
ROMANIA: LEADER FACES MISCONDUCT CHARGES IN COURT HEARING

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Romania's most powerful politician is preparing to defend himself against corruption charges, days after the U.S. State Department said graft remains widespread at every level of the country's government.

In the run-up to Wednesday's hearing, Liviu Dragnea, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party, has dismissed the charges of official misconduct as "mere statements, gossip and rumors."

Prosecutors say Dragnea intervened to keep two women on the payroll of a family welfare agency, even though they were employed by the party. They have pleaded guilty.

In recent months, Romania's left-wing government has embarked on a contentious judicial overhaul, prompting protests and criticism from Washington and its partners in the European Union.

The government has also been criticized for undermining the work of the anti-corruption prosecutors' unit which last year successfully prosecuted 713 officials, including 28 mayors.

Justice Minister Tudorel Toader called for the resignation of National Anti-Corruption Directorate Chief Prosecutor Laura Codruta Kovesi saying she was unfit for the job and pointing to cases of alleged wrongdoing among prosecutors. President Klaus Iohannis refused to fire her, but she is regularly criticized and mocked in pro-government media.

Kovesi insists corruption remains widespread, alleging some hospital managers have taken bribes worth millions of euros, while the defrauding of EU funds has doubled.

Critics say they are concerned that government proposals, including restricting public statements about corruption probes and allowing suspects to be present when a whistleblower makes allegations against them, would make prosecutions harder.

Dragnea is already barred from serving as prime minister due to a 2016 conviction for vote-rigging. Separately, he had his assets frozen on charges of embezzling EU funds. He denies wrongdoing.

Despite the allegations, Dragnea strengthened his grip on power this year. Supporters admire him for enforcing party discipline and his tough stand against what he says are abuses of the anti-corruption office.

Laura Stefan, a Romanian anti-corruption specialist, says politicians who face graft probes, see

Dragnea "as a problem solver."

"For party leaders, as long as he delivers in terms of financial allocations and legal initiatives regarding the criminal justice issues, he will remain in power," said Stefan, of the Expert Forum public policy think tank in Bucharest.

Crucially, Dragnea has the support of local party bosses who also fear corruption probes. His ally, Senate speaker, Calin Popescu Tariceanu is on trial for making false statements to protect people on trial in a real estate case involving a prince.

Some former high-level officials who are being probed for corruption have fled to Costa Rica, Madagascar, and Serbia, periodically making statements claiming they are politically persecuted in Romania.

Corruption is part of everyday life in Romania according to the U.S. State Department in its annual report on human rights' practices which cited "numerous reports of government corruption," last year and "bribery remained common in the public sector."

The Council of Europe's anti-corruption agency has also voiced "serious concerns" about the judicial overhaul and draft amendments to the criminal code. Romania's justice system remains under special EU monitoring.

<http://uk.businessinsider.com/ap-romania-leader-faces-misconduct-charges-in-court-hearing-2018-4>

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