



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “Moldova: Access and Accountability”

Tuesday, March 10, 2020

12:30 p.m.

Room 2200, Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Statement of Helsinki Commission Ranking Member Senator Ben Cardin

Mr. Chairman, in a world with so many dangers and pressing problems, why should we care about Moldova? It is roughly the size of Maryland, dominated on either side by much larger and more easily recognizable Romania and Ukraine. It borders no major bodies of water, and its location is not particularly strategic. Its economy is small and mainly agricultural. Yet to ignore Moldova for these reasons would be a mistake. It’s a pivotal point of contestation between the West and Russia, and for years it has been mired in a post-Soviet political swamp where business, law, and politics are all tainted by corruption. And corruption leads inevitably to a poorer quality of life for Moldovans.

Though Moldova doesn’t border Russia, we know that Vladimir Putin is interested in maintaining his sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space wherever he can. This is a threat to Moldova and its European aspirations. A Moldova under the influence of Putin’s Russia is a Moldova with less accountability for government malfeasance and fewer opportunities to protect Western values and pursue a higher standard of living. It’s influenced by disinformation and propaganda and it works hand-in-hand with pro-Russia politicians who look to Moscow to secure their own personal and political gains. It is for this reason that I am particularly concerned

about the fall of Maia Sandu's government and the return of the Socialist party. President Dodon may claim to want good relationships with both the EU and Russia, but it seems that his sympathies tend toward the latter, which may put Moldova's democratic development at risk.

I was pleased to see that notorious oligarch and former head of the Democratic Party of Moldova Vlad Plahotniuc was sanctioned and he and his close family prohibited from entering the country. However, we now know that he has been hiding here, perhaps for months at a time, for longer than he has been sanctioned. I hope that he will soon be turned over to Moldova to face some semblance of justice for the crimes he is implicated in and the wrongs he has done to the Moldovan state and its people, who deserve better than to be manipulated by crooks and thugs with great political power. If Plahotniuc is allowed to remain in the United States, it embarrassingly undermines our sanctions policy.

With regards to Moldova's overarching struggle with corruption and increasing influence from Russia, more action and support is needed from the United States. This is why, in December 2019, Senator Wicker and I introduced the Countering Russian and Other Overseas Kleptocracy (CROOK) Act. Similar to the version the version introduced in the House by Representatives Keating (D-MA) and Fitzpatrick (R-PA), the CROOK Act creates an anti-corruption action fund that can be tapped at critical windows of opportunity for reform in foreign states. The CROOK Act is designed to protect vulnerable countries, like Moldova, from tactics used by Russia and other kleptocratic governments that use corruption to erode democratic governance and destabilize countries through dirty money and corrosive capital.

The fund created by our bill requires no additional appropriation. Rather, it collects its money from a "prevention payment" charged to those who face steep penalties for violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), our most

important law for deterring foreign bribery. The FCPA is a cure for corruption—it punishes it after the fact. Our bill focuses on prevention—it seeks to create an environment in which foreign officials do not ask for “pay-to-play” bribes to begin with. As our founding father Benjamin Franklin famously said, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Hopefully, one day our fund will collect no money when global corruption is a thing of the past.

As the Helsinki Commission continues to assess both access and accountability with regards to Moldova, I urge my Senate colleagues on the Commission to support this important legislation.