

Interview of the Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova Claus Neukirch to online news agency Newsmaker - 26 October 2018

German diplomat Claus Neukirch became the Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova in September. In an interview with the Newsmaker's columnist Evghenii Sholari, he described what Chisinau and Tiraspol will do after the implementation of the "package of eight", what the settlement of the Transdniestrian conflict will give to a specific resident of the right or left bank of the Dniester, whether the united Moldova will retain the European course and is it appropriate to compare the situation in Transdniestria with the conflict in Donbas. This is the first interview by Neukirch to a Moldovan media outlet after his appointment as Head of the OSCE Mission.

You became the Head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova in September. At the same time, you had worked in its structure for a long time since the beginning of the 2000s. These were the times of the Kozak Memorandum, Yushchenko Plan, and then the "Package Approach" proposed by Chisinau. Are we closer to resolving the conflict than we were 10-15 years ago, or, conversely, have we moved away from it?

I think we need to look ahead and not so much back to what happened in the past. What strikes me is a very constructive atmosphere now. In the past when I worked in Moldova I saw atmosphere of mistrust. Sometimes there was a feeling that people did not want to really agree on the questions which could be solved. The situation is different now. There is trust. There is progress in things that have been blocked for more than two decades. The Gura Bicului-Bychok bridge is open after 26 years. We had discussions on the licence plates for more than 20 years and now we have the possibility for drivers from Transdniestria to use neutral-designed number plates for the entire continent. The situation of the Latin-script schools is as stable as I think it has ever been over the past twenty years. I think we are on the right track – building trust to move to the discussions towards political settlement. It does not mean we are ready to discuss these questions tomorrow. This is still a long way away. The Sides need to consolidate this spirit and implement agreements. In this case I see good prospects to move to the settlement talks.

The political settlement is almost not visible at this point.

It is important that all the small steps we have done carry the idea of the final settlement. The final settlement is based on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova and a special status for Transdniestria within Moldova. I think this is especially enshrined in the solution we found on the licence plates. The licence plates have a neutral design, but the cars carry an MD sticker on the back, registration documents also show an MD sign. The documents are issued together by the Moldovan and Transdniestrian representatives in the joint Vehicle Registration Offices. This has something special for Transdniestria but it also very clearly states the sovereignty of Moldova.

At the end of 2017, we saw how Chisinau and Tiraspol have quite quickly agreed on a whole package of problems that had not been solved for years. We talked about the special role in this of Vladimir Plahotniuc and Victor Gushan. What is the secret of their sudden deal making ability?

It is a question of political will, courage and ownership on both banks. This was the basis for the success in the past. This is something we very highly value. The OSCE can only facilitate the process, while political will, leadership and ownership of both Sides form its basis.

Will this be enough to bring to a close all the questions of the “package of eight” by the end of the year, as planned?

The package of eight is almost finalized. The Gura Bicului-Bychok Bridge is open. Over 80% of the farmlands in the Dubasari district have been restituted, and the other 20% are being processed. The Latin-script schools have rental contracts for 20 years for a symbolic fee, there is freedom of movement for the pupils and the tariffs for utilities are coming down to the level of other educational institutions in the area. The Joint Vehicle Registration Offices are functional: more than 600 neutral-designed licence plates have been issued and these vehicles have travelled to Romania, Ukraine and other countries. We also have the recognition of diplomas for the university in Tiraspol going well: almost 160 diplomas have received recognition. This will enable students from Tiraspol to study abroad, in European universities. Where we need to concentrate now is the area of telecommunications. It is a complicated process, which involves legal, political and commercial interests. Here I am also confident that with the political leadership, the will and the ownership I have seen so far, we can have further progress in this process in the end of the year.

Apparently, it is also not so simple with criminal proceedings instituted against Transdnistrian officials.

The Moldovan Government has informed the Prosecutor General about the change in the Dubasari farmland and it means Chisinau has fulfilled its part of the respective protocol decision on the Dubasari farmland. We hope that the Prosecutor General might now be able to facilitate resolution of criminal cases related to the Dubasari farmland. But it is a question for the judiciary and we have no direct influence on this process. I also learned that Chisinau considers the idea of discussing the entire issue in a larger context, in terms of transitional justice. This might be something a new parliament might embark on. The issue of the freedom of movement may take some time, but we are on the right track.

Let's say the questions of the “package of eight” are resolved. What's next? Another package?

The package of eight was the result of the proposals of Tiraspol and Chisinau.

We would like to keep this approach for the next year: the Sides will identify what priorities they want to discuss and we will support them with these next steps. Some of the discussions are going on: on banking, human rights and civil status documentation. The package of eight has never been seen as a limitation. These confidence-building measures will pave the way towards the political discussions on the final settlement. We should never lose a sight of it. This is where we want to go based on building trust and going step by step.

What you call progress, some in Chisinau and Tiraspol refer to as concessions and renunciation.

It is a classical issue: you look at a glass and say whether it is half full or half empty. I usually look at it and say it is half full. It was empty before I poured water into it. And this is also how I would see the agreements, which have been reached over the past year. This is really not about concessions, but about creating win-win situations in each of the agreements from the package of eight.

I can give you one example: the Latin-script schools. I served in this Mission in 2004, when the schools were almost closed by force. Now they have rent contracts, stability and there is freedom of movement for the pupils. This is a huge progress and it is good for everyone. First of all, it is good for the pupils and for the parents. The Gura Bicului-Bychok Bridge, if it is repaired, will connect the Odessa port to European transport corridors. With the licence plates, drivers from Transdniestria can now travel throughout Europe. But at the same time, Moldova has been recognized as the state, with Transdniestria as part of it, which issues registration documents with an MD sign and an MD sticker on the back of a car. The final settlement solution is in one of these agreements. I think we should concentrate on the progress, on the positive things and use it as a basis to go further and integrate them into the final settlement.

Imagine a resident of Transdniestria. He has a collection of Moldovan, Ukrainian and Russian passports in his pocket. He lives rather poorly, but in a relatively comfortable cultural and linguistic environment. At the same time, on the right bank he sees the same poverty, corruption, theft of a billion, migration, a non-functional state, which many people call captured. What is his reintegration bonus, and why is reintegration better than the status quo?

The current situation contributes to the difficult economic situation on both banks. Both banks pay the costs of separation. We should look at the opportunities, which would be much better if the Transdniestrian settlement process is resolved. A reintegrated country would be much more attractive for investors. The goal is to develop the right bank so it will be more attractive for the population on the left bank. Of course, you want to promote development opportunities for the people who already live here on the right bank. You do it for your own sake and become more attractive for the other side.

Now imagine a resident of the right bank. He believes there are 400 thousand people with a Soviet mentality in Transdniestria, who will

come and change the political balance and reverse the development. What would you say to him in this regard?

Well, you can see changes as a threat, or you can see changes as an opportunity. I do not think that the reintegration of Transdniestria, if it is done in a proper manner as it is laid out in the mandate of this Mission, would harm any of the development perspectives of the Republic of Moldova. I believe it is a win-win situation. A reintegrated country is much more stable and much more attractive for investments, for outside partners; while the separation holds Moldova back. The settlement will be an opportunity for further development and that would be for the benefit of everyone.

And what about the European integration? The authorities in Chisinau say that the reintegrated state should preserve the European vector. But who can guarantee anything if one day 400 thousand Transdniestrians become part of the political process in Moldova?

European integration is something discussed at the moment here, on the right bank. There are different views on the right bank in this regard: how to proceed, how fast to proceed, how to balance it with the traditional ties of Moldova. After all, it is a sovereign decision and it is a decision which will be backed by the majority of the population how to develop this country. From my point of view, reintegration of Transdniestria will make Moldova more attractive for outside partners. I think those who want European integration should be the most interested in reintegrating Transdniestria, in finding a final settlement agreement. The final settlement will be one with a special status for Transdniestria within a sovereign Republic of Moldova. It should be done in a way that it would be a well-functioning state attractive to partners and the entire international community. If we have this, we have a country which has more opportunities, including for the European integration.

In the Transdniestrian settlement, geopolitical competition between external players has always been present. In recent years, reportedly, the intermediaries and observers have managed to come to a certain balance and a common non-politicized approach. Is this really true, or are these some geopolitical manoeuvres?

The Transdniestrian settlement should be solved by the people who live here. It has to be settled for the benefit of the population on both banks of the river. This is one of the positive developments in recent years: Russia, Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States work together in agreement, irrespective of the geopolitical discrepancies these partners have in other areas. This shared approach benefits the settlement process.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Donbas, parallels have often been drawn between the situation in Transdniestria and there. You coordinated the work of the OSCE monitoring mission in the eastern Ukraine. In your opinion, how appropriate are the parallels, linkages and references to the situation in Donbas. And are they useful for the Transdniestrian settlement or, conversely, throw the situation back?

There is a famous quote by Leo Tolstoy from his novel *Anna Karenina*: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I think it is very difficult and sometimes dangerous to draw parallels. There is an ongoing exchange of artillery fire in Donbas and this situation cannot be transposed to what is happening here. Together with the Sides, we try to find solutions, which work here. We might sometimes look around the world at other situations and look how they are solved or regulated. We do this here as well. We work with Gagauzia, because we think that the functioning autonomy of Gagauzia is important not only for people who live there, and the stability of the country, but this also sends a very strong signal to Tiraspol. We organized a study visit for the representatives for the Ministry of Education and from Gagauzia to South Tyrol, Italy to learn about multilingual education. Gagauzia is not South Tyrol, so we will not use a one-to-one transfer of what we have seen there. Therefore, I think we should not jump to the conclusions of what would be applicable here for other areas.

All these years on the two banks of the Dniester in schools, in the media, at the official level, diametrically opposed versions of the events of 1992 have been told, where participants and victims are divided into “us” and “enemies”. Is it possible, in your opinion, after almost three decades to come to the end, to stop dividing the victims into friends and foes and to hold, for example, joint commemorative events?

I think this is where we want to move in the perspective. In all conflicts when it comes to the commemoration of those who died in a conflict, those who suffered, the grievances are there, the emotions are there. These emotions should be processed and this process should be designed in a very cautious manner. Coming to terms with the past, mutual acknowledgment of the losses and suffering and the ability to look forward is something that would be beneficial for both Sides coming closer together. However, the initiative should come from those who have survived the conflict. We cannot impose this approach on the Sides, they should have a local ownership of this initiative. We will support such initiatives, if they come up.