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Viewpoint: Romania protests a warning from the street

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"Brutal and unthinkable in a West European country." That was the verdict on two years of Romanian austerity measures from Andreas Treichl, the president of Austria's Erste Group, the largest foreign investor in the Romanian banking sector.

But he added that "Easterners are used to brutality", placing the measures taken in response to the global crisis in the broader context of hardship as a result of post-communist transition: the job losses, 25% public salary cuts, pension freezes and harsh reductions in social security benefits.

Whether he really meant it as a praise for Romanian resilience against adversity is a good question.

In any case, it is no longer true. A wave of spontaneous protests began last week, directed against the centre-right coalition government, and especially against President Traian Basescu, who since early 2010 has played the role of main communicator and driving force behind the austerity package.

TV spat

The trigger was a live, televised spat between President Basescu and junior health minister Dr Raed Arafat, a physician who is well-known and respected for reforming almost single-handedly, largely against the wish of the old medical establishment, the ambulance-paramedics system.

When the president blamed Dr Arafat for blocking an important health care reform law because "he was a leftie who didn't like privatisation and competition", the public instinctively stood with the austere doctor against the rude and flamboyant politician.

Their response was even more remarkable in a Latin nation with little experience of immigration and occasional inclinations towards jingoism, since Dr Arafat is a Palestinian, born in the West Bank city of Nablus, who came to Romania for the first time in the 1980s as a medical student.

When he resigned from the Ministry of Health, crowds began to gather in the streets of Bucharest and Targu Mures, the Transylvanian city where he studied and began his career.

In the capital, demonstrators used Facebook to co-ordinate and marched around the presidential residence with Dr Arafat's portrait.

Sensing trouble, the president asked the government the next day to withdraw the controversial draft law.

Riot police

But it was too late: the protests had taken on a life of their own.

On Saturday, Bucharest saw clashes between riot police and a few radical groups - apparently organised football fans, who had infiltrated the meetings with their usual arsenal of pyrotechnics.

By starting a gratuitous war with a popular figure, President Basescu merely popped a bubble of social tensions which had been accumulating since the beginning of the crisis.

From the second day of the protests, few people in the street were mentioning the health care law or Dr Arafat any more. The government has now humbly asked him to return, and he has agreed.

Older people are complaining about pensions, salaries and prices.

Students and professionals are unhappy about corruption or the coupling of local and parliamentary elections later this year (a tactical move by the government thought to increase their chances).

Eco-activists are fighting a large, open-pit mining project believed to be favoured by the president and the ruling party. And nastier fringes are grumbling about foreigners and the freemasonry which they see as trying to enslave the country through global financial machinations.

On the other hand, it is also true that there have been relatively few protesters all along: on one day the police put the total at about 13,000, spread around 50 Romanian cities and towns, with a maximum of 1,500 in Bucharest.

It is unlikely that the government will be unseated by such small crowds, and the numbers are falling.

Mistrust of politicians

The opposition Social Democrats and Liberals are trying hard to capitalise on the street events: there are signs that in many locations that their youth organisations have played a part in organising the demonstrations.

But open involvement for them is risky: senior opposition figures were booed by the genuine protesters on a par with the government. And the same has happened to other marginal, populist would-be leaders, in a sign that the political class in general is distrusted, not just the ruling power.

Their use of excessive language - "dictatorship", "tyranny" - when most commercial media are harshly critical of the government and public TV has broadcast live the protests for four to five hours a day - may play well with the hardcore activists but is likely to alienate the silent majority, who are otherwise not necessarily sympathetic to the president.

In short, Romanian society has risen up against its political leaders - but not very high.

There is still a long way to go before the protests reach the critical mass and coherence of the Spanish "indignados" or other "Occupy" movements.

Nevertheless, President Basescu and the ruling coalition would be ill advised to ignore the message of the street.

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