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UNITATE ÎN VREMURI ÎNTUNECATE DE AMENINȚĂRI ȘI INCERTITUDINE: abordarea durabilității și rezilienței la provocările externe și interne

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Rezumat: *Noile amenințări din politica globală fac ca situația de securitate din Europa și din spațiul post-sovietic să fie mai puțin stabilă și transparentă. Administrația Trump, din diverse motive și uneori necunoscute, caută cel puțin o posibilitate de conciliere cu Rusia lui Putin, neacceptând o izolare și pedepsire pentru numeroase crime comise de aceasta împotriva umanității în Ucraina și dincolo de aceasta. UE pare a fi lăsată singură de SUA, iar unitatea NATO este, de asemenea, pusă sub semnul întrebării. În aceste condiții pentru Ucraina și Moldova, este vital să se reconsidere politicile lor externe și interne pentru a obține mai multe resurse pentru sustenabilitatea democratiției, reziliență și protejarea suveranității. Numeroși factori subminează unitatea acestor țări din interior și din străinătate. De aceea, cercetătorul trebuie să caute o contraforță care să poată reduce riscurile existente și să conducă statele și societatea noastră către o dezvoltare mai stabilă și prosperă. Solidaritatea și sprijinul din partea UE rămân extrem de valoroase. Totuși, există un anumit potențial în cooperarea dintre Moldova și Ucraina, împreună cu multe dintre țările din Europa Centrală și de Est, care rămâne neatins până în prezent. Aceste resurse și potențial sunt discutate în lucrare.*

Cuvinte cheie: Ucraina. Schimbări globale, agresiunea rusească, democrația amenințată, reziliență.

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UNITY IN DARK TIMES OF THREATS AND INCERTAINABILITY: sustainability approaching resilience to external and domestic challenges

Abstract: *New threats in global policy make the security situation in Europe and the post-Soviet space even less stable and transparent. The D. Trump administration, for various and sometimes unclear reasons, seeks at least rapprochement with Russia, appeasement of V. Putin rather than of containment and punishment for many crimes committed by Russia against humanity in Ukraine and beyond. The EU seems to be left on its own by the US, and the unity of NATO is also being questioned. According to these conditions for Ukraine and Moldova, it is vital to reconsider their foreign and domestic policies to get more resources for democratic sustainability, resilience, and protection of sovereignty. Plenty of factors undermine these countries' unity from within and abroad. That's why the researcher has to look for a counterforce that can lower existing risks and drive our states and society towards more stable and prosperous development. The solidarity and support from the EU remain crucially valuable. Still, there is some potential in cooperation between Moldova and Ukraine, together with many of the CEE countries, which remain untouched till now. Those resources and potential are discussed in the paper.*

Keywords: Ukraine. Global changes, Russian aggression, democracy under threat, resilience.

This paper touches upon the dramatically changing conditions we are living in now. World affairs are getting darker because of an avalanche of threats and uncertainty covering our continent and the globe. This statement is true because we live under clouds of ascending uncertainty and turbulence. The rapid rebirth of Russian imperialism is especially dangerous, which the author attributes to the case of retroimperial policy and politics of that country's leadership. Russia pursues its vicious interests, which are flavored by its pervasive understanding of history and its attempt to disseminate Kremlin visions of a past time. It advocates aggressive claims to restore Russia's role as a superpower, not only a regional one but a global superpower. For doing so, the territories of the former USSR and the former Communist bloc are a special place for Russian national interests and domination. More precisely, they are the targets for Russia's propaganda and military machinery. The new reality, which Russia tried to construct,

was launched openly in 2008, when the Russo-Georgian War happened. Later, with the Russian intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, it became evident. From the full-fledged aggression of Russia since the 24th of February, 2022, only the naivest and optimistic persons might be doubting what is going on with Russia nowadays.

Still, since the beginning of 2025, we are to adapt ourselves even to a quickly changing, more complicated political environment, and not only in Ukraine and Moldova. Starting from the outbreak of Russia's full-fledged intervention in Ukraine, we used to rely on certain international solidarity with the Western democratic countries, presided over by the United States. However, with the change of the American administration, a situation began changing. When Donald Trump returned to the President's office, he suddenly exercised a very sharp and dramatic departure from the United States' well-established role as a flagship of the democratic world to the so-called 'honest broker' in dealing with a dubious perspective of a good peace with Russia and Ukraine. Then, all of a sudden, we see that President Trump and some of his close associates repeat Kremlin words and propaganda clichés, literally just the exact phrases. To recall some of too many, it's about tricks with making Ukraine not Russia guilty for the war. One might recall a famous, groundless allegation that President Vladimir Zelensky is a dictator. When a journalist asked D. Trump about his opinion regarding Mr. Vladimir Putin, he said he doesn't use these words.

So, who began this terrible war to D. Trump? Suddenly, for him it seems that Ukraine attacked Russia, and Russia just defended itself, not because of Ukraine's threat, but because of NATO enlargement. It's very well-known that all the countries of Eastern Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, which aimed at NATO's membership, wanted to see NATO enlarged so as not to threaten Russia. They moved to the Alliance, seeing themselves dangerously threatened by Russia. All in all, it's a very case for NATO enlargement. It might be understood why the Kremlin lies and manipulates facts. So, what prompts Washington to follow the same way, making consequences replace the reasons vis-à-vis Ukraine's vital need to join NATO?

One might recall that after the beginning of Russian intervention in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden promptly applied for NATO membership and were accepted relatively soon. What we have now to observe is that the Trump administration is closer to supporting retroimperialist claims of Russia. Intriguingly, the former claims to Canada and Greenland [2, 3 - 4]

are well understood and supported by the latter. So, it looks like a package of a 'big deal'. Please, you want to annex Canada and Greenland, so do we with Ukraine and the post-Soviet space. Thus, this 'big deal' threatens not only Ukraine and Moldova, but also European countries and beyond.

These new challenges require reconsidering the meaning and importance of European solidarity. Europe should be united, staying together as close as ever before. The United States is hardly a reliable and trustworthy strategic partner for us. Worst of all, the USA might be transforming into a reliable partner for Putin's Russia.

Thus, scholars and experts must reconsider all previous ideas and concepts born from the Cold War and post-Cold War era, primarily in International relations and security studies. Western Europe (and later Central Europe too), after the end of the Second World War, incredibly, if not overtly, relied on American protection, the USA's defensive shield against the USSR and later the Russian threat [4, 35-37]. Now, it seems not as viable as before, and it's not the case for security guarantees. Therefore, one has to assume that a whole structure of global insecurity is now approaching not a multi-polar world but a potential new global war, anarchy, and prevalence of the great powers. So far, it's a new situation or a return to the old, long-standing patterns of International politics. The collective West becomes more fragile and less confident. Ukraine and Moldova, as regional countries, do not have enough strength to stand against those aggressive trends left on their own, should the European democratic states follow their previous political line of indifference, infantilism, and strategic inertia.

That's why a principal resource for our capability to be protected and secured means properly reinforcing active and all-comprehensive European solidarity. The European Union must reshape itself from the prominent and proverbial economic giant, albeit a political dwarf, towards a strong and effective political and military union. There is no other way of avoiding approaching catastrophe, considering Mr. Trump repeated several times that the United States might leave NATO. Who knows when it might happen then?

While security became the most critical deficit and an urgent demand, the role of democracy protection and development should not be sacrificed equally by anybody. Under these pressing conditions, democratic sustainability gains greater importance than ever. What does it mean? First, it means the capacity of political institutions to act according to democratic

standards. Because if we lose the democratic standards, if we are getting closer to the existing Russian political system, if we are also getting a neo-totalitarian regime of Russia. Just recently, Mr. A. Lukashenko was inaugurated as the President of the Republic of Belarus for the seventh time in its history. It's awful but true. We know that Russia has had the same situation since 2000. As far as D. Medvedev's presidency was concerned, it was no longer a real substitute for Putin's reign. Since the last "elections" of V. Putin, Russia went from a consolidated authoritarian regime towards a neo-totalitarian regime, despite keeping Moldova and Ukraine on a democratic track, we must acknowledge that our state remains not a consolidated democracy. Still, stuck in a hybrid regime's shaky position. So, it combines both authoritarian and democratic features.

Being put under severe military and political pressure since 2014 and later attacked by Russia in 2022 from North, East, and South, Ukraine was in a very hard position [1, 62 - 64], which urged to transfer to more consolidated political power to concentrate all the country's resources and be able to protect itself against Russian invaders. It means a particular distortion of democratic mechanisms, institutions, procedures, and standards due to the limitations of the Marshall Law. Regular elections are impossible in a country at war. It poses particular challenges for Ukraine.

Many of those challenges apply to Moldova to a lesser extent and in a much softer way. First of all, because of the protracted existence of the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, whose territory has been effectively controlled by Russia since 1992 [7]. No wonder that Moldova is the second after the Ukraine state, which might be destroyed as a sovereign state by Russia, and the intensity of the hybrid war against this state only accelerates.

Therefore, Moldova is a divided and traumatised country, frightened and threatened simultaneously. Moldavian State and Society are very much influenced and covered with a widespread network of Russia's spies, agents of interests, and useful idiots. We witnessed that the last presidential campaign in Moldova was dramatic. It's a matter of pride that Moldova recently voted for the continuation of the European integration course. Still, most supporters are not overwhelming [5, 188 - 189]. Therefore, a threat of reverse development in the country remains possible. The pro-Russian forces might use the forthcoming parliamentary elections against the unity and sustainability of the country.

Despite those challenges, Ukraine stands fast and tries to be more resilient and consolidated. The fact that any elections under the condition of Martial law are not possible in Ukraine does not enhance the democratic sustainability of the country. On the contrary, the political situation is frozen, as it was in 2019 - 2020. Now it does not correspond adequately with society's new trends and requests. However, organising regular elections was impossible until the war's end. Thus, the allegation of V. Putin and his associates that Ukraine has no legitimate authorities is an ugly lie and manipulation [6]. It is Russia, not Ukraine, which has no legitimate political leadership. Since Putin came to power and dismantled any democratic order in the country, the Russian election was just a spectacular, but meaningless, imitation procedure. They are the formal act and procedure of election, as well as in Belarus, where citizens vote for one president. The only brief interval occurred in Russia's contemporary history, when D. Medvedev officially occupied the country's top post. Still, he was a so-called Ziti-president, not a real leader, while the real power did not fall from V. Putin's hands.

Therefore, authoritarian regimes, when succeeding in concentrating power upon controlled states, tend to move with their ambitions far beyond their countries' borders. So far, democracy is now under concerted attacks from within and outside. Therefore, democratic sustainability of our countries and their political institutions should be enforced and secured. It is very much about the efficacy of democratic institutions, because they are not as strong and stable as needed in Ukraine and Moldova. We have too many problems with notorious issues of widespread corruption, and it is a great challenge to fight against the direct and multi-layered corruption system. We have a problem, typical of our countries, including Romania, with favouritism and nepotism. Our country's political culture is inclined to care about our relatives and friends, much more than societal and state interests. Nepotism undermines the capacity of political institutions to act in the public interest rather than private and particular interests. Another threatening issue is a fundamental problem for all other countries: the dominance of populism. Ukraine harvested heavily from populism, yet the same applies to many democratic countries, such as the USA. First and foremost, once again, populism has a lot of reasons to flourish [8]. Not the least reason is that it proposes a very simplified vision of both domestic and foreign affairs, consequently promising a straightforward resolution for really complicated issues.

In the same way as the political track we observe in Romania, it is a hot topic. On the eve of another attempt to hold a presidential election, one can see their radical, populist politicians, who have gained strong support from their compatriots. Some candidates with public confidence could turn against the principal interest of Romania, not to mention Bucharest's stance towards the EU, NATO, and its neighbours. One can see that Ukraine faced populist temptation in 2019 and 2020. We see that D. Trump presents a peculiar picture of approaching populism. He also too often proposes a very simplified picture of world politics, its reasons, and consequences. His key and most favourable explanation of wrongdoings is that they have happened because he was not a president. Otherwise, nothing bad would have happened. Almighty genius Donald Trump, isn't it?

That populist way of thinking and acting is threatening to the sustainability of democratic institutions, checks and balances of power branches, and finally to the very prestige and appeal of democracy as such. The populist spread reaches a character of political pandemic disaster. It's also the responsibility of our citizens, by and large, and voters, because they have been magically convinced of the simplicity of the political offers, and they are misguided by this simplicity, which leads us towards nowhere but strategic mistakes, losses, and failures. Populism also undermines the effectiveness and efficiency of public institutions, making public service less and less professional and deteriorating the quality of Public Administration.

There, we have an inadequate response to the demands and urgent needs of public policy, a low capacity of our managerial cadres, and corruption, nepotism, and so on. One of the crucial issues is the problem of the professional education of our public servants. With the number of questions related to civil servants' procedures of appointment and fairness of their competitions for the vacant managerial posts, a critically important issue is the process of their European education. Adapted to the current situation [13, 186-190]. Despite some advances, it remains an incomplete task because of some contradictory political solutions in Ukraine and Moldova. While Moldova restored the central Institute for educating civil servants, Ukraine attempted to decentralise their education system and put it aside from the governmental priorities.

More generally, making our national education system Europeanized faces too many obstacles and delays. Of course, the situation in Higher education is better known to the author. Working for many years in Ukrai-

ne, Poland, and Lithuania, actively engaged in activities of Romania and Moldova Universities, the author has gathered experience and expertise in the field. Also of true importance is the experience of serving as a foreign expert for the Romanian Agency for the Quality of Higher Education (ARACIS). While evaluating academic quality at Suceava University, Jasi University, and Sibiu University, we have an essential chance of making a closer acquaintance with the pros and cons of educational policy and its implementation. A separate mission has been concluded with Kabul University in Moldova, as an institutional evaluation. All of that allows us to value the vital progress of Romanian and partly Moldavian Universities in recent decades. That's a perfect, optimistic sign. Still, our countries are addicted to the current threats—just one example. Many of us discuss Russian hybrid warfare, information war against practically any democratic or other targeted country, the threats of Russian fake news, and so on [12]. One vital question. Do our universities provide a systemic preparation of our specialists, not only to withstand the Russian information war, but to act, on the contrary, against Russia's neo-totalitarian regime and retroimperial pretence? Thus is a spring of making this hybrid war alive and to be destructive for our societies and states. One has to comprehend that Russia's hybrid war is successfully continuing and is spreading worldwide. This war is launched not against Ukraine, Moldova, Poland, or Romania. It's against the United States as well. Now it is well-known for threats of Russian direct interference in the elections in many Western countries, including the FRG and France. Do they work together regularly, making our countries entrenched and well organised on all levels, to withstand this hybrid war pressure on our countries? Besides some attempts in general, hardly yes. For instance, when Putin became president, he prepared the ground to eliminate any opposition, free media, and alternative leaders, sweeping them out of the public space, the country, and ordering their elimination. Let's remember the shooting of Boris Nemtsov. The only popular politician with a great personal experience of leadership and charisma is the former first deputy prime minister of the Russian Federation. So, his killing happened symbolically near the Kremlin. So many clear signals had been sent by Putin with his laws, e.g., on the foreign agents, restriction of NGOS' activity, and this foreign support, etc. Still, they were ignored or misinterpreted.

So, the awareness of what would have happened was critically low. Even when Russia turns to open military intervention in Georgia, the

collective West reacts slowly and not appropriately to the clear signals of ending the Yalta and Helsinki construction of international affairs with the anticipation of returning to business as usual (5). The intervention of Russia in Crimea and Donbass again provoked rather peace-dealing activity of too many leaders instead of making sober conclusions and necessary preparations for the further deterioration of regional and global security. However, Russia was and partly is sacrosanct. Now, Mr. Trump is caring more about Russia than Ukraine and Europe. He tends to secure Russian integrity and make Russia a strategic ally in fighting against the global dominance of China. Those expectations and calculations vis-à-vis Putin's Russia are grounded either on false ideas or a complete misunderstanding of Russia. Because of that, the US administration might suggest that Russia could be a reliable partner. Some American experts count on Russia violating, in recent times, over 117 international agreements. How can anybody rely on a kind of alliance with Russia, or Russian reliability, under these historical conditions?

So far, globally, there is a lack of competence and leadership. One of the reasons for this is degrading the elected representatives' education and professionalism. In contrast, another reason is rooted in a deficit of civic and political education of all citizens/voters. Combined, they pose a direct threat and dreadful danger to security, prosperity, and, in the final run, humanity's very existence. It is a real danger. The only way to overcome this expanding danger is to strengthen and further our educational system from pre-schooling, schooling, up to university and postgraduate education. We strive to make our politicians and public servants well-educated, well-aware of the current stressful and alarming world, and ready to secure the state and society from too many risks and challenges [10].

Let's conclude with a straightforward example. In Moldova, listening to the simple citizens' voices and opinions, I wondered about their admiration for Russia. They say: What does the European Union do for us? What is the value of Europe to us? Listening to those voices, after Russia's coming to Moldova, and later to Ukraine, destroying our lands, killing our people, raping our women, kidnapping our children, it's still not a lesson? Are they sure that the return of Russia will be like in the USSR times? They do not understand that Russia is now pursuing a genocide policy. To protect ourselves and defend our freedom and statehood, Central and Eastern European countries have to be much more united, conscious, and re-

sistant. To achieve those goals, they all need democratic sustainability and democratic resilience. So, we should not be just resistant [3]. We shouldn't be just sustainable. We should be flexible and renewable, namely resilient. One can find more reflections on those issues in the recently published book on resilience in Central and Eastern Europe [9, 573-577]. We have to add the concept of democratic sustainability to the idea of resilience. Accordingly, national strategies, programs, and applied measures must be compatible with both concepts, sustainability and resilience. Moldova and Ukraine should be as close together as ever. Our two countries have a lot of similarities, common domestic vulnerabilities, and foreign threats. We aim at a secure and better European future. Therefore, we must move together with the support of friends from Romania, Poland, and the European Union's member states.

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