

## Romania's politics on fire: Why Victor Ponta resigned and what it means for the country

*A tragic accident at a Bucharest nightclub resulted in 32 people losing their lives and triggered a series of events that culminated in the resignation of Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta on 4 November. Ponta was already under significant pressure to quit following corruption allegations, but had resisted handing in his resignation until now. Why this change of heart? [Dan Brett](#) provides a comprehensive analysis of the situation and points out that, for Ponta, resigning over an accident he could not be blamed for was the easiest way out. Despite Ponta's resignation, widespread anger at perceived political corruption has ensured protests have continued on the streets of Romanian towns and cities, with even the country's popular President Klaus Iohannis potentially in the firing line.*



Victor Ponta's [resignation](#) as Romania's Prime Minister on the morning of 4 November, after 20,000 people protested on the streets of Bucharest the day before, came as something of a surprise. Ponta – who had survived protests since becoming Prime Minister, had been accused of plagiarism and corruption, was heavily defeated in the [Presidential elections](#), and was facing court cases for [corruption](#) – had so far refused to quit. Now, following the deaths of 32 people in a fire at the [Colectiv Club](#) in Bucharest, he has finally resigned.

Despite Ponta's resignation, more protesters took to the streets on Wednesday night: the newspaper *Gândul* reported [30,000](#) people on the streets, with others placing the number as high as 60,000. The protests have not been limited to Bucharest, as is often the case, but have spread to provincial towns and cities including Cluj, Iași, Ploiești, Brașov, Alba Iulia, Miercurea-Ciuc, and Râmnicu-Vâlcea, reflecting the nationwide anger.



'Corruption is toxic' (via [Gândul](#))

The deaths at an unsafe club with no fire protection galvanised the population to take their widespread discontent to the streets. The protests come in the wake of the death of a [police motorcyclist](#) in a motorcade for Deputy Prime Minister Gabriel Oprea. Although Oprea was not entitled to a motorcade, he had claimed one anyway, using it for things such as his trips to the hairdresser and restaurants. Following the death, Ponta used his powers of emergency decree to change the law [post-factum](#) to entitle Oprea to a motorcade. Oprea has since come under further scrutiny over his [military and academic CV](#).

In the eyes of the population, the tragic accident at the club was the result of corruption, with permits and licenses given out upon receipt of a bribe. Indeed, the recent [anti-corruption drive](#) resulted in the Mayor of Bucharest Sorin Oprescu being caught red-handed taking bribes. After the fire, appeals for blood donations and medicine for the victims brought into sharper focus the underfunding of healthcare services and the theft of public money by the elite, who are accused of squandering it on vanity projects.

Corruption and enrichment is such a common feature of Romanian political life that it has become easy to dismiss it as 'over-stated' or to say 'they are all equally corrupt, so why care?'; however, the deaths of 32 people as a direct result of corruption has provoked widespread anger. It is no longer a game played by elite politicians to enrich themselves or their cronies, but rather the cause of the deaths of many innocent people.

## Key figures

Ponta came to power on the back of street protests against austerity in 2011-12. Seeing the popular anger, Ponta's [Social Democratic Party](#) (PSD) allied with members of the [National Liberal Party](#) (PNL) to form the [Social Liberal Union](#) electoral coalition (USL) and positioned themselves as opposed to austerity. In so doing, they successfully captured the sentiments and used them to propel themselves to power. However, once in office Ponta and the USL went back on every promise made. This explains the anger with the system – a political elite that has consistently captured and then betrayed every popular movement from the revolution of 1989.

While Victor Ponta and the allegations against him are relatively well known, his deputy and Interior Minister [Gabriel Oprea](#) is less well known. Oprea is a member of the smaller [National Union for the Progress of Romania](#) (UNPR) party. The UNPR is in office not because they gained enough votes, but because they agreed to be part of the USL electoral coalition with the PSD, and at the time the PNL, against then President Basescu's [Democratic Liberal Party](#) (PDL).



A part of various governments since the fall of communism, he has frequently switched sides, always claiming that it was 'in the national interest'. His roots lie in the military and the security apparatus, although his path from waiter in the military restaurant to four-star general has recently come under scrutiny. He is also reported to have threatened critical bloggers by telephone as well. Thus he is seen as a very murky and unpleasant politician.

Cristian Popescu aka Piedone, the mayor of Sector 4 in Bucharest, has also resigned. Bucharest has a mayor, and its 6 districts each have their own mayor as well. Piedone's sector includes the working class district of Berceni, as well as the southern part of Central Bucharest. Piedone is a member of Oprea's UNPR, but he had previously been elected as an independent mayor.

A populist, activist mayor, Piedone made his name as a health inspector, going to the markets with a television crew in tow and condemning meat that was unsafe. He maintained a visible profile on the streets of Sector 4; in the winter he could be seen outside directing trucks clearing the snow. In a country where politicians do nothing, he was seen as doing something. Thus he had built up a considerable support base among the population in Sector 4, whose general appearance and infrastructure considerably improved while he was mayor, and hence he was someone that national actors appealed to for support.

## An arrogant, vain elite

In addition to anger at politicians, anger has become increasingly directed against the Orthodox Church. Criticism has long been levelled against the church for its self-enrichment and exploitation of the poorest members of the population. The church, exempt from paying many taxes, has launched vanity projects such as the Cathedral for the Salvation of the Romanian People, which will cost approximately 500 million euros, and the Romanian Parliament has given [12 million euros of public money to the project](#). Moreover, it was recently revealed that the Patriarch, like Oprea, has also been using a [police motorcade](#). Satirical journal Times New Roman portrays the Patriarch's staff as topped with a dollar sign.

At the same time, the accident has shown the acute pressure under which Romanian hospitals operate. The appeals for [help](#) in the aftermath of the fire highlighted that the [drugs](#) hospitals need are simply unaffordable, and that the hospitals themselves are [under-funded](#) and under-staffed. A state of the art burn unit in Bucharest has [never opened](#) due to lack of resources and trained staff. The contrast between the Church taking money from the state and the population and the underfunding of key services has caused further tensions.

The Church and many politicians and commentators have shown a tin ear in their response to the tragedy. Some have explained the accident as the result of people invoking [Halloween](#) and evil spirits; the [Metropolitan of the Banat](#) claimed that the Church had failed to instil the correct moral values in those who died, suggesting that such values would have saved them. Others, like Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party (PNȚ-CD) leader Aurelian Pavelescu, [rejected the national mourning](#) decreed by the President and accused the victims of being uncultured, drug-taking, promiscuous anarchists.

Akin to an alcoholic denying they have a problem with drinking, apologists for the Church claim that it is being unfairly victimised, that there are many 'good' priests and only a few give the church a bad name; apologists for the PSD deploy much the same argument. However, in both cases this argument is based upon a denial of the problem and a desire to play the victim. This is not only in exceptionally poor taste, given the circumstances, but reflects the problems of a Romanian elite that thinks only of itself.

The exception to this response has perhaps been Piedone, who, after initially denying any responsibility and turning up with papers absolving him of any liability, accepted moral responsibility in his [resignation](#).



The satirical website [Times New Roman](#)'s view of the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Daniel Ciobotea.

### **Where are the intellectuals?**

It is significant that these protests have come from below and reflect anger not just at the government but the wider elite. While President Iohannis has shown more political deftness than Ponta, this anger is directed at the whole establishment, and there is a widespread view that swapping the PSD for the PNL will not improve anything, as the PNL is just as corrupt as the PSD.

While [some intellectuals](#) have criticised others for failing to take an active role, the Romanian intelligentsia as a whole has been deeply ineffective in providing leadership, let alone working with or for the population. Thus something of a vacuum is emerging without any clear leadership or alternative. This has been evidenced in the protests of Tuesday night where [rumours](#) spread of agitators from the security services or other unknown groups attempting to disrupt and divide the protesters.

### **Other roadblocks to reform**

At the same time, it is clear that considerable resistance from the Romanian political elite will remain. Despite the protests and calls for reform, on 4 November a collection of politicians from different parties launched an appeal to the Constitutional Court to challenge the recently passed law allowing the diaspora to [vote by post](#). The diaspora, which is seen as a major force demanding change and supporting the reformists, is seen as an enemy to the political elite.

The timing of the move was deliberate: the cut off for changes to the electoral law is 15 November, and, by waiting until now, the challengers ensured that the Constitutional Court will not be able to make a decision until 18 November. Hence, even if the appeal ends up being rejected, the diaspora will still not be able to vote, and the Romanian political

elite will more easily achieve its goal of keeping the rule. These political games and displays of power by the political elite go some way toward explaining why anger has now boiled over.

### Why resign?

The cynical view expressed by many Romanians is that Ponta is resigning now, when he is not under direct fire, in order to appear as a martyr. He has no direct responsibility for permits for clubs in Bucharest, nor is the incident connected to allegations of corruption against him. If he had resigned when accused of plagiarism or corruption, this would have been seen as an admission of guilt. By resigning over something for which he is not directly responsible, he is trying to make himself look like a 'good guy' – the victim of a baying mob.

Furthermore, by resigning now and taking Oprea and Piedone with him, Ponta has removed the main targets of popular anger. He hopes this will draw the sting out of the protests and that no deeper changes will need to be made. Thus, the resignation of the Ponta government may ensure that no real changes are made in the long run. However, the increase in the size of the protests on the evening of 4 November suggest that this may not happen.

### Where to now?

The recent anti-corruption drive that led to criminal charges being levelled against Ponta has also swept up Mayor of Bucharest Sorin Oprescu, as well as several district Mayors. Large parts of the administration have thus been gutted, with temporary replacements in charge.

One reason Ponta held on for so long as Prime Minister is because, under the Romanian constitution, his successor has to be nominated by the President. Thus it was likely that any replacement would be from President Klaus Iohannis's PNL party rather than Ponta's PSD or their allies. By refusing to resign, and with a sufficient parliamentary majority to ensure that he could not lose a vote of confidence, Ponta was able to brazen his way out. By resigning now, he puts the pressure on Iohannis and Ponta's replacement as president of the PSD, Liviu Dragnea (a man convicted of electoral fraud and suspected of widespread corruption), to find a replacement and to deal with the aftermath.

Some have suggested that the new government will be technocratic in character; however, this view is being met with suspicion that such a government would equate to more of the same. Names being floated as potential Prime Ministers include the likes of Monica Macovei, the former Justice Minister whose work started the current anti-corruption drive. Alternatively, Iohannis may push for early parliamentary elections to take advantage of the weakened PSD. However, this assumes that his supporters (especially in the diaspora) will vote and have not been alienated by anger with the situation. More significantly, the question remains whether the fire will result in any meaningful change in Romanian political life – whether corruption and the shirking of responsibility will end, or whether the names will change while the system remains the same.

The chant of the protesters of 'No PNL, No PSD, No USL, all out' reflects anger at the whole system, and placards warning Iohannis: "you have one chance – no Securitate guys, no Mafia guys, no corruption, otherwise you'll end up in the garbage of history just



Placards warning president Iohannis not to follow in other Romanian politicians' footsteps. (via [Gândul](#))

like Ponta, Băsescu, Iliescu”, show that, while Iohannis has an opportunity to reshape Romanian politics for good and is still widely trusted, he also has a serious challenge to face. Any failure will result in further alienation and anger with the system.

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**Update 11 November 2015:**

**The blog *Prințesa Urbană* has set up a page with information on the most seriously injured and details of how people wish to donate to their care. Several of the victims have been transported abroad, while others remain in Romania for treatment. [Access the page here.](#)**

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## About the author

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