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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The materials are realized by Lina Grau, foreign policy expert and programme coordinator with APE.

TOPICS OF THE EDITION:

1. **Signe Burgstaller:** The systemic high level corruption is a major obstacle for the political and economic development
2. **Nicu Popescu:** Brexit - any internal weakening of the EU has a negative effect on the Eastern European geopolitics
3. **Iulian Groza:** The current political climate is not favouring an advancement in the relations with the EU

The last period was marked by several important events for Moldova.



Starting with June 7, the Moldovan general Prosecutor's Office is having a new adviser from the European Union. The Latvian Aivars Ostapko was hired in a contest organized by the EU Delegation to Moldova in order to support the General Prosecutor's Office in the process of the institution reform and modernization. IPN is citing an official statement which says that the new advisor has 15 year-experience in the prosecution of Latvia and that he will be working with the Moldovan prosecutors to accelerate the institutional reforms.



President of the European People's Party, Joseph Daul, voiced concern about the health condition of the former Prime Minister, Vlad Filat, who has been on a hunger strike and who fainted during a court proceeding on June 21". Vlad Filat has been charged with bribery and abuse of power in connection with the theft of one billion lei from three Moldovan banks. "I am deeply concerned about the health of former Prime Minister, Vlad Filat, and the refusal of the authorities to guarantee him a fair and public trial," wrote the European politician on Twitter. Vlad Filat denies the accusations against him, saying that he is the victim of his former governance partner, the democratic ruler, Vlad Plahotniuc.



Vitaly Ignatiev who is in charge of foreign affairs in the separatist Transnistrian region said the international mediators in the negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict settlement are following "an utopian idea," trying to maintain the "boundaries of the Soviet Moldova". Ignatiev made the statement in an interview to Steffi Wurster, a German film director who is shooting a documentary about the peacekeeping mission on the Dniester. Vitaly Ignatiev also said that the negotiations are not going to succeed unless account is taken of the results of the 2006 referendum on the willingness of the region's population to get independent and closer to Russia.



A survey of the State Centre for Sociological Researches from Moscow conducted in early June in the separatist Transnistrian region reveals that 86 percent of respondents would like to join Russia, while only 9 percent are advocating for the independence of Transnistria. Reunification with Moldova is considered a good option by only 2 percent of respondents. At the same time, the survey shows that 24 percent of Transnistrians would vote in the so-called presidential elections from December for the president of the Supreme Soviet, Vadim Krasnoselskii, and only 11 percent would give their vote for the current Tiraspol leader, Yevgeny Shevchuk. The latter became very unpopular as a result of the deep economic crisis that the separatist region of Moldova has been facing in the past two years.



The Moldovan Foreign Ministry submitted on June 2nd a verbal note to the Russian Embassy challenging the Russian authorities to stop illegal recruitment on the territory of the Republic of Moldova of Moldovan citizens in the Russian Armed Forces. Citing recruiting actions registered recently in Ternovca of Slobodzia raion, as well as other previously registered similar cases, the MAEIE stated that such actions are contrary to the national and international law and calls again on Russia to withdraw its troops and ammunition from the Republic of Moldova, and also to transform the current peacekeeping operation into a multinational civil mission with an international mandate.

Several ambassadors of the EU member states in Chisinau showed a red card to corruption in Moldova, a gesture borrowed from the symbolism of the European Football Championship that is taking place these days. The diplomats posed with the EU flag in the background, holding a red card saying "Red to corruption". The action was supported by representatives of the civil society who adopted the same gesture on the social networks.



Signe Burgstaller: The systemic high level corruption is a major obstacle for the political and economic development



Sweden is one of the biggest donors for Moldova and has played an important role in supporting the

democratic reforms and Moldova's European course, being one of the initiators of the Eastern Partnership.

The ambassador of Sweden in Moldova, Signe Burgstaller, calls on the Moldovan authorities to promote real reforms and says they will bring international assistance based on the progress domestically. "More support for more reforms," said Signe Burgstaller in an exclusive interview to the FES/APE Foreign Policy Newsletter.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Sweden has always had an active position and voice in Moldova. What are the priorities of your mandate?

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** Sweden established diplomatic relations with Moldova in 1992 and has been an active supporter of the political, economic and social development of Moldova for over two decades now. One of our main instruments is a bilateral reform cooperation program, currently amounting to around 10-12 million euros per year.

Sweden has also been a strong supporter of Moldova within the EU Eastern Partnership, which was launched in 2009 in order to promote the economic integration and political association of the eastern neighbourhood countries with the European Union.

During my mandate as ambassador of Sweden to Moldova I will continue to give priority to supporting the reform agenda of Moldova, predicated on the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, and in line with our own bilateral results strategy for reform cooperation with Eastern Europe. In this way, Sweden wishes to contribute to the development of Moldova, bring concrete benefits to the population and also promote the European integration process of Moldova.

Another priority for me is to continue to build on our excellent bilateral ties across the board - in the political, economic, cultural, educational and many other spheres. Wherever possible I will support people-to-people contacts and exchanges, as this very much makes up the fabric of our bilateral relations.

■ **Lina Grâu:** How do you find the situation in Moldova, especially in the banking and justice sectors, in the area of fighting against corruption and independence of mass media?

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** A country of great potential, Moldova is still facing many difficult challenges, including in the areas that you just mentioned. The high-level systemic corruption is a major obstacle to political and economic development, as is the lack of independence of the judiciary agencies. The situation in the banking sector is of particular concern, and urgent action is needed to strengthen the governance structures and enhance the transparency of bank ownership. Key reforms are needed in order to reduce the scope for corruption, strengthen the rule of law, improve the business environment and achieve macro-financial stability in the country – not primarily because it serves to fulfil commitments under the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, but because it is in the interest of Moldova to do so.

When it comes to the media situation, I would like to underline the role of independent media as a fundamental pillar of any democratic society, both as a watchdog but also as a platform for the free flow of ideas. Although there is a large number of media outlets in Moldova and mostly free access to information, and the media

freedom is sufficiently guaranteed by law, there are some worrying trends in the media sphere. These include the concentration and lack of transparency in ownership of media and unequal access to income through advertising, amounting to increased financial pressure on some independent media actors. The legal framework would need to be amended in accordance with international recommendations in this field.

■ **Lina Grâu:** How did Moldova manage in a very short time to become from a success story of the European Union into a country gripped by instability, political and economic crisis? What went wrong?

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** After the EU Eastern Partnership was launched, Moldova was making fast progress in negotiating, signing and ratifying the Association Agreement and the DCFTA. As the only Eastern Partnership country so far, Moldova also entered into a visa liberalization agreement with the EU. These are true milestones in the country's relations with the EU and impressive achievements as such, but the hard work really begins with the implementation of the reform agenda.

Due to the banking fraud and other circumstances, much of the political energy was consumed by the internal political and economic crisis situation last year. There was a loss of momentum for the reform process, but it is getting back on track again. Work on the road map on the reform agenda is making good progress, but also much work remains to be done in order to implement all the reforms. I hope and expect that the government authorities will continue to push the agenda forward and deliver on their

commitments and promises made, not least to the Moldovan electorate.

■ **Lina Grâu:** To what extent is the European vector recoverable for Moldova in conditions of tensions in the region and uncertain domestic political situation? What does a real progress on the European path depend on?

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** I think the European vector is the way forward for Moldova, and despite the many turbulences of last year that brought about a slowdown of the reform agenda, the European course of direction has not changed. The results of the latest parliamentary election also show that the majority of population is in favour of the European orientation of the country.

I believe the answer to the many challenges facing Moldova is to pursue the European path and the reform agenda with even more vigour and determination. This will also involve deep and structural reforms that may be painful in the short term, but that will increase the stability, resilience and prosperity of the country in the long run. Other countries in Europe have gone through this transition process in recent time with great success, and it can happen in Moldova, too.

■ **Lina Grâu:** There are many voices lately in the society saying that the authorities are rather simulating than implementing reforms. How do you see things - are the reforms simulated or real?

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** Real reforms are needed across all sectors: the fight against corruption, justice, finance, banking, public administration, regional development, media, energy and

more. There is a great expectation for the government authorities to deliver on their commitments and promises made, not least to the Moldovan population, but also to the international partners. In the end, the government authorities will be judged by their actions, not their rhetoric.

■ **Lina Grâu:** What messages would you have in this context to the Moldovan authorities, the opposition, the political class, civil society?

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** There is a need to unite around a common vision for where you would like Moldova to be in 5 or 10 years, and then to mobilize all resources in the society to move towards that vision. The government authorities, the parliament, the opposition, the civil society, media outlets – they all have an important role to play in the advancement of the society.

Another important issue is how to create the best conditions for an inclusive society, where all the ethnic minorities can thrive and feel proud to be a citizen of Moldova. The multilingual population and diversity of Moldova is an asset that the country can benefit a lot more from.

■ **Lina Grâu:** The situation in Moldova is not very calm and quiet, same as in the region. What do you think are the major risks for Moldova?

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** I think it is important that the government authorities – and all other stakeholders – remain focused on the reform agenda and making steady progress on it, thus enhancing the overall functioning of the public services and improving the living conditions of the Moldovan people. Another halt or slowdown in

the reforms could lead to heightened tensions in society and result in political and economic instability.

■ **Lina Grâu:** How do you see the role of Moldova's development partners, particularly the EU and some large countries such as Germany, in promoting reforms? Lately, voices are getting stronger saying that the external assistance should be strongly conditioned by progress in reforms and fighting against corruption, because otherwise there is the impression that the West would support a corrupt and unsatisfying system.

■ **Signe Burgstaller:** Sweden is one of the main donor partners in Moldova, alongside the EU, Germany, the USA and some others. As an EU member we also share in the EU assistance programs in Moldova.

The role of the development partners is to promote reforms by providing political, financial and technical support to the reform efforts. The international donor community engages in a dialogue with the government authorities on the needed reforms and last year produced a Briefing Book recommending reforms in a range of sectors. We can be supportive but we can't be the drivers of the process. Ultimately, the political will and leadership of Moldova will determine the pace and scope of the reforms.

The development partners of Moldova are willing to engage with the government in supporting reforms, but this also comes with an expectation that the government delivers on reforms. A lower implementation rate means a lower level of funding. But this also goes the other way around: more reforms means more funding.

Nicu Popescu: Brexit - any internal weakening of the EU has a negative effect on the Eastern European geopolitics



On June 23rd, the British citizens are called to a referendum to decide whether the country will remain or not in the EU. The latest polls announced very tight results of the referendum which is decisive for the political and economic future of Great Britain. An ORB poll for the Daily Telegraph three days before the referendum day gives two percent more to the anti-Brexit supporters, with 49% of voting intentions. The YouGov Institute has revealed, on the contrary, to the Times, a slight advantage in favour of the adverse camp. The referendum will have major economic and political implications not just for the UK but also for the European Union and Eastern Europe, explains Nicu Popescu, expert of the European Institute for Security Studies in Paris.

■ **Lina Grâu:** What are the major implications of the referendum from June 23rd in the UK?

■ **Nicu Popescu:** The impact of this

referendum is quite negative primarily for the UK, because it has brought to a polarization of the political space, political parties, and public debate and has led to the strengthening and crystallization of a populist-nationalist discourse which is now using this common vehicle to strengthen the anti-European message and persuade part of the British public. So no matter what happens in the real life, the impact on the British politics is already negative and it will be felt for many years ahead.

Obviously all these existential discussions generate pressure on the EU coming from several directions – economy, migration crisis, the Eurosceptic discussions and the popularity of populist parties in the Western Europe. So there are many pretty worrying trends that are weakening the potential of the EU, its unity, and implicitly its credibility internationally - both in its relations with China, Russia and the Middle East, and obviously with Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, the EU, since its creation in 1950, has always had crises in some areas, but in the end, having democracies with democratic, consolidated and institutional systems, is functioning regardless of certain leaders of a certain time. So from this perspective, the EU has both the experience, the history, and the ability to cope with crises.

■ **Lina Grâu:** How will an eventual decision by the British to leave the EU affect the countries in the Eastern Europe and especially the region of the Republic of Moldova?

■ **Nicu Popescu:** It is evident that for most post-Soviet states - Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Belarus - it is in their interest that other forces and influential external political actors exist in the region. These countries want the EU to be an influential player in the region, because this allows them to diversify their foreign policy relations and consolidate their margin of manoeuvre in foreign policy. So any internal weakening of the EU has, obviously, a negative effect on the Eastern European geopolitics.

On the other hand - and this is clearly observed in recent years - we have a situation where a large part of the EU Member States do not subscribe formally and disagree with the sanctions policy against Russia. However, none of these countries have blocked or want to block the current policy of the EU towards Russia because, since the situation in the EU is already quite complicated, they do not want to create other intra-

European conflicts because of Russia. An unexpected effect of the crisis in the EU - the economic crisis, the situation with the referendum in the UK – is that it paradoxically lead to a greater unity against Russia. And, paradoxically, the EU is today more united on Russia than it was in 2007, 2008 or 2009.

■ **Lina Grâu:** What impact will the UK situation have on Moldova and the assistance it receives from London, particularly to support democracy in the country? There are already voices saying that in case of Brexit, the British public sector spending will be reduced dramatically.

■ **Nicu Popescu:** Moldova is not going to be directly affected by the British Referendum. Theoretically and eventually, Moldova may feel some effects later through certain political processes.

Regardless of whether Britain stays or withdraws from the EU, in London there is a relatively broad consensus that the UK should remain an active foreign policy player on the international scene. While in the last five years the UK government has implemented some pretty drastic austerity measures- reduced the public expenditures and the number of public sector employees- however, the British Government has not cut spending in two areas - health and international assistance. So, the British assistance budget to third countries was not reduced. This points out to a certain degree of internal political consensus- that Britain, whether in the EU or outside the EU, must remain one of the most active and influential countries in the world.

From this perspective I do not think there is a connection between the UK assistance to Moldova and the referendum.

■ **Lina Grâu:** And if the British still decide to remain in the EU? The Brexit discussions alone have already managed to make big waves in the EU. Do you think they will have repercussions on the situation in the EU, or things will settle down?

■ **Nicu Popescu:** If the British vote against leaving the EU, nothing practically will happen in real time and the current status quo will be extended for many years ahead.

But obviously, there is this wave of electoral insurgency across the EU and of anti-political sentiments against the current EU elite. There is a trend affecting the UK today, but also many other countries in the EU. And this wave will continue and will lead in the coming years to electoral crises throughout Europe.

So, from the legal point of view, nothing will happen to Great Britain, but the political problem of the European public dissatisfaction with the current state of Europe is not going anywhere after the day of referendum in the UK. Recently there were elections in Austria, where a far-right party nearly won the elections and now we are having a referendum in the UK and these kind of crises will be repeated several times a year in the EU.

If the UK votes against remaining in the EU, the scenario is also very clear – the negotiations of withdrawal from the EU will probably take a very long time- from 5 to 7 years- a period of time during which the UK will be having a rather weak negotiating position with the EU member states, the latter not willing to make concessions to Britain. And theoretically, I don't exclude the scenario when in the next 5-7 years, the UK will be negotiating with difficulties the conditions of withdrawal from the EU, and that the conditions will be so bad that London will decide to reconsider its position and

revise its decision of withdrawing from the EU in a new referendum.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Getting back to Moldova, what would be your reply to those who speculate on Brexit saying that if older EU countries like UK want to leave the EU, then why Moldova should go towards the EU and not shift to the East?

■ **Nicu Popescu:** Moldova would have had great luck if it had been in the position of Great Britain or France - with their prosperity and functionality of institutions, so as to be able to afford to question the benefits of the European integration. It would be more useful for Moldova to compare itself with the Central European countries that have gone through European transformations - Romania, the Baltic States, Poland, and Bulgaria. The latter, in the last 15 years of the EU integration have gone through phenomenal transformations in all areas - from infrastructure to functional institutions. And this type of transformations and positive changes are not offered in the East.

If you want me to be more specific, I suggest to take a look at the foreign trade statistics of a country like Armenia, which joined the Eurasian Union last year. After joining the Eurasian Union, the Armenian exports to Russia fell by 38 percent, as much as the European exports to Russia did, even though Russia and the EU exchanged sanctions and restrictions. So, it's enough to look at the external trade statistics of Kazakhstan and Armenia with Russia to see that those states that have joined the Eurasian Union recently, are in a very bad situation. They have raised tariffs on imports from almost all countries, so the domestic products are more expensive, while the exports to Russia fell. These countries are facing a growing economic decline which is directly caused by their dependency on the Eurasian Union market.

Julian Groza: The current political climate is not favouring an advancement in the relations with the EU



The EU Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova will enter into force on 1 July 2016, according to a decision taken in May by the EU Foreign Affairs Council. The Association Agreement was signed in Brussels on 27 June 2014 and ratified by the Moldovan Parliament on July 2, 2014, and by the European Parliament on 13 November 2014. At the time of signing, the Agreement established a new legal framework for the advancement of relations between Moldova and the EU towards a qualitatively higher level-political association and economic integration with the EU. The document applies to the whole territory of Moldova, including the Transnistrian region.

One of the negotiators of this document, Julian Groza, former Deputy

Minister of Foreign Affairs, currently executive director of the Institute for European Policy and Reforms, says that at the time of signing of the agreement, the Moldovan authorities hoped for much better prospects for Moldova's European course. But those hopes were compromised by corruption and inconsistency of the Moldovan political class.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Mr. Julian Groza, you've been part of the negotiating team on behalf of Chisinau on the Association Agreement with the European Union. The question may seem subjective – could you imagine two or three years ago that in June-July 2016 we would reach the point where we are now?

■ **Julian Groza:** It was very hard then to anticipate the developments. We

thinking Then of how to structure the implementation agenda in order to increase the dynamics of realization of commitments under the Association Agreement, including in light of the objective of submitting an accession application to the European Union.

Today, of course, the things are a little bit different than we expected. This is largely due to the developments of the last year- the way the government was formed and the governmental crisis. The government institutions have certainly tried to implement the commitments – adoption of laws and promoting reforms - but in the conditions of a government crisis it is very hard to promote an agenda that requires a certain political will as well as political stability.

Earlier this year a new government was formed and there are many questions of legitimacy in the society but also among our European partners as to the manner in which it was formed. The good thing, however, was the increased pace in fulfilling the commitments under the Association Agreement as compared to the last year.

The Institute for European Policies and Reform has done an analysis and the findings were that the implementation effort has increased and even doubled compared to the last year. This refers to the removal of debts that accumulated last year rather than implementation of the actions planned for 2016. The roadmap that the government and parliament approved in response to the EU Council conclusions on Moldova

from February is presented by the Government as a measure aimed at speeding up the implementation of key commitments set out by the EU - justice and banking sector reforms, the efficient and not selective fight against corruption. We will see at the end of July, which is the deadline for the implementation, to what extent the government will manage to fulfil the commitments under the roadmap.

Ultimately, what matters most at the moment - and all our partners mention this - is that there are many problems to be overcome. And this is not only about the legislative aspect, as here you can see certain results. The key problem lies in how the legal institutions function and fight against corruption on one hand, and in how the banking sector is operating, on the other hand. These are the basic pillars for stability. We are going to see how these commitments will be fulfilled, including in the context of discussions with the IMF.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Let's speak about the political dialogue with the European Union. Two or three years ago, the Republic of Moldova was the success story and much supported by the European partners. Now we see a lot of critical messages coming from the EU side. Do you think this is a temporary change of paradigm, or it will take Moldova some time to restore trust?

■ **Iulian Groza:** Certainly we need some time to restore trust, but more than that, we need concrete results - implementation of reforms and a clear political will to do so. This is what also our partners in Brussels mentioned at the last meeting of the Association Council.

And finally, we see that the government, in one way or another,

has no choice but implement concrete reforms. The problem is how this is being fulfilled. For the moment, we are at the stage of promises and declarations. We see that certain facts run contrary to the promises made - the way the decisions are taken in the justice sector, the way judges are appointed, the way the fight against corruption takes place - all these indicate that there is no judicial institution truly independent from the political factor and that the justice can be characterized as subjective. There is also the bank fraud that certainly changed the image of Moldova both in the country and outside.

If is to look at the evolution of Moldova - European Union dialogue, the year 2014 was indeed the highlight, when the promises of the pro-European government regarding the new agenda for the EU relations through the Association Agreement and the visa-free regime were virtually fulfilled.

The turning point was the situation after the parliamentary elections in November 2014, when the pro-European parties have received a supporting vote. The society has confirmed this way that it's supporting the pro-European course of the country. However, these parties have failed to create a government which would continue the reforms.

It will take Moldova several years to restore trust and this will very much depend on how the government will respond to the citizens' expectations and progress in the area of fighting against political and high level corruption.

Earlier this year the dialogue with the EU has seen some changes compared to the situation at the end of the last year. The EU was virtually

forced to support the creation of the government. Since the country was -and continues to be - in a crisis, the EU did not see another alternative. Or, there was an alternative that was promoted as a ghost - that eventual early elections could bring to power anti-European and anti-reform forces in Moldova. In that situation, the EU judgement was simple - between two evils it chose the least.

This way, the attitude of the European Union became pragmatic, but reserved. The conclusions of the EU Council of Ministers in February shows very clearly that the EU rhetoric has shifted from general messages about the need for reforms, fighting against corruption, the judicial independence and depolitisation of institutions to very concrete issues. The conclusions contain 10 conditions that have been practically taken over in the Roadmap of the Moldovan authorities.

So the EU's approach is pragmatic - the direct budgetary support has been suspended, which is a very big problem for Moldova. This assistance can be resumed only if there is an agreement with the IMF, the latter implying economic and macro-financial stability and solving the problems in the banking sector. But even if the budgetary support was suspended, the EU continues to support Moldova through technical assistance projects, including projects aiming at meta-monitoring of political processes and the government. We can see how the EU mission of high-level advisors was strengthened - it increased to 25 advisors, the latter serving not only the government but also other institutions such as the Parliament and regulatory agencies. This shows that the EU continues to have an interest in Moldova to be reformed.



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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

Another important element is that the EU has started to offer more support for the communication efforts in order to counteract the anti-European propaganda in Moldova, also changing its approach towards the civil society. Basically, there are now more programmes by the EU and other European foundations aimed at supporting the Moldovan civil society. This brings me to the idea that our relationship with the EU is structured not only around the government. The relationship is more with the Moldovan people and this should be clear to everybody. The EU's interest is clearly to influence these processes in a positive way and put pressure on the government for it to change by supporting the efforts of the civil society.

■ **Lina Grâu:** A very important aspect of the Association Agreement was the Free Trade Agreement. Your institute has made an analysis of this document. Can we broadly say that Moldova benefits from free trade with the EU at maximum?

■ **Iulian Groza:** In terms of numbers, there is a positive dynamics, but certainly the trade potential with the EU is not yet fully exploited. The reason is, again, the low speed of our institutions in the implementation of the conditions that create preconditions for our exporters to access the EU market. We are talking about standards or sanitary and phytosanitary measures.

Here the EU also has been providing support to the government institutions and businesses in order to familiarize them with the opportunities of the EU market.

The fact that Moldova has been for a long time dependent on the Eastern

market made the Moldovan economic enterprises believe that it is much harder to access the EU market because of the standards. But if there is a will, there is a way. Take a look at the wine sector – the EU provided support for its modernization through the European Investment Bank. The sector succeeded to modernize, while the operators learned how to penetrate the EU market despite its saturation with wine products.

We should strengthen the agrifood sector in the same way. The fruits and vegetables are our asset, therefore we should support its modernization efforts.

■ **Lina Grâu:** One of the major benefits of the relationship with the EU for the Moldovan citizens that the latter are practically not even noticing, is the free movement in the EU. The Moldovan citizens have been moving freely in the EU for already two years. To what extent this will continue to give benefits to Moldova in the medium and long term? In the EU they are discussing now the possibility of limiting the free-visa access for countries like Ukraine and Georgia, after the visa regime is liberalized for those countries. Is there a risk for the Republic of Moldova that its visa free regime will be reconsidered, given the security problems in the region?

■ **Iulian Groza:** Probably the advantages of the EU visa free regime can already be felt and seen in Moldova, where more than 600 thousand citizens have benefited from the scheme in the last two years. Also in the Transnistrian region there are over 100 thousand citizens who used this procedure. The way the visa-free regime is being implemented doesn't raise questions about violations or create preconditions

for reconsidering the visa-free regime with Moldova. The violations or non-return numbers are insignificant.

To put it short, the visa-free regime is working and the way it is functioning in Moldova should serve as an example for the EU in taking a positive decision with regard to Georgia and Ukraine.

Of course, the refugee crisis that the EU is currently facing is influencing the internal debate on the visa-free regime. Moldova was lucky to get it in 2014 as we used this opportunity at maximum. If we had failed then, it could have been much more difficult now to achieve visa-free regime with the EU.

In our case, but also in the case of Ukraine and Georgia, the very idea of visa-free regime offers certain opportunities and benefits for citizens in the first place. I do not think the idea of suspension of the visa-free regime could be discussed in a practical way. Our region does not currently represent a migration risk for the EU and the figures confirm this.

In the political or geopolitical context - I don't think the blame for the faulty manner in which the reforms are implemented should be put on citizens. The citizens need more freedom to interact with the EU in order to see the values and be able to apply them in practice in their country.

■ **Lina Grâu:** To what extent the political climate in Moldova is beneficial and favouring the European course of the Republic of Moldova?

■ **Iulian Groza:** Certainly the current political climate in Moldova is not favouring an advancement in the relationship with the EU. If in November 2014 we were seriously talking

about submitting an EU membership application, currently in the Republic of Moldova and the EU there are no longer such discussions. Today they are discussing about how to stabilize the situation.

Without concrete results it will be very hard to talk in a medium term perspective about the idea of joining the EU. The first thing to be done is to advance with the implementation of the Association Agreement. This summer, talks will begin on the Association Agenda for the next period, given that the current one is ending in July. It's a great opportunity to set priorities that can generate change.

In the short and medium term, I think the focus should be on the judiciary and anti-corruption. Without changing the situation in these areas it will be very difficult to promote an agenda of advanced reforms with the EU.

Firstly, in the case of Moldova we should discuss with the EU about a permanent mission in the field of legal institutions, with specialists that not only provide advice but also help strengthening the institution so that it can be truly independent from political influence. Secondly, given the importance of this area, it would be

good to introduce a mechanism similar to the one in Romania when the latter was a candidate country - a verification mechanism to take the pulse of the governance in this area.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Where is the Europeanisation factor in the Moldovan society if the things are so bad when it comes to the political class?

■ **Iulian Groza:** I would not be so categorical. On the political dimension there are still political actors who continue to promote the idea of the European integration. And by the way, if you look at the polls, the general perception in the society is still one of strong sympathy in relation to the EU, even if the European integration has been very much discredited by the political factor.

Opportunities still exist and there are people promoting them. Unfortunately, many of them are in opposition now and cannot strongly influence the developments. But in the society, I think, the responsibility lies with the civil society and the non-governmental organizations.

European integration does not need to contrast with other vectors and integration processes. I think we will win

more if we fill this process with content and if we promote European integration as a development model. I am sure that in Moldova all citizens want to get rid of political corruption, overcome poverty and all citizens want functional and effective institutions, better roads ... We cannot find all these things in the East - I don't see there examples of functional state and legal institutions and political systems that could benefit somehow the transformation of Moldova. No one can convince me of the contrary. But I saw this in Central and Eastern Europe countries that engaged in a genuine process of European integration.

I wish very much that Moldova's European integration became a matter of consensus and that there were no more discussions about whether we should or not continue the process. What we need are debates and discussions on how we can achieve European integration. This rhetoric should be promoted more widely in the society by NGOs and opinion leaders so that our citizens have a better understanding of what the European integration is about. This way the politicians will be held accountable for the simplistic approach of comparing geopolitical vectors as the latter only divide the society as we see in the polls.

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