

## Foreign Policy Synthesis and Debates

*Biweekly Bulletin, Nr. 36, from 25.07.2010*

### Impact of recent tensions between Chisinau and Moscow upon the pragmatic development of Moldo-Russian relations

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**The main themes of the show:**

- 1. Current Relations between Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation**
- 2. The Decree of the Acting President, Mihai Ghimpu and the problems facing Moldovan wine exporters in Russia**
- 3. The appearance of articles critical of the fact that Romania would give a large number of citizenships to Moldovan natives**
- 4. Evolution of relations between Russian Federation and Republic of Moldova**

**Corneliu RUSNAC, moderator Imedia:** *Good day, dear listeners! I am Corneliu Rusnac and I invite you to a new edition of the broadcast of discussions on topics of foreign policy, produced with the support of the „Foreign Policy Association” and financed by the „Friedrich Ebert” Foundation.*

The theme of our program today will be devoted to Republic of Moldova's relations with the Russian Federation taking into account that some elements of tension have recently emerged in the relations between Chisinau and Moscow. Our guests in the studio are *Mr. Nicu Popescu, Advisor to the Prime Minister on foreign policy matters and Mr. Victor Chirilă, Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association.* Hello and welcome to our program!

#### **1. Current Relations between Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation**

**Corneliu RUSNAC:** So how can we describe relations between Republic of Moldova and Russian Federation today?

**Nicu POPESCU, Adviser to the Prime Minister on matters of foreign policy:** I think relations between Republic of Moldova and Russian Federation have a high development potential. Both Russia and Moldova wish to develop this potential. We want a partnership that would serve the economic and political interests of both countries and are confident that both Russia and Moldova want better relations than we have at this time.

**Victor CHIRILĂ, Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association:** From my perspective, I believe that Moldovan-Russian relations are unfortunately quite unpredictable. This is vividly proven by the latter scandal about the Decree issued by Mr. Mihai Ghimpu on commemorating the Soviet occupation and, of course, the Russian Federation's statements and actions that followed; very harsh

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statements against Moldova and more specifically against the Alliances. The Alliance is accused of transforming our country into a zone of regional destabilization, in addition to this Russian Federation once again resorted to economic sanctions, even supposing that indeed our wine contains a substance inadmissible for import in Russia. Nevertheless, I think that sanctions imposed by Russian Federation on imports of Moldovan wine have a political subtext and this is inadmissible if there is a desire to build a trustworthy partnership between the two capitals, Moscow and Chisinau I mean.

### 2. The Decree of the Acting President, Mihai Ghimpu and the problems facing Moldovan wine exporters in Russia

**Corneliu RUSNAC:** Let us take point by point the problems that have appeared lately in relations between Chisinau and Moscow and start with the Decree of Acting President, Mr. Mihai Ghimpu by which June 28, 1940 was declared the day of Soviet occupation. You have said it yourself that after this Decree Moldovan wine exporters in Russia began to encounter problems again. As in 2006, Russian health service found harmful substances in Moldovan wines, and the head of the service, Gennady Onishenko launched a series of more political than technical statements addressed to the current government in Chisinau. How can this wine war be commented on, this new wine war?

**Victor CHIRILĂ:** I think that this wine war is a disproportionate action from the side of the Federation Russian and I think they appealed to this new economic blackmail to determine the political leaders in Chisinau, leaders of the Alliance in particular, to become more pragmatic than they tried to prove they were. Here, in fact, Mr. Ghimpu's Decree brought a very delicate topic into the spotlight of the political dialogue between Moscow and Chisinau, a matter related to history, a subject seen differently in Moscow and Chisinau. Moscow has been disturbed by this and decided to teach us a lesson. Yet it seems that the action of Moscow is a direct involvement in the internal affairs of our country. Indeed, even in Republic of Moldova the subject of Soviet occupations is a sensitive issue, an issue that divides the society, at least into two camps. However, it was finally shown, by the decision of the Constitutional Court, that the topic can be addressed by Moldovan institutions and can only be resolve by using the internal legal and political framework without ingressions, influences, and pressure from some neighboring countries or those farther away. Therefore, I believe that this painful response from the Russian Federation was ultimately an unnecessary one because this topic could have been much easier to overcome if the Russian Federation had been much calmer and more moderate in its reactions.

**Nicu POPESCU:** I want to make some clarifications. There is not, in any case a new wine war. Indeed, there are some very serious problems with deliveries of Moldovan wines on the market of the Russian Federation, it is not in any event a matter of war and the very word implies a much higher intensity of tension, yet we know very well, just two years ago we watched live on television, what does war mean in the case of Russia and Georgia and I completely refuse to use the term war when we refer to Moldovan-Russian relations. There are indeed difficulties but the main concern of the Government is to overcome them. The main concern of the Government is to ensure and save those jobs, those of tens of thousands of people who are involved in the wine industry, those companies that took loans wishing to develop their businesses, we want to support those companies and in the Government's approach the main concern refers to life and the quality of life of our citizens who are involved in this important branch of national

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economy. Namely through this perspective the Government tries to solve this problem through direct dialogue with the Russian Federation. As for the Decree of the Interim President Mihai Ghimpu again, I think that besides the fact that we are facing a situation towards which the Russian Federation has one interpretation of the history of this region and much of ... or the largest part of society in Republic of Moldova has a different interpretation of history and we are also facing a situation where the Republic of Moldova does not have a consensus on history within its own borders. I think it is very good to talk about these things, but it is equally important to maintain that unity of the political class because only in the circumstances of a more or less unified political class will we be able to Europeanize Moldova based on those European standards which we want to implement in Republic of Moldova. Again, the real challenge in the process of Europeanization of Republic of Moldova refers first and foremost to the unity of the political class, to the unity of the Alliance for European Integration, since only thus we can bring Moldova closer to the Union European.

**Corneliu RUSNAC:** Why does Russia still appear so sensitive regarding the date of June 28<sup>th</sup> 1940, especially since the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as a result of which Bessarabia was annexed by the USSR was yet condemned by the Soviet Union?

**Nicu POPESCU:** I began with the fact that Republic of Moldova does not have a common social understanding of the events of that time, but within the Russian Federation there are also some discussions about its own past that are, I suspect, even more intense. Not surprisingly, virtually all countries in Central and Eastern Europe passed and continue to pass through very difficult moments of redefining history. And we know that the persona of Marshal Antonescu is a controversial one in Romania, it is a divisive figure in the society. In the case of Hungary it is General Horthy which, again, is not an element that would unify the nation. We can see how heated the debates on the Holodomor were in Ukraine, the hunger of years 1933-1934 that divide the political class. Yes, issues related to history are very sensitive in this region; both in Moldova and in Ukraine or Russia, states often react very nervously to these symbolic gestures. This is regrettable but it is one thing we see in virtually every country of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans. For that purpose, as I said, this is unfortunate but I suppose it will take a decade or two till we shall be able to discuss these sensitive issues in a calmer manner. From the perspective of the Government of Moldova we would like to discuss this calmly because the success of Republic of Moldova as a state depends on that political peace, including in the area of foreign policy, which would allow us to come close as much as we can to the EU.

**Victor CHIRILĂ:** I think that Russia did not give up the idea of regaining its influence in the post-Soviet space. I agree that there is this debate on the past and the future of Russia in the Russian society. There are different opinions. Russian society has not yet decided on the future, in what direction will Russia go. At the same time, I think the current political elite wants very much this region where we are to remain under Moscow's influence. It looks with concern and suspicion at EU's intentions to attract more and more Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Belarus, and the states from the Caucasus in a relationship which would involve a close economic, political and social partnership between EU and Eastern European countries. This, of course, will be unacceptable to Russia and it was demonstrated by various statements, although currently Russian politicians have a more moderate and understanding

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speech. This is just the surface. It has not essentially changed. The Act establishing the Customs Union including Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus was signed recently. Moscow's intention is to turn it into a pole of attraction, of regional integration for other countries former Soviet states, to turn it into a political initiative not only an essentially economic one, to create a new political and economic space with its centre in Moscow. We should keep trace of this thing. But I believe that recent developments that have followed Mr. Ghimpu's Decree, in fact, draw our attention and bring into the spot light a very sad fact that pragmatism that has been the focus in recent months, or rather the last year, of the government in Chisinau is not credible in Moscow. Moscow has tried several times to doubt the reliability of the new government. Whether it was during the CIS summit in Chisinau last year, or within the Moldovan-Russian-Ukrainian consultations on the Transnistrian problem, Russia always insists that Republic of Moldova should recognize Transnistria as an equal party. We can see Mr. Ambassador in Chisinau very active in expressing his surprise, dissatisfaction with some actions taken by the Government. We are witnesses of how active the Moldovan Mitropolia currently promotes a pro-Russian agenda in our country. We see that there are some parties and some political figures in Chisinau that are associated directly with Moscow. Some Russian foundations have increased their presence, activities and actions in Republic of Moldova, especially when it comes to interaction with civil society, that part of the civil society does not recognize or does not have as its primary objective the European integration, but perceives European integration in Russian terms. All these things are done under the cover of the so-called Moldovan-Russian pragmatism and it would be near sighted to neglect all these trends. Moreover, this pragmatism has brought us a respite that practical ended with Mihai Ghimpu's Decree, which also shows that Russia does not let us have that long time to strengthen ourselves on the path of European integration without having to face obstacles. Russia is not interested in such an evolution.

I guess everything that happened in the context of this decree was only a pretext used by Russia to announce its actual position which, until recently, was unclear in Chisinau. Russia, in fact, until Mr. Ghimpu's Decree has employed a wait-and-see policy it was on stand-by. Thus, finally, we can see what is the real position of the Russian Federation and I am afraid that all this harassment, either economic or political, will enhance in the weeks and months to come as we approach the referendum which is not seen favorably by Moscow, we are approaching the parliamentary and presidential elections, which is an opportunity for Russian Federation to advance its own agenda and support the coming to power of forces that are more flexible and more understanding towards Russian Federation. From my own perspective, I think that a reassessment of our position towards Moscow is required. Not in the sense of confrontation but in the sense of readjusting the objectives and mechanisms to achieve these goals. We cannot promote pragmatism by just avoiding sensitive issues in respect to Russian Federation or always look for Moscow's mercifulness towards us.

**Nicu POPESCU:** Nobody is looking for mercifulness and Republic of Moldova's pragmatism is not one adopted for the sake of relations with the Russian Federation, China or the U.S. It is a pragmatic approach for the sake of Republic of Moldova, which serves primarily the interests of Moldova and the pragmatism, if you wish, occurs first and foremost in our relations with the EU, which continues to be our most important strategic direction and I realize very well that the topic of today's program is Russia, but if we look at those economic and political realities then we see that Moldova is moving fast and takes

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significant steps towards the EU. Let me just give you some figures: for instance our foreign trade - EU has a 50% share, about 17-18% of our external trade relates to Russian Federation, thus EU is a three times larger partner than the Russian Federation is. Again, we referred to the wine problem, but I want to say that wine production amounts to only 1.6% of Republic of Moldova's gross domestic product. Obviously there are several related industries, banking business is connected to the situation of wine sector, transport companies as well, but the amount of 1.6% of GDP in itself is a significant amount, a large one, but we cannot say that the world is coming to an end in the circumstances in which our wine producing sector faces problems.

And something else I want to say, for instance, Republic of Moldova already has a share of wine export to the EU and the annual quota has been covered in a proportion of 83% in just six months. This shows that Republic of Moldova can produce quality wines, it can actually export them to the EU, in fact we could export more wine than we are currently allowed under this quota and for this reason, our main priority is to diversify the market for Moldovan wines, because our country does have the potential and we shall certainly do so. This job involves time, it requires serious work and exactly due to this, and I'm not afraid I use the word pragmatism, which sometimes I think appears to take on some negative allusions because we prefer to deal with diversification of Republic of Moldova's markets, with Europeanization of Republic of Moldova, with the visa dialogue with EU, instead of going out on the barricades, launching us into endless discussions about history because, in fact, we refer to the idea that there are a number of people in the Government of Moldova who are the driving forces of reform. And now we have to think very clearly in what direction it is better for those people to channel their political energy. Is it better to get out on the barricades, to make strong statements, which I do not know, suit a few percent of the population or invest the time and political energy in real Europeanization of Moldova. I personally prefer to dwell on visas, work on the process of visa liberalization for Moldovan citizens and just during the last several weeks, almost two-three times a day, for instance, to give you a simple example, we are meeting to discuss what to do with border management, how to accelerate the introduction of biometric passports, how do we connect all border guards' check points at a so-called TETRA system, which will allow us, again, to meet one of the conditions imposed by the EU. I think that for the sake of Republic of Moldova, for the good of Moldovan citizens it is better to invest this time, this political energy we have in Republic of Moldova in these technical details, sometimes boring, which will allow us to bring Moldova closer to the EU.

### **3. The appearance of articles critical of the fact that Romania would give a large number of citizenships to Moldovan natives**

**Corneliu RUSNAC:** A series of articles critical of the fact that Romania would give a large number of citizenships to natives of Moldovan have recently appeared almost simultaneously in the German, British and Italian press. The authors of these articles were worried that Moldovans with Romanian passports could invade the EU in search of a job when the rate of unemployment is rather high in the EU. On the other hand, statistics show that the number of Moldovans who went abroad has varied around the figure of 600,000 during the last ten years and that the ability to obtain Romanian citizenship does not seem to have influenced this figure too much. However what might be the explanation for the appearance of these articles in the Western press, especially since some local analysts point to Russia's hand in, so to speak

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metaphorically, which would be disturbed by the fact that Romania grants its citizenship to many Moldovan citizens.

**Victor CHIRILĂ:** It is certainly a coordinated action. Who? It's hard to say. We can engage in endless speculation on this subject. We need to understand that not only Russia views this initiative of Romania in a less positive manner, but there are persons, groups, EU politicians who do not agree with this initiative. Therefore, I think we need to focus not on who is behind this, but instead on what the message of these articles is. The message is very worrying to citizens of Republic of Moldova, it is worrying because there are certain forces, politicians, interest groups who would like to see Republic of Moldova or its citizens remained locked. They deny or do not relate to the overall situation we find ourselves in. There are over 300 000 citizens of Moldova in the EU and most of them are already working legally in EU Member States, paying taxes that go to budget of these states, have legal work permits, many of them, especially young people already have families, their children attend schools, kindergartens of the respective states, speaking the language of the country, their parents are learning the language as well, they are integrating into society. This very part of the problem is not reflected. In fact, we lose, Republic of Moldova loses from this legal or illegal emigration and Italy wins, which finds itself with a new generation of youth who integrate easily, accept traditions and uphold the law. Here is who wins: Italy Portugal, Ireland and I think that it is to the benefit of those countries that the situation with these citizens be clearly legalized in those countries. Therefore, I think this campaign is a little malicious; these articles seem to me virulent and ill willing towards the Republic of Moldova, they do not render the whole issue just as it is. It does not include, for example, those citizenships that are being given by Russia and Ukraine which combined are more than the citizenships, passports offered by Romania. Unlike citizenships offered by Russia, Romanian citizenship provides our citizens the right not only to travel freely in EU are, but also to work legally, to study in the EU. The advantages are enormous and this process should not be seen as an attempt to bring Moldova into the EU through the back door. This will not happen. Because we know very clearly that there are well-established criteria designed not only for citizens but for the entire country. If the country is not ready in terms of its institutions and its legislation to cope with those requirements which are imposed by the EU, Republic of Moldova will certainly not join. Meanwhile, Moldovan citizens wish to be part of the European community and their right is legal, is constitutional and I do not believe that this willingness from the side of Romania questions or undermines the sovereignty or independence of Republic of Moldova. Conversely, by offering this opportunity they contribute to the economic and social development and political strengthening of our country.

**Nicu POPESCU:** I think we should not exaggerate the importance of this wave of publications but rather see them in a broader context. Yet, what we have seen is that in a number of right wing publications from the EU appeared several articles, that among other things made reference to Republic of Moldova, but the truth is that many of these newspapers and the conservative public of the EU are very concerned about the immigration issues. If you take these newspapers that wrote about the issue of Romanian citizenship, you will see that those newspapers three or four times a week write about legal and illegal migration in the EU and have a very strong anti-immigration policy and in this context, those newspapers regularly criticizes Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Malta, and sometimes Italy is being criticized for keeping a

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too relaxed policy, Spain is being criticized for granting amnesties to immigrants, the new members are criticized as well. In January there was a wave of publications about Macedonia, may I remind you that last December the EU abolished visas for Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and in one or two months after this there was, again, a wave of press saying that following the liberalization of visa regime for the Balkan states there was a new flood of migrants, something that was not confirmed later. Hence, this specific case of the Moldovan-Romanian relations fell in this dynamic of writing regularly and with hostility on EU immigration but, again, I invite you to go on to the web page of the Daily Telegraph and the Il Giornale today and you will see in the last three days another article on immigration. Unfortunately it is a very sensitive issue for the EU, a highly problematic file. We know that right-wing anti-immigrations forces gain many votes in elections, both in the Netherlands and in Austria and even in Germany sometimes, though less. Yes, it is a European problem. Moldova is perceived in these speeches not in terms of it being a personal problem with the country of Moldova or with Moldovans as citizens of this state but with immigration in general, regardless of where this immigration comes from. Secondly, if we refer again to the case of Romanian citizenships, I personally notice that it is already the third or fourth wave of publications on this subject. About once a year a wave of publications in which a journalist, probably due to lack of subjects during summer remembers that President Basescu has once said that eight hundred thousand citizens of Republic of Moldova wish to obtain Romanian citizenship, he or she remembers this, mentions it in a new article, other journalists pick up this topic and thus we receive a flood of publications about a very specific subject, the avalanche passes after two weeks, and everybody forgets the same journalists and the same newspapers write about other subjects. And if we talk about the process of issuing passports in this region from the European perspective, in fact, I understand why those political forces and those journalists who are preoccupied with the problem of immigration do not care about the process in which Russia and Ukraine are offering their passports to citizens of Republic of Moldova, for the mere fact that a Russian passport or a passport of Ukraine does not affect immigration flows and waves into the UE, while obtaining a Romanian passport gives the opportunity to travel to the EU. These articles are regrettable. They have a certain xenophobic tinge in them. We dislike this thing, but we continue to work. These issues will be removed with the abolition of the Schengen visas for citizens of Republic of Moldova and in order to achieve these prospects, I prefer to ignore these articles and focus on those things we have to undertake in Moldova and which will allow us to travel without visas in the EU space in the foreseeable future.

#### 4. Evolution of relations between Russian Federation and Republic of Moldova

**Corneliu RUSNAC:** How do you think relations with Russia will evolve in future taking into account the fact that we have already entered the campaign, first for the referendum, then for the parliament and then possibly the presidential one?

**Nicu POPESCU:** This depends both on Russia and on the results of our elections, but I think the future relations with Russia depend largely on how Russia will be able to come out of the economic crisis. We should not focus on our very little situation, very local, and see the evolution of Russian foreign policy only through the light of Republic of Moldova. The evolution of Russian foreign policy depends largely on how Russia will be able to come out of this economic crisis. If Russia, however, strengthens its

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current discourse that says that Russia's modernization can only happen through a partnership with U.S. and EU, these are some messages sent recently by President Medvedev. For the time being we do not know whether these messages will become reality in the policies of Russian Federation. We hope that this is so, and Republic of Moldova will fit into this context. The main lesson that Russian Federation is learning following the economic crisis is that only through integration with the western value system can Russia modernize and survive as a state, the largest state in the world in terms of territory, then the relations with Republic of Moldova I am sure will move in a good direction. If Russia learns the opposite lesson, if it believes that as a result of this crisis the West is not as important any more, that it needs to strengthen its so-called sovereign economy, the so-called sovereign democracy, then I guess that relations between Republic of Moldova and Russian Federation will continue to face the difficulties. Yet, again, as I said, the future of Republic of Moldova does not depend on Russian Federation; it depends primarily on Republic of Moldova. Yet again, if we are to go back to the popular subject of visas and wine, Republic of Moldova is doing its homework, it produced good quality wine, invests in good marketing in the EU or Canada, introduces Biometric Passport, and ensures movement at the border. These are things over which Russia does not have direct influence. If Republic of Moldova does its homework immaculately, then its future will depend first of all on its domestic success, on the success of its Europeanization and not on the direction taken or not taken by the Russian Federation.

**Victor CHIRILĂ:** I believe that our policy towards the Russian Federation should be readjusted. Pragmatism is good if it has some clear objectives. In this case the objectives are not so clear. Of course, it is important to make sure that we have the needed respite from the Russian Federation in order to deal with our European integration, to modernize our economy, to strengthen our democracy, to harmonize our laws and our institutions with those of the EU, because here and in this way the fate of our country will be decided. However, I think our policy should not depend on the volatile disposition of politicians in Moscow. Personal relationships with certain politicians there is important, but in the current conditions in can become a lever of influence of the Russian Federation, this is on the one hand. On the other hand, I believe that Chisinau should make clear its position towards the Kremlin. Of course, we have common objective but is important to view and share them in the same way. Also, Republic of Moldova is not a country that is controlled by only one party like the United Russia. From now on we are going to have coalitions, and as always there are different voices within a coalition, different interests, different visions of the future, of historical events that have influenced our evolution. This thing should not be used by Federation Russian to express its dissatisfaction every through economic sanctions. These debates in Republic of Moldova is a natural process characteristic of a democratic society. But if they are being raised at the level of barriers between countries, then perhaps something has to be changed in relation to that State. In this case, we refer to the Russian Federation. Therefore, I think that after the parliamentary and presidential elections in autumn there will be a need for a new strategy towards Moscow, a strategy to clearly set the objectives to be pursued, objectives which should be jointly pursued with the Russian Federation, we need to specify the mechanisms for obtaining these goals, but also to clearly set the principles and rules guiding our relations with Russia. Yes, it is problematic to expect from Russia that it will comply with these rules. It is important for us that these rules are clear to our Western partners so that they would not blame us for straining relations with the important eastern partner. We need a stable,



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sustainable partnership with Russian Federation, but a partnership that would have some goals for us to accomplish in a clearly set period of time.

Transnistrian problem could be the essence of such a partnership. Everything depends, as Mr. Popescu said, on how Russia manages to come out of this crisis. If it understands that the partnership with EU and the U.S. is more important than the visions of settling the problem, the Transnistrian problem will become closer and we shall find a common denominator. Unfortunately, today, despite the forthcoming of Russian Federation towards EU and the U.S. we do not see an approximation of these visions. It is therefore necessary to prepare for complicated situations with Russia in the future as well and to do everything possible to diminish the importance that political and economic leverage Russian Federation uses to impose its will upon the Republic of Moldova. How? This can be done by modernizing the wine industry through radical measures, sometimes ignoring the political circumstances and electoral situation in Republic of Moldova. If some exporters are guilty of exporting low quality wine into the Russian Federation then there have to be taken drastic measures, these exporters have to be deprived of their export licenses, to restructure this company, to find possibilities of attracting foreign investors to the Republic of Moldova, especially from EU and hire wine distribution companies from the U.S. and EU to handle the marketing of our wine on the U.S. and EU markets and not let citizens of Republic of Moldova take care of this, unfortunately, we see that they are more concerned about their own pocket. This is what an effective strategy towards Russian Federation means. One should not personalize the relationship with Moscow because this, ultimately, will affect our own policy, the effectiveness of our policies towards the Russian Federation.

**Corneliu RUSNAC:** Unfortunately, the time reserved for our program has expired. I thank you very much for your presence in this show. Dear listeners, I remind you that you have listened to a broadcast of discussions on issues of foreign policy conducted with the support of the Foreign Policy Association and funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. See you soon!