

The last nail in the coffin of Moldovan democracy?

The final decision of the Moldovan Supreme Court on 25 June to invalidate the Kishinev mayor election victory by a pro-Western candidate felt like the last nail in the coffin of Moldovan democracy.

The brazen behaviour by the Moldovan “justice system” and its open servitude to the oligarchic regime of Plahotniuc is so obvious that the ruling caused not only a wave of harsh condemnations from the EU and US, but also a massive popular demonstration against the regime on Sunday 24 June, the first of this size after a long period of desperation and apathy. The central part of the city was full of people – and, of course, large numbers of police, some of whom were even brought to the capital from other towns.

The elections results in Baltsey and Kishinev have shown that the Plahotniuc regime’s popularity is falling, in spite of millions of euros spent and the use of government resources. Plahotniuc’s image and he personally are so odious and toxic that they were even afraid to openly support their candidate for mayor, instead promoting her as “independent”.

Plahotniuc and his “democratic party” are in disarray and appear to be starting to show despair. They preside over a system that is so corrupt that they must fear that if they lose power, they may end up facing real justice.

An wide-ranging EU parliament resolution [[link here](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2018-0303+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN) <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+TA+P8-TA-2018-0303+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>] adopted on 5 July slammed the country’s rulers and urged the EU Commission to suspend financial support and condition it on the reinstatement of the mayoral election result. It also said other funding should be withheld until it is certain the upcoming parliamentary election has been held in line with EU standards.

The statement expresses concern over “the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a narrow group of people”, “systemic corruption” and “selective justice being used as a tool to exert pressure on political opponents”, among many more issues.

That is why they are going all in to hold on to power.

The first evidence of this strategy was the promotion and adoption of changes to the electoral law that introduced a new mixed voting system. It is worth noting that the “democrats” worked together on this with the socialists, who in fact didn’t need it, because their rating was very high and they would have won the parliament under the old electoral system.

This joint action is more vivid proof that the “democrats” are playing a double game with the socialists and the Kremlin. The socialists know they would have swept out the democrats forever under the old electoral system. But they went along with the changes, in spite of total disapproval from local NGOs, Brussels and the Venice Commission, among others.

The second piece of evidence was the appointment of Plahotniuc's closest friends and personally loyal placemen to key law-enforcement positions for the next five years, including the heads of the anti-corruption centre, state security services, national integrity agency and even the General Prosecutor who was appointed earlier at the same time as President Dodon, in spite of many question marks from NGOs about their integrity and professionalism. None of them would ever touch Plahotniuc or the top "democrats" in power.

Ironically, on 26 June an article was published that claims the speaker of the parliament, Andrian Candu, vice chairman of the Democratic Party, at whose wedding Plahotniuc was a "man of honour", used to do business with, and signed contracts on behalf of, Plahotniuc's companies when he was an MP and even when he was already speaker. The article presented signed documents and other evidence. However, this has been public knowledge for several years and nothing has been done by our law-enforcement agencies.

The third fact that shows Plahotniuc is desperate is the invalidation of the Kishinev election result. His regime was shocked by the victory of one of the two opposition leaders, Andrei Nastase. This victory was symbolic and important for the opposition as it showed that people were so fed up with Plahotniuc's rule, they were not swayed by the massive resources he threw at his candidates.

The Democrats still has much it wants to do in Kishinev and elsewhere, and the new opposition mayor would have threatened their grand plans. This is why the loyal courts tried so hard to find an excuse to invalidate the election result.

The justification the judges used is simply outrageous: Nastase posted on Facebook on election day calling for people, especially the young, to express their civic position and get out to vote. He didn't make any political or campaign points, he simply called for high turnout to ensure the election was valid. As the EU Parliament resolution pointed out, this has been common practice in Moldovan votes. Not only did Nastase's opponent do the same this time, but in previous votes, former prime ministers Vlad Filat and Iurie Leanca, Dodon, Candu and others all appealed to voters to come to the polling stations.

This sets a very dangerous precedent for future elections, especially the crucial parliamentary vote in autumn.

When an oligarchy like ours runs out of trustworthy, charismatic leaders and attractive ideas, when people despise it in spite of millions of dollars spent on self-promotion, when its popularity falls despite government resources being used, the only way to hold to power is to bend the law and use the law-enforcement bodies as your personal cudgel. Inevitably, this turns the country not only into an 'Absurdistan' but also helps it slip slowly into the abyss of autocracy.

And yet I am still wondering: is this truly a last-gasp, no-holds-barred effort? Or is Plahotniuc continuing to try and cover up his real intentions? Plahotniuc is not considered to be very bright, and would have never reached his current position without very serious support from the intelligence services. A recent article in the

Romanian press repeated claims that Plahotniuc is an agent of the Romanian and Russian foreign intelligence services. Speculation also persists that he has support from Washington (through the Romanian special services) and London (through laundered money).

Ironically, on the same day that the Supreme Court buried our democracy, the “democratic” Prime Minister Pavel Filip was received by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, an event also used by Plahotniuc’s media as an indirect sign of US support for his regime.

Pondering this brings me to the following conclusions: Plahotniuc has reached a deal with the Russian intelligence services and the Kremlin; and the situation in Moldova currently resembles the situation in Ukraine before the annexation of Crimea.

I would like to remind you about a special CNN report, a 45-minute film about why Putin is the most powerful man in the world. It contains a passage stating that he is a very smart man and he has won all the poker games he’s played in international affairs, wisely playing very weak cards for maximum effect.

This is true. He inherited the biggest country in the world when it was a total shambles, corrupted and ruined, and while the West was contemplating Russia and admiring Putin, he steadily and slowly not only returned to Russia to a condition of strength, but also started to dictate to the world again, just like in Soviet times.

In 2008 the West not only swallowed the annexation of the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but even brokered it! It felt like Prague in 1938. Then in 2014, came the annexation of Crimea, which the West also swallowed, though not so happily. Later on part of eastern Ukraine followed. Then Syria. Then interference in the US elections. And all this after the West finally woke up and imposed sanctions meant to weaken Russia.

Everybody is now talking about the Russian threat. And no one pays much attention to countries like Moldova.

This is a big mistake.

Because Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea, Western Ukraine, Syria and Transnistria/Moldova are the weak cards well played by Putin in order to garner big results. It is a kind of “creeping dominance” and it has worked very well.

Big geopolitical achievements are always achieved with small, step-by-step gains.

This means that Moldova is geopolitically part of the “Russian package”: the Russian army stationed in Transnistria, billions of dollars laundered through Moldova, money used for bribing Western politicians and financing subversive actions in Europe and all over the world, Russian organised crime working through Moldova, internet proxies and groups of influence used from Moldova, and so on.

To ignore this, and to continue supporting Plahotniuc's regime, which has demonstrated its close connections to Russian politics, which in turn is believed to be closely connected to organised crime, means to lose to Russia once again.

There is more than enough evidence that Plahotniuc has come to some kind of arrangement with Russia's FSB or SVR or both:

1) He continues to cover up for Ilan Shor, the main figure mentioned in the Kroll report on the billion-dollar theft and money laundering operations involving Moldova. Shor also gave evidence against Filat 3 years ago, and in spite of having been convicted to 7 years in prison, Shor is now happily working as the mayor of Orhey town, heads his own party and is preparing to become an MP in the autumn parliamentary election, which will get him immunity from his criminal sentence. Ilan Shor has direct contacts with Kremlin officials, Russian intelligence services and organised crime. He was used as a front man for the suspicious and illegal privatisation of Kishinev international airport, which was sold to a shell company in Krasnoyarsk, Russia.

2) Moldova imports energy, and despite being the poorest country in Europe, for some reason it pays an absurdly high price for electricity. Why? Because an immense amount of money is also being laundered in this business, and mostly by groups under the influence of the Russian intelligence services. After a recent "tender", the Moldovan Economy Ministry signed an import contract with a Ukrainian company. However, after a couple of weeks, the deputy economy minister responsible for this tender was arrested and the contract annulled, and a new contract was then signed with the Transnistrian power station controlled by RAO EES Russia. Unsurprisingly, the price per KW is now higher. Everybody knows that this is a scheme by Plahotniuc and Russian and Transnistrian companies. Just another example of the kind of "economic reform" carried out by Moldova's "democrats".

3) On instructions from Plahotniuc, President Dodon negotiated with the Kremlin and Gazprom and appointed Plahotniuc's personal friend chairman of MoldovaGaz. Later, he was unexpectedly appointed chief of the State Security Service, also in coordination with the Kremlin.

4) The latest agreements with Transnistria, some of them detrimental to Moldova's integrity and sovereignty, were all concluded on instructions from Moscow.

5) The facilitation of the admission to Transnistria of new technologies and equipment for cryptocurrency and crypto-technology all took place under the control of Moscow.

6) Plahotniuc's role in bringing to power Putin poodle Dodon as president, and later on a coordinated change of the electoral law together with Dodon's socialists.

7) In spite of Plahotniuc's anti-Russian rhetoric, and in spite of his anti-Russian propaganda bill, the Russians have never cancelled their contract with Plahotniuc for re-transmitting ORT, the main Kremlin state TV channel, in Moldova. Since this channel is politically controlled, draw your own conclusions. Also, Plahotniuc has a

complete monopoly on the media, which brainwashes Moldovans in a far worse way than Russian TV.

Against this background, the voiding of the Kishinev mayor election result comes as no surprise, and is part of the arrangement with Russia that in autumn he will bring to power the socialists and form a coalition with them, and he will continue to rule Moldova for the next 5 years through the obedient puppet Dodon.

In return he gets impunity, geopolitical protection for his illegally amassed fortunes and cover to continue milking the country.

So, Russia wins here again. And the West loses an important battle. I repeat: it's a mistake to neglect "small nuisances" like Moldova, because Russia is gaining step-by-step bridgeheads for further influence and actions in Europe and the rest of the world.

Earlier I mentioned the parallel with Ukrainian events that led to the annexation of Crimea. Why?

Romanian intelligence services are also engaged in subversive actions in Moldova. Romania's long-term interest to have a weak and unstable Moldova coincides with Russian interests to have a weak Moldova: the worse it is in Moldova, the more people will tend to think about unification with Romania, while Transnistria will not be interested in a weak Moldova and will more tend towards remaining a Russian territory like Kaliningrad. I do not exclude a more complex Russian-Romanian scenario to destabilise the situation here after the World Cup ends. It would be designed to give Russia a new casus belli for Crimea-style actions.

All of the above leads me to the following conclusions:

1) Whether it was just shortsightedness by the West, or that some in the West profited from corruption, money laundering and other shadow businesses with the Plahotniuc regime, it seems the time has now come to understand that further turning a blind eye towards the regime in Moldova means only one thing: losing long-term to Russian influence not only in Moldova, but also more widely in Europe.

2) Given the unprecedented decision to invalidate the election result in Kishinev, which showed the anti-democratic essence of Plahotniuc's rule, it is clear that if anything can be done in Moldova to help get rid of this clique, now is the time. A new team of people with integrity must come to power. Otherwise, since the current rulers are masters of fake elections, Moldova will remain a captured state forever, under Russian direct influence through the Plahotniuc-Dodon tandem.

Help from outside is required because Plahotniuc's clique dominates, through his loyal media and law-enforcement bodies, the obedient justice system, his paramilitary groups (private security firms and martial arts sports clubs). This monolith of power is so terrifying and so overwhelming that the weak opposition needs support, direct or indirect.

3) The last 10 years of "democratic" chaos have shown that the Western/USA strategy of working through the Romanian intelligence services in Moldova has

become absolutely counter-productive. The West, primarily the US and the UK, has to build its own bridgehead of economic, political and media influence in Moldova. It must simultaneously collect its own information about Russian proxies and influence exerted through various unregistered groups in Moldova, and not just rely on Romania's SRI, which has always had a double agenda in Moldova and has never been objective, not to mention its historical connections to Russian businesses and intelligence services.

4) Plahotniuc and his team are not an asset anymore. Plahotniuc has instead become an irritation and is having a negative impact for Romania. He has to be sacrificed as a serious liability which could capsize the whole ship. He and Dodon are two small men with huge ambitions but shallow souls, while Plahotniuc's toxicity and obnoxiousness are shameful for the modern West. Besides, sensing his own failure, Plahotniuc has now stepped under the umbrella of the Russian intelligence services, not to mention his links to Russian organised crime.