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A #Colectiv Responsibility to Fight Corruption: Romania's Nightclub Fire Protests Singe the System

Anita Sobják

The tragic fire in Club Colectiv in Bucharest shed light on the broader systemic problems of corruption. The resulting and quickly swelling public outrage fits in with a series of anti-systemic protests in Romania in recent years. A change of government resulting from the prime minister's swift resignation will bring no immediate relief to an ailing system. For that to happen, more efforts are needed on all fronts: among the political elite, civil society, as well as Romania's external partners. The latter can be important in preventing political destabilisation and promoting positive change.

The accidental fire in Bucharest's Club Colectiv on 30 October left at least 53 dead, dozens more in critical condition, and more than a hundred with severe burns. The fire was sparked by use of a pyrotechnic display during a concert in a room covered with highly flammable foam used for soundproofing, but with only one exit at the disposal of the 300-400 attendees—conditions that go against fire safety norms.

“Corruption Kills.” The accident in Bucharest happened not only because of the club's owners' negligence but also because Romania's legal and bureaucratic system is full of loopholes and rampant with corruption, where permits for doing business can be simply bought. Thus, as protesters' posters put it, this time “corruption killed”. Even though throughout the past year Romania has many times made international headlines for its success in fighting corruption, it was mostly for enacting spectacular prison sentences on politicians and businessmen.¹ The force behind the sentences is the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA), a specialised prosecution office established in 2005. Yet, anti-corruption efforts have still by far not acquired a systemic character, as prosecution and adjudication of corruption are not yet matched by prevention. Furthermore, despite some achievements on the elite level, corruption is still encountered in all state institutions and among local authorities, which retain an unchanged culture of bribery.

What initially started as a public manifestation of sympathy for the victims and their families, swelled at a huge pace into wide-scale protests against the entire political system. At the height of the protests, an estimated 35,000 people protested on Bucharest's streets, and some 60,000 country-wide. In an unexpectedly quick reaction, Prime Minister Victor Ponta resigned, along with the mayor of District 4 in Bucharest where the club was located. Meanwhile, President Klaus Iohannis invited for consultations on the new government not only the political parties but also representatives from civil society. This is a rare event in Romanian politics, where the authorities are reluctant to conduct dialogue with members of civil society. Thus, the consultations can be counted as a significant short-term achievement of the protesters. In waiting for the formation of the new government, the protests are naturally waning; yet, if the future political developments will disappoint the public, another eruption of protest can easily happen.

The demonstrations are among the largest in the post-communist history of Romania and can be perceived as the culmination of a series of mass protests in the past four years. In a society perceived before as largely apathetic, demonstrations had been sparked by such controversies as shale gas exploration (between 2012–2014), stray dogs (in 2013), gold mining at Roșia Montană (in 2013), and most recently, by electoral fraud during the first round of the presidential elections (in November 2014). All these issues served as a starting point for the protests but then quickly developed into broader anti-establishment manifestations against discredited political leadership. Similar to the previous

¹ A. Sobják, “Corruption Out, Schengen In: Time for a Fair Discussion on Romania,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 20 (752), 18 February 2015, www.pism.pl.

protests, the demonstrators were now organising themselves via online social networks (using the internet hashtag “#colectiv”) and are mainly young people unrelated to any political formations.

Consequences of the Eruption of Protest. If the prime minister’s quick resignation seemed to be a generous gesture of taking political responsibility for the accident, in fact it has little direct connection with it. During his close to three-year-long tenure Ponta has passed many stress tests. He refused to resign against fierce public demands (and even an imploration by President Iohannis in September) on many issues, such as proved plagiarism in his Ph.D. thesis or charges of corruption, tax evasion and money laundering. Thus, one evening of protests would be far from enough to break his position had it not been for the accumulated pressure on him inside his Social Democrat Party (PSD). In October, Ponta was replaced as party leader by Liviu Dragnea, a decision which already forecasted his approaching departure as premier. With parliamentary elections planned for late 2016, Ponta’s stepping down is good for PSD, leaving it with both time and credit and rebuild trust with its disillusioned electorate before the polls.

But a few resignations or a mere reshuffle of the cabinet will not bring significant change. If early elections are called (a solution opposed by the governing PSD and pushed for by the main opposition liberal party, the National Liberal Party, or PNL), that would in all probability also only rotate the current political elite. Yet for the time being, the parties agreed to the formation of a technocratic government until parliamentary elections next year, a solution supported by the president and demanded by the protesters. The president nominated as prime minister Dacian Cioloș, a former EU Commissioner for Agriculture. A non-political government potentially gives a chance at reform and the rise of new political figures and parties which might gain support in the polls. Such a solution, however, also carries a risk of a political crisis. The non-political government will be reliant on the backing of the major parties in the parliament (PSD and PNL), in exchange for which they will probably expect control over some government positions. The denomination “technocratic” could thus become illusory, in which case the public would feel deceived. On the other hand, should the new government try to go against the parties’ wishes, it can be blocked in bringing in any significant initiatives. This situation could be particularly problematic in the short term, given that there is no budget plan for 2016 yet.

Although a change in government is unlikely to bring changes in Romania’s foreign policy, a prolonged political crisis could harm the country’s international standing. In the course of the past few years, Romania has gradually gained credit abroad in a number of areas: political stability, a series of visible achievements in fighting high-level corruption, and successful recovery from the economic crisis. After showing economic growth of 2.4% in 2014, a rise to 3.5% is expected in 2015 (if so, it would be the fifth consecutive year with growth). Moreover, with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the Ukraine-Russia war, Romania’s significance has also increased in terms of regional security. As an expression of this, the so-called mini-summit ahead of next year’s NATO Summit in Warsaw was held in Bucharest on 4 November. In this context, it is in the best interest of Bucharest’s Euro-Atlantic partners that the domestic environment in Romania remains stable and predictable. Regardless of the composition of the new government, Romania will keep its commitments to NATO (including the U.S. ballistic missile defence system and a possible NATO presence on Romanian soil). However, if the political scene undergoes significant change, issues such as a gradual increase in the defence budget, already agreed by all parties, could be subject to change.

A Collective Solution. Even in the event of a technocratic government, chances for immediate changes are slim, more probable is political stagnation until the elections next year, or, worse, a political crisis. But even if the system cannot be overhauled overnight, the protests have brought about some valuable, even if less obvious and not so immediate benefits. First, if the largest parties (PSD and PNL) want to survive politically, they will have to demonstrate responsiveness to the protesters by introducing new faces to their lines. Due to the number of resignations, politicians’ accountability towards the long ignored electorate will also increase. Finally, when viewed as a follow-up to the series of protests in previous years, the current demonstrations constitute one step further along the long path of civic awakening of Romanian society.

Yet, there are also two important lessons from the protests in previous years that should be taken into account to achieve more than the short-term success of resignations or similar. First, the real change demanded by protesters requires that the appetite for civic engagement evolve further into a readiness for political engagement. Only this will provide an injection of fresh politicians who would be able to change the system from the inside. Second, for lasting effects, the protests need to lead to a better embedding of civil society organisations in policymaking. This is a practice eagerly promoted by the EU in third states (it is even a requirement for assistance to the Eastern Partnership states), yet it does not function well in a Member State like Romania. The president’s initiative to hold consultations with civil society representatives is an important gesture, but the very management of the invitation revealed how little connection the administration has with this sector. Therefore, beyond ad-hoc meetings in crisis situations, formal, or semi-formal mechanisms are needed for regular consultations between the government and civil society in various sectors. A monitoring commission of civil society representatives scrutinising the activity of the new government until the elections would also ensure that the protests will not burst forth again and lead to a longer period of political instability.

Although the EU has very limited policy means to leverage the internal politics of its Member States, it does have the political means to encourage the rule of law, be that via public declarations or behind closed-door diplomacy. For instance, the publicly expressed support for the “civil process” on the streets by the U.S. ambassador to Romania was a significant signal for the parties not to ignore the protests. Thus, the EU together with the U.S. should express their expectations towards their Romanian partner to maintain political and economic stability, continue the fight against corruption on all levels, and increase dialogue with civil society. They should also emphasise that in the midst of several regional crises, they are relying on Romania to be a responsible regional stakeholder, one with consistent foreign and security policies.