

Romanian citizens voted in parliamentary elections yesterday. The results are not what you would expect in Eastern Europe these days: with 46% of the [seats](#) in both chambers of Parliament, the Social-Democrats (PSD) left everyone else in the [dust](#); the far right party is puny, largely unknown and failed to enter the Parliament.

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That this country was not engulfed by the region's right-wing populist wave may seem puzzling. This is a multiethnic country whose interwar nationalism and fascism were strong. Even its communism had a strong nationalist flavor and its early post-communist politics saw the rise of the strongest ultranationalist parties in the region. Romania is also one of Europe's poorest countries, its banking sector and export industry are almost entirely foreign owned and where economic hardship sent close to a third of the labour force into emigration. Too many of its politicians, civil servants and business elite are corrupt, its population has one of the most conservative and authoritarian social values in Europe and, to top it off, Hungary's Victor Orban unleashed new tension in bilateral relations. Local millionaires funded TV stations and parties peddling the standard rightwing populist fare. In brief, it should be the ideal playground of right populist parties. Several right-wing parties made a bid for entry into the Parliament using the rhetoric familiar with their peers elsewhere in the region. None broke through. There are several reasons for this.

History matters...

The first reason is political history. In this country far-right political formations had been part of the government or ran large municipalities during early post-communism's economic tragedy, before they could even begin to enter Parliament in other East-Central European countries. As such, to many voters, the populist right message is reminiscent of the grim socio-economic failures and mismanagement of resources associated with that period. Sending rightwing populists to fix potholes can be a disaster for their political future.

Second, the Social Democrats' [institutional infrastructure](#) and economic policy record are those of the region's most resilient and effective political formation. Critically, the institutional infrastructure of the PSD remains highly competitive: the top of the party hierarchy has real authority and its reach on the ground has no counterpart. This comes with the usual pork barrel politics feeding the party-municipal government networks and their known neo-patrimonial pathologies, but a third of the country still lives and votes in villages and, come election time, it is a huge asset to have these local party institutions. Saying that these party institutions and networks are but means for personal enrichment is a cheap shot. There are many outrageous instances of graft and cronyism but the center-right just learned how misguided was their obliviousness to the fact that PSD administrations in key areas were actually quite apt to deliver improved healthcare, roads and education, not just discretionary rents for their constituencies.

Outrage with the graft of the political establishment (and particularly of the Social Democrats), does not have to be vented via a "cool-ified" anti-establishment right populist party given to ranting about the vices of the political mainstream. There are other, more mainstream channels for this in Romania.

On policy, the PSD may be riddled with major integrity issues but they made a comeback in 2012 as the anti-austerity party and this was their big message now. It was not just talk. While solidly pro-business, pro-middle class and keeping unions at arms' length, when in government (2012-15) they also negotiated with the Troika to increase the minimum wage several times and cut VAT for staples and medicine. This demand-side boost balanced with pro-export sector measures supported the sharpest economic [recovery](#) in the Eurozone. Although in these elections they moved further to the right on economic issues to attract urban middle class electorates not too keen on corruption issues, their Reaganesque tax cuts sit, implausibly, next to their staple left-leaning wage-led growth strategy. Although some of the PSD's leading economists tend to be more Keynesian minded and lashed out at the growing inequality amidst the economic boom, the PSD as a whole has no plans to reverse the 2011 legislation that wrecked collective bargaining and reduced unions to irrelevance.

...and so does context

The third reason is that outrage with the graft of the political establishment (and particularly of the Social Democrats), does not have to be vented via a “cool-ified” anti-establishment right populist party given to ranting about the vices of the political mainstream. There are other, more mainstream channels for this in Romania. One is a new party ([USR](#)) whose chief identity marker is not a clear program or ideology, but the profile of its candidates. The party brings together a (quite young) motley crew of neoliberals, environmentalists, left liberals, genuine social-democrats, Christian Democrats, anti-poverty NGO types and minority rights activists. One of the leaders is a French executive who speaks like an old fashioned Gaullist. As such, a common ideology is hard to come by. What makes them most appealing for the educated and the middle class demographic in large cities is the fact that none of the USR leaders and candidates are indicted or sentenced and can make credible claims to meritocracy as bearers of prestigious degrees, technocratic experiences, respectable business or activist careers that inspire credibility with the urban middle class. Moreover, the space for the far right to lash out at the corruption of the establishment is reduced by the country’s draconian [anti-corruption prosecutor](#), which has been extremely successful at sending to jail large swathes of the political class, courts, police force and domestic corporate elite. Live arrests and footage with the powerful being accommodated in jail cells destroys the sandbox of populist play.

Fourth, the political economy of right populism demands real or plausibly impending economic decline, with downward status and income mobility for a largely sedentary population, increasing competition with migrants over public services or jobs and the sense that mainstream parties are unwilling/unable to arrest socio-economic decline. None of these conditions are in place in Romania. The country is the source of the largest emigration flows inside the EU. For most emigrants and their families, this means an improved socio-economic status. Moreover, the country’s economy has been growing strong since 2011 and although this did not dent inequality, poverty and social exclusion, the declinist sentiment that the right populists feed off of elsewhere is not widespread. Romania has been famously inefficient at tapping EU funds (unlike Poland or Hungary), yet after twenty years of dereliction, the improvement of the country’s infrastructure or the modernization of its schools is significant and broadly advertised. Moreover, the exit choice dampens discontent. It is harder, then, for one to make political gains from blaming the EU for all kinds of local ills.

Crowding out populism?

Finally and most importantly, Romania may not have a parliamentary far-right populist force, but some of the language, reflexes and themes associated with these parties have long been a part of the mainstream. Indeed, one does not have to wait for LGBT-bashing to come from the rightwing populists. The Liberals and the Social-Democrats have done it repeatedly and have recently supported a referendum for banning gay marriage in the Constitution. Ghastly slurs against opponents with foreign sounding names (such as the current President, who is an ethnic German) and conspiracy theories about the reach of a supposedly occult “Soros network”, pushing secularism, excessive minority rights, global economic interests and refugee quotas have been peddled in broad daylight by mainstream politicians, much like Fidesz types do in Budapest. Classism that borders on explicit scorn for social benefit takers, another hallmark of Central European right populism, has been a mainstay of the Romanian center-right for years. As in the early days of the Lega Nord’s anti-Mezzogiorno antics, many in the center-right often dwell on the contrast between the poverty of (often PSD-ran) Southern regions presented as inhabited by welfare-dependent riff-raff, and the more right-leaning regions of the formerly Austro-Hungarian parts of the country in the Center, West and North.

Since PSD is not a genuine labour party, but a cross between a Blairite and a socially conservative political construct with no serious opposition on the economic left, right-wing populist entrepreneurs could launch productive raids into the massive electorate displaced by the violence of Romania’s neoliberal dependent capitalism, the curtailment of freedom of movement and the risk of protectionism in developed economies.

PSD may be a member of the European Socialists, but on identity politics (say nationalism, LGBT, migration, church-state relations) it has been a solidly conservative party catering to the country’s prevailing authoritarian social values. All this does not mean that the Social Democrats will go the way of the Slovak Smer or that the Liberals will veer to the populist

right just like Fidesz did. Many young MPs in the party are progressives, some with pro-Roma or pro-LGBT positions. Worse case scenario, after many years spent in the doghouse of the non-EU eligible periphery, once in power, the Social Democrats act as a disciplined party of the European mainstream and serve as a dependable pro-EU political force. They are one of the actors that make the EU be a positive thing still. If, on the other hand, the West European center-left loses out even more to the populist right than it has done so far, much of this ideological conformism may melt into the air.

There are two big concerns at this point. One is that having been the party that was most damaged by prosecutions and jail sentences for graft, the PSD may attempt to weaken the anti-corruption arm of the state. However problematic some aspects of this function (such as the use of militarized wire-tapping), it would be distressing (and politically self-destructive for the above mentioned reasons) to see it wrecked. The other concern is more serious even: since PSD is not a genuine labour party, but a cross between a Blairite and a socially conservative political construct with no serious opposition on the economic left, right-wing populist entrepreneurs could launch productive raids into the massive electorate displaced by the violence of Romania's neoliberal [dependent capitalism](#), the curtailment of freedom of movement and the risk of protectionism in developed economies. This is no time for self-congratulatory remarks about the Romanian liberal anomaly in an illiberal region. Instead, it is time for taking distribution issues seriously. Romanian liberal democracy may be living on borrowed time.



This article has also appeared on [openDemocracy](#) as part of an editorial partnership with EuVisions.

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