

Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the Transdniestrian Settlement Process **Franco Frattini's interview with [Radio Europa Liberă](#) (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty)**

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You recently said that the Italian OSCE Chairmanship had set important priority areas in which to achieve concrete results. What exactly do you aim to achieve?

Italy has taken on the OSCE Chairmanship in a year that has the potential to be a very positive for the Transdniestrian settlement process and thus for the Republic of Moldova. We will build on the work of previous Chairmanships, and in particular our Austrian predecessors, under whom we saw five ground-breaking agreements signed between the Sides in November 2017. These five agreements have already been, or are being, implemented. In the “5+2” Vienna Protocol, the Sides committed to reaching agreements on the remaining three issues from their so-called priority list of the “package of eight”.

I see my task, in tandem with the OSCE Mission to Moldova and our international partners in the “5+2” process, to have all eight agreements implemented this year. I strongly believe in the bottom-up approach as this is a way to build trust between the Sides. Trust is the key ingredient to resolving any conflict. The Speaker of Moldovan Parliament, Mr. Candu, recently said that at this stage the Sides need to look for practical solutions, “to seek common ground and build trust. We must begin to trust each other, and only after this talk about marriage.” I fully endorse this approach, the job of the international partners is to help facilitate that trust; once the trust exists the final political settlement becomes possible. But let me underscore, the decisions and responsibilities, and indeed the credit for the five agreements in November, lie fully with the Sides. The Republic of Moldova, as the state, has the opportunity to demonstrate leadership to ensure that progress in the settlement process continues.

We're told that Chisinau and Tiraspol have begun implementing the protocols signed in November, related to the opening of the Gura Bicului bridge, the apostilization of the Transnistrian diplomas, the functioning of Latin-script schools on the left bank of the Nistru River, and the restoration of the rights of farmers from the Dubasari district. I recently travelled to Dubasari, and the locals complained that these arrangements haven't brought results yet. When could we expect to feel the impact?

And also add the agreement on telecommunications to your list. The agreements on LSS, on apostilization of Transdniestrian diplomas and on the opening of Gura Bicului – Bychok bridge have been implemented in a speedy manner. The OSCE Mission to Moldova is in daily contact with the Sides to monitor the implementation of these agreements, and assist where possible. I am in permanent contact with the Mission, including through my advisor Alfredo Conte, who recently visited Moldova. I receive timely and accurate information about all the developments, including real-time readouts of the “1+1” and Working Group

negotiations. Regarding the agreement on the Dubasari farmlands – as you know, it restores the 2006 mechanism that allows the Dubasari farmers to access and cultivate their lands. From the Mission’s regular contact with the Bureau of Reintegration, we know that most farmers, per the re-established 2006 mechanism, have submitted the application packages to the Transdnestrian authorities to allow them regain access to their land in time for spring planting. That is what the agreement is supposed to do, and my expectation is that it will be honoured. The Mission will continue to stay in close contact and assist both Sides with the implementation of this decision that affirms the right to one’s property.

What is your opinion about the Civil Society Statement on the Red Lines in the Transnistrian Settlement, which shows that the authorities of the Republic of Moldova are making concessions to Tiraspol?

Debates on issues of public interest are indispensable to a democratic process. I can only encourage more civil society actors to become involved in the discussion, as any discourse on the future of a country requires as much. As for the key parameters of the Transdnestrian settlement process, or the red lines, as you referred to them, these are incorporated in the mandate of the OSCE Mission to Moldova first adopted in 1993 and extended every year by all 57 OSCE participating States. The mandate clearly states that the end goal of the settlement process is to agree on a formula of a special status for Transdnestria within the Republic of Moldova that does not abridge or impinge on the sovereignty or territorial integrity of Moldova. I want to underscore: no OSCE participating State disputes the end state; this is one of the reasons this settlement process is promising. The Republic of Moldova has the support of the international community on the articulated parameters, which Moldova itself endorses.

Do you admit that a swift settlement may be disadvantageous to the Republic of Moldova as a functional state?

The settlement – that is the affirmation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders with a special status for Transdnestria – by definition cannot disadvantage Moldova. Whether the process is swift or gradual, the outcome will be the same. This being said, the current step-by-step process of building mutual trust is most likely the optimal approach. The glue that will make the settlement work will be the trust gained through the agreements the Sides have reached and those they will reach, and most importantly, implement. The Sides will see that not only can they live together in one country, but by doing so will ensure peace, stability and prosperity for the people on both banks of the Dniester/Nistru River.

You said that the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict is impossible without Russia’s support. Why do you consider that Moscow plays an important role in the Transnistrian conflict settlement? Isn’t Ukraine’s role equally important?

What I have said, and what I think, is that the role of Russia is as important as is the role of the Mission’s other fellow mediator, Ukraine, and the other international partners in the “5+2” process, namely the observers, the United States and the European Union. Indeed, it has been the collective voice of the international partners starting back with the “5+2” Berlin meeting that has helped create this new positive dynamic in the settlement process. The international partners share the view that we are here to support Chisinau and Tiraspol in the settlement process and to move forward on an output basis within the parameters agreed by

all 57 OSCE participating States. This is what has been clearly communicated to me by my “5+2” international partners. We also all firmly believe additional results this year are possible. But allow me to reiterate once again: the international partners can and are willing to help move the settlement process forward; however, the ultimate responsibility, and main credit, for its progress lies with the Sides.

Some observers talk about your personal sympathy for Vladimir Putin and the fact that you call the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov "a good friend". According to these experts, there is a certain degree of skepticism surrounding your intentions to really solve the Transnistrian conflict. What would be your answer to these opinion makers?

During my political career, I have built contacts with a number of political leaders in Europe and across the Atlantic Ocean. I have a wide network of contacts and I see this as an asset, one that will help me nurture progress in the settlement process. Yes, I do have good relations with Mr. Lavrov as I do with politicians and policymakers in Europe and the U.S.. I wish to stress, in this respect, that I see myself as a good friend of Moldova. In my years as Italian Foreign Minister and as Vice President of the European Commission, I have been spearheading efforts to move Moldova closer to the European family, where it belongs. I am the same person who, 11 years ago, as European Commission Vice President opened in Chisinau the first ever Common Visa Application Centre, to greatly facilitate the procedures for visas. That paved the way to the visa-free regime. I did so as true friend of Moldova. Moreover, I am committed to working closely with each of the “5+2” international partners. As I mentioned, we all are committed to helping the Sides meet the commitments they made in the “5+2” Vienna Protocol. This is important in order to improve the lives of people on both banks of the Dniester/Nistru River and develop the necessary trust to get to a final settlement.

You consider that the withdrawal of Russian troops is not a priority issue, but the opinion of those familiar with the Transnistrian file is that these troops are a destabilizing factor. Why does Russia not honor its commitments made at the Istanbul Summit?

It is important to clarify what is meant when we speak about “Russian troops”. There is a clear difference between the trilateral Moldovan-Russian-Transdnestrian peacekeeping forces and the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF). The peacekeeping contingent, stationed within the Security Zone, is operating within the framework of the 1992 ceasefire agreement which is still in force. Separately, the OGRF is stationed outside the Security Zone, and is not a part of the joint peacekeeping mission. The Istanbul Summit declaration you mentioned refers to the OGRF. I also recall that in September last year, speaking in New York at the UN General Assembly, Moldovan Prime Minister Filip stressed that the request to withdraw the foreign troops applies to the OGRF and not the Russian contingent of the Joint Peacekeeping Force. In this regard, you may be aware that the 1999 Istanbul Summit Declaration expanded the mandate of the OSCE Mission to Moldova to provide co-ordination of financial and technical assistance for the transparent removal and destruction of ammunition and armaments from the Cobasna depot. Some part of it was destroyed or withdrawn with OSCE assistance until 2004, when the process was halted. Let me echo a position the OSCE Mission to Moldova regularly reminds the actors on the ground, the OSCE remains ready to play a facilitating role when this process resumes.

Speaking about security issues, I think it is important to note that the Transdniestrian settlement process is about creating a secure and stable environment where the rights of the people can be freely implemented. Thus, the Peacekeeping contingent is not just about ensuring security, which it has, but it is also about ensuring the freedom of movement in the Security Zone. Therefore, I am heartened that this issue will be resolved in 2018, as it is one of three remaining issues of the “package of eight”.

Why is so much attention given to the Transnistrian file and why are the conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia not spoken about? Could the Transnistrian settlement serve as a precedent for other states in this region that have frozen conflicts on their territory?

I actually think it is the Transdniestrian file that does not get the attention it deserves. Moldova’s engagement in the settlement process under this government has shown real statesmanship, by promoting a realistic, pragmatic approach that focuses on solving specific issues that impact the daily lives of people on both banks of the Dniester/Nistru River. Moreover, the consolidated, magnanimous and practical approach to the settlement process by the President and the Prime Minister to promote the reintegration of the country, despite their political differences and status as electoral competitors, is to be commended, as is the reciprocal constructive engagement of the current Transdniestrian leader. I believe that the output-based approach on the ground, and the 57 participating States unanimous endorsement of this approach, gives hope that there is another way to those in the other so-called frozen conflicts, where we see the horrific loss of lives.

How do you imagine in practice a reintegrated Moldova? Will there be one army? One customs authority? One police? One currency?

Such issues need to be part of the process, but this is something for the Sides to agree upon. I would add, however, that there is not one model. Indeed, there are a variety of approaches even among the countries of the European Union. The result will be what works best for Chisinau and Tiraspol in the context of Moldova’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, with Transdniestria confident that the competencies it will have as part of its special status within Moldova will guarantee the human, political, economic and social rights of its population.

What status would the Transnistrian region deserve?

Again, this is an issue that the Sides must decide. It will be rooted within the parameters of the agreed end state that has been endorsed by all 57 participating States of the OSCE, including the Republic of Moldova, and reaffirmed annually through Ministerial Council Statements. The underlying principle is that the status will not impede the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova.

There are European countries that have regions within them that have a special status. Italy, for example, has the province of Alto Adige. But I stress, this is only an example, and it is up to the Sides to decide. This is a discussion the respective authorities need to engage in to ensure that the result respects the rights and needed competencies of the end state formula on which the settlement process is based.

As I have seen in the Mission’s reporting, I have been encouraged by the constructive dialogue and professional engagement of the Working Groups led by the Chief Negotiators. In my phone calls with them, I welcomed their resolute commitment to look for ways

forward, the sense of responsibility to improve the lives of people, and the acknowledgement that building trust was a critical factor. This evolving, positive dynamic, I believe reflects the commitment of the current leadership on both Sides to make genuine progress in the process, and not only this year.

How do you explain the fact that the Transnistrian settlement is not one of the priorities for the citizens of the Republic of Moldova?

I partly addressed this when answering your question on civil society. By the way, the fact that civil society is becoming increasingly engaged on this issue, that press coverage of developments in the settlement process is becoming more common relative to previous years, and even this interview, all serve to me as indicators that the Transdnistriean settlement, that is the reintegration of the country, is moving up the list of priorities for Moldovans. I link this to the recent agreements that were signed and implemented and are now providing tangible benefits to the people on both banks. The more benefits people see, the higher the public interest will be, and the more progress they will expect in the settlement process.

This is all good; it strengthens trust, which makes negotiations easier. It builds confidence among people on both banks that a settlement is possible. I understand election processes well – we just had one in Italy, but it is important Moldova does not lose this momentum. Neither politics nor elections should be allowed to stand in the way; progress is about statesmanship, and that is what builds a country and makes history. As I said, there is increasing interest and expectation in the settlement process that Chisinau and Tiraspol have created through their good work. I will do my utmost to ensure the full implementation this year of all the issues from the so-called “package of eight”.

What is the role of mass media in bringing closer the two banks of the Nistru River?

First and foremost, mass media should adhere to a high level of professionalism and provide accurate, factual and balanced reporting. I think this is the key peacebuilding role to be played by journalists reporting on conflicts. Second, I think it is important to create opportunities for co-operation between journalists from both banks – something that the OSCE Mission to Moldova has been working on. By working together journalists can contribute to a better understanding of the issues people face in their day-to-day lives on both banks of the Dniester/Nistru River and explain how the agreements signed between Chisinau and Tiraspol, and then implemented, can improve their lives.

What message do you have for the citizens of the Republic of Moldova?

My message is for the people and the authorities. You have the good will of the international community; there is international consensus on the end state; there is a fundamentally new constructive dynamic in the settlement process that has already brought tangible results. All this should give decision makers in Chisinau and also in Tiraspol confidence in their ability to reach a final settlement. You have a unique opportunity to create a brighter future for yourselves and to also give hope to others affected by protracted conflicts that they can be solved. But with opportunity comes responsibility. I urge you not to miss the opportunity to continue to build trust through agreements and their implementation, and thus draw closer to the day when a final settlement will be possible. I look forward to learning more in person during my visit at the end of March, and assessing how I can help that goal to be achieved.