

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



The German Presidency of the Council of the European Union will have a clear mandate - "Together for the relaunch of Europe". The announcement was made on May 29th by the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas on the occasion of the presentation of the upcoming presidency logo - a loop that embodies the Möbius strip to symbolize the unity of Europe. "Taking over the presidency of the EU Council in these challenging times brings extraordinary responsibility. The expectations from our presidency were high, but now they are even higher because of the crisis. We have six busy months ahead of us - and we can't wait to get started," said Maas in a message posted on the website of the future German presidency, which Berlin will take over for the 13th time on July 1st. According to Maas, Germany wants the presidency of the EU Council to be "in the service of the European cause", to give a "boost" and to be a "consensus facilitator". "The task of overcoming the COVID-19 crisis is a unique opportunity for us in the EU. We can and must come even closer together, developing greater internal solidarity and becoming stronger and more sovereign vis-a-vis the outside world", added the head of German diplomacy.



The success of the Global Coronavirus Response Initiative, launched on May 4th and which in less than a month old, has raised € 9.8 billion for universal, affordable access to vaccination, treatment and testing for COVID-19, determined the European Commission to launch its next stage - "Global Goal: Unite For Our Future", following the "Global Citizen" model. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on this occasion: "The whole world must be united and fight the virus, once and for all. The good news is that this is happening. That is why we are launching a new campaign, in which, during the next month, the citizens will express their opinion and will contribute to our joint efforts to fight the coronavirus". The assessment will be made on June 27th, when the European Commission will host a final donor summit, an event in which businesses, foundations and citizens will be able to join forces with public donors.



Presidents Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump discussed on Monday, June 1st, on the phone the US leader's proposal to expand the G7 format, the Kremlin said in a statement. According to the document, the telephone conversation took place at the initiative of the American side, and President Donald Trump informed his counterpart Vladimir Putin about the idea of inviting Russia and other countries to the next G7 meeting, postponed because of the pandemic. The United States confirmed the telephone conversation, but did not provide further information. Initially, the US president wanted the G7 Summit to take place in Washington in late June, but "in person" to signal a "return to normal", but Chancellor Angela Merkel declined the invitation because of the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus pandemic. In response, the president postponed the summit for an unspecified date, but also described the G7 format as "outdated", saying it should be expanded with the participation of countries such as Russia and South Korea, India and Australia. The Russian Federation was part of the G7, which had become the G8 in the 1990s, but was expelled from the group in 2014 after the abusive annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea.

Europe 2020: can it become also our story?



7 May 2020. Twenty trucks of the Romanian Army bring humanitarian aid to Chisinau

Sorina Ștefârță

For many years, including in the Republic of Moldova, May has been the month of the united Europe. Because in May 1950, the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, launched the declaration that laid the foundation of the European Union. And in another May, 2004, the EU grew by ten members, demolishing the

virtual Iron Curtain between Eastern and Western Europe, which still survived despite the fact that the concrete walls had fallen.

The year 2020 didn't bring either the fall of any wall, nor new accessions to the community bloc. On the contrary, on the last day of January, the EU lost one of its 28 members - the United Kingdom. And the pandemic

that broke out shortly after with all its might over European countries has done what even the worst crises in decades did not manage: closing borders and restricting freedom of movement, one of the founding values of a united Europe. And yet...

Despite the pandemic outside and the sad reality around us, May

► 2020 was the month of a united Europe. For though the borders were closed, the hearts were opened. Once the initial shock was overcome, the European Union understood that in order to overcome the pandemic and the deep economic crisis, it should stand in solidarity and the key word of this just ended spring was "together".

"Together" acted the "Team Europe" (the generic title of the EU's global pandemic response), which provided substantial lots of humanitarian aid to the countries most in need. The Republic of Moldova was no exception, daily in Chisinau arriving impressive quantities of protective equipment, medicines and even medical staff that came in support of our doctors.

"Together", in May, at the initiative of the European Commission, EUR 9.8 billion was raised for universal access, affordability, vaccination, treatment and testing for Covid-19. "Together for the relaunch of Europe", Germany announced a week ago its motto for the six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union, which will start on July 1st.

"Europe is a story about generations. And each generation of Europeans has its own story. In these decisive moments, we have always opted to take a leap forward together. This is what has enabled us to build a Europe of peace and prosperity without peer or precedent anywhere in the world. (...) Today we face our very own defining moment - we either all go it alone and accepting a Union of haves and have-nots or we walk that road together" said Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, when proposing a new EU recovery plan worth EUR750 billion, which she called the "Next Generation EU", in addition to the multiannual budget of EUR 1.1 trillion.

The May Newsletter is also about "together" and the "story about generations". It could also be our story. We could also be "together", couldn't we?!

Only with serious changes can the Republic of Moldova become a better state

HE Peter Michalko, Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova



The European continent has gone this spring through the worst crisis since the World War II, that has not been consumed yet - the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused a severe economic recession in all the EU member states and not only. The problems - both healthcare and economic ones - have spread in waves around the world, including in the EU neighbourhood. How has the European Union faced this major challenge internally? How did it act in the neighbouring countries and

what can we expect from the EU in the future? You can find answers to the questions above from the interview with HE Peter Michalko, the Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova.

We have brought Europe into every citizen's home this year

■ ***Ambassador, we are at the end of May, the month in which we traditionally celebrate the European***

Union and the member states of the community. How were the Europe 2020 Days, when all activities transferred to the virtual space?

■ The pandemic has created an unusual situation for the whole planet when, together with the observance of sanitary rules to protect our health, we had to adapt to a different reality of life and work. We have also changed the traditional ways of celebrating Europe Day, going online, on the radio and TV. Unfortunately, it was not possible to meet our friends in the European Town, in Chisinau and other places of the country; to talk live, listen to music and watch movies together, and taste the dishes of the European peoples.

At the same time, thanks to modern technologies, we have seen in this isolation a chance to bring Europe into every citizen's home. We have been on the radio and television shows. We have organized lots of events online, and on May 9th, we broadcast a mega-concert with the participation of musicians from the National Youth Orchestra of Moldova and children from *La La Play Voices*.

Almost 200 fantastic artists performed a song from each of the 27 EU Member States and, at the end, the "Ode to Joy" by Ludwig van Beethoven, the anthem of the European Union. This concert was watched by over 300 thousand people, and together with the European Film and Culture Festival we accumulated almost two million views – pleasing results.

■ **You mentioned May 9th, the day when the European Union celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, which laid the foundation for a united Europe. What did this period mean for the European continent?**

■ There have been seven decades of peace and prosperity, which have materialized in the highest development standards in the world in the most diverse fields. These are indisputable facts that make the EU a reliable partner,

including for the neighbouring countries that we have close cooperation with. In this context, it is important for the people of the Republic of Moldova to know that the European Union - its neighbour and friend - is the country's biggest supporter. We do this both through the assistance we provide and through the political association and economic integration. This means European standards, access to the European market, which is the largest in the world, and freedom to travel. So, even 70 years after the Schuman Declaration, the European Union brings peace, prosperity and progress to the people - and it will continue to do so in the future.

The "Team Europe" showed both unity and solidarity

■ **And yet, how united is Europe today when the member states, hit by the pandemic, have taken drastic security measures to the point of closing borders and stopping traffic - one of the fundamental values of the Union?**

■ It was a necessary measure to take in order to stop the spread of the pandemic, and today, the countries that have passed its acute phase are already lifting the travel restrictions. Yes, we will still have to follow certain health and hygiene rules, but freedom of movement - one of the fundamental values of the European Union - will remain. At the same time, if is to speak in a broader sense, I am convinced that Europe will be even more united than before the pandemic. Yes, there was the initial impact, when each country made efforts to ensure the health of its own citizens. However, in a very short time, the European solidarity has fully manifested itself - from humanitarian aid provided between member states and patients transported by train or plane from countries with overburdened medical systems to the least affected ones, to complex support packages offered by the European Commission to all 27 Member

States. Since April, the European Commission has launched a 100 billion Euros Temporary Support Instrument (SURE) to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency and allocate resources to support the health sectors in the most vulnerable member states. At the beginning of May, 7.4 billion Euros was collected from donors around the world at the Global Vaccine Summit organized online by the European Commission, which will be directed toward the development and worldwide distribution of diagnostic tests, COVID-19 treatments and vaccines. And on May 27th, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a grand plan to revive the EU economy - a 750 billion Euros mutual fund called the *Recovery Instrument*, which comes in addition to the multi-annual budget of 1,1 trillion Euros. And these are just the key elements.

■ **How will the situation in the European Union affect the neighbouring countries, especially given the imminent economic crisis that will mark us all?**

■ There will obviously be an economic impact and it is important that it should be felt as little as possible by the people and society. Precisely in order to respond in a consolidated way to this impact, on April 8th, the European Union launched the "Team Europe" package aimed at partner countries in the fight against the pandemic. It is a package of about 20 billion Euros, which is a joint effort of the EU, member states and financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. It is a global response through which the EU also helps the countries of the Eastern Partnership or those in the Balkans, but also countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia or Latin America. Our focus are the people at greatest risk, including children, women, the elderly and the disabled, migrants or refugees. It is a difficult time and so that no one is left alone in the face of need, the

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EU chooses to be a global player and a major contributor to the international aid system...

■ ***The “Team Europe” was notable also in the Republic of Moldova. Already in April and then during the whole month of May, we’ve heard almost daily about aid coming from the EU member states...***

■ It is true: despite the difficult situation that most European countries find themselves in, we have witnessed a real marathon of aid provided by the EU countries to the people of the Republic of Moldova- from medicines to protective equipment, from support for doctors to medical staff who have worked in various hospitals. I am very grateful to all the EU Member States and my colleagues, the Ambassadors of the member countries, for this support, which has clearly shown that we are in solidarity and stronger together. The “Team Europe” showed both unity and solidarity - common solidarity with the Republic of Moldova. This is in addition to the fact that, on March 30th, the European Commission announced a solid support package for the Eastern Partnership countries to cover the immediate needs of the health sector (30 million Euros); for civil society organizations caring for vulnerable people (11.3 million Euros); to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the crisis with focus on the private sector and SMEs (100 million Euros). In addition, the Commission will redirect the use of existing instruments in amount of up to 700 million Euros across the region to help mitigate the socio-economic impact of the crisis by supporting companies. And we are always looking for new tools.

After the pandemic, reforms will be even more vital

■ ***What has been the support provided strictly to the Republic of Moldova?***

■ The European Union has identified and reoriented from existing or future

projects more than 87 million Euros for immediate needs and the consequence management of the pandemic crisis.

This support goes directly to people.

We are working together with our implementation partners, such as UNDP, and have provided several EU financial assistances lots. A few days ago, for example, families affected by the crisis in 70 communities of the Republic of Moldova began to receive aid through an EU-funded project implemented by the UN Women and UNICEF Moldova. Protective equipment, hygiene products, food and educational materials are meant to support families, to prevent domestic violence, including against children, which is a very important issue especially during the crisis... In addition, the EU will provide another 100 million Euros macro-financial assistance of emergency, in addition to the remaining 70 million Euros macro-financial assistance agreed in November 2017. The first tranche of the new macro-financial assistance could be provided in a fairly short time without certain conditions, while the second one - at the end of this year or early next year. This money is earmarked for the state budget of the country, i.e. for pensions, salaries and other emergencies.

■ ***Your statements are somewhat at odds with the messages of some media close to the Power, namely, that there would still be conditionalities. This is the message also promoted by some politicians in Chisinau who have launched anti-European statements or are trying to diminish the importance of EU support...***

■ No special conditions have been set for the emergency assistance provided in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic - the 87 million Euros, as well as the first tranche of the new macro-financial assistance of 100 million Euros. With regard to the second tranche, there will be certain conditionalities related to domestic reforms and policy measures to be implemented. However, we hope that the memorandum on assistance will

be negotiated fairly soon and the first tranche will be released immediately, because this is in the interest of the Moldovan citizens. As for the statements ... of course it is regrettable that our sincere help is put in a negative light. But the European Union remains the strongest supporter of the Republic of Moldova, stands here in support of the Moldovan people and will continue to provide assistance that will produce tangible results for Moldovan citizens. And, when the Government of the Republic of Moldova comes up with new requests for additional macro-financial assistance, the EU will do so on the basis of the same principles, including the strict conditionality related to the progress of domestic reforms...

■ ***Speaking of reforms, will they still matter after the pandemic? Will justice reform, the rule of law or freedom of the press still be relevant? For it is known that all around the world now there has been a period in which several liberties have been restricted...***

■ Changes and reforms should continue and be carried out in a determined and consistent manner. The economic impact of the crisis will affect most countries. The competition for investment is going to be high. And who will be better prepared for this competition: the one who made systemic changes and reforms or the one who did nothing in this regard? Does anyone think you can be competitive and attract investments with unreformed justice? Or that you can attract investments that will create jobs and ensure decent wages for people with corrupt institutions? Only with serious changes the Republic of Moldova can become a better state for its citizens! Therefore, the reform effort should continue: for a real justice reform, a business-friendly environment, liquidation of monopolies and illicit schemes in the economy, investigation of the bank fraud, bringing the guilty to justice and recovery of the stolen money. We have been following the situation in the above-mentioned areas very closely,

we have been advocating for years for a real effort, and we want to see results - not for us, for the people. As for the restrictions on certain freedoms, the EU has made it clear that the crisis is not a reason to restrict civil liberties. Especially the freedom of the press, which has been extremely important for a fair and objective information.

The future always depends on those who make decisions

■ **Is there an estimate of the aid provided to the Republic of Moldova by the European Union, say, since the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014?**

■ The European Union assistance did not start with the signing of the Agreement, but much earlier, and since 2007 until now, the total amount has exceeded 1 billion Euros, through annual programmes for the Republic of Moldova and regional programmes. Thus, the EU remains the country's main development partner with the largest European assistance per capita. The support is aimed at sustainable economic development, strengthening the rule of law, developing local communities. For the future, it is important that these perspectives be used. Just imagine the benefits that projects like EU4Climate - which are so important for agriculture and the fight against climate change- or the regional cooperation programmes for infrastructure that connect the country with the European Union can bring. And the Association Agreement, including the Free Trade Agreement, will now be the most important engine in the economic recovery and exit from the crisis due to the access of Moldovan products to the European market...

■ **The EU has developed more than a thousand projects across the country - from infrastructure projects on the two banks of the Nistru to water treatment plants on the Prut, from**

business incubators in the north to local development groups in the south. Why do you put so much emphasis on regions?

■ Our goal is to get as close to people as possible. That is why we have developed several local initiatives such as the key regions of Ungheni and Cahul, launched in January 2020, or energy efficiency projects, which have renovated hundreds of buildings across the country. I would also like to mention the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations, which are so important in the life of a society. All those who make efforts for the development of the country and policies in areas of public interest, those who help their fellow citizens in difficulty are a factor that guarantees that the Republic of Moldova can progress as a modern society which is at the service of its citizens. An example in this sense is the LEADER initiative, which supports a great wave of enthusiasm of the rural people formed in Local Action Groups. This support goes directly to people and helps them to change their lives at home for the better. We have worked with all people and made no difference based on geographical or other criteria. For example, we have a very good cooperation with the Gagauz autonomy. Recently we have discussed with Bashkan Irina Vlah about the cooperation in the field of investments in economy and infrastructure of the region. We will continue this regional and local approach, because people see the tangible results and feel the change for the better.

■ **People see the change. You are not at your first interaction with our country - ten years ago, you worked for the EUBAM Mission, you were adviser to the EU Special Representative ... Do you see changes?**

■ Let's say I've seen times when things moved very fast, as it did last year, for example, when we saw the will for reforms and improvement of

democratic standards. And I've seen times when things have stagnated or when the democratic standards have not been met. There were moments that proved that the Republic of Moldova can make progress - all that is needed is political will. The citizens are waiting for changes. And they deserve a better life.

■ **What are the future expectations of the European Union from the Republic of Moldova? And whom does the way things develop in our country depend on?**

■ The future always depends on those who take decisions in a state, and for this future to be a good one, decision makers have to keep their commitments. We want European standards to become a reality in the Republic of Moldova. We want Moldova to make reforms, guarantee democratic standards, and make justice and economy work. We want that the state institutions to be at the service of the citizens and for the quality of people's lives to be constantly improved. These are also the expectations of the new objectives of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020, which aims at increasing trade, consolidating connectivity and deepening the economic integration between the EU and the six eastern countries; strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law; environmental and climate resilience; digital transformation; promoting a fair and inclusive society. "The power of our neighbours is also the power of the European Union", said Josep Borell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on March 18th on the occasion of the public presentation of the post-2020 targets. The last two months have shown us that we are indeed stronger together - and there are no alternatives.

■ **Ambassador, thank you for the interview and see you in a better future!**

**Sorina Ștefăruță
29 May 2020**

Editorial

Romania, an Indispensable Strategic Partner of the Republic of Moldova

On 27 April 2020, Bucharest and Chisinau marked the tenth anniversary of the Strategic Partnership for European Integration of the Republic of Moldova. A Partnership through which Romania is committed to actively support globally the actions of the Republic of Moldova for the preservation of its sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity as the sole subject of international law; establish a structured framework for cooperation to support the country's accession to the European Union; provide Chisinau with support, expertise and technical assistance in the process of institutional, political, economic and regional cooperation in order to meet the criteria for the EU membership; support the efforts of the Republic of Moldova in order to obtain a clear perspective for the EU accession. A decade that, viewed ten years later, was the most successful period in the history of the Moldovan-Romanian relations. What has been achieved, however, in this decade of Partnership - and what could be done better?..

What has Romania done in the last ten years?

Romania became the first economic partner and an influential political partner of the Republic of Moldova. The total volume of bilateral trade increased from 700 million USD in 2009 to 2.2 billion. USD in 2019, while the political dialogue and sectoral cooperation have intensified significantly. A number of new formats of dialogue and bilateral cooperation have been launched such as: the Joint governmental meetings; the Joint Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Cooperation and European Integration; joint sectoral commissions and working groups, such as the joint road commission and the energy interconnection working group.

Romania has established itself as one of the most important partners of the Republic of Moldova within the EU. The



Victor Chirilă,
executive director of the
Foreign Policy Association (APE)

Informal Group for European Action of the Republic of Moldova (GAERM), created at the initiative of Romania and France, played a key role in promoting Chisinau's interests and positions in the context of visa liberalization and negotiation of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the EU.

Today, Romania is one of the most active and important development partners of our country. The Republic of Moldova represents the priority no. 1 for Romania's development and cooperation policy, Chisinau receiving most of the development assistance provided through RO-AID. Over the last ten years, there have been signed and implemented the Bilateral Agreement on the implementation of the technical and financial assistance programme based on a non-reimbursable financial assistance amounting to 100 million Euros granted by Romania to the Republic of Moldova,

as well as the Agreement on reimbursable financial assistance in the amount of 150 million Euros.

Romania is about to become the guarantor of our energy security. During this period, a series of joint actions/ projects aimed at ensuring the energy independence of the Republic of Moldova were launched and implemented. The Iași-Ungheni gas pipeline was built, which is currently being extended to Chisinau. The LEA 110 Kv Falciu - Gotești interconnection power line was put into operation. In partnership with Romania, the process of connecting the energy system of the Republic of Moldova to the European Network of Transmission System Operators (ENTSO-E) was launched. Following this objective, the Institute for Energy Studies and Designs in Bucharest developed with the support of the EBRD the feasibility study for the asynchronous interconnection of the electric power systems of the two countries. Based on the study and with the assistance of the EBRD, the World Bank

and the EIB, the Republic of Moldova will build the back-to-back station in Vulcanesti, the LEA 400 Kv Vulcanesti - Chisinau power line and will modernize the power station in Chisinau.

A new Partnership for a new decade?

These important achievements have made Romania, in the last decade, an indispensable strategic partner for the Republic of Moldova in areas such as economic development, energy security and European integration. It is an obvious reality recognized by most of the political forces on the left bank of the Prut, including the pro-Russian parties among which the ruling Socialist Party (PSRM). De facto, today, no parliamentary party in the Republic of Moldova officially speaks out against the Strategic Partnership with Romania - but only "officially" ...

However, only the pro-European parties in Chisinau- the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) and the DA Platform are opting for relaunching and boosting the Strategic Partnership, possibly by adopting a new declaration laying the foundations for strategic cooperation between Romania and Moldova for the next decade. On 9 October 2019, in Chisinau, Ramona Mănescu and Nicu Popescu (Foreign Ministers of Romania and the Republic of Moldova at that time) signed the Roadmap on the priority areas of the Romanian-Moldovan cooperation. The document emphasizes the infrastructural interconnection of both states that is essential for the economic integration of the Republic of Moldova with the EU.

The Romanian authorities are also open for a perspective approach that will strengthen the European course of the Republic of Moldova. In their opinion, the ten years since the signing of the Strategic Partnership should

have been an "opportunity to look responsibly and pragmatically into the future" ... However, the decision-makers in Bucharest believe that the political situation in Chisinau is not encouraging such an approach, because local developments "do not attest to the continuation or implementation of sustainable reforms oriented toward advancing the European agenda and do not provide the guarantee of a European path for the Republic of Moldova." Therefore, the development of the bilateral Strategic Partnership cannot be fulfilled to its true potential, while new perspectives can be drawn only after the change of political realities and after the relaunch of the sustainable reform agenda in Chisinau. This new opportunity could open in the near future, either in the context of a possible return of pro-European parties to power or after the presidential election.

Failures to avoid in the next Partnership

Exploring new opportunities and perspectives, however, will require a comprehensive analysis not only of the successes, but also of the shortcomings that overshadowed the Strategic Partnership between the two Romanian states, limiting its positive impact. In our opinion, there are several failures that should be considered, respectively removed. For example, Romania has failed to assert itself as a coagulator/unifier of the pro-European forces in Chisinau - especially of the parties that were part of the 2009-2015 governing alliances. Unfortunately, the lack of a unitary institutional approach of Romania towards the pro-European parties in Chisinau stimulated the fierce and even unfair competition between them for the title of the privileged and exclusive actor in the dialogue with the Romanian authorities, contributing to the animosity and mistrust between

them. In addition, the exclusive stake of Bucharest, for a long time, on the government controlled by the oligarch Plahotniuc and its lack of firm conditioning, led to the disappointment of a part of the pro-European electorate in Romania's ability to promote the democratic reform agenda in the Republic. Moldova.

Romania also missed the opportunity to become a strategic investor, supplier and major distributor on the electricity market in the Republic of Moldova by purchasing the energy and electricity supply and distribution companies *Gas Natural Fenosa Energy Supply and Red Union Fenosa*. The two companies that supply electricity to 2/3 of the Moldovan population were acquired by "EMMA Capital Group", an obscure company registered in London, behind which would be the interests of the oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc. According to unofficial information, the Bucharest authorities expressed interest in acquiring the respective companies but were ignored by the Moldovan decision-makers on the pretext that the intention had been announced too late.

Ultimately, despite the important support provided by Bucharest to the Romanian-language press in the Republic of Moldova, the performance of the latter in terms of development/affirmation of influential, independent and pluralistic pro-European media is far from complete. The impact of the Romanian-language media benefiting from Romania's assistance is low because it is unable to cope with the anti-European propaganda funded and promoted by Russia and the media holdings controlled by oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc and the pro-Russian Socialist Party.

These details should be taken into account by the future Strategic Partnership whenever it will be.

This crisis has shown us at least two essential things: we are not alone in need, and good neighbourly relations are crucial

Oleg Țulea, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration



The pandemic crisis and its economic consequences did not bypass the Republic of Moldova. As a result, even in our case, the authorities had to come up with solutions to a lot of challenges that, in most cases, required an immediate response. One of the most sought institutions in this regard has been the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, which had to manage vital files in a pandemic period - repatriation of citizens, provision of transport corridors, attracting 'emergency' assistance to name just a few. I spoke with Oleg Țulea, the head of the Moldovan diplomacy, about how the Foreign Office team responded to this major challenge.

The first week was a real test of fire

■ ***Mr. Tulea, your mandate will most likely be associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. What were the biggest challenges of that period?***

■ Indeed, the first two months of my term as Minister were marked by full mobilization and involvement of the entire diplomatic service in efforts to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is about, above all, the central role of the ministry in solving thousands of cases of Moldovan citizens in difficulty abroad and in managing an unprecedented operation to repatriate our fellow citizens. In fact, at the time I took office on 16 March, most European countries had already taken exceptional measures with a direct impact on restricting free movement. In just two or three days, the countries where we have the largest communities of our citizens have stopped regular flights, and states such as Slovenia, Austria, Hungary or Ukraine have suspended or drastically restricted transit through their territory. Thus, overnight, thousands of Moldovan citizens found themselves really stuck between borders. We had to manage dozens of humanitarian cases at the

same time and find quick and practical solutions for each of them. And when solutions could not be found at the level of our embassies with the authorities of the respective states, I simply took the phone and called my counterparts, asking them to intervene and unblock the situation. I think the first week was for me but also for my colleagues in the ministry a real test of fire and one of the biggest challenges.

Once this first phase was over, in which we acted as firefighters, together with the Crisis Unit established within the ministry, we managed to lay the foundation for institutional actions and processes, including organizing charter flights and establishing effective mechanisms for cooperation with national transport authorities. This helped to reduce the speculations and even the initial panic, and allowed us, for the most part, to cope with the wave of requests for assistance.

■ ***How many citizens were repatriated thanks to the MAEIE contribution?***

■ With modest human resources, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has facilitated the return to the country so far of about 25,000 citizens, organizing for this purpose over 200 repatriation missions, of which 75 by air and over 130 -by ground. However, MAEIE's contribution to mitigating the consequences of the pandemic crisis has been much broader and has manifested itself in many other ways such as resolving deadlocks and streamlining the movement of freight carriers, ensuring special transit corridors through several states, mobilizing external humanitarian assistance bilaterally and multilaterally, solving

the problems related to the export restrictions of medicines and medical equipment adopted by several states, assisting our partners in repatriating the citizens of these countries from the Republic of Moldova, constantly updating the information on travel restrictions imposed by other states and informing our citizens, permanent interaction with our citizens and the provision of urgent consular assistance.

In fact, since the first week of the crisis, we decided to install an additional line, expand the work schedule and increase the number of operators at the Call Center, which until then received an average of 200 calls per day. It was the same with our diplomatic missions, many of which, being in states where the coronavirus was very aggressive, were transferred online. Even though they were flooded with messages and calls, they tried to respond to every request for assistance or information (either about the conditions for returning home or how to extend the legal term of residence in the country of residence, or about being included in the lists for special repatriation charter flights or ticketing methods for them). In some states, in the first weeks, the consular officials personally travelled to the scene to assist citizens in difficulty, to try to unblock certain situations or even to accompany convoys of cars and buses to the border with the Republic of Moldova. I would also like to thank the MAEIE staff for all their effort and dedication in this difficult period.

The Diaspora has remained a priority for the Foreign Ministry

■ *It would seem that the connection of the Moldovan state with its citizens living abroad is closer than ever. At the same time, there was dissatisfaction with the obligation to buy health insurance for those who returned home, the accusations of some political actors that the diaspora would be irresponsible and would bring the virus home... How*

is the Foreign Office managing the relationship with the diaspora?

■ Protecting the rights and interests of the Moldovan citizens abroad and providing assistance to those in difficulty has been and remains one of the basic functions and a priority in the activity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The crisis has not changed this. At the same time, the crisis provided us with multiple beautiful examples of mobilization of the Moldovan communities and of our diaspora organizations, when they sent donations for the healthcare system at home or helped their fellow citizens who found themselves without a place to live and without resources. In many countries, the diaspora has helped the embassies manage the flow of repatriation requests and identify humanitarian cases in need of priority assistance.

Regarding the second part of the question, there are at least two factors that we cannot deny: the share of our citizens living abroad compared to the total population is extremely high, often higher than in other states, and the capacity of our system of simultaneously managing an increased number of COVID-19 cases is, unfortunately, more modest than in most European countries. Therefore, the national authorities were justifiably concerned with avoiding the situation in which an influx from abroad could generate a sudden overload of our health system. Based on these concerns, the authorities came with an appeal to citizens who have a relatively stable situation - for example, a job and a residence visa - to refrain, as far as possible, from traveling to the Republic of Moldova. In fact, similar calls were made by other states, including our neighbours, Romania and Ukraine ... Regarding the initial proposal on conditioning the boarding on charter flights with the prior procurement of health insurance, in the end, the Commission for Emergency Situations took a different decision - already on arrival in the Republic of Moldova, regardless of whether the person came

by plane or by land, everybody had to sign a declaration on his/ her own responsibility, committing to pay the health insurance within 72 hours.

■ **What are the main things that this crisis has highlighted from the perspective of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?**

■ First of all, it has shown once again how interdependent we are in the world of today but also that such global challenges require coordinated responses, based on international cooperation and solidarity. At the same time, our citizens saw that we were not left alone when in need, Chisinau receiving concrete support and valuable help from its friends and partners, even when many of these states were also hit hard by the pandemic. The crisis has also demonstrated, with all its might, how important the good-neighbourly relations and strategic partnership with Romania and Ukraine are. Throughout the pandemic, the ground transit of people and goods to and from the Republic of Moldova was ensured through these two states. And I assure you that we have benefited from an excellent cooperation from both Bucharest and Kiev that proved receptive in solving the problems emerged in the context of the crisis.

The “who gave more and who was the first” approaches are counterproductive

■ **Another perhaps less visible concern of the Foreign Office was to attract “emergency” external aid to combat the health and economic effects of the pandemic. What is the figure and form of this assistance at the end of May?**

■ Indeed, even from the first days of the pandemic, the ministry was fully involved in identifying and mobilizing humanitarian aid to support the healthcare system. Based on the information on urgent needs provided by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection, we have

taken numerous steps with specialized international organizations and bilateral partners, involving in this effort our entire network of diplomatic missions. At present, it's hard to count all the assistance we've received, so I can't give you an exact figure now. It is certain though that this support has been very helpful for our doctors and that it would have been much more difficult for us to manage the pandemic without it.

So far, we have received bilateral aid from more than 20 countries: EU member states - Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Hungary - and Azerbaijan, China, Switzerland, the Russian Federation, Japan, Qatar, the Republic of Korea, the USA and Turkey. I would like once again to express our deep gratitude to each state for these impressive gestures of solidarity. At the same time, I would like to highlight the strong support of Romania, which in addition to a humanitarian donation of critical medical equipment, medicines and protective equipment worth 3.5 million euros, has sent a medical mission to the Republic of Moldova, consisting of 52 people, of which 41 doctors and nurses. Several international organizations have responded to our calls - the UN and its specialized agencies (first of all, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNFPA), the European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Council of Europe Development Bank. On top of that, the Republic of Moldova has activated for the first time the EU civil protection mechanism, through which several EU states have provided us with assistance. Also for the first time we addressed a request for assistance to the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center, through which NATO aid was channelled.

■ **The European Union has announced a generous package of support for neighbouring states in various forms, including 100 million Euros of macro-financial assistance. How do you explain, however, that we are provided with 100**

million Euros, while Georgia, a country comparable to us - 183 million Euros?

■ Indeed, even though many of the Western European countries have been hit hardest by the pandemic, the EU has managed to mobilize an impressive amount of assistance for its neighbours. It is provided in the form of medical support and aid to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the crisis. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, at the beginning of April, the European Commission decided to grant us 87 million Euros to cover immediate needs and to overcome the long-term consequences caused by the pandemic crisis. I would like to emphasize that these are non-reimbursable funds offered without any conditions, being redirected from the EU ongoing or planned projects in other areas. A significant part of this money was donated to WHO activities, including the procurement of medical supplies. The assistance in question was complemented by two packages of 140 and 700 million Euros respectively, allocated by the EU to the six Eastern Partnership countries within a regional assistance programme aimed at combatting the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis ...

The 100 million Euros macro-financial assistance you are referring to, while comparing it to the 183 million Euros given to Georgia, is part of the 3 billion Euros package earmarked for ten countries in the EU's extended neighbourhood. As mentioned in the text of the European Union decision, the amount of macro-financial assistance differs from country to country and is justified by the updated assessments of external financing needs, which is closely linked to the support of other development partners (IMF or WB).

■ **There were, however, numerous political ping-pongs related to the external assistance. How harmful are such approaches?**

■ I will say one thing - any help is welcome in crisis situations. We are grateful to all those who supported us in

these difficult circumstances. So I consider the approaches such as "who gave more or who was the first" - which still appear in the public space - to be incorrect and even counterproductive.

The relations between Chisinau and Bucharest will have an upward course

■ **At the end of April, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Moldova and Romania. On this occasion, in a statement, the Romanian authorities pointed out both the successes of this Partnership and the problems facing the Republic of Moldova, as well as Romania's expectations from Moldovan officials. How justified are these reproaches-expectations? And how do you see the bilateral relations between our countries in the next ten years?**

■ I believe that we need to treat with understanding and receptiveness the constructive criticisms coming from our strategic and development partners regarding the pace and the way of implementing the European agenda reforms. This criticism can contribute to eliminating the shortcomings and accelerating the positive transformations in society as the objectives that the Government is consistently pursuing are to increase the living standards of the citizens, fight corruption and ensure the rule of law. That is why I am convinced that despite the "cold winds" that sometimes blow over the two capitals, the relations between Chisinau and Bucharest will be developing, deepening and consolidating.

Proof of this is the Strategic Partnership whose goal is the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European family. Within this Partnership, large-scale energy and infrastructure projects have been carried out in the last decade; Romania has provided substantial support in promoting our European agenda and has become our

main trade and economic partner with a trade volume of over 1.6 billion USD in 2019. I believe that the Strategic Partnership will be developed on these strong pillars in the following ten years. We are interested in strengthening and deepening the relations between our countries with the aim of achieving the goals of the European integration. We will do this by finalizing the projects and programmes initiated, as well as by launching new projects designed to contribute to the implementation of the democratic reform agenda and to improvement of the living standards of the Moldovan citizens. It is natural to be so, because this relationship has a special and privileged character, being based on the same common values - history, language and culture.

■ **How would you qualify today the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova? Does it exist or ... has it been reduced to humanitarian aid and charter flights, as your predecessor, Nicu Popescu, stated recently on his Facebook? And how do you see a return to normalcy?**

■ If we look at things objectively, we have to recognize that the pandemic has affected not only the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova - it has disrupted the entire agenda of international life. All states and international organizations have been forced to resort more often to remote communication channels, including through social networks. I witnessed a kind of videoconferencing diplomacy... At the same time, the Foreign Ministers of Hungary and Romania paid working visits to the Republic of Moldova to accompany important lots of humanitarian aid granted to our country. I have been in constant communication with my counterparts, most of the EU foreign ministers, as well as with senior officials in the European Union. As for the classic "normality", including in the field of international relations, unfortunately, I don't think anyone could say exactly when we will return to it. Like everyone else, however, we want this to happen as soon as possible.

The priority number one remains unchanged: European integration

■ **What are the priority directions of our country's foreign policy? Are we going eastward? Westward? Are we still implementing the Association Agreement?**

■ We have no serious reason to change the priorities of foreign policy, whose purpose is to help create the necessary conditions to achieve the objectives set in the governmental programme - further reforms and modernization of society to ensure sustainable socio-economic development of the country. Therefore, the number one priority of foreign policy remains unchanged: *European integration*, including *the achievement of the objectives set out in the Association Agreement with the EU*. Furthermore, the consolidation of good neighbourly relations and strategic partnership with Romania and Ukraine, intensification of cooperation with the USA, the Russian Federation, China, Turkey and other traditional partners, diversification of sales markets for Moldovan products remain important.

■ **How much is the principle of "a balanced foreign policy between East and West", promoted by President Igor Dodon, is characteristic to the Foreign Office activity?**

■ Naturally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration and its entire team are led by the Government Work Programme and Action Plan for 2020-2023. Respectively, the Moldovan diplomacy focuses on achieving the foreign policy objectives set out in these directive documents. This means that our country has to promote a consistent, pragmatic and transparent foreign policy in order to enjoy credibility and support in both the West and the East, and the promotion of national interests and the defense of the citizens' interests are at the center of its action.

■ **How will the Ministry contribute to the achievement of the long-term policy**

objectives of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020 - a Partnership that Creates, Protects, Greens, Connects, Enables - launched on March 18th this year?

■ In order to understand how the Republic of Moldova sees itself in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the next decade, we should objectively assess the place and role of our country within this initiative. While the Republic of Moldova had initially a somewhat sceptical attitude towards the Eastern Partnership because the initiative in question did not provide for the European perspective, over time it became an active and constructive participant in the EaP. Most of the objectives set at the time of the EaP launch were achieved. The Republic of Moldova has signed an Association Agreement with the EU, under which it has carried out a process of structural reforms aimed at contributing to the consolidation of democracy, the rule of law and sustainable development. We have a deep and comprehensive free trade regime with the EU - DCFTA, which allows more than two thirds of Moldovan exports, including from the Transnistrian region, to be traded on the Community market. The Moldovan citizens can travel without visas to European countries – since April 2014 until now, more than 2.3 million Moldovans have benefited from the liberalized visa regime, making over 8.5 million trips to European countries.

In 2019, a series of public consultations took place to develop the strategy for further development of the EaP. Like the other partners, the Republic of Moldova has developed its national position on the future of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020 - one that should meet our expectations and as you said, to create, protect, green, connect and enable. Our goal is to promote, within the Eastern Partnership, an ambitious cooperation agenda to ensure continued rapprochement with the European Union.

■ **Thank you for the interview and I wish you strength to the whole team.**

Sorina Ștefăruță

Expert Opinion

EU's Strategic Sovereignty start in Eastern Europe



Nicu Popescu



Gustav Gressel

While European societies take stock on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic on the EU, it has been increasingly common to hear that the pandemic proved the need for the EU to be more strategically sovereign. No doubt about that. But the real test for EU power and its strategic sovereignty won't be in masks, but on how the EU deals with external problems, not least in its neighbourhood, write in a joint editorial published on www.euractiv.ro Nicu Popescu, director of the European Council of Foreign Relations' Wider Europe Programme (Paris) and Gustav Gressel, senior policy fellow with the European Council for Foreign Policy (Berlin).

As the EU is preparing a summit in June with the Eastern Partnership states (COVID19 conditions allowing) the agenda of that summit still looks like a throwback to the pre-geopolitical good old days when Russia was not invading neighbours, China was a 'responsible stakeholder' meekly 'bidding its time', and the US was an inclusive, multilateralist, and ready to cover for EU inaction in certain domains like security and defence. None of those conditions hold true today. And this dictates the EU a need to significantly scale up its policies in the neighbourhood.

EU Marginalisation, a consequence of EU's own choice

The EU is already marginalised, and not very relevant for the hardest dossiers

in its southern neighbourhood: Syria, Libya, the Israeli-Palestine conflict and broader regional dynamics. The EU is less influential on Turkey than it has been in decades. The state of EU's influence and relevance in Eastern Europe is not as poor, but the prospects don't look good. And it's not because of the US, China or Russia, but because of EU's own choice to avoid dealing with hard security matters and concentrate on its socio-economic goals.

In the last decade the EU has invested billions in aid and loans in its neighbourhood. It hosted dozens of summits, beefed up its diplomatic presence, agreed on free trade areas, helped improve energy security, and liberalised travel and visa-regimes in its Eastern neighbourhood. Achievements have been plenty. But few of them are irreversible. They can all be foiled by the eroding security situation.

EU's neighbours are under a constant security assault: from propaganda, dirty political party finance from abroad, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, intelligence subversion, and, as Ukraine proved, open military aggression.

As ungeopolitical as possible in Eastern Europe

In the past, strengthening the resilience of Eastern Neighbourhood states in matters of security and defence was mostly left to Washington. The US took the lead in helping states on defence assistance and reforms, intelligence cooperation, and cyber security. Because the US was virtually the only such helper on matters of state survival for countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova the US also gained significant 'premium' leverage. EU's financial assistance could not always buy the same degree of influence. Certainly, the US and the EU worked together to insist on critical reforms.

But this arrangement is threatened now. The way Ukraine ended up enmeshed in Trump's failed impeachment left deep scars on the political landscapes of both Eastern Europe and Washington. The mistrust

between President Trump and most of those senior policy makers who are supposed to implement policies on eastern Europe is certainly inhibiting US influence and credibility.

One might think, under these circumstances the EU would engage in a major scaling up of its Eastern Partnership policy. But that is far from certain. Even though the EU institutions have the ambitions and the desire to significantly scale it up, there is a strong current among some member states to keep the EU as ungeopolitical as possible in Eastern Europe. In recent months some member states tried to completely deprive the Eastern Partnership conversation of any security ambition. There was even an attempt to relegate the EaP to matters of environment, fighting inequalities and boosting youth exchanges.

A rather large and otherwise ambitious member state even argued that the EaP should have nothing to deal even with 'cyber security', let alone harder security matters, in order not to irritate Russia. Such positioning is not unlike Donald Trump's isolationist disengagement.

It is time for security partnerships with neighbours

If Europe is indeed ready and willing to become more geopolitical, and strategically autonomous, it is time to show that in its Eastern Partnership policy. One way to do so is to launch an Eastern Partnership Security Compact: an initiative bringing together EU funds and institutions with the capabilities of EU member states willing to boost security cooperation with EU's neighbours. Some EU member states already have some modest cooperation initiatives in security and defence. But these are fragmented, poorly coordinated and not very resourceful.

The idea is to merge, and scale up such already ongoing cooperation. Such a compact would seek to boost both assistance and cooperation on intelligence coordination, security sector support, cyber security, and increased military cooperation.

On the latter a "foreign military sales programme" akin to the US, under which partners can purchase selective European military equipment for special loans could be part of the initiative. Reshaping military training, education,

defence and comprehensive national security planning is also needed. On intelligence and cyber, capacity building programmes and closer cooperation to early on identify clandestine threats and subversive structures is paramount.

Such a package would also help EU's ability to foster and support reforms within the cyber-, security-, intelligence-, and defence-sector, particularly regarding the public accountability, rule of law, and most important the fight against corruption.

It is time for the EU to stop being afraid of its own shadow in security matters. Without dealing with such sensitive, and un-Brussels-like issues, the EU influence, effectiveness and strategic sovereignty ambitions will always hit glass ceiling. It is time to start investing in security partnerships with its neighbours. Such partnerships should not be linked to the complex issue of EU and NATO enlargements. The point is to strengthen EU's allies' capabilities and start turning the EU into a full-spectrum power in its own neighbourhood. Or else, the EU power risks going down the route of growing irrelevance, as it did in the Southern Mediterranean in the last decade.

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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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