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## Romania: the Downfall of Untouchables Continues

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*EuroPoint:* EU's Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification is empowering Romanian civil society to eradicate corruption in public offices. In the process of practicing its constitutional civil liberties, the country is maturing as a liberal democracy.

In a country ranked fifth in the world for Internet connection speeds, it is easier to file a corruption complaint online than yelping the corner pastry shop. Newspapers and TV newscasts are running the same story over and over again albeit with different names every time: yesterday's untouchables, today's prosecuted for corruption, tomorrow's inmates. MPs, ministers, judges, prosecutors, a former prime minister, local officials regardless of the party affiliation, an oligarchy who until recently enjoyed the protection of the pro-Russian Democratic Socialist Party (PSD) in power.

Two months into the presidency of [Klaus Iohannis](#), the fight against corruption is in overdrive. In March, Finance Minister Darius Valcov resigned after being investigated for a €2 million bribe in exchange for a public works contract. The same month, police investigating a possible property scam arrested Horia Georgescu, the chief of one of the EU-backed anticorruption agencies, the National Integrity Agency.



Klaus Iohannis Won His Presidency Bid in November 2014 on an Anticorruption Ticket

Following a year with a record number of convictions that include nine MPs and twelve former or current ministers, public trust in the EU-backed Anti-Corruption General Directorate (*Directia Nationala Anticoruptie*, DNA) is at **63%**. That is higher than the church and the army. Political parties only enjoy 10.8% of public trust.

When the Senate refused on March 25 to lift immunity to former Transport Minister, Dan Sova, spontaneous crowds gathered in protest on the streets of Bucharest and other main cities, demanding MPs face the law. President Iohannis posted on his Facebook page, "I cannot overlook the fact that that the Parliament blocked a request from Justice ... nobody is above the law."

Most DNA investigations are triggered by public complaints from a young, frustrated, Western-minded, cosmopolitan, post-Communist generation. This was not the case ten years ago, when the institution was founded as a prerequisite for Romania joining the EU. In those days, the protective umbrella of the ruling PSD party (continuator of the former communists) shielded a corrupt oligarchy. DNA was perceived as mere smoke and mirrors for the EU. Trust in the institution was low as apathetic citizens were doubtful anything would change. High profile cases were few and far

between, convictions inexistent, and the NUP stamp (*Neinceperea Urmarii Penale*, Non-Prosecution) ruled the day. MPs filled out statements of assets “*la mișto*” (in mockery). And Romania as a whole, was a good example of an illiberal democracy.

After Romania joined the EU, the Commission invoked the safeguard measure of the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification (CVM) to implement commitments undertaken by member states during the accession negotiations. In Romania’s case, the CVM set benchmarks and bi-annual reports to strengthen the rule of law and ensure a transparent, efficient judiciary and enhance accountability of those elected to public office.

Former President Traian Basescu (in office 2004 – 2014) spearheaded the fight against corruption despite opposition from the ruling PSD, which accused him of using the DNA to settle political scores. Following a wave of high profile arrest among the ruling elite in 2012, Prime-Minister Victor Ponta (PSD) compared the DNA with the feared *Securitate*, the repressive secret police from the country’s communist past. Yet the tide turned against Mr. Ponta, who lost the presidential elections as he was perceived as the ultimate protector of graft.

DNA’s latest request for Parliament to vote on lifting the immunity of three MPs produced panic among their colleagues. MPs would have to choose between solidarity with their peers and democratic liberalism. With public trust in the Parliament at hysterical historical lows, some party leaders chose to videotape the votes of their MPs to prevent allegations of backroom deals.

Emboldened by EU’s CVM mechanism, spearheaded by two presidents, filing complaints against corrupt public officials is becoming a national sport in one of EU’s most corrupt countries. Will Romania achieve Singapore’s performance in this cleanup, absent an autocratic Lee Kuan Yew? The show must go on!

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