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Romanian premier pledges U-turn on law

By James Fontanella-Khan in Brussels

Romania's prime minister has written to EU leaders vowing to reverse a series of controversial measures that Brussels warned were a threat to democratic institutions in one of the bloc's newest member states.

In a letter to José Manuel Barroso, the European Commission president, sent on Monday, Victor Ponta vowed to repeal an emergency ordinance that reduced the powers of the country's constitutional court and promised to find a new national ombudsman who enjoyed cross-party support.

“I would like to assure you, Mr President, that these demarches express Romania's firm commitment towards fully respecting its status, as a member of the European Union,” Mr Ponta wrote in the letter, obtained by the Financial Times.

The rapid U-turn – Mr Ponta imposed the emergency measures just two weeks ago – is a significant victory for Mr Barroso, who had summoned the Romanian prime minister to Brussels last week to express the commission's displeasure at the moves.

The Romanian prime minister had drawn international criticism in Europe and the US after moving to impeach Traian Basescu, the Romanian president, firing the country's ombudsman and curtailing the powers of the constitutional court.

The abrupt reversal could stabilise Romanian financial markets. The political uncertainty sparked by the power struggle between Mr Basescu and Mr Ponta has sent the leu to an all-time low against the euro and raised concerns about Bucharest's €5bn credit line with the IMF.

A commission spokesman said Mr Barroso welcomed “the swift action” by Mr Ponta's government, saying the measures were “indispensable to re-establish trust and confidence”.

Diplomats in Brussels welcomed Romania's rapid response to EU demands, but political analysts in Bucharest said European leaders should remain vigilant to ensure the commitments made by Mr Ponta were not just empty promises.

“Before celebrating we should wait and see what the government actually does,” said Sorin Ionita, a political analyst at Bucharest’s Expert Forum think-tank.

“The government and parliament have yet to repeal the law that reduced the constitutional court’s powers, and unless something is done on Wednesday’s parliamentary session there is no reason to believe they will do it at a later stage.”

An EU diplomat agreed it was necessary to “keep putting pressure on Ponta to make sure he doesn’t back track at a later stage”.

Mr Ponta’s spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

The commission is expected to prolong monitoring Romania’s progress on fighting corruption and organised crime and modernising its judicial system.

The country will be scrutinised more regularly than Bulgaria, which was put on the same monitoring programme when both countries joined the EU in 2007.

The US and the EU have urged Mr Ponta’s leftist coalition to operate within the law after parliament last week voted to suspend Traian Basescu, the Romania’s president since 2004, triggering a national referendum over whether to remove the president, scheduled for July 29.

Opponents and analysts accused Romania’s coalition of trying to sideline the constitutional court and using short-cuts in the impeachment process as well as trying to change the rules of the referendum.

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