

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:  
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**“Moldova: Access and Accountability”**

**Committee Members Present:**

**Representative Alcee L. Hastings (D-FL), Chairman;  
Representative Robert B. Aderholt (R-AL);  
Representative Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX)**

**Committee Staff Present:**

**Alex T. Johnson, Chief of Staff, Commission for Security and Cooperation in  
Europe**

**Witnesses:**

**Ambassador William H. Hill, Global Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center for  
International Studies, and Former Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova;  
Tatyana Margolin, Regional Director, Eurasia Program, Open Society  
Foundations;  
Valeriu Paşa, Program Manager, WatchDog.MD**

**The Hearing Was Held From 12:23 p.m. To 1:52 p.m. in Room 2200, Rayburn  
House Office Building, Washington, D.C., Representative Alcee L. Hastings  
(D-FL), Chairman, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe,  
presiding**

**Date: Tuesday, March 10, 2020**

HASTINGS: Thank you all. I'm especially glad to see all of you, and my friend that I don't get to see often enough, Ambassador Hill. It's just an honor and a privilege to have you here with us. I have this notorious habit of trying to start things on time. (Laughter.) And I never worry about crowds. We do have recordings of the ongoing events and will be widely disseminated. So don't be distracted by the fact that we don't have a roomful here.

Welcome to the Helsinki Commission hearing: "Moldova: Access and Accountability." 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 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 in the state of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 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't make the claim in the country on ethnic grounds, as it has attempted to do so in eastern Ukraine, for instance. But other cultural ties remain and are asserted through a controlled oligarchic media, with Russian conglomerate connections, and other forms of political pressure at all levels of government.

Moldova's current present, Igor Dodon, 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 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 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. Plahotniuc, 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's unacceptable for him to remain here. He must be brought to justice.

The United States has increased its support to 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.

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 Hill testified. Ambassador, I'm sure that you will agree that many things have improved in Moldova, yet the perennial issues that 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 United States Department of State and various agencies of the U.S. intelligence community. And a 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. Ms. Margolin was previously a division director for the Eurasia program, leaving the program's work on responding to the reactionary backlash and closing civic space in Eurasian regions. An attorney by training, and I won't hold that against her since I'm one as well, Margolin was previously a foreign law clerk at the Supreme Court of Israel, and a staff attorney at the Women's Law Project – and happy Women's Month – a nonprofit legal advocacy organization committed to fighting discrimination against women.

Our last witness, joining us all the way from Moldova, is Valeriu Paşa, a program manager at Watchdog.MD. He has worked as researcher and in public administration in the last three years. He's been involved in civil society as a public policy analyst and researcher in media, electoral democracy, politics, and anti-propaganda field. With that, I would like to turn it over to our first speaker, Ambassador Hill.

HILL: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would very much like to thank you and your colleagues for this opportunity to appear before the Helsinki Commission, and to applaud you for holding this hearing and keeping attention on Moldova. I would recall last summer, when events were in the balance in Chişinău you stepped into the breach with a key statement on behalf of the Helsinki Commission, which supported the coalition government which was emerging to take the place of the Plahotniuc government which had been voted out of office, but was refusing to leave. This is a contribution – this is one of the many contributions over the years that I have seen the Commission make. And I applaud it.

I also appreciate this opportunity especially since I have a long personal history with the Commission. I've worked with you, or representatives, since 1985, when I hosted – I think he's hiding back there somewhere – Bob Hand in Yugoslavia, on the way to the – or, to the Vienna follow-up meeting. And so I really appreciate the work that the Commission has done over the years. And I'm glad I can continue to contribute.

I've provided a written submission, which I understand has been made available to the commissioners. And I would ask that this submission be entered into any records you make of these proceedings.

HASTINGS: Without objection.

HILL: Thank you, sir. In my oral remarks, I would like to amplify and augment a few of the general points I made in this submission. First of all, on why Moldova matters to all of us here in the U.S. I believe that Europe remains an important, if not the most important, ally of the U.S. And weak governance in Moldova and the unresolved Transnistrian conflict, erode regional stability and security in Southeast Europe, and thus affect American interests in a strong and prosperous Europe. Weak or bad governance and corruption have plagued Moldova for decades, but for the past 10 years they've been the product of ostensibly pro-European, pro-Western governments.

The effects of this corruption in Moldova have been felt even in the U.S., where some of the illegal billions transferred by the so-called Russian laundromat have ended up here in the United States. Indeed, some of the funds embezzled in the Magnitsky case were actually laundered through Moldova before ending up in the West. Now, while professing pro-Western, pro-American political orientations, some corrupt Moldovan politicians have attempted to manipulate our political system to shore up their support from an increasingly angry Moldovan public.

The most egregious of these, Vladimir Plahotniuc who, as you said, fled Moldova last June and has reportedly taken refuge here in the United States, even though in January the State Department declared him and his immediate family members ineligible for U.S. visas. Plahotniuc's rise and fall epitomized the manner in which we in the U.S. have sometimes been susceptible to geopolitical appeals from compromise leaders who seek to abuse a professed pro-Western orientation to keep themselves in power. We, the U.S., lose credibility and support when we succumb to the pleadings of such dubious political actors. In my view, this has certainly happened to us over the past five years in Moldova.

I'm worried that the new government in Moldova, which came to power after the fall of the coalition Sandu administration last November, may well be repeating this pattern. Prime Minister Chicu and President Dodon both have expressed intentions to continue Moldova's course of European integration, or closer relations with the EU. However, a number of their actions have raised questions whether they are willing to follow through on this or whether this is truly their intent. Now, I don't believe we should write off the new government, but I believe we need to be more rigorous in demanding fewer promises and more performance in return for our continued support.

On Transnistria and Russia, let me state categorically that there is no question that the Russian Federation troops present in Moldova's Transnistrian region, against the will of the legally recognized government, should leave – period. However, I believe that one must not exaggerate the Russian military threat in Moldova because even – in my view – even if these troops would be removed today this would not solve either the Transnistrian conflict or the problem of Russian influence in Moldova.

In my estimation, what Moscow really wants is a friendly, cooperative government in Chisinau. And it uses many levers of state power to pursue that aim. One major element of this goal is to block further NATO and EU expansion in the region. Russia has played an important role in the ongoing Transnistrian conflict, often not constructive. But the issue is complex, with many local angles. Neither Tiraspol nor Chisinau show any desire to resume active fighting, and the population on both banks of the Dniester River get along pretty well. It really is amazing how much contact and how friendly this contact actually is.

The conflict today, in my view, is really between local political and economic elites. There is corruption in the Transnistrian regime, to be sure, but the left bank's economy also is much bigger, and also contains many solid, normal enterprises. Of the, say, 300-plus residents of the left bank, if one postulates that, say, even 20,000 are bad guys or corrupt, that leaves a really large number of people who go to work every day to normal enterprises and conduct daily, normal economic activities that would be fully legal – except for the fact that they occur in an unrecognized entity. We need to take this dilemma into account when we pursue a lasting settlement.

I believe that we in the West, the U.S., the EU, and even in Moldova, often tend to pay too much attention to Russia's role and some of the most egregious separatist leaders, and we overlook the dangers to stability, security, and international rule of law in the persistence – just the persistence of this substantial ungoverned space. Transnistria has been used as a giant offshore, duty-free area by corrupt political and business leaders from all of the states of the region, not just Moldova. Let me repeat, all of the local elites – Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and beyond. And they all benefit from the continuing inability of those working on it to resolve the Transnistrian conflict.

Now, some good progress has been made by the EU and the OSCE-led political settlement process during the last five years on bringing the Transnistrian region into an acceptable international, legal, and economic regime. However, much more needs to be done. And many of these recent gains could be lost as the result of today's growing political instability in the region, in particular on Moldova's right bank. We in the U.S., and our friends and allies in Europe, are not helpless.

And I've suggested in my written submission a number of things we might do to address these problems. To review just a couple, we need to keep involved even though recent events may be discouraging. And we need to apply greater, more effective conditionality in our assistance and support. And you can help hold the executive branch to account on this, in making sure that this gets done. We need to compete more effectively with Russian soft power

in the region, in particular in support for independent media and media supplied to Moldova, both in Romanian and Russian language materials.

We need to worry a little bit less, in my view, about geopolitics and about losing Moldova if we press whatever government is in power in Chisinau to live up to and carry out what it promises to us. For the immediate future, there's going to be a substantial Russophone population in Moldova which will be receptive to some of Moscow's advances. But over the years, polls have shown repeatedly that at least half or more of Moldova's population favors European integration. We need to take care not to disillusion this part of Moldova's people in the Western ideals and the Western system of governance.

I believe that we will do best in Moldova if we remain true to our principles and provide consistent support for good governance, rule of law, and a decent investment climate. Moldova's people have shown repeatedly, by taking to the streets more than once, that this is what they want. And they will not long tolerate any government that strays too far from these goals. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity.

HASTINGS: Thank you, Ambassador Hill.

Ms. Margolin.

MARGOLIN: Thank you, Chairman Hastings. And thank you to the Commission for your work to protect and promote human rights. And it is an honor, and I deeply appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about the important work that the Open Society Foundations have done over the past 30 years to ensure that Moldova has one of the most vibrant civil societies in the entire post-Soviet space. The Open Society Foundations are the world's large private funder of independent groups working for justice, democratic governance, and human rights. We work to build vibrant and inclusive societies grounded in respect for human rights and the rule of law, whose governments are accountable and open to the participation of the public.

Our foundation in Moldova, the Soros Foundation – Moldova, was established –

HASTINGS: Excuse me, your mic.

MARGOLIN: It's not on?

(Off-side conversation.)

MARGOLIN: Thank you. The Open – the Soros Foundation – Moldova was founded in 1992, shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, and has since invested around \$130 million U.S. in Moldova. And please allow me to highlight some of their most notable achievements over the years. Our foundation led the way in modernizing the early childhood education system in Moldova, and piloted and advanced the concept of palliative care. With the foundation's support, Moldova created the public defender's office, one of the first national legal aid systems in Eastern Europe, to fight for reforms in the criminal justice system.

In a media environment, that Ambassador Hill so accurately highlighted, that is dominated by politicians and oligarchs, the foundation has continued to support independent investigative journalism. And in 2010, when the global financial crisis hit Moldova very hard, the foundation provided emergency funding to local leaders to supply immediate relief for all Moldovans. This included everything from clothing and books, to setting up extracurricular activities, so that up to 4,000 Moldovan children could continue attending school uninterrupted.

Moldova is considered routinely the poorest country in Eastern Europe, and 20 percent of rural Moldovans are living in or below poverty. The country is commonly categorized as being a captured state run by kleptocrats. It's been suffering from the brain drain phenomenon for quite some time, with every fourth Moldovan currently working abroad. This is not surprising given that corruption permeates all aspects of a typical Moldovan's life. Last year, a third of Moldovans indicated that corruption is their most pressing concern. The country ranks 120th out of 180 countries on the Transparency International 2019 corruption perception index, between Sierra Leone and Nigeria.

As a result, public trust in the government is abysmal, hovering around 6 percent. Half of the population believes that all public institutions are corrupt, with the political parties receiving the most negative ratings, at around 53 percent, followed by the courts at 52 percent, and the police at 51 percent. The scale of Moldova's corruption and the audacity of its oligarchs received world notoriety after 2014 when \$1 billion U.S. were siphoned off through local banks, with Moldovans left footing the bill.

Vladimir Plahotniuc, whom Ambassador Hill mentioned, is a Moldovan oligarch who was allegedly one of the key responsible actors in the scandal. In January 2020, Mr. Plahotniuc was placed under U.S. sanctions, but we were deeply troubled when we read earlier this month Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's article alleging with credible evidence that Mr. Plahotniuc was currently in the United States. And I would like to take this opportunity to urge members of this Commission, and Chairman Hastings already alluded to it, to please use your resources to ensure that Mr. Plahotniuc is not sheltered by the United States.

HASTINGS: Is he at large, or is he in prison or?

MARGOLIN: He's at large. I mean, we don't know his whereabouts, but he's not in prison.

HASTINGS: OK.

MARGOLIN: And I urge you to please request a classified briefing to better understand how and why the sanctions mechanism could have failed in this instance, because certainly it's consequential for future instances as well. And with every day that Mr. Plahotniuc continues to evade justice, the Moldovan public's distrust in institutions, which I've already mentioned is quite devastatingly small, and their country continues to fall. With the West's complicity in sheltering Plahotniuc, Western values lose credibility, allowing the Russian government media to capitalize on the sentiment, especially in light of the upcoming 2020 Moldovan presidential elections.

Russia's been paying very close attention to Moldova, and its engagement with Moldova has been holistic. It has made efforts to capture the state politically. The incumbent pro-Russian president Igor Dodon, who was already mentioned, was videotaped saying that he's been getting between \$700,000 and \$1 million U.S. from Russia monthly. The son of the former general prosecutor of Russia Igor Chaika has allegedly been investing in cryptocurrency mining in Transnistria, Moldova's Russian-backed breakaway region that Ambassador Hill already described. As you know, corrupt oligarchs rely on cryptocurrency because it is difficult to trace.

Mr. Chaika also bought a controlling stake in the Moldovan media company that is licensed to rebroadcast Russia's main government channel, Channel 1. Access to this channel, recently was the most popular channel in Moldova, is a powerful pre-election tool in a country where most people still receive their news from television. Russia even has an answer to Moldova's demographic crisis: resurgence of anti-LGBTQI narratives and the promotion of so-called traditional values. A year ago Moldova, at the invitation of President Dodon, hosted The World Congress of Families, a designated hate group co-founded by Russians that promotes hardline nationalistic and racist narratives.

With such low trust in Moldova's institutions, the country is ripe for outside influence and manipulation. And the upcoming presidential elections will be taking place in this climate. Though the president does not hold many powers in the Moldovan political system, as it is a parliamentary republic, it is nevertheless an important steppingstone for several political actors. For Mr. Dodon, the stakes are high. In the upcoming elections he will need to reaffirm his strong hold on society to preserve support both from his Socialist Party, but also from his outside sponsors like Russia. Winning the presidential election will allow Dodon to continue consolidating his power, including through anticipated parliamentary elections, which are the real target of most presidential candidates.

Dodon is using the Russian playbook in discrediting the opposition. As recently as last week, he'd made a statement alleging foreign interference destabilizing Moldova. We have seen this done in the Russian playbook quite often, as you know, with Russian opposition to foreign funding of NGOs. It is crucial when Moldova's elections do take place that the OSCE election observers are present in full force. A runoff would make Dodon vulnerable, so he will use all mechanisms at his disposal to avoid it. And it is therefore crucial to preserve the integrity of the electoral process in the very first round. We anticipate pro-Russian forces investing heavily in the Transnistrian vote, as well as possible suppression of the diaspora vote.

Our foundation in Chisinau has come up with multilayered interventions to address these challenges that I have just emphasized, and make sure that elections are free and fair. Last year alone, we invested 3.1 million in various initiatives related to democratic practice and human rights, economic governance and advancement, public health, education, and the justice reform. To address the endemic corruption, we have been investing heavily in supporting investigative journalism. Moldovan journalists have played a crucial role in reporting on corrupt public officials, the integrity of candidates running for public office, and the abuse of public funds. The brave and accurate reporting has made sure that these issues stay on top of the public's agenda.

What's more, the foundation's about to begin assisting the government in transforming the justice system and bolster the rule of law. This is, as you can imagine, one of the most difficult areas to reform, and where the stakes are particularly high. We've been closely tracking governmental justice reform efforts so far, making them transparent to the public and bringing together key local experts whose input into these reforms will ensure that they're sustainable. I'll be glad to answer any further questions you may have about the Open Society Foundations' work in Moldova. And, again, I thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

HASTINGS: Ambassador Hill, I think you know my colleague, Representative Aderholt. Mr. Paşa and Ms. Margolin, he has joined us. Robert and I have worked actively in this organization for quite some time. If you would get your mic and proceed, Mr. Paşa, we would appreciate it.

PAŞA: Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Hastings, honorable audience. It's a great honor for me to witness here today. And thank you for this opportunity. I will try to refer as much as possible on internal political –

HASTINGS: He's all the way here from Moldova. (Laughs.)

PAŞA: Yeah. So the first case of COVID-19 has been officially recorded in Moldova on March 7th. The patient traveled by plane from Italy, and symptoms were already observed while onboard. When the patient lost consciousness, so it was – obviously it's a problem – the crew informed the Moldovan authorities ahead of time that a suspected case is on board. But all 144 passengers were allowed to – each to go to their homes, to spread around the country, and even go to Ukraine, and some of them in Transnistrian region. Only the following day the police tried to find them all and to verify their health.

So and the passenger who I mentioned was taken to the hospital on a regular ambulance and considering that the hospital that was allegedly purposefully set up for COVID patients did not have ICU equipment. The patient was taken then to the general hospital, full of other patients. Turns out next day morning the Moldovan government presented erroneous and even false information about this case. The prime minister blamed the patient for everything that happened, without forgetting to ostentatiously and consciously reference the fact that the patient is a woman. Next day, the president of the country illegally disclosed the name of the patient.

So based on this 48-hour episode, one can only conceive the level of incompetence of the current government of Moldova. So who are the people who lead Moldova today? Nominally it is Socialist Party, supported by the Democratic Party, or PDM. In a sense, President Igor Dodon has personally taken the responsibility of governing the country, and Party of Socialists is subordinated to him. As about PDM members of the parliament, the support of the government for them is for the sake of avoiding snap elections, because most of them understand they simply will not pass in case of snap elections.

Other reason is the impunity for all of them. The members of the parliament who make up the parliamentary majority today are miraculously spared for issues with justice bodies for the allegations of corruption or abuses they have been involved in during the Plahotniuc regime.

The latter one, Plahotniuc as was mentioned, is a fugitive and seems to continue to hide in United States. All this while he still plays some games behind the scenes in Moldovan politics, splitting a few PDM MPs who have been most loyal to him with a yet-unclear goal. So we don't know why they created the new political power. What is clear, though, is that he wants to become an important player in Moldovan politics again.

As regards of foreign affairs, the government of Igor Dodon is exclusively serving Kremlin's interests. It strongly promotes concepts and narratives that come from Moscow, such as: Europe will not survive without Russia. Or, Republic of Moldova, but also other East European countries must have permanent neutrality status under the guarantees of Russia, EU, and United States. That is to give up – that means, as for me, to give up on sovereignty of each of these states on foreign policy. Any major political decision on home affairs is also strongly coordinated with Moscow.

The Kremlin-affiliated actors' control over media is growing exponentially, as was mentioned previously. The anti-EU and especially anti-United States propaganda is intensifying in Republic of Moldova. Reforms are actually not happening. The published, then withdrawn, concept of the justice reform was virtually an open attempt to politically resubordinate the judiciary to those in power. So take the control from Plahotniuc and put it under Dodon and his affiliates. The new attorney general gave us some hope of an appointment but he first gave up on the fight against corruption among the politicians in power, then he enlisted to serve the president's political interests.

The deputy governor of Moldova's central bank was arrested for allegation of involvement in 1 billion (dollar) bank fraud. He is also the husband of a PDM MP, who appears to have wanted to leave the current governing coalition, and probably to become a part of those new political power affiliated to Plahotniuc. After she officially declared she will stay in PDM, next day her husband was released from prison. So this is a very bad sign of all types of practices of the general prosecutor office.

There is still talk about a potential reformatting of the government by combining the pro-European opposition and the PDM. But the capacity to negotiate and formulate a compromise between those political forces is very low. They simply do not trust each other, and do not have this experience to make complicated compromises. Even the opposition has internal disagreements. I mean, the genuine pro-European opposition who formed previously ACUM electoral bloc. That is why we encourage a much more active role of the United States in mediation of this situation, based on very recent Georgia's successful example.

Another and even more important role for the United States is promoting justice and rule of law in Republic of Moldova. President Dodon is an official who has worked for the public sector all his life, but who spends ten times more than what he and his family officially earn. So this is every month. It would be naïve to expect him to build a justice and anticorruption system that will knock on his door very soon, in case it will be independent. That is why the current government will not reform the justice system. Rather, it will try to subordinate it under the cover of alleged reforms. And the system is very malleable. Judges, prosecutors, as well as

other officials, are easily drawn into supporting illegalities because they know nothing will happen to them.

The United States could make a huge contribution to the changing of this state of affairs by personally sanctioning corrupt officials. First of all, it is about applying together sanctions or, let's say, a tougher type of sanctions against personally Plahotniuc. But perhaps more importantly, or not less importantly, is for some officials of slightly lower level to be publicly sanctioned. The latter have no billions of dollars to hide away from sanctions, and so they will see that one can no longer hide from justice in their villa in Spain or Romania. This should result in a trend of refusing to conduct all illegal requests. This will mean the end of impunity.

We believe the best candidates to be put under the Global Magnitsky Act, apart from Plahotniuc – of course, with him together – are the former Governor of the National Bank Dorin Drăguțanu, and Ilan Shor, who executed the theft of \$1 billion from the national banking system. All the preparatory work in this regard has been done, and material is already under the review in U.S. national agencies. So that needs just to be promoted.

In conclusion, we have a corrupt and incompetent government, a divided opposition, one-third of the voters who cannot vote because they stay abroad, and incredible suppression of voters. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of citizens sincerely want to go towards EU and the West. Unfortunately, within the country those who remain – and this is just around two-thirds of all voters, the situation is divided 50 to 50 between those who are pro-West and those affected by Kremlin propaganda.

We see a potential positive role of United States throughout the intense cooperation with the EU, first of all, the political mediation between genuine pro-European forces and those who can support them in the parliament or outside it, the support of the free press and civil society, and the promotion of anticorruption, to have personal sanctions applied to highly corrupt individuals. Thank you.

HASTINGS: Thank you so very much. Let me take a moment to acknowledge the great work of our ambassador in Moldova, Ambassador Dereck Hogan. Thank you so much for all you do for all of us in that arena. I'd also make an apology. I have a pretty critical appointment and I'm going to have to leave. But my colleague is going to be with you for at least another 30 minutes. We had hoped that Senator Wicker would get here, but he's held up in the Senate.

Ambassador Hill, the question that I have for you is a rather general one. In your oral testimony, you spoke to things that needed to be done. But what – how can the United States better support Moldova's reform efforts? And what about in the area Mr. Pașa mentioned on sanctioning corrupt officials?

HILL: Well, Mr. Chairman, we have a number of different ways that we can impose individualized financial and economic sanctions, as well as broader sanctions, either withholding assistance or specifically targeting assets that are held around the globe. And one simply needs to do the work. And one simply needs to follow through. We have gone for a long time, I think, with a succession of governments in Moldova where we've had exchanges expressing opinions

that action needs to be taken, or things need to be cleaned up. And unfortunately there haven't been consequences that follow the failure then to comply with these admonitions, or to fulfill promises that are made in response to them. And I think we need to be more hardnosed about that.

I think a combination of a little more attention and identifying assistance where money, political support, or personnel assistance – expert assistance provided since the Moldovan government is very, very thin in personnel, given the brain drain they've suffered over the past two decades. But we combine this with a willingness simply to impose consequences and cut off funding, cut off cooperative activities, show that if the performance that we desire or agree is necessary is not forthcoming, that we are simply going to withhold our cooperation or our assistance for a time until we see behavior change or until the people on the ground change and start doing things. This is easier to say than it is to do. And it requires a sustained approach. But I think that's what's necessary.

HASTINGS: Ms. Margolin, in the area of justice reform you and I as lawyers know – I was always fascinated in Iraq, for example, we spent all of that time on the police and whole bunch of other stuff, but we never did stand up a justice system. Do you see any opportunity for real justice reform there?

MARGOLIN: Open Society Foundations has attempted to support justice reform in many countries, with varying successes. I think in Moldova there is genuine desperation, exasperation of the public that is pushing for this justice reform, which is I think really significant and really positive. So I think the environment is incredibly ripe for it. Certainly with the current government there are not a lot of champions of this reform. My colleagues spoke about the sort of desperate attempts of the current government to look east rather than west. But I do think Europe, the United States, and Western donors hold a lot of leverage in Moldova. And I think the justice reform really can proceed.

I think our expectations need to be to scale. And I think it's going to take a long time. But I think the young people who have remained in Moldova are really, really truly committed. And civil society is quite robust. So I do think it is something that needs to at least be attempted and should not be given up on.

HASTINGS: Right. Mr. Paşa, in the work that you do, particularly raising issues in the media and in civil society, do you receive threats?

PAŞA: Well, usually I respond to this question with it's too late for me to think about that, because if I was not afraid of Plahotniuc, who is a person descending from gangsters of '90s, of post-Soviet time, so I will not – I will not be afraid of a person like Dodon, who is a simple imitation of Plahotniuc. He's not, let's say, a serious politician. But at the same time, they are working on their destruction. This is a real Kremlin-type playbook, trying to discredit active civil society members, independent media. We see now really increased attacks on what foreign donors means, especially Open Society Foundations, but also on some personalities.

The big threat, actually, which we have now is that, indeed, as I told, we have a clear majority of citizens of Moldova who want the change, who support the reform of justice and the pro-European path of Moldova. Unfortunately, most of them – or at least half of them – live abroad. And the government is doing everything to not – first of all, to make them not want to vote, and not allowed to vote, because of not opening enough polling stations abroad. This is the people who maintain economically Moldova. They work and send money home. This is the only way Moldovan economy survives. What they do now, especially which is their main narrative about coronavirus, is about making people who still live in Moldova hate our diaspora, especially those who are from Italy.

HASTINGS: You mentioned the coronavirus case. Has it expanded since that time?

PAȘA: Well, unfortunately, today there are two more cases. Unfortunately, from more than 10,000 people who came in the last one and a half weeks just from Italy, they tested less than 50 people.

HASTINGS: I see.

PAȘA: Their capacity is extremely low. And, I don't know, it was clear with Plahotniuc that was an extremely corrupt and nondemocratic government. This is not less corrupt, but they are even more incompetent. It's like if the term of – how it is – kakistocracy, yeah, I think – will have a practical applying someone, probably now it's in Moldova. And what they do the more, the main efforts the government are now about producing and distribution of disinformation in electoral context, fake news. So the majority of propagandists who worked previously for Plahotniuc now were just hired by Dodon and paid with the money that comes from Russia. This is the change, unfortunately, we received.

That's why I would raise as much attention on elections, because we have a very clear majority of pro-European voters. But by using administrative resources, media, Russian money, Russian technologies of doing elections – which means actually meddling – and suppression of the diaspora voters, we can have at the end of election a totally opposite result as it normally could be. That's why I think that foreign partners need to do as much as possible not to meddle, not to support a specific candidate, but to balance the chances in order to do the election as fair as it's possible. Thank you.

HASTINGS: Right. Well, I certainly will raise with the president of the OSCE the critical need to make sure that we have as many election observers from ODIHR and OSCE and other interested countries to be there.

I genuinely thank all of you all. I do have an important appointment and I'm going to have to leave. But I'm leaving you in the best of hands, all right? Thank you all so much.

ADERHOLT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And it's good to be here and to have a chance to, you know, learn a little bit more about Moldova. Having visited there and having had a little bit of contact with the country, I've had a little bit of opportunity with Moldova. But it's still a

country that is very perplexing to me. So I welcome this opportunity to learn from you and to see what your observations are, and how we can go from there.

I know Chairman Hastings asked you, Ambassador Hill, about your thoughts on how we, as the United States, can better support a Moldova reform. And thank you for your comments on that. I'd also like to hear from our other two witnesses, and just sort of their thoughts on how the United States can be more effective in trying to help with reforms there. Ladies first. Oh.

PAŞA: First of all, I would like to mention investments. Technical support is incredibly important. But that's also important if it is given to a government that has the will to do reforms, genuine reforms. But United States, if I'm not wrong, provided \$75 million support for the justice reform from 2010 to 2015. The idea was to create a genuinely independent and efficient and fair justice system. What we got at the end of the day, even more politically controlled, biased, and unfair justice system. But a little bit better technically supported.

I will a little bit disagree with colleague Tatyana that it is possible to expect any real results with this government. Nope. This is – I don't want to lie to you. This power will not build an independent justice system. They will just try to subordinate it. Next. There is no need just for money. The news that the State Secretary Pompeo designated Plahotniuc under this type of sanctions, which are the softest – or, one of the softest possible. But only, if I'm not wrong, that state secretary or State Department could impose on its own. So from what I researched, State Department cannot simply cancel an active visa.

Most probably, Mr. Plahotniuc is present in United States till now legally. This is what this type of sanctions means. But there is a much more – or, much stronger instrument, which is called Global Magnitsky Act, which is extremely efficient and is specially designated for such type of cases, because that was an extremely powerful message to all political class and state employees – important state employees in Moldova. So the impunity didn't go anymore all around the world, because till now we have a lot of fugitive corruptioners.

And actually, in all 10 years we do not have at least one big case of corruption really, say, that led to jail of someone who was involved. We have hundreds, if not thousands, of journalistic investigations with all the proofs. And that's the case of the ex-Prime Minister Filat. My opinion is he is corrupt. But he was not convicted for corruption, but just because Plahotniuc wanted that, unfortunately. So that's why I think this symbolic, not costly but extremely impactful, actions would be the best help United States can provide now to Moldova.

ADERHOLT: Ms. Margolin?

MARGOLIN: Thank you. I will emphasize that I wasn't suggesting that somehow on justice reform under this government will be a piece of cake. But I do still think that it's quite significant not to give up on these reforms. Again, it is quite true – you know, I work around – across the entire post-Soviet space. And, yes, oftentimes it is one step forward and a couple of steps sideways, sometimes some steps back. But nevertheless we have to persist. And I think specifically to justice reform, we have to take a holistic approach. And also, of course, adjust our expectations.

So first of all, I think what the United States should continue doing, and what it's been doing, but maybe even more so than up till now, is to make sure to work in close contact with local civil society in these reforms. I think what oftentimes foreign governments do when they offer help to other nations is come in and really sort of try to pursue their own agendas without understanding the context, et cetera. I think working in concert with civil society is absolutely essential. People like Mr. Paşa do the very important reality checks for people who are just new to Moldova. And he will – you know, even a meeting with Mr. Paşa with the U.S. embassy, he will immediately tell you sort of what the things that are going to likely fail, and what are the things that may take root. And that's the approach that we take. That's most important.

But I also think, even in the justice reform that has been unsuccessful, I think keeping it on the agenda and educating the public about justice failures is still significant. Making sure that people are aware that this reform is taking place and what exactly has failed – which is where the journalists come in – I think is crucial and important. Again, I think in post-Soviet countries we have to really change our definition of success. Will we be able to reform the judiciary overnight? Most definitely unlikely. But do we have to continue pressing and keeping it on top of the agenda? Definitely. So as the budget is moving through the Appropriations Committee, I believe right now, I think it's essential that the money committed from Moldova remains at least stable and that we continue pushing justice reform as one of the priorities. And I think Mr. Paşa and I can agree on that.

PAŞA: Absolutely.

ADERHOLT: Let me ask – clarify one thing that you – I forgot who mentioned earlier. The percentage of the population that's living outside – oh sorry. The number of people that are living outside of Moldova, the population, what was that number again?

MARGOLIN: I mentioned that every fourth Moldovan works abroad. One in four. You think it's higher? Yeah, these are the official – oh, sorry. The latest Moldovan census was done in 2014 and is considered one of the least reliable censuses in history of all census in the world.

ADERHOLT: What did that census show?

MARGOLIN: Population of 3.1, I think. But really – I think the recent numbers are closer to 2.9. And what is your estimation of how many people live abroad? Not more than –

PAŞA: We have an estimation of at least 1.1 million based on different references. It's about the quality of the government that is not able, at least, to count how many citizens it has inside the country. Well, there are different objective and subjective causes. We have some, like, 200,000 people who work abroad most of the year, and the rest – up to 1 million but I think a little bit less, which live permanently. Just in Italy we have around 300,000 people. In Russia, we have less than 300,000. It decreased a lot after 2014 economic crisis in Russia. In United States, in Canada, in France, in United Kingdom, all around the world.

If we are saying about active population, like young people, up to – like, who are less than 50 – it's about 40 percent of working power – real, active working power of the country. If we are speaking of people who are 18-25, it's more than half who have already left the country. This is a tragedy. It's not just about economic situation, but it's a lot about the quality of public services and the perspective for life, and the personal security, the security of the ownership.

If you know that you live in a country where you establish a business and someone just takes it by illegal decision of a judge or a prosecutor who just wanted to have it, well you better will develop in a country which is much richer and open, as much of European Union countries. Obviously, the easiness of taking Romanian citizenship is a factor, it makes it easier, because people just get Romanian citizenship, which they legally can take because of historical context. And they can live legally and work legally all around Europe. And Moldova is not competitive.

MARGOLIN: If I might just share a terrifying statistic that Moldova, I think, based on the U.N. statistics, is one of the top three countries that is losing population quickest, and is projected to lose, I think, up to 20 percent of the population by 2035.

ADERHOLT: Let me change it up just a little bit and to ask about the religious freedom in Moldova. What's your all – each of you, based on your different perspectives on this, what is your assessment of how religious freedom – are people able to worship freely in Moldova and how would you characterize that?

Ambassador, we'll start with you.

HILL: I'll go, briefly. The primary religion is Eastern Orthodox. And there's a competition between the portion of the church is that loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate and a portion that is loyal to the Romanian Orthodox hierarchy. And the terms of this competition have varied over time. But it involves questions of property and church revenues, as much as – much more so than disputes over doctrine or theology. In the post-Soviet time, there has been a spread of Evangelical Protestant sects which, from time to time, have suffered from measures of resistance taking against them by authorities on both banks. But this has not been –

ADERHOLT: When you say both banks, you mean –

HILL: I mean, the Transnistrian separatist authorities, as well as the recognized government in Chisinau. But you know, denominations such as Baptists, in my observation, have been able to work most successfully. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists have encountered greater problems. This is a phenomenon that goes beyond Moldova. But the Orthodox Church in general has seen Evangelical Protestantism as a threat to its ecclesiastical domination. But in general, the Orthodox are able – have been able to worship relatively freely.

Most recently the Moldovan authorities have recognized the effects of the Holocaust in Moldova, which used to have an extremely substantial Jewish population, but which was largely removed both by the effects of the Holocaust, World War II, and then emigration near the end of the Soviet period. But overall, freedom of religion I would say, from my experience and

knowledge in Moldova, is a mixed bag. You know, and it is one where the bulk of the Orthodox population don't face great impediments.

PAȘA: I would add some issues. First of all, I would agree with what Ambassador Hill mentioned on this subject. We still have some problems, not so extensive as that was 20 year(s) ago at local level when dominant Orthodox Church, on the local level, is promoting the hate against – especially against neo-Protestants. It is still present. And the leadership of the Moldovan Orthodox Church is not doing anything with that. This is not surprising. This is just the same situation as is, for example, in Russia, as the majority of Moldovan Orthodox Churches are subordinated to Russian Patriarchate.

I would also touch a little bit different aspect of religious freedom, is the political freedom of religious people. Unfortunately, my opinion is the biggest problem with religious freedom is the involvement of the leadership of the churches, but also of local clerics, in political campaigns and in supporting specific candidates. Unfortunately, that is not just about, as could be expected, the Russian Orthodox Church. It's very present in a bad way, in my opinion, in the Baptist Church in Moldova, when practically all the population which belongs to this church is forced to support a specific candidate, just because he is actually the leader of this church in Moldova. That's a bad thing, in my opinion. But it's not so impactful.

But the impact of this involvement of Russian Orthodox Church in elections is extremely high. So they openly support President Dodon and his party. The patriarch is openly supporting President Dodon and his party. Many of the clerics on the local level – many were political campaigning for the candidate, the presidential elections we had in 2016. And this is what we will expect now, which for sure will be present, unfortunately.

MARGOLIN: And just to add to what Mr. Pașa was saying, I – we are observing similarly problematic engagement with the Russian Orthodox Church, specifically with Mr. Dodon's flirtation with the Russian Orthodox Church and using it to his own benefit. So, for example, Patriarch Kirill was supposed to be in attendance at The World Congress of Families that I had mentioned. He was an invited guest of honor. And we see – I think the alarming thing is seeing the church narrative being manipulated in order to address the demographic crisis, rather than addressing the underlying issues in the demographic crisis.

So we see the church narratives being used to blame depopulation of Moldova on sexual minorities and other minorities. So the LGBTQ community is to be blamed for the fact that Moldova's population is shrinking, rather than the fact that young people are leaving in droves because the country's unlivable, due to corruption. And certainly this narrative politically is quite useful to Mr. Dodon because it's a much easier one to propose rather than fix the underlying problems facing his society.

ADERHOLT: Let me ask you, Mrs. Margolin, I understand that civil society groups in Moldova are fragile. So what are we seeing in terms of the indigenous people there in Moldova stepping in to help lead the country?

MARGOLIN: I think that's what so impressive about Moldova, that even though some of the statistics I rattled out, you know, just truly appear to leave absolutely no room for hope, we see – I mean, Mr. Paşa here is an example of an active civil society leader who stays in Moldova even though certainly he could go many different places. I think the resilience of civil society is what Moldova has going for it sort of the most. That is what ascertains its future, I think. That's the thing that we have left to hold on to the absolute most.

And again, whenever I visit Moldova and meet with civil society groups, you truly just – your first question to them always is: How do you keep going? Because there is just one setback after another. And it is these unbelievably dedicated and committed young people. I mean, even in the government, even in this new technocratic government, when you visit and meet with politicians they're oftentimes, you know, in their 20s, serving as ministers of justice and other quite high positions.

And I think that is one way to attract youth back to Moldova, is that you can advance quite a lot in that context. And the civil society is truly there, unified, and coalesced, and supporting the people who do want to come back. And actually, civil society is one of the reasons we still have attractive jobs for young people in Moldova. Jobs at places like Watchdog.MD, or the Soros Foundation-Moldova, these are jobs that offer young people with very few other opportunities in the country exciting, stimulating environments that make them stay there.

ADERHOLT: My – I have also got to slip out. As you know, we're usually – most of us – this time of year, the hearings are going on and we got to float from one to the other. Before I recognize Representative Jackson Lee, let me just ask you one quick one. What's your take on the Transnistrian request for more troops?

HILL: It's – that was nonsense. That was a political ploy. And they're not going to get it because with Ukraine and Russian relations, Russian planes can't even cross Ukrainian airspace now, and everything has to come in through the Chisinau airport. So the Moldovans won't get them. This was, in my reading and from folks that I talked to involved in the process, it was a rather frivolous exchange as part of a dispute that arose in the overall settlement process. And the sides continue to spar over the size and adequacy of the peacekeeping force, and of the need for troops, or whether this should be a civilian policing operation. I don't think it's a real threat.

It's, of course, nonconstructive, but it was meant to be nonconstructive in order to disrupt an argument that was going on over other aspects, practical relations between Tiraspol and Chisinau. The Russian – I noted in what I provided in writing the Russian military presence there right now is negligible. It's illegal. And, period, that the Russians should respect the Moldovans' wishes. But if you're talking in military terms, there's far more dangerous – there's far more danger and a far more substantial military forces of the two sides – two sides field themselves. And but there's no evidence that they want to fight each other.

This is by and large more a political problem, as part of the political complex of relations between Chisinau and Moscow, and Moldova's desire to get – really achieve full independence

and sovereignty from a Russian presence that has been there since Moldova achieved independence in 1991.

ADERHOLT: Unfortunately I have got to slip out. But I'd like to turn it over to Representative Jackson Lee. She is a member of the U.S. Delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and also a member of the Ad Hoc Committee on Migration. So, recognize you, Ms. Jackson Lee, and I'll turn the mic over to you.

JACKSON LEE: Thank you very much. And let me follow suit with respect to overlapping hearings. And I certainly wanted to be here. I think Moldova is symbolic of our friends in the neighborhood and pending concerns that we may be facing.

Let me first – let me thank all the witnesses. And let me, first of all, thank the congressman for yielding, thank Chairman Hastings for convening this meeting, and the ranking member as well. But you are having elections soon. And my interest would be in whoever feels most able to pointedly answer. The question is the preparedness for Moldova to have elections that might look like they're being fair, and that there be accountability. And as I was listening to the rising, or at least the presence of young people – which are probably young voters, we would hope – how do you see that election coming in light of the inclination of Moldova to lean to the East?

PAŞA: Thank you, Representative Jackson Lee.

I will try to repeat just some issues from what I mentioned previously, enough to go forward. First, we have a big problem with the suppression of voters. This is about one-third of all people who have the right to vote, who permanently live abroad. And government is free to create conditions for them to participate in a higher number or not. And that could make the difference at the elections. Inside the country the situation is more or less split.

JACKSON LEE: More or less?

PAŞA: Split in half. Like, 50/50, or more or less. It's based on the surveys, on the sociology. We have approximately half of those who are better informed and support pro-European path of the country, and let's say pro-Western and pro-reform orientation. Other half, mainly because of extensive presence of Kremlin propaganda in the years – it's not a new one. It was from the very beginning of the independence of Republic of Moldova, just believe and have this picture of the world created by Kremlin narratives. So they tended to vote for those political forces which are being openly supported by the leadership of Russian Federation. In this case, mainly we are speaking about President Igor Dodon and his political party, and his supporters.

So the big issue is if the elections will be really free, which means free access to vote. This is for a second. It's a big disbalance in the media space in the Republic of Moldova. So we have two media – main media groups, one still owned by the ex-leader of Democratic Party of Moldova, Plahotniuc, and other owned by Igor Dodon, but he's actually an intermediary. Actually this is media group controlled and financed, illegally actually, from Moscow. Now, they've even established a direct ownership of the main TV station.

So they use the fact that they have this big amounts of money, and they are very competitive on entertainment. That's why they have the control of information delivered to a big part of population. Mainly, I am speaking about older people in rural areas could not have more than three TV channels – all three controlled by the government, or governing party. And these three TV stations deliver the same narratives, the same stories. And they simply do not cover enormous corruption and failures. And it's not just about corruption. This is also about the incompetence of this government. They simply did not know about that. And a lot of propaganda.

JACKSON LEE: So let me follow up on your very detailed – with that in mind, we're not expecting any change in government. Are we expecting any increase in turnout? Mr. Ambassador?

HILL: Let me – Representative Jackson Lee, let me – Mr. Paşa has given you the – quite justifiably – the side of the glass that's half-empty. Let me give the side that's half full, because I've watched Moldovan elections from 1996 to the present day. And part of the full glass is that these elections have never been perfect, but in contrast to most of the countries around in the former Soviet area, they have been competitive, and generally competitive, and there have been real changes in government. And I would not exclude the possibility, notwithstanding all of the ailments that Valeriu suggests. I do not exclude the possibility that properly conducted, properly organized, that a campaign of pro-reform, center-left, center-right parties or representatives could not win.

The last presidential election, 2016, conducted between an openly pro-Kremlin candidate and a pro-Western candidate, was something like 51 ½ to 48 ½ percent. It was not a big win. And I've watched Moldovan politics over the years turn to the East, turn to the West. What I see in all of this is a population that whether they vote pro-East or pro-West, are terribly frustrated by the continued failure of political leaders on both sides to carry out the promises they make about economic reform, jobs, health care, all of these things that are important to any population anywhere in the world.

And therefore, I don't exclude – I mean, we need to watch out for all of these abuses. We need to support freedom of media, free conditions in a campaign, electoral reform that will allow Moldovans who are working abroad the opportunity to cast their ballots abroad. But nonetheless, I wouldn't want anybody to write off hope that there's a real possibility – this country remains in the balance, which is what makes it I think much more hopeful than many places we look at, because the people really do come out, support change, work for this.

And there is an electorate that is relatively open and evenly balanced that can and will vote. And so far, despite the abuses, the elections have been competitive. And for the most – you know, except for one instance this June, and Plahotniuc is now – he's in Miami, I'm told reliably by people. But aside from this one instance, the losers ceded power freely, transferred power freely, peacefully. So this is not a bad record. And it's one that I think – I look at it, you know, as the glass half-full. And I want to make the glass fuller, rather than concentrate only on what's wrong.

JACKSON LEE: I'm willing to accept that. And I think the – Mr. Payer – Paşa, excuse me, was giving, I guess, the elements of democracy that we're all concerned about. I want the best for Moldova. They're in the neighborhood next to Ukraine and Romania. And so I know that they are challenged.

And so let me follow – let me continue on your line of reasoning, Ambassador Hill. And we understand that there was a billion dollars siphoned off between 2012 and 2014. Has there been a commission or any kind of organizational entity to try to find out what happened to that money and the banks, to your knowledge? Which I would assume would impact young people's sort of trust of their government.

HILL: Let me give a brief recapitulation, then I'm sure that my colleagues here can answer – or can augment some details. But, yeah, there was an investigative – the government hired an American firm, Kroll, to conduct an investigation. Two reports have been done, which have only unofficially – not really fully and officially made public. The biggest follow-on shock from this theft was that the government announced that government funds, in other words tax money, would be used to replace – to make up the money that was lost. And so the population ended up with – paying for the theft.

The money has not been recovered. It has not been traced down, at least publicly – in stuff that's been publicly announced. Two politicians have been convicted for at least partially – in cases partially related to this theft. Neither one of them is in jail. One of them is in Miami, as far as I know now. The other one is in Israel and sending messages over social media back to Moldova. In a situation like this, whatever the other details, simply drives an electorate to fury or despair, or both.

JACKSON LEE: Thank you. Do you – Mr. Paşa do you have any – because I have another question. So I think I'm satisfied with that answer.

I think there are at least three cases – coronavirus cases in Moldova. Does anyone want to comment on – the country is one of the poorest countries. And does anyone want to comment on what you think their infrastructure is to be able to handle any potential spread of the virus?

PAŞA: I will try. We're following the subject. We are working as an NGO extensively on countering disinformation on this issue, which we think is critical especially because of, let's say, large exposure of the population to the Russian language. The people understand Russian, so they consume this Kremlin-produced disinformation a lot. What we see now is – it's not an issue of money and of how rich the country is. Even existing resources are being deployed, used very poorly. That was the issue I started with.

First, it's like, you do not need to be an expert to understand that if you have a potential case you do not let all other passengers from the plane to go home, to spread all around the country, some of them even left the country or went to Transnistrian region. You do not take the patient and bring it to the special hospital with a simple ambulance. And after that, even – it's enough to write on Wikipedia that you will need this special equipment for maintaining the

ventilation and ICU equipment. So they prepared this hospital for one week but didn't put it there. After that, they take the patient to a general hospital.

So this is about incompetence. This is not about lack of money. We have 10,000 people come just from Italy, 90 percent of them from northern Italy. Normally, they came home. They used to verify with a test, like 33 persons, till a day ago. So this is unfortunately not about the – you know, about the money. This is about competence. The situation is bad in this way. Why? Because they appointed, in so-called technocratic government, people who are able just to execute orders.

And the person who is giving orders is Igor Dodon. And he is not a professional in any area. This is just an opportunist who was not involved in some real management in his life. This is what we have. Wow, that was not so easy for him to win because he was backed on one side by Putin, on the other side supported by Plahotniuc because Plahotniuc was four years ago afraid not to win elections.

Come back to the issue of elections, I just want to be understood correct. My feeling is that even with all this control of media, Russian support, church support, money, full control of the government, Igor Dodon will lose next elections. This is my feeling. I have some experience in elections in Moldova also. (Laughs.)

JACKSON LEE: That the government will lose the next election?

PAŞA: The president.

MARGOLIN: That the current government will change.

PAŞA: I think – well, I don't know if the government will change. We can see the change of majority in the parliament, as I was mentioning before. For that, we really need an international mediation based on the recent Georgian model, because, let's say, the pro-European opposition, genuine opposition, do not have experience to – like, to make complicated negotiations. On the other hand, there is also a need for an international, let's say, how to call it, not support but mainly some guarantees, or – you know. That is how things are going in the region.

I think he will lose, because he is in office for three years, but just for four months he holds all the power. And at least now people will see that he's not able just to use this power, because he's not Plahotniuc. Plahotniuc acted as a real, you know, some mix between businessman and gangster. And he was efficient to control the system more or less. And Igor Dodon simply had not understood previously what it is to hold the government in your hands.

JACKSON LEE: Well, let me conclude my remarks with saying that you have been here for a period of time, and I have layers and layers of questions. But I just want to put on the record that it seems that there was a pro-Western government that was overtaken just about a year ago that disappointed many of us, because certainly he was duly elected and there were Moldovans who thought that that was a good thing to have happen. The close to 1,500 Russian

troops that remain on Moldovan soil. And I'm not sure at the invitation of the government or somewhat uninvited, like Ukraine.

But it is strategically well-situated. It is important. I think it is important for the Helsinki Commission to be studious in assessing its progress. And as I listen to questions that were asked, there is, I hope, a vigorous population of youth who see things in the future that they can see a government that listens to their voices, a government that's economic infrastructure provides them with lifelong success, which I think is important, particularly as Moldova's described as a very, very poor country.

So I will be looking forward to seeing how the United States, working with international allies, can be somewhat constructive in our engagement with Moldova, and also engagement with Russia, to express our pushback on their interference with a sovereign nation, which I think is key for Moldova – the people of Moldova to grow and have some form of representation that they choose.

So with that, I didn't know whether Ambassador Hill was poised to make a last sentence. It looked like he was in posture to speak. If he is, I will yield to him for a moment.

HILL: I'm listening attentively.

JACKSON LEE: (Laughs.) OK. It looked like you were in posture to make a comment.

But in any event, I think this was an important hearing, and I'll look forward to keeping Moldova on my radar screen. There's just a lot of elements I'm concerned about. The coronavirus – I don't feel comfortable by the answer. And we know we're in a pandemic. And it's a question that we have been asking all day almost every day since we too in the United States have sort of missed the mark. And I don't mind putting that on the record. The administration has missed the mark. We do need to be proactive in trying to work in the United States, but also be actively engaged with countries that could benefit from our insight and the way we that we organize that. So we're trying to get our structure in line as this moves somewhat at a rapid – somewhat of a rapid speech. And I appreciate the testimony that you've given on Moldova. Thank you.

JOHNSON: Oh behalf – thank you. On behalf of Chairman Hastings, thank you Representative Jackson Lee for your leadership in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and your concern in particular with this case with Moldova. We wish to thank our witnesses for their tremendous testimony and their time in joining us here with the U.S. Helsinki Commission for this hearing on “Moldova: Access and Accountability.” And with that, on behalf of the chairman, this hearing is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 1:52 p.m., the hearing ended.]