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Frozen conflict: Government crisis in Bucharest continues

Parliament goes into summer recess without electing a new Prime Minister, while confidence in President Dan is crumbling due to questionable crisis management.

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The Romanian parliament's summer recess did not begin peacefully. The vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Ilie Bolojan's (PNL) government on May 5th triggered bitter infighting in Romania's political landscape. The vote itself was already perceived as sacrilege: the motion of no confidence was jointly introduced by the social democratic PSD and the right-wing populist AUR. It remains unclear who was acting as a facilitator for whom. The motion received 281 votes, significantly more than the required 233. The PSD members resigned from the government. Bolojan has since continued to govern in a caretaker capacity – together with the reform-oriented USR and the Hungarian party (UDMR). President Nicușor Dan, attempting to mediate in the tense situation, is increasingly losing the trust of his former supporters.

Before the summer recess, there had been two unsuccessful attempts to install a new Prime Minister. After fruitless negotiations with the parties, MEP Eugen Tomac, whom President Nicușor Dan had put forward, withdrew his candidacy. Dan immediately pulled Adrian Veștea, the PNL vice-chairman and Bolojan's internal rival, out of his hat, as a sort of ace up his sleeve. Both, the appointment itself and the exclusion of Bolojan's PNL from the process, were seen as a declaration of war and an attempt by the president to split the party.

The PNL leadership reacted immediately, calling a party congress to propose the expulsion of several PNL representatives labeled "coup plotters." Dan had tried unsuccessfully to force a parliamentary vote on Veștea before the party congress. Since then, the parliamentary positions have hardened. Two options are currently on the table: a government led by PSD leader Sorin Grindeanu, for which the votes of AUR would be essential; or - as proposed by the PNL - a government led by PNL MEP and EPP Vice-President Siegfried Mureșan, currently one of the chief negotiators for the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework.

The power of networks

Several events surrounding the vote of no confidence in Romanian politics gave cause for concern:

- ▶ A bill passed the Senate that ostensibly aims to create "transparency" regarding NGO donors. The law is not yet effective, as it lacks a vote in the plenary session of the crucial second chamber; furthermore, President Dan would have to sign it. But a regulation hangs like a sword of Damocles in the parliamentary process, one that is primarily intended to intimidate. Critical online media outlets are, in particular, structured as NGOs. Pressure on their funders could undermine their resources, especially if AUR forms a government with the PSD, or if these parties, in the currently unlikely event of new elections, even manage to dominate the next parliament.
- ▶ Prior to the PNL party congress, the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) summoned Bucharest's mayor and PNL deputy chairman, Ciprian Ciucu, on suspicion of bribery and

subsequently placed him under "judicial supervision." Ciucu then withdrew his candidacy for the PNL vice presidency, citing the need to protect the party from further damage, as it could take years to clear up the allegations.

- › Dominic Fritz, national chairman of the liberal USR, which remains a coalition partner of the PNL and has consistently backed Bolojan in political debates, is also under fire: In June, the Supreme Court rejected his appeal against a report by the National Integrity Agency (ANI). In its report, ANI accused Fritz of a conflict of interest in his actions related to donations to the USR. Political observers consider the accusations fabricated, as Fritz had merely confirmed a decision made by his predecessor as mayor.
- › The CSM, the highest body of judicial self-governance, has adopted a roughly 70-page statement branding individuals and media outlets by name as "unfriendly to the judiciary." This is an extraordinary case of overreach by an organ of the separation of powers - and one with a potentially intimidating effect. Lia Savonea, President of the Supreme Court and a member of the CSM, is considered the driving force behind the report.
- › A district court in Ilfov, located in the northern commuter belt of Bucharest, declared a decision by the PNL party leadership (at the national level) invalid. Since Hubert Thuma, one of Bolojan's fiercest opponents, is the PNL county council president in Ilfov, few believe this is a coincidence.
- › In Bucharest, separate chambers, headed by hand-picked judges, are to be established to deal specifically with political parties and NGOs.

The list of such incidents is even longer. It raises concerns among journalists, NGOs, and even some diplomats that Romania might be drifting into illiberalism. This would be a severe blow to Romania's still fragile democracy, where various power networks are attempting to undermine the

separation of powers. And apparently, they are succeeding. The PSD is considered the spider at the center of these networks. However, the actors involved, above all, PSD Chairman Sorin Grindeanu, remain largely invisible. Given Romania's history, it is not surprising that many suspect the intelligence services play an equally significant role. Trust in democratic institutions and individuals can hardly be built under such circumstances.

A look at the key players

Nicușor Dan emerged victorious in the second round of the 2025 presidential elections. In the first round, George Simion, the AUR candidate, had been clearly in the lead. Dan, the former mayor of Bucharest and co-founder of the liberal USR, became a savior figure for all those who wanted to prevent the right-wing populist Simion from winning. However, after his empty promise to address the scandals in the justice system documented in a report by the investigative website "recorder.ro," and after his maneuvering surrounding the vote of no confidence against Bolojan, many no longer see him as a defender of the values he previously proclaimed. Dan is seen as too much on Grindeanu's side and not enough on Bolojan's. He is perceived as being too focused on securing his second term. Furthermore, the change in his official rhetoric from "pro-European" to "pro-Western" has been interpreted as an attempt to curry favor with the American "MAGA" movement. Not least, the direct attack on the reform wing of the PNL through the nomination of Adrian Veștea has caused Dan's former supporters to lose trust. AUR, meanwhile, has announced its intention to initiate impeachment proceedings against him.

Sorin Grindeanu, chairman of the PSD and speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, is ostensibly the trigger of the current government crisis. Political observers point to the predicament Grindeanu found himself in after Prime Minister Bolojan, citing budget consolidation, withdrew financial commitments made by his predecessor, the PSD Prime Minister Ciolacu, to Romanian mayors. This created pressure from the mayors, the PSD's power base, to remove Bolojan (and with him, the austerity measures) from the

government. Grindeanu, who often adopted a populist tone beforehand, is now caught in a trap of his own making: the longer the government crisis drags on, the more the right-wing populist AUR gains ground with its narrative of "total opposition." Without AUR, which directly targets the PSD's voter base, Grindeanu cannot become Prime Minister.

Ilie Bolojan's popularity, which stemmed from his refusal to exempt even privileged circles (the judiciary, security services) from his austerity measures, is now in a state of "wear and tear." As acting Prime Minister, his ability to act is currently limited. Reports of misconduct by his supporters, particularly Dominic Fritz and Ciprian Ciucu, regardless of their veracity, undermine the image of Bolojan as an "incorruptible" figure. He is also the heir to PNL decisions that contributed to the erosion of judicial processes. As party chairman, he represents the entire party and is now feeling the consequences of past transgressions by others.

Dominic Fritz, the mayor of Timișoara and chairman of the USR (Save Romania Union), originally from southern Baden, has apparently become, alongside Bolojan, "public enemy number two" for opponents of political reforms. Fritz and the USR have clearly positioned themselves. Like Bolojan, he has also made it clear that he will not support a government with the PSD (Social Democratic Party). With the court's confirmation of the ANI (National Intelligence Agency) report, it is now uncertain whether he will be banned from running for public office for three years.

George Simion, chairman of the right-wing populist AUR and a member of parliament, won the first round of the 2025 presidential election. Much like the German AfD, AUR benefits, not least, from a disillusionment with the political "system" that it itself fuels. While AUR initially campaigned on the promise of "total opposition," it is now increasingly playing a kind of "good cop, bad cop" game with the PSD. This is causing internal tensions within Simion's party, from which several members of parliament have since defected.

Hunor Kelemen leads the political representation of the Hungarian minority, the UDMR (EPP). The UDMR supported the previous coalition under Bolojan. The party, which currently holds 31 seats in parliament, plays a crucial role in securing government majorities. Until Orbán's defeat in Hungary, the UDMR aligned itself with Fidesz, but in Romania, it acted in a supportive and pro-European manner.

Siegfried Mureșan is a Member of the European Parliament from the National Liberal Party (PNL). As a member of the European Parliament's Committee on Budgets and the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, he is Romania's most prominent financial and budgetary expert at the EU level. He was the chief negotiator for the 2018 and 2024 EU budgets and is co-rapporteur for the EU's multiannual financial framework after 2027. Elected Vice President of the PNL by the party congress, he is now the PNL's nominee for Prime Minister. Given Romania's significant reliance on EU funding, he would guarantee this pro-European continuity. He would also ensure that a sound public budget prevents Romania's national debt from being classified as junk by the rating agencies.

What happens next?

Parliament went into summer recess at the beginning of July. It is not out of the question whether an extraordinary parliamentary session will be held at the end of July, in which a new Prime Minister will be elected. However, there are currently no realistic solutions to the parliamentary conflict, which is why the number of those categorically ruling out new elections is decreasing. Given the political deadlock, AUR believes it has a better chance of winning, which is why party leader Simion has announced its intention to seek new elections. For most parliamentarians from other parties, however, new elections would offer more risks than opportunities. This, in turn, supports predictions that a successful election of a Prime Minister could still take place – possibly after the summer recess in September.

President Nicușor Dan is clearly the biggest loser at present. His attempts to successfully get a

Prime Minister elected by parliament have failed. In the nominations for influential positions in the judiciary, his choices fell primarily on candidates favored by the PSD. He has lost the trust of reformers in the PNL and USR, as well as that of many representatives of the media and civil society who had placed great hopes in him.

With the weakness of democratic actors, the opportunities grow for those who are less concerned with freedom, institutions, and human dignity. Illiberal clouds are clearly visible on Romania's summer sky. Public perception is growing that the judiciary is being used both as a tactical arena for political battles and as a tool for

opaque but coordinated influence and machinations. A slide into illiberalism would be a catastrophe not only for Romania, but also for the EU and NATO. A Romania that blocks access to Ukraine, with its more than 600-kilometer border, would be a nightmare.

At least the crisis also presents an opportunity for the PNL to clearly define its position, potentially shed personnel "baggage", and regain trust by acknowledging past mistakes. It's also a chance to bring people along on the urgently needed path of reform by offering a positive, empathetic vision for the future.

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