

Is Romania doomed to instability?

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On 29 January, the Romanian parliament passed a vote of confidence in Viorica Dăncilă's centre-left government. This is already the third cabinet formed by the coalition of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE) since the election in December 2016. On the previous occasions, the centre-left majority caused the dismissals of prime ministers in June 2017 and January 2018. More than half of the ministries will have new heads in Dăncilă's cabinet. The ministers who have maintained their positions include: the ministers of defence, of foreign affairs and of justice. Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă, who originates from the same region as the leader of the Social Democrats leader, was previously a member of the European Parliament.

Commentary

- Dăncilă's cabinet will have a stronger support base in the government camp than its two predecessors. This is because the new cabinet has representatives from all the regional factions of the PSD. The upcoming European Parliament and presidential elections in 2019 will be an additional consolidating factor. The president of the PSD remains the key figure in the government camp and he will likely maintain his influence on the government's agenda and on the prime minister herself. Dăncilă lacks a support base inside her own party and also political experience. In fact, she has not been engaged in domestic politics so far.
- A political dispute concerning comprehensive changes in the prosecution authorities and the judiciary has been intensifying in Romania between the government camp on one side, and the president, the opposition, judicial and prosecution circles, and representatives of non-governmental organisations on the other side. In December 2017, the parliamentary majority swiftly passed the amendments of three acts organising the functioning of the judicial system introducing, for example, a disciplinary chamber for judges and changes in the procedures for dismissing the attorney general and the head of the National Anti-Corruption Directorate. The coalition is arguing that the changes will adjust the law to the Constitutional Court's verdicts and will streamline the operation of the judicial system. Opponents claim that changes will undermine the independence of the judiciary and the prosecution authorities, block the fight against corruption, and protect politicians from the government camp. The Constitutional Court questioned the constitutionality of some regulations of two of the acts (an award concerning the amendment of the third one is expected to be passed in February this year). However,

this has not reduced the heat of the political disputes. Further controversies have been provoked by the planned amendment of the criminal code which is expected to be beneficial to the leader of the PSD who is standing trial in two criminal cases.

- The dispute over the judiciary reforms is a source of tension between the government camp in Romania and its main foreign partners. The USA and some EU member states are worried about the independence of the judiciary being undermined and the fight against corruption being halted in Romania. Towards the end of January, the European Commission voiced its concerns about the manner in which the new acts had been passed and possible further amendments of regulations of the criminal code. To date, the government has corrected controversial regulations under the influence of criticism from abroad, partly due to the strategic partnership with the USA, efforts to join the Schengen Area, and preparations for holding the EU presidency in the first half of 2019. However, this time the government seems to be more determined to push through the changes in the judicial system and the prosecution authorities as soon as possible. The ruling coalition has recently intensified 'sovereignty inclined' rhetoric and dwelled on 'parallel state' theory suggesting that secret services meddle in politics and interfere in the judiciary and prosecution authorities.