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NEWSLETTER

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Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

TOPICS OF THE EDITION:

- 1.** Natalia Stercul, executive director of the Foreign Policy Association: Russia still has a series of levers of pressure on Moldova, and on the eve of the local elections this will be increasingly felt
- 2.** Editorial by Alexei Tulbure, director of the Oral History Institute of Moldova: How Moldovan-Russian relations have developed: from strategic relations to visible deterioration
- 3.** Ion Tabarta, executive director of the NATO Information and Documentation Center: The Russian Federation is trying to widen the electoral pool for certain pro-Russian actors from the Republic of Moldova
- 4.** Analysis by Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives (PISA): Moldovan-Russian relations and security risks in the context of reducing the number of Russian diplomats in Chisinau

News in Brief

 President Maia Sandu received the "Freedom Fighter" Award 2023, offered by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA). "We are proud to present the 2023 Freedom Fighter Award to President Maia Sandu for leadership in challenging Russia's hybrid assault on Moldova, for supporting Ukraine's struggle for freedom, and for supporting democratic values," CEPA said on August 24. The Forum of the Center for European Policy Analysis 2023 will be held under the slogan "Winning the war. Winning the peace". According to organizers, the event will feature a series of debates focusing on the transatlantic response to Russia's war in Ukraine and how to translate unity into action, strengthen collective security, and achieve continued prosperity. The award will take place during the CEPA Forum from September 26-29, where Maia Sandu is invited as a speaker.

 The nominal average gross monthly salary of an employee in the Republic of Moldova in 2022 was 10,447 lei, an increase by 16.3% compared to 2021. Even though salaries increased, the number of employees on the labour market decreased by 1.3 %, shows the data of the National Bureau of Statistics. In the budget sector, the average gross monthly salary in 2022 was 8,891.1 lei, while in the real sector – 10,954.7 lei (by 23.2% higher than in the budget sector). A total average number of employees of 75.4% were employed in the real sector of the economy, while 24.6% – in the public sector, respectively. The highest salaries were recorded in the field of information and communications, financial and insurance activity, and production and supply of electricity and heat, gas, hot water, and air conditioning. On the other hand, the lowest salaries were received by professionals from the areas that provide accommodation and public catering services, from agriculture, forestry and fishing, and art, recreation and leisure activities.

 The Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova, Dorin Recean, met with his Ukrainian counterpart, Denis Shmigal, in Kiev, on August 24, where they discussed the dynamism of joint projects in the fields of economy, energy, agriculture, infrastructure, and transport. The Moldovan official condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. "Russia and Putin want to restore the Soviet Union and this is becoming more and more obvious to everyone [...] We stand in solidarity with Ukraine. Again, thank you very much for defending Moldova, for defending Europe and also for defending the fundamental values that are the basis of our society", said Recean. In Kiev, Recean also had a meeting with the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. The head from Kiev wrote on a social network that the discussions focused on the development of Ukrainian food transit through the Republic of Moldova and the creation of the relevant infrastructure.

The Republic of Moldova and Russia under the sign of the bilateral relations' freezing



Moldovan Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu with his counterpart Sergei Lavrov during the visit to Moscow on 13 September 2019. Source: Nicu Popescu, Twitter

Russia remains the main source of risk to the national security of the Republic of Moldova, which is also reflected in the declining level of bilateral diplomatic relations. Moscow and Chisinau are in their most antagonistic period since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The present situation is caused by the change in the paradigm of relations in the two states. If until July 2021, the Republic of Moldova was either in the sphere of total influence of Russia, or in a situation of pragmatic relationship, this changed after the coming to power of pro-European forces. Despite

trying to have a polite external relationship with Russia, Moscow became more and more aggressive beginning to press the pressure buttons, a deja-vu that Chisinau felt back in 2013-2014, when it was signing the Association Agreement with the European Union, through the economic

► embargoes imposed that created crises and destabilization at the moment.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 further deepened the rift between the two capitals, and the subsequent positioning of the Republic of Moldova on the side of Ukraine and the condemnation of Russia, bundled with the direct military threats that Chisinau received from several leaders in Moscow, sealed the rupture between the two sides.

The diplomatic scandal between Moscow and Chisinau was inevitable, as all Eastern European states reduced the number of Russian diplomatic staff against the background of either a reply to Russian

threats, or sanctioning the invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, in Moscow, the Moldovan diplomacy operated with six people, while Chisinau hosted almost 100 Russian diplomats and auxiliary staff. On top of that, suspicions of espionage activities carried out by the Russian Embassy in Chisinau intensified.

The scandal of antennas from the Russian diplomatic building in Chisinau was the drop that filled the glass. Thus, almost 50 Russian diplomats packed their luggage and left the Republic of Moldova only on the last day of the August 15 deadline. And this gesture was defiant on the part of Moscow.

What is certain, however, is that Moscow will not stop hostile actions against

Chisinau, but could even intensify them on this background of resentment and frustration. In fact, Russia is increasingly active with muddying the waters in ATU Gagauzia. The strategy would be to create political strongholds for the pro-Russian leaders who started in Orhei, expanded to Comrat and we could see them further in several districts, after the local elections this autumn.

The dissensions are far from over, and the next years – 2023, 2024, 2025 – will be decisive from the perspective of local, presidential, and parliamentary elections, to measure Russia's level of action and influence in Moldova through Moscow-friendly political actors.

Mădălin Necșuțu

Russia still has a series of levers of pressure on Moldova, and on the eve of the local elections this will be increasingly felt

The executive director of the Foreign Policy Association, Natalia Stercul, has talked in an interview for the FES/APE foreign policy bulletin about how the current situation of the diplomatic relations between Chisinau and Moscow came to be. The hostile attitude, determined by the diametrically opposed interests of Russia and the Republic of Moldova, on the part of Moscow, led to a visible cooling between the two capitals, especially against the background of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We also discussed about Russia's influence today in Moldova and the security threats it is posing. Find more about this in the interview below:



■ **How do you see the bilateral relations between Russia and the Republic of Moldova at the moment? Can we say that they are at the lowest level since the collapse of the USSR and the independence of the Republic of Moldova?**

■ At the moment, the bilateral relations between Russia and the Republic of Moldova are actually reduced to a minimum. Russia's war against Ukraine created objective and difficult preconditions for the Moldovan authorities to rethink the approaches of interaction with Russian. Intentions to develop constructive relations have been replaced by alienation, cooling of relations with Russia, and unwillingness to look for other compromises, mutually acceptable solutions to promote bilateral cooperation. The condemnation of Russia's aggressive military actions against neighbouring Ukraine, the decrease in the number of high-level contacts and political dialogue, the deterioration of diplomatic ties, as well as the reduction of trade and turnover between states are the defining characteristics of the Republic of Moldova.

With the beginning of the large-scale invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, national security issues have become key for Moldova. There came an understanding of the importance of developing the country's defence potential and modernizing the army. For the Republic of Moldova, the decision of joining the EU has become a definitive and irrevocable one. As for the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, the 1+1 format is

increasingly considered, while the issue of the withdrawal of Russian troops stationed illegally in the Transnistrian region entered the final declaration of the NATO summit in Vilnius, in which the Republic of Moldova took part. Therefore, it would probably be correct to talk not about a decrease in the level of interaction, but about the movement of Moldova in another direction - towards the civilizational West and the desire to move away from the influence of Russia as much as possible.

Russian invasion of Ukraine, a turning point

■ **Chisinau ordered recently a massive reduction of the Russian diplomatic corps in Chisinau and reaching a parity between the number of diplomats from the two states. What will be the impact of this decision? Is it going to affect the Moldovan citizens living in Russia?**

■ In the case of Moldova and Russia, the number of diplomatic personnel has always varied since the opening of the diplomatic missions of the host countries. The number of Russian diplomats in Moldova significantly exceeded that of the Moldovan diplomats in Russia, which was explained by the specifics of the interaction between the states, being perceived quite naturally, given the historical past and Russia's influence on many processes that took place in Moldova for a long time.

The war in Ukraine radically changed the situation not only in our country, but also in many

other states. There are countries that have significantly reduced the numerical presence of the Russian diplomatic corps on the territories of their states. Parity as a principle of equal representation of the parties, regulated by the Vienna Convention, contains a provision according to which the number of diplomatic personnel can be adjusted according to the dynamics of the situation. In the case of Moldova, when it comes to espionage and external interference in internal affairs, which represent a threat to the sovereignty and national security of the state, reducing the diplomatic staff is an absolutely natural decision. Moscow considers this move by the pro-European authorities as actions "in accordance with the anti-Russian campaign of the collective West", which, however, is expected from Russia.

According to the statements of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the consequences of this unfriendly approach of Chisinau will affect not only the relations of the states, but will primarily affect the citizens of both countries, whose opportunities to receive consular assistance in a timely manner, as well as to maintain business and cultural ties will be significantly limited. The Russian side says that embassy staff simply will not be able to properly provide consular services with reduced staff. In addition, the activities of the Trade Representative Office and the Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Chisinau will have to be curtailed.

For its part, the Moldovan side notes that the remaining number of diplomatic personnel

is sufficient to provide all the necessary services. Most likely, it will be more difficult for the Embassy of the Republic of Moldova in Moscow to protect the interests of Moldovan citizens. If the Russian side takes retaliatory actions to reduce the diplomatic staff of the Republic of Moldova on its territory, a significant number of Moldovan citizens on the territory of the Russian Federation will be deprived of the opportunity to receive qualified diplomatic, legal, and advisory support.

Undoubtedly, retaliatory measures from the Russian side will follow, which can be versatile, as Russia still has a number of levers of pressure on Moldova. On the eve of the local elections, this will become more and more felt, the pro-Russian political forces aimed at destabilizing the country, have already becoming more and more active. In addition, the pro-Russian regions, the north of Moldova, where a significant part of the Russian-speaking population lives, Gagauzia, the Transnistrian region and the localities of the Security Zone and adjacent areas will be used as response measures. However, the Moldovan authorities had to calculate the risks that this step may entail, which apparently turned out to be less significant compared to the ever-present influence of the Russian Federation and its pressure on domestic political processes.

■ Along with this scandal of the reduction of the number of Russian diplomats in Chisinau, have the accusations of espionage or other hostile actions of Russia in the Republic of Moldova also increased? How likely is this hypothesis that Russia is also

carrying out illegal espionage or wiretapping activities through its diplomats in Chisinau?

■ The journalistic investigation carried out by *The Insider* and the local television station *Jurnal TV* about the antennas on the roof of the diplomatic mission became a kind of catalyst for the subsequent reaction of the Moldovan authorities to achieve maximum separation from Russia and reduce its levers of influence in Moldova. Recently, the harsh rhetoric of the Russian Federation against Moldova found more and more immediate and reasoned responses from the Moldovan authorities, although no large-scale measures were taken.

The facts testifying to espionage have become a kind of trigger for practical actions by Moldova in remove Russia on its path towards closer rapprochement with the West. The Russian side denies the accusations of espionage. According to the ambassador of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova, Oleg Vasnetsov, “the espionage scandal is just a pretext to motivate the decision to reduce the number of employees of diplomatic missions”. However, experts say that Russian espionage has intensified its efforts in Moldova since 2015, and the information about this is true.

Russian instruments of influence in the Republic of Moldova

■ How many levers of greater influence has Russia today in Chisinau? Could you please list the most important ones for us and at the same time talk

about how important or not the leverage of Russian gas is in influencing politics in Chisinau?

■ The Russian levers of influence on Moldova are not at all exhausted, they remain and find expression both in the internal political struggle in its various forms and manifestations, the energy problems that affect the living standards of the population, and in the continuous pro-Russian feelings, propaganda and disinformation, which is especially noticeable in the pro-Russian regions. Pro-Russian political forces, fugitive oligarchs continue to enjoy the trust of the population, the elections in Gagauzia being a convincing proof of this. In addition, the political leaders of the already defunct Shor Party have not disappeared and continue their activities. Don't forget cyber attacks and Moldova's vulnerability in this regard.

Russia has always used the gas issue as a political and economic weapon and will continue to follow the same scenario. Efforts to diversify sources are undeniably important, but so far this does not solve the problem holistically. Despite the fact that Moldova has been importing gas from Romania, since December 2022, using the Iași-Ungheni pipeline, the right bank is dependent on the left bank of the Dniester, importing approximately 80% of its electricity from the Cuciurgan plant. Relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol remain very tense. After the expiry of the contract with Gazprom, Ukraine could stop the transit of Russian gas in 2024, and the Transnistrian region will be in a vulnerable position, losing

the Russian gas which it gets for free. Moldova must prepare for this scenario in the context of the reintegration policy. Also, the unpredictability of the future functionality of the Ukrainian energy system under wartime conditions should be considered. Therefore, the problem is not only in the diversification of sources, but also in the storage possibilities, interconnection, and pricing policy. Blackmail with gas will undoubtedly be used by Russia against Moldova.

■ **Can we say today that the decision-makers in Chisinau are freer to make decisions without fear of blackmail, pressure, or threats from Moscow?**

■ Undoubtedly, power structures have become not only freer in decision-making, but also very consistent and decisive in their actions. Of course, this is due to the irreversibility of the European integration course, which opened Moldova's possibility to join the EU and benefit from the support of European partners. All this allows us to move forward and not look back at Moscow's reaction, harsh rhetoric, and blackmail policy.

■ **Will the distancing of Moldovan authorities from Russia produce effects among the population as well? Do you think the pro-European authorities will lose or win electorally from an attitude of detachment towards Moscow?**

■ Political speculation targeting pro-Russian citizens cannot be avoided in this matter. However, this will not have major political effects. Alienation from Russia

proceeded progressively and intensified in Moldova even before the start of the war in Ukraine. Therefore, it is unlikely that the current situation will induce the population of Moldova to change its commitment to the pro-European political course. The factor of distancing from Russia, although it will be used, will not become decisive in the electoral processes.

Western vectors of development, essential for Chisinau

■ **How important for the development of the Republic of Moldova is the proximity to the EU and NATO compared to the proximity to Russia? How do you explain today that Russia and Vladimir Putin still have so many supporters in the Republic of Moldova, even if they are actually less than in previous years?**

■ Rapprochement towards the EU and NATO is the only true way for the development of Moldova's foreign policy and its transformation into a truly democratic state, therefore, for our country, the primary task is to complete the reforms and join the EU.

Putinism is run by an authoritarian regime that has infiltrated Russian political activists, the media, and the Russian judiciary. Corruption at the highest levels of government, disinformation of the population, closing down of independent media, and violation of fundamental rights of citizens are the main features of Putin's policy in Russia. But Putin's popularity

image has fallen significantly since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, including among Russian citizens.

This is convincingly demonstrated by the Russian citizens, who don't want to do anything with Putin's bloody regime, leaving the territory of Russia. Unfortunately, Moldovan society retains features of Russian influence and *Putinism* as a form of conservative, populist, and personalist autocracy. These traits have long been used as additional triggers for political speculation and for dividing lines in society. Often Moldovan politicians themselves have done so to gain additional political bonuses in the power struggle. The results of this, although less significant today, is still the continued support of Russia and Putin in Moldova.

■ **How important is the battle for the "hearts and minds" of Moldovan citizens today, given that Russian propaganda is still high in the Republic of Moldova? What can be done to reduce this phenomenon of misinformation and propaganda?**

■ Maintaining information security remains an important task for the Republic of Moldova. We can see how much effort and financial resources the EU spends on combating Russian propaganda. Therefore, Moldova still has a lot of work to do in this direction to "keep up" with the EU countries. It is important that the legislative initiatives adopted or those in the process of being adopted be implemented and respected in a practical way.

■ **Thank you!**

Editorial

How Moldovan-Russian relations have developed: from strategic relations to visible deterioration

Editorial by Alexei Tulbure

I am writing this editorial at the moment of the lowest level of Moldovan-Russian relations in the last 30 years. Russia has launched a treacherous, aggressive war in Ukraine and has been waging a real hybrid war against the Republic of Moldova: energy blackmail, undermining political stability, cyber attacks, a frantic, anti-Ukrainian, anti-European, and anti-Western propaganda, etc. Moldova quickly withdraws from CIS structures and expels dozens of Russian diplomats. Let's try to understand the essence of what is happening.

The Moldovan-Russian relations in the post-Soviet era went through different periods, but already in the 2000s they ceased to be strategic (although they were still called that). Relative stability was maintained in gas supplies from Russia to Moldova, but problems increased in all other directions. I did not set out to examine the correlation between the degradation of democracy in Russia and the deterioration of its bilateral relations with former Soviet republics, however, there seems to be a connection between them.

The endless politically motivated bans on the import of Moldovan products have practically blocked the access of our producers to the Russian markets. In the Transnistrian region, Russia, contrary to the decisions of the OSCE summit in Istanbul (1999), has still been keeping its troops and weapons, while supporting the unconstitutional authorities there in every possible way (including free gas for Tiraspol), blocking the political resolution of the conflict.



A noticeable cooling and then a deterioration of relations occurred after the pro-European party PAS won the parliamentary elections in 2021. European integration became the absolute priority of the new government, and in a more targeted form - the accession of Moldova to the European Union. This did not leave much room for the so-called equal partnership with East and West approach, which characterized Moldova's foreign policy for several years. This approach suited Moscow quite well, especially since European reforms in Moldova have not gone too well for decades, and the prospect of "going towards West" did not pose a danger to Moldova.

Energy blackmail

This was followed by energy blackmail from Russia and a very difficult heating season in 2021-2022. However, until 24 February 2022, these relations fit very well into the existing paradigm of Russia's interaction with the post-Soviet

world, and after the deterioration of relations, under certain circumstances, another period of rapprochement could come, etc.

February 24, 2022 changed everything. Russia, in violation of international law, unleashed an unprovoked, treacherous, and vile war against Ukraine. Moscow has demonstrated to the whole world that it is ready to destroy in punishment of those who dares independently choose their own development path.

Russia has demonstrated to the whole world that it does not recognize the full sovereignty of the former Soviet republics, considering the post-Soviet countries as territories in its sphere of influence.

The independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova are also seriously threatened. It can be argued with a high degree of probability that, if the armed forces of the aggressor had not been stopped, Russian troops would

already be in Moldova. Even if only the Transnistrian region were occupied, we could forget about Moldova's sovereignty. Independence would turn into an empty phrase.

Intensified hybrid warfare

The inability of Russian troops to break the so-called "southern corridor" along the Black Sea coast to the Transnistrian region of Moldova, forced Moscow to activate other (hybrid) forms of pressure on our country. Gross energy blackmail continued in even more blatant forms in the fall-winter of 2022-2023. During the same period, the Kremlin openly supported the street protests of the anti-European forces, whose goal was to establish a regime loyal to Moscow in Moldova.

Chisinau's reaction to the war in Ukraine and to Moscow's actions against Moldova, from my point of view, is absolutely natural and justified. Russia does not recognize the norms of international law, commits war crimes, and has become a pariah in the international arena. To pretend that nothing is happening and continue "business as usual" is an extremely cynical behaviour. Moldova is a responsible member of the international community, and today it is its duty to contribute to strengthening security in the world. For a long time, we were only consumers of security, but today we are also sponsoring it.

It is difficult for the "people on February 23", that is, those who live and perceive reality as if there was no war and there is no war (I'm reminding here about 6 TV stations for which there was no war), to explain, for example, that today Moldova cannot be neutral towards what is happening in Ukraine.

Is it possible to be "neutral" to injustice, to evil, to the bombing of peaceful cities, to the massacres of civilians?

To be neutral in the destruction of the basic principles, of universal morality that make possible the existence of humans on Earth? No, Moldova will not be neutral towards crimes, because such neutrality is complicity with criminals.

Russia today is killing, trampling on the principles, norms and standards of international law, the morality common to all people, and therefore (in a completely natural way!) the relations of the Republic of Moldova with Moscow could not, in principle, develop according to another scenario.

Escape from the ex-Soviet space

The war has caused tectonic ideological shifts in the region. Ukraine and Moldova no longer perceive themselves as "post-Soviet space". The term itself implies a kind of inextricable dependence on the former political centre of the Soviet world, on Moscow. After 24 February 2022, this dependence was eliminated (including the energy one, which most clearly demonstrates this). And the self-perception mentioned above, expressed in words, also invented in Moscow – "post-Soviet space", "near abroad" – has disappeared.

Ukraine today is probably the most united society on the planet. The only thing is the desire to get rid of Moscow's influence forever and become part of the democratic world and a full member of NATO and the EU. Moldova is not such a consolidated society, but the vast majority of the population is in favour of a more restraint relationship with Russia, unconditionally supporting the country's European integration, i.e. full EU membership. Ukraine and Moldova obtaining the status of EU candidate countries have institutionalized this transition from the "post-Soviet space" to the countries of the free world.

Mentally, the West has included Ukraine and Moldova in the "free world", we

just have to "stand up" to its norms and standards. The fact that this transition took place, and Russia could not resist it in any way (stopping, blocking, etc.), marks a new era - the era of development without looking back at Moscow.

European integration without xenophobia towards Russians

At the same time, we must understand that Moldova has never been Russophobic. Chisinau never conditioned, "decorated" or "coloured" its European choice with xenophobia, in particular, with hatred towards Russia and Russians. Exceptions regarding certain political fringes do not count. I repeat, there is no Russophobia today. It is not Russia and the Russians that Moldova does not accept, but the Nazism emanating from there. It does not accept the fantasy and great power "values" that Putin's Russia is promoting and instilling.

Is there a good future for Moldovan-Russian relations? I'm sure there is. We have a common past, we speak Russian, a significant part of the Moldovan population is closely connected to the high Russian culture and so on. From an economic point of view, it would be great to return with Moldovan products on the Russian market. Moldovan products are traditional for Russians, the market in Russia is also traditional for Moldovans - an excellent condition for cooperation. Bilateral interaction can develop in any direction.

However, all this can happen - this is my deep conviction - only if (or when) certain political changes take place in Russia. The changes that will end the war in Ukraine will return Russia to the ranks of responsible and respected members of the international community. Our relations will improve when Russia respects international law, including the sovereignty and independence of neighbouring countries.

The Russian Federation is trying to widen the electoral pool for certain pro-Russian actors from the Republic of Moldova

The political analyst Ion Tabarta gave an interview for the FES/APE foreign policy bulletin about the Moldovan-Russian relations and their prospects, in the light of the latest major scandal regarding the reduction of the number of Russian diplomats in Chisinau and the accusations of espionage activity carried out by Russia in the Republic of Moldova. We discussed about Moscow's levers of influence, energy security, pro-Russian politicians from Chisinau, but also the pressure points - UTA Gagauza and Transnistria - that Moscow could use to destabilize the Republic of Moldova. We are inviting you to read the full interview below:

■ In light of the most recent events related to the expulsion of Russian diplomats, how do you see the bilateral relations between Russia and the Republic of Moldova at the moment? Can we say they are at their lowest level since the collapse of the USSR and the independence of the Republic of Moldova?

■ Yes, we can say that. Indeed, our relations are quite tense, but this tension is not from yesterday or today. There were constant tensions. I think that after 2009, our relations with the Russian Federation, even if we thought that for a certain period they were pragmatic, they were not. For example, when Vladimiri Filat was prime minister, he tried to build pragmatic relations with Russia, but in the context in which the Republic of Moldova was approaching the



European Union, when it was preparing to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, since 2013, Moscow began to impose economic embargoes.

Later, during the regime of Vladimir Plahotniuc, bilateral relations were just as tense, although some negative aspects were then imitated. Let me remind you about the Plahotniuc-Dodon power binomial. Back then, the Presidency led by Dodon was trying to build a closer relationship with the Russian Federation, while the government, on the contrary, was in a more complicated relationship with Moscow. However, we cannot say that the bilateral relationship was a good one then.

Then we had the 2019-2020 period, when all the power belonged to Igor

Dodon, but even then Dodon, under the slogan of geopolitical balance, tried to change the development vector of the Republic of Moldova from west to east. However, this did not work for Dodon, also because of the mistakes he made.

Now the pro-European government is insistently trying to move towards West. He took an intransigent position on the war in Ukraine. The current government is openly talking about the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, although at the beginning of the conflict, Chisinau did not align to the sanctions. It was clear however that the bilateral relationship will be tense as long as the Republic of Moldova tries to move in the pro-European direction and respect certain international rules, and Chisinau calls things their name.

You can have a good relationship with the Russian Federation only in case of an unequivocal acceptance from the start to be part of its sphere of influence.

Expulsion of Russian diplomats

■ **With this recent episode of the expulsion of Russian diplomats from Chisinau, however, the Republic of Moldova was one of the last countries in the region to reduce the Russian diplomatic staff. Why do you think it took so long compared to neighbouring states?**

■ It is true, but the Russian Federation argues otherwise, namely that Russian diplomats are needed in Chisinau. I then saw that after the incident, they suspended their consular services in the Republic of Moldova for an indefinite period, using this pretext of diplomatic staff reductions. They said that there is simply no one to provide these services or consular duties.

In fact, we must understand that compared to Poland, Romania or the Baltic countries, where there is a large pro-Western adhesion at the level of society and only a small minority of 5-10% pro-Russians, in the Republic of Moldova we have a large number of citizens who are pro-Russian or some who say they are favourable to both the West and the East. Any decision of this kind naturally causes certain reactions. It is a sensitive one for the government.

Moscow's possible reaction

■ **What do you think could be the consequences of such a move on the part of Chisinau, what kind of measures could Moscow respond with?**

■ In addition to what I spoke above about the cancelled consular services, we can mention that list of about 30 people who were declared undesirable on the territory of Russia. But those people, most likely, had no intention of travelling to Russia. It is more a symbolic gesture, because Russia cannot respond equivalently in diplomatic terms, or according to the principle of diplomatic parity, because that would mean Moldova would be left without diplomatic services.

We could probably expect economic consequences as well. We cannot rule out that a number of states allied to Moscow, such as Belarus, can introduce certain embargoes or economic sanctions against Moldovan products. Even a visa regime for Moldovans from Russia is not excluded, but this would be the last measure Russia would resort to.

We are also seeing how certain political actors in Moldova are trying to get into the government, repeatedly using this topic of the recent diplomatic scandal.

Pro-Kremlin partisans

■ **How big do you think is Russia's influence in Chisinau today and how much room for manoeuvre does Russia still have through its "fifth column" in the Republic of Moldova?**

■ We must admit that this "fifth column" of Russia exists in the Republic of Moldova. Maybe it has decreased. We also have the diaspora as a structural element that has changed the balance of forces regarding geopolitical criteria. While before the pro eastern forces dominated, now it is the pro-western ones that dominate.

However, Moldova's pro-European path is irreversible and as long as it remains so, the Russian Federation will insist on the "fifth column". In Moldova, the situation is not like in Western states, where Russia tries to establish anti-Western entities to create confusion or disrupt the public agenda in those states. In Moldova, on the contrary, Russia is trying through the "fifth column" to influence or control political decisions.

We can now see how the geopolitical parties joined efforts with the oligarchic ones. Even if they don't really get along, they still act together in favour of Moscow. In the Moldovan society, such decisions can cost a lot ruling parties.

You asked me earlier why the Republic of Moldova was delaying this decision regarding the Russian diplomats. Probably, the government had already prepared this decision regarding diplomatic parity, but a context was needed for it to be implemented and explained to the public.

I believe that the journalistic investigation - about the antennas on the Russian Embassy building in Chisinau that would have served espionage purposes - was not accidental. It is possible that it was coordinated with certain circles at the level of political decisions. Immediately after that journalistic investigation, a day or two later, Chisinau came up with the political decision to expel the Russian diplomats.

This shows once again that in the Republic of Moldova, those who are pro-Western are not necessarily anti-Russian.

■ **I have seen the latest statements of the spokesperson of the Russian MFA, Maria Zaharova,**

who also attacked the head of the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office, Veronica Dragalin – that she does not care about Moldova and that she could go back to the USA at any time. How big is Moscow's interest in sabotaging the justice reform in the Republic of Moldova?

■ It is of great interest because Russia is no longer a state governed by law or with functional institutions. Russia is rather a state formation without institutions that maintains good relations with authoritarian regimes, some of which do not even have any ideology, as happened, for example, in the 20th century.

Any democratic state with functional institutions will not organically be part of the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation. Moscow does not want reforms in Chisinau, instead it wants to keep it in the grey area, precisely so that the Republic of Moldova remains in its sphere of influence. In other words, Russia wants to have control over political decisions in Chisinau.

That is why it is vital for the Russian Federation, from a geopolitical perspective, that the reforms fail in the Republic of Moldova. In such a scenario, the political rating of the current pro-European government will obviously decrease. Unfortunately, the government also contributes to this situation.

Solutions for combating Russian disinformation

■ **Despite the efforts made, the consequences of the hybrid war waged by Russia, especially through**

the propaganda in the Republic of Moldova, can be seen with the naked eye. How do you assess the level of Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova today and what could be the possible solutions to this problem?

■ Unfortunately, the solutions can only be long-lasting. We cannot say that we have fought the propaganda, so much so that this phenomenon of propaganda is now not only in the classical conventional area - radios, televisions or written newspapers.

Currently, we see that many of these elements of propaganda have moved to virtual space, to social networks, to Telegram channels, and so it is harder to fight it.

I think we can go by two methods here. One is the restrictive method, but we need to have clear legal instruments, through which we can try to reduce this propaganda, while the second method has to do with an important element - that of media education.

We can come up with many restrictive instruments, but as long as we do not educate society through "media literacy", it will be complicated to fight propaganda.

An example of this is UTA Gagauza, where there is an eminently pro-Russian society. You can't restrict anything there. It won't work. Maybe only in Chisinau, where people have a different vision and a different mentality. From a structural point of view, we can say that we have about two or three Moldovan peoples [in mentality - n.r.].

It is one thing to come up with certain restrictions in a more informed and educated environment and another thing to impose such restrictions in an environment that feeds from propaganda. You can't just go there with restrictive methods, you have to apply educational means there.

In my opinion, propaganda works on several levels, on various types of audiences. Sometimes certain messages are promoted that might not resonate with the average educated person, but resonate with others. We remember the ridiculous "fake news" - the pandemic showed this clearly, or the episode from the presidential elections with the fake that Maia Sandu will bring 30,000 Syrian refugees to the Republic of Moldova. These are just a few examples.

■ **Mr. Tabarta, is Moldova secured from an energy point of view for this winter or can we still expect surprises from Russia through this energy leverage?**

■ We can now say that when it comes to energy we are more prepared compared to the past years. The problem of gas supply from alternative sources no longer exists – we are now buying from the European exchange at a better price.

We now also have the Iasi-Ungheni gas pipeline, which many said, with bad intentions, that it is just a piece of scrap metal. Currently we can see the utility of this gas pipeline.

The energy problem for the Republic of Moldova, however, is electricity. We have an indirect dependence on

Russia in this regard. The Republic of Moldova depends on the electricity produced at the Cuciurgan plant in the Transnistrian region. Chisinau buys about 80-90% of its electricity from there. Before the fall of last year, we were taking 70% from Transnistria and 30% from Ukraine.

But now Ukraine has its problems and no longer has the possibility to export to the Republic of Moldova. Even the electricity that comes to the Republic of Moldova through the European ENTSO-E system enters the high voltage line that partially passes through the territory of Ukraine, but the distribution takes place through the separatist region of Transnistria.

From this point of view, the Republic of Moldova is vulnerable, if we refer to energy security. When we build those electricity interconnection lines with Romania, this dependence on Transnistria will disappear.

I would also like to bring up a point related to natural gas. Russia could stop deliveries to the Republic of Moldova and then a problem arises for the Transnistrian region. We know that all the natural gas that we are importing now through the contract with Gazprom goes to the Transnistrian region, which is used to produce electricity that is delivered to the right bank of the Dniester.

Here we have this interdependence, but if Russia does not deliver natural gas to the Republic of Moldova, including the Transnistrian region, Chisinau will have to do something about it. In the Transnistrian region we have Moldovan citizens, although, from a constitutional point of view, they are not subordinate.

From a legal point of view, however, the Republic of Moldova bears responsibility and cannot abandon that territory. However, there could also be the problem of Moldova buying gas on the free market for the left bank, and the Tiraspol regime not paying for it.

Here we have some contradictions that will have to be resolved later. If we solve them and there is no more energy dependence on Russia, this dependence will no longer depend on parity as it is now between the right bank and the Transnistrian region. The balance of forces will definitely change and will be one in favour of Chisinau.

The powder keg

■ **Do Transnistria and Gagauzia remain the pressure points that Russia can press at the moment, or do the authorities in Chisinau have the situation under control?**

■ The paradox is that, in fact, the pressure point is UTA Gagauzia. It is not the Transnistrian region. The Transnistrian region is outside the political processes in the Republic of Moldova.

We saw how previously Vladimir Plahotniuc or Igor Dodon tried to bring as many voters as possible from the Transnistrian region and how in 2021 the two even tried to move some polling stations to the territory which was not constitutionally controlled by Chisinau.

The problem, however, is UTA Gagauzia, because this territory is

in the constitutional field of the Republic of Moldova and is used by the Russian Federation to increase the electoral pool for pro-Russian political forces. We are talking here especially about the Șor Party. All this party does is to buy the electoral vote in Gagauzia with those cheap and risky promises.

Ilan Șor is interested in widening his electoral pool. He was a political experiment in Orhei, then he expanded his activity to Balti and Taraclia, and now he is trying to have a monolithic electorate in Gagauzia.

Most likely, Ilan Șor's parties will go into one political block and try to concentrate the votes. We now have the Chance Party, which is a political derivative of the Șor Party, the Renaissance Party and what we lack at the moment is a party with the letter "O" to form the ȘOR acronym.

What the Russian Federation wants to do now, through its political actors, is to widen the electoral pool for certain pro-Russian actors from the Republic of Moldova. Thus, UTA Gagauzia is an element that, at the level of public perception, is a threat to the current government.

Currently, the government does not know what to do with the "Gagauz issue" and we must admit this. The fact that PAS now chose not to get involved is not in its favour. PAS did not participate in the elections there as it was clear from the start that it did not have any chance, however I think it should have had a candidate in the recent elections for the position of governor of Gagauzia.

■ **Thank you!**

SECURITY & DEFENCE DIGEST

The Platform for Security and Defense Initiatives

Moldovan-Russian relations and security risks in the context of reducing the number of Russian diplomats in Chisinau

On August 14, an important media headline were the two coaches with dozens of Russian diplomats and their families, but also technical-administrative employees, who left for the airport to leave the territory of the Republic of Moldova after the Chisinau authorities had decided to reduce the staff of the Russian Embassy.

This decision was taken „ as a result of numerous unfriendly actions against the Republic of Moldova”, as well as the “destabilization” trends of the country. Some experts claim that the secret services in Moscow coordinate Russia’s interests in South-eastern Europe through the Russian diplomatic mission in Chisinau, a “command centre” in the region. Moreover, once “the strategic partner” of Moldova is declared “aggressor” by the international community.

It is worth mentioning that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, several European countries such as the Baltic states, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Romania, have reduced the numerical presence of the Russian diplomatic corps, invoking the principle of parity. In the case of the Republic of Moldova and the

Russian Federation, the disparity has existed since the opening of diplomatic offices, to the detriment of Chisinau. Actually, relations from the perspective of “large states” and “small states ” could mean that large states have larger diplomatic missions and small states have smaller ones, and the lack of parity is a well-known situation in international relations.

This does not mean, however, that relations between states must be unequal or give the most numerous one the right not to respect the sovereignty of the state of residence. In addition, beyond the employees accredited to the Embassy of the Russian Federation, there are a number of Russian diplomats operating at the Russian Center for Culture and Science, a Russian propaganda tool, but also at the Migration Bureau within the

Consular Section of the Embassy, which are extremely discreet in carrying out its activities. Following the actions of the Moldovan state, statements were to be expected from the Russian authorities that “this unfriendly step of official Chisinau will undoubtedly have consequences on the Russian-Moldovan relations” (from the statement of the Russian Foreign Ministry). Such statements are part of Moscow’s traditional instruments that fuel the fear of Moldovan citizens towards the Russian Federation.

Risk analysis and work scenarios

In this context, although it is necessary to carry out an analysis of the risks to be overcome, however, in the context of the current security environment, it is important to clarify the “actions” or “inactions” that threatens the country’s security situation.

In retrospect of the country’s security situation, after independence and

the military conflict on the Dniester, Moldovan-Russian relations could not be characterized as friendly. Although there were exceptions, when there were conditions for a potential political rapprochement (during the governments of the political left wing, e.g. the Communist Party and the Socialist Party), the alleged friendship and good understanding were rather a precondition of diplomatic customs (natural for international relations) and the masking of reality for part of the electorate than a deviation from the created normality.

Respectively, since the declaration of independence of the Republic of Moldova in 1991, in the Eastern European space, although there has been a metamorphosis of mentality, we cannot neglect the implications of the policy of domination of the Russian Federation in this space, as a result of the influence of Russian propaganda and other hybrid instruments. At the same time, the existence of an unresolved conflict on the left bank of the Dniester River, the Transnistrian region, has direct implications for national security.

Moreover, Moscow's refusal to implement the commitments made under the 1999 Istanbul Convention regarding the withdrawal of troops and military equipment from the Transnistrian region not only creates a major impediment to resolving the Transnistrian conflict, but also limits confidence in such relations against the background of the Moscow policy to maintain, at any cost, its presence in this region.

We cannot neglect the geopolitical perspective in the relations between the Russian Federation

and the Republic of Moldova which is determined by some "messianic" projects of Moscow inspired by history to adopt an expansionist and neo-imperial policy promoted by Alexandr Dughin. The latter advocated the rapprochement of totally opposite cultures and ideologies in order to maintain the tradition of great power for Russia as the successor of Byzantium. Moreover, appropriating the status of the third Rome (the egoism of the Russian Orthodox culture), the Russian Federation also assigned itself the status of a state that has the right to decide the fate of the "near abroad" ("space of interest" with Moldova being a part). Here we are talking about the perspective of "strong state" and "weak state" (explained by Barry Buzan), i.e. weak states have a very low level of "societal cohesion", respectively they are sensitive to the influence policy of great powers such as the Russian Federation in the situation of Moldova.

The Republic of Moldova, in one way or another, previously accepted the policy of vassalage, but in different periods this policy had certain limits. For example, ex-president Vladimir Voronin's refusal to sign the *Kozak Plan* angered the Kremlin, but at the same time placed this issue as a red line in the relationship between the two states. At the same time, we cannot neglect the support of the West in rejecting the Russian offer, which implied the federalization of the Republic of Moldova, or, based on the balance of forces and means between the two states, possibly even its "Transnistrianisation". It was the West that later gave Moldova a helping hand in reducing the

negative effects of the economic blockade imposed by Russia as a result of that diplomatic failure.

Extending influence through soft power tools

As a result of the mentioned red line, the Russian Federation's strategy towards relations with the Republic of Moldova continued to be characterized by the expansion of influence through the "soft power" element. Although the parties supported by it have not yet obtained absolute power in the Republic of Moldova, they have been, as a rule, the second largest political force that has had the tendency to take over the government in whole or in part in different government configurations.

In its "soft power" effort, Russia also uses local actors such as cultural, sports or religious NGOs. In addition to substantial capital investments, all this machinery required the creation (through secondment or local recruitment) of a complex network of human personnel. Moreover, such actions require both legislative and operational measures from the Republic of Moldova.

Respectively, the drafting and adoption of the three laws of the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), which establish its instructional powers in ensuring state security and combating foreign espionage, as well as the recent actions regarding the destruction of a Kremlin espionage network in Moldova, are important instruments in reducing foreign involvement in destabilizing and influencing

internal political processes in the country.

To support the need for preventive actions to counter such threats, we would like to remind you that the effects felt by Moldova for not accepting the *Kozak plan* did not stop only at the economic blockade of 2006. In mid-February 2013, the Russian Federation opened, without Moldova's consent, a consulate in Tirapsol. Following that, in 2014 and 2021 there were discussions about opening a consulate of the Russian Federation in Comrat.

In autumn of 2021, the existence of a strategic document drafted by the Russian presidential administration describing a plan to make Moldova dependent on Moscow was discussed in the media. One of the objectives established by the authors of the document was to compel the Republic of Moldova to join the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and to increase its participation in the Eurasian Economic Union (EUEA). Among the short-term objectives was the creation of a network of non-governmental organizations to promote the development of Russian-Moldovan relations and the opening of a Russian consulate general in Gagauzia in the context of the massive distribution of Russian passports to the native population.

Fear of irritating Moscow and the lack of measures

Although the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the conflict in eastern Ukraine should have brought the

issue of national security and defence back onto the political agenda of Chisinau, this did not happen. The authorities in Chisinau continued, in their characteristic manner, to feign an impartial position for fear of upsetting the Russian Federation, especially since from that moment, from a military point of view, Chisinau was under Moscow's immediate range of action.

The invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 is another event that generates opportunities to reset Moldovan-Russian relations. Russia is in flagrant violation of international law by invading Ukraine and one estimate is that it intends to regain political and administrative control over an area over which it claims historical rights (Putin's 1989 NATO withdrawal ultimatum).

In this situation, Moldova being one of the first countries threatened, except for the statements of Moldovan officials regarding the condemnation of Russia's behaviour in the neighbouring country, consistent actions were not taken. Obviously, the discussions regarding the inaction of the Government in Chisinau started to be interpretative, especially after Ukraine prevented the materialization of the Russian plan to create a terrestrial corridor to Transnistria. Moreover, there followed an example of Moscow's diplomatic disregard for Chisinau by ignoring requests for explanations regarding the collateral strikes on the national territory as a result of the Russian missile raids on Ukraine.

For this reason, the recent announcement by the Chisinau authorities regarding the expulsion of dozens of Russian diplomats surprised not only the local public opinion, but probably also the international community. This measure, although a delayed one, is an indicator of the maturity of the state of the Republic of Moldova, but also a political determination to leave the sphere of influence of this state with imperialist interests. At the same time, it is important to have a preventive approach and to analyse scenarios that could result following the decision of the Moldova authorities, although they could anyway be related to the events in the region, referring directly to the situation in Ukraine.

The first reaction of Russia informed with a view to a tailored response, as a result of which the citizens of the Republic of Moldova will be the ones to suffer. We remind you that previously, in February, Moscow launched threats against Chisinau, with the Russian Foreign Minister declaring that the Republic of Moldova could follow the path of Ukraine.

This happened after president Maia Sandu warned that Russia is preparing a coup in which "criminal groups, such as the Șor party all its derivatives" will be involved. Regarding the statement of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, it could be interpreted as a threat, however, Moscow deciphered the response by taking actions to limit consular and cultural services for citizens. To replicate

the symmetry of the action, in the case of diplomatic parity, we do not necessarily expect the expulsion of Moldovan diplomats from Moscow, but the continuation of the manipulation of citizens by Moscow, for example.

Russia's response and risks that can be countered with more action

On August 18, the first response followed - several officials from Chisinau were banned from entering Russia (18 PAS deputies and two other people, namely the deputy head of the Border Police, Oleg Bucataru, and the director of the Independent Press Association, Petru Macovei).

Another scenario is inciting spirits and political destabilization through "proxy" actors who have certain limits of action at the moment. This scenario is not new, because it is not the first decade in which the Kremlin tries to destabilize the internal political situation in Moldova. Thus, its hybrid

instruments will try to keep up its pace further.

Hybrid threats associated with Russia aim to undermine the legitimacy of the government in Chisinau in favour of pro-Russian and/or Eurosceptic factions. This objective is closely linked to the upcoming local elections in 2023, followed by the presidential elections in 2024 and the parliamentary elections in 2025.

In this context, it was necessary and timely for the EU to include the Russian hybrid warfare approach as an area of assistance by launching in April the EU Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova (EUMP) within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to increase the resilience of the country's security sector. Both the EU and the current government of the Republic of Moldova anticipate that the EUMP could effectively mitigate the risks of Russian hybrid interference in the electoral processes.

The spectrum of Russian threats ranges from Russian military presence in the Transnistrian region to information campaigns that amplify and harmonize the political and socioeconomic challenges facing the Moldovan authorities. These efforts aim to fuel public discontent, particularly in regions with a strong Russian cultural affiliation, such as the Gagauz autonomy.

Finally, we can say that the Russian response to the expulsion of its diplomatic staff will not have a major impact on Moldova, since Russia's levers of influence are weakened as a result of the regional ordeal that it alone created. Compared to other times and other circumstances, Russia does not allow itself the luxury of organizing 'custom' strategies, especially in the context of the events in Ukraine. Moreover, the limitation of Russia's geographical access to Moldova is an opportunity for it because it gives it the time for prophylaxis, filtering, and cleaning the national territory from disruptive elements acting against the national interest.

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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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