Igor Dodon was elected Moldova’s president at the end of last October, just days before the election that would hand Donald Trump the presidency of the United States. And just like Trump, Dodon, who had run on a pro-Russian platform, promptly set about upending old alignments and certainties in his country.

Dodon’s first state visit was to Moscow, on 17 January. At a joint news conference with Russian leader Vladimir Putin, Dodon claimed that Moldova had not benefited “in the slightest” from deepening relations with the European Union. He alleged that an Association Agreement with the EU, which entered into force last summer, led to a decline in Moldovan exports to Russia. What his country needed instead, he suggested, were “friendly relations and a strategic partnership with Russia.”

What Dodon left out in his comments was that the decline in trade with Russia was due to Russian sanctions, not to the effects of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) that forms part of the Association Agreement with the EU – effects that will emerge only in the longer term. Russia imposed sanctions in 2013-14 in response to Moldova’s deepening relationship with the EU and the progress made in the association negotiations. He was also silent about the considerable financial assistance Moldova received from the EU. (The dramatic changes in Moldova's foreign trade relations are outlined in a new CEPS Policy Insight.)

Dodon is expected to visit Brussels on 6th and 7th of February – to launch the idea of a “trilateral platform” between the European Union, Russia and Moldova. He is also seeking observer status for his country in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), saying that a majority of Moldovans wanted to join it rather than a free-trade area with the EU. (Recent polls suggest that 40%-50% of Moldovans prefer the EEU over the Association Agreement with the EU.) The trilateral forum and observer status in the EEU appear designed to avoid a hard choice between Brussels and Moscow; the key question is whether it will be sufficient to persuade Moscow to drop its trade sanctions against Moldova.

Underpinning Dodon’s trilateral initiative is his belief that Moldova will never be allowed to join the EU and that in order to regain a level of influence over its breakaway region of Transdniester, which
has been under Russian control for the past 25 years, the country needs to find ‘common ground’ with Russia. On January 23rd, he told Russia’s state-run TV channel RT that the people in Transdniester and Gagauzia oppose European integration and want closer ties with Russia instead: “We will not succeed in uniting the country if we do not build a strategic partnership with Russia.”

At the same time, Dodon warned that next-door neighbor Romania (a member of the EU since 2007) was poised “to absorb us at any moment”, suggesting that Moldova risked losing its statehood altogether if it did not steer clear of the EU. As a consequence, he supports the termination of Moldova’s Association Agreement with the EU, although he has said that he would leave a decision to do so to the next parliament, due to be elected next year.

All this suggests that Dodon’s bold policy statements will be tempered by pragmatic considerations. Dodon is a former leader of the Socialist Party, which controls the largest group in the country’s parliament but is in opposition. The current government consists of a coalition of parties that nominally favour closer ties with the EU. With the limited powers inherent in the president’s office, there is not that much that Dodon can do at the moment.

Nevertheless, his election is a manifestation of very real developments in Moldova and possibly the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood more generally. ‘Enlargement fatigue’ may now have spread from core Europe to the other side, afflicting the countries on the EU’s fringe, whose citizens are demanding more tangible returns on the investment in reform they have been asked to make in the name of European integration. (Never mind that many of these reforms are shallow or have not been undertaken at all.)

Moreover, even if Dodon's statements may not shape policy at this point, they have already cast doubt on Moldova's strategic orientation towards Europe, as Michael Emerson, Senior Associate Research Fellow at CEPS, and Denis Cenușa, a Researcher at Expert-Grup, Chisinau, argue in their Policy Insight.

The benefits of increased trade with the EU may be too abstract, or too unevenly spread, to leave much of an impression with ordinary Moldovans, many of whom see a venal political elite as the prime drivers of European integration (or a make-believe version thereof) and the main beneficiaries of the EU’s financial assistance. A massive banking scandal, in which one billion US dollars was stolen and transformed into public debt with the connivance of the country’s supposedly pro-EU leadership, further eroded trust in the authorities and in the EU. The EU should ensure that it does not go soft on political elites simply because they profess to be pro-European.

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**General news**

Remarks by Federica Mogherini upon arrival at the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 12 December 2016. [Link](#)

Foreign Affairs Council, 12 December 2016. [Link](#)

Remarks by Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 12 December 2016. [Link](#)
Eastern Neighbourhood

Armenia

Local EU Statement on electoral reform in Armenia, Yerevan, 01 December 2016. Link

EU continues to invest in creating new job opportunities and strengthening fiscal governance in Armenia, 16 December 2017. Link

Azerbaijan

Statement by the Spokesperson on the cases of Giyas Ibrahimov and Bayram Mamedov, Brussels, 09 December 2017. Link

Belarus

Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the recent executions in Belarus, Brussels, 01 December 2016. Link

Georgia

Remarks by HRVP Mogherini at the press conference following the Association Council between the European Union and Georgia, Brussels, 02 December 2016. Link

EU-Georgia Association Council - Joint press release, 02 December 2016. Link

Georgia: EU monitoring mission's mandate prolonged for two years, 12 December 2016. Link

Georgia to get visa-free access to the EU, MEPs and Council negotiators agree, 13 December 2016. Link

Visas: Council confirms agreement on visa liberalisation for Georgia, Brussels, 20 December 2016. Link

Moldova

The EU is resuming budget support assistance to the Republic of Moldova, Chisinau, 23 December 2016. Link
Commission proposes EUR 100 million in Macro-Financial Assistance to the Republic of Moldova, Brussels, 13 January 2017. Link

Ukraine

EU report: Ukraine carrying out unprecedented reforms, Brussels, 13 December 2016. Link

European Council conclusions on Ukraine, 15 December 2016. Link

EU-Ukraine Association Council - Joint press release, 19 December 2016, Link

Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the meeting of the EU-Ukraine Association Council, Brussels, 19 December 2016. Link

Agreement between the European Commission and the Ukrainian government to develop and modernize public administration reform in Ukraine, 19 December 2016. Link

Russia

Statement by the Spokesperson on the "foreign agent" status of the Memorial International Society, Brussels, 16 December 2016. Link

Russia: EU prolongs economic sanctions by six months, 19 December 2016. Link

Assassination of the Russian Ambassador in Turkey, Andrei Karlov, 19 December 2016. Link

Southern Neighbourhood

EU and IOM launch initiative for migrant protection and reintegration in Africa along the Central Mediterranean migration routes, Brussels, 15 December 2016. Link

European Union approves projects worth €37 million to tackle migration challenges in North Africa, Brussels, 16 December 2016. Link

High Representative/Vice-President Mogherini co-chairs the Second Regional Forum of the Union for the Mediterranean, Brussels, 20 January 2017. Link

Opening Remarks by the High Representative Federica Mogherini at the Second Regional Forum of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), Brussels, 23 January 2017. Link

Remarks by Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Ministerial meeting of the Union for the Mediterranean, 23 January 2017. Link
European Agenda on Migration: Commission reports on progress in making the new European Border and Coast Guard fully operational, 25 January 2017. Link

**Egypt**

Statement by the spokesperson on the terrorist attack in Cairo, Egypt, 11 December 2016. Link

Remarks by the High Representative/ Vice-President Federica Mogherini following the signature of the Financing Agreement with Ms Sahar Nasr, Minister of International Cooperation of Egypt, 20 December 2016. Link

On the latest attack in Egypt, 09 January 2016. Link

Decision by Egyptian court to freeze assets of two prominent human rights organizations and their directors, 12 January 2016. Link

**Israel**

Statement by the Spokesperson on the "Regularisation Bill" in Israel, Brussels, 08 December 2016. Link

Statement by the Spokesperson on today’s attack in Jerusalem, Brussels, 08 January 2017. Link

Statement by the Spokesperson on the Israeli announcement to build 2.500 settlement units, Brussels, 24 January 2017. Link

**Jordan**

Jordan: €200m in loans approved, 08 December 2016. Link

EU and Jordan adopted partnership priorities and compact, 20 December 2016. Link

**Lebanon**

Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the formation of a new government in Lebanon, 19 December 2016. Link

Lebanon: Council adopts conclusions, Brussels, 16 January 2017. Link

Opening remarks by HRVP Mogherini, at the joint press conference with Gebran Bassil, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants of Lebanon, 26 January 2017. Link

Remarks by HRVP Mogherini following her meeting with Mr Saad Hariri, Prime Minister of Lebanon, Brussels, 26 January 2017. Link

**Libya**

Liberation of Sirte, Brussels, 19 December 2016. Link
Federica Mogherini speaks with the Libyan Prime Minister Fayez Al Sarraj, Brussels, 17 January 2017. Link

HR/VP Federica Mogherini meets UN Special Representative for Libya Martin Kobler, Brussels, 24 January 2017. Link

EU-Libya relations, Brussels, 25 January 2017. Link

Morocco

Déclaration conjointe par Federica Mogherini et le Ministre des Affaires étrangères et de la coopération du royaume du Maroc Salahddine Mezouar, Brussels, 21 December 2016. Link

Palestine

The EU and Swiss Missions in Jerusalem and Ramallah condemn death sentences issued in Gaza, Jerusalem, 26 January 2017. Link

Syria

Federica Mogherini’s remarks at the panel on the future of Syria with the UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura, Rome, 03 December 2016. Link

Federica Mogherini discusses Syria in the margins of OSCE Ministerial Council, Hamburg, 08 December 2016. Link

Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the situation in Aleppo, 09 December 2016. Link

Remarks by HR/VP Mogherini ahead of the Foreign Affairs Council’s discussion on Syria, Brussels, 12 December 2016. Link

Battle for Aleppo: MEPs call for an immediate cessation of hostilities, 14 December 2016. Link

EU-Syria relations, Brussels, 23 December 2016. Link

Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini the announcement of a cessation of hostilities in Syria, Brussels, 30 December 2016. Link

Second round of meetings in the framework of the EU regional initiative on the future of Syria, 10 January 2017. Link

Tunisia

Remarques de la Haute Représentante/Vice-présidente Federica Mogherini à l’issue de la rencontre avec le Président de la Tunisie, M. Beji Caïd Essebsi, 01 December 2016. Link

Second high-level political dialogue on ‘security and counter-terrorism’: European Union and Tunisia renew their cooperation, Brussels, 19 January 2017. Link
Tunisia: Council extends freeze on the assets of 48 persons for another year, 27 January 2017. Link

Enlargement/Other

Statement on Enhancing the Fight Against Illicit Trafficking of Firearms and Ammunition in the Western Balkans, Brussels, 16 December 2016. Link

Albania

EU supports Territorial and Administrative Reform in Albania, new agreement signed, 20 December 2016. Link

Statement of EU Delegation to Albania, Tirana, 22 December 2016. Link

EU Commission grants EUR 90 million to Albania, Tirana, 23 December 2016. Link

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Johannes Hahn visits Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 08 December 2016. Link

The EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina marking a new stage of trade cooperation with today's signature, 15 December 2016. Link

Kosovo

The latest developments regarding the Mitrovica bridge, Brussels, 08 December 2016. Link

Kosovo and EU held 1st SAA Sub-committee on Justice, Freedom and Security, Pristina, 26 January 2017. Link

EU in Kosovo concerned over lack of transparency in amending RTK Law, Pristina, 27 January 2017. Link

Macedonia

Joint Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the early parliamentary elections in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Montenegro, 12 December 2016. Link

Montenegro

Eighth meeting of the Accession Conference with Montenegro, 13 December 2016. Link

Remarks by President Donald Tusk after his meeting with Prime Minister of Montenegro Duško Marković, 26 January 2017. Link

Serbia
EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Implementation of the Justice Agreement, Brussels, 10 December 2016. Link

High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini meets with Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, 12 December 2016. Link

Fourth meeting of the Accession Conference with Serbia, 13 December 2016. Link

Stabilisation and Association Council between the European Union and Serbia, 13 December 2016. Link

EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Implementation of the arrangement on telecommunication, 15 December 2016. Link

Federica Mogherini’s statement following the high level meeting in the framework of the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, Brussels, 24 January 2017. Link

**Turkey**

Rencontre entre Mme Federica Mogherini et le ministre turc des affaires étrangères, M. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Brussels, 06 December 2016. Link

Statement by HR/VP Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the bomb attack in Istanbul, Brussels, Brussels, 11 December 2016. Link

High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini speaks to Foreign Minister of Turkey, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, 17 December 2016. Link

Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn on the New Year's attack in Istanbul, 01 January 2016. Link

Facility for Refugees in Turkey: Commission Reports on Progress in Fifth Steering Committee, Brussels, 12 January 2017. Link

**EEA/EFTA**

Council conclusions on a homogeneous extended single market and EU relations with Non-EU Western European countries, 13 December 2016. Link

**Switzerland**

European Commission welcomes progress in relations between the European Union and Switzerland, Brussels, 22 December 2016. Link

Letter of congratulations from Presidents Tusk and Juncker to Doris Leuthard on her election as President of the Swiss Confederation, 23 December 2016. Link

Back issues
Perils and Opportunities: The EU Neighbourhood in 2017

The European Neighbourhood Watch editorial of January 2017 looked at the strategic implications for the neighbourhood of the events that dominated headlines last year – foremost among them the election of Donald Trump as US President, the UK referendum to leave the EU and the fall of Aleppo. To read the editorial, please click the button below.

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