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The Moldovan “grand chessboard”

A change of power occurred in Moldova in June. It was motivated by an understanding and engagement of external actors – Russia, USA, and the EU. This understanding bears significant implications not only for Moldova, but in a greater picture, for the structure of the international order as well, especially in Eastern Europe. It may stimulate the emergence of a new, more consensual stage of the relationship between the West and Russia as regards this geographic area.

Internal situation in Moldova. The period of formal diarchy in Moldova emerging from the political turning point which topped at the beginning of June 2019 (see ICE Comments 37/2019), culminated in the step-down of the hitherto authorities and the loss of influence by an oligarch, Vladimir Plahotniuc. On 14 June, the administration of the Democratic Party of Moldova (DPM) resigned and the party announced their transfer to the opposition. Plahotniuc and several others in his orbit left the country. A day after, the Constitutional Court resigned. The court played an inglorious role during the political crisis of 8-9 June by following the political dispositions of Plahotniuc and the DPM (the Venice Commission judged the decisions made by the court had no legal grounds). New authorities were recognized by the European Union, Russia, the United States, and several other countries (e.g. Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, Poland).

The change of power entails neither the immediate stabilization nor improvement of the internal situation in Moldova. This is due to the fact that the state's dysfunctionality is of systemic character. A specific, pathological political system prevailed over the past years. The system involved the cooperation of principally rivaling political parties – the DPM and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM). It is noteworthy that the cooperation was based upon informal political and business relations and joint interests, which often verged upon legal and economic grey areas. Officially, the two parties, both to the eyes of the public and external partners, were involved in political rivalry, actually never trusting each other on the whole. However, it was Plahotniuc who occupied the dominant position in the country and subordinated several state institutions and media to his objectives. The convergence of these factors resulted in the fact that since the parliamentary elections of February 2019, the DPM and PSRM have been unable to establish a coalition government. The reason behind this were not only tensions between the parties, but disagreements between their leaders – Plahotniuc and Igor Dodon (the President of Moldova and the leader of PSRM). In June, it became evident that in face of the lack of coalition government (since the February election), a new snap election would ensue. Plahotniuc intended to win the election by e.g. discrediting Dodon and marking him out as a traitor. Recordings which would supposedly prove Dodon's loyalty towards Russia were to assist in doing so. Ultimately, these were released in the aftermath of the 8-9 June events. However, they had little impact upon the course of events. Despite the above, the PSRM feared the blackmail and attacks of DPM, and a possible defeat in the snap election. This motivated the decision regarding a “provisional political agreement” with the pro-West, reformist ACUM, and the adoption of restrictions regarding previous expectations (concerning appointments to positions). However, the fundamental driver behind the emergence of such an “exotic” coalition as PSRM-ACUM, was the external pressure exerted by Russia, the EU, and the United States. Due to the fact that the coalition is of tactical and provisional character, and that parties included in it will fight for votes in the coming elections (presidential in 2020, and parliamentary in a few/ several months), further changes in the political situation of Moldova ought to be expected (tensions, a rift in the coalition government).

Plahotniuc and his significance. The issue of Moldova's prospective political course remains open. The political crisis in June did not result in a deep and permanent political change. Both the external actors and PSRM-ACUM aimed primarily at the “de-oligarchization” – in this case understood specifically as the removal of Vladimir

Plahotniuc and those associated with him. This objective would never materialize if it were not for the intervention of external actors who increasingly viewed Plahotniuc and his party as a problem. From the point of view of the West, especially the EU, Plahotniuc became a factor preventing the modernization and democratization of the country, and by doing so, transforming Moldova into an authoritarian and oligarchic state. To reach this end, he applied pro-West and pro-EU rhetoric, which de facto discredited the West and the ideas of European integration in the eyes of the Moldovan public. At the same time, for a long time, he was able to gain sympathy of western states and institutions by propagating the fear of Russia and seeming as the only guarantor of Moldova's West-oriented course. As far as Russia is concerned, Plahotniuc became a problem for several reasons. First of all, owing to his influences, he dominated the pro-Russian president Igor Dodon (whose PSRM party was defeated in the latest election. Russia was expecting a victory). Secondly, his influences started reaching out as far as Transnistria, which resulted in several conflicts of interest. Third of all, on numerous occasions, Plahotniuc demonstrated his anti-Russian attitude. This resulted in the expulsion of Russian diplomats, Dmitry Rogozin, the Deputy PM, becoming a *persona non grata*, and in a motion during the UN forum concerning the withdrawal of Russian forces from Transnistria.

Finally, both the EU and Russia accused Plahotniuc of breaking the law, including criminal offences. Because the EU suspected him of transferring approx. one billion dollars out of the Moldovan bank system, any financial aid to the country was suspended. Russia directly accused the oligarch of being involved in organized crime, smuggling and drug trafficking, money laundering, and even a case of contract killing.

As a consequence, a shared interest between the West and Russia emerged concerning Plahotniuc. In line of the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" proverb, a tactical alliance was opened which resulted in the "de-oligarchization".

The concert of superpowers. The temporary emergence of shared interests is nothing surprising. However, the broader picture is significant. It is hardly a coincidence that the representatives of the EU, USA and Russia make an ostentatious visit to Kishinev on 3 June, and a few days later a rapid political transformation occurs (after months of a stalemate). It is also hardly a chance occurrence that an oligarch in control of the country agrees to hand over his power and leave the country after a few minutes of conversation with the US ambassador.

The events in Moldova may suggest the emergence of a new stage in the relations between the West and Russia – a phase of understanding, probably limited to Eastern Europe (possibly a part of the post-Soviet space). Even though this area is likely to remain the field of systemic rivalry (norms and values), but simultaneously, in the immediate international relations, will become its object instead of the subject. An open rivalry in the "buffer" Eastern Europe benefits no one because: a) the United States is focused upon its global interests, especially in the context of China and Iran; b) the EU struggles with several internal troubles; c) Russian authorities seek a solution to the leadership crisis and internal problems which cannot be compensated to the public by the "national project". Therefore, it seems that an agreement, even in the form of the concert of superpowers, which disregards the concerned party, offers the best scenario.

It seems that the Moldovan game has been the most beneficial to Russia, at least in the short-term perspective. Prior to the elections, Dodon and the PSRM, supported by the Federation, are in good political situation. Should they win, Russia will maintain and consolidate its influence in Moldova (the fact that the country is virtually exclusively dependent upon Russian gas is noteworthy). Should they be defeated, a next political crisis is likely to emerge, which will be to the detriment of the country's integration with the West. However, in the strategic dimension, it was significant to present a new *modus operandi* to the world, and communicate that nothing in Eastern Europe happens without our part in and acceptance of it, thus cooperation with us seems reasonable for the benefit of all.

Impact upon Eastern and Central Europe. Ukraine ought to view the events in Moldova as a warning – the authorities in Kiev may not necessarily have a say in the way the Donbas issue and the separatist quasi-republics are handled. Due to the growth of Russian influence at the "near border", President Lukashenko, who seeks to make Belarus more independent from Russia in various aspects, wherever possible, may tighten both the internal

policy as well as his politics towards Russia. In addition, all countries of the region received a clear message that in case of a confrontation with Russia, they ought to count primarily upon themselves. Poland, in the context of its relations with the countries of Eastern Europe, Russia, and the United States, but also in light of its position in the EU (and for example the shape of the Eastern Partnership) ought to draw lessons from the situation as well.

Trans. Tomasz Kuraś