

Wrecking Moldova

Wednesday 27 September 2023, by [ERIZANU Paula](#) (Date first published: 3 June 2023).

A portrait of Ilan Shor, the key pro-Kremlin politician in Moldova who led the country's most recent anti-government demonstrations

Since last September, Moldova's capital Chişinău has been seeing significant anti-government protests amid the energy crisis caused partly by the war in Ukraine. As Russia reduced gas supplies to Moldova over the past year, people's energy bills went up sixfold and inflation [reached](#) up to 33%.

Moldova's tough economic situation made room for some politicians wanting to profit off the crisis and re-establish control over the country. The anti-government protests held in the country have been organised and largely ideologically and financially supported by Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor, who's been proven to have ties with Russia, and his eponymous party.

Despite the involvement with the protests, Shor himself cannot attend any. Back in Moldova, he was sentenced to 15 years behind bars for fraud and money laundering. Because of that he has to oversee all the operations from Israel and delegate tasks to his trusted colleagues, namely the party's vice president Marina Tauber, who is also under investigation for accepting illicit party funds from a criminal organisation and forging the party reports.

Moldovan journalist and writer Paula Erizanu tells the story of Ilan Shor and his pro-Kremlin party that's been trying to destabilise the country and profit off its citizens. With this story, Novaya Gazeta Europe kicks off a series of portraits featuring prominent, but not widely known, pro-Kremlin politicians in Europe.

Husband, playboy, fraudster

At Moldova's [anti-government protests](#) on 18 September, a man shows up on a LED TV set, carried on people's shoulders like an icon. He is quite young, chubby-cheeked and green-eyed. He tells people that he loves them and that soon he will come back — which might remind you of either Donald Trump, or Jesus on Jehova's Witnesses flyers. His name is Ilan Shor and he is on a TV set because he is in Israel, under US and EU sanctions, trying to avoid a 15-year sentence for taking part in a bank fraud that stripped Moldova of 12% of its GDP.

The son of Moldovan businessman Miron Shor, Ilan was born in Tel Aviv in 1987. The deputy head of the Russian-language A.P. Chekhov Theatre in Chişinău, Miron Shor emigrated to Israel in the 1970s, where he opened several businesses and went into politics to represent Jews coming from the former USSR. He also ran a business in Bulgaria. In the early 90s, the family came back to Moldova. By 1994, Miron Shor owned perfumery, clothing brands and cosmetics shops that he brought together under one sole umbrella: ShorHolding. He [founded](#) the Rotary Club branch in Moldova and organised fashion shows and art exhibitions.

According to the [memoirs](#) of Margareta Tzvikm, a family friend, when Ilan was only seven, Miron would talk to his business partners, and then turn to his child to ask him "Do you agree?"

Tzvik was not just close to the family, she was also the former deputy head of Sputnik Moldova and Ilan Shor's TV channels Televiziunea Centrală and Orhei TV, now [suspended](#). "I never forbid him to do anything," Miron told Tzvik about his son. By the time Ilan was 16-17, he went to all negotiations with Miron, family friends say. When Miron died in 2005, Ilan took over his companies at only 18 years old.

"When Miron died, he left many influential friends behind," said someone from the Shors' intimate circle who wished to remain anonymous. "They all wanted to help Ilan, whom they'd known since he was a child. Miron was a modest man, his office was in a regular hotel with squeaky floors. When he died, we didn't even know that he owned Duty Free shops, we thought he only ran a boutique shop at the Sun City mall. What his father hid, Ilan showed off."

With his inherited money, as well as clandestine acquisitions of buildings from the Moldovan Confederation of Trade Unions, Ilan soon [became](#) a regular in glamorous clubs, which he frequented surrounded by his own security guards. He borrowed hundreds of thousands of dollars from wealthy pals to organise lavish birthday parties or buy his red Ferrari from his friend, Gabriel Stati, the son of Anatol Stati, one of the wealthiest people in Moldova. [According to Shor](#), it was in 2008 that he also met Moldova's future Prime Minister Vlad Filat in the Chişinău night club Flamingo. Still, at this point, Shor was only known among financial elites.

The wider public learned about Ilan Shor when the media [covered](#) his wedding to Russian pop star Jasmin in 2011, when he was 24. The event was held at The Republican Palace, where at that time the Moldovan Parliament held its sessions (while construction works were underway at the historic building, destroyed in the 2009 protests). The bonanza was deemed "The Wedding of the Year" and was attended by several Moldovan presidents, including Petru Lucinschi, Vladimir Voronin, Igor Dodon, as well as by MPs from the whole political spectrum, and celebrities, such as Russian singers Nikolay Baskov and Phillip Kirkorov. Dodon told the press this was one of the most beautiful weddings he ever attended.

Between 2009 and 2019, a series of pro-European coalitions led Moldova, culminating with the 2014 [Association Agreement](#) with the EU, which dropped the visa regime for Moldovan citizens. (Ukraine did not sign the agreement, which sparked the Euromaidan protests.)

But behind the scenes, some of the country's greatest corruption schemes were sewn: the concession of the airport and the billion-dollar theft.

The airport

In 2013, while Vlad Filat was Prime Minister of Moldova, the Chişinău airport was controversially ceded to the newly founded Russian owned company [AviaInvest](#) for 49 years. Officially, the company was meant to inject foreign investment into the airport infrastructure. But in fact, the only money invested in the airport came from the profits made running it. Moreover, some of the profits went to companies owned by Shor. It was only in late 2022 that an arbitration court in Stockholm [decided](#) that the airport should go back into state ownership — which it did.

Now, Shor has turned to destabilising the aviation sector in Moldova via the AirMoldova flight operator. According to investigations by [deschide.md](#) and [TV8](#), at the time of its privatisation in 2018, AirMoldova boasted a business revenue of 150 million dollars, eight planes (two of them owned, six rented), and covered half of the flights to and from Moldova. Now AirMoldova is [controlled](#) by Shor via several companies.

At 115 million dollars, in March 2023, AirMoldova debt was three times bigger than its

revenue, and it continues to grow by 5 million dollars per month.

AirMoldova's [biggest creditor](#), to whom it supposedly owes 30 million dollars, is AviaInvest, Shor's company that used to own the Chişinău Airport. AirMoldova does not own any planes any longer and only rents out two planes: due to its debt, external clients refuse to rent their planes out to it any longer. Its flights [keep](#) being postponed and cancelled. In a public [statement](#), AirMoldova blamed the government for interfering in its business.

But let's go back to what made Shor famous in Moldova: the billion-dollar theft.

The billion dollar theft and Shor's first steps in politics

According to [prosecutors](#), the scheme consisted of taking non-performing loans from three of Moldova's biggest banks during 2012-2014 (Banca de Economii, UniBank, Banca Socială) and taking them out of the country through Latvian banks, new offshore and limited companies in Malta, the UK, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and eventually landing in Russia. (Vnesheconombank, whose board was led by Russia's former president Dmitry Medvedev, [owned](#) 24% of shares at Banca de Economii). In order to save the banks through bailouts, one billion dollars was taken from state reserves between 2014-2015. But the banks went bankrupt anyway, which makes some wonder whether the bail-out scheme was just the second stage of the billion-dollar theft. (In 2016, the stolen billion was transformed into state debt, to be paid by citizens via tax approximately until 2041.)

On 5 May 2015, on his blog, Andrian Candu, the speaker of Parliament and the godson of oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc (who is now also sanctioned by the US), [published](#) a report on the theft, supposedly written by the Kroll investigative company. According to the report — which [many think](#) was modified for political purposes — Shor appeared as the main beneficiary of the scheme. The next day, Shor, as the head of the Administration Council at Banca de Economii (Bank of Savings) was placed under house arrest for abuse of office, while the government was made from a majority share owner into a minority one.

A week later, Shor [declared](#) he was entering politics. This is how he escaped house arrest. He took over the Ravnopravye (Equality) party from Valerii Klimenko, a Russian-born journalist who infamously [said](#) "Moldova can only be maintained within the borders of Russia." Shor re-baptised the party under his own name. By 15 June, he was elected mayor of Orhei, a town in the centre of Moldova, vowing to transform it into... Monaco. He also swore to repair all roads and provide free public transport and free Wi-Fi, all on his dime.

A few months later on 13 October 2015, Shor [made](#) public declarations about how he had paid the former Prime Minister Vlad Filat 250 million dollars throughout five years, in exchange for various services, such as selling petrol tax-free on the border. He said they were partners in crime in the billion-dollar theft. Two days later, Filat was arrested. Shor also bore witness against Veaceslav Platon but not against Vladimir Plahotniuc. Following Shor's accusations, in the summer of 2016, Platon, who was in Kyiv at the time, was also [arrested](#) and sent to Moldova. Like Filat, Platon, who is seen as the mastermind behind the so-called Russian laundromat, spent four years in prison. He was released in 2020. The arrests paved the way for Vladimir Plahotniuc's dictatorial rule between 2016 and 2019. People from Filat's circles [say](#) that Shor's claims were part of Plahotniuc's scheme to rid himself of his main competitors. They also claim this was a means to distract the public and the judiciary from his ensuing corruption schemes that took a billion dollars out of the state reserves.

In 2017, Shor was found guilty of fraud and money laundering and [sentenced](#) to seven years in prison. (Later, the court [increased](#) the sentence to 15 years.)

In 2019, after the general elections, an unlikely coalition was formed between the pro-European then ACUM bloc (made of Maia Sandu's PAS and Andrei Năstase's Platforma DA party) and the pro-Russian PSRM party, led by Igor Dodon, in order to oust Vlad Plahotniuc from power. A parliamentary commission investigating the billion-dollar theft [concluded](#) that the main beneficiaries in the scheme were: Plahotniuc, who took the lion's share, then Vlad Filat, and finally Ilan Shor and his allies.

Following the change in the national political landscape, both Plahotniuc and Shor illegally [left](#) Moldova in 2019. (Platon fled to London in 2021.) Shor is now living in a [luxury villa](#) in Israel, while leading anti-government protests across Moldova.

Marina Tauber: Shor's accessory

Marina Tauber, who is also sanctioned by the EU, was one of the people mentioned in the Kroll report, which revealed some of the mechanisms used to transfer the stolen billion out of Moldova. According to the report, Tauber [received](#) three transfers of approximately 1.5 million dollars, which she used to buy 4.6% of Unibank shares. While Shor is in Israel, Tauber serves as the leader of the Shor party in Moldova. "We are starving to death, while they [the government] hold millions," the glamorous blonde would shout in the megaphone at demonstrations, while [holding](#) several late-generation iPhones in her hand — a violation of her house arrest.

Tauber studied at Logica, a Chișinău high school founded by Ilan Shor's father, Miron. Aspiring to become a professional tennis player, Tauber graduated from Moldova's State University with a Physical Education and Sport degree in 2011, after an eight-year enrolment there (instead of the usual five). From 2007, she started to work as a tennis coach. In 2010, she joined the Moldovan Tennis Federation as development manager and deputy head. In 2011, the director of the Federation, Igor Țurcan, who owned businesses in construction and tobacco, died in hospital after a car with a Russian registration plate number [exploded](#) in front of him as he came out of his office at the Moldovan Tennis Federation in the centre of Chișinău. Tauber then became the head of the federation. The prosecutors have not found the assassins to this day. Three months before his death, Țurcan [mentioned](#) that "everything that had happened in the field of tennis in the past few years concerned the plot of land of the Specialised Tennis School" and promised that "under no circumstances will he let this plot of land be taken". Tauber led that school during 2015-2017.

But by 2016, Tauber had already joined Ilan Shor's political project, becoming the party's vice president. In 2018, she became mayor of the village Jora de Jos. According to the [Promo-Lex](#) NGO, Tauber exceeded the legal budget limit by more than three times. But Chișinău's court of appeal [rejected](#) the appeal to investigate the case. Also in 2018, during a protest rally, Tauber [attacked](#) two journalists with a broom. In 2019, she was elected a Member of Parliament, leaving her local seat behind. In [2022](#) she temporarily lost her legal immunity and was placed under house arrest for her involvement in the billion-dollar theft.

She lost her immunity once again [last month](#), while being investigated for accepting illicit party funds from a criminal organisation and forging the party reports. She pleaded not guilty.

For a few months in 2020, the Shor party [governed](#) the country in an informal coalition together with the Socialists party.

Dinu Țurcanu: new protest leader

Perhaps the most surprising Shor member is Dinu Țurcanu, 42, the head of the Orhei district, who

joined the Shor party in 2019, in a U-turn on his declared political ideology. Ten years before, in 2009, Țurcanu was one of the so-called “[seven magnificent](#)” youth meant to relaunch the Popular Christian Democratic Party (PPCD) — which had gathered a following thanks to their declared commitment to the reunification between Moldova and Romania, but fell out of grace with their own electorate after they formed a coalition with the pro-Russian Communist Party in 2007-2009.

At the two 2009 elections, PPCD didn’t even get any parliamentary seats. More recently, Iurie Roșca, the leader of PPCD throughout the 90s and the 2000s, joined Sputnik Moldova, [promoting](#) pro-Putin, anti-vaxxer and anti-Ukraine messages.

Țurcanu — a graduate of NATO studies at the National School of Advanced Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest — had been a consultant to Roșca while he was a deputy speaker in parliament during the latter’s coalition with the Communists. In 2010, Țurcanu [presented](#) himself as the number two person in the PPCD hierarchy. After his 2009 and 2010 attempts, he campaigned to become a PPCD MP in 2014 once again, but to no avail. Then he withdrew from politics until he joined Shor in 2019. In 2022, Țurcanu was [named](#) an “anti-government protest leader” by Shor.

Cash for the coup?

In December 2022, the Ziarul de Gardă (ZDG) independent newspaper published an investigation titled [OrheiLeaks](#), revealing Țurcanu’s private phone conversations. In the chats, Tauber and Țurcanu respectively appeared to be the main decision makers, below Ilan Shor, whom they called IM (for Ilan Mironovich) or Mr President (always with capital letters) — something Ziarul de Gardă suggested was a Shor personality cult. Every decision, from the budget for local public lighting projects to announcing that Țurcanu had had COVID seemed to have been consulted with Shor. Tauber, who is much closer to Shor, even coordinated Țurcanu’s condolence messages to Shor on the anniversary of his father’s death.

The financial conversations revealed even more interesting details. ZDG’s award-winning investigation, [Protesters to Rent](#), involved undercover reporters who revealed that Shor’s demonstrators were paid cash (called “colaci”, meaning “bread”) for showing up. In [OrheiLeaks](#), Țurcanu asks for money — referred to as “bread”, “petrol”, “car rent”, and “salary” — from Tauber, for himself and his team, which includes former PPCD colleague Radu Bușilă. Bușilă’s texts from 2019, two days before the parliamentary elections that led to a majority win for the pro-European party PAS, include requests for money for “subcurators”, “observers”, “heads of quarters”.

This January, Ukrainian president [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) said in Brussels that he had read intelligence reports disclosing a Russian plan to “destroy” Moldova.

President [Maia Sandu](#) confirmed the information, saying that the coup would involve foreign citizens with military or sports training who would infiltrate the protests to cause disorder. In March, the Moldovan police [said](#) they foiled a plot to create mass unrest by Russia-backed actors. Shor denies any such plans.

Merișor shops

However, the Shor protests opposing pro-European reformist parties in Moldova did not start last year. Even in 2018, in one Facebook [video](#), Shor took out his 1,500-dollar Hermes belt and threatened to “slap” then-opposition leaders Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase on their “bums”. (Shor [said](#) the belt was a present from his wife. Tauber was [spotted](#) wearing a similar belt.) During the same period, Shor demonstrators [took to the streets](#), blaming Sandu and Năstase for supposedly

closing down Shor's "social shops" — although they had no power then, leading extra-parliamentary parties and holding no official position.

The Merişor shops (translating as Little Apple, a pun on the name Şor) were launched in 2015. The Shor party declares that they are cheap shops intended to help pensioners and the vulnerable. In order to be able to buy food there, however, one has to register with the Shor party, present an ID and a pensioner card. In exchange, customers receive a card with the Shor party logo on it.

One product that actually is cheaper than in other shops is bread, which can be found at 2MDL (or 10 cents). But other produce is sold [at or above](#) market rates. The business owning these shops, Magazine Sociale SRL, is registered as a private data operator, able to collect names, ID numbers, birth dates, phone numbers, home addresses. In 2016, the Shor presidential candidate Inna Popenco was expelled from the campaign due to undeclared additional funding — that is, distributing Merişor shop cards in her meetings with voters. At the moment, according to the Shor website, there are 27 Merişor [shops](#) in Moldova.

Shor's television

While the Merişor shops remain open, despite being used in electoral campaigns with undeclared funds, Shor's TV channels were suspended in December 2022. The Exceptional Situations Committee ruled that during the state of emergency, caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, TV6, OrheiTV, Primul in Moldova, Accent TV, NTV and RTR will have their licences temporarily removed "in order to protect the national space and prevent disinformation risks". NTV and RTR are directly linked to Russian state media.

While TV6 and OrheiTV have been Shor's for years, the Russian retransmission TV channels Primul in Moldova and Accent TV changed [administrators and owners](#) last autumn. Local media wrote that the swap represented an ownership shift from the Socialists' party to the Shor party. Had their licences not been suspended, Shor would have had an unprecedented monopoly over the TV and advertising market in Moldova.

In March earlier this year, the Minister of Justice Sergiu Litvinenco, a member of the ruling party PAS, [filed](#) a request to declare the Shor party "unconstitutional" for repeatedly trespassing the electoral code. The Constitutional Court is still examining the case.

Shor in Găgăuzia

Despite the ongoing investigations into the Shor party funding and the suspension of the biggest Russian and Shor-affiliated TV channels, the Shor party won the recent local elections in Găgăuzia, an autonomous region in the south of Moldova, populated by Russified Christian Turks.

The new leader, called "bashkan", is Evghenia Gutsul, a 37-year-old woman who has never been involved in politics before. A mother of two, in her wealth declaration, she [said](#) she had earned 200 euros over the past two years in addition to 700 euros as maternity benefits, while her husband earned a total of 7,000 euros. But she also [reports](#) "a donation" of 20,000 euros and a gift of 5,000 euros to her children. Amid accusations of voter bribery and organised transport for voters in Găgăuzia, prosecutors and officers of the Anti-Corruption Centre searched the houses of eight Shor party members. But the Comrat Court of Appeal still [declared](#) the elections valid.

Last September, Shor party representatives went to Moscow to meet Duma senior officials and negotiate a special gas price and economic deal with the Kremlin. The Russian authorities [confirmed](#) that Orhei, largely controlled by Shor, will be the only Moldovan district able to export agricultural produce to Russia while there was an embargo on Moldovan fruit.

Following in the footsteps of Orhei, Gutsul [announced](#) that she wanted to resume local exports to Russia and open a diplomatic representation for Găgăuzia in Moscow (which is illegal). Thus, Shor is trying to undermine Chișinău and turn Moldova away from its pro-European, reformist path. He is unlikely to succeed. But the battle for Moldovan people's minds and hearts remains tense.

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