

## **New Impetus for Romanian War on Corruption**

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More needs to be done to stamp out the high-level corruption, seen as major obstacle to the country's bid to join the European Union.

In the lobby of Romania's anti-corruption office in downtown Bucharest sits a statue of Vlad the Impaler, the 15th-century leader best known in the West as the model for the fictional Count Dracula.

In Romania itself, however, Vlad is seen as a symbol of justice and moral rectitude, all the more so now given the rampant corruption that followed the collapse of communism in 1989. Although the statue was inherited from the building's previous occupants, Romania's new anti-corruption prosecutor, Daniel Morar, seems keen to keep it as a role model for his officers.

Morar, 38, who was appointed last week, has previously been involved in tackling corruption in the Transylvanian city of Cluj. Now he wants to improve the way the National Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, PNA, functions.

"We need dynamic and effective officers who are able to take the initiative and who won't allow themselves to be politically manipulated," Morar told Balkans Crisis Report, BCR.

Justice Minister Monica Macovei has said she expects Morar to perform well.

"After one year in office, Morar will publicly present an activity report, and I won't hesitate to remove him from office if he does not produce visible results," she added after nominating him for the job.

In early August, Macovei urged the Council of Magistrates which controls the country's judiciary, to dismiss Morar's predecessor Ioan Amariei and seven other top prosecutors, saying they had failed to catch the big fish in the world of corruption. "Substantial funds were pumped into the PNA but it never functioned properly, and it has yet to produce the desired results," said Macovei.

Analysts unanimously welcomed the changes, saying they opened the way for a sea change in the way the government tackles corruption – a key outstanding requirement for European Union accession.

Romania, ranked by the watchdog group Transparency International as the most corrupt of new and aspiring EU member states, has been told by Brussels that it must prosecute big corruption cases or else see its accession chances shrink. Other international institutions list the problem as one of the main stumbling blocks to reform and foreign investment.

No truly high-profile public figure has been convicted to date. Between 2003 and 2005, the list of people facing corruption charges included only a handful of relatively influential people: one senator, one deputy director of the Central Bank, three directors of other commercial banks, and eight directors with the agriculture ministry.

At the lower end of the scale, there were more than 1,000 doctors and teachers and close to 200 police officers.

"Romania has complied with most requests from the EU to put in place all the necessary legislation, committees and resolutions which all ostensibly deal with corruption. But it has always lacked good officers capable of combating high-level corruption," political analyst Cristian Ghinea told BCR. "Morar at least seems determined to rely only on prosecutors who are keen to catch the big fish."

The new head of PNA has certainly started with high-level targets, by launching an investigation to decide whether two former senior politicians should be charged with abuse of office. Former justice minister Rodica Stanoiu and the former deputy chairman of the Social Democrat Party, PSD, Florin Georgescu will be investigated to find out whether they abused their positions to influence last November's elections.

Before the election, both men are said to have attended a meeting of the PSD - the ruling party at the time - at which senior party members allegedly discussed instructing prosecutors to investigate opposition leaders, and tightening control over television and print outlets.

PSD leaders have said the case is groundless, and have accused the centre-right government formed after the election of conducting a witch-hunt against its predecessors. "It is merely an act of intimidation and harassment against our people," PSD leader Mircea Geoana told the press. "A criminal enquiry can be launched only if there are serious pointers against someone."

As well as external observers, Romanians themselves perceive the country as being awash with corruption - no surprise since most people live on an average monthly wage of 150 euro. The perception is strengthened by the tales of wrongdoing that fill the newspaper pages every day, with scandals ranging from the unexplained wealth of political figures cronies to vanishing profits from the sale of state-run companies.

At a practical level, though, Romanians are more immediately concerned about the bribes, known as "spaga", that they themselves have to pay for basic services. Although schooling and medical services are supposed to be free, people often have to hand over some cash to get decent hospital treatment or to place their children in good schools - in some cases even to get them good exam results.

"My mother was in hospital and I had to pay the doctors and nurses to treat her," said Raluca Badescu, a teacher. "To get her an operation, I had to pay almost 100 [US] dollars for the surgeon's services, not to mention money for the nurses."

While dealing with this more mundane level of corruption, people are also watching closely - and with a measure of cynicism - to see whether the government will really deliver on its campaign to nail the high-level culprits.

"There are so many corruption cases that are known, yet nothing gets done about it," said Fane Paduret, a pensioner. "These recent changes in the PNA office are just an attempt by the government to show off to the foreigners. "But they can't fool us. We live here."

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