch to the left which promised governmental stability, protests erupted in Bucharest, prompted by an incredible blunder of the social-democrat government.

## The protests of February 2017

As if they were completely oblivious to their own history and society, the new government furtively passed during the night of January 31/ February 1st (!) an executive urgency act which introduced a few changes to the Penal Code, aiming to soften or decriminalize the abuse of public office. Amongst many other politicians, the leader of the ruling social-democrat party was to be positively affected by the change. Massive protests promptly erupted in most of the cities of Romania, and prominently in Bucharest. After five days of protests, the government was forced to issue on February 5 another urgency act cancelling the first one, in a decree which clumsily acknowledged the power of the street.

This time around, the protests oscillated from the beginning between calls to cancel the decriminalizing decree and, on the contrary, step up the social justice campaign, and anti-communist chants simply aimed at the governing social-democrats (the “red pest”). The protests were generally peaceful and exerted little to no pressure on the police. As the days went by, they featured giant laser projectors, lots of “smart and funny” signs, and kept on bringing to prominence the new generation of “beautiful people”, the urban middle classes, including the “creatives”, IT workers, capitalist businessmen, and even a bank director. The street rallies were very much rallies on the social media too; one of the massive rallies was choreographed so that the crowd produced with its smartphones a giant version of the Romanian flag, sharing afterwards on social media all the reports of the event from the Western press. As expected, a report was soon published on Washington Post with the title “Romanian creativity is hallmark of huge anti-graft protests” [13]. Promptly, a Romanian news site reported back the Western reaction with the added title “What Does It Mean To Protest Like a Romanian” [14]. The idea of the “Romanian” was clearly determined in this instance by the Western take.

The next week, the protests tended to be self-focused or self-interested rather than focused on social issues; every other protester seemed to stream live on social media “from the protest” and to share Western reports praising the struggle for democracy of the “Romanian people”. After the cancelling of the decriminalizing act, the protests centered on anti-government messages (“thieves” and “incompetents”), and insulting messages targeting the electoral base of the social-democrats (poor, old, smelly, with bad teeth) and the pro-government part of the culture industry (“fake news”). The indignation of the middle-class took not only classist, but downright proto-fascist tones. The situation became such that a journalist felt free to express on social media her indignation that the uneducated, poor people are eating from the dumpsters. Furthermore, one could clearly see the return of certain neoliberal tropes (such as arguments against increasing the minimum wage), as well as a barrage of sympathetic interviews with businessmen and entrepreneurs [15] and even initiatives from the good IT people to censor the “fake news”. The manifestations also tended to praise the NDA as a social justice institution. The public faces of the protests arguably tended to revert to dreams of a clean and civilized capitalism by way of anticorruption, which would eliminate the

incompetent people from governance and the ugly people from relevance.

# Reactions from the left

The Romanian independent left, which encompasses very different groups and tendencies, while appreciative of the initial mass mobilization, was remarkably united in the criticism of the context and the direction taken by the protests. Many reactions from the independent left focused on the class politics of the anticorruption campaign, criticism of the governing party, analyses of the social composition of the protests and the ensuing tasks for the left.

Tudorina Mihai underlined [16] that the right-leaning culture industry and social media has simply not accepted the nominal switch to the left, namely the fact that the winners of the democratic elections of 2016 were the “corrupts”. She noticed that in the aftermath of PSD’s blunder, “the public debate is currently monopolized by the issue of corruption. The debates about wages, pensions, contributions, social houses, schools, kindergartens and nurseries have become ancillary. Even the national anti-poverty campaign... was forgotten”. She also expressed serious doubts about the capacity of PSD to assume a leftist discourse.

Ciprian ?iulea wrote in Baricada [17] that the “anticorruption is the local equivalent of the ethnical and religious chauvinisms sustaining nowadays the surrogates of Western democracy in Hungary and Poland... it is the main force ensuring the domination of the middle class of ‘civilisation’ and ‘occidentalism’ against the retrograde crowd of fools”. As for the government party, he noticed that “PSD has blown up the political stability and made a mockery of the people who placed hopes in their governing program”. As a consequence, “during a time of serious social and economic problems, the social and economic perspective is nowhere to be found in the public space” and “the debate on the dubious relations between the secret services and the justice system has been stifled”. He underlined the mutations of power determined by the rise of anticorruption: “PSD did not understand how much power has moved outside the political system. NDA has become an extraordinary center of right-wing power, able to work with the services and to make alliances with other state institutions or the presidency... Why right-wing? Because by identifying democracy and the public good with the rule of law, the anticorruption eliminates the social state... reduces it to the negative action of combating illegality, and sustains a social order that privileges the upper classes: a lot of legality, small taxes and very few social services”.

Costi Rogozanu noticed in VoxPublica and for CriticAtac [18] that the protests featured for the first time “many of the top 5 percenters”. As a consequence, “the protests are dominated by the discourse of a middle class asking for a new post-crisis contract, which would enlist the exclusive support of a part of the state”. He further observes that “while the political abuse is met with intransigence, the abuses of the business world are easily accepted” and calls for the rejection of the alternative between social policies coming with corruption, on one side, and anticorruption coming with the destruction of the social state, on the other.

Mãœna de Lucru (CWI supporters in Romania) also emphasized the class politics of the protests [19]: “the tendency to diabolize the entire electorate of PSD, often in class terms... comes packed with a lazy narrative about ‘the two Romanias’: on the one hand, the urban, middle-class, educated half that wants a democratic and modern country and which is now in the streets; on the other hand, the rural, poor, uneducated half that holds us back by voting with corrupt parties like PSD”. Consequently, ML argued that “the left has to categorically denounce the PSD government with all its undemocratic abuses and right-wing agenda, while at the same time drawing attention to the limits of the anti-corruption struggle as well as to the right-wing features of the protests”.

Rãœvna (anarcho-communists) argued [20] that anticorruption is a power struggle between different factions within the state and therefore presents no interest for the working class, but warned that a fascist tendency may well lurk



underneath the sympathies of the protesters for authoritarian institutions like the NDA and the deep resentments of middle-class protesters for the perceived inferior class.

The Demos Platform [21] insisted on the complexity of the movement and against the reduction of the protests to a right-wing tendency, and pleaded for the reformation of the democratic left outside and against PSD, which is considered “fundamentally corrupt and unreformable”.

Florin Poenaru wrote for Political Critique [22] that “anti-corruption has been a very destabilizing factor of Romanian politics ... it dialed down on the powers of Parliament and cut the leadership of the mainstream parties to the bone. Additionally, anti-corruption managed to compromise politics itself ... To put it shortly, politics itself became a synonym for corruption”. He also emphasized the resulting fragmentation of the state: “we now witness a split within the executive of the country: on the one hand is the Prime Minister, backed by the Parliamentary majority; on the other hand is the President, who enjoys the support of the judicial system and controls the secret intelligence service. The protesters on the streets are clearly in favor of the latter, sometimes in explicit terms”. He also noticed the class politics of the protests: “the mobilization against the government was also a mobilization against its economic policies. The Social Democrats increased the minimum wage and pensions, cut taxes for the poorest segments, and increased – even though just slightly, compared to the needs – the social welfare spending....Unsurprisingly, corporate workers (especially their bosses), were on the streets to protest. People in Bucharest’s corporations were offered free days off work to be able to stay up at night and protest against the government”.

## Conclusion

The Romanian protests from February 2017 exposed the corrupt and/or inept organization of the ruling PSD, but also emphasized the size of its political apparatus; they tended to exert right-wing pressures on the center-right social-democrat party and gave new expression to class politics. The events underlined that the issue of anticorruption is not ideologically neutral, but leans heavily to the right and has appeared in a particular historical context, as the “European dream” unravels at the disappointing end of the transition to capitalism of the former socialist bloc. After admitting its mistake, the government has been significantly weakened but trudges along. For now, we are confronted with a situation in which the left seems to temporarily have “lost the street”, and yet the protesting middle class is clearly new to the culture of protest, and stops short of pushing for a regime change.

In the longer view, the former socialist bloc is at the end of the transition to capitalism. We are confronted with a generalized disenchantment with the liberal European dream (which marks the return of ethno-nationalists but could also spark renewed politics of the communal, as well as regional internationalism against the West-Russia divisions). We also face a generalized discontent with the plunder of local wealth and with the current situation of capitalist monopolies and quasi-monopolies. At this end, we are presented with two deeply diverging tendencies: one towards the recomposition of capital (the transition 2.0), the other towards the social recomposition of a deeply unequal society. Although the protests started from the common ground of asking for social justice at the core of governance, the participating middle-class moved clearly in the first direction, articulating the vision of a capitalist state with a cleaner and maybe more humane face. Society would still be organized around money, but would be run by a competent elite of Westernized experts. The discontent is also caused by the fact that currently the middle-class simply lacks real political representation outside the Presidency. The one-year Ciolo? government seemed to embody a new generation of moderate right-wing politics, yet remained non-committal as the crisis exploded. It is important to recall that at this point all three right-wing parties that have governed during the post-socialist transition have been poetically sanctioned by the Romanian people: they have either disappeared (PNT, PDL) or are at their lowest level yet (PNL).

The events from Bucharest may signal indeed a shifting terrain of politics, a degradation of electoral democracy, in

which the political struggle takes place to a significant extent outside the electoral field. The anti-corruption campaign and the dissolution of the dominant post-socialist ideologies have depleted the political class. In a fragmented state the urban middle class tries to claim the support of certain state institutions with good reputation, willing to either pay the price or ignore that they acquired power in conjunction with private interests and by aligning to hegemonic external pressures. The economic stagnation coupled with the emergence in political power of capitalist oligarchs throughout the region may also indicate the coming of yet another wave of privatization and recomposition of capital, under “innovative” forms claiming to combat inefficiency and corruption.

The social and communal background of the protests remains justified and unrepresented, expressing a historical desire for social justice and well-being which cannot be reduced to the struggle against corruption. For now, the pressing issues of the redistribution of wealth and of regaining popular sovereignty lurk in the background but are not explicitly on the table of either the left or right. The radically increased contradiction between popular sovereignty and state sovereignty (expressed by the ascension of the NDA police and the secret services to the public sphere) may lead to further aggravations in the context of external militarization. In this situation, organizing a social forum on wealth redistribution, popular sovereignty and regional peace, or simply on changing positively the direction of the transition, seems more necessary and opportune than ever, especially if it brings together the various groups of the protest movements, the independent left and the progressives from existent parliamentary parties. To be continued with another effort.

[criticattac](#)

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[1] See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-r...>, or: <http://time.com/4660860/romania-pro...>

[2] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/op...>

[3] <http://www.euronews.com/2016/11/03/...>

[4] <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/...>

[5] <http://adevarul.ro/economie/bani/c...>

[6] <http://anticoruptie.hotnews.ro/stir...>

[7] [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosarul\\_%E2%80%9EMicrosoft%E2%80%9D](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosarul_%E2%80%9EMicrosoft%E2%80%9D)

[8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/...>

[9] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2...>

[10] <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/20...>

[11] <http://www.cotidianul.ro/administra...>

[12] <http://www.ziare.com/dacian-ciolos/...>

[13] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/worl...>



[14] <http://www.ziar.com/news=10373774>

[15] See for instance the following painful report, half-commercial half a businessmen's philosophy about protests:  
<http://www.startupcafe.ro/stiri-afa...>

[16] <http://adevarul.ro/blogs/tudorina.mihai>

[17] <http://baricada.org/anticoruptia-im...>

[18] <http://voxpública.realitatea.net/po...>

[19] <http://www.socialistworld.net/doc/7875>

[20] <https://iasromania.wordpress.com/20...>

[21] [www.platforma-demos.ro](http://www.platforma-demos.ro)

[22] <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/20...>