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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 Republic of Moldova is firmly engaged in the process of consolidating the rule of law and reforming the justice, said the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Aurel Ciocoi, during the second session of the Joint Working Group on the Rule of Law and Good Governance, recently held in Chisinau within the *Moldova-USA Strategic Dialogue*. He highlighted the relationship between an effective and impartial justice and the state credibility vis-à-vis external partners, and appreciated the US support in carrying out crucial reforms for the development of our country. At the end of the meeting, which brought together representatives of several authorities and civil society from both states, a *Joint Declaration* was adopted. The USA and the Republic of Moldova reaffirmed their continued commitment to deepening the bilateral partnership and cooperation to fight corruption, as well as protecting independent institutions and establishing an impartial justice, which the people of the Republic of Moldova deserve. Chisinau and Washington have agreed to cooperate in five key areas: carrying out significant reforms in the justice sector, strengthening anti-corruption institutions, promoting the media and free civil society, improving government transparency and defending human rights.



HE Peter Michalko, EU Ambassador to Chisinau, has recently confirmed the intention of Brussels to continue supporting Moldova. The statement was made during a meeting with Prime Minister Ion Chicu, attended by the EU high-level advisers, who work for several public authorities in the country: "It is important for us to show that the EU is ready to support you in achieving tangible results in the socio-economic development and the EU advisers are your instrument in the process of progress". The advisers presented their areas of competence, described the current situation in each area, talked about communication with central and local authorities, formulated priority topics for each area they are currently focused on. Among the areas addressed were the fight against corruption, the education and research sector, the energy and renewables sector, the Transnistrian regulation, state security and others. Peter Michalko appreciated the team of the EU advisers as highly motivated and competent, and mentioned about the EU's willingness to provide expertise on other dimensions as well. "This support is of great added value and can lead to increased EU support," said the EU Ambassador.



The Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting, the OSCE Special Representative of the Albanian Chairperson-in-Office for the Transnistrian settlement, made, at the end of January, his first visit to the Republic of Moldova in his new position. "My goal is to support the parties in their efforts to reach a comprehensive regulation, based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova, within its internationally recognized borders, with a special status for Transnistria, which fully guarantees human rights, the political, economic and social rights of the population", noted Thomas Mayr-Harting. According to him, the visit just two weeks after the official takeover of the OSCE Presidency by Albania denotes the attention Tirana is paying to resolving the conflict. In Chisinau, the official met with representatives of the senior leaders of the Moldovan state. He also visited Tiraspol, where he met with the Transnistrian leader, Vadim Krasnoselsky and the political representative Vitaly Ignatiev.

Republic of Moldova, a 2020 between parallel realities

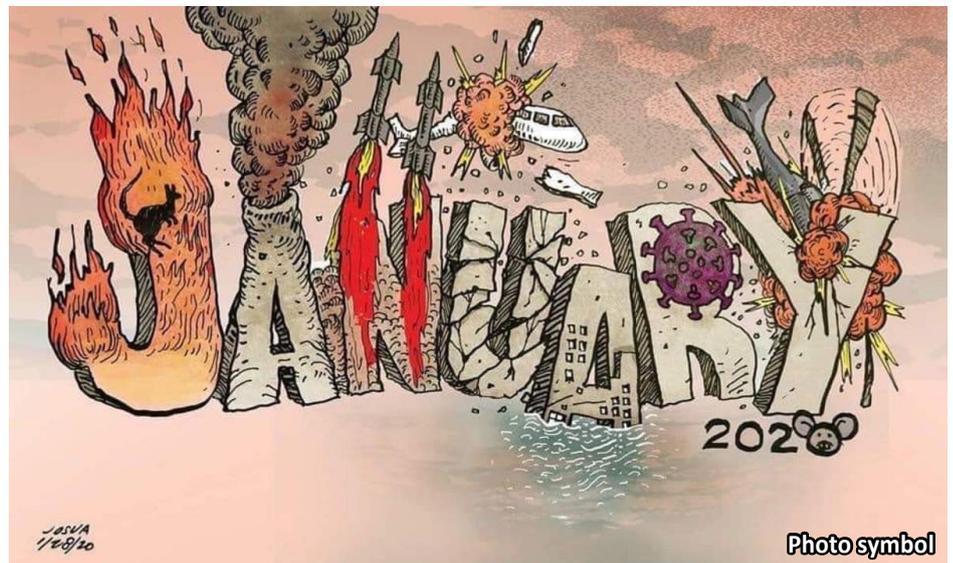


Photo symbol

Sorina Ștefârță

The year 2020 is barely getting around, the Christmas decorations are still around the house, while others have their Christmas tree still decorated. However, the things are happening on such high speed and at such spring temperatures that the New Year's Eve seems to have happened in another century and even in another

geographical dimension.

We remember that, among others, somewhere not so far away, a super-new American drone killed a rather old, but legendary Iranian general; that everyone was feverishly awaiting the start of a new world conflagration and that, again by human recklessness, two hundred innocent people lost their lives on a peaceful plane hit by those in possession of weapons.

We also remember that Australia burned, that we were in solidarity with the kangaroos and koala bears, without having time to find out if it finally started to rain over the single country-continent. For, meanwhile, a new and deadly corona virus has begun to roam the planet, showing us how small we are especially in the age of globalization. Even since the final

► Brexit agreement, which finally brought Britain out of the European Union, it seems to have been a hundred years, not just a few days.

The official Republic of Moldova is keeping pace the best it can. And because we have neither koala bears nor killing viruses, we have been enjoying our geopolitical “uniqueness”. For, how can you not rejoice when, from the country placed “on the road to all evil,” if is to believe the chroniclers, we have transformed, like the ugly duckling, into a magnificent swan that brings balance between East and West; a modest but tenacious constructor of an enlarged Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, an idea that certainly does not belong to us, having been produced in other laboratories of political PR.

The deep-rooted Republic of Moldova, contrary to the “official” model, is leading its life at an ordinary pace. Tens of thousands of old people count the wood they have left until the nettles appear (how good that we haven’t had snowstorms this year!); and tens of thousands of young people are thinking how not to grow old in the Republic of Moldova. And they are looking for Lisbon on the map: we do not know where exactly Europe will end, we do not know if it will really reach Vladivostok, but we certainly know where it starts and it’s there that we want to go!

The 2020 wants to tell us that it is again a decisive and changing destiny year. New presidential elections are announced in autumn. Older and less expired candidates have already lined up at the start line, while some have even started fighting their opponents. The deep-rooted Moldova is watching TV night after night, trying to understand what to expect from the official Moldova. It sees a statesman saying that the (Association) Agreement is good and that Europe, the one we want to balance, will still give us money. Then it sees another statesman raising his voice to the European emissaries who ... will they still give us money?

And it understands that it doesn’t understand anything anymore – the parallel reality has long been part of this world ... Read about all this in the first 2020 edition of the Newsletter with direct and less direct texts and confidence.

Republic of Moldova, at the crossroads again



Angela Grămadă, director, Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (ESGA), Bucharest

In the interview she gave us at the end of last year, Angela Grămadă, director of ESGA Bucharest, mentioned, among other things, that she had been working on a policy paper dedicated to the Republic of Moldova and to the events that had marked the country in 2019. Today, in the first 2020 edition of the newsletter, we offer you a compressed version of the document entitled „Republic of Moldova- at the crossroads again”, inviting you to read the full version on www.esga.ro. The study aims at explaining how the priorities are defined, how the resources are evaluated and how the national interests of the Republic of Moldova are promoted in the context of internal political crises. It also contains a thorough analysis of the profile of the most important local parties, with their successes and mistakes (we will get back on that latter), as well as a series of “policy options” for the country - recommendations that may be useful to both the Government and the Opposition (whatever they may be, at some point).

During 18-19 December 2019, the seventh meeting of the European Union - Republic of Moldova

Parliamentary Association Committee was held in Strasbourg, during which a Joint Declaration was adopted on strengthening the relationship between the two parties. According to the Declaration, the expectations of the European partners coincide with those of the Moldovan citizens, namely, the Chisinau authorities have to implement the necessary reforms for the socio-economic development of the country. Also, the Declaration highlights expressly what these reforms should be: the implementation of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA with an emphasis on strengthening public institutions and respecting the principle of separation of powers in the state; justice reform; investigation of frauds in the banking system; ensuring the necessary conditions for economic growth and increased living standards; encouraging forms of cooperation with the EU, including trade. De facto, the document does not introduce new elements in the bilateral dialogue between Brussels and Chisinau, but underlines the previously made commitments. This is just a description of the de facto situation and less enthusiasm about the new changes in the political life of the Republic of Moldova: the no-confidence vote against the Maia Sandu Government and the Ion Chicu Government, whose independence is relative. (...)

2019, a busy political year

On 24 February 2019, parliamentary elections were held in the Republic of Moldova, after which three political parties and one political bloc managed to overcome the electoral threshold. Also, three independent candidates succeeded in gaining voters’ support. However, no party obtained enough seats to form a parliamentary majority, which soon led to the political crisis. Any

format proposed and discussed by public opinion and political actors engaged in the debates seemed to be inappropriate and even dramatic for the image of a party... The negotiations were difficult and any attempt to communicate messages or conditionalities to colleagues from other political parties was dealt with suspicion. The drama of the situation was due to the fact that any association with the Democratic Party, led at that time by Vladimir Plahotniuc, was perceived as the beginning of the end for the other parties. The most logical parliamentary formula seemed to be a PDM-PSRM coalition. But, the insistence of certain civil society actors to impose, in the public space, the idea of another form of cooperation between two different political groups - the ACUM Bloc and the PSRM – allowed for at least a different debate and, at the same time, for a consistent debate with regard to a temporary coalition. This *coalition of convenience* - as it entered history- between the PSRM and the ACUM Bloc was created at the end of the legal term for forming the parliamentary majority, being encouraged by both the Western and Eastern partners. The representatives of the civil society have succeeded for the first time in imposing a “compromise solution” on the politicians, changing their official agenda.

On 8 June 2019, the parliamentary groups of the PSRM and the ACUM Bloc voted the Government headed by Maia Sandu. But the consensus between the two political actors, built around the idea of fighting with the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, supported and encouraged discursively by Brussels and Moscow, was short-lived. The *Coalition of convenience* lasted for five months, during which the Government has managed to deliver several positive messages to the external partners, improve the country’s foreign policy image and initiate some reform measures in the public institutions. At the same time, President Igor Dodon has managed to capitalize on some external opportunities, to gain access to western international platforms and forums, where he made several statements about

the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova and the prospects for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.

Republic of Moldova: a problem, a priority or an opportunity?

One of the priorities of the international public opinion for the year 2020 (the one that is concerned with the Black Sea region or the development of the Eastern Partnership), will have to become the assessment of the impact of internal policy processes and foreign policy initiatives promoted by the Moldovan authorities. The assessment should be correct, based on truthful and consistent information, which can only be obtained in an effective dialogue with both representatives of the political class and the business community, as well as with civil society actors (think tanks, NGOs), media and civic activists). When we talk about assessing the *de facto* situation or defining the real problems facing the Republic of Moldova, the analysis should start with a simple assessment, but capable of setting the tone for future bi- or multilateral initiatives: is the Republic of Moldova a problem, a priority or an opportunity to lay the foundation for a new policy in Eastern Europe? Both the European Union, the United States, and the Russian Federation did not miss in 2019 the opportunity to make their voice heard in Chisinau. The success of the “discursive, political investments” or “active measures” is assessed and felt differently. Some political actors in the Republic of Moldova have shown that the external “investments” in their projects have been effective, while others have withdrawn, arguing that integrity is a long-term image action and that the fight against corruption or against imposing an authoritarian regime is also possible from the position of a parliamentary opposition.

Equally important is for the country’s external partners to understand the domestic, external and regional context, but also to ignore the persuasion elements used by Igor Dodon and the new government, and not to overlook

in their assessments the references to “geopolitics” and “non-geopolitics”. Both situations are explored by Moldovan politicians. The assertion that the political discourse is too geo-politicized in the Republic of Moldova will not disappear. This was also confirmed by the way the *coalition of convenience* between the Socialists and the members of the ACUM Bloc developed. On the one hand, we had a good collaboration of the Chisinau Government with Brussels and other western capitals, and on the other hand, we could witness the exploration of the opportunities offered by the Executive to the presidential office and the party-the PSRM- and the continuation of the dialogue with Moscow. While the pro-European parties have made certain attempts to promote certain values, European realities, justice and reforms, the Socialists have succeeded in subjecting this “non-geopolitical” approach to the patrimonial and political interests of their party. Even when it comes to the “need for internal progress”, in fact, a choice is made between East and West, that is, between governance and management models of economic affairs and politics as a whole.

If the European Union wants the Republic of Moldova to become self-reliant, self-governing and accountable to its own national interests, the Western partners should be better at promoting vision, transformation, commitment and independence among those political forces that they indirectly count on or which they co-opted in the financial assistance management. This is about not only the verbalization of the conditionalities imposed or the mentioning of the Association Agreement as a basis for bilateral dialogue. The best option could be to convince the Republic of Moldova that it is important in itself for the international partners and not as an instrument or place for testing transferable models to other states.

Moreover, the agreements between the great powers should not prejudice the concept of “good governance” as a solution for the Republic of Moldova.

After the open support by the Western officials, but also the Russian ones, of the *coalition of convenience* between the PSRM and ACUM, a debate on the “efficiency of this political marriage” opened in the public space. All in the context of knowing the effects of the state business management model promoted by Russia - an authoritarian one - in addition to the Kremlin’s influence in undermining the democratic processes in several EU Member States, exploring ethnic, social, security fears, etc. Did the EU and the US understand the Kremlin’s support for an alliance that could officially not declare and promote anything but European values and integration? Beyond the discursive “political comfort” propagated from the Republic of Moldova in Brussels and Washington, the scepticism evoked by certain domestic actors should have been correctly assessed. However, the domestic actors have felt ignored.

The Options of political actors: what alternatives did they have?

At the end of 2019, the Republic of Moldova managed to avoid a new political crisis. The PSRM-ACUM coalition has broken up. The new Executive led by Ion Chicu, which included most of President Dodon’s people, was sworn in with the support of the PDM deputies, that is the MPs of the oligarch against whom the former parliamentary majority has allied. Early elections could be avoided, for the time being, even if they were still an option for certain political actors interested in reorganizing the government format or obtaining a more secure legitimacy for their own status and role. Regarding the political results of 2019 we can also include the adoption without public debates of the 2020 budget, taking over of projects and initiatives from the former government and presenting them as original projects of the new Executive or launching discussions on obtaining a 500 million USD credit from the Russian Federation – all the above happened in less than two weeks after the inauguration of the Ion Chicu Government. Also, an extremely important thing in the context

of the assessment of the year 2019, but also for the smooth running of Igor Dodon’s election campaign, is the fact that Moscow and Kiev have reached an agreement on the gas transit through the Ukrainian territory. (...)

At the same time, messages coming at the end of 2019 from the European Union, but also from Bucharest or Kiev, are not encouraging for the current government. The technical and financial assistance will be conditional, reorganized or partially withdrawn for certain areas. **The options are as follows:** reorganizing the technical assistance, following the analysis of the real needs of the Republic of Moldova and exploring the opportunities for it to be granted directly to citizens, local public authorities and civil society - and thus avoiding the interaction with a Government whose independence is interpretable. **The priorities, in principle, have not changed:** justice reform, transparency, public procurement, infrastructure projects, supporting partnerships between local public authorities and citizens, community projects that are correlated with the objectives of the Association Agreement and the Free Trade Agreement. **The final objectives are:** to contribute to the efficiency of this assistance, to generate benefits for both parties and to encourage a sincere and transparent dialogue with the Moldovan authorities. However, in order to make this possible, the external partners of the Republic of Moldova need to start from a consistent assessment of the options faced by the important political actors on the political scene in Chisinau, those who count in defining and promoting national interests and that cannot be ignored as dialogue partners. They represent the political choice of the citizens of the country who chose them in the elections - and it is an option that must be respected. The quality of this assessment will depend on the content and efficiency of the political dialogue between the Republic of Moldova and its western partners, but also on the dialogue with Russia, which is aware of the value of its investments in this country. (...)

Apparently, stability ...

Thus in 2019 the Republic of Moldova has gone through important political processes for the future of democracy, which have created opportunities, but also risks for the participants involved in them. The final beneficiaries of the electoral promises - consistent and pragmatic reforms - are still waiting for the positive effects of governance, regardless of the political colour of the Power.

Apparently, the end of the political and economic year was characterized by the term “stability”, but one designed in a certain form, suitable for a part of the political class - the one that is currently running the country’s domestic and external affairs. The opponents of this perspective, mistakenly presented to the public, need to be aware of the fact that one of the less optimistic conclusions of 2019 is that the necessary reforms for the Republic of Moldova are not on the agenda of political actors. The reforms have become rhetorical and have been included in the electoral platforms, but they are not priorities. In addition, in order to take on the responsibility of governance, as the ACUM Bloc has done, there was a need for a consistent, not situational parliamentary support that would disappear at the first political uncertainty. If the agreement between the ACUM and the PSRM was a temporary one, the first ones had to think, in a timely manner, of an action plan, capable of preventing the opposition from withdrawing and giving up important tools to achieve positive results.

2020 is an election year, first of all, which means that the reforms will be postponed again. Most likely, the political actors will be concerned about the reconfiguration of the electoral promises, not about the content of the reforms or public policies that the Moldovan society needs. However, the year 2020 may be decisive for some political actors to restore their image, reform themselves or get the attention of the confused electorate.

Editorial

Three variables for the foreign policy agenda of the Republic of Moldova in an election year

Mihai Mogîldea, Team leader, Europeanization Programme, Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE)

The year 2020 was unofficially proclaimed in the Republic of Moldova as one of a “balanced foreign policy”. It happened due to President Igor Dodon, who, in the absence of a functional checks and balances, quasi-necessary for our country, assumed, at a declarative level, the promotion of such a policy. However, this approach has proved inefficient and unreliable so far, especially among European and transatlantic chancellors. Today, the foreign policy file is in a complicated situation, marked by semi-isolation at the level of diplomatic interaction between the Republic of Moldova and the EU member states and Ukraine, as well as the USA.

The arguments behind the development of the so-called balanced foreign policy were of two types. On the one hand, we were presented with the thesis of developing mutually beneficial relations with both the West and the East, aiming at implementing all the bilateral commitments in force with the EU, NATO and third countries. On the other hand, there was made an attempt to promote the concept of a united Europe “from Lisbon to Vladivostok”, in which the Republic of Moldova, as a European state, would have “a special role”.

Although both theses are closely correlated with the interests of the Russian Federation in the region, the first is partly based on the electoral aspirations of Igor Dodon for this year’s presidential elections. Through balanced foreign policy, the President relies on attracting the support of the centrist electorate, especially in an eventual second round election. In particular, Mr Dodon will have to demonstrate to this group of voters that his dedicated foreign policy efforts have delivered results and improved cooperation with the country’s strategic partners. And here we have to analyse a few variables, whose



performance will influence President Igor Dodon’s electoral success.

Variable 1: Resumption of the EU macro-financial assistance

In October 2019, the Sandu Government managed to obtain the approval of the first 30 million Euros tranche of the 100 million Euros macro-financial assistance granted by the EU as part of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Republic of Moldova (2017). The disbursement of the first installment was possible due to the progress made by the Chisinau authorities in the area of respecting the political preconditions, inasmuch as the ten technical conditionalities by Brussels had been fulfilled during the Filip Government.

At the end of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Council in September 2019, the former prime minister announced the possibility of disbursement until the end of last year of the second tranche of the European macro-financial assistance, which did not happen because of the fall of the Sandu Government.

In the “era” of Chicu Cabinet, positive signals from Brussels were delayed, including on the size of the macro-financial assistance. Even though, at present, the eight conditionalities for disbursement of the second tranche are largely fulfilled, there is not much optimism neither among the Chisinau authorities, nor among the European officials. And that’s because, as mentioned in a recent interview by the Finance minister Sergiu Puşcuţa, there are also political conditionalities related to the justice system reform and the fight against corruption. Thus, it is not excluded that, in the absence of progress on the two key segments, as well as of a new agreement with the IMF, the second and third tranches of the EU assistance will not be provided to the Republic of Moldova this year either.

The resumption of macro-financial assistance is important for the image of the Moldovan-European relations. Its weight

is measured in qualitative terms and refers to the capacity of government institutions to deliver a series of key reforms for the current stage of the Association Agreement. In this context, the macro-financial assistance comes “as a package” together with the advancement of the dialogue with the EU, and, in its absence, the electoral discourse of Igor Dodon will be overshadowed by the failures of the foreign policy on the Western dimension.

Variable 2: Advancing the Transnistrian conflict settlement process

From August last year – when with trumpets blaring there was announced the initiative to destroy the ammunition in the Colbasna depot by the Russian Federation - no major progress was made in the Transnistrian regulation. The broad consultations in the “5 + 2” format for the negotiation and signing of the Bratislava Protocol were not successful, leaving many open questions regarding the continuity of the “small steps” strategy in 2020. Although in 2016-2019 Igor Dodon had seven meetings with Vadim Krasnoselski, the president’s levers of influence over the unrecognized Tiraspol leader have been quite limited. In terms of achievements, President Dodon and the Chicu Government will probably try to advance the discussions on the issue of the Colbasna ammunition depot, so that by autumn there will be a formal commitment and an action plan by Russia for the evacuation of ammunition. Also, in this context, we could have a presentation of the country reintegration concept in close cohabitation with the Kremlin’s visions for the status of the Transnistrian region. Last but not least, Igor Dodon will intensify the dialogue with Vadim Krasnoselski on both the formal and informal level. It is expected that the head of state will rely on the support of the unrecognized Tiraspol leader to ensure the organized transportation of tens of thousands of Transnistrian residents to the polling stations on the right bank in the presidential elections of autumn 2020.

Variable 3: Revival of bilateral contacts with Romania and Ukraine

After the installation of the Chicu Government, the relations between Bucharest and Chisinau could be characterized by a short but strongly suggestive expression: “There is no such thing as a free lunch”. De facto, the Romanian Government took over the European Union’s discourse towards the Republic of Moldova and has explicitly mentioned that it would strictly condition any effort and financial support with efficiency of the reforms undertaken by the new Chicu Executive. The scepticism about the cabinet of ministers

subordinated to Igor Dodon has become more pronounced in recent months, culminating with the not at all friendly statements of the interim Romanian Prime Minister Ludovic Orban about the “seriousness” of the Chicu Government. In the East, the situation is not any brighter. In more than three years of office, the Moldovan President hasn’t stepped foot in the leading institutions in Kiev, where Igor Dodon is perceived as a loyal ally of the Putin regime. Hence the lack of support for the Chicu Government, whose the Defense Minister has previously praised the fighting spirit of the Donbass separatists.

On the backdrop of the above-mentioned situation, in the bilateral relations with Bucharest and Kiev, the Moldovan Government will have to manage a series of important files: the energy interconnection of the country with Romania, respectively identifying solutions to the problem of the Nistru hydroelectric power station and installing joint check points at the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. In the absence of active bilateral contacts, we cannot expect that the three files will advance rapidly, especially since the last two require active and continuous negotiation rounds. However, Romania and Ukraine will most likely retain a visible reluctance towards the Chisinau Government and will not engage in a new agenda of actions with the Republic of Moldova until the autumn presidential elections.

Balanced, but a bit ... behind

In the first three months of the Chicu Government, the “balanced foreign policy” has been lagging behind, almost failing to happen in many areas. The results of the Moldovan diplomacy during this period were quite modest, while the number of bilateral visits in the western capitals by the Moldovan political leaders fully confirms this finding. At the moment, it is clear that the attention of the external partners is directed to the justice reform and the functioning of the democratic institutions in Chisinau, whose performance will determine the financial and technical support provided to the country.

The obtaining of a new presidential term by Igor Dodon will be partially influenced by the three variables presented above. It is certain that, although he hasn’t extended foreign policy prerogatives, in 2020, the head of state will, impose his own agenda meant to provide him with legitimacy among external partners. Equally certain is that, if electoral debates on foreign policy were to take place tomorrow, President Igor Dodon would be way behind Maia Sandu. It remains to be seen how and if he will manage to make up this difference.

Anyone trying to take control over the state institutions is a threat to society

Vladislav Kulminski, executive director, Institute for Strategic Initiatives

“The Filip government was corrupt, the Sandu government was dreamy and idealistic, and the Chicu government is powerless”, said Vladislav Kulminski at the end of 2019 in a talk-show on TVC 2. A statement that scandalized several friends and those who don’t have him at heart, but also set the tone for the political debate in 2020. The current Prime Minister even found it appropriate to respond via social networks, which is a bit uncommon for someone in such a position. Despite the reproaches that have been brought to him, including on the grounds that he was less vocal in the times when he was advisor to two Prime Ministers (Leanca and Sandu), Vladislav Kulminski, executive director of the Institute for Strategic Initiatives (IPIS), says it is his duty not to keep silent. What every citizen should not be silent about, find out in the following interview.

■ **Mr. Kulminski, you are a frequent presence of political programmes where, as a rule, you monitor and criticize intensely the act of government. Just as critical you are in your online appearances and on social media. Did you develop a passion for fighting the current Power? Is it a political or a personal cause? Or you simply like to be a Don Quixote who fights the windmills?**

■ It’s neither *donquijotism* nor personal whim. I really believe that we should avoid a new state capture in the Republic of Moldova as we had until the summer of 2019. We all know how it is to live in a captured state and we are obliged not to allow a “re-issue” of this situation. And the problem is not in Igor Nikolaevich Dodon. It can be X, Y, Z or any other person who, through his/her actions and decisions, tries to capture the state institutions and



to control absolutely everything that moves in this country. The problem is institutional and, anyone who tries to take control over the state institutions, is a threat to society.

Neither Vlad Plahotniuc was a monster in his early days...

■ **Exactly eight months ago, also President Dodon was talking about the state capture and promised that he would fight this phenomenon...**

■ Yes, only it was about Mr. Plahotniuc then... Unfortunately, very soon after, we have realised that the head of state is taking on more and more practices that he himself used to criticize, and we have no counterbalance to this process and to his growing power. One year ago, even under the conditions of the Republic of Moldova, we had democratic elections whose main goal was, for a good part

of society, to remove the state from the captivity of a single politician. For, when one person controls all the state institutions, the day will inevitably come when that person will begin to use them in increasingly narrow interests. And even if at present President Dodon prefers to obtain the desired results in a different way than Mr. Plahotniuc did - he does not take over businesses via the National Anti-corruption Centre, Ministry of Interior and judges, he does not fabricate criminal cases, but he uses money, functions and a sort of dialogue instead -, the essence is the same. The purchase, and thus the narrowing of the uncomfortable information space is a first signal even if he doesn’t persecute his critics. But if he wins the autumn elections, with all the institutions in his pocket, the “red line” will be easy to cross. In other words, neither Vlad Plahotniuc was a monster in his early days. But we are all humans and it is hard for us to resist the temptation of misusing power...

■ Who - or what - can provide the counterbalance you are talking about?

■ First of all, an independent justice. But we see it very clearly that, through the so-called reform of the judiciary, President Dodon, together with the Socialist Party, can only ensure the loyalty of the actors in the system. No politician today wants independence of this sector for the simple reason that an independent justice would immediately affect his/her interests. I would place the Prosecutor's Office in second place, which also has to be an independent institution.

■ Mr Stoianoglo has not shown any independence so far?

■ Yes, and I really believe that the situation with Mr. Stoianoglo is much better than it used to be in the case of the previous prosecutor general, in the sense that the Prosecutor's Office will probably no longer be involved in different schemes or attempts to take over businesses by force, threaten or send businessmen to prison. However, I do not think that we can talk today about Mr. Stoianoglo and the Prosecutor's Office per se as being independent. The serious and deep reform of the Prosecutor's Office would mean that Mr. Stoianoglo is free to initiate investigations, including against Mr. Dodon and the Socialist Party, because there are enough reasons liable to justice lying on the surface. Can you imagine that? I cannot. Can you imagine them investigating the matter of the money that the head of state spends on his exotic holidays? I cannot. Even if no one has doubts about Mr Stoianoglo's integrity and no one could say that he is corrupt ... the problem is not what he does, but rather what he does not. It is enough to remember about the freedom of action Laura Codruța Kövesi enjoyed in Romania so that we have no longer illusions.

The sole mission of this Executive is to ensure the re-election of Igor Dodon

■ Why doesn't the Legislative Power intervene?..

■ The Parliament, like the Government, is not free at all. In the case of the Legislature, what Mr. Dodon did to seduce the Democratic Party MPs that they became part of this majority remains an open question. There are a few reasonable suspicions: access to schemes, money and the promise that they will not be brought to justice... As far as the Government is concerned, there is no question of independence either and I doubt that there is anyone in this country who believes that Mr. Chicu decides things. Even if he walks hand in hand with the head of state, according to Putin's model ... Sometimes I have the impression that you can designate anyone in the position of prime minister, even Philip Kirkorov, as nothing is going to change drastically anyway. The same day, on the same TV stations, we will necessarily see the same four-five news about what the President does and what the Government wants to do. Because the sole mission of this Executive, but also of the parallel reality it creates, is to ensure the re-election of Igor Dodon as President.

■ What chances to resist this bulldozer-roller has the press?..

■ The media should be the most visible and the most vocal counterbalance. Only, as I said earlier, at the current stage, Mr. Dodon and PSRM control about 70 percent of the information space. He bought newspapers, portals, including those that were in opposition to the Power, trying to negotiate, against certain amounts or services, with opinion-makers so that they don't criticize him. These are far cleverer moves than simply persecuting people who express a different opinion, as Plahotniuc did. These are dangerous movements, while the counterbalance is getting smaller.

■ The likelihood that Igor Dodon will win another presidential term is high. Could he tamper with the Constitution as the Kremlin leader had done recently?

■ I do not know how high this probability is, but it is certainly increasing- by money, by administrative methods and

by purchasing the information space. If, however, he obtains his second term, I will not rule anything out. Not being independent in actions, he could do many bad things to the Republic of Moldova. Even Alexandr Lukashenko shows more stoicism in the negotiations with Putin, defending the sovereignty of his country. I doubt Mr. Dodon is capable of that. Nor could he say a categorical "no" as Mr Voronin did in 2003, refusing to sign the Kozak Memorandum overnight. The political interests, but also the economic interests, don't allow him to do that since he has businesses in the Russian Federation though his brother. The latter are very dangerous things for the Republic of Moldova. We will have to make a stand then by all means, including street protests.

A reintegration at any price cannot be accepted

■ What is happening to the Transnistrian settlement? It is an issue you have been following closely also during the times you were working for the government...

■ I'll answer you through two stories-examples. The first dates at 2013, when a federalization plan for the Republic of Moldova was developed. I heard it had been written in Tiraspol and that Mr. Dodon presented it as the only method of resolving the Transnistrian conflict. Those who saw the document say that the Kozak Memorandum was a children's play compared to it. The plan provided for three federative subjects - Transnistria, Gagauzia and the Republic of Moldova - each with its own Constitution and monetary system - and Mr. Igor Dodon promoted it intensely in 2013-2014, hoping it will please the Russian Federation. But to what extent did he promote the interests of his country so that even his own team criticized him? Including Mr. Vasile Șova, who was then Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration and who, by the way, is not part of the current government (as far as I'm informed, it is because he used to be too

harsh in promoting the interests of the Republic of Moldova in the '5 + 2' format).

■ Perhaps he wanted a reintegration at any cost?..

■ There can be no reintegration at any cost. Everything has a price and it's better not to have anything at all than to accept conditions that will turn the Republic of Moldova into a non-functional state, a state unable to promote its independent foreign policy and national interests. And here comes the second story- a very recent one related to the car registration plates. Chisinau had taken a tougher position in the negotiation process recently, aiming at tipping the balance in the interests of the Republic of Moldova - an approach sanctioned also by Igor Dodon, who wanted to strengthen his image of a strong leader. Following this logic, on 10 January 2020, the Chisinau authorities decided to suspend the application of the temporary exception for the control measures for cars in the Transnistrian region - that is, to no longer allow the crossing through the check points of cars without neutral registration numbers. And already on 17 January 2020, the same authorities announced that their decision had been ... a test. It is obvious that pressure has been put and that, as a result, the head of state has ordered our negotiators to step back. This action spoils the image of the negotiating team, but also of the country in general. And this is when we have very few friends in the negotiation process .. So, here we are with the Transnistrian settlement.

■ Where do we get stuck in the domestic politics?

■ Our big problem here is that we don't have a development plan. A credit to make 300 km of road is not a development plan, but an electoral plan. In addition, we do not have a transparent system of public procurement and we do not know how the companies are selected. So, the money from the roads will go "where it should go". Just exactly as the money

will go - more specifically, to a company whose largest part of shares is still owned by Vlad Plahotniuc – in the case of the tender for the procurement of tablets for the 101 MPs. Despite the fact that the price proposed by the winning company was the highest ... Hundreds of such tenders take place every month, their mission being to bring money into the increasingly hungry budget of the ruling party. At the same time, Mr. Chicu talks about the "fourth industrial revolution" without seeing that the country is, in fact, on the verge of an institutional collapse. This is our biggest problem and the task no. 1. for the current but also the future governments – to build a functional and integrated institutional system. Without institutions we will not be able to have economic growth. The current administrative system doesn't cope with the challenges and closes our doors to economic development. It is when, in fact, all we need are rational economic plans, many of which gather dust in drawers, and a serious and necessarily incorruptible Government. Unfortunately, we haven't had all these in the almost 30 years of independence.

If the law does not work, the domino effect can be triggered

■ ***It would be the fourth category of government, after "corrupt", "dreamy" and "powerless"...***

■ We need a government ready to take on the difficult task of reforming the country de facto, and not as much as the electoral interests allow. It is certain that the current government cannot ensure progress. And it is neither about the famous international isolation, to which we quickly returned, nor the already ridiculous hunting of people at various events to take pictures with ... Our problem is that we are not able to ensure the law enforcement. And a kind of domino effect is triggered by this situation... as without law you have no investments, no growth, no salaries or higher pensions.

■ Speaking about institutions, how much truth is there in the story with Vasile Botnari and the Turkish teachers? Is he a scapegoat in some way?

■ He's not just a scapegoat, because he was a key actor at that stage. But surely there are more officials who have been involved in that unqualified action which needs to be investigated by justice. Under no circumstances should the investigation limit to Mr Botnari as he did not take the decisions on his own. Most likely he simply materialized the agreement between Igor Dodon and Recep Erdoğan. Proof of that was the press conference held at the end of the year in Ankara, when the Turkish President personally thanked the Moldovan President for the extradition of the seven teachers. Although, in fact, they were not extradited, but kidnapped and taken to Turkey, where they were sent to prison. That was a crime that breaks all international laws according to which you cannot send a person to the country where his or her life or dignity may be in danger.

■ ***In November you were appointed Secretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, from where you quit three days after your appointment following the dismissal of the Sandu Government. How do you appreciate today's foreign policy, including the statements by the Minister Aureliu Ciocoi, which scandalized lots of people?***

■ Such statements usually happen when a good diplomat wants to become a politician... As for the ministry as an institution, there are people with very good expertise in the field of European integration, people for whom the relationship with the EU - which, actually, has been getting lost lately – has been their main job. And it is not their fault that the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova today is no longer multilateral and that the relationship with the EU and the USA is at zero or that President Dodon has taken over Viktor Yanukovich's model in the

international relations - and we all remember what the acrobatics of the former Ukrainian leader ended up with ... This imbalance in foreign policy can lead to an even greater isolation. And no matter how good the diplomats are, we cannot expect from them what the entire political class and the entire government team cannot do. All these people can do - and I hope they do it - is to be wise enough to remain equidistant and not promote, in a militant manner, those initiatives that are not beneficial to the Republic of Moldova. Professional diplomats know how to wait for the hard times to pass.

■ **When and how will we have better times in the situation when there are new storms on the political stage - the splitting up of the ACUM bloc, regroupings of the left and right-wing forces?..**

■ It could happen this year, following the presidential elections, which, I hope, will put an end to the imbalance by which one person concentrates all the power. In this context, the unity of the ACUM bloc is very important and I think that both components of the Bloc do a great deal of damage through mutual quarrels and teasing, but especially by putting forward different candidates for the Hâncești constituency. Rather than arguing with each other - a suicidal political strategy - it would be better to fight the true opponents. That really matters, and what's happening on other segments is of minor importance.

■ **Thank you for the interview.**

Sorina Ștefăruță

Chisinau, 10 February 2020

Expert Opinion

Dionis Cenușă: **“The ‘Macronization’ of the EU-Russia ties and the impact on the Eastern neighbourhood”**



Cenușă who starting with 2020 has been main columnist with the Info-Prim Neo News Agency.

At the end of 2019, several analysts noted the emergence of increasingly obvious dissensions among European leaders on the issue of the EU relations with the Russian Federation. The assumptions seem to have been confirmed at the recent Security Conference in Munich, where the issue of normalizing the relations with Russia has been reinstated by the French President Emmanuel Macron. It is a topic that we will certainly get back to this year in our Newsletter. For now, we suggest you to find out how the ‘macronisation’ of the EU-Russia relations could impact the Eastern neighbourhood of the community bloc, including the Republic of Moldova. An article signed by the researcher Dionis

The normalization of the dialogue with Russia has returned to the forefront during the 2020 Munich Security Conference. The French leader Emmanuel Macron wants an improved relationship with Russia. The repeated request to rehabilitate the strategic dialogue with the eastern giant does not ignore the Russian aggression towards Ukraine but regards it as a single deviation from the norm. Such an approach benefits national governments and leaders with pro-Russian sympathies within the EU and, primarily, in the European proximity. As a result, tolerant political beliefs about Russia's misdoings on the international arena are gaining public visibility, free political advertising and electoral potential favourable to pro-Russian forces, as in the case of Moldova.

The prospect of a compromise with Moscow is being promoted

Macron's insensitivity to the ubiquitous Russian hybrid attacks in the Ukrainian and European affairs in general, outlines

dangerous prospects for the cohesion and integrity of the Europeanization process. Therefore, the acceptability of the political rapprochement with Russia receives validation. The price paid for such an adventure would be neglecting the critics of the autocratic regime led by Vladimir Putin.

Motivated by Germany's increased passivity, caused by the future post-Merkel political transition, the French leader inoculates the prospect of a compromise with Moscow. Macron justifies the need for cohabitation with Russia, even though it is "uncomfortable" ([Euronews, February 2020](#)). That is also a reaction to an international order increasingly impacted by US trade unilateralism and China's investment neo-imperialism. Thus, the political consequences for popularizing the discourse about the need to unify "space from Lisbon to Vladivostok" are decreasing dramatically. A controversial transnational belief is proliferating that the EU would be incomplete without a partnership with Russia. Macron intends to invest political-diplomatic energy to coordinate actions with Russia in the overlapping regions, rather than to fail to anticipate them.

European integration with a Russian accent

The misleading thought that Russia possesses the ability and internal will to correct itself blinds the realistic assessment of the structural threats caused by the Russian factor. The gaze at Russia through a distorted mirror favours neither the local opposition forces nor the democratic elements in the European neighbourhood where Russian influence awards and tolerates pro-Russian leaders who disregard liberal democracy. An openness to Russia without the application of a critical filter induces the idea that the European integration would be compatible with the Russian presence, even if the latter builds its "soft power" on the denigration of the liberal core that underlies the European identity and project. Cancelling European concerns about the critical situation of Russian democracy and its effects on the regional and international security architecture weakens the political standards attached to the Europeanization of Moldova and other Eastern Partnership countries.

As a result, the European integration can quickly develop a Russian accent, characterized by three significant aspects. First, the relationship with the EU would consist of a request for external financing in exchange

for a very technical approach to any reform. The second aspect involves prioritization of the economic sectors, where the financial interests prevail, and the dedication for the implementation of the political principles would be dried up. Last but not least, the traditional-Christian values can get equal footing with liberal ones, which are at the base of the rule of law, of which human rights are part.

Thus, the social segments that remained behind the Europeanization would remain demotivated to embrace liberal values, viewed as a source of impasse.

Instead of conclusions...

The 'Macronization' of the European approach towards Russia brings with it clear challenges for an objective and critical standing against Vladimir Putin's regime misbehaviour concerning its citizens, but also within the international affairs. The advantage of European integration lies in the political principles it implies, more than the practical aspects that come with the absorption of European regulations. The rehabilitation of relations with Russia without its political transformation, preceded by the liberation of the Ukrainian territory, may result in a robust Russian emphasis on the European integration in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

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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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