

Moldova: pro-Russian opposition leader sentenced to 15 years in prison

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On 13 April, the Chisinau Court of Appeals sentenced Ilan Șor, a businessman and leader of the opposition pro-Russian ȘOR party, to 15 years in prison for participating in the so-called 'theft of the century', namely the embezzlement of around \$1 billion from the Moldovan banking sector in 2014. At the same time, the court ordered the confiscation of Șor's assets, worth around €250 million, in favour of the National Bank of Moldova (NBM). The politician fled the country in 2019, and is currently in hiding, most likely in Israel. After the sentence was passed, he claimed that it had been handed down illegally, under political pressure from the government. In his opinion, the court's decision is the government's revenge for the anti-government demonstrations that his group has been holding regularly for several months in the centre of the capital. He also stressed that the verdict would not stop him from continuing to fight, and called on his supporters to demonstrate on 7 May. At the same time, Șor's lawyers announced that they would contest the verdict at the Supreme Judicial Chamber (the highest court in Moldova). President Maia Sandu expressed satisfaction with the verdict, stating that both the government and the majority of Moldovan citizens had expected a decision like this and the return of the embezzled funds.

Commentary

- The verdict of the Court of Appeal marks a breakthrough in the proceedings against Șor. Although he had been sentenced to 7½ years in prison by the court of first instance back in 2015 (a year after the banking scandal), it took another eight years to consider the appeal. This was mainly due to the huge corruption prevalent in the Moldovan judiciary which allowed for the trial to be postponed (by means including changing the composition of the judges, or even transferring the case to other courts) several dozen times.
- Contrary to Șor's claims, the Moldovan judiciary had enough evidence for the court to sentence him. At the same time, the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), which has been ruling the country since 2021, was very keen to close the proceedings as soon as possible, for political and reputational reasons. This group came to power mainly because it promised to combat corruption and punish those involved in the country's most infamous financial scandals, especially the 'theft of the century', which significantly lowered the standard of living of Moldova's residents; its consequences included the collapse of the Moldovan leu's exchange rate and a sharp increase in national debt. The ground-breaking verdict of the Court of Appeal in the Șor case will provide grounds for

arguing that the thorough judicial reform implemented by the PAS since the second half of 2021 has been successful. So far, the government has been regularly accused of inefficiency in this area. This was one of the main reasons for the dismissal of Sergiu Litvinenco from the position of justice minister in February this year, and has had a negative impact on PAS's ratings. More verdicts are expected in the coming months, including one concerning Veaceslav Platon; he has also been charged with involvement in the 'theft of the century', and is currently hiding in London.

- The decision of the Court of Appeals does not mean that Șor will go to jail in the near future, because he is not in Moldova. However, it will increase the pressure on the Israeli authorities to extradite him, or alternatively, to allow him to apply to serve his sentence in Israel. More importantly, it could make it easier for the state to recover the €250 million that was seized after the judgement of the court of first instance. This amount is about 30% of the funds which the government used to stabilise the situation in the financial sector after the 2014 scandal.
- Șor will use the verdict as an argument to support the thesis about the growing politicisation of the judiciary, and will argue that he is being persecuted by his political opponents. This narrative will be strengthened by the likely decision of the Constitutional Court to ban the activities of the ȘOR party; a hearing on this matter will be held in mid-May. At the same time, however, the verdict is unlikely to affect the popularity of the party, which currently stands at around 10–15%, or increase the scale of the protests. The public demonstrations have been taking place regularly for several months, but no more than a few thousand people take part in them.