

The birth of a new civic platform in Romania

Interview with Oana Băluță and Camil Pârnu, Demos¹

Romania's political landscape has become increasingly problematic as a result of growing social inequality and economic instability. In this context, Demos has emerged as a growing citizens platform that aims to secure more political influence for the people. It offers open forums for the citizens to come together and reflect on common demands and the problems that the government is not solving. Oana Băluță and Camil Pârnu are members of the new initiative Demos. They reflect about the political situation, the social struggles and about how the new citizens' platform can influence the political agenda in the country. Oana Băluță is an associate professor at the University of Bucharest's Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies and Camil Pârnu is an associate professor at the university's Faculty of Political Science.

Over the last few years, in certain European countries like Greece, Spain and Poland we have seen the formation of political parties that began as social movements or citizens' platforms. How was Demos formed, what does it mean to be a civic platform and how do you see the transition to a political party?

Many of the members of Demos as a civic platform have been directly involved in the waves of protest that Romania has seen since 2011. A particularity of these protests is that they have been rather effective in these last five years – forcing two resignations by prime ministers

1 | This interview took place in November 2016, before the parliamentary elections in Romania, where the Social Democrats won 46 per cent of the vote.

and, in the 2013 protests over the Rosia Montana gold mining project, a policy change from what was a very broad parliamentary coalition on other issues. Part of the strength of the street protests derived from the *de facto* impossibility of forming new political parties and the increasing cartelisation of the existing ones. In the course of the last year the electoral legislation has changed, making it much easier to establish new political parties. Some of the newly formed political parties are, however, very neoliberal in their social and political outlook – as they insist on post-political expertise delivering a social conflict-free society. We, by contrast, are focussing on the key issues of rising inequality (Romania has the highest level of income inequality in the EU), social and environmental policy, poverty, housing, and rebuilding the social state, which is in the process of being dismantled. Our political and social vision is driven by the lessons and vocabulary of the social protests.

How would you describe the political context in Romania today? And within this context, what are the main policies advocated by Demos?

Given that 2016 is an election year in Romania – local elections have already been held and parliamentary ones will take place in December – it makes sense to reflect on the political context in terms of both the *political parties running for election* and the *public policies*. The competition is fiercer in this year's elections because new political parties have been established that have the potential to displace the parties that traditionally win. There is also a mixture of ideologies, a reluctance to adopt any single ideology, confusion regarding the official ideology, the public policies and the rhetoric of the politicians, as well as opportunistic strategies that embrace nationalism, populism and moral conservatism.

Demos is not running in the elections because for now it still functions as a civic platform. It brings people together to debate and discuss solidarity, democracy and giving politics back to the people. Despite the growing competition among political parties, socio-economic and environmental issues are still being left aside despite the fact that they are creating inequality and a lack of opportunities for individuals and groups. Demos wants to play an active role in combating inequality in education, in the labour market, in healthcare, in the environment and in the social welfare system by promoting opportunities for individuals in a precarious

situation/the disadvantaged. Demos also advocates gender-sensitive, anti-racist and environmentally-friendly policies.

What are the main social issues in Romania today and how is the government dealing with them?

The main social issues are unemployment, workers' rights, access to decent healthcare and education, work-life balance policies, housing, and the protection of vulnerable individuals – for instance women who are victims of gender-based violence. Some social issues are being addressed by the government, while others are being ignored or “postponed”. Take public kindergartens, for instance. Their number has decreased steadily since 1989, and the statistics show that the shortage of public kindergarten places is having a negative impact on women's employment rates and children's access to public school education, particularly in rural areas. Developing and investing in public kindergartens yields positive results in terms of gender equality and children's access to primary school education, especially in the case of one-parent families and families that are struggling financially and desperately need a second income to stay above the poverty line. You cannot increase employment rates among women without investing in public kindergartens. We have to understand the cumulative impact the lack of kindergarten places has for instance on pensions and on poverty rates among elderly women.

Where is Demos operating at the moment? Do you have different groups at the national and regional levels? If so, how do the policies and methods differ from one level to the other?

We are starting to set up central and local party structures (the party will become an official entity in a couple of months) to prepare for the next elections in three years' time. Parallel to this process the civic platform is now present in many of the big cities and has national reach. We selected particular themes for the debates at each local event – labour laws, the reconstruction of the social welfare state, the creation of new anti-corruption policies etc. We are very pleased with the attention and feedback that these local debates have generated and we continue to develop this network.

When we talk to the founders and members of new political parties in Europe, they point to the challenges of maintaining a productive, enduring and healthy relationship between the social movement that produced them and the institutions. What are the expectations of Demos in this respect?

Because Demos is still a civic platform at present we have not yet actively confronted that challenge, although there is an internal process of negotiating our own identity as we make the transition from civic activists to members of a political party. For the moment our organisational structure remains rather horizontal and we are setting up working groups and subgroups in which we can harmonise our expertise for several key policy areas, such as social policy, environmental policy, administrative reform etc. This means that when the political party is finally established it will inherit the style and political culture of the civic platform. It will, however, be a political party with specific decision-making procedures. We have included several groups in a process of consultation in order to ensure a better integration and coverage of various policy areas. We have already consulted green NGOs, LGBT groups and newly formed trade unions, and we plan to have consultations with women's rights groups and other such organisations. Many members of the Demos Initiative Group come from social movements and NGOs themselves, and we can build up a healthy relationship with these groups if there is mutual trust and if we understand and accept each other's limitations, as well as the importance of working together in order to respond more effectively to the needs of special groups and better represent their interests. It will be a learning process for both the agents of social movements and Demos. We need to create trust, advocate specific policies and dialogue, and embrace an approach based on common sense.