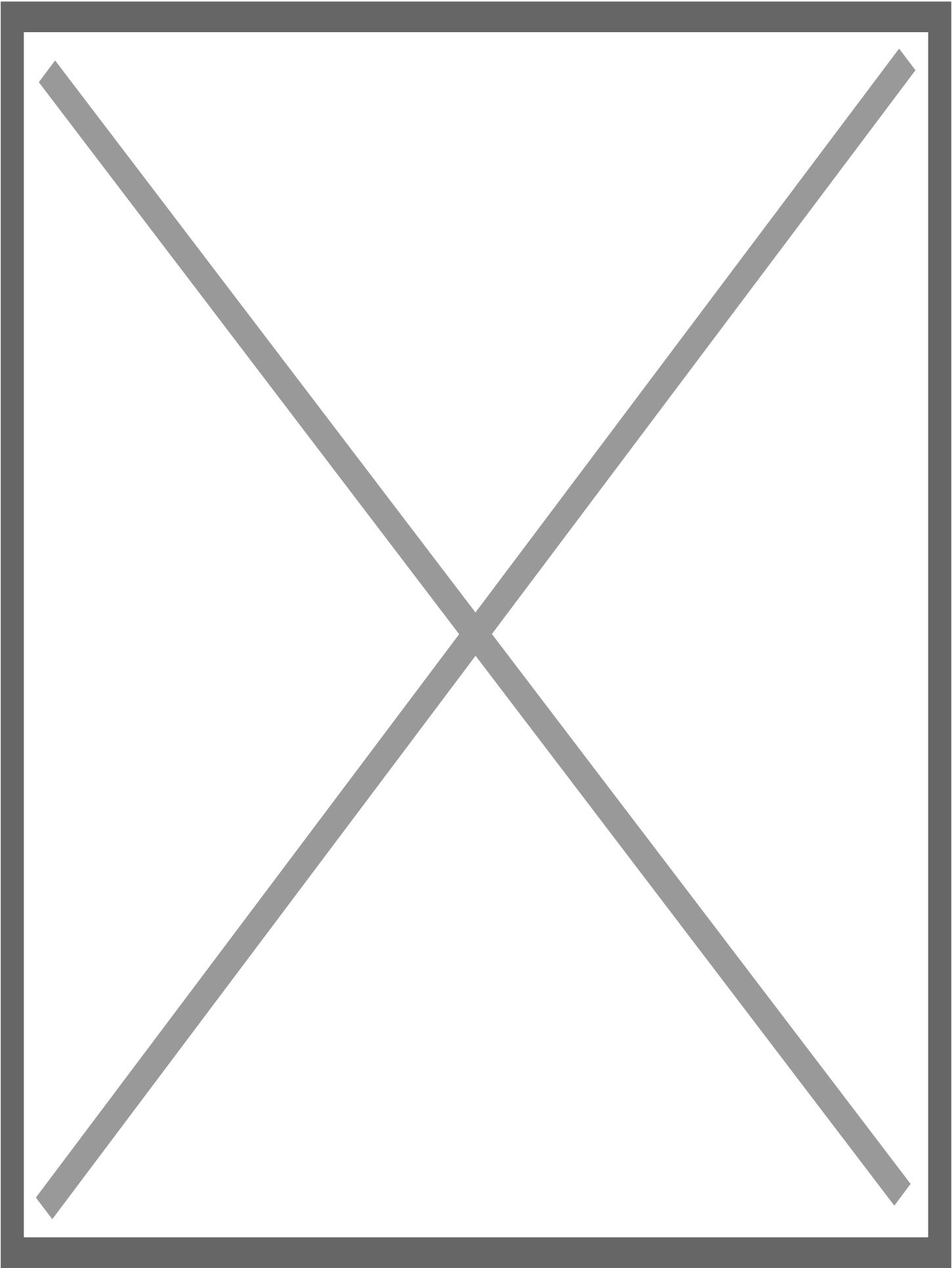


France's former President Sarkozy appears in court on corruption charges

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Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy

Paris, November 24 (RHC)-- Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy has gone on trial on charges of corruption and influence peddling, becoming the first ex-president in France to appear in the dock. Sarkozy, who led France from 2007 to 2012, attended the court in the capital Paris on Monday but declined to make any statement to reporters.

The former president stood trial for trying to bribe a magistrate in return for information about an investigation into his party finances 13 years ago. Prosecutors said Sarkozy and his then-lawyer Thierry Herzog promised former senior judge Gilbert Azibert a prestigious job in Monaco in exchange for inside information on an inquiry into claims he had accepted illicit payments during his 2007 presidential campaign.

The bribery inquiry saw Sarkozy become the first former president that was apprehended for questioning after the investigation was launched in 2014. Denouncing the case as "a scandal that will go down in history," the French ex-president fought furiously to have the case thrown out but failed.

Sarkozy's court hearings have so far been disrupted due to the coronavirus pandemic and Azibert, a key figure in the case, has not appeared in court due to a high risk of contracting COVID-19 given his long-term heart condition.

French media said legal proceedings would be adjourned on Monday as the 74-year-old former senior judge has to undergo a medical check, and that the trial is set to last until December 10.

Sarkozy's case is known as the "wiretapping case" in France because phone calls between him and his then-lawyer were tapped in 2014, in which Sarkozy used the alias "Paul Bismuth" and they discussed Azibert.

During their discussions, French media reported that the ex-president had been heard telling Herzog, "I'll get him promoted, I'll help him." Sarkozy denied any wrongdoing, also underlining that Azibert did not get the Monaco position.

Charged with bribery and influence peddling, Sarkozy risks a prison sentence of up to 10 years and a fine of \$1.2 million. Herzog faces the same charges and a further allegation of violating professional secrecy.

In a separate case, Sarkozy is also scheduled to be tried on March 17, 2021, over accusations of having fraudulently overspent in his 2012 presidential campaign. His re-election bid fell through at that time.

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