

Virginia Dumitraş

With what conclusions about Moldova you went back to Estonia, after having different meeting with our heads of government, different politicians and after participating at the Wine Festival?

First of all I saw that Moldova is one of the most successful Eastern Partners of the European Union with its reforms. Moldova is a country of good news.

Secondly, it was important to feel the determination of Moldovan leaders to protect your decision to choose Europe. Your president, Nicolae Timofti, made a significant statement when he said that he saw no other choice for Moldova than a place in the European community, but success depends mostly on the Moldovan people themselves: friends can only help to a certain degree.

Moldova has many friends and allies in Europe. However, Moldova makes its own choices. It seems to me, if I may say so as a friend, that many people in Moldova have not yet understood the meaning of choosing Europe, the meaning of your country's integration with the European Union. The situation was the same in Estonia 15 years ago, before the government started actively explaining the benefits that accession to the European Union would give us. At present, Estonia is the most European-minded country in the European Union and we don't have many people who question our EU membership.

Speaking of wine ... The desire of the European Commission to open the European market to Moldovan wine makers as soon as possible is justified, as your wine is really good and I believe that they are fully competitive on international markets.

As I opened the Wine Festival in Chisinau on 5 October, I said that hard work and patience – caring, waiting and letting the wine age for a long time before consumption – are the essence of wine. And I added: "This is also the essence of Europe."

It was mentioned several times that we should accelerate the reforms in the judicial field and fight with corruption. Estonia could be an example in this sense, what would be your advice, what should we do in order to reduce our level of corruption?

Many relationships and attitudes of the whole society, including the way people regard corrupt acts, must be changed in order to reduce corruption. This is not easy and requires years of systematic work. In Estonia, we managed to do it. The European Council and the European Union, as well as other democratic states, helped us a lot. Exchanging experiences and learning from achievements is beneficial in any case.

Speaking of the judicial system, there are three critical measures: independent and competence-based selection of judges; competitive salaries; and professional ethics with control mechanisms. In Estonia, people who want to become judges have to take a judge's exam and pass a security check.

The members of the examination committee are mostly judges elected by judges from among judges. The security check clarifies whether the judicial candidate has any connections that would prevent him from administering justice objectively. Salary is also extremely important: if the salaries of top lawyers are not competitive on the labour market, it creates a serious threat of corruption and obviously means that the best lawyers are not interested in working as judges. Agreeing on a judicial code of ethics among judges and regular discussions about such a code are important for developing professional dignity and healthy attitudes.

The need for a strong anti-corruption police unit must also be emphasised. Detecting and processing the corruption crimes of all three branches of power – the parliament, the government and the courts – whilst respecting the principle of separation of powers, has a discouraging impact and helps clean the system of those who took office at a time when salaries were not competitive and the professional competence and personal characteristics of candidates were not adequately checked.

Also, Estonia is an example of being internationally recognized as a state which has undergone fast info-technological development. How expensive is digitalization and how

much did we lose for not doing it earlier?

There are different ways of doing this. We did it our way actually because we were poor. We couldn't afford a huge government server, so we had to work out the system we now have, the X-road – and it turns out to be a really good solution, in terms of both functionality and security. Our X-road is open-source and non-proprietary: we give it to those who are interested in developing theirs in the same direction. It has been much cheaper than many other options that other countries have used or planned to use. And once working, e-governance in fact saves money and resources as it reduces the costs of public administration – and, through increasing transparency, reduces corruption.

How many years does it take to have first results and how do we teach and accustom to digitalization the third generation and people from villages?

We started digitising our society in the early 1990s, and we invested heavily in education. By 1997 our schools were online, and some 15 years later – which is how long it takes for education reforms to show results – we saw a tech start-up boom that is apparently the result of that investment. Our e-state has been functioning since about 2000 and we keep adding new services, both private and public. It is a process: it can take time for results to be seen, and it is important to get the legislation right, e.g. to have legal digital signatures, so things can go on from there.

As for villages, there is no need to go through every stage of tech development. For example, in Afghanistan there are only 200,000 fixed line phones, but the system of e-governance works on mobile phones too – and they have 20 million phones with SIM cards. So the lack of legacy technology is no obstacle.

On your way back to Estonia you mentioned that Moldova "has fulfilled all the Commission's requirements for visa-free travel to the EU. Let's give it to them". How many chances do you think we have to obtain a visa liberalization regime as long as there are still sceptical countries like Germany, France or Holland and has long as we have an uncontrolled territory – transnistrian region?

Visa liberalisation is a technical process where specific requirements must be fulfilled. Progress on these issues is assessed by the European Commission. We expect a positive report from the Commission.

So I could tweet "Let's give it to them" once again. I hope that the European Union as a community only considers the fact that all criteria have been met rather than single political attitudes. Visa liberalisation cannot be regarded as something emotional, as it is a technical issue – we should disregard emotions if all criteria are met.

Speaking of Transnistria, every citizen of Moldova can use the freedom granted by visa liberation for Moldova irrespective of whether they live in Chisinau, Washington, Tiraspol, Rome, Comrat, Kiev, Brussels or wherever. However, if someone lives in Moldova without being a citizen of Moldova or an EU country, they cannot enter the European Union without a visa. That's all there is to it.

Moldova is facing difficult times being under Russian's Federation pressures. Estonia had the same experience, what would be your advice for us? What did Estonia learn from that period?

Let me start this from a little further back. The economic and political pressure currently experienced by Ukraine and Moldova, who have tied their future to the European Union, has no place in 21st century European politics. You want to belong to Europe; you see your future in the European Union. This is your free choice and we support it with the same conviction we feel when we oppose attempts to force a different future on you with threats and sanctions. The European Union will never agree to such extortion. European values do not permit scare tactics in international relations.

But yes, you're right: there was a time when Estonia felt the same kind of economic and trade pressure. Our entrepreneurs were flexible and refocused on Western markets. It's true that in many cases they had to improve the quality of their products, but they managed to do so, and in the end everyone benefitted from this. One must not get tangled up in the past in one's foreign economic and trade relations, or in politics on a broader scale, because those who cannot cope with their past will remain its hostages without the ability to move forward.

There are clear and simple reasons to be optimistic here – the European Union has 500 million people living there. It's a huge market.

Recently, in an interview for a newspaper from Switzerland being asked about why Russian language is not Estonia's second language, you mentioned that it's an occupation language. How can we solve the problems with the Russian language because so far a lot of Russians still don't want to learn Romanian?

The first important thing you should know is that I have never been derogatory about any nation or language: it's just not me.

Now let's talk history. The Republic of Estonia did not give up its independence voluntarily in 1940 and neither did it join the Soviet Union voluntarily. The Soviet Union, relying on the secret pact made with Nazi Germany, annexed and occupied Estonia and established Russian as one of its languages of the Soviet administration. This also happened in Moldova on the basis of the same Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Coming back to the present, teaching and speaking the state language of Moldova in Moldova is elementary. I have lived and worked in the United States and Canada, and I obviously learned to speak English. When I worked in Germany, I learned German. I cannot imagine how one could live well in a country, understand its people and culture or feel a part of the society without speaking its official language. I can see the historical reasons why Russian is still widespread in Moldova, but I can't understand the aversion to your official language. Only Moldova itself can keep its language alive and value it.

What should Moldova do after Vilnius until Riga Summit in order to convince all 28 EU members that we deserve a concrete European perspective?

Initialling the association and free trade agreements AA/DCFTA with Moldova at the Vilnius summit is in itself a clear European prospect for you. However, they are only the first joint steps by Moldova and the European Union – there's still a long way to go. The Vilnius summit is not a pit stop; it's one of the many milestones on the road we walk together. We will always need

wisdom and stability, strength and tenacity, the support of our people and our friends.

I would certainly attribute more importance to the support of your own people, because the inner conviction of Moldova and strong support within the country are what euro-integration requires above all else. This will also help convince the EU-skeptics.

Looking from aside, the European Union is demanding when it comes to its partners. I know this because of my own experience of the long negotiation process Estonia had to go through. The reason for this is the desire to have a strong and successful community, the desire for cooperation between the partners of the European Union to make them stronger and to add strength to the European Union.

The European Union relies on common values, the rule of law, democracy, freedom of speech and transparency in politics as well as economic decisions. The European Union also relies on mutual responsibility and expects everyone to preserve these common values and follow the agreed rules. This is the path that takes you closer to the European Union – the path of preserving our values and adhering to agreements.

Some entrepreneurs are afraid that they will not manage to compete with European products after Moldova will have a DCFTA with EU. What would be your message for them?

There is no doubt that more extensive trade with the European Union will also set higher standards for Moldovan entrepreneurs and their products. We experienced this ourselves before our accession and I'm certain that Estonian manufacturers and consumers only gained from this. The experience of countries that have become closely integrated with the EU indicates that local products do not go anywhere and that people continue to prefer them, mostly due to the price level, which in Moldova is not going to catch with the EU average any time soon.

One of the goals of the free trade agreement DCFTA is to help Moldovan industrial and agricultural producers improve the quality of their production and products. The EU will give its Eastern Partners, incl. Moldova, the technical assistance they need to increase their capability –

improving legislation and its implementation, the production standards of companies and the state's ability to control quality.