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# NEWSLETTER

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## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

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

### TOPICS OF THE EDITION:

1. Romanian ambassador to Chisinau, **Daniel Ioniță**: Romanian assistance is directed at all Moldovan citizens, and not at certain parties or politicians
2. Ukrainian ambassador to Chisinau, **Ivan Gnatișin**: Ukraine is a good neighbour and friend of Moldova.
3. Political analyst **Mihai Popșoi**: The statements of President Dodon create a less pleasant diplomatic atmosphere in the relations with neighbours.

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



The speaker of Parliament, Andrian Candu, and the Prime Minister, Pavel Filip, have handed out to the Russian ambassador a note on, what they called, "harassment" by the Russian Federation of Moldovan officials. According to the note, at least 25 Moldovan officials have been "humiliated" in the recent months at the entry into the Russian Federation and a Russian institution tried to put under "international monitoring" several Moldovan politicians, including MPs. Filip and Candu also said that these alleged Russian abuses would have escalated after Chisinau asked Moscow for cooperation in the investigation of the laundry of the money of Russian origin through the Moldovan banking system in amount of 22 billion dollars.



Russia's Foreign Ministry said the Moldovan note "raises questions". "We will have to evaluate all the facts before we discuss this issue seriously," said the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin. However, he has not cancelled his visit to Chisinau and Tiraspol on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> March.



On March 17<sup>th</sup>, the president Igor Dodon was received again in Kremlin by the Russian leader Vladimir Putin. This happened exactly after two months since his first visit to Moscow after he took over the presidency. A press release of the presidential office says that in Russia, Dodon asked for several categories of Moldovan immigrants to be forgiven the breach of the stay regime in Russia and for more Moldovan products to be received again on the Russian market. The Russian news agencies reported that at a Moldovan-Russian business forum, President Igor Dodon has urged the Russian businessmen to invest in Moldova because that way they can acquire citizenship of the country and thus be able to travel to Europe without visa.



The Democratic Party has already submitted the draft law on changing the electoral system into uninominal to the Parliament, but the speaker Andrian Candu, assured that the draft law will be subject to vote only after it has been discussed in public and consulted with the Venice Commission.



The Governments of Romania and the Republic of Moldova will hold a joint meeting on March 23<sup>rd</sup> in Piatra Neamt. The news comes after the Prime Minister Pavel Filip, at a meeting with Romanian ambassador, Daniel Ioniță, thanked the Romanian Government for the financial assistance provided to Chisinau. Romania issued on February 27<sup>th</sup> a new tranche in amount of € 50 million Euro from the 150 million euros loan for Moldova.

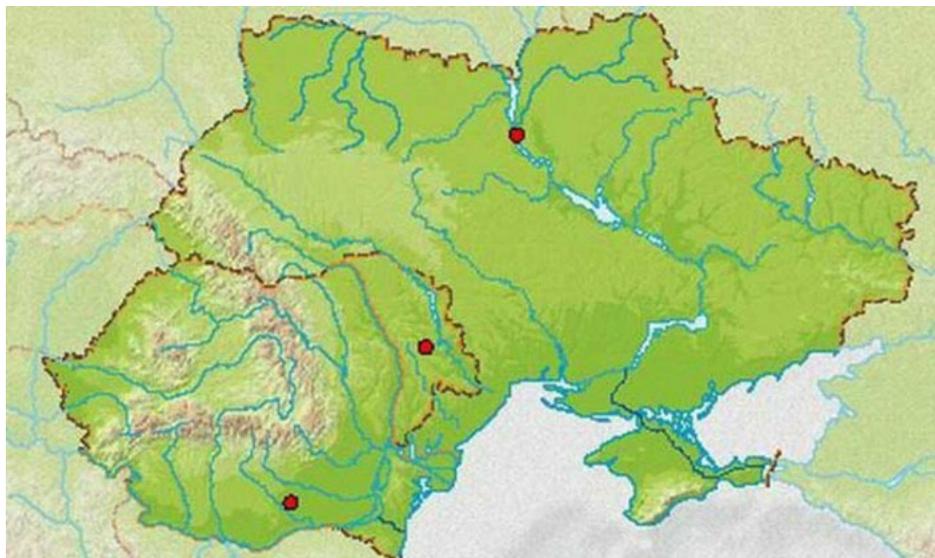


The joint border checkpoint from Cuciurgan will be located on the territory of Ukraine and will start its operation by the end of the year, says the deputy prime minister, George Balan. Similar checkpoints will be established at other crossing points on the Transnistrian segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. Establishment of joint control in Cuciurgan was one of the main topics discussed in Tiraspol with the Russian deputy foreign minister, Grigori Karasin. The Tiraspol separatist administration asked for Russia's support in stopping the creation of this border checkpoint.



The European Commission has issued a **report** on the progress in the implementation by Moldova of the Association Agreement with the EU, in the period since the 2014 elections and until present. The report talks about the widespread corruption, but also about the beginning of "crucial economic stabilization reforms after the 'massive bank fraud.'" The report expresses regret that those who committed it have not been brought to justice. "Moldova has adopted a series of reforms, but it has to do more to fulfil the commitments it has assumed under the Association Agreement with the EU." "The fact that the economic interests are concentrated into the hands of a smaller number of people creates a risk that the public policies be influenced by these people," reads the document. It states that during that period the EU provided financial assistance to Moldova in amount of 310 million Euro. Regarding trade, the report says that the EU has strengthened its position as the main trading partner where Moldova delivers 63 percent of its exports."

## Moldova's relations with its neighbours - Romania and Ukraine



### Daniel Ioniță: Romanian assistance is directed at all Moldovan citizens, and not at certain parties or politicians

**T**he Romanian ambassador to Chisinau, Daniel Ionita, says that Romania has been and remains an active supporter of the Republic of Moldova, that the assistance it provides is directed primarily at the ordinary people and that the European perspective is the only one that can bring prosperity, stability, and a bright future for Moldovan citizens.



■ **Lina Grău:** Ambassador, the Republic of Moldova has only two neighbours and with both of them it had favourable and less favourable periods in their relations, sometimes even tense relations. From your point of view, how are the relations between Chisinau and Bucharest at the moment?

■ **Daniel Ioniță:** We have very good relations at the government and parliamentary level. I'd remind you that, recently, the Romanian Government has released the second tranche of the 150 million Euro loan agreement. The second tranche of 50 million EUR, which is more than one billion MDL, has just reached Chisinau too. This gesture of the Romanian Government should be understood that it wants to support Moldova's reform process by supporting its state budget, because through the state budget the money will reach out to all Moldovans. It's just a very recent example.

But also in other areas the relations between Romania and Moldova are some special and framed by common language, history, culture, and traditions. And, I think, regardless of political colour, or tones, or accents of the political leaders, on the practical level, the things are going to work well.

■ **Lina Grău:** You mentioned about the loan. Over the years, Romania has been one of the biggest donors of the Republic of Moldova taking into account the scholarships that the Romanian Government has been providing since 1990, the support for the renovation of kindergartens, and other assistance channelled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

the Department of Romanians from Everywhere. Particularly in relation to the above-mentioned loan, they have argued in public that Romania is somehow supporting the government controlled by the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc.

■ **Daniel Ioniță:** In fact, there are several questions in your comment and I'll try to address them all.

Indeed, the assistance provided by Romania to Moldova is consistent and covers several levels of understanding. On the one hand, we are talking about the reimbursable loan, but on the other hand, Romania has also provided a 100 million Euros grant, an important part of which has been spent so far on kindergartens' renovation and on humanitarian assistance projects in various localities affected by natural disasters and so on.

At the same time, Romania has had an important contribution in the education sphere – it offered scholarships, but also minibuses donated generously by the Romanian Government in order to transport the Moldovan children and students to schools. The programme of minibuses will continue in the next few months, as we are in the process of procuring other 100 buses that will reach the Republic of Moldova.

In addition to the above-mentioned, the Romanian Government has implemented development assistance programmes. Thus, we are close to finalizing several important cultural projects - renovation of cultural objects which we think are important cultural institutions in Moldova. Two of

them are in Chisinau – the National Art Museum, which was already completed, and the Organ Hall, which is in the process of being finalized. Another one in Cahul - the State Theatre of Cahul - is basically being built almost from scratch.

There are projects developed with the support from the Department that has been transformed recently into the Ministry of Relations with the Romanian Diaspora and twinning programmes aiming at direct operation between various localities. There exist also twinning programmes between different localities in Romania and Moldova.

Over the years, Romania has been an active supporter and promoter of the idea of free movement in the EU for Moldovan citizens.

Overall, you should know that probably there is no area where we have no examples of cooperation, or good practices, or agreements under implementation, or projects to be implemented.

So very briefly, our assistance in Moldova is consistent and we want that it benefits all Moldovan citizens, regardless of the language they speak, the ethnicity they identify themselves with and the place they live.

Getting back to the other part of your question, let us remember that the first instalment of the 150 million Euro loan agreement was released by the Romanian Government in August of last year, only after a series of measures aimed at re-establishing the Republic Moldova on a credible reform roadmap has been fulfilled and that takes into account both

the self-undertaken objectives of the Government and Parliament in Chisinau and the need to fulfil certain criteria that would convince us that things in Moldova are going on a credible and verifiable pro-European path.

So the first tranche was released only after these steps have been completed, the last one being conditioned with an agreement at the technical level with the IMF. Since then we have observed that the reform processes in Chisinau have continued and that the self-undertaken obligations have been fulfilled in a responsible manner by the authorities.

Sure, sometimes we wish that some reforms went quicker through certain phases, just to be really felt by those whom they address - all Moldovan citizens. But we must remember that this assistance of Romania has not been provided to a particular party or government, it was provided to the Republic of Moldova and Moldovan citizens. And by that agreement, the second loan tranche, we want to contribute to the welfare of all Moldovan citizens.

So, I would not link the given agreement with the name of a particular politician or politicians, but rather with reform processes that are so much needed.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Ambassador, concerning energy cooperation, Romania is a gateway to the European Union for Moldova. The Iasi-Ungheni gas pipeline was built and money has been invested, but gases don't come yet. What is actually happening and what is the fate of other energy

projects that are being discussed, including the power lines?

■ **Daniel Ioniță:** However, the gas is circulating through the Iasi-Ungheni pipeline, but, obviously, the parameters do not fully meet our expectations. In order for that pipeline to be really efficient in terms of energy security of the Republic of Moldova, there is need for an extension of the gas pipeline on the Ungheni Chisinau section. And I am pleased to inform you that we are working on the technical design of the gas pipeline which is going to be finalised in the near future. The next stage will be the physical construction of the gas pipeline.

We would like that the next two years bring good news in this area, because it is necessary that Moldova can benefit from alternatives to the current energy source and thus benefit from better prices that will be felt by every citizen.

At the same time, we are working with a view to extending the projects of power line interconnection. Feasibility studies were completed and as far as I know, they are working at present to make the interconnection on the power lines possible. A solution that is being discussed aims at interconnecting the electric lines in the south, through asynchronous connection. That includes also construction of back-to-back transformer stations.

So there exist technical solutions as well as desire on both our side and on the side of the authorities in Chisinau. Personally I am convinced that we are going to make positive progress on this issue. At the same time, this

project can be completed with the help of grants from the European Union and EBRD loans and, why not, with funding from other sources.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Regarding the security aspect, there are two things that I want to refer to. First, the Transnistrian settlement process. The discussions on this dimension have intensified lately, and Romania needs stability on its borders. How do you see the developments on this issue in the next future and how do you assess the progress made in this area so far?

■ **Daniel Ioniță:** As you know, Romania is not part of the 5 + 2 negotiating format, but through our membership in the European Union and the OSCE, we are carefully following the developments of these discussions. Obviously, Romania is a firm and vocal advocate of a negotiated, political and diplomatic solution to this conflict that takes into account the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova and is the result of direct negotiations between the parties. So this should be a solution that is fully assumed by all parties.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Another issue that I would like to tackle is the collaboration with NATO. We know that a NATO liaison office will open in Chisinau in the near future. There have been voices from among Moldovan authorities, and the presidency in particular, who said this is going to be a challenge for the security of Moldova. From Romania's experience, is the cooperation with NATO positive?

■ **Daniel Ioniță:** Absolutely. I have no emotion whatsoever in this regard.

If you ask me about the Romanian experience, the answer can be just one - yes, our membership and integration into NATO has brought Romania more security and stability as well as the prospect of predictable and decent developments that contributed to raising the living standards and setting Romania on an irreversible democratic path. So, Romania's experience is one hundred percent positive.

But what will the opening of a NATO liaison office in Chisinau mean for the Republic of Moldova? I think they know very little about what this liaison office means, in essence. And I think this must be communicated better, as things are not clearly understood.

So first, the NATO liaison office is a diplomatic and one hundred percent civilian mission, with a small number of diplomats who together with the Moldovan authorities will follow how the cooperation programmes are implemented in Moldova. This is about the programmes that the Republic of Moldova has selected for strengthening its military capabilities. This liaison office is going to manage together with the Moldovan authorities the funds allocated by NATO for these reform processes.

Is this issue a military threat to Moldova? Is this liaison office going to bring any prejudice to Moldova's neutrality status? Is this liaison office a challenge for Moldova given its situation in the region? From my point of view, the answer to these questions is clear, but I will abstain from saying which this is, because it is not my role to express a position on this issue.

But you should know that such liaison offices exist also in other states that

have directly assumed the neutrality statuses and expressed very clearly that they don't intend to join NATO. If I'm not mistaken, such a liaison office exist in Azerbaijan and even in Moscow. And I don't think the Russian Federation is interested in joining NATO in the coming years.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Ambassador, trying to address a subject that you didn't want to talk about in public, I'll try to rephrase it. Will the Moldovan army and military lose or win from Moldova's participation in the international missions organized by NATO in Romania or other states of the European Union?

■ **Daniel Ioniță:** Also here there are two questions into one. First, I would start with a very important aspect. The multinational exercises organized in Romania, but also in other states, were running under NATO, but were not NATO military exercises. Those were multinational exercises. So this is one aspect I wanted to point out.

And basically, the last exercise-the Platinum Eagle 2016- falls under this category. It was a multinational exercise attended, indeed, by certain NATO member states but also by other partner countries that are not interested in having any relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and that, essentially, aim at improving the training capacity of their military. That is the answer to the first part of your question.

The second part of my answer relates to a different aspect that I took out from the public statements of your officials. About 80 percent of the required military training

needs of officers and soldiers of the Republic of Moldova is assured by the participation in these external exercises. So, through participation in multinational exercises, the Moldovan military can ensure the necessary degree of military training and the chance to interact with their peers from other countries. And furthermore, this participation contributes to meeting the bilateral or multilateral agreements signed between Republic of Moldova and Romania and other states.

Romania and Republic of Moldova signed a military cooperation agreement in 2012. This agreement envisages a range of activities both in Moldova and in Romania that aim at joint participation in exercises, training, and exchanges of information on specific domains and so on. This is an interaction from which, I believe, first of all, the Moldovan military could benefit.

Let us not forget, however, that Romania is a member of NATO and the Romanian military have more opportunities for participation and training.

■ **Lina Grâu:** In the Moldovan society there is a very high degree of disappointment regarding the way the authorities have dealt with the European course and with the idea of European integration. Is the European vector still realistic for Moldova?

■ **Daniel Ioniță:** If you ask me, I think that is the only feasible vector. But if you ask Moldovan citizens you may get nuanced answers.

From Romania's point of view, only the European perspective can bring

stability and prosperity to all citizens of Moldova.

This perspective requires effort, commitment, assumed responsibility and envisages painful but necessary reforms in order to improve the way the policies are designed but also implemented.

Because very often, no matter who you talk to - and I had the pleasure to interact recently with representatives of political parties that are not represented in Parliament - you will see that it is relatively easy to criticize what is going wrong in Moldova, but it is, perhaps, more difficult to assume the responsibilities and to improve things.

I think the models that the European Union is promoting, through the positive examples of the states, some of which have integrated into the European Union recently, can contribute to promoting clear pro-European messages that reach out to the citizens - and here is the main challenge- and more than that, understood and internalized by them. Because in many cases, this message has been somewhat discredited by a government performance which didn't leave up to the citizens' expectations.

And, obviously, in this situation, you have to act like in sports, with a handicap you have to be aware of, on the one hand, and on the other hand, you have to assume it and try to overcome. So if you ask me, yes – the European integration is the only perspective that can ensure a prosperous and bright future for the Moldovan citizens.

## ***Ivan Gnațișin: Ukraine is a good neighbour and friend of Moldova***

**O**n March 10<sup>th</sup>, Ukraine and Moldova marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic relations. In this context, in a message to his Ukrainian counterpart, the Moldovan Foreign Minister, Andrei Galbur, has underlined the intense and constructive character of the political dialogue with Ukraine, which makes a valuable contribution to the strengthening of friendly, good neighborly relations and of the mutually beneficial cooperation.



Galbur has noted the active cooperation of our states in achieving the common goal of European integration, including against the background of new challenges and threats to the regional security.

In this context, Galbur mentioned about the firm position of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine regarding the settlement of existing conflicts on the territories of both countries through political and diplomatic methods, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both countries.

In his turn, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Pavlo Klimkin, stressed that Ukraine aims at strengthening the friendship and good neighborly relations with Moldova, including

in the context of the promotion by both countries of the European integration.

Also, in the context of the anniversary, the Prime Ministers of the two countries exchanged congratulatory messages.

The Ukrainian ambassador to Chisinau, Ivan Gnațișin, said in the interview given to this newsletter that his country remains a good neighbour of Moldova, an impartial mediator in the Transnistrian settlement and a loyal supporter of the idea of the European integration.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Ambassador, the Republic of Moldova has only two neighbours and with both of them it had favourable and less favourable

periods in their relations, sometimes event tense relations. From your point of view, how are the relations between Chisinau and Kiev at the moment?

■ **Ivan Gnatishin:** Let's leave the past to the historians and talk about today's realities.

The Ukrainian-Moldovan relations are characterized as friendly and good-neighbourly. And this is not just a declarative phrase, but reality. We are having an active political dialogue - in 2016, more than 10 top-level meetings took place.

The trade and economic cooperation is intensively developing: the total volume of trade in goods and services between Ukraine and Moldova increased by 23% compared to 2015 and amounted to 785.2 million US dollars. This year began with the visit of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, Pavel Filip, to Ukraine. A Roadmap for the Development of Bilateral Cooperation for 2017 was signed, providing for a number of activities. I will just mention some of them:

- the final resolution of problematic issues that have been on the agenda for many years;
- organisation of the next meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation;
- completion of the state border demarcation and organization of the joint control at the checkpoints on the Ukrainian-Moldovan border, and others.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Is the current geopolitical context affecting these relations?

■ **Ivan Gnatishin:** Undoubtedly, the general geopolitical tension and the Russian aggression against Ukraine has affected the Ukrainian-Moldovan relations, especially their economic component.

The entire world is witnessing today the hearings in The Hague of Ukraine's lawsuit against the Russian Federation filed with the International Court of Justice with demands to stop the continuing violations of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination by Russia, as well as to compensate for the damage inflicted.

In December of last year, the UN General Assembly, in its resolution "The Situation of Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (Ukraine)," co-authored by Moldova, documented and condemned the systemic violations of human rights by the Russian occupation authorities.

Since the beginning of this year, the pro-Russian militants in Donbass have significantly intensified the shelling from heavy weapons, which, according to the Minsk agreements, should be withdrawn. Every day, they report about the dead and wounded among the Ukrainian military and civilians. The residential areas are bombarded, while the infrastructure of the region is purposefully destroyed. During three days alone

in January of this year, Avdeevka has been the target of 345 tons of ammunition by the militants, which is 8 full railroad cars. The supply of the city with heat, water and electricity has been disrupted. The Ukrainian authorities are working hard to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe there.

Recognition of the documents of certain districts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, introduction of the regions into the "ruble zone", and confiscation of the property of the Ukrainian state and private enterprises for "humanitarian considerations" are additional evidence of the occupation of Ukrainian territories.

The same sources and causes of the origin of the Transnistrian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts are also conducive to cooperation with a view to identifying solutions to the conflicts of the two countries.

Therefore, the geopolitical context requires that we unite, develop effective instruments of confrontation and ... survival.

Fortunately, in this hybrid war, Ukraine has become a platform for confrontation between the two worlds, and not a polygon, like Syria.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Is the opening of the NATO office in Moldova a challenge to Moldova's security?

■ **Ivan Gnatishin:** I do not see any challenges here. In Ukraine, the NATO liaison office was opened in 1999. It allowed for a more effective implementation of the Alliance's

assistance programs in our country, including during the period when we declared “neutrality and non-alignment”. The latter, however, could not ensure Ukraine’s security, contrary to the obligations of the participants in the Budapest Memorandum.

What kind of challenge can a diplomatic representation present? The real challenge and danger, as the bitter experience of our country has shown, is the presence of foreign troops on the territory of our state. As the world experience is showing, today, NATO is the most reliable guarantor of the security of its members.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Transnistrian settlement – what was the vision and interest of Ukraine before and after 2014? Is federalization a solution or a problem? Can Moldova count on Ukraine’s support in the Transnistrian settlement?

■ **Ivan Gnatishin:** Ukraine has only one quite practical interest in this direction - a peaceful, united, prosperous and economically developed Moldova as a stable neighbour. Our policy in bilateral relations, as well as in the Transnistrian settlement, is aimed at this. The position of Ukraine remains unchanged - the solution of the Transnistrian conflict with respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders.

Despite the external aggression and occupation of part its territory, the Ukrainian side remains an impartial and consistent mediator in the

negotiations over the Transnistrian settlement.

We are of the opinion that the federalization, which they have been trying to impose from the outside based on the 2003 model, is not a solution to the Transnistrian problem, but on the contrary, an aggravation of the conflict.

Ukraine supports the “small steps” policy and is in solidarity with the Moldovan side in the need for a quick transition to the settlement of political issues, for which the “5 + 2” format was created.

Ukraine also supports the legitimate demands of the Republic of Moldova regarding the need to adhere to the previously reached agreements, in particular the implementation of the decisions of the Istanbul 1999 OSCE summit on the withdrawal of Russian troops, weapons and ammunition from the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Is Ukraine interested in supplying Moldova with electricity? Is it important for the Republic of Moldova to diversify the supplies?

■ **Ivan Gnatishin:** Until 2014, Ukraine was one of the main electricity suppliers to Moldova and is now ready again to return to the Moldovan energy market.

I am confident that the diversification of electricity supplies is also in the interests of Moldova.

■ **Lina Grâu:** What do you think about the hydro power plants and the ecologic problem of the Nistru?

■ **Ivan Gnatishin:** This topic is excessively politicized. Regarding the construction of new hydro power plants, the prospect is very far. During the recent visit of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, Pavel Filip, to Ukraine, the Prime Minister of Ukraine, Vladimir Groisman, has explicitly confirmed the transparency of the approaches to the adoption of the relevant decision on the basis of a joint study on the possible impact of this project.

The planning and basic construction works of the Nistru integrated hydroelectric complex were carried out back in the USSR. Having installed 3 more PSPs, we will be able to provide high-quality, stable electric energy not only to Ukraine, but also to Moldova.

In addition, the cascade of the reservoirs of the Nistru hydroelectric complex allows for stabilization of the Nistru regime, evenly using water supplies for the needs of the population of the adjacent regions of Ukraine and Moldova. So, according to the “Ukrgidroenergo,” against the background of the general rainfall in the Nistru basin, in the most droughty periods, the Nistru PSPA, at the request of the “Apele Moldovei”, increased the discharge of water from the reservoir in order to fully supply the Moldovan population with water.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Is the Moldovan president Igor Dodon a challenge to the Moldovan-Ukrainian relations, especially referring to his statements on the Crimea? Will he be invited to Kiev?

■ **Ivan Gnatishin:** We respect the choice of the Moldovan people who elected Mr. Dodon as their President.

Several months ago, I assessed the statements on the status of the Crimea which was occupied by Russia and my assessment didn't change - we demand respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our state.

As far as I know, there are no plans so far for the visit of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Igor Dodon, to Ukraine.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Is the European integration still an important vector for the development of our region?

European integration is a conscious and experienced choice of the people of Ukraine. It is its national idea. Our people deserve better living conditions. Both Ukrainian and Moldovan people are aware of how free, dignified and in what conditions people of the European Union states live and work.

In the regional context, European integration is the basis for close cooperation in strengthening democracy and civil society institutions, implementing systemic internal reforms, and effectively combating corruption. The implementation of many Ukrainian-Moldovan infrastructure and other projects will depend on funding, including from the EU, which is directly related to the implementation of association agreements.

## **Mihai Popșoi: The statements of President Dodon create a less pleasant diplomatic atmosphere in the relations with neighbours.**

**The foreign policy expert, Mihai Popșoi, a PhD student in political science at the University of Milan and member of the Moldovan Foreign Policy Association, says the biggest challenge in the relations with Kiev and Bucharest is the domestic policy of Chisinau and that an increase in the weight of Igor Dodon's Socialist Party will inevitably lead to new tensions in the relations with neighbors, relations that are quite good at the moment.**



■ **Lina Grâu:** How do you see the relations between Moldova and its two neighbouring countries - Romania and Ukraine- at this moment?

■ **Mihai Popșoi:** An overview would lead us to the thought that the relationship between Moldova and Romania, on the one hand, and Ukraine, on the other hand, is a good one. The governments of these three countries have somewhat similar views in relations with the EU and the Euro-Atlantic space.

But if we look deeper, in the context of domestic politics in Bucharest, Kiev and Chisinau, things get complicated.

Regarding the majority coalition in Chisinau, its relations with Bucharest were largely based on materialistic considerations. The part of belonging to the same space of values with Romania is of minor importance to the Democratic Party, while the Liberal Party failed to impose its vision and unionist ideas within the government.

Meanwhile, the right-wing opposition finds itself in a very complicated situation. It hoped that Romania will have a more decisive stance, but Romania has chosen to provide financial support to the Moldovan government, largely for geopolitical reasons, which is supporting this government in power. And now we see that the current government is trying to stay in power also after the 2018 elections through changing of the electoral system. So, Romania has had and continues to have a very important role in terms of domestic politics in Chisinau.

Regarding the relations with Kiev, they are also complicated, both

because of the Transnistrian conflict and, more recently, in the context of the problems of Crimea and Donbas. It seems that we are getting into a bit strange situation where the Ukrainian politicians are calling for support and solidarity, while the politicians in Chisinau don't seem to hear them for fear not to antagonize Russia.

The Moldovan government's position is very prudent, trying to "reconcile both the goat and the cabbage" - it is pro-European, but at the same time, it is trying to build a relationship with the Russian Federation. I believe that the recent visit to Chisinau of the vice chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee of the Ukrainian Rada and his statements encouraging directly the Moldovan government to impose stricter controls on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border of the Transnistrian segment, remained without reactions.

During his recent visit to Kiev, Pavel Filip has also discussed the issue of the common border crossing points. But there is a long way from words to deeds.

■ **Lina Grău:** The existing duality in the Moldovan politics, to what extent does it influence the relations with Romania on the one hand, and those with Ukraine, on the other hand? The president Dodon said during the election campaign that Crimea, *de jure*, belongs to Ukraine, but *de facto*, to Russia. On the other hand, it attacked Romania, so arrows flew in all directions. How does this aspect influence the bilateral relationship with the two neighbours?

■ **Mihai Popșoi:** Indeed, during the election campaign, the position of Dodon was quite harsh and unfriendly towards the two neighbours of the Republic of Moldova. But after three months since his inauguration, it is becoming increasingly clear that those tough positions of Dodon's in the electoral campaign were meant only to consolidate his electorate, while his actions after he took over the presidency, make us think that he would rather try not to antagonize things. But neither has he direct mechanisms to do so, even if he would like to do so as his power is very limited.

Those bellicose statements can sometimes be interpreted as benefiting the power in Chisinau and first of all, Vlad Plahotniuc, because they allow the Democrats to position themselves as defenders of the European vector and of good relations with Romania and Ukraine. It seems to be nothing more than the well-known tactics of "the good and the bad cop" that has been already de-conspired and the only thing Kiev and Chisinau can do is to ignore the aggressive statements of President Dodon, what they are actually doing already.

However, I must admit that these statements create a less pleasant atmosphere in the diplomatic relations between our states, even though they cannot have a direct impact. The situation could change, though, with a possible Dodon's victory in the 2018 parliamentary elections, when his rhetoric could be implemented into public policy, which will have a serious impact on Moldova.

■ **Lina Grău:** Igor Dodon is a very frequent guest in Moscow. Do you think he can rely on the same frequency of official visits to Kiev and Bucharest?

■ **Mihai Popșoi:** This will become evident this week, when Dodon returns to Moscow, although he promised that after the initial visits to Moscow and Brussels he will go to Bucharest or Kiev. But he is not doing it and it is understandable why - because he is not welcome, neither in Bucharest or Kiev, as a result of his previous statements. Well, in Moscow he is welcome, for understandable reasons.

■ **Lina Grău:** Russia is not a direct neighbour of Moldova, however, it is very present in the media and public space, having direct or indirect representatives among the political class and civil society. How do you see this presence in the context of the geopolitical situation? And how did you find the recent diplomatic incident, when the Russian ambassador was summoned to the Prime Minister Filip and informed about Chisinau's indignation in relation to the abusive treatment of some Moldovan officials in Russia?

■ **Mihai Popșoi:** Indeed, Russia, although not a direct neighbour, is perhaps the most influential force affecting the domestic and foreign policy of the country. Unfortunately, this is a reality.

As for the recent diplomatic incident, is not yet clear what the essence of the problem is. From the multiple versions that have circulated, one is curious that says that Russia had tried

to put Plahotniuc under the Interpol monitoring. So, Russia is in a position to create preconditions for the oligarch Plahotniuc to be investigated and supervised by the Interpol. The Prime Minister Filip complained to the Western diplomats – the EU and the USA ambassadors - requesting support and protection of oligarch Plahotniuc.

This is a difficult situation for the Western diplomats, because it puts them in a difficult situation, given Plahotniuc's personality and rating in Moldova.

It remains to be seen how accurate this information is -that Russia wants Plahotniuc to be supervised by Interpol. The explanation given by the Government that it would be allegedly a response to the investigations initiated by the law enforcement bodies in Moldova in the context of the laundering of \$20 billion through the Moldovan banks seem implausible.

It is a fact, though, that Russia has influenced in the past the political processes in Moldova and it will try to do so in the future. It depends now on the Moldovan politicians and their ability to prevent Russia's plans in order to promote the interests of the Moldovan parties and of the citizens who support them.

■ **Lina Grâu:** I would like to address also the issue of energy in the relations with the neighbours. Theoretically, Moldova would have a fundamental interest in diversifying its sources of gas supplies that are now coming from the Russian Federation, and of the electricity,

which are coming from Transnistria, the latter producing the electricity with the help of the Russian gas. However, Transnistria is not paying for this gas, the debts being put on Moldova's shoulders. So, Moldova should have a vital interest in diversifying its energy sources. And we see that at the moment, there is very little gas coming from Romania and the developments in the extension of the pipelines from Ungheni to Chisinau are insignificant, while the electricity is bought from Transnistria and not Ukraine. What is actually happening in this area?

■ **Mihai Popșoi:** You're right, it is a very illogical situation. Especially when we refer to the so-called 'statistic' parties - and here I mean especially the centre-left parties. The Socialist Party and the Democratic Party are great defenders of the Moldovan identity and sovereignty of Moldova. But when it comes to energy security of the state, these parties ignore the importance of diversifying both the gas and electricity supply sources. This undermines the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova, because as long as you are dependent on one supplier, you are very vulnerable.

When signing last year the contract for the supply of electricity with the Cuciurgan power station, the latter was a bad movement in relation to our partners in Ukraine, which after a period of instability, at the moment of signing of the contract, were ready to sell electricity to Moldova at a more convenient price to the Moldovan consumers. However, Chisinau has chosen to buy electricity from Transnistria.

The explanation here is at the same time simple and painful for the Moldovan citizens, because they are forced to subsidize the separatist regime - paying the bill for electricity each month, the Moldovan government is inevitably supporting the separatist regime in Tiraspol, to the detriment of the Ukrainian partners.

It is an open secret that EnergoCapital, which acts as an intermediary in this business, benefits both the Tiraspol and Chisinau leadership. The profit of this company goes to offshore sites. In this situation, the Moldovans remain with the bill and less friendly relations with Kiev.

In terms of gas supply from Romania the situation is equally complicated. Chisinau was not insistent enough and has not invested enough to build that pipeline. Neither the Romanian side has given sufficient diligence to turn this project into a truly viable one.

But we have to understand that the Russian factor is also important here. Because if Moldova receives gas from Romania, whether it comes from the continental Europe or whether that is liquefied gas coming from the sea, this would mean weakening of Russia's influence. Russia opposes a lot this process of gas supply diversification for Moldova. And even if we admit that Romania would like to invest into Moldova and support it, the lack of initiative on the side of Chisinau, because of the pressure from Moscow, makes this process a difficult one, which will have no success on the short and medium term.

■ **Lina Grâu:** In the current context, do you think the European vector is still valid for Moldova?

■ **Mihai Popșoi:** The European integration vector is the only viable vector for Moldova, especially in the context of Ukraine's pro-European positioning.

A possible re-orientation to Russia and the Eurasian space of Moldova would be obviously to the detriment of Moldovan citizens from both economic and political points of view.

But the most important is that from the economic point of view, if we look at the figures, the European market is incomparable both as volume and purchasing power, and especially,

the quality standards. Moreover, the experience of our relations with the Eurasian market, especially with the Russian Federation, is very unpleasant - embargoes, pressure on our migrants in the Russian Federation ... This instability and political influence on the economic relations proves that this pro-Russian alternative is to the detriment of the Moldovan citizens.

Unfortunately, some parties and politicians, seeing the survey data showing that the support for the European integration decreases, are getting disappointed and the power of and dedication in promoting the European integration lose from their intensity. However, I would suggest them, on the contrary, to make

their best to contribute in order to return to that level of support for the European integration that we once had – more than 70 percent in 2007-2008.

That decline in support for the European vector has objective reasons: the self-called “Alliances for European Integration” have failed in fighting against corruption and in raising the living standards in Moldova. This, it is natural for the support of the European vector to decline. But we have to understand very clearly that this support has declined not because of the European Union, but because of the involuntary association of the EU with the lack of vision and poor governance in Moldova.

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