





NEWSLETTER

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About LRCM

Legal Resources Centre from Moldova (LRCM) is a nonprofit organization that contributes to strengthening democracy and the rule of law in the Republic of Moldova with emphasis on justice and human rights. Our work includes research and advocacy. We are independent and politically non-affiliated.



THE AMENDED DRAFT LAW ON THE REFORM OF THE SCJ WAS ENDORSED BY THE VENICE COMMISSION

At the plenary session of 16-17 December 2022, the Venice Commission issued a follow-up opinion on the draft law regarding the reform of the Supreme Court of Justice (SCJ) and the extraordinary evaluation of judges and candidates for the position of judge of the CSJ. The Commission reviewed the recent changes and found that most of its previous recommendations from October 2022 (see more in Newsletter no. 50) have been implemented, with some minor adjustments to be made.

The Commission noted the authorities of the Republic of Moldova complied with the following recommendations: the elimination of the possibility to transfer judges from the SCJ who passed the vetting to another court without their consent; the introduction of the provision according to which the majority of judges at the SCJ are career judges, maintaining all current judges at the SCJ, even if their number is greater than the 11 career judges provided for by the draft law, and the addition of the Ombudsman to the group of persons entitled to request that the SCJ rules on contradictory judicial practices.

The Commission noted that some recommendations were partially implemented, such as the recommendation that the Superior Council of Magistracy (CSM) members should decide by a simple majority vote as to whether a judge passed an evaluation or not, in a public session, based on the report presented by the Evaluation Committee. However, the Commission recommended that the draft law be improved so that it is clearly stipulated that the report of the Evaluation Committee itself cannot lead to the suspension of a judge from office. Likewise, the recently added provision that the Evaluation Committee resumes the procedure following the rejection of the report by the CSM, requires a lot of time. However, the Moldovan authorities have the discretion to make the best decision in this regard as long as the SCM has the decisive role.

The Commission welcomed the reduction of the prohibition period to hold office for a judge that does not pass the vetting from ten to seven years, and for other posts in the judiciary from seven to five years. However, the Commission recommended that the unique and

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The Venice Commission ended the year 2022 with a record number of issued opinions, and the Republic of Moldova is one of the top member countries that requested the Commission's expertise most often. exceptional nature of the assessment be better reflected in the draft law. Similarly, no alternative is provided for the SCM to apply measures other than the removal of a judge from office, which must be the last resort. In conclusion, the CSM should be granted a margin of appreciation in the application of other less invasive measures.

The Commission recommended that the decisions adopted in the interest of the law are binding only for the SCJ, not for the lower courts, which may deviate from the established jurisprudence if the circumstances of the case are different, or if new arguments a raised. At the same time, any interested party must always have the possibility to appeal against these decisions.

PRE-VETTING COMMISSION HEARINGS DIGEST – WHAT WAS THE COMMITTEE MOST INTERESTED IN ABOUT THE SCM CANDIDATES? (PART II)

In the second half of December 2022, the Pre-Vetting Committee interviewed several judges who are running for the Superior Council of Magistracy (CSM). Previously, in Newsletter no. 51, LRCM put together a digest of the interviews of those 15 (out of the total of 25) judges that took place between 7 October and 3 December 2022. On 14-16 December 2022, the Pre-Vetting Commission held another round of interviews with six more judges. LRCM has carefully analysed the interviews and presents the most important issues discussed with SCM candidates.

On 14 December 2022, Mihail BUŞULEAC, judge of the Cahul District Court, was asked about his purchase of two apartments in Chisinau in 2007 and 2010 from his parents' donations and own savings, as well as buying another apartment between 2016-2021, two commercial premises and part of an adjacent land in Cahul. The commission was interested in the financial sources he used to buy these assets, while living rent-free and for a long time in an apartment that did not belong to him, and about settling several cases in which one party was represented by a lawyer that sold one of the commercial spaces to the judge. Marina RUSU was interviewed on the same day and was asked about her failure to declare certain bank accounts and failing to declare her wealth and personal interests acquired while she was on childcare leave. She was also asked about a 2019 disciplinary procedure related to the lengthy examination of several cases, as well as questions about the candidate's activity on social media, which could affect the image of the judiciary.

On 15 December 2022, Ion CHIRTOACĂ, judge at the Chisinau District Court was asked about a car insurance for a Mercedes owned by his brother, which was concluded by him and later with his wife, , as well as about the right to use this car, which he did not declare. Chirtoacă was also asked about procuring an apartment at a preferential price in 2022, although since 2010 he already owned another apartment, about failing to declare four bank accounts active between 2012 and 2015, as well as about the decision taken by the panel of

Buying apartments at a preferential price, failing to declare donations and savings, examining case files in which closely connected lawyers participate, but also delivering court suspicious decisions in highprofile cases - these are just some of the aspects that the candidates were asked about.

judges, of which he was part, on the criminal case regarding the assassination attempt of Vladimir PLAHOTNIUC. On the same day, another judge of the Chisinau District Court, Victor SANDU, was interviewed. He was asked about importing, in his name, 20 motorcycles and 10 cars since 2008 and selling them without declaring any profit, about procuring in 2021 a Mercedes that previously belonged to a prosecutor, about his decision from 2016 on the PSRM vs. 'RISE' case, which led to the conviction of Moldova at the European Court of Human Rights, and about the decision taken by the panel of judges, of which he was a part, on the criminal case regarding the assassination attempt of Vladimir PLAHOTNIUC.

On 16 December 2022, the judge of the Orhei District Court, Veronica CUPCEA, was interviewed. She was asked about where she got the funds to buy an apartment in Chisinau and an apartment, plot of land and adjacent outbuilding in Criuleni in 2012, the anticipated payment in 2014 and 2020 of two loans of 270 000 MDL and, respectively, 540 000 MDL, and about failing to declare several donations from relatives, several bank accounts and cash savings. Aureliu POSTICĂ, judge of the Chisinau District Court, was also interviewed on the same day and was asked about buying an apartment at a preferential price in 2013, about his wife and daughter privatising an apartment in Chisinau in 2009, about obtaining free-of-charge in 2010 of a plot of land in Durlesti, which he later alienated in exchange for EUR 8,000, all of which were obtained as benefits for holding the position of prosecutor. He was also asked about procuring from his in-laws in 2020 of a plot of land and a house located in Durlesti, about obtaining an interest-free loan in 2016 of 6 000 EUR from a close relative, whose income, according to official data, between 2011 and 2015 equalled 170 000 MDL (8 500 EUR), about travelling (crossing the state border) with several lawyers who later participated in several criminal cases examined by him, about the erroneous declaration of his wife's income from two commercial companies whose founder and effective beneficiary she is, as well as about the substantial differences between his family's income and expenses in 2015, 2017 and 2018.

On 12 January 2023 was interviewed the last candidate running for CSM, Alexei PANIŞ who works at the Chisinau District Court. He was asked about the buying in 2012 of a new Kia Sorento model car for 300 000 MDL and selling it in 2017 at the same price, both transactions being carried out by verbal agreement. He was also asked about failing to declare in 2018 approximately 500 000 MDL, buying in 2011-2013 an apartment in Chisinau and two cars worth 1.1 million MDL with money donated by his parents', although during the indicated period his parents declared an income of about 200 000 MDL, while their consumption expenses were estimated at 150 000 MDL. The commission also asked about the statement of the National Integrated Authority (NIA) regarding the discrepancy of about 2 million MDL between the acquired wealth and the income of the candidate's parents for the period 2012-2020, and about loaning 300 000 MDL in 2021 from his father, although the NIA finding was already known. The judge was also asked about the discrepancy of about 100 000 MDL between his family's income and expenses in 2021, about failing

to declare the conflict of interests when examining the reinstatement of the former president of the Chisinau Court of Appeal, Vladislav CLIMA (more information), but also about the decision of the Disciplinary Board of the CSM from April 2022 by which he was disciplined.

To date, the Pre-Vetting Commission issued its decisions on 17 candidates, five of which (Livia MITROFAN, Maria FRUNZE, Ioana CHIRONEȚ, Vasile ȘCHIOPU and Sergiu CARAMAN passed the vetting and will be eligible to run for the CSM. The recorded interviews can be viewed on the Commission's website.

THE VENICE COMMISSION EXPLAINED WHEN A PARTY CAN BE 'OUTLAWED'

On 1 December 2022, the Venice Commission issued an advisory opinion (amicus curiae) regarding the declaration of a political party as unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court requested it as the Government asked the Court to verify how (un)constitutional the 'Şor' Party's activity was. The Government based its request on three main reasons: (a) the conviction of the founder of the party, Ilan ŞOR in the Banking Fraud Case, but also the investigation of the members of the 'Şor' parliamentary faction for illegal financing by an organized criminal group, (b) related irregularities of financing the 'Şor' party, established and repeatedly sanctioned by the authorities, as well as (c) the alleged exhaustion of other less severe legal sanctioning mechanisms.

The Constitutional Court requested the Venice Commission to explain two aspects: (1) the applicable European standards in the field of the unconstitutional declaration of a political party, and (2) the actions of a political party that can justify its unconstitutional declaration.

Relating to the first aspect, the Commission concluded that banning a party affects the freedom of assembly and association. However, this freedom is not absolute and banning can be admissible if it is convincingly justified. According to the Commission, a party can only be banned if such a measure is legal, proportionate to the aim pursued and is necessary in a democratic society. For such measures to be justified, the authorities must prove the existence of a 'pressing social need' and 'relevant and sufficient' reasons. States must show convincingly (based on compelling evidence) that the party's policies and/or actions pose an imminent threat to democracy, security, or human rights. In addition, the authorities must demonstrate that there are no other means to achieve the stated goals, which would limit freedom of association to a lesser extent.

The Venice Commission admitted that threats to democracy or serious imminent threats to security can be included in the notion of 'pressing social needs'. Based on other experiences in the region, the Commission concluded that states could have a greater margin of appreciation, thanks to a better Venice Commission: The [Constitutional] Court is best placed to assess whether there is a 'compelling social need' to declare a party unconstitutional, however, this decision must be based on convincing reasons. understanding of the local and regional context. Thus, the Commission admitted that the regional context should also be considered – the war in Ukraine and its consequences for the national security of the Republic of Moldova.

The Venice Commission did not answer explicitly the second question of the Constitutional Court (the actions of a party that would lead to its banning). While admitting that the termination of a party's activity is possible in general, it concluded that the Constitutional Court remains best placed to assess whether there is a 'compelling social need' to declare a party unconstitutional. Thus, the Constitutional Court must analyse with great caution the Government's accusations and guarantee a fair trial (especially the opportunity to defend itself) to the 'Şor' political party to conclude that it balances the important social interest of independent and self-regulated political parties with the interest of the state to protect and defend the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova.

LRCM sent the Constitutional Court an opinion on the same subject. LRCM recommends the Constitutional Court be guided by the standards and guarantees established by ECtHR jurisprudence and carefully check the reasons invoked by the authorities. Considering the implications of a possible decision to declare a party unconstitutional, the party in question must have the opportunity to present its opinion before the Constitutional Court.

The Constitutional Court would issue a solution on the Constitutionality of the 'Şor' party, most likely by the end of May 2023. If the Government's request is accepted, the Ministry of Justice will be entitled to apply to the court for the dissolution of the party.

HOW HAVE ACTS OF TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT BEEN PUNISHED IN THE LAST 10 YEARS?

On 5 December 2022, the LRCM launched a research study on the uniformity of judicial practice regarding torture and ill-treatment. LRCM analysed all 71 publicly available irrevocable decisions of the Supreme Court of Justice (SCJ), as well as the Courts of Appeal and district courts' decisions on those cases. The cases concern 102 persons accused of ill-treatment committed between 2006 and 2018.

According to the study, the main people investigated for these types of cases are police officers (75%), schoolteachers (8%) and employees of private security companies (6%). The average length of a trial in all three levels of courts of a case of torture or ill-treatment is six years, 4.5 times longer than the average length of examination of an ordinary criminal case. The shortest duration of a judicial process was 375 days, and the longest lasted 4 163 days (11.5 years). The prosecution's investigation period of the case must be added to that period. In some cases, the investigation lasted over five years. As a result, for ill-treatment that occurred until December 2012, it is possible to apply the five-to-fifteen-year

Only 19% of those guilty of torture were incarcerated, while torture trials last 4.5 times longer than average. statute of limitations for the application of the criminal sanction. In at least two analysed cases, the statute of limitations automatically triggered the nonapplication of sanctions and the trial was discontinued.

In district courts, the acquittal rate in torture and ill-treatment cases was 38%, 13 times higher than the average acquittal rate in criminal cases. In another 12% of cases, the trial was discontinued. However, prosecutors are more likely to be succeed in the courts of appeal, where the conviction rate rises from 50% to 82%. The SCJ upheld three out of four decisions of the appeal courts.

Although more than 80% of persons brought to court on torture or ill-treatment charges are convicted, in practice only 19% of them were sentenced to imprisonment. The actual conviction rate is subtantively lower than average and creates impunity for torturers. Judges have always ordered a prison sentence very close to the statutory minimum. Suspensions have been ordered whenever the legislation gave the judge discretion to do so (only prison sentences of up to five years can be suspended). Such a practice of sanctioning ill-treatment can hardly be reconciled with the commitment to fight it effectively.

The research concluded that the judicial practice in these cases is not uniform, once an impressive number of verdicts of the district court are overturned and the decisions of the courts of appeal are often overturned by the SCJ. The study does not recommend tightening the sanctions for torture or ill-treatment but draws attention to the need for the appropriate and uniform application of the sanctions already provided by law.

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS – HOW DO THE AUTHORITIES JUSTIFY THE SUSPENSION OF SIX TV STATIONS?

On 16 December 2022, the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE) suspended the broadcasting licenses of six television stations (Primul în Moldova, RTR-Moldova, Accent TV, NTV Moldova, TV6 and Orhei TV) for the period of the state of emergency. According to the CSE, the suspension is necessary "to protect the national information space and prevent disinformation, based on the list of persons subject to international sanctions, as well as the multiple findings from the monitoring reports of the Audiovisual Council (AC) regarding violations of the Audiovisual Media Services Code". In other words, the licences were suspended for failing to report the correct information about national events and the war in Ukraine, as well as because these TV channels are affiliated with Ilan ŞOR, even if officially he does not control them.

The CSE decision is an administrative act issued by derogation from the legal framework. The Administrative Code stipulates that grounds for individual administrative acts must be provided and that restriction of certain rights can only take place if they are absolutely necessary in the interests of national security, territorial integrity, public order, etc. The CSE decision polarised public opinion.

To prevent misunderstandings, but also the extensive interpretation of this precedent in the future, the authorities must motivate or explain the reasoning of the CSE decision. For some, it was necessary and justified, even overdue, for others – an abuse and unjustified interference with freedom of expression. The targeted TV stations contested the CSE decision in court. The judges have not yet issued a verdict.

On 16 December 2022, the Council of the European Union banned the broadcasting of four Russian TV stations: NTV/NTV Mir, Rossiya 1, REN TV and Pervyi Kanal. The Council cited that this measure is necessary to 'counter the Russian Federation's systematic international campaign of disinformation and information manipulation, which aims to destabilize neighbouring countries, the EU and its member states". These four TV stations are controlled by the leadership of the Russian Federation and have been used for propaganda and legitimization of the war in Ukraine.

On 20 December 2022, LRCM together with other civil society organizations issued a statement recognizing the urgent need to combat disinformation through mass media. To prevent biased interpretations, as well as the extensive interpretation of this precedent in the future, they requested that all factual circumstances and concrete arguments that were the basis of the CSE's decision to be publicly communicated. The organizations also called on the authorities to take all necessary measures to prevent the legitimisation of the war in Ukraine and to combat the concentration of control over the media.

According to the decisions of the Audiovisual Council, numerous sanctions were applied to suspended TV stations in 2022: NTV Moldova – 22 sanctions, Primul in Moldova – 17 sanctions, RTR-Moldova – 14 sanctions, Orhei TV – 13 sanctions, TV6 – 13 sanctions, Accent TV – 5 sanctions. On the other hand, some of the TV stations banned in the European Union (REN TV) continue to be broadcast on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, it is not clear whether there is any evidence that would confirm the control of the six stations by Ilan ŞOR, since one person is prohibited by law to control such a large number of TV channels.

On 20 December 2022, the Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, Jānis MAžEIKS, also mentioned that the national authorities must provide details and explicit reasoning regarding the suspension decision so that it is understandable to the population.

THE AUTHORITIES PROPOSE SEIZING THE ASSETS OF VLADIMIR PLAHOTNIUC AND ILAN ŞOR AS A RESULT OF THE SANCTIONS APPLIED TO THEM BY THE USA AND GREAT BRITAIN

On 9 December 2022, the UK Government announced a list of sanctions targeting 30 people suspected of corruption and human rights abuses. This list includes the former leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova, Vladimir PLAHOTNIUC, accused of capturing and corrupting state institutions in Moldova, and the fugitive MP and Head of the 'ŞOR' Party, Ilan ŞOR, convicted of fraud and money laundering,

both investigated in the Banking Fraud Case. This decision comes as a result of sanctions announced on 26 October 2022 by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the United States (US) Department of the Treasury. The last decision concerned 21 persons and entities involved in acts of corruption, including Vladimir PLAHOTNIUC and Ilan ŞOR (see details in LRCM Newsletter no. 50).

According to the British Embassy in the Republic of Moldova, all assets owned by Vladimir PLAHOTNIUC and Ilan ŞOR in Great Britain, or in any of the overseas territories of Great Britain, such as the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands, will be frozen. In addition, the prohibition of British citizens from carrying out transactions with the sanctioned subjects, and the prohibition of the latter from entering the UK, was ordered.

Israel acted similarly, blocking all of Ilan ŞOR's accounts. Minister of Justice Sergiu LITVINENCO confirmed that this decision came as a result of the sanctions imposed by the USA, but also due to the interventions of the authorities of the Republic of Moldova in addition to the authorities of Israel.

The decision of the USA and the UK to impose international sanctions on some persons, including Vladimir PLAHOTNIUC and Ilan ŞOR, served as an impetus for the authorities of the Republic of Moldova to come up with new legislative initiatives. Thus, on 9 December 2022, the draft law on the implementation of international restrictive measures against persons who have violated fundamental human rights, democracy and the rule of law (the Magnitsky Act) was published for public consultation. The Magnitsky-Moldova draft law was drafted by the Ministry of Justice. Even though at the national level there are already similar regulations established by the Law on the application of international restrictive measures (Law No. 25/2016), the authors of the draft law specified that it is distinguished by its purpose, but also by the diversity and specificity of the regulated international restrictive measures covered by its provisions.

Thus, according to the Ministry of Justice, the object of the draft law is the establishment at the national level of an effective and permanent mechanism for the application of the restrictive measures established by the European Union (EU), international organizations and other states. This mechanism also includes the application in Moldova of international restrictive measures to ensure respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, democracy, and the rule of law, thus sanctioning the people who violated them.

According to Ministry of Justice, the Magnitsky-Moldova Law project was inspired by the Magnitsky Bill, adopted by the US Congress in 2012 and which has been applied globally since 2016 (Global Magnitsky Act). The purpose of this law is to sanction foreign officials for serious violations of human rights or democracy. Sanctions under the Magnitsky Act involve freezing assets or interests in the property of sanctioned individuals and barring them from entering the US.

The project proposed by the Ministry of Justice is not limited to foreign citizens, but also targets natural and legal persons from the Republic of Moldova who have committed acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, serious violations of human

It is not yet clear when or if the Magnitsky bill will move forward, as it differs greatly from similar legislation from other states. rights or abuses . The draft law also targets persons who are responsible for acts of corruption or activities that can be qualified as acts of high-level corruption. The project also covers persons who are suspected, based on official or public information, of collaborating with foreign intelligence services that carry out actions hostile to the Republic of Moldova.

The sanctions provided for in the Magnitsky-Moldova draft law aimed at freezing the assets or blocking funds or financial resources derived or generated from assets owned on the territory of the Republic of Moldova by the sanctioned persons, as well as prohibiting to provide any type of financial services to them. In this sense, the sanctioned persons and their affiliated persons will no longer be able to sell, donate or transfer goods located in Moldova. They will no longer be able to open a bank account, make bank transfers or benefit from loans in the Republic of Moldova. Legal entities that will continue to engage in transactions or activities with them will also be sanctioned. The draft law also includes the ban on entering the territory of the Republic of Moldova and the refusal to grant or cancel any type of visa for all sanctioned persons who are foreign citizens or stateless persons.

Another important provision of the draft law refers to the creation of the Interinstitutional Supervisory Council. The role of this new institution will be to ensure the implementation of the law. The Council will be led by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, and its composition will include authorities and representatives of public institutions that have legal powers in the relevant fields.

I IN BRIEF

At the end of October 2022, the criminal investigation against the former president of the Chisinau District Court, Radu ȚURCANU, for abusing power, was closed. On 28 November 2022, that decision was annulled after judge Vasilisa MUNTEAN, from the Chisinau District Court, and the judicial assistant, Victoria ROȘCA, from the same court, challenged it. The criminal investigation in the case of judge Radu ȚURCANU was started last year following the information presented by former judge Mihail MURGULEȚ, accusing him of unjustified attacks.

On 28 November 2022, several draft laws regarding the activity of Moldovan Secret Service were registered in the Parliament and later sent to the Venice Commission for an opinion . On 14 October 2022, public consultations were held on the three draft laws, but they will be voted on by the Parliament only after the opinion of the Venice Commission is issued. The purpose of these legislative initiatives, as stated by the Intelligence Service, is to improve existing legal provisions and adjust them to the standards of secret services in countries with a strong democracy.

On 2 December 2022, the National Integrity Authority (NIA) found that Igor

DODON, the former President of the Republic of Moldova, who is criminally investigated in several cases (see details in LRCM Newsletter no. 45) violated the legislation on declaration of assets. According to NIA, between 2017 and 2019, Dodon's income and wealth differed by 1 175 457 MDL (around 58 000 EUR). The wealth checks were initiated by NIA following a journalistic investigation about the luxury vacations, purchases of goods and large expenses incurred by Igor DODON and his family. On 30 December 2022, Igor DODON contested the NIA's findings at the Chisinau Court of Appeal.

Unprecedented coalition in the judiciary. On 9 December 2022, more than 250 judges signed a joint address to the President of the Parliament, Igor GROSU, requesting the provision of the state budget with sufficient funds to allow the increase of judges' salaries. The judges' claims are based on a recent decision of the Constitutional Court, by which it was established that the legislation on salaries in the public sector must provide for the necessary mechanisms to ensure the protection of judges' salaries and pensions from monetary fluctuations, as part of ensuring their independence. The state budget was approved in the final reading on 22 December 2022, but the judges' salaries have not increased at all.

On 16 December 2022, the Parliament voted in its final reading the draft law on strengthening the capacities of the Council for Equality (Council). The project provides for the expansion of the scope of contraventions that the Council can find, introduces the right of the Council to submit conclusions (amicus curiae) in the court of law, strengthens the mechanism for reporting issues to it, examining complaints, etc. However, although requested, the Council did not obtain the right to sanction acts of discrimination and to refer the matters to the Constitutional Court (see details in LRCM Newsletter no. 51). The draft law entered into force on 1 January 2023.

On 19 December 2022, the Chisinau District Court, Ciocana headquarters, pronounced the decision in the criminal case against Ruslan HARCENCO, a criminal investigator of the National Anticorruption Centre (NAC). He was sentenced to three years and six months in prison for influence peddling in particularly large proportions. In 2016, he allegedly demanded 100 000 EUR from a businessman so that the latter would not be arrested and his assets would not be seized. Even though the criminal prosecution lasted only three months, the examination of the case in the Chisinau District Court lasted six years. The judges also ordered that the 100 000 EUR would be seized in the benefit of the state. The sentence is not final and can be appealed at the Chisinau Court of Appeal.

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