

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

MONTHLY BULLETIN • DECEMBER 2020 • NR.11 (177)

Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Sorina Ștefârță, editor-coordinator

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News in brief



The post-election events in the Chisinau Parliament have resulted in harsh reactions from international partners. The European Union criticized the way in which on Thursday, December 3, the MPs of the PSRM, "Sor" Party and "Penru Moldo" Group voted a package of laws, including a law which limits the presidential powers. "The vote took place in a way that does not follow the procedures and is supported by people who have been involved in corruption and the 2014 bank fraud. This runs the risk that the legislation could serve private interests," the EU statement said. At the same time, the EU Delegation in our country states that the legal proposals were submitted only two weeks after the Republic of Moldova elected a new president, "with the expectation that the president can exercise her functions according to the Constitution based on which she was elected." "It is therefore essential that any changes to these presidential powers comply with the necessary and legally required procedures, including the democratic control." The EU noted that it expects from all the decision-makers in our country to respect the rule of law and guarantee democracy, in line with the expectations of the people and the principles of the Association Agreement.



The United States has also reacted harshly to the Parliament's decision to repeal the law authorizing the sale of the former Republican Stadium land to the United States for building a new embassy complex. "The USA has been negotiating in good faith with the governments of the Republic of Moldova the acquisition of the land for over a decade. This repeal violates a binding bilateral agreement, violates international law and adversely affects the relations between the United States and the Republic of Moldova," reads the text of the diplomatic mission. The embassy said the United States was ready to invest more than \$ 250 million to build a new headquarters in Chisinau, creating hundreds of jobs, supporting local businesses and revitalizing the city's economy. "As we have constantly said, any new construction on this land will respect its cultural and historical significance. We urge the authorities of the Republic of Moldova to rethink this step and to honour their obligations", mentions the US Embassy. Prime Minister Ion Chicu has also criticized the Parliament's decision, calling it a mistake.



At the recent 27th meeting of the OSCE Council of Foreign Ministers, the Declaration on the "5 + 2" format of the Transnistrian settlement has been adopted by consensus. In particular, the Foreign Ministers of the participating States urged the parties to intensify interaction to overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and to step up dialogue and ongoing efforts to protect human rights in the Transnistrian region, including the rapid restoration of free movement between the two banks of the Nistru. The ministers have also reiterated their determination to peacefully identify a comprehensive and lasting solution to the Transnistrian conflict based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders with the adoption of the special status of the Transnistrian region. Also, the USA and Romania reiterated the need to complete the process of withdrawing the foreign troops and ammunition from the territory of the country, in accordance with the commitments assumed by the Russian Federation within the OSCE.

A Trapped Presidency



Chișinău, December 6, 2020... Tens of thousands of protesters demand the resignation of the Government and early elections

Foto: EPA

Sorina Ștefârță

Less than a month has passed since the presidential election, the elected president has not yet taken

office, and not even the Constitutional Court has taken the time (and courage?) to rule on the election results. However, Maia Sandu has already been

blamed for whatever you want; some of the politicians and the media they control have remained frozen in the two weeks before the second round

► of elections, when the PAS candidate was subjected to fierce propaganda launched by the army of political advisers.

It is obvious that the losers have already started the revenge and they are doing it hysterically locally or resorting to all kinds of Russian channels from which we can find out that we have elected a monster that wants to take out the rescuing Russian army from Transnistria ... as if this army should not, once and for all, leave and as if the official position of the Republic of Moldova, including the one voiced by the incumbent President, has been different. They do it, spreading lies or voting in a defiant way laws that put us on a powder keg. They are doing it, forgetting that, as a rule, when the powder explodes, it destroys almost everything in its path.

These few weeks have actually shown us that Maia Sandu's presidential mandate will be trapped - more or less visible, more or less clever. The traps might be consistently set by those for whom she - and implicitly the idea of integrity and liquidation of corrupt schemes for which the president-elect has been so massively supported - is simply destructive.

Will President Maia Sandu manage to avoid them and, especially, to defuse those who are already thinking about how to return to power in four years? This is what the November issue of our Newsletter is about. What is certain though is that she will not succeed on her own.

There are sufficient members of the European Union which understand the importance of supporting the Republic of Moldova

Dr. Liliana Popescu, vice-rector of the National School of Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest



Bucharest has been among the first capitals to welcome Maia Sandu's victory in the November 15 presidential election, and President Klaus Iohannis was the first head of state to congratulate her on her victory and it looks like he will be the first head of state to visit Chisinau after Sandu's official inauguration. A visit all the more symbolic as Igor Dodon's four years in office meant four years of freezing between the presidential institutions in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. How is the future mandate of Maia

Sandu seen from Bucharest, what are the obvious and unforeseeable difficulties and how will the regional relations develop in the new political context? I've discussed about these with Dr. Liliana Popescu, university professor and vice-rector of the National School of Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest (SNSPA). A researcher, whose areas of interest include the processes of democratization and Europeanization in the EU's eastern neighbourhood, as well as the relationship between the EU and the post-Soviet space.

Eastern Europe could set a different trend...

■ *Ms. Popescu, what explains the great interest in this presidential election in the Republic of Moldova? Although we are not a presidential republic, and the powers of the president are more than modest, the resonance of the November 2020 elections, implicitly Maia Sandu's victory, has been unprecedented...*

■ What counted a lot, I think, is that the citizens have elected their president through a direct vote. This gives great legitimacy to the president. Before Dodon, the president was elected by Parliament. The law has been changed for him and it is him that the law has disadvantaged now. And that's because he has, in the meantime, upset the citizens because he hadn't kept his promises; in addition, there was that famous episode with "the bag" and others just as shameful... As a result, people have penalised him. And it was natural to do so, opting in favour of Maia Sandu, who does not only project the image of an honest politician, but is really a person who pursues the public good and not personal interests. People always feel this and appreciate it - and this is exactly what has happened now in the Republic of Moldova.

■ *When you say that people always appreciate a sincere and honest person, is it worth thinking that things and values have been changing also in the Balkans, which according to an unwritten code it's more about schemes than integrity...*

■ There is hope they can change, although there is still much work to be done. If we go south to Bulgaria, we see a politician clinging with all his might to power; if we go to the West, in Hungary, we find a prime minister who has created all the conditions to remain in office for as long as possible, and, in the meantime, he has built an entire

infrastructure of people and institutions with the help of which he is planning to stay on top. Things are not simple in the Balkans either, nor in Romania ... All this does not mean that our area could not set a different trend, including by electing Maia Sandu as President of the Republic of Moldova. Why not?! Nobody said that trends can only come from the West and that they cannot be launched by an Eastern country...

The current status-quo in Transnistria is automatically to the advantage of Russia

■ *What would be from your point of view the main challenges of the future President of the Republic of Moldova?*

■ The first challenge is related to the composition of the Parliament, which is to her disadvantage and the only solution would be early elections. Unfortunately, the participation in the presidential elections showed a fragmentation of the Opposition in Chisinau - perhaps a possible parliamentary election would be an opportunity for it to unite and consolidate... Another challenge is related to the fact that, according to the Constitution, the head of state does not have much power. We are now witnessing a further decrease in the presidential powers through the new parliamentary decisions under the influence of the still President Dodon. In addition, we should not forget about the regional and European political situation, as well as about the neighbourhood with a country at war with Russia...

■ *What exactly do you mean when you talk about the European political situation? How can it impact us?*

■ First of all, it is about the multiple and diverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for the European Union - in particular, the economic consequences. Yes, the European Commission has come up with extraordinary measures to support states

and their economies, but even so, at international level, the European Union is not in the best condition. It is enough to look at China and its rise, the rivalry between China and the United States, which was traditionally allied with the EU. And it seems that even under the new president Joe Biden, the USA will not return with the same power in the transatlantic relationship. And then, from the economic point of view, the European Union is on its own. At the same time, it faces its own internal challenges.

These have always existed, it is true, but nevertheless, a great challenge of the moment is related to the euro area and the EU countries that are not part of it. The euro area feels the need to integrate more deeply, otherwise it can no longer be sustained, but not all the EU Member States share this perspective. It is a reality and we cannot bury our heads in the sand like ostriches- we need to see to it that the gap between the Eastern and Western Europe does not increase even more.

■ *In this context, do you think that there is a risk that the European support for the Republic of Moldova, implicitly for the new President Maia Sandu, will be limited to the congratulations that have come in recent weeks from various European leaders?*

■ I don't think so. I believe there are sufficient members of the European Union - Romania, first of all, but also other states, which understand the importance of the support given to the Republic of Moldova and not only. Obviously, the decisions depend on the EU internal policy, lobbying and alliances created, but it can be successful.

■ *On the other side of the geopolitical balance is Russia, which in the last electoral cycles (2019 and 2020) has also had its say through the voters in Transnistria, who have been brought in an organized way to the polling stations on the right bank. How do you think the Russian Federation will play through*

Transnistria, in the new political context in Chisinau?

■ I think that the Russian Federation should not do anything more that it has done so far - maintaining Transnistria as a separatist territory where the social and political life is relatively independent of Chisinau. In addition to that, maintaining the so-called peacekeeping troops. So, everything the Transnistrian region means today, its current status quo, work to the advantage of the Kremlin and to the detriment of the Republic of Moldova. For this reason, Maia Sandu's refusal to meet with the Tiraspol leader is explicable - she does not want to legitimize an illegitimate separatist regime.

The difference between the Western Balkans and the Republic of Moldova is more geopolitical

■ ***How high is the risk of the Kremlin's retaliation for the fact that, following the victory of Maia Sandu, Russia "has lost the Republic of Moldova"? At the same time, there were opinions in Chisinau according to which the rapid acceptance by Moscow of this victory is only a strategic manoeuvre and that, in fact, a crisis will follow ...***

■ First of all, I have to point out that, no matter how critical I am about the EU's (non) economic performance, it does not compare with the problems that Russia has, especially in terms of modernizing its economy. Russia is on a downward economic trend, unfortunately, despite its political successes internationally. Because it failed to agree with the West, the Kremlin resorted to a strategic partnership with China, a rapprochement in which Russia is on the second place. As for a possible crisis ... Russia is very good at disinformation and information warfare. This is what it has been doing in the Republic of Moldova, and has been trying to do in Romania or elsewhere ...

In your case, the problem is aggravated due to the large share of Russian capital, the vulnerable information space and the agents of influence. So, I don't think it is going to invent new things, it will be using the existing tools and the "client's material".

■ ***One of the main electoral promises of Maia Sandu was the fight against corruption and the justice system reform. What are her chances of success in the situation where the Parliament has already started to sabotage it? Would Romania's experience be useful?***

■ It is difficult to compare the Republic of Moldova with Romania, which had the chance to join the EU, thus ensuring both internal and external pressure for judicial reforms to take place and the fight against big corruption to start de facto. In your case, I believe it is rather the failures and successes of Ukraine in this regard that should be followed. In my opinion, the similarity with Ukraine is bigger, including in terms of position in relation to the EU. I also believe that we should insist on the recognition of a different status for the country, one deriving from its membership of the Eastern Partnership. For if I were to compare certain economic or political performances of the Republic of Moldova with the states of the Western Balkans, we will see that the difference between them is more of a geopolitical nature. Even though the situation of the Western Balkans is not excellent- there are several domestic and international barriers that prevent these states from advancing in the accession process, but they have been registered for accession. So, it takes a lot of patience and a lot of confidence.

■ ***Was it a surprise for you that the citizens of the Republic of Moldova elected a woman as president?***

■ I would add "pro-European and transatlantic president", along with "woman" - and you wouldn't have certainly said that voters in the Republic

of Moldova are in a position to make such a leap, especially given the number of low blows and jokes about her. But the most important aspect is that the citizens have elected her through a direct vote, which means that people know what their interest is and that they want to change things. I do not know though to what extent that will be possible in the current political situation and with such a hostile Parliament. But there is another phenomenon in politics sometimes: when a very strong actor enjoys the support of the masses, then also the party switchers understand that they have to reorient themselves...

■ ***Maia Sandu is committed to restoring and developing the relations with Romania and Ukraine - countries in which Igor Dodon has been de facto undesirable. Is it possible for this "rehabilitation" to become something more - a trilateral partnership, for instance - in the conditions of certain existing animosities between Bucharest and Kiev?***

■ Indeed, Maia Sandu has announced as a priority the restoration of relations with neighbours and Mr. Iohannis is already expected to pay a visit to Chisinau... It is a wonderful thing and I am convinced that the resumption of dialogue with the presidential institution in Kiev will not be a problem for the new President of the Republic of Moldova. As for the relationship between Bucharest and Kiev, in my opinion, it is good. Yes, with small elements of roughness, with the need to negotiate - but overall, it is a good relationship. As a result, I am inclined to believe that the trilateral partnership between the three capitals initiated in the '90es is an interesting idea and it's worth being resumed and developed.

■ ***Dear Liliana, thank you for the interview.***

***Sorina Ștefăruță
Chișinău-București, 28 November 2020***

Editorial

The battle of disinformation and post-presidential defrost

Mădălin Necșușu,
BalkanInsight.com
reporter

There has been a lot of talk about the fact that a fake news can be produced in five minutes, while it takes days to dismantle it. That's how it works. But the imagination of those who produce such fakes is not always overflowing and this was seen in the recent presidential campaign - especially between the two election rounds in the Republic of Moldova.

The left-wing candidate chose a losing ticket. He thought that fuelling hatred and societal division would fill the gap of his first term. A term in which, frankly speaking, he made only sterile visits abroad, as few as you can count on fingers of one hand. Most of them were in Moscow, where he knocked on the closed doors of the Kremlin, and the pictures taken with Russian officials, regularly spread on the social networks, did not have a long-term effect.

As a result, strategists around him tried to fill the void of political sterility with fake news, disinformation, black PR, demonization and manipulation. As if he intended to do a kind of "informational" test on the people of the country... While in 2016 a fake news such as the arrival of 30,000 Syrian immigrants in the Republic of Moldova made the electoral difference between the candidates Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu, this time the winning card back then was fatal to Dodon. Lightning didn't strike in the same place twice...

The tap of propaganda is to be opened

Even though his team has insisted to the point of refusal on these tactics, a few projects aimed at combatting fake news, such as the StopFals (StopFake) implemented by API, the



WatchDog community project and the "Demagog. Buletin de Chișinău" of the International Association of Romanian Journalists have managed to successfully dismantle all the topics made up by the candidate's consultants. Themes such as "Maia Sandu is a disciple of Soros and is on the payroll of the occult world", "Maia Sandu will close the schools and hospitals", "with Sandu coming to power, the armed conflict with Tiraspol will break out again" etc. were repeated until saturation and thus the reverse effect was obtained. Dismantling these lies by rationally explaining them by "debunking" programmes has made even Igor Dodon say in a show on the N4 that this recipe "didn't work as it once did ..."

But the subject of such manipulative theses is far from closed. In the almost three decades of Moldova's existence, most of politicians have tried to hide their political incapacities behind hate speech and division, resorting to dirty attacks on political opponents. It was the failure of these costly propaganda and fake news campaigns that led the Socialists and their leader Igor Dodon to try, in the post-election period, to turn on the big tap of disinformation. Specifically, they have tried to bring back the themes of linguistic division and reduce from the TV content in the state language to make room for the Russian language content.

In particular, these initiatives aim to news bulletins, news-analytical talk shows and military programmes - in fact, everything that means the anti-Western propaganda of the Kremlin in the information space of the Republic of Moldova. A space that, in the post-Soviet area, is among the most exposed to information and with a very low resilience to Russian propaganda. If the authors of this bill manage to get it through Parliament, the country will again suffer from exposure to such disinformation campaigns.

Moldova in the whirlpool of troubled waters

Leaving aside the propagandist-media aspect, it is clear that also after this election the Republic of Moldova will be swimming in troubled waters, and the political struggle in Chisinau will be radicalized. In the political cycle of the last four years, the Socialist Party (PSRM) has managed to gradually seize all power in the state and the fact that Maia Sandu won the presidential race changes a little bit the situation, but does not solve the problem entirely. In order to implement her reformist agenda in a democratic and European spirit, she will have to change the paradigm of the position that she was elected to by a large number of citizens and achieve a metamorphosis, transforming from the president-mediator into a president-player.

Although the prerogatives of the president are limited, Maia Sandu will have to act promptly, since the Constitution also gives her the right to legislative initiative. It is obvious that without a parliamentary majority, which could only be formed after early elections and, subsequently, the joining of all healthy pro-European forces, it is hard to believe that the new president will be able to do much. However, the time of the alliance with the current legislative configuration has passed. The imprint of the backstage games, the kleptocratic background and the integrity issues make it impossible to associate the image between the pro-European forces and the other parties in the current Parliament. The forced political cohabitation from June to November 2019 has fully proved this - and the one that gets burned with soup will then blow in yogurt.

Perhaps one of the biggest problems of the political class in Chisinau is the fact that the binary geopolitical division of the "pro-Russian left" and the "pro-European right" did not give a chance to a pro-European centre-left party with young people with Western visions. This centre-left segment has been "privatized" in the last decade by the Democratic Party - only it was a fake European party. In the event of early elections, the segment could be covered by a newly created centre-left party, made up of young pro-Europeans following the example of the social democratic parties in Europe.

But the most important thing for the next period is the implementation of the European agenda - more precisely, the insistence on justice reform. Maia Sandu won the elections, focusing on the fight against corruption and will have to start delivering legislative initiatives and lobbying for this extremely important segment. The fight will not be easy at all. The eclectic caste and corrupt system will not give way without a fierce confrontation, controlling still enough leverage to deal with light attacks. As a result, the attacks to be directed on the system must be strong, repeated and lasting, and for a real success, Maia Sandu should engage in this effort the Western partners.

In other words, Romania's example is the most accessible. The justice reform, which is not completed in Bucharest either, started in 2004. It was made with great sacrifices, and a few years ago it was close to being overturned by the obscure interests of several politicians in trouble with law. Things are not going to change overnight in Chisinau either. But even Romania would not have managed to fight with the "vile system" without the support of the West and the CVM established as a tool of control and pressure on this area of justice.

Diplomatic priorities

In the diplomatic area, Maia Sandu will have to relaunch the collaboration with the West and, as a first step at this level, the relations with the neighbours - Romania and Ukraine - should be resumed. It has already been announced, after about five years of frost, a visit to Chisinau of President Klaus Iohannis, the Cotroceni leader being among the first to openly bet on Maia Sandu and then congratulated her on the election results. Romania has also announced that it will work on a series of joint projects, and the amount of EUR 56 million invested by Bucharest in the last decade in the Moldovan schools and kindergartens, in the Iasi-Chisinau Gas Pipeline, minibuses for students, renovation of cultural buildings and so on will surely increase in the near future. The connection of the future Târgu Mureş-Iaşi highway, with extension to Ungheni, will have to be the next large-scale bilateral project to connect the Republic of Moldova by land to the European infrastructure for economic reasons.

Also, Maia Sandu will have to insist on the relationship with Poland, the second big player in the EU directly interested in the European future of the Republic of Moldova; as well as to take advantage of the good image it enjoys in Brussels to attract EU funds. However, until she resolves the parliamentary majority issue, she will most likely agree to the direction chosen in recent years by the EU - to invest locally in major cities in Moldova and rural areas, and not necessarily to send money to the centre.

Last but not least, the new president, who is also the head of the National Army, will have to pay sufficient attention to the joint exercises of the Moldovan military with NATO. With an underfunded defense sector of about 0.4% of GDP annually, the Republic of Moldova will have to intensify relations with the NATO states that can help it with free military equipment and training of soldiers. In the years to come, Maia Sandu will have to break the fixed idea in the country that a collaboration with NATO could lead to war. This Soviet-type mentality, fuelled by the Russian propaganda, has been holding Chisinau back for many years. All states with European aspirations, without exception, have a good and solid cooperation with the North Atlantic Alliance, whether they are neutral or not. This logic, which is reminiscent of the Cold War and Soviet indoctrination, should disappear, and Maia Sandu can play an important role in this.

Without a parliamentary majority and a government, Maia Sandu will be the symbol of change, but not the change itself



Vitaly Portnikov, journalist, Ukrainian service of the Radio Free Europe

The Ukrainian journalist and political analyst Vitaly Portnikov is one of the most resounding voices in Kiev, including in relation to the Republic of Moldova. He has been a good observer of political phenomena and our political class for many years, has participated in various events and debates organized in Chisinau, where he has friends and collaborates with people from the media and civil society. The recent presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova were no exception, including due to the geopolitical visions announced by the two candidates, but also due to the fact that Chisinau's relations with its neighbours have not been the best in recent years. What will follow after the election and to what extent is the change promised by Maia Sandu possible? Find out about this from an intransigent view from Kiev. It should be mentioned that the discussion took place two weeks after the elections.

Sandu and Zelensky cannot be analysed in comparative terms

■ **Mr. Vitaly Portnikov, to what extent can we compare the euphoria and especially the results of the 15 November 2020 elections in the Republic of Moldova, which were won by Maia Sandu, with the euphoria and the results of the 20 May 2019 elections in Ukraine won by Volodymyr Zelensky?**

■ There are two things, phenomena and characters that cannot be compared in any form. Moreover, I would rather

compare Zelensky's victory with that of Igor Dodon. This would be the parallel. Volodymyr Zelensky is a product of the revenge of oligarchic clans that do not want a normal political development for our country. He is the person, who his entire life, even before entering politics, was linked with various oligarchic groups, worked for them and fulfilled their whims. He became president only as a result of the consensus between these clans, generously "spiced up" with the launch of the virtual televised project "Sluga naroda" ("People's Servant") and

of the systemic compromise of the process of consolidating the Ukrainian statehood and reforms by oligarchic and pro-Russian TV stations. Therefore, a comparison of Zelensky with Sandu is not only incorrect, but can also create a wrong impression of the situation created in Ukraine in 2019. I'm always saying that we have had two attempts to lead the country focused on strengthening the Ukrainian statehood - in 2004 and 2014- and two attempts of revenge - in 2010, through Yanukovich and in 2019, through Zelensky, who is actually a masked Yanukovich.

■ **In this context, could you list some of the mistakes Zelensky made that should be avoided by Mrs Sandu?**

■ I'm insisting you cannot compare the two. Volodymyr Zelensky is neither a politician nor a statesman. In addition, he is linked to oligarchic clans ... Maia Sandu is a professional politician. Of course, the new President of the Republic of Moldova will want to build good relations with Ukraine, and this is natural. But to compare them means to condemn Maia Sandu to fiasco, because this is exactly what awaits Zelensky most likely already in 2021. I very much hope that we will turn this ugly and tragic page in the history of our country. If we do not get rid of him and of the oligarchic clientele that he is serving, the Ukrainian state will have serious problems both internally and externally.

■ **So we cannot talk about Ukraine as a positive example for us?**

■ Ukraine was a positive example for the Republic of Moldova in 2014-2019. In 2019, we had a triumph of populism...

■ **How much do they know in Ukraine about the recent presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova? In general, do we exist in the public space of Kiev?**

■ Of course, the Ukrainians knew about the elections in the Republic of Moldova, but they knew about it especially through the prism of Igor Dodon, perceived as a pro-Russian politician, one who does not recognize Crimea as Ukrainian territory. This was the reason why many of those watching the political processes in Chisinau wanted his defeat. Maia Sandu, though less well known, was permanently seen as a pro-European leader. In general, I have to remind you that Ukraine is a big country and I would be cheating if I said that the whole population has kept an eye on the Republic of Moldova. But believe me, there is a significant number of people in Kiev - officials, diplomats, politicians or even journalists - who are closely following the political processes and movements taking place in Chisinau.

We've seen how the 2019 compromise ended ...

■ **You are also one of these observers. In this context, what do you think will be the biggest challenges of the future president?**

■ First of all, we have to say it bluntly - as long as she does not have a parliamentary majority and a government behind her, her role will be symbolic. And of course, we should expect parliamentary elections. Even though the incumbent president suggests that Ms. Sandu could create a new majority in Parliament and appoint her own government, the question remains: who will this government rely on, on which majority?! Is it on the same Democrats of Plahotniuc, who ensured the Chicu-Dodon government? If so, what will have to be sacrificed in exchange for this support? Anyway, it is going to be a government based on compromise, and we have already seen it in 2019 what this compromise can result in... It is going to be the same now, only that the reputation of the President of the country will suffer.

■ **Does this mean it is better to be the "tin soldier" and lose than to accept compromises?**

■ Well, this compromise will end up in compromising the party currently led by Maia Sandu, in its expulsion from power being accused it had destroyed everything!..

■ **How do you think Transnistria will manifest in relation to the new head of state? And what chances of progress in resolving the conflict could Maia Sandu have?**

■ Transnistria will have the same role it has had so far - as a territory controlled by the Russian Federation, which will exert pressure on the Chisinau authorities if necessary. As for the second question, it really doesn't matter what Chisinau wants, no matter who is at the helm of the country. And this is because the problem of the Transnistrian conflict settlement is not yours, but Moscow's and Putin's. If Russia wanted to, everything would be resolved in a week ... Obviously, you will have to look for ways to de facto reintegrate the people from there, because they have lived in a different reality for several decades. But the decision itself is not yours... And you will not see a politician who does not say at least that he/she will try as it is both difficult and counterproductive to acknowledge your own helplessness and the helplessness of your state.

■ **What are the chances that the Russian Federation could change its approach?**

■ The Moscow authorities are promoting an absolutely correct policy from the point of view of a state that seeks to consolidate its imperial ambitions. The Kremlin maintains armed forces in the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, and more recently in Azerbaijan. In the countries of Central Asia, Moscow is supporting corrupt clans that do not allow the development of the economy and that depend on the Russian Federation as a country that accepts their gasterbeiters. Thus, de facto, across the former Soviet Union, Russia is

either a conflict-donor state or a sponsor of the labour force.

Moldova, like Georgia or Ukraine, should resist for a period ...

■ **In this context, do you agree with the idea that Moscow has lost Moldova for good, as some Russian politicians trumpeted immediately after November 15?..**

■ I've heard something like this before ... when Vlad Filat was prime minister and when the Association Agreement with the EU was signed ... And I want to remind you that during Filat's time, the pro-Russian forces were less represented in Parliament than today.

■ **Getting back to what you have earlier said that a compromise is not a solution. At the same time, to a certain extent, Maia Sandu has also won due to a compromise - that of accepting the support of Renato Usatâi and his party ...**

■ I do not share this point of view, and the election results in Bălți serves as an argument – in Balti people voted for Igor Dodon, not for Maia Sandu. It is true, however, that in the event of early parliamentary elections, it is likely that a large niche in the Legislature will be occupied by Mr Usatai's party, which represents, de facto, also the Russian clients and populism. Without his deputies it is not going to be possible to form a coalition. As a result, there will be a temptation to resort again to a compromise with pro-Russian forces – a little bit "different" forces, but still pro-Russian... Personally, I think that the Republic of Moldova should resist for a while in the face of such temptations - until radical changes in the Russian Federation, for example. This is true for both Ukraine and Georgia - to resist and preserve statehood. I think this will also be the mission no.1 of Maia Sandu.

■ **A risky mission both for the popular mentality and for the political image - there will be many who will accuse her**

of doing nothing but “resisting” for four years...

■ Not at all! To resist does not mean to do nothing. This means proposing reforms, promoting change, fighting for election victory, fighting against corruption - as much as your powers allow and as much as possible in existing realities.

■ ***Although unofficially, in the last four years, Igor Dodon has been undesirable both in Kiev and Bucharest. Maia Sandu, just the day after the elections, was called by the presidents Volodimir Zelensky and Klaus Iohannis, herself repeatedly declaring that she will restore the good relations with the neighbours. To what extent could the new leader from Chisinau stimulate the “untying” of the old package of problems between our countries?***

■ I'm sure she can do it. She has shown that it's in her power, including during her time as Prime Minister, when she visited Ukraine and addressed bilateral issues in the most serious way. I think that Mrs. Sandu has a serious partner in the current government in Kiev, as in the case of the leadership in Bucharest, by the way. At the same time, regardless of who was president of the Republic of Moldova, the dialogue between the Governments of Chisinau and Kiev was effective. It is true that it diminished after the arrival of Ion Chicu at the helm of the Moldovan Executive, but the problem was not in the person of Ion Chicu, but in the fact that he was associated with a president, whose political course was absolutely unacceptable for Ukraine... Yes, the government deals with the economic relations and they can be absolutely ok, but let's not forget that the president can be the lobbyist of some or other economic or energy interests; she can launch negotiations on the Transnistrian issue... There are many opportunities for cooperation with Kiev, not to mention those opened by the relationship with Bucharest, which should continue to be the advocate of the Republic of Moldova in the EU.

Only a strengthened regional effort can counterbalance Russia's offensive

■ ***Could the new leader from Chisinau generate cohesion in the region?***

■ I have always been convinced that Bucharest and Kiev should think together about the stability and security of the Republic of Moldova. Only in this way, through a consolidated effort, can a counterbalance be created to the destabilization actions undertaken by Russia in your country. Unfortunately, we have not been able to obtain such cooperation between Ukraine and Romania. Now, the Republic of Moldova could take the initiative - and start with the idea of a trilateral meeting, for example. It would be a premiere and a new stage in the history of diplomacy between the three countries, with concrete results, I hope. For Ukraine, it is very important that the Republic of Moldova walk on the path toward European integration, that is on the path of excluding a capitulation in front of Moscow.

■ ***Why hasn't this been done so far - or at least before Dodon?..***

■ I have discussed this idea more than once with President Snegur and President Lucinschi. But ... between Ukraine and Romania, unfortunately - this is what happened historically - there is no understanding as I would have liked. Both sides treat each other with a kind of skepticism, do not appreciate each other and fail to understand each other. It is a strange, unfortunate and even tragic situation. Romania is a state about the same size as Poland, which is in our sights, with similar economic potential. But for Ukraine, it seems Romania is as distant as Spain from a geographical point of view and so is Kiev for Bucharest... Moreover: until 2014, because they did not want to recognize the enemy in the person of the Russian Federation, many Ukrainian politicians found the enemy... in Romania. It was simpler - Romania is a “non-dangerous” enemy. This has left its mark

on our relations, to the detriment of not only Kiev and Bucharest, but also Chisinau.

■ ***How do you see the future of the region, taking into account the post-election events in Belarus, the latent war in Eastern Ukraine, and our uncertainty?***

■ Troubled times are awaiting us and it is not going to be easy. Moscow will do everything in its power not to lose its influence in the region. Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova remain important to it because, with these territories, Russia is a European power, and without them - an Asian one. And Russia cannot remain in a civilisation space only with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, such a position would throw it towards China. Together with Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, however, it remains connected to Europe. It's an old dilemma, which yet Boris Yeltsin has confirmed to me: he didn't want to be president of an Asian country and ... the CIS soon appeared ... So, until we prove it to Moscow, punctually and pragmatically, that we have the ability to protect ourselves from its “craving”, the Kremlin will try to dominate us, time and again. A capitulation of the Republic of Moldova to Moscow, at least in matters related to the territorial integrity of the country, would be a very dangerous precedent for Ukraine. Moldova often appears as a political training ground, where the Kremlin is testing the models it later proposes to Kiev, and each time it is very painful.

■ ***How to find the balance between the necessary pragmatism and the need to develop a political dialogue with the Russian Federation?***

■ We will not find this balance until Russia itself recognizes us and treats us as independent states, not as “rebel provinces”.

■ ***Thank you for the interview.***

***Sorina Ștefăruță
Chisinau-Kiev, 28 November 2020***

Expert Opinion

Dionis Cenușă: “Moldova-Russia relationship and the post-Dodon transition, between ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ approaches”



Hundreds of texts have probably been written about the autumn 2020 presidential elections. The press, and through it the people, are looking for answers to dozens of questions - from the reasons of failure of one of the candidates to the secret of the victory of the other - but above all they are looking to the future. One of these prospects refers to the relationship with the Russian Federation, which has been fluctuating in all these almost 30 years of independence of the Republic of Moldova. A relationship that has not become fair despite the “privileged” conditions that the incumbent president Igor Dodon has always claimed to be enjoying. Will Maia Sandu manage to “tame” Moscow, which, as we know, does not believe in tears? Dionis Cenușă, researcher and main columnist at IPN.md, comes up with his point of view on the future of the Moldovan-Russian relations in an [analysis signed for the IPN.md](#).

The winner of the presidential election, the leader of the pro-European opposition and former Prime Minister

Maia Sandu, has introduced the objective of taking Moldova out of external “[isolation](#)” in the list of

immediate priorities of her term. Right after her victory, Sandu met with the ambassadors of Romania, France and the USA in Chisinau. She had telephone conversations with the leaders of the EU member states and the neighbouring countries, as well as with representatives of European institutions, before her actual swearing into office. Maia Sandu has presented all these steps as the beginning of the exit from “[coma](#)” of the Moldovan foreign policy. The interpretation offered by the new president requires nuanced clarifications regarding the real fluctuations in the country’s foreign policy over the last five years. In the same context, the following analysis underlines the recommendations concerning the risks that may arise in the course of reviewing the relations with Russia, mainly if that occurs in a hasty or radical manner.

From a multi-vector foreign policy to a “consistent” one?

In 2015-2020, the country’s foreign policy has passed through several distinct stages of transition. The period 2015-2019 stood out for the fact that diplomacy was subject to private interests (including political survival) of the oligarchic government ([NEE, November 2019](#)). At the time, the conflicts between the so-called

pro-EU government and the pro-Russian presidency allowed for the exploitation of foreign geopolitical animosities - artificially antagonized multivector foreign policy. After that, from the summer until the end of autumn 2019, the country suddenly switched to a constructive, but also oscillating multivector foreign policy ([NEE, November 2019](#)). Back then, the geopolitical accents varied depending on the institution involved - the presidency continually manifested its pro-Russian preferences, while the government's primary interest was in political and sectoral rapprochement with the EU. From the end of 2019 until December 2020, the foreign policy has retained its multivector nature, but the political dialogue with Russia has been prioritized, while the relations with Western partners have developed continuously within the framework of sectoral cooperation ([3DCFTA, July 2020](#)). Therefore, the relations with the EU have remained active, predominantly at the technical and sectoral level. Being the responsibility of the majority coalition and of the Chicu Government, the relations with the EU did not receive a political impetus, developing according to the pre-established agenda. The episodic acceleration of reforms has been determined by the European conditionality mechanism and the collective pressure of the opposition and civil society that received political support from the EU institutions.

From the end of 2020, together with the beginning of Maia Sandu's presidency, the reopening of Moldovan foreign policy will take place at the presidential level. The symbolic actions are inevitable, such as bringing the EU flag back into the picture after Igor Dodon had removed it from the presidential office in 2016. The same applies to the renaming from Moldovan into Romanian of the language on the official website of the institution. The corrections

intended by Sandu may reinforce the perception that the presidency is going through a kind of "Europeanization", being the opposite the direction of Igor Dodon. The latter benefited from a certain goodwill from Russia, like access to the Russian market of certain categories of producers, temporary amnesty for Moldovan workers etc. in exchange for a proven geopolitical loyalty. [Restoring the country's dignity internationally](#) and pursuing a "positive, active and open" foreign policy will face fewer obstacles in the West. The same is practically impossible in the relationship with Russia if Maia Sandu gives up accommodating Russian interests in one form or another. However, the dependence on the Russian factor admitted by Igor Dodon has produced specific expectations in Moscow, which Maia Sandu is not exactly willing to deliver. In general, Moldova's balanced foreign policy in the post-Dodon period can be consistent only with predictable external actors - EU, USA. The dialogue with Russia will require more strategic calculation and flexibility than pure consistency. [Sandu's ambitions expressed before the inauguration scheduled for December 2020](#) were to have pragmatic relations "with both the West and the East". Such desideratum does not signal an abandonment of the balanced foreign policy, applied previously in a rather faulty manner.

What is "taken out of isolation" - the country or the presidency?

The election of the new Moldovan president will inevitably influence the foreign policy, but less structurally and more at the institutional level. Objectively, the qualitative transformations in the country's foreign policy began after the fall of the oligarchic regime in the summer of 2019 ([NEE, November 2019](#)). Then, the establishment of the governing

coalition, in which political forces with distinct geopolitical visions coexisted, allowed for a qualitative revival of the dialogue with the West and the East. Until then, the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc exploited geopolitical animosities between the EU and Russia to make up for the domestic policy shortcomings and gain political capital in the local struggle for power. For these reasons, the fall of the oligarchic regime in mid-2019, unlikely to happen without the geopolitical consensus reached between the EU, the USA and Russia, has led to the relaunch of foreign policy. Igor Dodon, who continued to cultivate preferences for the pro-Russian and even Eurasian orientation during his presidency, did not exploit that political situation. The November 2020 presidential elections and the victory of Maia Sandu can produce qualitative changes at the level of the presidential institution. Therefore, under Sandu's leadership, the presidential office can escape from "isolation", and less so the country. In practical and conceptual terms, the presidency requires effective dismantling of the geopolitical prejudices. These have become, on the one hand, an indivisible element of the presidency because of Dodon's membership in the Eurasian cultural-traditionalist space, attributable to Russia. On the other hand, the presidency was dragged into regional geopolitical animosities, imported for propagandistic purposes by the oligarchic regime perceived as a pro-EU political actor.

Two immediate needs for the positive transformation of the presidency are credibility and balanced foreign policy. The rehabilitation of the credibility of the Presidential office both locally and in relation to the Western partners is essential. In addition to the purely institutional aspect, Maia Sandu will have to eliminate, cautiously and gradually, the geopolitical legacy of Igor

Dodon, whose intention has always been to generate symbiosis between Moldovan national interests and Russian geopolitical interests. As a President who complied with the regional geopolitical status quo suggested by Moscow, Igor Dodon provoked a “regime of reluctance” on the part of the multiple international actors who have complicated relations with Russia. Thus, Dodon’s presidency became the victim of its geopolitical positioning on the Russian side, responsible for the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the militarized separatism in Donbas. For these reasons, President Sandu’s primary foreign policy mission should contain measures that can convincingly restore and maintain a genuine geopolitical autonomy of the country.

Sandu’s intentions and challenges in her relationship with Russia

In her electoral discourse, Maia Sandu placed the relationship with Russia on the last place among the foreign policy objectives after the implementation of the Association Agreement with the EU, the consolidation of relations with Romania and Ukraine and the development of a strategic dialogue with the USA. Her electoral promises included “ensuring normal, non-conflicting relations” with Russia, based on shared interests in four specific areas - trade, investment, free movement and culture. The electoral programme lacked the explicit mentioning of Moscow’s clear role in the Transnistrian settlement. Similarly, this aspect has been missing in the first post-election promises. In any case, progress in solving socio-economic issues with Russia depends on political contacts, which in turn, can develop through personalized communication with the Kremlin. Without this interdependence in place, achieving quantifiable progress will be

complicated. In addition to the general transition that the presidency’s dialogue with international actors will go through, another transition will be due to the disappearance of the informal element of personal friendships, built by Dodon with various political actors in Russia. In general, two main factors can create tensions in relations with Russia, which Maia Sandu as president will have to face.

First, it is about Dodon’s legacy, which includes two major components - the combination of official and informal relations with decision-makers in Russia and the political agenda derived from the presence in Eurasian organizations - the Eurasian Economic Union. Requesting the abolition of observer status in the Eurasian Union or ignoring the informal nature of the dialogue with Russia may have general consequences for the bilateral relations.

The second factor consists of (un) intentional misinterpretation of the actions and statements of President Maia Sandu by Russian primary and secondary political actors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Duma, etc.). In this regard, the official communication of the Moldovan presidency in the Russian language will matter as much as counteracting misinformation in the Russian-language press in Moldova. The pro-Russian political forces in Moldova, in particular the Socialists with Igor Dodon as their leader starting with December 2020, are determined to complicate Sandu’s relations with Moscow. Thus, Dodon has already managed to distort Sandu’s statements regarding the “withdrawal of Russian forces” from the Transnistrian region, and Russia converted the misinterpretation into a harsh reaction against Sandu. In general, Maia Sandu’s attitude towards the eastern dimension of foreign policy requires an ‘intelligent’ approach,

which allows the construction of a sustainable strategy. The futile strain of relations with Russia may emerge from an ‘emotional’ positioning in the face of either the challenges posed by local pro-Russian forces or those of Moscow’s production. Relying on international multilateral platforms (OSCE, UN, Council of Europe, etc.), on the one hand, and ensuring effective external communication (including in Russian), will reduce the incidence of emotions in the decision-making on foreign policy. The Transnistrian conflict settlement and the status of Gagauz autonomy are on the list of complicated issues with a strong presence of the Russian factor. A smart way to inject constructivism into the relationship with Russia can be the “small steps” tactic, in which efforts should focus on files where results are achievable. President Maia Sandu should keep a clear perspective on the impact of foreign policy on power relations within the domestic political dynamics. Any radical movements concerning Russia, such as the eventual abandonment of the Eurasian Union, may benefit pro-Russian forces in the face of early parliamentary elections, which may take place at any moment in time.

Russia’s expectations from Moldova in the post-Dodon period

There is a perception that Russia would have lost its positions in Moldova due to the victory of Maia Sandu. The visibility of the pro-Russian approach will decrease in the public space. In addition, the Russian interests will no longer be promoted under the Moldovan flag in the international forums. Moreover, Sandu’s presidency will interrupt any possible access to information related to the country’s national security. Nevertheless, Dodon’s presidency has produced “a baggage” of commitments

and relations with Moscow, which cannot be ignored by the new president. Any sudden move in a different direction from “Dodon’s legacy” could produce, for the time being, unpredictable reactions from Russia.

So, first of all, the Transnistrian settlement dimension will change, because Maia Sandu wants to decriminalize the region, including with the help of Ukraine, rather than legitimize in any way the state of affairs on the left bank of the Nistru (smuggling, debt on natural gas). It is unclear whether the political and oligarchic forces in the separatist region, along with Moscow coordinators, will accept measures that could diminish the balance of power between Chisinau and Tiraspol.

The second sensitive issue is the membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Starting with 2018, President Dodon initiated interactions with the Eurasian structures on which Maia Sandu will have to decide whether they should be maintained or not. The interpretation of their cancellation will be of a move against Moscow, and the reaction may affect the dossiers that have no direct connection, such as access to the Russian market or the legal situation of Moldovan workers.

The last but not least, the dimension of domestic policy - from defining the status of Gagauz autonomy to guaranteeing the legal conditions for the functioning of the Russian language - can be another volatile field. The Socialists led by Igor Dodon are mobilizing in parliament to portray Sandu eventually as a Russophobic president. In this regard, the political discourse on consolidating the Gagauz autonomy will count. Conferring a privileged position to the Russian language within a new organic law, in addition to the constitutional provisions, will also matter. Lastly, the cancellation of the law against Russian propaganda, adopted in 2017 ([IPN, December 2017](#)).

In lieu of conclusion...

Moldova’s dependence on Russia has weakened in recent years, due to integration into the European market or the construction of alternative natural gas distribution sources. However, the structural problems described above make the normalization of relations less dependent on the pragmatic intentions of Sandu’s presidency or the effectiveness of the bilateral negotiations, and more on Moscow’s strategic geopolitical interests. The example of Ukraine or Georgia shows that the preference of the electorate towards Russia can be reversible, and the

pro-Russian forces have a high capacity for regeneration. That is why Sandu’s presidency needs a “rational” approach, in which a long-term perspective prevails over the strengthening of relations with Russia in the direction of pragmatism by depersonalizing institutional contacts. Even though Dodon’s legacy creates sources of irritation for the new president, dismantling that legacy should involve gradual actions and avoiding “emotional” behaviour. A certain way to prevent or diminish critical situations in relations with Russia is to make extensive use of international multilateral platforms. The post-Dodon transition means both ending the partial isolation of the presidency in the relation with the West and a new attempt by Moldovan pro-European forces to build a more predictable relationship with the Kremlin.

Finally, Maia Sandu has to be aware of her real political resources, which are currently limited. Therefore, any radical or hasty measure concerning Russia is doomed to failure, if it does not result from a favourable power combination internally. That would require a parliament with integrity, renewed through early elections and governed by a coalition controlled by pro-European forces, and a government friendly to President Sandu.

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