

Filat has been arrested – a new stage in the war of the Moldovan political elites

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On 15 October, the Moldovan parliament lifted the immunity of Vlad Filat, the former prime minister and the leader of one of the parties forming the government coalition, the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM). After the parliamentary session, Filat was detained by agents of the Moldovan National Anti-Corruption Centre. He has been accused of participation in the largest case of embezzlement of bank funds in Moldova's history and has faced charges of corruption and abuse of power (for which he may be sentenced to a custodial sentence of between 7 and 15 years). On 18 October, the court decided that Filat would be detained for 30 days.

Filat's detention is something unprecedented in Moldova's political life. It is the first time in the country's history that such a high-ranking politician and one who also belongs to the ruling government camp will face a court trial. The fact that Filat has faced the charges and has been stripped of immunity is an element of the political struggle underway for at least five years between the two most influential people in the country: Vlad Filat and Vlad Plahotniuc, a billionaire who controls the second grouping in the government coalition, the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM). Even though it seems very likely that Filat has participated in siphoning off funds from the Moldovan banking sector, there is nevertheless plenty of evidence suggesting that other senior members of Moldovan elites, including Plahotniuc, could have been involved in the scandal.

The removal of the former prime minister has upset the fragile politico-oligarchic balance which has existed in Moldova for a few years. Even though his detention has in general been positively received by the Moldovan public, who want to see a de-oligarchisation in their country, this does not mean that the oligarchic system will be disassembled; on the contrary, it will become even more entrenched, and Vlad Plahotniuc's power will increase significantly. The present situation destabilises the political system in the country. However, a snap election still seems unlikely.

Struggle within the system

The prosecutor general, upon whose motion parliament lifted Filat's immunity, claims that he has evidence proving that the ex-prime minister took part in siphoning off around one billion US dollars from the Moldovan banking sector at the end of 2014. He also claims that Filat has received a bribe worth around US\$250 million from Ilan Shor, a Moldovan-Russian millionaire, who is probably the main architect of the bank scam. In his response to the

prosecutor general's accusations, Filat stated that Plahotniuc, who controls a number of state institutions, including the prosecution authorities, is the person behind the motion to strip him of immunity and the accusation of his participation in the financial scandal. Filat claimed that "the Moldovan administration of justice is rotten, because it is controlled by a single man." He also added that "as long as Plahotniuc is present in Moldovan politics, the country will have no future." Filat also admitted that the previous parliamentary election (in November 2014) was not entirely fair.

The anti-governmental protests in the centre of Chisinau which have been ongoing since September have served as a catalyst of tension between the two politicians. Demonstrators from the pro-European movement Dignity and Truth (DA) set up their tent city in front of the government headquarters at the beginning of September. They were followed by the pro-Russian parties, the Socialists led by Igor Dodon and Our Party led by Renato Usatii, who began a similar permanent protest towards the end of September on the square in front of parliament.

The prosecutor general's office (which Plahotniuc controls) was used to launch the investigation against Filat and to remove him from power. This allowed Plahotniuc to rid himself of his main political and business rival and at the same time to appease public sentiment.

One of the key demands of the two groups of demonstrators is that those guilty of siphoning off US\$1 billion from the Moldovan financial sector be held accountable. Filat's detention will weaken the Liberal Democratic Party, and will thus enable Plahotniuc to subordinate those state administration structures which until recently were under that party's control.

Reaction from the opposition

Dodon and Usatii have recognised Filat's detention as their success since it was their supporters who demonstrated on 15 October in front of parliament demanding that the government resign. At the same time, both leaders emphasised that this did not meet all of their demands, and said that they would continue their protest until the rest of their demands are satisfied, including the resignation of the government and a snap election.

The reaction of the pro-European protest movement DA has so far been unclear. Although the decision to strip Filat of immunity and indict him was positively received by the demonstrators, the way the parliamentary session unfolded took the DA's leaders by surprise. On 16 October, they demanded that the prosecution authorities should disclose all cases and investigations concerning senior government officials. Since the movement has not taken a clear stance on the Filat case and was passive on 15 October, its significance will continue to fall back, and the pro-European demonstrators will become increasingly frustrated and less and less mobilised.

Possible developments in Moldovan politics

Both PDM and the Liberal Party (the third member of the government coalition) want the present coalition to continue, and Prime Minister Valeriu Strelet from the Liberal Democratic

Party, who took control of the party after Filat's detention, has declared that he will not resign of his own accord.

Three scenarios seem possible at present. According to the first one, PLDM will remain in the coalition, and the present government will continue. This is the optimal variant from the Democratic Party's point of view. The leaderless Liberal Democratic Party is no longer such a dangerous political rival. Despite Filat's tough words addressed to Plahotniuc and PLDM's declared support to Filat, it cannot be ruled out that this grouping will decide to remain in the coalition for pragmatic reasons. Should it join the opposition, its image might improve to some extent, but this would also mean it would lose its previous influence (including financial influence) and probably also the disintegration of the party in the near future. According to the second scenario, PLDM will leave the government coalition and a new majority coalition will be formed on the basis of the Democratic Party and the Communists (PCRM, until recently the main pro-Russian opposition party which has found itself in a deep crisis). The scenario which involves a snap election is the least likely. It would be beneficial only to the pro-Russian groupings led by Dodon and Usatii. In the present situation, the election would be unconstitutional, since a parliamentary election cannot be held less than six months ahead of a presidential election, with the next one scheduled for March 2016.

The detention of Filat and the possible reboot of the coalition will not bring about a change in Chisinau's declared pro-European approach. However, there is no doubt that Plahotniuc's growing influence in Moldovan politics will continue to prevent the structural modernisation of the country and the implementation of the reforms envisaged under the Association Agreement with the EU.