MOLDOVA'S POLITICAL SELF AND THE ENERGY CONUNDRUM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

Cătălin Gomboş and Dragoş C. Mateescu

ABSTRACT: *This article employs a method of discourse analysis from a social constructivist perspective to evidence the emergence and stabilisation of a discourse of sovereignty in Moldova over the last decades. Within this context, it also explores the meaning of Transnistria and energy security for Moldova's political ontology. The argument builds on the premise that the discourse of sovereignty signals a collective Moldovan subjectivity expressing its standing in the regional context. The main hypothesis tested is that, if determined to opt decisively between East and West, Moldova may choose the path of European integration even at the expense of renouncing sovereignty over Transnistria.*
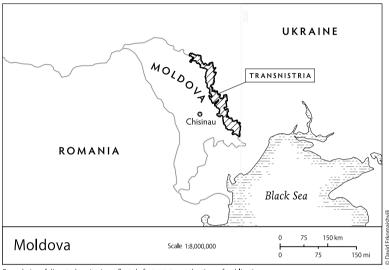
KEYWORDS: sovereignty, Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Romania, European Union, energy security, Balkans, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Moldova is one of the states born in Eastern Europe with the dismembering of the Soviet Union (USSR). Following its 1991 proclamation of independence, this tiny country became isolated from the large Soviet markets and from the Soviet subsidies for energy consumption, thus remaining extremely vulnerable to Russia's gas policies.[1] It is important to note in this context that the *Progress* pipeline for liquid gas from Russia to Turkey and the Balkans passes through Moldova's Transnistrian districts where security problems could affect the stability of energy transfers to the south.[2] Issues of political identity are also, at least, as important as economic aspects on the regional post-communist political agenda. Unlike in the case of other Western Newly Independent States (WNIS), Moldova's population is predominantly non-Slavic, Romanian-speaking and most of its contemporary territory was under Romanian

sovereignty during the interwar period.[3] These details have played a major role in the country's regional positioning over the last decades.

General Background and Methodological Considerations

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UKRAINE

MOLDOVA

TRANSNISTRIA

Chisinau

ROMANIA

Black Sea

Moldova

Scale 1:8,000,000

0   75   150 km
0   75   150 mi

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Boundaries of disputed territories reflect de facto status at the time of publication

A series of laws adopted by the Supreme Soviet of Moldova in 1989 recognised the unity between Moldovan and Romanian languages, thus signalling the rebirth of Romanian nationalism after generations of Soviet rule. This move triggered a sharp response among the Slavic peoples within the country, especially in Transnistria, and from Moscow.[4] Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Moldova had to balance between pro-Western and pro-Eastern alternatives, with Romania and Russia still being 'the two poles' of the country's politics.[5]

The so-called "Transnistrian issue" has emerged in this context as a strong intervening variable on Moldova's path toward sovereign statehood and European integration. Transnistria is a strip of land between the Dniester River and the Ukrainian border, currently under Chişinău's *de jure* sovereignty, where Slavs form the majority.[6] The region had been heavily industrialised by the Soviets

and around 40% of Moldova's entire industrial production still originates there.[7] It gradually gained a special status in relations with Moscow, which saw it as economically and politically more reliable than the rural, Romanian-speaking population west of the Dniester River.[8]

In response to the above-mentioned language reforms and suspecting that Moldova would soon join Romania, the people in Transnistria established their own republic within the Soviet Union in 1990.[9] Following the proclamation of Moldova's independence in the summer of 1991, the region also proclaimed its own independence under the leadership of Igor Smirnov. The central authorities in Chişinău attempted to restore their control but encountered the resistance of the locals, supported by an operational group of the Russian 14th Army. The conflict ended in July 1992 when Boris Yeltsin, President of Russia, and Mircea Snegur of Moldova signed a ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire was to be ensured by a military force consisting of Moldovan, Transnistrian, and Russian troops.[10] The status of Transnistria thus became subject to negotiations between Chişinău and Tiraspol, with Russia and Ukraine as guarantors under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

This region is currently *de facto* independent but has not been recognised by any state, including Russia.[11] This confirms that the Russian support for Tiraspol is not as much for the Transnistrians as it is for an entity apt to undermine the territorial sovereignty of Moldova. Moldovan authorities have been waiting ever since the conclusion of the ceasefire agreement for the removal of foreign military troops from Transnistria, which continues to be under Moldova's sovereignty by international law. After 2005, the status of this province has become subject to negotiations taking place in a larger, "5+2" format. Moldova and the *de facto* authorities in Transnistria remain the main negotiating actors; Russia and Ukraine continue to act as mediating guarantors under the OSCE auspices, while the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) have become observers.[12]

This article analyses in this context the official discourse of the national sovereign self in independent Moldova with a focus on the relations with the West (EU, Romania) and the East (Russia). The US, Germany, the OSCE, NATO and other entities will also

be referred to, but that without altering the general understanding of West-East methodological division of discourses. The central question is about the meaning of energy security and implicitly the meaning of Transnistria for the Moldovan political ontology. Is there a possibility that this country could choose European integration at the expense of renouncing sovereignty over Transnistria? From these concerns derive a number of other questions that are relevant for Eastern European politics. What would be the consequences of such a decision for security in general and energy security in particular in Europe? Which are the main effects of/on the European Neighbourhood Policy in this context? Lastly, is there a possibility of a major change in Moldova's external political orientation in the light of its current political turmoil?

The authors adopt a discourse analysis approach to evaluate the ontological weight of energy security and of Transnistria in the post-communist discourse of national sovereignty in Moldova between the West and the East. The methodology builds on the social constructivist perspective and conscientiously avoids a "realist" approach. In short, realist thinking would not be apt to explicate the survival of this tiny country despite of not possessing any of the means or capabilities that realist theorists consider necessary for viable statehood.[13] Despite this, the evidence deployed will clearly indicate that the Moldovans have been remarkably successful in contouring a discourse of national sovereignty even against the most pessimistic predictions. Analysing the Moldovan understanding of political reality will then demand an exploration of the production of meanings making it in what is essentially a discursive context.

From a constructivist perspective, the "reality" of human society is socially produced and our knowledge of politics is invariably mediated by instrumental and normative dimensions of interpretation.[14] The social constructivist tradition in the study of world politics is intimately tied to the linguistic turn in social sciences, which builds essentially on the idea that social reality can be said to exist in and through language.[15] The specific method of analysis will mainly focus on the intentional and responsible production of a specific, hegemonic discourse of national interest and sovereignty in Moldova.[16] This builds on the premise that discourse signals the presence of a particular subjectivity deciding on the particular meanings of its own sovereign standing.[17]

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In effect, the article takes into account discursive constructions which tend to institute a sovereign Moldovan political self within the context of regional politics, implying the emergence of its particular interpretation of developments, one attempting to transgress the hierarchy of meanings established by other regional actors. The result is the constitution of a particular, Moldovan understanding of political reality in the region.[18] The analysis will thus focus on the discourses of sovereignty emanating from Chişinău in correlation with other relevant predications of regional politics. Central in the exploration are those directly involved or interested in the "5+2" negotiations format over the Transnistrian issue and originating in Tiraspol, Moscow, Brussels, Bucharest and Washington. The main hypothesis advanced is that, if determined to opt decisively for one of the sides, either the East or the West, Moldova may engage decisively on the path of European integration even at the expense of renouncing sovereignty over Transnistria. And this, in turn, may bear significant consequences for the regional and continental stability.

The Meaning of "Moldova:" The Emergence of Moldovan Sovereignty and the Transnistrian Issue

The WNIS countries, including Moldova, are important for Europe's energy security. Serious disruptions in the transit of gas and oil from Russia to the EU through these states could lead to unpredictable consequences for both the EU and the main suppliers, such as the Russian giant *Gazprom*.[19] While energy deals depend essentially on solid arrangements between suppliers and beneficiaries, the long-term implementation of such deals still hangs on the security of transfers.[20] And that inevitably leads to questions regarding the stability of the transit states. For the South-eastern Europe, at least until the *Nabucco* and *South Stream* projects become reliable facts, the supply of liquid gas continues to rely on the *Progress* pipeline from Russia through Moldova.[21] This passes, however, through Moldova's Transnistrian districts, which indicates the importance of a solution to the respective regional conflict for the energy flows and the stability of the Moldovan state as a whole.

Within this context, a central problem may be that the modern Moldovan sovereignty is extremely young and fragile, building on a problematic political identity. The Romanian people dwelling between the Prut and Dniestr rivers were subjected to Tsarist domination and policies of Russification after 1812.[22] After the First World War, this territory, also known as Bessarabia, joined Transylvania and Bukovina to unite with the Romanian Kingdom and thus formed the Greater Romania. This achievement was confirmed by the Treaties of Paris (1920) and inaugurated Bucharest's intensive efforts of Romanianisation and anti-Russian propaganda.[23]

However, Stalin's westward expansion soon stopped the Romanian project in Bessarabia. He had ordered in 1924 the creation inside the USSR of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) on a territory east of Dniester River, which had been Ukrainian historically and included today's Transnistria. The aim was to counteract the union of Bessarabian Moldovans with Romania, the MASSR symbolising 'the continuing Soviet territorial claims on Bessarabia.'[24] Following the military defeat of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia reoccupied Bessarabia and added to it the MASSR to form the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR).[25] In effect, the authorities in Moscow had more than four decades in the post-war era to engineer a sophisticated version of Moldovan political identity stressing its strong historical links with the Slavic world and thus differentiated from the Romanian identity.[26]

The post-Soviet movement for independence built in response on the Romanian language as distinct feature of Moldovan identity. The Supreme Moldovan Soviet adopted in August 1989 the set of language laws mentioned above that suggested a revival of Romanian nationalism.[27] While acknowledging the importance of Russian in inter-ethnic communication given the country's complex cultural mosaic, the respective laws replaced it with Romanian as language of administration and professional accomplishment.[28] Hence, the threat was for many Russian-speakers that their native tongue would become confined to merely informal communication. Public manifestations of sympathy for Romania alienated even more the Russophone population and its elites. In Transnistria especially, the new trends in Chișinău suggested the possibility of Moldova reuniting with Romania, which many associated with inevitable Romanianisation.[29]

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"Pan-Romanianism" occupied a certain place in this context, one usually associated in the 1990s with the country's Western, European alternatives. It found expression in cultural and political activism in both Moldova and Romania, benefitting from the support of authorities at times and feeding on the enthusiasm of partisans of the recreation of Greater Romania representing around 10% of the population, mostly intellectuals.[30] However, the pan-Romanianist discourse built on the Moldovan identity as mere invention of the Soviet propaganda and therefore belonging to a past that had to be renounced. This extreme position determined only the radicalisation of Russophones, the separatist move in Tiraspol, and the emergence of a current more favourable to the strengthening of the Moldovan political identity. Thus, the 1990s can be described as a period when the question about the state's identity emerged, one addressed by two major and fundamentally conflicting camps: the militants for a rapid return to Romanian sovereignty (Romanianists) and the supporters of an independent Moldovan state (Moldovanists), either eastward or westward oriented.[31]

The Romanianists suffered a decisive blow in the elections of February 1994, in which the Agrarian Democratic Party won with the open support of (then) President Mircea Snegur. The same year, the state's constitution was also adopted by the Parliament. Its text built on the essentially Moldovanist idea that the cultural identity of the nation was related to the Romanian one, but its political identity and hence the state was Moldovan.[32] This met in fact the option expressed by the population in a referendum held in 1994. Around 95% of participants expressed disagreement about unification with Romania and support for the sovereignty of the young Moldovan state.[33]

In fact, the electoral episodes in 1994, 1998, and 2001 saw the Romanianist theme retreating from the centre of the political stage and relatively few Romanianist politicians managed to obtain key executive positions, with the significant exception of certain members of the Liberal Party. Instead, initially anti-Romanianist politicians such as Mircea Snegur and others developed a discourse of national sovereignty friendlier to the idea of a common cultural heritage with Romania, while promoting uncompromisingly the country's distinct political identity. [34]

On the issue of Transnistria, the initial cries from both Romanianists and Moldovanist political forces, including President Snegur, invoking the country's territorial integrity and labelling the separatists as traitors were gradually replaced by a more nuanced discourse.[35] Even immediately after the conclusion of the brief civil war, the government 'worked to appease the Gagauzi and Transnistrians by stressing the non-ethnic, citizenship-based nature of the Moldovan state.'[36] The 1994 constitution confirmed later this view by allowing for a large degree of autonomy for the Gagauz and Transnistrian communities and by recognising and guaranteeing the citizens' right to preserve, develop and express their ethnic identities and languages (Articles 10 and 13).[37]

These constitutional principles were also strengthened by other relevant provisions in the Education Law of 1995.[38] The main consequence of this primary and secondary legislation was then the formal silencing of the logic of Romanian nationalism in Moldova. The proclamation of a "national" state with the fundamental law would have raised at least two critical questions: one about the identity of that nation and another about the extent of minority rights under its sovereignty.[39] However, the situation in Transnistria continued as a frozen conflict despite the obvious diminishing of the role played by pro-Romanian nationalism in Moldovan politics.

Until 2001, Moldova's discourse regarding Transnistria had been marked by the country's neutrality and the commitment not to admit foreign troops on its territory under Article 11 of the 1994 constitution.[40] These constitutional provisions were also reflected in the Moldovan 'foreign policy' concept stressing the independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of the state, while capitalising on its definition as a multi-ethnic polity offering large autonomy to minorities. Moldova's foreign policy aimed therefore at underlining the differences in political culture setting the country apart from neighbours such as Romania, Ukraine or Russia. Despite differences, however, Moldova attempted to develop relations of genuine partnership with all neighbours, which projected its own 'middle ground' between the west (Romania) and the east (Russia).[41]

The dominant foreign policy discourse became thus marked by Moldovanist self-confidence also reflecting trust in the good will of other regional actors. However, despite Moscow promising at the

1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul to withdraw its military presence by 2003, Russian troops and munitions stayed in Transnistria.[42] They continued to serve the traditional aim of Moscow's policy of support for the authorities in Tiraspol as to undermine Moldova's sovereignty. This determined Chişinău to look for alternative ways that could lead to securing the territorial integrity of the state, a vital aspect given the importance of the Transnistrian region in the country's economy. By 1994, Snegur was already contemplating the possibility of granting Transnistria full autonomy in a domestic political context in which the blurring of Moldova's Romanian identity was already obvious.

Moscow's gas policy began to influence the Moldovan political landscape toward the end of the 1990s. Gas supplies were reduced on a number of occasions, which eventually produced serious economic problems, a dramatic decrease in living standards and a government crisis in Chişinău that brought the communists to power in 2001.[43] However, Moscow's gas policies cannot be made exclusively responsible for the Moldovan political developments, which owed even more to the structural problems in the economy.[44] The ineffective reform in agriculture, practically the only economic sector on which the state could rely on, a profoundly corrupted process of transition to a free-market economy, and the 1998 economic crisis in Russia may have been among the main causes of the disaster.[45] By 2000 Moldova became the poorest country in Europe, having also reached the highest debt level in the region. Against this background, a series of changes to the constitution in 2000 led to Moldova becoming a parliamentary political system. Following the clear victory in the 2001 elections on a pro-Russia platform, the communists were thus apt to retain the control of domestic politics.[46]

The Party of Communists from the Republic of Moldova (PCRM) and their head, Vladimir Voronin, as President of Moldova initiated efforts toward rapprochement with Russia. A bilateral treaty between the two countries was signed toward the end of 2001, which established Moscow as clearly defined direction in Chişinău's foreign policy. The treaty made Russia guarantor of the peace process in Transnistria and mentioned Moldova's territorial integrity as one of the principles in negotiations.[47] It was hoped that concessions to and closer economic and political ties with Moscow would

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eventually bring Russian support for a solution to the Transnistrian crisis. Things went so far that formal talks between the two countries seemed to lead to the exclusion of Igor Smirnov, the leader of the separatist regime in Tiraspol, from the regional chess table. However, the move was never realised and Moscow returned to its original position of support for the breakaway province, thus undermining the territorial sovereignty of Moldova. This apparently inexplicable turn was to become encoded in the so-called "Kozak memorandum" of 2003.[48]

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Transnistria and Moldovan Sovereignty after 2003

Dmitry Kozak, deputy chief of Vladimir Putin's presidential administration and a person with little if any diplomatic experience, presented the memorandum to William Hill, ambassador of the OSCE to Chişinău, on 14 November 2003. It contained a unilateral Russian proposal aiming at turning the country into a federal state in which Transnistria would have gained a status equal with that of Moldova. This plan presented two major advantages for Tiraspol. Firstly, it allowed its representatives to veto any federal decision. Secondly, it offered Transnistria the legal conditions for leaving the federal union, which would have facilitated later the international recognition of this breakaway province. Moreover, the memorandum allowed for the continuation of Russian military presence in the province, i.e. on Moldovan soil.[49]

Russian-Moldovan relations in the energy sector also saw interesting developments in 2003. During the first half of that year, the Russian energy giant Gazprom advanced higher prices for gas imported by Moldova, followed by an offer to swap Chişinău's debts for an increased share in the strategic gas company Moldova-Gaz. The move would have augmented the Russian political influence in the region, but it was not realised in a Moldovan domestic context dominated by popular protests against Moscow's general attitude. In November 2003, the same month when the Kozak memorandum was presented publicly, Gazprom also made another offer for lowering the price of gas imports to Moldova.[50]

However, these developments could not draw attention away from the dangers contained in the memorandum. Most European

states and OSCE members opposed the continuation of Russia's military presence in Transnistria. President Voronin and many "Moldovanist" politicians in Chişinău were also deeply unhappy with the idea of Tiraspol having equal power with the Moldovan state in the Kremlin-tailored federal mechanisms. Eventually, both the Kozak memorandum and Gazprom's targeting Moldova-Gaz showed clearly how little a price Moscow was putting on Chişinău's sovereignty.

While Putin was prepared to fly to Moldova to sign the agreement on the memorandum, Voronin declined the offer and thus is said to have affronted the Russian leader so much that relations between the two countries never really recovered.[51] Moscow continued thereafter to support the equal footing of Transnistria with Moldova in a federal state, despite later problems (explained below) with Smirnov's regime. This inevitably increased popular suspicion about Russia and surveys undertaken during that period indicate the growing popularity of the "European" option. An increasingly self-confident communist government in Chişinău resisted in December 2003 Gazprom's plans to also take control of the country's main energy company, MGRES.[52]

Thus, events after 1994 indicate the gradual affirmation of a dominant discourse of a national sovereign self in Moldova. Russia's energy policy and its position on the Transnistrian issue legitimated this discourse taking European coordinates. After 2003, even some traditionally pro-Russian politicians in the PCRM begun to express relative support for the country's European integration, which they saw as more convenient than a pro-Romania discourse.[53] This "Europeanist" card proved the winning one in the 2005 elections when the communists managed to gain for the second time the majority in parliament.[54] The regional context also favoured the westward move.

The Kremlin's "gas wars" with Ukraine and Belarus and the repeated cuts in gas supplies to Moldova diminished Moscow's popularity among ordinary people.[55] When a deal was reached between the PCRM and the anti-communist parties for the election of Voronin as country's president and when Ukrainian and Georgian leaders congratulated the new Moldovan head of state, it became clear that a politically better defined Moldova was emerging in the regional context. However, other developments showed that the

change was even more profound. Ambassador Hill noted recently that the 2003 Kozak memorandum had produced an atmosphere where 'Russian and Western mediators were increasingly at odds.'[56] By now, the US and especially the EU also became more present in the region's affairs.

THE EU FACTOR AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF A NON-ROMANIAN "WEST" IN MOLDOVAN POLITICS

The emergence of the EU as important factor in its eastern neighbourhood decisively shaped Moldova's current predication of sovereignty. The limited options of the early 1990s, i.e. either an eastwards (re)turn to Russia or westernisation through reunion with Romania, gradually started fading in the context of an emerging, broader "European" alternative. In 1994, the parliament in Chişinău approved after significant delay the country's joining the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). However, the electoral victory of the Agrarians the same year also inaugurated an official "Moldovanist" discourse, supported by the public opinion, of independence from Moscow and against union with Romania.[57] Also in 1994, a Partnership for Peace (PfP) agreement was initiated with NATO and a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was signed with the EU. The Lucinschi administration even applied for EU associate status in 1997 when it announced the country's strategic target of becoming EU member.[58]

The PCA was ratified by the Parliament in 1998, a step accompanied by the adoption of the Principal Directions of Foreign Policy for the period 1998-2002. This document came in continuation of the 1995 "foreign policy concept" and gave clear expression to priorities as perceived in Chişinău. It indicated as strategic objectives the consolidation of sovereignty, including a solution to the Transnistrian issue, and the integration in the EU, which was also confirmed as priority in the 1999 *European Strategy*.[59] These two capital objectives were thus placed much above issues of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, including relations with Romania, Ukraine, NATO, or the CIS.[60] Significantly, the year of 1998 also marked, as already explained above, the end of Chişinău's control over Moldova-Gaz. A deal concluded in July 1998 handed fifty per cent plus one shares to Russia's Gazprom and thus an important

"bargaining chip" was renounced by the Moldovan authorities in their relations with the Kremlin.[61] Such episodes and subsequent developments inevitably contributed to the alienation of the Moldovan public opinion from the old centre of power in former USSR.

The Kozak episode was particularly decisive in determining a decisive pro-European turn in Moldovan politics, at least in declarative form. The victory of Voronin's communists in the 2005 elections on a platform supporting European integration was followed on 1 July 2006 by Romanian President Traian Băsescu stating to the media in both countries that he invited Chişinău to join Bucharest in the EU. This was one early example of what later became Băsescu's numerous such public, rather unbalanced declarations on both internal and external affairs. The sarcasm implicit in this official statement and its addressing a group of Moldovan exchange students in Romania and not the Moldovan authorities was soon confirmed by developments on the ground.[62] Romania's EU membership became an accomplished fact in 2007, while Moldova continued life on the other side of the fence, as a country not included in the enlargement process, but in the large regional approach under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It was within the context of this policy that the EU developed an official stance toward Moldova and its Transnistrian problem after 2005.

The EU does not recognise the independence of Transnistria. It has repeatedly expressed support for the integrity of the Moldovan state and has acquired "observer" status in 2005, in what is now known as the "5+2" format of negotiations.[63] This development came at a time when the Western foreign policy makers were becoming increasingly vocal about the centrality of security and political stability in the eastern neighbourhood of the EU for the general continental security. The 2007 enlargement made the Union neighbour Turkey, the Black Sea, and Moldova. Thus, the notion of the "wider Black Sea" took new meanings after 2007 and Chişinău's problems became Europe's, too, as encoded in the ENP.

The perspective of integration into NATO structures could have been another Moldovan objective. However, the signing of the PfP agreement in 1994 did not imply Chişinău's commitment to becoming a member of the organisation. On the contrary, the 1994 Constitution stipulated clearly the country's "permanent neutrality" and successive governments stressed this aspect especially in

negotiations with Russia.[64] The particular consistency regarding this issue clearly indicates a discourse of sovereign self-preservation aiming at creating a place for Moldova independent from the Russian offer within the CIS and the Romanian option for a NATO-based security policy.

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The path adopted by Chişinău took instead neutrality and European integration as solutions to the security problem. Integration in the European common market may well be the correct option in the long run for a country that continues to be the poorest in the richest of continents.[65] Indeed, Brussels has offered an alternative approach, reformulated with the ENP and focused on continental stability through economic cooperation conditioned upon democratic reforms.

The idea of the ENP was advanced in 2002 by the United Kingdom as specific offer to differentiate Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova from the former Yugoslav states, already covered by the Stabilisation and Association Process.[66] Launched officially by the European Commission in 2003, it inaugurated a discourse of the eastern neighbourhood in which the EU intended to lead the democratic reformation of countries in the region that were willing to adopt its values.[67] The policy offers essentially 'the prospect of a stake in the EU's Internal Market and further integration and liberalisation to promote the free movement of persons, goods, services and capital.'[68] There is evidence that all these are linked to the predication of a common, even if minimal, position over energy issues in relation with 'political and security imperatives' and 'the quality of overall relations with Russia.'[69]

The ENP takes concrete forms in the Action Plans adopted by the EU and the partner countries. These Action Plans establish short and medium-term priorities concerning democratic reforms and reforms addressing specific issues, from economic and social cooperation, trade and market-related rules, or cooperation in justice and home affairs to cooperation in sectors such as transport, energy, information society, environment, etc. The European Commission and the governments of partner countries are responsible for implementation and monitoring, the first set of Progress Reports having been released by the European Commission in December 2006.

The EU-Moldova Action Plan (EURMAP) was adopted by the bilateral Cooperation Council in February 2005 and represents the main guidance for domestic reforms in Moldova ever since.[70] The same year, the EU appointed a Special Representative and opened a Commission Delegation in Chişinău, while also launching the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) for improving security along the Moldova-Ukraine frontiers.[71] The discourse about the Transnistrian issue in this context has been dominated by the EU's general preoccupation with the continental security and support for Moldova's territorial integrity. Both the Special Representative and the European Commission Delegation to Moldova (ECDM) are tasked in this context with the monitoring of relations between Chişinău and Tiraspol. It was the ECDM that begun talks on behalf of the EU in the "5+2" format of negotiations.[72]

The EURMAP supports a viable solution to the conflict 'respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognised borders, and guaranteeing respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights.'[73] The government in Tiraspol is recognised as partner in negotiations but is invariably referred to as *de facto* authority. That is while the legality and sovereign rights of the government in Chişinău are officially supported by the EU, which also recognises Moldova as increasingly important for the eastern dimension of the Union's external relations.[74] Within this general context, the Union has extended until nowadays a visa ban on Transnistrian officials, which had been first imposed in 2003.[75] However, and despite the apparent upgrade in the EU's presence in the region, the effects of the ENP-related reforms had been rather weak on the Transnistrian problem.

It is true that the EUBAM framework facilitated cooperation between Moldova and Ukraine on the management of their borders. This cooperation bore fruit when, in 2006, the two countries reached an agreement by which all goods from Transnistria could enter Ukraine only with new Moldovan export certificates. The implementation of this agreement did reduce smuggling and illegal trade and was therefore welcomed by the EU.[76] However, this episode remained rather singular and the general ENP framework has failed to determine fundamental change in the relations between Chişinău and Tiraspol. In fact, the Head of the EUDM has indicated that the EU is more interested in a "small steps" approach, with an

initial focus on rebuilding infrastructure systems between Chişinău and Tiraspol. Further progress in relations between the two authorities could build, according to the EU logic, on such small achievements that should first bring closer the peoples on the two sides of the Dniestr River.[77]

Russia, on the other hand, continued to play energy (especially gas) games with Moldova to impose its position on Transnistria. Thus, with the exception of brief periods (1999–2001, 2004, 2005–2007) when commercial concerns seemed to prevail, the entire period after 1991 has been marked by Chişinău's dependence on Russian gas and Russia's manipulation of this situation towards its political advantage. This presupposed the interruption of supplies and juggling with gas prices, including the demand that Moldova pay the increasingly high debts made through Tiraspol's ambiguous subvention policies in Transnistria. Ironically, it was the MGRES power plant in Transnistria – by now finally in Russian hands – that cut energy supplies for Moldova during the winter of 2005–2006, simultaneous with Russia's gas supply cuts and an embargo on Moldovan agricultural products.[78]

The EU influence in these energy games has been magnificently absent. And when Voronin explicitly called for an EU, or even NATO led mission to replace the Russian peacekeeping troops in Transnistria, the Union remained mute. The first such proposal was rejected by the Russians in 2003 and the second encountered the reluctance of the EU member States to participate.[79] Even the more recent individual efforts of the EU Special Representative to bring Moldovan and Transnistrian leaders at the same negotiation table in Brussels could not lead to concrete results concerning the conflict. The lack of coordination between the ENP funding and the initiatives of the Special Representative, plus the absence of a common, coherent EU foreign policy render such achievements futile.[80]

The current context of financial trouble and the political situation in the region do not seem to encourage fundamental changes in the near future. Romania could be a partner of Chişinău helping Moldova's European integration but it has its own problems as EU member. The Commission monitors the reforms in the field of justice and home affairs where corruption continues to represent a major matter of concern, which delays the Romania's entry in the Schengen area. The foreign policy initiatives in Bucharest,

while always suffering from a coherence deficit, are also affected by diminished funding due to the financial crisis. Moreover, the "Moldovanist" stance of President Voronin in particular, and his communists in general, has irritated Bucharest for the last decade and made cooperation between the two states difficult.

However, two recent developments after the troubled fall of the communists from power in Moldova in 2009 suggest that the Romanian authorities consider supporting this neighbouring state. The first came in April 2010 when the Romanian President Băsescu and interim Moldovan President Ghimpu signed a protocol granting Moldova €100 million for a period of four years for development projects.[81] The second was the decision of the Romanian energy authorities in 2011 to stop buying electricity from the MGRES power plant in Transnistria. One of the stated reasons behind the decision has been the desire on both sides to connect the two countries' energy sectors toward their integration in the European energy system.[82]

It is important to note at this point that the two countries do not share an identical view of European integration. While the notion was interwoven with that of Euro-Atlantic integration in Romania, which indicated the country's efforts toward EU *and* NATO membership, Moldovan officials have always been keen to refer in their public statements to European integration only. That is partly due to the country's constitutional commitment, underlined above, to neutrality. It is, however, also due to an understanding by the political class in Moldova of the importance of cordial relations with Moscow. Voronin has included this aspect as an imperative in the platform of the Party of Communists for the 2011 elections.[83] Russian foreign policy officials also made it clear that a solution to the Transnistrian problem depends on the preservation of Moldova's neutrality.[84] The country's political leadership after the fall of the Voronin's communists seems to follow this line and refrains from expressing positions contrary to the respective constitutional stipulations.

The Present and Future of Moldova

Currently, the stability of Moldova continues to depend on the solution to the frozen conflict in Transnistria. As underlined above,

this problem has a long history as Russian construct designed to counteract the establishment of a non-Russian sovereignty between Prut and Dniestr Rivers. Transnistria's political ontology has been linked to the political designs of communist Kremlin, which continued under all post-communist regimes placing this province among the Russian "zones of privileged interests," where Russian citizens reside. The protection of these citizens and their businesses is considered to demand Moscow's capacity to intervene in those zones, which has in turn generated an informal but substantial Russian neighbourhood policy by comparison with the formal but less substantial ENP.[85] This seems to have been from the start the so-called Eurasian option in Moldovan politics. The analysis here of the country's first decades of sovereignty indicates the reluctance of Moldovan politicians, regardless of political colours, to adopt that path.

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The "Western" card has been from inception a more attractive one overall but it was not really successful during the years when it seemed associated with "Romanianist" ideals. Instead, what gradually emerged was an increasingly coherent official discourse of a national sovereign subjectivity predicating its own condition in regional affairs. This line of thought has been clearly identified for the entire period from the independence until the moment of writing and continues to be the dominant discourse in Chişinău even after the fall of Voronin's communist regime in 2009.[86] It is a discourse that constantly indicates the nation's strategic objective of European integration, while predicating Romania as a neighbour with which Moldova has significant cultural ties, but not much more important politically than other neighbours, such as Russia, or Ukraine.

This perspective continues to be insisted upon in official declarations of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, from Andrei Stratan in 2007 to Iurie Leanca in 2011.[87] The Presidents of Moldova have also been generally supportive of this path. The first one, Snegur, initiated and signed the PCA with the EU in 1994. Under his successor, Lucinschi, the country applied for the status of EU associate in 1997 and the PCA was ratified in Parliament in 1998, the European integration being viewed at the time as a way to solve all the country's problems.[88]

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Voronin too was considered in the mid-2000s the prime initiator of the current process of European integration, which placed Moldova within the ENP context.[89] And these efforts cannot be viewed separately from the attitude of hostility toward Romania at times. There have been contested Romanian positions in relations with Moldova, such as concerning the status of the Moldovan language and Bucharest's policy of granting citizenship *en masse* to Moldovans on the ground that they had been deprived of Romanian citizenship by the Soviets after World War II. As a reaction, Voronin and his PCRM have chosen after 2005 to express unequivocal support for the preservation of Moldova's sovereignty and for its European integration interwoven with an aggressive stance toward Bucharest.[90]

Caught between two historical options, pro-Russian Eurasianism and pro-Romanian Europeanism, Moldova currently seems to have chosen European integration as the option promising the preservation of its sovereignty and stability. The logic behind the two political myths above has been altered by developments on the ground. The "Romanianist" current has remained in general at a success rate of only around 10 percent, while the pro-Russian positions lost popularity following the repeated cuts in gas supplies and the developments around the Kozak memorandum in 2003. The dubious attitudes in Moscow vis-à-vis the Russian troops still present in Transnistria and the continuous support for the regime in Tiraspol continue to fuel Chişinău's suspicions.[91]

There are signs that even the Transnistrian problem gradually cease to present high interest for a Moldovan public opinion increasingly caught up with the project of European integration and the country's ongoing social and political problems. While public support from politicians for such a solution may still be equivalent to political suicide, a controversial opinion poll in 2007 indicated that had it been necessary for their country's European integration, 68 percent of the Moldovan citizens would accept the independence of Transnistria.[92] Coupled with the perceived dominant support for an independent state all throughout the post-communist years, the public opinion seems, indeed, to incline toward a more pragmatic understanding of Moldovan statehood in which the preservation of sovereignty is prioritised over identity questions.[93] In this sense, Moldova tries its best to advance in the direction of

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European integration and significant progress concerning economic integration has been made within the context of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement.[94]

The negotiations aiming at solving the Transnistrian issue have also been recently given relative impetus with the parties meeting again in the "5+2" format, for the first time in six years. The meeting was held under the auspices of the OSCE in Vilnius on 30 November and 1 December 2011. It brought together yet again representatives of Moldova and Transnistria as main negotiating parties, the mediators OSCE, Russia and Ukraine, and representatives of the EU and US as observers. The negotiations were described by the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Ažubalis as laying 'solid ground for the future work on promoting the conflict resolution.' The parties discussed 'principles and procedures for the conduct of negotiations' and agreed on their continuation in an official format in February, 2012 in Ireland.[95] The EU continues within this context to opt for the "small steps" policy and welcomes the initial agreement on more practical measures, such as the reestablishment of railway and telephone connections between the communities on both sides of the Dniestr River.[96] However, the constant insistence of the Transnistrian representatives ever since 1992 on a status of equality with Chişinău in a federal structure is expected to compromise any advancement in negotiations.

High on the agenda of Moldovan politics is nowadays the negotiation of a new gas deal with Russia. Moldova consumes annually between 2 and 2.5 billion cubic meters of Russian gas and also serves as transit for 10 percent of this gas to Europe. In this context, the authorities in Chişinău hope for an increase in the tariff for the transit of gas up to the average European level.[97] The conclusion of this new arrangement cannot be separated, however, from political developments. The presidential elections in Transnistria had a relatively surprising outcome in December 2011, when both the long term leader, Igor Smirnov, and the Kremlin-backed candidate, Anatoli Kaminski, were defeated by Evgheni Shevciuk, a former chairman of the Supreme Soviet in the region. Although experts from both Tiraspol and Chişinău interviewed by Radio Chişinău doubt that Shevciuk is going to improve relations with Moldova, there are signs that at least some change would occur, considering the pragmatism expressed by the new leader in Tiraspol.

At 43, Shevciuk represents a generation younger than the previous leadership and, as soon as his victory was proclaimed, he announced plans to simplify the border-crossing procedures, a step cautiously welcomed by the central authorities in Chişinău. Parliamentary and presidential elections also took place in Russia in December 2011 and March 2012, respectively. An opinion poll undertaken in the first half of 2011 showed that around 57% the Moldovans currently view Russia as a preferable strategic partner for their country as compared to 24% for the EU, 7% for Romania, and only 2% for the US and Ukraine.[98]

Against this background, Russian authorities took the opportunity of the parliamentary elections to defy, yet again, Moldovan sovereignty by opening 24 ballot offices in the country. Such gestures, coupled with the general level of sympathy in Russia for the Putin-Medvedev team, suggest that neither parliamentary nor presidential elections (March 2012) can bring fundamental alterations to Russian attitudes toward Moldova. At the same time, the people in Transnistria seem not at all ready to accept the full severance of ties with Moscow regardless of who the leaders of Russia will be.[99]

Eventually, the configuration of political power in Chişinău remains the determining factor for the future of Moldova. The population gives mixed signals as concerning the paths it would prefer. While supporting their country's strategic partnership with Russia, as mentioned above, 64% of Moldovans would also support the EU membership.[100] The people's options are therefore becoming increasingly important in this tiny but strategically important country in the neighbourhood of the EU. It depends on the EU itself, in this context, to make the perspective of European integration more attractive than any other option to the Moldovan citizens and the political powers in their state. In any case, as the aspects underlined in this article clearly suggest, Moldova seems to have left behind the period when its identity pose serious problems. Instead, a more coherent discourse of sovereignty has emerged over the last years, which speaks of a subjectivity apt to predicate its own condition and interests in the region. It remains to be seen in 2012 and the years ahead whether this discourse will come to make sense to and draw full attention from policy makers in Tiraspol, Moscow, and especially the EU.

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