

Moldova – A Test Case in EU-Russian Relations?

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Alongside the proliferation of policy counselling after the end of the Cold War, problems connected with the expertise and the independence of the experts, the transparency and the added-value of the advisory process are increasingly coming under scrutiny.¹ Political advisors are supposed to be unrestrained by private or corporate interests, dispose of a wide range of scholarly knowledge, think in an innovative way, question conventional wisdom, and formulate alternative concepts and agendas. Most importantly, experts should neither tend to become part of the inner decision-making process, nor should they take into account potential political concerns and reactions to their findings before presenting them. With these criteria in mind, guidelines have been made showing how evidence should be worked out and applied to enhance the ability of government decision-makers to take better informed decisions.

This paper attempts to point to some of the discrepancies between topical scholarly assessments² of the political processes going on in and around Moldova since the early 1990s, on the one hand, and actual Western policy vis-à-vis Moldova on the other.

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- 1 Notre Europe: Europe and its Think Tanks: A Promise to be Fulfilled. Paris: 2004; J. Braml: Think Tanks versus "Denkfabriken"? US and German Policy Research Institutes' Coping with and Influencing their Environments. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2004; Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Standards and "Best Practices" of Scientific Policy Advice. Berlin: 2006; and, J. Thies: Die Krise der Politikberatung. In: Merkur, 61 (2007) 3, 266–270.
 - 2 A. U. Gabanyi: Moldova zwischen Russland, Rumänien und der Ukraine. In: Außenpolitik, 1 (1993), 98–107; A. U. Gabanyi: Die Moldaurepublik zwischen Wende und Rückwendung. In: Südosteuropa, 42 (1993) 3–4, 163–207; A. U. Gabanyi: Die Parlamentswahlen in Moldova vom 27.7.1994. In: Südosteuropa, 43 (1994) 8, 453–477; A. U. Gabanyi: Die Moldau-Republik zwischen Rußland, Rumänien und der Ukraine. In: K. Kaiser/H.-P. Schwarz (eds.): Die Außenpolitik der neuen Republiken im östlichen Europa. Rußland und die Nachfolgestaaten der Sowjetunion in Europa. Bonner Schriften zur Integration Europas 1. Bonn: 1994, 131–156; A. U. Gabanyi: Die politische Entwicklung in Moldova. In: B. Meissner/A. Eisfeld (eds.): Die GUS-Staaten in Europa und Asien, Nationen und Nationalitäten in Osteuropa 3. Baden-Baden: 1995, 81–106; A. U. Gabanyi: Moldova im Spannungsfeld zwischen Rußland, Rumänien und der Ukraine. Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, 16 (1996), 40; A. U. Gabanyi: Die Republik Moldau im Kontext der Neuen EU-Nachbarschaftspolitik. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, S46/2004; A. U. Gabanyi: Die Perspektive einer Perspektive. Moldova und die Neue Nachbarschaftspolitik der EU. In: Osteuropa, 55 (2005) 2, 24–39.

Western Indifference versus Russian Strategic Interests

For tsarist Russia and later on for the Soviet Union, the area stretching between the mouths of the Danube and the Black Sea had always been considered to be of supreme strategic importance. The former Socialist Soviet Republic of Moldova, occupied by tsarist Russia in 1812, declared its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991. Since the late 1980s, similar political processes had occurred in the countries stretching along the “arch of instability” along the frontiers of the former Soviet Union from the Baltic to the Caucasus. Soon after the national movements unfolded in Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan, independent-minded leaders started being reigned in by separatist movements. The same pattern of action was taken in these three countries and aimed at securing Russian influence in the strategically most important areas of the former Soviet Union: After fomenting separatist crises on the territory of these states, Moscow stepped in to mediate in these conflicts by dislocating military units into the respective regions in order, allegedly, to restore or keep peace and to protect Russian minorities or Russian colonists there. By doing so, Russia actually wanted to assert its lasting *droit de regard* in the area and even to get Western legitimation for its continued military presence there. From the Russian point of view, keeping Moldova and Ukraine in their sphere of influence was tantamount to preserving Russia’s role as a regional and even a global player. On the contrary, a loss of its hold on the western republics of Ukraine and Moldova would lead to Russia’s isolation from Western Europe and damage its stance not only vis-à-vis the countries of East Central Europe, but also vis-à-vis the countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Moscow’s policy vis-à-vis the Republic of Moldova was aimed at creating a precedent and a test case for Moscow’s long-term strategy aimed at replacing the Soviet hegemonic leadership model by a new, more flexible concept aimed at securing Russia’s hegemony in its near surroundings.

By contrast, in the early 1990s the countries of the Euro-Atlantic alliance were not interested in a disintegration of the Soviet federal state. The only Soviet republics singled out for independence were the Baltic countries whose annexation under the Hitler-Stalin-Pact of 1939 the USA had never recognised. The USA as well as the other Western powers did not, however, question the annexation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukowina by the Soviet Union under the same secret pact. On the contrary: Western countries are on record for having put pressure on both independent Moldova and post-Ceaușescu Romania to prevent them from planning reunification in the event of a collapse of the Soviet state. Neither did Western countries try to prevent the Russian-sponsored armed conflict between Moldova and Transnistria in 1992–1993. It was only in 1994 that Moldova got some verbal Western support for its demand for a withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria.

In Moldova in particular, Western economic organisations pressurised the government in Chişinău to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Moldova's President Mircea Snegur himself pointed out that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank had linked their promise of economic assistance to Moldova to the "recommendation" to sign the CIS Pact in Alma Ata.³

Transnistria – Ethnic Conflict or Proxy Conflict?

The Transnistrian conflict is the root cause for Moldova's main security problem – the inability of the state to exercise sovereign control over the country's territory and frontiers, with severely negative repercussions for the consolidation of the state, its economic and social policy, and international relations. Although, theoretically speaking, the preconditions for a paradigmatic conflict are in place in Transnistria – an ethnically mixed population, historical territorial disputes and arbitrarily drawn frontiers – the conflict in Transnistria is no ethnic conflict. What is going on here is a "proxy conflict" typical for the processes that have started in this part of the world since the dissolution of the Soviet hegemonic structures. Russian officials pointed out again and again that Transnistria was a part of Russia and bound to stay a part of Russia. Russia's Vice President Alexander Rutskoy who visited Tiraspol' in March 1992 called Transnistria "Russian territory."⁴ Russian Foreign Minister Andrej Kozyrev emphasised that the CIS states which had belonged to the Russian sphere of influence for centuries represented a region of vital interest for Russia. Moreover, defending the rights of the Russians in the other CIS countries was a priority of Russian policy that had to be implemented if necessary by the use of force.⁵ For the nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Russia's sphere of influence comprised the Republic of Moldova as a whole and Romania as well.⁶ For the former Commanding General of the 14th Army Alexander Lebed, Transnistria represented "Russia's key to the Balkans" and "a strategic crossroad between Ukraine, Romania and the Black Sea. If Russia were to leave this area, it would lose its influence in the entire region."⁷

By contrast, Western countries have long ignored the armed conflict that broke out in the eastern province of the Republic of Moldova in 1992. In the meantime, the now frozen conflict between the central government in Chişinău and the separatist, self-proclaimed Transnistrian Republic has turned into Moldova's main problem and the country's stumbling block in its efforts to join the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. For quite some time, Western chancelleries have viewed the conflict as a mainly ethnic conflict due to Moldova's alleged merger plans with neighbouring Romania. The half-hearted endeavours undertaken by the Organiza-

3 BASA Press (30 September 1993).

4 See: Vormarsch der Konservativen in Russland. In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (27 August 1992).

5 *Nezavisimaja Gazeta* (1 April 1992); *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (18 January 1994).

6 Quoted from Romulus Căpălescu, "Paranoia roşie. In: *Adevărul* (8 October 1992).

7 Alexander Lebed on Russian television (16 May 1993).

tion for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to solve the conflict actually contributed to the division of Moldova's territory becoming permanent, something which cemented the *de facto* independence of the claimed statehood of the Transnistrian Republic and its separatist government structures. A representative at the Chişinău OSCE mission established in 1993 clearly stated that "the case of the Moldova mission clearly proved that ethnic and separatist conflict potentials in [Russia's] 'near abroad' can be more easily and for mutual benefit if the CSCE acts in accordance with Moscow. Respect for Russia's security interests as well as the concern of the Russian and Russian speaking minorities do not serve Russia's hegemonic interests, but is in keeping with the core principles of the OSCE."⁸

Western countries did not heed the protests voiced by the Moldovan government against Russia's policy in Transnistria. Speaking before the UN General Assembly on 8 October 1993, Moldova's Foreign Minister Nicolae Tau pointed out that "the conflict in Transnistria was not, as claimed by Russia, an interethnic conflicts, but a political conflict which the Russian Federation had used as a pretext in order to justify the enduring presence of its army on the territory of Moldova." Russia's support for the regime in Transnistria was "the main threat for the independence, security and integrity of the Republic of Moldova." Russia, Tau said, aimed at restoring "the old imperial structures with the blessing of the international community."⁹ As early as in 1995 representatives of Moldova at the OSCE had voiced their "well-founded suspicion" that Russia was planning to leave their armament to the Transnistrian army and guards and to turn the eventual withdrawal of the 14th Army into a purely formal exercise.¹⁰

A peaceful solution of the Transnistrian problem is therefore improbable before the Russian leaders have deployed "around 3,500 highly efficient and mobile" peacekeeping troops in a Russian military basis in Transnistria.¹¹ Although the interests of the separatists in Transnistria did not always fully coincide with Moscow's strategies, Russian and Transnistrian leaders were at all times in full agreement on the need to co-operate. Evidence showed that the Transnistrian leadership was at no point disposed to accept the most generous offers of autonomy within the context of a unified Moldovan state but always insisted on its demand for a confederation consisting of two *de facto* independent states. Already in October 1995, Transnistria adopted a constitution declaring the eastern part of Moldova a separate state.

8 S. Troebst: Internationale Vermittlungsbemühungen zwischen Moldova und der selbsternannten "Transnistrischen Moldavischen Republik." Als KSZE-Diplomat beiderseits des Dnjestr. In: Osteuropa-Info, 3 (1995).

9 The speech was published some days later on 14 October 1993, in the Moldovan newspaper Moldova Suverană.

10 Romulus Căpălescu: Transnistria, ultimul avanpost al Rusiei spre Vest. In: Adevărul (2 September 1994).

11 Russia's Minister of Defence quoted in: Österreichische militärische Zeitschrift, 43 (1995) 5, 581.

Moldova – A Special Case in European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

For a decade, neither Moldova's wish for a rapprochement with the EU nor the 1992 secessionist civil war and the illegal Russian military presence on its territory induced a change in the EU's policy of benign neglect vis-à-vis this country. Like most of the CIS countries, Moldova signed a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with the EU in 1994 which came into force in 1998. It was not until 2002, when the EU set the time frame for the integration of Romania in 2007, that Moldova came into the visor of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy – but not as a state earmarked for future integration, but as a fragile, ill-governed, poor and conflict-ridden state in the EU vicinity which needed stability and security.

Once Romania joined the EU in 2007, the Republic of Moldova became an immediate neighbour of the European Union. In the rather negative perception of the EU, the Republic of Moldova represents a weak state with arbitrarily drawn frontiers and a defective national identity. Devoid of energy resources and with an economic structure highly dependent on Russian deliveries and export markets, Moldova has been exposed to strong economic and political pressure from Moscow since achieving independence in 1991. Following initial efforts at reform, which had earned it membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, Moldova which was affected by the 1998 economic crisis in Russia, is currently leading the list of the poorest nations in Europe. Poverty and the collapse of the state welfare systems have caused a severe social crisis, prompting a considerable number of able-bodied citizens to leave the country in search of labour abroad.

In the context of its European Neighbourhood, the Republic of Moldova represents a special case. Moldovans have a strong European identity and a strong and unequivocal impetus to join the European Union. To date, the European integration project is the major political project rallying the country's political elites and enjoying the support of 70% of the population – for a number of reasons. Geographically speaking, Moldova is the ENP country located closest to the eastern border of the EU. Secondly, Moldova's majority population shares its cultural and linguistic identity with several West European (Latin, Romance language speaking) peoples. Also, Moldova borders on Romania, the country of which it was part before being occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. However, unlike the Baltic states which were annexed by the Soviet Union under the Secret Protocol of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin-Pact, independent Moldova, which had equally been a victim of the pact, did not get the Western support to move closer to NATO and the EU which was given to the Baltic states. Instead, it was forced to join the CIS shortly after breaking away from the Soviet Union in 1991.

This special European vocation prompted the Republic of Moldova to move closer to European and Western institutions than the rest of the CIS states. In 1995, Moldova was the first CIS country to join the Council of Europe. As early as 1997, the Moldovan President Petru Lucinschi expressed his country's wish to start nego-

tiations on an associate partnership with the EU, expressing the country's hope for a future full membership in the EU.

For the Republic of Moldova, EU integration is the main goal of its foreign policy strategy. Although President Voronin once mentioned the year 2009 as the date envisaged for his country's accession to the EU, Moldovan leaders are generally realistic enough to reckon with a much later date. EU integration is not viewed as a goal in itself but as the country's only road to modernisation and democratisation patterned on the European model. This is why Moldova's European Strategy, an internal document, is structured in accordance with the 31 negotiation chapters upon which accession to the EU is based. There is a growing awareness in Moldova that adopting the EU *acquis* even in the absence of a clear integration perspective will improve the country's legal framework, lower the risks for foreign investors and facilitate trade with EU member-states as well as East Central and Southeast European countries. The country's medium-term strategy consists of reaping the highest possible economic benefits from the Neighbourhood Policy and gradually obtaining a stake in the EU's internal market. Politically, Moldova will persist in its endeavour to take a shortcut towards EU membership by seeking ever closer regional integration with the Southeast European countries which were granted an, albeit distant, integration perspective.

From Benign Neglect to Fruitful Co-operation

The Moldovan government acknowledged the publication on 11 March 2003 of the EU concept on Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours with great satisfaction, pinning considerable hopes on the EU's declared willingness to engage in the solution of the frozen conflict in Transnistria and in post-conflict reconstruction work. Moreover, Moldova gave a positive reception to the prospect of being offered the opportunity to participate in the EU market. From the very start, however, there was disappointment at the lack of an integration perspective and at the fact that inside ENP Moldova was lumped together with the other Western CIS states and not with the Southeast European countries which were given a different treatment under the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This disappointment did not, however, prevent the Chişinău administration from availing itself of this opportunity to enter into a contractual relationship with the EU, becoming the first ENP country to finalise negotiations on an Action Plan with the EU, on 21 February 2005. Political observers in Moldova appreciated the fact that by concluding the Action Plan, Moldova had engaged in a new type of co-operative relationship with the EU patterned on the Copenhagen Criteria, and the prospect of EU engagement in conflict solution. They were, moreover, disappointed by the lack of concrete benchmarks in the Action Plan which would have allowed for the evaluation of the implementation of the tasks set for Moldova.

From the very beginning the government in Chişinău has been aware of the differences between the interests and goals of the EU Neighbourhood Policy and Moldova's expectations. The EU is basically pursuing a policy of democratisation and stabilisation by exclusion, whereas Moldova is interested in gaining a perspective of eventual inclusion in the EU structures. Moreover, for the EU, Moldova is a testing ground for its CFSP in the new geopolitical environment of the CIS space. In case of a failure of this policy, the main risk is a loss of its credibility. Moldova, however, by engaging in a course of rapprochement with the EU, incurs considerably higher security risks and economic losses. Moreover, from the EU's point of view, the risks emanating from Moldova can be minimised by addressing this country's imperfect transition and by assisting it in the process of democratisation, legal and market reforms. Moldova, which lacks control over parts of its territory and borders as a result of the secessionist conflict on its territory, tends to overstate the impact of the Transnistrian conflict as an impediment for reforms. As a result, the EU and Moldova's views tend to differ with regard to the sequencing of measures under the Action Plan: Whereas the EU insists on Moldova taking faster steps towards European standards, Moldova presses for stabilisation assistance as a precondition for sustainable reform.

The EU and Moldova also differed in their evaluation of the results achieved in the implementation of the Action Plan. While agreeing on the progress made by the Moldovan authorities in implementing the Plan, the EU considers that the Moldovan government is lagging behind in its efforts of reforming the legal system and public administration, curbing corruption and safeguarding human rights and press freedom. Occasionally, questions are also asked in the European Commission or Parliament circles about the irreversibility of Moldova's pro-European stance and in particular on the credibility of its communist President Vladimir Voronin. Reference is made to the fact that, to this date, Moldova has not, like Georgia, announced its intention to leave the CIS, that it has not supported the EU condemnation of the Lukashenka regime in Belarus, and that the government has not applied for membership of NATO.

Progress in EU-Moldova Co-operation under the Action Plan

More than two years after the signing of Moldova's bilateral Action Plan, EU-Moldovan co-operation has reached a new level. The EU has fulfilled a number of Moldovan desiderata. In the economic field, the EU accepted Moldova into the Generalised System of Preferences plus scheme – the EU equivalent of the Most Favoured Nation's Clause, which offers better access to the EU's internal market. In order to be granted the EU autonomous trade preferences for a number of its export products, Moldova will have to reform its system of country-of-origin certification and to consolidate its customs administration. The EU also promised Moldova more technical and financial aid under the provisions of its 2007–2013 budget. One of the most urgent issues on Moldova's agenda has been to achieve a more favour-

able visa regime for certain categories of its citizens in the EU. Talks between EU and Moldovan officials on the issue have just started. For its part, the Chişinău government had already promised to renounce the visa regime for EU citizens starting 1 January 2007. Recently, also Moldova fulfilled the EU demand for the signing of an agreement on air transport services with the EU. Last year, the EU appointed a Special Representative for Moldova, whose task is to contribute to the settling of the conflict in Transnistria and the European Commission opened its Delegation in Chişinău. Moreover, a Border Assistance Mission started work along the Transnistrian Border with Ukraine. Together with the USA, the EU was also granted observer status in the negotiation format on the Transnistrian conflict. Another important achievement for Moldova under the Action Plan was the EU support for Moldova's joining of regional organisations in Southeastern Europe. Based on its historical ties and cultural affinities, Moldova has long tried to achieve closer integration with the regional organisations grouping the countries of Southeastern Europe. Moldova was a founding member in 1996 of the South East European Cooperation Initiative (SECI). It has enjoyed observer status with the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) since 1999. With active Romanian support, Moldova became a member of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe; it also holds observer status in the Athens Process for establishing a regional energy market in Southeastern Europe. In April 2006, the Republic of Moldova joined the Central European Free Trade Agreement alongside two future EU members, Bulgaria and Romania, and the Western Balkan countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, as well as the UN administration of Kosovo, all of which have an EU integration perspective. Moreover, Moldova became a full member of the SEECP in May 2006.

Apart from this, the EU has operated a number of significant changes in its policy vis-à-vis the Republic of Moldova prompted by a modification of the regional political environment characterised by a hardening of Russia's overall foreign-policy stance, the openly aggressive attitude adopted by the regime in Transnistria and the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine.

As a result of the EU's recent involvement in conflict resolution in Moldova, the awareness has been growing among EU officials with regard to the true nature of the conflict, the competing interests of the players involved (Russia in particular) and the possibility of the "frozen conflict" turning into a dramatic crisis. Not least thanks to the intensified engagement of the EU, the circumstances for finding a solution to the unresolved territorial conflict between the Republic of Moldova and the breakaway Trans-Dniester Republic have, on the face of things, improved. The Orange Revolution has awakened expectations that Ukraine could be relied on to be co-operative in these negotiations, although subsequent evolutions on the Ukrainian political-scene have dampened hopes for a reliable partnership with this country. Moldova remained stable after the March 2005 general elections in Moldova, when President Vladimir Voronin's Communist Party, campaigning for a continuation of

the country's pro-Western policy, prevailed and even won the support of conservatives forming a broad pro-European majority in parliament.

Greater EU Involvement Produces Mixed Results

Paradoxically, despite these positive developments, the chances of a fast, mutually agreed solution to the Transnistrian conflict have not increased as a result of EU involvement. There has been no progress on the withdrawal of Russian troops and military equipment from the – internationally unrecognised – Trans-Dniester Republic and none in the restoration of the territorial integrity of the Moldovan Republic. The Moldovan government's proposal to replace the Russian peacekeepers with an international force has been rejected by both Moscow and the Trans-Dniester Republic. The five-power negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict came to a standstill.

Empowered by sharply increased revenues from its natural gas sales, Russia has been for some time pursuing its interests through increasingly assertive policies, that do not shy away from conflict. Already in 1991, the Moscow leadership had resorted to massive blackmail excluding Moldovan deliveries to Russia from the CIS trade and putting customs preferences in place, in order to punish the government and the parliament in Chişinău for its reluctance to ratify the CIS Pact. As a result, Moldova's indebtedness to Russia was growing quickly and the Chişinău government was obliged to sell 51% of the gas transit lines crossing Moldovan territory to Gazprom.¹²

Since 2005 Russia once more tried to blackmail the government in Chişinău into compliance by raising the price of its gas deliveries to the highest level in CIS, by closing its market to Moldovan wine exports and by openly supporting the secessionist threat of the Transnistrian leadership do not bode well.

The relative calm in the Trans-Dniester Republic is, however, deceptive. Moscow is relentlessly pursuing its policy of economic and political destabilisation of Moldova. The Kremlin's calculation appears to be that this course will undermine the Moldovan population's confidence in its own government and its pro-European course and ultimately bring about a change of leadership or policy in Moldova. If this approach of low-level escalation fails to achieve its goal, Russia could step up its destabilisation efforts and weigh up a strategy of "thawing out" or even "heating up" the Transnistrian conflict, which has been frozen for years. If the Trans-Dniester Republic would actually declare its secession, Moldova would face a fateful decision: Either to accept the territorial loss and continue its policies of modernisation and closer relations with the EU – or to reunite with the breakaway Trans-Dniester Republic in the course of a return to the Russian sphere of influence and abandon modernisation and Europeanisation. In the unlikely event of the Moldovan government using military force to prevent the Tiraspol' leadership from

12 C. Hoffmann: Die Sahnestücke in russischer Hand. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (15 September 1995).

separating it would have scant prospect of success, because the Moldovan armed forces are clearly inferior to those of the Trans-Dniester Republic, which – as in 1992 – can rely on Russian support. A military defeat would have the same consequence, of placing the whole Moldovan Republic in the Russian sphere of influence.

Moscow considers the victorious “revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine and not least the abrupt pro-Western turn in Moldova as a progressive penetration of the EU and NATO into a sphere of influence that Russia explicitly claims as its own. The EU’s increased involvement in Moldova fitted into this pattern of understanding. Accordingly, Russia’s policies are still oriented on retaining influence in Moldova, expanding its economic sphere of influence, and ultimately once again stationing its own troops across the whole territory of Moldova. The breakaway Trans-Dniester Republic fulfilled a central function here. The Russian troops stationed in Trans-Dniester Republic can be used to exert political and military pressure to lend weight to efforts to gain a degree of control over Moldova’s domestic and foreign policy and above all to prevent it from coming closer to the EU and NATO. The Russian leadership has never been willing to accept negotiated solutions that would have meant giving up this asset. The leading elite of Transnistria has just as little interest in any solution to the Transnistrian conflict that would strengthen the unitary Moldovan state and serve Chişinău’s pro-European course. Its interest is in consolidating and expanding its own power base, to allow it to continue its profitable illegal transactions in an undemocratic autocracy under Russian protection.

In order to avoid an escalation of the conflict Moldova’s President Voronin, acting upon EU advice, sought to restore the political dialogue with Moscow which had been interrupted in 2003. At the beginning of August 2006 he presented Russia’s President Vladimir Putin with a plan for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, proposing an end to the peacekeeping mission and the withdrawal of the Russian peacekeeping troops from the Trans-Dniester Republic. In return, Voronin promised broad autonomy for the Trans-Dniester Republic as well as a permanent promise of Moldovan neutrality, which would have amounted to relinquishing the option of joining NATO. Faced with the threat of losing its leverage on Russia, the separatist Trans-Dniester regime took further steps to escalate the conflict. On 17 September 2006, a referendum was held in Tiraspol’ on independence for the Trans-Dniester Republic and its union with Russia, securing a sweeping majority for this move.

The Secession of Kosovo – a Model for Transnistria?

From the very beginning of the Transnistrian crisis, Russia has more or less openly supported the separatist moves of the Transnistrian leaders. Reference models for an independent Trans-Dniester Republic were being discussed not only in the Trans-Dniester Republic itself, but also by Russian politicians. The Turkish model, first raised publicly by Vladimir Putin in February 2006, draws on the analogy to

the recognition of an independent Northern Cyprus by Turkey. Since Montenegro left its confederation with Serbia following a referendum, the Montenegrin model has been cited increasingly often. The Kosovo model is about the possibility of recognising the secession of a non-state entity under international law.

The USA and the EU member-states hold the view that UN recognition of the independence of Kosovo represents a unique case and does not set a precedent in international relations. Russia has rejected the Western argument regarding the unique character of the Kosovo case from the very beginning of the debates on the issue.¹³ Talking to Russian and foreign journalists on 31 January 2006, Putin made it abundantly clear that the Kosovo case was of “immense importance” for Russia as a basic principle of international law and as an issue in the context of the post-Soviet space.

It seems that the Western countries have miscalculated Russia’s behaviour in the protracted debates on Kosovo prior to the voting on the issue at the UN Security Council meeting. In the USA and EU, it was expected that Russia would finally agree to the Western axiom that Kosovo represents a unique case which does not set a precedent in the context of international relations. Moscow’s lingering opposition to the Western stance on Kosovo was erroneously interpreted as mere filibustering and as a face-saving exercise to cover up inevitable defeat. Western countries expect that Moscow will finally accept the *fait accompli* of Kosovo independence. Western analysts were perhaps wrong in assuming that Russia actually wants a secession of Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia and truly desires the integration of these break-away provinces with the Russian federal state.

All these assumptions may prove wrong in the end. One of Russia’s main interests in the Kosovo debate may be to create diversion or even division between the USA and the EU as well as within the EU. Russia may be interested in posing as a friend of Serbia in order to support its long-term geostrategic and geo-economic interests in Southeastern Europe.

However, at the core of the debate may well be Russia’s desire to build an image for itself as a world-wide defender of the tested principles of international law enshrined in the UN charter as opposed to the allegedly unprincipled Western (mainly US) power policy, transgressing the territorial integrity, sovereignty and autonomy of world nations in pursuit. At the same time, Russia wants to ward off NATO and EU attempts to extend their influence in the post-Soviet space by presenting itself as the only regional power entitled to – and capable of – solving the frozen conflicts in the newly independent republics and of keeping or restoring peace in the area. Recent rumours concerned an alleged Russian agreement with Moldova bringing about a solution of the Transnistrian imbroglio, could signal that the Moscow leadership is perhaps up to a more comprehensive plan. To this date, one can only speculate what such a plan might look like. Will Russia use the increasing tension in Kosovo to put pressure on Moldova (and/or Georgia) to accept a

13 Press conference for the Russian and foreign media, 31 January 2006.

plan contrary to its major interest of Europeanisation? Will Russia finally accept the Ahtisaari Plan for Kosovo in exchange for Western acceptance of presence of Russian troops in Moldova and Georgia? Will Russia's plan achieve Western legitimisation of its military presence in Moldova, by agreeing to the stationing of multinational peace keeping troops with a majority participation of Russian soldiers? Will Russia ask for its troops to be deployed in Kosovo in exchange for a continuing military presence in Transnistria?

It can be expected that Russia will take decisive steps on both the Kosovo and the Transnistria issues within the next few months preceding the presidential and maybe even the parliamentary elections in Russia. This is why the countries of the EU should themselves consider turning Moldova into a test case for their own neighbourhood policy. In the case of a supply crisis the EU should be in a position to quickly set in motion concrete aid measures to ensure supplies of electricity and natural gas, and possibly food too, to the Moldovan population. Beyond that, the EU should also support Moldova's efforts to free itself as quickly as possible from its two-fold dependency: on energy supplies from Russia and the Trans-Dniester Republic and on exports to Russia. The EU should implement concrete measures (for example liberalising market access for Moldovan agricultural products or easing visa restrictions) designed to show ordinary Moldovans that the advantages of the Europeanisation policies pursued by the government in Chişinău outweigh the concomitant risks and disadvantages.

The EU's foremost concern should be to exhaust all the diplomatic options for dissuading Russia from supporting secession. Recognition of a separate Trans-Dniester Republic by the EU should be excluded in no uncertain terms. If the Trans-Dniester Republic were to break away nonetheless, the only way to prevent destabilisation of the rest of Moldova would be for the EU to clearly demonstrate to Moldova the advantages resulting from this secession. Without Transnistria, Moldova would be able to exert control over its territory more effectively, defend its borders better against hard and soft security risks, and more successfully advance the democratisation and reform processes. Only a clear perspective of EU membership (not necessarily with a fixed date) would be able to compensate the population and leadership of Moldova – whose *raison d'état* is based on territorial rather than ethnic considerations – for the loss of the eastern territories (over which it has long had no actual control).

Independently of the question of a possible escalation of the conflict over the Trans-Dniester Republic, the EU should reconsider the terms of its neighbourhood policy vis-à-vis Moldova, both in terms of the integration perspective and with regard to the linkage established between Moldova and Ukraine, not to speak of Belarus. The EU should accept that, in terms of its geographical position and historical traditions, Moldova is a country of Southeastern Europe and should be treated accordingly. So it would only be logical to conclude a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Moldova, like those already concluded with the states of the Western Balkans. At the end of the process of gradual rapprochement to EU standards

and values, Moldova should not be explicitly denied the initiated perspective of integration. Whereas disappointment and “pragmatism” have been spreading in Ukraine, Moldovan elites and the Moldovan population are (still) pursuing EU integration as the country’s only foreign-policy alternative.

Last but not least, in a small country like Moldova, quick progress on the path to Europeanisation could be achieved with a comparably small amount of EU funds. Success of EU policy in Moldova would inevitably become a model bearing a favourable impact on the political processes in Ukraine and beyond.