

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

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News in Brief



The Moldovan Prime Minister, Natalia Gavrilă, discussed, on December 9, in Bucharest, with her counterpart Nicolae Ciucă about the development of the bilateral relationship in the area of infrastructure projects, reduction of roaming tariffs and signing of a new financial assistance contract in the amount of 100 million euros. "We have a historic chance to turn the language community into a community of great projects for the benefit of the people on both banks of the Prut, by building new bridges literally and figuratively, whether we are talking about interconnection in the energy sphere, or about connecting the transport infrastructure in the Republic of Moldova to the European networks, or we lay the foundations for facilitating telecommunications", said Natalia Gavrilă. She thanked Romania for its help during the COVID-19 pandemic with vaccines and medical equipment, but also during the gas crisis in October



The Minister for Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Nicu Popescu, together with Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, in the presence of President Maia Sandu and European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen, signed on 15 December the Financing Agreement "Contract for consolidating the state and its resilience" in the amount of 60 million euros. The event took place on the sidelines of the Eastern Partnership Summit, which took place on December 14-15 in Brussels. The agreement provides for a €60 million grant to manage the crisis in the energy sector. "The help provided by the European Union proves that we have true friends and international credibility, and comes with concrete benefits for the citizens of the country" said Nicu Popescu.



The current separatist leader Vadim Krasnoselski from Tiraspol won, on December 12, with a score of 79.4% the so-called presidential elections that took place in Tiraspol, against an obscure official from the Grigoriopol district, Serghei Pinzar. Krasnoselski received 113,620 votes, while his opponent Serghei Pinzar was voted by 16,914 citizens on the left bank of the Dniester, according to official figures. Vadim Krasnoselski, 51, is a Russian militia general very close to the Sheriff holding company owned by the local oligarch Viktor Gușan. Prior to Sunday's vote, the Tiraspol Central Electoral Commission eliminated Krasnoselsky's competitors one by one for a variety of reasons. The separatist authorities even changed the Electoral Code before the elections removing the electoral threshold and introducing the possibility of voting "against" one of the candidates.

Republic of Moldova in 2021: a retrospective of political change



European leaders together with the Heads of State of the Eastern Partnership at the Brussels EaP Summit on 15 December 2021

The year 2021 for the Republic of Moldova was marked by opportunities, crises, challenges and tests in a context it has never encountered before. For the first time in the last 30 years, power in Moldova has been taken over entirely by pro-European forces.

The first move by pro-European President Maia Sandu was to thaw

and renew ties with the neighbours and the West. It reconnected the Republic of Moldova with both European and democratic values and the tap to development funds previously stopped by the governments of the Democrats and then Socialists.

Maia Sandu met with her counterparts in Bucharest and Kiev, after which she

paid visits to Brussels and the most important capitals of Europe such as Berlin and Paris. The meetings took place in an atmosphere of maximum openness for the reformist president.

Gaining of power after the July 11 elections by the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) was once again a reconfirmation of Maya Sandu's work ▶

► to bring the West closer. She turned out to be the main locomotive of the party that the citizens voted for precisely in order to support the reformist agenda for the head of state. Thus, in a trio of powers - the Presidency, the Government and the Parliament – it seemed that nothing would stand in the way of the European forces to implement a reformist agenda and make the long-awaited changes.

The first blow happened in October, when Russia again tested Moldova's vulnerabilities and dependence on the Russian gas within a global gas crisis. Engaged in a "reformist blitzkrieg", the PAS people have faced their first major crisis, a situation from which it was difficult to get out without high costs. A high price for gas, the formula of which we do not know even today, a five-year contract and the postponement by at least one year, until October 2022, of the Energy Package III which involves the liberalization of the gas market after the acquisition of a volume until that date of about three billion cubic meters of gas.

Not only did Russia make a disadvantageous contract for Chisinau, but it went through its propaganda to show that it still has major levers in Chisinau and that this pro-European government cannot avoid its relationship with Moscow. Image harassment on the background of the weakness and inexperience of pro-European power has continued with threats and ultimatums to pay exorbitant bills.

Last but not least, the new government must make these reforms, but it must make them consciously and with a medium-long-term projection. From Brussels, the Moldovan power is asked to be guided by the Latin phrase 'festina lente', but in reality, they want a score performed in the cadence 'allegro ma non troppo' (alert, but not too fast). It remains to be seen how fast the Moldovan power representatives will direct Moldova towards Europe and how winding this road will be.

The rule of law in the Republic of Moldova is in an extraordinary situation

Julian Groza, director IPRE



The Executive Director of the Institute of European Policy and Reforms (IPRE), Julian Groza, gave us an extensive interview about the European course of the Republic of Moldova and the challenges it has ahead on its way towards the European Union. We have reviewed the achievements of the pro-European power in Chisinau and discussed about what the current power has to do in order to succeed in the reforms that the country needs so desperately for modernization. Last but not least, we have discussed about the threats to the security of the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistrian settlement. We are inviting you to read this interview below:

■ **The year 2021 together with the installation of Maia Sandu at the helm of presidency meant also a thawing of relations with the EU and neighbouring states - Romania and Ukraine. How important was this rapid movement of Chisinau?**

■ The results of the presidential election and the popular support received by President Maia Sandu gave her the legitimacy to start an agenda to fight corruption and promote the justice system reform. Another priority of the president was to get Moldova out of isolation as Romania and Ukraine are neighbouring countries and for many years Moldova has had frozen relations with them at the Presidential Administration level. Thus, restoring bilateral strategic relations with Romania and Ukraine was one of Maia Sandu's priorities. The visit of the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis immediately after the inauguration of Sandu as President should also be mentioned. This was followed by Sandu's visit to Kiev, which meant restoring the bilateral relations at the highest level and setting a clear strategic partnership agenda. In the case of Ukraine, it was agreed to set up a Presidential Council to oversee the progress of the bilateral relationship and promotion of bilateral projects.

■ **At the same time, there are voices among experts talking about a possible meeting between Maia Sandu and Vladimir Putin. Is such a meeting needed today and what benefits might it bring?**

■ If we look at the vision of President Maia Sandu on the foreign policy dimension, we see a clear approach of promoting an active and consistent policy, and at the same time, involving the creation of a non-conflict framework around the Republic of Moldova to emphasize the development of bilateral relations with external partners.

The Russian Federation is a complicated partner for Moldova. The need to resolve outstanding issues on our bilateral agenda is obvious. Former President Dodon used to commute to the Kremlin, however he failed to resolve the historical bilateral problems of the two countries – the problem of our citizens working in Russia, the bilateral trade, which is affected by a series of blockades imposed unilaterally by Moscow, not to mention the Transnistrian issue.

We've seen the diplomatic efforts of the Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu, and existing contacts at the level of the two diplomats that confirm this vision of promoting a pragmatic relationship focused on solving these problems.

As to the meeting at the level of country presidents, I think this must take place only when the necessary premises exist. And these premises are currently missing. There are a lot of new topics on the bilateral agenda such as the energy crisis and many others. When there is a positive dynamic and a very clear agenda for addressing these issues at the government level, this will create the necessary conditions for contacts at a higher level.

There is openness in Chisinau and we've seen this after the visit in Chisinau, in August, immediately after the parliamentary elections, of the head of

the Russian Presidential Administration Dimitrii Kozak. There have also been other contacts with the Russian government officials, including during the energy crisis.

Achievements and shortcomings

■ **If you were to characterize the first 100 days of the new government, how would you describe them? What was good and what was not so good?**

■ The political support from Parliament, based on the popular vote in parliamentary elections, gives this Government wide legitimacy. Moreover, the current political framework provides even more premises for directing the common agenda of Parliament, the Presidency and the Government on priority issues. We understand that everything related to justice reform, cleaning the system, the public institutions, and the judiciary from corruption, fighting corruption and impunity - all these things are priorities on the government agenda. Also the negative impact of this pandemic situation on the socio-economic systems has been on the government agenda in these 100 days. The basis for a pension system reform has been laid by raising the minimum pension and introducing early retirement. Therefore, on the domestic dimension, these results are important developments.

Regarding the foreign policy, we have seen numerous interactions of the Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu both in Chisinau and abroad. Also the Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita has had high-level meetings during these 100 days, including in Brussels. To summarise, I think that during these 100 days the foundations have been laid for the implementation of the Government Action Plan.

Not all of our observers' expectations or priorities as we see them are on the

Government agenda. For example, the administrative-territorial reform and the local public administration reform are not on the Government agenda at the moment. We understand that there is political awareness of this need and hope this will translate into concrete policy actions as soon as possible so as not to miss that window of opportunity related to the 2023 local elections.

There exist other issues identified or associated in one way or another with the government approach to communication. We have witnessed criticism by the civil society about the decision-making processes, transparency of decision-making, promotion of certain laws, and so on. I personally understand this urgency and haste to promote as many legal initiatives as possible given that there are many shortcomings and crises that need to be addressed in a speedy way, but this obviously does not mean violation of basic principles. The decision-making process should take into account the views of all stakeholders.

What needs to be done in the justice area

■ **What is your perception, are we moving towards the consolidation of the rule of law and democracy in Moldova or it's a long way to get there?**

■ I believe that the rule of law in Moldova is in an extraordinary situation. Unfortunately, previous governments have used state institutions to protect their political and personal interests and to benefit from state rents. At the same time, they have subordinated the institutions to themselves and practically created a parallel state. This was very much based on systemic corruption, which obviously made the rule of law in Moldova vulnerable. This extraordinary state of affairs today requires an extraordinary effort through policies and interventions, which will allow to fight, first of all, the impunity, a phenomenon that I am sure has seriously annoyed the

Moldovan citizens. We could see that in the early presidential and parliamentary elections.

The fight against corruption meets a high level of resistance within the system, because in all these years various kleptocrats have subordinated the state institutions and justice, and have built ties within the system. Though these kleptocrats have left the country, they have kept their ties and we are seeing that through different decisions taken at different levels of the justice system and state institutions. In order to break these ties, a very clear, predictable and lasting agenda for changing the rule of law is certainly needed.

One solution the Government is thinking of and promoting is the extraordinary evaluation of judges and prosecutors. It is a complex solution that needs to be well prepared and implemented in a way that brings results. This process will take time and we are noticing an adaptation of the government strategy for achieving this solution, for example focusing on the evaluation of the candidates to be appointed or elected to the Superior Council of Prosecutors (SCP) and the Superior Council of Magistracy (SCM). This process is seen as an element of "prevention" before starting the complex extraordinary evaluation process. This approach is a logical one, which should, on the one hand, test the extraordinary evaluation concept and, on the other hand, create conditions for the justice self-administration system - SCP and SCM - to get honest people on board capable of changing things.

In parallel with this complex process, we hear daily about cases of high-level corruption and illicit enrichment initiated against magistrates but also against civil servants. These cases send a strong signal to the system and society. However, the biggest challenge remains the finality of these cases. They must be completed within a reasonable time - not in 6-7 years, but in a much shorter period. This will involve interventions to both legal

and institutional frameworks, as well as efforts by the development partners and civil society in general.

The EU is by far Moldova's best partner

■ **If is to summarise and draw a line seven years after the signing of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, what are the conclusions? What was done well and what could have been done better?**

■ After seven years, the Republic of Moldova is much closer to the EU, according to official figures. From a commercial point of view, the connection is very close. Over 60% of exports are directed to the EU market, and half of the imports coming to the Republic of Moldova is from the EU.

There is a higher mobility of citizens. Also, the start of vaccination programmes has demonstrated the close ties of the Republic of Moldova with the EU.

Clearly, political instability and all these political crises, the lack of a very clear will to implement reforms, especially in the field of the rule of law and justice, have slowed down certain processes of law enforcement and implementation of the Association Agreement provisions, especially on the political dimension. From my observations, the EU's strict conditionality approach when providing assistance to the Republic of Moldova played a key role in increasing, on the one hand, the government accountability and, on the other hand, maintaining a fairly high level of support by the EU for the Moldovan citizens.

The EU is today the most credible international partner for our citizens. This summer we have noticed a positive trend in the citizens' perception in relation to the goal of European integration of the country. Almost 60% of the Moldovan citizens want the country to become a member of the EU. All this put together

in addition to an ambitious agenda of the Government towards the EU create preconditions for the shortcomings from the recent years to be overcome with targeted and increased EU support.

We have also seen the economic recovery plan of Euro 600 million announced this summer by the EU and the budget assistance of 60 million euros in connection with the gas crisis. If we look to the future, the support for the Republic of Moldova is getting bigger. This support is provided not only for the reforms or citizens, businessmen or LPAs, but also for important investment processes that will help recover the economic and financial situation of the country.

Opportunities will also be highlighted at the Eastern Partnership Summit, which again involves a major investment package.

■ **What are your expectations from the Brussels Eastern Partnership Summit on December 15? What are the topics that the Republic of Moldova will insist upon and what perspectives for advancement towards the European integration does this format open?**

■ This summit will launch new opportunities 12 years after the launch of the Eastern Partnership. This platform provided an opportunity to advance political association and economic integration with the EU. From the perspective of the Republic of Moldova and other associated countries this summit should pay more attention to the development issues and priorities of the Eastern Partnership.

The Eastern Partnership Summit is approving this € 2.6 billion investment and economic recovery plan, which could be multiplied under various programmes in cooperation with other international financial partners. According to the European Commission's forecasts, we are talking about almost 17 billion euros for the Eastern Partnership states.

Chisinau's expectations from this summit is a bigger focus on the Associated Trio states- Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. The cooperation in this format has evolved over the past two years, and on the eve of the Eastern Partnership summit it has taken on a new dimension. I am referring here to the Memorandum of Foreign Ministers signed in Kiev and to the declaration of the presidents of the three states signed in Batumi, as well as to the recent visit of the prime ministers to Brussels. All this is trying to draw the EU's attention to the three states with European aspirations, which want to become members of the EU. They want to step up the integration process and the prospects for the next five years, which will create more opportunities for them, individually or together, to move faster to a higher level of cooperation with the EU, despite existing challenges.

I am well aware that the EU is not ready today to discuss new waves of enlargement. There is an enlargement process under way with the countries of the Western Balkans. In the perspective of the next 5-10 years, it is obvious that the enlargement will be a taboo subject, although the support in several European countries is great. At the same time, it will increase the attention of such countries as France, Germany that were previously reluctant to a more advanced relationship with countries like the Republic of Moldova.

Therefore, there is a certain dynamic that in a medium- and long-term perspective could create premises. Many things today depend, first of all, on countries like Moldova. We need to put things right. We all understand that in order to succeed, we should move in a more determined way towards the EU. We must create conditions for the political criteria - the rule of law - to be respected and ensured. Thus, we have a lot of work to do on the implementation of the Association Agreement. All this together will help us change the perspective with regard to acceptance by the EU of the Republic of Moldova.

Changes in the Transnistrian settlement approach

■ **If we were to talk about a new strategy for the Transnistrian settlement, what benchmarks should the Chisinau authorities consider?**

■ If we look at the process of reintegration of the country in recent years, the emphasis on strengthening trust between the two banks of the Dniester has created more conditions for our citizens - no matter where they live, in Chisinau or Tiraspol - businessmen, operating companies to enjoy the benefits offered by the EU.

Speaking of trade, a large part of the exports from the Transnistrian region are oriented towards the EU market. If we put together trade on both sides of the Dniester, we are talking about over 70% of exports going to European markets. At the same time, if we look at the imports coming to the Transnistrian region, they come from the Russian Federation. If we talk about citizens, there are more and more citizens from the Transnistrian region who benefit from free movement in the European space.

The pandemic period made it very clear that there is no discrimination against citizens by the Chisinau authorities when it comes to the distribution of resources, vaccines or support to healthcare workers. All these confidence-building measures obviously help to create a framework in which more and more citizens of the Transnistrian region and citizens of the Republic of Moldova connect their present and future with the Republic of Moldova. There is no interethnic conflict between citizens, the Transnistrian conflict is a political and geopolitical one.

In addition to all this, there are kleptocratic implications. We know very well that the Transnistrian region is used as an offshore, including for the use of cheap electricity for cryptocurrency mines that have appeared in the last

year in the Transnistrian region. There are several challenges we face in the Transnistrian conflict resolution process, and the biggest issue we have and which politicians need to think about is the human rights. Human rights in the Transnistrian region are violated on a daily basis, and the situation is deteriorating, so resolving this issue must be a priority for the Moldovan government.

In practical terms, there are Russian troops stationed illegally in the Transnistrian region today. This is a permanent threat to the security and national sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, the Cobasna depot with a huge volume of weapons and ammunition poses permanent danger to the lives of citizens no matter where they live, in Tiraspol, Chisinau or Odessa.

Chisinau must identify those processes and decisions that will create premises for the dynamization of the Transnistrian settlement and promote them on the negotiating agenda in the 5 + 2 format. It is important for Moscow to honour its commitment to withdraw troops from the Transnistrian region. It is also important to review the status of peacekeepers in the region. At the same time, closer cooperation is needed between the Chisinau and Kiev authorities, including between the partners involved.

Smuggling of alcohol and cigarettes remains a big problem. I do not think that today the Republic of Moldova can hope for a quick political solution to the Transnistrian conflict. This process of negotiation and reintegration must be sustainable. This means that the issues faced by the citizens and the system must be addressed and solved step by step. Last but not least, we need strong support from our international partners to increase the level of resilience of the Republic of Moldova to various threats to national security, which, unfortunately, are still present today in the Transnistrian region.

■ **Thank you!**

Analysis

Retrospective of 2021: Romania and Ukraine - how far we have come in transforming partnerships

The year 2021 has been one of the paradigm shifts in the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova. Electoral events have significantly changed the structure of the governing act, and therefore the content of the decisions that have been taken in this regard.

Obviously, the most important achievements of the new leadership relate to changing the quality of dialogue with Western external partners. However, I think it important to give priority to the analysis of bilateral relations with the two neighbours: Romania and Ukraine. In the event of a crisis - health, energy or security - the support came from these two countries.

Obviously, both Bucharest and Kiev have different arguments to support the Moldovan authorities, and these must be understood, regardless of their complexity, so that they can subsequently act consistently and responsibly towards the qualitative transformation of these interactions, without prejudice to the interests of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova.

The basis on which the partnership with Kiev is built

Although Maia Sandu met Klaus Iohannis in December 2020 on his official visit to Chisinau, her first visit was to Kiev in January 2021. The meeting between President Maia Sandu and Volodymyr Zelenskyy was intensely addressed in the information space, especially her political behaviour, which aroused emotions and admiration among Ukrainian journalists. However, the visit was important from another perspective.

It was the first time in a long time that the Moldovan leadership has firmly said that it respects Ukraine's territorial



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

integrity within internationally recognized borders, hoping to reaffirm a mutual attitude and support for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.

Economic and political cooperation remain pillars of the bilateral partnership - at least that is the message emphasized by both heads of state. Another important point in the talks was cooperation on anti-corruption, assistance in combating illicit trafficking in goods and services across border crossing points, but also deepening the dialogue to ensure proper border management contributes to strengthening the security of both states.

However, problematic issues remain on the bilateral agenda, for which there is no immediate solution and a clear strategy is needed to honour the promises made

by the leaders of the two states at a discursive level, as well as concrete actions by public institutions responsible for their implementation.

Without transparent tenders organized for the purchase of electricity or without sustainable transport infrastructure, connecting economic agents, or without guarantees of respect for the right to private property (of the Republic of Moldova in Ukraine on inherited properties), or without a constructive approach to include in a compulsory way the inclusion of the civil security component in the management of the water resources of the Dniester River (see Novodnestrovsk power plants here), little progress can be made in achieving normal parameters of political and economic interaction between Chisinau and Kiev.

Also this year, there have been moments of crisis in the bilateral dialogue between Chisinau and Kiev. The most serious has been the kidnapping of a Ukrainian citizen from the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

This clearly highlighted the shortcomings of the national security system, but at the same time was a demonstration of negligence of the interests of deepening the bilateral relationship. The kidnapping of Ceaus was also a clear demonstration for foreign partners that Ukraine's domestic policy is still subject at times to group interests for which the foreign policy strategy matters less at certain times.

Although there is still no clear legal finality in this case, the presence of Maia Sandu at the launch of the Crimean Platform (August 2021) speaks for a clearer understanding by the new leadership of the complicated context of regional security.

Volodymyr Zelensky's speech on 27 August 2021, delivered in Chisinau, and his invitation to the partners present, but especially to Chisinau, which has limited military capabilities, to contribute to counteracting security risks, can also be interpreted as an attempt to strengthen a still fragile partnership.

The bilateral dialogue between Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova has seen ascending and descending lines in 2021. The factors influencing the results in a positive or negative way must be properly analysed and assessed in order to really provide consistency to the political interaction and benefits for people.

How to reconfirm the strategic partnership with Romania

As mentioned above, in the bilateral dialogue between Bucharest and Chisinau, the analysis should be resumed from the time of the visit of the Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis, in December 2020. Romania has reaffirmed at the highest level its firm commitment, at least at the discursive level, even if it was previously treated negligently by the leadership of the Republic of Moldova or was intentionally undermined at the initiative of some political actors on both banks of the Prut.

Romania continued to provide technical, agricultural and medical assistance to the Republic of Moldova, and the intensification of institutional interactions at the public level could be further highlighted when the new electoral cycle ended in Chisinau. With the election of the new legislature (11 July 2021) the things have become clearer and easier to deal with in diplomatic interventions. The support provided by the citizens of the Republic of Moldova for a completely different government has been welcomed and appreciated by external partners. Romania was no exception.

Earlier, Romanian officials maintained their support in certain red lines that referred to European integration and anti-corruption reforms. A rigid discourse, which in some places

provided enough space to be interpreted as biased towards particular political or economic interests. The responsibility for such a public perception lies with both parties, especially after the diplomatic scandal over the expiry of the legal terms for the extension of the non-reimbursable financial assistance of 100 million euros.

It should also be mentioned the periods of political uncertainty in both states, which obviously influenced the number and quality of interactions at different institutional levels. Domestic political crises often delay foreign policy decisions, and this creates additional vulnerabilities for strategic partnerships.

The approach in the strategy of the government authorities in Bucharest and Chisinau after the "calming of electoral spirits" has been that of Maia Sandu's government (October 2019), when a series of projects of common interest were identified, compatible with the objectives of both partners. The difference now is that in Chisinau, there is a cohesion at the level of political decision to act and support the validation of this strategic partnership.

The visits of Moldovan officials to the Romanian capital (president, government) have already yielded results. Signing a new roadmap, promises to sign new documents for financial and technical assistance, including through programs to finance bilateral projects, non-commercial energy assistance during the current energy crisis - all aimed at encouraging the reform of the bilateral strategic partnership on new principles, less influenced by particular interests of some political actors.

Obviously, the quality of the bilateral dialogue between Bucharest and Chisinau should be constantly monitored and evaluated in order not to allow usurpation of investments already made in 2021.

Energy crisis - one that united the interests of Ukrainians and Romanians in the Republic of Moldova

In September, the Republic of Moldova went through a new energy crisis. Being almost one hundred percent dependent on the delivery of natural gas from the Russian Federation and being a participant in bilateral energy projects still not functioning, in the absence of a firm contract for the delivery of energy resources to consumers (households and businesses), the Moldovan government risked losing the first major battle for state energy security.

Of course, the actions taken, the intense negotiations and the external assistance have greatly contributed to the

- establishment of a “safety pillow” for domestic consumers.

However, without immediate and concrete assistance from Ukraine and Romania, the challenges would have been more serious. Both Kiev and Bucharest provided the necessary support for the Chisinau authorities to consolidate their negotiating positions, but also to increase their credibility at home.

Obviously, the reasons for providing assistance were different: Ukraine because it wanted Gazprom to have fewer tools of pressure against the Republic of Moldova, and Romania because it committed to support Chisinau in its European course and integration into the energy circuit, but mainly because of the strategic content of the bilateral partnership and the philosophy on which it is based. Regardless of the reasons for assistance of the neighbouring states, the reaction to help the Republic of Moldova was appreciated.

Instead of conclusions

Although the greatest success of the Republic of Moldova in 2021 can be considered the change in the governance paradigm and regain of trust of Western partners, it is worth mentioning the change in the structure of dialogue and bilateral interactions with neighbouring states.

It is vital for the Republic of Moldova to understand its own internal needs and to appreciate extremely effectively the resources available to achieve its immediate national interests. In crisis situations, the first countries that could provide the necessary assistance are the neighbouring states, which in this case are also highlighted as strategic partners.

It is important now not to deviate from the statements and promises made to citizens. Words must be confirmed by deeds

Alexei Tulbure, director of the Oral History Institute



Political scientist Alexei Tulbure gave an interview to the FES/ APE foreign policy newsletter in which he shared his vision about the most important events of the year 2021 and as well as about the lessons the Republic of Moldova should learn from the experience of the current year. From the coming to power of the pro-European forces, the energy crisis to the progress of the reforms so necessary for the Republic of Moldova you can read in the full interview below:

■ **How would you characterize the year 2021 and what should we keep in mind with regard to the important political events if we were to do a political retrospective?**

■ It is too early to draw conclusions as Mao Zedong said when asked about the 150th anniversary of the French

Revolution. In our case, it is too early to conclude the consequences of this year's political events which are already going down in history. However, from my point of view, some milestones of 2021 are quite obvious.

We have all witnessed the change of power in our country as a result of the unprecedented mobilization and efforts of an impressive number of people, including people with different political preferences in the past. People voted for reforms, for solving the real problems facing the state and society. Geopolitics has given way to politics. Finally, common sense, whose terrible deficit we have been facing, has won in Moldova.

We also expected - and it is important to mention it - that the firm and consistent position of politicians and, above all, of

the head of state (even without too many powers), can generate important changes and transformations in the country. Changes for the better. This is also essential for the awareness of what has happened to all of us and the country in the last 10-12 years, when the cowardice and corruptibility of the political class, including some heads of state and other senior officials of the country, have led to the seizure of the Republic of Moldova by the mafia.

At the moment, we are still far from completely deoligarchizing and demafiotising the country, but we can rightly say that Moldova has begun to return to what is called normalcy. We have returned to the naturalness of the political process: transparent decision-making mechanisms have been restored by government structures (there are still problems, but progress is obvious), there are discussions in the public space on really important topics (not fakes) for country, the fear of punishment for dissent has disappeared, the process of cleansing the state institutions of compromised persons has begun.

Focusing on the justice reform, the authorities are not only trying to start the process of building a rule of law in Moldova, but at this initial stage it is already sending a clear and obvious signal to the whole society: the period of permissiveness, criminals and impunity for crimes is over! A much-needed correction of the ethical foundations underlying Moldovan social life is being promoted.

It is important now not to diverge from the statements and promises made to the citizens. Words must be confirmed by deeds.

■ **How do you see the concentration of political power in the hands of a single political force? What would be the advantages and disadvantages for the Republic of Moldova?**

■ The advantage is that the ruling party has every opportunity to implement the

political programme voted by the citizens. The government has the full support of the parliamentary majority and there is no risk of blocking the decision-making process.

The disadvantage is that the monopoly of power often leads to the temptation for the government and parliamentary majority to reduce or ignore the procedures of public consultations on the decisions to be made, including the discussions and consultations in parliament. We have seen this over the years in the practices of Moldovan politics - the views of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition, of the civil society have not been taken into account, while the majority of the government in the parliament has turned into a voting machine. That state of affairs inevitably affects the quality of the decisions made. This would be the best scenario. In the worst case, this would cause the degradation of power and the undermining of democracy.

The current situation has an interesting specificity: the PAS victory is primarily the voters' merit, and then that of the president and her party. If the PAS thinks otherwise and doesn't understand these landmarks of public opinion; if the party does not extend the participation of citizens in the ruling of the country and only strengthens its power monopoly, the consequences could be serious for both the ruling political party and the country.

Arrears in the area of justice

■ **How do you characterize the first 100 days of the Gavrilita Government? What are the most important achievements and drawbacks or things that went wrong?**

■ The first 100 days of the Gavrilita government are not as impressive as the first 100 days of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration, from which this unwritten tradition of a first summing up period started. In the first 100 days of

President Roosevelt, the people of the United States believed they would get out of the Great Depression. The 100 days of the Gavrilita government did not erode the expectations and confidence of Moldovans in the new government's readiness to fight corruption and de-oligarchize the state.

Positive achievements were noted by both the authorities and experts: unblocking external financing, starting the cleaning up of the state structures of so-called compromised people, adopting social protection measures for the population (increasing pensions, salaries and allowances), and in general, identifying a positive solution to the "gas crisis". Special mentioning should be made of the government efforts to find alternative sources of gas supply for the country. It was generally a very useful experience.

When it comes to negative aspects, we could obviously list the extremely controversial appointments of judges to the Supreme Court of Justice (Dorel Musteață and Ghenadie Plămădeală) and of former prosecutor Eugen Rurac in a senior position at the Security and Information Service (SIS). The appointment of a new Ombudsperson, who has already been removed by parliament, can also qualify as a failure. Mistakes are inevitable, much has been said about that, however, it is important that they be acknowledged and not repeated in the future.

There are also many doubts about the arrest of Prosecutor General Stoianoglo. The President has called for maximum openness in this matter, but we do not yet have answers to existing questions and transparency in that matter. Ongoing resignations and appointments to the prosecutor's office look more like a war of clans rather than a cleansing of the system.

There is a lack of transparency in the activities of many ministries and departments. One of the fundamental problems of the new government

is communication, informing the society about real plans, intentions, achievements, etc. Many questions would have disappeared if there was a more effective communication and interaction between government officials, the media and society.

■ **How do you assess the beginning of the judiciary reform together with the new government? Some referred to that as “masked show”, while others think the power should “cut into living flesh” when it comes to corruption. How do you assess the situation?**

■ The “masked shows” are not yet a reform of the judiciary. The real reform, according to the Minister of Justice, will begin with an “external evaluation” of judges and prosecutors in 2022. In the meantime, we have the same Supreme Council of Magistracy, the same judges, the same prosecutors who served the “captured state” and its “heads” one, two or five years ago.

And we are witnessing an unnatural symbiosis, an involuntary interaction between the new government, which has promised to fight corruption, and the completely corrupt judges and prosecutors. For the latter, this is an attempt to adapt to a new political environment, mimicry, a matter of survival. For the authorities, I hope, this is a forced and temporary situation.

The arrest and detention of offenders are inalienable elements of the rule of law, in which the principle “punishment must inevitably follow a crime”. Detention and arrest of corrupt officials, judges and prosecutors is good; however, we must be sure that these detentions and arrests are a triumph of justice and not an attempt by the old system to adapt to the new times, trying to please the new government and thus survive any upheavals and stay “in business”. It remains to be seen how many cases will go to court and what will happen to them there. The justice system reform is a very complex process and it hasn’t started yet.

External evaluation of magistrates, a milestone

■ **Do you think the external evaluation will really be the central pillar of the justice reform? And do you think the mechanism proposed by the current government is viable or not, and why?**

■ The main lesson of the first months of the new government is that there will be no speedy judicial reform, because it seems impossible or complicated to do so. There has been a lot of talk in Moldova about transitional justice.

In June 2019, Parliament adopted the Declaration on the Captured State, which made it possible to introduce elements of this transitional justice system: mass layoffs and accelerated evaluation of police officers, prosecutors, some judges, those in the anti-corruption system; establishment of the anti-corruption tribunal and special teams of prosecutors, etc. This did not happen in 2019 and neither in 2021. The Ministry of Justice has taken the path of organizing an “external evaluation” of judges and prosecutors, which will begin only next year.

We are not the first to follow this path. There is experience in Albania, Ukraine and other countries. However, that experience is not clear and unambiguous, with the same results. There has been a lot of discussion about this in the public space of the Republic of Moldova and it does not make sense to dwell on this topic in detail in this interview.

For the reform to yield positive results, we need honest and well-trained professional “evaluators.” We need people to be accepted as arbitrators by society and professional associations of judges and prosecutors. In other words, there is a need for confidence in the reform and in what the authorities are doing. In this sense, the current appointments of unworthy people undermine the credibility of the authorities and seriously affect the future reforms.

We need a factual basis and very high-quality evidence when we make certain decisions, especially regarding dismissal, opening of criminal cases, otherwise, judges and prosecutors will be reinstated through national court and ECHR decisions.

The question remains: who in the national courts who hasn’t been subject to the “external evaluation” will judge the cases of their fellow judges? What decisions will they make? Judging by what is happening today, judges almost always make decisions in favour of their fellow judges. A striking example of this is that of Oleg Melniciuc, who continues to work in court after being sentenced to 7 years imprisonment for illegal enrichment.

There are also questions about the duration of the external evaluation as around 1,000 people need to be evaluated. That assessment may not end with the end of the current parliamentary term. And what will happen in the Moldovan judiciary all these years?

Justice reform is not only about the integrity of judges and prosecutors, but also about improving and increasing their professional level, etc. We have few specialists capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting complex cases of human rights, domestic violence, property disputes, transnational crimes involving Moldovan citizens, etc. To cut a long story short, there are more questions than answers today about justice system reform.

Voted for anti-corruption, without geopolitics

■ **How do you assess the performance of the opposition after the 11 July elections? Is there a need for a more united left-wing force in the Republic of Moldova? Are there premises for a progressive and pro-European left-wing force?**

■ The opposition is an indispensable element of a functioning democratic

political system, and Moldova needs a strong, active and intelligent opposition. These could be those who may come to power tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. In this sense, and this is my opinion, the return to power of the PSRM and the Shor Party, for example, is unimaginable

In 2021, for the first time in many years, we managed to avoid discussing geopolitical issues in elections, and even in public debates. Moldovan voters have voted massively for the party that promotes an anti-corruption and reform agenda. The PSRM, which has once again tried to use a geopolitical rhetoric, to transpose the political struggle into a symbolic space (preserving traditional values, traditional family, supporting Orthodoxy, etc.), has lost the elections. This is a clear signal from our society that Moldovans want a different political situation and different politicians in their country, whether they are in power or in opposition.

In this context, the opposition needed by our political system and our country is an opposition that promotes a real political agenda for the Moldovan society. This should be a democratic opposition, because democracy is the civilizational choice of our country. Electoral exercises should become a choice between the democratic development options of the country, and not between democracy and various manifestations of non-democracy - authoritarianism, oligarchy, etc.

If we talk about a “pro-European left power” (by name and doctrine), this is a force whose absence in Moldova is distorting the country’s political system. The country is in dire need of such a political power.

The long-running struggle of the CPSU (b) - CPSU (Union Communist Party of the Bolsheviks, later the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and the entire international communist movement for decades against the Social-Democratic parties and their stigma has not passed

without consequences and future impact. Strong pro-European left-wing parties have not emerged in any post-Soviet country.

However, our problem is not even that. It is that we have neither “right” nor “left” in the European sense of these terms. Our parties call themselves so, paying tribute to tradition, but that has nothing to do with doctrines. The Socialists and Communists of Moldova are very conservative parties, with right-wing radicalism elements. And PAS, according to what it says and does, looks more of a left-wing party, although it calls itself “right-wing”.

Defrost and development

■ **How do you assess Maia Sandu’s thawing of foreign relations? Do you think it would also be necessary to establish a relationship with the East, perhaps a visit by the President to Moscow?**

■ Relations with our international partners have always been (with rare exceptions) indicators of the state of affairs within the Republic of Moldova. The degradation of democracy, the seizure of the state by oligarchs, the impunity for stealing public money, the lack of democratic reforms, etc. have led to stopping of relations with our traditional development partners, blocking of external financing and the international isolation of the Republic of Moldova.

A way out of this isolation, an increase in external financing (very favourable) from international partners is certainly a very positive development for our country. The reason for this state comes from the change of power, but also from the prodigious, well-intentioned activity of the head of state and her team.

This unblocking of relations with external partners is one of the important achievements of the first months of the

new government. “Good news from Brussels” is, without any doubt, one of the new government’s cries for victory. Reading these titles, people understand that the Republic of Moldova has again received support from partners and this is extremely beneficial and important in this beginning of change for the better.

Reforms should create conditions for us to earn more, to produce and export quality products and services, to increase the income of the population through economic mechanisms, to increase budget revenues, etc. This moment does not exclude external loans and borrowings. However, under the new conditions, we will not act as applicants, but as equal partners, which is a normal state of affairs.

■ **How do you see the recent gas supply agreement with Russia? Is it advantageous or not for the Republic of Moldova?**

■ I liked more the stages of the process of looking for alternative sources of gas supply. Even though everyone today understands the limits of alternative supply options, the experience has been excellent and we seem to be moving in the right direction.

As for the gas price of USD 450 per thousand cubic meters, this is most likely a good option. It’s hard for me to evaluate it somehow at the moment. I think it is too early to draw conclusions. Let’s see how we will handle the payment and how the price and tariffs will change as the market situation changes.

I understand that we have entered a long period of high prices for imported energy resources and the right strategy is to strengthen the economic power of the state and well-being of the population, which will allow both the country and the people to cover higher costs for the energy resources consumed.

■ **Thank you!**

Expert opinion

“The change of face” of the Republic of Moldova

Ludmila Nofit, executive director of Foreign Policy Association (APE)

The year 2021 has been a year of challenges and opportunities for the Republic of Moldova and its citizens. The trigger for the series of domestic political developments was the election in May 2020 of Maia Sandu as President of the country. This has had an immediate impact on the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova.

The bilateral relations with Ukraine and Romania, as well as with the Western partners, have been reset. The landslide victory in the July early parliamentary elections of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) has reaffirmed Moldova's commitment for the European course.

On the other hand, establishing a constructive dialogue with the Russian Federation remains a challenge for the new leadership in the context of the pro-European forces holding absolute power. In addition to the challenges posed by the pandemic and its inefficient management, the gas crisis has proved to be quite a complicated exercise for the Moldovan authorities.

The country's energy security has been exposed to risks due to several factors, and has been widely exploited politically by Moscow. A difficult period is coming for the Republic of Moldova due to the overlapping of several crises globally, delaying the ambitious agenda of the ruling party. What is certain though is that a realistic approach and a balanced political pragmatism are needed.

Defrosting the foreign political dialogue of the Republic of Moldova

The takeover of the state leadership by Maia Sandu as a pro-European and pro-reformist president has created

favourable conditions for resetting the political dialogue with the strategic development partners of the Republic of Moldova. Since the beginning of her term, the high-level contacts have clearly intensified and some of which have resumed after a hiatus of more than a decade. However, this shows openness of the Western chancelleries in relation to the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu.

Restoring relations with neighbours has been an important goal of the new Moldovan presidential administration. The Romanian president Klaus Iohannis was the first high-ranking official to visit Chisinau, at the invitation of his counterpart Maia Sandu, after taking office. This demonstrates the preferential nature of relations between these two countries. Romania was among the first Moldova's partners to support the efforts of combatting the Covid-19 pandemic, providing donations in the form of medical equipment and devices, medicines, vaccines, tests, etc., including financial support for strengthening civil society and independent media.

Intensification of the Moldovan-Romanian contacts has continued during 2021, a prominent result being signature on 23 November 2021, at the level of foreign ministers, of a road map on priority areas for cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and Romania, such as: energy interconnection,



transport infrastructure, communications and information society, cyber security, etc. It has been described as a “unique political moment” in order to achieve “historic results”, according to Maia Sandu.

The relationship with Ukraine is just as important for the Republic of Moldova, and her first visit abroad in her capacity as president, Maia Sandu has paid to Kiev, in January this year. A number of issues on the bilateral agenda were addressed: boosting economic relations, developing communication and infrastructure projects, including the common goals of European integration and regional security. A remarkable moment of that visit was the mutual recognition of the territorial integrity of the two countries, in particular, President Sandu explicitly mentioned that the Crimean Peninsula belongs to Ukraine, in the context in which Igor Dodon had stated the opposite.

Beyond the friendly nature of relations between Presidents Sandu and Zelenski, the Moldovan-Ukrainian relationship is a complex one, which requires a comprehensive approach based on trust and reciprocity, especially on certain sensitive issues.

The situation of some Moldovan real estate on the territory of Ukraine, the impact of the Dniester hydropower complex on the environment and the Dniester River, the agreement on some issues related to the Transnistrian case are among the problems that need immediate solutions in the context of a favourable relevant expertise and assistance.

At the beginning of her term, the head of state, being boycotted by a parliament that lacked trust, focused her efforts on convincing the Western partners to provide support to Moldova in combating the consequences of pandemics, and facilitating access to vaccines and medical equipment, etc.

Resumption of dialogue with the EU

The resumption of the political dialogue with the EU was of strategic importance for the Republic of Moldova, which had been in isolation during the former government. The visit to Brussels in January has seen the beginning in thawing the partnership with the European institutions.

A response visit has followed by the leader of the European Council, Charles Michel, who assured the Republic of Moldova of the European support and solidarity, while emphasizing that the materialization of EU assistance is conditioned by the implementation of reforms in strategic areas. Thus, the stakes of the July early parliamentary elections were crucial in this regard.

These efforts have resulted in obtaining a direct budgetary support programme for the Republic of Moldova in the amount of 15 mln Euro, under the Covid-19 Resilience Agreement. Subsequently, in the summer of this year, the European Commission approved an economic recovery plan for the Republic of Moldova in the amount of 600 mln Euro, money offered conditionally as microfinance

assistance, grants and investments. With the takeover in Chisinau of the pro-European forces, additional financial assistance programmes for the Republic of Moldova have followed. What is certain is that Maia Sandu's meetings with senior European officials have created favourable conditions for a new chapter in the history of Moldovan-European relations, offering *carte blanche* for several European leaders to resume political dialogue with Moldova.

The highlight was Maia Sandu's visit to Paris in February, at the invitation of her French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, being the first interaction at the level of presidents after 13 years. Such a meeting reveals the openness and support of France in the process of Euro integration of the Republic of Moldova by carrying out reforms in the justice sector, fighting corruption, and ensuring a competitive and transparent investment climate.

This visit also demonstrates the level of popularity and credibility that Maia Sandu enjoys as an honest political leader. The first immediate result of that meeting was inclusion of the Republic of Moldova in the list of countries eligible for the assistance of the French Agency for Development.

Special relationship with Berlin

Following the re-establishment of contacts with Western leaders, the head of state was received in Berlin, in May, by the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the visit also including a teleconference with the Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel. In addition to the rhetoric of fighting corruption and reforming the judiciary, Maia Sandu has noted the substantial contribution of the German assistance programmes in the infrastructure, energy efficiency, local and regional development programmes in the Republic of Moldova, which have exceeded 290 million euros in the last 20 years.

In addition, negotiations have been initiated on the conversion of the Moldovan driving license to the German one, as well as the possibility of signing an agreement on the employment of Moldovan citizens in seasonal agricultural work in Germany. The interest of the German friend and partner towards the Moldovan side is obvious: they want a predictable and secure Moldova from all points of view. This has been confirmed by the German president Steinmeier during his visit to Chisinau from September: "It is in the interest of the European Union to have a stable political and economic development at our eastern border. We are here to assure the Moldovan government of our support."

The political burden of the July 11 early parliamentary elections was extremely stressful, especially for President Maia Sandu and her political party, PAS. The absolute victory of the PAS, obtaining 63 out of a total of 101 seats, has allowed the party to form the government on its own, avoiding the creation of coalitions doomed to failure.

These elections assured the Euro-Atlantic partners of the irreversibility of reform and transformation processes in the Republic of Moldova, based on the principles of good governance and rule of law, and of the firm commitment to strengthen the political and economic association with the EU. At the same time, it was an impetus for the resumption and intensification of contacts at all levels with countries such as Slovakia, Lithuania, USA, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Austria etc, but also with the international organisations - IMF, USAID etc.

With regard to deepening cooperation with the EU in the framework of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), there has been achieved the official establishment of the "Associated Trio" format by signing in May, in Kiev, of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Foreign Ministers of Georgia, Moldova and

Ukraine on advanced cooperation in the field of European integration of the three countries. This common goal was strengthened by the signing of the Batumi Declaration on 19 July by the leaders of the three countries in the presence of the President of the European Council.

New co-operation priorities have been set, including in the field of regional security, signalling to the EU the strong commitment of the Associated Trio to move forward on the European path by setting more ambitious goals in the context of the December 2021 EaP Summit.

What to do about Russia

A sensitive topic on the foreign policy agenda of the Republic of Moldova is the establishment of a constructive and pragmatic partnership with the Russian Federation, taking into account its levers of influence and the multitude of problems accumulated between

the two countries. The rhetoric of the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Moldova has changed with the takeover of full power by a pro-European political party, and the visit to Chisinau, in August, of the deputy head of the Russian Federation administration, Dmitri Kozak, aimed to “examine” the new political situation in Chisinau.

The prospect of a direct meeting between political leaders Maia Sandu and Vladimir Putin depends on the extent to which concrete issues, such as Transnistrian settlement, will be resolved. The meeting of the Moldovan and Russian foreign ministers in Moscow has been an important step in relaunching the political dialogue to activate cooperation at legislative and executive levels.

The gas crisis has highlighted several issues, namely: the systematic vulnerabilities of the energy sector of the Republic of Moldova, the lack of experience and insufficient training of the current government in identifying alternative sources of gas supply, and

the weak position in negotiating the new contract with the Gazprom, which has led to the unilateral approach of the Russian Federation on the terms of the new contract and billing.

Finally, there is a risk of triggering artificial energy crises that provide the necessary tools for energy and political blackmail in relation to the Republic of Moldova. What is certain is that the price for ensuring the country’s energy security is much higher, and in order to avoid new shocks, a smart approach from the new government is needed.

According to public health experts, the current management has failed to effectively manage the pandemic in terms of prevention, follow-up and treatment. As a result, Moldova has a low vaccination rate (944.930 people vaccinated with the second shot), and the healthcare system of the Republic of Moldova is not yet fully operational to ensure access to healthcare services other than those related to the treatment of Covid-19.

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



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