

FOREIGN POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AFTER THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: Challenges and Perspectives

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April 2021

Summary

- *The 2020 presidential elections in Moldova have triggered the reconfiguration of the country's domestic and foreign policies, which now seek to break out the country's international isolation, stabilize the pandemic and political crises, and carry out the internal reform. Such priorities have added a certain geopolitical neutrality feature to the new foreign policy strategy.*
- *Led by Maia Sandu, Moldova is open to a pragmatic dialogue with all its cooperation partners, but the nature of that dialogue is determined by the priorities set in the domestic and foreign agendas: managing the health and economic crises generated by the pandemic, resuming foreign financial assistance, advancing democratic reforms and ensuring the rule of law, resolving sectoral issues related to security, trade and the Transnistrian case, or strengthening economic cooperation.*
- *In the absence of a functional Parliament and Government, the country's foreign policy is not fully outlined and can only be partially implemented. Given the clashes and tensions the European Union and the U.S. have with Russia and China at the international level, after the situation in the country is stabilized and the long-term priorities are defined, the Moldovan authorities will have to carefully define the areas of cooperation with foreign partners and the ways in which they will engage. These relations will have to be based on the convergence of bilateral and national interests, parity, Moldova's bilateral and multilateral commitments/agreements, and ongoing dialogue.*

Introduction

The 2020 presidential elections and the victory of Maia Sandu, the candidate of a pro-European center-right party, have reset and revitalized Moldova's foreign policy. The break out of the country's international isolation is due to the internalization of foreign policy objectives and aligning them to the country's existing problems. Previously, the interference of party and political interests of the Democratic (DPM) and Socialists Parties (PSRM) in defining the foreign policy vector did not necessarily contribute to solving these problems, developing the country or fostering and maintaining good cooperation with its partners. Nowadays, the national interest, fight against corruption, strengthening of democracy, rule of law and the improvement of citizens' lives are reference points for the new foreign agenda. By invoking these priorities, Maia Sandu added a certain geopolitical neutrality feature to the new foreign policy strategy, which is reflected in the solutions offered by the European agenda and pragmatic and positive relations with Russia or China.

The new foreign policy agenda concerning the EU is clearer and more dynamic, as opposed to the less defined bilateral agendas with the U.S., Russia or China, which can be explained by the limited bilateral interactions. The areas and long-term priorities of the foreign policy invoked by the President are not supported by a final comprehensive plan. These limitations can be explained by the instability derived from the parliamentary crisis, the lack of a full-fledged government and the pandemic crisis. However, there are foreign policy directions and objectives clearly outlined by the presidential institution.

The relations with these actors and the future perspectives of Moldova's foreign policy are the topics covered in this policy brief. The purpose of this approach is to analyze the nature of the foreign agenda promoted by Maia Sandu and to highlight the opportunities and challenges that can derive from these dialogues and partnerships.

The status of Moldova's foreign relations and the legacies of the previous governments and leadership

The political forces in Moldova have not ensured the continuity of the foreign policy vector in terms of its geographical direction, values or objectives and policies, although all of them have stated that those agendas would aim to guarantee the well-being of citizens and the country's interest, and despite the fact that there is a broad political consensus on the European course. The pro-European vector of the DPM Government, which was not supported by qualitative changes in the domestic policy (fight against corruption and money laundering, reform of the judiciary, deconcentration of power in the state), balanced by a presidential institution geared towards a partnership with Russia, albeit a not very fruitful one, clashed with the EU's conditionality policy.

The 2019 pro-reform and anti-oligarchic policy of the Sandu Government, which unfroze the relations with European officials for a short period of time, was later replaced by the 'balanced foreign policy' of the predominantly socialist leadership and the new technocratic Government. The openness to a beneficial and non-geopolitical cooperation with all international partners that could support the country's development did not lead to any tangible internal reforms but did aim to promote and strengthen the strategic partnership with Russia. With its many directions and foreign policy approaches, Moldova has failed to build sustainable and positive relations with all its cooperation partners.

In the new presidential term, the country had to face the legacies of the previous political regimes: international isolation, distant and tense relations with the EU, Romania, the U.S. and Ukraine, outstanding commitments with the EU, missed financial opportunities for development projects, supported by Romania or the U.S., an ambitious Transnistrian region, as well as unsolved trade and politics-related issues with Russia, in addition to other matters of foreign policy on which no

substantial progress had been made.

The strategy and purpose behind the foreign policy advanced by Maia Sandu

The ‘foreign policy in the interest of the citizen’¹ of the current President, which is both a national and external goal,² is shaped by the problems faced by the country’s citizens, corruption, the quality of the democratic, institutional, political and justice processes, the need to secure Moldova’s integrity and sovereignty, to combat the pandemic crisis and to foster the national economy. Seen as tools to advance the domestic agenda, Maia Sandu invokes the importance of a positive, open and pragmatic interaction with all cooperation partners, the restoring of good relations with the EU, the U.S., Romania, Ukraine and Russia, enhancing economic diplomacy, ensuring a dignified international representation of the country, as well as mitigating the risks of conflict and tensions for Moldova. Although most of these rudimentary state priorities and needs are in line with the European standards,³ values and the bilateral agendas advanced by the EU, the U.S. or Romania, resolving disputes with Russia, identifying opportunities for cooperation and building pragmatic, beneficial and non-conflictual relations with non-Western partners equally meet the national interest of the country.

Maia Sandu’s post-election talks with the ambassadors of the EU, Romania, the U.S. and Russia, including her visits to Brussels⁴ or France,⁵ sought to bring Moldova out of the international isolation and initiate cooperation with a different presidential institution. In most cases, the priority was to obtain healthcare support and financial assistance to combat the pandemic effects, coupled with attempts to restore the country’s credibility and the partners’ openness to offer help and support, including in the long term, all by conveying a pro-reform message.

The current interim Government seems to adopt, only in part, a more moderate stance, which is more complementary to Maia Sandu’s agenda. The Government argued that it maintained the pro-European track by finalising the Strategy for ensuring the independence and integrity of the justice system, negotiating the new EU-Moldova agenda, implementing the DCFTA, the Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline project supported by the EU⁶ and by conducting discussions on facilitating e-commerce in the country, where the EU and the U.S. are also involved.⁷

The implementation of the foreign policy agenda is not entirely possible, given that the Parliament and the Government have the competencies to approve the foreign policy directions and ensure their implementation, respectively. However, the country’s presence and representation at the international level, the initiation of discussions on potential joint projects, the high-level dialogues conducted by the President, as well as the competence to propose bills and tackle national security threats, within which Maia Sandu included corruption and energy security issues, are all important and, in the case of the former President, were the ones that disbalanced Moldova’s foreign policy.

¹ Message from the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, addressed to the diplomatic corps, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 15 January 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/presa/mesajul-presedintelui-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-adresat-corpului-diplomatic>

² Maia Sandu Presidential Program, official page of the presidential candidate, October 2020, <https://maiasandu2020.md/program/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, took stock of the visit to Brussels, the Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 20 January 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-a-facut-bilantul-vizitei-la-bruxelles>

⁵ The President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, took stock of the visit to Paris, the Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 8 February 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-a-facut-bilantul-vizitei-la-paris>

⁶ Statements by the Minister Aureliu Ciocoi at the Forum on European Integration of the Republic of Moldova 2020, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, 8 December 2020, <https://mfa.gov.md/ro/content/declaratiile-ministrului-aureliu-ciocoi-cadrul-forumului-privind-integrarea-europeana>

⁷ Aureliu Ciocoi, at ‘e-TRADECON’: ‘Only by unifying our efforts we will succeed in increasing the competitiveness of the country’, Government of the Republic of Moldova’, 25 March 2021, <https://gov.md/ro/content/aureliu-ciocoi-cadrul-e-tradecon-doar-unificandu-ne-eforturile-vom-reusi-sporirea-gradului>

The European Union

European integration in Maia Sandu's foreign policy agenda is a major direction of development and a final 'civilizational project' for Moldova.⁸ Being open to such a political and economic project, the European Union has been quite demanding, in the recent years, in terms of authorities' performance in strengthening good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, the fight against corruption, the investigation of frauds in the financial-banking system or the reform of the justice system.⁹ Such conditionalities set by the EU in the 2017 macro-financial assistance agreement were also reflected in the 2020 assistance program, designed to support the country's economy and the implementation of the AA, in the context of the pandemic crisis.¹⁰ Having the same rhetoric, the new presidency has attempted to restore Moldova's relations with the EU, which previously had been severed by the DPM's oligarchic system, an emphasis placed by the former government primarily on economic and sectoral cooperation, rather than advancing the reforms demanded by the European institutions, and by the former President's attempts to diminish the EU assistance and Moldova-EU partnership,¹¹ while prioritizing the political dialogue with Russia and its assistance.

During her official meetings in Brussels, Maia Sandu voiced her intention to step up the cooperation with the EU and ensure the internal reform, all while seeking solutions to immediate problems: access to vaccines, medical equipment and assistance to the farmers and businesses affected by the pandemic.¹² Although the European institutions continue to be trenchant when it comes to meeting all conditionalities but open to the political potential of Maia Sandu,¹³ they have signed a Covid-19 resilience agreement with Moldova,¹⁴ an assistance that adds on the COVAX program and the financial support offered to Moldova to fight the pandemic. Given the opportunity for reform and the ongoing negotiations on the new association agenda, discussions have been resumed with the EU High-Level Advisers in Moldova on areas such as justice, anti-corruption, administrative reform, energy, education, reintegration or the fight against money laundering,¹⁵ which are also crucial for the EU's seven-year assistance planned for the country. In addition, the EU has shown willingness to adopt an Economic Recovery Plan for Moldova in the next period.¹⁶

The opportunities resulting from a pro-European foreign policy do support the immediate but also the long-term objectives of the new agenda. As the country's main trading partner, the EU is crucial for the revitalization of the national economy through the European Investment Bank's programs, which have supported the development of SMEs and the agricultural sector.¹⁷ The EU can also support the reform of the judiciary, as it has been previously involved in a technical

⁸ Interview // Maia Sandu: 'Citizens no longer want Dodon, because he identifies with the system that generated poverty, migration, injustice and corruption', anticoruptie.md, 2 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2PIGX77>.

⁹ Report on the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova, the European Parliament, 28 September 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0166_EN.html

¹⁰ Coronavirus: Eight macro-financial assistance programmes agreed to support enlargement and neighbourhood partners, the European Commission, 11 August 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1457

¹¹ Does Chicu contradict Dodon? 'The EU offers generous support to our country and we are grateful', Agora, 10 April 2020, <https://agora.md/stiri/69633/chicu-il-contrazice-pe-dodon-ue-ofera-un-sprijin-generos-tarii-noastre-si-suntem-recunoscatori>

¹² The President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, had a meeting with Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 18 January 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-a-avut-o-intrevedere-cu-ursula-von-der-leyen-presedinta-comisiei-europene>

¹³ The President Maia Sandu met with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 28 February 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/presa/presedintele-maia-sandu-s-a-intlnit-cu-presedintele-consiliului-european-charles-michel>

¹⁴ The President Maia Sandu signed the EU Financial Assistance Agreement of 15 million euros, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 22 February 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-maia-sandu-a-semnat-acordul-de-asistenta-financiara-de-15-milioane-de-euro-din-partea-ue>

¹⁵ The President Maia Sandu had a working meeting with the EU High-Level Advisers in the Republic of Moldova, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 6 February 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-maia-sandu-a-avut-o-sedinta-de-lucru-cu-inaltii-consilieri-ue-in-republica-moldova>

¹⁶ The European Union has carried out the mission of programming the assistance priorities for the Republic of Moldova for the next seven years, the Ministry of Finance, 5 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/32Obm0W>

¹⁷ President Maia Sandu met with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, op. cit.

assistance project aimed to prevent and fight corruption in the country's justice system.¹⁸ Moreover, the support provided by the EU High-Level Advisers' Mission to the Government for the effective implementation of the AA and DCFTA reforms and policies must be capitalized. Energy security is another common priority, as the EU is involved with Romania in the construction of the Iasi-Ungheni gas pipeline and the Ungheni-Chisinau branch, which Maia Sandu hopes will ensure more diversity within/strategic independence of the energy sector. As a recipient of Transnistrian exports and an observer in the 5+2 negotiations, the EU will continue to play an important role in gradually bringing closer the two banks through initiatives in the economic, social, cultural, administrative, health and media sectors within the EU Programme 'Support for Confidence Building Measures',¹⁹ as well as through assistance to combat the pandemic.

In the absence of a Parliament and Government able to support the reform agenda, the Moldova-EU relations could be blocked by conditionalities and backlogs that will hinder the country's ability to advance on other foreign policy issues: digital transformations, cross-border infrastructure projects, information security or environmental protection. In the long run, the country may find itself *in limbo*, not being functional enough to 'export' foreign policy and remaining merely a recipient of foreign assistance, investments and projects, being also susceptible to incursions into the domestic political and decision-making processes and in several strategic development sectors (energy, infrastructure or the digital sector), contrary to the national interest.

The United States of America

Through the new (internalized) foreign policy direction adopted by the Presidency, Moldova is closer to the priorities advanced by the U.S. in the bilateral agenda in the past few years. If initially, the Strategic Dialogue between the U.S. and the Republic of Moldova, launched in 2013, was meant to mainly strengthen the country's capacity to counter internal and external security threats, it gradually included the areas of good governance and the rule of law as priorities. Similarly to the European practice, the U.S. has highlighted its 'conditionalities': reform of the judiciary, fight against corruption, fostering free media and civil society, transparency of the governance process and assurance of human rights,²⁰ while engaging state institutions in political dialogue to advance those areas and financing sector-specific projects through the USAID program. Prior to the presidential elections, the advancement of democratic processes, including the reform of the judiciary and the capitalization of the Strategic Dialogue were central topics of the interaction between the U.S. and the Moldovan Government.²¹

As the partner that Maia Sandu relied on for support in investigating the bank theft and reforming the same sectors in 2019,²² the U.S. is considered by the Presidency as a 'reliable partner for development and democratization processes',²³ with which Moldova aims to deepen the cooperation for the development of the economy, state institutions, democracy and good governance at the local level in the long run, in exchange for a reform agenda. Immediate priorities in the bilateral talks, however, focused again on finding support to tackle the economic effects of the pandemic, for which

¹⁸ Project Supporting the effective prevention and fight against corruption in the justice sector, EU4Moldova Platform, <https://www.eu4moldova.md/ro/content/sprijinirea-prevenirii-eficiente-%C8%99i-combaterii-corup%C8%99Biei-%C3%AEn-sectorul-justi%C8%99Biei>

¹⁹ European Union Confidence Building Measures Programme in the Republic of Moldova (EU CBM), <https://eucbm.eu4moldova.md/news/>

²⁰ Popescu, Nicu and Gherasimov, Cristina, 2021: time to relaunch Moldovan-American relations, Institute for European Policies and Reforms, December 2020, <http://ipre.md/2020/12/17/policy-brief-2021-time-to-upgrade-us-moldova-relations/>

²¹ Joint U.S.-Moldova Statement Regarding the Strategic Dialogue Working Group on Rule of Law and Good Governance, the US Embassy in Moldova, 27 January 2020, <https://md.usembassy.gov/joint-u-s-moldova-statement-regarding-the-strategic-dialogue-working-group-on-rule-of-law-and-good-governance/>

²² Key moments of the visit of Prime Minister Maia Sandu to the United States of America, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 21 September 2019, <https://gov.md/ro/content/momente-cheie-ale-vizitei-prim-ministrului-maia-sandu-statele-unite-ale-americii>

²³ The President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, had a meeting with Derek J. Hogan, the US Ambassador to our country, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 21 January 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/presa/presedintele-republicii-moldova-maia-sandu-a-avut-o-intrevedere-cu-dereck-j-hogan-ambasadorul-sua-in-tara-noastra>

USAID could offer help.²⁴

The long-term support of the U.S. is equally important. The U.S. is already involved in projects that aim to increase competitiveness, develop the agricultural sector and improve the transparency of the financial sector, through USAID.²⁵ However, Moldova's ability to access major new financial assistance, such as the one from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, depends on its ability to and results in fighting corruption. Although the operational support that the U.S. could provide for justice reform, through the Open Justice project, for instance, in preventing money laundering or in strengthening the financial-banking system, through the expertise and information-sharing provided by the U.S. state agencies, is crucial for domestic reform and the advancement of the bilateral dialogue, any progress will depend on the direction of Moldova's domestic and foreign policies.

In addition to the initiatives that support Moldova's integration into 'Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community',²⁶ the country's security, sovereignty and territorial integrity are issues on the bilateral agenda that can also generate (non-)opportunities. The expertise and experience of the U.S. in modernizing and reforming the national military or in strengthening cyber security through the MITRE corporation²⁷ can be valuable for revising and updating the national security strategy, planned by Maia Sandu, and in ensuring the sector's transition to non-traditional forms of defence (information, digital, cyber security). As for the Transnistrian conflict, the diplomatic role of the U.S. as an observer in the 5+2 negotiations format and in maintaining political dialogue with the Transnistrian authorities to strengthen the ties between both banks may be useful for the renewed reintegration process. In 2019, there were talks about the U.S. involvement in monitoring the destruction of ammunition in Cobasna²⁸.

The U.S. is able to export to Moldova not only assistance, but also political weight and involvement that is somewhat of a double-edged sword.²⁹ The impact of the U.S. diplomacy, coupled with that of the EU and Russia, on the 2019 political crisis, as well as the alignment of Maia Sandu's agenda with the foreign policy priorities of President Joe Biden: fight against corruption, the primacy of democracy and the rule of law, are undoubtedly important.³⁰ More ambitious decisions and initiatives on sensitive political issues in Moldova, however, could pose risks to the constructive and peaceful environment that Maia Sandu wants, in particular in the context of the U.S.-Russia clashes and tensions in eastern Ukraine.

Russia and the Transnistrian case

Prior to the 2020 elections, Moldova's relations with Russia were quite politicized, unequal, unstable and unproductive, although the previous government and presidential institution, for instance, was (pro-)active in cooperating with the Russian authorities. In the new foreign policy, the head of state aims to build new relations with the Russian Federation: positive, constructive,

²⁴ The President Maia Sandu met with the US Ambassador Derek J. Hogan and the new head of the USAID Mission in Chisinau, Scott Hocklander, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 24 February 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/presa/presedintele-maia-sandu-s-a-intlnit-cu-ambasadorul-sua-dereck-j-hogan-si-cu-noul-sef-al-misiunii-usaid-la-chisinau-scott-hocklander>

²⁵ Information note on cooperation with the USA 2021, Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure, <https://mei.gov.md/ro/content/parteneri-de-dezvoltare>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Popescu, Nicu and Gherasimov, Cristina, op. cit.

²⁸ Key moments of Prime Minister Maia Sandu's visit to the United States of America, op. cit.

²⁹ US Ambassador to the Republic of Moldova Derek J. Hogan: 'Courage, commitment to democratic principles will overcome the political crisis in the Republic of Moldova', anticoruptie.md, 11 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3gCg35X>

Commentary by the Department of Information and Press of the Russian Foreign Ministry in connection with the continuation of the Western interference in the internal political processes in Moldova, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3njzZfc>

³⁰ Toosi, Nahal, Going after the 'Achilles' heel': Biden charges into global anti-corruption fight, Politico, 16 March 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/16/biden-global-anti-corruption-fight-476160>

Quirk, Patrick W., The Democracy Summit must be paired with a democracy strategy, Brookings, 19 February 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/19/the-democracy-summit-must-be-paired-with-a-democracy-strategy/>

‘mutually respectful and mutually beneficial’³¹, while not necessarily considering it to be the first strategic partner of Moldova.

By repeatedly invoking the authority of citizens’ and national interests,³² it seems that Maia Sandu seeks to remove (geo-)politics from the negotiating table and avoid ‘opportunities’ whereby Russia could counter the country’s decisions with which it disagrees, as in the case of the 2013-2014 embargo, although such risks will continue to exist. It is noteworthy that this foreign agenda is diametrically opposite to what is discussed above: Moldova will not call on Russia to resolve the country’s functional problems, but will advance another kind of national interest – resolving bilateral issues and disputes,³³ coupled with ensuring good neighbourly relations and an effective cooperation. Those issues include the Transnistrian case, trade barriers, dependence on the Russian gas and problems with tariffs and gas supply, the status and security of Moldovan citizens in Russia, the need to depoliticize the bilateral relations, including the economic ones, and to ensure that Moldova’s neutrality is indeed respected.

So far, the public reactions on this issue have been mainly focused on economic cooperation. Maia Sandu is open, for example, to a Russian financial support that would be both accessible and devoid of any risks for Moldova.³⁴ In 2020, the agreement for the \$200 million loan for infrastructure projects, its politicized use and electoral implications, was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, given the problematic provisions related to accessing and returning it. The renegotiation of the conditions will also depend on the governmental institution (and its stance on the matter). The tax exempt export of agricultural goods from the country will have to be renegotiated as well, an objective that the President wants to achieve for all 19 tariff positions through sustainable solutions, rather than the temporary, unstable and political agreements concluded so far.³⁵

Moldova’s status in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) may be a contentious issue in the new foreign policy with Russia, since Ion Chicu and Igor Dodon did support and endorse closer cooperation with the EEU. With an observer status obtained in 2018, Moldova was supposed to deepen the cooperation to eliminate trade constraints, attract investments and cooperate in the agro-industrial area, in infrastructure, e-commerce and digitalization,³⁶ which are undoubtedly important sectors. The economic profitability of the project, pushed by the previous authorities who were involved in negotiations for the country’s accession to the Eurasian Development Bank, remains uncertain as the AA, DCFTA and the economic issues with Russia remained in place. Regardless of whether this policy would have ensured fruitful bilateral relations, Maia Sandu may want to distance the country from the EEU, since the organization did not represent a foreign policy objective while she served as Prime Minister.³⁷

The President did intend to inquire with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the legality of obtaining the observer status,³⁸ the enhanced cooperation with the EEU being previously also criticized by the

³¹ The message of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, addressed to the diplomatic corps, op. cit.

³² Maia Sandu: My goal as president will be getting the country rid of poverty and turning the authorities back to the needs of people, Deutsche Welle, 12 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/2QUuQ15>

³³ Maia Sandu: ‘The year 2021 is very important from the perspective of relations with the EU’, Radio Free Europe Moldova, 2 December 2020, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/30980642.html>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Maia Sandu: My goal as president will be getting the country rid of poverty and turning the authorities back to the needs of people, op. cit.

³⁶ Ion Chicu participated online at the meeting of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 9 October 2020, <https://gov.md/ro/content/ion-chicu-participat-format-online-la-reuniunea-consiliului-interguvernamental-urasiatric>

³⁷ Nicu Popescu: ‘In no case is the Eurasian Union a foreign policy objective of the Republic of Moldova’, Radio Free Europe Moldova, 2 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/3dLwzPj>

³⁸ Maia Sandu questioned the legitimacy of granting Moldova the observer status in EurAsEC, Newsmaker, 30 November 2020, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/maia-sandu-a-pus-sub-semnul-intrebarii-legitimitatea-acordarii-statutului-de-observator-moldovei-in-urasec/>

DPM Government, who saw it as clashing with the EU's commitments.³⁹ This may explain the President's emphasis on the collaboration with the CIS, the second largest commercial market for Moldova,⁴⁰ a region that may be economically and politically important and useful, and serve as a means to 'pacify' Russia in exchange for non-accession to the EEU. It is certain that Maia Sandu wants a separation of relations with Russia and those within the CIS, as well as the resolution of any trade issues with Russia through the bilateral format,⁴¹ which, technically, should ensure steady and good relations, including free trade with the CIS, in case any tensions with Russia arise.

Although the Russian President seems to have confirmed the importance of constructive cooperation that would meet the interests of the citizens of both countries,⁴² Russia is in somewhat of an expectative state,⁴³ according to the former Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu, amid the current political crisis in Moldova. The dialogues between the Russian authorities and the new presidential institution on enhancing trade and economic relations and supplying the country with the Russian COVID-19 vaccine,⁴⁴ which did result in a donation from Russia, cannot anticipate or lay the foundation for a pragmatic bilateral relation, one that involves major economic, political and security issues. The Russian President is not necessarily open to compromises when it comes to the situation in Belarus, the military tensions in Ukraine and does not seem willing to give in to the EU/US demands. There is also no certainty that a Moldovan political force with a pro-Russian agenda that could cushion Russia's policies will remain in power. The new Presidency will have to be cautious and develop an interaction strategy with Russia early on.

A similar approach will be needed to ensure progress in the Transnistrian case, in addition to an internal action plan coordinated with the other parties involved in the 5+2 negotiations. Maia Sandu's current strategy is stratified. She has firmly reiterated the country's stance on the need to withdraw the Russian troops from the region and transform the peacekeeping mission into a civilian one under the OSCE, a statement which, according to Russia, does not promise positive bilateral relations.⁴⁵ At the same time, the President advocates for the expansion of the internal reform in the Transnistrian region as well: anti-corruption policies, addressing regional smuggling, schemes, preventing the involvement of politicians and businessmen in the country in illegal activities, as well as developing socio-economic policies.⁴⁶ As an agenda that aims to unify the standards and, most likely, seeks to eliminate the political interest and tools (not just Moldovan ones) that fuel the Transnistrian conflict, this proposal will be difficult to implement, covering some of the disputed issues discussed in the 2019 Bratislava negotiations.⁴⁷ The Moldovan authorities could make unilateral efforts (domestic reforms that could stop the flow of illegal activity coming from Moldova), advance reforms through the OSCE or seek the support of other partners such as Germany, which invests in the region through diplomatic projects and initiatives.

The cooperation does not look promising. Although the Transnistrian leader hopes to continue the dialogue in the 5+2 format and the bilateral talks previously conducted by Igor Dodon, Maia Sandu

³⁹ Republic of Moldova received the observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Radio Free Europe Moldova, 14 May 2018, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/29226426.html>

⁴⁰ Report on the activity of the Government of the Republic of Moldova in 2019 and the first four months of 2020, the Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2020, p. 14, https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/raport_guvern_2019-2020_15052020.pdf

⁴¹ Maia Sandu questioned the legitimacy of granting Moldova the observer status in EurAsEC, op. cit.

⁴² Putin's congratulation for Sandu, Agora, 16 November 2020, <https://agora.md/stiri/80120/felicitarea-lui-putin-pentru-sandu>

⁴³ APE Live: 'Relaunching the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova: evolutions, challenges, perspectives', Association for Foreign Policy, 29 March 2021, <http://www.ape.md/2021/04/a-pe-live-dialoguri-de-politica-externa-integrare-europeana-si-securitate-relansarea-politicii-externe-a-republicii-moldova-evolutii-sfidari-perspective-29-martie-2021/>

⁴⁴ The President Maia Sandu met with the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Moldova, Oleg Vasnetsov, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 25 March 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/presa/presedintele-maia-sandu-s-a-intlnit-cu-ambasadorul-federatiei-ruse-in-republica-moldova-oleg-vasnetov>

⁴⁵ Moscow says call to leave Moldovan breakaway region 'irresponsible', Euractiv, 2 December 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/moscow-says-call-to-leave-moldovan-breakaway-region-irresponsible>

⁴⁶ Maia Sandu: My goal as president will be getting the country rid of poverty and turning the authorities back to the needs of people, op. cit.

⁴⁷ The OSCE President promises to push for negotiations to resolve the Transnistrian issue, Radio Free Europe Moldova, 17 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3sOMktb>

urges for a constructive dialogue in the larger format of negotiations, with parties that ‘respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty’ of the country, while Vadim Krasnoselski insists, among other things, on keeping the Russian troops in the region.⁴⁸ With that being said, the previous dynamic interactions with the Presidency did not necessarily contribute to the de-escalation of tensions or the resolution of political issues. The instances of military exercises conducted on the left bank of the Dniester River, the violation of human rights, restriction of free movement in the case of several groups of people and the 37 checkpoints that were illegally installed during the pandemic on the territory that falls under Moldova’s jurisdiction, which were handled later only partially, were quite suggestive.⁴⁹ Moldova’s relations with the Transnistrian authorities could potentially become more constructive by removing parallel discussions and the political factor that can lead to different agreements between the parties and to the authorities’ double standards on the Transnistrian issue.

Although the need to initiate negotiations and political dialogues for the final settlement of the conflict is being discussed, it is unlikely that large-scale actions will be taken in this regard. Due to the tensions in Ukraine and V. Krasnoselski’s synchronized statements about the region’s ability to respond to an (unlikely) armed attack initiated by Moldova,⁵⁰ the stake could be maintaining a relatively peaceful stability in the region and not taking immediate action concerning the destruction of ammunition in Cobasna and the withdrawal of the Russian troops. In addition, the initiation of an internal process of decriminalization and the ‘reform’ of the region could help, being also supported by the OSCE agenda that aims to create conditions that could lead to the final negotiation of solutions to the conflict.⁵¹

The relation and cooperation with other actors: China

Although China finds itself outside Moldovan geopolitics and the traditional US-EU-Romania-Ukraine-Russia foreign policy axis, with a minor strategic interest in the country compared to other states and regions in Europe, the Moldovan-Chinese relations are developing and evolving discreetly, and may potentially have major implications. So far, the bilateral dialogue has aimed to promote important economic objectives: bringing the Chinese business environment closer to the domestic market; negotiating a free trade agreement;⁵² and the implementation of the “One Belt, One Road” (BRI) program;⁵³ to which the Chinese assistance offered in response to the pandemic crisis adds on and is also noteworthy. According to a short statement on Moldova’s relations with China, Maia Sandu’s new foreign agenda focuses on strengthening the trade-related economic cooperation and on wider exports of domestic products, particularly agricultural goods.⁵⁴ This initial approach seems to differ from the import of projects/initiatives that China is counting on and highlights China’s subtle conditionality: the free trade agreement will ensure greater opportunities to export agricultural goods.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Consolidated annual report Implementation of the Action Plan for 2020, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2021, pp. 22-24, https://cancelaria.gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/raport_consolidat_pag_2020.pdf

⁵⁰ Tiraspol leader visits Moscow: Transnistria has army able to defend itself, Radio Free Europe Moldova, 11 April 2021, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/31197072.html>

⁵¹ The Interim Prime Minister, in dialogue with the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, on the evolution of the Transnistrian case settlement process, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 17 February 2021, <https://gov.md/ro/content/prim-ministrul-interimar-dialog-cu-presedintele-exercitiu-al-osce-despre-evolutia-0>

Claus Neukirch: We are here to help both sides, and the last thing we want to do is resolve the conflict for them, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Foreign Policy Association, February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3nnjZcm>

⁵² Moldova and China, interested in signing a Free Trade Agreement, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 7 April 2017, <https://gov.md/ro/content/moldova-si-china-interesate-de-semnarea-unui-acord-de-comert-liber>

⁵³ Prime Minister Ion Chicu noted Moldova’s interest in expanding cooperation with China, Infotag, 27 November 2019, <http://www.infotag.md/economics-ro/280922/>

⁵⁴ China president Xi Jinping congratulates Maia Sandu, Infotag, 24 November 2020, <http://www.infotag.md/politics-en/288811/>

⁵⁵ Zhang Yinghong: With the signing of the Free Trade Agreement, we will have more Moldovan products on the Chinese market, IPN, 16 March 2021, https://www.ipn.md/ro/zhang-yinghong-odata-cu-semnarea-acordului-de-liber-schimb-7965_1080343.html#ixzz6pFoUZFKF

Several issues may clash with the pragmatic and positive relations that are pursued, at least formally, by both countries. Maia Sandu does not have a clear and comprehensive Moldova-China cooperation agenda (that would also be publicly visible), which is probably explained by the prioritization of the problems generated by the current internal crisis. This contrasts with the proactive efforts of the Chinese officials, who use other channels to advance the bilateral agenda. So far, there have been dynamic contacts initiated and maintained with government officials regarding the launch of several projects for the development of e-commerce,⁵⁶ in the ICT sector and IT services with the involvement of Huawei⁵⁷, preceded by discussions on potential investments in the industry, energy and artificial intelligence sectors,⁵⁸ and an intention to expand the cooperation with Moldova, including within the BRI, expressed by the Chinese authorities⁵⁹.

This agenda, for which the previous Moldovan authorities showed keen interest, seems to generate nowadays much higher expectations from Moldova. It may be that the new presidential institution will not entirely respond to those expectations, and only if they support the country's national interest. The cooperation of the Chinese authorities with all political forces/parties, a practice highlighted by the former Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu, which can also be relevant in Moldova's case,⁶⁰ does not necessarily guarantee a consistent or balanced bilateral agenda. The parallel discussions of the Chinese officials with the PSRM on strengthening the strategic partnership between the states and the signing of a cooperation protocol between the PSRM and the CCP⁶¹ are representative cases. China's insistence on developing relations in strategic areas that the country's authorities do not fully understand nor have strategic control over, including within controversial projects such as the BRI, which the EU counteracts by advancing its own economic and digital sovereignty, is also somewhat problematic.

Since China is quite active in the region, is nowadays Russia's cooperation partner in international politics and represents a 'systemic rival' for the EU,⁶² China's actions in the country will have to be continuously observed and anticipated through a foreign policy agenda that takes into account the opportunities and inopportunities of the bilateral relation, regardless of the country's level of interest in Moldova. It is not clear what economic/political implications the Russia-China partnership can have for the country, both being committed to addressing common challenges (probably referring to the US and EU), and also to counter misinformation and ensure their own political security.⁶³ The implications of the BRI project, which more recently will also include the export of policies, technologies, foreign assistance and health diplomacy, are not clear.⁶⁴ However, the new foreign policy will have to take into account the interests of the Chinese companies operating in Moldova, the renegotiation of the 2019 infrastructure project⁶⁵ and the loan for the post-pandemic revitalization of the country's economy that was discussed in 2020,⁶⁶ while aligning them to

⁵⁶ Aureliu Ciocoi discussed opportunities to intensify Moldovan-Chinese trade relations with investor Chu Song, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 20 January 2021, <https://gov.md/ro/content/aureliu-ciocoi-discutat-despre-oportunitatile-intensificarii-relatiilor-comerciale-moldo>

⁵⁷ Chinese company Huawei, interested in developing IT projects in the Republic of Moldova, Government of the Republic of Moldova, 18 March 2021, <https://gov.md/ro/content/compania-chineza-huawei-interesata-dezvoltarea-proiectelor-it-republica-moldova>

⁵⁸ Tudor Ulianovschi: 'Chinese investments in the Republic of Moldova represent the advanced level of relations between our countries', Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, 3 April 2019, <https://mfa.gov.md/ro/node/1064>

⁵⁹ Prime Minister Ion Chicu noted Moldova's interest in expanding cooperation with China, op. cit.

⁶⁰ APE Live: 'Relaunching the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova: evolutions, challenges, perspectives', op. cit.

⁶¹ Igor Dodon pleads for the consolidation of the strategic partnership between Moldova and China, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, 21 January 2021, <https://socialistii.md/igor-dodon-vystupaet-za-ukreplenija-strategicheskogo-partnerstva-mezhdu-moldovoj-i-kitaem/>

⁶² EU-China – A strategic outlook, European Commission, 12 March 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

⁶³ Keyue, Xu, China, Russia continue to cooperate on fighting color revolutions, safeguarding political security: Wang Yi, Global Times, 7 March 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217551.shtml>

⁶⁴ China Prepares New Era Of 'Belt And Road' Amid Pandemic Pressures, Radio Free Europe, 14 March 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-new-era-belt-and-road-amid-pandemic/31150402.html>

⁶⁵ Two national roads will be rehabilitated with the support of China, the Government of the Republic of Moldova, 30 January 2019, <https://gov.md/ro/content/doua-drumuri-nationale-vor-fi-reabilitate-cu-sprrijinul-chinei-0>

⁶⁶ Igor Dodon: According to the darkest scenario, the budget could have losses of 300 million euros this year, Moldpres, 20 March 2020, <https://www.moldpres.md/news/2020/03/20/20002501>

Moldova's national interest.

Shaping a broader pragmatic foreign policy. Moldova as a security provider or exporter of foreign policy

Beyond an agenda that should ensure a proper and independent functioning of the state, Moldova needs an intensive and extensive foreign policy that would make the country more sustainable, capable to keep up with new regional and international challenges and would allow it to explore opportunities outside its traditional area of cooperation. A similar intention is reflected in the new strategy – interest is showcased in areas such as the environment, renewable energy, digitization, information security and defence against hybrid threats.⁶⁷ At the same time, finding new cooperation opportunities with partners such as Japan, China, Turkey or Israel, as well as the regions that have not been explored as much under Moldova's foreign agenda: the Arab states, India, countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, seems to be also encouraged.⁶⁸

Such opportunities exist at the bilateral and multilateral level. Japan, Moldova's third largest donor, can contribute through grants and investments in environmental protection and the IT sector development.⁶⁹ Maia Sandu's visit to France resulted in negotiations between the French Development Agency and the Moldovan authorities on assistance priorities, which included the transition to renewable energy and protection of biodiversity.⁷⁰ Moldova-EU cooperation on information security, cyber security and defence against hybrid attacks may substantially increase, the EU's intention to invest in strengthening its operational capacity,⁷¹ with stakes for both Russia and China, being, more or less, complementary to the Moldovan authorities' objective to set in place mechanisms for early warning of and response to hybrid threats and cyber incidents. Being a relatively new field for Moldova, there may be an issue with managing the investments in the sector: those from the West, such as the US contribution to the Moldova IT Park, and those that China is advancing, issues related to the balance between those investments, as well as to the potentially conflicting interests.

Moldova also seems to be interested in having a broader agenda – being able to benefit from and contribute to regional security by joining the Three Seas Initiative,⁷² a project supported by the US due to its potential in developing, stabilizing and strengthening the resilience of 12 European countries by interconnecting them at the level of digital infrastructure, transport and energy.⁷³ Having been previously involved in the activities of the Initiative, the Moldovan authorities will now have to build pragmatic and beneficial relations, which would also take into account the (geo)political implications of the project. Last but not least, the cooperation with regions that have been less explored by Moldova is limited, for the most part, to the import and export of several categories of products but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' involvement in seeking new bilateral opportunities could broaden and strengthen it.

⁶⁷ Maia Sandu Presidential Program, op. cit.

French businessmen have expressed interest in investing in the Republic of Moldova, after talks with the President Maia Sandu, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 4 February 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/presa/oamenii-de-afaceri-din-franta-si-au-manifestat-interesul-de-a-investi-in-republica-moldova-dupa-discutiile-cu-presedintele-maia-sandu>

⁶⁸ The message of the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, addressed to the diplomatic corps, op. cit.

⁶⁹ Bilateral cooperation, Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, <https://mfa.gov.md/ro/content/japonia-0>
Information note on cooperation with Japan 2021, Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure, <https://mei.gov.md/ro/content/parteneri-de-dezvoltare>

Consolidated annual report Implementation of the Action Plan for 2020, op. cit., p. 11.

⁷⁰ The Ministry of Finance met with representatives of the French Development Agency to identify priorities for assistance to the Republic of Moldova, Ministry of Finance, 23 March 2021, <https://bit.ly/2Own5yv>

⁷¹ Remarks by President Charles Michel following the second session of the video conference of the members of the European Council, 26 February 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/02/26/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-second-session-of-the-video-conference-of-the-members-of-the-european-council/>

⁷² Joint statement by the President of the Republic of Moldova, Maia Sandu, and the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Kyiv, Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 12 January 2021, <https://bit.ly/2T3IO1S>

⁷³ Tuma, Petr, What Biden's election means for Central Europe, Atlantic Council, 22 December 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-bidens-election-means-for-central-europe/>

Moldova is not functional enough to offer financial assistance to other states, make donations and finance foreign projects. It could contribute, however, through other means: its internal stability that could support the regional stability, a more (pro)active involvement in cross-border projects and in the UN international peacekeeping missions. According to Nicu Popescu, the country's afforestation and its transition to renewable energy that would also support the EU's environmental policy could serve as a contribution to the regional agenda.⁷⁴ Such an intention is currently showcased by the new Presidency.⁷⁵

Conclusions and recommendations

Moldova's new foreign policy agenda, which prioritizes development and internal reform, could build a functional and stable state undergoing a long-term development process. The implementation of this agenda, however, depends on the political will, technical capital and level of expertise of the authorities, the Parliament and Government's teams and agendas, the openness of foreign partners to pragmatic bilateral relations and the regional/international dynamics. The current foreign policy agenda is not comprehensive and is contingent not only on the Presidency, but also the Parliament and Government. The results of the early parliamentary elections will have a final saying in how this agenda will look like.

- Although the political dialogue is important and inevitable in the process of defining and implementing the foreign agenda, the commitments and obligations contracted by Moldova and its partners under bilateral/multilateral agreements must be invoked. The legal basis, which must be (re)negotiated with caution and be based on the national interest, should ensure more constructivism in bilateral relations and clarity on areas of conflict or common interest (in Moldova's cooperation with China in the context of European integration; in its dialogue with Russia on the Transnistrian case and the obligations assumed at the 1999 OSCE Summit, etc.). High-level contact, including the one initiated and maintained by the presidential institution, should be based on such a principle.
- The issues related to the sustainable absorption of financial assistance offered by the EU or the U.S. can be linked to the existence and quality of development projects that are attached (or not) to that assistance. To ensure the proper functioning of the state and productive bilateral relations, the EU and the U.S. will have to offer even more support through expertise, information, transfer of practices and technical assistance, in addition to their financial support and conditionality clauses. Moldova's authorities would then be more equipped and able to work on and implement qualitative development projects attached to financial assistance.
- Given the politico-military nature of the current tensions in the region and the complexity of the Moldovan-Russian relations, the country's authorities could initially work with Russia on less sensitive bilateral issues, topics that are detached from the regional dynamics and on which both parties may also have converging stances, such as the security of Moldovan citizens in Russia, the agreement of cooperation in the field of pension insurance or labor migration. Any progress on these issues and a good initial collaboration could potentially ensure openness in the bilateral relations and eliminate the risk that such policies will be blocked later on by tensions surrounding the more sensitive issues (the Transnistrian case, energy-related issues, bilateral trade).

⁷⁴ APE Live: 'Relaunching the foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova: evolutions, challenges, perspectives', op. cit.

⁷⁵ President Maia Sandu: 'Afforestation must become a major objective of our country in the medium and long term', Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 14 April 2021, <https://www.presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-maia-sandu-impadurirea-trebuie-sa-devina-un-obiectiv-major-al-tarii-noastre-pe-termen-mediu-si-lung>

- Being a country that is less regarded by Moldova's authorities and expert community, it is important to take into consideration and examine the intention and extent of China's policies in Moldova; the potential and likelihood of their implementation (given that there is no outcome of the 2019 infrastructure project and the 2020 loan offer); the balancing of the national and Chinese interests in bilateral projects; if any convergence between the European integration process, the initiatives and projects previously negotiated by Moldova with China and Moldova's new foreign policy agenda is possible; and the broader (regional) implications of Chinese projects in Moldova. China should not be excluded from Moldova's foreign policy agenda, but instead connected to national sectoral projects (in the field of ICT, IT, etc.), where other states or institutions would also take part, as a mechanism ensuring a transparent and balanced collaboration.
- The authorities must carefully examine available foreign policy opportunities, areas where Moldova might have a competitive advantage, as well as the sectors that are new to the country (digital, cyber, renewable energy sectors), to which Moldova should gradually adapt. Those would need to be supported and reinforced by feasible action plans and early negotiations and discussions with foreign partners, carried out by ministries, state agencies and embassies. By having strategic awareness and understanding of these areas, Moldova will be able to keep up with its cooperation partners, assimilate practices, expertise and technical assistance, as well as negotiate bilateral projects and investment agreements while being much more aware of their opportunities and inopportunities.

Abbreviations:

AA – Association Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States

DCFTA – Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

SMEs – Small and medium-sized enterprises

MFAEI - Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova

UN – United Nations

OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

DPM – Democratic Party of Moldova

PSRM – Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova

ICT – Information and communication technology

EEU – Eurasian Economic Union

USAID - United States Agency for International Development

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About the Foreign Policy Association of the Republic of Moldova:

Foreign Policy Association (APE) is one of the leading foreign policy think-tanks in Moldova. The Association is committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the resolution of the Transnistrian problem in the context of the country's Europeanization. APE was established in 2003 by a prominent group of local experts, public figures, former government officials and high-ranking diplomats, who decided to contribute through their experience and expertise to the formulation and promotion of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova.

The information and opinions provided in this analytical material belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation of the German Marshall Fund in the United States of America.

The study developed within the project 'Moldova reality check – Study visit to Moldova for the US and European experts, journalists, and public officials', funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation of the German Marshall Fund from the United States and implemented by the Foreign Policy Association of Moldova.