

# Is there extreme right in Romania?

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**While extreme right all around Europe achieves unprecedented electoral successes, Romania seems immune to such political developments. In the last few years, none of the extreme right parties made a significant breakthrough in parliamentary politics. But that doesn't mean that ideology of extreme right is not influential in this country. On the contrary, racist, xenophobic and homophobic ideas are well represented in the policies of mainstream political parties.**

Much has been made of the success of extreme right parties in various countries across the EU in the last few years. The concern is genuine since extremist forces today enjoy unprecedented popular support. In Romania, the opposite was the case: the establishment and the media praised the country for its lack of extreme right parties. Such parties did not even run, let alone win something.

But this celebratory mood should not blind us to the fact that the extreme right is well represented in Romania as well. One should not conflate the absence of organized extreme right parties with the absence of the extreme right as such. A more pervasive phenomenon is, in fact, taking place: mainstream parties have engulfed the language and ideology of the extreme right. Far from being absent from Romanian politics, extreme right views and language are at its core.

## Object of hate

The major difference between western extreme right and the eastern one is the object of hate they have. In the western case, it is predominantly the figure of the migrant that organizes the system of fear on which extremism flourishes, whereas in the east it is mainly the figure of the Roma. All the nationalistic, xenophobic and racist sentiments are directed towards it. This has been the main feature of Romanian politicians for at least a decade, if not more. For example, the ex-president Traian Băsescu has made a series of violent remarks against women, the Roma and the poor while he openly praised the positive legacy of Marshal Antonescu, the World War II Romanian leader and a staunch ally of Hitler, known for authorizing the deportation and killing of Jews and Roma. There was no difference between the president's views from those usually associated with the extreme right. Similarly, a series of Romanian politicians, most prominently two foreign affairs ministers, have suggested the deportation and incarceration of Roma people. Mayors across the country took their advice literally in some cases, by expelling the Roma from city centres or by building concrete walls around their segregated communities. While, indeed, there are no vigilante groups tormenting the Roma as in neighbouring Hungary, in Romania the local politicians of all stripes are taking up this task, with the explicit support of the majority of the population.

The current government in power, even though nominally a Social Democrat one, has its share of extreme right manifestations as well. A few years ago, one of its prime leaders denied the Holocaust. The former foreign affairs minister (there must be something with this job) openly slurred homosexuality in a conference, while endorsing the values of the traditional Romanian family. In fact, the Social-Democrats are now explicitly moving towards a nationalist agenda, after previously trying to hide their neoliberalism behind the old arguments of the Third Way. This was evident in

2014 in the campaign for the European parliament: "Proud to be Romanian" was their slogan, which is usually associated with conservative politics.

This is not a new strategy either. Starting with the Communist Party prior to 1989, and then with every major party afterwards, the ruling political class was always able to mobilize nationalism, racism and extremism to its favour whenever political circumstances demanded it. Building the figure of the menacing Other, constructing the nation as a fortress under siege, mobilizing against external enemies were always part and parcel of mainstream politics from the 19<sup>th</sup> century nation-building process, not the strategies of some peculiar right-wing extremists. They were an integral part of the development of Romanian politics that accompanied the definition of a nation-state in which blood, land and religion were salient components.

Therefore, in Romania, the problem is not the mysterious absence of the extreme right, but the difficulty to disentangle such components from mainstream politics. They are almost synonymous and quintessential.

The challenge of mainstream politicians is to preserve the monopoly on this discourse and use it only to their own benefits. And this might confuse observers since indeed such a strategy reflects a more encompassing political protectionism. Romania has one of the most restricting laws in the EU regarding the formation of political parties. Not only the number of signatures required to form a political organization is huge (and in addition, signatures must be collected proportionally from the entire country's territory), but also the deposit is beyond the reach of people. A few years ago, a former prime minister, with notoriety and vast political and economic connections, tried to form his own party. He was not able to gather the required amount of signatures and therefore took the easier solution: he bought an already existing one. Regular citizens cannot do the same (form or simply buy a party) and therefore many remain disenfranchised and un-represented by the existing political class.

### **Post-fascism**

But this also keeps at bay and out of the recognized spectrum of political parties the extreme right. Without the realistic possibility of forming a party, the extreme right groups and manifestations remain at the level of civic initiatives and NGOs, dealing like many other NGOs with specific issues: fight against LGBT rights, support the rehabilitation of aforementioned Marshall Antonescu and so on. Their presence is stronger online and takes different forms: from secular nationalist football hooligans, to fascist Christian nostalgics of the interwar period, to eco-friendly, conservative anti-capitalists.

The vast array of such views and the number of groups existing in the shadow of organized politics became visible during the protests against Roşia Montană goldmine exploitation in the autumn of 2013. United by the common enemy of the foreign corporation, this struggle offered a platform for previously underground groups to come into the open and make their case. It is also true that, in some cases, their presence was magnified by the government in order to discredit the protests. The criticism of the extreme right, especially the one coming from the left, was also instrumentalized against the protests themselves. Thus, the mainstream parties try to control not only the ideology of the extreme right but also the groups embracing it, mobilizing them in order to regain control over political situations.

Therefore, we need a different perspective to look at these issues, especially in Romania where many people were so quick to point out the absence of the extreme right as a sign of deep-seated European values and democracy. One such useful perspective is G.M Tamas' notion of post-fascism: a matrix of various politics, policies, practices and ideologies that have nothing to do with the

historical legacy of Nazism as such, but the one that is oriented against the Enlightenment idea of universal citizenship. Basically, post-fascism is a political operation of excluding from citizenship, and indeed, from the ranks of human beings, certain categories of people deemed undesirable, dangerous, lowly, filthy, expendable. This can be the migrant, the Roma, the poor, the homosexual, the woman, the Jew and whomever at one point the majority decides to outcast as a scapegoat.

Who needs the extreme-right in such a context? Post-fascism is the tyranny of the mainstream politics itself, its fundamental core. The current debates about the extreme right in Europe (necessary as they are) should not blind us however to the advancement of post-fascism as politics proper. From this perspective, Romania is a case in point.

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## **Florin Poenaru**

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