



URIEC – Newsletter #5
Occasional issue

There is a new government in Romania. What caused these changes and what are the similarities and differences between nowadays Romania and Ukraine you can see from the comments of the experts of Ukraine-Romania International Experts Consortium collected by «Strategic and Security Studies Group».

Mihai Sebe, PhD** : *A #Collective driven change – Romania's 2015 autumn protests and their implications*



A #Collective tragedy

A tragic fire that took place in the Club Colectiv [meaning Collective in English, from here the #Collective (#Colectiv, in Romanian) that became a symbol of the protests in social, media] in Bucharest on October 30th led to a death toll of at least 55 persons, several dozens in critical status and more than a hundred persons with serious burn injuries.

What started as a tragic incident became the rallying point of a thousand of protesters fed up with systemic corruption.

A #Collective protest

In a country with a low appetite for mass protests the Club Colectiv tragedy offered the background for a massive protest that started in the days following the tragedy. The news that the fire was made possible by the systemic violation of fire safety rules, with a strong suspicion of foul play amidst the entire chain of responsible authorities were the spark that ignited this protest that at its height rounded approx. 30 000 persons in Bucharest alone.

A #Collective new hope

What came as a surprise for many was the resignation of the Prime-minister Victor Ponta on November 4th even though he didn't have any direct connection with the tragic incident forcing with this a total governmental restart.

In a symbolic gesture meant to set apart for the day to day Romanian politics, the Romanian president called for political consultations not only the representatives of Parliamentary political parties but also with the representatives of the street movements, some well-known activists as well as fresh figures.

Although with a somehow contested selection process, the meeting with the civil society had its advantages showing an administration more open to dialogue and compromise. The key topics may be

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briefly summarized as: transparency; administrative reform; democratization of the political process; economic efficiency in state run enterprises and last but not least the fight against corruption.

A #Collective new deal

As no political party seem determined to assume a political government the President nominated Mr. Dacian Ciolos, former EU Commissioner on Agriculture as designated Prime-minister on November 10th.

His nomination is yet to be voted by the Parliament (estimated vote in the week November 16 -20th). He opens the door for fresh administrative reforms (demanded by the protesters) as well as gives an opportunity for the rise of new political figures (given the assumed character of “technocrats” of the new ministers) or even for new parties.

Yet the risks of a non-political government remains high. First of all the new government needs the political support of the major Parliamentarian parties (PSD and PNL) and thus the label of “technocrat” may hide a political driven agenda that risks to spark new protests.

Secondly if the government tries to adopt projects and policies not endorsed by the Parliament it risks that this back-fires and thus for us all to assist to a “political guerilla warfare” a real quagmire that would affect the entire society.

As for the idea of early elections - they seem improbable as in neither major parties are really prepared for them.

With parliamentary elections set up for the late 2016 the Victor Ponta resignation, although unexpected, may prove to be beneficial for the main political party, the PSD who may have the time to reshuffle its internal organization and came up with fresh new figures. This lesson and practices also apply to PNL who also realized the need for an internal change.

A #Collective civil society solution for consolidated results

The main lesson that must be learn is that even if civil society protests may lead to a government change, the society as a whole needs to be able to enter the political arena and create fresh, new parties that can challenge the status quo while following the full democratic procedures.

Second lesson is that the civil society needs also to act as a watch dog for the legislative process in order to ensure a more responsive legislation to the needs of the many. The ad-hoc meetings must be replaced by efficient and permanent consultations mechanisms between all the stakeholders involved.

A #Collective international security risk

All this internal changes are taking place into a tumultuous international situation and the attention must be also directed toward maintaining a stable security and foreign policy. Romania must keep these areas out of internal debates and keep it status as a reliable security and foreign policy partner for both the EU and the US in the region. Regardless of any domestic disputes Romania must uphold all its security



arrangements and promises and also provide an adequate financing for the defense issue in accordance with its NATO's engagements.

Alexandru Coita, Entrepreneur, political commentator, PhD in International Security:

The „CTRL ALT DEL” Revolution and the Phoenix effect



Romania is going through a watershed moment in its post-communist history. A devastating fire in a Bucharest night club laid bare the grim reality of a dysfunctional system of norms which is still ridden with corruption.

The tragedy at Colectiv also served to catalyze the massive rebuttal of a sclerotic and deeply entrenched system by a connected and upwardly mobile generation whose time seems to have finally come.

This is a step change for Romania that could usher in a new paradigm for society and politics alike. Yet the biggest challenge will be that of keeping the momentum for reform. Romania must find a way to rebuild trust in a delegitimized political class, all the while fulfilling the aspirations of a newly enfranchised generation that is on its way to becoming the backbone of the country.

Romania's recent history is rife with fitful changes and inconsistent implementation of a reform agenda that hinges on eradicating endemic corruption. While the big picture may show a smooth upwards trajectory toward NATO and then EU membership, every day realities indicate that, while progress is undeniable, it has been slower and more chaotic than many would have wished for.

For a generation of middle-class young professionals, the growing disconnect between their expectations for change and the systemic inertia simmered to a boil when their peers were brought to a horrid death by poor regulations and petty corruption.

What followed was the clash between two dynamics moving in opposite directions. On one side, mainstream politicians acted in a self-preservation effort that generated erratic shifts between real reforms and subsequent retrenchment into the old ways of doing politics. On the other, the Romanian society gradually came across a newfound civic conscience. The prevalence of social media (some statistics count some 8 million Facebook accounts for a population of no more than 20 million) and the ensuing democratization of access to information freed Romanians from the monopoly of traditional channels of information.

The real power of the street became apparent when a weak and delegitimized government chose to step down less than 24 hours after the swell of the protests swept through the streets of Bucharest. The empowering effect of this clear causation should not be discounted. I believe it will serve to rearrange the balance of power between people and politicians.

In this sense, we can see a Phoenix effect that has seen the rebirth of Romanian civic voice out of the ashes of the Colectiv disaster.

To what extent this key moment will lead to enduring changes largely depends on the ability of the mainstream Romanian parties to reform and get back in touch with the public. Currently, both major

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Romanian political parties are facing a profound identity crisis. The nomination of a technocratic government Prime Minister by President Iohannis serves to restore stability, while giving politicians time to reframe their approach toward the public sphere by the time general elections are due, in November of next year.

Before Colectiv, Romania had a strong and independent judiciary, world class anticorruption bodies, and a strong security guarantee. After this moment, my country has gained another most important asset in the voice of a strong and uninhibited civil society. Together, these forces have broken into the black box of an arrogant and disconnected political class. To rebuild legitimacy and ensure the sustainability of these changes, it is now the turn of politicians to reinvent themselves. The Romanian social contract is up for being renewed and this can only be done by honest, credible and loyal signatories on both sides.

Lucian Dumitru Dirdala, Political Scientist, PhD, „Mihail Kogălniceanu” University, Iași:

Citizen empowerment is one of the best things that could happen to Romania



After the civic outburst that led to the resignation of Mr. Ponta's centre-left government, most Romanians could be relatively satisfied with the new team assembled by the former EU Commissioner for Agriculture, Mr. Dacian Cioloș. With one exception, the new ministers have no political experience, and one might wonder if they are really able to advance a new style of government.

Both policy initiative and policy implementation might prove difficult for experts lacking a strong party support, especially since next year Romania will have local and legislative elections.

The position of President Klaus Iohannis was strengthened by the course of action he chose during the crisis, although disappointment is gaining ground, as it always does when the expectations are unreasonably high. The tens of thousands of Romanians who took to the streets for the public good – rather than for narrow grievances – will soon find out that they have gained far less than they hoped. But it will still be a gain, and citizen empowerment is one of the best things that could happen to Romania.

Following the resignation of the centre-left government of Mr. Victor Ponta, the former EU Commissioner for Agriculture, Mr. Dacian Cioloș has advanced a list that should satisfy all the main political forces, including the former governing party, the Social-Democrats (PSD). One of the Deputy Prime-Ministers is a well known sociologists with strong links to PSD, and his portfolio includes the influential departments of Regional Development and Civil Service. The rest of the cabinet consists of technocrats with variable degrees of experience in EU and international bodies, as well as in the private sector.

The views and opinions expressed in these newsletter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any organization they are connected to neither the position of Strategic and Security Studies Group

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