

Interview with Mr. Ion Sturza, ex Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova:

„It is not Putin who is powerful, it is the global leaders who are weak “

In his position as Prime Minister of the Republic of Moldova in the late 90s, Ion Sturza met with Vladimir Putin on many formal and informal occasions. For this reason the European leaders often called upon Mr. Sturza's opinion on Mr. Putin's mindset at the time.

What is now Ion Sturza's opinion about the Russian President's strategy?

Mr. Sturza (53 years old) has started his political carrier in 1999 and became well-known for his nine-month running of the government. Although he withdrew from the political scene, many conationals would be in favor of his presidency in the county across the Prut River (Republic of Moldova – note of translator). As a business man his name surfaced in 2007. Mr. Sturza intermediated one of the largest M@A transactions in Romanian history, the sale of Rompetrol to KazMunaiGaz. He settled in Bucharest and is currently running an Investment Fund of his own, Fribourg Capital, which has a widely diversified portfolio with projects in the e-commerce, real estate, manufacturing and other industries. Throughout the years Ion Sturza managed to meet in person with the World's most prominent leaders, the ones that shaped the history over the last decades like Bill Clinton, Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair. He was also acquainted with Vladimir Putin.

Reporter: Is Putin a powerful person?

Ion Sturza: Not really. Power is very relative. Putin is not a strong leader. His entire career clearly shows that he is continuously fighting his frustrations and his inferiority complex. The family he originated from was extremely humble. I had presentations in front of the Western audience on the topic „Who is Mr Putin?“.

When was that?

In the year 2000, in 1999 and 2000 to be precise.

After you were no longer the Prime Minister?

Yes, afterwards I used to be invited to all kind of “courts”...and I had a theory that has proved entirely true. Not that Putin is powerful, it is the global leaders that are weak. After Clinton, Blair and Chirac, who else is there? Merkel is the only one to oppose Putin to a certain extent, as she is aware of his mindset. Period.

Are you saying that Western leaders have simply diluted over time...

Yes. This has been acknowledged by the Western opinion makers themselves.

What were you telling the Western leaders in your presentations about Putin's way of thinking?

My theory was very simple, stemming from my personal interactions with him as well. His career wasn't a career of success.

How many times have you met with him?

Several times, I would say, I cannot recall precisely.

As the Prime Minister?

As Prime Minister, but also as Deputy Prime Minister, both formally and informally before Putin became President. However, everyone understood that he was picked out and promoted by oligarchs. The same oligarchs he has easily terminated afterwards.

Reporter: ... Terminated...

Some of them, while the others he has forced to work for him and for the country, or for the country and for him. It does not matter.

The promise to take away power from the oligarchs was one of the leverages that triggered his success in 2000 elections.

Not really. In the year 2000 he won the power with a single statement: "We will soak the terrorists in the toilet". It was a genial statement. He had neither notoriety, no popularity.

Did he say it in public?

Yes, publicly, in a TV broadcasting. I heard it personally. I thought I will fall off my chair. It was said brutally but it reached every Russian's heart in the aftermath of the terrorist acts. Those ill-fated terrorist acts that ended up in blowing several houses.

Was the state power rather weak at that time?

The state power was rather weak at the time and he was smart enough to avoid getting into conflict. But he dealt with all of them gradually. Those who opposed him even a little bit committed suicide in London.

When describing his psychological portrait in the West I was always saying "Let's look at his career, his social origins".

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As a child, he was physically very fragile. And he had both persistency and tenacity to practice sport, box in particular, then judo to build up his body. He chose the Law Faculty to study as he was aware that law was good for the carrier. But he entered the university as the son of a laborer, thanks to his "humble" origin. The Law Faculty was allowed only for those who have served in the Army, or were designated by the party or those who had appropriate social origin.

He came to the Intelligence Service without previous contacts. It was well known that the staff was rigorously selected for many years. He opened the door and said “I want to become your spy”. Or something similar. It was so shocking and so very frank that they gave him a chance. His career in the Soviet Intelligence Service didn’t last long and it was not brilliant. He was dispatched to the Friendship Society in Dresden, at the lowest level. Only Mongolia was lower than that. He left the Service with the rank of major. His next job was as a taxi driver. He also had some income from managing his “dacha”, a country house.

Did he go back to Moscow from Dresden?

He went back to Sankt-Petersburg and was very lucky to meet there Sobceak (Anatolii Sobceak, the first democratically elected mayor of Sankt-Petersburg – editor’s note), who still had old Soviet habits and was in need of a reliable security agent close to him. This is how his short external trade career began.

In the office of the mayor?

Yes, in Sankt-Petersburg.

In charge of foreign relations?

Not really, that came later. It was in Sankt-Petersburg that he got to know Ciubais (Anatolii Ciubais is a Russian politician and business man, responsible for the post-soviet Russia’s privatization – editor’s note). Ciubais brought him to Moscow, to President Eltin’s administration where he was found very obedient and easily manipulated by oligarchs.

However he had this feature to easily overcome his complexes. I was telling the westerners (Putin became Russia’s President in 2000, editor’s note): “The first thing he will do is to build an unprecedented castle in St. Petersburg for himself”. He formerly visited or maybe just saw castles from the outside. None of the Soviet leaders did this before. He did it. The second thing (which he was telling the westerners - editor’s note) will be to attract around him the cultural elite of St. Petersburg, opera and ballet. And third, he will try to launch himself on the world’s political scene. I tried to explain to westerners that Vladimir Putin and Russia should not be excluded, because meanwhile Putin’s power and influence has

grew a lot in comparison with his timid beginnings. The world leaders made the mistake of being ignorant...

Reporter: Was he timid?

Ion Sturza: Extremely timid, extremely reserved and now he is exactly the opposite, because he has had overcome his complexes of a small vulnerable child. This is my perception.

Gradually we went back to the times of Cold War: the same wording and the same actions. Everyone speaks of Russia's expansionist desires as a given. Where does this come from?

There are no expansionist desires. Gradually we went back to the times of Cold War: the same wording and the same actions. And it was not Russia that started it. It was rather the West that started it. One of the key elements of the Cold War was the formation of the so-called circle of friends. The European Union established a circle of this kind by launching the Eastern Partnership Initiative Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova as part of it. Even Belarus was approached. Its name was tale telling: the Pact for Security and Stability. Simply put, money in exchange for security and stability, without interfering into the political processes of the respective states. However, the Europeans...

Reporter: When did this start?

Ion Sturza: About five years ago. They, the Europeans are more cynical. Why do we need to give money to these countries for stability and security? Let us give them European prospects, but no money.

A dream...

Just a dream. Moreover, let us impose them to deploy their own resources and their own money to foster tough reforms (this is emphasized – note of the editor) so that they reach the European Union social and economic standards, which by themselves would mean security and stability. However, it did not work this way, not in Ukraine, at least. The very same reflex emerged in the Russians: to build a circle of friends. All countries (except the

Baltic states and Belarus – note of the editor) have shown weaknesses. Including Armenia, that has negotiated the Association Agreement and was ready to sign it. Ukraine was ready to sign the Association Agreement. The Moldovans have just initialled the Agreement. Historically speaking, the Western world has always wanted to move the borders closer to Moscow, while Moscow wanted to move the border closer to Berlin. It is regretful that the arrogant and superior behaviour of the West offered the Russians many reasons to reanimate their imperial instincts.

In a reactive manner.

In a reactive manner. This is the appropriate word “reactive”. Because they (the Russians - note of the editor) may always say: “It wasn’t us who started all this!” “When we dismantled the Soviet Union and granted you the opportunity to unify Germany we requested that you do not extend NATO”. (...) The West, seeing the real weakness of Russia has made a move, without considering that a brutal reaction may follow... and that Russia may demand in a real manner, not just in a statement of some reactionaries like Jirinowski, to overtake a good part of Ukraine. This is the situation. We need to be honest with ourselves.

The Maidan is also a lesson for both Moldova and Romania, a lesson for any country that respects its people. Period.

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Do you believe that Putin has this personal desire to remake the Soviet Union?

No, no and no. The North of Kazakhstan was populated Russians almost exclusively. Any country of the former Soviet space has a Russian diaspora, including the Republic of Moldova with one third of the population being Russian speakers.

Out of four million population.

Which diminished to three and a half million. Some have left. But this is of no significance. They (the Russians – note of the editor), want to follow the American model: if anything happens to an American, an US aircraft carrier goes to save him/her. Taking into account

the fact that the Russians have been distributing passports to ten, hundred thousands of Russian speakers in all these countries, theoretically speaking, to follow the abovementioned model, they may send the aircraft carrier as well. In fact, this is what was pursued in the case of Crimea. In fact, Crimea (I have even written a small article about it) is the Transnistria of 1992, a straight copy. First of all, the disobedience to national local government. The national government and the active movement tries to restore order and fair play. The other side responds by paramilitary movements, the Kazaks, a conflict emerges which offers the Russians sort of a virtual right to interfere. They interfere, occupy the place and stay. It is true that Ukraine had the power of discernment not to intervene and to give no orders to the enforcement troops.

Still we cannot say that Ukraine is happy. It has avoided a war, but it has lost Crimea.

I want to say that we need not discount the Ukrainians. They are very stubborn. Russia has gained a territory but has also gained a big problem. Historically speaking, the Ukrainians will never forget and forgive. They'd be better off to give up something to the Ukrainians, so that they are content and happy. About 45 milion (of them about 30 million Ukrainians) are hostile right beside Russia. Extremely hostile.

Reporter: Then, what is it that Russia has gained?

Ion Sturza: It has not gained a lot, because although the enthusiasm (he means Russian leaders present at the event which announced the annexation of Crimea – editor's note) was at par with the one we've seen in 30's chronicles about Stalin, when everyone was standing and applauding continuously, I observed many sad and thoughtful faces, including of people whom I knew for many years. Those who showed a lot of enthusiasm were people brought from the crowd. However, of those who were in the first 15 rows, I know personally half of them or even more. I saw their thoughtfulness... They look at it geo-strategically. I have an even simpler theory. The Maidan has appeared as a reaction to ... (he pronounces the words slowly in a lesson like fashion – note of the editor)

..poverty...

Even poverty is not the whole problem. It was a reaction to corruption, arrogance, ,lack of respect for the law and for their own people. I was asking my friends, doctors, people of significance, businessmen, people who were staying in the Maidan why were they doing it. It was cold, it was dangerous... Most of the people who came to stay in the Maidan are people with good will who did not want to live under Yanukovici's regime any longer, a corrupt, brutal, authoritarian regime. That is what it was. There should be no illusion that people were fighting there for democratic values. This is what the Maidan phenomenon means. And this is a lesson not only for Ukraine. It is also a lesson for Moldova and for Romania and for any country which has no respect for its people. Period. (...)

(By the way, about Russia's plans to overtake Crimea – note of the editor). I believe that all the decisions were ad-hoc decisions, because they took what was lying around. In fact, Ukraine has lost its country with its own hands. They have lost their country and the Russians came and picked it up.

I have the impression that Bucharest politicians intend to make maximal use of their love for the Republic of Moldova in the election year. Let them be careful not to suffocate someone with their love.
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Reporter: What do you think will happen now? Transnistria has requested to join Russia.

No, no and no. We need not take it very seriously, because this was the opinion of a person who has just a formal position in Transnistria (...) I believe that Russia will need to take a break to digest what it has already taken. Because any second or third step will have much larger consequences than Crimea as such. This would mean that there is a plan for extension.

Still, it did happen: a part of an independent and sovereign state has been annexed and joined to Russia.

No other words qualify here except military aggression and annexation. Many things explain the enthusiasm of Crimean population. I will give you some figures: apparently 1.5 million people have participated in the referendum, over 90 per cent of the population. Let us assume that about 600,000 of these people are retired. Most of them are retired

militaries inherited from the Soviet Union and most are, certainly, Russians. About 200,000 people work in the public sector. Most of the population are beneficiaries of the social system. Over 50% of Crimea budget is subsidized from Kiev. Well, pensions and salaries in Russia, as well as social benefits, are two-three times higher than in Crimea. For militaries they are ten times higher or more. And all of them have seen the power of the dollar. I understand these people very well.

What are the ramifications of all this for Romania?

Romania has two challenges: first is the Republic of Moldova and the second is the border between NATO and the Russian Federation. Now it is no longer at the periphery. It is in the centre. Therefore challenges emerge. These are virtual challenges. Let us hope they will not evolve into security challenges. It is difficult for me to believe that the Romanian society will be indifferent to an eventual danger to the security of the Republic of Moldova. And I believe there are more people concerned about it in Bucharest, than in Chisinau. I have the impression that Bucharest politicians in an election year intend to make maximal use (emphasized – editor’s note.) of their love for the Republic of Moldova. Let them take care not to suffocate us with so much love (...)

I try to tell the Romanians here in Romania that 90 per cent of the Moldovans are for an independent and sovereign state. This is neither good, nor bad. It is a fact and we need to take it into account.

Is the will for unification greater among the Romanians?

Yes, indeed. The proportion is reversed: 90 to 10 and 10 to 90. There are the statistics. And each leader of the Republic of Moldova should take into account this reality. And the reverse is also true. I understand the Romanian politicians.

Who does Moldova belong to, in fact? To Europe or to the East?

Statistically, the population is divided into two groups: national elites are 100% for Europe and I believe the elites need to take care of the country and not the peasants, needn’t they? And they need to carry the European project to the end. This is the story.

The security is expensive. If a buffer zone with Russia is requested, it has to be paid for. Period. Or the Iron Wall could emerge again.

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Ukraine is left hanging in the air financially speaking. It needs 15 billion dollars for current payments.

Even the Ukrainians do not know how much they need.

There is the danger that it will go into bankruptcy.

Is it for the first time? No, it has been there twice or so. They have invited creditors and told them: we give you 10 per cent. In 1999 (he was Prime Minister of Moldova – editor’s note.), when we were paying the debts of the state, which were some type of financial pyramid and we were not paying pensions and salaries, all CIS countries got bankrupt, including Ukraine. Ukraine appealed to all (creditors – editor’s note.) and told them: “we pay this amount and we pay you in thirty years”. And it left people with billions of dollars hanging in the air. I believe now it will happen again. Tacitly, the United States is buying the debt. Tacitly. At a very serious discount.

The debt will never be paid in full, but who will pump money into Ukraine?

Those who refused to offer a lesser amount before signing the Association Agreement, the European Union. The United States – only very marginally. The latter always do things in Europe with others’ hands. We saw it in the Balkans. Thus, the Europeans are the ones to make contributions. If they want to have stability and security they have to pay.

It is easy to understand the hesitation of the European Union, which, in its turn, has internal problems with Greece, Spain, Italy...

Security is expensive. If you want a buffer zone between you and Russia, you need to pay. Period. Or build a new Iron Wall. Create new military capacities. One should always crunch the numbers carefully.