

Society

# Policy Brief: Romanian politicians failed to communicate effectively, leaving room for extremist to exploit weaknesses of democracy

by EWB 25. 10. 2023.



*Protests in Romania; Photo: Flickr/Albert Dobrin*

VIENNA – Upcoming democratic movements in Romania should clarify their goals and organizational structure early on and then try to become entrenched within groups of society, recommends [Policy Brief “Democracy from below in Romania: How far can it get before breaking”](#), published within the WB2EU Network. It is added that that will be a marathon, not a sprint.

Policy Brief recommends that established parties

and politicians to listen rather than discourage challenges coming from below, as long as they are pro-democratic. The recommendation for donors and founders is to get what they pay for. “If you pay for projects, you will have successful projects. But if you want a vibrant, organic civil society, consider long-term and core funding”, Policy Brief states.

**Andrei Tiut**, a political scientist from Romania and author of Policy Brief, recalls that between 2012 and 2017, successive waves of protests brought public officials to account. He adds that the government was overthrown, and significant pieces of legislation were overturned. He adds that in 2016, a new liberal party (Save Romania Union) entered parliament, asking for the democratization of public life, and boasting its own international democratic decision-making.

“In 2020, the party entered parliament, and then, the government. Events like these contributed not only to increases in the quality of democracy as measured by international indexes but also in democratic resilience”, the author assesses adding that since then, the situation has deteriorated.

Policy Brief describes that the quality of democracy has declined, reaching a low point in 2021, and the government has been unable to communicate with the population effectively in successive crises.

“Public dissatisfaction did not manifest itself through pro-democratic protests like in the past, on the contrary, we can see an increase in the voting intention for extremist parties and a general decrease in trust in democratically oriented institutions, be they internal or international”, Tiut believes.

However, this Policy Brief notes that public pro-democratic protests have historically been slow to take off, and even when they did, they were ignited by comparatively less important issues, appearing as “black swans”.

“This may be due to the failure of protest movements to crystalize into permanent structures of representation and, in a more general sense, the failure of civil society to become a representative voice for the public”, the author believes.

According to Policy Brief in the absence of visible public pressure or actions by authorities to take this pressure into account, dissatisfaction is likely to accumulate and, if the recent past is an indicator, boil over.

“It may well be that in the near future, most likely before the parliamentary elections in 2024, we will have massive waves of public dissatisfaction starting from apparently unimportant issues that will serve as sparks that ignite existing grievances in society”, believes the Tiut.

He says that the combination of several reasons makes Romanian democracy more vulnerable in 2023 and acts as a deterrent to bottom-up pressure. These can be structural, contextual, and based on elite errors.

“An important structural reason is that these movements from below have failed to build stable institutions. This relates to a larger failure of representative institutions in Romania... Politicians and the state elite failed to communicate effectively, leaving room for extremist forces to exploit the weaknesses of democracy. Thus, even when Romanian politicians made reasonable decisions, they often

have the impression that they were doing so against their will”, Policy Brief says.

The author underlines that the lesson from the case of Romania could be that highly decentralized, leaderless mobilization strategies are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they allow democratic movements to organize even in countries like Romania, where interpersonal trust is low. On the other hand, such movements often lack staying power, allowing established politicians to wait them out.

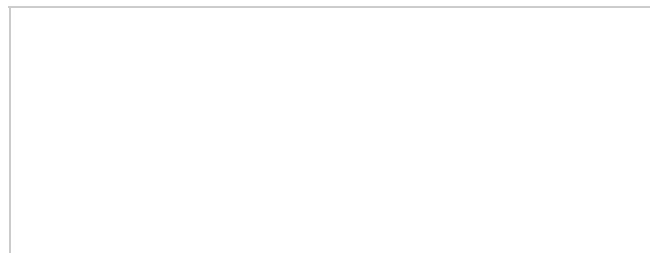
“Another lesson is that politicians who take advantage of the lack of organization within grassroots movements do so at their own risk. If they choose to ignore the underlying dissatisfaction of the population, then other forces will fill in the void of representation. Sometimes these forces can be democrats and liberals, but other times they will be populists and extremists”, the author concludes.

**“ The Policy Brief is published in the framework of the WB2EU project. The project aims at the establishment of a network of renowned think-tanks, do-tanks, universities, higher education institutes and policy centres from the Western Balkans, neighbouring countries and EU member states that will be most decisive for the enlargement process and Europeanisation of the region in the upcoming years. The WB2EU project is co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme.**

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