

With Romania's entry into the EU, the border with Moldova has become the European frontier and this has created a series of difficulties for Moldavians, considering also that the precarious economic condition of the country, considered the most economically devastated one on our continent, causes continuous emigration. Corruption, which certainly does not attract potential foreign investors, is flourishing. In this framework, Voronin's popularity, the president and friend of the Russians...

Moldova: a black hole in Europe

GEOPOLITICS 3

by Fernando Orlandi

On 25 August, during the talk-show "Conversation with the President" on State-controlled NIT television, Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin claimed that the only problem in relations with Moscow has to do with the secessionists of Transnistria. For the rest, in his words, relations with Putin's Russia are normal: "Our relationship with Russia is truly normal and civil. It is in line with current international standards, in the spirit of comradeship and based on three hundred years of friendship between our people. With President Vladimir Putin we agree on developing this relationship following the same spirit. There is only one obstacle along the way: the problem of Transnistria".

Then Voronin added: "Russia has recently adopted a truly constructive attitude to the issue. It is no secret that Russia has a great influence on Transnistria. And the solution to the Transnistrian question would help intensify links with Russia in every respect".

A Soviet career

Voronin's career is an exemplary Soviet biography: born on 25 May 1941 in Corjova, he studied at the Chisinau Co-operative College and then at the Institute for Food Industry. In 1983 he graduated from the Academy of Social Sciences of the Communist Party's Central Committee of the Soviet Union and in 1991 from the Academy of the Ministry of the Home



Affairs (Interior) of the Soviet Union. In parallel to the qualifications went administrative and political posts. In short, his career was very smooth, with the party following him from its beginning right up to his position of power. In 1983 he was an Inspector and Vice-Head of the Organisation section of the Communist Party's Central Committee of Moldova. In 1985 he became head of a section of the Council of Ministers of Moldova and at the same time held the post of First Secretary of the Bender party committee.

During the Soviet era, he reached the level of General and in 1989-90 he was the Minister of Home Affairs of Moldova.

Shortly after having assumed this post, he found himself in a very difficult situation. While *perestroika* was in full swing, in Soviet Moldova the Popular Front, which fights for democracy in the country, demanded that the celebrations of the Bolsheviks taking power (celebrated on 7 November) take place without a military parade, a “show of force” that would intimidate the democratic movement and was not in line with the “new thought” of Mikhail Gorbachev.

The parade however was not cancelled and the celebrations were overshadowed by a demonstration gathering more people than the official event. Despite the ferocious intervention of the forces of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the demonstrators managed to stop the parade, the only time this occurred in the Soviet Union that year. Clashes were rather violent and arrests were made. On 10 November, “Military Day”, around twenty demonstrators were still in prison. A protest organised in front of the Ministry of Home Affairs led to more violent military action. The disproportionate use of force obtained the opposite result than the authorities desired: the protest quickly spread and the same building of the Ministry of Home Affairs was attacked. The situation calmed down only when all the people arrested on both 7 and 10 November were released.

In the following days, Moscow reacted by sending at least 4,000 soldiers and Minister of Home Affairs Voronin found himself under investigation, accused of negligence, basically for not having sufficiently repressed the protests. But he did not fall into disgrace: he was transferred to Moscow where he continued working for the pan-Soviet Ministry of Home Affairs and then, at the end of the USSR, in Boris Yeltsin’s early years, in the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Russian Federation.

Voronin, who some claim continues to be a General for Russia’s Ministry of Home Affairs, returned to Moldova some years later to rebuild and direct the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova. In March of 1998 he was elected to Parliament (and re-elected at the subsequent elections of February 2001). Having found himself in unpleasant situations (in 2000, in one of his interventions in the chamber, he defined the



_The popularity of the Moldavian President Voronin (above: photographed with his ally Putin in Istanbul in June on the occasion of the BSEC summit) is now in free fall. The opposition won the local elections

national flag as “fascist”), he has also been accused of having relations with controversial figures, such as the businessman Boris Birshtein.

A united family

Elected President of the Republic on 7 April 2001, Voronin was reconfirmed in 2005. His son Oleg quickly became the most successful businessman of the country. The press repeatedly reports the hushed-up scandals and investigations which inexplicably stop when the circle closes. His father, in spite of the presidential post, continues to maintain Russian as well as Moldovan citizenship.

Oleg Voronin is undoubtedly the richest man of the poorest and most devastated country on our continent. According to the *Global Corruption Report* published by Transparency International, the judiciary



system is among the most corrupt in the world. The *Failed State Index* has Moldova as the worst State in Europe, with a worse judgement than the one given to Belarus with its dictator Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The country also receives a terrible rating according to the Country Risk Service of the Economist Intelligence Unit: the risks for those investing in Moldova equal those of Syria, Ivory Coast, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Oleg Voronin's financial interests concern the most unlikely industries. For the *Centrul de Investigatii Jurnalistice*, the President of the Republic has built himself a real business clan. According to the results of one of their investigations, companies and State bodies have transferred their finances to FinComBank, chaired by Oleg Voronin, who is also the owner of a series of off-shore companies, including Orbit Enterprises Ltd (registered in Gibraltar). It is said that Voronin's son also has interests in the wine exporting industry, through the company Wine International Project (registered in Nicosia). However, the wine industry is the subject of a series of feuds and retaliations put in place by Moscow. After the gas feud, which hit the country's finances,

Rospotrebnadzor, the Russian federal service for the supervision of consumer rights, blocked the import of wine from Moldova in March 2006. The country exports 80% of its production to Russia and due to this arbitrary measure (according to analysis by Western technical experts that wine is not sophisticated or dangerous for consumers), earnings from exports reduced last year to 173 million dollars against 313 million dollars in 2005.

Once again Russia could not resist employing a financial lever to achieve political aims.

Extremely difficult financial conditions

With the entrance of Romania into the European Union (1 January 2007), the border with Moldova has become the EU's new frontier, and this has caused a series of new difficulties for Moldavians desiring to get in the West, who now have to obtain a visa.

The country's precarious conditions generate emigration. Even though its gross national product is growing, the development of the economy is more and more dependent on the transfer of wages from those working

abroad, while mass emigration is having negative repercussions on the nation's society.

In this context, Voronin's popularity is currently free-falling. Local elections of June 2007 saw the unexpected victory of the anti-communist opposition and Dorin Chirtoaca, a young Liberal (29-years-old), already an activist for the defence of human rights, became the new mayor of the capital. The change in the electoral mood is worrying the President, who is now looking for an agreement with Moscow. For Voronin the key is in solving the conflict in Transnistria. Vladimir Socor, a well-known analyst, of the Jamestown Foundation, in recent months has obtained a copy of the draft of the agreement discussed by Voronin and Putin. According to Socor, "a frustrated Voronin continuously increases the price he is prepared to pay to get Putin's consent to an agreement that Moldova can tolerate". And the price includes the subordination of the national economy to the Russian Federation.

A black hole in Europe

On 27 August Moldova celebrated its independence. The country, which today finds itself between Romania and Ukraine, was part of Romania in the years between 1918 and 1939 (with the name of Bessarabia), until Bucharest was forced to surrender it to the Soviet Union in 1940. The subsequent annexation by the USSR led to the re-imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet. In the years of *perestroika* the question of language assumed a heavily political meaning, and on 31 August 1989, when it was still part of the USSR, the Supreme Soviet of the country promulgated a law that restored Latin characters and made Romanian (Moldavian) the country's official language. The issue of the alphabet unleashed heated political arguments, quickly flaring up into violence and armed battles. From a political point of view, Soviet-obedient conservatives backed Cyrillic, whereas the new democratic opposition concentrated in the Popular Front wanted the Latin alphabet. Hence the path opened for the secession of Transnistria, also thanks to the support supplied by the troops of the Fourteenth Soviet Army and the political coverage supplied during the years by Moscow, in violation of the international

commitments assumed, which provided for the withdrawal of their military.

21 July 2007, a month before Independence Day, marked the fifteenth anniversary of the end of fighting in Transnistria (there were more than 1,000 victims). The self-proclaimed republic with its capital at Tiraspol has never received any international acknowledgement and constitutes a real black hole at the heart of Europe. Without any international control system, the territory of Transnistria is the perfect sanctuary for every kind of illegal traffic and criminal activity. It is a thorn in the European Union's side in terms of security.

Russia maintains a military presence of about 1,500 men in Transnistria, officially as peacekeepers, but in reality to maintain the status quo and protect the regime in Tiraspol.

The unresolved conflict (one of the so-called four "frozen conflicts" in Europe, together with that of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia and that of Nagorno Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia) has also generated a number of repercussions on the international scene and the military dimension of European security. Due to the Russian military presence against the will of the government of Moldova, the United States and NATO member countries have not ratified the 1999 version of the Treaty of Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), which governs military deployment on our continent (recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin used the failed ratification derived from non-fulfilment by Moscow as a pretext to announce the withdrawal of Russia from the treaty).

Is a solution to the conflict in sight?

In 2003, an agreement between Chisinau and Moscow was reached (the so-called Kozak Memorandum), which favoured the secessionists. The Russian plan included the federation of Moldova with the separatist region of Transnistria, but at the last minute Voronin pulled out, for fear of paying too high a price for the agreement and re-orienting his country towards the EU. The following year, after the decision to close the few schools using Moldavian still open in Transnistria, the situation became more tense and Voronin defined the regime in



_Voronin is counting on winning favour with the electorate once again by resolving the conflict in Transnistria, the self-proclaimed republic which has never received any international acknowledgement and constitutes a dangerous black hole at the heart Europe

Tiraspol as a “trans-national criminal group”. In reality, over the years the conflict has greatly diminished from an ethnic and linguistic point of view. The only thing left really is the “different orientation” of the two territories: Moldova aspires to EU integration while the management in power at Tiraspol believe its future lies with Russia. Situations change and political worries have led Voronin to look to Moscow again (a good three meetings with Putin in June). Secret negotiations between Chisinau and Moscow have had the effect of re-awakening the EU from its slumber. On 12 July the European Parliament adopted a unanimous resolution demanding that the EU participate directly in negotiations concerning Transnistria,

while condemning a series of repressive actions implemented by the “totalitarian regime of Transnistria”. Even Washington is beginning to move, and officials from the State Department are exploring, together with governments of some European countries, the possibility of creating a multinational peacekeeping force for Transnistria. If this project goes ahead and the international community starts being assertive, the conflict in Transnistria could find a solution.