

Foreign Policy Synthesis and Debates

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Republic of Moldova's European vector from the point of view of the Presidential Adviser Dan Dungaciu

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The main topics of the show:

1. Moscow's concern with the European policy pursued by the Alliance for European Integration
2. Restrictions imposed by Russia on imports of Moldovan wines, fruits and vegetables
3. The Alternative to the pro-European policy of the Alliance for European Integration
4. Signing the Association Agreement between Republic of Moldova and EU and its benefits
5. Achieving a liberalized visa regime
6. Transnistrian conflict – obstacle or not in the way of EU granting Republic of Moldova a liberalized visa regime
7. EU's role in the Transnistrian settlement process

Corneliu RUSNAC, moderator Imedia: *Good day, dear listeners! I am Corneliu Rusnac and I welcome 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.*

Corneliu RUSNAC: In today's show I would like to present you a discussion with Dan Dungaciu, European Integration Adviser to the Interim President Mihai Ghimpu. Recently, in an interview on TVR, Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschi said that there could be a potential link between the recent scandal in Moscow on espionage charges against Romanian diplomat Gabriel Greco and the support that Romania is offering Republic of Moldova. Teodor Baconschi said, I quote "we have early elections on the horizon in the neighboring country, namely in Republic of Moldova, therefore, there is probably an anxiety over what is apparently seen in Moscow as a risk of Republic of Moldova becoming too close to the EU". I asked Mr. Dan Dungaciu why Moscow should be concerned about the European policy promoted by the current coalition government.

1. Moscow's concern with the European policy pursued by the Alliance for European Integration

Dan DUNGACIU, European Integration Adviser to the Interim President Mihai Ghimpu: My feeling is that in this space where we are now it is very risky to believe in coincidences. Things do not happen just randomly and I am not saying this without a reason, especially since it is not just about the events referred to by Mr. Baconschi in his interview, it is also about other things that happened lately

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which are at least strange and which bring into light a certain interest about what could happen to Republic of Moldova or regarding what the leaders of the Alliance for European Integration say should happen to Moldova. And if this was talked about before the establishment of the current Alliance, because at least since 2005 onwards the issue of European integration was on everyone's lips, everyone was talking about European integration, now things have become more complicated, they have changed in the sense that this thing actually occurs. Not the European integration itself, things are more complicated here but, the desire for integration starts to gain shape. Well in this framework, of course, also related to the electoral context, the context of the referendum, there are things happening to Republic of Moldova without a clear explanation and I would name here not just those found in your preamble but I would refer here to a type of campaign that suddenly appeared in the international press and in which Republic of Moldova is associated with countries it has no relation as a matter of fact but, it is directed so as to look very bad in the eyes of the Western public opinion. I am not saying that these things are critical but they are important because they create the environment and political decisions are taken in a certain environment. If this atmosphere is created and it becomes unfavorable if to a project of European integration or European enlargement then sure that Republic of Moldova could be affected. Besides the scandal that has already been announced here, Romania is warned by that widely publicized episode in the Russian Federation, an affair that has been reported before, and then put on television as if the first intervention had not been sufficient. So an explicit media campaign was intended, there for those who saw things more closely, which is unusual so to speak, it is not common because when such incidents happen even if they were real, things are done differently. So a media event against Romania has been orchestrated for the world to see that Romania is and must be punished. Add to this the sudden embargos that have been imposed, add that the tough statements that have come from Moscow against Republic of Moldova but also against Bucharest and I think we would have the whole picture. If we take each element one by one and take it out of context, we might not understand everything. If we look at the whole picture in front of us we might start asking questions and these questions could even be relevant. My feeling about the pro-European vector that Republic of Moldova has taken upon itself is that it does not appear just in words but also in deeds.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Speaking of embargoes, we witnessed so far that Russia has imposed restrictions on Moldovan wines and lately also on fruits and vegetables from Moldova, to what extent are these restrictions related to the pro-European policy of Republic of Moldova and can we expect new restrictions and new pressure from Moscow?

2. Restrictions imposed by Russia on imports of Moldovan wines, fruits and vegetables

Dan DUNGACIU: I think herein it is also very important the way Russian Federation will build its political and geopolitical projection in the short and medium term. If it wants this neighborhood to be in conflict for various reasons that are not connected only to Republic of Moldova, but perhaps only for the sake of negotiations. Russian Federation is the country with the most neighbors and negotiates several cases at the same time and then it maybe the need to create a conflict situation in a region to have greater bargaining power in other areas. Parenthetically, you remember when there were, when the Summit EU - Russian took place in the Russian Federation, the main enemy was Romania which allegedly would have

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granted too many citizenships and would have been causing a lot of harm in the neighborhood, which Federation Russian also calls the near abroad, and everyone in Moscow accused Romania. The problem is that it was obviously not true but Romania was used to hijack the issue of Georgia which was indeed real, extremely difficult and very pressing for the Russian Federation. The way Russian Federation projects itself externally of course depends only on Moscow, thus Republic of Moldova might find itself as in that famous joke with the rabbit roaming the woods and being beaten for either wearing or not wearing hat cap. The problem is not whether you have a cap or not, the problem is that if you want to create a conflict you create it. My feeling is that Russian Federation often does exactly so. What is the best thing in this circumstance or what can Republic of Moldova do in this case, you know as someone said that the most pragmatic thing is a good theory. I mean, you must have a clear conception of where you want to go and how you want to do that.

The idea we hear every time that Republic of Moldova should be pragmatic in its relations with the Russian Federation is likely to turn into a meaningless phrase because nobody understands what that pragmatism is and where will it lead us eventually. Here is the problem of substance and it was seen very clearly. Despite some statements that have been very much embellished, and were very hopeful of the Russian Federation there were still those embargos without any justification or, apparently, without any logic therefore the pragmatism should definitely be redefined or the parameters of the relationship should be changed. My feeling is that if we want to keep the word pragmatic in our relationship with the Russian Federation that the most pragmatic thing is, and I repeat what has been said, economic reconfiguration of Republic of Moldova, namely the identification of alternative markets. It would be the most pragmatic thing and if we were to find something positive from this embargo which Republic of Moldova was threatened with or actually was imposed on, it is this forcing, actually felt by the Government of Republic of Moldova to seek other markets because things are serious this time. And the fact that relations with Romania have been reopened and from this perspective, therefore, in very concrete terms, beyond political statements that have sometimes a rhetorical flair but are not often applied, so the fact that these relations were reopened in the area of food production means something very important. And I would say also that this issue had to be addressed some time ago, especially as Romania has, even if it is not its representative but, nonetheless it sent someone to the European Commission, particularly in the European Commission for Agriculture. Let's be very clear, Commissioner for Agriculture is the a Romanian representative in the Commission but, that does not mean that while having direct knowledge of this area he cannot do more, including for the Romania – Moldova relationship in the agricultural and food production sphere.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Could the current pro-European policy of Moldovan authorities have an alternative?

3. The Alternative to the pro-European policy of the Alliance for European Integration

Dan DUNGACIU: It was said at one point that Republic of Moldova while being between east and west should be a sort of bridge between these two spaces. The idea of a bridge in this area has been used in our case as well at one time and it must be understood very well. The bridge can be a place which identifies

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you as being nowhere. When you are a bridge you are nowhere or if you are a bridge it means that you are not in the west. When we are referred to as a bridge and we are here at the Euro-Atlantic border we must be very careful because, as far as I understand, not only myself but everyone who follows official developments and speeches, the idea of Republic of Moldova is to integrate or to come as close as possible to the EU, eventually to join the EU and not to remain a bridge. I have not heard any politician in Republic of Moldova to say that "My foreign policy goal is to make Moldova a bridge. I do not want to bring it into the EU." If you remain a bridge it poses a big risk. That means, in diplomatic terms, that you are not within the club, you are outside. Having been conferred the status of a bridge, over which, if you are not careful, many can cross over and then the situation is not at all comfortable. I do not want to repeat here what has been said about the donkey of ... it looked at one reek that at another, finally dying of starvation, because the story is already known. What I mean is that it is definitely unnatural to say about a country which borders the eastern area that it must turn its back or have no relationship with this space. Obviously, it is natural to do so. The problem is from what position to do that. Poland also had relations with the Russian Federation, occasionally good and sometimes less good, but it did so with the guarantee that EU and NATO stand behind. And even if at some point Poland slightly irritated the EU, it was the terrible child blocking bilateral agreements between Brussels and Moscow, it did so knowing that Poland is closer to the EU or NATO than the Russian Federation, Poland, I repeat, is part of the club. So it is obvious. When you are at the frontier you have relations with the east no matter what. The status is the problem and Republic of Moldova has to reach a better status, in order to be able to have relations with the Russian Federation, so as not to be cornered or blackmailed in some way or another every time, and this better status in the area is offered by NATO and EU membership. Republic of Moldova being neutral is trying to enter directly into the EU club and there most certainly it will find itself in a different negotiating position with the Russian Federation because what it has now, as everyday experience proves, seems not enough.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Negotiations with EU on the Association Agreement between Moldova and the EU have started a long time, several rounds of negotiations were held so far, but when could this Agreement be signed after all and how would Republic of Moldova benefit from it?

4. Signing the Association Agreement between Republic of Moldova and EU and its benefits

Dan DUNGACIU: It is a very complicated question because the Association Agreement has several dimensions that each has several subsections. They talk very much today in Republic of Moldova about a liberalized visa regime, for instance, which is a concrete thing that a person experiences directly. It is a thing that you can use; if you gain it today you can use it tomorrow. The problem is when you can get it or how you can get it because things are a little more complicated from what has been suggested at the time when this process of negotiation started. It is a tricky thing that has two dimensions: one is a purely technical dimension, another dimension is strictly political. If you ask me frankly which one is easier to overcome it would be very difficult for me to say, because both are extremely complicated. Neither should not be neglected, not one nor the other. Technical aspect is certainly one which you can solve by putting some institutions in place which would be credible in the eyes of similar institutions in the West.

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In this case, perhaps equally important is the Ministry of Interior as is the Ministry of Foreign Minister. I mean, you need to be credible not only to the Foreign Ministries of other countries. The discussion moves to the level of Ministries of Interior and if it is only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that is promoting the status of Republic of Moldova as part of the delegation to Brussels, for instance, I do not know if that is enough because there it reaches only one dimension. The Minister of Interior from a certain state may be Germany, France, Belgium or whichever you want, may say: "No, Republic of Moldova has a problem." Then he can block decisions taken by the State Government. Therefore we need to talk very realistically about these things because Republic of Moldova has a problem from this perspective and this problem refers to the management of the Transnistrian region and the way this issue will be presented to European officials, again, not European political officials, but officials... they are all officials and are part of EU member states' governments, but dealing with very concrete things. They are not European officials for they are not paid by Brussels. They are officials of national governments, but they can have a word to say because Republic of Moldova, I repeat, must clearly explain how you can secure not the border between Republic of Moldova and Romania or Moldova and Ukraine, but the incidental border placed approximately along the river Dniester. This will be a problem that Republic of Moldova must think a lot about.

As far as the political aspect is concerned, again, things should be discussed very carefully because the atmosphere that is created at the EU level could lead to problems. There are so many things today in Brussels that do not look good in respect to the Western Balkans and one of them suggested that the Commission was given too much power in managing these states and the Commission, having enough power, granted this visa-free regime even if there was no agreement of EU member states. Therefore, a discussion started, which in turn, alongside debates about migration in the EU, is likely to create an environment which will not help the negotiations that Republic of Moldova will have to undertake with each country. In order to get visa liberalization, one should get a political agreement of virtually every state, thus, sure the atmosphere has to be as good as possible. Hence the technical problem, that sounds technical, about how to get visa liberalization, has different political and geopolitical cloak. You must be very careful here about how you offer when you hold political negotiations and a dilemma that is almost permanent in Republic of Moldova's foreign policy appears whether to go together with the Ukraine or go separately from Ukraine. It is just one of the dilemmas that we can add to an issue that as I said seems purely technical, but all have political repercussions if we analyze carefully and to the end.

Corneliu RUSNAC: What should Republic of Moldova do in order to achieve a liberalized visa regime?

5. Achieving a liberalized visa regime

Dan DUNGACIU: It should be aware of the complexity of the problem. My feeling is that time periods of a year, one year and half, which were mentioned at the time on the eve of starting negotiations, are very optimistic. I am not saying that it should not be so, but the complexity of these issue and Romania these things have been seen quite clear, the complexity of these cases is higher. The difference between Republic of Moldova and Romania is that when Romania was preparing for accession Brussels was

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ready or so to say, this enlargement fatigue that is so much talked about was not so pressing. Hence, it was a natural way, even if some of them were raising eyebrows; it was in a way natural to continue the enlargement process. Nobody was realistically suggesting that Romania and Bulgaria should be kept outside the EU. Thus, it was another environment.

Secondly, what also happened in France, for instance, where Sarkozy imposed that any enlargement after Croatia would have to be passed by referendum is a pretty bad sign because EU citizens usually do not distinguish very carefully between the 4 million, which is the population of Moldova and tens of millions of Ukrainians and they discuss strictly in terms of migrants or us versus them, foreigners and locals, so to speak, therefore, they tend to greatly simplify the problem and then, this also may be a problem. Beyond that, to respond promptly and strictly to the question, it must be aware that this is a complicated issue. That it has two pillars: one technical, the other political. The political aspect does not refer only to foreign policy; it reflects the ability to convince officials in national governments that Republic of Moldova is not a problem. Thirdly, it has to make a decision about how will Republic of Moldova position itself in the future as an actor independent of any package, namely, Moldova renounces the package approach and as a result of the setback that Ukraine encountered recently, trying to gush on watershed and to join the EU on its own or go in a package with Ukraine and in that moment, certainly, other difficulties arise. This decision should be taken by the Moldovan authorities. Whatever the decision is some difficulties will arise, but the decision should be made because otherwise you are trying to come up with some illusions that you are either independent or in a package as circumstances require or as the circumstances suggest and this may be a decision which does not help that much. All these things and many more must be put on paper, they should be taken on, I do not mean that this has not been done so far. Certainly many of them have been taken on and many of these cases are being worked on already, but things should be clarified and viewed in their real size. Republic of Moldova has committed itself to the path of European integration at a time which is not as favorable as it was when Romania traveled this road. It was difficult with Romania, but certainly in the case of Moldova things are even more complicated.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Let us return to the Transnistrian problem, to what extent would this problem, this conflict be a hindrance to Republic of Moldova becoming closer to the EU beyond the visa-free regime?

6. Transnistrian conflict – obstacle or not in the way of EU granting Republic of Moldova a liberalized visa regime

Dan DUNGACIU: Herein there are two aspects as well. There is one purely technical aspect, as I was saying that is linked to visa liberalization and which there is no point to talk about now because I have reviewed it as far as it was possible. The second one is the political aspect, or if you will, the geopolitical one. If Republic of Moldova is somehow on the first page of talks, bilateral discussions with the Russian Federation via the German initiative that is a good thing, but it may also be something less good because many times in this space translations are not the most competent. What I mean is that, the federalization project began in 2000 with an OSCE project that was supported at a time by about four U.S. ambassadors, even four ambassadors at one time were backing this project, but its translation into

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Russian was called the Kozak Memorandum. Thus, what began as a matter that could be discussed ended as a story that had to be straightforwardly rejected. Something similar happens to European initiatives as well. Not everything that starts well ends well in this area. What starts well can end badly. And then the problem that must be told bluntly in Chisinau, and I think that is to some extent told, is that the Transnistrian problem should not be discussed or Republic of Moldova should not be discussed in the context of the Transnistrian issue, but the Transnistrian issue should be discussed in the context of Republic of Moldova. Who tries to make, either due to ignorance or superficiality, Republic of Moldova an annex to the Transnistrian issue is likely to push Chisinau on a completely blocked road. What does this mean? It means that when two big important regional powers Germany and the Russian Federation negotiate, you must be very cautious at the time about where those negotiations are leading to and how much each player is willing to concede. It is beyond any idea or suspicion that Germany had a different agenda when it proposed this arrangement or the debate with the Russian Federation, not by a long shot.

The problem is certainly what Germany did; it brought back on the agenda an important issues. But, if I may parenthetically, it has done also something else. What did Germany do in this type of negotiation? It took an issue that is important for the EU, but is not similarly important; in the sense that there are countries with different agendas and which do not put much value on relations with the Russian Federation or that are pursuing a type of settlement with the Russian Federation that is particularly different. So, if you go in the EU and say: "Let's sign, particularly, an agreement with Russian Federation" certainly you will not find unanimity. Consensus is difficult to achieve. Some are not very interested stakeholders while others have very specific interests and so forth. Then the EU tacitly authorized, at least this was suggested by Angela Merkel in her press conference with President Medvedev, it tacitly delegated Germany to see how far they can go in their relationship with the Russian Federation, how much can be proposed how much can be conceded, how willing is the Russian Federation to accept and how much is Russia inclined to reject. Germany has taken on this role. It is a very important role. It put forth a feeler, and one of the things which were asked of the Russian Federation was the settlement of the Transnistrian issue. Up to here, sure, things are important, but we must see them in this perspective. So a sort of Germany that is not standing for the EU when negotiating with the Russian Federation, but it is not only Germany alone either. This is a new strategy in European diplomacy, which is not validated as such, it is not recognized as such, but is significant and I make a parenthesis here, in the long and medium term we could probably see even the relationship between Romania and Republic of Moldova drawn along this lines while keeping of course the proportions. Nobody says that the relationship between Germany and Russian Federation can be equated to that of Romania and Republic of Moldova, but keeping the proportions, let us say frankly, Republic of Moldova is an important area for EU or it should be, but there is no consensus there either. There is lack of interest, lack of knowledge, others have too much interest, too little interest, others link Republic of Moldova to other relations, namely the relationship with the Russian Federation, so there is no consensus, maybe it would not be a bad idea to have an actor at the EU level that would not be delegated by the EU, but would push things as much as it could and start a sort of exploratory work for it subsequently to return to the EU and say: "Sir, this is what you can and this is what you cannot", I closed the parenthesis. It would not be bad to witness such a project because it would probably be to the advantage of Republic of Moldova, and now I closed the parenthesis for good.

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And now I should return to the issue of this memorandum. The memorandum began in principle, certainly as a generous initiative, but our experience compels us to be careful because we do not know how it ends. Then, in these circumstances, Republic of Moldova should very well set the red lines that it cannot cross. From this point of view, some statements that were made at the level, and I must say it regardless of the office where we are, not at the level of Republic of Moldova's President's Office, statements that conditioned the settlement of the Transnistrian issue with a prior withdrawal of Russian troops and weapons and I welcome this because then some clear milestones are set. During negotiations you do not know how much you deviate from the original project even without realizing it and then someone should say "look, these limits are our benchmarks, we cannot cross them", I believe it is a good thing and such a voice does not hurt, conversely it may not be necessarily the original intentions, but, again, during the negotiations distancing might be dangerous sometimes. We are very much interested to see what may come out of this memorandum, but I think we must address it with caution as any other tentative agreement in this region. I do not think it was about a simple trick like "withdraw the troops and we give you visas" because things do not work this way in the EU. The EU bureaucracy is too large so as to confuse numbers with pearls. Withdrawal of troops is about one dossier, visas about other types of institutions, thus we should not oversimplify, but without this kind of generalization, this problem still needs an amount of caution, I repeat, because, Republic of Moldova must say, at times bluntly that there are limits beyond which it will never cross.

Corneliu RUSNAC: However, what do you think should be the role of EU in the Transnistrian settlement process? Is it sufficient for it to be limited to observer status in the 5 +2 format?

7. EU's role in the Transnistrian settlement process

Dan DUNGACIU: It is very difficult to radically change the rule of the game during the game. The 5+2 format is there, whether we like it or not. It is there at least on paper because from 2006 it has not been actually active in a very visible way. That does not mean that beyond the format itself there are no negotiations or discussions. But if the EU is able to assert itself more I believe this bilateral dialogue or this Merkel-Medvedev agreement is an attempt to do so. I mean that it is an attempt to put problem on the agenda in a different way, to check out the pulse, as I said before. We will have to wait and see if this attempt or strategy wins, but certainly this is the only way we can imagine today a more active role of the EU. And if we go forward and talk about a change in format of troops stationed, certainly, herein also things can be advanced from an EU perspective because - a new format or change of format which is now stationed in the Transnistrian region or putting it under the aegis of the OSCE are all things that are being discussed within the OSCE, but the substantive issue, from what we here from the Russian Federation, is in fact a kind of discourse that goes even lower than what the Russians called during the time of Primakov the principle of synchronization. The principle of synchronization means that political problem is solved simultaneously with the military problem. Today, including statements by Russian Federation Ambassador Kuzmin, spoke about conflict resolution and subsequently addressing the issue of Russian troops. So things are lower than they were in 1997, if you will, with the principle of synchronization. We see that things are rather complicated here. Certainly a difference of opinion, added

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here, when talking about troops, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which is, again, one almost suspended, is very important for some players. The problem and one of the many pitfalls that exist here is lest the actors of the European region or from the area of the negotiations format to come to discuss this Treaty outside the settlement process. If this happens, the issue of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe to be decoupled from the Transnistrian conflict settlement then for sure things will not go the right direction. All these things, all these discussions, beyond these quite general words though which we approach this problem, must take account of some small pitfalls that may occur, not necessarily intentionally, but may occur due to the interests of various players in this region, which are almost never convergent, or to put it bluntly, not everyone wants the resolution in the same fashion as does Republic of Moldovan or Moldova's friends or closest allies of Chisinau at this time, and, from this point of view, without putting the Russian Federation at one extreme and Chisinau at the other, from this perspective these differences might give us the run-around. Any problem that we discuss must definitely have a well enough prepared file so that Chisinau would be exempt from the danger that it faces each time it starts negotiations.

Corneliu RUSNAC: Dear listeners I remind you that you have listened to a broadcast with Dan Dungaciu, Presidential Adviser on European Integration issues. Here we end our program today. The show was produced with the support of the Foreign Policy Association and funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. I, Corneliu Rusnac, am saying goodbye and welcome you to a new program. See you soon!