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The Time of the Oligarch. Relations Between Romania and the Republic of Moldova (2009-2018)¹

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Abstract

This article aims to present the evolution of relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova over the last decade, in the period between “the Twitter revolution” and the summer of 2018, the moment when there was a dramatic cooling of relations between the European Union, the United States, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, on the one hand, and Moldova on the other. In this article we also analyze the way in which Romania has reacted to Moldova's side skids and try to make sense of the extent to which the government in Bucharest may be considered responsible for the transformation of Moldova from the success story of the Eastern Partnership into a captive state, as it is considered today.

Keywords: foreign policy, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Plahotniuc.

Introduction

Between 2009 and 2013, the Republic of Moldova was perhaps one of the most important projects of Romania's foreign policy, with the aim of modernizing the neighboring state and bringing it closer to the European Union (EU). Initially this was seen with suspicion and mistrust, based on the assertion that the real aim was to restore the Greater Romania of the interwar period, when the territory of the former Soviet republic annexed by Stalin in 1940 was a part of the Kingdom of Romania. However, Bucharest managed to convince its partners that it can act in a constructive manner. A favorable international context and a reforming and pro-European government in Chișinău made the Republic of Moldova a success story of the Eastern Partnership, which was launched in May 2009 at the EU summit in

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¹ This article is an extended version of our article published in Romanian, “Prizonierii lui Plahotniuc. Relațiile dintre România și Republica Moldova”, *Contributors*, 3 August 2018, <http://www.contributors.ro/administratie/prizonierii-lui-plahotniuc-relatiile-dintre-romania-si-republica-moldova/>.

Prague. Moldova – in part thanks to Romania – has become a new favorite, but also consolation, for the West, disappointed with the evolution of the “orange revolution” in Kiev, and afflicted by “Ukraine fatigue”.

Before 2009 as well, but especially after the pro-Europeans came to power in Chișinău, Romania promoted in the West, more or less efficiently, more or less intelligently, the Moldova case. At the same time, the situation in Moldova has degraded dramatically and Romania continued to deliver narratives about reforms and democratization, stories that were accepted for a while, with no critical spirit, by the other governments. When it became evident that the political, economic and social situations are deeply degraded, and that the stories delivered by Romanian diplomacy had no real basis, a closer monitoring and conditioning of financial help and loans started.

The invalidation of the elections for the mayor of Chișinău, won on the 3rd of June 2018 by Andrei Năstase, one of the leaders of the anti-oligarchic and pro-European opposition, was a turning moment in the relations between European institutions and the Republic of Moldova. The European Parliament and the European Commission, the European External Action Service, have reacted in unison, not just by criticizing Chișinău, but also suspending loan payments. The only one that didn't react was Romania, who, with this gesture, suggests that it continues to support the oligarchic regime installed in the Republic of Moldova.

This article analyzes the evolution of the relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova over the last decade (2009-2018), trying to decipher the underpinnings of the change in the paradigm of Romanian diplomacy along this period. We also examine the way in which Romania has reacted to Moldova's side skids and try to make sense of the extent to which the government in Bucharest may be considered responsible for the transformation of Moldova from the success story of the Eastern Partnership into a captive state, as it is considered today². This article provides an initial narrative regarding the relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova in the period between “the Twitter revolution” and the summer of 2018, the moment when there was a dramatic cooling of relations between the EU, the United States (US), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, on the one hand, and Moldova on the other.

The Theoretical Framework And The Context Of The Relationship

In what concerns the theoretical framework of the study, the first important element concerns the European Union as a “normative power”. I

² The first important foreign dignitary who formulated this conclusion was Thorbjørn Jagland, General Secretary of the Council of Europe, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/11/opinion/bring-moldova-back-from-the-brink.html>. (Accessed 15 July 2018).

argue the normative action of the EU, joined by Romania in 2007, failed by consolidating in the Republic of Moldova a “patronalist” type of regime, as defined by Henry Hale³. The second consideration refers to the approach taken by the Bucharest government in its bilateral relation with Chişinău, within the limits of a hybrid theoretical construction in regard to regional security, from a realistic perspective combined with a historicist perspective, which is a guiding line in the Romanian approach of the last few decades. We consider that the “normative” approach has dominated the Romanian institutions’ tactic in the period between the autumn of 2009 and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014. This includes the initialing of the Association Agreement and the Free Trade Association between the EU and Moldova at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership in November 2013. A second stage started dramatically in the spring of 2014, with the destabilization of the south and east of Ukraine, in what was called once Novorossyia, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula during the spring and summer of 2014, continuing to this day.

The period between the autumn of 2009 and the summer of 2018 started with the Treaty of Lisbon of December 2009, which brought several important changes to the EU foreign action: the position of High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy was created, with the foundation being laid for the European External Action Service.

The EU acts in the international arena, in its southern and eastern vicinity, as a normative power⁴. This paradigm allows us to analyze the Eastern Partnership as part of external normative action by which the EU promotes values in relation to third parties. From this perspective, the EU is, first and foremost, “a changer of norms” in its eastern and southern vicinity.

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) deals with no less than sixteen countries. In the South it deals with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, and Lebanon. In the East it deals with Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus. In the first years of implementation, the ENP proved to be far from the success it was expected to be. The main reason was the difference between the East and the South, regions of different sizes and with dissimilar problems. The first attempt to adjust the approach came from Germany, which launched the ENP Plus, a new concept, which Berlin tried to promote during its presidency.

³ Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics. Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 372-420. The concept of “patronage” is particularly useful in analyzing the evolution of politics in Moldova. Professor Hale, however, goes no further than 2012.

⁴ Ian Manners, “As You Like It: European Union Normative Power in the European Neighbourhood Policy”, in Richard Whitman and Stefan Wolff (eds.) *The European Neighbourhood Policy Since 2003. Much Ado about Nothing?* Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2009, pp. 29-50.

In April 2007, during the German presidency, the European Commission gave a green light to a regional project, The Black Sea Synergy⁵, addressed to Romania and Bulgaria (EU member states), to Turkey (a EU candidate state), to Russia (a EU strategic partner), and to other five ex-Soviet states: Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. On the 14th of February 2008, at a special conference organized in Kiev by the EU, attended by foreign ministers from the Black Sea Basin, they launched the Black Sea Synergy, the first project for regional coagulation as part of the ENP.⁶ It was for the first time when in the eastern vicinity a multilateral framework was built to allow cooperation with Russia, still seen as an important strategic partner for the EU, and to create a mechanism of cooperation with Turkey. Black Sea Synergy was the first major project after the creation of the multilateral frameworks forming the basis of the neighborhood policy⁷.

Once ten Central European countries in Central and Eastern Europe joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, the border of the West practically moved to the old border of the Soviet Union. After this fifth historic expansion, the EU started to rethink the relationship it had with its neighbors. The tense regional context in Eastern Europe⁸ produced by the five-days war, between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, as well as the gas crises between Russia and Ukraine, rushed the crystallization of a new project⁹. With Poland and Sweden at the helm, through their foreign ministers, Radek Sikorski and Card Bild, the new project was entitled the Eastern Partnership (EaP), aimed at former Soviet republics, three in Eastern Europe, Belarus, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and three in Southern Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan. The Eastern Partnership was launched at the EU summit in Prague (7 May 2009), in a joint statement¹⁰. The initiative did not offer the former Soviet republics the

⁵ “Black Sea Synergy: Approaches for a deeper cooperation”, November 2007, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_12344-1522-2-30.pdf?071120084243. (Accessed 18 July 2018).

⁶ “Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the countries of the European Union and of the wider Black Sea area”, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/blacksea/doc/joint_statement_blacksea_en.pdf. (Accessed 18 June 2018).

⁷ Elena Korosteleva, *The European Union and its Eastern Neighbours. Towards a more ambitious partnership?*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012, pp. 20-38; Georgiana Martinezgarnelo y Calvo, “The Eastern Partnership as an expression of the European Neighbourhood Policy: reinforcing the European normative power with the Eastern partners”, in *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, volume 5, issue 1, June 2014, pp. 132-133.

⁸ Vasile Rotaru, “Russia’s ‘Contribution’ to the Inception of the Eastern Partnership”, in *Studia politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, col. XIV, no. 2/2014, pp. 236-240.

⁹ Jeanne Park, “The European Union’s Eastern Partnership”, March 14 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/background/european-unions-eastern-partnership>. (Accessed 18 June 2018). The establishment of the Eastern Partnership “to reaffirm the EU’s commitment to the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus following the August 2009 Russia-Georgia war and the January 2009 Russia-Ukraine gas dispute”.

¹⁰ “The Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit Prague, 7 May 2009”, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/107589.pdf.

perspective of joining the EU, which reduced the EaP's capacity to attract and mobilize. The benefits of being a part of the EaP should not be underestimated, however. Six countries with a population of 75 million people, using a free trade zone, can access a market of 500 million consumers, the biggest and richest in the world.

Eastern expansion of the Euro-Atlantic institutions troubled and angered Russia. NATO's expansion to the East was perceived as a direct threat, something uttered clearly by President Vladimir Putin, in April 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest. The assault on Georgia, recognizing the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was a response to Ukraine and Georgia's attempt to join NATO. EaP could not dispel Russia's fear that the EU wants to keep marching East, even in absence of the military dimension of NATO.

A decisive fact in the EaP's destiny was the evolution of the situation in Ukraine. Since independence and up to 2014, Ukraine has oscillated between the West and Russia, exploiting opportunities wherever it could¹¹. In the autumn of 2013, the Vilnius Eastern Partnership summit was supposed to be held. Ready for endorsement were the association agreements between the EU and three EaP states. The president Viktor Yanukovich announced in 2013 that Kiev would comply with requirements from Brussels, preparing to sign the agreement. At that point, Putin put pressure on Yanukovich and threatened Ukraine with unilateral economic sanctions and with cutting off gas deliveries. In exchange for getting closer to Russia, giving up the Vilnius agreement with the EU, and staying within Russia's sphere of influence, Moscow promised a 16 billion USD loan, and 33% discount on imported gas. In a not so far future, Ukraine was supposed to join the Eurasian Economic Union¹². Brussels did not correctly assess Russia's reaction to Ukraine joining the EaP, and responded to Moscow's move with a conciliatory policy. "The EU cast the partnership as a bureaucratic and economic project, without sufficiently mapping out the politics to prepare for certain contingencies"¹³ which was to become evident only after Crimea was occupied.

The crisis in Ukraine was supposed to force a serious analysis of the results, and a relaunch of the EaP. Which did not occur. Some sector policies were adjusted on the fly, and the ambitions of the project were reduced¹⁴.

(Accessed 17 June 2018). At point 2: "The main goal of the Eastern Partnership is to create the necessary conditions to accelerate political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries."

¹¹ Stephen White, Ian McAllister and Valentina Feklyunina, "Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West?", *The British Journal of politics and International relations*, vol. XII, 2010, pp. 347-362.

¹² Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis. What it means for the West*, Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 63-65.

¹³ Jeanne Park, "The European Union's Eastern Partnership". (Accessed 18 June 2018).

¹⁴ JOINT STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT, "Eastern Partnership - 20 Deliverables for 2020 Focusing on key priorities and tangible results", https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eap_20_deliverables_for_2020.pdf. (Accessed 19 June 2018).

Emphasis was moved on economic development and diversification, access to infrastructure and business financing, and on creating jobs. The consolidation of institutions and good governance remained a priority of the EU in the EaP countries, and the functioning of anti-corruption mechanisms was believed to be crucial for development. Increasing the quality of the justice system, increasing transparency by expanding citizen participation in decision-making, are admirable aims, but have too little traction at grassroots level¹⁵.

Analysts evaluate the results yielded by the EaP very differently, and the recommendations are also very diverse¹⁶. Some are limited to very technical evaluations, almost incomprehensible, but even the harshest critics admit that progress has been made in countries like the Republic of Moldova and Georgia¹⁷.

This is the general framework for the evolution of the Republic of Moldova in the last decade. None of the advantages it had, counted enough to make a difference for Moldova. On the contrary, in its case the transition seemed to be even more difficult than in the other former Soviet republics. The Baltic countries, which went into the USSR in 1940, along with Moldova, have weathered transition successfully, and have joined NATO and the EU over a decade and a half ago¹⁸.

An Overview Of The Bilateral Relationship Between Romania And Moldova

The bilateral relationship between Romania and the Republic of Moldova has worked in the last decade based on two paradigms. The tipping point was the spring of 2014, the period between the moment Russia annexed Crimea, followed by the signing in Brussels of the Association Agreement and The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA). The first period, 2009-2014, was dominated by a “normative” approach, in which Romanian diplomacy contributed significantly to the transfer of community *acquis* from the EU to Chișinău. A second stage (2014-2018), dominated by a realistic

¹⁵ “2017 Eastern Partnership Summit: Stronger together”, Brussels, 24 November 2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4845_en.htm. (Accessed 18 June 2018).

¹⁶ Hans Martin Sieg, “Between Geopolitics and Transformation: Challenges and Perspectives for the Eastern Partnership”, in *DGAP analyse*, no. 10/November 2016, 16 pp.; “European Eastern Partnership: Recommendations for a Refined Approach. From Brussels Forum to the Riga Conference”, 28 pp.

¹⁷ Jeanne Park, “The European Union’s Eastern Partnership”. (Accessed 18 June 2018).

¹⁸ Petru Negură, “The Republic of Moldova’s Transition. Between a Failed Communism and an Un-Commenced Capitalism?”, in *Studia politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol.XVI, no. 4, 2016, pp. 557-567; Anastasia Iarvoi, Jenifer Albert, Ludovica Smargiassi, “Republic of Moldova: Transition from communism to democracy”, *New Eastern Europe*, 16.05.2018, <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/05/16/republic-moldova-transition-communism-democracy/>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

paradigm, but which, in fact, has a mixed air, with many historicist and “patronalist” elements, which makes it difficult to define. As security and defense elements dominate Romania's regional policy paradigm, after the annexation of Crimea, the realistic framework may be considered dominant.

In his doctoral thesis, Dorin Cimpoeșu analyzed the two decades between 1989, the year of national rebirth in the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, manifested as the struggle to replace the Cyrillic alphabet and the imposition of the Romanian language, in the context of Gorbachev's *Glasnost*, and the year 2009, the end of the Voronin administration. However, the Moldovan author, worked with all the clichés of Romanian historiography. His main critique concerning Romania was that it doesn't have a national strategy that is “unitary, coherent and pragmatic, on medium and long term, regarding the Republic of Moldova”¹⁹. However, “Bessarabia” remains Romania's number one priority in foreign policy having as “strategic objectives the economic integration and the consolidation of the common cultural and spiritual space”²⁰. Additionally, another important problem Romania confronts, is it does not have enough financial resources to achieve economic, cultural, and spiritual integration with Moldova. The public funding is too meager for this project, believed Cimpoeșu, considering that this has more of a symbolic character, and could not cover the costs of large-scale projects²¹. In spite of all this, Bucharest's starting point is the historical right over the territory over the Prut and the Dnestr, from the commonality of kin, language, history, culture, that ties together the two “Romanian states”²².

There are more problems, in addition to the lack of money. The first is the poor knowledge of Moldovan realities, and the profoundly emotional approach of the bilateral relation, which makes the elites in Bucharest, and even in Romanian society, repeat a number of errors made in the interwar period. Among them are the excessive politicization of the “Bessarabia problem”, and “exporting partisan ideology”²³, considering that the political parties are interested in forming relations with Moldovan groups with the same orientation²⁴. Other errors identified by Cimpoeșu in Romania's actions are: neglecting the complex psychology of a population which believes it has a “Moldovan” identity, a result of Soviet propaganda and Russification; treating the issue of “Bessarabia” as an electoral weapon; the lack of a complex and correct interpretation of the interests of Russia and Ukraine. In addition, the

¹⁹ Dorin Cimpoeșu, *Republica Moldova între România și Rusia 1989-2009*, Casa Limbii Române Nichita Stănescu, Chișinău, 2010, p. 46.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 48.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

author admits that Chișinău does not manifest either a great interest for achieving “the unity of Romanian spirituality” since Moldovan statehood is supported by a local political class, which has ambitions of affirmation, and autonomy. All this in a context in which the long transition from Ceausescu to the EU and NATO integration prevented Romania from being attractive or become a model for the great mass of Moldovan citizens²⁵. These shortcomings identified by Cimpoeșu are supposed to explain the success that Russia had in Moldova, together with the frozen conflict in Transdnestr as a main tool for blackmail used by Russia against the Republic of Moldova. Moscow has additional instruments such as Chișinău’s dependency on Russian energy resources, and on the Russian market for Moldovan agricultural foodstuffs and wines. We could add to that a strong network of Moscow loyalists through which Russia influences Moldovan politics, economy, and society²⁶.

The “Twitter Revolution” (2009) As A Reset Moment

Relations between Romania and the Republic of Moldova during the two terms in office held by Vladimir Voronin (2001-2009), the leader of the Party of Communists in the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) were dominated by tensions, which reached a climax when the two countries mutually expelled ambassadors in the spring of 2009, in the context of the violent protests on April the 7th. In the summer of 2009, after the Moldovan communists failed in their attempt to elect a speaker of Parliament, relations between Bucharest and Chișinău entered a new stage. As the domestic political crisis deepened in Chișinău, relations with Bucharest relaxed²⁷.

The result of the snap elections provided the opportunity to form a pro-European coalition: the Alliance for European Integration (AEI), around the Liberal Democratic Party of Moldova (LDPM), led by PM Vlad Filat. The coalition also included the Liberal Party (LP), led by Mihail Ghimpu, whose nephew, Dorin Chirtoacă, was mayor of Chișinău, elected in 2007. Since 2009, the LP had the votes of the unionist electorate, which he had taken over from Iurie Roșca²⁸, leader of the Christian Democratic Popular Party, compromised by its part in the coalition led by the PCRM. For many years a favorite of the Romanian Foreign Ministry, the Romanian Cultural Institute, and the Foreign

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 50-51.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 52-54.

²⁷ “Relații politice”, <http://Chișinău.mae.ro/node/167> (The Romanian Embassy in Chișinău's website). (Accessed 14 July 2018).

²⁸ “Iurie Roșca, slujbaş FSB al Moscovei la Chișinău. Nume de cod ‘Liderul’”, *România Breaking News*, 6 august 2014, <https://romaniabreakingnews.ro/iurie-rosca-slujbas-fsb-al-moscovei-la-chisinau-video/>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

Intelligence Service, Roșca now coordinates the Russian propaganda website sputnik.md, promoting in Romania, through book launches²⁹ and translations, Aleksandr Dugin, one of the major ideologues of the Eurasian current, a supporter of the idea that Russia must oppose by any means Western powers and their values.

In the autumn of 2009, the AEI was joined by the Democratic Party of Moldova (DPM), led by Dumitru Diacov, but financed and controlled by a mysterious character, Vladimir Plahotniuc³⁰. The fourth party in the coalition was the Our Moldova Alliance, headed by Serafim Urechean. Only two of the four parties had solid relations with the political world in Bucharest, the DPM, a member of the Socialist International, and Ghimpu's Liberal Party, a member of the ALDE European political family, alongside the Romanian National Liberal Party, led by former PM Calin Popescu-Tariceanu, but close to unionist political groups, and by some figures associated with the president of Romania, Traian Băsescu.

At that point, Romania had a chance to reset its relationship with the Republic of Moldova. The foreign context was favorable. The launch of the Eastern Partnership at the EU summit in Prague of May 2009 offered the European institutional framework through which Moldova could reinvent itself. In Bucharest, the second half of 2009 was marked by a political crisis, which put the issue of Moldova lower on the public agenda in Romania.

The beginning of the year 2009 meant the end of the trial in the Hague between Romania and Ukraine for dividing the continental shelf³¹. The aggressive way in which the ruling of the International Court of Justice was presented to the Romanian public, which was being compared to the creation of Greater Romania in 1918, caused many to consider it as a sort of historical vengeance against the East. The air was filled with the aggression of a frustrated nation, feeding a noisy nationalism, with little compatibility with the Euro-Atlantic club that Romania had just joined. This episode, however, ended fairly quickly, but was taken note of by foreign observers and embassies. Thus, in a few months, when the government in Bucharest used the context of the “Twitter revolution” in Chișinău to change the paradigm of the bilateral Romania-Moldova relationship, was seen with suspicion. The phrase that was obsessively

²⁹ Răzvan Filip, “Am fost la întâlnirea fanilor lui Putin din România și am aflat că gayii o să distrugă omenirea. Ideologul oficial al Kremlinului a venit la București și și-a lansat o carte într-o sală a Primăriei Capitalei, înconjurat de foști securiști și PRM-iști”, *Vice*, 6 aprilie 2017, <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/4xe99g/am-fost-la-intalnirea-fanilor-lui-putin-din-romania>. (Accessed 18 July 2018).

³⁰ Maria Levchenko, “Vlad Plahotniuc: Moldova’s man in the shadows”, 25 February 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/maria-levchenko/vlad-plahotniuc-moldova-s-man-in-shadows>. (Accessed 15 May 2018).

³¹ For details and backstage, see Bogdan Aureescu, *Avanscena și culisele procesului de la Haga. Memoriile unui tânăr diplomat*, Monitorul oficial, București, 2009.

repeated was that Romania had a “hidden agenda” in its relationship with Moldova³².

Therefore, in 2009 Bucharest was forced somewhat to change its approach to its bilateral relationship with Chișinău, if it wanted to avoid colliding with Western governments. Also, foreign ministers Cristian Diaconescu (January – September 2009), then Teodor Baconschi (December 2009 – January 2012) did not want to stay prisoner to obsolete approaches, the kind that caused image problems for Romania. Governing platforms, starting with the one of 2009, also reflected this change in approach³³.

Energy and education are mentioned as priority areas for collaboration. The Eastern Partnership, whose launch was seen with jealousy in Bucharest, because it was overshadowing the Black Sea Synergy promoted by Romania, was reevaluated and all of a sudden there was talk of taking advantage of it. Therefore, the document contains a lot of European Union, the Eastern Partnership, and less nationalist rhetoric. It is an important change, which occurred gradually after Romania joined the EU, on the 1st of January 2007.

The achievements in the bilateral relationship between 2009 and 2012, during the Boc and Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu governments, went beyond expectations. Practically, the list of priorities sketched by Bucharest in the summer of 2009 by Minister Diaconescu, was largely carried out: the strategic partnership, the small border traffic agreement, the opening of two more Romanian consulates, in Balti and Cahul, the inauguration of the “Mihai Eminescu” Romanian Cultural Institute, down to the last joint government session in Iași, co-presided over by Ungureanu, a few days before his government was dismissed by censure motion (May 7, 2012).

After 2012, the government of the Social Liberal Union (SLU), made up of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Liberal Party (NLP) led by Victor Ponta, continued and developed the old projects dating back to the term held by Teodor Baconschi at the Foreign Ministry (December 2009-January 2012), adding a few new ones. The 2013-2016 governing platform is thicker, but the issue of the Republic of Moldova is given a lot of attention³⁴. The relationship with the Republic of Moldova is mentioned in the document right after the strategic partnership with the US. Emphasis is placed on support for Moldova's European bid, on finalizing negotiations for the Association Agreement with the EU and the DCFTA and liberalizing the visa regime for Moldovan citizens. Details are provided for bilateral energy projects (the Iasi-Ungheni gas pipeline, the above ground electrical lines Fălciu-Gotești and

³² Interview with ambassador Teodor Baconschi, May 2013, Bucharest.

³³ “Programul de guvernare 2009-2012”, <http://www.cdep.ro/pdfs/guv200912/ProgramGuvernare.pdf>. (Accessed 12 July 2018).

³⁴ “Programul de guvernare 2013-2016”, http://gov.ro/fisiere/pagini_fisiere/13-08-02-10-48-52program-de-guvernare-2013-20161.pdf. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

Suceava-Bălți, etc.) It is important to emphasize the fact that the SDP, which held the foreign portfolio through Titus Corlățean (2012-2014) did not revert to the annexionist and revisionist rhetoric³⁵ which it had promoted before, which would have worried Western governments, but continued the line of the Boc government, meaning treating the issue of the Republic of Moldova in a European paradigm.

Between President Traian Băsescu and the government led by Victor Ponta, in their two years of cohabitation (2012-2014), there has been a veritable competition for control of the relationship with the Republic of Moldova, speculated by the Iurie Leancă government. The victory in the presidential elections in the autumn of 2014, by Klaus Iohannis, did not move from the government to the presidency the file of the bilateral relationship, as was to be expected. President Iohannis, with the exception of the February 2015 visit to Chișinău, where he thanked the people who voted for him, manifested no interest towards the Republic of Moldova. The following foreign ministers in the years of cohabitation, Bogdan Aurescu (Ponta government, 2015) and Lazăr Comănescu (Dacian Cioloș government, 2016), played “transition” roles, continuing older projects.

However, it was precisely in these two years, that the Republic of Moldova foundered into a dramatic political crisis, a social and moral crisis that turned it from the “valedictorian” of the EaP into the “problem child”, and the West started to refer to Moldova as a “captive state”.

Between September 2009 and January 2013, when the *Pădurea domnească*³⁶ (“Princely Forest”), scandal erupted, the authorities in Bucharest avoided discriminating between its interlocutors in Bucharest, preferring some

³⁵ This was the fear of several embassies in Bucharest, especially because Corlățean’s appointment at the Minister for Foreign Affairs came after he had been Justice Minister during the time when Băsescu was being impeached, in the summer of 2012. In addition, Corlățean had held in the Năstase government the position of head of the Department of Romanians Abroad, where he made several nationalist statements, noted with concern by foreign diplomats accredited to Bucharest. Conversations with foreign diplomats in Bucharest (August- September 2012).

³⁶ On the 23rd of December, 2012, during a hunt at the Pădurea Domnească science reserve, it seems that General Prosecutor Valeriu Zubco, a close associate of DPM leader Vlad Plahotniuc, allegedly shot fatally a young man. Plahotniuc allegedly tried to cover up the case, afraid to lose an important cog in his power mechanism, the General Prosecutor, a position that went to the DPM as part of the protocol to form the Alliance for European Integration. In January 2013, a huge political scandal erupted, which resulted in Parliament dismissing the General Prosecutor, the dismissal of the deputy speaker of Parliament, Plahotniuc, and the fall of the Vlad Filat government. Valentina Basiul, “Parlamentul: Vânătorii de rang înalt din Pădurea Domnească să fie demiși, la fel și toți cei care au tăinuit producerea crimei”, *Adevărul*, 15.01.2013, <https://adevarul.ro/moldova/politica/vanatoareadin-padurea-domneasca-fostilegala-vanatorii-cei-implicati-intainuirea-decesului-sorin-paciu-incalcat-sir-articole-codulpenal1511e0793344a782118419153/index.html>. (Accessed 12 July 2018).

against others, working openly with all the main parties, LDPM, LP, and the DPM and their leaders, the prime minister (PM) Vlad Filat, Mihai Ghimpu and Marian Lupu (in fact with Vladimir Plahotniuc, the real leader). Even though PM Filat was a member of the European Popular Party (PPE), just as the main party in the governing coalition in Bucharest was, the unionist Ghimpu was seen, not only in Bucharest, but across the world, as the politician that was closest to Traian Băsescu. It was a relationship that was more personal than anything, which did not influence – to Ghimpu's chagrin – the official political line in Bucharest. At their turn, the Moldovan democrats had a solid relationship with the SDP. This political balance between the three components of the AIE stayed in place until the *Pădurea domnească* scandal (January- April 2013). After that, the relative balance between the three parties in the governing coalition broke, to the advantage of the DPM.

How did that happen? Through the agreement to set up AIE 2³⁷, whose annexes were revealed to the public, the DPM took political control of the General Prosecutor's Office and the Center for Combating Economic Crime and Corruption³⁸. In other words, the DPM appointed the leadership of these institutions, the General Prosecutor's Office and the head of the department dedicated to fighting corruption. Another party, the LP for instance, appointed the leadership of no less important institutions, such as the Intelligence and Security Services and the National Bank of Moldova. The same with Filat's party. And, although the annexes of the agreement made it clear that the coalition parties simply cut Moldova into slices for themselves, distributing among themselves the ministries and their subordinated institutions, the political leaders saw this as a normal thing³⁹. In time, the political control over the justice system, the General Prosecutor's Office and anti-corruption, then the courts and courts of appeal, turned Plahotniuc into the most influential businessman and political figure in the Republic of Moldova⁴⁰. He held the most effective weapon to fight against his economic competitors and political

³⁷ AIE 2 was formed after the 2010 parliamentary election by LDPM, DPM and LP. Its majority increased from 53 seats to 59 by 101. The new cabinet was voted in January 2011 led by Vlad Filat, the leader of the LDPM.

³⁸ "Acordul de Constituire al AIE a fost făcut public", *Unimedia*, 18 ianuarie 2011, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/doc-acordul-de-constituire-al-aie-a-fost-facut-public--vezi-documentul-28687.html>. (Accessed 14 July 2018); "Detalii din acordul secret al AIE", *Unimedia*, 16 noiembrie 2011, <https://unimedia.info/stiri/detalii-din-acordul-secret-al-aie-41233.html>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

³⁹ "Ghimpu sparge 'misterul': Nu este nimic secret în anexele Acordului AIE2. Diacov: Țin de bucătăria internă", *Unimedia*, 20 ianuarie 2011, <https://goo.gl/fa9Foy>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

⁴⁰ Valentina Basiul, "Vlad Plahotniuc, om de afaceri, fost politician - o schiță de portret", *Radio Europa Liberă*, 13.01.2016, <https://www.europalibera.org/a/27329569.html>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

adversaries. And he could present to Western governments this veritable settling of accounts between the ex-Soviet mafia as a struggle against corruption, carried out in the name of European values.

So Plahotniuc used in early 2013 the influence he had on the justice system to take Filat out of the equation for taking on the position of prime minister, as part of the new AIE 3⁴¹ coalition. This is the beginning of the end for Vlad Filat. It was not the first slippage of the justice system in Moldova. Previously there had been several raider attacks⁴². Using judicial decisions, tens and hundreds of thousands, then millions of dollars were stolen, by changing the owners of some goods. However, the ruling – by blocking the appointment of Filat as PM - of the Constitutional Court (CC) was something new, dramatically influencing the political game, and opening up an era of unprecedented abuse in the ex-Soviet republics. Practically, one of the political players (DPM) was manipulating the arbiter (CC), pushing it to issue rulings only in its own favor.

The brutal use of the justice system in the political game culminated with the invalidation, in June 2018, of the elections for the office of mayor of Chișinău. Andrei Năstase, a leader of the pro-European and anti-oligarchic opposition, who was disliked by Plahotniuc, won the elections⁴³. It was something that had never happened before, even in Azerbaijan or Belarus.

The SDP Bets On Plahotniuc

Most likely, the government in Bucharest read through a partisan political filter the crisis caused by the crime at Padurea domneasca (the SDP and

⁴¹ AIE 3 was formed after the Pădurea domneasca political crisis, April 2013. The new cabinet was led by Iurie Leancă. “Noi dezvăluiri despre Mafia din RM”, 13 septembrie 2011, <http://www.moldova.org/noi-dezvaluiri-despre-mafia-din-rm-224915-rom/>. (Accessed 14 July 2018); “Cei 12 ‘judecători raider’”, *Ziarul de gardă*, 26 ianuarie 2012, <https://www.zdg.md/editia-print/investigatii/cei-12-judecatori-raider/comment-page-1>. (Accessed 14 July 2018); “Firme implicate în atacurile raider sunt noii proprietari ai Moldasig”, *Adevărul*, 2 august 2012, https://adevarul.ro/moldova/economie/firme-implicate-atacuri-raider-noii-proprietari-moldasig-1_50a_ee5e57c42d5a663a18b00/index.html. (Accessed 14 July 2018); “Moldova-Agroindbank, supusă unui ATAC RAIDER fără precedent”, *Ziarul național*, 28 mai 2013, <https://www.ziarulnational.md/moldva-agroindbank-supusa-unui-atac-raider-fara-precedent/>. (Accessed 14 July 2018); “Documen-tele care dovedesc implicarea lui Plahotniuc și Candu în atacul raider asupra Victoriabank”, *Jurnal de Chișinău*, <http://www.jc.md/documentele-care-dovedesc-implicarea-lui-plahotniuc-si-candu-in-atacul-raider-asupra-victoriabank-doc/> (Accessed 14 July 2018).

⁴³ Eugen Tomiuc, “Moldova’s Andrei Năstase: The Man Who Would Be Mayor -- Or More”, *Radio Free Europe*, July 4, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-andrei-nastase-the-man-who-would-be-mayor-or-more/29336544.html>. (Accessed 5 July 2018).

the DPM are members of the Socialist family). Ponta and Corlățean welcomed Filat's removal, as they considered him an ally of President Băsescu, their great political enemy⁴⁴. Filat's removal opened the door for consolidating the influence of the SLU on the bilateral relationship, to the detriment of President Băsescu, with whom Ponta-Corlățean were in competition. That this was the most likely situation is confirmed by at least two details. Even though Romania had leverage over Chișinău, it preferred not using it, witnessing passively the twisting of legislation, carried out by Chief Justice of the CC, Alexandru Tănase, who was close to Bucharest⁴⁵, and a personal enemy of Filat. Vlad Filat's replacement was former foreign minister and of European integration, Iurie Leancă, who entered into a close relationship with Ponta, so close that he was present on the National Arena when Ponta launched his presidential campaign in the autumn of 2014, even though Leancă is part of a different European political family, that of the European Popular Party.

Starting with the spring of 2013 and up to today, the government in Bucharest has a favorite interlocutor, Vlad Plahotniuc. It is unlikely that the Social Democratic ideology is what unites Ponta, Corlățean and Plahotniuc, Moldova's richest man. It is very likely that the Plahotniuc project dates back to the Adrian Năstase government (2001-2004). The first decade after the fall of the USSR is a fairly hazy stage in Plahotniuc's biography. The mystery grows when it comes to the early 2000s, when, with support from the Năstase government, Plahotniuc was appointed, in 2002, general manager of Petrom Moldova, Petrom's largest branch, itself the most important oil company in Romania.

There are public indications that Plahotniuc was a higher-up in the criminal world⁴⁶. He was invited to Cotroceni by President Ion Iliescu⁴⁷ and

⁴⁴ Interview with a diplomat accredited to Chișinău by the European External Action Service (EEAS), who was visiting Bucharest periodically for meetings with FM official. He was intrigued by the aggressive support that Romania had for Plahotniuc, which had become obvious for foreign embassies since early 2013 (May 2013).

⁴⁵ Armand Goșu, "Anticorupție originală la Chișinău", *Revista* 22, <https://revista22.ro/60046/antcorupie-original-la-chiinu.html>. (Accessed July 23 2018). Unionist journalist Constantin Tănase (1949-2014), the father of judge Al. Tănase, edited the journal *Timpul* in Chișinău, for many years. He led the journal while being partially financed by the Romanian government in Bucharest, through various structures subordinated to the latter.

⁴⁶ Plahotniuc was on the Interpol list in Italy, wanted for belonging to a major criminal ring in Moscow. "Controversații care vor în Parlament. Inculpați, condamnați prinși cu mită și trasești politici", *Ziarul de gardă*, 16.10.2014, <http://www.zdg.md/editia-print/investigatii/conroversatii-care-vor-in-parlament-inculpati-condamnați-prinsi-cu-mita-si-traseisti-politici>. (Accessed 14 July 2018). "Investigație: 'Omul din Umbră' – Afacerile, interesele și oamenii de legătură ai lui Serghei Iaralov și Vlad Plahotniuc", 11.07.2016, <http://actualitati.md/md/investigatie-omul-din-umbra-afacerile-interesele-si-oamenii-de-legatura-ai-lui-serghei-iaralov-si-vlad-plahotniuc>. (Accessed 14 July 2018);

introduced to Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin, when the latter was on a visit to Romania in the autumn of 2002, as part of a group of successful business people. A few years later, Plahotniuc obtained from the authorities in Bucharest a new identity, with the name Vlad Ulinici⁴⁸, with a different date of birth, with another Romanian passport, details revealed in the press a few years later⁴⁹. It is possible that the young people who were then in the entourage of the SDP's prime minister Năstase (Victor Ponta, Titus Corlăţean, Bogdan Aurescu, Dan Mihalache), and who later occupied important positions in the Romanian state, being able to influence the relations with Moldova, to have known about Plahotniuc's relationship with the SDP and members of the Năstase government⁵⁰. In this case, the decision to support Plahotniuc, quietly contemplating how Filat was moved away, was equal to the decision to bet on the oligarch who holds the Moldovan state captive could be emotional rather than rational. In this case, Plahotniuc may rather be a SDP project.

“Afacerile Puterii și ale Opoziției: PlahotniucLeaks”, *RISE Moldova*, 18.05.2015, <https://www.rise.md/articol/plahotniucleaks/> (Accessed 14 July, 2018); Corina Rebegea, “No Country for Oligarchs”, *CEPA*, January 28, 2016, <http://cepa.org/index/?id=dfc406a9727d091df0eb6ffbce24345d>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

⁴⁷ Plahotniuc recounted the episode a few years after that, in an interview for *Timpul*: ‘I met Voronin through former Romanian president Ion Iliescu, who made me the recommendation of being a dignified representative of Romanian investments in the Republic of Moldova. Of course, that, being the representative of such a large company [PETROM – author's note], which pays 3% of the country's budget, it was compulsory to have a communication relationship with the presidency. This fact itself set the press on fire and created the “controversial businessman”’, Pavel Păduraru, “În exclusivitate pentru TIMPUL, Vlad Plahotniuc: «Eu am susținut și am să susțin orice guvernare»”, *Timpul*, 28 mai 2010, <https://www.timpul.md/articol/in-exclusivitate-pentru-timpul-vlad-plahotniuc-eu-am-sustinut-si-am-sa-sustin-orice-guvernare-11378.html>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

⁴⁸ Alina Țurcanu, “Vladimir Plahotniuc, oligarh și al treilea om în stat, are dublă identitate: una în Moldova, una în România”, *Adevărul*, 27.01.2011, https://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/vladimir-plahotniuc-oligarh-treilea-om-stat-dubla-identitate-moldova-romania-1_50ad6e177c42d5a66394ff29/index.html. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

⁴⁹ Armand Goșu, “Republic of Moldova. The Year 2015 in Politics”, in *Studia politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. XVI, nr. 1, 2016, pp. 30-33. Plahotniuc had an undeclared piece of property in Bucharest, in the Pipera residential area. Ana Poenariu, “Vila din București a oligarhului Plahotniuc”, *RISE Moldova*, 29.10.2016, <https://www.rise.md/vila-din-bucuresti-a-oligarhului-plahotniuc/>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

⁵⁰ In 2012-2015, Victor Ponta was prime minister, Titus Corlăţean was foreign minister (2012-2014), Bogdan Aurescu was Secretary of State of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, holding the Republic of Moldova dossier portfolio (2010-2014) and minister of Foreign Affairs (2015). Dan Mihalache, former adviser for Adrian Năstase (2001-2004), after commuting for years between Bucharest and Chișinău as SDP representative in the relation with the DPM, between December 2014 and June 2016 he was the main adviser for President Iohannis, precisely during the period when Romania reaffirmed its support for Plahotniuc.

However, we should mention an important detail. Most often, both in Bucharest and in Chișinău, though this opinion is quite widespread among foreign analysts (Western, but also Russian), statements are made, under cover of anonymity, that Plahotniuc is the “project” of the Romanian Foreign Intelligence Service (Serviciul de Informații Externe, SIE), which is difficult to verify⁵¹.

The *Pădurea domnească* scandal, in early 2013, is a turning point in Moldova's political history, and inevitably, this moment also influenced the evolution of the relationship with Romania. This crisis was the result of tensions between Filat and Plahotniuc, in a country without democratic traditions, with weak institutions, political parties built around leaders, not doctrines, simple instruments in a fight for resources. As if in a criminal world ceremony⁵², the president of the most important pro-European party, Vlad Filat, publicly bowed to Plahotniuc for calling him a “puppeteer”, publicly begging forgiveness, in the hope of returning to his prime ministerial seat but to no avail. The CC decided that the person accused of corruption in a censure motion (a political document), passed by a vote, can no longer hold the position of premier⁵³. Thus, the leader of the most important political party in Chișinău, the LDPM, was bizarrely removed from the main stage, where Ghimpu and Plahotniuc consolidated their position. Both are close to Bucharest, the first close to the NLP, but especially the entourage of President Băsescu, while the second is close to the SDP. The two Romanian parties, the SDP and the NLP formed in 2013-2014 the Socialist Liberal Union, which had an overwhelming majority in Parliament.

In spite of all this, this new version, the fourth, of the pro-European coalition, AIE, created after the parliamentary elections of November 2014⁵⁴,

⁵¹ “Sturza: Plahotniuc a fost ‘salvat’ în 2016 de serviciile secrete românești”, *Radio Orhei*, <http://radioorhei.info/sturza-plahotniuc-a-fost-salvat-in-2016-de-serviciile-secrete-romanesti/>. (Accessed 14 July 2018).

⁵² For the criminal world phenomenon in the entire Soviet space, but especially in Russia, see the excellent book by Mark Galeotti, *The Vory. Russia's super mafia*, Yale University Press, 2018.

⁵³ “Hotărârea Curții Constituționale nr. 4 din 22.04.2013”, <http://constcourt.md/ccdocview.php?tip=hotariri&docid=443&l=ro>. (Accessed 10 May 2018). “3. In line with art. 1, par. (3), 101 par. (2), and 103 par. (2) of the Constitution: The Prime Minister of a Government dismissed by censure motion for suspicion of corruption is in *the impossibility to exercise its attributions*; - In case the Government is dismissed by censure motion for suspicion of corruption, the President of the Republic of Moldova has the constitutional obligation to designate an interim Prime Minister from among the members of the Government, one whose integrity is not tainted.”

⁵⁴ Corina Rebegea, Peter Doran, “Moldova’s Parliamentary Elections: European Values narrowly survive”, CEPA, December 2, 2014, <http://cepa.org/content/moldova%E2%80%99s-parliamentary-elections-european-values-narrowly-survive>. (Accessed 20 January 2016).

had at its center once again Filat's party, because the LDPM had obtained, among pro-European parties, the largest number of votes⁵⁵. Only a few weeks after the elections, the scandal irrupted and the “theft of the century” was announced. It was discovered that a billion dollars had disappeared from three banks, a huge amount for the poorest country in Europe, a disappearance that Plahotniuc allegedly was not unrelated to⁵⁶.

In Chişinău, a long string of protests and public gatherings started, attended by tens of thousands of citizens. During the spring and summer, several marathon protests took place, and in autumn, in front of the Parliament, three distinct tent camps were erected. The first one was that of the protesters in the market, organized by the Justice and Truth Platform, a civic movement that, in a few months, would turn into a political party. The other two, built later, are those of Igor Dodon's Socialists, and of Our Party, led by the controversial figure Renato Usatyi. The role of the latter – it came to light quite soon – was to compromise the anti-oligarchic protests generated by the theft of the billion dollars.

And, in spite of the deepening crisis, Bucharest had no reaction. Foreign embassies, Western governments, high ranking officials, drew attention to the slippage in Moldova, deploring the fact that an entire country was taken over by one man, oligarch Plahotniuc, and called for the investigation of the robbery in the banking system. Romania was quiet. Not even the uncovering of the laundering of almost 20 billion dollars through Moldova, to the benefit of people in President Vladimir Putin's entourage, did not raise questions in Bucharest⁵⁷. Ponta continued to visit Moldova several times a year, and Romanian-Moldovan projects were going better than ever. During his last visit to Chişinău, on the 26th and 27th of August 2015, Ponta went straight to the Nobil hotel to meet its owner, oligarch Plahotniuc, to the stupefaction of Moldovan ministers and prime minister, who were waiting for him with an honor guard at the government building⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ “Alegerile parlamentare în Moldova din 30 noiembrie 2014”, <http://www.e-democracy.md/elections/parliamentary/2014/>. (Accessed 15 July 2018).

⁵⁶ “Radiography Of A Bank Fraud In Moldova: From Money Laundering To Billion Fraud And State Debt”, *Transparency International Moldova*, 20.12.2016, <https://www.transparency.md/2016/12/20/radiography-of-a-bank-fraud-in-moldova-from-money-laundering-to-billion-fraud-and-state-debt/>. (Accessed 12 July, 2018). Elena Dumitru, „Jaful secolului”: jurnaliştii străini demonstrează legătura lui Plahotniuc cu miliardul furat din băncile moldoveneşti, *Adevărul*, https://adevarul.ro/international/europa/jaful-secolului-jurnalistii-straini-demonstreaza-legatura-plahotniuc-miliardul-furat-bancile-moldovenesti-1_555b5575cfbe376e355eed8f/index.html. (Accessed 15 July 2018).

⁵⁷ Veaceslav Berbeca, Ion Tăbârţă, “Puterea hibridă și actorii săi. Operațiunea “Laundromat”: analiza actorilor și acțiunilor întreprinse”, IDIS “Viitorul”, http://www.viitorul.org/files/1_3.pdf. (Accessed 14 June 2018).

⁵⁸ Interview with analyst Igor Boţan (September 2015, Chişinău).

Faced with more and more intense protests, the response of the oligarchic regime in Chișinău was to vote to lift parliamentary immunity for Vlad Filat (the DPM voted alongside the Socialists and the pro-Russian Communists) and to arrest the former PM on the 15th of October⁵⁹. Predictably, such a move led to the fall of the government, generating an ample political crisis that shook to its core the political scene in Chișinău. The climax of the crisis was Plahotniuc's attempt to become prime minister of the Republic of Moldova himself. The attempt failed due to the mobilization of Western embassies in Chișinău, and also due to a bizarre incident, which indicated that Plahotniuc himself blackmailed President Nicolae Timofti⁶⁰. Later on, the president said he had made a mistake, and that he had made those statements under the pressure of the emotions of the moment⁶¹. What is certain is that, within a few days, through blackmail and corruption, Plahotniuc managed to form a parliamentary majority (controlling over 51 deputies out of a total of 101), in spite of the fact that, according to the results of the elections on the 30th of November, 2014, the DPM had only 19 deputies, fewer than three other political parties, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, the LDPM, and the PCRM.

The Dacian Cioloș (November 2015 – January 2017) Government, Missing The Reset

The vote in Parliament in favor of Pavel Filip, the DPM candidate for prime minister, his swearing in the middle of the night (January 20), in a Chișinău paralyzed by protests, was possible in part due to effective support that Plahotniuc received from Bucharest, where a “technocrati” government had been recently installed, led by the former European Commissioner for Agriculture, Dacian Cioloș.

On the 14th of January 2016, Romanian Foreign Minister Lazăr Comănescu seemed to have started the operation to convince Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland to have the US openly, or at least tacitly, support Plahotniuc and his regime in Chișinău. The main thesis promoted by Romanian diplomacy was that this would be for the sake of stability. The two dignitaries were in Trakai, Lithuania, where they were taking part in an informal

⁵⁹ Armand Goșu, *Euro-falia. Turbulențe și involuții în fostul spațiu sovietic*, Curtea Veche, 2016, pp. 177-178.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 191-196.

⁶¹ “Nicolae Timofti: I told Plahotniuc afterwards that I was wrong”, 22 December 2016, https://en.publika.md/nicolae-timofti-i-told-plahotniuc-afterwards-that-i-was-wrong-_2632485.html. (Accessed 15 July 2018).

security meeting⁶², and that same day, in Bucharest, the newly minted ambassador of the Republic of Moldova, Mihai Gribincea, was at the Foreign Ministry to file a copy of his letter of accreditation. On this occasion, Romanian Secretary of State Radu Podgoreanu underlined the unprecedented “complexity” of the situation in the Republic of Moldova, which necessitates “the speedy formation in Chişinău of a government to ensure the stability of the country”⁶³.

The next episode came only four days after that, during the 18th of January visit to Bucharest of Victoria Nuland, which gave an opportunity to Romanian diplomacy to continue lobbying for Plahotniuc, which it had started doing in Lithuania⁶⁴. This time, Nuland’s interlocutor was Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs Daniel Ioniţa, today Romanian ambassador to Chişinău. The official communiqué was neutral and did not refer to “stability”: “The two officials had a comprehensive exchange of ideas regarding the evolution of events in Romania’s Eastern Neighborhood, favoring the situations in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and the relationship with Russia”⁶⁵. Despite this official statement, the Romanian media in Bucharest, and commentators from the Foreign Ministry entourage promoted the idea that the US and Romania, by supporting “political stability” in Chişinău, grant their agreement to the Plahotniuc government⁶⁶.

On the evening of the 20th of January 2016, the streets of Chişinău were taken over by tens of thousands of protesters, angry at the fact that, under the cover of the night, without observing legal provisions, the Filip government had been sworn in. At the same time, Romanian diplomats issued a statement through which they supported Plahotniuc:

“The Foreign Ministry is following closely the events in Chişinău. We urge to calm, and appeal to all political actors in the Republic of Moldova to act with all possible responsibility for carrying out the democratic process of investing the Pavel Filip Government, government which obtained the vote of confidence of the legitimate Parliament in Chişinău.”⁶⁷

⁶² “Întrevedere Lazăr Comănescu - Victoria Nuland, în marja ‘Snow Meeting’”, 14.01.2016, “Both sides expressed concern with the present situation, at the same time underlining how important it was for political actors in the Republic of Moldova to be more aware of the need to act to maintain the country on a European path, in consonance with the interests of its citizens”. <http://www.mae.ro/node/35286>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁶³ “Primirea de către secretarul de stat Radu Podgorean, în vizită de prezentare, a ambasadorului Republicii Moldova la Bucureşti, Mihai Gribincea”, 14 January 2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/35282>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁶⁴ “Lobbying” it was the word used in various conversations by western diplomats in Bucharest (January-March 2016).

⁶⁵ “Consultările secretarului de stat pentru afaceri strategice Daniel Ioniţa cu asistentul secretarului de stat al SUA pentru afaceri europene și eurasiatice Victoria Nuland”, 18.01.2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/35376>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁶⁶ Interview with analyst Igor Boţan (April 2016 Bucharest).

⁶⁷ “Comunicat de presă”, 20.01.2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/35431>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

It is unlikely that in the entire Foreign Ministry Central Unit in Bucharest and the Romanian Embassy in Chișinău there was no one who knew that the DPM and Plahotniuc had not won the 2014 elections, but that it had won only 19 seats (out of 101), and that it had built its majority through blackmail and corruption, which made that majority illegitimate and immoral.

That attitude on the part of Bucharest was rather bizarre for neutral observers. First of all, the SDP executive led by Ponta had just fallen. At the helm was former European Commissioner for Agriculture, Dacian Cioloș, whose political experience, at least theoretically, should have made him more attuned to sensibilities in Brussels related to events in Chișinău. On the contrary, the Cioloș government had taken in the entire leadership of Romanian diplomacy and copy-paste the political options in sensitive dossiers, such as the one on the relationship with the Republic of Moldova.

The series of lobbying actions in favor of the Plahotniuc regime undertaken by the Romanian Foreign Ministry continued, on the 29th of January, with a briefing for the diplomatic missions of EU and NATO states accredited to Bucharest on the events in the Republic of Moldova, emphasizing the importance of “maintaining stability in the Republic of Moldova”, held the briefing⁶⁸. For Bucharest, stability meant support for Plahotniuc, disparaging street protests generated by the theft of the billion dollars, and of the leaders of the pro-European and anti-oligarchic opposition, Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase. A few months later, it was proven that the pretext given by Secretary of State Daniel Ioniță to the ambassadors, claiming that if Plahotniuc lost power snap elections would have to be held, and would be won by the pro-Russian Igor Dodon, was ridiculous, as it was contradicted by the evolution of events.

Due to pressure from Brussels⁶⁹, which was disappointed in the way in which the “European technocrat” team in Bucharest had managed the crisis in Chișinău, the Cioloș government tried to save face by issuing a letter on the 30th of January 2016, with vague conditions for the payment of an initial tranche of 60 million Euros of the 150 million loan granted to the Republic of Moldova⁷⁰. Money was the most important instrument – given the crisis caused by the theft

⁶⁸ “Susținerea de către secretarul de stat Daniel Ioniță a unui briefing de informare pe tema evoluțiilor din Republica Moldova”, 29.01.2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/35537>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁶⁹ Interviews with public servants working for the Commission (February 2016).

⁷⁰ “Premierul Dacian Cioloș a trimis astăzi omologului său din Republica Moldova, Pavel Filip, o scrisoare care detaliază conținutul discuțiilor avute la București în data de 26 ianuarie 2016 în legătură cu acordul de împrumut dintre România și Republica Moldova”, 30 January 2016, <http://gov.ro/ro/media/comunicate/premierul-dacian-ciolo-a-trimis-astazi-omologului-sau-din-republica-moldova-pavel-filip-o-scrisoare-care-detaliaza-continutul-discutiilor-avute-la-bucure-ti-in-data-de-26-ianuarie-2016-in-legatura-cu-acordul-de-imprumut-dintre-romania-i-republica-moldova&page=1>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

of the billion dollars – to pressure the establishment in Chişinău in order to keep Moldova on track towards the West. Considering that the East, meaning Russia, could not give money to Moldova even if it wanted to, due to international sanctions applied because of its annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Donbass, and especially because of the drop in the price of oil.

In Chişinău, the non-parliamentary opposition, through its two leaders, Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase, was disappointed by the support shown by Romania for Plahotniuc. It is a disappointment that lasts to this day. The doors of institutions in Bucharest will remain closed to the two, not only at the Foreign Ministry or at the Cotroceni Presidential Palace, but also in Parliament or various ministries, where any contact with Sandu and Năstase is blocked.

In February 2016, some influential personalities⁷¹ in Moldovan civil society expressed their utter shock at the lack of empathy on the side of Bucharest with the plight of the population across the Prut. Moreover, they expressed their opinion that the Romanian government will not go through even with these minimal conditions. A few months later, on the 24th of August, in a long press release, the government announced that PM Cioloş would visit Chişinău. He was accompanied by a delegation of ministers (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Regional Development and Administration Vasile Dâncu; Energy Minister Victor Grigorescu; Public Finance Minister Anca Dragu; Justice Minister Raluca Prună; Minister for European Funds Cristian Ghinea; Delegate Minister for Relations with Romanians Abroad Maria Ligor.) Only Băsescu had taken over the Prut more ministers, when he had visited in 2010.

The following paragraph from the Cioloş government press release is significant:

“The visit to Chişinău of the Romanian delegation led by PM Dacian Cioloş comes in the context of the release of the first tranche, worth 60 million Euro, of the reimbursable loan for the Republic of Moldova today, 24 August [...] as a result of noting results in living up to commitments made to this end by the Republic of Moldova.”⁷²

As if 60 million were not sufficient, the Cioloş government also approved a loan worth 5 million Euro for investments in preschool infrastructure⁷³.

⁷¹ For example, the president of the Moldova PEN Club, Vitalie Ciobanu, “România și Marea Adunare Națională de la Chişinău”, *Revista* 22, 26.01.2016, <https://revista22.ro/70251547/romnia-i-marea-adunare-naional-de-la-chiinu.html>. (Accessed 17 July 2018).

⁷² “Premierul Dacian Cioloş va merge în vizită oficială la Chişinău”, 24 august 2016, <http://gov.ro/ro/media/comunicate/premierul-dacian-Cioloş-va-merge-in-vizita-oficiala-la-chi-inau&page=9>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁷³ “Comunicat de presă - şedinţă de guvern - Asistenţă financiară pentru investiţii în infrastructura preşcolară și programe adresate comunităţilor locale din Republica Moldova”, 24 august 2016. (Accessed 17 July 2018).

With Plahotniuc To The Bitter End!

On the 4th of March 2016, in another bizarre decision, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova reintroduced presidential elections in a parliamentary republic. Even though the presidential vote had the potential to break apart the anti-oligarchic front, by Năstase's withdrawal and the support granted to Maia Sandu, the pro-European group, even though it lost the elections, came out stronger. In the second round, on 13 November, pro-Russian Igor Dodon faced off against pro-European Maia Sandu. As if to contradict Bucharest's narrative, Plahotniuc helped pro-Russian Igor Dodon. Daniel Ioniță, appointed ambassador to Chișinău on 23 May 2016 by President Iohannis, did not come out with a press release, and didn't explain the logical fracture in Romanian diplomacy's attitude. So it turns out that the Russian threat narrative was valid only if the leaders of the non-parliamentary opposition, Sandu and Năstase, organized protests. When Plahotniuc supported Dodon in grabbing the presidency, the Russian threat ceased to exist.

Bucharest was extremely active in 2016 in relation to Chișinău. Countless announcements of encouragement and official visits were made. On 26 January, Pavel Filip came to Bucharest, calling for the unblocking of the 150 million Euro loan promised by Romania. The discussion with Ciolos gave him great hope, and rightly so. On the 14th of April, a deputy foreign minister from Moldova was received in Bucharest by Minister Comănescu and Secretary of State Ioniță. According to the Romanian Foreign Ministry press release, the Romanian dignitaries spoke about "the positive evolution of events registered in the last few months in promoting reforms". Comănescu assured the Moldovan dignitary that "Romania will give full support needed for reforms... [Comănescu] added that progress in this area is directly relevant for meeting, in the near future, the conditions necessary for the transfer of the first tranche of the 150 million Euro loan offered by Romania"⁷⁴. One day later, in Bratislava, at the GLOBSEC, Comănescu met Moldovan Foreign Minister Andrei Galbur, and assured him of the "strong support" that Romania provides to his country⁷⁵. In May, the Minister for Romanians Abroad made a three-day visit to Chișinău. On this occasion they once again touted the thesis of "consolidating stability" in the Republic of Moldova⁷⁶.

⁷⁴ "Consultări politice cu Republica Moldova", 14.04.2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/36675>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁷⁵ "Participarea ministrului afacerilor externe, Lazăr Comănescu, la conferința internațională GLOBSEC 2016", 14.04.2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/36681>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁷⁶ "Vizita ministrului delegat Dan Stoenescu în Republica Moldova", 15 May 2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/37035>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

The peak of diplomatic lobbying to consolidate the Plahotniuc regime came in the summer of 2016, when Minister Comănescu visited the Republic of Moldova together with the Secretary of State for European Affairs of the French Foreign Ministry, Harlem Desir. Comănescu and Desir were also co-presidents of the Republic of Moldova's Group for European Action, initiated by former minister Baconchi in January 2010. This French-Romanian pair promoting the Republic of Moldova in Brussels did not function for a time. But, after Cioloș's visit to Paris, where he was received by French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, with whom he signed the updated roadmap of the bilateral Strategic Partnership, this Group for European Action was relaunched, and the two ministers, Comănescu and Desir, visited Chișinău on the 16th and 17th of June. The message at the meeting with President Timofti and PM Filip was the same: "consolidating stability". Even at the meeting with the pro-European opposition leaders, Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase, the message was similar: according to a press release from the Foreign Ministry in Bucharest, the two dignitaries underlined "the importance of maintaining stability", and political debates regarding the presidential elections in the autumn "must stay within existing democratic frameworks, and not affect the ongoing processes of relaunching reforms and consolidating stability in the Republic of Moldova"⁷⁷. In other words, the opposition in Chișinău should get its act together and stop bothering the Plahotniuc regime, because that would affect Moldova's stability. The two ministers then met experts from civil society, Igor Munteanu, Igor Boțan, Arcadie Barbăroșie etc. In an almost surreal move, Comănescu – according to the official FM press release – called on them to "maintain their impartiality and rigorous way to tackle public debate issues"⁷⁸. Which means that Boțan, Barbăroșie etc. were neither "impartial", nor "rigorous".

The 23-25 of August visit by Prime Minister Cioloș, followed by Romania handing over the loan tranche, right before the start of the election campaign in Moldova, did not help the DPM candidate much. Marian Lupu was withdrawn from the presidential race by Plahotniuc, as he was ranked modestly, around the middle of the list of candidates⁷⁹. Pro-Russian Igor Dodon's victory in the presidential elections with Plahotniuc's support⁸⁰ did not, surprisingly,

⁷⁷ "A doua zi a vizitei comune la Chișinău a ministrului afacerilor externe, Lazăr Comănescu, și secretarului de stat pentru afaceri europene în MAE francez, Harlem Désir", 17 June 2016, <http://www.mae.ro/node/37515>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹ Corina Rebegea, "East Meets West in Moldova's Presidential Elections", CEPA, November 3, 2016, <http://cepa.org/East-meets-West-in-Moldovas-presidential-elections> (accessed on 18 December 2016).

⁸⁰ The media controlled by Plahotniuc unleashed, during the last weeks of the campaign, but also during the two rounds of voting, an aggressive fake-news campaign against Maia Sandu, who was accused of having the intention to allow 30.000 Syrians to emigrate to Moldova, of being a lesbian, of leading an immoral life, of being corrupt, etc. The chief

change Bucharest's attitude towards the political regime in Chișinău, as the Moldovan oligarch continued to enjoy not only confidence, but also support from the state authorities in Romania. DPM signed a collaboration agreement not only with United Russia, President Vladimir Putin's party, but also with the SDP, a member of the Socialist International. The signing ceremony, taking place at the central headquarters of the SDP, in September 2014, was attended, in addition to PM Ponta, by Foreign Minister Corlățean and by Liviu Dragnea, current chairman of the SDP⁸¹. The first collaboration agreement between the SDP and the DPM was signed in 2006, being periodically renewed since then.

The decisive victory by the SDP in the 2016 elections brought only stylistic changes in the relationship with the Republic of Moldova. The successive SDP governments in 2017-2018 reduced the frequency of contacts, but stayed on target, unconditionally supporting the increasingly authoritarian regime installed by Plahotniuc. The best proofs are the three governing platforms, which remained unchanged in what concerns their Moldova chapter. Even if they borrow much from Ponta's platform, what is lacking is the enthusiasm of the prime minister. In two years', time, between August 2013 and August 2015, Ponta had visited the Republic of Moldova eight times, setting a record that is hard, even impossible, to ever beat. Instead of four visits a year, his successors as heads of government made a single visit to Chișinău and invited their Moldovan counterparts to Bucharest also once a year.

The consolidation of the political situation in Moldova and the positions of the Filip government in Chișinău are also reflected in the agenda of talks with Romanian dignitaries. The phrase "consolidating stability" disappeared, replaced by some more concrete talks on energy and transportation

TV channels involved in the campaign belong to Plahotniuc's media holding and include Prime TV and news channel Publika TV. During the day of the election, local authorities controlled by MDP organized the movement of tens of busses in Transnistria, transporting citizens to polling stations from East of the Dniester where pro-Russian candidate, Igor Dodon, had a better standing in polls. Audio recordings of a close collaborator of Plahotniuc, Constantin Botnari, were also revealed. In them, the latter declared that in the electoral campaign of the fall 2016, the enemies of MDP were Maia Sandu (who presented her candidacy against pro-Russian Dodon) and Andrei Năstase, and that Dodon was not competing against MDP. Exclusive audio : "Dodon nu ne este concurent: Indicațiile lui Botnari, alias Borsetka, în timpul prezidențialelor din 2016", <http://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/026a2e5986fbb8cc/live-cabinetul-din-umbra-audio-cu-botnari-dand-indicatii-celor-din-pd-sa-l-promoveze-pe-dodon-in-timpul-alegerilor-din-2016.html>. (Accessed 24 July 2018).

⁸¹ Maxim Pulber, "Democrații moldoveni și social-democrații români se vor susține reciproc în alegeri", *Realitatea*, 10 September 2014, http://www.realitatea.md/democra-ii-moldoveni-i-social-democra-ii-romani-se-vor-sus-ine-reciproc-in-alegeri-ne-vor-facilita-accesul_8781.html (accessed on 19 July 2018); "Vlad Plahotniuc salutes signing of cooperation agreement between PDM and Romanian PSD", 07.10.2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kX8EXjTih3A>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

interconnection, as well as about the participation of Romanian companies in the privatization process in Moldova⁸². The political instability in Bucharest, but also the meager capacity of the SDP governments to implement their own decisions, prevented the projects from advancing. In fact, Chișinău is interested in the loans from Romania, not the process of certain projects.

The Centennial In Bucharest And Chișinău: Operetta Unionism

As the year 2018 is celebrated in Bucharest as the Greater Romania Centennial, including the union of Bessarabia and Romania, it was an occasion to test relations between the SDP and the DPM, and the way in which Moldovan dignitaries respond to the sensibilities of the government of Romania.

On the 27th of March, (9 April new style, according to the Gregorian calendar) the day that marked 100 years from the union of Bessarabia and Romania, the Romanian Parliament, in solemn joint session, adopted a “Declaration for the celebration of the union of Bessarabia with Motherland Romania”⁸³. The document considers “fully legitimate” the wishes of those who support “the unification of the two states” and insures that “Romania and its citizens are and will always be prepared to welcome any organic manifestations for reunification on the side of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova”⁸⁴. The document does not detail in which way the unionists in the Republic of Moldova would be supported by Bucharest, making plausible any speculation.

The solemn session in Bucharest was also attended by a delegation from the Parliament in Chișinău, led by its speaker, Andrian Candu. However, President Klaus Iohannis was absent, resuming himself to sending a message about the need to “deepen the strategic partnership” between Romania and the Republic of Moldova, as well as talking about Bucharest's commitment to support Chișinău's efforts to join the EU⁸⁵. The Romanian president's message

⁸² “Întrevederea ministrului delegat pentru Afaceri Europene, Victor Negrescu, cu viceministrul afacerilor externe și integrării europene al Republicii Moldova, Daniela Morari”, 28.07.2017, <http://www.mae.ro/node/42698>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁸³ “Declarație pentru celebrarea unirii Basarabiei cu Țara Mamă, România, la 27 martie 1918”, http://www.cdep.ro/pdfs/oz/20180327_declaratie.pdf. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁵ Alina Neagu, “Mesajul lui Klaus Iohannis la aniversarea unui secol de la unirea Basarabiei cu România: Unul dintre momentele care definesc pentru totdeauna istoria și țin treze conștiințele”, *Hotnews*, 27.03.2018, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-22365708-mesajul-lui-klaus-iohannis-aniversarea-unui-secol-unirea-basarabiei-romnia-unul-dintre-acele-momente-care-definesc-pentru-totdeauna-istoria-tin-treze-constiintele-generatie-dupa-generatie.htm>. (Accessed 16 July 2018).

was in stark contrast to the discourses given by the speakers of the two chambers of Parliament, Calin Popescu-Tariceanu and Liviu Dragnea. The latter invoked, in favor of the union, the Helsinki Final Act, and called on those present at the solemn session to be more daring in enacting the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. Liviu Dragnea, the chairman of the SDP, the main governing party, wants the union with the Republic of Moldova. “Romania was strong when it was united. And it will be united. This is our ideal”⁸⁶.

“Don't we have the courage to say clearly what we want? And, so that there is no confusion, I say it openly, simply, and explicitly – I want to unite with the Republic of Moldova! I want us to be together in Europe, as a single nation. Romania was stronger when it was united. And it will be united. And it will be strong. This is our ideal.”⁸⁷

With this statement, Dragnea was competing with former president Traian Băsescu, who had been more and more active with regard to the Republic of Moldova in the last few years. Băsescu had taken part in a unionist meeting in Chișinău, on Sunday, the 25th of March, attended by 15,000 people at the most, where a proclamation was adopted calling on the Bucharest Parliament to get involved in the “Peaceful reunification of the nation”. Traian Băsescu spoke at the meeting, calling on the two parliaments to vote once again on the union, just as they had done 100 years before. Moreover, the former president called on the union with the Republic of Moldova to be Romania's third country project, after the first had been finalized, joining NATO and the EU respectively⁸⁸.

“We call on the parliaments in Bucharest and Chișinău to vote on the union once again. [...] The union is what Romania and the Republic of Moldova need. If Romania has two great objectives. 1: to secure entry into NATO, which it did; 2: to ensure its prosperity and join the EU. The third country objective must be reunification.”⁸⁹

More leaders attended the unionist meeting in Chișinău from Bucharest. Until the 27th of March, the most active promoter of unionism in Romania seemed to be the former president Traian Băsescu, and in the Republic of Moldova the leaders of the Liberal Party of Mihai Ghimpu, as well as the newly set up Party of National Unity, headed by Anatol Țălaru, former defense minister in Chișinău.

⁸⁶ “Dragnea: ‘Vreau să ne unim cu Moldova. Vreau să fim împreună în Europa, dar ca o singură națiune’”, *Hotnews*, 27 March 2018, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-22365501-dragnea-vreau-unim-moldova-vreau-fim-impreuna-europa-dar-singura-natiune.htm>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁸ “Discurs Traian Băsescu Chișinău 25 martie 2018 Marea Adunare Centenara”, 25.03.2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBVtu31IJ10>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

In the Republic of Moldova, the Popular Movement Party, led by Traian Băsescu, was, according to polls, on the brink of entering Parliament. For a long time, the most vocal parties on the issue of the unification with Moldova were small and, on the fringes, and were in the opposition. They were trying to mobilize as large a segment as they could of a pro-unionist electorate, which has grown from 18% to 25% in the last quarter century in the Republic of Moldova⁹⁰. Initially it was the people voting for the National Front, then those voting for the Christian Democratic Popular Party, led by Iurie Roșca, and, more recently, for the Liberal Party.

The percentage of voters in favor of the union was never large enough to change the political trajectory of the Republic of Moldova. A recent opinion poll, in December 2017, set at 21% the segment of Moldovans who would vote in favor of union with Romania. However, more than half, 56.2%, would be against the union, according to the same poll⁹¹. Conversely, in Romania, a January 2018 poll found that only 27% of citizens believe the union with the Republic of Moldova necessary or very necessary⁹². These figures explain why the topic of the union was never embraced by major parties until very recently. The subject was a favorite of small parties, which appealed to a minor electorate, but one, that was extremely active and politicized, electing these parties in Parliament.

If in Moldova, the topic of the union remains the province of smaller parties, in Romania, after the 27th of March, the unification project was embraced by the SDP chairman Liviu Dragnea, the head of the most important political party, and perhaps the most influential politician in Bucharest right now.

The Democratic Party of Moldova, which controls the government in Chișinău, in spite of the fact that it is close to the SDP, its colleague in the Socialist International, does not display unionist tendencies, and the party statute sets the aim of building in Moldova a Moldovan civic nation, which Bucharest refuses to accept even as an intellectual debate topic, arguing that the Moldovan nation is a concept concocted by Stalin.

⁹⁰ Interviews with analysts Igor Boțan, Arcadie Barbăroșie, and Petru Negură (September 2015, April 2016, Chișinău).

⁹¹ “BOP 2017: 1/3 dintre cetățenii R. Moldova ar vota pentru unirea cu Rusia”, *Agora*, 14 decembrie 2017, <http://agora.md/stiri/40151/bop-2017-1-3-dintre-cetatenii-r--moldova-ar-vota-pentru-unirea-cu-rusia>. (Accessed 19 July 2018).

⁹² Florin Pușcaș, “Sondaj CURS: Două treimi dintre români consideră că unirea cu Republica Moldova este puțin sau deloc necesară”, *Știri pe surse*, 18 January 2018, https://www.stiripesurse.ro/sondaj-curs-pentru-stiripesurse-ro-doua-treimi-dintre-romani-considera-ca-unirea-cu-republica-moldova-este-pu-in-sau-deloc-necesara_1243396.html. (Accessed 18 July 2018).

Who Controls The Relationship With The Republic Of Moldova?

From the “Twitter revolution” in the spring of 2009 in Chișinău to this day, the Romanian presidency and the foreign minister have been a team and have had the same political color for only two years, between December 2009 and January 2012. This is the period when the Republic of Moldova’ dossier was handled by the Foreign Ministry. Even if there were still clogs in the system, be it at the presidency or at the Foreign Ministry, the relationship between Băsescu and Baconschi ensured coherence in the eastern policy, especially in the Bucharest-Chișinău bilateral relationship. Once the ministry was taken over by Corlățean, the situation changed. A fierce competition started between President Băsescu and the Ponta government for control of the bilateral relationship with the Republic of Moldova. Ponta got personally involved, and the prime minister unblocked with determination many of the projects that for years had only been talked about, but never acted upon. As a result, in 2014 the Ponta government overcame Băsescu, and the Socialist-Liberal Union ministers limited his range of action to security, in a very tense regional context, dominated by Crimea’s annexation by Russia and the destabilization of Donbass. This regional context, shaped by the Russian threat, and the lack of other institutional tools, pushed Băsescu to use more and more the intelligence services that he controlled through the Consiliul Suprem de Apărare a Țării (Higher Defense Council) as foreign policy tools.

Klaus Iohannis’ victory in the elections of 2014 and Ponta’s weakened position, still allowing him to be premier for another year, made foreign policy become an increasingly important issue. The Russian threat, which intelligence services knew how to dangle over everyone’s heads to get maximum advantages (larger budgeting, control over certain embassies and directorates within the Foreign Ministry), was a factor that encouraged this process. The President Klaus Iohannis, who was preoccupied to differentiate himself from his predecessor, Traian Băsescu, who was very careful with the bilateral relationship with Chișinău, showed no interest in this dossier. This context favored the intelligence services, which consolidated their control and became more autonomous, but were left directionless, because, as militarized institutions, they no longer had a commander to guide them.

The blockage in Romania’s foreign policy as of September 2014, when the SDP and DPM signed a collaboration protocol in Bucharest, was not to be laid at the feet of the intelligence services and the presidential administration entirely, but also at those of the Foreign Ministry, which was completely paralyzed, in a crisis of expertise, being fought over by no less than four ministers, Deputy Prime Minister Ana Birchall, Foreign Minister Teodor

Meleşcanu, the Minister of European Affairs, and the Minister of Romanians Abroad. For the time being, Romania remains dependent on Plahotniuc in its foreign policy with regard to the Republic of Moldova and gives no signs that it is about to change this dependency.