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Editorial Board: Vlad Lupan, Victor Chirilă, Liubomir Chiriac, Veaceslav Berbeca, Sergiu Lipcean, Carolina Ungureanu, Eduard Țugui, Veaceslav Ioniță, Ion Tăbârță, Mihai Țurcanu

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Another Eastern European Nation Gets Tangled In US Politics

Vlad LUPAN
Independent Expert,
Former Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to the UN

Days after Richard Grenell was recently named by President Trump as the United States' acting national director of intelligence — America's chief spy — a media site [reported](#) that Grenell had worked for an Eastern European politician whom the US has accused of corruption and barred from the country. Grenell, who is in the job until a permanent director is named and confirmed, apparently did not disclose that income or register as a foreign agent. The story is complicated.

The politician is Vladimir Plahotniuc, whose left-wing Democratic Party in Moldova was portrayed by Grenell and [others](#) in an article in The Washington Times, a conservative publication, as being virtually the only pro-Western force in Moldova. Plahotniuc, however, had been financing the pro-Russian Moldovan Communist Party from 2001 to 2009, where the current Moldovan president, Igor Dodon, was his colleague.

President Putin of Russia [supports Dodon](#). In 2017, Putin suggested at a meeting of the **Eurasian Economic Forum** to “[ask Dodon](#)” about Russian election interference in the US. Meanwhile, a Moldovan media [investigation](#) found that propaganda was being spread in Moldova in its own 2016 elections by media controlled by Dodon, Plahotniuc and Russia in 2016, suggesting that their cooperation continues.

As early as August 2016, it was revealed that Plahotniuc [pronounced *pluh-hot-NEWK*] was a [main suspect](#) in the so-called Russian Laundromat case, which “legitimized” Russian criminals' money through Moldovan courts and banks. Eastern Europe security experts knew that Bratva — the Russian mafia — has [close links](#) to Russian security services that attack elections and carry out assassinations with unknown sources of money, possibly laundered abroad. The Kremlin's man in charge of Moldova (and now in charge of Ukraine, too), Dmitri Kozak, was Putin's chief of staff and a former security service officer.

Plahotniuc's role in the Russian Laundromat should have been worrying for Moldova watchers. Grenell, a former spokesperson for several US ambassadors at the United Nations and most recently Trump's ambassador in Germany, was not a Moldova watcher. He wrote about the country for the first time in August 2016, after Forbes [contended](#) that Plahotniuc was involved in the Laundromat operation. Grenell's articles were partly replies to the Forbes account and meant to support Mr. P, as the oligarch was nicknamed in Moldova, despite concerns about his links to Dodon and to the Russian mob.

Grenell gave a Skype interview to a private TV station owned by Mr. P after an [anticorruption resolution](#) was introduced in the US Congress to expose Plahotniuc's Laundromat activities. Moldovan TV claimed in a subsequent online [post](#) that Grenell even accused the Republican representative who tabled that resolution, Randy Weber of Texas, of being paid to denigrate the Moldovan government. Such a resolution and revelation of Plahotniuc's links to the criminal world would have certainly threatened Mr. P's image in the US.

Perhaps the situation in August 2016 and afterward may have seemed unclear to some people outside Moldova, including in the US. Yet in Europe, there were signals that Plahotniuc and Dodon had an undeclared [power-sharing “cartel”](#) from mid-2016 till early 2019, when they split geopolitical spheres of responsibilities. While Dodon was on Putin’s side, Plahotniuc was promoted in Washington, D.C., as the man behind a pro-Western government, as Grenell wrote in [his 2016 articles](#).

Grenell wasn’t the only person who fell for Plahotniuc’s maneuvering. He [was received](#) by US officials in 2016 and published an [essay](#) in Politico; and the Moldovan prime minister, whom he controlled, wrote an op-ed in [The Hill](#). A Republican member of the Moldova caucus in the US House of Representatives, Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma, also [expressed](#) support in The Hill for Plahotniuc.

Plahotniuc apparently invested in developing links to both Republican and Democratic parties in the US. Though not always trustworthy, a Russian language [news site](#) from Moldova said it had verified US documents that showed Plahotniuc used such lobbying firms as the Podesta Group, Cogent Strategies and Cornerstone Government Affairs to provide their clients with public relations services, research and analysis on US topics important for Plahotniuc as well as to create a strategy for social networks.

Facebook closed numerous accounts of Plahotniuc in 2019 for [coordinated inauthentic behavior, some linked to government officials](#). All US lobbying businesses reported their work for the Plahotniuc-controlled Democratic Party of Moldova to the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) unit, although not always [indicating](#) the amount for services rendered.

The same Russian language [news site](#) from Moldova alleged that some \$40,000 was paid to the Prime Policy Group, another US lobbying firm. The amount was not mentioned in the FARA registration. Plahotniuc also seems to have worked through a [partner](#) with triple Russia-US-Moldova citizenships, Vazha Dzhashi, who [made some payments](#) in the US on Plahotniuc’s behalf. Plahotniuc has denied this allegation, thus avoiding possible accusations of direct disbursements by a foreign actor. Grenell [denied](#) receiving money for the articles he wrote.

Clearly, the Kremlin is not interested in fighting corruption in Moldova or elsewhere. By 2019, it wanted Plahotniuc out of Moldova to [make way](#) for Russia’s main protégé, Dodon. Contrary to Russia, I can confirm from direct experience that the US has always called on Eastern Europeans to fight corruption in their region. I have served as foreign policy adviser to an acting Moldovan president, Mihai Ghimpu, and as Moldovan ambassador to UN. Knowingly or not, Grenell, Podesta and some US officials and lobbyists have tolerated the corruption of Plahotniuc, perhaps thinking that he is saving Moldova from Dodon, contrary to evidence, thus undermining American anticorruption calls.

Republican officials in the US maintained during Trump’s impeachment hearings that the US continues to fight corruption in Eastern Europe, accusing Ukraine, for example, of being the most-corrupt country in the region. In light of Grenell’s work and companies who supported a corrupt Moldovan official, such accusations have to be weighed carefully. After consecutive GOP and Democratic White House administrations have recklessly tried to reset relations with an increasingly belligerent Russia, which uses corruption as a tool, the Kremlin has attacked elections in both the US and Ukraine.

Against this background, although corruption concerns persist, Ukrainians ousted their corrupt pro-Russian leader, Viktor Yanukovich, in 2014. In 2019, they elected Volodymyr Zelensky president on an anticorruption mandate.

Moldovans also became unsettled when they saw Russian media [triumphing](#) over unconfirmed news that Plahotniuc had found refuge in Miami after people voted him out of office for corruption in 2019 elections. Some relief came when Secretary of State Pompeo designated Plahotniuc [for corruption](#), prohibiting his entry to the US. No one knows for certain, it appears, Plahotniuc’s whereabouts, although Dodon, the Moldovan president, said recently that he had been told by American officials that he is still in the US.

What is concerning is that bipartisan missteps were made in Washington by US analysts, lobbyists and some officials as well as by media that lacked regional expertise. The facts went unchecked, regional experts closely connected to the events were seemingly not consulted and many of the new “experts” that emerged after the Russian election interference did not speak Russian or any other regional languages. The lack or [disregard](#) of factual expertise and situational, rather than strategic, thinking enabled too many mistakes.

It is important for the future of the US and Eastern Europe to limit the role of kleptocratic foreign oligarchs in shady lobbying practices that are endangering both parts of the world. The US needs to reinforce its expertise on Eastern Europe, and cash-starved US think tanks should become less prone to [foreign interference or funding](#) that can spill into the media.

An expert roundtable on Eastern Europe could be organized with Congressional, civil society and intelligence community participation. The Helsinki Committee of the US, a bipartisan intergovernmental body led by the US House of Representatives that focuses on the Euro-Atlantic area, provides an excellent venue for such a dialogue.

Trump has recently abandoned the nomination of Grenell as a permanent director of National Intelligence in favor of John Ratcliffe, a Republican member of Congress from Texas. Ratcliffe was nominated last year for the job, but his name was withdrawn after questions about his qualifications surfaced. He made [worrying statements](#) during the impeachment hearings in January, contradicting actual anticorruption events in Ukraine and that “Ukraine interference” was a proven Russian narrative. He also claimed that foreign interference is acceptable because it was allegedly misused by political opponents of Trump as well.

In light of the US presidential elections in November, nefarious lobby practices and invalid narratives for partisan reasons must be avoided. It is important for America’s intelligence boss to be a seasoned and knowledgeable security professional to ensure that America is protected and that it helps its front-line partners, including in Eastern Europe.