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A GEOPOLITICAL STAKE: REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE EURASIAN UNION

Mircea-Cristian Ghenghea*

Abstract: *Following the initialling of the Vilnius Agreement from 28-29 November 2013, the Republic of Moldova seemed to have entered the path towards the European integration. The great failure for the Brussels' leaders was, by far, the Ukraine's refuse to sign the Association Agreement, a decision placed on the account of Moscow's influence and which proved once more the fact that the relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation have grown increasingly confrontational over the Eastern Partnership's countries. In the context of the unrests in Kiev at the beginning of 2014 and subsequently of the pro-Russian movements in the South and East of the Ukrainian state, the Republic of Moldova has acquired a special significance within the geopolitical situation of the region, being regarded as an outpost of what certain analysts already consider to be the "New Cold War".*

Keywords: Republic of Moldova; geopolitics; European Union; Eurasian Union.

JEL Classification: F50; F53; F54.

INTRODUCTION

27 November 2013 was a highly significant date for two of the Eastern Partnership's members, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. On that day, in Vilnius, Lithuania, the representatives of the two states initialized the Vilnius Agreement, coming one step closer to the European Union. The great failure of the summit was Ukraine, the most important and advanced member of the Eastern Partnership, which was supposed to sign the Association Agreement but for reasons widely known did not. The process of re-defining the European Union's Eastern neighbourhood had to come to a hold as the unfortunate events in Ukraine and the Russian Federation's involvement led the world to the edge of a conflict which might lead to a general destabilization of the situation within the South-East of Europe.

1. FOLLOWING THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA – “LOST IN GEOPOLITICAL GAMES”

At the beginning of 2014, an article signed by a freelance writer in Chişinău surprised the reality from this small state at the border of the European Union – “lost in geopolitical games”

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(Corlăţeanu, 2014). Less visible at the end of 2013, when the Ukrainian crisis had arisen, the strategic importance of the Republic of Moldova rapidly increased in the context of the Russian annexation of Crimea and the aggressive anti-Ukrainian attitude manifested by Moscow. A number of articles and analysis regarding the special position of the small former Soviet republic have already been issued and the situation seems to get even worse as the Russian Federation is not willing to step back in order to give up its influence within the territories that it once mastered. Under these circumstances the Transnistrian file acquired a new page as the leaders of the so-called Transnistrian Republic have already solicited the inclusion in Russia. The Crimean episode became the precedent they needed to invoke and the narrow strip of land became “the frontline in East-West struggle” as depicted in an article published in “Financial Times” (Oliver, 2014).

A brief survey of the major interests in the region shows the followings:

- the European Union needs the Republic of Moldova to firmly confirm its political option in order to prove not only that the Eastern Partnership was not a complete failure, but also to acquire a safe and certain partner in this region.
- the United States of America are concerned with protecting their interests in South-Eastern Europe where they have deployed elements of the anti-missile shield, an action which has been permanently contested by Russia.
- the Russian Federation has a particular interest in keeping the Republic of Moldova under its influence as it strives to maintain its economic and political presence in order to secure the Eastern part of this state – Transnistria – a territory where Moscow constantly refused to withdraw its military forces from. In addition to this, President Vladimir Putin did not give up his master plan of creating the Eurasian Union and Ukraine was supposed to play a certain part in this strategy.

2. THE WEST, THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND THE “NEW APPEASEMENT” POLICY

“History repeats itself” – this is one leitmotiv that seems to be in many people’s minds when thinking about the Ukrainian crisis and the way in which Vladimir Putin acts and endangers the international relations’ system. Yet history tends to repeat itself only when people learned nothing from previous experiences that put to test their will and capacity of response or the following generations simply forget or ignore the teachings of the past.

Despite critics and contradictions, a number of analysts, specialists in international relations and politicians considered that Vladimir Putin’s actions surprisingly resemble Hitler’s during the

'30s, when the West's capacity of defence and reaction was also put to test but failed to prove itself. Yet this aspect is more than worrying when taking into account not only the proper annexation of Crimea or the possibility of invading the East and South of Ukraine, but the fact that the Russian Federation shows complete disrespect regarding international treaties and obligations assumed by mutual consent. Combining these elements and the rather flexible and divided attitude of the Western European powers one might even consider that we are dealing here with a new kind of appeasement, in certain manners similar to the conciliator attitude that Hitler used in order to achieve his purposes at the end of '30s. Naturally, the general conditions and the international elements are now largely different, we have other major actors within the field of international relations and the Great Powers' interests are considered mainly from a global perspective. However, the issue stands as it might lead to a reconfiguration of international spheres of influence and the balance of power might shift again.

The above mentioned major actors (the United States of America, the European Union, the Russian Federation) – to which one must necessarily add China – are likely to confront the necessity of redefining the coordinates they use for revealing their diplomatic and geopolitical games. One might also assist to a very interesting change of economic background in the eventuality of emerging the Eurasian Union – this will truly be a test especially for the economic capacity of the European Union, even if only considering the possibility that Russia will change its major economic targets and will focus primarily on the Asian connections with China and other states.

Another conclusion can also be drawn from the recent events and has already been mentioned under various forms in a number of articles and analysis: “The premise of an international order defined by the West and shared by the rest has been shown to be faulty” (Janning, 2014). Under these terms entities like the Russian Federation, China, and quite likely certain emergent powers would definitely challenge the American and Western geopolitical supremacy.

One of the questions that seem to preoccupy the thoughts of many analysts and Western politicians is “how far is Vladimir Putin willing to go?”, as it is more than clear that the Ukrainian crisis is at the same time a test and a possibility to prove that Russia has recovered after the Cold War and is trying to play again an important role in the international arena. Yet, from Europe's perspective, the main question should be “how far is the European Union willing to let this situation go?”. It is true, however, that the instruments preferred and promoted by the leaders in Brussels – dialogue and negotiations – had no effect so far. Besides, let us not forget that the Eurasian Union projected by Vladimir Putin can and should be seen also as a strong reaction against the continuous

extending European Union and against the military force of the Occident, NATO, which was permanently regarded in Moscow as an alliance directed specifically against Russia (Janning, 2014).

In our opinion, it is more than a question of territorial gains for the Russian Federation within the space of the former Soviet Union. The main issue is that Vladimir Putin and a large part of the Russian political elites wish to retake the position held by Moscow before the collapse in 1991 and the unfortunate events in Ukraine represent only a phase of this attempt.

3. THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION – A VITAL PROJECT FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND THE POLITICAL ELITES IN CHIȘINĂU

Within the current geopolitical and economic background, the Republic of Moldova is but one of the strategic points of the European continent. Due to the fact that its Eastern part – Transnistria – represents a key-point for the Russian influence in the region, the Republic of Moldova unwittingly became a sort of “no man’s land”, a political entity which seems to have already chosen the direction it should follow: West. Nevertheless, things are not so simple.

Were we to use a word game, the Republic of Moldova is rather doomed to deal only with Unions: escaped from the former Soviet Union, it hopes and prepares to become a part of the European Union, despite the fact that a number of its citizens would prefer to be members of the Customs Union (the future Eurasian Union). Following the events in April 2009, when the communist leadership was removed, the government in Chișinău repeatedly proved its desire of European integration as this is the only possible way not only for completely breaking up with the Soviet past, but also for the very existence of the state. As a consequence, there were certain periods when a very aggressive European discourse was promoted in order to emphasize this aspect, but also to avoid the frontal approach of other very sensitive matters like the identity of the Republic of Moldova’s citizens or the possibility of territorial disintegration if the Transnistrian side of the state would actually decide that and would be backed by Russia.

The efforts of the leaders in Chișinău are continuously contested by the former holders of the power, the communists and their supporters. It is not a secret that the Russian propaganda is very strong in the Republic of Moldova despite the fact that the idea of European integration has already become a common place for the public opinion. Russian TV channels and Russian newspapers and magazines practically dominate the media background within the former Soviet republic. Although the official language is Romanian or, as most politicians in Chișinău like to say, Moldavian, and

there is also an official decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova regarding this aspect in December 2013, the Russian language continues to play an important role in many citizens' everyday life. Nevertheless one must not forget the fact that the communist inheritance is still very strong especially when thinking about the mentality of the population, a fact which clearly represents an obstacle when we try to understand certain features of the Moldavian political stage.

During the last two years, as the efforts and preoccupations of the government for acquiring a real perspective of European integration have increasingly grown, the Communists' Party and their allies promoted their own goals trying to counterbalance the pro-European campaign. One of the subjects of this truly anti-European integration offensive refers to the benefits that would result for the Republic of Moldova if the state became a part of the Customs Union (the future Eurasian Union). Especially after the summit in Vilnius the articles and various manifestations against the European integration and also against the Romanian identity became even more numerous than before. For instance, in spite of its alleged adversity towards the Communists' Party, the Socialists' Party in Moldova conducts a vigorous press campaign against the European idea and in favour of the Customs Union. Slogans like *За таможенный союз!* (For the Customs Union!), *Молдаване – не румыны!* (Moldavians – not Romanians!), or *Люблю Молдову* (I love Moldova) can be frequently met in most issues of the periodical entitled "The Socialists".

All international observers and analysts agreed that in the Republic of Moldova the division between the citizens wishing closer ties with the Russian Federation and those choosing the European way is really sharp. Many of the first are easy to manipulate and indoctrinate, as their way of thinking was practically deformed during the long Soviet period. This twisted way of seeing things is just one of the features that characterize the true wicked and poisoned communist inheritance which can be met within the Republic of Moldova.

The whole of the aspects presented here combined with the fact that the country will face parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2014 which could still bring an unwanted victory for the Communists' Party contribute to the underlining of a rather complex and delicate situation which fully necessitates the attention of the decisional factors of the European Union. It is also quite clear that a communist-led Republic of Moldova might turn sooner or later from an Association Agreement with the European Union to a possible membership in the Customs Union – the future Eurasian Union (Boonstra and Shapovalova, 2014, p. 41).

4. THE OTHER WAY – THE UNION WITH ROMANIA

Following the initialling of the Vilnius Agreement from November 2013 by the Moldavian Prime Minister Iurie Leancă, the Romanian President Traian Băsescu brought to public discussion the idea of a project regarding the unification of the two states, Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The reactions and statements of the political leaders in Chişinău are widely known, practically denying any intention of union with Romania and emphasizing the fact that there is a Moldavian identity and a Moldavian nation. The situation was not new at all. After the events in April 2009, when plans and ideas of unification had again begun to flourish, the attitude of the Moldavian politicians was also quite clear in this regard, a new version of the so-called “Moldovenist doctrine” coming to life step-by-step. Those who are not familiarized with the historical and political background in the Republic of Moldova might consider rather contradictory and more than surprising the fact that the democratic forces leading nowadays the neighbouring state have fully assumed and promoted a Soviet inspired thesis previously sustained by their political opponents, the communists and their allies. Yet the contradiction is only apparent. Such an attitude was and will probably be a permanent feature of the Moldavian diplomacy as long as the identity project named *Republic of Moldova* will stand and as long as in Chişinău will exist a political elite unwilling to give up its prerogatives and privileges in order to integrate in another state – Romania – where it will not have any guaranties for maintaining the positions it has now. Besides, one must note that this issue of the more or less formally rejection of Romania has become a constant within the leading circles in Chişinău regardless of their political colour. It would be interesting to see how these leading circles would react if the so-called Moldavian statality was really endangered.

According to one of the most authorized Romanian analysts of these issues, namely Dan Dungaciu, former councillor of the Moldavian ex-president Mihai Ghimpu, one can talk about a true syndrome of the political elites in the Republic of Moldova, metaphorically named *the “too much Romania” syndrome* (Dungaciu, 2013). The idea was developed in an article published in the summer of 2013. The author did not state any conclusions, he simply acknowledged the syndrome in question which is closely connected with the so-called “European Moldovenism”, having some very interesting implications for the identity project *Republic of Moldova*.

After the euphoria of initialling the Vilnius Agreement, many have noticed with dissatisfaction and concern that the formulations and expressions chosen for the final statement in Vilnius were very prudent and moderate as there was no reference to two issues of major interest

for the government in Chişinău: the frozen conflicts (with immediate reference to Transnistria) and Article 49 of the European Union's Treaty which provides the clear possibility of accession. Thus, in the eventuality of a more difficult European way both for internal and external reasons (such as the need to implement certain reforms, the connection to the European Union's standards, and various pressures and interferences from the East), it would be again interesting to see to what extent the identity project and the European one will hold – the two major Moldavian projects promoted by the democratic politicians in Chişinău. The real endangering of one of these two projects could automatically lead to endangering the other, having as a final result the questioning of the perspectives of the state Republic of Moldova.

CONCLUSIONS

The international context at the beginning of 2014 and the clashes of the Great Powers' interests in South-Eastern Europe and particularly in Ukraine do not contribute in any way to the shaping of a calm and peaceful climate within the former Soviet entity Republic of Moldova. Both at the level of political stage and the population, the state continues to be divided between the two options – West (European Union) and East (Customs Union and implicitly the Russian Federation). A complex of internal and external factors also plays an important role when discussing the hesitations and the duplicitous attitude which sometimes characterized the actions of the politicians in Chişinău within the last five years. Nevertheless, nobody can deny that the political forces that got the power after April 2009 have done much in order to come as close as possible to the European Union and try to take the Republic of Moldova out of the so-called “grey zone” in which the state finds itself because of the situations in Transnistria and Găgăuzia and because of the pressures exerted by the Russia (Boonstra and Shapovalova, 2014, p. 44). Yet, the closest date mentioned for the desired integration in the European Union is year 2019. As an Eastern neighbour of the European Union and a former Soviet republic, Moldova has only a few options. One of the moments that will show which way its citizens decide to go is represented by the elections in the autumn of 2014. The context might complicate depending on the situation in Ukraine and the attitude of the Russian Federation. Things might get even worse if thinking at the possibility of the direct access of Moscow in the Transnistrian region or in the Southern part of Ukraine. However, the unwanted case of the dismemberment of Ukraine and the Russian presence will put the Republic of Moldova, the European Union and Romania in a very delicate dilemma: if Europe does not want to lose Moldova, and if the Moldavian citizens truly desire to become members of the European

Union and to completely break up with the Soviet past, this might lead to a way which seems to be at the same time the fastest but also the most problematic, because of the international entanglements and discontents – the unification with Romania.

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