

# Romania: Reflections on the street protests and the country's communist past

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*Protests have continued in Romania despite the government revoking a controversial decree that would have decriminalised some forms of misconduct by public officials. [Dennis Deletant](#) traces the roots of the protest through Romania's communist past, writing that corruption, autocratic impulses, and incompetence have characterised the attitudes and actions of successive governments and the bureaucracy since the revolution.*



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Communism has cast a long shadow over Romania. Since the overthrow of Ceaușescu, Romania's progress along the road to political and economic reform has been hesitant. Given the chequered achievements of successive governments since the revolution, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the political will to reform has been lukewarm. Events have shown that the impetus for reform has come from outside rather than from within. The International Monetary Fund, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the United States and NATO have been the major catalysts of reform and the need to satisfy the requirements of these institutions in order to achieve integration into the so-called 'Euro-Atlantic structures' spurred and guided the reform process in Romania.

Whereas Ceaușescu succeeded in uniting Romanians in opposition to him, his fall threw them into confusion. In what at the time seemed to be the only revolution to live up to its name, the reasoning in the West was that because Romania had cast aside a communist dictator it would become democratic and peaceful. The Romanians whom I met in Bucharest in the closing days of December 1989 – and they were largely young men and women in their late teens and early twenties who were helping to guard the Central Committee building and the TV headquarters – were exuberant at Ceaușescu's overthrow, but that exuberance was tinged with apprehension about the future. That apprehension proved prophetic. At Christmas 1989, the Western and Romanian media were interpreting the

overthrow as the 'people's revolution', rightly praising the predominant role of the young, and yet within a month many Romanians had become disillusioned, complaining bitterly about the 'theft' of their revolution by the 'neo-Communists'.

### Romania's communist legacy

The legacy of totalitarian rule in Romania was therefore markedly different from that elsewhere. In the words of one of the young 'revolutionaries' wearing the tricolor armband of red, yellow and blue whom I met guarding the entrance to a metro station shortly after my arrival in Bucharest with the BBC in late December 1989, "we want real democracy, not Romanian democracy." That they should do so is not surprising. Although the Romanian Communist Party was declared dead in January 1990, no one produced a death certificate – members of the Party merely swapped their cards for those of the ruling National Salvation Front and most of them carried on as if nothing had changed in Romanian political life.

The NSF tried to blend into the present and bury the past. Its successor, the Social Democratic Party of Romania (PSD), showed a similar reluctance to question the past. Only a few of those responsible for the bloodshed in December 1989 were brought to trial. The anti-democratic instincts of those who grasped power in late December 1989 brought the miners to Bucharest in June 1990. Their incursions then and in the following year bore the hallmarks of the tactics used by the Communists in Romania in 1945 and elsewhere in Central Europe to subvert democratic order.

Yet the overthrow of Ceaușescu did lead to a political revolution: the single-party monopoly was removed, multi-party elections – albeit flawed – were held in 1990, the command economy was dismantled, and censorship abolished. There was a democratic transfer of power in 1996 when the neo-Communists suffered their first defeat at the ballot box since the revolution. At the personal level, possession of a passport became a right, not a privilege, in early 1990, and therefore restrictions on travel abroad by the state were removed. The reviled abortion decree, introduced by Ceaușescu, was immediately rescinded. Yet the rule of law was fragile, and reform of the judicial system was sorely needed. The political will to bring senior politicians to court to face credible charges of corruption was wanting. For Romanians, the words attributed to Honoré de Balzac, 'Laws are spider webs through which the big flies pass and the little ones get caught', ran particularly true.

One analyst of Romania [had this to say](#) in 1990 about that country: 'Political life in Romania is again being vitiated by malevolence, calumny, fantastic rumour, paranoia, and irresponsibility. Things are indeed getting back to normal.' Much of this is still true today. Indeed, prime minister Dacian Cioloș [complained](#) in October 2016 that he was upset that 'in Romania no one no longer trusts anyone and everyone proceeds from the assumption that everything is a lie.'

A major legacy of communist rule in Romania was legal confusion. After 1990, the five-year economic plan was abandoned and a 'jungle' economy emerged in which the principal elements were the accumulation of capital and the formation of new economic and political elites. The latter often had their roots in the ranks of old Communist Party activists and members of the *Securitate*. The slow rate of privatisation in 1990-1996 can be explained by the former communist elites' desire to control change in Romania. To control change in the economy they required time to accumulate capital. Such privatisations were often by management buyouts in the absence of a credible legal framework. They could be termed 'a-legal' rather than 'illegal'.

A numerous class of profiteers took advantage of this climate. Most of them were managers of state-owned enterprises who perfected the art of buying and selling under the table, but this black economy extended to the heads of the *Securitate*-controlled trade companies involved in dealing in precious metals and arms. Many of these company heads siphoned off their commission for sales to private accounts abroad and used these funds after 1990 to fund new import-export companies based on the contacts they had made with foreign partners under Ceaușescu.

The transition from the state-controlled command economy to a market economy was hesitant, with laws introduced

while communist-era laws, not being annulled, were still on the statute book. This situation led to duplication of legislation and judicial inconsistency in the early 1990s. It is thus hardly surprising that foreign investors shied away from Romania. Foreign direct investment in Romania between 1990 and 2003 totalled 10 billion USD, whereas by comparison Poland received almost the same amount in 2000 alone.

## The 2017 protests

It was only after the resolution of the 2012 constitutional crisis, provoked by the PSD government's unsuccessful attempt to impeach President Traian Băsescu, that observers of Romania felt able to believe that an aspiration for the rule of law could be translated into a respect for it. It is only through such respect that a country can be accepted as an equal partner in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Yet good government still eludes Romania. Here the dictum that 'we should never make the perfect the enemy of the good' comes to mind but this does not justify the cognitive dissonance exhibited by many in government in Romania over the last quarter-century which is reflected in denials that a problem exists.

Perhaps, in analyses of Romania, there is a tendency to offer logic to a situation where no logic exists, yet the fact remains that failure to respect the rule of law and widespread corruption pose a danger to the internal cohesion and stability of the state, a danger underlined by Romania's alliance partners. The contempt for the electorate shown by the PSD government of Liviu Dragnea by its furtive issue of an executive order – it did not go through parliament – on the night of 31 January, 2017 to decriminalise misconduct by public officials causing damage worth less than about \$48,000, opened the PSD to the charge that it was not a party that represented the interests of disadvantaged social groups and the working class but one for corrupt oligarchs and bureaucrats.

In effect, the PSD government, it can be argued, was seeking to legalise corruption, transforming its *de facto* status into a *de jure* one. The order met with the largest continuous street protests seen in Romania since the revolution, with more than 150,000 people estimated to have gathered on five successive evenings in front of the government's headquarters in Bucharest's *Piața Victoriei* and tens of thousands more rallying on the streets of around twenty other cities calling for the measure to be withdrawn.

It provoked a swift reaction from the embassies of Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands and the United States. In a [joint statement](#), the embassies declared that the ordinance 'can only undermine Romania's standing in the international community and risks damaging partnerships that are based on common values, inherent in the guiding principles of the EU and NATO.' The consequences of the executive order's rescindment, announced by the government on 5 February, are mired in the persisting confusion that still blights the interpretation and application of significant legislation.

Western values rest implicitly on an idea of human kind which seeks to cultivate the inherent dignity of the individual. The West enshrines that aim in institutions which it has formed and which are based on freedom, government by consent, and the rule of law. Some Romanian politicians respect the application of the law, and the vigilance of the press. Many do not. Honesty is a more important attribute than the capacity to charm, character trumps personality. Corruption, autocratic impulses, widespread incompetence, and a lack of professionalism have characterised the attitudes and actions of successive governments and the bureaucracy since the revolution.

Over the last three years, major progress has been made in the drive against corruption in the ranks of the political and business elite, a drive which itself is not without its flaws. Addressing the other problems in the public domain will require not only a continued concerted effort from the judicial institutions and from Romanian society, but especially a commitment from the Romanian government and parliament to respect and protect the will of the people.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor*

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