

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.

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

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News in Brief



Moldova will receive the first batches of COVID-19 vaccine starting with mid-February 2021. Chisinau will receive 24,570 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine (Comirnaty) and 264,000 doses produced by Oxford/AstraZeneca. The vaccine produced by Oxford/AstraZeneca will be delivered to Moldova in installments, starting with the end of February, for the first and second quarters. The COVAX platform is one of three pillars of access to the COVID-19 (ACT) Accelerator (Diagnosis, Treatment and Vaccines) tools, which was launched in April by the WHO, the European Commission and France in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVAX has received applications for the supply of COVID-19 vaccine from 72 countries. In the first stage, only 18 countries were selected, including Republic of Moldova, which will receive free doses of COVAX to vaccinate 20 per cent of the population. Subsequently, Moldova will procure vaccines through COVAX at a preferential price. Republic of Moldova joined COVAX in August 2020, through a letter of intent signed by the Ministry of Health. The application for the COVID-19 vaccine was sent on December 7th.



Romania offers emergency humanitarian aid to the Republic of Moldova to fight the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The aid, which consists of medical protection equipment, totalling about 48 million lei, will arrive in Chisinau in the coming days. The first batch of aid provided by the Bucharest Government, totalling 2.2 million Euros, arrived on February 11 and ended on February 13. "The Romanian government has decided to provide emergency external humanitarian aid free of charge to the Moldovan authorities. The Romanian delegation participating in the mission will be made up of the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, of eight people", announced the Prime Minister of Romania, Florin Cîtu. In the first phase, humanitarian aid will consist of medical protective equipment: 1.5 million surgical masks, 100,000 FFP3 masks, 100,000 medical suits and 100,000 non-sterile gloves.



President Maia Sandu assured, after the visit to Brussels on January 17-19, that it would be possible to unblock the EU funding after the future early elections. "The EU has a huge potential for assistance to Moldova, which has been missed in recent years due to the fact that the country's leadership has included people who pursue personal, corrupt interests, not the interests of citizens. The EU wants to help us, but it wants to see a reliable partner. Therefore, our task is to organize the work in the country, we must have a stable and responsible leadership. When this happens, the EU will unblock all funding to our country," Sandu said in a press briefing after returning from Brussels. Sandu also said that snap parliamentary elections should be held in Moldova as soon as possible, and then "the responsible deputies will be able to change the laws adopted by the Socialists and the deputies of the Shor Party", after which the country will receive the necessary funding.

Diplomatic Thaw and Development Prospects of the Republic of Moldova



President Maia Sandu with French counterpart Emmanuel Macron at the Élysée Palace

The meetings of the new President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, with the neighbours and some of the most important development partners of the country have quickly paid off. The shift in the paradigm and the thawing of relations with them have produced immediate effects, unlocking funds and new development opportunities in Moldova's relations with Romania, Ukraine, the European Union and France.

The four meetings held one after the other by Maia Sandu in Chisinau, Kyiv, Brussels and Paris have brought material benefits and restored the relations between Chisinau and several traditional partners of the Republic of Moldova that had been frozen during Igor Dodon's presidential term.

Maia Sandu's concentrated diplomatic campaign has rethought the relationship at the Republic of Moldova's presidential

level with the counterpart institutions in the states mentioned above.

On February 10, Romania announced a new concrete medical aid worth 2.2 million euros in the form of medical equipment designed to fight the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, Bucharest and Brussels have worked together to pave the way for the Republic of Moldova to receive medical aid in these difficult times.

► "As a result of the discussions we had with the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, the Prime Minister of Romania Florin Citu and with high EU officials, it was possible to reactivate, as an exception for our country, the European Civil Protection Mechanism through which the EU countries can help us with donations," said Maia Sandu.

Kyiv and Chisinau have agreed on infrastructure projects such as constructing a bridge over the Nistru in the Yampil-Cosauti region and a highway that will connect the two capitals aimed at shortening travel times, increasing trade relations and further interconnecting the two states to the European motorways.

From Brussels, Maia Sandu has returned with promises of thawing the funding as soon as reforms are implemented and a concrete aid of 21.4 million euros on the police reform. From Paris, the newly elected Moldovan President has returned with the French's interest to invest in infrastructure projects in Moldova, increasing the potential in bilateral trade and support for the European course.

The most notable achievement of this mini-diplomatic tour of Maia Sandu remains the Republic of Moldova's exit from the international isolation in the West. More precisely, the re-establishment of strategic relations in a natural path, from where Chisinau can receive concrete material and political assistance in the coming years.

In this edition, we are inviting you to read an interview with the presidential adviser on foreign policy, Cristina Gherasimov, and an editorial on how President Maia Sandu thawed the relations with European partners and Moldova's neighbouring countries. We have also published an exclusive interview with the Ambassador of Ukraine to Chisinau, His Excellency Marko Shevchenko, and last but not least, the expert opinion on the opportunities and challenges of the bilateral Chisinau-Kyiv relationship by Natalia Stercul, expert with the Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (APE).

Mădălin Necșuțu

Moldova's foreign policy in upcoming years should help protect and promote the interests of its citizens

Cristina Gherasimov, foreign policy advisor to President Maia Sandu



President Maia Sandu's recent visits to several European capitals have invigorated Moldova's relations with Chisinau's neighbours and traditional partners in terms of its European aspirations. We talked with the presidential adviser on foreign policy, Cristina Gherasimov, who has provided a series of interesting details about the significance of President Maia Sandu's recent meetings with her counterparts from Ukraine, France, and Brussels. What are the stakes and the most important aspects of these meetings were find out in the following interview:

■ ***If you were to name five foreign policy priorities of the Republic of Moldova, what would they be in your opinion and why?***

■ During the last five years, Moldova has undercut its own development process by freezing relations with its main external development partners. The cases of high-level corruption and the lack of political will of Moldovan authorities to investigate these cases have caused the international

community to no longer see Moldova as a country open to reforms. Moldova was perceived as a country that chose the path of stagnation and not that of progress. For this reason, Moldova has virtually disappeared from the European agenda.

In this context of isolation and freezing of relations with its strategic and development partners, in addition to the pandemic that is going to continue to cost us dearly in 2021 – both in human lives and as economic and social impact - the main objective of Moldova's foreign policy in upcoming years is to promote an active and consistent policy that will help protect and promote the interests of its citizens.

The government's outreach abroad should help facilitate the post-Covid recovery process, revive the economy by attracting foreign investment and promoting exports, and develop a more favourable regional environment, especially with our direct neighbours. This will then allow us to focus efforts on sustainable domestic transformations. We need to start first by improving relations with our neighbours,

thawing and deepening the political dialogue with development partners. This has to be based on trust and mutual respect, common interests, cooperation and transparent communication.

These objectives can only be achieved if Moldova demonstrates consistency and political will domestically to pursue those country strategies.

The complex Chisinau-Kyiv relationship

■ **Why has the relationship with Kyiv been so complicated all these years and what impression did you get after the official visit to Kyiv? What aspects have thawed in this relationship and what are the future plans on this dimension?**

During these almost 30 years of independence, our relationship with Kyiv has been and remains complicated. We have multiple sensitive issues that require both political will and goodwill on both sides to be resolved. Complex discussions and negotiations are usually not prioritized by authorities if these conditions are missing.

We are at a political stage when there is interest both in Chisinau and Kyiv to address not only complicated cases, but also to cooperate on concrete projects that will allow to jointly explore the new existing opportunities offered by our common aspirations towards European integration.

The visit to Kyiv, which took place in early January, is a first step in this direction. President Zelensky and his team have shown not only openness for talks and negotiations, but also a desire to build new bridges between our countries, both in direct and also figurative ways. These are the conditions that need to be present that I mentioned earlier - political will and goodwill. During the visit, many topics of strategic importance on our bilateral agenda, regional security and European integration have been addressed. We agreed to continue the political dialogue on these issues at the levels of government and parliament, as well as at the level of presidents within the premises of a newly

formed Council. Hopefully, these first discussions at the level of heads of states have laid the foundation for constructive cooperation, based on mutual and lasting trust.

If this political will at the level of heads of state continues to be supported by respective parliaments and governments, the new strategic partnership could be directed towards strengthening cooperation in the fields of trade and economy, environmental protection, energy, interconnection of transport infrastructure, combating cross-border crime, and strengthening regional security. Our region is impacted by multiple crises. Nevertheless, it also opens up many opportunities. Only through joint efforts with our neighbours can we succeed in strengthening the stability and security in the region that will allow us to focus both on modernizing our societies and economies and also on better managing existing threats and challenges.

■ **Could you please give us some details about the composition of the new Council under the two presidencies? What is going to be its composition, how often will it meet and what would be, in general, its role?**

■ The legal framework of this Council has not yet been agreed upon, but it could include up to six members on behalf of each party, to be appointed by the presidents depending on the topics proposed for consideration. Likewise, the Council could convene at least once a year, alternately in Ukraine and Moldova. The role of the Council will be to provide strategic direction for bilateral relations, to conduct consultations on bilateral and regional issues of mutual interest, and to monitor the implementation of agreements to be reached.

■ **Both before and after the visit, in Chisinau and beyond, the Kyiv energy plans on the Dniester River and the possible negative impact on the environment for the Republic of Moldova have been intensely commented. How did the discussions on this topic go and what was agreed? Could Moldova request the EU expertise/ mediation on this issue**

or this problem can be addressed only bilaterally?

■ This issue has been indeed discussed in Kyiv. We have confirmed our readiness for a wider discussion on all issues related to the functioning of the Nistru Hydropower Complex. This is one of those sensitive topics that I have mentioned earlier. In this context, of course, the need to coordinate our efforts to protect the ecology of the Nistru river basin has been addressed. The economic benefits for Ukraine that would be generated by increasing existing capacity or building new hydroelectric power plants on the Nistru - even if they are understandable - should in no way prevail over the environmental component as too many citizens on both river banks depend on maintaining and protecting a healthy river ecosystem.

Even though there is a bilateral commission for the protection and sustainable use of the Nistru river, the Moldovan side has proposed to reconsider a new joint appeal to our European partners similar to the one launched in 2018, when our prime-ministers jointly addressed the European Commission. Kyiv has expressed its openness to this approach. During the visit in Brussels, we have discussed the possibility for the EU to provide us with expertise to organize an environmental impact assessment of the Nistru river basin.

Assistance we get from Brussels depends on the efforts we put in domestically

■ **How do you characterize your recent visit to Brussels? Are there promises to release funds for the Republic of Moldova, even if it does not have a Government inclined to reforms? How do they see the situation in Brussels and are they willing to continue supporting Moldova in such a context?**

■ President Sandu was received very warmly in Brussels. This speaks about the support that Moldova is given for its European path if it is ready to pursue the implementation of the reforms within the Association Agreement.

The timing of this visit is also important because the assistance that will be offered to the six Eastern Partnership countries, including to the Republic of Moldova, for the next financial cycle is now discussed and negotiated in Brussels. In this regard, the talks in Brussels were also necessary to ensure that an increase of the financial envelope for our country could be considered not only for 2021, but also for the coming years.

We are often used to measuring the impact of visits in concrete and immediate donations - "What did you come back with? What did you bring?" We need to get rid of this mentality. Especially if we remember how much our relations with Brussels have been damaged in recent years. Strategic relationships require consistent efforts, discussions and negotiations that lead to decisions made and activities implemented, not just stated or written on paper. This is the only way to build genuine trust-based relationships that could generate assistance in the future for the exclusive benefit of citizens even when we have governments that are not willing to carry out complex and painful reforms.

It is certain that if we do not carry out the reforms we have committed to, we cannot expect new disbursements or new financing instruments, neither in the short nor in the longer term. The EU is not an ATM from where to withdraw money every time we need it. The assistance we get from Brussels depends on the efforts we put in domestically, and the political will that we demonstrate in the coming months.

The assistance that was offered in a very short time, in the summer-autumn of 2019, after the Sandu government was sworn in, is a good example that clearly demonstrates that when there is political will and clear efforts on our part to pursue reforms, the doors of the EU are wide open for the support we need.

The importance of Paris support

■ **How would you characterize Sandu's visit to France? What were the main**

issues on the bilateral agenda and what was actually achieved as a result of this visit?

It is an important visit from several perspectives. First, it came at the initiative of the French Presidency. It means a lot to our country in the context in which the last meeting at the presidential level took place in 1998, in Chisinau. This invitation is a sign of firm support offered to President Sandu by France in its efforts to succeed with the democratic reforms in Moldova.

Second, as one of the most influential countries in the European Union, France plays a decisive role in the evolution of the European Union's policy towards the Republic of Moldova and the assistance provided from Brussels. The support of France, in this context, namely when deciding the financial allocations for the coming years for the region, including for the Republic of Moldova, is a very important one.

Numerous topics have been discussed on the bilateral agenda, including the initiation of negotiations for the signing of a social security agreement for our citizens, the possibility of facilitating the process of converting driving licenses for Moldovans residing in France, the signing of the convention on double taxation, increased cooperation and assistance for bilingual classes and vocational education, as well as in the fields of protection and restoration of historical monuments. We also discussed how France can better support good governance in Moldova, as well as the ways in which it could help us consolidate the statehood and independence of our country.

More precisely, Moldova will also be included in the list of countries eligible for assistance from the French Development Agency. This means, for example, infrastructure projects at the national level for the benefit of citizens. France also promised to increase the financial resources that would strengthen the quality of bilingual classes and the activity of the Alliance Française in Moldova. More possible assistance for medium-term projects will be finalized in the coming weeks.

■ **Should we expect a visit to Germany by President Maia Sandu in the near future, where, as we well know, she is very well regarded?**

■ Germany is a key development partner for our country. It is an EU member state that has supported us and continues to do so, not least because we have also invested time in cultivating these good relations of cooperation and friendship throughout the years. If we receive an invitation to visit Berlin, I can only assume that President Sandu will accept it.

The need for domestic political consensus

■ **How imperative is it to hold early elections and then form a majority to support pro-European reforms?**

■ The existence of a national consensus around the need to conduct pro-European reforms is, first of all, important for us, for the process of development and modernization of our country. It is through this lens that we should look at the need for coordinated efforts between the executive and the legislature, and not just through the lens of the need to improve relations with Western partners.

At the same time, you can have an aligned government-president-parliament axis which will not achieve much for the benefit of the citizens, if the interests of such a coalition differ from the national ones. Likewise, you can have cohabitating political forces that are able to achieve a lot, as the experience of other states show where forces of different political ideology make alliances to promote the national interests and the interests of their citizens. What we really need is to prioritize a development agenda for the country and not for private pockets. If such a desideratum were to guide the political elite in parliament today, much could be achieved, I think, even with the current composition.

■ **Thank you for the interview!**

Mădălin Necșuțu

Editorial

How Maia Sandu thawed the relations with the neighbours and the West

The Republic of Moldova has been isolated on the Europe map for four years from its neighbours and Western partners. The confrontational relations promoted by the President Igor Dodon with the West, but also with its neighbours - Ukraine and Romania - made the Republic of Moldova, at the presidential level, a state rather belonging to the Euro-Asian space.

The “balanced” policy promoted by the former head of state, Igor Dodon, has been rather pro-Eastern and anti-Western. The totally uninspired statements, according to some even deliberate, that the Crimean Peninsula belongs to Russia and that it has not been illegally annexed by Moscow in 2014, has pushed the Republic of Moldova led by Igor Dodon into a shadow cone with regard to the relations with Kiev.

Likewise, Dodon’s statements about the common history and culture with Romania have determined a real glaciation at the presidential level with Bucharest. As for the EU, the appearance of Dodon in Brussels as a Moscow messenger rather than a head of his own state, has caused an uproar in the Western chancelleries.

Instead, the former president has always done extensive PR exercises during his visits to Moscow. However, this has brought almost no tangible economic benefits for the Republic of Moldova, apart from the partial and temporary lifting of the embargo imposed by Russia since 2013 on the Moldovan products. Not even the price of gas supplied by Gazprom has changed for the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, towards the end of Dodon’s mandate, Moldova was paying one of the highest prices in Europe per thousand cubic meters for the Gazprom gas.

All the above have changed to 180 degrees, we can say, together with the installation at the helm of the country of



Madalin Necsutu, journalist, contributor to the Balkan Insight

Maia Sandu, a pro-European politician par excellence who has consistently supported the promotion of Western democratic values.

As she announced during the presidential election campaign, Maia Sandu has reset the toxic relations with the neighbours. The first guest in Chisinau was President Klaus Iohannis, who had not been in Moldova for five years due to the negative attitude of Igor Dodon towards Romania just from the beginning of his term. Although she had met Iohannis in Bucharest, on several previous occasions, Maia Sandu received Klaus Iohannis on December 29, 2020, in Chisinau, warmly and with much openness just in her first days of the presidential term.

Romania has continued to help the Republic of Moldova, as it had previously done, with medical aid worth 3.5 million euros in 2020, promising 200,000 doses of coronavirus vaccine from Romania’s stock contracted through the European Union by the worldwide accepted pharmaceutical representatives. Iohannis has also promised 6,000 tons of diesel to help farmers, after Russia did not live up to its promise. Iohannis has also spoken in Chisinau about 100 million euros in grants and 250,000 euros for the media sector. In response, Maia Sandu has appreciated the sacrifice made by the Romanian doctors in Chisinau in 2020, who came voluntarily to help.

Visit to Kyiv

The first external visit of Maia Sandu has followed, between January 11 and 12, 2021, which brought back in a positive light Moldova’s relations with its another important neighbour. The Kiev-Chisinau relationship is still below its potential, but Maia Sandu and her Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, are determined to change this paradigm. The two sides have agreed to set up a council in the framework of the two presidencies to meet regularly and discuss the bilateral issues.

Discussions have also been held about the development of infrastructure between the two states and about the possibility of travelling with the ID card.

The two leaders have recognized each other's territorial integrity. Maia Sandu has said clearly and unequivocally that the Crimean Peninsula belongs without any nuance only to Ukraine. In turn, Zelensky spoke about the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova and the need for the reintegration of the Transnistrian separatist region.

Moreover, the two have calmly addressed the issue of Kiev's energy plans on the Nistru, which involve the development of the *Novodnestrovsk* Hydropower Complex infrastructure.

So far, Ukraine has not presented to Chisinau any environmental impact assessment on the Dniester River, given that almost 80 per cent of Moldova's drinking water comes from this river of vital importance not only for Moldova but also for the Odessa region of Ukraine. Maia Sandu has even spoken of the EU involvement at the level of expertise on this issue. However, it is good that such projects are put on the table in a transparent and negotiable light.

Good signs from Brussels

Maia Sandu has had her visit in Brussels, between January 18-19, in a unique way and her first meeting was with the Chief Prosecutor of the European Public Prosecutor's Office, Laura Codruta Kovesi. This meeting between the two has not been the first one and was meant to be a symbolic one, through which Maia Sandu veiledly has asked in an express way for the help of the European Union in the fight against corruption. Kovesi has become a landmark of the fiercest anti-corruption fighters not only in Romania, but also at the European level, which is why she occupies this important position in Brussels.

Maia Sandu has been received in Brussels at the highest level by Charles Michel, President of the European Council, Ursula Von Der Leyen, President of the European Commission, Josep Borell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission- basically, the triad that ensures the top leadership of the European Union. The above meetings have been followed by visits with several sectoral representatives of the European Commission.

Back from Brussels, Sandu has announced that the EU wants to help Moldova with the engines running at full speed and has criticized the irresponsibility of those who have before slowed down this relationship. The head of state said that "the EU wants to help us, it wants to support the development of the Republic of Moldova, but it must have a reliable partner here" and that Brussels is ready to unlock all the funds available

when there is a stable and really reformist government in Chisinau.

"We have received promises that the European institutions in cooperation with other international institutions will try to help us in addition to what they have already done for our country. We have obtained the confirmation that 21.4 million euros for the police reform will be allocated soon", specified the head of state.

After 13 years at the Elysée Palace

The "diplomatic offensive" has not stopped here. It was for the first time in the last 13 years that the of state of the Republic of Moldova was invited to the Elysée Palace. Thus, between February 3-4, Maia Sandu was invited for visit by her French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron.

As in the case of the Brussels, not only the visit to one of the most important capitals of Europe mattered, but also the reaction of pride on behalf of the Moldovan citizens. The multitude of positive messages received by Maia Sandu from her compatriots on the social networks have created the impression of a positive feeling of the citizens in relation to their president who represents them at the highest level in Europe. Perhaps a feeling that has been lacking too much in recent years in relation to the head of state.

In Paris, Macron gave a clear signal that France will unconditionally support the Republic of Moldova as long as there is political will in Chisinau to continue the European path and to modernize the country. In turn, Maia Sandu has resumed the rhetoric about the fight against corruption to create the conditions for a predictable investment environment. She has spoken clearly about the desire for the French investments to penetrate as much as possible the Republic of Moldova, and for France to rise in the top 10 investors in the country.

The visit is all the more important given that France is one of the two locomotives of the European Union. Most likely, given Maia Sandu's good relations in Germany, one of her next visits will certainly be in Berlin, where the head of state has always had the doors open, having benefited from political and economic support.

The "diplomatic offensive" launched by Maia Sandu and the welcome by the most important European capitals has been a concrete signal that the EU is looking towards the Republic of Moldova with hope. More than that, it is ready for concrete help to Chisinau. It also depends on the political will of the Moldovan Government and the parliamentary majority and how the dice will be thrown in the domestic politics of the Republic of Moldova. The ideal scenario for all these goals to be achieved is a pro-European government and parliamentary majority in the near future.

Ukraine and Moldova are a part of the European family, so nobody can reasonably question their European aspirations

Marko Shevchenko, Ambassador of Ukraine to the Republic of Moldova

The Ukrainian Ambassador to the Republic of Moldova, Marko Shevchenko, gave us an interview talking about the recent visit paid to Kyiv by the Moldovan President Maia Sandu to her counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky. The main challenges for both Moldova and Ukraine on the European path and the joint future infrastructure projects were the topics at the core of our discussion with His Excellency Marko Shevchenko.

■ **What can you tell us about the bridge over the Dniester River and a quicker Kyiv-Chisinau motoway, and the perspectives of such projects after the recent talks between President Sandu and Zelensky?**

■ Joint infrastructure projects implemented in the two neighbouring countries' interests are essential elements of any bilateral cooperation. Chisinau is the closest European capital to Kyiv, but these days it takes eight to nine hours to get to it by car. After finishing the project of the Yampil - Koseuts bridge construction and partial road modernisation in the Vinnytsya region of Ukraine, it will take only five to six hours to drive from Chisinau to Kyiv. It will be the shortest route from the Baltics to the Balkans, promoting trade, economic ties, people-to-people connections etc. This project would also give a good impetus to the development of promising tourist routes, including the "weekend" tourist routs (for example, Ukrainian and Moldovan wineries, border castles and fortresses.)

Therefore, in January, during the first official foreign visit of the



newly appointed President of the Republic of Moldova Mrs. Maia Sandu to Ukraine, we have agreed to implement that project and to speed up the signing of the intergovernmental agreement on the construction of the Yampil-Koseuts Bridge across the Dniester River as well as certain following documents.

■ **During the recent meeting in Kyiv, there have also been talks about travelling with just the identity card, without passports. Could you please give us more details about this?**

■ Ukraine initiated the issue of simplification of the bilateral travel regime with the Republic of Moldova in 2018. Since 2019 Ukraine and Moldova have been working upon the draft of the new bilateral agreement on the visa-free travel for citizens. The negotiations are on an advanced stage, so I hope that both sides will finalize them really soon.

Energy plans on Dniester River

■ **Could you tell us more about the Hydro Complex's project development on**

the River and Kyiv's plans to develop it? What about the environmental impact?

■ The 'Dniester hydropower complex' is comprised of two hydroelectric plants with Pumped Storage. A buffer reservoir between the first two facilities regulates the flow of water downstream of the Dniester River. Besides the electricity generation and Ukraine's power system balancing, the Complex seasonally equalises the water discharge in the Dniester to combat spring floods and provide water to Moldova and Odesa region of Ukraine during the dry season.

To promote the Dniester River's protection and sustainable development, Ukraine and Moldova have signed the Agreement on cooperation in this field and have established a bilateral mechanism - joint Dniester Commission. This body's main task is to achieve rational and environmentally safe usage and protection of water resources of the Dniester River basin. Two meetings of the Commission have already been held and. I hope that both sides will be able to resume their activity this year.

In particular, they have to discuss the large-scale analysis of the Complex's impact on the ecosystem of the Dniester basin that was completed under the Global Ecologic Fund with the involvement of the Moldovan and Ukrainian Environmental experts at the end of 2019.

Among other conclusions, the experts have noted the reduction of the maximum runoff of water from reservoirs in the spring (flood control) and the increase of the minimum runoff of water from reservoirs in the summer (maintenance of the guaranteed volume of water for the functioning of river water intakes).

What are in your opinion the most significant challenges for Moldova and Ukraine on the common European path?

Ukraine and Moldova are a part of the European family. Our people have clearly demonstrated their European

choice during the last decade, so nobody can reasonably question the European aspirations of both countries. That is why Ukraine and Moldova's leaders have recently reaffirmed their mutual interests in deepening regional cooperation, implementing the Association Agreements with the EU and consolidating our cooperation within Eastern Partnership to become closer to the EU.

I am far from saying that our way to the European Union is going to be bright, straight and free of snags. No, Ukraine and Moldova have to overcome lots of obstacles and challenges. Drastic domestic reforms are targeted on defeating corruption, and, of course, the so-called "Russian factor" in conflict settlements, - all these aspects need to be attentively considered and realised. Nevertheless, I have no doubts about our prosperous accomplishments on this way.

Common European path

What about Eastern Partnership and possible joint projects between Moldova and Ukraine?

During the meeting of the President of Ukraine and the President of Moldova on January 12, 2021, the priorities for the two countries' cooperation on the European integration and the Eastern Partnership Summit in 2021 were set out, *inter alia*.

They have reaffirmed the readiness to coordinate Ukrainian and Moldovan efforts to strengthen the Eastern Partnership initiative. The principle of differentiation and European ambitions of partner countries should be taken into account as well.

Both Ukraine and Moldova consider it necessary to develop further the "EU + 3 Associated Partners" format of cooperation. The parties call on the EU to deepen the dialogue on the DCFTA and extend it to other aspects of cooperation as well as the gradual sectorial integration, including the areas

of justice, the digital economy, energy, transport, etc.

How was Maia Sandu's visit to Ukraine perceived, and what was the feedback?

■ The President of Ukraine was one of the first world leaders to congratulate Mrs Maia Sandu on her election as President of Moldova, inviting her to pay an official visit to Ukraine. This visit took place a month ago and has generated very positive expectations in Ukraine for a rapid and radical improvement in the cooperation with amiable Moldova. In particular, the heads of state have had a good occasion to discuss a wide range of bilateral cooperation issues in the political, cultural and educational spheres, security and energy industries, trade and transport, and many others. They have agreed to relaunch the Ukrainian-Moldovan relations and create appropriate conditions for bringing them to the strategic partnership level. The two Presidents have also decided to establish the Ukrainian-Moldovan Presidential Council and realise the new bridge construction project over Dniester River.

Could you tell us more about this new Ukrainian -Moldavian presidential council? What are its components and how is it going to work?

■ Ukraine strives to use the window of opportunity, which appeared at the end of 2020, giving a new impetus to the Ukrainian-Moldovan relations.

A bilateral mechanism for annual meetings in the Presidential Council's format, in our opinion, is very functional and can be used to discuss strategies for bilateral relationships and many international and regional issues of mutual interest, as well as to monitor the implementation of agreements reached at the highest level.

Thank you for this interview

Mădălin Necșuțu

Expert opinion

New Window of Opportunity for the Moldovan-Ukrainian Dialogue: Right Time to Act

Maia Sandu's election as the new Moldovan head of state represents a real chance to reset Moldova's relationship with Ukraine. That being clearly reflected in her first step towards ensuring the multi-level interstate interaction functionality, where the central role will be placed on the dialogue between the heads of state. Today the key question is: "Are the states going to take advantage of this opportunity?"

Natalia Stercul, Foreign Policy Association of the Republic of Moldova

The last time visit of the Moldovan President to Ukraine was in [2015](#). President Maia Sandu has filled soon this gap paying her first foreign visit to Ukraine that gave a sound impetus to the Moldovan-Ukrainian relationship leaving the paradoxical peculiarities of recent years, when the communication between these two states was limited only to regular contacts at the government level. A full-fledged dialogue at the presidential level has been restored and a Presidential Council has been formed - a coordination body at the level of heads of state aiming at strengthening the cooperation between the two countries. Intensive political cooperation will certainly bring mutual benefits of shared collaboration, feasible results in solving the existing bilateral problems, and the opportunity of timely response to the issues that may arise in the interaction between the two neighbouring states.

Different perspectives and challenges

Nevertheless, these two countries have stepped into the 2021 year with different perspectives and challenges. There is a certain disappointment in Ukraine due to the political and socio-economic instability, the current pandemic situation, the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine, and

the significant drop in the rating of the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Given the precarious and uncertain situation in Ukraine, it is challenging to provide forecasts concerning the further country's development. However, it is possible to envisage reformative Ukraine's power structures in the short term.

In the case of Moldova, the impact of the pandemic has been significant, however, the new year has started with optimistic views and high expectations from the newly elected President concerning the country's domestic and foreign political landscape.

The symbolic date of the [official inauguration of the Moldovan President](#) on Christmas Eve has become a baseline for new hope of change in different sectors such as foreign policy, national security, sustainable democratic development of the country and implementation of the European agenda. No miracle is expected due to the difficult political situation, when President Sandu does not have a parliamentary majority and government behind her. However, a pro-European candidate's election is the beginning of a new political cycle in Moldova's democratic change. A new phase of Moldova's historical development has begun.



These new expectations and opportunities include resetting pragmatic relations with Ukraine. The issue of mutual support in matters of regional security is still highly relevant. Russia remains unwilling to end the seven-year Ukrainian war. President V. Zelensky could not find a compromise for peace and ceasefire. However, in his [statement and promises](#) during the election campaign, he was confident he would realize them. Ukraine is now creating a ["Crimean platform"](#) intending to return the country's Crimea and territorial integrity. Kyiv is planning to invite Russia to discussion on the Crimea de-occupation, in the hope of a civilized approach. Sometimes miracles happen, but not in this case. It demonstrates that Zelensky has only a limited grasp of the geopolitical objectives driving the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Moldova's newly elected President Maia Sandu has also declared a hardline approach towards Russia in the Transnistrian conflict settlement, calling on the Russian authorities to withdraw the military troops and armament from the Transnistrian region. ["This is not just](#)

[a declaration – this is a necessity, I would work with Russia for as long as it takes](#)”, explains Sandu.

Russia's influence remains strong in Europe

Unfortunately, the aftermath of Moldovan presidential election does not fully indicate that President Putin's policy of backing the allied regimes in Russia's historical sphere of influence (traditionally, Moldova is an integral part of this sphere) is failing. Russia will continue to strengthen its influence on the European territory and will use both its soft and hard power as it does not want to carry out a shift entirely on the East. That is why the issue of regional security will remain open in the coming years.

However, Moldova and Ukraine must focus on strengthening the state resilience at all levels creating a common shield against old and new threats. Special attention should be paid to hybrid threats. A significant problem is the lack of measures and mechanisms to counteract hybrid threats, disinformation, fake news and political propaganda. These destructive elements are obstacles in the democratic development and promotion of the European agenda in both countries and require new result-oriented approaches in order to identify effective solutions. Joint projects in this field can help expand bilateral cooperation in fighting misinformation, support media freedom, and develop independent media journalism, truly media pluralism, and media literacy.

Joint border control

Another critical issue of these two countries is the implementation of joint control along the [Moldova-Ukraine border](#). That means enhancing integrated border management

by including the border and customs issues linked to the launch of full-fledged joint control at the 'Kuchurhan-Pervomaisk' and 'Giurgiulesti-Reni' border crossing points. This refers also to the border infrastructure development plans and full implementation arrangements based on the Agreement on Joint Control concerning the moving of persons, vehicles and goods across the Ukraine-Moldovan state border.

Significant changes have taken place in the Moldovan-Ukrainian dialogue, which might be the beginning of a new political partnership development phase. This would not be possible without the European factor that bonds Moldova and Ukraine around the European aspiration, creating prospects of building the European security system that will counter the national security threats of both countries and continue the implementation of the European agenda.

Economic opportunities and challenges in the Moldovan-Ukrainian cooperation require more attention in the present-day surroundings, as the pandemic consequences have reduced the trade volume between the two states. According to the [State Statistics Service of Ukraine](#), the volume of trade in goods in January-July 2020 amounted to \$390.7 million. Exports of goods to Moldova amounted to \$352.8 million (a decrease by 14.3% compared to the same period of 2019), imports of goods - \$37.9 million (a decrease by 25.5%). Both countries are mutually interested in increasing the turnover of the bilateral trade and implementing joint economic projects in various fields in the near future.

The energy issue is still one of the priorities on the bilateral agenda. Moldova's external energy dependence is a serious struggle in this regard. Ukraine has been a reliable partner in this field. However, the problem

of gas transit through Ukraine in the context of the deteriorating Ukrainian-Russian relations has been one of the key-issues for the pro-Russian Moldovan political authorities. On several occasions, Ukraine has voiced readiness to restore the [export of electricity](#) to Moldova. Cooperation between these two in the energy field depends a lot on the political will to pursue cooperation under the EU umbrella and following the European norms and regulations.

The search for viable solutions for long-standing bilateral problems remains open. Among the critical and sensitive issues is the so-called [“package agreements”](#) that include the completion of the border demarcation process, the recognition of property rights, and the settlement of the Dniester River's hydro-hub operating conditions.

It is time to set and implement ambitious objectives in different fields of the Moldovan-Ukrainian cooperation, including joint activities in the framework of the European agenda tasks of the EU's distribution of funding in the coming five years. Moldova and Ukraine should fully use these prerogatives of new opportunities for greater economic and social rapprochement, to strengthen regional solidarity in maintaining security and environmental protection. There is the need to pay more attention to the national minorities' problems in Moldova and Ukraine, taking into account the fact that the diaspora activism plays an important role in promoting democracy and human rights in both countries. All this will open the way to a new format of cooperation between states based on a constructive, actual and pragmatic approach in finding solutions to existing problems in the bilateral dialogue.

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