
EU SAYS ROMANIA HAS BACKTRACKED ON COURT REFORMS

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The European Commission complained Tuesday that Romania has gone back on court reforms, urging Bucharest to revive efforts immediately to fight corruption and ensure judicial independence.

The European Union's executive arm highlighted growing concerns about threats to the rule of law and democratic values in not just Romania but other member countries such as Poland and Hungary.

"I regret that Romania has not only stalled its reform process, but also reopened and backtracked on issues where progress was made over the past 10 years," Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans said, presenting a report.

"It is essential that Romania gets back on track immediately in the fight against corruption and also ensures an independent judiciary," he said.

The former Dutch foreign minister also expressed concern about restrictions on press freedom under Prime Minister Viorica Dancila's left-wing government in Bucharest.

"We need the media to be able to work free from pressure," he told a press conference later.

Timmermans, the EU's pointman on rule of law threats, issued eight recommendations for Romania, including immediately suspending procedures to appoint or dismiss prosecutors.

He also urged Romania to freeze the implementation of changes to the criminal code.

The commission said it will continue to follow Romania closely and will assess the situation before the end of the executive's mandate next year.

"We don't do this to punish, we do this to help," Timmermans told reporters, stressing it was part of a cooperative dialogue with Romania.

In contrast, the Commission last year launched action that could result in unprecedented sanctions against Poland's right-wing government over allegations that it posed a "systemic threat" to the rule of law.

The European Parliament launched a similar action in recent months against Poland's ally

Hungary, though member states could veto the sanctions that would result in their losing EU voting rights.

For months, the Commission has been expressing concern about changes to Romania's penal code pushed through by the Social Democratic Party-led government, which its critics say are unconstitutional and threaten judicial independence.

During a debate last month in the European Parliament with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker stressed the need for progress in Romania before it assumes the bloc's rotating presidency in January.

'Not ready for this'

Juncker warned Romania not to undermine its bid to join Europe's passport-free Schengen zone, where Bucharest needs a recommendation from the Commission and unanimous support from the other 27 EU member countries.

Romania and neighboring Bulgaria's bid to join the Schengen zone — which is composed of 22 EU nations and four non-EU countries — have been blocked since 2007.

The Schengen area is one of the pillars of the European project, enshrining the right to free movement.

Bulgaria fared far better in the commission report, with Timmermans hailing its progress on judicial reform as well as fighting corruption and organized crime.

Prosecutors have had some success in clamping down on corruption in Romania, which has a reputation as one of the EU's most graft-ridden countries, but the government accuses them of overstepping their power.

After winning elections in late 2016, the government attempted to water down anti-corruption legislation, but abandoned the plans in face of the biggest wave of protests since the collapse of communism in 1989.

In a non-binding vote, the European Parliament on Tuesday also warned Romania against undermining the independence of its courts and the fight against corruption before it assumes the EU presidency.

On Tuesday, The Romanian government appointed George Ciamba, a 52-year-old experienced diplomat, as Europe minister in order to prepare for the bloc presidency.

Iohannis, who hails from Romania's center-right, had claimed that the leftist government is "not ready for this" presidency after Ciamba's predecessor Victor Negrescu, 33, resigned late last week.

No public explanation was given but Romanian press reports said colleagues had blamed Negrescu for failing to ease EU concerns about Romania's upcoming presidency.

Dancila insisted Romania was ready for the job and accused Iohannis of harming the country.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/eu-says-romania-has-backtracked-on-court-reforms/4656610.html>

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