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Moldova's European Choice: 'Between Two Stools'?

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Moldova's European Choice: 'Between Two Stools'?

ELENA KOROSTELEVA

Abstract

The article examines EU–Moldovan relations from the perspective of the external governance framework. It reveals some considerable progress in the procedural engagement of both parties. However, the internal instability experienced by Moldova in 2009 is seen to have disrupted these relations, stalling further negotiations and even questioning Moldova's true commitment to Europe. To understand this ostensibly sudden change in Moldova's allegiance to Europe, it is argued that analysis needs to go beyond conventional governance framework(s). Premised on the notion of 'constitutive boundaries' a 'partnership' perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of the boundaries of 'the other', thus revealing the salience of geopolitics and culture in Moldova's relations with the outside world.

MOLDOVA, A SMALL LAND-LOCKED COUNTRY, A MERE 0.2% the size of Russia, gained its independence in 1991 for the first time in its long history.¹ The dissolution of the USSR left the country in absolute disarray: with steadily declining birth and fertility rates,² Moldova was rapidly becoming unsustainable as a nation.³ Torn between a vociferous Russian-speaking minority and resolute Moldovan–Romanian majority, many of whom were emigrating, Moldova looked unsettled and deserted. Around one third of its workforce was residing (often illegally) in other countries (Pantiru *et al.* 2007). The situation was further exacerbated by government

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¹For a detailed overview of Moldova's history see Teague (2004, pp. 13–24).

²For more information see http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/moldova_statistics.html; http://globalis.gvu.unu.edu/indicator_detail.cfm?Country=MD&IndicatorID=132; and <http://www.statistica.md/pageview.php?l=en&idc=334&id=2339>, all accessed 15 July 2009.

³In 2009 Moldova reported 3.6 million residing on its territory (excluding the Transdnistrian Moldovan Republic, which suggests a decline of 800,000 people since 1990). For more information see *Moldova in Figures 2009: Statistical Pocket-book*, available at: http://www.statistica.md/public/files/publicatii_electronice/Moldova_in_cifre/Breviar_en_fr_2009.pdf, accessed 15 July 2009.

corruption⁴ and a poorly managed economy, which remained in recession for much of the first decade of its independence: ‘Even Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, three Caucasian countries that face[d] war and ethnic conflict, have left Moldova behind’ (Spanu 2004, p. 104). By early 2000 nearly 80% of the nation was living below the poverty line, with one fifth of Moldovan children experiencing absolute poverty (Pantiru *et al.* 2007). At the same time remittances from Moldovans working abroad became a sizeable part of the economy for around two-thirds of the country’s households, accounting for 40% of the total GDP.⁵

In 1992 a separatist war erupted claiming some 1,000 lives and reducing Moldova to effectively ‘two republics in one’ (Hanne 2004, p. 81): the official Republic of Moldova and a self-proclaimed Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (TMR) viewed by Russia as ‘a zone of special strategic interest’ (Löwenhardt *et al.* 2001, p. 614).⁶ Some 2,600 troops from the Russian 14th Army were initially stationed there, supported by between 5,000 and 6,000 TMR soldiers, with a substantial stockpile of Soviet weaponry; their combined total almost equalled the size of Moldova’s army. As Löwenhardt *et al.* comment, the TMR ‘unrecognised by all but its own rulers and the Russians’ became ‘a hotbed of organised crime, illegal arms dealings and the smuggling of narcotics and human beings’ (Löwenhardt *et al.* 2001, p. 615). The separatist war left Moldova with a frozen conflict on its territory and also deprived it of major resources, as the TMR controlled 90% of Moldova’s energy and one third of its industrial output in the early 1990s (Löwenhardt *et al.* 2001, p. 614).

Moldova was evidently struggling to survive unaided. The demise of the USSR left Moldova heavily dependent on Russia: 80% of Moldova’s exports were to the latter. By 1997 Moldova had accrued an energy debt of around 11% of its total GDP. The Transnistrian conflict and the 1998 Russian economic crisis drove Moldova to the brink of national bankruptcy, reducing its already low GDP to 34% of the 1989 level, its industrial and agricultural outputs by nearly a quarter, and its exports by half (Pantiru *et al.* 2007, pp. 4–5).

Logic would suggest that Moldova, being hitherto well integrated into the USSR, would seek closer cooperation with the CIS and with Russia especially, as Belarus did in the early 1990s. Instead, however, in 1994 Moldova chose to place itself on the path of European integration by launching negotiations, on its own accord, with the European Union (EU) for a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). By 1999 European integration was officially declared to be Moldova’s main foreign policy priority, subsequently developing into *The Concept of European Integration of the*

⁴Moldova was at the bottom (ranked 75) of Transparency International’s 1999 Corruption Perception Index, which has not significantly altered since. For more information see http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/previous_cpi/1999, accessed 15 July 2009.

⁵*Remittances in the Republic of Moldova: Patterns, Trends and Effects* (Chisinau, International Organisation for Migration), available at: http://www.un.md/key_doc_pub/IOM/Remittances_eng.pdf, pp.3–4, accessed 15 July 2009.

⁶Unless otherwise stated the term Moldova will be used to describe the Republic of Moldova. The Transnistrian Moldovan Republic will be referenced separately or simply as TMR as appropriate.

Republic of Moldova,⁷ thus reflecting its aspirations for eventual membership of the EU. By 2001 Moldova had become a member of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe and in 2005 successfully negotiated an Action Plan (AP) under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), culminating in 2008 with a series of institutional, legal and political reforms. The EU became Moldova's major trade partner and accounted for 50.2% of Moldova's trade.⁸

Given the remarkable progress Moldova has made in less than a decade, it may seem that Moldovan–EU relations are now irreversibly set to guide the country's path to European integration. However, 2009 was a critical year for Moldova's government and people. The year had begun with President Voronin's unprecedented criticism of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the Russian media and his sudden, trilateral negotiations with Russia and TMR over a settlement of the conflict on the eve of the elections. Thereafter there was an outbreak of civil unrest during the April 2009 parliamentary elections, resulting in a bloody aftermath. Since the outcome of the elections was inconclusive as far as the selection of a new president was concerned a second set of parliamentary elections took place in July. However, these elections were also inconclusive and parliament remained incapable of electing a Head of State.⁹ In relation to the EU the government also failed to complete the AP even after the deadline was extended until July 2009. These unexpected events, as well as continued stalemate in party politics, left Moldova's prospects for European integration more distant than ever—even after over 10 years of reform and gradual upgrading towards a modern European state.

What has caused this abrupt turn in Moldova's policy? What are the obstacles to Moldova's smooth cooperation with the EU? Why, after dedicating so much effort and commitment in the last 10 years to European reforms, has Moldova's transition faltered and become more cautious towards the EU's new initiatives? Was there ever really a commitment to Europe? Conventional wisdom suggests that perhaps one explanation may lie in the EU's enlargement fatigue and its silent denial of the European aspirations of its Eastern neighbours like Ukraine and Moldova. On the other hand, it may also be that the problem lies with Moldova, which in the language of EU diplomats, 'adopts good laws, but has a poor enforcement record' (Buscaneanu 2008a, p. 4). However, are these explanations adequate to explain the sudden halt in progress in Moldova's adjustment to the EU?

A more nuanced investigation highlights the inevitable interplay of geopolitics, which clearly intensified following the adoption of the EaP (Council of the European Union 2009). Furthermore, Moldova may have entrapped itself with its over-reliance on third-party aid, its national sense of inferiority, and the power politics that was

⁷Available at: <http://www.pasos.org/www-pasosmembers-org/publications/the-european-strategy-of-the-republic-of-moldova>, accessed 15 July 2009; and some brief information on <http://www.moldova.md/en/europa/>, accessed 15 July 2009.

⁸Moldova remains the only country in the Eastern neighbourhood with such a high level of trade engagement with the EU, closely followed by Ukraine (39.2%) and Georgia (31.1%). For more information see: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/bilateral/data.htm>, accessed 15 July 2009.

⁹Mihai Ghimpu, the speaker of parliament, assumed the post of Acting President of Moldova, on the resignation of President Voronin on 11 September 2009, until a new president could be elected by parliament.

vainly played by the Party of Communists (*Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova*, PCMR). These factors and others will be examined below. The article will begin with a discussion of a theoretical framework for analysing the EU's engagement with Moldova. The following section will then proceed by evaluating Moldova's journey to the EU in the light of the proposed theoretical framework. The next section will focus more substantively on Moldova's geopolitics.¹⁰ In the final section, the prevailing culture and public opinion—captured through a nationwide survey, focus groups, elite interviews and school essays¹¹—will be examined to understand why EU–Moldovan relations stalled. In conclusion, a more pessimistic outlook will be considered—by placing Moldova in the vicious circle of elite self-interests, both at home and abroad.

Governance or partnership in EU–Moldova relations?

Since the launch of the ENP there has been a general tendency to conceptualise the EU's relations with its neighbours through an external governance perspective which offers a comprehensive basis for analysing various modes of exchange and interaction between the EU and its partner states (Lavenex 2004, 2008; Raik 2006; Gänzle 2008, 2009; Tulmets 2006, 2007; Weber *et al.* 2007). Although multiple and varied,¹² governance approaches focus on ways of translating the new philosophy of partnership embedded in the ENP into the realities of the European neighbourhood (Commission of European Communities 2004, p. 8). The new philosophy of the ENP was clearly designed to overcome the initially asymmetrical and unilateral character of the EU's relations with third states previously exposed by enlargement (Tulmets 2007).

¹⁰For a more comprehensive discussion of the geopolitical factor in the ENP, see Korosteleva (2009), Popescu and Wilson (2009) and Averre (2009).

¹¹This research is part of the wider project 'Europeanising or Securitising the Outsiders? Assessing the EU's Partnership-building Approach with Eastern Europe', under the ESRC grant (RES-061–25–0001). For more information on the project see: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/en/research/EKPproject/index.htm>. In Moldova, Independent Sociological Service 'Opinia' (ISS) was sub-contracted to undertake project research, which included survey, interviews, focus groups and a study of school essays. A nationwide survey was conducted in November 2008, involving 1,000 respondents in a multi-staged, stratified random sample. Eighteen interviews were conducted in two phases: (i) in February 2009 interviews undertaken by ISS involved government officials, MPs, representatives of political parties, the mass media and think-tank organisations (February 2009, conducted by ISS); and (ii) in October 2009 interviews undertaken by the author comprised of officials of the EU Delegation in Moldova, selected EU embassies and senior government and parliament officials in Chisinau. Interviews were semi-structured, in-depth, audio-recorded when permitted, anonymised when requested, and lasted on average for 40–50 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English or the local language. Five focus groups were conducted in Chisinau, Beltsi, Kahul and in small towns of the Central regions in May–June 2009 (conducted by ISS) and comprised of students, representatives of NGOs, academia, parties, government and the mass media. On average they had eight participants, lasted up to two hours, and were audio- and video-recorded, using local languages for interlocation. A study of 50 school essays of the final-year pupils from three randomly selected schools in Chisinau was conducted in March–April 2009. In the study, school leavers were requested, without prior warning, to write a maximum of a two-page essay on pre-set questions. The survey lasted on average 30–45 minutes. Essays were anonymised and computerised. For technical reports on fieldwork and brief analytical findings please see the above website.

¹²For a comprehensive analysis of various schools and modes of governance see Treib *et al.* (2007).

However, the notion of 'partnership' was not envisioned as replacing the EU's existing stress on 'governance' premised on 'coercive conditionality' that has typified its relations with prospective member and partner countries, but instead to complement it by utilising 'more voluntary measures like new policy ideas, ... mutual agreements or joint ownership, ... participation and deconcentration/decentralisation' (Tulmets 2007, p. 212). As a result, when translated into practice, the new 'partnership' framework, initially conceptualised as voluntary, flexible and non-binding, ceases to operate and becomes another instance of 'external governance' after all:

governance needs not be 'new' ... Instead EU external relations may exhibit many features of 'old governance', including the highly asymmetrical relationship between insiders and outsiders; the imposition of predetermined formal rules; the exclusive participation of bureaucratic actors; and top-down communication structures. (Lavenex 2004, p. 682)

According to Lavenex (2008, p. 939), the new governance approach can be seen to follow two major modes of exchange between the EU and its neighbours: a legal or regulatory mode concerning the transfer of EU rules, procedures and practices (parts of the EU *acquis*), and an institutional or organisational mode envisaging tapping into the EU policy structures and joint decision-making at lower political levels by way of 'horizontal network governance'. Others, such as Gänzle (2008, 2009), define external governance by its *modus operandi*—that is, through rules, actors and procedures related to specific modes of communication, thus giving rise to four suitable modes of governance: hierarchy, negotiation, competition and cooperation.

Such external governance frameworks are undoubtedly useful for evaluating the EU's actions in specific fields of its relations with outsiders. However, they are not without shortcomings, of which two are particularly worth noting here: first, the governance framework does not afford a satisfactory means of understanding how notions of partnership are translated into practice and what limits there are to the potential reach and appeal of the ENP and EaP in the neighbourhood; and secondly, since it focuses mainly on procedural questions, the framework can detect gaps and limitations, but it struggles to interpret their causes and consequences, especially if they exceed the procedural modes of exchange. For example, the external governance approach has failed to identify reasons for the varied (and often negative) response of neighbours to the ENP.

It is therefore proposed to adapt the external governance framework by adding the notion of 'boundaries of order' developed by Smith. This views the EU's relations with its 'near abroad' as the politics of inclusion, based on the negotiated order of boundaries, 'in which not only the outcomes but also the process itself of the EU boundary setting is a matter of negotiation', and which essentially is premised on learning about the perceived boundaries of others, and 'crossing rather than defending the boundaries' (Smith 1996, p. 23). According to Smith, different types of boundaries—geopolitical, institutional or legal, transactional and cultural—'exist or can be constructed between the Union and its environment'. However, whereas Smith contends that 'the key variable ... is the ability of the Union to draw, to maintain or to modify a boundary between itself and the changing European order' and that the 'EU can structure and control linkages between insiders and outsiders' (Smith 1996,

pp. 12–13), it is argued here that the existence and the construction of boundaries is essentially a two-way and ‘mutually constitutive’ process, whereby the EU is not only an actor, but also a subject to boundary construction itself, in this case undertaken by its neighbours.¹³

This enhanced framework of governance, which may be described as an ‘extended partnership’ approach,¹⁴ allows the conceptualisation of EU–neighbour relations to become far more comprehensive. It offers an understanding of both causes and consequences of the procedural modes of governance, and it includes a sense of partnership or participation by accounting for interests and boundaries of others. This perspective will be applied to the analysis of the Moldova–EU relations in order to evaluate the outcomes of governance and to understand how real partnership can be enabled.

Moldova’s journey to EU: committed non-commitment?

First, in order to appreciate the progress Moldova has made, and the difficulties it has encountered on the path of European integration, a brief overview of the development of Moldovan–EU relations is offered. Then, drawing on Smith’s conceptualisation of the boundaries involved in international governance relations, the specific boundaries of Moldovan–EU relations, institutional/regulatory, transactional and conflict management, will be discussed.

A brief history of Moldova–EU relations

Moldova and the EU signed their first contractual agreement (PCA) in 1994, thus providing a framework for the development of political dialogue, trade and investment and setting the basis for cooperation between the EU and Moldova. To achieve this, however, it took President Mircea Snegur several attempts to bring Moldova to the attention of the EU, and this was followed by a period of procrastination before the PCA was ratified during the presidency of Petru Lucinschi, Moldova’s second President (Chiril 2001). With an intended 10-year timeframe, the PCA finally came into force in July 1998, institutionalising three main bodies to oversee its implementation: the Cooperation Committee (comprising senior civil servants), the Cooperation Council (comprising ministers and Commissioners) and the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (comprising members of the Moldovan and European parliaments). The execution of the PCA for Moldova was challenging but with progressive effort there were some clear accomplishments, especially relating to the processes of Moldova’s legislative adaptation to the EU *acquis* and the facilitation of its access to the European market. However, there have also been some sizable inconsistencies and outright failures, for which Moldova blamed the absence of benchmarks in the PCA, its late enforcement and limited motivation for reform (Buscaneanu 2006).

¹³For more discussion of ‘boundary politics’ see Bosse and Korosteleva (2009) and Korosteleva (2009).

¹⁴For more conceptual discussion see Korosteleva (forthcoming).

Similarities drawn between the PCA and European Agreements signed with candidate countries in East-Central Europe¹⁵ significantly inflated the government's hope for Moldova's European future. In actual fact, Moldova had officially aired its aspirations for membership for the first time during Lucinschi's presidency in 1996, and by 1999 it formally became the main strategic objective of Moldova's foreign policy (The European Strategy 2007). It has been further encouraged by the European Parliament's (EP) resolution on the Wider Neighbourhood Framework which clearly recognised 'the right of countries, such as Ukraine and Moldova, that explicitly express their European aspirations to obtain EU membership when they fulfil all the requisite political and economic criteria' (European Parliament 2003, point 15). The year 1999 also saw Moldova adopt the *Concept of Integration in the EU*, soon transforming into the *European Strategy* in 2005,¹⁶ and the *Declaration on the Political Partnership to Achieve the Objective of European Integration* signed by all parties of the Moldovan parliament.¹⁷ These intentions were duly institutionalised through the creation of a National Commission for European Integration headed by the prime minister, and a new Department for Integration within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A further symbolic step in the direction of closer cooperation with the EU was the opening of a Permanent Delegation of the Republic of Moldova in Brussels in January 2005.

In 2005 Moldova signed the Action Plan (AP) under the new ENP agreement albeit after taking several long rounds to negotiate its course.¹⁸ The AP considerably politicised the need for further reform including cooperation in justice and home affairs, as well as the settlement of the Transdnistrian conflict.¹⁹ Some commentators noted that the AP, originally envisaged as partnership, reflected a considerable dose of EU self-interest, and had a strong sense of 'centre-periphery' relations, being 'quite "thin" on EU responsibilities' (Popescu 2005, p. 38) and 'more or less commanding' (Buscaneanu 2006, p. 26).

Shortly after signing the AP, an EU Special Representative for Moldova was appointed with a mandate that also included the monitoring of Moldovan-TMR relations. Six months later the EU opened the European Commission Delegation to Moldova and began talks on a settlement of the Transdnistrian conflict under a new

¹⁵For more discussion on this see Chiril (2001), Buscaneanu (2006, 2008a) and Gheorghiu (2005).

¹⁶The strategy, formally acknowledged by the European Commission, was requested by Presidential Decree No. 351 (2/04/2004) but was never approved by parliament (Gheorghiu 2005). It actually emerged before Moldova signed up to the ENP Action Plan (AP), and was indeed initiated on its own accord, showing Moldova's clear aspirations for European integration. After signing the AP, the strategy's structure was adjusted to reflect the AP's objectives, and was meant to be periodically updated to monitor the AP implementation progress.

¹⁷The statement can be accessed on the website of the EP delegation to the EU-Moldova Parliamentary Cooperation Committee at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/dmd20050524_08/dmd20050524_08en.pdf, accessed 15 July 2009.

¹⁸Moldova felt inspired by the EP's resolution in 2003, but soon became disappointed by the EU proposal under the ENP, which appeared to add nothing new to Moldova-EU relations. See Buscaneanu (2006, p. 25).

¹⁹See *The EU-Moldova ENP Action Plan*, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/action_plans/moldova_enp_ap_final_en.pdf, accessed 15 July 2009.

'Five-Plus-Two' format.²⁰ By December 2005 the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) was finally launched. In May 2006 Moldova was accepted as a member of the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP), which was seen by the Moldovan government as an additional (and later, as a principal) stepping stone to European integration. When a decision was made in Brussels to recommend extending the APs to its neighbours for another year, President Voronin was quick to reassure the EU that Moldova would meet the deadline without problems, hoping as a frontrunner to negotiate a new (and more binding) deal with Europe the following year (Buscaneanu 2008b, p. 23). The Commission, however, strongly recommended that Moldova accept the offered extension, pointing out that further reforms were needed to achieve 'independence of judiciary, freedom of media, respect for human rights, anti-corruption fight, and attractive investment climate' (Commission of European Communities 2008a, p. 4). An official visit to Chisinau by Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for Foreign Relations and the ENP, in February 2008, dispelled any doubts that a new contractual agreement would be signed soon unless considerable progress was made in completing the AP by July 2009. The 2009 parliamentary elections and their aftermath subsequently led to a political impasse since it did not produce a sufficient majority in the parliament to elect a Head of State. This considerably disrupted the progress of the AP and revealed a whole gamut of internal limitations in Moldova related to its pro-European stance. Ferrero-Waldner visited Moldova once again on 26–27 November 2009 in an attempt to reassure the country of the EU's continuing support, and to reinvigorate Moldova's commitment to Europe, scheduling the launch of new negotiations for an Association Agreement for January 2010.²¹ The success of the latter, however, is subject to Moldova's ability to comply with the EU's rules and regulations arising from these negotiations and may be difficult to achieve given the budgetary and political constraints in the country.²²

Institutional/regulatory boundaries

Following the adoption of the AP, a number of important institutional and regulatory developments took place. Apart from institutionalising EU–Moldovan relations

²⁰The 'five' comprised Moldova, Transdnistria, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE. The two were the EU and the USA as two additional international observers.

²¹For more information see Ferrero-Waldner's speech in the Moldovan parliament, Speech/09/563, 27 November 2009, available at: <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/09/563&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>, accessed 12 February 2010.

²²For more details see <http://soderkoping.org.ua/page27744.html>, accessed 14 June 2010. Several critical steps to achieve more stability in the country have been made, including the release of a joint statement by the EU–Moldova Cooperation Council (21 December 2009) outlining further commitments and actions for both partners (see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/112025.pdf, accessed 12 February 2010); the launch of negotiations on an Association Agreement (see http://www.delmda.ec.europa.eu/whatsnew/press_releases_en.shtml, accessed 12 February 2010); and recently, the EU's decision to increase funding for EaP, and Moldova in particular for 2011–2013 (see <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/221&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>, accessed 15 July 2010).

through various government, parliamentary and civil society fora,²³ the following developments also took place, some of which were Moldova's own initiatives. In April 2007, the Common Visa Application Centre was opened in Chisinau, to simplify procedures for issuing visas to Moldova's citizens, and the enforcement of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements was introduced from January 2008. From March 2008, Moldova was included on the list of states benefiting from the Autonomous Trade Preferences (ATP), which differs from the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP+) by providing for duty-free and quota-free access to EU markets for all products originating in Moldova (except for specific agricultural products). In June 2008 a Pilot Mobility Partnership with the EU was signed, aiming to enhance legal migration opportunities for Moldovan citizens, and to consolidate capacities for migration management and the fight against illegal migration and trafficking. Other developments included twinning arrangements and short-term expert missions through the Instrument of Technical Cooperation and Information Exchange of the European Commission (TAIEX) and cooperation with the European Investment Bank on several projects concerning infrastructure and support for sustainable development, especially in the light of the global economic recession (Spruds *et al.* 2008, p. 8).²⁴

Despite some limited criticism of EU actions in relation to specific needs and policies,²⁵ the overall level of technical and procedural cooperation in the direction of mutual boundary-shifting between the EU and Moldova has been relatively high (Commission of European Communities 2008a). The problems, however, have arisen when translating Moldova's new pro-European institutional and regulatory frameworks into practice. As the Commission's Progress Report on Moldova observes, 'effective implementation of reforms remains a challenge' (Commission of European Communities 2008a, p. 2). This is particularly true in the areas of judicial reform, fighting corruption, ensuring media freedom and improving the business and investment climate (Buscaneanu 2008a, 2008b; Munteanu 2008; Minzarari 2008). Moldova's handling of the problems resulting from the 2009 parliamentary elections has been particularly revealing, including the outbreak of violence and the authorities' repressive measures to restore order and silence the opposition, in particular by summoning NGOs to court and persecuting opposition leaders, and the PCRM's corrupt attempts to reinstate themselves in power in the aftermath. Following new parliamentary elections on 29 July 2009, the PCRM were reinstated in power, albeit with a much smaller 45% share of the vote and 48 seats, as the leading (but not the majority) party in parliament. This in turn promised a further fierce fight for the country's leadership.²⁶

²³For more details see The European Strategy (2007, Section 1.1 especially).

²⁴For a full evaluation of the EU–Moldova AP see Buscaneanu (2008a), European Commission (2008a) and Minzarari (2008).

²⁵In the first instance these include decision making towards visa fee facilitation policy and more effective tools to fight economic recession. See Popescu and Wilson (2009) and Popescu (2005).

²⁶For more information on election results and reports, see: <http://www.alegeri.md/en/>, ADEPT branch site, accessed 15 July 2009. At the time of writing the power struggle continued between different party factions in parliament to elect a new president. For details see Wilson (2009), and 'Pereizbranniki naroda', *Kommersant*, 99, 4154, 4 June 2009.

Given the slow pace of real reform it has been suggested that the Moldovan authorities have been playing a ‘small-step tactic’, obscured by elaborate legislative acts and pro-European rhetoric, but in real terms they are aiming to secure the EU’s financial backing to simply maintain the *status quo*: ‘Greater progress in “sensitive” sectors will be unlikely, as liberalisation of reforms in these fields will undermine the ruling party’s hold on power. In Moldova, like elsewhere, power is a very valuable asset’ (Buscaneanu 2008a, p. 87).

Transactional boundaries

During the period 1991–2006 Moldova received €320 million from the EU, mainly through the TACIS and Macro Financial Assistance Instrument (MFAI) programmes. The National Indicative Programme for Moldova (2007–2010) envisioned a budget of €209.7 million from the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI). This was to be further supplemented with funds from the governance facility (for example €16.6 million in 2008), some ongoing projects financed by TACIS and some compensatory schemes available under the MFAI. Furthermore, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has also provided some limited funding (for example €200,000 in 2007). Altogether this means that Moldova has been one of the leading ENPI financial recipients, receiving a per capita spending of €48.²⁷ With the introduction of the EaP Moldova is likely to benefit further as financial aid is likely to increase by another €2.1 billion by 2020 (Cristal 2009).

In 2007 and 2008 the ENPI Annual Action Programme (AAP) for Moldova included €80 million to assist integrated border management and improvement of the border control within the EUBAM, as well as reform of the social assistance system and support for civil society in the TRM. Whether and how the latter translates into practice is another matter, especially in light of inherent limitations of the ENPI (Bosse 2009) and its restricted leverage in the TMR. Border management remains the most successful and by far the most generously sponsored project. Apart from direct funding from EUBAM, Moldova also received €400,000 worth of technical assistance (such as printers, computers and telephones) and €730,000 for developing the Border Guard Service. There was also funding of €1 million for cross-border cooperation (CBC) projects to fight human trafficking and drug smuggling. Furthermore, Moldova has received financial aid on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, in 2007 it was provided with €3 million to combat the unprecedented drought; and a further €10 million was allocated under the Food Security Programme. EIDHR provided an additional €200,000 in aid for the Transdnestrrian region, which however, is rather negligible especially when compared with EIDHR spending in other parts of the world (Spruds *et al.* 2008, p. 10), or indeed, in light of Russia’s 2009 launch of a \$7.5 billion crisis fund for neighbouring economic partners, of which TMR is one.²⁸

²⁷For comparison, ENPI per capita spending for other East European neighbours in 2008 was as follows: €33 for Armenia; €26 for Georgia, €11 for Azerbaijan and Ukraine. Only the Palestinian Authority receives more financial aid per capita (€152) than that of Moldova under the ENP. For more information see Spruds *et al.* (2008, p. 7).

²⁸Russian Lawmakers Approve \$7.5bln Crisis Fund for Neighbouring Economic Partners’, *Associated Press*, 15 July 2009.

Interestingly, these generous financial provisions make Moldova the top aid recipient per capita in the region, but do not automatically translate into Moldova's unequivocal commitment to the European course. As some scholars have commented:

Moldova's ruling political elite has been rather ineffective in advancing the European integration idea as the central consolidating national idea. [It] has been hesitant in adopting new foreign and security policy strategies, which would unequivocally identify Moldova's European choice. It has also taken a reactive . . . stance *vis-à-vis* Europe, [which] gives doubts about the actual intentions of Moldova's ruling elite. (Spruds *et al.* 2008, p. 13)

Many more tangible and regulated efforts would be needed to afford a real shift of transactional boundaries in favour of closer cooperation between the EU and Moldova, most of all in the areas of facilitation of a free visa regime, better regulated workforce provisions for Moldovan citizens in the EU, and especially a more nuanced governance of Romania's policies towards Moldova.²⁹ Above all, however, management of the Transdnistrian conflict remains the most conspicuous hindrance to effective EU–Moldovan cooperation.

Conflict management boundaries: the Transdnistrian conflict

The Transdnistrian conflict is one with more of a political than an ethnic nature (Kolstø & Malgin 1998) and has been ongoing for over a decade, with limited progress towards tangible solutions. EU involvement clearly intensified from 2005, thus increasing Western pressure in the region. The great challenge however has concerned how to decrease Russia's influence in the region, which as the next section will demonstrate, may be as difficult as removing geopolitics from Moldova's existence (Quo Vadis 2007; Vahl 2005; Minzarari 2009; Popescu 2006).

So far four major negotiations to resolve the conflict have taken place, with limited progress towards settlement. The first was launched in July 1992 between Russia and Moldova with a view to reaching a bilateral ceasefire agreement and to establishing a tripartite peacekeeping force (comprising of Russia, Moldova and TMR). The arrangements remained unsatisfactory, reflecting Russia's geo-strategic interest in the region. In May 1997, a Memorandum on the 'Normalisation of Relations between the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic' was launched by Evgeny Primakov, then the Russian Foreign Minister, and signed in Moscow. It introduced the concept of a 'common state' in search of a federal solution to the conflict, also providing for a gradual withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping troops from the region. Further negotiations proved ineffective however, resulting in Moldova's withdrawal from the negotiations in 2001, and Russia extending its presence in TMR indefinitely.

²⁹This is particularly relevant in light of Romanian President Traian Basescu's announcement on 14 April 2009 on facilitating the process of granting Romanian citizenship to Moldovans, which potentially could cause exodus of the Moldovan population and severely undermine its economic *status quo*. For more information see Dura and Gnedina (2009).

A ‘Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structures of the Unified State’, known as the ‘Kozak Referendum’, was offered (again at Russia’s initiative) in November 2003, pushing further for the creation of a federalised Moldova. The document also mentioned the need to retain Russian military presence on Moldovan territory for a period of 20 years. This clearly pro-Russian document was rejected by President Voronin, albeit after a long period of consideration. Instead, in 2004, Moldova (with the support of the EU and the USA) offered a ‘3-D strategy’—Demilitarisation, Decriminalisation and Democratisation—which proposed a five-party format for the conflict-settlement to now include Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, the OSCE and TMR. From November 2005 the US and EU joined as observers. Western presence was further enforced with the launch of the EUBAM mission in 2005.

In response Russia introduced sanction-driven policies against Moldova banning the import of some agricultural produce and wine, and claiming the repayment of energy debt (accompanied by shortages of gas supplies) during 2006–2007 (Popescu 2006; Minzarari 2009). In March 2009, however, on the eve of Moldova’s parliamentary elections, a Kremlin-brokered meeting between President Voronin, TMR President Smirnov and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev took place to negotiate a new settlement deal for the region premised on Russia’s proposal of transforming peacekeeping forces.³⁰ However, apart from certain electoral gains pursued by Voronin on the eve of the elections, the actual declaration had little new to offer: ‘What this is about is not the improbable transformation of the current peacekeeping mission [into an OSCE-supervised contingent], but about the lack of future progress towards Russian withdrawal’ (Tomiuc 2009).

Thus, besides some declaratory statements by the Moldovan leadership, Russia’s heavy steering of negotiations and the limited or disunited involvement of the EU, management of the conflict with TMR has seen little progress and is unlikely to see any for some time, as the next section highlights. Boundary shifting has so far proved to be a long and problematic path for Moldova. On the one hand, Moldova unduly exaggerated its expectations for EU membership, by suggesting a concrete deadline of 2007, while not being able to deliver its pledges. Declaratory politics, incomplete AP and PCA, corrupt elections and political instability in 2009, conditioned by the power-mongering of the Moldovan leadership made its allegiance to the EU ambiguous and in practice, non-committal. Moldova has seemed to adopt European rhetoric only when it suited, for electoral gains and power maintenance rather than for real reform on the ground. On the other hand, the geo-strategic interplay of its larger neighbours—Russia and the EU—also reflects Moldova’s failures and hesitation, and is the subject of the next section.

Falling between stools: the geopolitical boundaries of EU governance

As with other East European states, Moldova finds itself in the contested neighbourhood of both Russia and the EU, and naturally attempts to balance its relations with both powers by playing geopolitics on their contradictions (Phinnemore

³⁰This was the second meeting between the presidents of Moldova and TMR in the history of the conflict. See Tomiuc (2009).

2006, p. 7). The larger neighbours clearly pursue differing aims and tactics towards Moldova, thus achieving various degrees of success and leverage over the country: 'Whereas the EU pursues an under-resourced technocratic neighbourhood policy, Russia pursues a well-resourced geopolitical policy that touches raw nerves throughout the neighbourhood' (Popescu & Wilson 2009, p. 2). The outcome of the interplay however, is far from straightforward. Although Moldova has progressively shown signs of greater involvement and commitment (at least on paper) to the EU, Russia's presence in the region remains far more tangible and in many ways, far more substantial than it appears on the surface.

Russia's imprint on Moldova's policies is evident in the Moldovan leadership's rhetoric—ranging from sporadic statements of disappointment with Europe, subtle criticism of EU politics and overt testimonies, such as Voronin's claim that Moldova 'must resist in the face of Europe just as Cuba resists in the face of the US' (Phinnemore 2006, p. 9). Also, more tellingly, Moldova's actions, especially in critical situations of power challenge, have indicated its continuing dependence on Russia's power politics. Russia's preponderance in the region is unquestionable. It deploys hard power—from military, economic and nationalist to electoral and political tools—to fully exert and extend its influence over the country. For example, Russian troops remain actively stationed in the TMR and may be immediately deployed as necessary. Russia is also a key player, and more importantly, is perceived as such by the Moldovan elite, in the process of conflict resolution in Transdnistria, the success of which came to be seen as almost entirely dependent on Russia's political will (Popescu 2006, p. 5).³¹

Russia has also used various economic means to negotiate its political leverage, such as the sudden reductions in the supply of gas, oil and electricity during the winter of 2005–2006 after the failure to reach agreement on the Kozak Memorandum for Transdnistria. As Popescu and Wilson point out, 'the TMR's debt to Gazprom on the eve of the January 2009 gas crisis was bigger than Ukraine's (\$1.8 billion as compared with \$1.5 billion), but no one in Moscow thought of putting pressure on the satellite' (Popescu & Wilson 2009, p. 5). Economic embargoes on Moldova's main items of export—on wine and some vegetables that allegedly contained pesticides, as well as on heavy metals and other hazardous substances—were used to discipline Moldova for its increasingly defined leaning towards the West. Conversely, industries in the TMR have considerably benefited from Russia's generous subsidies and investments, and Russia's political backing on the international level makes it harder for Moldova to negotiate a suitable settlement of the conflict with the TMR.³²

Russia's policy on the issue of passports to residents of the TMR is another useful tool in its promotion of 'divide and rule' politics. Its main objective is to secure Russia's legitimate right to intervene in order to protect the interests of Russian citizens on territories with unsettled identities. Russia effectively applied this right to

³¹The views of the Moldovan elite, as revealed in elite interviews, are discussed in the next section.

³²*Research Paper on Transnistria by the Centre for Strategic Studies and Reforms*, 2003, available at: <http://www.cisr-md.org/pdf/0311%20transn-research.pdf>, accessed 15 July 2009.

intervene in the TMR, which has no common border with Russia but where 15% of residents are formally Russian-passport holders.³³

This influence extends to the level of electoral politics, and Russia's active political engagement in domestic elections has been felt throughout the period since Moldova's independence. Notably, Russia's preferred choice of candidates was successfully pursued in 2001, resulting in the unexpected victory of the PCRM which secured just over 50% of the vote. The outcome, not surprisingly, was Moldova's adoption of greater foreign policy flexibility towards the CIS, even raising the prospect of a joint union with Belarus and Russia.³⁴ In early 2003, similar goals were evident in attempts to affect the PCRM's vote share in local elections (49.9%³⁵) and to put additional pressure on the Moldova–EU ENP negotiations that year (Gorda 2003; Marandici 2008). In 2007 in the aftermath of the local elections which barely 'secured' the PCRM's victory (39.7% of vote share in 2007 elections³⁶) Voronin yet again redefined his allegiances in favour of Russia, two days before his meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow (Minzarari 2008, 2009). The 2009 parliamentary elections were no exception to the electoral game played by the regime in an attempt to attract Russia's support. Before his meeting with Medvedev, on the eve of the elections, Voronin, in his interview to the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, openly stated his displeasure with the EaP by comparing it to the 'EU-controlled CIS-II encirclement of Russia', and questioning its usefulness for Moldova.³⁷ He subsequently received Russia's full backing regarding Moldova's controversial elections: the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and *Duma* stated that they were 'in full correspondence with democratic and legal norms' and openly accused some external actors of purposefully undermining the 'socio-economic stability' and 'balanced foreign policy' of Moldova (Dura & Gnedina 2009, p. 3). This clearly suggests, as aptly expressed by Minzarari, that 'when cost-and-benefits of the Russian pressure become significantly bigger than those from the EU, Moldova ... will choose the course of action that will benefit the most powerful' (2009, p. 27).

In contrast, the EU, perhaps naively, has seen itself as an influential normative player in the region, whose appeal is based on the broad notions of interdependency and its political and economic attractiveness to the neighbours (Raik 2006; Youngs 2004). The EU, however, often takes its 'soft power' appeal for granted, as reforms that the EU demands from its neighbours are hard, laborious and in the short term, socially alienating. They require firm commitment from the partners and certain political sacrifice to stay the course, which does not often find resonance with the multi-vectored policies of the EU neighbours, heavily influenced by Russia. As Popescu and Wilson observe, 'pro-EU sentiments in the neighbourhood are broad but shallow and confused. ... Publics and governments tend to see a "European choice" as a geopolitical alignment, rather than a commitment to put their houses in order'

³³Interestingly, statistics indicate that there are more Russian inhabitants in Chisinau, Moldova's capital, than in the whole of the TMR. See Munteanu (2008, p. 14).

³⁴*RFE/RL Newsline*, 23 April 2001.

³⁵See Central Election Commission, available at: <http://www.parties.e-democracy.md/en/local/elections2003/>, accessed 15 July 2009.

³⁶See <http://www.alegeri.md/en/2007/>, accessed 21 June 2010.

³⁷'Perezbranniki naroda', *Kommersant*, 99, 4154, 4 June 2009.

(2009, pp. 3–4). Moreover, the EU remains cautious and unambitious about what it is willing to offer to its neighbours, and to Moldova in particular, effectively avoiding any concrete discussions of the much wanted finality for EU–Moldovan cooperation in the form of eventual EU membership. The EU's inconclusive commitment in relation to the future prospects for front-runners like Moldova and Ukraine is understandable, but may be politically erroneous. Driven by its own enlargement fatigue, concomitant with internal problems of legitimacy and recession, the EU has lacked any distinct vision of the future for European integration, which is also to be defined through its rapprochement with Russia in their treatment of 'Europe-in-between'. Although explicable, this (non-)commitment of the EU leaves Moldova with the enormous problems of how to steer its European integration without any prospect of integration, and how to resist a far more assertive Russia's *realpolitik*. It seems likely that more oscillation towards the East may be a likely outcome given the ongoing economic crisis, Russia's eagerness to help and the EaP's limited appeal for Moldova.

The Moldovan cultural boundary: 'between two stools', and will it fall to the ground?

This section explores the cultural boundary that, along with geopolitics, has the potential to sway Moldova's course in either direction and make boundary shifting for the EU difficult, if not impossible. Primary survey research conducted in the region suggests that pro-European discourse amongst the Moldovan population and its elite seems sufficiently robust to withstand the uncertainties of the future. On the other hand, as the results of a more nuanced examination of elite responses and focus groups reveal, Moldova's European choice is not yet set in stone and may considerably decrease under the assertive pressure of Russia.

Population survey

Moldova clearly stands out from its eastern neighbours by showing unprecedented levels of public enthusiasm and support for European integration. Our opinion survey showed that support for joining the EU almost trebled from 32% in 1998 to 78.8% in late 2008.³⁸ Furthermore, Moldovans also seem to demonstrate good awareness and knowledge about the EU in their self-perception.³⁹ According to our survey, many associate the EU with economic prosperity (57%), freedom of movement (38%), democracy (32%) and stability (30%). Two-thirds of the population perceive the EU as a benevolent and altruistic political player. An overwhelming majority (84%) state that mutual trust forms the foundation for EU–Moldova relations. A total of 63% of

³⁸These figures are corroborated by other surveys conducted in Moldova, showing a clear pro-European trend of opinion amongst the general population. See, for example, 'Report on the Assessment of Public Perception Regarding the Process of European Integration and Implementation of EU-RM Action Plan', IDIS 'Viitorul', April 2008, and other relevant documents, available at: <http://docs.moldova.org/category/european-integration-10-eng.html>, accessed 15 July 2009.

³⁹For details please see a synopsis of our project findings, available at: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/interpol/en/research/EKProject/index.htm>.

respondents note that ‘thinking about the EU’ arouses in them feelings of hope and faith; and every tenth respondent feels enthusiasm and motivation towards the EU.

In contrast to their eastern neighbours, Moldovans see themselves as having much in common with their fellow Europeans: they tend to ascribe many liberal values, including democracy, human rights and respect for diversity, which they normally associate with the EU, to their country as well, and they do not perceive themselves as culturally different to the rest of Europe. Such positive attitudes to Europe—almost exceptional in the East European region according to opinion polls⁴⁰—may suggest that Moldova is now irrevocably committed to European integration, thus shifting its cultural boundaries unequivocally Westward. However the picture does not appear to be so straightforward when it comes to choosing between the West and the East. In this respect, the ‘competition’ between the EU and Russia is very close, with 40% believing that ties with Europe are more important as opposed to 34% who think that ties with Russia are more important. Furthermore, about 45% of the respondents support the current government’s foreign policies which include Russia as Moldova’s first priority. In response to a question asking how they would vote if there were ‘a referendum tomorrow’, 39% of Moldovans said they would vote for strengthening ties with both the EU and Russia, with a further 33% clearly prioritising the EU and 19% Russia. In other words, the choice was not at all clear-cut, suggesting a subtle difference between Moldovans’ alignment with Europe (which many of the neighbours also seem to display) and their commitment to Europe, which is yet to emerge (Popescu & Wilson 2009, p. 4).

Elite interviews

Further insights into this cultural and geopolitical differentiation are revealed by individual-level responses from our elite interviews and focus groups. Expert interviews, conducted as part of our project in early 2009 with Moldovan government officials, journalists, representatives of think-tank organisations and members of the civil service, indicated a rather pragmatic and almost promiscuous attitude of Moldovan elite members to the country’s European policy. Almost all respondents unanimously pointed out that despite the officially declared European direction of Moldova’s foreign policy, it was actually divided between Russia as its first priority and Europe as its second priority, and that policy was pursued in detail in accordance with the country’s immediate economic objectives. For example, according to one respondent:

... Moldova, whether she wants it or not, chooses her policies not because of some ‘shared norms’ but according to her plain economic interests. If people wish to live by European standards they may do so, but for Russia it does not make any difference (Think-tank representative, Chisinau, December 2008)

From the elite perspective, the inclusion of Russia in Moldova’s main foreign policy priorities is not accidental or contradictory. As many interviewees observed, pragmatic

⁴⁰For more information see www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/minisites/widereurope/index.html, accessed 15 July 2009.

prioritisation of Russia over their 'moral' commitment to Europe was simply a matter of *realpolitik*, owing to Moldova's excessive trade and energy dependency on Russia, Russia's leading role in the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, and the potential security threat Russia posed for Moldova:

Russia plays a decisive role in solving the conflict . . . It is also our major energy exporter to Moldova. (MP, Committee on Foreign Policy and European Integration, Chisinau, December 2008)

Today's Russia—being large and undemocratic—is a direct threat to any country in the region. I am not saying that Russia as a country, but Russian government (MP, Committee on Foreign Policy and European Integration, Chisinau, December 2008)

Russia is our major trading partner, and a key player in the Transnistrian conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of European Integration, Chisinau, December 2008)

This is not to say that the Moldovan elites, in contrast to their people, are Eurosceptic, cynical or unenthusiastic about Moldova's European course. In fact, quite the opposite is the case, in that they all see their future in Europe and they perceive Moldova's Associational status as the next natural step forward. Equally, they do not see any critical cultural differences or indeed historic traditions that could divorce them from Europe. Contrary to the views of the general public however, they remain more cautious about the precariousness of Moldova's position as 'Europe-in-between', which is duly reflected in its ambiguous foreign policy:

It is not the EU's policy towards Moldova that is ambiguous or declaratory . . . It is our politics that is unclear . . . What is certain, though, is that Moldova cannot implement all EU requirements, not only because they are unattainable, but because of far more objective reasons—we, as a country, has not yet committed ourselves to the EU (Social Democratic Party, Parliament, Chisinau, December 2008)

Apart from the geopolitical boundary that still remains firmly in place, a far more nuanced cultural boundary has surfaced, which the EU has yet to address—that is, Moldova's feeling of inferiority and absolute reliance on third-party directives. All respondents explicitly noted that there cannot be a conceivable equal partnership between the EU and Moldova, simply because the latter is too 'insignificant' and 'needy':

Of course we are not equal partners, and we should realise and accept this! We aspire to become a younger brother, who should look up and obey the big brother's orders. (Social Democratic Party, Chisinau, January 2009)

Yes, I believe, the EU must and can dictate its own conditions, simply because it is in our interests: if we wish to integrate into the EU, we have to listen! (Committee on Foreign Policy, Parliament, Chisinau, January 2009)

This particular cultural attitude clearly raises a problem for the EU with regard to the prospects for clear progress and a firmer commitment to European reforms in Moldova. Conversely, and perhaps, far more importantly, this attitude is also problematic for Moldova, which instead of taking the lead in foreseeing European reforms, shifts responsibility for their initiation and implementation to third party supervision. The ramifications of such passivity on the part of a partner-state may be far reaching. First, it undermines the original idea of partnership (through participation) and intellectual ownership upon which the ENP and the EaP are conceptually premised, thus inadvertently limiting their potential impact; but secondly and more crucially, this over-reliance on the directives and governing hand of the EU, further enhanced by a domestic sense of inferiority, requires the EU's constant custody over Moldova and the offering of more tangible incentives which it cannot give or promise. In contrast, as Medvedev's actions have shown, Russia finds such styles of guardianship agreeable and is ready to negotiate with Moldova on its own conditions.

Focus groups

The findings of focus groups further challenge the picture of Moldova's seemingly uniform commitment to Europe, exposing more pronounced cultural differences and geopolitical choices.⁴¹ In particular, an absolute majority of focus group participants noted that Moldova's European allegiances are on paper only and in practice they have always followed the Russian course:

Moldova's foreign policy has always been defined by the external political situation. We are a small country and therefore ought to orient our objectives in accordance with policies of larger states. (Experts, Chisinau, 5 June 2009)

Focus group respondents also proved more Eurosceptic and critical of the EU's treatment of Moldova, explicitly questioning its ulterior motives towards the country:

I think Europe takes care of us as barbarians . . . They give us bread crusts so we keep quiet and peaceful. Because if they leave us hungry, we can create trouble, and take their bread away . . . This is the European wisdom. (Mixed group, Kahul, 12 June 2009)

Paradoxically, individual-level responses in focus groups also revealed more cultural differences that were initially noted by the nationwide survey. In particular, respondents highlighted the impact of Soviet legacies, historic traditions and indeed, a different set of norms and values to those of the West, that now have been inculcated

⁴¹Five focus-groups were conducted in Moldova during May–June 2009, comprising of eight participants sampled using a snowballing method and a screening questionnaire. Individual groups consisted of: (i) students; (ii) women with higher education; (iii) men with higher education; (iv) people working in think-tanks (academics, NGO and policy institute members) with some knowledge of the ENP/EaP (experts); and (v) a control group of mixed origin.

into people's behaviour and mentality. One comment for example, was: 'We differ from them by our system of values, traditions, customs, which define us as a nation. This includes our upbringing and is reflected in our way of thinking' (mixed group). Some also observed differences in Moldova's predisposition to a more authoritarian style of governance; others noted that people's relations in the East were more open and less calculating (as opposed to the West). Overall, however, the gap was not regarded as insurmountable, and could be breached with sufficient motivation: 'If we speak about political culture, then, believe me, we are hundreds of years apart from the EU; ethically, however, we are the frontrunners, and they can learn a lot from us' (educated male, small town, central region).

To conclude, both elite interviews and focus groups spelt out more clearly the precarious ambiguity and cultural peculiarity of Moldovan foreign policy. Belonging to 'Europe-in-between', Moldova naturally resists a firm definition of its priorities, often relying on 'the hand that appears closer to its mouth' at any given moment of time. Additionally, Moldova's cultural over-reliance on EU orders and directives may be partly a response to its Soviet past, reflecting an inability to create adequate foundations for building partnerships on equal and participatory terms. EU governance, on the other hand, may be a useful tool in the short term, but is unsuitable for cultivating lasting reciprocal relations for the future—that is, the kind of relations that assume a two-way exchange.

School essays

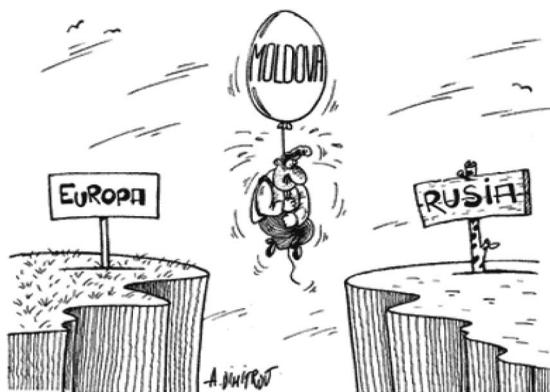
The ideas expressed in the pupils' essays stand out in their value, as they, to some degree, project Moldova's vision of the future, as seen through the eyes of its future generation. Three particular sentiments are worth noting.

First, an attitude that may be summed up as 'no shame, but blame'. Although growing up in poverty and seeing their country being torn apart by corruption, recession and war, the children did not seem to submit to feelings of inferiority or meekness as was often the case with the surveyed adults. Instead, clearly perceiving the tragedy of their situation, they directly attributed blame to the limitations of the current government. For example, for one pupil Moldova suffered from an 'absolutely incompetent government when everything is decided by shouting and beating'.

Secondly, and unexpectedly, there was a widespread perception of Moldova as a lonely and forsaken country, associated with an image of an orphan abandoned by his parents:

Moldova is in my opinion, like an orphan who has been abandoned by his family and has no sense of direction. He wants to do something positive, but in the end is left with his wish, but no concrete actions, because he is not sure where to go and is not ready to take responsibility for what he wants.

Thirdly, however, there is also a belief in a European future for Moldova. Although the children's perceptions of Moldova were relatively pessimistic and frustrated at times, their vision of the future was far more positive and reassuring. All of them



Source: Association for Participatory Democracy (ADEPT), available at: <http://www.e-democracy.md/en/cartoons/0002/>, accessed 15 July 2009.

FIGURE 1. MOLDOVA: BETWEEN EUROPE AND RUSSIA

confessed a desire to see Moldova as part of the EU, which in their understanding, would give them a better quality of life and pride of their homeland. For example one pupil commented: ‘... Our people have always been slaves to other nations and empires; maybe this time, with the EU membership, we will see some freedom’.

To conclude, the children’s essays understandably expressed a considerable degree of grief, dissatisfaction and negativity; however, their outlook of the future was paradoxically unambiguous and positive: Moldova will be independent and prosperous one day, as an intrinsic part of the European Union.

Conclusion: falling between stools or learning to survive?

This article has examined EU–Moldova relations from the external governance perspective. In particular, the analysis has detected relatively high levels of engagement in the areas of legislative reforms, economic restructuring and border management in the process of Moldova’s adapting to the EU *acquis*. In 2005 Moldova formally declared its absolute commitment to a European course, and until 2009 EU–Moldovan relations had been progressing well (at least on paper). The year 2009, however, saw Voronin’s open criticism of EU policies, his bilateral talks with Russia over TMR which excluded the EU, his conspicuous absence at the EaP launch and his general mishandling of the parliamentary elections, which certainly marks the year as a watershed in EU–Moldovan relations placing Moldova further away from the prospect of European integration than ever before.

To understand this seemingly sudden change in Moldova’s rather zealous alignment with Europe, one needs to go beyond conventional governance framework(s). The extension of governance framework to encompass an understanding of the boundaries of both sides reveals the salience of geopolitics and culture in EU–Moldovan relations. The analysis clearly shows that Moldova, being part of the contested neighbourhood of the EU and Russia, has been trying to balance between the two powers playing on their contradictions and availability.

Research based on the nationwide survey, interviews and focus groups, corroborated the assumptions that no matter how enthusiastic the population and the elites may feel about Europe, when it comes to choosing between the two larger neighbours, Moldova's 'moral' alignment with the EU gives way to a more pragmatic 'allegiance' to Russia.

Furthermore, analysis revealed the considerable cultural peculiarity of Moldova in its over-reliance on the directive governance of the EU. Given its particular sense of inferiority, Moldova struggles to undertake reforms independently, and requires constant EU custody. If the relations were to progress further, it would require more clarity and commitment from the EU in order to convert Moldova's current alignment into a resolute commitment to a European course. This however may not be possible; which leaves Moldova in a precarious situation of falling between two 'stools', as Figure 1 depicts, in search of a safer and surer 'landing' in the future.

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