

VISIT UNDER EU PRESIDENCY

VISIT TO ROMANIA - 3 AND 4 JUNE 2019

A visit in person is worth more than any number of newspaper articles, which is why the FMA paid a visit to Bucharest during the Romanian Council Presidency.

The Former Members Association's visit to Bucharest coincided with a number of significant political events. Romania's 51.07% participation rate in the European elections showed that its people really do care about the EU. The referendum called at the same time by Romanian President Klaus W Johannis, which attracted an 83% turnout, had significant domestic political consequences.

A visit to the Dimitrie Gusti National Village Museum, an open-air ethnographic museum, gave us an impressive overview of traditional village life in various parts of Romania.

Stephan Meuser, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's representative in Romania, gave us an insight into the country's unique cultural characteristics and talked about its current political situation, with an emphasis on infrastructure, the low-wage sector, corruption and the outcome of the European elections. Rémus Pricopie, Rector of the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, welcomed us warmly to the prestigious

university. We had a lively exchange with highly qualified students. We had plenty of time to comment after an introduction by the delegate Erna Hennicot Schoepges. They asked us a great many questions on the future of Europe, including the dispute over Brexit.

Mugur Isarescu, Governor of the Central Bank of Romania, talked to us about the monetary situation in the country and the Bank's independent status. Accession to the euro was at the heart of our discussions, as was the country's internal economic development, given that there is a significant disparity between rural and urban areas. Mr Nicusor Ruiu, a member of the Bank Committee, organised a visit to the Bank's museum and a tour of the prestigious building.

Four outstanding musicians from the Paul Constantinescu Philharmonic Orchestra demonstrated their talents at a dinner hosted by the Romanian Parliament, creating an atmosphere conducive to a fruitful exchange of views.

The following day, a meeting with the delegation at the People's Palace was led by the Chairs of the European Affairs Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies,

Angel Tîlvăr and Rozália-Ibolya Biró, and by the Chairs of the European Affairs Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Romanian Senate, Gabriela Crețu, and Cristian Dumitrescu former MEPs.

Ovidiu Gant, former MEP and current member of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies representing the Transylvanian minority, joined us at the meeting. Discussions touched on access to the Schengen area and Romania's special arrangements in the area of common defence.

At the Mugurele Nuclear Physics Institute, researchers presented the ELI project, which is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and involves the most advanced research into photo-nuclear physics in the world. Work using the ELI laser and the hugely significant research being carried out into nuclear waste by 250 researchers take place in colossal and highly specialised premises. The technical director of the institute, Dr Calin Alexandru Ur, talked about the shortage of researchers in the area of nuclear physics and presented his international recruitment programme.

Our exposure to the country's culture and politics and our meetings with people there showed how important it is for the FMA to visit other countries.

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The FMA Delegation at the the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

INSECURITY IN EUROPE

During the Association's trip to Romania from 2 to 4 June 2019 – which was most interesting and very well organised – we had a meeting with lecturers and students from the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration. At one point in the discussion, someone from the university asked about the causes of the division and political instability laid bare by the results of the European Parliament elections held a few days earlier.

Whilst listening to the question I noted down the word 'insecurity'. As the results of the European elections have shown, there has been an emergence and consolidation of far-left and far-right political ideas. I believe the reason for this is a sense of insecurity relating to the fact that, in many people's eyes, EU membership is unable to provide the guarantees of stability and individual and collective progress that such membership was supposed to bring. One of the EU's greatest achievements – if not the greatest

– is the welfare state: the largest and most significant level of social assistance of all in the large, developed regions across the world. Western Europe, rising from the ashes of the Second World War, built societies with social safeguards that provided extremely high levels of security for the lives of the people in the countries concerned. The welfare state was and still is our societies' greatest achievement, a guarantee embedded in membership of the European Union.

The economic crisis and its effects, however, have destroyed that sense of security. Social assistance levels have been forced downwards, and owing to their debts, many Member States cannot afford to raise them again. Policies designed to maintain or restore deficit levels in the eurozone countries meant that budget cuts needed to be taken – and are indeed still being taken. Those cuts are making it impossible for the countries concerned to meet the demand for improvements across

large swathes of society, and many people are extremely concerned about rising inequality. Insecurity surrounding pensions and jobs, and low wages, mean that young people are finding it extremely difficult to secure decent housing and make plans for the future with a view to settling down and having a family. The crisis is now behind us, of course: rates of economic growth are showing continuing signs of recovery, but they are not enough to bring down the excessive levels of debt. Nor are they enough to reassure the middle classes, who are crucial when it comes to ensuring the stability of society. And nor are they enough to improve the plight of young people, who in many Member States are hardest hit by unemployment. Basically, insecurity and very low expectations in terms of prospects have become widespread among many levels of society in Europe. All the opinion polls suggest that for the first time we have a generation that thinks life will be worse for the generation to come. In my view, this insecurity about the future, which was absent before the economic crisis, has undermined – and is still undermining – the foundations of the social consensus that centred around accepting membership of the European Union. It is pushing people to vote for the extreme left and the extreme right, and that is what we discussed in our visit to Romania, just after the European elections.



FMA Delegation during the Visit to Romania

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