

# Failed anti-LGBT referendum shows Romanians' deep disillusionment with the political establishment.

Friday 7 December 2018, by [BORTUN Vladimir](#) (Date first published: 5 December 2018).

**The restoration of capitalism in countries like Romania failed to meet its promises and has instead delivered mass economic migration, vast income inequality, decaying public services, precarious jobs, low wages and corruption.**

This has led, in turn, to deep disillusionment with the political establishment, as reflected in the mere 39% turnout in the general elections two years ago. The failure of the 'family referendum' this October is the last expression of that disillusionment.

In the autumn of 2015, an array of ultra-conservative religious groups and NGOs entitled the Coalition for Family [1] launched a petition to modify the Constitution. The aim was to redefine marriage as not merely a union between spouses but between a man and a woman, on the basis that a potential legalisation of same-sex marriage in the future would undermine the 'traditional family' and threaten the wellbeing of Romanian children. Three million signatures were raised through highly questionable methods [2], which resulted in the Parliament's decision to hold a referendum on the matter.

Apart from the centre-right Save Romania Union (USR) and a couple of progressive independent MPs, all parliamentary forces endorsed a 'Yes' vote, in favour of the constitutional change. While reflecting the reactionary outlook prevailing among the political caste, that endorsement was mainly motivated by political opportunism. When a third of the workforce experiences material deprivation [3] and almost half is on the minimum wage [4], when the rate of industrial disputes has escalated in recent years and mass anti-corruption protests have shaken the government, this attack on LGBTQ+ rights was used to try and distract attention from the before mentioned issues in society and channel popular dissatisfaction against a historically oppressed minority (remember that homosexuality was decriminalised in Romania only in 2001).

Such an instrumentalization of the referendum particularly suited the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD), which thereby consolidated its right-wing characteristics. For, despite its name and formal affiliation to European social democracy, PSD is roughly the equivalent of Fidesz in Hungary or Law & Justice in Poland – a right-wing populist party that chiefly represents the interests of domestic oligarchs and bureaucratic networks. The main reason for PSD still being in power lies with its limited social concessions, such as the repeated albeit insufficient increases of the minimum wage, concessions nowhere to be found in the dogmatic neoliberal agenda of the opposition parties.

But despite the millions of euros pumped into the 'Yes' campaign, despite the extension of the voting period from one to two days, despite lowering the validation threshold from 50% to 30%, the referendum utterly failed as only 20% of the eligible voters went to polls! This failure was an expression of people's clear awareness of the material problems facing them and their children, in a

country with the highest infant mortality rate [5] in the EU and where nearly 100,000 children live apart from their parents due to economic migration [6]. The abstention in the referendum was therefore an unambiguous sign of contempt towards the political establishment responsible of such social problems.

An important role in the defeat of this reactionary initiative was played by the LGBTQ+ activist community [7], joined by the aforementioned USR but also by new left groups such as the social democratic formation Demos [8] and the radical, anti-capitalist Mâna de Lucru [9] (Working Hand – CWI group in Romania) in calling for a boycott of the referendum. This not only proved effective but allowed the left to link the question of LGBTQ+ rights with socio-economic issues and make the case for joint struggle against neoliberal capitalism and the forms of oppression it fuels. It is from this emerging new left that the alternative to the discredited political establishment and its mix of neoliberal and reactionary policies has to come.

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<https://www.transform-network.net/de/blog/article/failed-referendum-in-romania-shows-deep-disillusionment-with-the-political-establishment/>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://coalitiapentrufamilie.ro/english/>

[2] <https://newsweek.ro/actualitate/minori-si-persoane-decedate-au-semnat-pentru-sustinerea-initiativei-coalitei-pentru-familie>

[3] Eurofound 2017 Research Report: In-work poverty in the EU [https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef\\_publication/field\\_ef\\_document/ef1725en.pdf](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef1725en.pdf)

[4] <https://www.romania-insider.com/half-employees-romania-minimum-wage/>

[5] <https://www.indexmundi.com/map/?t=0&v=29&r=eu&l=en>

[6] <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/romanian-migrant-workers-leave-96-000-children-behind-statistics-03-13-2018>

[7] [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/pa9xjb/romania-referendum-2018-boycott-marriage-equality](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/pa9xjb/romania-referendum-2018-boycott-marriage-equality)

[8] <http://platforma-demos.ro/index.php/2018/09/12/drepturile-nu-se-supun-la-vot/>

[9] <https://manadelucru.net/boicotati-referendumul/>