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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.

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



Starting with the 31<sup>st</sup> of August the Republic of Moldova is entering the “electoral period” before the presidential elections that will take place on October 30<sup>th</sup>. “Electoral period” does not mean “election campaign”. For the first time, the election campaign will not start with the official registration of each candidate, but for all competitors on the same date -September 30<sup>th</sup>.



The “Action and Solidarity Party”, led by Maia Sandu, and the “Truth and Dignity Platform Party”, led by Andrei Nastase announced they would decide on a common candidate for the presidential election that will also be supported by the Liberal Democratic Party. The choice will be made between Maia Sandu and Andrei Nastase, says the press release. Also the Democratic Party - the ruling party- held internal consultations to appoint a presidential candidate, whose name will be announced later.



The Russian Federation has announced its intention to open on the territory of the Republic of Moldova 25 polling stations for the elections in the Russian Duma from September 18<sup>th</sup> - one in Chisinau, one in Balti and one in Comrat, a mobile polling station in Cahul, and 22 polling stations in the Transnistrian region. The Moldovan Foreign Ministry said it doesn't oppose the plans, but it warns against opening polling stations in Transnistria, where Chisinau cannot guarantee the security of polling centres.



In Transnistria, the Russian Troops Task Force has conducted new military exercises together with units of the power structures of the Tiraspol separatist administration and medical teams. The exercise which took place on August 16<sup>th</sup> is the second exercise conducted jointly by the Russian and Transnistrian soldiers in less than two weeks. The Moldovan Bureau for Reintegration described the exercises from August 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> as “illegal, unacceptable and defiant” and reiterated its call on the Russian Federation to withdraw its troops and munitions from the Transnistrian region.



Several NGOs have handed over to the EU Delegation in Chisinau an appeal calling for an international investigation into the issue of the bank robbery. The NGOs argue that the internal investigation is not credible if the officials who admitted the robbery remain in office.



On August 24<sup>th</sup>, the Romanian Government has released the first tranche of 60 million euros from the 150 million reimbursable aid promised to the Republic of Moldova. The Romanian Prime Minister, Dacian Cioloș, said during the official 2-day visit to Chisinau that the second installment will be released after Chisinau signs the agreement with the IMF. The loan had been frozen because of the “one billion theft” from the Moldovan banks. Pavel Filip's government says it hopes to conclude an agreement with the IMF in October.

## **Serghei Gherasimciuk: The alternative to the European integration is transformation of Ukraine and of the Republic of Moldova into a „geopolitical morass” between Russia and the EU**



**B**oth Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are celebrating these days a quarter of century of independence. The Ukrainian analyst Serghei Gherasimciuk, expert with the Foreign Policy Council in

Kiev, says that after a quarter of century the Moldovan-Ukrainian relations are promising, especially in light of the European vector embraced by both capitals, despite many thorny issues.

■ **Lina Grău:** Could you please make an analysis of the stage the two states are after 25 years of independence. What parallels and contrasts can you draw between Ukraine and Moldova?

■ **Serghei Gherasimciuk:** If is to talk about parallels between the two countries, an indisputable one is that both countries were once part of the Soviet Union, which had an impact on the political culture of our elites and on the political culture of the society in general. Another similarity is that after the collapse of the USSR both countries found themselves in a situation of economic crisis that has lasted long enough.

There are also positive parallels - both countries have decided that the European option is a priority and have been implementing Association Agreements with the European Union.

■ **Lina Grău:** Neither the Republic of Moldova nor Ukraine has managed in these 25 years to become a zone of stability and security. Why did that happen? Why have they become a buffer zone between Russia and Europe rather than a space clearly affiliated to a European security umbrella as it happened, for example, with the Baltic countries?

■ **Serghei Gherasimciuk:** The first reason, I think, is that neither Ukraine nor Moldova, unlike the Baltic countries, had strong enough advocates in NATO and the EU. Apart from the general view on the need to extend, both in NATO and the EU the interests of the Baltic States were very strongly supported by lobbying groups from the Scandinavian countries. Poland has always been Ukraine's advocate, while the advocate of the Republic of Moldova was Romania, but it was obvious that in 1990 these countries could not compare with the influence of the lobbyists of the Baltic State neither economically nor in terms of the political influence.

Another reason is the position of the political leadership both in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. The Moldovan

government and President Voronin in particular, as well as the Ukrainian government and President Kuchma tried to sit on two stools, oscillating between the EU and the Russian Federation.

Such an oscillating position was somehow justified as it allowed tactically to obtain privileges both from the EU and Russia. But now, with tensioning of the relations between Moscow and the EU, the feeling is that we simply lost time. We were not ready for a confrontation and now, when the confrontation occurred, the level of our relations with the EU does not meet our needs yet.

And, unquestionably, a third factor should be taken into account- an external factor which is Russia's position. The Russian Federation, ever since the Soviet Union, has planted various mechanisms to prevent the disintegration of the Soviet Union. These mechanisms were the regions with separatism potential – it is about Transnistria in Moldova and Crimea in Ukraine. And we see that as our countries have begun to distance themselves from Moscow's influence, levers were implemented in order to detonate these delayed action mines. And now we see that Transnistria in Moldova's case and Donbass and Crimea in the case of Ukraine became kind of anchors that in one way or another are deterring us from getting closer to the European structures.

■ **Lina Grău:** Speaking about the separatist regions, many Moldovan experts draw the public attention to the fact that for many years, Ukraine has not been supporting Chisinau in the Transnistrian settlement – in spite of its official correct position, de facto, it has supported the separatist regime in Transnistria. The Ukrainian authorities seem now to have changed their approach, especially in light of what happened in Crimea and Donbass. First, how do you evaluate this opinion of Moldovan experts? And secondly, do you think it is possible with joint efforts to bring the Transnistrian region into the legal space of the Republic of Moldova?

■ **Serghei Gherasimciuk:** You're right - Ukraine has always underlined that it is in favour of resolving the Transnistrian conflict only on the basis of international law and sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, it has long been felt in Ukraine and its foreign policy influenced by the Soviet past that Ukraine was trying to position itself as a great power which could afford to a certain extent not to take into account all the interests of the Republic of Moldova.

Now the situation has changed and this has become visible not only in the context of the war in Donbass, it changed during the period of Viktor Yushchenko who proposed his own settlement plan. Already then the positions of Ukraine and Moldova have become much closer. During President Yanukovich, Transnistria, I think, was in general outside Kiev's foreign policy, because Yanukovich had very little interest in the subject. Since Poroshenko has become president, the issue seems to have gained importance.

On the other hand, my impression is that at present there are some problems caused by the Republic of Moldova. Many experts here in Kiev are concerned about the format of negotiations between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation – visits of the Deputy Prime Minister Rogozin, discussions about roadmaps etc. On the one hand, it is obvious that Ukraine is now interested in supporting the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, there are experts in Ukraine who are worried about the fact that Chisinau itself would be ready to change the format and limit the influence of Ukraine in this format, discussing directly with Moscow.

Regarding the extent to which joint efforts can contribute to the reintegration of the Transnistrian region, it seems to me that a lot will depend now on the results of presidential elections in Moldova, but also on the so-called elections of the Transnistrian leader. In

both cases changes of elites are possible, so the results could have an impact on the dynamics of contacts between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Taking into account this dynamic the other participants in the regulatory process will also have to take some positions. That is why, I believe, that until after the elections and stabilization of the situation, it would be premature to talk about any progress in the Transnistrian settlement.

■ **Lina Grâu:** We can say that Kiev is now firmly on the side of Chisinau and it can provide backing in the negotiations and discussions with Moscow and also with the OSCE which has been lately trying to impose certain decisions regarded as unacceptable by the expert community in Moldova. Can Chisinau count on support from Kiev?

■ **Serghei Gherasimciuk:** From my point of view, yes, now Moldova can entirely count on support from Kiev. The most recent example was the day when the Moldovan government protested against the Russian military applications in Transnistria- Ukraine has reacted promptly supporting Moldova's position.

But there is a subtlety that should be taken into account – this is about reciprocity. It is unquestionably that Chisinau can count on support from Kiev and Kiev, in its turn, relies on such support from Chisinau. That is why I would like to get back to the issue of resumption of contacts between Moldova and the Russian Federation. It is excellent when countries are trying to find common ground, but Ukraine is looking with certain concern at these contacts. If there is a danger that Ukraine's interests will be ignored in these negotiations or the Republic of Moldova will rely on the Russian experts in the settlement of certain Moldovan-Ukrainian bilateral contentious issues, it is sure in that case that Ukraine will change its position, because, at the moment, Russia is not perceived as a partner by Ukraine. If Moldova gets closer to Russia, this will not

add confidence in the relations between Chisinau and Kiev.

■ **Lina Grâu:** You mentioned earlier about political elites. Moldovan experts recognize that at present the political and economic power in the Republic of Moldova is concentrated into the hands of an oligarch. There are also big question marks as to the corruption of the power in Kiev. Do you think these problems that exist both in Ukraine and Moldova can be overcome?

■ **Serghei Gherasimciuk:** The issue of corruption is indeed very acute for both countries. And here I would like to remind you about what I have mentioned at the beginning of this interview – the Soviet legacy that has influenced the political power. Corruption, unfortunately, is present not only at the high-level, but also in the everyday life of both countries. At present, certain changes are being made, the EU lobbying actively for creation of anti-corruption structures. I would not count on the fact that this problem will be resolved in the short-term period. Now a lot of people are talking about the success story of Romania as an example for both Moldova and Ukraine. But we should note that Romania has been in the EU for years and it is only now that the anticorruption activity is gaining scale. That is why both in Ukraine and Moldova we cannot count on short-term results no matter how much we would like them to happen. It is rather a long term goal provided the foreign policy is oriented towards integration into the EU as the fight against corruption is supported by the EU. Only if this direction is maintained can we expect progress.

On the other hand, another important factor is the political will of the leading players in both capitals - they have to understand that in absence of radical changes, the countries will remain in a geopolitical "morass", meaning there will be no progress in getting closer to the EU and both countries will remain a buffer zone between the EU and the Russian Federation.

■ **Lina Grâu:** How do you see the prospects and future of our region in the medium term?

■ **Serghei Gherasimciuk:** It is increasingly that we hear in Brussels and our capitals that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia form sort of a trio, a group of signatory countries of the Association Agreement, that would have the potential to move fast on the way toward European integration provided they join efforts and exchange experience in the area of reforms. On the one hand, we are losing a part of the Eastern Partnership countries – Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia - because these countries have not reached this level yet. An example of countries that joined efforts and became success stories are the Baltic States or the countries from the Visegrad Group. If this scenario is successful, it would promote development of both Ukraine and Moldova.

There are alternative scenarios, of course- the risk of coming to power of the pro-Russian forces in Moldova and the risk of military escalation in Ukraine. And if we get under the Russian military or political influence, the region will, unfortunately, become less attractive to the European partners, risking to remain a grey area and a geopolitical "morass".

However, by and large, drawing the line, we can say that both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have achieved a lot during these years of independence, despite the poor starting conditions. Both countries have set themselves the ambitious goal of getting closer to the EU and there is even competition between them in this respect which means they are likely to achieve this.

And, undoubtedly, the role of civil society here is huge as both the government in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine are driven by the civil society. And given the potential of the civil society, which has increased considerably lately, I still hope for the optimistic scenario.

## **Sorin Ioniță: After 25 de years, it has been found out that the uncertainty was convenient to the political elite in the Republic of Moldova**



**S**ymbolically, the Romanian Government has released the first tranche of 60 million Euros from the promised 150 million Euro loan, just a few days before the Republic of Moldova's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence. On August 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, the Romanian Prime Minister, Dacian Cioloș, visited Chisinau together with six ministers responsible for the justice sector and economic and regional development.

*In a press conference together with the Prime Minister, Pavel Filip, Dacian Cioloș spoke about the dedicated support provided by Romania to the Republic of Moldova in order to strengthen democracy and support reforms and Moldova's European integration."*

*The president of the Expert Forum from Romania, Sorin Ionita, says Romania*

*will remain a faithful advocate of the European integration of the Republic of Moldova but the ball now is in the court of Chisinau, which has to reform and improve the quality of governance.*

■ **Lina Grâu:** How is the Republic of Moldova seen from outside at its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, a period in which the Baltic States have managed to integrate into the European Union and NATO?

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** The Baltic States, which are the same size as Moldova, have managed to integrate into the EU and NATO because they wanted this, while in case of Moldova it is not clear whether it wanted it. The fact that the country remained in this state of uncertainty was caused by the war from 1991 and the situation in Transnistria, which is a frozen conflict,

but also because of the option of the Moldovan society. There is no consensus or ardent desire to become part of the EU and NATO. So, it happened what people wanted. I mean, the country remained in a state of ambiguity – sitting on two stools.

■ **Lina Grâu:** I think this happened also because of the quality of the Moldovan political class.

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** It is true and we can talk about the quality of the political class based on some standards. Let's take for example the Romanian standards which are very low, or the East-European standards. Nobody is very happy with their politicians, you know it very well. People are not happy in Poland or Bulgaria. But the situation in the Republic of Moldova has been objectively more difficult- the Moldovan political class, which is weak, without directions, and corrupt, had to face very hard options. Let's take, for instance, the geo-political options. I do not know any European or East-European politician who would have dared to say decisively: "Let's abandon Transnistria and take it to the West." It's clear that you cannot move towards the European integration together with Transnistria. So we are blaming the Moldovan politicians for things that even the European politicians wouldn't have had the courage to take easy.

Of course, the political class has been weak. It had to face a very difficult context and it didn't fulfil its tasks, so it's clear there is stagnation. Moldova is probably the country that has stagnated most since '90 - '91. Well, we can also talk about Ukraine, but there the problems

are of different nature. Even in Bosnia and Albania we see quite good progress. And it's not that we see it, but the people there feel it. They are not frustrated as Moldovans that nothing happens. The people here have the feeling that, in fact, the country will not get anywhere. And perhaps this is a justified feeling.

■ **Lina Grău:** You mentioned that Moldova has had the deepest stagnation. However, there were also positive things which brought hopes that we were moving into the right direction – especially this is about the relations with the European Union.

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** I know, but those were not realities – those were some hopes that, at the moment, seemed to be justified. It was in 2009, 2010, 2011, when there was a lot of hope in Moldova.

There was hope from the diplomatic point of view in terms of reconnecting to Europe, developing relationships, and progress on the European agenda. But neither then, I think, there was much progress in the economic prosperity of citizens. But there existed, at least, some hope for the future, which disappeared later and we all know in what conditions ...

Well, it's not that the hope has totally disappeared as there is an Association Agreement and a Roadmap, but I do not know if people in Moldova put any trust in such instruments. However, they should insist with these instruments and the political elite should continue on this way. But, sure, the people are much less enthusiastic than four, five, six, seven years ago.

■ **Lina Grău:** How do you see the prospects of the European course of the Republic of Moldova? Is there a medium or long-term perspective? Can we say we remained in a grey area or there is still some hope?

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** I'll be direct here – Moldova is in a grey area and has two

very big problems. One is internal and has to do with the quality of governance in Chisinau, which hasn't improved greatly and the disappointment after that wave of hope is very big. Moldova was on the peak and now it's down, from this point of view. This is about the domestic context that is strictly related to the quality of governance. The progress in this regard has been minimal in the last 25 years. Moldova is the country that has done the least in terms of quality of governance.

Secondly, it is about the regional context. And, of course, until you do your homework you cannot have a voice in any discussions with neighbours – this is what we have learned in Romania. It is more complicated in the case of Moldova, as the country has to solve the Transnistrian dilemma. And that is a very, very serious problem, because we can speak of integration in the European Union, but when passing from official discussions, where everyone is polite, to the informal discussions, the question still stands: "Ok, the question is where Moldova ends" Who integrates into Europe? And this is a very difficult question to answer as you neither can force the people from the left bank to integrate into Europe against their will, nor renounce them. This is an ambiguous game holding the country back.

I'm not saying I have solutions. I mean, unfortunately, a small country with a weak political class has inherited a difficult problem that anyone would have found difficult to resolve – be it the political class in Poland, Romania or Bulgaria. Fortunately, we have not had such problems.

In Moldova there is no consensus for integration and it is not only about Transnistria, there is also Gagauzia and a part of the population that are still ambiguous regarding the membership in the European structures, not to mention NATO.

My message is that you have to work. I mean, we all know that the situation is

difficult, but even if slowly you still have to move on.

■ **Lina Grău:** Given the quality of the political class in Chisinau and the increasing citizens' demotivation, what can Moldova count on in promoting the European course? Romania has always been an advocate of the Republic of Moldova. Can Romania do more about supporting Moldova?

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** Yes, Romania could always do more if it was more coherent. Look at the agenda from the times of enthusiasm - when hundreds of millions money and projects were promised... Things have moved very slowly. Some money was given and we have seen some results -the school buses, SMURD, the investment programme in kindergartens, scholarships ... But, of course, Romania could do much more and in a more consistent way.

But, ultimately, I think it depends on Moldova and on its political class what it wants to do, because the support from the European Union was always there. And I would like to contradict those who complain: "Oh, Europe has abandoned us, Brussels has abandoned us." No! It does not matter if people in Brussels are annoyed or less annoyed. The institution called Association Agreement and the Roadmap are there and you should work to implement them. However, I feel that the government in Chisinau are less receptive to what Brussels proposes, that is, on the other hand, accused of being very sceptical and not wanting Moldova into the EU. Sure, it's hard to talk about membership, but let's do the small important things and not speak about great plans.

To summarize, I think the ball is still with Chisinau in relation with the European Union and that there are many free kicks and corners to beat. And I see the Moldovan players staying with the ball at their feet and not kicking it.

■ **Lina Grău:** Do you think Romania should

have made the loan more conditional? The first tranche has been released and we have heard the Prime Minister, Dacian Ciolos, announcing in Chisinau that the second tranche could be released after Moldova signs the agreement with the IMF

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** I belong to the Romanian civil society and I know very well its position - we shouted to our government that there should be very serious conditionality for helping the Moldovan Government, because the soft assistance programme - when you give money without conditions - is to the detriment of Moldovan citizens. No one will benefit from this money - after all it's not that much money - it will be swallowed up somewhere in the budget and it will be very difficult to track it down.

So, yes, we are in favour of the assistance to be provided, but we insisted all along, sending memoranda, and having meetings with the Romanian Government, maintaining that it is in the interests of the ordinary Moldovan citizens that their government be put conditionality.

Theoretically, they say there has been conditionality. They say the first step has already been made and that there will follow tougher conditionality for the following tranches. We really hope so! Now that the first instalment was released, I hope this will not be used in the electoral campaign by the likely candidate, and namely by Prime Minister Filip.

■ **Lina Grău:** How do you see the future of the region - the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine - in the medium term?

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** Both Moldova and Ukraine are countries that depend on the quality of internal governance, coherence and the messages of the government and the political class in general, including the opposition. The question is - is there a bit of consensus on certain topics? Is there such a consensus in the Parliament, among the right and left wing parties and the opposition? Is there a minimal consensus on some issues - the EU,

regional security issues, direction to follow, and the governance at home?

In Romania we had the Snagov Pact which set the political consensus on the priority of European integration. There should be such a pact also in the Republic of Moldova. This is the way forward. Also Ukraine needs such a pact. The question is whether this is possible. Does this reflect the will of the majority of the population? Is there consensus that prosperity is in one direction and not in the other direction and that we got convinced about it over the last 25 years? As you cannot have Association and Free Trade Agreements with both sides. This is not possible technically and in this situation you have to choose. So you have to put barrier on one side and decide where to integrate.

I still have the feeling the choice has been made but rhetorically. Officially, yes, the Moldovan government has opted for the European Union. But what does it mean when the Moldovan state enterprises use offshores outside the European Union? How can this be explained when the public institutions use offshores in Transnistria and elsewhere for public contracts? What is then the Western option about?

■ **Lina Grău:** At the moment, in Chisinau there are no conditions for signing such a pact. What are the prospects of the country in this situation?

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** It is important to have a discussion - a real one, where all the options are put on the table. It's not possible without a fundamental option. It is a situation that is convenient to certain political elites.

After 25 years, the political elite of all parties exploits very well this state of uncertainty. They are actually gaining from the uncertainty. This game cannot continue anymore, because this way you are reinforcing this system of incentives and everything is built around this strategy: companies, public institutions, relations. Everything is built around taking advantage of the uncertainty. That's

how the scandal in the banking system started; that's why we have scandals with privatizations; that's why money is being siphoned in the energy sector - because there are people who have a very rational and material interest to maintain this uncertainty. And I think these things are not discussed, even by those who declare themselves pro-Europeans.

■ **Lina Grău:** What would be the solutions in this case?

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** The situation is so difficult in Moldova that I think it's unprofessional to start to figure out solutions in a minute. But I think I've pointed out where to start. You have to work on those directions that can change the game. For example, you can change the situation if tomorrow you pass a law that any enterprise and public institution in Moldova can no longer use offshores in the contracts. You can make more such changes - cutting several important means through which the government revenue drains from Moldova - and we'll see what happens.

Those who benefit could be forced to change their strategy - at least to try to steal from Europe, not to steal using the old systems in Eastern Europe. It is also a form of integration. Many who have agreed in Romania on the Snagov Pact from 1995, have thought about this strategy. They thought rationally: "There is money in Europe. Why shall we stay here like fools when we can be inside and steal money from Europe?" Those were their thoughts then. They might have managed to do it at the beginning, but failed to do it later. Maybe we can persuade the thieves from Moldova that they can steal in Europe and fool them in such a way.

Things will change - in Europe it's not possible to steal in the way it is happening now in Moldova. Neither here is everything clean, but things are within civilized limits and there are mechanisms to fight against such phenomena. And they really work - you can see it in other European countries and you can see it also in Romania.

## **Sergiu Musteață: Some things have changed for the better but not to the extent to be able to say Moldova is a rule of law**

**The historian and professor Sergiu Musteață is saying that after 25 years of independence the Republic of Moldova has not managed to become a prosperous state and to ensure decent living conditions and security guarantees for its citizens.**

■ **Lina Grău:** What do you think about the situation of the Republic of Moldova at its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence?

■ **Sergiu Musteață:** After 25 years, unfortunately, we can say that the situation in the country is worse than at the beginning of its independence. The Republic of Moldova split off from the Soviet space without any debts and now the situation in this respect is rather bad. Regarding the economic development, things didn't improve either. On the contrary, the situation has worsened in certain areas, despite private ownership, free market economy with open rules that Moldova adopted.

As to the political situation, Moldova didn't have a coherent policy like the Baltic countries. The latter had clear goals and have largely achieved them – they became EU and NATO members and reliable partners for the world states, while the Republic of Moldova has balanced between East and West. This unclear geopolitical position turned us into an unreliable partner both for the EU and Russia.

These oscillations and manoeuvring from one direction to another has not ensured us a clear political vision. Therefore, the Moldovan society today is much divided on this issue, while the politicians do nothing,



but speculate on geopolitical issues in election campaigns or when it suits them. And this is not fair. If Moldova is an independent state like other European countries, it must say it very clearly what its political course is and what it aims at.

That would facilitate the settlement of several problems at the local level, in particular the identity issue. Regarding the identity issue, unfortunately, the Moldovan people do not associate themselves with a single state and some of them do not associate with the Moldova's citizenship. There are cases when people hold three or four citizenships which shows that people do not understand the role and meaning of citizenship, the responsibilities they have towards the state. By applying for multiple citizenships they only seek ways to secure a more decent life.

■ **Lina Grău:** You spoke about economic, political and identity matters. But what do you think about the social situation in the

Republic of Moldova? When we became an independent state, Moldova had over 4 million population. Now it is very difficult to say how many we are, because even the census figures have not been made public...

■ **Sergiu Musteață:** Also the demographic and social situation is bad. We were not able to carry out this census properly so that we can operate with recent data. This demonstrates incapacity, but also irresponsibility of those who were involved in the census. I would rather suggest the authorities to neglect the census conducted in 2014 and start preparing for a new one in a serious way, with responsible people.

So we do not know what the exact number of the Moldovan population is. Speculatively, I would say it decreased by one million- let's say one million is abroad and the number of those who move from rural to urban areas is

increasing ... But, again, these are just assumptions that cannot be supported by accurate data. Therefore, it is very difficult to assess the real state of the Moldovan population from the numerical perspective. It is also difficult to say what people are thinking about. The people have plunged into poverty and despite the fact that several governments and parties stated they had made poverty reduction a priority, they failed to improve the living standards of the population. Poverty is increasing in the Republic of Moldova that pretends to be independent and building democracy.

Take the pension system, for example. We are on the brink of collapse regarding the capacity to collect the necessary resources for the pension fund. In two or three years we will not be able to cover the current pensions and social payments. This means that the government should urgently reform the pension system including revision of the pension calculation methods, retirement age and other aspects. It should identify solutions to prevent a collapse of the social system of the country.

■ **Lina Grâu:** From a regional perspective, I would like to take a look at what the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Baltic States managed to obtain in terms of security over these 25 years of independence. Despite the fact that they broke from the USSR at the same time, we see a very big difference between the Baltic States, on the one hand, and Ukraine and Moldova on the other hand. Why did we get to the point of becoming a buffer zone between Russia and Europe rather than an area of security and stability that could have provided us with a certain internal balance?

■ **Sergiu Musteață:** We have a so-called frozen conflict which causes us headaches in the separatist region of Transnistria but also in other administrative-territorial and ethnic segments of Moldova. In the recent years we have experienced some statements - thank God they didn't lead to actions that could distort the overall

stability of Moldova – by the Gagauz-Yeri Administrative Territorial Unit. The situation in Transnistria didn't progress towards a better understanding. The existent negotiations have been rather simulated and in most cases, whenever there was certain progress, it was Chisinau and not Tiraspol that made concessions.

Unfortunately, the Transnistrian region remains today an area of instability. And if we look at the military exercises by the so-called peacekeepers that took place recently, we can see once again that Moldova is unable to control this area. It is a signal of instability, including in the context of what is happening in Ukraine. It is with great regret that I'm saying this, because Ukraine hasn't been a partner to us over the years in the Transnistrian regulation and today it is facing a much more complicated situation than Moldova – it has areas of conflict and lost territories as a result of the annexation steps made by Russia. Today, Ukraine has re-conceptualized its foreign policy and regional security policy. Today also Ukraine is in danger because of the challenges posed by Russia and the local groups fuelled by Russia.

What should the Republic of Moldova do in this difficult context and situation? It is a small country and it is very difficult to resist the external challenges as well as the internal ones that are supplied from outside. So Moldova needs reliable partners that could help it overcome this state of deadlock and become attractive for such separatist spaces as Transnistria. I would not leave also Gagauzia without attention.

An independent state is primarily characterized by its ability to guarantee security to citizens. I do not think Moldovan institutions can say it firmly today that they guarantee our daily security, national and regional security.

■ **Lina Grâu:** The picture you drew is far from being optimistic. What did prevent Moldova from achieving what the Baltic States have achieved, for example?

■ **Sergiu Musteață:** First, the difference between us and the Baltic States resides in mentality. They have a different mentality. We didn't have political leaders or a political class to work for the state or for the Moldovan citizens. They fought among themselves for spheres of influence and for dividing the capital and for many other things that have led to the situation we are having today. That is why I am saying that we don't have politicians or governments to be proud of. The confidence in government is very low. If we look at the polls, the majority of the population trusts the church rather than the courts, for example. This is contrary to what it should like in a democratic and modern state.

The situation of the justice sector and police that should ensure stability and public order - this should be discussed in the most serious way in order to identify solutions. Why do we have the reputation of the most corrupt and poorest country in the South-Eastern Europe?

■ **Lina Grâu:** Yet, during its recent history, the Republic of Moldova has had positive moments and full of optimism that brought hope for change. This is about the relations with the EU. We had some really positive results - the Association Agreement, visa-free travel in the EU ... Can we say at this moment that Moldova has European perspective in the situation when we became from the "success story" of the EU "the most corrupt country in Southeast Europe"?

■ **Sergiu Musteață:** Indeed, there have been many good things. The world has developed and people have travelled all over the world, the young people have the opportunity to study in other countries ... This is all true that some things have changed for the better, but not to the extent that we can say our country is a rule of law.

Regarding the Association Agreement, of course, that was a step forward compare to Ukraine, for example, which failed at a time and had very serious consequences. We seemed to have made a good



beginning, but in the process we haven't managed to produce sound results.

As to the free trade and visa-free movement, these are definitely advantages and bonuses we received in the context of that success story in order to encourage us to go further. But we couldn't appreciate that gesture of the European structures and, unfortunately, we let them down losing thus the chance of speeding up the European integration process.

Today we have to work very hard to recover the lost years and the wasted resources, and return to a true integration perspective. Today this perspective is declarative rather than real - we have to work hard for the implementation of the Association Agreement and should not lie to people that in two to three years Moldova will become an EU member.

I think it is premature to talk that we will achieve the status of the candidate state in the near future, as we did not meet the commitments under the Association Agreement. What has been implemented are minor things. Speaking about modifying and approving laws, that is not enough as the laws need to become lucrative tools. We promised to fight corruption, but actually what we have is just a simulation like in many other areas. If we took it step by step, we would understand that in the near future we do not have any chance to become an EU candidate state.

But this doesn't mean that the European aspirations should be reduced or somehow neglected. We are a European state at least geographically, a state that has expressed interest in joining the European structures. And in that sense, if we really want to build a truly democratic state with a civilizing perspective, we should meet the commitments to the EU, but also to the citizens. Then, certainly, in a few years, in a few decades, if we really work for that, we will reach the standards of living and the level of responsibility that can give us the right to proudly say that we are ready to apply for the EU membership. Until then, we need to work hard.

**Lina Grău:** What are the prospects for the Republic of Moldova?

**Sergiu Musteață:** Of course, the prospects are not very optimistic. It is very difficult to get rid of corruption and build a stable society in a very short time. Things have deteriorated very quickly over the last two decades and it won't be simple to recover the situation.

In fact, you could do it provided people are more responsible and conscientious. Unfortunately, again in comparison with the Baltic States, the citizens' participation and responsibility is very low. People want changes, but are not ready to participate; they want to live better, but don't work hard ... People need to understand that if we really want to become a civilized and democratic society, everyone should become active. Education should become a lifelong

activity for everyone, otherwise, we are at risk to disappear as a state and society. The number of people leaving the country is growing. We have realized that after 25 years of independence Moldova is populated by old people, children left without parents and by those who do not have the resources to leave the country today but are thinking about leaving tomorrow.

Thus the situation is very delicate and the people in power should call a spade a spade as the situation we find ourselves in is very difficult. We should be aware of it and seek solutions to get out of this situation. The people in the government should be more accountable and transparent in the decision-making. We are often told the things are improving, but the reality is just the opposite. For example, they say the wages have increased, without taking into account that the purchasing power has decreased significantly.

A major problem today in Moldova is the corruption. It's high time to move from words to deeds. We've had enough of speculations and lies - that they had punished someone for bribes or that they had dismissed others for influence peddling. It's not the way to fight corruption. We could look at the experience of the western European countries or closer, at the Georgian experience. The people in power have to understand that they have to serve the citizens and not their leader or someone on the top. People are expecting results and real changes.

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