

Strategy of Relations between Neighbouring Countries: Scenario of the Republic of Moldova

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Relations of the Republic of Moldova with the neighbouring countries are currently characterized by positive dynamics. It sets the stage for development of common strategic thinking culture that considers European aspirations of the states. This would allow strengthening pragmatism in relations between the parties if policy approaches are sound and constructive. It is necessary to extend the use of efficient instruments for cooperation, which is becoming a trend of the new strategy of cooperation between the aforementioned countries. Nowadays, more than ever, it requires much more activity, coherence and competence of Moldovan, Ukrainian and Romanian authority structures.

It is possible not only to overcome present-day challenges, but also to make joint efforts to pursue new opportunities and chances in modern-day conditions, resting on historical, geographical and cultural connections that form a crucial basis for relations between these countries. Promptness and coherence of actions are key to achieve common priorities that are united by similar goals - democratic and sustainable development, good-neighbourly relations and improvement in the well-being of people.

Features of political relations between the countries

In fact, in 2017 internal political situation in Moldova was complicated and ambiguous. The opposition between the pro-Russian President and pro-European majority escalated, becoming, perhaps, one of the distinguishing features of internal policy in Moldova last year. This could not but affect relations of Moldova with the neighbouring countries - Ukraine and Romania.

Despite the fact that 2017 was very fruitful for bilateral cooperation between Moldova and Ukraine, the pre-electoral rhetoric of I. Dodon, and statements about affiliation of Crimea, that he made during his first visit abroad, to Moscow, have been perceived by Ukrainian side as disrespect for sovereignty of their country and largely preconditioned absence of political dialog between Heads of state of Moldova and Ukraine. This prevented positive trends in dynamics of relations between Moldova and Ukraine from reaching a new level of cooperation, such as setting up a new efficient platform to achieve genuine good-neighbourly relations, considering common European aspirations of the countries. This had very substantial grounds. Intensification of contacts between Prime Ministers of the states in 2017, meetings between Prime Minister of Moldova P. Filip and President of Ukraine P. Poroshenko were favourable for dynamics of cooperation between the two countries. The parties managed to reach agreements on a whole range of bilateral cooperation issues. Among them, the following are fundamental: settle operating conditions for the

comprehensive hydropower hub on Nistru, complete state border demarcation and recognize mutual property rights.

Features of political relations between the countries, determined, among other things, by role of newly elected President of Moldova, set the stage for understanding the nature of priorities for Moldavian state development, which he has set. I. Dodon's actions against ex-President of Romania T. Basescu evoked a wide response in the society. In particular, the fact that the newly elected President of Moldova signed a decree that deprived T. Basescu of Moldovan citizenship.¹ I. Dodon referred to Romania's ex-President appeals about elimination of Moldova's statehood by joining Romania, repeatedly declared refusal to recognize existence of Moldovan people and the fact that citizenship of Moldova had been illegally granted to him by former President of Moldova N. Timofti. This incident could be treated in different ways - as personal animosity or standing up for own convictions, having necessary powers for this. The issue of unionist movements' increase in Moldova becomes a subject of political speculations that do not reveal real nature of emerging political reality. However, it encourages concerns to be raised, especially among people in Gagauzia and Transnistria.² These concerns are reinforced by the same President's statements about Eurounionist direction of Moldova's development and the need to consolidate patriotic forces of the country against current regime.³ As the current President of Romania Klaus Iohannis is a very tactful and politically correct person, no reactive measures at political level followed. Cooling of relations between Moldova and Romania was avoided.

Protection of statehood as I. Dodon's main task, which he announced during election campaign, is widely translated into his actions. Among them, there are statements, about the need to change the name of the language, as well as the History of Romania to History of Moldova in school curricula. These ideas mostly cause discontent, rather than enjoy support in the society. Besides, this causes artificial division in the society of Moldova, dividing it more and more, not only by the principle of a so-called titular majority and national minorities, but by the principle of self-identification of indigenous people of Moldova as well. Personal beliefs, combined with political opportunism should not become political context, within which contradictions increase. There is no doubt that Unionist Movements and provocative statements about unification of Moldova and Romania are destructive by their nature, because they contradict national interest of Moldova. However, current officials in Romania do not make such statements.

Choosing European course of development people should realize that by becoming a part of EU Moldova will become a part of a "large European family" and borders will be blurred. Thus, many issues, which previously could be used as a reason for discussions and speculations, would remain off the agenda. The issue of unification with Romania is one of them.

¹ Dodon's Cold War with Romania // <http://www.dw.com/ro/r%C4%83zboiul-rece-al-lui-dodon-cu-rom%C3%A2nia/a-37119667>

² Moldovans have not noticed that they already live in Romania // <http://www.gagauz.md/2017/12/moldavane-ne-zametili-cto-uzhe-zhivut-v-rumynii/>

³ The Eurounionist regime realizes that can retain the power only by gross violation // <http://dodon.md/guvernarea-eurounionista-intelega-se-poate-mentine-la-putere-doar-prin-abateri-grave/>

Nonetheless, realizing that the situation for the President of Moldova is complicated, efforts should be focused on constructive and forward-looking decisions that will provide current President an opportunity to create a platform for political dialog. Building relations with neighbouring countries, developing bilateral contacts and dialog between Heads of the states is regarded as pragmatic. This will provide an opportunity for timely response on issues, which inevitably arise in the process of countries' cooperation. In addition, this will help to improve image of the country and strengthen positions on the international scene.

Apparently, realizing the increasing necessity of a dialog at the level of Heads of the states, I. Dodon invited President of Romania Klaus Iohannis to Moldova, having underscored the importance of developing relations with the neighbouring country. Though there was no answer from the President of Romania yet, the first step for consolidating efforts to promote political dialog at the level of Heads of the states had been made. Sometime later I. Dodon also addressed K. Iohannis a greetings letter on the National Day of Romania.⁴ Despite this, it is obvious that pursuing dialog between Presidents would not be simple because of quite different opinions on future development of foreign policies of countries.

Commercial and Economic Cooperation

One must also pay attention to the commercial and economic cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the neighbouring countries. Romania and Ukraine are still the most important trade partners of the Republic of Moldova. According to the data of the National Statistics Bureau, export from the Republic of Moldova to Romania in January-November 2017 was 545.89 mln USD, i.e. 24.9 %, and import – 631.76 mln USD, i.e. 14.49%.⁵ Ukraine also has good indicators. Thus, export for the same period of 2017 was 60.135 mln USD, i.e. 2.74%, and import of Ukrainian goods and products – 464.02 mln USD, making up 10.64%.⁶

Meetings at the level of prime-ministers between Moldova and Ukraine were more than regular in 2017 as the parties were open and ready for dialog. During the visit of the Ukrainian Prime Minister V. Groysman to Moldova, the Road Map to develop cooperation between the countries for 2018 has been signed. It is important to mention that this visit on the 6th of October 2017, on occasion of "Business Forum 2017", was the first in the last 16 years visit of the head of Ukrainian Government to Moldova.⁷ Among the priorities of cooperation, the following was underscored: consolidation of efforts to unify energy systems of the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to ensure their inclusion into the European energy system, as well as alternative supply of natural gas. The use of transport potential of the two

⁴ Igor Dodon congratulated Klaus Iohannis on the occasion of the National Day of Romania // <http://www.moldova.org/igor-dodon-l-felicitat-pe-klaus-iohannis-cu-ocazia-zilei-nationale-romaniei/>

⁵ Foreign trade of the Republic of Moldova in January-November 2017 // <http://www.statistica.md/category.php?l=ro&idc=336>

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Prime-ministers of Moldova and Ukraine have signed the Road Map of cooperation between the two countries for 2018 // <http://gov.md/ru/content/premer-ministry-moldovy-i-ukrainy-podpisali-dorozhnyu-kartu-po-razvitiyu-sotrudnichestva>

states in European direction has been remarked, also due to the bridge built near Soroca and Yampil, the restoration of the railway sector "Basarabeasca - Berezine", as well as inclusion of the "Edinet-Vinnytsia" into the TEN-T trans-European transportation network. There are also plans of joint Moldovan - Ukrainian development of production process and further export of products into the EU market. Further, the efficient work of Moldovan - Ukrainian intergovernmental commission for commercial and economic cooperation will be ensured.⁸ It will deepen and consolidate bilateral interaction between the states.

At the meeting of Ministers of economy of the Republic of Moldova and Romania in October. Issues of commercial and economic cooperation between the countries, joint investment opportunities involving business environments of both countries have been discussed. The parties noted that the relations, based on efficient cooperation and implementation of joint projects in various sectors of economy, have recently improved. The unused potential in development of trade, infrastructure and industry reveals perspectives of bilateral relations development. Cooperation in energy sector, implementation of joint projects in this area play an important role in tackling energy security and energy community system issues.⁹

Joint commissions of the countries have made significant contributions to the development of commercial and economic cooperation between the countries. Thus, on the 12th of October 2017 the 10th meeting of the joint intergovernmental committee on economic cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and Romania took place in Bucharest.¹⁰ The intergovernmental committee for economic cooperation is an efficient platform for intensification of relations between the parties and initiation of new joint investment projects. According to the Protocol that it approved, 17 directions have been identified as promising for cooperation, among them: trade, industry, energy, agriculture, cross-border cooperation, tourism, interaction in urbanism and other. Attention has also been paid to joint development of the banking sector. Exim Bank of Romania was ready to cooperate with the banks from Moldova, support investment projects of Romanian companies in the Republic of Moldova.¹¹

For a long time, Romania has been providing financial assistance to the Republic of Moldova, allocating money for building roads, sanitation systems, kindergartens and schools. In 2017, the projects to assist the Republic of Moldova in the sphere of education have finalized. The Government of Romania provided to our

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Ministers of Economy of RM and Romania: There is unused potential in bilateral development // <https://deschide.md/ro/stiri/economic/19246/Mini%C8%99trii-Economiei-RMoldova-%C8%99i-Rom%C3%A2niei-Exist%C4%83-un-poten%C8%9Bial-nevalorificat-%C3%AEEn-dezvoltarea-rela%C8%9Biilor-bilaterale.htm>

¹⁰ Intergovernmental committee for economic cooperation between Moldova and Romania // <http://www.mec.gov.md/ro/content/comisia-interguvernamentala-moldo-romana-pentru-colaborare-economica>

¹¹ Idem.

country 96 school mini-buses and 5500 scholarships for high school and university studies in Romania.¹²

The Government of Romania is also funding restoration of the Organ Hall, which is an architectural monument of national importance, on the Register of Historical Monuments of the Republic of Moldova. The donation for restoration works went up to 1 mln euro.¹³ Assistance is also provided in healthcare. In particular, the Cardiology Unit of the Centre of Mother and Child has been renovated.¹⁴

Besides, a new institute of assistance has been created – RoAid - Romanian Agency for international cooperation for development,¹⁵ which works to fight extreme poverty and support sustainable democratic development in emerging countries. The main priorities are humanitarian and multilateral assistance, as well as education.

Thus, the strategy of building relations between the neighbouring countries is marked by a positive dynamic of commercial and economic cooperation. Joint projects are implemented and common plans are made to accomplish the agreements reached in the future. The year 2017 was quite fruitful for negotiations, finalizing of previous programs and development of a common vision for inclusion into the EU market.

Issues in regional and international security

The neighbouring Ukraine and Romania have expressed dissatisfaction and criticized the President of the Republic of Moldova because of numerous cases when he prohibited to Moldovan military to take part in planned military exercises. In particular, the ambassador of Romania in Moldova together with the US ambassador have sent a letter to the President, calling the actions of the President "unfriendly behaviour"¹⁶ as I. Dodon did not allow Moldovan military to take part in a joint mission with NATO military in Romania at the beginning of February 2017. The ambiguity of interpretations is quite clear in this matter, revealing the complexity of actual agenda in the Republic of Moldova. On one hand, Moldovan military cannot be isolated from training process. On the other hand, in the opinion of the President of the country, the line of non-interference in internal matters of a state must not be surmountable, which he in fact said in response to the address of Ambassadors.¹⁷

¹² Romania will provide more scholarships for high-school and university students from Moldova // <http://diez.md/2016/12/22/romania-va-oferi-mai-multe-burse-de-studii-elevilor-si-studentilor-din-republica-moldova/>

¹³ New face of the Organ Hall in Chisinau, a pearl of architecture regains life // http://www.realitatea.md/noua-fata-a-salii-cu-orga-din-chisinau--o-bijuterie-de-arhitectura-care-si-recapata-viata--galerie-foto-_67029.html

¹⁴ Cardiology Unit of the Institute of Mother and Child renovated with support of the Government of Romania // <http://msmps.gov.md/ro/content/sectia-cardiologie-institutului-mamei-si-copilului-renovata-cu-suportul-guvernului-romaniei>

¹⁵ RoAid. About cooperation for development // <http://www.roaid.ro/>

¹⁶ President of RM Igor Dodon brought down the ambassadors of the USA and Romania // <http://izborsk.md/blog/2017/02/25/prezident-rm-igor-dodon-postavil-na-mesto-poslov-ssha-i-rumynii/>

¹⁷ Idem.

Nonetheless, the cancellation of planned military exercises has an unfavourable impact not only on the level of preparedness of the military, but also on the agreements reached under international programs and projects, where the Republic of Moldova is involved.

A similar situation was about to happen in September 2017, this time with regard to the exercise that took place in Ukraine under NATO's Program Partnership for Peace. The conflict between the President and the Government in this sense allowed Moldovan military to take part in the exercise and train, but it also became a reason for Ukrainian authorities to be concerned. The President has referred to the neutral status of the Republic of Moldova numerous times. However, his reasons are mostly viewed from the point of view of possible intensification of Kremlin's control.

Moreover, in spite of the President's criticism and reasons given, NATO Liaison Office was opened in Chisinau. Moldova's Euro-Atlantic aspirations gradually are implemented, in spite of dualist rhetoric on this matter. Under conditions when regional states try to consolidate efforts to reduce Russian influence in the region and globally because of Russia's aggressive policy, it is extremely difficult to provide convincing arguments for the position of the Republic of Moldova exclusively from the point of view of neutrality. However, Deputy Secretary General of NATO Rose Gottemoeller paid special attention to the fact that "the Constitution of Moldova is a document with the highest status. In all documents, concerning our interaction there is always reference to the Constitution that stipulates the neutral status of the country. NATO recognizes the neutrality of Moldova in all documents".¹⁸ Nonetheless, growing Euro-Atlantic tendencies will undoubtedly have impact on the Republic of Moldova, which acts together with Western countries, but preserves its neutral status.

The number of Ukrainians who support Ukraine joining NATO rapidly increased. According to the opinion poll of the Razumkov Centre and Democratic Initiatives Fund in March 2017, 72% of the population support the idea of Ukraine joining NATO.¹⁹ The President of Ukraine P. Poroshenko has expressed firm position on the Euro-Atlantic integration path numerous times. Moreover, he is convinced of the positive outcome of referenda on joining NATO and EU, which he intends to run in the nearest future. The head of the state expressed conviction that the outcome of voting will be "as convincingly positive as the historical referendum on independence".²⁰

This issue enjoys special attention as NATO is building two command centres in Romania. The units will function as part of the land forces headquarters in Bucharest and will have limited staff, dealing mostly with planning of international

¹⁸ "All documents say that NATO recognizes the neutrality of Moldova". NM interview with Deputy Secretary General of NATO Rose Gottemoeller // <http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/priznanie-neytraliteta-moldovy-so-storony-nato-est-vo-vseh-dokumentah-intervyu-nm-35104>

¹⁹ 72% of Ukrainians support joining NATO // <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/politics/3823363-vstuplenye-v-nato-podderzhivavut-72-ukrayntsev>

²⁰ Poroshenko: There will certainly be a referendum regarding NATO // <https://korrespondent.net/ukraine/3912835-poroshenko-referendum-po-nato-budet-tochno>

exercises.²¹ It also has not been overlooked that Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, took part in the opening ceremony. In his speech, he referred to article five of the NATO agreement and underscored the fact that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia must become stronger.

The issue of reintegration of the Republic of Moldova and unification of the country pursuant the return of the districts on the left bank of Nistru is still relevant. For these processes year 2017 has been quite fruitful, mostly due to symmetrical actions of Moldova and Ukraine with regard to controlling segments of the border where there was no control for a long time. Mention must be made that it became possible also thanks to the fact that Ukraine became aware of the risks posed by the central segment of the state border. The position of Ukraine with regard to Transnistrian region has changed cardinally - from policy of loyalty to greater moderation. On the 7th of October 2017, the Agreement on joint control on the border between Moldova and Ukraine was signed.²² Joint checkpoints open up new opportunities for providing security in border areas.

Thus, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Romania have similar positions on European aspirations, support to regional and international security. The European factor united them on a whole range of issues, having opened up new opportunities for these states.

Conclusion:

Traditionally, Moldova has friendly relations with neighbouring countries, being linked to them by historical past and common cultural space. Outside of the context of geopolitical preferences and aspirations of Ukraine and Romania, the Republic of Moldova always tried to support bilateral cooperation with these countries. The generally accepted traditional norms and customs were also there in 2017. Nonetheless, the forms of interaction showed novelty and regularity, concentration of efforts on development and practical implementation of pragmatic solutions, despite the existing misunderstandings, difficulties and political manipulations, which accompanied the positive trend in relations. We consider that it is important to preserve the pragmatic trend in development of joint projects that will help the countries to integrate in the EU faster. Commitment to cooperation, promotion of European values and aspirations will allow enlarging the common dialog platform. The path to the EU means an enormous amount of work that requires consolidation of efforts of power structures and of the society, first in matters concerning democratic standards, human rights, civic freedoms, independence of judiciary and of the media. All these require efforts. Citizens must trust the authorities and there should be a conviction that the European vector of development is not only the best development option for the country, but a civilizational choice in favour of European values and standards.

²¹ Romania: NATO notes growing aggression of Russia // <https://www.europalibera.org/a/27108197.html>

²² Moldova and Ukraine signed an agreement on joint border control on the border between Moldova and Ukraine // <http://gov.md/ru/content/moldova-i-ukraina-podpisali-soglashenie-o-sovmestnom-pogranichnom-kontrolle-na-moldavsko>

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