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# NEWSLETTER

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## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

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

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



If elections were held next Sunday, only two parties would enter the Parliament - the Socialist Party, a party headed until recently by Igor Dodon, with 32%, and the Party of Action and Solidarity, led by Maia Sandu - with 18%. The other parties would not pass the threshold, according to a survey conducted by the CBS-Axa Centre for Sociological Studies at the order of IDIS Viitorul. The survey shows that the percentage of those who believe the country is going in a wrong direction dropped by almost 20% in just a few months. Eight out of ten Moldovans are dissatisfied with the economic situation of the country. Corruption, low salaries and pensions, lack of jobs and the stolen billion from the banks are the main concerns and problems that impede economic prosperity.



President Igor Dodon paid his first two visits in his new capacity- to Moscow (January 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>) and Brussels (February 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>). In Moscow, Igor Dodon said the Association Agreement with the European Union hasn't brought any benefits to Moldova, being detrimental to the interests of the country and that after the Socialist Party wins the majority in the next parliamentary elections, he will opt to cancel this document. Dodon also advocates federalization of Moldova and said that Transnistrian gas debt of over \$ 6 billion belongs to Moldova.



The Chisinau Government reiterated the importance of the EU Association Agreement signed in 2014, after President Igor Dodon had said in Moscow that it is disadvantageous for Moldovans and that it should be canceled or renegotiated. The Prime Minister Pavel Filip said the agreement is "to the benefit of the Republic of Moldova", "will not be revised", and the pro-European reforms will be continued.



In Brussels, Igor Dodon said, after the meeting with the Deputy Secretary General of NATO, Rose Gottemoeller, that the opening of a NATO office in Chisinau would be a challenge and would undermine the Transnistrian problem settlement, thus he does not agree to it. The deputy Secretary General of NATO and NATO spokeswoman, Oana Lungescu, said that the NATO office in Chisinau will be opened based on the agreement between the Republic of Moldova and NATO and that it is going to be a small civil diplomatic office. A government press release announces that the NATO liaison office will be opened in Chisinau in April.



The Austrian Foreign Minister and the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Sebastian Kurz, paid a visit to Moldova on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> of February. He said that "the Transnistrian Settlement Process is high on the agenda of the Austria OSCE chairmanship from 2017".

## Sebastian Kurz: We should make best use of this window of opportunity in political terms



**A**ustria's Foreign Minister and the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Sebastian Kurtz, is stating in an exclusive interview to the APE/FES Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates Newsletter that there is "a window of political opportunity" in the

Transnistrian conflict process, in the next 18 months, given that neither Chisinau nor Tiraspol have elections, but it depends on the political will of both sides whether it would be possible to advance in solution of the key issues.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *What are the priorities of the Austrian Chairmanship of OSCE in 2017 regarding Eastern Europe?*

■ **Sebastian Kurz:** We want to contribute to greater security and stability in Europe through a co-operative approach. As OSCE Chairmanship, we will therefore put a particular emphasis on three issues: First, defusing the existing armed conflicts that have caused so much misery, displacement and destruction in the OSCE area – especially in Eastern Europe. Second, we must deal with the major challenges to internal security posed by increasing threats of terrorism and growing radicalisation, especially of young people. We will work together to identify and address root causes and triggers for radicalisation. Third, we need to counteract the increasing loss of trust between States and also of our citizens towards State institutions. Austria, following its tradition as a bridge-builder, will act transparently to foster open and results-oriented dialogue.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *What are the risks of the Transnistrian frozen conflict for the regional security?*

■ **Sebastian Kurz:** A stable, prosperous Moldova contributes to regional security and promotes economic development. It is important that the sides continue to engage constructively within the existing formats in order to find sustainable solutions that benefit the people on both banks.

Violations of agreements that regulate the situation in the Security Zone must be avoided: All stakeholders must contribute actively to improve the security situation on the ground and make progress towards greater stability and predictability.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *What are the core approaches in the settlement of the Transnistrian issue? (To what extent the Austrian Chairmanship of OSCE will focus on political dialogue and resumption of the negotiations in the 5+2 format; changing the peacekeeping mission on the Nistru River into a civilian mission with an international mandate; withdrawal of Russian troops from the Transnistrian region?)*

■ **Sebastian Kurz:** The Transnistrian Settlement Process is high on our agenda. My Special Representative, Ambassador Wolf Dietrich Heim, already met with both sides to discuss perspectives for 2017. We appreciate the progress made last year in Berlin and Hamburg, and will remain committed to a results-oriented approach.

What we need is political will, pragmatism and flexibility in dealing with the outstanding issues that are currently on the table, including issues as telecommunications, education, transportation or criminal cases. This would not only improve the quality of life for people on both sides, but also help to advance the settlement process. In addition to ensuring the implementation of all issues of the Berlin Protocol, we should also work on solutions for the question of Latin-script schools, the Dubasari farm land and free movement of persons, goods and services.

Regarding the peacekeeping force, we consider the rotation of Russian troops a bilateral issue between Moldova and the Russian Federation. However, in 1999, the mandate of the OSCE Mission was expanded to provide transparency and co-ordination on the removal and destruction of Russian ammunition and armaments.

The OSCE remains ready to play a facilitating role whenever this process resumes.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *In your opinion, does the Transnistrian region status quo contribute to maintaining stability in the Eastern European region or it leads to deeper separation of the two conflicting sides thus endangering the regional security?*

■ **Sebastian Kurz:** We must not become complacent with the current situation. Unresolved conflicts are an enduring threat to stability and security. We must remember that there are people living in the conflict areas who continue to suffer on a daily basis. It is in the interest of the conflicting sides to keep working towards a political settlement of the conflict, and that is what we are trying to support by taking small, practical steps beneficial to both sides.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *During the official visit of the new elected president of the Republic of Moldova, Igor Dodon, to Moscow the issue of direct negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol with the Russian mediation was discussed. Do you think this would be an appropriate format for identifying and guaranteeing a settlement of the Transnistrian issue?*

■ **Sebastian Kurz:** Moldova's international partners within the "5+2" format highly esteem the commitment undertaken by Chisinau to elaborate a policy and vision, as well as resources, for a special status for Transnistria within a sovereign Moldova. Any accompanying direct or indirect discussions of stakeholders can be positive, if they are held in a constructive way. Let me remind in that context, that direct talks between Chisinau and Tiraspol already take

place, including on the level of chief negotiators.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *The civil society experts mentioned federalization of the Republic of Moldova as one of the “red lines” that would undermine the viability of the country. Do you foresee the federalization as an emerging topic on the agenda on negotiations in one way or another?*

■ **Sebastian Kurz:** We focus on content, not only on wording. The consensus among the OSCE participating States is that a settlement needs to strengthen Moldova’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, while providing for a special status for Transnistria within Moldova. I welcome debate on possible models that concentrate on concrete mechanisms of power-sharing. This debate should in my view also include other elements of society, such as legislators, the business sector and civil society.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *From your perspective, could 2017 bring considerable progress in a fair settlement of the Transnistrian conflict? Could a political solution to the Transnistrian conflict be reached?*

■ **Sebastian Kurz:** The fact that no elections on either side of the Nistru are scheduled in the next 18 months could be conducive to progress. We should make best use of this window of opportunity in political terms. The OSCE stands ready to help promote tangible results to advance the settlement, foster trust between the sides, and improve the lives of people on both banks. However, it is up to the sides to provide the essential ingredient - political will - to settle the key issues one by one.

■ **Lina Grâu:** On February 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>, the Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz paid an official visit to the Republic of Moldova. This was his first visit as chairman-in-office of the OSCE. During his visit, Sebastian Kurz has inaugurated the Austrian Embassy in Moldova, attended the Moldovan-Austrian Business Forum and met with the Foreign Minister Andrei Galbur, the Prime Minister Pavel Filip and the President Igor Dodon. Sebastian Kurz visited also Tiraspol.



At a press conference in Chisinau, Sebastian Kurz referred to the situation in eastern Ukraine, underlining that “the violation of the agreements discussed in Minsk and the violence are unacceptable” and that the “situation of the population is critical- with thousands of people having no access to electricity, water and heat, especially in cold weather conditions. “The OSCE observers have registered over 20 thousand violations of the ceasefire agreement. We demand immediate cessation of violence and access to the conflict zone for the international observers and humanitarian aid “, said Sebastian Kurz.

The Moldovan Foreign Minister Andrei Galbur announced that during the meeting with the OSCE Chairman they have discussed about organization in the second quarter of this year, in Vienna, of a new meeting in the 5+2 format.

■ **Andrei Galbur:** We have saluted the willingness of the Austrian Foreign Minister, in his capacity as OSCE chairman-in-office, to help boost the negotiations in the 5+2 format in order to ensure a positive dynamic of the process.

We also talked about the importance of promoting further measures to build confidence and resolve urgent problems faced by people on both sides of the Nistru.

I've advocated for extending the list of issues on the negotiations agenda formulated in the Berlin protocol by addressing issues of continuous concern to us. I've stressed in particular the free movement of people, goods and services between the two sides; ensuring good functioning of Latin-script schools in the Transnistrian region; free access of farmers from the Dubasari district to their agricultural land, and other important issues.

The Austrian foreign minister and the OSCE Chairman-in-office Kurz and I have agreed on the opportunity to strengthen our efforts with a view to organizing a new meeting in the 5+2 format during the Austrian chairmanship.

The Prime Minister Pavel Filip expressed hope after the meeting with the OSCE Chairman that the year 2017 will be more fruitful with regard to the Transnistrian settlement and that the contacts in the 5+2 and 1+1 formats will intensify. He has also expressed hope that they will launch the discussions about the security issues and the legal status of the Transnistrian region. He mentioned Chisinau is grateful to the German Chairmanship of the OSCE of the last year for its contribution to the resumption after a two-year break of the negotiations in the 5+2 format.

**Pavel Filip:** Our main interest in 2017 is to address in the negotiation process, apart from issues formulated in the Berlin protocol, the issue of a special legal status for the Transnistrian region as part of Moldova. We believe that it is high time to start discussions on the political matters from the third basket of the "5+2" negotiations. What we call the small steps policy and confidence building measures should end up with the settlement of the Transnistrian problem and the reunification of the two banks of the Nistru.



We are concerned about continued military activities of the Task Force of the Russian troops stationed illegally in Transnistria that in 2016 were trained for the first time and the Tiraspol security forces. Hopefully the OSCE Austrian Chairmanship and the OSCE Mission to Moldova will take relevant attitude towards the illegal presence of the Russian troops in Moldova and their interaction with the Transnistrian security agencies, including through supporting our efforts with regard to the unconditional withdrawal of the troops and munitions from the territory of Moldova and transformation of the current peacekeeping operation into a civil mission with an international mandate.

At the same time, Pavel Filip spoke against federalisation of the Republic of Moldova.

**Pavel Filip:** We want and believe that we should already talk about a special status for the Transnistrian region- a viable status for the region that would not affect the functionality in any way of the Moldovan state. Our position is categorically against federalization, because we don't believe it's a good solution. And we rely heavily on the Austrian chairmanship of the OSCE this year. If until now we have been talking about the first and second basket of issues, I think it is high time to move to the third basket of issues - security and legal status of the region. Last year, under the German chairmanship, we were able to resume the negotiations in the "5+2" format after a two-year break, being very close to solving other issues of interest to the citizens. That is why I hope that if we continue with the same energy, we will have success this year.

After the meeting with Sebastian Kurz, President Igor Dodon wrote in a posting on a social network that he expressed hope that the Austrian chairmanship of the OSCE will help to boost the process of negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict settlement. "We made the vision of the Moldovan presidency known, says Igor Dodon in the post, including the steps we propose for the near future. The approach is to address the issues as part of one single package: four topics of importance to the citizens from the two banks of the river Nistru.

I'm reiterating that the Transnistrian conflict settlement process should end up with reintegration of Moldova and Transnistria, the latter having a special status within the country. Although the presidency and government have



different visions on many issues of domestic and foreign policy, in terms of reintegration, I'm in favour of a common approach and cooperation with a view to finding optimal solutions to the benefit of people on both sides of the Nistru.

We have discussed the intention to organize jointly with the OSCE, at the end of 2017, in Chisinau, an International Conference on the topic "Moldova - territory of stability and development or a new challenge in the relations between East and West". "

During the meeting in Tiraspol, the newly elected leader of the Transnistrian region, Vadim Krasnoselskii, emphasized that in the Transnistrian settlement process there should be primarily addressed the issues affecting the everyday life of ordinary people and stressed that "quite a lot of such issues have accumulated".

"Some of them have already been discussed in the 5+2 negotiations and I hope that many of them will be solved with your participation. Transnistria is a peaceful state. We want to live in peace with our neighbours - Moldova and Ukraine. We should take steps that will allow ordinary people of Transnistria and Moldova to live comfortably and not be hostages of incorrect political decisions taken by civil servants," said Vadim Krasnoselskii.

Referring to the issues that were discussed during the meeting with the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Vadim Krasnoselskii mentioned the termination of criminal

cases, the resumption of railway traffic and solution of the communications problems. At the same time, the leader of the breakaway region was categorically against addressing the subject of Transnistria's status, underlining that "the independence of Transnistria is its security guarantee."

"The political issues are out of place now, we have a lot of other problems that should be addressed as a matter of urgency. The people expressed its will back in the 2006 referendum- voting for the independence of Transnistria with its subsequent annexation to Russia. And, of course, I'm not going to change that course ", said Vadim Krasnoselskii.

The head of the negotiation team from Tiraspol, Vitali Ignatiev, also present at the meeting, was quoted by the local press, saying that the purpose of Tiraspol is "the regulation of the Moldovan-Transnistrian relations based on equality of parties and good neighbourliness principle."

"Our international partners, including the Austrian OSCE Chairmanship, confirm their attachment for regulating the social and humanitarian issues. Last year, the obligations of the Berlin Protocol outlining the issues and their solution mechanisms, were not fulfilled. I have no doubt that we will continue working with a view to achieving them. In addition, there are other issues that have not been reflected in that document, for example, the railway traffic. Unfortunately, many times, while the issues remain unresolved, new ones add to those, and thus the dialogue takes on a negative dynamic", said Vitaliy Ignatiev.



## **Andrei Deviatkov: Moscow is aware of the electoral character of Igor Dodon's rhetoric**

**A**ndrei Deviatkov, senior analyst with the Research Centre of the Post-Soviet space of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Science, says the pro-Russia's statements made by Igor Dodon were not enough to determine a stronger support from the Russian Federation, because Kremlin understands the limited powers of the President of the Republic of Moldova and is sceptical about the victory of the Socialist Party in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *From Moscow's point of view, what can Chisinau count on in its relations with Russia? Russia itself is not in a very good economic situation.*

■ **Andrei Deviatkov:** The notion of "Chisinau" has to be divided into two - the Socialist Party and Dodon, on the one hand, and the Democratic Party with the Government, on the other hand. For Moscow these are two different "Chişinău". Moscow understands very well that it is not at all certain that the 2018 elections will change the political landscape in Moldova.

I'm following Igor Dodon's statements and my impression is that they have a pre-electoral character. He works for a certain segment of the Moldovan



electorate and makes very harsh statements, departing from earlier less trenchant statements made in the campaign and adopting more radical positions, for example, with regard to the Association Agreement.

Including during his visit to Moscow, Dodon put his own political interests first and worked for his electorate.

My impression is that Moscow is not interested in denouncing the Association Agreement - it understands that this is unlikely. Today, the official position of Moscow at the negotiations within the Rogozin-Calmîc Intergovernmental Commission is that there should be found a trilateral negotiations format within which two free trade

areas - CIS and the EU - could co-exist peacefully in Moldova.

That is why I think that for Russia, at the moment, there is no ideal partner in Chisinau. If we speak about the current Democratic Party government, against Brussel's tough position towards Russia with regard to the situation in Ukraine, it is not ready to accept concessions in favour of Moscow and make amendments to the Association Agreement. As to Igor Dodon, Moscow understands that his statements and position have a pre-electoral character, including when he talked about denouncing the Association Agreement.

However, given that Dodon is trying to prove his pro-Russian orientation at the symbolical level, Moscow agreed to make some formal concessions, including because Russia has very few friends internationally and among the CIS countries. These concessions are related primarily to the 40-50 thousand Moldovan migrants whose access is banned in Russia. To that end, there has been created a commission under the Security Council of the Russian Federation which may take a decision to allow access for the Moldovan migrants to the Russian Federation. However, with regard to the biggest part of migrants, Moscow said there will be

no legalization and the issue will not be discussed for the moment.

Regarding the access of Moldovan products on the Russian market, everything will depend on fulfillment of the Calmîc-Rogozin Roadmap signed in November. This does not depend on Dodon, but it depends on how the Moldovan phytosanitary organizations and customs will work with the Russian structures-Rospotrebnadzor, Rosselkhoznadzor. This will also depend on the creation of the joint database of products imported from Moldova to Russia, on whether the single window for wine exports to the Krasnodar region will work or not, and on whether the phytosanitary norms will be observed or not... If these things are done, the bans may be lifted.

But, given the Brussels position, the issue of lifting the customs duties and the most favoured nation regime, is not on the agenda at present. This means that the Moldovan products will most likely get access on the Russian market, but the high tariffs of 14-20 percent will remain.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *You say Moscow is aware of the electoral character of Igor Dodon's declarations. But it is evident that Moscow would like that the Socialist Party wins the majority at the next election – it would be simpler to control the whole country and not just Transnistria. How will Moscow act in this situation?*

■ **Andrei Deviatkov:** In Moscow they understand it very well that Igor Dodon is just one of the centers of influence in Moldova. There is also the Democratic Party and the right-wing

parties that proved quite strong in the presidential elections.

In Moldova there are no factors at present to consolidate a national position in order to address structural issues. I mean there are prospects for permanent geopolitical clashes, debate and protest mood with regard to any issue. So very few in Russia believe in the thesis that the Socialist Party will come to power and Russia will have a partner.

The Socialist Party already has the majority, but because of the so-called independent MPs who migrated to the ruling coalition, it has no power. And if the electoral system in Moldova is changed towards a mixed system, the number of independent MPs will increase. Even if the Socialist Party may win the majority on party lists, it will lose in the uninominal constituencies, especially given the use by the current power of administrative resources. Accordingly, if there are no massive social protests of right-wing voters, the share of the Democratic Party will increase.

Internationally, the big powers have other concerns at present that Moldova – the EU and USA are preoccupied with their own internal problems. IMF has resumed financing, Romania supports in one way or the other the Moldovan government, which is the Democratic Party. So at present, there are more factors that stabilize the current political regime in Moldova than factors that destabilize it. For the moment, I don't see any factors that could change the political regime or the balance of forces in 2017 and 2018. And in Moscow they understand this thing very well. In my opinion, at present, there are no

premises for a change of the situation.

■ **Lina Grâu:** *Do you think a political progress in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict is possible this year? During the recent visit of the Austrian chairman of the OSCE, Sebastian Kurtz, the Moldovan authorities mentioned the need to address the issues from the third basket pertaining to security and political status of the region. Do you think this year, in addition to the 5+2 and 1+1 contacts, a document on the political status may be discussed?*

■ **Andrei Deviatkov:** I don't think so. There are many political and ideological battles around "pro and against federalization". On a practical level, there are a lot of factors that play against progress. First, when Sebastian Kurz came to Chisinau, the Government on the one hand, and Dodon on the other hand, presented him with different regulatory plans. So the Austrian Foreign Ministry will have to work and combine the two projects.

Pavel Filip made strong statements at the press conference with Sebastian Kurz related to the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Transnistria, saying also that the Berlin Protocol can be discussed only in the context of determining the political status of Transnistria- a status that Chisinau sees as being consistent with the Constitution, which means Transnistria cannot be a subject of federation, but a unitary part of the state of the Republic of Moldova.

The Austrian chairmanship of the OSCE will try, as Germany did, to use the Transnistrian issue to create a



relatively positive atmosphere in Europe, showing that against the background of the crisis in Ukraine, the Transnistrian problem can still be resolved – peacefully and with the participation of Russia, not against Russia. But Moldova will oppose, primarily because for the Democratic Party now, any failure on Transnistria will mean a vulnerability in the face of the right political flank.

So there are no real prospects for a political settlement. Now there is an escalation of the conflict in Ukraine. Also in the West they have, to put it mildly, negative emotions towards Russia. Given this background, it would be very difficult to reach any major agreement on Transnistria, though the issue seems apparently very simple.

The Austrian presidency of the OSCE will be helped by the former German OSCE Chairman Mr. Cord Meier Klodt, who will be German Ambassador to Bucharest and will try to influence Romania's position as Romania has always been very skeptical about any participation of the Russian Federation in the Transnistrian settlement.

We can also see that Transnistria today is seeking support from Moscow, insisting on the 2006 referendum where the majority of the population expressed its will in favour of the region's independence.

So neither from the Moldovan nor the Transnistrian side can we see an approximation of positions.



## Association Agreement for Moldova – opposing views

*Lina Grâu*

The day Igor Dodon left for Brussels, he published on his blog his personal vision on the Moldova- EU relations, stating that signing of the Association Agreement “did not improve the export position of Moldova”, instead “it deteriorated catastrophically the conditions on the Russian export market.” The analysis presents selective data of the National Bureau of Statistics on exports to the EU market, saying that contrary to the estimates, the exports didn't increase, but rather decreased. The figures presented show a decline in exports to the European market in the period of September 2014-August 2016, but also indicate significant growth in the last quarter of 2016.

Igor Dodon also points out that in two years since the Association Agreement has entered into force, the foreign direct investments in Moldova's economy decreased by 17% compare to the period before the entry into force of the Association Agreement with the EU.

The president also makes reference to several international reports which show a worsening of the situation in terms of perception of corruption, competitiveness, freedom of the press in Moldova, suggesting that the situation has worsened in the last two years since the Association Agreement with the EU.

In an analysis published before Igor Dodon's visit to Brussels, the expert of the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels, Michael Emerson, and Dionis Cenusă from the Analytical Center Expert- Group in Moldova, maintain that the Moldovan exports to the EU grew by 11% over the period of almost three years of the Free Trade Agreement, while analysed in a longer term perspective of ten years, the exports increased by 274% -from 444 mln US dollars in 2005 to 1 bln 218 mln US dollars 2015.

The position of the president Igor Dodon in relation to the Association Agreement has already brought significant damage to the economy, because he kept the potential investors away and an eventual abrogation of the Association Agreement in order to join the Eurasian Union would mean a more dramatic step than we could imagine, comparable to an economic suicide, reads the analysis signed by the two experts.

## **Dionis Cenușă: On the contrary, statistics show that we have an increase in exports to the EU**

**D**ionis Cenușă, expert with the Independent Analytical Centre Expert-Grup, says that in his analysis, Igor Dodon gives an erroneous interpretation, using statistics in a selective way, and maintains that the statements made by the Moldovan president during his visits to Moscow and Brussels have electoral connotation.

■ **Lina Grâu:** How do you interpret the two visits of the President Dodon at the beginning of his mandate?

■ **Dionis Cenușă:** Mr Dodon sees his visits abroad through his own political agenda. Both visits - to Moscow and Brussels - fully reflect Dodon's interests and political aspirations for the coming years, including of his party in connection with the 2018 elections.

The visit to Moscow was necessary, because most of his electoral promises were about re-establishing the trade relations with Russia, while the visit to Brussels – because during the election campaign Igor Dodon repeatedly criticized the European Union, the Association Agreement, and the European integration process.

■ **Lina Grâu:** If you say these visits have electoral connotation, this means they work only for a certain part of society. What about the statement by Igor Dodon that he will be the president of all citizens of the Republic of Moldova?

■ **Dionis Cenușă:** President Dodon came into office saying he would promote



national interests, the interests of the majority of the population. But, unfortunately, he continues to carry out the political agenda of his own party and electorate.

The position of president is a way for the Socialist Party to expand its control over the political power in Moldova. Therefore, what we see now is continuation of the presidential election campaign, just having the parliamentary elections in 2018 at the horizon.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Regarding the messages conveyed by Igor Dodon with regard to foreign policy, but also domestic policy - we saw that he has insisted exactly on the sensitive topics that traditionally generate a turbulent reaction of the society: the language, flag, history etc. – what do they convey from the perspective of unity in the society?

■ **Dionis Cenușă:** Although the president Dodon says he wants to strengthen the Moldovan identity, he is actively promoting the 'moldovenism'. I think

he is actively exploiting the fears of a certain segment of the society in order to consolidate his political power. I do not see how the 'moldovenism' can contribute to the unity in society, it is obvious that there is a category of the population that is pro-Romanian and another part which is neither pro-Romanian nor 'moldovenist'. I mean the society is too divided to use 'moldovenism' in uniting the society.

Therefore, the only explanation I have is that by exploiting the fears of the possibility of liquidation of the Republic of Moldova as an independent state, or the possibility of separatism in the country because of the Gagauz autonomy, or many other topics he is exploiting when speaking about 'Moldovenism', Igor Dodon aims at strengthening his political agenda.

■ **Lina Grâu:** Igor Dodon said the Association Agreement has brought more disadvantages than advantages to the Republic of Moldova and that he will advocate for its cancellation when his party has the majority in the Parliament. You've made an economic analysis. What can you say, from the economic development perspective: was the Association Agreement really a disadvantage for the Moldovan citizens?

■ **Dionis Cenușă:** I cannot agree to the president's statements. There are statistical data in numbers, not percentages, which clearly show that since 2008 onwards we have had an increase from 820 mln US dollars to 1 bln and 246 mln US dollars in the trade with the European Union.

The insignificant drop that Igor Dodon refers to and that is correct, in 2015, is a cumulative effect of several processes that occurred in the region and is linked to the sanctions that Russia has applied to the European Union, decrease in the consumption in the EU, but also to the capacity of Moldovan producers to deliver products to meet the requirements of the EU market. But this, in no case, has to do with the Association Agreement.

Actually, the statistics show that we have, on the contrary, an increase in exports. I'm not referring to percentages, but to the actual figures and the sums of money. In addition, we get more benefits and opportunities on the European market for Moldovan products.

Of course, very much depends on the capacity of Moldovan exporters to comply with the European requirements, which, indeed, are complicated. But they open global benefits. I mean, once we comply with the standards for the European market, we automatically qualify for other markets which are as competitive as the European one. Ultimately, the Association Agreement, on the contrary, opens more doors than it closes.

And if we compare it with the Free Trade Agreement within the CIS, Russia does not comply with its provisions and applies political instruments, which was never the case with the EU.

■ **Lina Grău:** Can we talk about a European perspective for the Republic of Moldova under the present conditions?

■ **Dionis Cenușă:** The European perspective is very uncertain. The European Union is undergoing several overlapping crises and it is also naïve and premature to talk about a certain perspective.

What matters though is to demonstrate that we can deliver concrete results that are tangible for citizens, under the conditions of the Association Agreement with the EU. I mean, as more we implement under the Association Agreement, the closer we get to a European perspective. But the latter cannot be currently institutionalized in the European Union, because Moldova is not a priority on the EU foreign agenda, unfortunately.

■ **Lina Grău:** *We've seen lately an increase in the contacts and talks on the Transnistrian issue. Do you think we will be able this year to move towards*

*a political solution, in the way Chisinau insists? On the other hand, we see that Tiraspol is increasingly talking about the fact they will not renounce its independence. What are the risks of this process?*

■ **Dionis Cenușă:** The Transnistrian settlement is a geopolitical, political and therefore highly dependent on the constellation of political decisions in Moscow that influences the decisions in Tiraspol, and respectively the reaction of Chisinau. I do not think Russia is interested in settling the Transnistrian conflict at the moment. Therefore I don't believe progress is possible in the coming year.

What is certain is Russia's attempt to bring again into the discussion Moldova's federalization scenario, including with the help of Igor Dodon and the Socialist Party. And this is a risk for sustainable settlement of the conflict. I believe that the EU, including through implementation of the Association Agreement and Free Trade Agreement in Transnistria and the confidence-building measures, could create certain preconditions for a more active dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol. But for now we limit ourselves to building trust and not to the settlement of the conflict.

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