
LEADER OF ROMANIA'S RULING PARTY SENTENCED FOR CORRUPTION

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The powerful leader of Romanias ruling party has been sentenced to prison in a blow to a government that has showered praise on Donald Trumps drain the swamp rhetoric, and threatened to create the EUs latest populist headache.

Liviu Dragnea, head of the Social Democratic party (PSD) and regarded as the most powerful man in the country, was convicted of abuse of power and handed a three-and-a-half-year sentence in an initial verdict after a corruption trial. Dragnea is expected to appeal.

Prosecutors had said that Dragnea, at the time a government official, intervened from 2008 to 2010 to keep two women on the payroll of a family welfare agency, even though they were employed by his party. The women have admitted working for the party although they received their salaries from the welfare agency.

The news was greeted with delight by flag-waving crowds in Bucharest, where pro- and anti-government demonstrations have brought tens of thousands of protestors to the streets in recent weeks.

But the conviction may lead to further political tensions in Romania, where the PSD has prepared moves to impeach opposition-backed President Klaus Iohannis and sack the head of the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA), an official body that has convicted hundreds of politicians and officials in recent years.

Iohannis has backed the DNA, and stalled on a recent constitutional court ruling that he could not overrule the governments decision to sack its chief prosecutor. The court has also issued a ruling that would effectively increase the PSD governments control over the judiciary. Dragneas conviction adds further to a complex political crisis.

I expect harsh words from both the PSD and the president following the Dragnea decision, said Radu Delicote, a consultant at Bucharest-based communications agency Smartlink. Its hot out there. Theres an institutional conflict, and its possible that the president will be suspended.

The PSD and its allies won a landslide election victory in December 2016, and though Dragnea was barred from becoming prime minister by a previous conviction for vote-rigging, he is seen as effectively leading the government.

The new administration soon launched emergency legislation designed to limit anti-corruption prosecutions, leading to Romanias biggest street protests since the fall of communism in 1989. It

also moved judicial reforms that critics say are targeted at lifting the ban on Dragnea becoming premier, and easing penalties on corruption.

The legal process shows that Romania is still a believer in European values, and that institutions around the judiciary are strong, despite the ambitions of a clique with self-interest at heart, said Manuel Costescu, a former minister and until recently an opposition MP. They were trying to decriminalise criminality.

The PSD argues that it is working to tackle a sinister deep state network of security agents, judges, and prosecutors that are undermining the work of an elected government that is still riding high in the polls.

Dragnea has accused the EU and Nato of backing this odious system, and PSD figures have praised Trumps efforts to drain the swamp.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/21/leader-of-romanias-ruling-party-sentenced-for-corruption>

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