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Valeriu Paşa

«ASK DODON» - WHY IS RUSSIA MEDDLING IN MOLDOVA'S 2019 ELECTIONS?

This study systematizes the evidence of Russian Federation's meddling in the electoral campaign for the parliamentary elections on February 24 in the Republic of Moldova. An analysis is provided for the reasons and possible impact of these actions over the voting results.

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Kingdom of the Netherlands

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«ASK DODON» - Why Is Russia Meddling In Moldova's 2019 Elections?

Introduction.

Parliamentary elections are to be held in the Republic of Moldova on February 24. In a way which became routine already, the ruling Democratic Party tries to position itself as pro-European, although it has repeatedly taken a “pro-Moldova” position as well, meaning a kind of waiver from European integration. Actually this has been an address meant to respond to the Western partners’ critics for missing reforms, democracy deterioration, endemic corruption, and destruction of the last appearances of the rule of law. The Party of Socialists, whose de-facto leader is President Igor Dodon, positions itself on the opposite side of the geo-political barricade. This party is prevailing over the left wing of the electorate. The ethnical minorities and Russophile voters traditionally vote for this party.

The ACUM Block is the third force entering this electoral campaign. It is composed of 2 new extra-parliamentary parties. It openly claims the EU integration option, but has largely eliminated the geo-political aspects from its political discourse. Moreover, representatives of this competitor claim that the topics related to geo-political options have no relevance, being introduced in the public speech only to divide the society and imitate an alleged political fight between the PSRM and the PDM. This fight has been really mimed for three years, as socialists and democrats have supported and helped each other in all aspects that really matter.

When analysing these processes, it is important to always remember a piece of truth that became axiomatic – “everything is a game and nothing is what it seems to be” in politics in the Republic of Moldova. Indeed, the PSRM and the PDM, or better-said – Igor Dodon and Vlad Plahotniuc, have successfully “cohabitated” on the political stage in the Republic of Moldova. Furthermore, Plahotniuc is the de-facto creator of Dodon’s party. It was also Plahotniuc who ensured the President’s office for Dodon. As an exchange, Dodon ensured peace within the left wing, and abolished any chance for left forces to get united with the right ones in the fight to unseat the Moldovan oligarch’s regime. Besides, Dodon lobbied for certain economic interests in Russia for Plahotniuc, legitimized the highly-disputed modification of the electoral system, and even legalized the controversial laws on fiscal amnesty and money-based citizenship. At the same time, the conflict and the aggression during the current electoral campaign does not seem to be really spurious. Vlad Plahotniuc’s TV stations challenge Dodon and the socialists in a tough manner. The response from Dodon’s media is on the same wave, although focusing mainly on Ilan Sor, another subordinate of Plahotniuc.

Only time will show if this is the outcome of parties’ innate unease because of the unpredictable nature of the mixed electoral system or is a real conflict. It is clear that Moscow demands good results in elections from Dodon. Meanwhile Plahotniuc does not

¹ https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3763938?from=doc_vrez

want the socialists to take the majority of seats in the Parliament, but he still needs a big socialist faction in the legislative body to maintain the balance and to continue the game of blackmailing European and American partners. The geo-political stakes do not seem to be as ephemeral as presented by ACUM Block either. Russia asserts gains in the Transnistrian issue. It gets actively involved in the electoral campaign (as presented below). And one stake is crystal clear – Russia wants to avoid, at all costs, the Republic of Moldova’s return on the path of European integration and reforms.

The given analysis is not exhaustive. The space does not allow us to describe all facts or elaborate too much over the effects. We do not pretend to provide categorical conclusions. We rather note some facts and state some rationales. A more detailed report on evidence of foreign meddling in the electoral process from 2019, as well as in the past ones, will be made public after the elections from February 24. This is a preliminary report.

Meddling in elections – a habit

On the 2nd of June 2017, the 21st International Economic Forum was held in Sankt Petersburg, Russia. The plenary session included a panel attended by Vladimir Putin, Austrian Chancellor Kern, Indian Prime Minister Modi and the newly elected President of the Republic of Moldova – Igor Dodon. Megyn Kelly, a presenter from NBC at that time (FoxNews in the past), has moderated that panel and had the chance to ask a number of questions related to political issues. After trying without too much success to give the Russian President a hard time with uncomfortable questions on investigation of meddling in the USA elections, Kelly addressed the Indian Prime Minister².

- “Prime Minister Modi, President Putin said at some point that Russia does not get involved in state sponsoring of elections in other countries. Do you believe this?”

The entire audience, actually full of Russian President’s fans, started laughing. The American presenter also smiled. While the Indian Prime Minister was preparing to give an answer, Putin, being obviously amused, made the first move and turned on the microphone.

– “Ask Dodon. He knows”.

Putin looked very pleased with the joke, the audience was applauding and laughing. The Moldovan President displayed a confused smile.

The leader from Moscow knows what he is saying, especially when talking about Moldova. Through its state structures or via groups of interest directly or indirectly affiliated to the Kremlin, the Russian Federation meddled to different extent in all the parliamentary elections organized in the Republic of Moldova, since the former KGB colonel occupied the presidential office in Kremlin. It has happened even during local elections; be it the ones in Chisinau (2007, when supporting the communists’ candidate),

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3OYwtFID9Q> (Min: 2:04:10)

but, especially, in Gagauzia – Russia’s support was decisive during the last elections of the Bashkan.

The same situation occurred during the presidential elections won by Igor Dodon shortly before the given event. Vladimir Putin had a reason to amuse himself. In a period of just two years, with Vlad Plahotniuc’s direct support, he succeeded to turn the political looser Igor Dodon, who could not pass over the rating threshold of only 1.5% before the fall of 2014, into the President of the country and a political leader enjoying the highest level of trust in the Republic of Moldova. The highest, after Vladimir Putin³.

To influence the elections, over the years Russian Federation has used the whole toolkit that a number of countries are currently familiar with – media, shadow financing or even financing from criminal proceeds, the Russian Orthodox Church, social media, sponsored posts, manipulating content produced specially for the local public, organized criminal groups affiliated to the underworld gangs from Russia, political consultants, collection of sociological data or other knowledge necessary for influencing election results, open political support for certain candidates (transfer of positive image), targeted mobilization of Moldovan Diaspora in Russia, involvement of unconstitutional authorities from Tiraspol. The intensity, as well as the efficiency of the influence has varied. By the way – it was efficiency that limped almost always. The consultants delegated from Moscow mainly delivered poor solutions and superficial attitudes. Only by being overlapped with the local context, the Russian support proved to be decisive in 2014 and 2016. The methods were improved and refined. Russia came rather prepared for the 2019 elections. Based on what it currently does, it is clear that it has learned from its own mistakes.

An important thing to be understood is that there is no centralized/uniform policy towards the Republic of Moldova, just like in the case of other countries and major international cases. Different influence groups from Russia are involved. They also have common and contradictory interests, as different local stakeholders from the Republic of Moldova advocate, and fight among themselves for managing the “case”. The control over the subject is bringing reputation and of course money. For instance, Igor Dodon’s “guardians” from Kremlin during 2014 and 2016⁴, have turned against him, shortly after he ended up in the office of the President of the Republic of Moldova⁵. It seems that this conflict has failed to exhaust itself.

This internal struggle was well noticed in 2014, when persons from the Russian presidential administration took a chance on Dodon. Another political project attributed to certain groups of influence from Moscow was the one led by Renato Usatii. The same happened in 2010 and 2005. In 2016 it lasted only as long as the first round of the presidential elections. While in the second round, all the resources were aligned to support Igor Dodon. It worked. Especially, taking into account that there was no opposition from inside the Republic of Moldova. The resources’ holder – Vlad Plahotniuc, has also used all

³ The evolution of confidence and intention ratings may be viewed on the platform <http://bop.ipp.md/>

⁴ <https://omg.md/index.php?newsid=5478>

⁵ <https://newdaynews.ru/moskow/604069.html>

resources to avoid Maia Sandu's victory⁶. Moscow and Vlad Plahotniuc worked in the same direction. And it does not matter, wherever it was with formal or mutual agreement⁷.

Yes – Vladimir Putin is right, President Dodon would have things to tell.

Possibly, the Moldovan President could tell that Russian Federation's meddling in Moldovan elections works decisively only if the Moldovan state structures facilitate and amplify its effect. When in 2005 Moscow undertook a major effort to punish communist Voronin, it baffled. Putin's annoyance with the episode of the Kozak Memorandum not being signed was huge. Small parties, openly declared to be pro-Russian, such as Ravnopravie or Patria-Rodina, received massive media support, and most probably not only media support. It was also during the same elections when Moscow supported the leaders of the Democratic Moldova Block through different structures and actions, despite the pro-European façade displayed at that time by Serafim Urechean and his colleagues. But the Moldovan state structures did their job, probably to the great surprise of the Russian side. Arrests, expulsions, probably the arrest of ex-minister Pasat were part of the same case. Moldovan security has somehow thrown off the Russian structures' interference. The communists won the elections; the small pro-Russian parties remained under the electoral threshold; and the block led by Urechean broke up immediately after elections. The superficiality of responsible people from Moscow mattered as well. They were not able to at least unite on one single list the parties declaring themselves to be pro-Russian, which would have had the chance to overcome the minimum threshold set for a parliamentary faction. And the communists succeeded to maintain the absolute majority of the Russophile electorate and those feeling nostalgic for the Soviet times, although the Russian state press declared them to be traitors of the reconciliation process with Moscow, and Voronin announced the strategic direction of European integration.

It is something totally different when the leadership of the Moldovan State is on your side. In 2014, the pro-Russian party led by Igor Dodon got the first place in elections. The Russian state press was jubilating⁸. It all became possible due to the massive support provided by the Russian Federation, and not only. The determining factor was the exclusion of the party led by Renato Usatii from elections. The introduction in the electoral run of a clone of the Communists' Party has also contributed to this. All these were arranged, to a great extent, by Vlad Plahotniuc. No wonder – the Party of Socialists led by Igor Dodon was effectively created by the leader of Moldovan democrats by cutting a group out of the party led by Vladimir Voronin. It seems that the scenario of eliminating Renato Usatii was promoted in Moscow by Igor Dodon himself⁹. The fact is that Kremlin-affiliated analytical group responsible for consulting the socialists during the elections from 2014 was suggesting to remove some pro-Russian parties from the electoral run so as to avoid a poor score for the PSRM¹⁰. But it was only after the elections that the Russian side

⁶ <http://www.e-democracy.md/files/elections/presidential2016/final-report-api-cji-elections-2016-ro.pdf>

⁷ A detailed report on evidence and evaluated impact of Russian Federation's meddling in the elections in the Republic of Moldova since 2001 until 2019 will be published after the parliamentary elections of 24 February.

⁸ <https://www.1tv.ru/news/issue/2014-12-01/21:00#8>

⁹ A number of active participants (from Usatii's camp and the democrats). Even Usatii leaves it to be understood as it is (<http://www.jurnaltv.md/news/b3a91e263771ba1d/ora-expertizei-11-februarie.html>).

¹⁰ <https://riss.ru/analitics/6792/>

realized that by excluding Usatii, they have missed the opportunity to create a majority, which would have been more favorable to the Eastern vector¹¹. *Slovenliness* – it seems that the legendary superficiality of the Russian nomenclature played an awful trick on them. And the actions undertaken by Vlad Plahotniuc have really led to establishing a parliamentary majority created from parties declaring themselves to be pro-European. Actually, taking into account what followed, it is rather difficult to qualify these actions as positive.

It was much easier in 2016. The pro-Russian Igor Dodon won the elections only because Vlad Plahotniuc gave him this opportunity. When the Constitutional Court was dictating on March 4, 2016 the cancellation of the constitutional reform from 2000, Igor Dodon's competitors from the left wing got already eliminated. Cancelling the modification contrary to the legal provision set in art. 78 of the Constitution, the Court cancelled the modification of all points, except for the one setting the minimum age for the candidates running for the highest position in the State. This point remained unchanged without any legal reason. As of March 2016, Renato Usatii was the most popular Moldovan politician, but under the new conditions, he was too young to run for elections for the president's office. This missed opportunity cost him almost all his popularity. In just several months, the absolute majority of his supporters has migrated to Igor Dodon, only because he was able to run for those elections and was waving the flag of joining the Customs Union.

When Vlad Plahotniuc's efforts on one side, and Moscow's efforts on the other side, did not succeed to make Igor Dodon president in the first round of elections, both sides got flustered. The massive protest vote and the less expected unification of the right-wing forces took the elections to the second round. The angry Renato Usatii has also contributed to this by insisting having a left-wing candidate and not supporting Dodon. The electoral campaign for the second round has discharged the dirtiest electoral manipulations. The Russian Federation has infected the social media with fakes¹², the Church affiliated to the Moscow Patriarchy got involved as never before, voters from the Transnistrian region got mobilized, and no money was spared. Vlad Plahotniuc did not lag behind and undertook all efforts to diminish the result of the pro-European opposition candidate. Igor Dodon won the elections with big emotions. But the most important contribution of the head of the rule in Chisinau was to allow all the support coming from Moscow. And the money meant to finance the electoral campaigns and coming from Russia (which is strictly prohibited by Moldovan legislation) was let to flow loose¹³.

Hence, with or without formal agreement, Vladimir Putin and Vladimir Plahotniuc made Igor Dodon the President of the Republic of Moldova. And who the person-candidate was did not matter to any of them. Only the counter-candidate mattered. For Vladimir Plahotniuc – Maia Sandu in the office of the president would have been a nightmare. The bogey with the "Russian tanks", which is always used to blackmail the Western partners, would have disappeared at once. And Moscow could not allow it either.

¹¹ Considering the unusually big number of cancelled votes and the Communists' votes going to the clone Communist Reformating Party, the left-wing parties have actually accumulated the majority in the elections from 2014.

¹² <https://ok.ru/video/183507289537>

¹³ <https://www.rise.md/articol/banii-lui-dodon-din-bahamas/>

It would have meant that the next stage would be the coming of a pro-reforms and anti-corruption administration, meaning a potential positioning of the Republic of Moldova on an almost irreversible path of EU integration.

Russian meddling in 2019.

The page «Правда о Молдове» (*Truth about Moldova*) appears in Facebook on the 9th of February 2019 (Image 1)



Image 1. Screenshot of the page *Правда о Молдове* (*Truth about Moldova*) dated February 14, 2019.

The page had no public posts, just the profile photo and cover photo. At the same time, the page had a number of posts, but all of them were hidden on the home page, and namely three short videos. Although hidden on the home page by the administrators, because they got promoted through paid advertising, targeting the public from the Republic of Moldova, these videos had a high viewership. The three videos had a deeply manipulating content targeting the local public. The first one presents the leader of the Democratic Party – Vlad Plahotniuc as a politician directly led by the US Government, listing the biggest failures and wrongdoings that the administration from Chisinau is accused of. It is just that all of them are not attributed to the corrupt nature of the respective administration, but to some “orders coming from the guardians from over the ocean”¹⁴. The second video targets the Romanian-speaking audience in the Republic of Moldova. It refers to the deficient policies and endemic corruption of Moldovan administration and calls upon citizens not to vote for the representatives of the power. It does not cover geo-political messages at all; instead it provides a compilation of video sequences associating the ruling power with all social issues and poverty in the country¹⁵.

The third video is tackling the Russian-speaking audience (about 20% of the population) and the Russophile electorate from the Republic of Moldova. The video covers the Democratic Party’s conscious policy that is against the interests of Russian-speaking citizens of the Republic of Moldova and against the country’s relations with Russia. All

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUInc5vBdZg&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9kv5znJM_U&feature=youtu.be

these decisions are ascribed to the “orders of the American guardians”¹⁶. Based on the content, style, high quality of used narrative and arranged manipulations, the videos were produced in the Russian Federation or, at least, with the involvement of some Russian expertise.

This activity was reported on February 14 to the Facebook team responsible for integrity of electoral processes. The page was removed by the social media administrators on February 15 (Image 2).



Image 2. Page *Иравада о Молдове (Truth about Moldova)* was removed from Facebook.

When reported to Facebook, those three videos have already been shared over 30 thousand times and have been viewed over 850 thousand times. Before the page was removed, one single video exceeded 20 thousand shares and 500 thousand views. These are totally unusual figures for the Moldovan segment of Facebook network, especially in such a short period of time¹⁷. The figures denote a very efficient advertising campaign set in the page background, as well as the attractive nature of the manipulative videos. The separate targeting of different audience segments denotes the existence of some sociological data backstopping the campaign, possibly even databases with audience types (based on users’ behavior on other online platforms).

The content and the strategic purposes perceived by those who were backstopping the campaign are of more interest. The story line is not new. Since Vlad Plahotniuc took over the monopoly over the administration in 2016, the Russian press has spoken with one voice about him. He could be defined as follows – “Vlad Plahotniuc is the biggest evil and he destroys the Republic of Moldova, but he does not do it by himself, he just executes the orders coming from Washington and Brussels”. The story line resonates heavily with the opinions of the absolute majority of the population in Moldova.

Under the conditions of a huge negative rating among Moldovans, when 8 out of 10 Moldovans think that Vlad Plahotniuc is the head of corruption and thieves in the country, the Russian narrative is of maximum success. Nothing exceptional, according to the existing models – the first part of the manipulation should be a piece of truth. “Plahotniuc – the executioner of Moldova” is an axiomatic truth for the big majority of Moldovans. In this context, the second part of the manipulation fits easier. Especially when American partners, unlike the European ones, did not manage to build an efficient

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhmvB4wxwZ0&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁷ In attached PDF documents, please see the figures and the images from the given page <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10Td6kikh3TJgY9Ox11ErKVdU-rav4Cmm>

public communication in the Republic of Moldova – a communication which would clearly separate them from the wrongdoings and bad decisions of the ruling power in Chisinau.

The attack against Romania is not missing either, and here the case becomes even more convincing, as the government, the ruling party, and other institutions of the Romanian State did not hesitate to provide unconditional and open support to the toxic administration from Chisinau over these three years. To be convincing for the Moldovan audience – the authors of this disinformation campaign have introduced a lot of fakes about the alleged unpopular decisions taken in Chisinau under the Western pressure (increasing the retirement age, thefts from the banking system, blocking economic relations with Russia, corruption, etc.).

In the context of the current electoral campaign, it is not possible for these videos to worsen the image of the Democratic Party leader and his party too much. It is difficult to deteriorate something which does not really exist. The achieved purpose and impact are much more delicately thought through. By associating Plahotniuc's negative image with the Western governments, they denigrate the very pro-Western and pro-European idea, and this will have a strong influence over the chances of the opposition pro-European parties. The above-mentioned manipulation campaign was actually attempting to **direct the voters displeased with the current governance – led by Plahotniuc – toward the pro-Russian parties, especially the PSRM.**

The story line “Plahotniuc – the puppet of the West” is widely spread in the Russian press. Alongside Washington, Brussels and Bucharest, now London has been introduced as the “puppeteer” of the unpopular regime in Chisinau (Image 3). The Kremlin acknowledges Plahotniuc's toxicity in relation to corruption cases and trans-border financial schemes. When developing a story meant to legitimate the opening of a new case for William Browder, the financier who is a huge headache for Putin's regime, the Moldovan oligarch got a “prominent place” in this fake¹⁸. If it is consumed by the internal public in Russia, why not to use the same dirty tricks for voters from Moldova?

Приобретший недавно у «кавказского пехотинца Путина» дом в графстве Суррей за £45 млн, Виктор Лукашенко, частенько заходит на вечерние чаепития к Владимиру Плахотнюку и его бизнес партнерам из Ми-6.

Говорят, что он также имеет ряд контактов с представителями от Демократической партии США, которые координируют свои действия с коллегами из Демократической партии Молдовы, главой которой является Плахотнюк и чей офис, расположен на территории посольства Молдовы в Лондоне.

Все осенние визиты в Вашингтон Юлии Тимошенко, где она была принята на высшем уровне и имела ряд контактов от Помпео и Пенса до сенаторов и конгрессменов, были оплачены за счёт Плахотнюка и бюджета демократической партии Республики Молдовы.

Радикальная риторика Лукашенко, вызванная опасениями сохранности многовекторных схем среди трансграничных стран около границ РФ, во многом разрушила планы на встрече 25 декабря снизить цены на газ для Беларуси и стать буфером договорённостей о снижении градуса в газовой Войне между Москвой и Киевом.

Наметившийся союз Порошенко и Лукашенко, опекаемый британским лобби, потерпел крах из-за превалирования личных интересов над коллективными.



НЕЗЫГАРЬ

62K 1:57:07 PM

¹⁸ http://www.ng.ru/economics/2018-11-28/4_7450_track.html

Image 3. Vlad Plahotniuc's toxic notoriety is used to denigrate any Western structure. Being in the grey zone of the Russian internet (the one with delicate propaganda targeting the elevated audience, such as Telegram channels), the Moldovan oligarch is a notorious bogey associated with a lot of alleged "unfriendly actions" and "dirty fast and loose playing" of the USA and other Western actors. Plahotniuc is called here "SRI agent" and "CIA resident in the Eastern Europe" and the "business partner of MI6".

The above-mentioned campaign on Facebook is just a small episode of Russian meddling with the elections of February 24. It would be impossible to describe everything in the given analysis, because of the limited space. All methods are being engaged. As one can see on the surface, the election of February 24, 2019 in the Republic of Moldova is much more important for Kremlin than what happened in the past. All the available methods were engaged so as to help the Socialists' Party victory.

Below, we will list only some of them, so as to show the already big scale and impact of this interference with the results. Igor Dodon and his party receive direct support through association with the positive image of Russian political¹⁹ and religious²⁰ leaders. Special Russian Services are involved in organizing electoral PR actions for the socialist leader²¹ and in pressuring his competitors from the left wing of the Moldovan electorate²². The Russian Government decided to open the market for Moldovan agricultural products during the electoral campaign²³ and offered amnesty to Moldovans who have violated the visitor/stay regime in Russia, if they go home to vote²⁴. Putin declares 2019 to be the year of Moldova in Russia²⁵, and provides a lot of snow removal trucks as a gift²⁶. Russian media enhances the electoral positions of the socialists by producing anti-European propaganda content massively spread in Moldova²⁷, including sponsored campaigns on the social media (Image 4).

The press outlets from the Republic of Moldova are paid to cover anti-European manipulating "news"²⁸. And a real tsunami of anti-European and pro-PSRM manipulation has invaded the second most popular social media in the Republic of Moldova – Odnoklassniki (OK.RU). The website belonging to the MAIL.RU group and associated by

¹⁹ <https://sputnik.md/politics/20190130/24424971/Decizii-importante-pentru-Moldova-dupa-intalnirea-lui-Dodon-cu-Putin.html>

<https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-international-22967245-calendare-imaginea-lui-igor-dodon-vladimir-putin-distribuite-transnistria-plina-campanie-electorala-avertisment-comisiei-electorale-pentru-dodon.htm>

²⁰ <https://sputnik.md/religion/20190201/24448877/fagaduinta-facuta-de-igor-dodon-patriarhul-Kiril.html>

²¹ <http://tv8.md/2019/02/11/video-igor-dodon-spune-ca-pilotii-moldoveni-luati-ca-ostatici-in-afghanistan-au-fost-eliberati-acum-doua-zile-acestia-s-ar-afla-la-moscova/>

²² <https://www.trm.md/ro/alegeri-parlamentare-2019/schimb-de-replici-intre-presedintele-igor-dodon-si-ilan-sor>
<http://www.jurnaltv.md/news/b3a91e263771ba1d/ora-expertizei-11-februarie.html>

²³ <http://protv.md/stiri/actualitate/igor-dodon-s-a-intalnit-cu-putin-la-moscova-l-am-informat-pe-presedintele---2467421.html>

²⁴ <http://protv.md/stiri/actualitate/amnistia-pentru-migrantii-din-moldova-aflati-in-rusia-care-au---2446411.html>

²⁵ <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/rezultatul-intalnirii-lui-dodon-cu-putin-2019-anul-r-oldova-in-f-rusa-2020-anul-f-ruse-in-r-moldova>

²⁶ <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/14cb75977fa198a1/video-kamaz-urile-lui-vladimir-putin-se-indreapta-spre-moldova-autospecialele-au-trecut-inspectia-tehnica-si-au-fost-pregatite-pentru-drum.html>

²⁷ <https://ro.sputnik.md/moldova/20190105/23980776/integrity-initiative-hackers-docs.html>

²⁸ <http://flux.md/stiri/politica/chatham-house-recomanda-sa-submineze-din-interior-ortodoxia-din-moldova>
<https://www.kp.md/daily/26927.3/3976687/>

<https://point.md/ru/novosti/politika/v-set-vylozhili-plany-integrity-initiative-po-borbe-s-rossiei-v-moldove>

Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov, does not notify its users about the fact that certain content is sponsored. For the sake of a simple experiment – I will access right now the platform without logging in. It is already on the very first page, in the right corner where a number of videos are displayed under the “Popular videos” column (See the attached document - OK.RU-1 page)²⁹.

Three out of the seven videos suggested on the very first page refer directly or indirectly to Moldovan politics and elections. The first video provides information about the new electoral system, uploaded by Votum.MD platform belonging to Simpals Company (which also holds Point.MD portal, which frequently publishes anti-European manipulating materials). The second video, which does not display the author (usual practice for OK.RU), provides scenes in which the son of the General Prosecutor of the Russian Federation – Igor Cheaika welcomes the Moldovan pilots released from the Taliban terrorist movement detention³⁰. The video has over 230 thousand views when accessing it, although it has been shared only 8 times!

The next video with electoral content is entitled “Страна, в которой мы можем проснуться” (The country in which we could wake up), and it is uploaded by “Moldova Yesterday” Project – a kind of creative department of the PSRM. The video concept has been copied from the spot developed for the presidential elections in Russia³¹ and threatens the voters with the closing of all schools if the administration does not change or if the pro-European opposition gets the power³². It is a typical story line for the PSRM. The video got over 470 thousand views.



Фонд стратегической культуры
Sponsorizat

Возможности англосаксов бороться с Россией руками граждан Молдавии «ограничены», однако надежды Лондон не теряет: советует донорам упираться на информационные кампании, внедрять образовательные программы и продолжать поддерживать «гражданское общество».

fondsk.ru
Chatham House
рекомендует поддывать ... Află mai multe

Сcrie un comentariu... GIF

Image 4. Sample of a sponsored manipulation campaign regarding the survey carried out by Chatham House³³.

One of the videos from the campaign carried out on Facebook, mentioned above, is also found on Odnoklassniki. It can be found in the group “Выборы в парламент Республики Молдова 2019” (*Elections for the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova 2019*), created only on February 7, 2019. As of the day the present analysis was compiled,

²⁹ <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10Td6kikh3TJgY9Ox11ErKVdU-rav4Cmm>

³⁰ <https://ok.ru/video/1060407543256>

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1sep5sudwE>

³² <https://ok.ru/video/1143410395854>

³³ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/civil-society-under-russias-threat-building-resilience-ukraine-belarus-and-moldova>

the group had only 110 members, meaning too few for OK.RU³⁴. All posts consist of 4 videos only, and all of them are related to elections. The first one got over 380 thousand views (with under 300 shares) in just one day. It tries to ridicule and associate the pro-European opposition leaders and the heads of the PDM with each other³⁵. The second one is about PDM's "Russo-phobia" and it already has over 600 thousand views in less than 3 days (with only 700 shares)³⁶. And this is just a small part of what has been uploaded and intensely promoted on the Russian social media over the last period of time. The local product of the PSRM creative group, with calls to vote for Dodon's party or not to vote for Sor and Plahotniuc is fully used. The same goes for the more thought through products, which were created by experts in Russian propaganda. Their target is to denigrate EU and USA, as well Romania and they play with primary feelings – fear, hate, exploiting the effects of local mentality.

All these videos are promoted for money so as to be viewed by as many as possible Moldovan voters. It is actually impossible to obtain such a volume of views based on such a small number of shares. The algorithm was clearly "handled" or it is a simple advertising campaign. This is no novelty for the elections in the Republic of Moldova. During the electoral campaign for the presidential elections in 2016, Odnoklassniki served as a strong tool for Russian Federation's meddling in the electoral campaign. The administration of the Russian site, which was the most popular social media site among Moldovans at that time, has prohibited the pro-European opposition candidates to post advertising on the respective site. Advertising was allowed only for Igor Dodon and Marian Lupu (PDM candidate who has been afterwards removed from the run by his boss). A similar situation is happening now. Political advertising on Odnoklassniki is allowed only for the Socialists' Party and Sor's party (Orhei mayor still maintains influential links in Moscow, Dmitrii Peskov being his main ally, and a family friend). It seems that those from Vlad Plahotniuc's Democratic Party also are posting advertising. Still, it is only the socialists and their videos that benefit from these "wonders" of the promotion algorithms of Mail.RU Company. While Ilan Sor and Vlad Plahotniuc, alongside the right-wing oppositions, USA and EU, are the main target of the denigration distributed on this site.

Even the NGOs working on election information campaigns are being refused to place their advertising by Odnoklassniki. On the eve of the first round of presidential elections in 2016, a "movie" was uploaded on Odnoklassniki, again without an author³⁷. It is a complex fake that was produced based on the narrative and style that exists in the Russian Federation. The video states that Maia Sandu is a representative "of the Grand Masonic Lodge", who was delegated to the Republic of Moldova to get a high-rank office and "destroy the Orthodox Church, the family institution, education and social system", and afterwards to leave the Republic of Moldova to be "swollen" by Romania. This video was hugely promoted exactly according to the above-described method. I have noticed it for the first time in 2 days after the first round of presidential elections, and it already had over 600 thousand views. Now, being uploaded and distributed by a number of pages, it

³⁴ <http://ipp.md/en/2018-02/propaganda-ruseasca-pe-odnoklassniki-cazul-republicii-moldova/>

³⁵ <https://ok.ru/video/902960712253>

³⁶ <https://ok.ru/video/901637540413>

³⁷ <https://ok.ru/video/183507289537>

cumulated up to 3 million views. We can easily assume that the first million was already reached just before the second round of those elections.

To better understand this impact, it is worth recalling that the total number of voters in the Republic of Moldova does not exceed 3 million, of which maximum 1.9 million voters are still in the country. About 1.5-1.6 million come to vote. Just for comparison reason, the most popular manipulating video posted by Russia Today (RT) during the presidential elections in the USA reached 9 million views in a country with over 400 million voters.

All the facts described above do not represent the full evidence of Russian meddling in the electoral campaign in the Republic of Moldova in 2019. President Igor Dodon, intensively used in the PSRM campaign, is being portrayed accompanied by Vladimir Putin, even though the law prohibits using foreign leaders' images. This is not applied in Igor Dodon's case, as nominally he is not running in this election. The country has been swarmed with newspapers featuring Dodon and Putin, hence the transfer of positive image of the Russian president³⁸ towards the PSRM is in full swing. There is much more to be mentioned, but we will provide thorough details in a report to be issued after the elections.

What is Russia seeking by interfering in these elections?

On 7 February 2019, Maria Zakharova was holding her traditional briefing as the mouthpiece of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs³⁹. Among others, Zakharova declared that Russia was not getting involved in the Moldovan elections. And that those who alleged it did not bring any evidence and 'are acting in line with the blueprints of Washington D.C. and western countries.' Ironically or not, but the Odnoklassniki group, referenced above, was created on 7 February as well.

On 12 February already, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow releases an official press statement to accuse USA in general and the American ambassador to Chişinău, in particular, of interference in the course of the parliamentary elections.⁴⁰ Without presenting any facts or evidence, the Russian diplomacy alleges the preparation of a 'maidan' in Chişinău if Washington D.C. disliked the results. Its final passages deserve special attention. "We do not want Moldova to become a field for such irresponsible experiments as the ones that destroyed Iraq and Libya and that plunged Syria and Ukraine into the deep of some bloody conflicts." What is Russia trying to say? That it is ready to repeat the Ukraine-like destabilization scenario in Moldova, too? It is difficult to understand at this point.

On 14 February, Nikolai Patrushev, head of the Russian Security Council, considered the most influential person in the Russian system of security structures, gives an interview to the officious *Komsomolskaya Pravda*⁴¹. Among others, the Russian official spoke about the Republic of Moldova. The newsroom gave a very suggestive title

³⁸ https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Studiu-WATCHDOG_propaganda-rusa-la-TV-2018.pdf

³⁹ http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/id/3503377#17

⁴⁰ http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdgBY/content/id/3513260

⁴¹ <https://www.kp.md/daily/26942/3993323/>

to the part referring to Moldova – “About a Maidan in Chişinău.” Funny is that one of the heads of the Russian security speaks in propaganda clichés, stating certain things without proof or for these to exist and be largely known in the public space:

“Washington D.C. and Brussels are not hiding that they will make efforts to obtain the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the Moldovan government and parliament. And this is possible if the supporters of this course win and form a pro-western coalition.” None of the power centers mentioned has expressed their support for a certain post-election scenario; similarly, many EU member states have repeatedly stressed the importance of free and fair elections. They have not expressed any preferences whatsoever. Then Patruşev alleges that, according to the polls, ‘the PSRM of President Igor Dodon’ is leading, as he opts for better relations with Russia as well as for maintaining a good relationship with EU and ‘against the Romanization of independent Moldova’.

Afterwards, Patrushev alleges that such a scenario does not satisfy the west (i.e. PSRM’s victory and a balanced foreign policy with inclination to Russia). He claims that this is the reason why pro-western political forces allegedly attempt to discredit the Moldovan president and exclude his party from the elections. Then the head of the Russian Security Council says that ‘the Moldovan society is pushed toward ‘splitting and conflict’ following the pro-western principle against those who do not support this course’. Patrushev claims it is a situation similar to Ukraine before the ‘2014 coup d’état’. “If the socialists win, it is excluded that the west will mobilize the right wing to create a Moldovan ‘maidan’ and will push them towards an impeachment of the president’. At the end of the passage, Nikolai Patrushev says he ‘nonetheless’ wishes that the elections take place ‘in a fair and balanced manner’.

On 30 January 2019, President Dodon paid a visit to Moscow. He also met with the Russian President.⁴² During that meeting, the Russian President among others allegedly said that ‘he was not indifferent’ to the parliamentary elections in Moldova:

“Of course, we, those in Russia, are not indifferent how the Moldovan parliament will be formed, I mean that the parliament forms the government and it depends on the latter how the Russian-Moldovan relations will develop to a large extent and if the initiatives with which the Moldovan President comes for developing the Russian-Moldovan relations will gain support.”⁴³

All these described above, put together, are capable of describing the situation well enough. It is no longer the case for us to insist on claims of whether Russia interferes in the Moldovan election campaign. What matters more is to try to understand its purpose. What is the goal aimed at by Kremlin in this effort? Is it doing it out of habit and in order to engage its *hybrid war* capabilities? Does it want the establishment of an administration in Chişinău that would be remotely guided by Moscow? In such case, is it a long-term

⁴² <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59752>

⁴³ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59752> - the syntax of the sentence and the use of uppercase or lowercase for such terms as the *parliament*, *government*, and *president* is kept as in the original Russian text published by Kremlin’s press service

vision that aims to anchor Moldova in the Russian zone of influence, or is it only a short-term one – ‘let our people come and then we will see’?

What is Moscow afraid of in this election, where does it feel its interests threatened? What is behind these statements of high Russian officials? Is it a simple trolling of the Russian diplomacy and security, or is it a threat of repeating the Ukraine’s destabilizing scenario in Moldova? In such a case, what are the conditions under which Kremlin would venture to unleash it? And not the least, what is the real attitude of Moscow and of various interest groups there toward the current rule and toward Vlad Plahotniuc personally? We will try to define some answers to these questions below and to establish what Moscow’s goals are based on the potential short- and medium-term post-election scenarios.

According to a credible opinion poll data⁴⁴ and the traditional behavior of the Moldovan electorate, a relative uncertainty will build up after the elections. Most likely, none of the candidates will obtain a majority. Based on the election of half of the members of the parliament in single mandate constituencies with one voting round, the PSRM of Igor Dodon maintains hypothetical chances of having a little more than 50% of the MPs. Anyway, the result of the elections will not necessarily reflect the real ratio of forces in the Parliament. The resources and pressuring tools held by the PDM leader may enable him to strongly change the balance of forces after the elections already, by recruiting a significant number of MPs elected on behalf of other parties, and from PSRM first of all. What matters in this analysis is to try and presume the form of the next administration in Moldova and how this format may affect Russia’s strategic interests.

1. *Majority led by President Dodon scenario.* This would be possible if PSRM forms a majority by recruiting Șor Party and/or PDM as a smaller partner in the administration. This scenario is unlikely because it would imply being accepted by Vlad Plahotniuc. Such a governance would imply a strong reorientation of the foreign policy towards the East. The balances system in such a majority would be strongly distorted by Vlad Plahotniuc’s control over the judiciary and force bodies. This would be an acceptable scenario for Moscow if considerable concessions are made in the Transnistrian case and ways are opened for the participation of Russian capital in the privatization of strategic infrastructure – power networks, telecommunications, and allowing it again on the banking market. Freezing of energy interconnection projects would certainly be first on the list. Though, they are already successfully sabotaged by the Government controlled by Plahotniuc.

This is not a negative scenario for Moscow; it even comes close to the one publicly stated by Patrushev and Putin. It is not, however, the most attractive one, since such a governance would not enjoy stability. Any form of alliance between the socialists and Plahotniuc or the parties controlled thereby would lead to a collapse of the electoral support for PSRM, while the administration would rapidly lose legitimacy, opening the way to a big comeback of right-wing parties. Those in Moscow understand the best that Plahotniuc’s toxicity would discredit even the pro-Customs Union propaganda idea. So, it is unlikely to be one of Moscow’s preferred options.

⁴⁴ <http://ipp.md/2019-02/bop-2019-trei-concurenti-electorali-ar-accede-in-parlament-daca-duminica-ar-avea-loc-alegeri/>

It depends on the priorities – whether they are for the short-term or whether the long-term ones prevail.

2. Another scenario would be a *majority made up of only PSRM MPs*. No matter how paradoxical it may sound but this does not seem to be such a favorable scenario for Moscow. Such an administration would demand Igor Dodon to take the whole responsibility for the situation in the country, including for the budget shortages. Short-term, Russia could achieve important gains with such a pro-Russia governances. In addition to the symbolic capital abundantly presented in the Russian media, the Russian oligarchs' capital might take over the control over some important branches of the Moldovan economy. The first in line are the energy sector and the banking system. And Igor Dodon may present such acquisitions as an achievement of his promise to bring in Russian investments. Another aspect is the Transnistrian issue, possibly even a rapid signing and enforcement of a new federalization of Moldova following the 2003 Kozak Memorandum. This would imply anchoring Moldova in the Russian zone of influence for a long time. But this is hypothetically speaking. In practice, the lack of external funding, which may come only from the West, would force Dodon to be careful in important decision-making. Moscow understands very well that the Moldovan president has no real ideological attachment to the Eastern vector. Such ideas as 'russkii mir' (the Russian world), 'Orthodox civilization', and other trickeries he opportunistically exploits in the rush for votes and capitalization of the Russian propaganda effects are not at all close to Igor Dodon.

Although he has strongly fallen in polls, due to the mixed system, PSRM has chances to win a majority. For instance, in the EU countries, where there are over 600 thousand voting Moldovans, and 100 thousand of them may come to the elections, only one MP is elected, whereas in the Transnistrian region, where maximum 15 thousand come, as many as two MPs are elected. The voting sections in Russia have been delineated in a separate constituency from the ones in Europe, which secures a reliable victory to the PSRM candidate. In the district of Taraclia, a constituency has been set up for a much smaller number of citizens than in other regions in the territory controlled by Moldova. That is, only due to how the election system is set up, PSRM is likely to receive at least 4 MPs as a 'gift'. This would strongly balance the losses caused by the decline in the rating.

The pro-Russia governance scenario is positive for Moscow but it is weak due to its lack of sustainability. The sudden turn of the foreign policy vector would generate Moldova's isolation. And this time it is not even about the EU or USA but rather about Romania and especially Ukraine. In such conditions, a PSRM administration would find it hard to survive. They will simply have no money for the budget. Moreover, there is a risk for Russia that such a governance would make Moldovan voters become very quickly disappointed with the Eurasia integration idea. President Dodon may discredit it a bit. Moreover, considering the emblematic opportunism of the Moldovan president, he may slowly turn his back to his former curators and repeat Vladimir Voronin's experience by finally aligning with the pro-Western option. Such a situation would, by all means, generate internal

tensions in the PSRM. Even now this party is not so unitary as it seems. At least two internal groups are fighting for the control of resources and even sabotage each other in important situations, as it happened during the Chişinău mayor elections in the summer of 2018.

3. A pro-European governance built around the ACUM block components. Due to the strong decline in the role played by the diaspora and the biased organization of the election system, the chances of the pro-European opposition forces to win the election numbers are very small. If the proportional system would have remained unchanged and the easy participation of the over one million voters settled abroad would have been facilitated, these parties would be the ones to most likely win the election. And this would happen even given their rather weak political offer and lack of electoral and political experience. Even in the conditions of a mixed system, but with two rounds and a fair delineation of constituencies, plus opening a sufficient number of voting sections abroad, the right-winged opposition would have high chances of victory. Even in the current conditions, the interdiction to vote abroad with expired documents will obstruct the right to vote for at least half a million of citizens. This will have a strong impact on the opposition's results. Such aspects are important to understand in order to know that the PDM governance has conscientiously annihilated the chances for the right-wing opposition to win.

As to Russia's interests, they in no case relate to such a scenario. Such an administration would mean, even in theory, that Moldova could resume its rapid pace of European integration. Such a Government, even if there is no way for it to excel in expertise and experience, will receive strong financial support and new openness from the USA and EU. But the most serious thing for Russia would be that the leaders of such a rule would have no reasons not to eliminate its instruments of influence on Moldova – the control of the natural gas system, propaganda, and mechanisms for corrupting political elites at central and local levels – and may even proceed to modernizing the system of security and defense institutions.

An especially unpleasant aspect for Kremlin and the numerous influence groups close to its political leadership or the Russian security structures could be clearing the artificial blockages of the investigation of various frauds. Along the years, Moldova has been used and involved in many cross-border crimes whose beneficiaries or participants have been various Russian entities. All this has been possible due to the cover by the Moldovan state institutions. Most often, these have been the ones under the direct control of Vlad Plahotniuc.

The Magnitsky case⁴⁵ in 2008, the Laundromat case in 2010-2015⁴⁶, the involvement of Russian banks in the scheme plundering BEM⁴⁷, the Russian gas thefts in Transnistria to reach the super-profits of Alisher Usmanov or RAO ES,

⁴⁵ <https://www.rise.md/english/magnitky-the-cellist-and-the-lawyer/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.rise.md/english/the-russian-laundromat/>

⁴⁷ <http://www.transparency.md/2016/10/17/radiografia-fraudelor-bancare-spalatoria-furtul-miliardelor-si-datoria-de-stat/>

as well as to fund the Transnistrian separatist regime,⁴⁸ the gas theft scheme in Transnistria via crypto-currency mining (whose beneficiary is the son of the Russian Prosecutor General Chaika⁴⁹) are only the most well-known ones. And their investigation by the Moldovan law-enforcement bodies is in 'stand by'. Even a simple cancelation of the political interdiction to take these investigations farther than the declarations of intention will give heavy headaches to Moscow. Heavy names in the Russian political and business circles will certainly be affected very quickly.

Another aspect is the Transnistrian case. An administration that would at least have the will to fight corruption for real, enjoying European and American technical and financial support, would have at least the theoretical chance of securing stable economic growth. Better living conditions could become a natural attraction for the population, but especially for the businesses, in the Transnistrian region. The same is true about Găgăuzia. Holding on to the EU market and even the simplest policy of making local economic elites loyal by facilitating Western investments and exports on the strong markets could, in a few years, break up their orientation to Russia. Such a scenario, perpetuated on medium term, would mean that Moscow may lose its instruments for destabilizing Moldova. And this already means a great geo-political defeat.

Moscow surely does not need this. Coming back to this scenario, it is deemed as very unlikely. There is only a very small chance that a consensus will be reached by which Vlad Plahotniuc will leave politics and, why not, the country, and that its MPs will grant political support to a majority formed by the ACUM block. Anyway, such a construction is hard to imagine and the conditions of ceding control over the law-enforcement is perceived as suicide by the Democratic leader. Mr. Plahotniuc does not believe that fair justice would be able to exist; he is sure that it would be used for revenge on him, as he himself has done many times.

For the Russian Federation, this is the single truly negative scenario. An unacceptable one, even. It implies too many risks of losing influence in Moldova as well as many headaches at international level.

4. *Maintaining the status quo scenario.* That is, an administration controlled monopolistically by Vlad Plahotniuc and the people close to him. In order to understand Moscow's attitude to a conservation of the current situation we must understand to what extent its interests are realistically affected now. On the Transnistrian dimension, the current administration does not affect in any way Russia's position of control. Moreover, it has made important concessions and not at all motivated that have strengthened the position of the separatist administration.⁵⁰ And the endemic corruption, the lack of rule of law, the rapid

⁴⁸ <http://www.viitorul.org/ro/content/impunitate-%C8%99i-%C3%AEn%C8%9Belegeri-rentiere-%C3%AEn-sectorul-energetic-al-%C8%9B%C4%83rii-0>

⁴⁹ <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/regiunea-transnistreana-bitcoin-lina-grau/29015333.html>

⁵⁰ <http://ipre.md/2018/10/04/de-ce-exista-iluzia-progresului-in-solutionarea-conflictului-transnistrean-si-care-sunt-capcanele-razboiului-proxi-rus-in-republica-moldova/>

decline of freedoms and the lack of a real improvement of living conditions in the territory controlled by Chişinău maintain the population of the separatist region on a 'pro-independent' position. It is also in Transnistria that the Russian oligarchs carry out various profit-making schemes. They do it by using the gas delivered by GazProm in an unhindered manner and in big quantities. This is gas for which they pay much lower than the market price. But even the little amounts paid reach the budget of the separatist authorities.⁵¹

The Moldovan authorities not only do not oppose such illegalities, but they even accept that all the differences are charged as debt of MoldovaGaz, whose leadership is appointed by the Moldovan Ministry of Economy (i.e. by Vlad Plahotniuc in the past 10 years). When Igor Chaika, son of Iurii Chaika, the Russian Prosecutor General) decided to use a more ingenious scheme of extracting gas from the GazProm concern, and namely, taking it over for generating electric power at MoldGRES, and use energy to mine crypto-currency, the Moldovan authorities not only did not immediately decide on criminal investigations, but rather persons in high-level positions in the customs service even facilitated the introduction of the necessary equipment into the separatist region.⁵² The delays in the investigation of all international crime cases, sensitive for Russia, were mentioned above.

At the same time, the unpopular administration led by the Moldovan oligarch brings Russia many indirect benefits. In addition to the toxic imagination of the Chişinău regime in its propaganda (as described above), Russia obtains strong positions in Moldova on medium- and long-term. The display of a pro-Western orientation by the current Chişinău governance cannot help make many citizens become disappointed with the European idea.

But the major impact that leads to a change in the balance of geo-political preferences among the Moldovan voters is emigration. Every year, Moldova loses at least 1% of its population. It is mainly the young voters with pro-Western preferences who are leaving.⁵³ An eventual conservation of the situation would certainly generate a new wave of emigration. A wave of 150-200 thousand emigrants in 4 years would mean that the relative balance of pro-EU and pro-Russia voters would strongly be inclined towards the second option in future elections.

Beyond the bravado displayed through all kind of op-eds published in the Western press,⁵⁴ the administration has not carried out any real actions whatsoever to diminish the Russian influence in Moldova. The Russian propaganda feels free in Chişinău. The Odnoklassniki social network, directly

⁵¹ <http://www.viitorul.org/ro/content/impunitate-%C8%99i-%C3%AEen%C8%9Belegeri-rentiere-%C3%AEen-sectorul-energetic-al-%C8%9B%C4%83rii-0>

⁵² <http://www.jurnaltv.md/news/070f2abce3a60900/cripto-afacerea-separatistilor-start.html>

⁵³ According to the POB of November 2018, around 70% of the ones prone to emigrate support the option of EU integration and only a little below 20% are those who prefer joining the Euro-Asiatic Union.

⁵⁴ <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/343526-an-east-west-flashpoint-that-needs-more-attention>

controlled by FSB⁵⁵, righteously forbidden in Ukraine,⁵⁶ continues to work feely in Moldova. The impact was described above. The shadow and corruption-based schemes through which the Moldovan agricultural products are exported to Russia are tolerated by the Moldovan law-enforcement bodies. This makes producers loyal to intermediaries with connections in Russia.⁵⁷ Such practice prevent modernizing the sector, fighting for quality markets and maintain the vulnerability of the agricultural sector (very sensitive socially) to Russia's policy.

The impact of the 'anti-propaganda law' is reduced and, outside news stories and programs, the anti-European propaganda, packaged in entertainment, is further disseminated on Moldovan TV stations. Even the TV station owned by the Democrat leader is the main distributor of such content. In addition to their direct effect, this rebroadcast practice kills the fair competition on the Moldovan media market. That is, there are no conditions in place to develop quality TV, based on competition for publicity funds. And the effect of reducing the amount of anti-western propaganda through news and TV programs has been neutralized by Russia through investments in online and local TV products. Even the main Russian propaganda vehicle, the Sputnik Moldova agency, works in Chişinău (but also in Romania) through the indirect facilitation of Vlad Plahotniuc. Sputnik Moldova was set up and is funded by Ilan Şor, through people close to him.

The most important thing, on top of this, is that Vlad Plahotniuc has deteriorated people's trust in state institutions. Even the security bodies. Combined with endemic corruption and total impunity, this phenomenon makes Moldova the most vulnerable state for hybrid destabilization scenarios (the scenario used in Ukraine). We will stop here.

An eventual maintenance of the status-quo does not at all seem a negative scenario for Russia. It is, maybe, the best for a long-term strategy. Keeping the current administration will definitely discredit the idea of European integration, will generate a powerful wave of emigration of the pro-European voters and will enable Russia impose a stable pro-Russia governance in the next election cycle. Despite the public appearances and conflicts that are not totally inexistent, the kleptocratic character of the current regime in Moldova undoubtedly favors the Kremlin.

So, what is the scenario that Moscow makes so much effort for? It is difficult to understand. It is, however, certain, that the biggest priority for Kremlin and the interest groups affiliated thereto is to avoid the coming of a truly pro-reform, pro-EU and anticorruption governance. This is the zeroed-in priority of this interference.

⁵⁵ <https://ru.hromadske.ua/posts/u-fsb-est-dostup-k-dannym-ukrayntsev-v-vkontakte-y-odnoklassnyky-snbo-ukrayny>

⁵⁶ <https://24tv.ua/ru/poroshenko-vvel-v-dejstvie-reshenie-snbo-o-zaprete-socsetej-vkontakte-i-odnoklassniki-n818006>

⁵⁷ <https://www.rise.md/export-din-livezi-fantoma-2/>

It is clear what Russia wants to avoid. Let us try to see what it wants to obtain and why. To be noted, first of all, that never, in no other elections, or for any other situations in Moldova, has there been so much attention from the Russian top leadership toward Moldova. Maybe only the period of the armed conflict on the Nistru River in 1992 would compare to this. Nor have there been involved so many Russian resources and institutions in any of all elections in Moldova. Unlike 2014-2016, we see that the media products are created in partnership with Moldovan experts. They are translated to Romanian and the subjects are adapted to the local realities and perceptions. The stakes seem even higher than it was in 2016. The coming on the stage of the head of the security system Patrushev and of the Russian president himself says much.

In order to understand what Vladimir Putin actually wants from the elections of 24 February in Moldova, it would be useful to take a look at the internal situation in Russia. Sociological agencies report a decline of people's trust in Vladimir Putin and in the ruling party "United Russia" to historically low rates.⁵⁸ This is happening on the background of an unpopular reform of the pension system and lack of credible actions to improve living standards. Analysts are noting an exhaustion of the effect of the 'Crimea is ours' extravaganza, which made many Russian citizens forget about the social and economic issues and the endemic corruption. However, such indicators are not critical, with over 60% stating that they are somewhat happy with the president's work.⁵⁹ And yet the trend is very poor as Putin has lost 20 percent points of trust in less than a year. Even if Kremlin's main political ideologist/technologist Vladislav Surkov is coming with a publication in which he states the 'immovability' of the system built by Putin during this period,⁶⁰ the situation is not rosy at all for the Moscow regime. In such conditions, efforts are being made to regain the good will of the Russian electorate.

Solutions are sought internally – by displaying energetic actions of fighting corruption and organized crime.⁶¹ But obtaining an important symbolic victory externally is much more tempting. The magical solution was tested and successfully applied in Georgia in 2008⁶² and in Ukraine in 2014.⁶³ What should be of concern is that military conflicts were unleashed in both cases. After facing economic sanctions for the military assault on Ukraine, interference in the US elections, poisoning of the Skripkal family in Great Britain, Russia's appetite for external aggressive actions might have fallen; therefore, the image of 'collector of the Russian lands' that put Vladimir Putin back in the top of political preferences is now built through non-military methods. At least the implementation of this scenario is being attempted through an absorption of Belarus.⁶⁴

Moscow's pressures on and persuasions of Alexandr Lukašenko seem to have begun yielding results. It will shortly be seen if the relative reconciliation of the Minsk regime with the West is frozen. In this regard, the Moldova situation can be viewed in a

⁵⁸ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29732521.html>

⁵⁹ <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29732521.html>

⁶⁰ http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html

⁶¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/rauf-arashukov-arrest-russia-murder-parliament-federation-council-police-a8753876.html>

⁶² <https://meduza.io/feature/2018/08/07/stydnye-voprosy-o-konflikte-v-yuzhnoy-osetii>

⁶³ https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/06/140626_putin_rating_crimea

⁶⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-belarus-unite-absorb-union-vladimir-putin-alexander-lukashenko-1333800>

totally different perspective. The need to redress the image of the Moscow leader and governance could push Russian elites to take all the risks and cover the necessary costs to turn Moldova into a kind of gubernia. And then victory should be ‘sold’ to their own electorate. And we could treat the combative statements about ‘maidan’ and ‘the Ukrainian scenario’ as a trenchant message for the West and the Chişinău regime that Moscow would not accept a failure in this case. Even less would it accept to be humiliated by having PSRM removed from the elections. Through Nikolai Patrushev’s words and the official press release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow has explicitly announced that it has the tools and the courage to destabilize Moldova. Especially as this would look well inside their own country.

The least of what Moscow needs is for the PSRM to rank first in the elections. Such a victory would be presented as Vladimir Putin’s personal victory on the external level and would fill the front pages of the governmental press for a while. However, we have no grounds to believe that Moscow would not proceed to an escalation of the situation to defend its strong positions obtained due to the weakness, incompetence and corruptibility of the Chişinău administration. Everything depends on the context and Vladimir Putin’s priorities in that moment.

Conclusions

Russia’s interference in the campaign for the parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova to take place on 24 February is massive. We are noticing the use of many tools that have become a classic in influencing the voting results. Apart from the Moldovan branch of the Russian Church and the organized criminal groups affiliated with Russia, many other types of resources are involved to a much larger extent than attested previously so far. The intense use of online manipulation draws special attention. Propaganda media products targeting the Moldovan public have been set up. Very powerful advertising campaigns have been found on Facebook and Odnoklassniki. Russian state institutions, including security ones, are making open efforts to support a certain candidate in the elections – PSRM and Igor Dodon.

As the level of trust in Vladimir Putin in Russia is declining, he is trying to obtain symbolic victories externally. The desire is thus to distract the Russian public’s attention from their internal problems. The election in Moldova is a part of this strategy. Kremlin needs at least a symbolic victory of the socialists in the elections. But he also aims for long-term strategic goals. He, first and foremost, wishes to avoid the establishment of a truly pro-European and pro-reform governance, capable – at least in theory – to anchor Moldova on the way to EU integration.

The impact of manipulation campaigns is very high. Propaganda videos are already collecting millions of views among Moldovan users. The main narrative is the slandering of USA and EU by associating them with the unpopular Chişinău regime and its leader Vlad Plahotniuc. Of all the possible post-election scenarios, the only one that is negative for Russia is the one under which ACUM block obtains absolute victory. Maintaining the current administration option seems to be the most positive scenario for Moscow for the long-term. But the internal context in Russia may push the Russian president to force a pro-Russia governance led by PSRM (alone or together with coalition partners). Even a destabilizing scenario following the Ukrainian model of 2014 need not be excluded. At least, the Russian officials are openly speaking about this and have the necessary tools for

it – the support of a great part of the population exposed to the Russian propaganda for many years, as well as the total lack of citizen trust in state institutions. These two aspects are making Moldova very vulnerable to such scenarios.

Given that, for the vast majority of the Moldovan citizens, their own Government and the ruling political elite are the main enemy, the exposure to outside risks grows significantly.

P.S.

Upon the completion of this analysis, the propaganda video on Odnoklassniki⁶⁵ that was written about above has exceeded 875 thousand views. It added over 275 thousand views in only 24 hours.

⁶⁵ <https://ok.ru/video/901637540413>