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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

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The last period was marked by a series of important events for the Republic of Moldova.



EU institutions agreed to approve 100m Euros financial aid to Moldova. However, a press release published on the website of the European Council points out that disbursement of money will depend on the attitude of the authorities towards the recommendations of the Venice Commission on the change of the electoral system.



The EU has announced it shares the criticism of the Venice Commission and of the OSCE Election Office on the initiative to change the voting system in Moldova. In a statement by Maja Kocijancic, spokesperson for the External Action Service, it is said that the EU shares the view that "such a fundamental change, although it is the sovereign prerogative of the country, is currently inappropriate."



US Ambassador to Chisinau, James Pettit, said changing of the electoral system is "an attempt by the Chisinau government to strengthen its political power." In a broadcast at JurnalTV, he said "the government's tendency to strengthen political power and its political influence is evident."



Andrian Candu, Speaker of Moldovan Parliament, reaffirmed that the Democratic Party will not give up the change of the electoral system and criticized the Venice Commission for exceeding its attributions. Speaking at PRO TV Chisinau, Candu argued that the experts of the Venice Commission "did not assess correctly when they pronounced on the political side of the change". However, he promised to take into account the Commission's legal recommendations.



President Igor Dodon abrogated the draft National Security Strategy of Moldova approved a year ago during ex- President Timofti's term. In a Facebook post, Dodon wrote that the document "no longer corresponds to the substantial changes that have taken place in the national, regional and international environment," Agora reports. The document which was developed with the assistance of the NATO experts named Romania and the USA as Moldova's main defense partners.



Moldova, together with Ukraine and Georgia, called on the European Parliament to adopt a resolution on the EU-membership prospect of the three countries. A statement in this sense was signed by the Presidents of Parliaments of Chisinau, Kiev and Tbilisi.



Parliament Speaker Andrian Candu said Moldova may apply for EU membership until the next parliamentary elections in 2018. "If we continue to produce results in implementing the reforms, I would say that in a year we could have results so that in 2018 we could apply for membership. I am optimistic that we will succeed", said Candu.



"Moldova must continue to implement reforms before moving on to the next stage in relations with the EU- filing an application for membership," said Johannes Hahn, EU Enlargement Commissioner, at the 9th meeting of the informal ministerial dialogue of the Eastern Partnership in Chisinau.

Financing of NGOs from abroad – are the authorities ready for this step?



Declaration on the attempt of the Moldovan authorities to ban the foreign financing of the civil society

Lina Grău

The civil society organizations in the Republic of Moldova are signalling on the authorities' intention to impose a series of restrictions on foreign financing of non-governmental organizations, which may endanger the existence of the associative sector and democracy in the Republic of Moldova.

A statement signed by the most prominent non-governmental organizations says the Ministry of Justice came up with the proposal to ban foreign financing for the organizations involved in political activity - that "contribute to the development and promotion of public policies aimed at influencing the legislative

process"- and in the electoral process.

The provisions were formulated as an amendment to the draft law on non-commercial organizations, drafted by a working group consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Justice and NGOs. The draft law was published on the website of the Ministry of Justice for public debates.

Adjustments by the Ministry of Justice impose new tax reports in addition to those already in place, as well as the obligation to publish reports confirming the origin of the organization's financial means and the income of the heads of NGOs.

For violation of these requirements, the Ministry of Justice will apply a fine to the organizations and their leaders equal to the value of "the material assets that the organization benefited from by violating the legal provisions" or will be able to liquidate the organization following a court's decision.

The NGOs Declaration qualifies the initiative of the Ministry of Justice as contrary to the international standards and the Association Agreement with the EU, similar restrictions existing only in Russia, Hungary and Azerbaijan.

"Such measures will deprive most of the active NGOs in the country of funding, while the foreign political organizations and foundations acting in the Republic of Moldova would have to end their work," the statement said. The statement also points out that the initiative comes at a time when there is a decline in the activity environment of non-commercial organizations, including through attacks against

several civil society activists.

"It is a matter of concern when the discussions in the country are directed at banning the foreign funding for civil society organizations," said Pirkka Tapiola, the head of the EU Delegation in Chisinau, at the "Politics" show on TV8.

"The civil society is very important for us as a partner and often as a critic and lobbyist in favour of certain changes," said the head of the EU Delegation in Chisinau.

Tapiola said he had discussed about the worsening of the civil society situation with the authorities and advised them to comply with the European practices in the field.

"It is absolutely normal for the civil society organizations to have the right to political opinions. It is normal for people who are civil society activists to have political opinions and be active in politics. Because in order to build a democracy there must be an active civil society. Power must be open to listening to civil society and this is very important for social consensus," said Pirkka Tapiola.

Parliament Speaker, Andrian Candu, said the NGOs fears that the government is going to limit external funding are unjustified, because the draft law is at an early stage of consideration and debate within a working group of the Ministry of Justice.

■ **Andrian Candu:** I would like to tell you that from what I have discussed with the Minister of Justice, but also with our international partners, this subject is far from being finalized, let alone approved. The draft law is

only in the process of drafting and debating in a working group within the Ministry of Justice. The draft law has been made public and subject to debates, and it is still a long way until it is finalized by the working group. Subsequently, the draft law will have to be approved by the Ministry of Justice, which will take quite some time, after which it will have to be approved by the Government, which will also last a great deal, because it will require the expertise of other ministries and institutions. Only after that the draft law will reach the Parliament.

But even before it comes to Parliament, we will request the international expertise of the Council of Europe. So this draft law is not going to be approved either by the Government or Parliament until it gets the endorsement by the Council of Europe.

At present, this draft law is not even a bill, because it was not registered as such. It is in a very crude form at the level of the Ministry of Justice and of the working group in which also the civil society participates.

That is why it is premature today to react in the way it is being reacted and it is premature to speculate in the way it is being speculated- that someone is seeking to control or to influence the civil society. So it's still a long way until the draft law will come out.

That's why my request to all those who have got already excited about this issue is to participate in the debates organized by the Ministry of Justice in the working group and contribute to this bill.

Arcadie Barbaroșie: Power has seen an enemy in the civil society organizations

Arcadie Barbaroșie, director of the Chisinau Public Policy Institute, says civil society has become undesirable for the authorities, because it has opposed several initiatives of the power, and there is a risk now that the civil society organizations and independent media will disappear, while the democratic climate will degrade.

■ **Lina Grâu:** More and more statements have been made lately both by power and their spokespersons saying that the civil society doesn't properly understand its role and purpose and that it is politically partisan. How do you see the role of the civil society in a democratic society? I think we've made it clear already in the early 90s.

■ **Arcadie Barbaroșie:** The civil society has a very clear function in our country. It is something that protects the citizen from the state. It is a wall between the state and the citizens, a wall that supports the citizens or protects them from the influence of the state. Of course, in this sense, the civil society can also do political activities. It can also perform political functions without identifying itself with a particular party.

For example, the civil society organizations can make electoral propaganda, talk generally about elections, participation in elections, and transparency, but without indicating the link with a single party. In this sense, yes, until 2009-2010 we were somehow not considered as political partners, but as organisations exercising political functions. We did make at that time anti-communist propaganda and responded to some of the Communist Party's actions.

However, now, a new interpretation of the law on public associations is proposed which says that the organizations receiving external support – the



Moldovan civil society organizations get only external support, having almost no internal support- can no longer benefit from such support if they get involved in electoral campaigns- not necessarily on behalf of a party, but in general.

This is reflected in the draft law of the Ministry of Justice. There are proposals for which the Ministry of Justice must be held accountable.

This initiative, I think, is not acceptable and I do not think it should be passed by Parliament, but I'm afraid the most unbelievable thing will happen. I am afraid the Parliament will vote for this law, which is only in line with the legislation of the Russian Federation and Belarus.

■ **Lina Grâu:** But the Republic of Moldova, including the current majority, says it is following the European course...

■ **Arcadie Barbaroșie:** Such draft laws exist also in some EU countries, for example in Hungary, but in those countries there is no such massive support of the civil society organizations from outside. For us, it is going to be a strong blow if the draft law is passed.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Why is this being done? After 1990, the voice of the civil society has often been the only articulated voice against the abuses of the authorities. Why are they trying to silence it now?

■ **Arcadie Barbaroșie:** I think the administration has seen in the civil society organizations a force that is not indifferent and is expressing clearly its point of view on things, which is not convenient to the administration.

For example, changing of the electoral system. We have often said that the law should be amended, that it is necessary to make order, including in the financing of political parties, and that the latter should be more intensely controlled. But what they are proposing now is to change the electoral model. It is not clear yet what system we are going to have- mixed or otherwise – but we will face a situation in which parties with 20 percent will win the election. And this is not permissible. We cannot replace democracy with such kind of representation in Parliament.

And it has become clear that the position of the civil society is against the administration and its proposals. As a result, several civil society organizations that have opposed- 15-20 organizations- are listed as organizations that cannot receive external support. Or if they get this support, they have to keep their mouths shut. So, the public administration has seen an enemy in the civil society organizations.

■ **Lina Grâu:** I have heard more recently representatives of civil society saying they feel some pressure from the authorities. How does this pressure and

the attempt to reduce external support for NGOs, their capacities, possibilities of involvement in certain decisions, manifest themselves?

■ **Arcadie Barbăroșie:** We didn't feel any external pressure, but I do not exclude the existence of such pressure in the case of other organizations. I do not exclude that they are brought to silence. This is obvious.

In the case of the civil society representatives who make comments, they are all on a list. Those who are included in the list have no longer access to televisions except very rarely. And when they are invited to television, they have to debate with other partners who usually cover their voice.

■ **Lina Grău:** What is the future of a society that suppresses inconvenient voices?

■ **Arcadie Barbăroșie:** Well, things are pretty clear about the future of such a society. Civil society consists of representatives of the society who have an integral opinion and if they are deprived of the opportunity to express it, the society will be left without any criticism of the proposals for amending laws, for example. And this is not good. It is not good for the society in general, because it does not take critical voices into account.

This will lead to the weakening of democracy in our country. If we are deprived of the right to express ourselves in this country, some organizations are going to disappear, others will be punished by the law and will also disappear. As a consequence, the critical word in the public sphere will disappear.

At the moment, we do not have much critical opinion in this sphere. In fact, only Jurnal TV and TV8 are critical among TV stations. Otherwise, I do not really see movements of society that would bring critical messages to the power.

Lilia Carasciuc: **Controlling the civil society is a clear way towards a dictatorial regime**



Transparency International Moldova's executive director Lilia Carasciuc says in the Republic of Moldova the state is undertaking certain actions in order to increase control over the civil society and inconvenient voices. But such a system is not just undemocratic and contrary to the European values, it is a clear way to a dictatorial regime.

■ **Lina Grău:** Lately, I have heard more and more voices from the government criticizing the civil society organisations, saying they don't properly understand their role in the society and that they are politicized. From your point of view, what is the role of the civil society organisations in a society that wants to be democratic and that claims to be on the road to European integration?

■ **Lilia Carasciuc:** It is always said that if you want to have a solid democracy, you need to have a vibrant civil society that monitors, follows, reacts, constructively criticises and doesn't accept concessions

in relation to corrupt people or work for the narrow interests of oligarchic groups.

Of course, this is not convenient for the governors, especially when the government has to assume all the positive and negative results over the last years.

What has happened in our country, at least from the perspective of Transparency International, it has been a very slow movement from an endemic corruption to a politicization of the fight against the corruption phenomenon and consequently, to a captured state situation. "Captured state" doesn't mean simply corruption, but it is when everything is controlled by a group of interests that adjusts the work of public institutions, of whole branches of state power to its own interest.

Of course, when we are in such a difficult situation, the civil society cannot simply come up with simple proposals for changing or improving the public policies. It should state that democracy is violated, that the economy is not entirely market-driven and that politics turned into political corruption and concentration of power in the fist of one person.

■ **Lina Grău:** I have heard certain civil society representatives complaining, sometimes discreetly and other times more directly, about the pressure exercised on them. What is this pressure about?

■ **Lilia Carasciuc:** Civil society wants to be as equidistant as possible. But when it has to criticize a government that has

compromised the European path and has admitted frauds comparable with a state budget, it cannot just come up with superficial specifications. And then, being uncomfortable for the governors, the latter start exerting pressure – directly like the Minister of Justice’s initiative, and indirectly through the so-called trumpets - NGOs organized and controlled by the state representatives through the paid bloggers and so on.

They chose to accuse the civil society of political partisanship, affiliations to various opposition groups. Actually, these things are absolutely normal - those who are opposing state capture and corruption should act together, because this is a danger to the whole of society.

There have been previous attempts to control the civil society. A special chapter on the civil society was tried to be introduced in the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, but the civil society opposed it. NGOs have already pretty strict rules for their activity. The state can have problems with regard to civil society only if its representatives don’t pay taxes or commit other violations.

But what is happening now is that the state wants to control the civil society. We have not even noticed when the legal framework has changed – in order to get the status of a public utility organization to be able to benefit from 2 percent of the citizens’ income tax, the NGOs have to re-register with the Ministry of Justice. This thing means another filter against the undesirable organisations.

They also came up with the idea of checking the income and expenses of people with an income higher than 300 thousand lei per year, which is about 1250 euro gross salary per month. In NGOs many people have such incomes, because they are qualified and also work in parallel on several projects. Such legal provisions give the authorities the possibility to initiate investigations without any reason against people who

have a certain income, thus holding them in fear and under control and influencing them in certain respects.

There are also attempts by certain “trumpets” to use some of the civil society in order to announce the government’s successes in the implementation of the Association Agreement. We had a case when an organization said the government had successfully achieved over 90 percent of the justice reform, which we didn’t agree with.

That is putting pressure on the civil society in different ways, not to mention the investigative journalists or the whistle-blowers who reported violations of the law and, instead of collaborating with them, the authorities have opened criminal cases against them for various reasons.

Another example of persecution of the civil society in the broad sense is the arrest of several people following a protest. They were accused of committing acts of hooliganism and put under arrest for many months. They were released only under the guaranty of the president. And the latter waited for thanks from these people who were denied the right to defend themselves. They were detained practically illegally, but were asked to thank them for being released.

■ **Lina Grâu:** In connection with the initiative of the Ministry of Justice that the civil society has signalled about, to what extent do you think the civil society of the Republic of Moldova could survive without funds from abroad?

■ **Lilia Carasciuc:** Well, that’s what they are counting on for the civil society is working on foreign funds. These are usually foundations with a sound reputation and not private individuals with integrity issues. Unlike the money provided to the state, when it comes to the civil society, the money is awarded on the basis of competition and with very strict requirements for audit on the use

of this money. That means there is no danger of corruption.

This is done to block our activity, so that the qualified civil society representatives either leave the country in search for a job or adjust to the wishes of the authorities.

■ **Lina Grâu:** What is the future of such a society?

■ **Lilia Carasciuc:** A society that chooses such a road can reach a dictatorial system. And this is all the more serious as we are now in an open world and many crimes can have international coverage. We have already seen an attempt to legalize the fraudulent money, which could have opened the door to the legalization of certain international frauds. There is not only the danger of dictatorship in a small country like Moldova, but also the danger of financing conflicts, the danger of money laundering, the danger of committing crimes, including assassinations, and so on.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Given these things happening in the Republic of Moldova, what do you think about the authorities saying that the country would continue along the European path? The practices applied seem to be inspired from the East rather than the West.

■ **Lilia Carasciuc:** Unfortunately, on the one hand, we declare that we are pro-European, on the other hand, we take over the practices of the countries known as dictatorships. And this shows how hypocritical these statements are.

On the one hand, money is being demanded from the EU to support this country, where frauds are taking place on such a large scale, on the other hand, it is convenient to have a so-called pro-Russian leader. And so, the population has to choose between a so-called pro-European dictator and a so-called pro-Russian leader who also doesn’t bring good prospects for this country.

Andrei Brighidin: More than 90 percent of NGOs could be silenced

Andrei Brighidin, expert with the East-European Foundation from Chisinau and member of the working group on the drafting of the law on non-commercial organisations, says the possible consequences of adopting the Ministry of Justice proposals would be catastrophic for the Moldovan civil society, which is overwhelmingly financed from abroad, but also for the democratic climate of the country.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Authorities increasingly say the civil society organisations don't properly understand their role in the society and that they are actually politicized. How do you see the role of the civil society organisations in a democratic society?

■ **Andrei Brighidin:** Very often the activity of public associations is confused with the activity of political parties. But they are, by definition, different. The political parties and electoral competitors struggle for power. In the case of public associations, they are indispensable ingredients of a free and democratic society. In other words, the public associations, through their involvement in political activities, promote and influence the focus on real issues, principles and ideologies, not on accession to power.

It is important to note that the work of many NGOs is by definition political, being protected by Article



25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The freedom of association cannot be dissociated from the freedom of opinion, the freedom to participate freely in the decision-making process.

Some may say that we already have provisions that ensure the right of citizens to participate in the decision-making process, including the Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova, which provides for the citizens' right to participate freely in the elections. However, we have to point out that the members of the Human Rights Committee have clarified the normative content and

said this right applies to individuals as well as to the persons who are associated, including in organizational of various legal forms -public associations, private institutions, foundations and so on.

Therefore, any attempt to limit the involvement of public associations in political activities is contrary to the international law on human rights. This also refers to the attempt to condition the financing of the public associations with their non-involvement in politics. However, this term is very vague and the involvement of public associations in politics is protected by international law on human rights.

Speaking about the funding of political parties by non-commercial organizations, this is an issue that needs to be considered separately. The ban on foreign funding is already provided for by the Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova and the Law on Political Parties. I don't understand the reason why this provision should be included in a new law that regulates the activity of non-commercial organizations. Or, if there is a desire to tighten the sanctions for political parties, amendments should be made to the Electoral Code.

Such restrictions have no place in a democratic society. We, the members of the working group that worked on this law, through our involvement in the development of the draft law, pursued the objective of developing

a legal framework to facilitate the right to freedom of association. The purpose of this working group was to establish simple registration provisions for the public associations, to reduce the possibility for the Ministry of Justice to interfere in the work of NGOs which is sometimes the case today, to clarify the relationship between the state and the public associations, to eliminate certain discriminatory provisions in relation to the disabled, non-citizens and others. Last but not least, our purpose was to ensure that this legal framework recognizes the freedom of association and clarifies the spectrum of rights of the public associations.

We have worked together extensively on this bill, which is now on the table of the Ministry of Justice, and I hope that this draft will not undergo changes in the sense of limiting the freedom of association and the freedom of public associations to participate in the decision-making process and in the administration of public affairs as it is stipulated in the international legislation to which the Republic of Moldova is a party.

■ **Lina Grâu:** From your point of view, what is going to happen if the Ministry of Justice insists on the promotion of these amendments? What will happen to the civil society in Moldova?

■ **Andrei Brighidin:** The effects of such an initiative will be disastrous. The associations that carry out civic

and electoral education activities or activities to empower the disadvantaged groups to participate in the electoral process, or electoral monitoring activities, could be silenced.

In addition, we talk about organizations that in the pre-electoral period carry out activities for developing the capacity of all electoral actors. Also the work of these organizations could be jeopardized. In their current formula, these provisions could create significant barriers for the human rights organizations. Any activity aimed at influencing laws, and I refer here to the democratic activity that must be protected in a free society, could be jeopardized.

In other words, we have a situation in the Republic of Moldova where over 90 percent of non-commercial organizations benefit from foreign funding, taking into account the fact that there are no conditions in Moldova for financing the activity of public associations from public means.

If these proposals are transformed into amendments to the law and then voted, more than 90 percent of public organizations, including the ones involved in the process of influencing laws, will be silenced.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Why do you think they are trying to reduce to silence the critical voice in the society?

■ **Andrei Brighidin:** I can only guess why as we don't have concrete evidence. But the year 2018 is an electoral year and probably in this election year, the authorities would like to limit the activity of non-governmental organizations, leaving political activities to the discretion of the political parties alone.

In this regard, I would like to point out that the UN Special Rapporteur on peaceful assemblies and freedom of association has clarified in one of his interventions that involvement in political activities should never be a prerogative of political parties only. People, including those associated, have a fundamental right to engage in public affairs. Apart from channelling the discussions into ideological aspects, the public associations promote tolerance, facilitate dialogue between ethnic groups, and as a result, the citizens are better informed about the platforms of different political competitors.

By introducing the provisions in question, the effect could be elimination of debates which are essential for a free and democratic society and this will in no way contribute to the advancement of democracy. On the contrary, this is going to mark the future elections and the pre-electoral climate, in general, by reducing to silence the critical voices.

Sorin Ioniță: Is European integration still a priority for Chisinau?

Sorin Ioniță, adviser to the Council of Europe, World Bank and UNDP on Eastern Europe and the Balkans, is pointing out that the Republic of Moldova seems to be in line with the regional trend of restricting the civil liberties, including persecution of the civil society and free press, a trend inspired from the Russian Federation and Belarus. Also the initiative of the Moldovan Ministry of Justice seems to draw inspiration from the Russian Federation's law regarding the declaration of foreign-funded NGOs as foreign agents.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Lately, I have heard more and more voices from the government criticizing the civil society organisations, saying they don't properly understand their role in the society and that they are politicized. How do you see these aspects? And what is the experience of Romania - what is the role and purpose of civil society in a democratic society?

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** What you are saying is not happening only in the Republic of Moldova, it is a regional trend. Fortunately, Romania is not yet part of it. But there are so many other examples from which it is clear that the Moldovan governors and especially their trolls take inspiration from. They seem to be aiming at cutting off from the root the independent, centrist, pro-European civil society, for instance all those who are working on the modernization project and who don't agree with an East-type project, where the oligarchy leads the country and everyone is silent.

Also the laws seem to draw inspiration from there - that is, declaration of all



inconvenient NGOs as external agents, because they are financed from abroad. Well, in a country like Moldova, where else could you finance your organisation from if you want to bring Moldova into Europe?

The declared goal of the authorities is to build a European agenda - with European policies and rule of law. Who is financing such objectives? Moldovan economic agents? Anyone in the East? It is obvious that the funding for this can come only from the Western projects - the European Commission or other bilateral donors.

If the authorities see it as a problem and are of the opinion that all NGOs are foreign agents, they should make their political choice clear - that we are going in another direction.

Their tactics are simple and clear. They create an army of trolls and trumpets and make a maximum scandal in the public space as you cannot understand anything. The extreme position of the government when trying to push the new electoral laws against the public

opinion, is presented as a reasonable thing. This way, everyone at the center-all decent public opinion- seems to be at the extreme. And the trolls are trying to qualify them as extremists, politicized and so on.

When you react to changing the electoral law doesn't mean being politicized. It is the candidate in the elections that is politicized. Dealing with important public issues, the country's economy, the budget deficit, and justice reforms is not being politicized, even if NGOs have a certain opinion that suits one party or another.

But these things are so basic that I don't think we have to explain them anymore. I think it is maximum hypocrisy to reopen these discussions that we had in the early 1990s - what civil society is and what a political party is and what the difference between them is.

■ **Lina Grâu:** On the contrary, the impression is that these things should be discussed in Moldova now...

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** Yes, the impression is that we are going back in terms of the level of discussion, instead of developing.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Exactly. We are discussing again in the Republic of Moldova about the limit between attitude, civic engagement and political engagement, the latter being invoked by the authorities that are irritated by the position of civil society.

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** That's the problem. It

seems that the authorities currently in power don't like any kind of involvement inconvenient to them.

It is very clear what civil society is - these are people who are concerned with public affairs, the public well-being, but who do not register to run for seats in Parliament or other elected bodies and don't live on public money, at least this refers to the NGOs in the Republic of Moldova.

Neither Moldovan ministries nor city halls have much funding for NGOs. Is it a problem if you are financed by the European Commission, when you are a nonprofit organization and you are dealing with, for example, the justice reform? It's a question that the Government has to answer using the subject and predicate: "Yes, you are a foreign agent and we need to cut your funding source." And then Brussels must also know that in Moldova it is no longer a priority to have independent experts funded by European funds.

As far as I know, these people working in civil society don't run for Parliament or local councils, so they are not politicians.

But, I repeat, it seems to me that we are reopening a discussion that should be called the "ABC of Democracy." And I thought that we solved these things and understood them back in 1992-1994.

Lina Grău: After 1990, the civil society has often been the only clear voice in opposing the dubious policies or initiatives by the authorities. Why are these voices being shut now? Is it because they are among the few who oppose the modification of the electoral system?

Sorin Ioniță: If you include the press in what you have just said, I think it is true. The media, as long as it is independent in the Republic of Moldova, is part of civil society and has also opposed it on many occasions. By the way, this discussion is also about the press, especially when it comes to its financing, because you cannot make journalism without money. While the full colonization of public discussion in a country takes you out of democracy.

Why now? It seems this opposition has quite annoyed them- it had stronger arguments and more visibility on the issue of the change of the electoral law than the power could expect. This position also coupled with the criticism of the Venice Commission. We have seen that the position of the Venice Commission has been misinterpreted in the Republic of Moldova - what was critical was actually presented as praise. It was quite a blatant attempt to reinterpret the Commission's message, while the criticism of the Venice Commission is not even hidden in its report, it is on the face. Therefore, in order for no one to tell the citizens that black is actually black and not white, the authorities have probably decided that it is better to "pull the NGOs plug out of the socket." It's a pretty rough plan.

There are several countries that committed such abuses - we are talking about similar issues in Hungary, in Poland. But they didn't go that far. They didn't go that far as to copy-paste Putin's laws. I knew that Mr. Dodon was favouring Putin, while Mr. Plahotniuc and the Government opposed him. This is what I understood from the theatre play that was presented to us. Are we now copying Putin's laws with the civil society organisations as foreign agents?

If this is the plan, they should write it down in their government programme for the people to know who they are voting for.

Lina Grău: From the experience of Romania, how strong and important is the voice of civil society?

Sorin Ioniță: Generally, it is very important in a democracy. Being Romanian and living in Bucharest, it seems to me that the civil society is not active enough and we can't do as much as we would like to.

Lina Grău: But if we compare the situation with what we are having in Moldova?

Sorin Ioniță: Obviously, compared to Moldova, not to mention Russia, things are incomparably better.

In our country, the civil society has played a very important role, for example, in the last half-year since the new government was established in December - it was the only force that pushed back some bad initiatives managing to keep the anti-corruption agenda - it all depended on mobilizing the civil society and the society in general that took to the street.

In recent years, both in Moldova and Romania, and in other countries, the rule of law is a priority. Why do the authorities want to change electoral laws? They want to gain control of a new majority and perpetuate a system without rule of law. It means they want to preserve the current system in Moldova - where the rule of law is weak, justice is subordinate and there exist areas that have never been touched by justice.

If you look at Romania, a huge scandal is going on these days – investigations have been initiated against the leader of the government, Liviu Dragnea. It seems that there are no untouchable areas by justice in Romania and I think this is good, even though for some people what is happening seems to be chaotic.

■ **Lina Grău:** It is a process to which the civil society contributed directly through attitude.

■ **Sorin Ioniță:** It is a natural process in which civil society has a decisive role. Because without its support, even prosecutors can't do their job. Their bosses will eventually "subjugate" these institutions if the latter don't have any support by the society -both the society at large- all the voters, the public opinion that we see in the polls- and a

more organized part of it that can react in a more technical manner when it is necessary.

I believe that the Republic of Moldova has now a million of other priorities on the association agenda - a lot of economic issues have to be discussed in which the involvement of the civil society is important and therefore the civil society should be strengthened. Instead of discussing these crucial issues, there have been invented this topic of the elections which polarized the society and this "political ballet" that is absolutely inefficient from the point of view of Moldova's integration into the EU. Only if there is a goal of European integration in Chisinau.

For the last year, it looks like no one is interested in European integration apart from the fact that from time to time

they are going to Brussels to ask for money. Is it only because of the money that they want Europe? Are the reforms of no interest to them? Has anyone talked about energy interconnections, rural development programmes and about what else we have to do to align to the European standards? Have you seen any public discussions or hearings in Parliament with participation of the civil society on these issues? And what about the justice reforms that are still unfinished?

It was expected that starting from last year the above-mentioned issues should have been the priorities. Instead, it seems that parasite-topics have been invented so that people start arguing and then punish those who say that changing the electoral system is really a false topic.

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