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## HOW THE WEST LOST MOLDOVA TO RUSSIA

### **Summary:**

*Today Moldova is not on the top of international political agenda, but it is important both for the West and Russia in the context of their geopolitical competition. At the same time it is a competition of two integrative projects, which propose two different models of development – the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. For a long time it seemed that parliamentary “Alliance for European Integration” will be able to make Moldova a successful example of Europeanization, but finally it discredited European idea and Moldovan people after massive social protests elected pro-Russian Igor Dodon president of the country. Now it seems that he will eventually integrate Moldova to the Eurasian Economic Union, but to do this he has to solve the problem of parliament, which is controlled by his political opponents. Referendum is supposed to become a solution. Finally, potential additional advantage of I. Dodon is that the challenge of Transnistria can also be overcome in connection to the Eurasian integration of Moldova, because Chisinau with the help of Kremlin will get unified state and Tiraspol – formal affiliation with Russia it dreams of. The story is not over yet, but Vladimir Putin’s chances to win are good as never.*

### **Keywords:**

*Moldova, Transnistria, European Union, Europeanization, America, Russia, “Kozak plan”, Eurasian Economic Union, Vladimir Putin, Vladimir Voronin, Andrei Nastase, “DA” movement, Igor Dodon, Vladimir Plahotniuc*

## Introduction

Moldova is one of the most problematic countries in Eastern Europe. It suffers from permanent political instability and has its “frozen conflict” in Transnistria.

One of the reasons of the internal tension is related to the historically formed dual identity of the country. Part of Moldovan people would prefer integration to the EU (possibly, through unification with Romania). Others are pro-Russian and support the project of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Political elite of Moldova at first seemed to be Moscow oriented, but then the leader of Communist party and president of the state Vladimir Voronin refused to sign the so-called “Kozak plan” of Transnistria integration back to Moldova, prepared by Russia, and eventually lost its power to the pro-Western parliamentary “Alliance for European Integration”.

But the latter after some time discredited pro-European course of the country, and finally a huge corruption scandal led to the massive social protests. America tried to use them to bring to power in Moldova new democratic forces with no bad history, but Vladimir Putin’s Russia took the initiative to its hands, and direct presidential elections were won by seemingly pro-Russian leader of Socialist party Igor Dodon.

Now there is a question, if Moldova integrates to the Eurasian Economic Union or the West, which still has pro-European parliament, can stop I. Dodon.

### **Why Moldova is important for the West and Russia**

Both Russia and the EU are interested in Moldova, and their reasons are rather similar. The European Union pursues the strategy of the “circles of influence”. In other words, the EU is a core area, then there is a close neighbourhood and finally – far zone of interest. The main purpose of the EU is to have stable, democratic and prosperous partners, which live in accordance with European standards and can buy European products or – to put it simple – are Europeanized (and for example, Association Agreement is one of the mechanisms to guarantee that)<sup>1</sup>.

In case of Moldova the EU is not much interested in its market, because it is very small. At the same time this state (differently from Ukraine) is more or less stable (of course, it has “frozen conflict” in Transnistria, but it is deeply “frozen”, and the possibility that it will renew is not big). Therefore, the only reason, why Brussels cares about Moldova, is its example.

Post-soviet countries are very problematic partners, and Eastern Partnership program actually failed. But for a long time Moldova, ruled by pro-Western parliamentary coalition, could have been treated as a successful (!)

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<sup>1</sup> More about Europeanization: N. A. de Flers, P. Müller, *Applying the concept of Europeanization to the study of foreign policy: dimensions and mechanisms*, Paper prepared for the GARNET Conference *The European Union in International Affairs*, 2010, <<http://www.ies.be/files/M%C3%BCller-B3.pdf>> (31.01.2017).

example of the Europeanization policy<sup>2</sup>. It means that European model is acceptable not only for the EU states, but also for a post-soviet one, and is more attractive than Russian integration project even without perspective of the membership in the European Union. Therefore, it would be a very painful image strike for the EU, if it loses Moldova to Russia (its Eurasian Economic Union), especially after signing of the Association Agreement.

Probably, the EU could accept democratic unification of Moldova and Romania (there is ethnic proximity between these two nations, especially in case of language), but for the moment such scenario is not very realistic. In both countries there are political forces, which support this idea<sup>3</sup>, but still the bigger part of the Moldovan elite (because of individual power interests) and the majority of people in Moldova (because of nationalistic and pro-Russian orientation) are not ready for losing independence<sup>4</sup>.

The essence of the strategy of the United States in the post-soviet area before Donald Trump has been to put maximal pressure on Russia to limit its influence there and stop the expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union. The most obvious example is Ukraine, but there was a moment, when it seemed that Transnistria could become the part of the Ukrainian conflict in order to provoke Russia for open (not only hybrid) military actions against Kiev<sup>5</sup>. In general, Moldova for American “hawks” used to be just another competition arena in broader geopolitical confrontation with Moscow just to prove Washington’s superiority.

The approach of Russia is very similar. It had close (strategic) economic ties with Ukraine, but additional value of Moldova for Russian economy is minimal (except of the so-called Moldovan “gastarbeiters”/migrant workers). Still, geopolitics has always been more important for Moscow than economic factor. And again, Moldova is of no crucial strategic (military) importance for Moscow – actually, there is no big difference, if NATO and American AMD system is in Romania or in Moldova (in the worst case, Transnistria can be

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<sup>2</sup> F. Parmentier, *Moldova, a Major European Success for the Eastern Partnership?* Fondation Robert Schuman, Policy Paper, European Issue No. 186, 22th November 2010, <<http://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/questions-d-europe/qe-186-en.pdf>> (31.01.2017).

<sup>3</sup> *В Кишиневе начался многотысячный митинг за объединение Молдавии с Румынией*, <<https://lenta.ru/news/2016/03/27/kshnv/>> (31.01.2017).

<sup>4</sup> *Опрос: За объединение с Румынией выступает треть жителей Молдавии*, <<http://vz.ru/news/2016/10/12/837580.html>> (31.01.2017).

<sup>5</sup> V. Воловој, *Приднестровье: костёр готов, осталось плеснуть бензин и поднести спичку*, <[http://baltnews.lt/vilnius\\_news/20150601/1013806348.html](http://baltnews.lt/vilnius_news/20150601/1013806348.html)> (31.01.2017).

recognized as a sovereign state by Russia and “Iskander” missiles as well as Russian military base can be deployed there)<sup>6</sup>.

So, Kremlin’s interest to keep Moldova in its sphere of influence is motivated mainly by the desire to show the West “red line” in the post-soviet area. At the same time, rather obvious Moscow plan to bring Moldova to the Eurasian Economic Union is more symbolic than practically meaningful step (like in case of Kyrgyzstan, which is in fact subsisted by Russia, but it is a geopolitical price for having it “inside”).

To sum up, fight for Moldova between Russia and the West is more a fight of models and images rather than strategic economic and military interests of the both sides. But the nuance is that for America and especially for the European Union the loss of Moldova is much less significant than for Moscow, because it is beyond the historical civilization border of the West, and Russia is ready to play hard for the systemic victory in the whole post-soviet space.

### **One billion, which changed everything**

In 2003 there was a big chance that so-called “Kozak plan” will help to unite Moldova, but at the very last minute its president V. Voronin changed his mind. Later Dmitry Kozak told, that V. Voronin called him and said: “Foreign diplomat came and told me such things, wrote me such things (...)”, - and after that president of Moldova refused to sign the document<sup>7</sup>. Important thing is that V. Putin had to participate in the ceremony, because V. Voronin asked him. Finally, he lost Putin’s respect and support, and eventually he and his Communist party lost the power to the pro-European coalition.

It is not a mistake to say that Moldova used to live in “stable instability”, but still its Western course was purposeful and consistent. And then the episode of Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat, who was sentenced to nine years in prison on corruption charges in a billion-dollar (huge sum for poor Moldova) bank fraud case, happened<sup>8</sup>.

This corruption scandal provoked massive street protests, in which two camps united – pro-Russian (Socialist party with I. Dodon ahead and “Our Party” with Renato Usatii ahead) and pro-European one (movement “DA” with

<sup>6</sup> И. Гладилин, *Россия возвращается в Приднестровье?*

<<http://www.km.ru/bssr/2012/04/17/geopoliticheskaya-strategiya-respublik-byvshego-sssr/rossiya-vozvrashchaetsya-v-pri>> (31.01.2017).

<sup>7</sup> *Слабость президента Воронина*, <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2005/11/25/kozak/>> (31.01.2017).

<sup>8</sup> *Moldova: Former PM Sentenced in Billion-Dollar Bank Fraud Case*,

<<https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/5424-moldova-former-pm-sentenced-in-billion-dollar-bank-fraud-case>> (01.02.2017).

Andrei Nastase ahead)<sup>9</sup>. The threat of “colourful revolution” in Moldova became very real (Parliament of the country was almost seized), but political system managed to find a compromise – organize direct presidential elections.

What is behind the scene in all these events? As A. Nastase said in 2015: “I see no reason to call the current Moldovan governance “pro-European”, as all they have done during the last five years is profoundly anti-European. Please do not confound their demagogy with their deeds. If there is a real force, which pushes pro-Russian parties to power and associates the EU with the disaster in Moldova, it is surely the current governance which calls themselves »pro-Europeans«”<sup>10</sup>.

In other words, after some time it became clear that pro-EU coalition in Moldova can critically discredit European idea in Moldova, and possibly the West (both Brussels and Washington) decided to “reload” the government of the country and bring to power new pro-European forces and faces (like A. Nastase and his movement “DA”)<sup>11</sup>. But suddenly one thing went wrong...

President of Russia V. Putin, being a fan of the Eastern martial arts, knows how to be patient. During “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine he could strongly support Viktor Yanukovich, but he decided to wait. And he was right, because “Orange” forces lost their popularity very fast, and finally V. Yanukovich became a president. During “Revolution of Dignity” V. Putin had to act (respond) because of geopolitical reasons (as he sees them), but then he stopped and froze the conflict in Donbas region. And again, new Ukrainian government is unable to rule the country successfully, gradually losing the support of the West.

Since demarche of V. Voronin in 2003 V. Putin had been patient until the case of V. Filat, and then Russia’s “agents” took an initiative from the hands of competitioners. The most interesting thing is that Kremlin used against his

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<sup>9</sup> More about Moldovan opposition’s relation to Russia: E. Tomiuç, *Strange Bedfellows: Moldovan Protest Leaders Share Common Goal, Different Beliefs*, <<http://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-protest-leaders-common-goal-different-beliefs/27517364.html>> (01.02.2017); *Российские компаньоны Додона уже видят его президентом Молдовы*, <<https://www.omg.md/index.php?newsid=12409>> (01.02.2017); *Moldovan candidate Renato Usatii in Russian spy allegations*, <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/europe/article4281951.ece>> (01.02.2017); *Об угрозе пророссийского переворота в Молдове*, Da Vinci AG Analytic Group, January 2016, <<http://ru.davinci.org.ua/docs/Moldova130116.pdf>> (01.02.2017).

<sup>10</sup> J. Drew, *Moldovan people feel let down by Europe*, <<https://www.eureporter.co/frontpage/2015/12/09/moldovan-democrats-feel-let-down-by-europe/>> (01.02.2017).

<sup>11</sup> Б. Рожин, *Молдавский бег по граблям*, <<http://colonelcassad.livejournal.com/2383678.html>> (01.02.2017).

opponents their own – “colourful” – technology, and they were visibly not ready for such scenario.

First Victoria Nuland from the US State Department tried to support a bit reformed government of Moldova with Pavel Filip ahead<sup>12</sup>. But this tactical move could not stop social protest. Therefore, the decision to legalize direct presidential elections was taken, expecting that “reserve project” (A. Nastase) can succeed. When it became evident that A. Nastase is not popular enough to defeat I. Dodon, he was forced to support another Western candidate Maia Sandu<sup>13</sup>.

Russia accepted the idea of direct presidential elections, because violent overturn of the pro-European government would inevitably face the problem of legitimation. At the same time, Moscow was sure that its protégé will win and he won. But the game is not over...

### The agenda of Igor Dodon

There was an expectation that V. Yanukovych will become a pro-Russian president in Ukraine, but after some time he started to play his own game and almost signed an Association Agreement with the EU. Therefore, there is a risk that I. Dodon can do the same. But at least his first statements and practical steps demonstrate his loyalty to Kremlin.

Commenting Brexit I. Dodon said: “The EU is a project with past, but without future. Moldova does not have to run after the train, which crumbles and loses wagons. We must concentrate on Moldova and learn to develop by ourselves”<sup>14</sup>. His other pre-election thought was that Crimea *de facto* is a Russian territory, and he did not change his mind as a president (although to speak about the official recognition of this fact by Moldova is too early, according to I. Dodon)<sup>15</sup>.

But the words are not so much important as practical steps. One of the first orders of the new president was to remove the EU flag from his office<sup>16</sup> – sim-

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<sup>12</sup> Е. Шоларь, *Штатный режим: Владимир Плахотнюк получил поддержку Вашингтона*, <<http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/shtatnyy-rezhim-vladimir-plahotnyuk-poluchil-podderzhku-vashingtona-21687>> (01.02.2017).

<sup>13</sup> М. Левченко, *Шансы антиолигархических сил на выборах в Молдове возросли*, <<http://ru.rfi.fr/evropa/20161018-shansy-antioligarhicheskikh-sil-na-vyborakh-v-moldove-vozrosli>> (01.02.2017).

<sup>14</sup> *Додон о Brexit: мы не должны бежать за разваливающимся поездом*, <<https://ru.sputnik.md/politics/20160624/7543777.html>> (02.02.2017).

<sup>15</sup> *Додон заявил, что пока никто в Молдавии не рискнет признать Крым российским*, <<https://ria.ru/world/20170117/1485895440.html>> (02.02.2017).

<sup>16</sup> Ch. Peat, *Anti-Putin Moldovan politicians restore EU flag after it was removed by pro-Russian leader*, <<http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/747770/European-Union-flag-Moldovan-EU-Vladimir-Putin-Igor-Dodon-Alina-Zotea-restore-Russia>> (02.02.2017).

ple, but very symbolic move. First country I. Dodon made official presidential visit to was Russia, where he informed that Moldova's decision on Association Agreement with the EU may be reviewed and that cooperation between Moldova and the Eurasian Economic Union will start<sup>17</sup>. Third, he fired Defence Minister Anatolie Salaru with the following explanation: "This minister was flirting with NATO, knowing that under the Constitution we are a neutral country. On his initiative, American military equipment rolled through the main square of Moldova on Victory Day. He openly advocates the unification of Moldova with Romania. He sacked a lot of professionals from the defence structures, replacing them with people close to the Liberal Party" - adding that A. Salaru has been repeatedly accused of embezzlement and corruption<sup>18</sup>. Finally, I. Dodon decided to cancel the agreement on establishing a NATO Liaison Office in the country's capital of Chisinau<sup>19</sup>. During his visit to Brussels he only repeated and even strengthened his critical views on the EU and NATO, proposing trilateral the EU-Russia-Moldova trade discussions<sup>20</sup>. At the same time he asked the ambassadors of America and Romania in Chisinau not to interfere into his activity<sup>21</sup>.

All these small and big practical things mean that I. Dodon started real pro-Russian activity, as if he wants to pay his Kremlin bill as fast as he can. Russia responds friendly, and it seems that the Moldavian president's words during his second visit to Moscow: "This year a new stage of our bilateral relations started – a stage of strategic partnership restoration. After the meeting, which I had with a president of Russian Federation in the beginning of the year, during two months many positive changes in our bilateral relations happened" – have real practical meaning<sup>22</sup>. But for the moment he is not powerful enough to bring Moldova back to the Russian sphere of influence (integrate it to the Eurasian Economic Union). Two obstacles are on his way.

<sup>17</sup> *Додон передал ЕС меморандум о сотрудничестве Молдовы с Евразийским союзом*, <[http://lb.ua/world/2017/01/25/356864\\_dodon\\_peredal\\_es\\_memorandum.html](http://lb.ua/world/2017/01/25/356864_dodon_peredal_es_memorandum.html)> (02.02.2017).

<sup>18</sup> *Moldova's Dodon fires Defense Minister Salaru: "He flirted with NATO"*, <[http://en.censor.net.ua/news/421224/moldovas\\_dodon\\_fires\\_defense\\_minister\\_salaru\\_he\\_flirted\\_with\\_nato](http://en.censor.net.ua/news/421224/moldovas_dodon_fires_defense_minister_salaru_he_flirted_with_nato)> (02.02.2017).

<sup>19</sup> *Moldova's leader plans to cancel agreement on establishing NATO Liaison Office in Chisinau*, <<http://trm.md/en/politic/igor-dodon-vrea-sa-anuleze-acordul-privind-deschiderea-biroului-nato-la-chisinau/>> (02.02.2017).

<sup>20</sup> *В Молдавии спорят об итогах визита президента Додона в Брюссель*, <[goo.gl/jJNZvH](http://goo.gl/jJNZvH)> (10.02.2017).

<sup>21</sup> *Президент Молдавии посоветовал послам США и Румынии не лезть в его дела*, <[https://lenta.ru/news/2017/02/26/bez\\_nravoucheniy/](https://lenta.ru/news/2017/02/26/bez_nravoucheniy/)> (01.03.2017).

<sup>22</sup> *Додон заявил о начале нового этапа в отношениях России и Молдавии*, <<https://ria.ru/world/20170316/1490217306.html>> (17.03.2017).

First is individual. There is one very influential person in Moldova. His name is Vladimir Plahotniuc – oligarch, who used to control the whole political process of the country. During last crisis V. Plahotniuc was on the side of the government (the West). After the victory of I. Dodon he said: “On the level of decision making Moldova is ruled by the pro-European government – not by pro-Russian president,” – and assured that there will be no denunciation of the Association Agreement with the EU and no agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, because it is against strategic priorities of Moldova<sup>23</sup>. Accordingly, the second obstacle on the Russian way of I. Dodon’s is systemic – pro-Western government and parliament, controlled by V. Plahotniuc and coordinated by the West.

But president of Moldova says that he is not going to give up. In his interview to “Deutsche Welle” he was very clear on his intentions<sup>24</sup>. Speaking about V. Plahotniuc and his political influence, I. Dodon explained: “He controls the Parliament and the Government, but he does not control the President. We will seek to organize early parliamentary elections or we will break this system after ordinary parliamentary elections”. Besides, I. Dodon said that he likes political system – strict power vertical – constructed in Belarus by Alexander Lukashenko, what can mean that he really wants to monopolize power in his hands. Finally, president of Moldova once again repeated that personally supports Eurasian Economic Union in comparison to the EU. At the same time I. Dodon accentuated that everything will depend on the position of the people of Moldova, but earlier he had said that he feels their support, and that they are against NATO and like the idea of the Eurasian integration<sup>25</sup>. This is not an empty populism, because president of Moldova has one very important political leverage in his hands – right to initiate referendum, which can give him a mandate to dissolve the parliament before its ordinary elections. And he did this<sup>26</sup>. Then Socialist party of the president (possibly with the help of “Our Party”), which is on the top of its popularity, is supposed to form a new parliamentary majority and government – pro-Russian ones. After that (not to

<sup>23</sup> “Я не уйду из политики, пока Молдова не станет сильной”. Плахотнюк высказался о президенте, оппозиции и краже миллиарда, <<http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/ya-ne-uydu-iz-politiki-poka-moldova-ne-stanet-silnoy-plahotnyuk-vyskazalsya-o-prez-29413>> (04.02.2017).

<sup>24</sup> Игорь Додон в программе “Немцова. Интервью”: Россия для Молдавии не пример, <<http://goo.gl/7B5Z5u>> (15.02.2017).

<sup>25</sup> Details here: Додон: судьба соглашения об ассоциации Молдовы с ЕС в руках народа, <<https://ru.sputnik.md/moldova/20170124/10939853/dodon-soglashenie-s-es-otmena-narod.html>> (04.02.2017); Опрос: более 40% граждан Молдавии поддерживают евразийский путь развития, <<http://www.ritm Eurasia.org/news--2017-02-04--prezident-moldavii-rasskazal-kakim-vidit-reshenie-pridnestrovskogo-voprosa-28223>> (04.02.2017).

<sup>26</sup> Додон инициировал референдум о расширении президентских полномочий, <<https://ru.sputnik.md/politics/20170118/10833003/dodon-referendum.html>> (29.03.2017).

speak about presumptive indirect help of Moscow to I. Dodon in the form of Russian trade and labour market for Moldovan products and gastarbeiters<sup>27</sup>, cheaper gas and/or preferential credits) Moldova's integration to the Eurasian Economic Union becomes a formality with a nice final accord.

It would be a great achievement of I. Dodon, if he could solve the problem of Transnistria in some way. And he wishes to – even had a meeting (first such in eight years) with his colleague from Tiraspol, which was positively evaluated in Moscow<sup>28</sup>, and wrote on his Facebook page that Transnistria must eventually become a part of Moldova with special status<sup>29</sup>. Tiraspol from its side proclaimed that it is ready discuss its political status with Chisinau in case of appropriate referendum (people will) in Moldova<sup>30</sup>. The plan in this context can be very simple – Moldova becomes a member of the Eurasian Economic Union together with (con)federated Transnistria (for example, on the background of some modified “Kozak plan”), what means that Chisinau will get integrated state and Tiraspol – formal affiliation with Russia it dreams of. Besides, Moscow will inevitably strengthen its political position in Moldova, because Transnistria voters and politicians, who will become the members of common institutions, are evidently pro-Russian.

It would be the end of the story “How the West lost Moldova to Russia”. But it is hard to believe that the West (some elites in America and the EU) and V. Plahotniuc will let this happen without fight.

## Conclusions

Moldova suffers from internal political instability for a long time, and the problem is complicated by Transnistria “frozen conflict” and geopolitical competition between the West and Russia for influence in this country. For the moment Moscow has been able to bring to power its candidate I. Dodon, but it is unclear, if he as a president can integrate Moldova to the Eurasian Economic

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<sup>27</sup> *Россия амнистировала молдавских мигрантов*, <<https://ru.sputnik.md/society/20170301/11467031/rossija-ammistirovala-moldavskih-migrantov.html>> (02.03.2017).

<sup>28</sup> *Президент России оценил мужество съездившего в Приднестровье Додона*, <[https://lenta.ru/news/2017/01/17/putin\\_dodon/](https://lenta.ru/news/2017/01/17/putin_dodon/)> (04.02.2017).

<sup>29</sup> *Президент Молдавии рассказал, каким видит решение приднестровского вопроса*, <<http://www.ritm Eurasia.org/news--2017-02-04--prezident-moldavii-rasskazal-kakim-vidit-reshenie-pridnestrovskogo-voprosa-28223>> (04.02.2017).

<sup>30</sup> *Приднестровье впервые готово обсуждать свой статус с Кишиневом*, <<http://izvestia.ru/news/666466>> (02.03.2017).

Union, because parliament of the state, backed by the West and oligarch V. Plahotniuc, is still pro-European.

Possibly, the decisive thing is that I. Dodon and his pro-Russian orientation is supported by the majority of Moldovan people, who have lost hope in European dream because of corruptive “democratic” government. Therefore, institute of referendum seems to become ideal mechanism for the president to monopolize power in his hands and bring Moldova back to the Russian sphere of influence.

Finally, potential additional advantage of I. Dodon is that the challenge of Transnistria can also be solved in connection to the Eurasian integration, because Chisinau with the help of Moscow will get unified state and Tiraspol – formal affiliation with Russia it dreams of.

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