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**Interview with Romania's Ambassador in Islamabad - Niculaie  
Goia: "Unfortunately, negative aspects regarding Pakistan are  
exaggerated"**

"Unfortunately (...) the negative tints regarding Pakistan are exaggerated, which has the unpleasant consequence of creating some reservations at the level of the Romanian business community in connection with the security of some possible businesses or cooperation projects with Pakistani companies," Ambassador of Romania in Islamabad Niculaie Goia said in an interview with AGERPRES, underscoring that during the two years spent in this country there were "no problems regarding the businessmen or projects in which companies from Europe were involved."

The Romanian diplomat argues that the security situation has considerably improved in Pakistan and the population's state of mind is much better and "there are no reasons of concern in Islamabad regarding more terrorist attacks than in any other capital of the world, including the ones in Europe." Moreover, he characterizes as "somewhat disproportionate" the deployment of forces generally used in Pakistan to ensure the security of the

heads of diplomatic missions, and assures that he has never had a "feeling of personal insecurity" in this country.

In this context, Niculaie Goia says that Pakistan, "one of the countries that suffered the most from terrorism" made huge sacrifices in order to improve the security situation, and the new Pakistani Executive led by Imran Khan "proposed to act more decisive, in order to improve the security environment and to reduce the tensions in the region." Moreover, the new Government makes efforts to improve the quality of life in Pakistan, including through the severe cut-back of school drop-out caused by poverty, which makes this generation vulnerable to extremist and radical messages, but also through "an ambitious programme aimed at fighting corruption."

In respect to the bilateral cooperation, Niculaie Goia stated in the interview granted via email that the diplomatic representation takes into account "several projects that can significantly contribute to the strengthening of the bilateral cultural relations and which mainly aims to intensify student exchanges and cooperation at university level."

Furthermore, Romania aims to develop the economic collaboration with Pakistan and one of the projects which could favor this thing is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), worth about 60 billion US dollars, "to which Romania can participate as a subcontractor of some objectives for which it certainly has the expertise and capability to achieve." At the same time, ways of collaborating on third markets are sought. "I am convinced that, as Romania will rebuild its external investor profile, and this thing will undoubtedly happen in the near future, it will find in Pakistan a reliable partner," the Romanian Ambassador to Pakistan said.

Last but not least, Romania's Embassy in Islamabad will put in efforts in order "to identify new opportunities for increasing trade, that should reach, in a few years, realistically speaking, to at least half of billion of US dollars." The e-mail interview is part of the #DiplomaticCentennial editorial project conducted by AGERPRES throughout the year, with an emphasis on diplomatic relations in the context of the 100th anniversary of the Greater Union.

*AGERPRES: Mr Niculaie Goia, you are Ambassador in Pakistan as of November 2016. We challenge you to an exercise of honesty. Which were the first three things that came in mind when thinking about Pakistan before starting your mandate and how much did the situation change in the meantime?*

Niculaie Goia: It's a very interesting question, which includes a journalist insinuation. Unfortunately, in respect to Pakistan, there is still a serious lack of perception, the country being associated with apocalyptic scenarios regarding the security situation and the dangers of the existence, on the soil of this state, of some extremist groups with or without links to Afghanistan. The fact is that the Pakistani Government, the army and the security services in Islamabad have carried out, over the last years, a very labor-intensive counter-terrorism activity, which has resulted in important successes, but also with an extremely high losses of human lives. As a result, the security situation has improved considerably, the population's state of mind is much better, and there are no reasons of concern in Islamabad regarding more terrorist attacks than in any other capital of the world, including the ones in Europe.

As a consequence, not the difficult security environment, the safety of the diplomatic office or ours, the personnel and not the terrorism in general were the things that came to mind for the first time when I was proposed to take over the Ambassador office of Romania in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. As much as curious and somewhat unpredictable it might seem, the first thing that came through my mind was a novel I read in my adolescence. I am talking about "The Rains Came" by US writer Louis Bromfield, which talks about a natural disaster (an earthquake followed by floods and heavy rains) which took place in the Indian city of Ranchipur. I do not remember the narrative very well, but I know it was a riot of the Indian population against the British administration, finally stifled in blood, but with great losses of lives. Everything was happening in the background of some catastrophic rains and floods, being the monsoon period, in a city that we could not identify later, that only existed in the author's imagination. Over the course of several decades, due to confusion, I thought it was Rawalpindi, a city near Islamabad, the capital city.

The second thing that came in mid was the fact that Pakistan is one of the nuclear powers of the world and, from this point of view, it has a special relevance in the geostrategic equation of South Asia and, in general, of today's world. The third thing was the geographic proximity to Afghanistan, where Romania has troops in the Resolute Support Mission, and where Romanian servicemen contribute, with great sacrifices, to the efforts to pacifying this country devastated by a terrible war that seems to be lasting for an eternity.

Then, of course, the natural thoughts and concerns followed before the beginning of a long-term mission abroad: if I will manage to adapt to some quite different conditions in relation to Romania and the countries where I have worked in the past, aspects regarding the culture, traditions, history,

political, economic and social situation of Pakistan, the structure of the Embassy, the personnel, the buildings, etc, etc. I sincerely tell you that I have never thought of the Taliban or any security threats to me or my family, and I believe that after two years here, I was right not to show any anxieties about these issues. Moreover, the Pakistani Executive led by Imran Khan, who was settled following the general elections of July 2018, proposed to take even more action to improve the security environment and reduce tensions in the region which have a negative impact over security.

AGERPRES: Your precursor in this office, Ambassador Emilian Ion, was among those who survived the collapse of a military helicopter on 8 May 8 2015, an air tragedy in which eight of the 17 people on board died, including the Ambassadors of Norway, the Philippines and Indonesia. Two possible causes of the tragedy were spread, namely a technical problem and an attack of the Talibans. Has the investigation reached a definitive conclusion about the causes of the crash of that military helicopter?

Niculaie Goia: It was an extremely unfortunate situation, devastating through its consequences, I'm firstly referring to the tragic disappearance of eight people. The Embassies that had diplomats at the board of that helicopter, in that fatal day, continued to make demarches and pressures in order to find out as soon as possible the truth regarding the motives that led to the helicopter crush. I cannot say that the investigation was conducted with maximum operability, but the results of the technical and forensic investigations - conducted by the Pakistani authorities and conveyed to those involved, more than two years after the event - highlighted that the incident was mainly caused by unfavorable weather conditions that generated extremely strong currents and the pilots lost control of the aircraft. The area where the incident occurred was a difficult one for helicopters, taking into account that it is situated between high mountain slopes that facilitate the creation of powerful currents which can take even the most experienced pilots by surprise. There are no clues to prove the existence of a terrorist attack, which is confirmed not only by the findings of the investigation, but also by the survivors of the tragic incident.

AGERPRES: Former Ambassador Emilian Ion also stated in an interview that, due to security reasons, he changed his travel route from home to the Embassy everyday. Have you maintained this precaution since you took over the office as Ambassador to Pakistan? What other security measures does this office requires in a country with a volatile security climate?

Nicolaie Goia: I wouldn't want to comment much on this topic. The great majority of the Embassies in Islamabad certainly have immediate physical protection teams that accompany the mission leaders in all their travels outside the Embassies, but this is not something specific just to Islamabad, as it is seen in most states of the world. I personally see it to be a somewhat disproportionate display of forces in relation to the actual situation in the field. We consider this kind of measures to be exaggerated and, as a result, we limit ourselves to adopting a preventive conduct and strict observance of the rules that govern our external activity in terms of defense of the mission headquarters and personnel. They aren't extraordinary measures, but often problems arise when we ignore the basic rules of behavior that we must have outside, especially in special situations or in troubled countries. This involves restrictions and certain restraints that we certainly assumed before taking over the office. The day-to-day change of the travel route from home to the Embassy is something that rather relates to the "Homeland" US action series and I do not think it has any relevance when it comes to the Romanian Ambassador in Islamabad and no connection to the reality in the field. In addition, the home is so close to the Embassy that one cannot really modify the route. Perhaps they are heads of missions of some countries who have another opinion, I have never had the feeling of personal insecurity. I have worked in several countries and I can make comparisons, I firmly believe that Pakistani people are very friendly, welcoming and hospitable people. In none of the countries I've worked in the past have I done so many local friends, and I have never received so many invitations in their homes.

The terrorist threat cannot be excluded in Pakistan, as it cannot be excluded in any other country. Unfortunately, and I underscore this thing, the negatives tints regarding Pakistan are exaggerated, which has the rather unpleasant consequence of creating some reservations at the level of the Romanian business community in connection with the security of some possible businesses or cooperation projects with Pakistani companies. I would like to say it very clear, from my two-year experience in this country, there have been no problems with businessmen or projects involving companies from Europe and, therefore, I encourage without reserves, the intensification of "business to business" and "people to people" contacts between the two countries. There is, of course, much to be done in order to increase the effectiveness of the counter-terrorism activities and, among these, certainly, the sincere cooperation between the major actors involved in the peacekeeping efforts of the area has an extremely important place.

*AGERPRES: Generally speaking, do you see an improvement in terms of Pakistan's security climate over the last two years? Taking into account your*

*wide diplomatic experience in the Middle East, what are currently the specific challenges in terms of security which Pakistan is confronted with?*

Niculaie Goia: Pakistan's security situation knew some positive developments over the last years, following the campaign conducted by the Pakistani army in the areas with high-terrorist risk. Efforts were put in and huge sacrifices were made by the Pakistani authorities in order to improve the security situation, which is firstly to the benefit of the Pakistani people. Terrorism killed in Pakistan over 74,000 people over the past 14 years, both servicemen and civilians, and generated economic losses worth over 123 billion US dollars. From this perspective, I believe, without exaggerating, that Pakistan is one of the countries that suffered the most from terrorism.

Compared to what happened in 2013, for instance, the security situation however improved considerably and there are premises for this positive trend to continue in the future. The challenges which Pakistan is confronted with in the security plan derives from the geopolitical settlement in a zonal security environment deeply affected by local conflicts, the proximity of high-instability countries, the proliferation of non-state actors with a pronounced terrorist potential, unrepressed temptation of some groups trying to solve their problems and frustrations or simply make their presence felt through violent manifestations.

At the same time, Pakistan is currently confronted with a difficult economic situation which has a serious impact in education, healthcare and growth of poverty, that through a perverse, but aggressive effect, can generate terrorism. According to official statistics, almost 40 percent of school-age children do not have access to education due to poverty, the impact of this situation being devastating for the country's future, but also making a generation vulnerable to extremist and radical messages. It should be noted, as I have already said, the efforts of the new Government, headed by Prime Minister Imran Khan to correct this situation, through effective measures to improve the overall quality of life in Pakistan, including by drastically reducing school dropout caused by poverty. I firmly believe that, through its natural riches, the tremendous potential of a particularly talented people, through the anti-corruption campaign that is increasingly present in Pakistan, the good governance and the drastic cut-back of bureaucracy, but also through the improvement of the security environment, this country has the potential to become one of the most important economies, not only in Asia, but also at global level, which will lead to solving many internal policy problems and will give it an external detente, according to the profile it will have in the new circumstances.

AGERPRES: In Pakistan, there are one of the most beautiful places on earth, such as Swat Valley and Siachen or Hispar glaciers. At the same time, in Pakistan, there are also UNESCO World Heritage historic sites such as the ruins of the old Mohenjo-Daro town and the Shalimar Gardens in Lahore. How much are the Romanians interested in Pakistan in terms of tourism? Has the number of Romanian tourists in Pakistan increased lately?

Niculaie Goia: Indeed, Pakistan has a tremendous tourist potential generated both by the historical sites and the geographic beauty of this extraordinary country, as well as by the ethnographic features of the various cultures that have populated the region for thousands of years. Pakistan has much to offer, from natural beauty and historical heritage, to cultural diversity. Unfortunately, Pakistan is not very well known and promoted in Romania as a tourist destination, but I am sure that along with the improvement of the security situation in the region, Pakistan can become a tourist attraction for the Romanians. Currently, Pakistan is visited especially by Romanian mountain climbers who dare to face the world's second highest mountain peak, K2.

AGERPRES: You said in a recent interview that the cultural links, given the historic relations and sympathy feelings that the two nations have for each other, create a huge potential for an increased collaboration. You are also convinced that the future presents an even better outlook in terms of the cultural relations between Romania and Pakistan. Are there any concrete projects in the area?

Niculaie Goia: It is important and absolutely necessary to further act in view of increasing the number of contacts through exchanges of experience between people of culture, science, outstanding mass media figures, students, etc. in order to improve the relations between the two countries and bring the cultural and scientific cooperation back to a level that highlights the huge potential of both countries. We take into account several projects that can make a significant contribution to strengthening the bilateral cultural relations and which are mainly aimed at enhancing student exchanges and cooperation at university level.

Both cultures have unique characteristics specific to their own regions and can be combined to provide the highest visibility to our countries. The cultural traditions of each party, combined with actions in the areas of education, scientific cooperation, etc., can offer mutual opportunities to

promote national values that will connect and strengthen cooperation among the states and continents we are part of.

It is almost impossible to highlight the special points of the Pakistani culture because they are so many. I want to underscore an aspect that highlights Pakistan's contribution to the universal culture: six objectives of this country are currently included in the UNESCO World Heritage, namely the Mohenjo-daro is an archaeological site, the Buddhist ruins in Takht-i-Bahi, the ancient city of Taxila, the Shalamar Fort and Garden in Lahore, the historic monuments in Thatta, the Rohtas Fort, the Sahr-i-Bahlol vestiges. All of this justifies the belief that Pakistan is a fascinating country in many respects, especially from a cultural point of view and historical values. It is an extremely friendly country with good, competent and friendly people.

*AGERPRES: Many Romanians heard about Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize laureate and the author of "I am Malala," translated in Romanian, which tells the story of a teenage girl shot by Talibans because she was militating for women's right to education. What other Pakistani personalities do you think deserve to be known in Romania?*

Niculaie Goia: Malala Yousafzai is, indeed, a model of heroism and perseverance in pursuing some exceptional ideals and, rightfully became a symbol and a source of inspiration of the young generation of Pakistan and not only. However, I want to mention that Pakistan is the sixth nation with the largest population around the world, a country that benefits an extraordinary human potential that offered humanity a series of outstanding figures, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, poet and philosopher Allama Iqbal, first Pakistani Nobel Prize laureate Dr. Abdus Salam or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, one of Pakistan's most important singers. Even current Prime Minister Imran Khan, a former cricket champion known all over the world, has inspired many Pakistani youth to go beyond their limits in order to achieve an exceptional level of performance regardless of the area in which they operate. By listing only the above, I certainly make an injustice to many Pakistani personalities who have impressed through a visionary thinking and contributed to the enrichment of the universal heritage in the most various areas of activity.

*AGERPRES: In the same interview granted to "Evolve" magazine you talked about common values of the EU, in the context of Romania taking over the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU, as of 1 January 2019. Among these you mentioned the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, justice, and the observance for the human rights, including the minority rights.*

pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, solidarity and equality between men and women. How do you think Pakistan is currently reporting to these common EU values?

Niculaie Goia: I reiterate Romania's support for the further development of the EU-Pakistan relations. I believe that the EU-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue will strengthen the current partnership, which is aimed at preventing instability, extremism and radicalization of the population.

Romania, having a dual status, as member of the EU and NATO, endorses the intensification of the EU-NATO-Pakistan relations through an intensified dialogue and a more wide cooperation. Pakistan has made considerable progress in areas such as strengthening democracy and observig human rights, but there is still a lot to be corrected or improved in order to get as close as possible to the value system promoted by the European Union. In this context, it is important to underline that the current Executive has launched an ambitious programme to fight corruption, increase the level of the population's education, improve the general living conditions of the population and create the necessary premises for constructive approaches in the areas of democracy and defence of human rights.

AGERPRES: Have you identified, within the context of the bilateral economic contacts, areas in which the entrepreneurs of each of the two countries could invest on the territory of the other, taking into account the distance between them and the current development trends of the business milieu, as well as the interests of these states in the two regions?

Niculaie Goia: Pakistan can become an important trade partner of Romania and both parties are interested in strengthening the volume of bilateral trade, which currently are far below our economies. Romania has a rich tradition of economic cooperation with Pakistan. We built here, in a not so far past, refineries, cement factories, tractors assembled lines, etc. In the numerous discussions I carried out with ministers of the Islamabad Government and business milieu representatives, a constant interest in resuming this kind of cooperation was pointed out, especially with regard to the construction of refineries, tractors assembling lines and agricultural machinery, automobile manufacture, heavy trucks etc. We have many positive signals in this respect and I hope that we can achieve the partial materialisation of these projects. I want to mention in this context that a giant project is currently carried out in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) worth approximately 60 billion US dollars, which is mainly funded by China, to which Romania can participate as a subcontractor of

some objectives for which it certainly has the expertise and ability to complete.

Besides the bilateral cooperation through mutual investments, we are also interested in finding collaboration options on third markets in which Romania and Pakistan can conjugate their resources and energies in the most constructive way. Unfortunately, this area is not at all represented lately because of multiple causes related, to some extent, to certain reserves of our country in terms of investments on third-party foreign market. Romania and Pakistan have areas of common interest both geographically (Near East, North Africa, etc.), as well as thematic (common interest in the development of IT and communications, civil engineering and infrastructure, agriculture, etc.) - and highly profitable cooperation for both parties can be envisaged.

I am convinced that, as Romania will rebuild its external investor profile, and this thing will undoubtedly happen in the near future, it will find a reliable partner in Pakistan. There is a strong need to strengthen international economic co-operation and, at the same time, to rebuild the traditional relationship with old friends, Pakistan being among them. The real potential of the two countries is huge and we should take full advantage of the areas of complementarity already identified by the two economies. The current level of bilateral trade does not reflect the true potential of the two countries. Efforts need to be made, and this is important on the Embassy's agenda, in order to identify new opportunities and areas for increased trade that should reach in a few years, realistically speaking, at least a half of billion US dollars.

*AGERPRES: One of Pakistan's notorious events is the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007 after a political rally in Rawalpindi, shortly after her return from exile and before the election. It's been more than a decade since then. How would you describe the current political life in Pakistan?*

Niculaie Goia: The assassination of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has generated a huge shock and created much emotion in both Pakistan and the international community, and continues to spark controversies. It undoubtedly was a black chapter in the history of the country, but we can say that Pakistan is currently a democratic state with a very vibrant political life, a fact reflected also by the way in which the last parliamentary elections were carried out. The political life of Pakistan has developed a lot over the past ten years as a result of the maturing of political parties and the consolidation of the legislative power that has fully assumed the role of modernising the country. I really do not believe that in Pakistan, under the current conditions, tragic events such as the one in question would be possible. At the same time, I see a new breath on the Pakistani political scene and a more substantial involvement of

youngsters in politics, beneficial to the country's progress and to the easy exchange between generations.

AGERPRES: You are probably meeting, while exercising the ambassador office, many people from Romania or other countries who come for the first time in Pakistan. What are the most widespread bias against Pakistan and how can they be fought?

Niculaie Goia: The most preconceived prejudices and ideas are related to the security situation, the presence of the Talibans, etc., as well as aspects which don't have a real basis and are generally related to violence, unfairly considered as part of the Pakistani society. As I said earlier, many efforts and enormous sacrifices have been made in Pakistan by the authorities to improve the security situation. I now believe that a strategy for changing the image of Pakistan is needed, one to really mirror the positive and negative aspects of the Pakistani society, and the advantages of multiculturalism which generated a unique ethnographic culture in the world. The criminality percentage is not more pronounced than in other countries, but let's not forget that we are talking about a country with more than 200 million inhabitants (only the city of Karachi has a higher population than Romania), where law enforcements operate on many fronts and they manage to greatly limit the acts of violence and fraud of any kind whatsoever.

AGERPRES: The Romanian community of Pakistan is a small one, limited to a few dozen people. This year Romania celebrates the Greater Union Centennial, a moment marked by Embassies and other institutions of the Romanian state through events held in all corners of the world. What events dedicated to the Centennial will the Embassy of Romania to Pakistan organised and what does the Embassy propose through such events?

Niculaie Goia: The Centennial is celebrated by Romanians around the world as a symbol of solidarity, hope and triumph against adverse circumstances. This reflects, up to now, Romania's attachment to the principles of tolerance, mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and respect for the cultural values of all people. We have already organized several public diplomacy activities, including by involving a part of the Romanians living in Pakistan, through which we have been able to sensitize the local audience about the exceptional significance of celebrating the Centennial.

In the local news, articles dedicated to the event have been published and I, as Ambassador, participated in many symposia, conferences, public events on this topic. I want to add that in the course of these actions we have

benefited from the full support of both local authorities and private institutes. In order to give you one example, I would mention the excellent cooperation that the embassy had with the Pakistani authorities and press in the expedition organized by a group of Romanian motorcyclists, under the aegis of the Centennial, who traveled the famous Karakorum highway carrying with them the flags and symbols of our great celebration.

We will further organise cultural and public diplomacy events that will focus on screenings, presentations at the level of some strategic research institutes and major university centers, and receptions at the level of diplomatic bodies accredited to Islamabad. We also have in mind the issuance of a philatelic edition marking the Greater Union Centennial in Pakistan. In fact, in the public diplomacy programme that we proposed for the next period, the Centennial and the taking over of Romania of the Presidency of the European Union Council represent major events which we will ensure suitable visibility in Pakistan.