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NEWSLETTER

MONTHLY BULLETIN • FEBRUARY 2020 • NR.2 (168)

Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Sorina Ștefârță, editor-coordinator

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News in brief



After a two-year break, President Igor Dodon returned to Brussels in early March. During his working visit to the Belgian capital, he promised that the Republic of Moldova will continue to implement the Association Agreement with the European Union, noting that our country relies on the cooperation with the EU in the process of consolidating the democratic institutions. In this context, the head of state committed to continue fighting corruption, reforming the justice system and investigating the "theft of the billion". At the same time, Igor Dodon reiterated his thesis of "a balanced between East and West foreign policy", which he should promote in Chisinau, while during the meeting with Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, he brought up again the idea of "permanent neutrality". "I reiterated that the constitutional status of permanent neutrality and the balanced foreign policy remain a priority and we intend to obtain the international recognition of the constitutional status of permanent neutrality of our country," he said.



The President's visit to Brussels was anticipated by that of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Aureliu Ciocoi, during which the progress of the relations between Moldova and the EU, as well as the security situation in the region, were addressed. Thus, in the discussion with Dragoș Tudorache, who is also the Rapporteur of the European Parliament for the Republic of Moldova, the achievements in the area of the Association Agreement were pointed out, while Petras Auštrevičius, the Rapporteur for the Eastern Partnership, underlined the importance of strengthening the cooperation of the partner states in the area of security, strategic communication and combating hybrid threats. Another topic on Aureliu Ciocoi's agenda was also the cooperation with NATO, a topic addressed with the Deputy Secretary General of the Alliance, Mircea Geoană. Priorities include the development of a new Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the NATO Assistance Package for strengthening our country's defense and security capabilities, the projects under the "Science for Peace and Security" Programme, the cooperation for combating the new security threats, but also the promotion of public diplomacy activities.



"The EU will continue to conditionally support the Republic of Moldova," said Luc Pierre Devigne, Deputy Director General for Europe and Central Asia, at the end of the fifth meeting of the EU-Moldova Association Committee, in Chisinau. According to him, the European assistance will depend on how Chisinau will respect the democratic laws and standards. "The European partners want concrete actions in the investigation of bank fraud, they want to see results in the fight against corruption and justice reform", said the official. Luc Pierre Devigne also discussed with the Moldovan authorities the need to respect the rule of law, to ensure media pluralism and to adopt the law on "The Russian laundromat". He was also dissatisfied with the fact that the people who received the citizenship of the Republic of Moldova through the "Citizenship through Investment" Programme remain anonymous. In turn, the Moldovan authorities spoke to the European official about the importance of boosting cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the EU, reiterated their commitment to respect the recommendations of international organizations such as the OSCE and the Venice Commission, and committed to hold extensive public consultations on the projects of major importance.

Whose direction is „the Transnistrian mace” flying to?



March 2nd, 2020, Chișinău. Veterans of the Nistru War, ready to storm the Government building

Photo: Jurnal TV

Sorina Ștefârță

For 28 years now, the beginning of spring is identified in the Republic of Moldova with the outbreak of the Nistru War in 1992, and March 2nd is a day in which we remember those tragic events and the people who fought and those who died to defend the territorial integrity of

the Republic of Moldova. It was a turning point that all the governments took into account in these 28 years - either left or right, either looking to the East or West. It's a historical trauma whose legitimacy, given the pain it carries, no politician has dared to question. Despite what these politicians thought about it de facto.

The spring of 2020 brought a new, if we can call it so, approach to these commemoration days. On March 2nd, hundreds of the Nistru war veterans participated in a protest which escalated with altercations in front of the Government, the participants in the event demanding the

► resignation of the Government and of the President of the Republic of Moldova. “We are not going to give up”!, “Dodon to prison!”, “Down with the traitors!”, here are just a few of the slogans shouted by the war veterans, who were outraged by the recent statements of the Minister of Foreign Affairs regarding the participation of the Russian Federation in the conflict on the Nistru. Specifically, the official mentioned that “the Russian army intervened on the territory of the Republic of Moldova in order to stop the bloodshed.”

Though, afterwards, the minister Aureliu Ciocoi said he was misunderstood and apologized to the PDM parliamentary group, which had asked for explanations, the Nistru veterans seem not to have been pleased with those explanations. So the commemoration of March 2nd, 2020 has quickly evolved into a protest and was about to escalate into disorder and violence. The traffic in the centre of Chisinau was blocked and, once he reached the Executive’s stairs, one of the protesters broke the glass door of the building with a mace. A mace that quickly became a symbol in which many saw a solution to the country’s multiple problems. And because the dreaded Coronavirus had not crossed the border yet, the politicians have not missed the chance to launch themselves into mutual accusations...

„This is not the first time that some politicians (now fugitives) have manipulated the veterans’ needs and anger to violently clash with various camps, to commit actions against the social order, the state and the citizens”, said President Igor Dodon. “The hypocritical government has transformed the commemoration into propaganda. After three decades, the Russian army is still on the territory of our country, and what is called the Transnistrian conflict has become a dirty business, with the involvement of corrupt politicians on both sides of the Nistru”, Maia Sandu, the leader of the Party for Action and Solidarity, replied.

And even though on the same day, Prime Minister Ion Chicu called a meeting with the participation of veterans, it is clear that the bomb was not defused until the end. Despite the fact that the Government promised to allocate an additional 10.65 million lei for the sanatorium treatment of the veterans and increase their monthly allowance from 100 to 300 lei, in addition to the medical insurance for the unemployed, it is clear that “the Transnistrian mace” was only left, for a while, in stand-by. Whose heads it is going to hit, it remains to be seen.

The explanation is simple: this category of people, who proved, perhaps, the greatest sacrifice in the contemporary history of the Republic of Moldova, remains among the most disadvantaged both materially, and morally. And the Transnistrian conflict remains sort of nebulous in the regional political context. The protagonists of this edition of the Newsletter also prove it. Enjoy your reading!

The most dangerous thing today is that weak people, both professionally and spiritually, work in the state institutions



Alexandru Jizdan, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for National Security, Defense and Public Order, Secretary General of the Democratic Party of Moldova

Because spring in the Republic of Moldova also means bringing up the Transnistrian issue on the agenda, the commemoration of March 2nd served as a starting point in the discussion with Alexandru Jizdan, general, MP, head of parliamentary committee and one of the leaders of the current PDM. Local and regional security challenges, political developments in the country and the need for a party cleansing before a new political alliance - read about all these below.

■ **Mr. Jizdan, since this interview happens immediately after the protest of the veterans of the 1992 Nistru War, how do you assess the happenings yesterday in the center of Chisinau and what do you think could be the outcome?**

■ First of all, I think we have to ask ourselves why people take to the street as the events can be understood only if we understand the causes that triggered them ... I listened attentively to the yesterday's statements of the protesters - most of them said their revolt is not caused by the lack of money or whims, but by the fact that they haven't been heard in the last 28 years. This is why my firm belief is that the issue of veterans was on the agenda of the Government, but also of the parliamentary agenda permanently and not only on the occasion of special dates, these people - our fellow citizens – would no longer have reasons to protest. And it is not only about the social component, which is important of course, but also about the general attitude of the state and the attention we pay to them. How do we organize the commemoration on March 2nd, February 15th or September 21st, when the Peace Day is marked? How do we involve these people in the life of society? What are the patriotic activities in which we ask for their participation? Let someone from among the dignitaries tell me the number of the recipients of the Stephen the Great Order that are still alive! Did we dedicate any books to them? Have we made a single film about these people while they are still alive? I think inattention and forgetfulness are the basis of these protests, so people have the right to be upset.

Minister Ciocoi has to resign

■ **Yet it is too simplistic an explanation...**

■ It is true that besides inattention, there were also a number of mistakes, including at the level of political

statements, such as that made by Aureliu Ciocoi, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration. I think he has to resign for this. Yes, we talked to him in the PDM parliamentary faction, he apologized for that blunder, but I told him personally: apologies must be presented to the veterans, not to the politicians. For us it was important to see to what extent his words are "a blunder" or his vision regarding the country's foreign policy. Mr. Ciocoi gave us assurances that the Foreign Ministry is still promoting a pro-European policy and apologized for the mistake he made. For us it was important to convince ourselves that we do not deviate from our values and that the Prime Minister Chicu does not break his promise he made when he asked us to support this Government, namely, that they will not deviate from the beneficial and useful things that we have achieved.

■ **How do you see the Transnistrian issue today and what are the chances of reintegration? I'm asking you as a former Minister of Interior, as well as of the chairman of a parliamentary committee, and as a person who – as the story says, at least - chose to enter the Police Academy because you had been marked by the events that happened 28 years ago...**

■ I would say that it is a frozen conflict including in the perception of ordinary citizens. If you made an experiment and calculated how many times in a week you have heard people talking about Transnistria!.. Here is the answer to the question: nobody cares. We have a deputy prime minister for reintegration, another two or three officials who deal with the issue, otherwise it's a topic of no interest. If we discussed it more intensely, I think it would be easier for us to find the solution.

■ **You are the chairman of the parliamentary committee, so you should also have levers to bring this issue up from the bottom of the people's priorities list, as it appears now in the**

opinion polls, to the top.

■ The fact that the Transnistrian issue is among the last in polls speaks of our degree of patriotism. Unfortunately, yes, today we are more interested about our stomach than about this territory ... At the same time, I think there is a proof of a false patriotism when some deputies appear with strong statements only in briefings, after which nobody hears from them anything on the issue for the rest of the year. It is not enough to fight in statements only on March 2nd... As for the National Security Committee, this topic is a constant one on our agenda and we will work to help identify solutions. Even if it is difficult as the Republic of Moldova is a small country, without political weight. Personally, being also chairman of the GUAAM Delegation, I also address the subject with my colleagues from Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia or Azerbaijan. All of these post-Soviet states have frozen conflicts - either Donbass, Abkhazia, Ossetia or Northern Karabakh - and we use this platform to exchange ideas. In addition, we must not forget that in the neighbouring country there is a war that, although we do not see and hear it as we did the one from 28 years ago on the Nistru, it has its effects including from the security point of view.

No one convinced me that the citizenship against investments is detrimental to the country

■ **What other security challenges are you permanently looking at?**

■ I believe Transnistria remains a priority, and the fact that, starting from June 2019, a number of tools have disappeared, unfortunately, makes us to become seismic in terms of security in the region. I mean, first of all, the filters we had at the Airport, the activity of the border police, the actions carried out by the Migration and Asylum Bureau or the observations of the Information and Security Service ... It was a group

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of activities that brought peace in the region. Currently Ukrainians are very disturbed and worried about what is happening in our country. Given the conflict in Donbass, they don't want it to escalate in the southern part of the country, in the Odessa region. In this context, I think that the role of the Democratic Party today in stopping certain processes and ensuring a counterbalance to the PSRM actions is very important. We showed it: when the PD was in power, there was a clear pro-European orientation and we did not allow for the state institutions to deviate from this course. Last June, I personally warned in the Parliament when the ACUM Bloc gave away to the PSRM all the important institutions for the state security - SIS, the Constitutional Court, some powers for the Security Supreme Council. These were at least strange decisions that, in the best case, I'm putting it down to the lack of experience.

■ ***In the last days of February, after heated debates, the Parliament extended - until September 1st, 2020 - the moratorium on granting citizenship against investments. It is a programme that continues to provoke controversy both at home and abroad, finding itself also on the list of concerns voiced to the Republic of Moldova by the European partners. However, you have had at least a "separate" opinion on this subject. How do you explain it?***

■ I said it then and I'm saying it now: when I see that this programme poses threats to the security of the state and citizens, I will be the first to sound the alarm. So far, however, no one has convinced me that the project in question is detrimental to the country. It is true that, as the colleagues in the Parliament have also decided, this secrecy of the names of citizenship applicants should be removed. We also made a request to the Public Services Agency in this regard, to make available the names of those who have received citizenship against investments. I understand the plea of the ACUM according to which everything

that PD produced is *a priori* bad, because Plahotniuc was behind PD. But I don't agree with it, because this is not true! By the way, for you to know, since the establishment of the first moratorium, we have invited in the Committee the representatives of the company that provides these services to our country, to find out from them where the risks are. They explained it to us in details and, in my opinion, there is more emotion than reason here. Yes, there must be no secrets. But if we reveal the names of the applicants, does the law in question become good or is it still bad?! From my point of view, we will earn more if they are able to improve this law and allow people to invest. Filters are enough. The sad thing is that we are not so attractive for the people to want to come to us. We are shouting that we do not have investments, infrastructure and jobs, and that the Moldovans are leaving massively the country, but we are giving up so easily on a project that can bring us 500 million euros ... I compare the situation of this law with that of the Republican Stadium – neither a new stadium was built, nor the old one has been functional for three decades.

■ ***Getting back to the security filters, why didn't you ask for their reintroduction from the current government that you supported and you voted for?***

■ We voted for this Government, but we are not participating in the governance, even though I understand that the people don't believe us. It is a topic that we have been thinking about. We have been thinking about the messages we are conveying and about the way we are positioning ourselves... My opinion is that we, the Democratic Party of Moldova, should come up with a decision – whether we remain in the current positions or we go into an open coalition and get involved in the act of government with people representing us and portfolios, continuing to play the role of a pro-European party, as we are. Because not only the ACUM bloc can be pro-European.

PSRM has no choice

■ ***Would PSRM accept a new pro-European party as a governing partner?***

■ I think PSRM has no choice today. We've seen how compatible they were with the ACUM - in fact, it was clear from the beginning that this alliance would last until the question of the Prosecutor's General selection was made. In the meantime, we have reminded, including our development partners, that we are a pro-European party. We allowed ourselves to be mocked, we survived without anyone's help and today everyone sees us that way. But we have our own agenda and we will act in the interest of the country.

■ ***The seven MPs who recently left the PDM also identify themselves as pro-Europeans. How did this rift affect the party?***

■ We did not intend to prove who is more pro-European. Only, when they left, our former colleagues operated with information that did not correspond to the truth. We have never negotiated with the Socialist Party on a coalition. However, we have had discussions with those who left for several months. In their displays of sincerity, they told us how things were de facto. Obviously, today, in public, they say different things, but the time will reveal everything: whose money they used, what the interests were, who they allied with and which values they defended. There is no money for free - if you get some money from someone, at some point you will have to work for it.

■ ***The Democratic Party has experienced this "financial dependence" for itself. How will you handle it now, without the financial flows that people and institutions got used to, and which have allowed you to expand unimaginably at times?***

■ We have the money coming from the state budget. Obviously it is not enough, but that the extent to which you refer is not good also. When everything is

based on money in a party, the people in the party become over the time motivated only by money. As Secretary General of the PDM, I have taken over a quite complicated processes. The requests coming from people were of all sorts like: it's the Village Day, are you giving us money to celebrate? However, despite such situations, we won the local elections without money. It was hard, much harder than when you had money, but we succeeded and that made us confident that we were doing the right thing at the leadership level. Today I can say that we are a living organism, we are not a single man's party, we do not depend only on money and, above all, we have among us people who continue to believe in the values of the Democratic Party.

■ **Regarding one's man party, you stated that the PDM no longer identifies with Mr. Plahotniuc. Now we are living a new phenomenon of a single man who controls everything that moves in the country. What levers are there to ensure a balance?**

■ Everyone who has absolute power in a state, especially in a poor state, needs to understand that people who have money, positions and a bit of talent are *a priori* despised. That's why I suggest everyone to learn the lessons of those who have already gone through this euphoria of success and popularity, which breaks you from reality. Only money does not save you and our recent history proves it sufficiently. And do not believe those who say that we are not moving at all from a democratic point of view. The fact that many of those who have stolen or violated the values of this state are either being pursued, or already arrested or convicted, is evidence of progress of society.

Confession before communion...

■ **Despite the progress you are talking about, Ilan Șor's traveling vans continue to pave the country's roads, while the charity foundations**



remain the best election agent for the politicians. When will we stop the voters' corruption?

■ The corruption of the voters also speaks about its specificity ... But the state has the duty to establish rules and to ensure the functioning of the law. The PDM was blamed, at its time, for not taking enough action to stop these things. There is some truth here and I personally have remorse for not having responded to that. Unfortunately, nobody did. It bothers me now to see how, daily, hundreds of people are loaded into buses in Hâncești and taken to have fun in Orhei, and in the evening they are brought home ... ready for the "correct vote". When the PDM officially comes to government, we will use different tools, capabilities and approaches. Most importantly, we will bring educated people. Because the most dangerous thing today is that both professionally and spiritually weak people work in the state institutions. Only when we understand that we need to have well-paid and educated people, will things change. Otherwise, poverty generates corruption. Let's take for example the issue of alcohol consumption by drivers. The laws have been restricted, the fines have increase, but the people continue to disregard them. Because they can "resolve" either with the police officer, the forensic doctor, the prosecutor or the judge. And

we sit and watch it in the Parliament not daring to touch this subject, lest we lose the electorate...

■ **When will that happen - the official return of the PDM to the government??**

■ I can't give you a date. It is certain that we must be prepared for this, and in the meantime, we must assume the mistakes. Because, being in opposition means we made mistakes. And if we are to make a statement about the PDM's past, let's do it! As a confession before communion ... Humanly and manly, I understand that I should have spoken *then*. But it is my duty to prove to everyone, including my children, that my stay in the party had no other interests than bringing our country back to normal. It may sound loud, but I will also demonstrate this through my actions in the future. Today, I rely only on my senses and, if I consider that Minister Ciocoi should be dismissed, I will say this out loud, and if I think that the Law on citizenship against investments does not deserve to be cancelled, I will defend this point of view. Let everyone come with evidence and have a battle of arguments. Because it looks as if we are at a wedding now where we all fight and we don't know what for.

■ **Thank you for the interview.**

**Sorina Ștefârță
Chisinau, 3 March 2020**

Editorial

Transnistria, still a focal point of internal and regional instability

Mădălin Necșuțu,
BalkanInsight.com Reporter

The presidential elections scheduled for November-December 2020 approaching, the topics of the Transnistrian issue will restart the discussions between Chisinau and Tiraspol which are, at the same time, becoming a powder keg with an increasingly shorter wick from the security point of view. On the one hand, the separatist regime in Tiraspol will try to force the hand of President Igor Dodon and his Government to obtain even more concessions; on the other hand, the head of state will try to make the conflict settlement one of his main topics of the campaign and achieve what nobody has done in almost 30 years -the settlement of the so-called frozen conflict.

Despite this fact, it is very unlikely that the objective of reintegrating the secessionist territory from the left bank of the Nistru will be achieved this year or in the near future. And this is because reintegration is something that depends entirely and utterly on Moscow's desire, whose priority, at the moment, is the escalating situation in Eastern Ukraine. At the same time, there is a tendency of Tiraspol to strengthen the Russian military presence on the territory controlled by the separatist forces, which is seriously undermining the security of the Republic of Moldova and, in extenso, of the entire region, if we take into account the fact that there are less than 100 kilometres to the border with NATO and the EU, with Romania.

A Kremlin pressure point

Transnistria continues to function as a Kremlin pressure point in the region which is pressed whenever it is necessary to remind the West of the Russian Federation's security belt,



which neighbours the aforementioned borders. The Moscow signal is transmitted down the vertical of power and thus the Kremlin's decisions are echoed occasionally and verbally by the Tiraspol regime.

Following this logic, in mid-January, the Co-chair of the Unified Control Commission (CUC) from Transnistria, Oleg Beleakov, called for an increase in the peacekeeping contingent in the region. He requested that the number of Russian military personnel be increased more than ten times - from 400 to 4200. In order to motivate his demand he invoked a potential danger on the part of the Chisinau authorities that would like to liquidate those posts.

Moreover, Oleg Beleakov demanded the resumption of the helicopter squadron's activity, designed for the peacekeeping forces. However, this would only lead to a re-arming of the region and to an even more unwanted military presence on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. That is an opposite process to the declared one- bringing more soldiers instead of withdrawing the illegally stationed troops on the territory of the country, under various pretexts or formats.

Straw on fire on the part of Chisinau

Even more problematic is that Beleakov's statements were also encouraged by the controversial statements of the Moldovan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aureliu Ciocoi, who scandalized the Moldovan society, but also raised the attention of the neighbouring states.

Namely, at the beginning of last month, Ciocoi said, during a press conference, that the Russian Federation intervened in the War on the Nistru in order to stop the bloodshed. This is a thesis rather invoked by Moscow in this conflict and far from the position of Chisinau on what happened in 1992. In addition, Aureliu Ciocoi believes that, for negotiating

with Russia and solving the Transnistrian conflict, written guarantees from NATO could be used that the Republic of Moldova will never have a future with the Alliance. This topic, again, is rather being vented by Moscow in which not even the most naive and ardent supporters of Russian policies in Chisinau really believe.

This triggered an effect of the snowball, which rolled over the following few weeks, culminating with the March 2nd protest in front of the Government, when the situation was about to degenerate dramatically because of the veterans outraged by such a disgraceful attitude of the Moldovan officials. We are talking here, de facto, of additional security risks on the right bank of the Nistru, which create but a negative image for the Republic of Moldova from a security perspective. Also, by the disregard and hostile attitude of the top leadership towards some of the veterans on the Nistru, a message of weakness and disinterest towards the fate of the country's current military in the case of a military scenario is given indirectly in relation with the separatist forces on the left bank.

It's not for the first time that the PSRM leaders want to point out that the Republic of Moldova doesn't need a national army at all; that, theoretically, the army has no one to fight with in the neighbourhood due to its absolute inferiority and because, in a sense, there can be no conflict with the Transnistrians as this has not happened for 30 years anyway ... However, such ideas conveyed by the political spectrum do not help Chisinau to ensure an adequate security framework, contributing even more to the instability and the perception that the state is incapable of ensuring the security of its citizens in the face of external or internal threats.

The risks of ostrich policy that buries its head in the sand

All these is coupled with the dual attitude of the political leaders from the right bank - in particular, that of President Igor Dodon. His rhetoric is full of addresses and references to patriotism and the need to reunite the country under the scepter of Chisinau. At the same time, his disappearance from the public space on March 2nd tells us he does not want to intensify the disputes with Tiraspol, which puts him in a lower position in the negotiations. Also, Prime Minister Ion Chicu avoided getting too much into the military history of the conflict and talked about other issues such as the Government's economic programme.

This dual position of the head of state, who avoids sensitive issues such as marking 28 years since the beginning of the conflict on the Nistru, does not keep Chisinau in a strong position in the negotiation process. Moreover, the separatist

leader from Tiraspol, Vadim Kransnoselski, set up for him the future priorities related to the Transnistrian issue and the commitments he made to Moscow. "I would advise Igor Dodon to think of something else, of the promises he made to the Russian Federation. It is about establishing the Russian language as the language of interethnic communication, the return of the Russian media on the Moldovan market, establishing schools with Russian language on the territory of the neighbouring state, because almost all of them have been closed ... The Socialists came to power, but where are their promises? Where?" he told the Transnistrian media on February 10th.

Imagological War

From an imagological point of view, Tiraspol opened a new front against Chisinau after the constitutional authorities had checkmated in the first phase. Since the end of last year, Chisinau and Tiraspol have been in a new phase of an imagological war caused by the desertion of Rjavitin soldier from the Transnistrian army in 2016, but captured in December 2019 in his hometown, Pervomaisk, by the Transnistrian militia while he was visiting his parents.

Alexandru Rjavitin was charged with three criminal cases: two for desertion and one for treason. Having been subject to torture and ill-treatment, he fled, by foot, to Chisinau, where he found shelter and was also given the citizenship of the Republic of Moldova. Later, after being detained on the left bank of the Nistru, the Transnistrians wanted to set an example for those who are thinking of doing the same thing. Today Rjavitin appears in various productions of the Transnistrian television in which he praises the conditions of the Transnistrian army following the reforms initiated by the Transnistrian leader Vadim Kransoselski and criticizes the Chisinau authorities for the treatment he had received during the "exile". The negative facts previously invoked by Rjavitin have disappeared and everything is now in a favourable light.

Yet, the young people are fleeing the Transnistrian region - either to the right bank of the Nistru or to the West - and the region is being depopulated at an accelerated pace. It seems that these will be new topics of heated discussions on the agenda of both parties in the future. The electoral logic will not help it either, while the security climate will suffer directly proportional to this.

All these come in addition to the excessive passport issuance carried out on the left bank of the Nistru by Russia, which has already over 220,000 citizens with legal documents there. In an eventual military scenario, these people could be legally called to arms under the Russian flag, and things could get even more complicated for both Chisinau and the entire region.

The veiled attempts to rewrite the history of the Transnistrian conflict is changing completely the paradigm of the state of Republic of Moldova



Viorel Cibotaru, director of the European Institute for Political Studies in Moldova

Former journalist and, at present, political analyst, with a mandate as Minister of Defense and one of party chairman, Viorel Cibotaru is the person who has first-hand experience of the Transnistrian conflict. On March 26th, 1992, along with several hundred other reservists, he was called, by order, to the Military Commissariat, from where he was sent to the Nistru military action area to take over the management of a company of the National Army that had just been established ... What has moved - if it has - in these years in the area of the Transnistrian settlement and why the people who risked their lives in those days can't find reason in the today's society? These are just some of the topics I covered in this interview...

It was an outburst of discontent and distress

■ **Mr. Cibotaru, why the commemoration this year of March 2nd turned, for the first time in fact, into a protest on the verge of violence?**

■ It was an outburst of discontent and distress of a large group of participants in the Nistru armed conflict - mostly police officers, but also volunteers who were either called under arms or volunteered, and who feel aggrieved today... It was an eruption of pain and a cry: listen to us at least today! Because these veterans are still waiting for the society's gratitude for their sacrifice from 28 years ago. It is extremely painful to see that you were not appreciated back then – as quite a few people were questioning the legitimacy of Chisinau's actions – and not even today you are appreciated, almost three decades away. However, history

has shown that I was right: I responded to the call of the state - I was mobilized along with some 200 other reserve officers (prosecutors, judges, journalists, historians) and we all acted on behalf of the national interest, participating in the restoration of the constitutional order and fighting for the freedom and independence of the Republic of Moldova. This, in fact, what should always be told to the citizens of our country about those days and about the people who fought and even died then. I do not feel gratitude and I think it is a common feeling of all the veterans of that war.

■ **However, gratitude is often an abstract and relative thing and for it to exist it must be based on something...**

■ Countries like the USA, Germany, and France and even the Russian Federation, in its specific style, have managed to find a way in so as not to exclude the veterans from the social circuit. But, if we look at how these people are integrated not only into a system of moral gratitude, but also in one of physical rehabilitation and satisfaction of social rights, we can see that we are at the bottom of the list. All these things have been voiced at the protest from March 2nd in the square. Although, as I said, it was just an outburst. The problems are not new, having been exposed not once by the veterans in press conferences or on other various occasions.

■ **How to explain the fact that in their speech the veterans have formulated**

now more explicitly than ever certain political and geopolitical statements and claims?

■ They were provoked and triggered by a series of statements made by the exponents of the current government. Whether it is Minister Gaiciuc or Ciocoi, the Prime Minister Chicu or President Dodon. The attitude of the politicians has irritated at maximum this category of people - the veterans of the Nistru War. These veiled attempts to rewrite history and thus reinterpret their role in the context of the events of that time - that it was a fratricidal war and that all were guilty – is changing completely the paradigm of both the state of Republic of Moldova, of the sacrifice by which it was constituted, and of the vision of these people who are experiencing an intense feeling that someone “up there” is playing games with them. Hence the reactions.

Aureliu Ciocoi expressed what the politicians think of us today

■ ***How do you explain that both the current, for the time being, and the previous Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration have stepped out of line when it comes to this issue?***

■ I have answered this question before. For me, it's a big difference. Nicu Popescu spoke about Transnistria in Bucharest, in the context of his visions as an international expert. And, at least until the events in Crimea, which saw a continuity of what happened to us in 1992, many of the analysts shared this view – it was an armed conflict backed by Russia, but generated by language problems and socio-economic differences between the two banks. But Nicu Popescu has quickly understood that one thing is to express an academic opinion and another one -the official position of the Republic of Moldova, which says directly that it was a war with the Russian Federation. This fact

is also confirmed by the ECHR Decision on the Ilascu case, and by the 1992 Ceasefire Agreement signed by Chisinau and Moscow, and subsequently, in 2005, by the legislation of the Republic of Moldova. In short, he made the mistake and apologized for it. In the case of Aureliu Ciocoi, however, he expressed what the politicians who lead the Republic of Moldova think today. This is what the Socialist Party thinks. This idea is being promoted by the Presidency, being at the same time the position that the Kremlin has been promoted for years: Russia had no involvement, it was a local war in which the people opposed the atrocities of Chisinau and have fought against the unionists. By contrast, Russia has imposed itself everywhere, including within the OSCE, as a peacemaker ... The fact that Mr. Ciocoi, as part of the government, supports this position has irritated the veterans even more.

■ ***Why do we get into such situations when there is no election campaign without the Transnistrian issue and no party that does not promise it will reintegrate the country?..***

■ Some are realistic, others too realistic ... For example, the Sandu government, which was in an unnatural alliance and had to seek certain ways of dialogue with the Russian Federation, did not make the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict a priority - and I think this approach was wrong both strategically and politically, both internally and externally, although it is clear that you cannot do too much. Likewise, the ACUM government has avoided putting national security issues on the table. But I think there are things inherent to a government with limited possibilities and within a very limited time frame. Even the current government, although it has several levers, is not concerned with these issues. In fact, they are acting as a government that is striving not to deviate from the purpose for which it was created - the election of Igor Dodon

for the second presidential term, a goal which comes together with some absolutely unfeasible ambitions such as requesting guarantees of permanent neutrality for the Republic of Moldova or accepting the balanced foreign policy formula.

■ ***Is this simple rhetoric or a reasoned argument?***

■ It is not rhetoric and, after all, every country wants a balanced and calculated foreign policy that expresses the national interests. Only, in the context of the Dodon-Chicu government, this means the departure from the Europeanization pace and adjustment to the European standards, and getting closer to an area of Russian influence. It is a setback in the European course of the country and people understand this very well.

Permanent neutrality is a guarantee that the Republic of Moldova will not be part of the West

■ ***But, even these days, in Brussels, President Dodon gave assurances that we will continue the implementation of the Association Agreement and of other key agreements with the EU***

■ It is true, he is stating loud and clear that he is not giving up on the European Union. Moreover, he did not proceed with the cancellation of the Association Agreement as he was stating in the election campaign from the fall of 2016. But Igor Dodon has done something even worse -he diminished from the enthusiasm of the people and of the bureaucratic apparatus. Everyone understands that we only say things, but don't do them. You will see stagnation in all areas respectively. There is neither new initiatives today, nor sustainability of the European path. Likewise, there is no fight against corruption in the justice system, while the budget embezzlement schemes continue to work. It is the beneficiary that has simply changed.

■ **To what extent does the incoherence of the Government affect our security?**

■ Unfortunately, the last attempt to reform the national defense and security system was made in 2014-2015. It was done according to a logic which resulted from a certain understanding of the risks to the security of the Republic of Moldova which were synchronized not only with our national interests, but also with the regional interests. The political class was a little scared then by the events on the Maidan in Kiev, by the way Putin proceeded with Yanukovich and how he took over Crimea... This shocked and somehow paved the way for the reforms in the sector. Thus, the development of a new National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy began, as a new approach to the defense system. It was absolutely necessary given the fact that we have only ground forces and a mobilization system that is constantly degrading. In addition, there has always been a kind of rivalry, which is becoming more and more hilarious, between creating a state with a defense system and a police state. In the case of our country, the focus was on the special police forces. So did Mr. Voronin, Mr. Plahotniuc, and this seems to be the approach of the new government, which wants a policeman in each village. There is a certain diversion from the way the modern world perceives the defense system. However, in order to maintain decency in the relations with Romania and NATO, the government had to accept a formula of the National Army development and reform. Only they postponed it for ten years, the funds being planned for after 2025.

■ **Some probably imagine that we will not even need an Army since we will be guaranteed permanent neutrality....**

■ This much-trumpeted neutrality is, in fact, a form of guarantee offered to Russia. Because nobody says who should give the guarantees. The UK? The

USA? Maybe Italy? What about NATO?!.. In fact, the key word that has been missing so far in this equation is the Russian Federation. Such a document cannot exist without it. They are doing it for Moscow as a guarantee that the Republic of Moldova will not be part of the West. I am absolutely convinced that, once this neutrality is achieved, the Kremlin will find found dozens of arguments why the Republic of Moldova cannot continue with the Association Agreement. Because there is the security component there or the common foreign policy component that contradict the principle of neutrality which, in fact, is demanded and formulated exclusively by Moscow. Nobody in Europe is demanding assurances that we are not going to fight against Romania, Hungary or other countries. So, the Russian Federation does not want to lose this territory from its sphere of influence. And when the time comes, it will act accordingly, either according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact model or the Crimean one.

The current President will remain in history as a person of perpetual scandals

■ **You said earlier that the current Government's mission is to propel the current President into a new term. Do you think that, once this new term has been won, Igor Dodon could change the existing agreements with NATO?**

■ I can foresee a complete freeze of political relations with the North Atlantic Alliance, especially since the dialogue is already lacking in this regard. But contacts will exist, because contacts also exist with North Korea... The ongoing programmes will continue to be implemented, though at the lowest level, from a kind of inertia. New ones are unlikely to be launched. Take, for instance, the Initiative to strengthen the defense capacity or the interoperability one. Why continue the interoperability

activities if the Republic of Moldova refuses to participate in exercises, trainings and joint operations? The same is true of education. We are asking for courses, support for the training of specialists, without knowing what we want to do with them after they have been trained and what the perspective offered by the Army is- what it will be dealing with and what its mission is. Meanwhile, the current management of the Ministry of Defense deals with the management of obsolete goods, and most of the money is spent on the maintenance of the apparatus - salaries, food, equipment - not on exercises. Thus, today, on the state account, we support people who are dressed in military uniform, but are not ready, in fact, for military missions.

■ **Will Igor Dodon succeed in becoming the person who reintegrated the Republic of Moldova?**

■ President Dodon has the reputation of a person of declarations, not achievements. I'm afraid we will remember him as a head of state, whom, in the first half of the term, everyone treated appallingly, and in the second half, he treated everyone appallingly. Name at least one achievement of his, except for the ghostly ideas of "balanced foreign policy" and "permanent neutrality." Neither in the eastern region, though voted there, Mr. Dodon is respected ... In fact, we are dealing with a successful media product, who will remain in history as a person of perpetual scandals: starting with leaving the Communist Party, the money he took from the Russians for the party and the extradited Turkish teachers in exchange for the luxurious repair of the Presidency building. Both him and Mr. Plahotniuc are just anti-heroes.

■ **Thank you for the interview.**

**Sorina Ștefârță
Chișinău, March 4th, 2020**

Expert Opinion

Oleg Serebrian: It is difficult to say when this Gordian knot - the Transnistrian problem- will finally be untied



One of the most important events dedicated to the security issues is the Munich International Conference - an annual forum that brings together hundreds of experts, having become the largest informal platform for the world leaders. Here they discuss political, security, defense, but also economic issues. More than 40 heads of state and government from four continents, foreign and defense ministers, heads of secret services participated in the February 2020 edition of the Conference. "Of course, the presence of our country at this event is important, because it gives us visibility and the possibility of establishing contacts and meetings", says in an interview for the Radio Free Europe dedicated to the Conference Moldova's ambassador to Germany, Oleg Serebrian. In Munich, he was part of the Delegation of the Republic of Moldova headed by President Igor Dodon. In the margin of the two conference days, the head of state held 12 bilateral meetings, including with German officials among them the Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. We are inviting you to read below the most important theses of the interview with HE Oleg Serebrian.

About Munich 2020 and the East European security

The security issue of the eastern part of the European continent has not been absent from the Munich debates. However, this year, the Conference did not have a session dedicated specifically to the Transnistrian conflict or the conflicts in the Black Sea area, in general, as it was the case of the previous editions of the conference when the invitees from the Republic of Moldova- the president of the country or the Prime Minister – spoke in the conference, as it happened in 2018, for instance. If we look at the list of debated topics, we can even say that we are witnessing a kind of geo-economization of international politics. We hope that at

the next year's edition the Transnistrian conflict, but also the other conflicts that form a semicircle in the northern area of the Black Sea, will be brought up during the debates and will be given more attention, especially given the unexpected and somewhat dangerous increase in the tensions between East and West of the European continent.

About the bilateral dialogue between Chisinau and Berlin

It is a good dialogue, the Republic of Moldova is a member of the Eastern Partnership. Of course, the expectations of our European partners, especially for countries like the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, are high, because

you always have higher expectations from the ones you care about more and I think this trio made up of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia is especially close to the EU. The Moldovan-German dialogue is part of the Moldovan-European dialogue, although there are, of course, aspects of bilateral nature. Especially we can talk about the very good cooperation in the economic field, Germany being the main investor in the industry, but also the political dialogue has developed quite well in recent years. Berlin has an important voice and has advocated for Moldova's proximity to the European family. Germany is still a close friend to our country. Governments have changed over the years, but Berlin has remained attached to our space all the time, paying attention to the political events that take place in our country and in the region. There are also many politicians with critical views, as always, depending on their political family, but overall, we can say that there is a good dialogue and Germany is still supporting our European path.

About Germany's role in the Transnistrian settlement

As the EU as a whole, Germany is interested in resolving this conflict that borders the Community bloc, so that the European Union's increasingly

uneasy borders may be settled. Though considered frozen, the Transnistrian conflict has a rather high detonation potential, with quite important actors involved. So, its defrosting could severely disrupt the European security as a whole. I cannot say that Germany has a distinct voice. The European Union participates in the "5 + 2" format and Germany is aligned with the European policies, although Berlin is perhaps one of the most active European capitals in this issue. We remember the "Berlin plus", the project launched in 2016 in the German capital, which talks about the "small steps" policy in the Transnistrian file. Then the traditional Bavarian conferences that take place in autumn with the participation of the OSCE and of those involved in the negotiations. Thus, the German partners offer a generous discussion platform, where they try to find solutions to very specific problems of the two banks of the Nistru. These are the peculiarities of Germany's position on this issue.

About a conflict that is "the closest to a solution"

It is true that we can hear this assertion quite often- that the Transnistrian conflict could be easier solved than those in the Caucasus, since mass expulsions of the population on ethnic criteria, ethnic cleansing, as it is the case of Karabakh, Abkhazia, or even South Ossetia, did not occur on the left bank of the Nistru. Another element is that there is a direct

dialogue between Chisinau and Tiraspol, and the so-called demarcation line between the territory controlled by the separatist authorities and the one under the control of the legitimate authorities of the Republic of Moldova is more permissive. Crossing the Nistru does not pose the same problems as crossing the border from Abkhazia to the territory controlled by the authorities in Tbilisi. We have hundreds of students from across the Nistru who are studying in Chisinau or in Balti. The trips, although sometimes difficult on both sides of the Nistru, especially to the Transnistrian area, are incomparably less problematic than those from Azerbaijan or Karabakh, which are practically impossible. I think that is why some claim the Transnistrian conflict is easier to solve. At the same time, when we go into details, we see that there are many elements to be removed in order to consider this conflict resolved and closed, the settlement process being still quite slow. It is difficult to say when this Gordian knot will be finally untied and how we can solve the Transnistrian problem. Though apparently simple, when we go into details, we see that there are still many complicated and problematic aspects.

About the balanced foreign policy, permanent neutrality and Germany's position

The Republic of Moldova is a sovereign country and its position regarding one

or another international issue does not, in any case, need to be approved or forbidden by other capitals. Germany never intended to give foreign policy lessons to countries or to direct them in one direction or another. It is the decision of the people of that country, the decision of the leadership of that country and what Germany wants in our case is internal stability and a close cooperation with the European Union. However, this close cooperation with the EU does not mean that it is at the expense of relations with other countries, whether they are in the West, East, North or South. Berlin does not regard the Republic of Moldova, so to speak, in the light of strictly geopolitical interests. Its interest is for us to be stable, and that there are no outbreaks of tension on the eastern borders of the EU and additional pressure on the European Union. This is what the German partners have always told us, and also now, during the discussions we had in Munich.

As for the recognition of the permanent neutrality of our country, this has not been officially expressed so far. This proposal was listened to, but it was neither rejected nor accepted. They took note of it. After all, it is the decision of Chisinau, Germany does not push the Republic of Moldova towards such a decision, nor does it try to stop Chisinau from this step.

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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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