

Romania's recent protests have become a social movement calling for the dignity of the people in the face of an unaccountable government.

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While originally sparked by the government's plan to partially privatize the health-care system, **Clara Volintiru** argues that the recent protests and demonstrations in Romania are ultimately not only about the reform of social security systems and austerity measures, but also have the aim of achieving greater government transparency and accountability.



Remus Prata lives in the small village of Baia de Aries, in Romania. He is 50 years old and following his own testimony his occupation is "to live from one day to the next". He claims he's decided to protest against president Basescu and the current Government, because of the poverty and the corruption that affects his country. He obtained a permit to protest in front of the local City Hall, without disclosing what he will be protesting against. Only after he had obtained the permit, he wrote down his objectives: "Down with Basescu! Down with the Government!".

Concomitantly with this one-man show, hundreds, and in some places, thousands of Romanians gathered in approximately 60 cities across the country to manifest their discontent against the other one-man show of the current administration: president's Traian Basescu overly intrusive actions in the political and executive spheres. Their actions resulted in the resignation of the government, on the 6th of February, which together with a severe winter climate ended the street protests. Nevertheless, a prolonged paralysis has been instituted in the governing process, as the opposition and the ruling coalition escalate their differences and debates.

Romanian protests, which rather ill fatedly kick-started 2012, have followed a widespread pattern of protest movements. Over the past year, we've witnessed a prolonged and intensive series of protests engulfing the cities of Europe, from the massive 'indignants' gatherings in Spain, Greece, and Italy, to "occupy" movements in London, Frankfurt or Davos. How does Romania fit in this pattern?



In Romania, apart from half-hearted syndicate marches, genuine street protests didn't occur in response to any of the economic reforms implemented over the past year, such as the pension and salary cuts, or the increases in taxes. Once ignited, protests didn't stop, as people continued to agitate for the resignation of the president and the government, even after the apparent trigger cause disappeared—a new health bill, which controversially aimed at privatizing the emergency services was redrawn, and the popular secretary of state, Raed Arafat, reinstated. So what are the protests really about?

From their side, people claim it's a battle for dignity more than a battle for personal prosperity. The protesters—pensioners, students, employees, seem to be triggered to a greater extent by what they

call humiliating treatment from their elected representatives. Thus, they invoke the contempt manifested by ministers and the president himself; some of the officials' first reactions to the protests were to call them "worms" or "violent and inept slum-dwellers". This triggered even more indignation within the population, thickening the lines in University Square—the evocative main protest location in Bucharest, the country's capital.

Like in neighboring Hungary, where a new constitution was passed with the two-thirds parliamentary majority despite political and popular widespread opposition, Romania's latest legislative reforms also circumvented public opinion. Even more stringently than in the Hungarian case, the Romanian Government chose to engage its responsibility before the Chambers, passing over the will of the MPs completely. Although the engagement of responsibility is sanctioned by article 114 in the Constitution, the number and significance of the legislation enacted by this procedure—over 14 national interest laws on education, labor, health, justice or the electoral system, was essentially undemocratic.

On their side, the ruling party and its supporters, both in the public, and the media, claim the protests were triggered by the opposition's manipulation and the austerity measures that overused the patience of the Romanian people. In their defense, the economic data seems to show that the current administration is doing a good job: IMF estimations point to a 2.5 % economic growth in 2011, with all quantitative performance criteria and indicative targets met to date. Within the general continental turmoil, these would generally be considered good news, but the living standards continue to remain low, and the state apparatus remains tainted by accusations of corruption and clientelism.

The Romanian protests may be very much like the solo protestor from Baia de Aries: synchronized to a broader series of connected events, but ultimately singular in its proceedings. Instead of a coherent list of demands, Romanians are putting forward popular characters: a 10 year old reminiscent of Hugo's Gavroche who ran away from home to protest, a young major Alexandru Gheorghe who eloquently reminds the army officials they serve the people first and foremost, reiterating the famous '89 message "The army is with the people!", a student who holds an "I love democracy!" sign, or the "Conan Policeman" who overzealously charges against vandals. Thus, from the TV stations, to Facebook and Twitter, the Romanian media is coalescing on what is sooner a festival mood, than a protest mood.

Still, the real issues of the quality of governance, the austerity measures, or the legislative reforms find their way into the general conversations sooner or later. The problem is that, at least for now, they are individually tailored, with highly dispersed voices. Putting the proverbial cart before the horse, Liviu Prata wrote in his demands only after he had obtained the permit to protest, which is suggestive of the broader protests requests: first obtain the resignation of the current government, think about the alternatives later.

The problem with this sequencing is that although there was great unity in diagnosing the problem—the current administration, there is massive polarization regarding the solution—anything from the more conventional options in favour of technocratic intermediary administrations (like Italy, and Greece) or the opposition parties, to the wildly unfeasible constitutional monarchy, formation of new political parties, or even massive dissolution of state structures. With local elections probably taking place in June 2012, it remains to be seen just how the Romanian protests will translate into democratic solutions.

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