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European Perspectives for Moldova: Challenges and Obstacles

Moldova appeared for the first time on the horizon of EU foreign policy in the second half of the '90s, but a comprehensive policy towards that country only started to be contoured with the launching of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009. The Warsaw Declaration of the second EaP summit acknowledged "the European aspirations and the European choice"¹ of Moldova, and as such, the EaP initiative might be treated as a pre-accession stage. Issues currently on the negotiation table are visa regime liberalization, signing the Association Agreement (which is to replace the PCA) and the establishment of an EU–Moldova free-trade area by a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.

The implementation of the EaP is a long-term process, which foresees a special role for EU member states. There are valid grounds to assume that Moldova's record in democratization could be more efficiently pushed forward by the direct support of member states that have interests in the country. Upon identifying these member states and examining the crossroads of their foreign policies, possible frameworks for cooperation can be explored in the view of a more efficient dialogue with Moldova.

Moldova: A "Success Story" with Problems

Since Moldova's population is only 4.3 million and because it lacks any spectacular economic potential or natural resources, interest in the country tends to be of a rather indirect nature and needs to be viewed in the wider context of the EU Eastern neighbourhood. The key issue in the region is geopolitical in nature: the EU wishes to have stable neighbours for the sake of its own security and in order to ensure a safe environment for economic relations with these countries. As traditional European political thinking sees

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¹ Council of the European Union, *Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit*, Warsaw, 30 September 2011, www.consilium.europa.eu.

democracy as the most likely guarantor of stability, the aim of the EU is the democratization of its neighbourhood. Although certain actors bring into the discussion the perspective of the eventual accession of these Eastern European states, this cannot be counted as a general objective of the EU.

Moreover, wishing to step up as a global actor, the EU first needs to conduct a successful foreign policy campaign in its immediate proximity. As such, the visible results of the Eastern Partnership are important in giving credibility to the capabilities of the EU in external affairs. This general objective can be easily projected to Moldova when taking into account the latest evaluations of the EaP. According to the European Neighbourhood Policy Progress Report published in May 2011, Moldova is No. 1 among the six EaP states in terms of implementing required reforms.² Among the main accomplishments are ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and modernization of the customs services in line with EU standards. Moldova also made progress on the majority of items in the Action Plan for 2010. At the same time, the Moldovan government took a proactive stance in cooperation with the EU back in 2009 and, consequently, has kept itself on track, making Moldova a potential success story in the region, at least in terms of democratization. As such, the EU has started to see Moldova as an example of visible results in democratization among the Eastern Partnership countries.

Even if at present Moldova seems to stand the highest chance of European integration, one must not overestimate the relative progress indicated by such evaluations. First of all, in spite of certain reforms taken by the government, the efforts to fight corruption, reform the judiciary, prosecution and police, and implement certain human-rights commitments are inadequate. Moreover, the current pro-European determination of the political elite should not be taken for granted. Even more so in view of an ongoing political crisis in the country that is equivalent to not having a president for two years now. What makes things worse is political instability that could endanger the current European orientation of the government. The dismantling of the Alliance for European Integration (AEI) and an eventual coalition of the Liberal Democrats and the Communist Party would totally reverse the achievements of the past two years.³

Finally, the major obstacle in the way of an EU–Moldova dialogue is posed by the still unregulated status of the secessionist territory of Transnistria. Shortly after the declaration of Moldovan independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the mainly ethnic Russian and Ukrainian inhabited area east of the Dniester renounced the authority of Chisinau and started a secessionist war with the help of Russia, which resulted in the *de facto* independence of Transnistria. Led by a business elite that centralized power in the hands of

² European Commission, *ENP Country Progress Report 2010—Republic of Moldova*, Brussels, 25.05.2011, www.eeas.europa.eu.

³ See Igor Botan, “Sad end of the ‘success story’”, www.e-democracy.md.

Igor Smirnov, Transnistria is not recognized by any state, but receives economic and political support from Russia, which also maintains about 1,200 troops in the territory.

The conflict between Moldova and separatist Transnistria has been frozen since 1992 by the inability of both sides to agree on the status of the region—the Moldovan government wishes to reintegrate it with the Moldovan state, while the Transnistrian authorities will accept nothing less than independence or the open wish to join the Russian Federation.⁴ The furthest that international conflict resolution attempts got was in initiating the so-called “5+2 negotiations” in which Moldova and Transnistria were participants, Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) acted as mediators and the EU and the United States were observers. But even these meetings came to a halt in 2006, only to be re-launched in 2010 as informal consultations. On 22 September 2011 at a meeting in Moscow, the parties involved announced the resumption of official negotiations in the “5+2” format. This meant that Russia and the Tiraspol authorities finally have stopped refusing to engage in negotiations, although they have continued to set pre-conditions. Participants in the Moscow meeting agreed that the next official meeting of the “Permanent Conference” will be dedicated to discussing the principles and agenda for the official negotiation process.⁵

There are no doubts that the Transnistrian conflict is solvable, since it is not based on religious, ethnic or linguistic differences. Maintaining the status quo is simply in the interest of both the business and political elites, because as far as the status of the region remains unsettled, no authority can exercise control over it and it will continue to serve as fertile soil for various forms of illegal economic activity. Under such conditions, the area remains almost unapproachable for the EU and makes even cooperation with Moldova problematic.

EU Member States’ Perspectives on Moldova

The lack of a genuine commitment or interest from EU member states—apart from Moldovan internal factors—do not contribute to an acceleration of the process of bringing Moldova closer to the EU. While Ukraine or South Caucasus are present on the agendas of many member states because of their large markets, energy transit routes or natural resources, the group of European countries with an interest in Moldova is much more restricted.

Romania has the clearest links with Moldova, consisting of historical, economic and geographic ties. Countries such as Poland and Germany see Moldova in a broader

⁴ “At the side of Russia—interview with Igor Smirnov, President of Transnistria”, *New Eastern Europe*, No. 5 (XIX) 2011, pp. 58–61.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Second Round of Moscow Consultations among the Participants of Transnistria “5 plus 2” Negotiations and the Resumption of the “Permanent Conference on Political Issues within the Negotiation Process towards a Transnistrian Settlement”*, Moscow, 22 September 2011, www.mid.ru.

perspective as a success in the Eastern dimension of the ENP, of which they wish to be the main promoters. Some member states—Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, the Baltic States and France—subscribe to this only to a limited extent, meaning they offer overall support but object to visa liberalization, though they can probably be persuaded to engage in cooperation with Moldova on an *ad hoc* basis. The remaining member states are either completely indifferent (Spain and the Netherlands) or indifferent as long as the question of membership is not brought into the discussion (Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom).

Since it has many reasons for encouraging an efficient, multilateral approach to Moldova, Romania is the most vocal supporter of not only EU dialogue but also accession. There is also a security concern behind its policy because of the shared border, which currently is the scene of arms and drugs smuggling, human trafficking and illegal immigration. Romania's geopolitical interest is explained by its aspirations to become a regional leader in the Black Sea region, a role for which exemplary terms with Moldova are a prerequisite. An economic perspective also should be noted. According to data published by the Moldovan National Bureau of Statistics, Romania is the Moldova's second trading partner, lagging not far behind Russia and ahead of Ukraine.⁶ In spite of a whole series of clear interests, internal problems prevent Romania from transforming its potential in external policy into real influence.

Romania–Moldova diplomatic relations reached a historical low point after the 2009 Moldovan elections when Romania was accused of instigating post-election riots. However, with the coming to power of the Alliance for European Integration coalition, bilateral relations started again to warm. Thanks to that, a Local Border Traffic Agreement entered into force in February 2010 and series of other bilateral cooperation agreements in fields such as agriculture, environment and education were signed. Moreover, in April 2010 a Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Moldova and Romania for Moldova's European Integration was signed. While this provides the basic political framework for cooperation on integration, an Action Plan detailing the partnership is still subject to negotiations.

Along with these bilateral project initiatives and agreements, Romania also was busy within the EU trying to move the issue of Moldovan integration forward. The conceptual base of these efforts has been to attempt to transfer Moldova from the group of countries covered by the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy to the Western Balkans group covered by the Enlargement Policy.⁷ In the case of the Western Balkans, the Stabilization and Association Process that was started in 1999 recognized the perspective of membership and aims at preparing countries that have signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement for

⁶ Biroul Național de Statistică, "Comerț exterior", www.statistica.md.

⁷ The package of countries in the Western Balkans are, in this context, a geopolitical, rather than a geographical reference; therefore, the inclusion of Moldova in this category is not an abuse of geography.

accession. Eastern and southern neighbour countries covered by the ENP do not hold such promises. A palpable result of the Romanian efforts to put Moldova on the European foreign policy agenda was the creation of the European Action Group on the Republic of Moldova.

Poland has lately become another advocate of EU policy towards Moldova. As a co-initiator and primary force behind the EaP, Poland has indirect interests in keeping Moldova on the European track, thus enhancing the credibility of its project. Based on the progress in assessments of the member countries in the project, Poland has a valid reason to attach high expectations to Moldova's progress and to invest more diplomatic effort in pushing forward its case.

Since Poland holds the presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2011, a wide range of opportunities are currently opening up for the country to give more weight and finally achieve some results with the EaP, which has been declared a priority. Under such conditions there should be enough room to accord increased attention to Moldova along with Belarus and Ukraine, which have traditionally been the main concerns of Poland in this context. However, the Polish support of Moldova has so far been expressed only in terms of gestures rather than actions, for instance, by the visit of Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski to Moldova in June this year. Because of the promises of support that were articulated during this occasion, Moldovans started to seriously view Poland as a patron within the EU. Another Polish gesture of mostly symbolic value that is fuelling Moldovan hopes for patronage is the foundation of the Polish–Moldovan Parliamentary Assembly in Chisinau on 25 July this year.⁸

Moldovan's high expectations of the Polish lobby were not disappointed during the second EaP summit in Warsaw on 29–30 September 2011, which were conducted under the Polish presidency of the EU Council. Moldova was satisfied with the appreciation and encouragement it received at the summit for its democratic developments and welcomed the recognition of its European aspirations⁹ in the final declaration of the summit.

Another development related to Moldovan integration that can be partially attributed to Poland was the establishment of the "V4 Eastern Partnership" by the four Visegrad countries on 16 June 2011¹⁰ in Bratislava. The new program will embark in 2012 with flagship projects focused on democratization and the transformation process. Each of the four Visegrad countries will deliver an additional €250,000 to the International Visegrad Fund for the purpose of this project.

⁸ *Inauguration of Parliamentary Assembly of Poland and Moldova*, 27 July 2011, www.easternpartnership.org.

⁹ *The declaration of Vlad Filat in Warsaw*, Press Release, Warsaw, 30 September, www.unimedia.md.

¹⁰ *Joint Statement on the Enhanced Visegrad Group Activities in the Eastern Partnership*, V4 Prime Minister's Summit, Bratislava, 16 June 2011, www.visegradgroup.eu.

Germany's interest in Moldova is evident in its attempts to promote a settlement of the Transnistria conflict. This signals that the primary German aim is to ensure stability in the neighbourhood while stopping short of any reference to EU membership. The reason for this is enlargement fatigue within Germany and the priority in the eyes of the Bundestag to deepen rather than widen the EU, that is, to first implement internal reforms and settle the eurozone crisis by strengthening economic integration and then speak about further enlargement only once those issues have been settled. Even if the German agenda stops short of including an accession possibility for Moldova, it gives grounds to aim for enhanced dialogue that includes both of these general European interests. Similar to Romania, Germany has its own strategic interest in stabilizing the region, and especially in solving the Transnistrian question because of economic ties there. Alongside Italy, Germany is the only EU trading partner of the separatist territory, with business relations at a low but constant level. Transnistrian companies had developed trade relations with Germany a decade ago. Today, there are about 20 German–Transnistrian joint ventures.

At the same time, Germany also shares Poland's motivation to achieve visible results in democratizing the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the reasons for giving priority to their Eastern neighbours is somewhat different. Poland aims at creating as high a level of general democratization of the region as possible, first, on the grounds of solidarity, and second, because it is in Poland's direct neighbourhood. The type of security Germany wants to achieve should be understood in the context of Russian–German relations. At a meeting in 2010, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev reached agreement on the so-called "Meseberg Memorandum"¹¹ which proposes a common Russian–European security dialogue in which Transnistria would be a test case. In contrast to the former European position to foster the autonomy of Transnistria within a unified Moldovan state, the memorandum points to a fundamental shift in Germany's strategy from a European vision to a Russian point of view of the issue. The document promotes a federation-based solution of the conflict without placing a constraint on Russia to withdraw troops from the territory.

EU Member States Cooperation—A Best-Case Scenario for Moldova?

Given the present situation and mapping the possibilities for joint, multilateral efforts to assist Moldova on its path of progress, three future scenarios can be imagined: pessimistic, which assumes that the communists return to power and effectively block the current pro-European reforms; optimistic, meaning that Moldova will be able to resolve the Transnistria conflict and join the EU; and, the status quo, which assumes the existence of separate states—Moldova and separatist Transnistria, of which, only Moldova will be able to count on meaningful development aid.

¹¹ *Memorandum*, Meeting of Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Dmitri Medvedev, Meseberg, 4–5 June 2010, www.bundesregierung.de.

According to the first and most pessimistic scenario, member states would remain indifferent to cooperation with Moldova and would not go beyond a rather declaratory intention to help. With the loss of motivation for Moldova to further pursue a pro-European policy, the Communist Party would be most likely to come back to power. This means the future Moldovan government would change direction and would follow Transnistria in relying more on Russian cooperation instead of looking to the EU. This also would mean a continuation of a low standard of living, and consequently, the economic migration of Moldovans to EU countries.

In second and most optimistic scenario, a member-state coalition would be set up to foster a quick resolution of the Transnistrian conflict and set Moldova irreversibly on a European path. The most plausible EU member states likely to bring forward the case of Moldova–EU relations are Poland and Romania, since the ambitions of the two countries intersect in several fields (such as energy policy, EU budget and the Eastern neighbourhood policy). Joining the Polish potential as a leader of the Eastern Partnership with Romania's special understanding in Moldova could lead to the sharing not only of foreign policy objectives but also achievements. Despite the potential of such a Polish–Romanian alliance, the post-1989 diplomatic history of the two countries shows they have rarely sought each others' support. The main reason for this is the foreign policy principle so much embedded in post-socialist countries to look to the Western part of the continent instead of reaching out to fellow countries in the region.

Polish–Romanian cooperation could be strengthened by Germany—a country that has a large influence on the Eastern dimension of the ENP while also having its own interests in Moldova. In this case, the challenge would be not to persuade Germany to pay more attention to Moldova—since it has initiatives of its own—but rather to take common actions. Poland and Romania do not hesitate to indicate that their support of Moldova has as the ultimate goal that country's accession to the EU. Germany follows a more functional train of thought: it aims to solve the Transnistrian conflict and wishes to ensure a secure environment in which to pursue its economic interests, but it also sees these objectives as being feasible without offering Moldova EU membership. This more pragmatic strategy can be explained by Germany's careful attention to the Russian factor, that is, to manoeuvre in the Eastern neighbourhood only so long as it does not disturb the fragile balance of relations with Russia.

A further pattern of cooperation seems to be lining up within the V4 countries. Even though Hungary is more prone to look towards the Balkans, and Slovakia and the Czech Republic are not primarily interested in Moldova, none has any reason to oppose closer ties with Moldova. Thus, most likely all three of them could be persuaded to engage with Poland at the lead for the sake of bringing forward the issue of common V4 security policy cooperation. In addition to these countries, cooperation on Moldova also could be extended

in the direction of the Baltic States and Bulgaria. Since they are located on the Eastern margins of the Union, the stability of the border region also is a general concern for them.

For the effective cooperation of these member states, a common position needs to be reached about the desired final objective of European–Moldovan relations. If the jointly set goal is EU membership, then Transnistria needs to be reunited with Moldova under an autonomous status and Moldova needs to enter the EU as a unified state, or else Russian influence on a federal Transnistria would prevent the region from gaining EU membership. In case the alliance of member states chooses to pursue a closer partnership with Moldova without membership, an alternative solution to the Transnistrian issue also would be acceptable. If the sole goal is to stabilize the country for cooperation, a federation also can serve this purpose.

The third scenario is to maintain the status quo. If despite member states' indifference, Chisinau's pro-European policy is maintained, then there is no urgency to settle the Transnistrian conflict and the EU cannot provide membership perspectives with that condition. Since it is squarely up to the Moldovan government to implement the reforms, that is likely to be an arduous process.