

## Mass unrest in Bucharest

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Image: Wikipedia

ROMANIA IS AT the threshold of political crisis, as the largest protests since the fall of communism in 1989 continue. The demonstrations were sparked by the government's attempt to introduce a decree which many believed sought to roll back anti-corruption measures in the country. After facing immense pressure from the estimated 500 000 citizens who took to the streets, the leftist government led by the Social Democratic Party (PSD) scrapped the ordinance. Upon announcement of the retraction of the decree, Prime Minister Sorin Grindneau stated "I don't want to divide Romania... it can't be divided in two. Romania in this moment seems broken in two." It seems, however, that it may be too late for the PSD to attempt to reunite the country behind their government. Protests have persisted even after the government's Uturn, suggesting that many Romanians wish to see systemic change stretching beyond this one issue.

Romanian democracy has been plagued by corruption since its inception. However, in recent years there has been a meaningful effort to address issues in the country. There has been a crackdown on corruption resulting in hundreds of officials being convicted. Among those stung by the effort was PSD party leader Liviu Dragneau, who is appealing the case that found him guilty of electoral fraud. The ordinance which triggered the protests would have cleared those accused or convicted of such corruption charges in which the sums involved are less than 200 000 lei (£38 000). The government justified the decree as an attempt to lessen the pressure on Romania's prison system. This is a legitimate concern as Romania's prison system has been criticised by the European Court of Human Rights as being dangerously overcrowded. Many Romanians, however, feared that this would be simply the first step in eroding any progress the country has made in tackling corruption.

This fear has not gone away with the decision, and many believe that the government, who are still insisting that the principles behind the decree were valid, will simply try to introduce similar legislation and jeopardise the country's fight against corruption. Protestors have been spurred on by the success of their action, and now feel that they need fresh leadership to ensure Romania's democracy is protected. The trust in the current government has been almost completely shattered, leading protestors to call for the resignation of the entire cabinet.

The developments in Romania will be highly concerning for those in Brussels. Romania's anti-corruption crackdown is something of a pre-condition for the country's membership of the EU, and as such any attempts to roll back the measures could jeopardise the integrity of its status as a member state. The

continued protests in Romania will address concerns about the region in general; both Hungary and Poland's governments have come under fire for infringing upon media and judicial independence in their respective states. In Poland the government were similarly forced to do a U-turn on controversial abortion legislation after protestors took to the streets en masse. The crisis in Romania will have knock-on implications for the status of the EU in the region as a whole. While those in Brussels may view the protests in Romania as a part of a destabilising patten, however, the protestors themselves see their demonstrations as momentous. Many have drawn comparisons between events now and the protests that took place prior to the fall of communism. The feeling among protestors is that they must fight against corruption in their country for the good of future generations.

There is a wish from many protestors for dramatic change in the country, and although their goal is to achieve a more stable Romania which is free of corruption, they may well end up inadvertently destabilising their state in the short-term. However, the success of Romanians in forcing their government to reverse its unpopular measure through mass protests will surely serve as an inspiration to those across the globe seeking to do the same.



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