



**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 Chairman Rep. Alcee Hastings

Good afternoon and welcome to this U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing “Moldova: Access and Accountability.” We will now come to order.

Moldova is a small country with some big challenges. The country has long been considered a point of contention between Russia and the West. And certainly, Moldova has become more European since it gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Just a few years ago, in 2014, the European Union ratified an association agreement with Moldova, increasing access to the global economy for trade, exchange, and development. Moldovans demanding better lives achieved greater freedom of movement with the EU through visa waivers to bring prosperity back to Moldova. Even so, Moldova has a long way to go if it plans to harmonize its policies and legislation with the EU. In a country heavily dependent on remittances from its diaspora, navigating local daily corruption and grand kleptocracy continues to deprive Moldovans of the services they desperately need. Like in any participating State of the Organization for Security in Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Moldovans deserve accountable institutions.

Moldova maintains a strong relationship with the West; however, it is still tugged by its old benefactor, Russia. Ethnic Russians, mainly remnants from the Soviet days, make up less than a fifth of the population of Moldova, so Russia can make little claim on the country on ethnic grounds as it has attempted to do in eastern Ukraine, for instance. But other cultural ties remain and are asserted through control oligarchic media with Russian conglomerate connections and other forms of political pressure at all levels of government.

Moldova's current President, Igor Dodon [doh-DAWN], and the Socialist Party of which he is a member, now exercise a good deal of power in Moldova. And this party has had a history of being sympathetic to Russia. Mr. Dodon has visited Russia frequently as head of state and has not been hesitant to praise President Putin, even going so far as to say that Moldova needed such a "patriot."

In addition to conditional loans from the IMF and other Western sources, Moldova has received millions of euros in loans from Russia, which is much less picky about making sure reforms are implemented, and makes it much more appealing to do business with for a government unwilling to prioritize improving internal conditions in the country. We should be concerned about the Kremlin supplying an easy way out and providing political cover to maintain corruption in Moldovan institutions, further denying accountability. We should also be concerned about Russia's presence in Transnistria, in Moldova's east. We have an expert here who can tell us what work the OSCE Mission to Moldova is doing there, and in the country more broadly.

As to Moldova's relationship to the United States, you may have heard that, despite our recent ban on him entering the country, one of the most corrupt oligarchs in Moldova's history is here on our soil. Vlad Plahotniuc [PLAH-hot-nee-YOOK], who is implicated in the theft of a billion dollars from Moldovan banks, fled

Moldova after his party lost power this summer and is now a wanted man. I hope we will discuss some of Plahotniuc's nefarious legacy and get to the bottom of why he is still in the United States. It is unacceptable for him to remain here. He must be brought to justice.

The United States has increased its support for Moldova in recent years, and for good reason. We hope to see Moldova reach its potential as a European nation of prosperity and the rule of law, rather than just another post-Soviet country under the thumb of Moscow. Today's hearing will emphasize the concern of the U.S. Congress, the OSCE, and the Helsinki Commission for this often-overlooked country.

[Opportunity for other Members to make statements]

It is hard to believe during my last chairmanship of the Commission during the 110th Congress in 2008, I chaired a hearing on Moldova at which Ambassador William Hill testified. Ambassador, I am sure that you will agree that many things have improved in Moldova, yet the perennial issues you sought to address while serving as Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova remain. I thank you for your leadership in calling attention to the needs that remain in Moldova through your work as a Global Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Studies and continued engagement with the U.S. Department of State and various agencies of the U.S. Intelligence Community. As retired Foreign Service Officer, Dr. Hill is an expert on Russia and the former Soviet Union, east-west relations, and European multilateral diplomacy.

Our next witness is Tatyana Margolin, the Regional Director of the Eurasia Program at the Open Society Foundations. She oversees all aspects of the program, providing leadership on strategy, management, governance, and budget. Margolin

was previously a division director for the Eurasia Program, leading the program's work on responding to the reactionary backlash and closing civic space in the Eurasia region. An attorney by training, Margolin was previously a foreign law clerk at the Supreme Court of Israel and a staff attorney at the Women's Law Project, a nonprofit legal advocacy organization committed to fighting discrimination against women.

Our last witness joining us all the way from Moldova is Valeriu Paşa [PAH-shah], a Program Manager at WatchDog.MD. He has worked as researcher and in public administration. In the last three years he has been involved in civil society as a public policy analyst and researcher in media, electoral democracy, politics and anti-propaganda fields.

With that, I turn it over to our first speaker, Ambassador Hill.