

Romania: Bid to Meet EU Norms Questioned

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Cut in size of government to speed up union membership prospects draws criticism.

Romania has axed a number of government ministries to meet European Union norms and increase efficiency, but some say the reshuffle is no more than surface tinkering that has left the country's structural problems untouched.

Prime Minister Adrian Nastase announced the changes on June 16 in a half-hour televised speech. Cutting the number of ministries from 23 to 14, he said a streamlined administration would be better placed to resolve problems in social welfare, health and other issues.

"Restructuring is vital for our upcoming assessment by the EU report this year," said Nastase, who also heads the ruling left-wing Social Democratic party, PSD. "It's clear we have to make this team more flexible, smaller and more efficient."

Some ministries were merged while others were simply abolished. Key posts dealing with foreign affairs, the interior, finance, justice and European integration were untouched.

While analysts welcomed the decision to trim Romania's large cabinet, in which the responsibilities of several ministries overlapped, they also questioned the long-term benefit.

"It is a long-overdue decision, as Romania had one of the most overstaffed governments in Europe," said Cristian Ghinea, of the think-tank, the Romanian Academic Society, SAR. "But the toughest job lies ahead, as Bucharest accelerates negotiations with the EU. In my opinion, the reshuffle is just a redistribution of the bureaucracy."

The prime minister was naturally more upbeat, hailing the government for fulfilling its goal of reforming the military in line for NATO membership and getting the EU to provisionally agree on 2007 as a date for Romania's entry.

"The new cabinet will be better placed to push through tough economic and other reforms needed to meet the 2007 date," Nastase said.

But Romania, the EU's second largest candidate state after Poland, has also been the slowest to reform. It has closed only 19 out of 30 chapters, as the policy areas that need to be negotiated with the union are called. It is the only candidate state not to merit description by Brussels as a "functioning market economy".

Bucharest has also recently risked a rift with its future EU partners over its staunchly pro-NATO and pro-American foreign policy. In August, Romania was the first country to agree to exempt US troops from prosecution under the provisions of the International Criminal Court. The EU criticised Bucharest for not having waited until Europe had determined its collective opinion on the issue.

In the meantime, European officials have chided Romania over the slow pace of its reforms and demanded major strides this year if Bucharest is to join the bloc on time.

Progress is constantly being monitored by the EU, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Brussels has particularly stressed the need for clear structural reform of the administration and the judiciary to cut corruption and create conditions for economic growth.

"Corruption is a product of failures in the system. The weaker justice and administration, the more vulnerable a country is to corruption," Jonathan Scheele, head of the European Commission delegation in Romania, said recently.

The country has a long way to go before its act is cleaned up. Last year, Romania was ranked 77th among 102 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index - it was also the most corrupt of the EU's candidate states.

Officialdom blames the slow pace of change in the decade following the collapse of communism in 1989 on the legacy of the late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. The former leader drove millions to near-starvation with his plans to create a self-sufficient economy by exporting food to pay off the foreign debt and building up loss-making industries.

The largely incompetent civil service is also cited as a factor behind the country's slow progress compared to other ex-communist countries.

"Different governments controlled by all-powerful parties and syndicates have proved unable to implement the necessary reforms," said Cornel Nistorescu, editor of leading daily newspaper Evenimentul Zilei.

Nistorescu says the latest reshuffle is more about improving the government's image 18 months ahead of the next general election than anything else.

The editor notes that most Romanians remain sceptical about EU integration, while the number of people who think the country is heading in the wrong direction is growing.

"The ruling PSD needed to restructure the government to give it a fresh boost in public confidence," he said.

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