



The Republic of Moldova at a Crossroads. West or East?

*An Assessment of the Presidential Elections in the
Republic of Moldova published by New Strategy Center – Romania
and Centro Studi Internazionali – Italy*

The Republic of Moldova at a Crossroads. West or East?

*An Assessment of the Presidential Elections in the
Republic of Moldova published by New Strategy Center –
Romania and Centro Studi Internazionali – Italy*

The election of Igor Dodon, the socialist candidate and promoter of closer ties with the Russian Federation, as president was predictable, considering the way in which the election campaign progressed. Nonetheless, it will not radically change the situation in the Republic of Moldova.

The former Soviet State will neither have chances nor formal EU accession perspectives in the future and it will continue its “double game”, oscillating between East and West in a desperate search for funds and support for survival.

From a geopolitical perspective, the West’s best behavior could be a wait strategy, maybe pushed to the limit of a *doing nothing* strategy. Since 2003, the strategic initiative belonged

to the Euro-Atlantic space. Today, the initiative passed in Russia’s court through the election of a president taken from the campaign photo with Vladimir Putin.

Now, Russia should be left alone to deal with the Republic of Moldova. Until today, it has done nothing else but trying to undermine the pro-European front in Chişinău, but now it could have in the president a powerful ally. Without the capability of raising funds for economic development, of promoting infrastructure investments and without the influence people talk about in the Republic of Moldova, Russia will be forced though to act. What will it do? What will it be able to do? In the best case scenario, maybe nothing. In the worst case scenario (forcing federalization), it will make a mistake. The hypothetical reactions caused by Russia’s too high pressures can rapidly change the power balance in Chişinău and in the region.



Source - www.despretoate.com

The Situation in the Republic of Moldova – an Unprecedented Crisis

Today, after 25 years, the Republic of Moldova is facing an unprecedented project crisis. The polls show that 80% of the population believes that the «direction is wrong», and the underlying problem is not just the crisis in itself, but the lack of solutions to the crisis. This is the novelty. In 25 years, the Republic of Moldova experimented almost everything: left-wing and right-wing governments, pro-East and pro-West governments. But nothing has come out of it, all of them compromised themselves more or less.

In Chişinău, there is no more talk about a “European Republic of Moldova”. In official discourses there is no more mention of “European integration” or “European perspectives”, but only a mild “getting closer to Europe”. In reality, Chişinău has never stood a clear, formal chance of accession to the EU, it only had the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA, July 2016) which under no circumstance guarantee the integration.

Geopolitically, considering that the accession to the European space is out of the question, the Republic of Moldova is rather becoming a grey area, consolidate its role (or conviction) as a frontier territory, a buffer zone, without a precise strategic identity, siding both with the East and with the West, but without decisively belonging to any of the spaces.

From EU’s perspective, the Republic of Moldova is part of the neighborhood policy framework, but it is not on a favorable trend like the enlargement policy in Western Balkans. The European Institutions’ interest is for the Republic of Moldova to become a predictable State and they have increased the resources so as to stabilize and develop this country. Financial allotments from the European Community within the

neighborhood policy have gradually increased after 2009. If until 2014 the Republic of Moldova had enjoyed the EU leaders’ appreciation for the progresses made in implementing reforms, the uncovering of the fraudulent financial mechanisms that led to the disappearance of a billion dollars from the State-owned banks alarmed institutions in Brussels, which were shocked by this corruption case.

In addition, in this moment, there is an historical conjuncture against the aspirations of the pro-European Moldovan front and that slowed Brussels political action towards its eastern neighbors. Specifically, the phenomena of instability in the Middle East and North Africa, the fast growth of migration to EU territory, the threat of domestic jihadist terrorism and question marks on the political future of Turkey have helped to push into the background the eastern enlargement dossier of the Union. To make matters worse, the European Union has to address the alarming growth of interior populist and Eurosceptics movements, standard bearers of the reform of the Treaties and opposed to any form of enlargement and partnership with neighbors.

The Republic of Moldova is in the front line among the States which could suffer a greater Russian influence in case USA’s interest in the region is to diminish following the shift in American foreign policy starting next year, after Trump’s administration will have taken office. In return, certain American officials in Europe have tried to reassure Eastern European States that the USA’s security commitments will not change. To this extent, the American Ambassador in Chişinău, James Pettit, has recently Stated that solidarity towards the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine will be unchanged. However, it remains to be seen to what extent there will be a recalibration of the American security policy in Eastern Europe during President Trump’s term. This might make the former Soviet States even more vulnerable, considering that Russia has already managed to regain a part of its influence in a number of places that were key spots for the former USSR.

Ignoring the Geopolitical Vote or “Why Maia Sandu Lost in Chişinău”

Even from the first round of the election, the pro-West candidate, Maia Sandu, systematically refused to approach the “Russian issue”, namely to accept the idea that the East-West axis was important in the presidential elections. The focus was on the older idea of the *Demnitate și Adevăr* Platform (which was linked to anti-oligarch protests with Renato Usatîi and Igor Dodon, people close to Moscow) according to which the main stake of the elections should be the fight against corruption, everything else (namely geopolitics, unionism or the identity issue) is diversion. The result is that Maia Sandu obtained an un hoped for result of 38.43% in the first round. However, the surprise was mitigated by the results – also not hoped for! – obtained by Igor Dodon –48.22%. A nearly 10% difference separated the two candidates.

Was the fight against corruption the main reason for the vote given to Maia Sandu? This Statement does not hold for a number of reasons.

The first: the distribution of the votes she received. If the fight against corruption and against Vlad Plahotniuc had been the reason behind the vote, then the distribution of the votes for Maia Sandu should have been relatively even, relatively equally spread across the Republic, as are corruption and the oligarch’s negative image. Obviously, there are no corrupt and non-corrupt districts, whole homogeneous corrupt regions and whole homogeneous non-corrupt regions. But the distribution of the votes for Ms Sandu indicates something else. Her votes have a regional distribution, and they are split into relatively compact regions: she won mostly in the Center of the Republic, with its pertaining shades, but the North and the South massively voted for Dodon. Any surprises? None. If anyone is to make a comparison between the distribution of the votes from the presidential elections and the local elections in June 2015, one can notice an obvious overlapping reflected also in the adjacent map: in general, Maia Sandu won in the districts where, in 2015 the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (PLDM) and the Liberal Party (PL) won, losing in the districts

taken by socialists or communists, though. Thus, the votes for the Democratic Party (PD) were distributed according to the non-homogeneous electoral structure of this party: the Democratic Party electorate in the North and in the South voted for Dodon, and the electorate in the Center voted for Maia Sandu. This overlapping of the votes for Maia Sandu and the older tendencies within the society on the left of the Prut River is highly relevant and it suggests that the trigger of the vote must be looked for elsewhere (as well), rather than in the fight against corruption and against oligarchy.

Secondly, we observe that the same logic applies in Chişinău as well. Igor Dodon won the “Russian” sectors Botanica and Râşcani (which traditionally vote for the left-wing, for the communists or the socialists and have a constant turn out because they are part of the stable electorate, that does not leave the country to work abroad), and Maia Sandu won the “Moldavian” sectors, Centru, Buiucani, and Ciocana (a fluctuant electorate due to migration), which traditionally votes for the pro-Europeans and with mayor Dorin Chirtoacă, supporter of a pro-Western policy and an advocate of the unification with Romania. Maia Sandu was voted roughly by the same poll that ensured Dorin Chirtoacă’s victories in the 2011 and 2015 local elections.

In the suburbs of Chişinău the situation is the same. Maia Sandu won in Truşeni, Ghidighici, Grătieşti, Ciorescu, Durleşti, Stăuceni, Tohatin, Cruzeşti, Budeşti, Coloniţa, Codru, Bubuieci, Băcioi, and Sîngera (these are the localities that voted for Dorin Chirtoacă for last year’s local elections). For Igor Dodon, the greatest number of votes were given only in Cricova, Vatra, and Vadul lui Vodă (at the local elections Dorin Chirtoacă lost in Vatra and Vadul lui Vodă, yet he won in Cricova, but it was a very tight race).

What conclusions can we draw? That the anticorruption vote or the anti-Plahotniuc vote is, simply and bluntly, mainly a simplification. In reality, it matters only for the already convinced ones. Because that electorate that traditionally votes pro-West is rather pro-Romanian, they speak Romanian. It does not mean that the ones who gave their vote to Maia Sandu do not support the fight against corruption or the liberation of the “captive State” – but this was not the only reason to give her a vote. Neither was in the second round.

In the second round, Maia Sandu declared in an interview for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: "I do not accept this campaign to be about geopolitics. For me, this campaign is about people who fight against corruption and against people who are the embodiment of corruption" (01.11.2016). The idea was reiterated almost conspicuously including in the first debate between the two candidates on the ProTV Chişinău TV station (03.11.2016). In turn, Igor Dodon strings along with her. The difference is that, whereas Igor Dodon had no interest in polarizing on the East-West axis (he already was "*the man from the photo with Putin*" and did not urgently need mobilization, but what he needed was electorate retention), Maia Sandu had all the reasons in the world not to ignore the geopolitical dimension, because that is where the vulnerable spots of the socialist candidate are. Here is what Igor Dodon was saying at the same radio station: "There are three things, three taboo topics for Igor Dodon and they cannot be negotiated, or debated. The first is Statehood. I will not negotiate with anybody anything related to the Republic of Moldova losing its Statehood. And I will be against those that plea for the liquidation of the State, against the unionists. The second, we will never negotiate the neutrality status. And we shall insist so as not to have military troops of other States present on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. And the third is related to our orthodox church, our orthodox belief" (01.11.2016). The problem with these messages is that they all have an underlying geopolitical stake. The "Statehood" promoted by Igor Dodon is of Soviet origin, because the identity reference points are the "Moldovan language" and the "history of the Moldovan people" which Igor Dodon wants to introduce in the place of the current "History of the Romanian People" textbooks.

The second issue, that of the neutrality, is in fact Moscow's main strategic stake in the Republic of Moldova: neutrality, in fact, means NATO denial and the illegal presence of the Russian troops on the territory of the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria / Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic). And the Republic of Moldova's neutrality combined with a budget of 0.4-0.5% of GDP allotted for national defense expenses make it a completely irrelevant State from a military point of view. Under the condition that neutrality would really be an option in Chişinău, the budgetary allotments for the army should really be much higher. The third issue, that of the church, is also a geopolitical stake: the Metropolis of Moldova Igor Dodon is referring to is under the canonical administration of Moscow Patriarchate, thus under the canonical control of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Metropolis of Moldova's explicit and indecent support for Dodon is, in fact, Russia's support.

Related to geopolitics, one must emphasize here the obsession of Igor Dodon's Socialist Party for the federalization of the Republic of Moldova. Here is what was written in the party program (in which there is no mentioning of the illegal presence of the Russian troops on the territory of the Republic of Moldova): "A federal republic means a few subjects of the federation, it means a bicameral Parliament made of the Chamber of the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives, it means a joint government and a president elected by the entire people of the country. Besides the existence of a government with federal powers, there will be local legislative governments and bodies of the subjects of the federation (just like currently there are in Găgăuzia, for example). The borders of the subjects of the federation will be established through local referendums organized in the districts that are between one subject and another. A Federal Moldova, with Transnistria incorporated as a subject of the federation, will have one official language only – the Moldovan language. And Russian will be a language for interethnic communication".

None of these topics was subject of electoral debate between the two candidates. In the campaign everything was a sort of a contest to determine who is the most corrupt in the country and the closest to Vlad Plahotniuc. Seen from a strategic point of view, the dispute was ridiculous. The problem was that Igor Dodon's weakness was not there. Maia Sandu miserably failed to hit her opponent's Achilles' heel and she hit the spots that were not his most vulnerable ones.

The topic of corruption is essential in the Republic of Moldova, but it cannot be discussed outside the East-West geopolitical tension. Just like none of the former Soviet States has ever integrated in the EU without first going through the NATO filter, no State in the region has efficiently fought against corruption by moving East of by ignoring the Euro-Atlantic path. Geopolitics without fight against corruption and development is a mere idea without a content, but fight against corruption without geopolitics is just an empty content without any guidelines.

What Does Russia Want?

Maybe, Russia would like to “aggress” the Republic of Moldova, but not through territory annexation or military means, but through “concession” of territories. Russia has no reason to take Transnistria from the Republic of Moldova because it already has it. And, furthermore, Transnistria declared its independence one year before the Republic of Moldova, basically the Republic of Moldova has not for one day controlled the separatist region. Russia could have recognized it as an independent State many years ago, with a *ready-to-go* validating referendum to legitimate such a decision, but this is not its interest. Russia’s interest is to stop NATO’s expansion to the East, and Transnistria is a perfect tool for such a thing.

So Transnistria may be a tool, not a purpose in itself. This would mean that by constituting a federation or by offering an “extended autonomy” for Transnistria within the territory of the Republic of Moldova, from an electoral point of view the nearly 10% of the massive pro-East votes will radically change the geostrategic vector of the Republic of Moldova in any ballot. At that point, not even in theory will one be able to talk any longer about the “European orientation of the Republic of Moldova”, or even about “getting closer to the EU”.

Russia, thus, does not want the “annexation” of Transnistria, it wants the “annexation” of the Republic of Moldova through *transtnistriization*.

Applying this strategy ensures a series of consistent gains for Russia: 1) The advancement of the Euro-Atlantic border is stopped permanently blocking the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Republic of Moldova as well as a potential unification with Romania; 2) It no longer pays for Transnistria (just as it would no longer pay for Donbas were it to obtain federalization there too), which is an important issue under the circumstances in which Moscow also has to economically manage the crisis in the Russian Federation, and Crimea’s integration, and the war expenses in Syria. Additionally, considering the debt of over 4 billion USD for gas Transnistria has to pay to Russia, debt which would thus be paid from the Republic of Moldova’s account, any shred of Chişinău’s autonomy would completely disappear.

And it is not only about the Republic of Moldova, but about the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, because the two States are interconnected. Any solution agreed upon for one of them will be replicated for the other. Russia wants the control of the whole through the part, namely to incorporate the separatist regions (except for Crimea, which is intangible) in Ukraine by offering guarantees to those (re)incorporated regions that Ukraine will not integrate in the Euro-Atlantic security space.



Source - www.biziday.ro

Negotiations for Transnistria

First of all, the Republic of Moldova is today in a weak position for negotiation, with Russia that wants to take advantage of the context, with the USA that are urged to tackle a high number of global crisis and Germany that wants to obtain a “successful” OSCE Chairmanship. But, in the case of Germany, it is not only about OSCE, because Germany started the dialogue with Russia on the Transnistrian issue some time ago (using the opportunity of the Meseberg Memorandum on June 4-5, 2010).

Second of all, any negotiation, even on technical aspects, is in favor of the Transnistrian party, hence of Russia.

By making concessions at the level of the “small steps” (vehicle registration plates, different telephone codes, accreditation of the “State” University of Tiraspol degrees, etc.), the Republic of Moldova will only affect the context in which it will negotiate the political and security aspects. To make concessions now means to affect Transnistria’s political status in the future, because the measures accepted now are part of the future status of the region.

Thirdly, the negotiation 5 + 2 is done at the same time with the negotiations between Kiev and Moscow held on the status of Donbas. Any concession made by Chişinău will affect Kiev and vice versa. Russia is waiting for the weakest link to break so as to accept an “extended autonomy” (meaning federalization) in Donbas or Transnistria, in order to apply the pattern to its neighbor as well.

The Republic of Moldova after Igor Dodon

The election of Igor Dodon as President could probably lead to the conservation of the present status quo on the political arena in Chişinău, characterized especially by Vlad Plahotniuc’s major influence, who already managed to demonstrate he has the necessary economic leverage through which he can dominate the political scene in Chişinău despite the fact that he does not hold any public office. The Parliament will transform into Igor Dodon’s main opposition arena, and Vlad Plahotniuc will try to gain the upper hand by analyzing which could be the best advantage for his business and political career. On that, Moldovans could expect from him both a pro-European opposition in order to clear a bit the negative image of the oligarch who, without hinders, controls all the political arena and an acceleration of a pragmatic full-functional pro-Russian attitude.

At the same time, a deceleration of the Republic of Moldova’s European trajectory is estimated, despite the progress registered within the EU Association Agreement. Noticing the positive

aspects it carries, even the economic players in Transnistria are making efforts in order to be in line with these standards. If the Republic of Moldova steps away from the parameters set within the agreement it will dilute even further the European perspective, which is already very fragile. Dodon’s victory will also mean maintaining the Russian troops on the territory of the Republic of Moldova and strengthening the ties between Chişinău and Moscow.

According to the Constitution, the President of the Republic of Moldova does not have special prerogatives. But as President of the Republic of Moldova, Igor Dodon will most probably try to impose a favorable government even before the parliamentary elections scheduled in 2018. Igor Dodon might push for a policy of independence from Romania and even from the EU, only if Russia is to offer it resolute guarantees of support and economic aid. It is unclear how anti-Romanian will his agenda be should he be elected President. The socialist candidate started his campaign with an anti-Romanian attitude, however, he nuanced his tone with the progression of the campaign.

Igor Dodon and Romania

Nonetheless, his discourse can focus on identity issues in the future, that would strengthen the theory of *Moldovenism* and hence the country's Statehood, to the detriment of developing closer ties with Romania, insisting on changing the history textbooks there where the history of the Romanian people is taught, insisting on supporting the Moldovan church, which is in fact affiliated to Moscow and, especially, insisting on neutrality. This approach is a *Vladimir Voronin-like approach*, trying to maintain focus on the identity issue, but supporting it on a pendulum between Russia and Romania. Despite his political and strategic preferences, Igor Dodon will not have the capacity to dilute the connection between the Republic of

Moldova's economy and the European economy without an insurance policy that the Russian market will be able to attract Moldovan products. Furthermore, Igor Dodon will not have the capacity to adopt such a policy without the guarantee that he can access dedicated Russian funds, considering that the Moldovan economy depends on European financial resources. It is unlikely for Russia to accept the status of sponsor that replaces European funding, considering the economic problems Russia is facing due to the price drop in oil and due to the sanctions imposed on it after the illegal annexation of Crimea.

In view of the upcoming parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova in 2018, but also in view of the hundredth celebration of the independence of the modern and Greater Romania – geopolitics will once more be at the forefront. This time officially and irrepressibly.

New Strategy Center (NSC) is a Romanian think tank, non-governmental organization, designed to provide a debating framework on topics of major interest for Romania. NSC submits relevant topics both in terms of threats to national security, and opportunities for economic development of the country to the general consideration and debate. The Balkans and the Black Sea are the main points of interest for NSC, a large and complementary area with a significant impact on Romanian security. The defense, the connection between the military modernization and industrial development, the energy security, the technological development, the challenges of the hybrid threats, the public diplomacy and the cyber security are some of other issues on which NSC is focused on.

The Rome-based **Centre for International Studies (Ce.S.I. - Centro Studi Internazionali)** was founded by Prof Andrea Margelletti in 2004. Since then, Prof Margelletti has been the Chairman of the Institute.

The research activity of the Institute is based on the Open Source Intelligence methodology (OSINT) and is focused on topics such as security, defense, terrorism, counter-terrorism and intelligence. The areas specifically covered by the Institute include Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa, wide Middle East, Balkans, ex-Soviet space and Asia. The Institute works not only with European private clients, but also with Italian institutional counterparts, such as the House of Representatives, the Senate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the single Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies.

This assessment was coordinated by Mr. Dan Dungaciu, member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center, and Mr. Marco Di Liddo, analyst of Centro Studi Internazionali.



www.newstrategycenter.ro