

Former Romanian PM suffers gunshot wound hours after prison sentencing

Diana Toma, Markus Salzmann
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On June 20, the former Prime Minister of Romania, Adrian Nastase, was admitted to a hospital in Bucharest with a gunshot wound in his neck. A few hours earlier he had been sentenced to two years imprisonment by the Supreme Court for abuse of office and illegal party financing. The ruling permitted no appeal.

According to media reports, the former prime minister received the verdict calmly. When police arrived at his house to take him to jail Nastase asked for some time to retrieve some books from his library. It is at this point that police say he attempted to kill himself with a pistol.

A few days later, however, doubts were raised about the story of suicide. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* pointed out that the right-handed Nastase, who is an experienced hunter and has a gun license, is said to have carried out the suicide attempt with his left hand.

Amongst a number of other inconsistencies, it has been pointed out that although he was taken by ambulance to the hospital he had no bandage on his neck at the time of his admission. The hospital is run by a colleague and member of Nastase's Social Democratic Party, who is also under suspicion of corruption.

The verdict against Adrian Nastase must be considered in relation to the ongoing political crisis in Romania. In early February, the centre-right government under Prime Minister Emil Boc (PD-L, Democratic-Liberal Party) was forced to resign following weeks of protests and mass demonstrations against the regime's brutal austerity program.

During its three-and-a-half year tenure the Boc government has imposed the most rigorous austerity program in all of Europe. Although the average wage in Romania is only €350 a month, the government cut public salaries by 25 percent and increased value added tax from

19 to 24 percent. Over 200,000 public service employees have lost their jobs since 2009.

The Boc government took power in late 2008 initially in the form of a coalition with the Social Democrats of the PSD. Ten months later, however, the PSD withdrew all its ministers from the government following disputes within the government focused primarily on the Interior Ministry. Boc enforced the dismissal of the social democrat Interior Minister, Dan Nica, and filled the post with one of his cronies. The interior ministry was responsible for organizing presidential elections in November 2009, and the PSD feared that Boc was preparing to rig the vote. Following the PSD's departure from government, Emil Boc continued on the basis of a PD-L-minority government.

It was at this time that the National Anti-Corruption Directorate (DNA) levelled charges against the long-standing chairman of the Social Democratic Party, Adrian Nastase. The authorities accused him of having abused "the influence or authority of the office of party chairman and organized a symposium for the building industry called 'Quality Trophy' in order to raise money for his presidential election campaign."

The conference was organized by a state agency. Companies and institutions donated funds amounting to €1.6 million which then flowed into Nastase's electoral campaign in 2004. "Quality Trophy" was a huge and lengthy court case, involving the interrogation of around 1,000 witnesses. It was the first of three trials directed against the former PM Nastase and came to an end last week.

Nastase is a well-known figure on the Romanian political scene. He is one of a group of former Stalinists who, following the toppling of Nicolae Ceaușescu, proclaimed his conversion to the free market economy. In 1989 he was an avowed supporter of Ceaușescu, serving

as the country's ambassador in China. One year later he became spokesman for the National Salvation Front (FSN) and the party's secretary for international relations. The FSN consisted of Ceaușescu loyalists from the army, secret service and former Romanian Communist Party.

In May 1990 he became minister of foreign affairs, a function he served between 1990-1992. Between December 2000 and December 2004 he was prime minister. His government prepared the way for Romania's entry into the European Union by enforcing a program of massive attacks on living standards, while at the same time permitting a tiny elite to enrich itself enormously.

Shortly before stepping down in 2004 the Nastase government issued a decree relieving two private oil refineries in Eastern Romania from €400 million debt owed to the state. The principal owner of the former state-owned refineries was Corneliu Iacobov, a leading member of the PSD. Together with other party members and business associates Iacobov controlled two refineries, which were privatized in 2001 and sold well below value. They were then deliberately driven to the brink of bankruptcy with huge sums of money flowing into private pockets through front companies.

The current attempt by the previous premier and social democratic leaders to avoid a jail sentence is not the first.

Nastase has already emerged unscathed from two other cases. On May 5, 2010, the DNA accused Nastase of having accepted bribes and blackmail money with his wife, Daniela Nastase, acting as his accomplice. The "Zambaccian" case was built around the charges that Nastase had received around €630,000, either directly or through middlemen.

He also profited from goods imported from China and the exploitation of workers involved in the construction and renovation of his properties in Bucharest and in the village of Cornu.

After the hearing, Nastase was sentenced to two years in prison after being found guilty on charges of blackmail. He was acquitted on the charges of taking bribes.

Another controversial case, "Aunt Tamara", ended on December 15, 2011. Nastase was acquitted, along with the other two defendants in the case, Ristea Priboi and Ioan Melinescu. In November 2000, Melinescu, a member of the National Office for the Prevention and Eradication of Money Laundering (ONPCSB) contacted Nastase and Priboi, informing them that the institution was investigating Daniela Nastase, after the sum of \$400,000 suddenly appeared in her bank account. In order to

prevent the investigation from going forward, Nastase allegedly appointed Melinescu as president of the institution.

Research into the circumstances concerning the \$400,000 placed in Daniela Nastase's account raised questions as to the legality of the transaction. The former PM declared that the sum came from proceeds from the sale of jewels, paintings and other goods by 91-year-old Cernasov Tamaram, the aunt of Daniela Nastase, who lived alone in an apartment building in Bucharest. There is no proof, however, that Aunt Tamara actually had owned the artifacts in question.

The present incumbent prime minister Victor Ponta (PSD) has since visited his "unfortunate" predecessor in hospital and said afterwards that Nastase was a "martyr."

Ponta is also currently facing charges of plagiarism and corruption allegations. Following his election victory in early summer, Ponta promised to head "the most honest government... Romania has ever had". Now he is accused, among other things, of having plagiarised half of his doctoral dissertation from other scientific publications.

In another case, a member of the social democrat parliamentary group, Catalin Voicu, was sentenced by the Supreme Court to five years in prison without parole for corruption. He had built up a criminal network based on bribery, intimidation and extortion.

Widespread corruption and mafia-like structures have developed in Romania under the eyes of the commissioners and the representatives of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The current campaign against corruption, however, is closely bound up with the attempt to impose a so-called government of experts which can much more effectively enforce the social cuts demanded by the EU and IMF.



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