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GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE

at No 267, 20 October 2018



Pro-Moldova, namely pro-Russia.

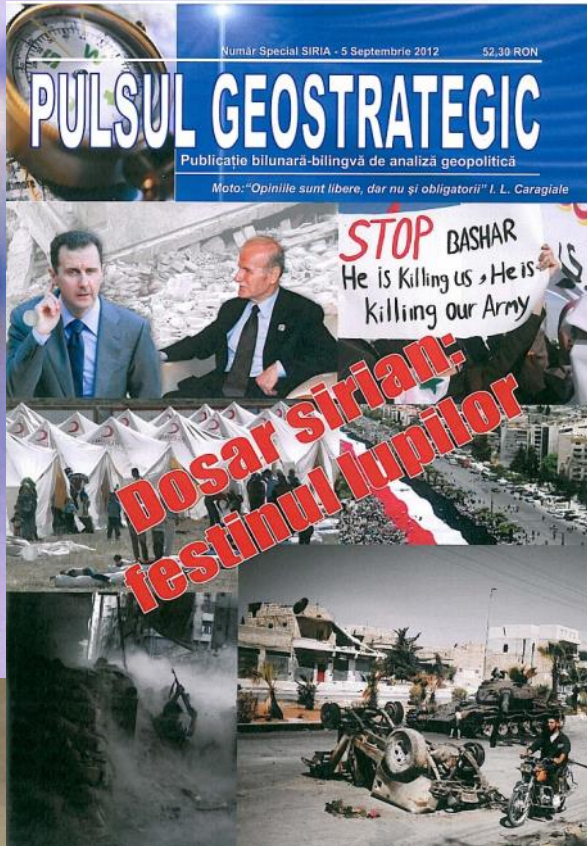
Chişinău stabs Kiev with Moscow's tacit nod



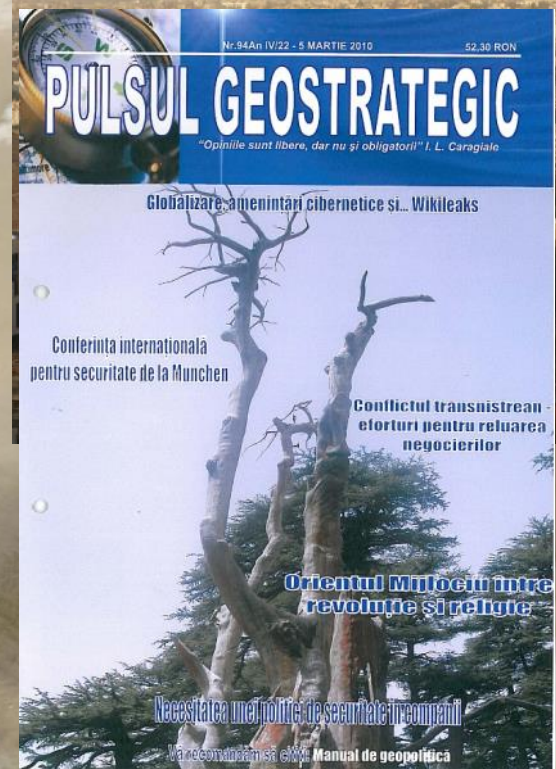
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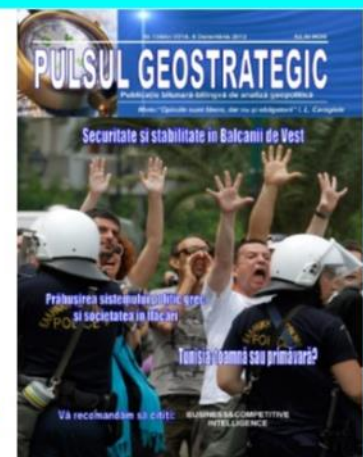
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Pro-Moldova, namely pro-Russia. Chişinău stabs Kiev with Moscow's tacit nod

*An analysis by Dan DUNGACIU**



In the 1970s, there was an American successful movie series called "Bewitched". The story was based on everyday's fears of the husband who wondered, and was always worried, of what surprises his witch consort had in store for him and to whom he swore eternal love.

This should be the feeling of those who have their minds set on betting, with guilty responsibility, on Plahotniuc-Dodon regime in Chişinău. In spite of an irresponsible and implausible readiness of Bucharest, which lasts explicitly since more than two years, the regime in Chişinău crosses all red lines which, in their naivete, some believed they will never cross. We are not speaking of the obvious signs of the cooperation of the binomial Plahotniuc-Dodon about whom we constantly wrote here at LARICS since 2017: the election of the director of the intelligence service (SIS) by the Parliament, joint nominations of ambassadors or judges, covering the theft of \$1 billion, voting together a new electoral legislation despite the western warnings, invalidating the elections in Chişinău and defying the EU and America, legitimising the Russian presence in R. of Moldova etc.



The special representative of the President-in-Office of OSCE for the Transnistrian settlement, Franco Frattini, and the president of DPM, Vladimir Plahotniuc

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The red line recently crossed is Vladimir Plahotniuc's and Igor Dodon's explicit and almost concomitant outburst, namely **abandonning the pro-European project and rhetorics** explicitly affirmed by the first and **the request for a referendum concerning Transnistria** made by the second. The synchronicity is obvious and the demarches in the mirror. The curtain has finally fallen in Chişinău. What LARICS said since a long time can be seen all-out, namely that the ultimate stake of Plahotniuc-Dodon binomial is a geopolitical/geostrategic one. More concretely, we speak about blurring the "European project" and the preparation of the "patriotic" coalition DMP (Plahotniuc) – Socialists' Party (Dodon) - "the independents" after the February 24th, 2019 parliamentarian elections with the prospect of "solving" the Transnistrian question in Russian terms, i.e. "special statute" for Transnistria. In short, the Transnistrianization of the R. of Moldova and moving the direct and explicit Russian influence to Romania's, NATO's and EU's frontier.

Before discussing at length the two synchronous gestures in Chişinău, **part of the binomial's strategic project we were speaking about**, we remind our readers a recent "spell" of the "wife" on the Prut River left bank which was overcome unforgivably fast, namely defying America and its tacit inclusion on the list of the international terrorism.

Chişinău places America on the list of international terrorism

We do not insist too much since LARICS approached already the topics. It is about the September 6th, 2018, gesture of the governance in Chişinău of arresting and sending to Turkey seven teachers of the Orizont College in Chişinău, one of the best schools in R. of Mol-



DPM president, Vladimir Plahotniuc and the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

dova, placed in the so-called "Gülenist movement". In spite of some authorities' embarrassing attempts to justify such gestures which obviously did not convince anyone, things are clear internally and externally: Turkey's financing (the presidency building, the national arena and others not made public) plus the possible Erdogan's visit to Chişinău had to be compensated somehow. Chişinău joined Pristina – and there are two entities in the world only, with the exception of Turkey, supporting such a demarche – of condemning and sanctioning the promoters of the "Gülenist terrorism" (Kosovo expelled on March 29th, 2018, six Turks who worked in the network of the Gülenist schools). By the way, in Kosovo (nevertheless a Muslim entity) Turkey manages the only region's airport, the electricity network and built two highways worth \$2 billion. What would be the price in Chişinău?

Mimicking the stupefaction, the pro-European scenery went out on ramp – the prime minister Filip – minister Leancă – the speaker Candu rolled over their eyes: setting up investigative commissions, committees, explanations etc. As if SIS would have acted on its own, autonomously, giving to itself political orders and against the grain with the government. Obviously, a cheap show. Let us remind, by the way, that SIS is not even under president Dodon's control and the appointment of the director of the institution and of his deputies is in Chişinău the prerogative of the parliament, namely of the parliamentary majority, i.e. DPM led by Vladimir Plahotniuc. (This was in fact the first visible and obvious deal between Plahotniuc and Dodon, as the latter, immediately after being elected president, accepted without a frown the fact that under his own eyes the parliament changed the legislation and took from the newly elected president the prerogative of appointing the director of SIS and offering this right to... Vladimir Plahotniuc).

One thing becomes clear for everybody. If Chişinău placed the teachers of the didactic network of Orizont type of Fethullah Gülen on the international terrorism list and the leader of this network Fethullah Gülen is still in the USA, without being expelled to Turkey, as Ankara requests insistently, that means we have not to wait too much until R. of Moldova will place on the list of international terrorism the... United States of America. That would be the immediate and logic consequence of expelling the "terrorist" teachers.

If anyone believes that Chişinău's gesture did not light a red lamp in Washington he/she is profoundly wrong. It is not yet clear if it was lightened up in Romania, too. It is beyond any doubt that gestures such as the absence of the minister of Defense of the R. of Moldova from the NATO Summit in Brussels, the lack of reaction of the official Chişinău to the fact that Russian armored cars and trucks without distinctive signs move around unhindered on the left bank of Nistru (Dniester) River (August 2018) or expelling the "Gülenist terrorists" from R. of Moldova raise strategic question marks which were or will be probably addressed including to the constant guarantor and partner of the governance in Chişinău. Namely to Bucharest.

With this small preamble, let us move to Chişinău's last "spells". Two in fact.

Signals for the East: the governing party is no longer "pro-European" – it becomes "pro-Moldova"

On September 14th, 2018, the National Political Council of the Democrat Party of Moldova (DPM), the governing party, met in Chişinău. In a press briefing, the leader of DPM, Vlad Plahotniuc, presented a series of extremely evocative changes from strategic perspective. The most important change is an **"actions plan through which DPM defines itself more categorically as a pro-Moldova party"**. No pro-European, pro-West or any other politi-

cal adhesion. Neither with the East, nor with the West. Simply "pro-Moldova"!

Here's the "argumentation": "DPM will go through several changes in what concern the



The logo of the Democrat Party of Moldova PHOTO Canal3.md

way it acts as well as its positioning on the political stage. Until now, the false impression was created for the citizens that they have to be pro-European, pro-Russian etc. and to move in one direction. No party acted for Moldova, the false impression was created that someone abroad takes care of us... ***I have discussed with the colleagues an actions plan through which DPM starts as of today to define itself as a pro-Moldova party which acts for the citizens and (for solving) the problems they are confronted with***". And more: "We want to get assured that DPM fulfils the people's will. The entire DPM's team will work for collecting these proposals from the citizens in the country's localities", Vlad Plahotniuc added. "The government will adapt its work to the population's requirements. DPM will come with a series of proposals and projects appearing after the consultations with the people in the country".

If it would't be a serious issue, it would be laughable:

DPM will start "the consultation with the people", Vladimir Plahotniuc says. Maybe he will ask where is the billion, who stole it and if anyone knows about that? However, wasn't it better that Mr Plahotniuc launch a consultation with the competent institutions for taking care of identifying the culprits of the "theft of the century" and, eventually, to recover the money?

DPM is no longer "pro-Europe". After it will collect projects and proposals from the people, who will finance them? From where will get R. of Moldova the money? If it isn't any longer "pro-European" but pro-Moldova, from where will the government ask for money? More concretely, from whom?

And we reach now the real stakes of the DPM leader's demarche. In reality, ***it is not so***

important that the governing party assumed the title of "pro-Moldova", as it is the fact that it gave up the explicit title of "pro-European". It was clear for everybody that R. of Moldova had in substance no chance whatsoever for the European integration with the current government formula. Something else is important, namely the **signal for the East.** Vladimir Plahotniuc and his party conveyed a clear signal to both Transnistria and Russia. The European idea is gradually blurred in Chişinău due to strategic and geopolitical reasons. **What Chişinău does by that is the preparation for "solving" the Transnistrian issue.** The change of rhetorics, of the symbology, of the focus, is the political and strategic preparation while implementing the so-called small steps is the political-administrative preparation of the process. A process which, we will see later on, is the main stake of the 2019 general elections. Let us keep in mind this aspect. For other steps will follow in the same score. Tiraspol – Moscow, y compris – do not like to hear too loudly the "pro-European" idea as it would be unnatural for the regime there to "reintegrate" itself with a Chişinău effectively and discursively committed to Europe. This is why Chişinău chosed to adjust itself from all points of view with the prospect of "reintegration". As it chosed to continuously give up in the framework of the "small steps" policy, it accepted to make concessions in what concern the ideological aspects and strategic vision. **So, the Transnistrian handkerchief on the European dulcimer...**

Vladimir Plahotniuc's message of "consulting the people in the country" includes, although hidden, another ingredient. Consulting the people may include, isn't it, a referendum, too. Including on the Transnistrian issue! That was on Vladimir Plahotniuc's tip of tongue. He was going to tell that explicitly but realized he was entering the field granted ideologically to his (second) binomial colleague, namely Igor Dodon. The president was charged, recently, (upon Russia's suggestion?), with public communication, with political massages, and the ideology speaking of the Transnistrian issue (yet having in mind that the difficult issues are negotiated with the pair Vladimir Plahotniuc – Victor Guşan, the chairman of Sheriff group). And Igor Dodon took over this movement and came with the proposal of referendum, perfectly synchronized with the DPM's initiative of becoming now "pro-Moldova" and of discussing with the citizens. Igor Dodon's idea in connection with the referendum for solving the Transnistrian issue is therefore the natural and logical consequence of the DPM leader's "pro-Moldova" message.

Dodon is betraying Plahotniuc and throws the referendum test. The government is keeping silent strategically

Five days after changing the "pro-European" vector into DPM's "pro-Moldova", on September 19th, 2018, president Igor Dodon strengthened the pro-Moldova option and revealed its strategic stake at a TV station in Chişinău.

Igor Dodon says explicitly that "after the parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova, **a referendum concerning the form of reintegration of the separatist Transnistrian region** could take place. There is no other alternative but the reintegration, so advances should be made in what concern free movement on the two banks of Dniester River as well as in what concern the political dialogue: after the parliamentary elections, we will discuss concrete scenarios on how this reintegration can take place yet something very important – any form of reintegration, of living together, will be discussed with all Republic of Moldova's citizens in the framework of a referendum".

After a formula will be agreed upon domestically, "the reintegration alternative will be



submitted to the international community“.

Let us understand very clear that Dodon, although he doesn't say that, speaks of the *political* settlement of the conflict which should precede the *military* settlement (the illegal presence of the Russian military and of Russian ammunition in Cobasna). Only after the political settlement, namely a "special status" for Transnistria, Dodon says, the "military troops on the left side of Dniester River must leave the area together with the weapons there“.

President Igor Dodon's messages are as clear as daylight:

The simple fact that the issue of the *political* mechanisms of settlement is raised before the Russian troops' withdrawal moves officially Chișinău's negotiating position even lower than the famous principle of "synchronization" presented in Primakov Memorandum (1997) which suggested that the Russian troops' withdrawal and the political settlement (federalization or special status for Transnistria) be achieved concomitantly (synchronized). Today, Chișinău gives up much more: it accepts to define a "special status" for the region even before the troops leave and the ammunitions on the left bank of Dniester River be removed.

In reality, what the authorities in Chișinău do now, including president Igor Dodon, contradicts the R. of Moldova's legislation unanimously voted in the parliament (*Law* No. 173

of 22.07.2005), which is very clear in this respect and which says that after the "region's demilitarization and decriminalization" only one could move to a discussion or negotiation of its political status. Igor Dodon knows that very well yet threw the issue precisely for relativizing the republic's legislation and opening a discussion front, **including for preparing the amendment of the respective legislation for which the future "patriotic coalition" (Dodon-Plahotniuc-"the independents") will need 3/5th of the votes in parliament.**

The government's response to Igor Dodon's initiative is nil. Complete silence. Nothing fortuitous and nothing surprising. It is obvious it is a joint scenario in which the two actors who will govern together after the 2019 parliamentary elections are testing the domestic market yet the external one, too, including Romania. As far as Romania is concerned, an actor Chişinău is interested in because it remained the only western actor guaranteeing and financing unconditionally the republic, here the reactions to the "spells" of the wife in Chişinău shine each time by default. As it happens now.

Transnistria's message. Russia's in fact

In diplomatic terms, Tiraspol is at the front. Chişinău gives up massively, systematically, on all fronts. Even the so-called Chişinău's request of withdrawal of the Russian troops



Photo: The special representative of the OSCE's President-in-Office for the Transnistrian settlement, Franco Frattini, hands over on September 10th, 2018, in Tiraspol the new "neutral" registration plates (different from those on the right bank of Dniester River) for the Transnistrian cars allowing them to legally circulate outside R. of Moldova(!). Besides him the "RMN's Foreign Affairs minister", Vitali Ignatiev (left), other diplomats in Chişinău, among whom the USA's ambassador, James Pettite (right).

from R. of Moldova's territory plays in Russia's favor, too, because the withdrawal request does not refer at all to the so-called pacifying troops which presence becomes, through Chişinău's initiative at the UN, legitimate (Chişinău's request to the UN refers exclusively to the Operative Group of Russian Troops - GOTR, in theory the second component of the Russian troops in the region).



*"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs" of "Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic"(RMN)
(Pridnestrovskaia Moldavskaia Respublika)*

The policy of "small steps" is undoubtedly in Transnistria's favor as we have shown previously when Tiraspol obtained from Chişinău the right for the cars of the self-proclaimed RMN to circulate freely outside the separatist region by accepting "neutral" registration plates which, watch out, are manufactured and delivered not in the territory Chişinău controls, as it would have been normal, because Chişinău guarantees and equate the registration plates, but in... Tiraspol and Râbniţa. I.e. Chişinău gave up the location and the supplier of the "neutral" plates. The Transnistrians may now go anywhere in the world with their personal cars without being obliged to have Chişinău's official plates, but "neutral" ones. Why would they need to reintegrate with the R. of Moldova?

On September 19th, 2018, the RMN's "Ministry of Foreign Affairs" commented promptly on president Dodon's proposals concerning the referendum.

No surprise, the message turns around the main line of message launched every time by Tiraspol under Moscow's nod: the only alternative Transnistria is preparing for domestically and internationally is as independent state recognized internationally (the only issue it does not state is why Moscow doesn't want that and never hurried, in any circumstance, to hint to the recognition of the "RMN").

The message rejects Igor Dodon's initiative: basically, the Transnistrian region considers itself a "state", at least in the making and on its way of being recognized internationally as depository of the popular sovereignty which is the only one which can affirm something making sense about the Region's and its citizen's future. The seven referenda that have taken place in Transnistria are being reminded, culminating with that of September 17th, 2006, when it was decided almost unanimously the "independence and, later on, free adherence to the Russian Federation".

It is a rejection, but a strategical one, with doors left open:

Everything is diplomatic, decent, thoughtful, nothing blunt. Tiraspol doesn't bark at Chişinău as it doesn't want in any case breaking off or blocking the negotiations with Chişinău (It is obvious Moscow doesn't want that, as main sponsor and beneficiary of the dialogue).

The argumentation is ample meaning that Tiraspol takes seriously what Chişinău says, talks, argues and expresses its point of view.

It is a bit ironic when admits that referendum is, after all, "something new for the Moldavian policy" and remarks – correctly – that no Chişinău's decision concerning "RMN" was taken after referendum and given the protests taking place of late in Chişinău, it could be tested on other topics, incidentally the future of the republic.

The sequence of the passages is very important, too. The grave way of expressing "RMN's" sovereignty is placed in Tiraspol's statement after the paragraph speaking of referenda as in a game suggesting that, nevertheless, the previous referenda were nor the last word. Namely, if needed, other referenda could be organized on the left bank of the Dniestr River... And there, in the words of Stalin, it is known who is counting the votes!

In the end, Tiraspol's statement reminds that the "RMN" is against the withdrawal of the "pacifying Russian forces from the territory of the region". The explicit ignorance of the troops of GOTR is either a bizarre element or surprisingly eloquent. Since the manner in which Tiraspol construed, the consensus with Chişinău is complete as we have already shown, as neither Chişinău requested the UN the Russian Federation's pacifying troops' withdrawal, but of GOTR troops only. Generally, in Tiraspol's position, there are no differences between the pacifying troops and GOTR yet it is very revealing that in the statement of "RMN's Ministry of Foreign Affairs" in response to Igor Dodon's initiative, there isn't any longer any distinction between the two and reference is made strictly to the "Russian Federation's pacifying troops".

Tiraspol's statement is perfectly consistent with the entire context. Tiraspol/Moscow negotiate and negotiate tough. Yet... negotiate! The nuances of the message to Igor Dodon's proposals should be discerned from this perspective.

Let us not forget ***that there were 83 (!!!) meetings in 8674 between Chişinău and Tiraspol representatives under the close scrutiny of the Russian Federation.*** Their purpose was the negotiation process, the implementation of the "small steps". In the mean time, Tiraspol begun to issue, as of September 10th, registration plates to the applicants and is preparing for the next "5 plus 2" meeting on which agenda the "RMN's" representatives will place the issue of telecommunications and of the trials the prosecutor's office in Chişinău initiated against certain leaders in Tiraspol (and the latter want them to be suspended). Whatever is going on further is plainly to the unrecognized republic's benefit.

Tiraspol is playing tough for this is the way Moscow negotiates. And, for the time being, it took it all, since it is Chişinău only which continuously, massively and irreversibly gave up. And only Chişinău. Why would Tiraspol make concessions if everything went so well so far? Isn't it clear that the stakes should be raised as high as possible so later on one has from where to diminish one's claims?

Geopolitical consequences

We are still far from a clarification yet the tendencies are more than obvious. Here are some of them:

The binomial Plahotniuc-Dodon's handovers in their relation with Tiraspol are increasingly eloquent and Chişinău is, with every passing day, increasingly explicit in showing the direction it is heading to. The Russian Federation is explicit, too, and does not need to withdraw its troops before any political settlement. And, nevertheless, R. of Moldova gives up in all fields, violating practically its own legislation.



Sample of neutral registration plates agreed upon and acknowledged by Chişinău for allowing the circulation of Transnistrian cars anywhere in the world

Chişinău plays in relation to Russia a completely different score than Kiev's and is becoming a major regional vulnerability, including for Ukraine. A handout of R. of Moldova would be a pressure element for Ukraine. The latter understood that and conveys signals accordingly. Ukraine's ambassador in R. of Moldova did not attend the "historical" opportunity in Tiraspol of Franco Frattini's handing over of registration plates on September 10th, 2018. Let us not forget that, in the end, Ukraine attends too the "5 plus 2", therefore Kiev has still a role to play in the settlement.

The handouts Chişinău offers now will not lead, if nothing radically changes in the international or regional context, to the independence of the Transnistrian region. Yet they generate two effects. The first of them, they strongly strengthen Tiraspol's negotiating position since the so far concessions of the "small steps" policy could never be taken back. The second pertains to the essential remark that the "small steps" are in no case social and economic ones only, they are political steps in configuring Transnistria's future political status in the framework of the envisaged federation. Therefore, Tiraspol wins anyway. If a settlement of the conflict is not reached, the life of the citizens in the region will improve anyway, the Transnistrian elites will become more independent from Chişinău and, in the end, will acquire legitimacy. And, if, in the end, the conflict is settled, it will be anyway in the framework of a "special status". The moment when it will negotiate its political status in the future configuration, Tiraspol would have gained already a good part of prerogatives through these "small steps". There is one single loser: R. of Moldova's pro-Western project which is not anylonger a priority in Chişinău, as Vladimir Plahotniuc clearly indicated recently through "pro-Moldova" project (except for the case private or public money may come into the republic or to their leaders, either from Brussels or from Bucharest).

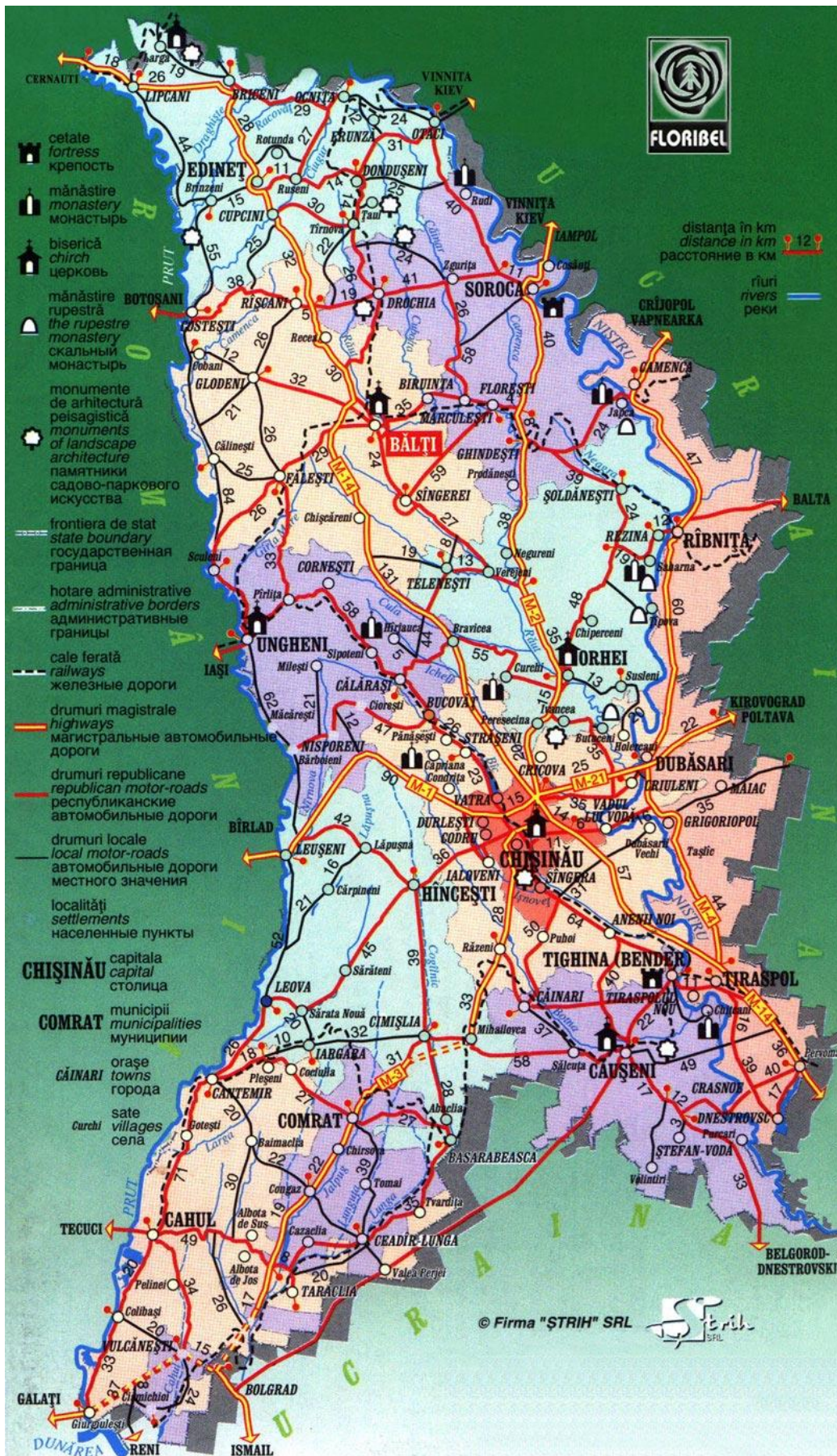
Russia plays tough the Transnistrian card and snatches as many as possible concessions from Chişinău before the final step. A step which is not imminent taking into account the international context. Moscow's purpose is obvious, namely a "special status" for Transnistria within R. of Moldova through which **the part controls the whole** or, in a more plastic way, "the tail wags the dog". Sending back again the same famous Dmitri Kozak, the author of the Memorandum with the same name, to manage the process is overriding and, this time, will not allow himself to err as it was the case in 2013.

It is obvious that a good part of Transnistria's negotiation is done by Russia an eye out for Ukraine. A solution obtained there, read Chişinău's capitulation, will be translated in Ukraine, too, and therefore the pressure on the neighbouring state for a "special statute" similar for the separatist Donbass will increase geometrically.

The international context is troubled with incomparable more questions than answers. **Russia waits at least for the November elections in the USA to see with whom it has to discuss and if it has something to discuss anylonger.** For the time being, it prepares the ground, and the Transnistrian file is one negotiating element, including through its connection with Ukraine. As usual, a series of European states, especially Germany, are open to dialogue and concessions. It is not clear what Donald Trump's America will do and how the configuration of power there will look like, and this is why the November elections are crucial.

Let it be clear for everybody: for Romania, the Transnistriazation of R. of Moldova would mean, on a medium and long run, neighbouring Russia. What would Bucharest do in the situation to react? What would be the red line violated by the binomial Plahotniuc-Dodon from which thereafter it will react and will not guarantee anylonger R. of Moldova? What is the red line after which, as it is the case in Hungary, the partnership with R. of Moldova cannot be considered anylonger "strategical"? Questions with no answers so far.

Boldlines belong to the author. Article published on September, 24th, 2018, by LARICS, larics.ro and republished with the kind acceptance of the author.





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“GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE” - founded by Corneliu PIVARIU in 2007

Bilingual monthly bulletin published by
INGEPO Consulting - Braşov
www.ingepo.ro; Ph: +4-0268 47 00 70

J08/2898/2006, CUI RO19298677/2006

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Computer Editing: Ionuţ PARASCHIV

Printed at: S.C. YOLANS S.R.L.. Braşov

ISSN: 1843-701X

Cover: colaj R. Moldova

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Print edition = 1.255,20 RON/314,00 Euro/ 390,00 USD

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