

Narratives Are Sexy: Romanian Corruption Protests and the EU

An interview with Claudiu Crăciun, Ioana Banach-Sirbu

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The Romanian protests of 2018 run the risk of being trapped in a political bubble. To overcome this challenge and become a much larger mobilisation, protesters need to learn to present themselves as an honest third force which crosses partisan lines. The Green European Journal spoke to Ioana Banach, deputy director of the Green European Foundation, and Claudiu Craciun, activist and one of the founders of Demos, a nascent political party in Romania.

Green European Journal: In [an interview with Green European Journal](#), the Romanian public intellectual Alina Mungiu-Pippidi argued that the recent Romanian demonstrations were staged, or at least manipulated by the government. Do you agree?

Ioana Banach: Saying that the protests were staged gives too much credit to the competences of the people running Romania. I assume Professor Mungiu-Pippidi was referring to two main issues that raise suspicions regarding the credibility of the protests. First, opposition parties are using the corruption scandal for political gain, and second, the Social Democrats are still popular, regardless of the protests.

The efforts of the opposition to make a theme out of corruption are natural. On the one hand, because some of them announced in 2016 that they want to run on an anti-corruption platform and, on the other hand, because of the obscenely high level of corruption associated with the current government. Also, the 30 per cent support for the Social Democrats does not mean that there is no disillusionment in the country. The reason for their current support is that there are groups of people who have benefited from the politics of the past three years; not to mention that they have always been good at mobilising people. This appeal is in great part due to the mutually beneficial relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Social Democrat government. The government approves funds for the church and the church supports the government. In a deeply religious society this plays an immense role, even during times of scandal.

Claudiu Craciun: I have to point out that almost every protest in the world is organised by groups that have some form of agenda and every protest is, more or less, co-opted on the political level. The important matter is the degree to which this is done. We had numerous protests after the Social Democrats took power in Romania and right away started working on their new judicial reform and anti-corruption legislation.^[1] All those protests – even though they also represent genuine discontent coming from significant parts of the public – were indeed part of a larger political setting, at least in the sense that they all supported the claims of the political opposition, as well as those of various institutional stakeholders, such as the leaders of the prosecuting offices. And in contrast to previous street movements in Romania, they also accept politicians within the ranks of the protestors. This makes it very difficult to distinguish between protestors and the political opposition.

Ioana Banach: This development has some positive connotations as well. Already in 2016, when we had our latest elections, a large number of people from civil society and the NGO sector decided to get into politics. There are three notable examples here: the Save Romania Union (USR) was launched only two and half years ago and became the third party in Romania after running on an anti-corruption platform in the 2016 legislative elections. Two other parties – the Liberty, Unity and Solidarity Party (lead by Dacian Ciolos, former EU Commissioner and technocrat prime minister) and Demos (the only party proposing an alternative on the Left) have just been officially launched. ^[2] All these parties are predominantly formed by people not previously involved in politics but part of important third sector movements. So, the fine line between politicians and protestors is blurring from both

directions.

Claudiu Craciun: But there is a serious problem with these kinds of protests: this militant civil movement that we can see on the streets these days is not perceived as the silent majority or a demonstration of regular citizens who look for moral and political leadership. And that seriously weakens the street protests.

What is the reason for that?

Claudiu Craciun: People are very dissatisfied with the political class in general. So when you are protesting against corruption but still take sides or accept political leaders at your rallies, you aren't getting out of your political bubble. You might get some convinced people on board, but for the scale of the current challenge you need a much larger mobilisation which can cross partisan lines and become a third force.

At the same time, I understand why this happens. The Social Democrats, without consulting anyone, started working on a judicial legislation and an anti-corruption reform which could undo lots of the country's past achievements. Thereby they split Romanian society along pro- and anti-corruption lines.

Ioana Banach: This also comes hand in hand with an increasingly hostile political environment. Ever since the Social Democrats came into power, they started using a language that is very much alien to democracy. They talk about some kind of – undefined – parallel state which is trying to organise a coup d'état, and so on. Most of the time, they refer to the political opposition, but more and more NGOs are starting to fall into the category of the parallel state, and even some private companies are accused of giving their employees days off to make them attend the protests.

In this situation, it is good to see that activists are getting into politics. I am happy that they are talking to citizens and I think that with time we are going to see the previously mentioned new parties become genuine movements. However, I agree with Claudiu that there are risks in regard to the future of the mobilisations, and we have to be very careful.

Romania is often mentioned as part of the group of illiberal states 'headed' by Hungary and Poland which may become subject to an Article 7 procedure.[3] Do you think these critiques are justified?

Claudiu Craciun: I definitely believe that the EU has to continue pushing for rule of law in Romania, for the sake of its own identity and values. However, there are two factors that make this difficult. On the one hand, Eastern European elites are lobbying hard, and they trying to convince the EU that it would be best to let them enjoy impunity. And second, there is the issue of misperceptions. Ever since we became members of the EU, Romania has been framed as a particularly difficult case. This has inevitably led to a kind of bias in Europe that makes it really hard for Romanian politics to do something that is convincing enough for the EU institutions. And that has led us to a catch-22 situation in which all measures are suspicious. The government's reforms are definitely harmful, and we need anti-corruption policies, but on the other hand the anti-corruption measures of the past also need to be reformed. Today's entanglement of the secret services in anti-corruption makes the whole drive suspicious.

Ioana Banach: I understand that it is 'sexy' to construct this narrative of problematic cases inside the EU and to create some pattern of illiberalisation. It makes for a really dramatic effect, but one that, however, doesn't reflect the truth. This is not to say that the situation in Romania is not really serious. I'd back what Claudiu said: the EU has to use all its tools to protect the rule of law and fundamental rights.

On the other hand, if we look at what the EU Commission has at its disposal, we can see that its toolset is rather poor. It has Article 7, it has the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (to monitor the progress of Romania and

Bulgaria), and that's pretty much it.

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The Article 7 procedure raises a few fundamental questions about the setting we have on a European level to ensure the rule of law. Do we have common standards to determine whether a country is moving in the right direction? I don't think so. Then, there seems to be quite some inconsistency in the way these instruments are used: take for example the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, an instrument used by the European Commission to measure progress to be made by Romania and Bulgaria in the fields of judicial reform, corruption, and (for Bulgaria) organised crime.

By 2016, Romania had a clear advantage over Bulgaria and yet in 2018 Bulgaria received a positive report on its progress. This is the first time that one of the two countries has a clear chance for lifting the mechanism set up at the time of joining the EU. The Commission's decision appears questionable, if not politically motivated, to those following the political situation in Bulgaria, a country that is bottom of Transparency International's corruption index.

Overall, how do you see the Romanian experience of over 10 years of EU membership?

Ioana Banach: From the economic point of view, you could see many positive developments such as a visible increase in GDP. Romania gains billions of euros in EU funds each year and the last decade has brought an influx of foreign multinationals. But the other side of the coin is social development. The gap between rich and poor remains huge and many young people have no other choice than to leave the country. Nowadays we can see that up to 25 per cent of Romanians are living and working abroad, and even though they send millions of euros home each year, their absence leaves a giant gap in the workforce. This also has a severe social impact: families fall apart, children grow up without their parents, and so on. Therefore, we still have a lot to do if we want to make things work.

Claudiu Craciun: 10 years into accession, on the whole, I think it is way better to be inside than outside the EU. Just look at Serbia, Ukraine or Belarus. But we find lots of stories, both good and bad. The good story is that we got a lot of investment and European funds. And even the people who didn't have enough economic opportunities in the country were given the chance to look for jobs elsewhere in Western Europe. But this development also meant that a whole generation of active people between their twenties and fifties almost disappeared from the rural and small urban areas.

In addition, I would also mention that most of the investments we see these days only come to us because the country still has a low-paid work force. EU accession was also the reason for austerity after the economic crisis, as harmful economic and social policies were supported by most of the right-wing forces in Europe. So, I would definitely find a plus and a minus for each of the major dimensions of European integration. But overall, it is definitely a good thing that we're in the EU. And I always stress the responsibility of national elites rather than European elites, because within the existing institutional and economic framework, we have more resources and more opportunities for development than we actually used to have.

Does Romania have enough power to resist harmful economic trends?

Claudiu Craciun: We definitely have vulnerabilities in our economy, especially in the car manufacturing sector, where we have a great exposure to automation. And we have a banking system which is all made up of foreign banks – so any problem that happens elsewhere is also felt in Romania. But the most critical dimension is the

political one – because some political forces, especially the Social Democrats, try to put Romania on this authoritarian, populist track that is more and more popular in Eastern Europe. In this model, elites are running the country, the dominant party has no real rival, media are subordinated, and civil society is weak. But interestingly, their role models, the governments of Poland or Hungary, are also very friendly to foreign capital. It is enough to look at how happy the German investors are with Victor Orbán; business interests don't mind whether you have a strong-handed ruler in a country.

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Ioana Banach: Neoliberalism is the leitmotiv in Romania, and for the past 20 years, it has defined the goals of all our governments: we wanted to have innovation and jobs provided by Western companies. By now, we have a lot of that. We have a middle class that works for foreign companies, we have a lot of production, and even parts of our unqualified workforce find relatively acceptable jobs at multinationals. But this also means that the government lacks control over the economy.

If you look at who is leading the conversation about the jobs affected by robotisation – which might affect up to 60 per cent of the people working in the country – it is Western actors that are pushing their agenda, while Romanians don't seem to pay any attention to the issue. Western companies are the ones who are benefiting from cheap labour, but I am not sure how willing they will be to support the Romanian people when their current economic advantages start to wane. Therefore, we really need to start our own conversations in the country on how we could step out of the neoliberal framework, and move quickly to make these conversations mainstream.

How can progressive forces provide solutions to Romania's structural problems?

Claudiu Craciun: With the so-called Social Democrats in power, we have serious structural imbalances and inequalities. The EU accession made us believe for many years that everything will go well. Our GDP is still growing but there is also a lot of poverty and underdevelopment. So, a new progressive project would need to halt the current fragmentation and eliminate inequalities in a way that would be able to speak to the base of the major parties as well.

The problem with the Social Democrats is that they are not really left-wing, but they still have some redistributive policies. They are for example the only ones who advocate for an increase in the minimum wage (even if their proposal is relatively modest). But in the meantime, their programme is made up of very toxic conservative elements and they contest the rule of law. The political Right, on the other hand, puts a lot of emphasis on integrity and anti-corruption – but they don't have a plan to modernise the country. Instead, they would leave everything to the invisible hand of the market. We in the Demos movement are trying to bring rule of law and left-wing economic policies together, and to drive the country towards a form of development that is desirable – with an honest public sector and political class.

Ioana Banach: In Romania, even when there are progressive legislative proposals on the table, they never get through parliament, so unless you have a majority there is nothing you can really do. The European elections, as well as the national ones in 2020, are really going to be about the question of whether a valid choice for an alternative is going to present itself in form of political parties.

I am very happy to see parties that show new, less corrupt paths into politics. However, they will face a huge challenge in terms of coming up with a new vision and narrative. Just being anti-corruption is not enough. The country needs to be ruled in other respects as well. At the same time, they will have to be pragmatic and strategic when choosing the topics they can really push for, because we have to acknowledge that society hasn't had too many meaningful conversations for the past few years.

[1] According to the Venice Commission, the criminal justice reform proposal weakens the fight against corruption and serious crime in the country, and critics have seen parts of the new measures as an attempt by the ruling party to weaken punishment for convicted officials.

[2] The Demos Platform is a political movement in Romania that officially registered in the Political Party Registry in the Summer of 2018. Its main goal is the construction of a new approach to politics: one that is based on participation, on the needs of the people, and one that is accountable them.

[3] Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union is an infringement procedure to suspend certain rights from member states that have committed fundamental rights violations.



Claudiu Crăciun, PhD, is a Lecturer in European Politics at the Faculty of Political Science, National School of Political Studies and Administration in Bucharest. Since 2009, he has been an expert of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and is involved in various civic and environmental campaigns. He is a founder and Secretary-General of Demos, a political party in Romania.



Ioana Banach works as deputy director at the Green European Foundation. Ioana has worked for 10 years in non-profit and political organisations in Romania, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium, specialising in education and capacity building programmes as tools to promote political activism and citizens' involvement in European democracy.

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