

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 European Commission approved on Friday, July 10, on behalf of the European Union, the disbursement of Euro 30 million of macro-financial assistance for the Republic of Moldova. The second and last tranche of the current macro-financial assistance programme for our country consists of Euro 10 million in the form of a grant and Euro 20 million in the form of a long-term and low-interest loan. The programme will help to meet the needs of external financing, respectively to reduce the economic shock caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The disbursement of assistance was conditional on the fulfilment of certain political preconditions, which the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) consider to have been met. In this context, the press release issued on 10 July states that sufficient intermediate progress has been made in this regard, in particular concerning the series of specific short-term actions related to justice, anti-corruption, the media and civil society.



Also on July 10, the European Commission made public the Report on the fulfilment of the visa liberalization requirements by the countries of the Western Balkans and three Eastern Partnership countries - Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. According to the report, the above-mentioned countries continue to meet the visa liberalization requirements, while the free movement brings economic, social and cultural benefits. The report focuses primarily on security and migration, which requires further action, even if "the vast majority of visa-free citizens are bona fide travellers with legitimate reasons to travel to the EU". "Overall, the visa-free travel scheme has achieved its goal: strengthening people-to-people contact between the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries and the EU, including with the diaspora communities in the EU Member States, improving business opportunities and cultural exchanges, and allowing citizens to get to know the EU better", states the document, covering the calendar year 2019 and the first half of 2020.



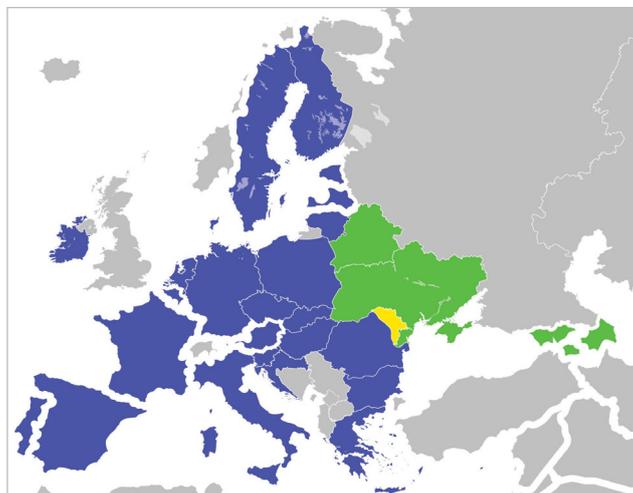
The post-2020 cooperation objectives were discussed at the virtual meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Eastern Partnership (EAP) countries, held on 1 July. Minister Oleg Tulea underlined the importance of deepening the political dialogue and agreeing on concrete long-term sectoral objectives, which will contribute to strengthening the resilience of the EAP countries, but also to deepening the integration processes with the EU. In this sense, the importance of continuing the dialogue of the associated partners with the European Commission on the implementation of reforms was mentioned. The following were mentioned among the priority objectives: connecting to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), reducing roaming tariffs between the EU and EAP countries, opening up the EAP countries' access to the European road transport market. Minister Oleg Tulea also expressed interest in strengthening security cooperation and welcomed the EU's readiness to deepen cooperation in the area of health system. All the ideas communicated will serve as a basis for the European Commission in preparing the consolidated version of the objectives post-2020.

The Eastern Partnership post-2020, the challenge of being more vocal and more visible

Sorina Ștefârță

June 2020 that has just past was not only expected for the "inaugural gong" of the holidays. This June, in Zagreb, Croatia, was to take shape the next decade of a project that very few gave it big chances of life in its infancy, in the distant 2009. It is about the Eastern Partnership and the Summit dedicated to it, which, like thousands of other events around the world, was turned upside down by the pandemic and ... postponed for next year.

To the surprise of many, however, the pandemic did not stop the talks on the Eastern Partnership. On the contrary, in a period that you would have expected it to be more of a total freeze - especially in the EU which was hit hard by the virus - the Eastern Partnership



has been propelled, with the contribution of the European Union, to a new dimension of integration and regional resilience to global threats. It happened, first of all, due to the fact that most of the European support offered to our country to fight the pandemic and its economic consequences came in the context of our membership of the Eastern Partnership.

A project launched with the aim of strengthening and deepening the political and economic relations between the EU, the Member States and the six states in the eastern neighbourhood of the community - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. A project that has developed according

► to the interests, ambitions and progress of each partner, allowing for differentiation, so that three of the six countries are associated to the EU.

But there seems to be something more at the root of this rebirth of the Eastern Partnership, apart from money and aid. And this is the perspective of the future. On 18 March this year, with the pandemic at the European level being in full swing, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented a proposal for the long-term policy objectives of the Eastern Partnership beyond 2020. And the announced goal, despite the pandemic, was the same- progress: strengthening democratic institutions, rule of law, environmental and climate resilience, digital transformation and promoting a fair and inclusive society.

“The power of our neighbours is also the power of the European Union; The Eastern Partnership remains an essential element of the EU foreign policy,” said the High Representative/ Vice President Josep Borrell. “We are sending a very clear message to the Eastern partner countries: we will work closely to address today’s challenges as a whole, including the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic,” said Olivér Várhelyi, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. And the support actions that followed proved his words ...

The European Union once again invites us to build together for the benefit of all. A partnership that creates - for resilient, sustainable and integrated economies; a partnership that protects - for responsible institutions, rule of law and security; a greening Partnership - towards environmental and climate resilience; a connecting Partnership - for a resilient digital transformation; an enabling Partnership - for resilient, fair and inclusive societies. A real galactic... And all we have to do is to find our place, be more visible and make ourselves heard. This is also what the current edition of the newsletter is about.

At some point, I think, they will apply a differentiated approach to the Eastern Partnership countries

Tatiana Molcean, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration



On 10 July 2020, our country came across two pieces of news that, as required by gender rules, were divided into “good” and “bad”. The good news came from Brussels, where the European Commission had made public the long-awaited decision on the disbursement of the second tranche of macro-financial assistance for the Republic of Moldova, worth 30 million euros. The second news came this morning from Rome and informed us that the Republic of Moldova has entered the list of 13 states against which, because of the inefficient management of the pandemic crisis, severe restrictions on access to the Italian territory are imposed. Because

both news fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, I discussed with Tatiana Molcean, Secretary of State responsible for European integration within the foreign office, about what these decisions mean for the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, but also for the future of our relations with the EU.

The decision of the European Commission encourages us

■ Mrs Molcean, let’s start with the good news - the European Commission’s announcement on the disbursement of the second tranche of macro-financial assistance agreed in 2017. What does

this mean for the country, apart from the financial component?

■ The decision on disbursement of assistance is a long-awaited one in Chisinau, but also at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in particular, and this is because a lot of work has been done to meet the specific and very strict conditions stipulated in the Memorandum of Understanding signed in autumn 2017. All have been fulfilled, the last being the one regarding the sanctions for money laundering, but also the ones remaining from the first tranche, such as the adoption of the Law on public procurement in the public utility system ... De facto, in addition to the general requirements - such as political stability or programme with the IMF - we had a set of specific actions for each tranche. For the second tranche, most of the conditions were met in 2018, among the most important being the adoption of new legislation in the financial-banking sector or in the insurance sector. Obviously, political conditionalities are added to the above, which depend mainly on politicians. Therefore, the decision of the European Commission is important for at least two reasons: 1) we really need the money and 2) it confirms that, when certain reforms are carried out, there is a result, a kind of reward. And it is an encouragement to continue – for both us, the Foreign Ministry, and the other ministries and institutions involved.

Can we talk about the third tranche today?

■ No, and there are objective reasons for that, and it's a shame that speculations are being made on this subject. Yes, in a way, the Republic of Moldova is guilty of missing this tranche. However, given that the first tranche, in fact, came only in November 2019 - although the conditions had been met in 2018 -, plus all the political changes that took place in 2017-2019, with dysfunctional parliament and elections, plus the change of governments, it was quite impossible to meet, within a reasonable time, the

stipulated requirements. We believe that we have done our utmost under this Memorandum of Understanding. In addition, if we take into account the specification that there must be at least three months between instalments - and the Agreement expires on July 18 - we think it is good that we have received the second installment. All the rest are assumptions. That, perhaps, in 2017 our implementation capacities were not evaluated correctly... That we relied on a unit of the political class to allow a faster adoption of key laws ... We don't know for sure. What is certain though is that the EU has gone lengths in setting the political conditions for a Macro-Financial Assistance Agreement involving both a grant and a loan element. On the one hand, it is a good thing, because it motivates us to be more active and efficient. On the other hand ... you can't make big changes with the existing context.

Is there a prospect of how the money will be spent?

■ This money goes to the budget and will be spent based on needs. Obviously, three years ago there was no pandemic and now they will also go to mitigate the effects of the health and economic crisis, caused by the new coronavirus. The 100-million-euro emergency assistance, announced by the European Commission in May and now under negotiations, will also go here.

We cannot pass laws in a conveyor-belt fashion

■ ***These 100 million is part of a larger amount, of three billion euros, provided for ten states in the neighbourhood of the European Union. Let me ask, as many have asked - why only 100 for the Republic of Moldova? And when do you expect the first tranche? They said in June, but we are already in July ...***

■ The evaluation was made by financial experts, based on budget revenue

forecasts. At that stage, the talks on the Russian loan of 200 million were still valid. Plus the talks with the IMF, which are going on ... It is neither fair nor productive to make comparisons. There are states in the Balkans that have received even less than us - should we automatically say that those states deserved less? As for the first tranche, we are very advanced in discussions. The agreement has already been approved by the Government - and we are among the first countries to do so - but here too there are procedures we cannot avoid. However, our plan is for the Agreement to be signed by the end of July, and for the first 50 million to come in September. And by the end of the year we expect to receive the second tranche.

For this 100 million, are there conditions imposed by the EU?

■ The first tranche is not conditional, while for the second one there are six specific conditions, which, in my opinion, are quite politicized, especially since this assistance is provided in an emergency situation. Unfortunately, I cannot make them public as long as the final document has not been made public. I can only tell you that it concerns the financial system, the transparency of public procurement in the health system, the justice and customs sectors. We would have liked to meet all the conditions this year and also to receive all the money this year, but we have to understand that the adoption by Parliament of a law is too much of a procedure and cannot be passed in a conveyor-belt fashion.

Which ministry has to carry the load?

■ Our current assessments show that most actions that relate not only to external assistance programmes, but to the entire European integration process, should be taken by the Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure, but also by the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment. We have a very close collaboration with both. And believe me, even the smallest decision is

prepared very rigorously to make sure it meets all the procedures and rigors.

In order to ask to open borders for us, the number of infections has to decrease

■ ***Let's move on to the less pleasant news - Italy (in the meantime, similar measures against the Republic of Moldova have been imposed by Bulgaria and Hungary). What are you going to do to get the country out of this impasse?***

■ Yes, we've been notified this morning about the ordinance of the Government in Rome. It is their legitimate decision, because, unfortunately, the situation is becoming serious again in several countries. However, let us not forget that it is a short-term restriction. In addition, the Republic of Moldova has a similar approach to citizens of other states. We are in a crisis that has swept the globe and every state is looking for solutions to protect its citizens. And it is not for us, the Foreign Office, to speak about it. Let the public health specialists speak!.. Yes, this situation creates inconveniences and frustrations. But we cannot ask them to open borders for us since we do not meet the criteria of public safety. We are following the developments, we are ready to give a helping hand (especially to the touristic companies, at present), but we cannot do it without a reasoned basis - and that would mean reducing the number of infections.

■ ***Speaking of borders ... today the European Commission has published another document regarding the Republic of Moldova - the third Annual Report on the visa suspension mechanism with the EU ...***

■ I would say it's the second good news for this July 10th! Good not only because of the general conclusions of the Report - "the citizens of the Republic of Moldova will continue to benefit from the liberalized visa regime with the Schengen states, and the authorities continue to meet the conditions underlying the liberalization

of the visa regime." This Report, which is a comprehensive assessment of the level of implementation of the EU visa-free regime criteria for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, needs to be read at the level of language subtleties ... And the key message is that we continue to meet the conditions that led to the liberalization of the visa regime and that there is no risk of losing this advantage. Obviously, we would like to see no remarks, no recommendations ... And the Commission further recommends that we look for ways to reduce the number of asylum applications lodged 'unjustifiably' by our compatriots in the Schengen countries; to carry out information campaigns in which to explain, once again, what the visa liberalization regime entails - because it is enough to enter some Facebook groups to see that the people use the passports for work; but there are also general recommendations on the adoption of the Justice Reform Strategy, strengthening the institutional capacities and competencies of National Agency for Integrity or continuing the investigation of the bank fraud and asset recovery. So there is still work to be done, but overall the language has improved. Because, there is a difference between "urgent measures are needed" and "the authorities are recommended". In addition, this report doesn't mention the citizenship by investment for the simple reason that the law in question has been repealed. I consider it a positive element.

■ ***Does this mean the rumours according to which the pandemic will allow the European Union to abolish the visa liberalization regime is unfounded?***

■ The last four months have amplified various conspiracy theories, it's true, and visas have not escaped untouched. But I can assure you that all the current restrictions are strictly related to the pandemic, and today each country is following the developments, adjusting its decisions every two weeks. I know, there are opinions that we should act on the principle of reciprocity - take the first step and open our borders, in the hope that the partners will do the same for us.

But we can't insist and put pressure on the health system just because we want to travel ... it's kind of selfish. In addition, we can remove any restrictions - if we do not improve the situation in the country, no one will allow us to go to them.

We would like to focus, as much as possible, on practical aspects

■ ***The liberalized visa regime, as well as the EU Association Agreement, are seen as successful achievements of the Eastern Partnership - for at least three countries. Last year, the Foreign Office was actively involved in developing suggestions for the future of this project. What is happening now at the ministry on this dimension?***

■ Indeed, last year we worked hard to formulate the post-2020 objectives of the Eastern Partnership and we had a very good cooperation with colleagues from Georgia and Ukraine in this regard. On March 18th the European Commission released its communiqué - a very complex one, by the way - and at the June 18th Summit the objectives were to be approved. Because of the pandemic, the Summit has been moved to 2021, respectively we are still working on improving the objectives and adjusting them to the new realities. Especially since things are specific to each of the six countries. For the three associated states, the priority is to strengthen the political dialogue with the EU, but also, going more into practice, to establish an interaction at ministerial level, for example. For we have now seen, in this crisis, how good it would have been, for example, for the Transport Ministers of the Eastern Partnership countries to have a direct communication between them, but also with Brussels. This is about the sectoral level. Then there is the draft on the roaming tariffs in the region, which was to be signed by the end of this year and which we hope will be the first step, after which we could focus on the EU countries; liberalization of the land road transport; inclusion in the Single European Payment System, which will reduce bank costs.

■ *What will you do in the field of security, which is being talked about more and more?*

■ At regional level, we need to focus on strengthening the capacity to respond to hybrid threats, in all their diversity and complexity, especially to work together. At the same time, I think that the idea of a differentiated approach of the Eastern Partnership countries will have its say: it is obvious that the Member States with European aspirations (Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia) have a vision on this type of threats, while the states that are not focused on integration (Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan) treat the issue in a more relaxed way.

■ *What are the priorities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the second part of this turbulent year 2020?*

■ We have worked throughout the pandemic with my colleagues making enormous efforts to repatriate our fellow citizens in difficulty, to identify sources of medical and protective equipment, and to attract humanitarian aid. In the coming period, we intend to work closely with the Parliament to ensure that the laws meet the European standards, as well as to develop the new Association Agenda dating from 2021. We are working on the latter at present, identifying priorities, together with the EU colleagues. It is important to resume the dialogue with the European Union as much as possible, and then to work on the internal Action Plan. All expire in 2020, so we are starting a new stage of cooperation.

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

Sorina Ștefăruță
10 July 2020

Editorial

Rule of law - the great challenge of the Eastern Partnership in the Republic of Moldova

In May 2009, the Republic of Moldova joined the Eastern Partnership. The country, which had just reached the age of majority (18 years of independence), hoped that this new initiative would help it prepare to meet the main criteria for joining the European Union - strengthening institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, and the development of a functioning market economy, able to cope with the competitive pressure within the EU.

For economic integration and political association

In the 11 years that have elapsed since then, thanks to the Eastern Partnership, the Republic of Moldova has made great progress in developing political, economic and social relations with the European Union. Taking advantage of the Brussels openness, the Chisinau authorities managed, in a relatively short period of time, to liberalize the visa regime and sign the Association Agreement with the EU, including the establishment of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, which offered Moldova the prospect of deep economic integration and political association with the European community.

The implementation of the Association Agreement with the EU and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, initiated in 2014, has had the effect of significantly increasing bilateral trade. In just the first four years of the Agreement, the exports to the EU from our country increased by 62%. Currently, the European



Victor Chirilă,
Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association (APE)

Union is the largest trading partner of the Republic of Moldova. In 2019, trade with the EU accounted for 66% of our total foreign trade. The European community is also the largest external financier of our country. In the last ten years, the EU has approved for our country funding of over 1.9 billion Euros, intended for the rehabilitation of transport infrastructure, education, health, agriculture, energy sector, business development and implementation of structural reforms.

Much more anchored in the European space

The European Union is also a major supporter of justice, police, anti-corruption and anti-money laundering

reforms, for which tens of millions of Euros have been allocated. To date, the Republic of Moldova has transposed into its national legislation over 25,000 EU technical standards, covering various fields. Since 2009, more than 17,660 small and medium-sized enterprises in our country have benefited from the EU financial assistance through the EU4Business Programme. With the political and financial support of the EU, it was possible to initiate major projects to interconnect the energy system of the Republic of Moldova to the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity and Natural Gas Transmission System in Romania - projects that in the coming years will contribute enormously to improving the energy security of our country.

Also, in the last five years, interpersonal contacts between EU countries and the Republic of Moldova have intensified. As a result of the liberalization of the visa regime with the EU on April 28, 2014, over 2.5 million Moldovan citizens were able to travel to European countries, and in the period of 2015-2019 almost 2800 university students and professors benefited from academic mobility offered by the Erasmus + Programme.

Undoubtedly, thanks to the Eastern Partnership, the Republic of Moldova is today much more anchored in the European space, and the EU has become the most important development partner of our country - an indispensable one even ... However, despite the successes mentioned, our country has extremely little progress in meeting the key criteria for the EU membership. As in 2009, today the Republic of Moldova remains a state in transition with a hybrid political system, dominated/ controlled by oligarchs, with an opaque market economy, inefficient institutions crushed by corruption, with the justice and the press being controlled by oligarchs and political parties, with corrupt

politicians serving the oligarchs, with a dysfunctional rule of law and an immature democracy.

Justice reform, which came to a standstill...

The EU is well aware of this reality. In its latest report on the progress of the Eastern Partnership in 2017-2020, Brussels acknowledges that progress has been achieved mainly in three of the four priority areas, namely: a stronger economy, stronger connectivity and a stronger society. As to the goal of achieving stronger governance and the rule of law, however, the successes are quite modest. And this refers not only to the Republic of Moldova, but also to the rest of the Eastern Partnership states.

In Chisinau, more than anywhere else, the justice reform - the key to building a functioning and credible rule of law - came to a standstill. Resonance files, such as the big bank fraud in 2014; "Russian Laundromat" - \$70 billion money laundering scheme, facilitated by political elites in the Republic of Moldova in 2010-2014; illegal extradition of Turkish teachers; funding of political parties by foreign oligarchs and state actors through offshore schemes, remain uninvestigated or are classified.

The decision of the prosecutors to remove from seizure some of the goods as part of the oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc's case opened for money laundering, as well as a series of recent court decisions aimed at releasing some politicians and oligarchs from detention, along with the acquittal of criminals charged with murder is undermining further the impartiality and credibility of local justice. Meanwhile, after a short period of suspense, the Republic of Moldova becomes, before our eyes and the eyes of the EU, a battleground for power, control of justice and financial resources. It's a fight being fought between the big/old oligarchs, who have not ceased to dominate the banking system, the country's economy

and a large part of the deputies in the current Parliament.

The Republic of Moldova, in the face of an existential dilemma

In the opinion of the Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Chicu, the Eastern Partnership has approached a "moment of truth" - either this regional initiative is reinvented and gaining "a new breath", or slowly but surely, it is losing its "political relevance". In reality, not the Eastern Partnership, but the Republic of Moldova is facing an existential dilemma - either it builds a functional rule of law, or it becomes an irrelevant state, a problem state, generating uncertainty and instability at the eastern border of the European Union.

From this point of view, the Eastern Partnership is more relevant than ever for our country, as it offers us not only the political support and financial assistance of the EU, but also the know-how that the community countries have in building a true rule of law. An experience without which we will never cross the doorstep of the European Union ...

In the coming years, the EU aims at contributing, through the Eastern Partnership, to strengthening the resilience of the six Member States of the initiative in critical areas such as the economy, responsible institutions and the rule of law, security, environment and climate change, digital transformation and fair and inclusive societies. It is certainly an extremely ambitious goal for the Republic of Moldova, whose success will depend primarily on our ability to build a reliable rule of law, guaranteeing all legal security and functional democratic institutions, essential for any reform. However, this will be impossible to achieve without fundamentally destroying the current oligarchic system - the number one enemy of the state of the Republic of Moldova, but also of the Eastern Partnership.

Moldovans' perceptions of the EU had already changed by the time of the pandemic

Iulian Groza, Executive Director, Institute for European Policies and Reforms



Though some sang its funeral before it was borne, and others continued to do so for years to come, the Eastern Partnership has developed and strengthened. So, for three of the six member-states, it resulted in an Association Agreement, a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and cancellation of visas ... And, once the first decade was over, it set out to draw new perspectives that will open new horizons for the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia (EU partner countries), but also for Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. What is the place of our country today in the Eastern Partnership? Do we still have the chance to get rid of the “failing student” label as we were recently called in a study, after having lost the title of the “eminent student”, but also that of the “success story”, if you remember?.. I discussed about all this with the political analyst Iulian Groza, executive director of the Institute for European Policies and Reforms.

The spirit of relations with the EU is not ambitious enough

■ Mr. Groza, our discussion is taking place the day when six years ago the Association Agreement of the Republic of Moldova with the European Union was signed. How was in your opinion this relatively short period: was it successful or rather unsuccessful?

■ Whether we like it or not, it is obvious that today we are not where, six years ago, we imagined we would be ... To

blame are the objective challenges facing any state and any society, but also the multiple internal problems that we could have avoided had there been the necessary political will. A retrospective look shows us, however, that despite the impediments that have not allowed us to move forward as we would have liked, our connection with the EU today is much stronger. The European Union continues to be the largest development partner and the largest trading partner of the Republic of Moldova - and with it, the country's strongest and most open

friend. And people see this, as evidenced by the latest survey conducted in the six Eastern Partnership countries, which shows that 63% of our citizens trust the European Union. At the same time, over 74% of Moldovans assess the relationship with the EU as positive; about 82% are aware of the financial support provided by the EU, of which 58% believe that the support is also effective. Ultimately, for 61% of our citizens the EU has a positive image, compared to 29% neutral image and only 9% - negative. I think this result is also due to the fact that, in the last three years, Chisinau's relationship with Brussels has been redirected from the advanced political dialogue, as it was until 2014, to a relationship focused mainly on people.

■ Don't you admit that, de facto, the change of perspective took place “due” to the pandemic crisis, during which the EU came with substantial aid?

■ It is a reality that we cannot rule out, especially since in the last few months the European Union has actively expressed its solidarity with the neighbouring countries, including the Republic of Moldova. And it did it despite the complicated political relationship with Chisinau ... At the same time, if we look closely at the technical data of the survey, we see the mentioning that the face-to-face interviews were conducted between February and March 2020, respectively before the COVID-19 crisis. So something had changed, in terms of perception, already before the pandemic, and the massive support provided by the EU and the Member States - both the humanitarian aid for the health system and the financial instruments to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis - could only strengthen this attitude. It will do it for sure.

■ **Why has this unprecedented response, offered by the European Union at a time when the EU countries themselves were fighting the pandemic, clashed nonetheless, more than once, with the almost icy reactions from the government in Chisinau?**

■ Probably because the European Union has remained consistent and has not given up, even during the pandemic, on the key objectives in the Republic of Moldova - to support reforms and actors of change, to help citizens and local public authorities. So, despite the arrows that regularly flew, I would say that the EU has managed to maintain dialogue. It exists both at the community level and within the cooperation and implementation formats of the Association Agreement. But the spirit of these relationships is less ambitious and not all opportunities are exploited ...

Fortunately, Brussels is not talking just to the Chisinau government

■ **What kind of ambition are you talking about?**

■ First of all, to integrate into the various formats of cooperation that the EU offers through the Eastern Partnership and to take advantage of the existing tools within these formats. Yes, this year has been a complicated one because of the pandemic, but we cannot say that the EU has abandoned us, etc. On the contrary, the European Union has supported us as never before. From what we see, including on the political dimension, it often turned a blind eye or even both eyes to the obvious problems of governance or structural reforms. In addition, in Brussels and other European capitals there are people who are thinking very honestly and very seriously how to help the Republic of Moldova. As a result of these concerns, the European Commission responded immediately to the anti-crisis macro-financial assistance, materialised in that advantageous EUR 100 million loan, which is already being negotiated and whose first tranche we hope will be disbursed in the next future. We should appreciate and capitalize on this attitude.

■ **At the same time, it is already clear that the Moldovan Government has missed the third tranche of assistance negotiated in 2017, amounting to EUR 40 million...**

■ Yes, and the explanation is the lack of clear progress on the reform conditionalities which were agreed then - and which we increasingly like to call "priority actions" ... All the more welcome is the opening of the European Commission to offer the EUR 30 million second tranche in parallel with the mobilization of the Moldovan government – though in the last-minute and without much zeal – that voted the Law on non-profit organizations, laws aimed at combating money laundering and strengthening the banking system, and repealed the Law on Citizenship against Investment. Thus, if we look at the papers, things seem to be moving forward. But if we look more closely at the quality of the dialogue with the EU, you understand that there is not much room for goodwill or gratitude on the part of Chisinau. At least, on the part of the country's president who prefers to put the EU in a negative light and diminish the importance of the European support. This may be his ace up his sleeve for the upcoming election period, but it is an approach that contradicts his own commitment to promoting a balanced foreign policy. Because, de facto, our foreign policy is a confused one, and the country is isolated. We do not have a normal relationship with Ukraine, we do not have a normal relationship with Romania. Only Mr. Dodon has a good relationship with Mr. Putin...

■ **Are there any chances for us to make a qualitative break as long as the political "head" says different things?**

■ Because it is more focused on politics, from time to time, the Government is trying to mend fences and balance the things ... and the high-level dialogue. From time to time, it succeeds. Prime Minister Ion Chicu, although with periodic turmoil, has a constant dialogue with the European ambassadors accredited to Chisinau. At

ministerial level, there are commitments and an ongoing dialogue with the structures of the European Commission and the EU Member States. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, along with the Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure, maintain the dialogue on their channel - and they do so in a very active way. Even on the part of the Ministry of Justice there is a kind of activation. It is a good thing, because, beyond the political context, if we want to advance in the implementation of systemic reforms, we need this technical, constructive and pragmatic dialogue. And also, the active involvement of non-governmental actors, by the way, because today, fortunately, the EU partner in the Republic of Moldova is not just the Government. There is civil society and local public authorities with which the EU cooperates directly. And it is a pity that, instead of using all the potential for dialogue, all the existing energies at central and local level, and focusing them in one direction - European integration - we often find ourselves as in the fable with the crab, swan and the pike. And this is not effective at all for the country ... Our final and common goal should be the reforms and the presence of the Republic of Moldova on the agenda of the EU, which, let's not forget, has enough problems even without us.

We are still given the chance to modernize and get stronger

■ **The pandemic has turned many things upside down both locally, regionally and globally. How do you see the future of our relationship with the European Union?**

■ The key format of our cooperation with the EU remains the Eastern Partnership. Even if we did not achieve everything we set out at its launch, however, together with Ukraine and Georgia, we managed to move forward - we have an Association Agreement and a visa-free regime, we have strengthened our institutional framework to be able to access more funds in the energy, infrastructure and education sectors. Yes, as 11 years ago, the

EU is not ready to discuss accession with our countries. Instead, the EU continues to give us the chance to modernize and get stronger: through the Association Agreement and the Free Trade Area, so that we can position ourselves even more firmly in the common European market; through energy interconnection projects and access to the single euro payments area; by eliminating roaming fees and strengthening the security dimension, ensuring our resilience to external threats. These are realistic objectives, but we should formulate them clearly and give them a logical form so that, at the 2021 Partnership Summit, the European Commission can turn them into deliverables for the next ten years. It's our big chance.

■ **What if we talk about short- and medium-term priorities?**

■ They are interconnected and interdependent. However, the Republic of Moldova should be primarily interested in the perspectives outlined by the post-2020 European Commission: the rule of law, economic resilience, environment and the Green Pact, resilience of societies and community development, energy interconnection ... and hence bridges, roads, the single market, the education and health sector reforms. As for the immediate priorities, there are three, in my opinion, and the pandemic has shown that they are vital: post-crisis economic recovery, including with the help of the EU and the financial packages provided to support the business environment; strengthening the health system, and it is obvious that we alone will not succeed; and, in the slightly longer term, the education sector, which has been abandoned. I would like us to have a European school and that the young people don't have to go abroad, but also to modernize the education system at all levels - kindergartens, schools, universities. And let's focus on the content, not just the form. We are part of the Bologna process, it is natural for us to have European curricula de facto, not just de jure. For this we do not have to invent the wheel, it is enough to take the experience of EU countries. For without an educated society, without specialists in key sectors, our country will

not be able to develop. External assistance will not save us because 1) it will not be eternal and 2) young people will continue to leave. And if there is talk of supporting an Eastern Partnership University in Kiev, why not have a European University in Chisinau?

■ **Several recent studies published by IPRE address the security dimension of the Eastern Partnership. What does this mean in practice?**

■ A close relationship on the security dimension - at least between the three partner countries - would give us more opportunities, and this without any presence in certain military alliances. De facto, we need a security pact with the EU, which is already being discussed. Countries that want this are exposed to security risks not only in the military sector, but also in the banking, information and media sectors. These are hybrid threats, internal political agents, certain external forces that propagate their interests through the media, the church or other social actors, making us vulnerable. We need to create a system to prevent these threats and have a proactive cooperation framework. Obviously, the final decision will depend on the countries involved.

■ **How realistic are these initiatives given the current position of our country? Personally, I did not feel too much enthusiasm in the Prime Minister Ion Chicu's speech at the video conference of the Eastern Partnership leaders from June 18...**

■ If we look at the three associated countries, we see that the challenges are about the same: corruption, the influence of oligarchs and their connection to state resources. The difference is the approach to the priorities they have set internally and in the EU's relationship. Georgia today, despite its internal challenges, is seen as the most determined country - it has an active diplomacy, does not hesitate and tries to seize every opportunity. Ukraine is doing the same... We are an EU partner country and no one has given up on this status, but obviously the approach matters

here as well. I still believe that it is a period of opportunity in which we can set up concrete projects leading to tangible results. We, as exponents of the non-governmental sector, will do this. We have also started discussions with colleagues from the three countries. But, of course, we also need the involvement of governments as only with joint effort will we approach the standards of a European democracy.

We can and should be generators of solutions. To do this, however, we need to connect the Eastern Partnership's policy proposals to our development priorities. For example, to the ones of the National Development Strategy 2030. Without a long-term plan to clearly indicate the areas of intervention linked to the sustainable development objectives and to the commitments aimed at approaching European standards, it will be very difficult for us to act as generators of ideas and solutions. We will be chaotic from one government to another and from one party to another... It is a process that requires the support of the political class and high-ranking decision-makers. Unfortunately, it is missing or, at least, there is no consistency. They come to power by pursuing their own or party goals, not the development of the country.

■ **Could the autumn elections change this damaging approach?**

■ Any election offers a chance for change. The presidential election, even if we are talking about a predominantly symbolic function, will determine the future of the Republic of Moldova. We need a head of state to act as an honest broker, to promote the citizens' interests, to support the Government, including on the external dimension, and to support the development of the country. If we have a president who thinks one thing, speaks another and makes the third, we will remain confused. And that's when we need, more than ever, a clear and calm internal framework.

■ **Thank you for the interview.**

Sorina Ștefăruță
27 June 2020

Expert Opinion

“It is time to focus our efforts on differentiated integration..”



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Foreign Affairs
and European
Integration



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Deputy Managing
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European External
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Mathieu Bousquet,
Head of Unit, Georgia
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Iulian Groza,
Executive Director,
IPRE



Nicu Popescu,
Director of the Wider
Europe Programme
ECFR, Paris, former
Min-ister of Foreign
Affairs and European
Integration



Cristina Gherasimov,
Research Fellow,
DGAP, Berlin

“Eastern Partnership beyond 2020: priorities and challenges of Moldova’s relations with the European Union” was the motto of an online discussion, held on June 30th, that brought together government actors, representatives of the EU institutions, researchers and civil society. The event was organized by the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE) in partnership with the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The hosts set out to discuss the main challenges and priorities for our country’s relations with the European Union in the context of future deliverables of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the updated priorities for the new EU-Moldova Association Agenda, but also the recent developments in Chisinau. We are inviting you to read below the main theses of the speakers.

MARTIN SIEG, KAS Representative in the Republic of Moldova and Romania: “When we talk about the Eastern Partnership, it is very clear that we can talk about progress with respect to trade, visa liberalisation, bilateral relations. However, there is one thing that keeps popping up in my head and that is that the Eastern Partnership in the beginning was meant, in particular, to promote democracy and rule of law. A fair assessment would be that these have fallen short. Perhaps one of the things to do is to see how we go from here and what should we do together to develop the Eastern Partnership

more in this direction. This is, I suppose, the core for deepening the EU-Moldova relations”.

OLEG ȚULEA, minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova: “Regarding Moldova’s relations with the EU, there are several aspects that need to be mentioned. First of all, we are celebrating six years since the signature of the Association Agreement – politically, these have been complicated years. Among the main challenges encountered are the bank fraud, but also the cancellation of the election results for Chisinau City Hall. It is clear that our credibility has been seriously compromised. Despite these challenges, over this period of six years we have managed to bring our country closer to the EU, a result of both the Republic of Moldova and the EU. Our foreign trade is oriented towards the EU market, with an export rate of 68-69%. Our citizens travel to the EU without visas, only with a biometric passport. Throughout this period, we have advanced the dialogue with the EU, despite political or economic instability”.

INA COȘERU, coordinator of the National Platform CSF, President of the National Environment Centre: “The National Platform is involved in the monitoring of the implementation of the Association Agreement by the Republic of Moldova. Our last statement focusses to the NGOs Law, part of the EU conditionalities for the disbursement of the second tranche of macro-financial assistance. I would like to assure you that we will be monitoring the implementation of the provisions of this law in the Republic of Moldova. Another important aspect is the development of NGOs at regional level and I would like to thank the European Commission for its support to civil society in the region and emphasize once again the crucial role of civil society for the sustainability of the Eastern Partnership”.

LUC DEVIGNE, Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia, European External Action Service (EEAS): “We continue to work on the strategy for the future of the Eastern Partnership and we will focus on the overall objective of strengthening the resilience of the Eastern Partnership. We aim to achieve this goal through five priorities: (1) An economy that delivers for all, including youth, through greater interconnectivity; (2) We will try to strengthen the transparency of the institutions and the rule of law; (3) We will support the green transformation, which is a priority of the European Commission; (4) We will support the digitization process to address corruption issues as well; (5) We will help build inclusive societies. In addition to these elements, I must emphasize that the reform of the justice sector, the fight against corruption and the depoliticization of institutions remain our priorities related to the Republic of Moldova”.

MATHIEU BOUSQUET, Head of Unit, DG NEAR, European Commission: “I must emphasize that the response to the COVID-19 crisis for the Eastern Partnership countries came from Team Europe, which includes the international financial institutions we work with: the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank, but also the EU Member States. We tried to respond quickly to the current situation and help the Republic of Moldova through bilateral programs, in addition to the 320 million euros grant component offered for the Eastern Partnership. The EU continues to help the Republic of Moldova and the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. We are currently in the process of negotiating a new EUR 100 million agreement in the form of macro-financial assistance with Moldova”.

MICHAEL GAHLER, member of the European Parliament, vice-chair of the EPP Group, AFET member: “For me, a

problem of interest in the context of the presidential elections is that the parties in the Republic of Moldova will not have access to conduct their election campaign in the Transnistrian region, and the inhabitants of the region will have access only to a certain type of information. Given the organized transportation of voters to the polling stations, these practices are far from correct. We, as members of the European Parliament, maintain a united position regarding the agenda of relations with the Republic of Moldova and the expectations we have from this dialogue”.

PETRAS AUŠTREVICIUS, member of the European Parliament, Rapporteur on the Republic of Moldova (Renew Europe): “We can see significant progress in the relations with the associated countries to the European Union. As for the European Parliament, we have delivered a more optimistic message than the EU Council and the European Commission. We talked about European aspirations and the European perspective, which must be recognized for these countries. We need to have a more ambitious agenda for the associated countries, such as the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. That is why I would like to talk about the Eastern Partnership, referring only to the “more for more” principle and not to “less for less”. We need to focus our efforts on differentiated integration. It is time to recognize sectorial results and better preparedness of the associated countries on certain dimensions of cooperation with the EU”.

CRISTINA GHERASIMOV, Research Fellow, DGAP Berlin: “The key priorities for Moldova’s relations with the EU should be related to ensuring the fairness of this year’s presidential elections. Secondly, we must ensure that the EU support in overcoming the COVID-19 crisis in the Republic of Moldova will reach the final beneficiaries and will not be

used for electoral purposes. In terms of medium-term priorities, we should facilitate the development of SMEs, the youth sector and the reform of the health sector. At the same time, it is essential to support the arts and culture sector, especially within the current crisis”.

DRAGOȘ TUDORACHE, member of the European Parliament, Rapporteur on the Republic of Moldova (Renew Europe Group): “The first component that is important for Chisinau is the Association Agreement, which is not just a matter of the legal framework through which the Republic of Moldova has made a political, strategic choice, but, in fact, is a model of governance, democracy a state has chosen to implement. The second component is good governance, which is the most important pillar, because it is a political one and goes to the essence

of that democratic model. The third component is the economic one. The figures show that the Association Agreement offered access to a huge market, which diversified the trade relations of the Moldovan entrepreneurs. So, the Association Agreement is a good framework and we need to continue its implementation”.

NICU POPESCU, director of the Wider Europe Programme (ECFR Paris), former Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova: «With this COVID-19 crisis, it has been shown that the EU is the first and main partner which has the desire, interest and ability to systematically help the Republic of Moldova, both medically and economically. I would like to contrast the EU assistance with discussions on the Russian assistance. Today, the Republic of Moldova pays for the

Russian gas much more than Germany does; Moldovan goods, which could be exported to the Russian market, remain blocked. And, obviously, this attempt of trafficking through the \$200 million loan agreement, which could have been a kind of screen for some schemes through which Moldovan citizens would have been robbed again, was very worrying. This fact indicates once again who is actually ready to continue helping the Republic of Moldova... The crisis of the last two months has also developed a strange behaviour, when the government was trying to promote a balanced foreign policy, but in reality, we found ourselves isolated, and those fairly systematic anti-EU attacks deepened this perception”.

The full version of the discussion could be found at <https://www.privesc.eu/arhiva/91143>

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