

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Sorina Ștefârță, editor-coordinator

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News in brief



In December this year, the EU Council formally endorsed the agreement concluded on 11 July 2019 with the Moldovan Government, which broadens the degree of trade liberalization for specific agricultural products under the DCFTA. The Republic of Moldova will be granted additional duty-free tariff rate quotas to export table grapes (of double the current amount) and plums (of a 50% increase on the current volume), as well as a new duty-free quota for cherries (of 1.500 tonnes). As part of the agreement, EU producers will also have more export opportunities, as the EU will gain additional duty-free access to the Moldovan market. Moreover, the thresholds triggering the anti-circumvention mechanism for wheat, barley, maize, sugar and processed cereals have also been raised, taking into account the trade patterns over the last few years. The agreement is part of the EU's commitment to citizens and businesses and the opportunities and benefits offered by the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). These revisions are in the context of the third year review of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Agreement. The EU completed this review in response to the sustained efforts made by Sandu's government to implement reforms under the DCFTA. The EU encourages the Republic of Moldova to continue the implementation of these needed reforms in the spirit of the Association Agreement. Before it can enter into force, the agreement will have to be approved by the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Committee in Trade Configuration (ACTC).



Aspects of bilateral political and economic cooperation, the intensification of the efficient interaction of the police at cross-border level, as well as the regional and global developments were addressed during the working visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Aureliu Ciocoi, in Berlin on December 16-17. The head of the Moldovan diplomacy had meetings with representatives of the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Federal Chancellor, the Office of the Federal President, and members of the Bundestag from various parties. The main topics discussed with the German interlocutors referred to the political situation in the Republic of Moldova, the problems and challenges of regional security, the Moldovan-German political and social-economic relations, the implementation of the Association Agreement, the Moldova-EU cooperation, the possibility of increasing the bilateral trade. The Minister thanked the German side for the political and economic support offered to our country and mentioned the need for its extension.



The priorities of the Government Action Plan for 2020-2023 was the key topic of the meeting that the Prime Minister Ion Chicu had with the accredited ambassadors in Chisinau on December 17. The chief executive mentioned as priorities the justice reform, the public investments in infrastructure, the modernization of the economy, and improved welfare of the people. "The government will act in a transparent manner. The implementation of the Association Agreement is a priority and we will keep an open dialogue with all the partners", said Ion Chicu. He thanked the representatives of the diplomatic corps for the constant support offered to the Republic of Moldova and stressed that, in fact, the assistance is provided to the citizens of the country, not to the Governments. The priorities in the field of European integration, implicitly the determination of the current Executive to continue and boost the European course of the Republic of Moldova were also addressed at the meeting of the Governmental Commission for European Integration, convened by Prime Minister Ion Chicu later this year.

Moldova 2019: a tragicomedy with an uncertain... ending

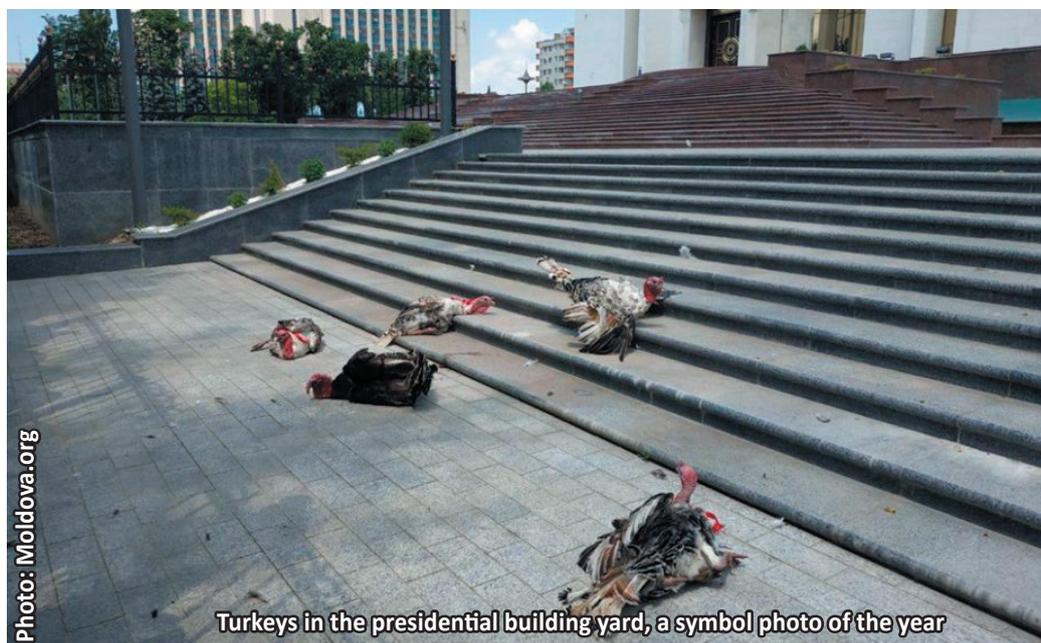


Photo: Moldova.org

Turkeys in the presidential building yard, a symbol photo of the year

Sorina Ștefârță

This last text of 2019 happened to be written after a show. I had been to the "Love with the fool" - a tasty comedy, played for several years with the full room at the National Theater "Eugene Ionesco". And as a good show always inspires, I realized that I am dividing the year that is

coming to an end into acts. How many were they? Who were the prompters and who were the real actors? And what happens when the curtain falls?

We started in January-February with a political-electoral reality that resulted in a Parliament as fragmented as the whole country, with

deputies that descended from the Kroll Report directly into the plenary session room and with a deep sense of fatality. There was a ping-pong of statements-accusations-negotiations etc. Then we found ourselves at the beginning of June which was marked by "pro" and "against" protests; with one week in which we

► had two Governments and many other “two”; with some poor turkeys thrown over the fence of the presidential building by other poor turkeys; and with the shameful, but healthy escape of the one who seemed to have put the country in his pocket for a long time - and with the escape of more than a dozen rats that left the “ship” together with the man ...

Today, it is still unclear whether we have actually got out of the famous pocket or not – or worse – have landed into another, just as dark and stinky. But the five months of the Maia Sandu Government - a real 15-minute intermission in a Republic of Moldova engaged in a theatre of the absurd - have shown that freedom and dignity are not so impossible if there is determination. Only you are asking yourself looking around, who still needs determination today? I also doubt we need freedom looking at how fast we are giving it all out.

And this is how we are entering a new act/year with a new Government, invested with an envious speed for a political class that can negotiate for months some trifles; with new risks of international isolation due to the new openly pro-Russian government; with new apocalyptic projects - compared to the future airports, the Chisinau Arena will look like an insignificant thing, including from a cost perspective; and with new plots of a president ready to do anything just to become president again. And that's not a big deal in a country where everyone is watching TV and you replace one media holding with another. And where you can't do anything, you just try it with sherry ...

Only in any good show, there is a proper denouement. The “Love with the fool” that served as a starting point in writing this text is no exception and, in the end, the fool is the one who thought himself super-smart. Because it is known that he who laughs last, laughs well... Our show, for the moment, is a tragicomedy, and the end is still uncertain - a fact confirmed also by the protagonists and authors of the 2019 last edition newsletter. But it is going to happen sooner or later.

Until then, happy New Year to everyone!
Read our newsletter and... go to the theatre!

We should look at the Republic of Moldova in a much wider regional context



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

For this interview, Angela Grămadă had to take a break from her work on a policy paper in the last days of 2019, that she decided to dedicate to the Republic of Moldova and the events that marked the country in 2019. According to our interlocutor, the paper is going to set the tone for the next year at ESGA, the think tank that she created in Bucharest in 2014. This is because in 2019, Ukraine was in the focus of her organisation. So in 2020, the attention of this platform that brings together experts, representatives of academia and civil society from Romania, the Euro-Atlantic area, the Middle East and the former Soviet area, will look also at the Republic of Moldova. It will happen not only because its founder, who has master degree and PhD in International Relations, both with SNSPA/ National School for Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest, comes from the left bank of the Prut, but also because, as she says, Chisinau is still in the cards... Whether this is good or bad, the next year is going to show. For now, let's see what the 2019 political year was like.

We don't really believe in coincidences in the region, especially when it comes to Russia

■ ***Dear Angela, is the Republic of Moldova still important - as a political case study, but also as a geographical area? Or is this policy paper a simple tribute at the end of the year?***

■ The document I am working on is, above all, my personal challenge. I set out to assess how the year 2019 was for the Republic of Moldova so as to have a clearer and more objective picture of the events - a necessary thing also because we, at ESGA, want to dedicate the next year to the Republic of Moldova. It so happened that in 2019, we focused all our efforts on Ukraine and have realized that, in this regional landscape, we pay too little attention to the seemingly small things, but which have quite a big impact on Ukraine as well. And Kiev is more attentive and sensitive than Chisinau or Bucharest to everything that happens in the region.

■ ***How and why?***

■ They understand it much better that certain processes that are taking place in Chisinau, Tiraspol or Comrat can have quite a big impact on how certain forces are imposed and their interests are promoted. That is why we understand that we have to look at the Republic of Moldova in a wider regional context, much wider than the Black Sea, for example. Unfortunately, in Bucharest, many people are convinced that they know everything about the Republic of Moldova and that no further explanation is needed. De facto, however, we have only a few analysts knowledgeable of the subject, and their grasp on

reality is limited to a few experts or representatives of political groups from Chisinau with whom they discuss. At the same time, the same political channels are used for communication between certain businessmen in Bucharest and Chisinau, and also it is through the same political channels that the investments, social and infrastructure initiatives with the Republic of Moldova are promoted - only to the extent that the party allows them or within the limit of their interests. I was surprised to see that the new socialist mayor of Chisinau was received in Bucharest, even though those representatives of the sector town halls are exponents of certain political forces, in particular, of the PSD...

■ ***It was surprising also for us to see Ion Ceban in Bucharest, taking into account that, traditionally, the socialists deny everything that is related to Romania or everything is Romanian.***

■ Well, their patrimonial interests say a different thing... It is true that I do not even understand how this transfer of discursive support from the PDM to the PSRM took place here in Bucharest, given that, by the statements from June 2019, the MFA, President Iohannis, the Romanian officials in Brussels have expressed concern about the “unnatural” PSRM-ACUM alliance, and have respectively set conditionalities. This went unnoticed in Chisinau - for them it was important that Bucharest recognize the new Power and no one looked at the first paragraphs. However, they referred to serious things, such as regional security, threats and challenges for Ukraine and the way Russia is trying to interfere with the Chisinau political decisions - with backup from the EU, of course. It is obvious that this alliance was also supported by the Europeans. And we don't really believe in coincidences in the region, especially when it comes to Russia.

The presidential elections are not the most important here

■ ***How and where does the Republic of Moldova end the year - more to the***

East, more to the West? It has not moved geographically, but politically and even spiritually, where are we?

■ It is important to distinguish between the good and the least good things the country has gone through this year, and to draw lessons. From the point of view of the democratic exercise, the Republic of Moldova took a step forward in 2019: the change of power took place within the limits of certain democratic parameters and they did not resort to force; the parties and authorities are trying to take into account certain recommendations from the development partners; we went through two electoral exercises that both national and international observers described as generally free and fair. We also note the improvement of the image of the Republic of Moldova abroad - and this strictly refers to the five-month Government of Maia Sandu; the attempt to reform certain public institutions and the decomposition of illegal schemes, through a much greater openness to the press. We had more independent journalism and more investigations, more information on the corrupt nature of the actions of certain decision-makers from the public sphere. It is also positive that many experienced people have returned home and have tried to contribute to the development of certain areas, while the civil society - what was left of it after many had been co-opted in the government sector - has become more proactive and more vocal, because it understands that things can return on the same track they were before June 2019 ... At the same time, what happened in November 2019 is very serious – the no-confidence vote against the Sandu Government and the way the socialists managed this crisis - they nominated a new prime minister and quickly invested a new government with the PDM vote. So, apparently, today everything works well in the Republic of Moldova, but, in fact, it is not so and I saw it on Monday, December 23rd, in the situation related to the concession of the Airport, when it nobody seems to know what happened and does not take responsibility. In the same way, no one sees that reformation-cleaning of the PDM, which is awaited by everybody.

■ ***In fact, they rather talk about the fact that the PDM is going to split...***

■ It can't be ruled out as we have witnessed before such “reinventions” on the political scene of the Republic of Moldova. But the renewal of some political parties cannot be done with old people, by splitting or by taking over old political parties that have not produced results. And I'm not just referring to the PDM here - let's not forget that the Socialist Party was taken over by Igor Dodon a few years ago through similar actions that are not necessarily honest...

■ ***What do you think the political spectrum will look like, when it is clear that ACUM is no longer what it used to be- there will be two candidates in the presidential elections in addition to a dozen of unionist parties. And that's just on the right-wing segment...***

■ First of all, parties should understand that the presidential elections aren't the most important thing. Yes, they are important because they identify leaders, and in the Republic of Moldova, it is still believed that a party has to be led by an iron hand while the leader should take decisions by himself/ herself. But the parliamentary elections are more important. As for the fact that today PPDA and PAS are more separate than together, this is neither regretful nor tragic. On the contrary, it is a chance for both to reinvent themselves, so that they become stronger later. And if they decide to cooperate on certain topics, on public policy projects, each party may come up with an additional vision. For this, however, they should pass through an honest process of internal self-evaluation, to focus on developing the party organization chart, to strengthen its human capital and to coagulate its electorate, and to come up with as many positive messages. People are tired of this imaginary fight with various dragon-oligarchs, when one sees it with the naked eye that power has passed from one oligarch to another...

■ ***But positive messages run the risk of failing in populism...***

■ Not if they are accompanied by concrete actions. To come up with public policy projects, to solve problems, to bring potential investors, to communicate what you want to do, based on the data - then you become credible, and credibility costs and helps you to get popular support much easier and with much less money than in the case of populists. It's ok to build an electoral programme based on the fight with Plahotniuc, maybe even two programmes. But people are waiting also for constructive messages and for some hope.

Maia Sandu's team left the Chicu Government many advantages

■ **Which of the mistakes of the current Opposition could have been avoided? I'm asking about them, because, they say the winners should not be subject to judgment...**

■ I have seen a lot of excuses from the ACUM, that they don't do one thing or another because they are busy with the government. And I do believe they were busy ... but being so busy they allowed Igor Dodon to go to the UN to support his view on the Transnistrian settlement and the need for international recognition of the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova. Also, the socialists went from house to house to present their candidates for the local elections. Zinaida Greceanii alone visited some 20 communities from North to South and from East to West. For comparison, the Maia Sandu's message in support of Galina Sajin – the ACUM candidate for the West constituency no 50 on October 20 about whom nobody knew almost anything - came just before the polls. Not to mention the general feeling that Andrei Nastase did not really want to win the mayoralty in Chisinau and that he ran for mayor out of necessity. This has played a nasty trick on him, because his messages were about something else, not about the City Hall. And you cannot get the people's vote if you are not convincing ... At the same time, I would mention that the Sandu Government almost exclusively engaged in the act of government - the PSRM had only three representatives in the Executive -, after which it assumed

responsibility for a draft law, which they knew from the beginning they would fail. Thus, consciously, they drew upon them the no-confidence vote, and subsequently, they gave up, for various reasons, on all levers they held in the public institutions they managed, such as the parliamentary committees. It doesn't seem fair to the voters, first of all.

■ **The conscious withdrawal in opposition of the PAS / PPDA has been noticed admitted by many people. But it was justified by the "right time" and the fact that, if they had remained in government, yielding more and more, their image would have been irretrievably damaged.**

■ It is an opinion that has the right to life. Only in June 2019 they were trying to convince us that they came to the government for at least a year and that they will face the challenges, with all the risks arising out of such an alliance of temporary convenience. Thus, they should have assumed their failure to organize the contest for the election of the Attorney General, and then they should have tried to communicate differently with the Socialists. In parallel, they should have implemented social projects, organized public debates on the 2020 budget, shown efficiency in other areas and shouldn't have left free space for the coalition partners. But they left consciously and, also consciously, left many advantages to the current government. Today the Chicu Government capitalises on what has done /planned well, including on the external dimension, the Sandu Government and the people who came from abroad to work in her cabinet. I saw, indeed, how the current Government has already undertaken many of the social projects announced by the previous executive...

■ **How realistic is for Maia Sandu to team up with PDM in order to get Igor Dodon ashore this time?**

■ It might be realistic, especially if we take into account the recent statements of the PAS MPs, who asked directly the Democrats for support of the no-confidence vote against the Government that they to file. But such an alliance should necessarily be conditioned with the internal reform of the PDM. Without

further guarantees, without the certainty that the new alliance will not bring major damage to the PAS image, it is unlikely that Maia Sandu will accept such a political construction.

Kiev is watching attentively what is happening in Chisinau

■ **You said earlier that Ukraine is more attentive to what is happening in the region, that they are more prepared and organized to respond to the dangers. Where are we failing – are we failing because we don't know or because we simply don't want to react?**

■ First of all, we got used to the Transnistrian problem and we think very little about it. Exceptions are certain events, such as the recent OSCE meeting in Bratislava, which reminded us that this was again about signing documents that offered new benefits to the Transnistrian leaders. The Ukrainians, however, are in an active phase of the war, the people die almost daily, and the civil society, after November 2013, fully understood its role and purpose, having closely monitored the political and the decision-making processes. De facto, Kiev understood that the Russians are testing a potential model in the Republic of Moldova to be later applied in Ukraine. The fact that since January 2019, so much has been discussed about a possible federalization of the country is not accidental - the Russians just want to do this in Eastern Ukraine and the model will be much easier to apply, if a precedent is created in the Republic of Moldova. Finally, Kiev is closely watching how Moscow takes over assets, finances parties, controls and manages economic processes in Chisinau, as well as deals with strategic objectives, such as the Airport. These are very important and revealing things for Ukraine, things that keep them vigilant. Unfortunately, we cannot speak of the same vigilance in the case of the Moldovan authorities.

■ **On a scale from one to ten, where are we in terms of security?**

■ Somewhere on Four, if we admit that one is the lowest position. The drawbacks

come from how we understand our need for security; how we manage the field in terms of investments, including in human resources in the Ministry of Defense; how we discuss with the development partners about the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict and how we transact, with the help of Tiraspol, national economic interests. In addition, we should take into account the fact that some political groups from Chisinau have encouraged polls such as the referendum held on 2 February 2014 in Gagauzia. So, we are in a rather ungrateful position with regard to our national security and this is especially so because we are trading political interests with it...

■ **Regarding the foreign policy, which are the forecasts for the 2020?**

■ There are certain risks in this area that have to be emphasized. They refer, above all, to the conditionalities about which the Republic of Moldova has been warned by both the European Union and Romania. It is also very important to see how the discussions on the Transnistrian file will take place, in order to be able to assess the further developments in the bilateral dialogue with Ukraine. The messages transmitted by the current government, managed by Igor Dodon - about the need to introduce neutrality as a priority on the international agenda, about deepening the processes of Eurasian integration, plus the lack of vision, but also of levers in the dialogue with Kiev and Bucharest – don't contribute to improving the content of foreign policy. On the contrary, these messages highlight the dissensions, but also the fears of external partners. Therefore, in 2020, we will have to get used to the fact that the external partners treat the decision-making process in Chisinau not only with concern, but also with a dose of suspicion that the Moldovan authorities are promoting foreign interests. As a result, they will limit their support to discursive encouragement and promises of technical and financial assistance for better times...

■ **Thank you for the interview and I wish you success!**

Sorina Ștefăriță

Editorial



Three Governments - three foreign policies or a different review of the year

Andrei Popov, president of the Institute for Strategic Initiatives (IPIS)

It is not the first time that three executives have changed in Chisinau during a single year (this happened in 1999 and 2015), but it is the absolute premiere that each of these three governments - Filip, Sandu and Chicu - got invested by three completely different combinations of parliamentary majorities. In its 28 years of independence, the Republic of Moldova has not had another year to be segmented so clearly into three distinct stages. Even the only element of continuity - President Igor Dodon - has played three completely different roles in each of these three phases: from the junior informal and vulnerable partner in the relations with Vlad Plahotniuc to the co-founder of the PSRM-ACUM majority and, ultimately, starting with the investment of the Chicu Government, to the undisputed leader of a new power vertical.

The depth of the ruptures that occurred in June and November between the three phases of political life is also underlined by the fact that, for the first time in our history, none of the former ministers retained his/her position in the three successive governments. This happened despite the previous practice of ensuring at least a minimum continuity in the governments. Even in the case of profound changes in the parliamentary majorities (1994, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2016), at least a few "old" ministers were kept in the new cabinet. For instance, although the year 2001 marked the beginning of a new political era, the Tarlev-1 Government took over six key ministers from the Braghiș Cabinet (Economy, Finance and Foreign Affairs).

Moreover, as a rule, the change of Governments did not affect the position of the Minister of Foreign

Affairs, a fact that symbolically transmitted a certain reassuring signal of continuity of the foreign policy course. Only three times did the new government come with a new Foreign Minister - in 1994, 2009, and 2016. In 2019, however, the exception became a rule and for the first time, in only one year, three Foreign Ministers took turns at the helm of the Moldovan diplomacy: Tudor Ulianoschi, Nicu Popescu and Aureliu Ciocoi. But certainly not the figure of the foreign ministers was the reason why the year 2019 was so clearly segmented into three stages so distinct not only for the internal politics, but also (almost equally) for the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova. The main reason was the **type of government and its degree of credibility in relations with our main partners.**

Thus, **the first half of 2019 has passed under the sign of Vlad Plahotniuc** and his attempts to maintain and strengthen his power by establishing, after the February parliamentary elections, a new cabinet of ministers, in which the Democratic Party would play the dominant role. Faced with a profound crisis of internal legitimacy and external credibility, the last months of the Plahotniuc / Filip's government were probably the darkest and most ungrateful period for our foreign policy and diplomatic endeavor. The government found itself - in particular, after the abusive and defiant cancelation of the elections results for the Chisinau City Hall in July 2018 - in a very unreliable and even hostile external environment, and in a quasi-isolation internationally.

Plahotniuc managed the counter-performance to set up against him not only Russia, but also the European Union and the United States. Despite the irreconcilable divergences between Brussels, Washington and Moscow on most international files, their interests reached a denominator

in Moldova. All the three of them saw maintaining the Plahotniuc regime as the worst option for their interests. The only tool of Plahotniuc's elimination was to support the creation of a parliamentary majority and a joint government between the PSRM and the ACUM Block. I do not agree, however, with those who say Plahotniuc's removal was possible only due to the external factors - first and foremost, the premises of change existed in the Moldovan society. But we have to admit that without the decisive contribution from the outside, it is most likely that the premises created internally would not have been sufficient to bring about the change.

Naturally, **the Sandu Government, invested by the PSRM-ACUM majority, was from the first days welcomed and supported by the EU, Russia and (after a few days of reflection) the USA**, as well as by Kiev and Bucharest (which initially had also manifested certain concerns regarding the risk that the change could be capitalized to strengthen the positions of the "pro-Russian forces"). However, although it had one of the shortest mandates in history (exceeding only the Gaburici and Streleț Governments in duration), during the record time of only five months, the Cabinet led by Maia Sandu managed to relaunch the relations of the Republic of Moldova with both the West and Russia.

The gates of the big capitals got almost immediately wide open for our country, and Prime Minister Sandu, in the very first month of her term, was received at the highest level in Bucharest, Brussels, Berlin and Kiev. Chisinau was visited by the EU Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. Maia Sandu paid two more visits to Brussels, in which she signed several EU financing agreements. After a two and

a half year break, also President Igor Dodon went to Brussels.

In June, President Dodon, boycotted until then by Bucharest, met in Chisinau with the adviser on foreign affairs to the Romanian President, Bogdan Aurescu, and with the State Secretary Dan Neculăescu. Then, in September, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly Session, he had his first meeting with his Romanian counterpart Klaus Johannis, apparently creating the premises for overcoming the deadlock between the President of the Republic of Moldova and Romania.

On July 23rd, five ministers from the Sandu Government attended, in Bucharest, the meeting of the **Republic of Moldova-Romania inter-ministerial working group**, agreeing on the promotion of several priority assistance projects, while in August, the Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu was invited to the annual meeting of the Romanian diplomacy. At the beginning of November, Chisinau and Bucharest almost completed the negotiations for a preferential loan.

The relationship with the United States was also filled with content through a whole series of meetings and visits to Chisinau, Washington and New York. In fact, this was the most intense period in the history of our bilateral relations: Nicu Popescu's visit to Washington; the visits to Chisinau of the USAID Deputy Administrator Brock Birman; of the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale, the fourth person in the hierarchy of the State Department, and the National Security Advisor to the U.S. President John Bolton. Then Maia Sandu's visit to Washington and her meeting with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence followed. Despite the modest publicity, the visit was full of substance, Prime Minister Sandu becoming the fifth leader of the Republic of Moldova received at the White House, after Snegur, Voronin,

Filat and Leancă. And that's after only four months of mandate! The meeting of President Igor Dodon with the Under Secretary of State Hale in New York, as well as the meeting of the Moldovan-U.S. Intergovernmental Commission, on October 28th, were also part of the new dynamics of the Moldovan-American relations. Thus, for the first time after the establishment of the Moldovan-American strategic dialogue in March 2014 and its formal relaunch in June 2017, from episodic meetings and actions, **it began to become rhythmic and structured, while the notion of "strategic" began to take shape and acquire real substance.**

After a glacial period in Chisinau's relations with the Russian Federation, characterized by tensions and freezing of contacts on the Government's line starting with March 2017, **the Moldovan-Russian dialogue also entered a rapid normalization.** The Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Kozak, who had been in Chisinau on June 3rd-4th, playing a decisive role in convincing Igor Dodon to form, in the last minute, a parliamentary majority with the ACUM bloc, made two more visits to our country (on June 24th and on September 20th-21st). The Minister of Economy Vadim Brânzan accompanied Igor Dodon to the meetings with Kozak and the head of "Gazprom" Alexei Miller, and, after a three-year break, the Moldovan Foreign Minister's visit to Moscow took place, followed by the meeting of the Moldovan-Russian Intergovernmental Commission and the Moldovan-Russian Economic Forum.

The climax that would have symbolically marked the complete normalization of the Moldovan-Russian political dialogue **was to be the visit of Prime Minister Maia Sandu to Moscow.** However, she did not rush to honour the invitation - invoking the importance of ensuring substantial results as a condition for going to Moscow, Maia

Sandu was obviously thinking about the possible political repercussions such a visit might have in the context of local elections and of the speculations that the Government was giving in to Russia. However, at the beginning of October, it was preliminarily agreed, through the diplomatic channels, that the visit and the Sandu-Medvedev meeting will take place at the end of the first decade of November. However, a few weeks before that date, the Russian side announced that the previously agreed period was no longer available, but no alternative dates, as provided in such cases by the diplomatic practice, have been proposed. In parallel, the Russian interlocutors asked Chisinau to elaborate a detailed action plan on how the Moldovan-Russian Joint Commission Protocol was implemented, a document presented as "indispensable" for a good preparation of Mrs. Sandu's visit to Moscow ...

The retrospective analysis of this episode, especially in the context of the flying visit made to Moscow by the new Prime Minister Chicu, in the first week after swearing into office (so without having time for thorough preparations), offers sufficient arguments to advance the hypothesis that, **at the end of October, the Russian side was already evaluating the possible (or even probable) dismissal of the Sandu Government shortly.** Or, once in opposition, Sandu would immediately become Dodon's direct competitor. And if her resignation had followed her visit to Moscow, this could have strengthened her positions on the center and, at the same time, could have deprived President Dodon's next loyal government of the possibility of carrying out a major PR action.

Moreover, it is almost unimaginable that the decision to dismiss the Sandu Government and to install, immediately, the Chicu Cabinet, with the votes of the PDM deputies, could be taken

without coordinating it with Moscow. The contribution to the disembarking of Plahotniuc represented for the Kremlin not only an image boost among certain segments of the Moldovan society, but also a step forward in trying to become credible as a potential partner capable of constructive cooperation with the West. Thus, for Moscow, the investment in the debarking of Plahotniuc and maintaining the majority of the PSRM-ACUM exceeded, as a stake, the framework of the Republic of Moldova. An important side effect was to provide arguments to the European politicians (President Emmanuel Macron, first of all) interested in and willing to re-engage Russia.

The dismissal of the Government (even though Prime Minister Maia Sandu chose the moment of departure by herself and forced the situation) would have inevitably been interpreted in the West as evidence that Russia (again) cheated, using the "credulity" of its partners to capitalize in a selfish way in its own interest. Thus, the natural conclusion: "If it is not possible to build, together with Russia, common solutions in a relatively peripheral file such as the Republic of Moldova, how can you trust it when discussing the situation in Ukraine, Syria, etc.?" Certainly, Dodon could not expose his main external employer to such a risk without coordinating with it first.

Moreover, he had to make convincing arguments that he keeps the situation under control and that **the alternative he will build with the Chicu Government in 2019-2020 is better - including from the perspective of Russia's interests - than continuing the cohabitation in government with Maia Sandu.**

But about this and about the foreign policy of President Dodon and the Chicu Government we will continue in the next edition. Already in 2020.

Reforms are done for the citizens, so it is logical to listen to what these people have to say

Dirk Wiese, member of the Bundestag, coordinator of the German Federal Government for inter-societal cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Partnership states

“In order for Germany to continue to support the Republic of Moldova, it is very important that the rule of law is felt by the citizens and that there are changes in areas such as justice, anti-corruption, public administration, policies for the young generation. We will monitor not only what is written, but what will be achieved for people...”. These are just a few statements made by the German Social-Democratic MP Dirk Wiese, coordinator of the Federal Government for inter-societal cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and the Eastern Partnership states, on December 16, during a public event organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Chisinau. What the Berlin, but also the EU expectations are from the Eastern Partnership countries, and how the future of the Moldovan-German relations is seen, read in the following interview.

■ **Mr. Wiese, you have attended recently, in Chisinau, a public event entitled “European integration of the Republic of Moldova and the current political context”. How would you describe this context for our readers? Is there still European Integration?**

■ It is in our strong interest that Europe grows further together. Not only within the European Union: for Moldova, the current framework for this is the Eastern Partnership.



Foto: <https://dirkwiese.de/>

■ **How do you assess the political developments in our country at the end of 2019 and, respectively, what will Berlin focus on in the Moldovan-German bilateral dialogue?**

■ It was a very eventful year in Moldovan politics. I do not want to assess it yet. We have seen some fresh impetus for reforms after the formation of the coalition government in summer. Now we have a new government which has also expressed its commitment to the implementation of the Association Agreement. The focus in our bilateral relations will be to support this process.

The contribution of the non-governmental sector is indispensable for sustainable reforms

■ **You have had meetings with the political leaders and government decision-makers, but also with representatives of the civil society. What are the conclusions that you have left Chisinau with?**

■ All political leaders agreed that reforms are important, not as an end in themselves, but for the people. If sometimes the benefits of reforms and of the support from the European

Union have not been visible enough, then we may have to communicate more. But most important is to include the Moldovan civil society. Their contribution will be necessary if Moldova wants to work towards sustainable, successful reforms.

■ **The incoherence that the Republic of Moldova has regularly shown in promoting and implementing reforms has caused serious fluctuations and even turbulence in the dialogue with the EU and with the member states. At the same time, more and more representatives of civil society believe the European assistance should be strictly conditioned, and the fulfilment of commitments - closely monitored, in consultation with the civil society. What do you think about this opinion and how do you see the cooperation with the civil society in this regard? Do you think the current Government is de facto willing to “report” to the non-governmental sector?**

■ As a parliamentarian, I can say from my own experience: to include civil society serves both sides. In a democratic society, citizens must have the possibility to promote the public good, their own personal views and interests. The government gets their expertise and must act in a transparent way and be able to explain how and why decisions are being taken. Practically everybody I talked to in Chisinau agreed: reforms must be implemented not for the European Union, but for Moldovan citizens. Therefore, it is only logical to listen what they have to say.

■ **In your speech during the public event in Chisinau you emphasized the need to continue with the justice reform, first of all. Do you think the current Government has the political will to**

advance with the justice system reform that the previous Cabinet and the current one have declared as a priority?

■ Foreign Minister Aureliu Ciocoi himself has emphasized how important justice reform is for Moldova, as have representatives in the parliament. So, everybody agrees in principle, but even more important will be to agree on concrete measures and their implementation. I can strongly recommend to make full use of the expertise which the Venice Commission provides in this crucial area.

The authorities should work constructively, for the country and for the benefit of the people

■ **The 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership was an important topic on the European agenda in 2019. How do you assess these EaP years at the level of successful and less successful results? Will we get to talk about the second decade?**

■ I wholeheartedly believe that the Eastern Partnership is a success story. If you look at where we started and where we stand today there is a lot which we and especially our Eastern partners have achieved. We signed ambitious Association Agreements and DCFTAs with Moldova, Georgia and the Ukraine and CEPA with Armenia. Trade increased substantially as have people-to-people contacts. Where more progress is needed is in the field of human rights, good governance, rule of law, independence of media and the fight against corruption. The implementation of agreed reforms in these areas needs to be a key priority for the coming years.

■ **How does Germany see the cooperation with the EaP countries? What are the Berlin expectations from the EaP partners, and in particular from the Republic of Moldova? What needs to be done to strengthen the relations and**

streamline the reform processes in the member states?

■ Naturally we are looking forward to broaden our relations with all six partner countries - both bilaterally as well as in the framework of the Eastern Partnership. Encouragement and support for the implementation of agreed reforms will need to remain an essential element of our relationship - for the sake of the citizens in the European Union and its neighbourhood. And these expectations apply also to the Republic of Moldova - the authorities should work constructively together with us, for the benefit of the people of Moldova.

■ **As a coordinator of the German Federal Government on the inter-societal cooperation with Russia, Central Asia and the EaP countries - so as a good connoisseur of the realities in the area - how do you assess the situation in the region? What are the biggest challenges and, if any, the most viable solutions?**

■ The biggest challenges for most of the countries are their relations to Russia. We always emphasize that the Eastern partnership is not directed against Russia. In our civil society cooperation, we explicitly include Russia. This is especially important since there are unresolved territorial conflicts. It is important to keep negotiations up, like we do in the Normandy format or the 5+2-negotiations. But at the same time, we have to bring people together in order to maintain an understanding what values we share in Europe, East or West.

Ensuring freedom and democracy is the mission of the state, but also of the society

■ **How do you see, in general, the developments and the solutions for the Transnistrian conflict with Berlin making considerable efforts in the regulatory process?**

■ Germany supports the 5+2 negotiations. Germany has contributed to the process by organizing the conference in Murnau and remains very interested. Unfortunately, the Bratislava memorandum was not signed until now. In Chisinau, I have also spoken to Mr Neukirch about the recent developments. Germany will continue to support the OSCE in its efforts to make progress possible.

■ **In November 2019, there were 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in 2020 Germany will mark the 30th anniversary of reunification. What is the main lesson learned in this period of time? And what lessons could we learn from the Germans, so that - possibly - we don't repeat your mistakes?**

■ In Germany, a new generation has grown that does not even remember the Cold War and the Berlin Wall. But history remains present in many ways. The main lesson is that freedom and democracy must be guaranteed by the state, its constitution and institutions, but at the same time society must remain actively engaged in order to have a stable and living democracy.

■ **According to the statement issued after the meeting you had with Aureliu Ciocoi, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, you assured that "Germany will pay greater attention to our country during its rotating Presidency of the EU Council from the second half of next year". What will this be about?**

■ Germany will take over the rotating presidency in the second half of 2020. There will be important decisions to be taken, for example on the budget. After the summit of the Eastern partnership in the first half of the year, we will continue to put an emphasis on the future of the Eastern partnership. This will include Moldova, since we see great potential for our cooperation.

■ **Thank you for the interview.**

Sorina Ștefârță

Expert opinion



Dionis Cenușă: “Traumatized European perspective in the EU neighbourhood and the Moldovan echoes”

The year 2019 has been disconcerting not only for the Republic of Moldova. There have been transformations in countries where transformations, as a rule, happened just “formally”; violent protests broke out in quiet and prosperous areas; and the facts of the matter that the politicians promised to solve in the electoral campaign have changed on the way not just once, becoming even more complex. Also the dynamics of the EU and its neighbourhood is changing on the way and this is the situation that the new European Commission, which started its activity on 1 December 2019, will have to cope with. What are its challenges on the Eastern dimension and what are the solutions to them?

These are the questions that the researcher Denis Cenușă is trying to answer in his analysis for the *Info-Prim Neo* -about the developments and involutions in Ukraine and Georgia, about the “Moldovan case” and the effects of tolerating oligarchic elements, and about the almost imminent readjustment of the Russian factor.

The intentions of the European Union to integrate its eastern neighbourhood into a functional, qualitative and democratic normative-institutional model accumulate new sources of

unpredictability. The conditions under which the new European Commission, headed by Ursula Von der Leyen, from December 1, 2019, must operate are fragile and hostile. *Fragility* consists of scattering democratic standards within the EU. Political regimes similar to those in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria or Malta weaken the rule of law at national level, but are also legitimized further through the affiliation with the pan-European parties. The *hostility* of the European context seems inevitable due to the elements of disintegration («Brexit»), the anti-European nationalist rhetoric and the competition of integrationist projects hosted by regimes with «vertical power» ([IPN, November 5, 2019](#)). The latter will compete for the attention of the European Commission along with issues of commercial (disputes with the US inside WTO), environmental (“Green European Deal”) or security (application of the 5G technology) nature ([Politico.eu, November 29, 2019](#)).

Three almost parallel processes...

Three parallel political processes, each of them with uncertain consequences, impose a nuanced look on EU’s relations with the Euro-optimistic countries that belong to the Eastern Partnership. *The first impulse* with inevitable political effects is the re-conceptualization of the conditions

of EU enlargement, which devalues the attractiveness of the European perspective. Actually, the revision of the enlargement mechanism, suggested by France at President Emmanuel Macron’s indications, could traumatize the European perspective, making it a hardly achievable objective. Raising the requirements, branching the (re-)evaluation criteria and inserting a disqualification and suspension mechanism upon the accession negotiations diversify the political costs for the pro-European forces in the Western Balkans, but also from the Eastern Partnership ([Euroactiv, November 2019](#)).

The second process derives from the attempt to facilitate a constructive dialogue with Russia, without applying conditionality and remedying measures dedicated to the international law and/or the European security architecture. On the contrary, with the support of France, Russia returned to the General Assembly of the Council of Europe, previously excluded for its actions against Ukraine ([IPN, 7 October 2019](#)). Similarly, Paris is calling for the elimination of NATO’s concerns about Russia, which in reality constantly proliferate threats regionally and globally ([Bloomberg, November 28, 2019](#)). Viewed as a gesture of capitulation in the face of the Russian military, informational and anti-democratic aggressions, restoring dialogue

with Russia for the time being remains outside the walls of EU institutions. With a neutralized resistance because of its own appetite for the Russian gas, Germany manifests a rather permissive approach to the “Macronian” goodwill towards Russia. The normalization of relations with Vladimir Putin’s regime, once injected into the bloodstream of the European structures, carries the risk of trivializing the pro-European discourse in the associated countries - Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

The third conglomerate of processes originates from the internal political inconsistencies in the pro-European parts of EU’s eastern neighborhood. Party-based and individual egoism obstructs the national strategic interests, but also prevails over the commitments to the European integration in the rule of law field.

Inside the Eastern neighbourhood

The Ukrainian governing elite under the presidency of Volodymyr Zelensky selectively fights against the oligarchic influences. Thus, the ex-president Petro Poroshenko is targeted [in more than 10 criminal cases](#), while Igor Kolomoisky, who left Privatbank with costs for the public budget accounting for \$ 5 billion, attacks the state institutions, such as the National Bank of Ukraine ([Intellinews, November 28, 2019](#)). Moreover, the underestimation of the Russian plans in Donbas aggravates the strategic positions of Kiev, already undermined by the US internal political infighting (“outward Trumpian traffic of influence”) and ignored by France ([implementation of “Steinmeier Formula”](#)) and Germany (“Nord Stream 2”).

The attempts to renew the Georgian political system consume institutional paths and resort to measures to solve governance problems through “street power” ([Agenda.ge, November 30, 2019](#)). The protests of the united opposition (about 30 political parties) seek to break the legitimacy of the political



regime, dependent on the oligarch Bidzina Ivashvili, by democratizing the voting system for the 2020 election ([GeorgiaToday, November 29, 2019](#)).

In Moldova, the governing alliances easily disintegrate under the pressure of the structural reforms, which are then offset by an active juggling with geopolitical vectors ([3DCFTAs, November 18, 2019](#)). As a result, the linearity of the reforms needed to strengthen democratic institutions and protect them from political corruption are endangered ([NewEasternEurope, November 27, 2019](#)).

Readjustments of the Russian factor in the EU Eastern neighbourhood

The Russian presence is re-launching in Eastern Europe, even if part of the region is involved in more advanced exercises of European integration. Embraced by Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the European agenda was initially confronted by Russia (2013-2014). Today the latter is in a stage of adjusting its interests to the local realities that are in a difficult transition towards the European model. The permeation of the European norms, reshaping of the trade flows and the

demographic changes are seen by Russia as an opportune time to re-enter the game. The aim does not seem to be the definitive exclusion of the European element; the re-adjustment for cohabitating with it counts more.

The actions of the Russian factor in EU’s eastern neighbourhood produce at least three behaviours within the political elites, which increase the predisposition towards Russia or predisposes to diminishing of the rival factor’s position - the European one:

- **The intensification of the aggressiveness of the separatist regions** (“South Ossetia”) in Georgia allows moving away the attention of Georgians from the deterioration of the democratic climate. At the same time, the governors close to the oligarch Ivanishvili use the insecurity caused by Russia to soften the criticism of the European partners against the defects of the rule of law. Thus, the quality of reforms declines, and the public energy is channelled towards ensuring security and public order, which may stimulate authoritarian thinking if the role of democratic institutions decreases.
- **The exploitation of peace aspirations in areas exposed to Russian military interference** characterizes precisely the overlapping between the political

objectives of the Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky and Russia's strategy of freezing the conflict in Donbas. Indirectly, the Russian factor becomes useful for the new Ukrainian political force, but also for the Europeans who prioritize relations with Moscow. However, in reality, both sides are losing because technically speaking they surrender to Russia aiming a "peace at any cost". Thus, the Ukrainian governing elite ruins the legitimacy necessary for the reforms associated with the advance towards European standards. At the same time, the European actors validate Russia's geopolitical superiority and contribute to the undermining of the European integration's authority in the eastern neighbourhood.

• **The valorization of political crises**, such as Russia's participation in the peaceful transition of power in Moldova, has propelled the pro-Russian forces into government ([3DCFTAs, September 1, 2019](#)). This balanced the pre-existing European aspirations in the decision-making process with an open interest to interact with the exponents of the Eurasian integration. That constitutes a significant investment in promoting the idea that comforts Russia concerning the cohabitation of the two geopolitical vectors. The Moldovan example may inspire other similar operations of Russia in the region. But before that, the minority government backed by the pro-Russian Socialists needs internal and external resources to stabilize the budget ([3DCFTA, November 27, 2019](#)), while Igor Dodon must win a second term in 2020.

The echoes of the Moldovan case

The situation in Moldova highlights the political turning points that can impact the European agenda, and which are applicable, to some extent, in other countries in the region. More specifically, there is a causal relationship between the presence of the oligarchic factor and its destructive nature for internal political dynamics, the "whitening" of the pro-Russian forces and, finally, the benevolent balancing of geopolitical orientation in favor of Russia.

The oligarchic element results from the disturbance of the democratic system, which, if not removed, produces negative effects for the power alternation and the vitality of the institutions. The oligarchic regime has discredited the EU's presence in Moldova and can do the same in Ukraine and Georgia, if that does not become the subject of EU's political conditionality and sectoral reforms, particularly in the field of justice. The EU's discrediting in the Moldovan case resulted from tolerating the political forces associated with both the oligarchic influence and the European vector. The latter's image has been ultimately degraded in a grave and irrecoverable way.

Against the background of disappointment in the old pro-European forces, the political system requires time to regenerate and produce new political parties, which will become credible to the more Western-

oriented public, which also is more demanding of reforms.

In such circumstances of political confusion, the forces with a conservative attitude towards reforms, close to the desirable political profile for Russia, become more attractive to the electorate. Consequently, although the European integration is maintained in force, it is relativized and balanced by normalizing relations with Russia, including with the Eurasian vector.

Instead of conclusions...

The EU's actions, as well as its inactions, in its neighbourhood, not only weakens its positions and those of the pro-European forces, but also represents an open invitation for geopolitical actors, with strategic objectives conflicting with the European integration. Traumatizing the European perspective is a wrong answer to the problem of the efficiency of the European integration, which can have long-term (geo-)political costs. At the same time, the failure to take measures to prevent the fortification of the oligarchic factors in the eastern neighbourhood contains threats to the sustainability of pro-European sentiments in the society.

Given the e(in)volutions in Ukraine and Georgia, we can deduce that the EU has learned very little from the Moldovan case regarding the effects of tolerating oligarchic elements. Therefore, the re-adjustment of the Russian factor, similar to the Moldovan model, acquires the nuances of an increasingly real scenario.

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



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