



# Weekly Briefing

**Romania political briefing:**  
**Resignation of two ministers for irregularities in the care system**  
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## **Resignation of two ministers for irregularities in the care system**

*The ministers of Labour and Family resigned and were replaced after irregularities in delivering treatment and alimentation in three institutions caring for young, elderly, sick and disabled people. The investigation showed high politicization of functions in public organizations in charge with supervision for the good going of these institutions. The scandal, burst in the brink of the elections in 2024, risk to affect the Social Democrat Party's (SDP) image. More than that, the main SDP candidate for the City Hall of Bucharest could be forced to renounce to such political ambitions.*

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of July, an investigation of the Directorate for the Investigation of Organized Crime and Terrorism (DIOCT) blew the political scene by providing proofs on serious irregularities on delivering treatment and alimentation in three institutions where young, elderly and sick and disabled people were cared for<sup>1</sup>. The investigation showed that the persons responsible for the management of the institutions had connections with some politicians with important functions in the governing parties. While the social dimension of this issue is an important subject that should be carefully considered, in the following we will only discuss the political effects of this matter.

The first to be accused by the irregularities of the investigation was the Labour Minister, Marius Budai, with responsibilities in what concerned those institutions, followed by the Minister of Family, Gabriela Firea, both members of the Social Democrat Party (SDP). However, both of them initially declared that they were not informed on the way in which the situation was managed inside the institutions, pointing that the accreditation files looked impeccable. In addition, the declarations on reforming the system were soon launched, as the Labour Minister intended to submit proposals for structural changes regarding the way the care system works. The Prime Minister also asked for the help of non-governmental organizations and associations in the field for recommending experienced persons in the care for people with

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<sup>1</sup> Ofițeru, A., 2023. „Ne e foame.” O localnică povestește cum erau tratați cei din „azilele groazei”. „Toți știau. Pande, Firea stau după colț”, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/azilele-groazei-vecini-voluntari-afumati/32501670.html> (accessed 21 July 2023).

disabilities, minors or the elderly, in order to be involved in the reform<sup>2</sup>. More than that, controls were carried out in all centres for people with disabilities.

### **The first reactions: dismissals or resignations**

The first reaction of the accused ministers was that of not assuming any responsibility in the matter. Both ministers denied involvement<sup>3</sup> in the case, claiming not to know on the happenings in those institutions. However, investigations show that residents of the city had complained to the police and the local institutions responsible for the situation of the elderly, and had even sued the city hall of the town in which the institutions were located. While the Ministry of Family had no attributions in the matter, the problem was that family and professional ties indicated connections between the minister and the persons involved in managing the situation.

Therefore, initially, several heads of institutions who should have known and intervened in the situation were suspended, dismissed or asked to resign, especially after the scandal gained momentum. Experts in politics claim<sup>4</sup> that such dismissals are only “attempts to stop public opinion, to stop the scandal, to transfer the interest to other people and to protect the very ones who made the appointments”. It was clear that there was a high reticence in blaming ministers. President Iohannis<sup>5</sup>, although demanding for tough measures against the culprits when the DIOCT investigation will end, avoided to mention who is politically guilty. The same general approach was followed by the leader of SDP and Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu, who blamed the system, as being a “corrupt and inactive”. SDP position was that the Ministry of the Family had no authority over nursing homes and that the prosecutors did not make any direct charges against it, therefore, before taking measures, the end of the investigation must be expected, for avoiding decisions made on emotion and political speculation. Experts indicate that the party’s strategy was to show that the fault is general and belongs to the entire political class<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Șancu, S., 2023. *Ministrul Muncii, Marius Budăi, și-a dat demisia în urma dezvăluirilor despre „azilele groazei”*. Vicepremierul Marian Neacșu, interimar, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/marius-budai-demisie-azilele-groazei/32501662.html> (accessed 21 July 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Pora, A., 2023. *De ce o menajează PSD și premierul pe Gabriela Firea în scandalul „azilelor groazei”?*, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/psd-firea-ciolacu-demite/32498815.html> (accessed 21 July 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Vulcan. D., 2023. *Demisiile din scandalul „azilelor groazei”. Acarul Păun a fost destituit, șefii se jură că n-au greșit și partidul îi crede*, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/azilele-groazei-gabriela-firea-marius-budai/32500497.html> (accessed 21 July 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Idem 4

<sup>6</sup> Idem 3

However, following the investigation, “the situation has become more and more serious, the information more and more clear, and the political responsibilities are as visible as possible, especially regarding the Ministry of Labour”<sup>7</sup>, according to experts. Finally, both ministers decided to resign. In addition, Gabriela Firea also left, for a non-mentioned period, from the position of president of the SDP organization in Bucharest. However, she mentioned that the gesture was made only for allowing the prime minister “to be able to quietly work on good economic and social projects for Romanians”, not because she considers herself guilty<sup>8</sup>. In addition, she mentioned that she is the focus of a denigration campaign whose aim is to hinder her political path. Following this move, the Prime Minister exonerated her again of any responsibility, showing that her minister portfolio had nothing to do with the situation, but appreciating the voluntary gesture.

Several other accusations were raised until calm is restored. Among others, social democrats asked NLP deputy Raluca Turcan and the actual Minister of Culture to resign, as a “a gesture of political dignity”<sup>9</sup>, given that during her tenure as Minister of Labour, one of the accused institutions was accredited. NLP, however, considered that there are no legal, moral or political implications for this gesture. The two ministers which resigned were soon replaced by two other ministers were appointed, both from SDP.

### **The effect on the political situation**

SDP suffered a deep hit for its image right in the period in which such problems are not acceptable anymore, in the view of the 2024 elections. The party was just managing to restore its reputation after some of the previous leaders were convicted for corruption. This is why SDP’s reaction was to accuse the entire political class for the problems in society which are, indeed, the accumulation of previous bad decision, irregularities which were not corrected and indifference.

The situation was the opportunity for other parties to attack the governing parties. USR, the major opposition party, was the most vocal, even insisting on abolishing the Ministry of the

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<sup>7</sup> Idem 2

<sup>8</sup> \*\*\* , 2023. *Natalia Intotero, propusă ministru al Familiei, Simona Bucura-Oprescu la Ministerul Muncii / Nominalizările au fost validate de conducerea PSD*, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26402473-conducerea-psd-reuneste-sedinta-urma-valideze-decizia-privind-nominalizarile-ministerele-muncii-familiei-cine-sunt-favoritii.htm> (accessed 21 July 2023).

<sup>9</sup> \*\*\* , 2023. *Ar trebui să facă și Raluca Turcan un pas în spate în scandalul azilelor groazei? Iohannis: Cred că demisiile politice au fost suficiente*, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26403673-trebuie-faca-raluca-turcan-pas-spate-scandalul-azilelor-groazei-iohannis-cred-demisiile-politice-fost-suficiente.htm> (accessed 21 July 2023).

Family<sup>10</sup>, accusing that it was specially created for Gabriela Firea in November 2021, when the governing coalition was inaugurated. USR submitted two requests regarding the hearings of those responsible in this case, but both were rejected in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. The whole situation could turn in favour of AUR, the extreme party that is on the rise and is very vocal in taking the part of the most disadvantaged in society.

In fact, the latest opinion poll for June<sup>11</sup> shows that SDP has lost two percentages in the voting intentions as compared to the previous month. However, SDP remains the first in Romanians' voting intentions, with 28.7%, followed by AUR (20.1%) and NLP (18%), while USR has only 12% of total. AUR had the highest raise as compared with May (1.5 percentage points), followed by NLP (0.7 percentage points) and USR (0.6). Both major parties (SDP and NLP) saw large drops in the voting intention after taking the leadership of the government. The distance between SDP and the following parties continues to remain important. However, parties are among the least credible organizations<sup>12</sup> for Romanians, with a score of 3 out of 10.

More than the impact on the party itself, the repercussions are rather on Gabriela Firea, the previous minister of Family. Although the ministry was not directly responsible for the situation, the minister was affected due to the connection with the persons involved in the problem. In fact, after 11 years in politics, Gabriela Firea resigned not only from the position of minister, but also from those in the party, remaining only with that of senator. Moreover, her political future could be further compromised. She was the SDP's candidate for the City Hall of Bucharest, titrated with the highest chances, and at some point, her name was also mentioned for a potential nomination for the position of President. Experts consider<sup>13</sup> that it is politically complicated to remove the association with this scandal, especially that in Romania, in general, there have been no major comebacks of politicians involved in certain scandals.

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<sup>10</sup> \*\*\* , 2023. Cătălin Drulă îi cere lui Ciolacu să desființeze Ministerul Familiei, creat special pentru Gabriela Firea, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26398519-catalin-drula-cere-lui-ciolacu-desfiinteze-ministerul-familiei-creat-special-pentru-gabriela-firea.htm> (accessed 21 July 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Pirvu, L., 2023. Sondaj INSCOP: PSD la cel mai mic scor din ultimii doi ani, dar tot pe locul 1 la intenția de vot / Cum stau PNL, USR și AUR, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26377538-ultimul-sondaj-inscop-psd-cel-mai-mic-scor-din-ultimii-doi-ani-dar-tot-locul-1-intentie-vot-cum-stau-pnl-usr-aur.htm> (accessed 22 July 2023).

<sup>12</sup> \*\*\* , 2023. SONDAJ: PSD favorit în intențiile de vot, PNL și AUR, umăr la umăr / Încrederea în partide, la pământ, și o cotă semnificativă pentru extrema dreaptă, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26410525-sondaj-psd-favorit-intențiile-vot-pnl-aur-umar-umar-increderea-partide-pamant-cota-semnificativa-pentru-extrema-dreapta.htm> (accessed 22 July 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Deșpa, O., 2023. Firea & Pandele au mizat pe Biserică în scandalul „azilelor groazei”, dar în loc de susținere au primit ocară, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/firea-si-biserica/32503808.html> (accessed 22 July 2023).

## **Conclusions**

More and more, parties tend to be seen as organizations that act more in their interests than in the interest of the society in general, encouraging nepotism in public institutions. There is the fear that the interest is rather in calming the scandal in the brinks of the elections than in effectively solving the problems in the system. Experts in the field of political science argue<sup>14</sup> that the situation is much broader and encompasses more institutions than nursing homes and children's institutions given the politicization of such establishments and the lack of experts that could make an impact in the management of the institutions and in really producing a change in the whole system.

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<sup>14</sup> Idem 2