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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Sorina Ștefârță, editor-coordinator

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News in Brief



"The EU support to the Republic of Moldova focuses on generating tangible benefits for the citizens across the country. Since the Sandu Government has taken office, the EU has observed a genuine political will to tackle reforms in areas that have a direct impact on people's lives such as fighting corruption and electoral reform." The statement belongs to Christian Danielsson, the General Director for the European Neighborhood and Enlargement Policy within the European Commission, who came to Chisinau to reaffirm the European Union's commitment to support the reforms initiated by the current Government. Christian Danielsson met with Prime Minister Maia Sandu, President Igor Dodon and Parliament Speaker Zinaida Greceanii. At the same time, during a public event hosted by the European Business Association, the EU official discussed with the representatives of the business environment and civil society about the key areas of the Association Agreement, the rule of law and justice reform as a guarantee for democracy and for the development of business, about the advantages of the Free Trade Area and the consolidation of an economy that will benefit the people, but also about the role of the whole society in supporting the European path of the Republic of Moldova.



The relationship on the eastern direction seems to occupy a significant place in the autumn agenda of the Moldovan Foreign Minister. On September 9, Nicu Popescu was in Kiev, where he discussed with his counterpart Vadym Prystaiko about securing the Moldovan-Ukrainian state border, including the Transnistrian segment; about facilitating border control procedures by expanding joint control points; about the ecological protection of the Nistru river, but also about the liberalization of the auto and air transport. Nicu Popescu welcomed the recent exchange of prisoners between Ukraine and Russia and reiterated that the Republic of Moldova does not recognize the so-called recent elections in Crimea and Sevastopol. Two days later, on September 11, Nicu Popescu was in Moscow, where he met with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. The issues on the agenda included topics such as the intensification of bilateral economic and trade relations; organizing the meeting of the Moldovan-Russian Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Cooperation, the problems faced by the Moldovan citizens in the absence of a social protection agreement with Russia, the priority of withdrawing the Russian troops deployed in the Transnistrian region and relaunching the dialogue on the withdrawal and destruction of ammunition stored in Cobasna.



"The USA has been a supporter in promoting the democratic values and principles in the Republic of Moldova, materialised in a considerable assistance and expertise offered since the declaration of our independence," said Prime Minister Maia Sandu at the opening of the "American Days", which is being held in September in different localities in the country. She welcomed the idea of this event, noting that "it is an excellent opportunity to learn about projects supported for years by the US Government, but also to learn about the culture, history and traditions of the American people." For his part, the US Ambassador to Chisinau, Derek J. Hogan, noted the tangible results attained by the Republic of Moldova thanks to the bilateral relations with the USA. "Since the independence of the Republic of Moldova, the US has invested a great deal to help strengthen the economy, fight corruption and increase transparency and accountability," said HE Hogan.

How many foreign policies are there in Chisinau today?



Sorina Ștefârță

Last week, Prime Minister Maia Sandu has paid her first official visit to the United States. The head of the Chisinau Executive met with the USA Vice-president, Mike Pence, with whom she discussed the key-priorities in the cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the USA, but also with other US officials.

Maia Sandu told Mike Pence about the reforms initiated by the Executive and about the process of dismantling the former political regime, and asked for the support of the US authorities, the FBI and the CIA, in the investigation of bank fraud. Also, time was reserved for meetings with representatives of the business environment, civil society and Moldovans based in Washington.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Nicu Popescu, formed part of the Moldovan delegation to the USA. He flew to the United States directly from Berlin, where on September 16th-17th he had a working visit at the invitation of his German counterpart Heiko Maas. As in the case of the other visits that he had in the little more than two months period since his appointment as

► minister, in Berlin, Nicu Popescu spoke about the advancement of our country on the European integration path as a priority and about the irreversibility of the reform progress.

As a proof, in a public debate organized by the German Foreign Policy Association, Minister Popescu presented also the reforms initiated by the current Executive, focusing on the key sectors: justice reform, strengthening the rule of law, modernizing the infrastructure, ensuring energy security. And first of all, the intention to strengthen the bilateral relations with the states in the region, respecting the main priority of the foreign policy - the dynamic implementation of the Association Agreement and the advancement of the country on the European path.

All good, beautiful and, above all, clear both from Maia Sandu, and Nicu Popescu. All good, beautiful and clear until the Moldovan X or Y, having returned in the evening from picking grapes or corn, turns on the TV and learns that, during his recent visit to Brussels, President Igor Dodon told "clearly" (the intensity depends on the TV station that gives the news) the NATO Secretary General that "The Alliance will not cross Moldova's border ...". And someone was saying two days ago that NATO is no longer a threat as it also helps us get rid of tons of pesticides or modernize our army, but this time it is the President who is saying that. And the President knows it better than any "minister" ...

Obviously, everything is just a metaphor. But as it is known that every metaphor is just a little metaphor, while the rest is pure reality. And the reality shows that the foreign policy messages conveyed by the official Chisinau, especially in the context of the current governing alliance, are often so contradictory that they generate a "borsch" (quoted by the regretted Viorel Mardare) not only in the Moldovans' heads, but also in the heads of the external partners. To what extent this "borsch" contributes to strengthening the state and its security it is difficult to say. It is certain though that today in Chisinau, several foreign policies are "carried out". Who will tilt the balance remains to be seen. But in the meantime, Igor Dodon is getting ready for his visit to the USA. To the UN General Assembly.

When we talk about a less involved West, we'd better look in the mirror



Vlad Lupan, political analyst, former Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to the UN

We are intervieweing today Vlad Lupan, a former Moldovan Ambassador of the Republic of Moldova to the United Nations, who currently lives in New York. With over 20-year experience in the public and diplomatic service, expertise in security issues, and also with a period in which he worked with the civil society, Mr. Lupan, has remained connected to the Republic of Moldova, and is a careful observer of the country's domestic and foreign political life. He comes up with suggestions and hopes to be heard, ready to contribute, though from afar, to the change at home. How is the Republic of Moldova seen today from over the Atlantic? Find out about it in the dialog below.

■ **Mr Lupan, how are the recent events in Chisinau seen from across the Atlantic?..**

■ Things are seen in a certain continuity - as expected, actually. A temporary coalition

was created to remove a compromised and controversial political figure from the public life. Since it is made of two components that cannot come to an agreement by definition, I don't think the current alliance will last very long and we are still to see what will be the results of this quite unnatural alliance. In a way, it reminds me of the coalition between the PPCD and the Communist Party, which ended up rather sadly for the Christian Democrats and their leader. However, at the moment, the situation is not fully identical - there is no total coalition between PSRM and ACUM.

■ **Was the "evil" that great to justify such a compromise coalition?**

■ It's a question that still doesn't have a 100 per cent clear answer. On one hand, I have criticized the idea of this coalition and I remain partly sceptical of it. But it was the only way to get Plahotniuc out of the game. On the other hand, if the ACUM bloc had resisted in Opposition, things would have been quite different image-wise in the long run. For in a coalition with Igor Dodon - who is supported by Russia and is not hiding this fact - the image

is going to suffer, and that means problems in future elections and a question mark both in the country and abroad. I have talked to many people, including former colleagues, friends of our country and they also remain worried about this difficult alliance.

It was the only way to free the Republic of Moldova from a corrupt regime

■ ***At the same time, the alliance was strongly supported by the foreign partners...***

■ I think the foreign partners understood, as we did, that this was the only way to free the Republic of Moldova from a corrupt regime. But this doesn't lessen the concern for our future, the dilemma remains valid. In addition, the change of power was aimed at cleaning the Republic of Moldova and initiating reforms acceptable to all stakeholders, especially to citizens. I have not seen it yet - and I don't think the foreign partners have seen it too - that all the *necessary* steps for such a change have been taken, from justice reform to national security.

■ ***In this context ... there were hundreds and thousands of voices which spoke about a kind of conspiracy theory between the great powers, after which we were ceded to Russia...***

■ These rumours were launched on a *Telegram* channel controlled by the Kremlin, and in particular, by a person working for the Russian secret services. I was able to confirm this in an investigation I conducted together with a well-known American journalist - the Russians wanted to create the impression that the Republic of Moldova was ceded to Russia. But it is not true, rather it is a manipulation to demoralize the people and make them believe that Igor Dodon is the only option for the future, because the country was ceded anyway... Leaving aside the conspiracy theories, from a professional perspective and from my diplomatic experience, I can say that divisions *a la Yalta* no longer exist. A visit by the EU representative to Moscow to discuss the situation in Chisinau is a natural thing, as Europeans understand too well that Russian Federation has a huge influence in our country, including through the pro-Russian political parties, Russian business and certain media. In fact ... the European Union is not even an uniform body and does not have a single

leader who decides to accept the Republic of Moldova into the EU or, on the contrary, to cede it to someone. Therefore, such a ceding could not take place by definition. On the contrary, according to my information, these developments were an actual coincidence, via an alignment of US, EU and Russian interests. The reasons, however, were different for each of the actors, but not the objective. For Russia, for instance, Mr. Plahotniuc was a hindrance to Mr. Dodon's ascension. Removing Plahotniuc from the political arena meant that the PDM voters would migrate, rather quickly, to the PSRM. While the objective of the USA and the EU was to support building a rule of law, implicitly by limiting the influence of the Russian Federation.

■ ***A limitation that is not very noticeable, by the way...***

■ Unfortunately, our people understand better brute force and most direct involvement. This is what Russia is showing and what Moldovans appreciate, even though the invisible part of the equation tells us that Russia's economy is equal to that of Italy ... This doesn't mean that Russia is weak - it has never been. In addition, it has always had the ability to intervene militarily, while its unchanged leader for nearly 20 years, and the need for the Russians to feel as a nation that is taken into account, has fuelled this perception of power... At the other extreme is the West with the rule that "it is your right to do as you please" - and this also refers to the foreign policy. And it's not that they are not firm, but they are involved to the extent their involvement is called upon. In my activity, I have heard many times from our foreign partners: we can support you and we also have the money for it, if you have the will. I would say that we do lack political will, rather than funding ... Therefore, when we talk about a less involved West, we should be better looking into the mirror.

The problem is that the actors clash...

■ ***Watching ourselves in the mirror... The new government has over 100 days of power. How was it? In your public statements, including on the social networks, I don't see you being very excited.***

■ We cannot be excited, for it is clear that many things cannot happen in a coalition with

the Socialists. The area in which I would have acted differently - one with impact on the relations with the EU and with its member states - is the justice reform. It is a fundamental issue, alongside the fight against corruption. Without these two elements, the Republic of Moldova will not be able to attract investments as we would like to and as the country's economy needs. Respectively, the well-being of the citizens will not improve, and this is the national interest no. 1, even though there is no talk about it at all. And I'm not just talking about money, but about all basic things for a healthy society - health care, education, services. Only this way will the citizens stop fleeing the country. Therefore, we should focus on the domestic reforms, especially in the field of justice and, personally, I would have advised the current government to establish a neutral commission for the key appointments in that sector and to select people on the same criteria of political neutrality and professionalism. In no case on political criteria. The methodology is not new, it is applied in Ukraine and it would at least worth a try. Otherwise, questions about the judicial system of the Republic of Moldova - with professionals from honest to less honest in it, including those who assisted the Russian laundromat - will persist. Otherwise one day another person may take over the justice system, just as Mr. Plahotniuc once did.

■ ***How do these realities reflect on the foreign relations?***

■ I think our foreign partners understand that, in the current situation, it is not possible to get 100per cent results. But questions about cleaning of the corrupt system remain valid. For no matter how successful the external actions are - and we are currently witnessing "recalibration" efforts abroad - neither the Prime Minister nor other ministers can always stay in Brussels, Bucharest or Berlin to promote the reforms of the country. In addition, while one player (the Government) is focused on solving the problems domestically and externally, the other player (the President) is involved in preparation for elections.

■ ***By the way, who is the key player in the foreign policy today?***

■ I would say there is an unofficial distribution - the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and the President. And we have always had this "duality" with the Government, the President has always played a more or less

active role in the foreign policy, according to the Constitution. The problem is not in the “how many” players we have, but in the fact that today they clash. It is visible and even anticipated - you didn’t expect Mr Dodon to become pro-European overnight and give up on his relationship with Russia, and Mrs Sandu to give up the European integration! A different question is - which are the areas where President Dodon is given freedom of action. This conventional and apparently logical distribution that I spoke about earlier can serve strictly to increase his political capital in the next presidential elections. You cannot forbid a president to act in foreign policy, it would be a legal nonsense, but minimal coordination, on basics, between the Presidency and the Foreign Ministry would normally be required. Otherwise, the divergences will increase.

Welfare cannot be built on assistance

■ *However, there has been a change of undertone. Mr. Dodon has visited NATO recently...*

■ Mr Voronin also visited NATO, but that doesn’t mean absolutely anything. As I said before, unlike the Russian Federation, the western organizations don’t forcefully occupy the territories of another state, so, everything depends on the political will of the country. NATO would be interested to cooperate with the Republic of Moldova, if there was interest from our country in this regard. Otherwise ... why would it spend money on the Republic of Moldova when it is neither economically nor geographically important? Our only importance comes from the presence of our country near Ukraine, which is facing Russian military aggression, and near Romania, whose military bases host American installations. We can think of us as being the center of universe, all people in their respective states do, but that doesn’t change the reality.

■ *What will this competition between the Government and the Presidency end up with?*

■ I think we simply have to accept the idea that there are two more or less incompatible components. As a result, the Government - which has more resources, but also more commitments – is consistently promoting its position: in a more nuanced and specific manner, with more explanations and

arguments. And here the ambassadors of the Republic of Moldova, whose mission is to promote the national interest of the country and get the support of the partners, could be more strongly involved. Also the diaspora could get involved, as we saw in the last few months that it is ready to contribute to the change at home. And, of course, we shouldn’t forget that we cannot endlessly ask for donations. Welfare of a country cannot be built on assistance, though assistance is needed to carry out domestic reforms that can lead to welfare. This is the direct impact of the domestic policy on the foreign policy.

■ *What is the impact of the regional context for the Republic of Moldova?*

■ I would say that two basic elements prevail at the regional level - the geopolitical and the anti-corruption ones. The Republic of Moldova has only two neighbours and, fortunately, the time has passed when Chisinau behaved like a dwarf hollering at two “giants”. Today, just as ten or twenty years ago, cooperation with Ukraine and Romania is extremely important. Romania is our first neighbour in the EU. Ukraine is the only natural barrier between us and the Russian Federation with its expansionist tendencies. Therefore, if I had to recommend something regionally, I would again suggest establishing a strategic partnership with Ukraine. Even if, from time to time, the officials from Chisinau were afraid that our European integration would be dragged by a tandem with Ukraine, eventually, the EU would calculate the success of each country individually ... And the other strategic partnership should be built with Romania, at least in the field of security. This is the recommendation I made back in 2009. But, because a vote in Parliament is needed in such cases, and the necessary majority did not exist and still doesn’t exist today, we do not have all the partnerships.

Maia Sandu’s visit to the USA is a positive signal

■ *You mentioned about security. What are the biggest challenges in this regard?*

■ I am one of the authors of the Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, voted by the Parliament in 2011. And that document, in the chapter “Security Risks”, places poverty first. Starting with 1989 and until present, because first of all of poverty

about two million people have fled, the population dropping from 4.5 to about 2.5 million. It is not a conventional, traditional for this area approach to security in the sense of military threats, but this doesn’t mean it is less important. For instance, we are used to look at the healthcare as a field that has no connection with security. In reality, the connection is direct, because a sick society will not be able to defend its country militarily. And to this list we should add energy security, information, economic and, more recently, food security, plus the Transnistrian conflict and corruption. In ancient times, if you succeeded in bribing the watchman guarding the gate, you could conquer the whole city. Today, in the same way, if you bribe a person, who controls the state institutions, you can influence as you please the situation in the state as a whole. So, in a logical case, security is part of welfare. And I would say that security is influenced by the strength of the judicial, economic, healthcare and social systems, as well as by the military force...

■ *On September 18-19, Prime Minister Maia Sandu was in the United States where she held several meetings with senior US officials. The announced results include a wide range of topics: from the commitment to further support the Republic of Moldova to the US involvement in the investigation of bank fraud. What is actually this visit telling us?*

■ It is undoubtedly a positive signal. It is a confirmation of the support offered by the Republican government of the White House to the Prime Minister Maia Sandu and the ACUM Block that she represents. At the same time, this was an opportunity for our American partners to evaluate the situation in Moldova from its source, a situation complicated by a temporary partnership with a political actor with different interests, President Dodon. Last, but not least, there undoubtedly was an assessment of priorities for immediate future. Thus, the message of the current US administration is not only a signal of support for a component of the Government, it is also a signal of support for the whole country. We hope to see this message translated into concrete actions.

■ *Thank you for the interview.*

Sorina Ștefăruță

Editorial

Chisinau on the moving sands of regional insecurity

Mădălin Necșuțu, reporter
BalkanInsight.com

With a small scale at the regional level, but also with intrinsic problems caused by the endless internal political struggles, the Republic of Moldova remains in the same gray area in terms of security. In the short and medium term, it is hard to believe that much will change from this perspective, while the proximity to the EU and NATO borders still places Chisinau in a buffer zone between the Euro-Atlantic area and Russia with increasingly pronounced militarist accents in the Black Sea region. This should further alert the Republic of Moldova as all the security turmoil in the region as well as a lack of expression at the level of foreign policy, keep the country on moving sanda.



The ideological division at the societal level is also projected at the leadership level by the inability of the country's leadership to formulate a clear foreign policy in a context that is becoming increasingly volatile. However, the picture is not completely bleak, but rather an interactive one, in which the players who share executive power develop their positions, sit at the playing table and try, each, to impose their political objectives.

Tactics of the ostrich that buries its head in the sand

The pro-European forces are oriented towards the EU rapprochement as a result of the signing of the Association Agreement in June 2014, but also towards a military cooperation with NATO through joint missions and exercises. At the same time, the nationalist and pro-Russian forces remain anchored in a Soviet-style paradigm, according to which the two blocks are in a position contrary to the interests of the Republic of Moldova. The tactic of the ostrich that buries its head in the sand, conceptually formulated as "neutrality", places Chisinau somewhere "in limbo" as the international slang refers to the states undecided about their future. All these dysfunctions at the leadership level, currently covered by President Igor Dodon and the Socialist

Party on the left, and the ACUM Block on the centre-right, have a major impact on the state's efforts to set forth and pursue clear and consistent foreign policy objectives, especially predictable at least in the medium term.

If we were to take them chronologically, from the beginning of 2019, we can see a number of key-moments in which the pro-Russian and pro-European political actors have tried various moves abroad. On February 15, President Igor Dodon attended the Security Conference in Munich, one of the most important annual events in the security field. There, he officially spoke of his "both and" or "either or" policy - all bundled in the "comprehensive package for Moldova". This novel concept, though built on the backdrop of some retreated ideas, should have summed up the so-

called concept of "permanent neutrality" and good relations with the East and the West. Or the so-called "gentle calf with two mothers" tactics, taken over from the former Communist President Vladimir Voronin ... At the same time, regarding the Transnistrian separatist region, Igor Dodon proposed a conflict resolution through a more active involvement of international actors in the settlement process. In short, an international peace conference that will identify the model of the Transnistrian settlement. What is interesting about this aspect formulated by the socialist President is the "timing" chosen, and namely 2020, the year of presidential elections when he will run for a second term.

Foreign policy in the logic of domestic policy interests

De facto, the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova is formulated by the head of state in the logic of his own domestic political interests. Moreover, the international stakeholders - obviously the Western ones and Russia that has no tradition of engaging in post-conflict reconstructions - will contribute, in Igor Dodon's view, in the next 10-15 years, with money to restore the region. Thus, by a move presented as a foreign

policy objective, Dodon would draw at least two dividends: 1) as the one who solved this complicated file and 2) infusion of about 300,000 citizens in the total number of voters, who would tilt the political balance in a decisive manner. In short, a reprint of the 2003 Kozak Memorandum, which proposed a larger role of internal decision for Tiraspol, but also for Comrat. One which, if need be, could cancel any advance towards the EU that is contrary to Moscow's interests in the region ...

Geographically speaking, since the beginning of his term, Igor Dodon has made over 30 visits to Russia. Other states from Asia and the Middle East followed, where nothing was resolved economically. The economic realities are that the Republic of Moldova has already reached a 70% level of exports directed to the EU markets. Yet, despite these realities, the country has become, from the first day of 2019, a member with observer status of the Customs Union - a structure in which the Republic of Moldova was introduced by Igor Dodon without having the mandate of the former Government. Such episodes, along with other inflammatory actions and statements from the past, have given President Dodon an international isolation, when neither the EU, the US nor its neighbours - Romania and Ukraine - wanted to talk to him.

Through a corollary of hostile actions, but also through the impression he created externally - as if he were only a carrier of a political-military project of Moscow in Chisinau - Igor Dodon has self-isolated, and with this he self-isolated the Republic of Moldova. His recent visit to Brussels at the beginning of September only strengthened his label. The head of state spoke to the EU counterparts about the declaratory intentions of Moscow to phase out ammunition from the Transnistrian Cobasna warehouse - a very vague move in details made in order to mimic the possibility of the troop withdrawal from the region. A desire of Chisinau expressed more and more vocal in recent years from the international stands. Thus, Moscow offered Dodon a mandate - to carry this message to Brussels on its behalf to test the Europeans' position on this subject.

A continuous forcing of limits

While during the ex- Filip Cabinet the prerogatives of Igor Dodon have been reduced to a minimum, together with the PD disembarkation from the government, the head of the state is continuously forcing the limits in the area of domestic and foreign policy. Thus, he created several parallel bodies - generically called "councils" - which are nothing but "shadow ministries" through which he is trying to exercise his executive power. At the same time, he is trying to put the Sandu Cabinet in a shadow cone on various major files - in particular, that of the relationship with Russia and the economic-political relations that result from it.

At the same time, the ACUM Bloc is trying to restore the state to the natural framework of relations with international partners, especially the EU. The democratic slippages - from the adoption

of the mixed vote in June 2017 to the cancellation of the election results for the Chisinau City Hall in June 2018 - made the PD an unrepeatable party at the European level, which led to the suspension of funds allocated to Chisinau by Brussels. The new Government, immediately after its installation in June 2019, has committed itself to repair the shabby bridges with all the international players that the Republic of Moldova is linked to and is in need of. The Prime Minister Maia Sandu's visits to Brussels and Bucharest restored the funding. Thus, according to the information provided by the Ministry of Finance, more than \$150 million is expected from the EU, the IMF, the World Bank and Romania.

Also, Prime Minister Maia Sandu obtained the acceptance of Bucharest for the biggest loan offered to the Republic of Moldova so far by Romania - 200 million euros. And the fact that - immediately after her taking office - Maia Sandu was received in Bucharest and Kiev speaks about the desire of the neighbouring chancelleries for a dialogue only at the level of executive power, with the head of the Government of Chisinau, and not with the head of state. The signal is as clear as possible, despite the President's interference - mainly for his image - in the foreign policy files managed by the Government.

Agitation, baffle and sinusoidal movements

Furthermore, Igor Dodon also showed his limits in the negotiation of these files - in fact, he proved the extent of his relations with Moscow. Because, since he came to power, at the end of 2016, he has not been able to reduce the high price of 237 USD per cubic meter, which Chisinau pays "Gazprom" for the gas. Neither his personal nor his zodiacal relations with the Kremlin rulers helped him achieve the expected results.

However, the current Executive has shown that it wants to have a civilized relationship with Russia. Evidence to that is the recent visit to Moscow of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Nicu Popescu. He touched upon all the sensitive points on the bilateral agenda: from the gas price to the stationing of the Russian troops in Transnistria or to the situation of Moldovans in Russia. Most likely, after the visit of Nicu Popescu, the Prime Minister Maia Sandu will also pay an official visit to Moscow for a meeting with her Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev. Such a move would break the image monopoly that President Dodon has been trying to build intensively over the last few years - that of seeming the only pillar of Chisinau's connection with Moscow.

There are agitations and baffle over the foreign policy issues denoting that the Republic of Moldova has not normalized yet relations with the East or the West. Only at the governmental level things are starting to settle on a normal course, while in the presidential area the sinusoidal movements of the President do not give predictability in formulating coherent policies in relation to the proximity of the Republic of Moldova and to the security needs of Chisinau in an increasingly troubled regional context...

To strengthen our security, we need a consolidated message and an informed society

Elena Mârzac, director of the NATO Information and Documentation Center (IDC) in the Republic of Moldova

The name of the North Atlantic Alliance is mentioned several times in the current edition of the Newsletter and the context in which it appears is almost the same: at the beginning of September, the NATO Headquarters hosted the visit of the President of the Republic of Moldova. Igor Dodon met with the General Secretary of the Alliance, Jens Stoltenberg, and even gave joint press statements. It is true that the statements betrayed a certain tension and ... dissension. Evidence to that are the post-visit headlines in the socialist affiliated press, which wanted to make it clear that the head of state remains uncompromising when it comes to our country's cooperation with NATO. How things are seen from the perspective of a person who has been busy for years with informing the public about the multiple aspects of cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, learn from the interview with Elena Mârzac, director of the NATO Information and Documentation Center (IDC) in the Republic of Moldova.

■ Mrs Mârzac, the opinions after Mr Igor Dodon's visit to NATO were very different - from the fact that it was a formality to speaking about a change in the president's attitude towards cooperation with the Alliance. Which are, in your opinion, the subtleties of the visit - if they exist, of course?

■ I think the recent visit of our President to NATO was triggered by a series of



circumstances at the national, regional and even international level, and its purpose was to show that he really promotes a balanced politics between East and West, especially that he also met with the European Union officials at that time. It is not his first visit to NATO. However, it is the first time he has met with the Secretary General of the organization. I think it was a formal and courtesy visit in order to reiterate the message that the Republic of Moldova is a neutral state and that it will remain so - this was the main message that he wanted to convey. He insisted on that although all previous speeches of NATO officials - whether in Chisinau or Brussels - mentioned expressly the fact that the Alliance respects the independence, integrity and neutrality of our country. That is why I would say the president's message was conveyed to the general public. For both at the Presidency and at

the Government levels, the importance of working with NATO (whether as an organization or with the member states) is fully recognised as NATO is the most important international organization that provides us support in reforming the security and defense sector. There is no other major strategic partner to help us with this.

The decision should be made by the people, and the people should be properly informed

■ If the permanent neutrality of the country is enshrined in the Constitution, on which the head of state insists so much, what would this solve?

■ I am inclined to believe that this permanent neutrality - a true fixed idea

that President Dodon and the Socialist Party have been trying to promote for some years now - is rather a request from the Russian Federation. And it is at least absurd, since we are completely missing the criterion number 1 which would confirm the status of permanent neutrality - there should be no foreign troops on the national territory. And they do exist in Moldova and it is precisely the Russian Federation that they belong to! In addition, I think the people should be consulted on this subject, but before that, they should be explained correctly and objectively what permanent neutrality means and what other national security solutions exist. No scary messages, no manipulation. At present, I am afraid there are no conditions for such a referendum.

■ ***However, if we look at the people, the balance is in favour of those who, more or less, are against NATO - both in terms of accession and cooperation. What should citizens know about these 25 years of the Partnership for Peace that the Republic of Moldova is a member of and that was celebrated last summer?***

■ During these 25 years, the Republic of Moldova understood the value of the relationship with NATO in the sense of being closer to the Euro-Atlantic community, but also of strengthening the security and defense institutions, using the standards and benefitting from programmes offered by the Alliance member states. We are a neutral state, but this does not imply isolation or passivity. We are members of the UN, we also participate in ensuring regional and, why not, international security through the presence of our military in the UN Peacebuilding Mission in Kosovo. It is already the tenth contingent and the country, as well as the military, are gaining from this, as they develop their professional capacities and also have a financial income. Also, through various programmes, the border infrastructure is improved, and mechanisms for combating trafficking of human beings and drugs, money laundering, organized

crime, cyber-attacks and terrorism are strengthened. We benefit from support for the army reform, so that our army becomes a modern, mobile and efficient military force, compatible with those of the NATO countries. Our soldiers have training, civilian control over the armed forces has been introduced and, thus, the Republic of Moldova is gradually becoming a more credible partner.

■ ***There is no talking, we don't hear or we don't want to hear about these realities?***

■ The problem is the excessive politicization of the subject. In addition, the citizens' perception is based on the Soviet reminiscences, strongly impregnated in our mentality, which is intoxicated daily with myths about NATO. These myths are heavily fueled by the Russian Federation through TV channels broadcast on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, local media making political partisanship and the pro-Kremlin politicians. This is why NATO is one of the actors targeted by the Russian information war, in which the Alliance is presented as an aggressive US-led military structure, which promotes a warlike and expansionist policy, and wishes to deepen the divide between the former Soviet states; and the Republic of Moldova is forced to join NATO, including as a condition for the European integration. In parallel, the message is conveyed that the Republic of Moldova has an incapable government; that, being a neutral state, it does not need armed forces or that they are weak, and that the country could survive only in a partnership with the Russian Federation. Everything is done to weaken the still fragile internal unity. And the result doesn't take long to appear: about 50% of citizens identify NATO with aggression and problems, and do not trust their own country.

We will only succeed with a common consolidated message

■ ***What is the information that could counterbalance this information war?***

■ We should tell people, again and again, that NATO has helped us to destroy the tones of pesticides, which have remained in various parts of the country since the Soviet period. And so it has contributed to improving the ecological security and the people's quality of life by cleaning the soil and water. Due to a NATO project we also have a food pesticide detection laboratory. I would also tell them about the projects that trained the authorities to deal with natural or anthropogenic disasters; the projects that contributed to the strengthening of the cyber defense and capabilities to combat the risks of biological agents; the "Science for Peace" Programme within which experts, scientists and researchers from the Republic of Moldova cooperate with their counterparts in NATO member states to solve various security issues in the civil, technology or innovation field. Or about the project called *Telemedicine*, which has developed a multinational telemedicine system that allows medical professionals to provide real-time recommendations to people in emergencies or conflict areas.

■ ***Who should spread this impressive content? As the people's opinions can be influenced by direct and permanent communication, so that they understand that security is not an abstract and one-sided issue.***

■ One problem is that there is little discussion at the level of policy makers. Moreover, we have distorted and even double messages: one comes from the Presidency, another from the Government and even among the members of the Cabinet there are different positions. So, there is no single voice on this subject, and without this voice any communication action is pure adventure. In addition, such communication is the obligation of governments, which have to set the tone to attract civil society, the media, academia, state institutions. But for this - and this is the most important thing - we have to decide where we want to get and what our purpose is. Only this way will we be able to explain to people why we need to strengthen the defense

capabilities, the professional army or the armed forces in general... We will only succeed by having a common message, not a double or a triple one, which disorients the citizens.

■ *Given the political situation in Chisinau and the (still) different views of the Power branches, the common message seems to be delayed. In this context, what are the prospects for the future? Or each one will implement their priorities in their area?*

■ At IDC NATO, whose priority objective is to inform the public, we are closely monitoring all the developments. From the public information that we have, there are no signs that NATO's partnership could be stopped. On the contrary, I think there will be an emphasis on development and deepening. This fact was also confirmed by the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister when they visited NATO. At the same time, I think the principle of balanced policy will have a say. That is, the Republic of Moldova will also take into account the reaction of the Russian Federation in its dialogue with the Alliance. But finally, the degree of openness and commitment in cooperation with NATO will depend on the Republic of Moldova. Neither in Brussels, nor in Chisinau there is talk about our country joining NATO, but only about intensifying the partnership. NATO needs, as a priority, stable partners in its vicinity. In this context, we hope that it will not forget the regional context. National security threats are no longer "linear"; they are cross-border, whether we are talking about military conflicts or pesticides, terrorism or migration. Neither big countries, not to mention small countries like us, can solve these problems by themselves. This is why it is good to work together. Chisinau, Kiev and Tbilisi already have joint initiatives to respond to the hybrid war and it would be a pity not to develop them further.

■ *Thank you for the interview and we wish you success.*

Sorina Ștefăruță

Expert Opinion

Dionis Cenușa: Moldova's "balanced" foreign policy, the Paris-Moscow axis and the Ukrainian dossier



The "multipolar" foreign policy promoted by Chisinau in the sense of the players that are instrumentalising it, but especially of the difference in the messages sent abroad by the respective players, is closely watched by the political analysts. In this regard, we propose a recent analysis signed for the Info-Prim Neo by Dionis Cenușa, in which he makes the connection between the "balanced policy" of President Igor Dodon and the current geopolitical realities in the region.

Balancing Moldova's foreign policy seems to become the essential element of President Igor Dodon's mandate, which expires in the fall of 2020. As a leader of pro-Russian forces, and in the absence of any serious resistance in domestic politics, the President is determined to influence the parameters of the foreign policy towards a "strategic partnership" with Russia. Except for the early elections which are uncertain so far, nothing else is able to temper his desire,

which is materializing, to raise Russia's profile in the configuration of national priorities. In this spirit, the European integration efforts are confronted with the power of the Russian-Eurasian "alternative". Thus, inevitably, the attitude towards veritable, tiring, but modernizing changes in any field- from economic production to the perception of values- will weaken because a simpler model is proposed.

The collapse of the oligarchic regime in the early summer of 2019 allowed the promoters of the Russian agenda in Moldova to overcome, for as long as possible, the handicap of being associating with "villains". At the same time, they adopted a pro-reform, unusual and uncharacteristic to them rhetoric, though vital for the local public and appreciated by external partners. Paradoxically, given these movements, President Dodon and the Socialists have demonstrated their political usefulness not only to Moscow, but also to

the West. Consequently, the government run by political parties inspired by the Russian political system and civilizational values is perceived as acceptable and attractive by both the East and the West.

A favourable regional geopolitical context

The regional geopolitical context seems to help this situation. The intention of the French President Emmanuel Macron to “reinvent an architecture of security and trust” between Russia and the EU indicates the emergence of a window of opportunity for re-launching relations with Moscow ([Elysee.fr, August 19, 2019](#)). That includes dealing with security issues in the common European neighbourhood. Paris’s initiative has led to the restart of the Russian-French Security Council on security issues, just one month after the Macron-Putin meeting. The focus of the Council is going to be the development of certain ideas regarding the “strategic stability and European security” ([MID.ru, September 8, 2019](#)).

The optimism of the French side, calmly accepted by Germany and other European states, including the EU, stems from an almost absolute certainty that Ukraine under the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky is willing to make all necessary concessions to stop the war in Donbas. As a result of his sincere commitment to end the war at any cost, though accompanied by multiple hidden risks, President Zelensky accepted the arrangements for an exchange of prisoners with Russia, agreed directly by the Russian President Vladimir Putin. As a result, 35 Ukrainians were released ([Reuters September 7, 2019](#)), of which 24 Ukrainian sailors and 11 political prisoners, illegally detained by the Russian authorities. At the same time, 35 Russian and Ukrainian citizens, detained in Ukraine for military activity in Donbas, were transported to Russia, including Ukrainian Volodymyr Tsemakh, requested by the Dutch authorities ([UNIAN, September 8, 2019](#)) for involvement in the downing of the MH17 civil aircraft in 2014 ([Radio Free Europe, September 5, 2019](#)). The exchange of prisoners prompted the discussion on the prospect of a final settlement of the “Donbas file”, with positive effects for all parties involved, but mostly for Russia. At the same time, the revival of the dialogue

between Kiev and Moscow facilitates the pro-Russian rhetoric within the Moldovan governing coalition and helps to multiply the perception that Russia would play a constructive role in the region, including in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.

“Normalization” of relations: the stakes for Ukraine, Russia and the EU

At the macro-geopolitical level, all the attention is captured by the thaw of the dialogue between Kiev and Moscow. The exchange of prisoners, vital to the physical and mental safety of those held illegally in Russia, is an essential starting point for a possible “normalization” of the Russian-Ukrainian relations. Both Zelensky and Putin need the best public image for long-term domestic political purposes. Each concession to Moscow represents a real danger for the national consensus around Ukrainian leader’s governing agenda and his own credibility and that of his “right hand” in the legislature - “Servant of the People’s Party”. However, diminishing the statistics of the war casualty and paving the way to a lasting peace prevails in Zelensky’s political calculations, reflected in, or inspired by, population’s expectations. The pre-election polls have defined very clearly the public preferences of the Ukrainians, placing the “end of the war in Donbas” on the top priority with 65%, followed by the improving of the economy (39%) and the fighting against corruption (33%) ([IRI, June 2019](#)).

Any improvement in the relations with Ukraine, without losing Russia’s real stake, offers benefits to Putin’s regime. The latter is interested in turning Zelensky’s peace-making profile into a valuable source for strengthening his own legitimacy, strongly challenged by the young generation of Russians. (...) Thus, while the Ukrainian leadership is pursuing a pacifist doctrine, Moscow is aiming at normalizing the bilateral relations with Ukraine ([Kremlin.ru, September 7, 2019](#)). The welcoming message of the Russian Foreign Ministry to Zelensky elucidates the signs of a tactic stimulating further concessions. Additionally, it seeks to discredit the Ukrainian political forces opposing a surrender approach ([MID.ru, September 7, 2019](#)).

Therefore, Russia makes Zelensky’s “political will” responsible for stabilizing the Donbas, increasing internal and external pressures on him. Future swaps of prisoners, which will target representatives of the Tatar minority from the Crimean Peninsula, will be used to diminish, in the eyes of the Ukrainian public, the military option as a solution for the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity in Donbas. The French activism in the Normandy format of negotiations ([Elisee.fr, September 7, 2019](#)) signals a sort of preparation of Europe’s “giants” to mediate the “normalization” of the Russian-Ukrainian relations, without offering Kiev guarantees concerning the costs of negotiations dictated by the Russian conditions. The EU does not intervene and has no responsibilities in the negotiation process, but it subtly encourages the continuation of the initiated process of de-escalation ([EEAS, September 7, 2019](#)).

Pacification of Donbas, a relief for all

(...) In Ukrainian leadership’s vision, the end of the war is primordial. The disciplined manner in which the recent “swap of prisoners” took place raises expectations that the Zelensky administration will repeat the same performance in the political part of the “Minsk agreements”. That regards the organization of elections in the separatist regions and the recognition of their results by Kiev ([KAS, February 2019](#)). Zelensky has the parliamentary majority (254 out of 424 mandates) needed to adjust the “self-governance law in certain areas of the Donbas and Luhansk region”. It would mean decoupling the “conducting of elections” from “the withdrawal of the military forces and the Russian armament” that are now interconnected. The failure in the energy dossier, with eventual suspension of the Russian gas transit through Ukraine at the end of 2019, could create animosities, but not strong enough to affect the substantiation of the Putin-Zelensky dialogue.

The pacification of Donbas will be a relief for the new composition of the European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen. Giving up on the extension of economic sanctions ([prolonged by January 2020](#)) will lead to the lift of the economic embargo

imposed by Russia on the EU agri-food products. European politics and economy are looking for alternative partner, interested in a multilateral international order - a logical consequence of the deterioration of Trans-Atlantic relations, caused by trade protectionism and unilateral diplomacy of the Washington administration. The recent announcement of stagnating German exports and concerns about a possible US-China trade war motivates France, Germany and the EU to strengthen the relations with international actors, considered indispensable for the European stability...

“Comprehensive package for Moldova” and the balanced foreign policy

The merging of geopolitical interests in Ukraine is of far greater importance than the perspective of the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, which has been in a “frozen” state for over two decades. However, the last steps of President Dodon externally, on the East-West directions, highlight his attempt to package the “balanced” foreign policy together with the Transnistrian issue. During his visit to Brussels, the second after the first one in February 2017, Igor Dodon articulated the points of the old “comprehensive package for Moldova”. Invoked at the Munich Security Conference in February 2019, the “comprehensive package” is based on two concepts. The first refers to “promoting a balanced foreign policy”, and the second refers to the “strengthening the principle of neutrality”, internationally recognized (Presedinte.md, February15, 2019).

The consensus of external actors - US, EU and Russia - concerning the overcoming of the Moldovan political crisis of June 2019 served as a benchmark to justify the validity of the concepts infused in the above mentioned “comprehensive package”. These concepts were introduced in the discussions with the Head of the EU diplomacy Federica Mogherini (Presedinte.md, September 5, 2019) and with the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. From a proposal ignored at the Munich Conference, the “balanced foreign policy based on the status of neutrality” has been transformed by Igor Dodon into a “a basic priority for the leadership of the Republic of Moldova” (Presedinte.md, September 5, 2019).

Without being shared by Prime Minister Maia Sandu and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and without being consulted with the Moldovan civil society, these foreign policy aspirations are illegitimate to start with. However, President Dodon plans to discuss the “comprehensive package for Moldova” with the EU, US and Russia and with them “to develop a road map for its successful implementation” (TASS, August 27, 2019).

Neither theoretically nor practically, such a “package” is somehow logical or achievable, even if President Dodon prioritizes it on his political agenda. *First of all*, the foreign policy and neutrality status are an emanation of popular sovereignty and cannot be fixed from the outside, if the country is a recognized subject of international law. *Another logic flaw* of the proposed mechanism is that any intervention by the US, EU or Russia in matters of domestic policy will be equivalent to an interference in Moldova’s internal affairs. (...)

Instead of conclusions...

Russia prefers to “normalize” relations with the countries in the region, which are facing separatism, with the ultimate aim of deepening the Russian influence. The mechanical embrace of the model suggested by the Russian side can lead to the inevitable “*transnistrianization*” of Ukraine. The “normalization” of relations, as in the case of Georgia, may also result in border revision (“*borderization*”) by the separatist regions supported by Russia (South Ossetia). Therefore, when normalizing the Russian-Ukrainian relations, the West has the obligation to support the national interests of Ukraine, thus investing in the stability of a country with European aspirations and in the Eastern security on the European continent.

Any kind of “package” for Moldova, used to immobilize the foreign policy or intervene in the status of neutrality which is already prescribed by the supreme law, is illegitimate *a priori*. No matter how resonant President Dodon’s position can be abroad, his gestures seem to serve Russia’s interests rather than promote the national ones, including by expressly ignoring the commitments under the Association Agreement with the EU. The Title II, Article 3 of the Agreement stipulates that the EU-Moldova political dialogue “*will enhance the effectiveness of political cooperation and promote convergence in foreign and security policy*”. To what extent is this provision compatible with the “comprehensive package” claimed by President Dodon?

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Foreign Policy Association (APE) is a non-governmental organization committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country Europeanization. APE was established in fall 2003 by a group of well-known experts, public personalities and former senior officials and diplomats, all of them reunited by their commitment to contribute with their expertise and experience to formulating and promoting by the Republic of Moldova of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy.



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