

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

# NEWSLETTER

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## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

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### TOPICS OF THE EDITION:

- 1.** *Oazu Nantoi, MP, PAS: I have not seen the government in Chisinau to initiate coherent projects or policies that would lead to the reintegration of people from Transnistria*
- 2.** *Editorial, Irina Tabaranu, journalist with the zonadesecuritate.md: Is it possible in the EU without the Transnistrian region?*
- 3.** *Veaceslav Ionita, expert with IDIS "Viitorul": The overnight reintegration of the Transnistrian region would be a problem for us*
- 4.** *Analysis, Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives (PISA): The National Security Strategy project at the stage of public consultations regarding the Transnistrian issue*

### News in Brief



The electricity supply contract signed on October 25 with the Cuciurgan Power Plant is mutually beneficial for Chisinau and Tiraspol, said the Minister of Energy, Victor Parlicov, in an interview for the Radio Chisinau. On the one hand, the agreement provides electricity at an advantageous price for Chisinau, and on the other, it supports the population on the left side of the Dniester. "Of course, there is flexibility in this contract. Volumes are also adjusted along the way. But the most important thing is that we keep the dialogue going. Neither party would benefit if we did not enter into this contract. We wanted to offer predictability both for those on the left side of the Dniester and for our consumers in terms of price," said the Minister of Energy. Parlicov referred to the current relationship with the left bank as much healthier than before. The minister also stated that a contract was signed only until the end of next year, because then the transit contract for Russian gas on Ukrainian territory that reaches the Transnistrian region expires. The cost per megawatt will remain unchanged – 66 US dollars.



The European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, and the President of the European Investment Bank (EIB), Werner Hoyer, formalized on October 25 a financial package through which the European Commission will provide an investment grant worth €12 million for the project EIB Global rehabilitation and modernization of two key sections of railway lines in Moldova. Backed by a follow-on €42 million loan from EIB Global, the upgraded rail infrastructure will not only improve the country's domestic connectivity, but also provide an important export route for Ukraine. The rehabilitation of the north-south railway corridor of Moldova will be a central element of this project. It provides an essential link between western Ukraine and key ports on the Danube and Prut, providing access to international waters. The improved railway connection between Moldova and Ukraine will stimulate both Ukrainian exports and the economy of the Republic of Moldova, especially in the context of the "EU-Ukraine Solidarity Colours" initiative.



Prime Minister Dorin Recean met on October 25 with high officials of the European Commission, during a visit to Brussels. He referred to the effort to implement the nine recommendations formulated by the European Commission, stressing that the Moldovan authorities continue to work to provide the European Commission with a solid basis for recommending the launch of accession negotiations at the end of this year. "Moldova's future is in the European Union, and the solidarity demonstrated by the EU is further proof that our country is part of the European family. We count on your support and are committed to further progress in implementing the Commission's recommendations. The opening of accession negotiations at the end of this year is a strategic priority for the Government I lead," said Prime Minister Dorin Recean.

## Transnistria, the "Achilles' heel" in the European path of Moldova



The building of the so-called Transnistrian Parliament. Photo: Mădălin Necșuțu

The integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU with a still unresolved frozen conflict on its territory still raises many question marks. Officials in Brussels say this is possible. The question is whether everything depends on the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine or not. Officials in Chisinau still have no

contingency plans in sight for the reintegration of this territory, one anchored in a thoroughly Soviet mentality where human rights abuses, organized crime and fear reign over the approximately 300,000 people left in this enclave fallen for several years in the hands of local oligarchs and politically controlled de facto by Moscow.

While some local businessmen have stayed in the West for a long time, where they keep most of their money, Russia maintains this "forward base of operations" of all kinds in the proximity of the EU and NATO. The goal is a precise one - to prevent the Republic of Moldova from

► advancing on the European path. If for three decades Moscow has fortified the Transnistrian region from all points of view - economic, military and social - in recent years, Russia has been advancing more and more in the territory constitutionally controlled by the Moldovan authorities, through electoral fraud, the “Achilles’ heel” of an impoverished population and a very shaky law enforcement system.

In the southern region of the Gagauz autonomy, Moscow is trying a “transnistrianization” under the relatively passive eyes or without an adequate response from Chisinau. The state shows obvious signs of weakness. The competent institutions were not able to stop the obvious frauds committed during the election of the governor of Gagauzia in May of this year.

Even if we accept the scenario in which the Transnistrian region will de facto capsize at the end of next year, after Ukraine no longer allows the transit of Russian gas to Moldova, including the Transnistrian region, the humanitarian problems will only spill over to Chisinau. The local oligarchs will pack what they can in a hurry and will most likely retire permanently to Germany, where they have been running their businesses successfully for several years, and Russia will have to give up a number of advantages.

However, Russia planted the seeds of long-term evil by passporting about 220,000 Transnistrians. If Chisinau does not cancel these passports, it will not democratize the space, will not empty it of Russian media propaganda and will not mentally connect it to Chisinau and European values. The risk of a Trojan horse inside Moldova then will be a permanent one. Even so, this process will not

happen overnight. We need a lot of money that can only come from international donors, policies and firm reintegration plans designed with the help of the West that will no longer cling to Russia’s interests in the region and be based on lots of domestic political will.

Russia will try to thwart all these movements, and without drastic measures against those who work openly against state power in the service of foreign powers, the European future does not sound very good for the Republic of Moldova anyway. All efforts will be herculean, and the European forces cannot afford any failure for another electoral cycle. Everything is going to be played out in this period of a little more than a year and a half in the local, presidential, and parliamentary elections.

*Mădălin Neceșuțu*

## ***I have not seen the government in Chisinau to initiate coherent projects or policies that would lead to the reintegration of people from Transnistria***

***D***eputy Oazu Nantoi, an MP and expert in the Transnistrian issue, gave us an interview for the FES/APE foreign policy newsletter in which we talked about possible scenarios of reintegration of the secessionist region on the left of the Dniester. We have discussed Moscow’s opposition to such a project and how coherent the Chisinau policies are, as well as those of the Western partners, in this regard. Read the full interview in the lines below:

■ Mr. Nantoi, is the European integration of Moldova together with the Transnistrian region, possible before the final resolution of this conflict? There is still talk of the Cyprus precedent, but is European integration conceivable with a separatist enclave that also has Russian soldiers on its territory?



■ The question is a fundamental one, but the answer to this question depends on several factors, both external and internal. The first and main external factor is the developments in the military conflict between Ukraine and the Russian

Federation. The mass media, but also some experts, have created exaggerated expectations regarding Ukraine’s counteroffensive in the spring of 2023. However, we see that the situation on the front line is a dramatic one. Russia still has

more human resources, has superiority in some categories of weaponry, first of all, aviation, etc. And it is extremely difficult for the Ukrainian side to retaliate against the Russian Federations, which in the meantime has learned to fight compared to what it was in February 2022. And yet, the situation on the front line is that factor that will determine the future and the situation on the left bank of the Dniester. The second point is that what we call the Transnistrian conflict can be defined as a hybrid conflict. On the one hand, no one can deny that the Russian Federation controls this region and has not given up the idea of imposing, under the pretext of the so-called conflict resolution, a special legal status guaranteed with certainty, as Russian diplomacy said, by which to maintain control over the entire Republic of Moldova.

I do not believe that the Russian Federation will give up on this idea, taking into account the obvious hybrid war that the Russian Federation is waging against the society and the current Moldovan government. The Russian Federation still hopes that the hybrid war will end up in the failure of the current government, a crisis, collapse, and then the time will come for a peaceful settlement, under the baton of the Kremlin conductors. But this is purely hypothetical.

In reality, if we look more pragmatically at what is called Transnistria, we know that the absolute majority of the residents on the left side of the Dniester are citizens of the Republic of Moldova, even if not all holders of IDs and passports of the Republic of Moldova consider themselves loyal citizens. However, this is a very important aspect. On 15 November 2020, when the second round of the presidential elections took place in Moldova, of those who came or were even brought from the left bank to vote for Igor Dodon, between 14-20% voted for Maia Sandu.

When last year, on 24 February 2023, rumours and fake news were spread on the left bank of the Dniester about a possible aggression of Ukraine against

Transnistria and a possible mobilization, for example, the people on the left bank rushed to take refuge on the right bank of the Dniester. So it is obvious that many people from the left bank of the Dniester perceive the right bank as a refuge, as an island of stability, predictability and with more guarantees of peace.

Not to mention the economic component, when all economic agents on the left side of the Dniester are registered in Chisinau and carry out import-export operations based on documents issued by the Customs Department of the Republic of Moldova. They present themselves to the Republic of Moldova as loyal economic agents. So, what moves economically on the left bank depends 100% on the position of the officials in Chisinau.

There is also this “enigma” of the energy sector, where the Russian Federation delivers gas for free, and from that gas the electricity that we use on the right bank is generated, thus maintaining the regime on the left bank of the Dniester. As more and more people understand, this is also a blackmail lever on the part of the Russian Federation, as Moscow can cut off these gas supplies. And then the right bank will collide with the very stressful prospect of taking control of the left bank, which will be an absolutely bankrupt territory.

### ***The urgent need for demilitarization***

#### ■ **What would be the solutions, Mr. Nantoi?**

■ At the same time, I would like to emphasize that I have never had a light attitude towards the reunification of the Republic of Moldova, for two reasons. The first, during decades, multiple programmes were carried out with millions and millions of wasted euros on “confidence building”, etc. However, I do not see a fundamental issue being discussed, neither on the right bank nor in the communication of the Moldovan officials with friends and development partners - the demilitarization of this region.

However, the international community has the experience when mechanisms were applied and demilitarization processes were carried out in conflict zones, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1996, when this scenario was realized, the Dayton agreements signed in Paris were reached. Some time has passed and over 25 years, realities have changed dramatically, and so has the international situation. Anyway, the problem remains and, in my opinion, there must be a dialogue between NATO and the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, first of all, so that the necessary mechanisms and resources for the peaceful demilitarization of the Transnistrian region can be prepared in time.

On the left side of the Dniester, there are no demented people to commit suicide, but the demilitarization of the region is needed anyway. Several years ago, I was saying that there is a need for a programme to repatriate some to the Russian Federation, but this issue is not even discussed.

I am not ready to be categorical about the applicability of the Cyprus model for the Republic of Moldova or not.

On the 30th anniversary of the reunification of the two Germanys, Mrs Merkel said that the process of reunification of the two Germanys is still far from over. And if we look at how people in the territories of the former GDR vote compared to the rest of the German territory, we see that some cleavages and some contrasts of mentality have been preserved, despite the fact that the reunification of the two Germanys was a desired process. And despite the fact that Federal Germany had a national fund where financial resources were accumulated to cover the reintegration process.

So, it is a very painstaking and long-lasting process, over electoral cycles, after which any difference in perception of the realities on the left and right banks of the Nist must disappear. Either way,

we have what we have, especially if we look at the Gagauz autonomy. Despite the fact that the law [granting autonomy to Comrat] was voted in 1994, until now, I have not seen on the part of the Chisinau governments, the initiation of some projects, some long-term coherent policies, which would have led to the integration of our fellow citizens. Not to their assimilation, but to their integration in the mental space of the Moldovan society.

### ***The legacy of distorted mentalities***

■ **Perhaps there is need for more policies for the young generation in the Transnistrian region, but also in the Gagauz autonomy?**

■ The Friedrich Ebert Foundation Moldova has published recently the Youth Study, the respondents being young people aged 5-29 from the Republic of Moldova. In addition to the fact that 50% of the respondents reported that they will leave the country, another very unpleasant and alarming thing has been noted. For example, in the Autonomous Region of Gagauzia, young people are carriers of almost the same clichés as their parents and grandparents.

Consequently, we can talk about the bankruptcy of the educational system in the Republic of Moldova and the lack of coherent policies to consolidate the Moldovan society and its civic cohesion based on the criterion of citizenship. And if we look at the European Union, both the European bureaucracy and EU politicians are under the impression of the shock experienced by the frontal aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. EU politicians even admit their past mistakes.

I have attended various meetings with experts from Germany, where they speak frankly about the political mistakes promoted by Germany in relation to the Putin regime. The pendulum has swung in the other direction, and the EU shows maximum openness towards the Republic

of Moldova, in particular. Yes, it is also about Ukraine, but Ukraine is in a state of war. However, for the Republic of Moldova, which is geographically protected by Ukraine, there is maximum openness.

We heard that the Republic of Moldova could become a member country of the EU without the resolution of the conflict in the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova. But I don't know what the EU will look like in a few years, because we see that some populist political movements are consolidating in some EU states, and Hungary is an example.

I think that it is extremely risky for the Moldovan society and for the political class, which identifies with the perspective of European integration, that we join the EU without Transnistria.

First, it overlooks the next very important point. Those residents on the left side of the Dniester who sympathize with the Republic of Moldova feel betrayed. Secondly, there is no guarantee that in 5-7 years the attitude towards the non-resolution of this conflict will not change. I believe the society and the political class should reconsider their attitude.

### ***Forced cohabitation, without solutions***

■ **How important is the inclusion of the Transnistrian issue in the new national security strategy and how will this change in the perspective of state institutions to solve this conflict?**

■ On 19 November 2001 the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Russian Federation was signed, where in the preamble it is fixed that the Russian Federation is the guarantor for the Republic of Moldova. This treaty was automatically extended for 10 years in May 2021, having been ratified by the Parliaments of both states. The fact that we have a national strategy in which for the first time it was frankly stated that the Russian Federation is the main threat to the Republic of Moldova means that we

have said the letter A in the alphabet, but there is still a long way to Z.

I am quite sceptical, given the fact that it will soon be three years since President Maia Sandu took office and there are two years of PAS government, and in relation to this issue we do not have any decisive and consistent position of the state regarding the human rights defense policies on the left side of the Dniester, especially of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova.

We are witnessing a non-transparent policy of concubinage with this regime. I mean the energy aspect and more. For this reason, the publication of this draft strategy will not produce big results.

At the same time, in the draft strategy that I read, with regard to the Transnistrian problem, it is even mentioned that it will be solved exclusively by peaceful and diplomatic means. The problem of dialogue with the population on the left bank of the Dniester, the defence of human rights, and the demilitarization process of the region are missing in the Strategy. These are very important though.

The demilitarization process cannot be achieved if it goes along the lines of diplomatic relations, diplomatic communication with the Kremlin administration. Even if Putin is gone, the situation in the Russian Federation is such that, without being defeated as Nazi Germany was, this revenge regime will retain both its essence and its grasp.

■ **Does the Republic of Moldova have a contingency plan developed for the reintegration of the Transnistrian region, especially given that at the end of next year, Ukraine, most likely, will not renew the transit agreement of Russian gas on its territory, therefore also to Moldova and the Transnistrian region? What can we expect from this?**

■ The question is full of unknowns and I am not ready to give the answer. I

have attended meetings that were not public with decision-makers involved in the formulation of policies regarding the left bank, and I know that at least some activities have started in terms of estimating the costs [of the reintegration of Transnistria]. We have to be aware that the situation can take an unexpected turn and we must be prepared for it.

First, we must have a vision, and then we must have draft action plans in areas that can be corrected. The Republic of Moldova is reuniting, and this means that the Ministry of Education must have an action plan based on which the educational institutions on the left of the Dniester, within a reasonable period of three months or a maximum of half a year, will switch to teaching based on the curriculum of the Republic of Moldova.

The problem of pensioners in the Transnistrian region can be solved more simply, if we don't think about the sums of money. But the question arises again - if on the left of the Dniester there are retired veterans of the force structures that committed crimes against the Republic of Moldova, how do we proceed with this category of pensioners?

It is also about the economic field and the property problem - based on which criteria will we recognize or not the privatizations on the left side of the Dniester, the right to property?

Not to mention the fact that the Cuciurgan Power Plant is part of the Russian energy group Inter-RAO. When Mr. Ion Chicu was prime minister, I asked him for an answer regarding who is the legal owner of the Cuciurgan Power Plant. I received answers from five institutions, but none concrete to my question.

If in the National Security Strategy we indicated Russia as the main threat, this does not oblige us to go further, including changing the attitude towards the problem of the conflict in the eastern districts of the Republic of Moldova.

### ***Moscow's Pawns and Messengers***

■ **The so-called foreign minister from Tiraspol, Vitalie Ignatiev, recently stated in an interview with the Russian press that, "both Chisinau and Brussels have realized that Transnistria is a completely separate state entity" and that there will come a time, soon, when this reality will be formalized. How do you see such statements?**

■ This Ignatiev, who was born in Odessa, is just a parrot of the Kremlin and in the interview given to the RIA Novosti agency, the ideas are not his. It was Kremlin that dictated to him what to say. In December 2021, a letter addressed by the alleged leader Vadim Krasnoselski to President Maia Sandu appeared. In that letter, Krasnoselski suggested to Maia Sandu to sit down at the negotiating table, and solve the citizens' problems in the 1 + 1 format. Moreover, in parallel, Dmitri Kozak fled to Vienna to try to revive the '5 + 2' negotiation format. I was then called by an important journalist from Moscow who asked my opinion on that. I laughed then ironically and said: did they order you to collect information from me? I told him: your scenario in which Krasnoselski, to the instructions of the Kremlin, addresses the president of Moldova to restart the negotiation process for Transnistria, in order to facilitate the betrayal of Ukraine by the West, will not work

So, what Ignatiev and Krasnoselski say is humiliating for us, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, for the simple reason that these puppets from Tiraspol feel safe as long as our society is indifferent and the political class is preoccupied with other issues.

### ***Obsolete negotiation format***

■ **Negotiations in the 5+2 format have not taken place for about four years. Is this format still relevant? Which format of negotiations do you see as viable in the current context of the war in the vicinity of Moldova?**

■ If we go back in time, to 2004, then a group of people from the civilian side of which I was also a part, put on the table what was called the 3D strategy - the demilitarization, decriminalization, and democratization of Transnistria.

On 10 June 2005, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova voted decision number 117 regarding the demilitarization and democratization of Transnistria, including the law of 22 July 2005 regarding the basic principles of the special legal state of the localities on the left of the Dniester which took into account the "3D Strategy".

At that time, former president Vladimir Voronin, during a meeting with Romanian president Ion Iliescu, near Costești, was asked by journalists how he sees the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict. Without understanding a word, Voronin said that there is "Strategy 3D".

Both in 2004 and now, I am absolutely convinced that what we call conflict resolution cannot be achieved through negotiations. An action plan that must be imposed on those on the left of the Dniester, who should accept collaboration for its implementation, if they want to escape criminal punishment. But there can be no discussion about negotiations.

Who are you negotiating with? With the Russian Federation? It's ridiculous. The pentilateral format, established in Bratislava in February 2002, which after the consultations of 26 September 2005 became 5+2, was a trap for the Republic of Moldova in which we wallowed helplessly for over 20 years. That is until it became obvious that the Russian Federation is an aggressor country that violates everything possible in the post-war world. Therefore, Russia cannot be a party to the negotiation process.

■ **Thank you!**

## Editorial

# Is it possible in the EU without the Transnistrian region?

Editorial by Irina Tabaranu

**The statements of the Moldovan officials regarding the integration into the European Union without 11% of its territory internationally recognized since 1992 by the entire international community raised many questions among the civil society and journalists' circle in the Republic of Moldova. Although an extremely sensitive and important subject, few of those for whom these statements caused internal dilemmas openly expressed their bewilderment.**

Chronologically, the first public statement about this was made by Nicu Popescu, the Moldovan foreign minister, in an interview for the *Politico* publication, after which the head of state Maia Sandu confirmed it, being asked in the context of Popescu's statement. Could Maia Sandu publicly disagree with her minister? I'm afraid not, at least if we look at it in the current regional context.

I wondered then how to explain that silence on such an important issue?

Because there are a lot of unknowns, some would say. How could the European community open its doors to a state that comes not only with socio-economic problems, which could be solved even through the accession process itself, but even with a Trojan horse in the heart of the fortress, with military troops belonging to a state that started a war on the European continent?

Because it is a too irresponsible statement on the part of a head of state, others would say, who know Maia Sandu as a politician who does not feel comfortable making irresponsible statements.



In a discussion on this topic with one of the colleagues, the latter tried to justify the statements: "They must surely have a plan that they don't make public, and that's why maybe it's not necessary to cut their wings."

I told myself then I will not settle for that excuse and I will set out below only some of the circumstances that, from my point of view, make it impossible for us to join the EU without the Transnistrian region.

### **Are we not solving it because we are not asked to?**

President Sandu answered, when she was asked if she agreed with Popescu, that accession is possible without the left bank of the Dniester and that she was waiting for a geopolitical opportunity in the next three to four years to resolve the Transnistrian conflict, and if there was none, I'm quoting: "The Republic of Moldova can no longer stand still". From this we understand that, in her opinion, the conflict is outside the country, but can we separate it?

Later, it was argued that the EU does not condition our integration by resolving the conflict. It is well known that many

of the actions and plans related to the reintegration of the country were delivered at the request or under the pressure of international partners, a fact that has always been criticized by the civil society. The desire and aspirations to resolve the Transnistrian conflict must come from within, but not be conditioned by third parties, and this rhetoric should change. Let's not do it because we have to tick the box, but because we want it.

Regarding the lack of conditionality, another question arises. Why do about 60% of the citizens of this country, including 14% of the people on the left of the river Dniester who voted for PAS in 2021, want to join the EU?

For many, the EU means development, stability and peace, and this also means solving the problems of territorial integrity, human rights and free movement caused by the existence of a frozen conflict.

Very often I have heard that for a country in the process of European integration, the process is the most beneficial and important. It involves reforms and changes. Reaching the final goal without a path is pointless as changes simply will not occur. In the current situation, when solving the

Transnistrian problem is practically out of the equation, it goes without saying that nothing will change.

### **European benefits without democratization conditions**

The separatist regime will continue to make money through exports to the EU. Now they do it within the framework of the Free Trade Agreement, which was also offered without conditions for democratization or solving human rights issues. No conditions were set, because there has never been a vision.

According to President Maia Sandu, after we are accepted into the EU and our living conditions improve, the people on the left bank will see the changes and they will want to have that too. But do the people of the region decide or have they ever decided anything? How will the head of state, but also us as a society, understand that the citizens there have seen and understood?

The president also says that joining the EU without the Transnistrian region does not mean giving up on the region. She probably says it for those in the opposition, so she can't be accused of questioning the integrity of the country. However, the fact that part of the country will be part of an agreement, and another part will not, won't this fuel even more separatism, which could also appear in another area, in the south of the country?

In addition to legal aspects, there are also human ones, and this situation can negatively influence the social cohesion between the two banks of the Dniester.

### **EU country with Russian "peace keepers"**

Related to the Transnistrian conflict, a peacekeeping mission led by the Russian Federation operates on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. This mission has [15 fixed military posts](#), most of whom are on the territory controlled by the Chisinau

authorities, not by the region, and what we do with them is not being discussed. When such statements are made, the leadership of the country cannot but have a plan about what will happen to these soldiers, posts and the peacekeeping mission in general, if we join the EU. Otherwise, such positions taken publicly speak of the fact that this leadership is irresponsible and naive when it comes to the Transnistrian issue.

It should be reminded that the nearest military post of the mission is in Vadul lui Vodă, where there are Russian, Transnistrian and national army soldiers. After accession, the military of an EU member state will also be part of this mission, if you can imagine that.

### **The administrative line is not on the Dniester**

Even if we were to give free rein to our imagination, it is hard to imagine a hypothetical border of the European Union, leaving the Transnistrian region on the outside, suspended between another state, Ukraine, which also aspires to join the EU.

The Transnistrian region is not only to the left of the Dniester, a territory that the current government admits may not be part of the EU. It is also on the right bank. The second largest town controlled by the Tiraspol regime, Tighina/Bender, is on the right side of the Dniester, as are five other villages near that town: Chițcani, Cremenciug, Gîsca, Merenești and Zahorna.

Tighina has a special status, there are two penitentiaries controlled by Chisinau, a Police Inspectorate, a military command of the Moldovan military contingent from the peacekeeping mission, a high school - structures of the Moldovan state that were preserved there at the cost of a colossal effort, even with blood. What will happen to them? Will they simply be removed from there due to the lack of vision of those currently in leadership positions?

More than that, on the left of the Dniester there are several villages and

communes that remained after the war under the flag of the Republic of Moldova, again, with enormous sacrifices. Are there scenarios, strategies what will happen to them? Who assumes their loss - Nicu Popescu or Maia Sandu?

### **Complicated connections**

If these details, perhaps more technical, have not convinced you that things in reality are much more complicated than in the statements, I would like to bring the example of the town of Varnița from Anenii Noi raion, on the right bank of the Dniester, which is in close proximity to Tighina. These two villages are closely connected to each other - all communal services (water, electricity, gas) used by the residents of Varnița are provided by the town of Tighina. This situation was created there due to the lack of desire to look for solutions to stop that dependence, but also because the rates in the Transnistrian region are lower for these services. Will this village be left without those services, or will the village, already European, continue to use those services from a region that will not be part of the agreement?

If the president is not informed about all these aspects that greatly complicate further accession to the EU without the region, I find it difficult to understand why she makes such public statements.

There is another hypothesis, that the government is not even analysing the option to separate the territory for joining the EU, and this message is being launched for the exponents of the Tiraspol regime, to give them signals that they will be isolated and that reintegration is the unique option.

Regardless of whether Maia Sandu is playing double or is intentionally not informed about all these complications related to the Transnistrian region, the statements according to which it is possible to join the EU without the Transnistrian region are grist for the mill to the Tiraspol regime which can strengthen their message that they are an independent republic.

# The overnight reintegration of the Transnistrian region would be a problem for us



**E**conomist Veaceslav Ionita gave an interview for the foreign policy newsletter of FES/APE in which we discussed the attractiveness of the right bank of the Dniester for the left bank in terms of the future development model. The Republic of Moldova can reintegrate the Transnistrian region, but there are certain conditions to be met, which includes a well-developed plan. More details in the full interview that follows:

■ **Mr. Ionita, can the right bank represent a model of economic attraction for the left bank at this moment, for a reintegration of the Republic of Moldova?**

■ I would like to give you an affirmative answer, but I find it difficult to do so. Yes, we have advanced a lot in terms of political and social freedoms. Our economic model is different, but the results are too modest to be able to say that we could represent a model of attraction for the left bank of the Dniester.

It must be said that the Transnistrian region, to the extent of 50 percent, survives thanks to the financing through dubious schemes by the Russian Federation. First, in the Transnistrian region, about half of the annual budget is formed exclusively from Russian gas, which is not paid for. Second, their economy runs on electricity and metallurgy exports. So they only work with free Russian gas. If we exclude the Russian gas from the formula, there would be no economy on the left bank of the Dniester, which would lead to

bankruptcy. But this thing is not perceived by the ordinary citizens there.

As an economist I can tell you that Moldova, having a very weak economy, with weak institutions that limp behind in terms of market economy, with a much weaker potential than the Transnistrian region, where 40 percent of the country's economy was concentrated, we are clearly superior to them.

Even with this development handicap, but with a European perspective, we have advanced enormously. Until 2016, it appeared that the living standards were better in Transnistria, even if it wasn't so, however, since 2016 that "success story of Transnistria" has disclosed.

## **Economic collapse without Moscow's intervention**

■ **Given that Russia would no longer provide free gas to Transnistria, would there no longer be a viable economic model to allow this separatist entity to operate?**

■ Yes, I definitely think that the economy of the Tiraspol regime cannot survive for more than a month. It would collapse immediately.

■ **How do you explain the fact that the separatist region of Transnistria could no longer keep up with the Republic of Moldova from an**



### economic point of view? What were the main factors in your opinion?

■ The main factors why Transnistria could not keep up with the Republic of Moldova were isolation, corruption and trying to keep alive a strange system. Like when the Soviet Union died, we in Moldova buried the dead, and they embalmed it. They believed that if you make up that system, it can live.

If we look carefully at the left bank of the Dniester, the exchange rate is maintained artificially, through administrative mechanisms. More precisely, the entrepreneurs are obliged to sell part of their currency. Some social prices are lower than on the right bank, but otherwise, the price of products in Transnistria has increased more than in Moldova.

They try to maintain a centralized economy with a stupid mix of free and centralized economy. But that doesn't work. There are three pillars: free competition, private initiative and non-interference of the state in economic affairs. Without these three basic ingredients, you cannot talk about an economy.

In Moldova, we don't have well-defined free competition either, we don't have proper free initiative and we have state interference in some places. However, they are in a smaller dose, a fact that has already created a difference compared to Transnistria, which can be seen with the naked eye.

### Gradual reintegration

■ Does Moldova currently have the economic power to reintegrate the left bank?

■ The reintegration of the Transnistrian region overnight would

be a problem for us. I think we would be able to do it in a few years. This problem would derive from two aspects. Let's not forget that we are talking about half of the Transnistrian economy that is artificially supported by money injections from Russia, by these dubious debts. So, Moldova should take over this funding. That is not the biggest problem though, but the fact that we have a difference in development.

We will have to ensure an increase in the salaries of budget workers and also pensioners, that is why the annual amount of effort we should make in Moldova would be about MDL15 billion [EUR 750 million], which it would account for 5% of GDP.

Therefore, we could not quickly reintegrate Transnistria economically. Germany managed to reintegrate the GDR, its eastern part, after borrowing. We don't have this tool that we could use. I think, however, that the effect of reintegration could also be given by the economic potential that exists in the Transnistrian region. The effect of the future investments of Moldova in Transnistria could pay off in a few years.

We are talking about a strong financial shock that in our case would last around three to four years, and after that period we could recover the investments. On the other hand, we have a lot of costs related to corruption on the right bank, while those on the left bank of the Dniester managed to reduce this phenomenon. Moreover, the Transnistrian regime paid bribes to politicians from Chisinau in order to obtain a series of advantages. Getting back to economics, the short-term benefits would be incomparable to the costs we could bear in the coming years.

### Possible scenarios and solutions

■ Could the nationalization of the Cuciurgan plant also be a solution, since its privatization was fraudulent? As well as the Rabnița Metallurgical plant, MMZ?

■ All privatizations on the left side of the Dniester are illegal and not recognized by the Chisinau authorities. All are either central or local public property. I think the Russians imagine that this will be a bargaining chip against the assets they have in Transnistria.

I would discuss three topics. The first is related to the properties, the second would be the bad debt to Gazprom, and the third would be the reintegration costs. For example, we introduced the medical insurance system in 2004. And you cannot demand from those on the left of the Dniester to immediately pay this contribution at the same level. You have to have a transition period of several years.

The biggest problem will occur on another dimension. In our country, the taxation system is based on physical entities, while in Transnistria on economic agents. They do not have VAT, and if reintegration happens, the taxation system must be reunified.

The tax burden on the population will be increased. It is difficult to solve this problem so as not to create a false connection between such a move and increased taxation for the population of Transnistria. But all these are matters related to the management of the reintegration process.

I think we have only one problem in this sense: the pleasure of the elites in Chisinau to be corrupted dominates over the national interest of reintegration.

■ Thank you!

**SECURITY & DEFENCE DIGEST**

*The Platform for Security and Defense Initiatives*

# ***The National Security Strategy project at the stage of public consultations regarding the Transnistrian issue***

***The draft of the new National Security Strategy, launched on 11 October 2023 by the President of the Republic of Moldova, attests to an essential change in the political discourse of Chisinau. The document has generated debates and positive opinions, especially in the context of the strategic vision that clearly establishes that the main external threat is the Russian Federation, which is excluded from the Transnistrian conflict resolution format. Obviously, in a democratic society, there is also criticism which could contribute to adjusting the Strategy according to the national needs and capacities. At the same time, there are negative messages that could have an electoral impact, and the Russian Federation once again accused the Moldovan government of Russophobia and animosity.***

Currently, the draft Strategy is at the stage of public consultations and there is enough flexibility to adjust the document before sending to vote in the parliament. Thus, there will be analyses of some aspects of the draft Strategy that have attracted the attention of both experts in security and public opinion.

The draft National Security Strategy (hereinafter referred to as the Strategy) is a new document, which differs from previously approved strategic documents by recognizing and expressly mentioning the Russian Federation as the greatest threat to the security of the Republic of Moldova. Obviously, this aspect qualifies the document as a brave one, which

clearly and bluntly says that Moldova is on its way to completely exit the grey area in which it has been since its independence and to irreversibly join the free world, the European community, where indeed it must belong. The furious reactions from the Kremlin denote the frustration, but also the current impotence of Moscow in its attempt to preserve at least some aspects of the influence it had in the post-Soviet space.

### ***Hybrid threats from Moscow***

In the same context, the hybrid threats are in the attention of the Strategy, especially when it comes to the hybrid type operations carried

out by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova in the political, economic, energy, social, informational, cyber fields, aimed at undermining the constitutional order, the derailment of the European course of the country and/or the disintegration of the state. This highlights that the assessment of the Russian Federation as a threat to national security was determined by well-established criteria, avoiding momentary emotions, that is, its real intentions in the region and the Republic of Moldova were evaluated. Accordingly, the activities to combat hybrid threats must be comprehensive and the process continuous. Moreover, we cannot neglect that "in the era of hybrid wars, peace is also hybrid", as expert Vladimir Socor, from the Jamestown Foundation (USA), claims, referring to the regional situation.

In the context of the internal security environment, the draft Strategy mentions corruption as one of the primary threats. This is not a new thing, and the Strategy clearly states that the Russian Federation uses elements of corruption to influence the

processes in the Republic of Moldova, mostly through the pro-Russian parties active in the country. The synergy of these two factors constitutes an existential threat to the state security.

### ***The National Army, higher on the list of priorities***

Regarding the ways of ensuring national security, the Strategy identifies the Armed Forces as the main element around which the other ways and means must be consolidated to counter existing threats. This is another new element in the national policy documents, as the National Army – the main element of the Armed Forces – has traditionally been neglected in terms of funding. And this fact inevitably led to the weakening of the country's defence capacity. The recognition that the Armed Forces must be strengthened and developed in order to deter and counter a possible military aggression from the Russian Federation determines the need for the National Army to be included in the top of priority institutions for the allocation of budgetary resources.

### ***The Transnistrian file, included in the document***

But let's move on to aspects that the strategy mentions lightly, and in some places without specifying, although their importance cannot be neglected. One of them is the Transnistrian conflict and the threats generated by the existence of the secessionist regime on the left of the Dniester. It should be reminded that within the National Security Concept of the Republic of Moldova, adopted by the Parliament on 22 May 2008 (Law No. LP112/2008), it

is mentioned that one of the main directions in its national security policy is "restoring the territorial integrity of the state, eliminating the presence of foreign military, strengthening the independence and sovereignty of the state", while in the chapter "Threats to national security", the Transnistrian conflict comes first. However, no clear objectives were set regarding the need to resolve it in accordance with the national interest, such as ensuring the territorial integrity of the country.

In 2011, by adopting the first National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova (Decision No. 153 of 15-07-2011 of the Parliament), one way to ensure national security refers to "managing the problems related to the Transnistrian conflict and the withdrawal of foreign troops", being declarative initiatives without a clear vision of reducing the impact on national security. In that Strategy, the main tool for solving the Transnistrian problem was considered the negotiation process in the "5+2" format, a format which was already ineffective at the time, while at the moment - already outdated.

Although the document notes that "the withdrawal from the Republic of Moldova of the foreign military presence is imperative and is to be carried out by virtue of the fact that it has no legal basis, contradicting the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova... ], as well as "of the ammunition belonging to the Federation Russia...", however, this did not ensure the desire to develop relevant actions in stimulating the process of political resolution of the conflict. Moreover, avoiding the integrated approach to the Transnistrian problem, i.e. in complex with other problems that are

interdependent (energy, economic, defence or societal and food security), does not ensure the achievement of the objectives of the Transnistrian conflict resolution.

Thus, for more than 30 years, the Transnistrian conflict resolution has been one of the major priorities of the Moldovan governments. Most likely, the reintegration of the country will remain one of the priorities, but the current draft Strategy denotes a change in the approach to this issue. However, the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict through the peaceful reintegration of the Transnistrian region is ranked 8 out of 10 in chapter II of the strategy, which identifies national security interests. And the critical condition for resolving the conflict remains the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of the left bank of the Dniester.

In this context, the question arises as to why the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict is positioned so low in the list of priorities of national security interests. Analysing the latest events and narratives related to the Transnistrian issue, it is worth noting that both the government exponents and European officials claim that the Republic of Moldova will be able to join the European Union without the Transnistrian region, although they do not directly mention the model of Cyprus, which is a member of the European Union, except for the part of the island that the Cypriot authorities do not control. Obviously, a rational assumption is that diminishing the importance of the Transnistrian problem in this equation becomes a natural necessity, in order not to create additional pretexts and obstacles in the national effort to join the EU. Either the settlement of the

Transnistrian issue will be the second stage, which will follow the European integration, and the accession to the EU will certainly stimulate and facilitate the resolution of the conflict.

### **Blockade of Russia through Tiraspol**

At the same time, it is imperative to remind that the Transnistrian separatism was supported and fuelled by the Russian Federation with the aim of keeping the Republic of Moldova in its sphere of influence, i.e. to make it impossible to join the EU and/or NATO. Based on the statements made by Brussels officials, we assume that the Transnistrian conflict is becoming a tool in Russia's foreign policy arsenal, which no longer has the weight it once had.

Another aspect is the credibility of a military threat, which could currently come from the Transnistrian militarized structures. For a long time, the militarized structures on the left of the Dniester, together with the Operative Group of Russian Troops in Transnistria, was considered the most significant threat to the Republic of Moldova.

The aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine demonstrated that the realities are different and there is an even greater danger – a direct land invasion by Russia. However, the current reality on the battlefield, especially Ukraine's taking of the strategic initiative, has put the separatist region in a very difficult position. Thus, the Russian Army cannot reach the borders of the Republic of Moldova by land, and because of this, the Tiraspol regime found itself in complete isolation. Under these conditions, any military operation carried out by the GOTR or the Transnistrian militarized structures, from the start are doomed

to failure because without the direct support of the Russian Federation they do not have the necessary military potential to carry out sustainable military operations.

### **Transnistria and the European integration**

Moreover, the Transnistrian region, through the recent policies implemented by Chisinau, is also moving towards Europe with small steps. Or the fact that economic agents from the Transnistrian region export their products more to the European Union denotes exactly this. At the same time, the reduction of the energy dependence of the right bank on the secessionist region will most likely accelerate the getting closer of the banks in a natural way dictated by economic considerations. Therefore, we can assume that the issue of the country's reintegration is at the bottom of the list of national security interests for the reasons mentioned above.

In addition, given the fact that issues related to human security are not directly stipulated in the draft Strategy, although within the public discussions of April 2023 on the aspects to be integrated into the Strategy the need for a holistic approach to it was highlighted, respectively the Transnistrian issue is also approached narrowly. It should be mentioned that the draft does not contain concrete objectives that would ensure societal cohesion in a divided society. Although reference is made to the resilience, this concept is neither understood by citizens nor appreciated at the institutional level.

During the public hearings on the draft Strategy on October 16, some experts came up with proposals to improve the document, especially with reference to the country's

defence capabilities and emphasis on deterrence. Thus, attention was drawn to the need to quantify the funding for the Armed Forces, which should exceed the psychological threshold of 1% of GDP - the lower admissible limit, because going below this figure means the underdevelopment of the defence sector.

The omission of this aspect from the draft Strategy leaves room for interpretation, as the document states that "the defence sector will be financed proportionally to the intensity of threats". This phrase does not reflect the security objectives arising from the description of the external security environment, as this is not only about the need to maintain a "proactive" approach to the defence system, but also about the development of its "preventive" character. For example, the decrease in the intensity of the war in Ukraine must not lead to a decrease in the funding of the defence sector, because it would bring us back to the initial point, namely the decrease in the country's defence capacity due to underfunding. The defence sector requires constant funding to enable the strengthening, development, and maintenance of military capabilities necessary to deter and counter any military threat.

In this context, the need to emphasize the preventive nature of the Strategy is also determined by the fact that since the military invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, the national defence system has had a "reactive" approach for the moment, and some experts mentioned is also necessary to specify aspects related to crisis management, respectively the term "resilience", which is present in the draft Strategy, will be understood as a capacity to recover and adapt to the security environment.

### **The need for public debates and societal cohesion**

We cannot neglect that the organization of such public discussions with the participation of representatives of civil society, academia, independent experts, but also high-level civil servants is an indicator of the governance of the security sector and the development of resilience. The national security strategy is a medium-term policy document that defines the national interest of the Republic of Moldova and expresses the national consensus on vulnerabilities, risks and threats, so the expertise on the content of the Strategy must be inclusive by reflecting the interests of all members of society, promoting societal cohesion.

Therefore, during the public debates, aspects were also discussed with reference to: the need to strengthen the findings by developing arguments and using landmark data that would avoid erroneous interpretations or the declarative aspect of the Strategy; the need to clarify the institutional

framework that will implement the Strategy and to specify the mechanism of civil-democratic control over the security sector; the need to reflect more clearly the relations of the Republic of Moldova with NATO, but also the issue of the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova.

To a large extent, the approach with reference to the last two topics is understandable: although the aggressiveness and brutal actions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, as well as the energy problem, have begun to lead to a partial change in the mentality of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. The latter still believe that neutrality is a guarantor of security, and according to the opinion poll presented in August, in the event of a referendum on Moldova's accession to NATO, 60.3% of citizens would vote against joining the Alliance.

However, in the context of the regional security, but also arising from the statements of Moldovan politicians - such as that the relations with NATO must be intensified exponentially,

and the neutrality of the Republic of Moldova cannot ensure our security - the strategy makes a very brief and vague reference to both issues. However, it is to be appreciated that both topics are found in the Strategy, and if necessary they can constitute a reference point for wider debates in society vis-à-vis the effectiveness of the status of neutrality and the intensification of cooperation with NATO.

Last but not least, there is the need to develop a communication mechanism and identify the relevant narratives in order to promote the need to develop a new Strategy, raise society's awareness of issues of national interest, but also with the aim of preventing misinformation and manipulation in the context of the finalization and approval of the National Security Strategy. In general terms, the document is brave, concrete and easy to read. In addition, as a result of the adjustments to be made, the final document will retain its valuable qualities mentioned above.

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