

INTERVIEW / Ukraine and NATO: a false pretext for Russia to start a war



Ziarul de Gardă discussed with Elena Mârzac, security expert, executive director of the NATO Information and Documentation Center in the Republic of Moldova, about neutrality, NATO, resilience, emergency suitcase, bunkers and social cohesion, in the context of the war in Ukraine.

○ **Discussions about NATO are at an unprecedented height. Why was it needed for a war to start in order for our society to discuss the advantages or disadvantages of NATO?**

○ On the one hand, it is good that we have come to talk more about security and defense, but I am sorry that my old assumption that we will take these issues seriously only when a conflict starts came true. Our only advantage today is that, for the time being, the conflict is not on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. We needed to have a security culture and an analytical ability a long time ago anyway... Yes, society has extremely divided opinions about NATO. I was following, after an interview on a television station, about 700 anti-NATO messages had appeared. And at the national level there is a lot of working, informing and explaining to do.

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○ **NATO has become, in a way, the apple of discord in the context of the war in Ukraine. Is it a threat, a pretext or a disinformation?**

○ This approach is part of the narrative of Russian propaganda. We know that the propaganda of the Russian authorities needs an excuse to justify what is happening in Ukraine. It is well known that every nation, according to the Charter of Nations and International Law, has the right to decide its own fate. And once Ukraine or Georgia or any other state has set itself the national goal of joining the EU or NATO, trying to decide on its own its foreign security policy, no one has the right to violate that right. The Russian Federation has many neighbors around it and they are trying to control those who are most vulnerable, whom they think should be under their influence. In the 21st century, we can no longer talk about spheres of influence of neither Russia nor the United States. In my opinion, this invocation of NATO's dangers to Russia's security is just a pretext. Let's analyze. If NATO is a threat, then why do states want to become NATO members? We can refer here to the partners of the former Warsaw Bloc or more recently, Finland or Sweden, or even Switzerland with an internationally recognized neutrality, and now it has decided to show solidarity with the sanctions applied to the Russian Federation. It should be noted that the war is not because Ukraine wants to become a NATO member, but because Putin does not stop showing an aggressive policy towards Ukraine, manifested by the annexation of Crimea, the separation of the Donbas, etc.

○ **But how close or how far was Ukraine from an eventual NATO membership?**

○ In relation to Georgia or the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine is in a more special partnership with NATO. Ukraine has stipulated in the Constitution that it wants to join NATO, although no concrete discussions on the subject have taken place so far. We know well the history of this collaboration, since 2008, from the Bucharest Summit, where Georgia and Ukraine were promised an eventual accession to NATO. In fact, Vladimir Putin also attended that summit. But the road to accession is quite long, in addition, Ukraine also has this conflict with Russia on its territory, which is an impediment to NATO membership. So Ukraine's accession was not and is not possible, nor was it being discussed at Brussels... Not even an invitation has been extended...

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○ **But when, how would it have been possible for Ukraine to join NATO since this proposal was made to it in 2008?**

○ Let me first explain what it means to become a NATO member country. First of all, NATO respects the policy of open doors. So any European country that is able to promote the principles and values of the Washington Treaty and that could contribute to security in the Euro-Atlantic area can become a NATO member country. That's what the official documents say. In fact, any accession is not required, it only takes place at the request of the candidate countries. If there is such a request, states are invited to enter into an intensified dialogue and are offered an Action Plan. Ukraine has not yet received such a Plan. In addition, there are many other criteria, political, economic, military, that must be met by any state that wants to join NATO. This means that the political system must be democratic and functional, the country must have a well-developed market economy, and respect for the fair treatment of minorities in that state. At the same time, the state must undertake to resolve any conflicts peacefully, but also to be able to contribute to NATO operations in the future, when it becomes a member state.

○ **Let's go back to Ukraine...**

○ In the case of Ukraine, there are several impediments. The most serious, which the Russian Federation has created over the last 30 years in several post-Soviet states, are frozen or ongoing military conflicts. These conflicts are created to prevent countries from becoming NATO member states in the future. This scenario is being set up in the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Remember - you cannot become a NATO member if you have an unresolved territorial dispute. So Ukraine was far from a NATO member state, even if it was promised. Ukraine did not have a day, a concrete year to join. It was necessary to follow this path, to realize all the political and economic criteria. We know very well that Ukraine still faces the problem of corruption, the control of the oligarchs, having arrears in several chapters. Yes, since 2014, after the annexation of Crimea and until now, NATO and the EU have strongly supported Ukraine in its democratic development and in the development of its defense capabilities.

○ **In the Republic of Moldova, it has been discussed in recent days that, if we were members of NATO, we might benefit from more security...**

○ At present, the Republic of Moldova, no matter how much it wants, cannot become a NATO member state, because it is a neutral state, because it has an unresolved conflict and because it has foreign troops on its territory. Yes, there is another condition - it must be worthy of it. I emphasize, as well, in the case of the Republic of Moldova that any relationship, any partnership with NATO is based on the principle of solicitation. If requested by the Government, then NATO will consider the request and the possibility of providing assistance. There is no imposed assistance. NATO is not coming to your territory to impose certain rules on you. Any action of cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and NATO took place at the request of the Government. As I said, NATO does not directly provide us with a degree of security, it cannot defend us in the event of a conflict. But what NATO can do and is doing is helping us develop our defense capabilities. We have collaborations that involve the development of the defense capabilities, of the humanitarian, civilian fields, in the transmission of initiatives to manage emergencies or exceptional situations, or how to counter certain threats in the cyber or environmental field, but it can not send us military or troops. First of all, because we are a neutral state, even if we are a partner state. A few days ago, I was in Riga, and when I was talking about citizens' perceptions of NATO, of threats, I always heard my colleagues' remarks: "Thank God we're in NATO." This way they feel safe, they know that in case of any conflict, someone will immediately defend them.

○ **But the "Partnership for Peace", in which the Republic of Moldova participates, what security guarantees does it offer us?**

○ Unfortunately, NATO only provides security guarantees for member states. The partners work with the member states to resolve certain security and defense issues in order to have interoperability in the event of conflicts, operations, interference or escalation.

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○ **And, in the event of a possible attack on the Republic Moldova, does NATO not have a mandate to intervene?**

○ It has no mandate to intervene in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia or any other partner state. It has a mandate for only the 30 member states of the Alliance. In order to benefit from this security that NATO member states can offer you, you must be part of the Alliance and contribute to security. The "principle of musketeers" is valid, art. 5 of the Washington Treaty - one for all and all for one. This article was invoked in 2001, when the terrorist attack in the US took place... The respective treaty also has other important stipulations. For example, art. 4, which regulates

situations in which there is a potential threat to any NATO member state. Member states shall then strengthen themselves to ensure the security of that state. This is what Romania did and this is the first time in NATO history when troops have been sent to Romania, namely to fortify the eastern flank and defend Romania in the event of an escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on Romanian territory. Since April 4, 1949, the Washington Treaty has been NATO's founding charter.

○ **Why do some voices say that NATO is a generator of war?**

○ It is one of the stereotypes that the Alliance's opponents are spreading around the world. The world should know that any NATO military operation must have a UN mandate. Without a UN mandate, peacekeeping operations cannot be carried out in any country. Moldova's military, even though we are a neutral state, is involved in the peacekeeping operation in Kosovo, but there is a UN mandate for this operation. Everything is done in cooperation with the UN Security Council, in accordance with the principles of international law.

○ **Is there a mandatory condition for the state that aspires to be an EU member state to be a NATO member state? I ask as, a few days ago, Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova applied for EU membership...**

○ A NATO membership is not a mandatory condition. We have NATO member states that are not members of the EU and vice versa, they are members of the EU, but not members of NATO. Turkey, USA, Canada, are members of the Alliance, but are not part of the EU. There are also EU member states that are either neutral or do not want to join NATO. Yes, there is a kind of unwritten rule, rather a stereotype, that NATO is a kind of EU antechamber. The only justification for this statement may be that, in order to become an EU Member State, you must meet a number of criteria. One of them is that you have to be a secure state, because when your territory is secure, when there are no active threats against you, then you can join the EU. As a NATO member, you have this preparation, but, I repeat, it is not a mandatory criteria.

○ **What does the submission of these applications mean?**

○ It means that the acceptance procedure could be started. Moldova can become an EU member state, remaining a neutral state and not joining NATO.

○ **A few days ago, the Pentagon said that Russia had changed its fighting strategy and that the blitz attack that was talked about in the first days turned into fighting actions that would generate "a bloodbath"... What could follow?**

○ This proves to us that this military operation, as Putin called it, had only the pretext of demilitarizing and stopping the intentions of joining NATO. It is clear that everything Putin has said so far about this military operation is a lie. He lied when he stated that military troops at the border were deployed only for exercises, that they were conducting joint exercises with the Belarusian military, and that they would later withdraw... It was all a lie. In the meantime, it has been shown to be a planned military action and is by no means a response to some NATO actions, as the Alliance is a defensive organization and its actions are not to provoke conflicts, but rather to prevent possible conflicts. Russia needed this pretext because it had already violated international law with the annexation of Crimea, when it started battles in the Donbas or when it proclaimed the republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. In reality, this is a long-planned military action to restore the image of the leader of an empire that Putin and his team have long wanted. It is understandable, because Ukraine is a country rich in all kinds of resources. Initially, they tried to discredit her in every way, claiming that there was no history, no population, no language, that she was, in fact, part of Russia. At the same time, claiming this false motive that he is defending his Russian citizens, they went and killed in turn, both Ukrainians and Russians.

○ **The Republic of Moldova is panicking. People are looking to get out of here or identify bunkers, where they would hide in the event of an attack. How can we defend ourselves?**

○ It's complicated to answer this question. According to the Constitution, we have a status of permanent neutrality that does not allow us to participate in military structures or in conflicts. At the same time, this status does not allow the deployment of foreign troops on the territory of the state. But our neutrality has already been violated when foreign troops deployed here have not withdrawn. So there is no guarantee that this status of neutrality will be respected. Although it is considered that we do not currently have military risks, it is difficult to know what kind of plans the Kremlin's strategists are hatching. We have seen unpredictable, illogical actions to the detriment of any international rules. We are alone with ourselves. Even Romania could not help us, because being a NATO member country, it should ask for NATO's consent in this regard.

○ **How prepared is our defense system?**

○ Unfortunately, we do not have an audit of the security sector. We know that there are vulnerabilities and risks, but it is being discussed, it is stated from the stands, that this crisis could be transferred to the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, to show the superiority and the fact that

Russia controls these territories. In order to deal with these situations, these risks and threats, we must have a certain resilience in this regard. If we talk about how secure the country is, we must say that security in general implies that there are a number of measures to protect against certain dangers. For example, if we talk about securing the border and this wave of refugees, we find that we are doing well, since no one is invading the country. As long as all those who enter are successfully verified, it proves that the state border is secure. Another example. To be resilient, we need to react. We have a big problem with disinformation and it is welcome to stop some media sources that cause hatred and division. We have security strategies and crisis management, but we cannot say that we are completely secure. But this crisis we are going through should also be a lesson for the future. Even if something happens in the Republic of Moldova, even if everything stops at the border with Ukraine, we still have a lot to learn. This message that everything depends on Ukraine is not accidental. If Ukraine is to stop all this fighting on its territory, we will have to thank it, but also understand that we have a lot to learn.

○ **Does neutrality no longer mean safety?**

○ Normally, neutrality would give us security, and no one the right to attack us. But this neutrality should be guaranteed. Russia has been a guarantor of Ukraine's neutrality under the 1994 Budapest Treaty. But it was Russia that attacked, violating all security guarantees. In my personal opinion, neutrality is not a solution to our security. If we want to be neutral, we must have a well-equipped army, a security sector resilient to any threats, especially since we have them. There are many external factors that have a negative impact, we have problems in the field of cyber defense, in the ecological field. Being a neutral state, we have to invest a lot in security, and security costs. Our problem is that we have too small a budget for security and defense, and this has been perpetuated premeditatedly over the years. The National Army, even if it received assistance and help, these were not enough to defend us. Yes, we have external partners who help us, but political willingness also matters a lot. To be neutral means to invest in the defense sector, but also in training the population, and in resilience, and in social cohesion.

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○ **Yes, in the future, but now, what can each person do?**

○ Now it is important that we remain united and supportive. Like it or not, in crisis situations, it is important to trust our government. We have seen, in the case of the pandemic, the states in which society trusted the government, came out of the crisis more easily, with fewer victims. At the same time, it is the duty of the authorities to inform us correctly, so that we do not panic because panic

and uncertainty cause manipulation and division. There are people who would like to destabilize the situation. They are very active on the internet, traveling in the villages... What can we do? We can inform ourselves from the first source, take into account the information provided by the authorities, and trust this information. Already after, when everything is over, we will have the freedom to decide whether to choose them again or not. It is now a priority to remain united and in solidarity.

○ **Should the emergency suitcase be prepared or not?**

○ No one can tell if it's better to leave or stay. Everyone is worried. Even NATO member countries. And it's normal in this situation. A recommendation for government institutions - to be more open, to understand the fears and anxieties of the people and to come with messages, to answer questions, including those related to the need for bunkers. Let's take the case of Ukraine. The president has always encouraged the people, he said they will resist. As a result, people are lining up to join the army. So, it has been achieved, people want to fight for their homeland.

○ **Can we cope or not?**

○ This question can be answered by the Ministry of Defense or the Government, but, as I said, there is no audit of the defense and security sector to give us exact answers to the question of whether our state can cope with an attack or a military conflict. The Republic of Moldova does not have the necessary capabilities of armed confrontation at the level of the Russian Federation because it does not have the capacity of air defense, anti-tank means or others. At the point where we are, trust, solidarity, unity and the most complex information about what to do to get out without losses, without dramas, including psychological ones, matter. Unfortunately, there are many unspoken things, probably following the intention not to create panic and worry.