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FINDING COMMON DENOMINATORS IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP REGION: TOWARDS A STRATEGIC FRENCH-GERMAN COOPERATION IN THE TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Beyond the current euro-zone crisis, the lack of a common understanding in Foreign Policy generally and in Neighbourhood Policies in particular is one of the main threats for the EU. While Franco-German relations are arguably the most important driver of EU integration, strategic cooperation between both countries remains limited in this area. This paper argues that Moldova, as one of the most promising countries in the Eastern and Southern EU neighbourhood in terms of Europeanisation, could and should be a 'laboratory' for strategic cooperation between France and Germany. Specifically, a common initiative on the resolution of the unsolved Transnistrian conflict in this country would represent a chance to overcome previous French-German divisions, as both countries' interests in this conflict overlap more than anywhere else in the EU neighbourhood.

Beyond the current euro-zone crisis, one of the main threats for the EU in the forthcoming years is the lack of a common understanding in Foreign Policy. A crucial yardstick for this is the EU's policy in its neighbourhood that has been scaled up significantly over the past years. Member states have very different perceptions of what should be EU priorities in this regard.

While recent events such as the Arab Spring have shown the deficiencies of a coherent European approach in its immediate neighbourhood, they have also underlined the need for a more strategic European foreign policy. Since the European Union cannot implement such policies on its own, a strategic approach requires commitment from all member states. The ineffectiveness of most neighbourhood initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP) or the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) mostly stems back to a lack of bilateral cooperation (Karbovskyi 2012: 16).

With regards to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its regional dimensions (EaP and UfM), it has become apparent that there are two groups of EU member-states with different interests, leaning either southwards (led by France and, to some extent, Spain) or eastwards (led by Germany and, to some extent, Poland), which is also reflected in the dynamics of

negotiations leading to the respective initiatives. In particular, a lack of strategic bilateral cooperation between the most powerful EU member states Germany and France has undermined both regional dimensions of the ENP until today, arguably weakening the overall EU leverage in its neighbourhood.

Against this background, the following paper advocates for a strategic Franco-German cooperation in the Republic of Moldova, with a specific focus on the Transnistrian conflict. It will be shown that here, interests of France and Germany are overlapping more than anywhere else in the eastern neighbourhood. Thus, a renewed conflict resolution initiative could first serve as a catalyst for overcoming the divisions on neighbourhood policies within the EU in general and second, improve the situation in the Transnistrian conflict.

First, this paper briefly introduces the importance of French-German relations within the EU before outlining both countries' interests in and policies towards Moldova (chapter 2). Following, the development of the Transnistrian conflict and the role of the different international actors therein will be analysed (chapter 3). Based on this, specific policy recommendations for a French-German initiative on Transnistria are developed (chapter 4).

2. FRANCE AND GERMANY IN MOLDOVA – INTERESTS, POLICIES AND CHALLENGES

2.1 French-German relations and the EU: Why Moldova represents a common denominator

France and Germany are widely considered as the ‘motor of Europe’. The two founding members of the EU are closely intertwined through geography, history, economy and politics. Accordingly, in the course of the past decades there have been several head-of-state ‘couples’, dating back to De Gaulle-Adenauer in 1963. Over the past years, as the euro crisis emerged this special relationship between French and German leaders was coined as ‘Merkozy’. Despite initial scepticism, also the new French President François Hollande, rather critical of Angela Merkel during his electoral campaign in France, has scheduled his first official visit to Berlin. Whatever the changes of presidents and chancellors, bilateral relations remain essential for both countries. To many observers, the EU needs both more coordination between its member states and stronger leadership – under the condition that the latter is neither perceived as hegemonic by its partners nor as further contributing to the already criticised democracy deficit in the EU.

Yet, the two countries now seem to diverge on economic and foreign policy, contributing to increasing tensions in the relationship. This is mostly due to the widening economic gap in both countries, e.g. with unemployment in France at 10,3% (Q3 2012), against 6,7% in Germany (December 2012). In addition, Germany, for a long time reluctant to consider itself as a rising power in Europe, is now increasingly vocal in international organisations such as UNO and NATO. Nevertheless, the military operation in Libya in 2011 exemplifies the lack of unity in foreign policy between the two countries, which is also becoming more visible in other fields (energy policy, defence, trade, environment etc.).

The EU’s neighbourhood programmes and policies represent an area where further cooperation is necessary, as many observers acknowledge that the ENP and its regional dimensions suffer from insufficiencies (Karbovskiy 2012: 16). That is why EU member states need a common understanding, reflection on the objectives and, stemming from that, new initiatives in order to vitalise the ENP. As already mentioned, the differences in approaching the neighbourhood are sensible between countries in favour of a more active Southern policy and those who advocate enlargement and more engagement in the East. Disagreements concern political priorities, budgets and the *finalité* of the policy.

From this perspective, Moldova is arguably the best ground for consensus eastwards as it remains of interest not only for Eastern-leaning Germany but also for France due to several reasons. First, despite the recent domestic crisis in the country Moldova can be considered the most Europe-leaning country in the EaP, especially when taking into account recent events in Ukraine and Georgia partly reversing the results of the colour revolutions. The political changes in Moldova after the events of 2009 (Radio Free Europe 2009) have improved both the image and the political situation of Moldova. A civil unrest over parliamentary elections in April of that year were followed by new elections later in 2009 and again in 2010, which ultimately led to the ouster of the Communist Party and allowed several parties to form a pro-Western coalition (“Alliance for European Integration”), led by former Prime Minister Vlad Filat. Undeniably, despite many remaining challenges, such as prevailing high-level corruption (Wolff 2012: 8), Moldova is also more visible in Brussels in terms of democratisation and legal adaptation of the EU *acquis communautaire*, which is for instance reflected by its No. 1 ranking in the EaP index (Solonenko et al. 2012). While the recent crisis

in the country, culminating in the resignation of the AIE government in March 2013 (Minzarari 2013), has undeniably put into question Chisinau's "EaP champion" narrative, more than 50% of Moldovans remain convinced of the country's pro-European path (IPP 2012: 77). Taking into account public opinion and the political commitment over the past years, Moldova still best allows for demonstrating that the approach of incentivising neighbours without offering EU membership can work – an argument that France and Germany have repeatedly emphasised.

Second, in spite of the current instability, in Moldova political and economic governance reforms should be easier to implement than elsewhere in the neighbourhood also because of the country's comparatively small size (33,000 square kilometres and 3.5 million inhabitants).

Third, Moldova represents a common denominator in the East since it has become a political priority for Germany while also France is culturally much more present in Chisinau than anywhere else in the EaP region.

Fourth and most importantly, with Transnistria being the so-called 'easiest-to-solve' frozen conflict in the EaP countries (Sieg 2012: 3), France and Germany have the possibility to further demonstrate their conflict resolution capacities in the post-Soviet space that were scaled up by both countries with their engagement after the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia (Rinnert 2012: 218). Both countries have repeatedly underlined their strong interest in a resolution of the Transnistria conflict that would significantly contribute to an improved security in the EU neighbourhood. While Germany politically is already very much involved in Moldova, Paris therefore also has several reasons to engage in closer cooperation with Berlin especially on the Transnistrian conflict, which will be elaborated on in the following parts.

2.2 Germany's rising influence in Moldova

In the past years, Germany has shown a remarkable interest for the Republic of Moldova considering previous international attention to the country and

accordingly, it is by now perceived as the most important European actor in Chisinau (Müller 2012: 389). Chancellor Merkel's visit to Moldova in August 2012 was the most visible sign yet both of the increased interest and of Berlin's commitment. Many interpreted the fact that German diplomats scheduled a visit of their head of state to Moldova in the midst of the on-going EU crisis as an extraordinary foreign policy signal (Dempsey 2012).

However, the German engagement towards the Republic of Moldova dates back already to 1991 when Berlin was one of the fiercest proponents of Chisinau's independence and, soon afterwards, the first EU member state to open an embassy in Chisinau. After a backdrop in bilateral relations during the Communist Party's rule from 2001-2009, German engagement in Moldova increased rapidly over the past years, in line with the broader underpinning of German support for the EaP. This was underlined not only by the Merkel visit but also by an increasing number of other high officials coming to Moldova, e.g. Foreign Minister Westerwelle in 2010 and Development Cooperation Minister Niebel in May 2012. Interestingly, also both the head of the EU delegation to Moldova and the head of the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM) are German diplomats.

Although the German commitment in Moldova can only be understood in the wider context of its relations with Russia (Meister 2012), there are two main reasons for the increasing importance of Moldova for decision-makers in Berlin: Germany is (1) looking for a 'success story' within the EaP, notably in terms of democratisation and it is (2) aiming at more stability at the EU border through a resolution of the Transnistrian conflict.

First, Moldova is currently perceived as the 'success story' of the EaP being the most democratic state in the region according to Freedom House (Freedom House 2012). This represents a possibility for Germany as a fierce EaP supporter to show that the general 'enlargement light' approach of the EaP and the recent 'more for more' adjustments work. A democratically and transparently governed Moldova, at the same time, would lead to more stability at the EU borders in the

east, which always has been and still is an articulated German interest. In light of the support for democratisation and approximation with Europe, German economic activities in Moldova's are also significantly expanding, despite the country's relatively small size. German exports to Moldova have steadily increased since the Alliance for European Integration won elections in 2009, currently amounting to around US\$400 Mio. The same is true for German direct investments in the country, with some companies being very active for several years already (Südzucker, Metro and Dräxlmaier) and others getting more and more interested, not least thanks to the increasing amount of German business delegations to Chisinau. Furthermore, Germany has become the most active development cooperation donor to Moldova, mainly through significantly scaling up its development agency's (GIZ) projects in the country. Both the visits of Chancellor Merkel and Minister Niebel in 2012 led to additional bilateral development funds of more than €15 Mio for 2012-2013.

Second, and most importantly, with the so-called 'Meseberg initiative' in 2010 Germany underlined its commitment to Moldova claiming a leading role in solving the Transnistria conflict. At a Russian-German summit in Meseberg in 2010, Germany offered Russia the formation of a "EU-Russian security committee under the condition of a Russian contribution to the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict" (Makarychev 2012). Although the Meseberg process "failed to change the prevailing Russian approach to the region or to activate the EU as a whole, (...) Merkel's diplomacy helped to re-launch the 5+2 talks on Transnistria and it kept the spotlight on Russia" (Litra/Popescu 2012: 8). With a strong focus on the Transnistria conflict in bilateral relations it becomes apparent that the German interests are first and foremost focused on achieving stability through conflict resolution while Moldova is 'europeanising'. At the same time, Germany aims to take leadership in the EU's policy towards Transnistria, underlined for instance with the circulation of an ambitious non-paper on conflict resolution measures in 2011 (Socor 2011). In Moldova, this commitment is generally perceived very positively with government officials often referring to the German experience of reunification as a role model for the envisaged reintegration of Transnistria.

In Merkel's main speech during her visit in August 2012, she emphasized Germany's support for Moldova and the on-going German commitment to the Meseberg initiative (Merkel 2012). At the same time, she promised an increasing German engagement in bottom-up initiatives both bilaterally and via EU programmes. In the context of her remarks on Transnistria, Merkel's message in Chisinau "carries a double address: directly to Moldova and indirectly to Russia. It lays down a marker for Europe in Moldova, clearly delimiting the country from Russia's Eurasia project, and offering a European choice to Transnistria as part of Moldova" (Socor 2012).

2.3 French policy towards Moldova: a lack of political will?

Despite a strong cultural connection, and to a lesser extent, economic ties, France has so far not been a major political partner for Moldova. In contrast to Germany, it has not put forward any significant initiative over the past years, and the last French President visiting Moldova was Jacques Chirac, in September 1998. Clearly, France is not the vocal EU partner for Moldova that it once was for Romania on its way toward European integration.

Bilateral relations are mainly driven by cultural links based on French language (Parmentier 2010): already in 1989, before Moldova's independence, the first committee for the *Alliance française* was created by a local group of professors. Since 1991, this institution, established before the opening of the French Embassy in Chisinau (1996), has played a key role in fostering cultural, scientific and technical cooperation, but also in extending cooperation in the economic and political fields. In 1997, Moldova became a full member of the International Organisation for the Francophonie (*Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*), the 3rd in Eastern Europe after Romania and Bulgaria. Roughly half of all Moldovan students learn French in schools, and as much as 1200 continue their higher education in France (Touteurope 2011) in 2011 while 300 higher civil servants are trained at the *Alliance française* (Alliance française 2012). With regards

to economic relations, French-Moldovan trade remains limited, however there are several French key investors in Moldova (e.g. Société générale, Lafarge, Lactalis, Orange). The broad cultural policy approach and the existing economic relations undeniably offer favourable perspectives for enhanced bilateral relations.

Yet, two main reasons may explain the limited French engagement in Moldova beyond cultural policy: (1) its preference towards the stabilisation of the Southern rim of Europe and (2) its wish to slow down or stop the pace of enlargement in the mid-term.

First, France is much more active in the South Mediterranean than in Eastern Europe, both economically and politically (Lang/Schwarzer 2011). President Sarkozy's first important diplomatic initiative was the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), for which he negotiated with Angela Merkel and finally had to scale down some of the ambitions. An increased attention towards the Southern Neighbourhood is also part of Hollande's foreign policy. For example, the new French government aims to upgrade bilateral relations with Algeria, underlined by President Hollande's official trip to Algiers with 200 delegation members in December 2012 (Smolar 2013).

However, this does not mean that France has no interest in the post-Soviet space: Russia was and remains a traditional partner of France. While cooperating on several subjects at the multilateral level (arms control, Middle East, role of the UNO) both countries do not share the same views in the common neighbourhood, e.g. on unresolved conflicts. After the collapse of the USSR, France was involved in the 'Minsk group' dealing with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict due to special ties with Armenia (an influential diaspora in France). In 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy was also instrumental in the French-led European mediation in the Georgian conflicts on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, the Transnistrian conflict is the separatist conflict in the post-Soviet space in which French conflict resolution engagement is most limited. While Transnistria has been discussed notably in the French-German-Russian Deauville Summit (October 2010), it was rather Angela Merkel than Nicolas Sarkozy raising this issue.

Second, French diplomacy is concerned about a final agreement on the EU borders, i.e. how far the enlargement process should go. In this perspective, member states should have their words to say on future enlargements, as a significant part of the political spectrum and public opinion in France is sceptical concerning Turkey but also concerning the post-Soviet countries. Similarly, France considers the EaP as an alternative to new EU memberships, with the aim of stabilising the neighbourhood. As a consequence, in Central and Eastern Europe France is sometimes accused of being indifferent to the fate of the Eastern neighbours and influenced by Russian interests. On the other side, Romania, a country considered as South-Eastern European, remains a partner with strong economic and political ties; France intensively lobbied in favour of Romania's EU membership (as it was the case with Bulgaria). President Nicolas Sarkozy and his Romanian colleague Traian Basescu signed a strategic partnership in 2008, but the content was not centred on foreign policy issues. At a press conference, the French President declared that the partnership "reinforces [his] conviction that all Balkan countries, with the addition of Moldova, have a perspective, in due time, to integrate with the European Union" (Sarkozy 2008). However, although a declared objective Romania has so far not succeeded in putting Moldovan affairs on the agenda of French-Romanian relations, except for the creation of a 'Group of friends of Moldova' in 2010, composed by representatives of EU member states.

Taking into account the outlined French and German interests and initiatives in Moldova, the following part focuses on the Transnistrian conflict. As mentioned above, this conflict is the best ground for strategic cooperation in the EaP countries, as it represents a common denominator with regards to French and German interests in the region.

3. THE TRANSNISTRIAN ISSUE IN PERSPECTIVE

In 1992, a short military conflict over the small territory of Transnistria, located east to the Dniester River, erupted within the newly independent Republic of Moldova, claiming the lives of more than 700 people. Contrary to other conflicts in the post-Soviet space, the Transnistria war did not break out because of ethnic differences between the two territories. The armed struggle was rather a result of disagreements over “the nature of relations between Chisinau and Moscow and the relative position of Russian and Moldovan/Romanian language in the public sphere” (Rodkiewicz 2011: 4). With significant support of former Soviet troops and Russia, Transnistria managed to defeat the weak Moldovan army by July 1992 and has turned into a de-facto independent entity afterwards. Ever since, Moldova has unsuccessfully aimed at the reintegration of Transnistria through various strategies and means. Transnistrian elites supported by Russia, on the other hand, have managed to make use of the complex geopolitical situation and thereby maintained the de-facto independence of their small strip of land until today (Kosienkowski 2012a).

While a detailed account of the Transnistrian conflict and its history would go beyond the scope of this paper (for such a detailed account, see for example Troebst 2003), an understanding of recent developments in this conflict is crucial as several factors defining the conflict situation have changed, opening a window of opportunities for a new conflict resolution approach (Rodkiewicz 2011: 12).

3.1 Recent developments in the conflict resolution process

After the 1990s, when few concrete measures were taken by any of the conflict parties or the international community, more and more actors put the Transnistrian

conflict on their agenda in the 2000s. Most importantly the so-called Kozak Memorandum of 2003, which represents the first full-scale conflict resolution plan, led to an increased attention of Transnistria especially in the EU and the USA. The memorandum, put forward by Russian counsellor Dmitry Kozak under the guidance of the Putin government, proposed the creation of a federal state with equal power distribution between Moldova and Transnistria. After the Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin - pressured by protesting Moldovans at home and by worried partners in the West - refused to sign the Memorandum, the so-called ‘5+2 talks’ were set up under the auspices of the OSCE in 2005. These negotiations include Moldova, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE with the USA and the EU as observers. However, shortly after their initiation the talks were dissolved in 2006 due to increasing disagreements between the stakeholders. While the conflict situation remained deadlocked in the years to follow, since 2009 several significant changes have taken place.

First of all, in 2009 the Alliance for Europe won the parliamentary elections in Moldova and following, it rapidly changed the country’s direction in contrast to the previous Communist Party rule. Declaring European integration a top priority, the new government led by Prime Minister Vlad Filat understood that “without the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict, Moldova has no chance to become a member of the EU since the Union would definitely refuse to import a ‘second Cyprus’” (Vegh 2012). Besides scaling-up resources directed towards Transnistria, the Filat government pursued a new approach towards conflict resolution, opting for a more comprehensive inclusion of the international community in all talks and avoiding bilateral negotiations with Russia.

Secondly, the above-mentioned changes within Moldova led, together with increased international com-

mitment especially from Germany, to the resumption of the 5+2 talks in November 2011 in Vilnius in framework of the Lithuanian OSCE presidency. While until today, the negotiation rounds did not produce any major outcomes beyond procedural agreements this re-launch nevertheless represents an important prerequisite for any further conflict resolution initiative to be successful.

Thirdly, in December 2011 Evgeny Shevchuk was elected new President of Transnistria, to the surprise of most observers. Shevchuk did not only win against Transnistria's long-term autocratic leader Igor Smirnov in the first round of the elections, but more importantly, he defeated Moscow's candidate Anatoly Kaminski in the second round with a landslide victory securing nearly 80% of all votes. Although most analysts agree that Shevchuk will not be able to bring about significant change to Transnistria due to remaining influence of Russia and former Transnistrian elites (Popescu 2012), significant progress on many issues has been made since he took office. While important technical questions such as the reestablishment of freight train connection between both sides of the Dniester River or the issue of licence tags for cars (Kommersant.md 2013a) have been solved, maybe even more importantly the number of bilateral meetings between both sides has rapidly increased, not least thanks to a good personal relationship between Filat and Shevchuk. This was underlined by a number of symbolic measures, e.g. the Moldovan and the Transnistrian Delegation taking the same plane to the 5+2 negotiations earlier in 2012 (Deviatkov 2012: 8).

While the above-mentioned developments have definitely opened a window of opportunity for conflict resolution, most analysts remain sceptical whether any significant change will be possible taking into account the positions of the international actors in this conflict (Litra/Popescu 2012).

3.2 International actors in Transnistria: Post-Soviet politics and the mapping of European engagement

Many international actors are involved in Transnistria, even beyond the OSCE's 5+2 negotiation format. It is

necessary to understand their priorities as the initiatives of the past decade (Kozak, Meseberg, etc.) have generally failed because of disagreements on the international level.

Generally, Moldova remains largely influenced by Russia, but as outlined above also European actors have an emerging interest in the region, especially in the conflict settlement. Being in favour of the status quo, Russia has played a decisive role in the conflict, and will continue to have strong regional influence. It recognises the integrity of the Moldovan territory, but in practice supports the secessionist entity through several means: the Russian-led peace-keeping operation, Russian citizenship granted to a large number of residents, diplomatic support in international organisations such as the OSCE, direct and indirect support to the local economy (through subsidised gas, products and, occasionally, through direct financial aid) and "outsourcing" of institutions (e.g. providing support for state and institution building in the secessionist regions) (Popescu 2006: 6). The Russian strategy has not been unambiguous – generally supportive of the separatists, but at times tempted by a rapprochement with the Moldovan authorities; its main goal is to keep influence in Moldova thanks to the Transnistrian leverage. It is now wary of confidence-building measures between Moldova and Transnistria, as the status quo provides a position of a power broker (Popescu / Litra 2012). The Russian-led Eurasian Union, aiming also at the accession of Transnistria, may not be as attractive as the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) for both Moldova and Transnistria economically, however, the latter remains largely dependent on Russian financial and political support.

As a neighbouring country and a member of the 5+2 negotiations, also Ukraine plays an important role in Transnistria. However, Ukraine's policy towards the conflict is generally characterised by inconsistency: Kiev tries to take advantage of its strong political and business links and regional interests with Transnistrian elites while offering collaboration to Moldovan authorities, e.g. on EUBAM. In any case, Ukrainian foreign policy is largely determined by other priorities than conflict resolution, i.e. relations with the European Union, Romania and Russia, as well as the issue of

Ukrainian's border security in the Southwest. Ukraine holds the OSCE chairmanship in 2013, and despite officially prioritising the Transnistria conflict during this time (Kommersant.md 2013b), it does not seem to be willing to antagonise Russia on Transnistria when it has other interests in the spheres of energy, business and culture (especially language). In a word, Ukraine will use Moldova as an area of cooperation with the EU, but will not support a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict at any price.

The EU institutions have increasingly been involved in the Transnistrian settlement over the past decade by taking direct actions as well as by influencing the regional environment and actors. The EUBAM mission, established in 2005, has been a step forward in this regard. Since last year, the EU has changed its focus to a policy of small steps, confidence building measures and bottom-up projects to support the Transnistrian conflict settlement, supported by additional funds amounting to €13.1 Mio (State Chancellery Moldova 2012). Also in general, EU-Moldova relations have recently been scaled up with rapidly proceeding Association Agreement negotiations, including talks on a DCFTA and visa liberalisation.

Concerning other EU Member States than the two on which this paper focuses, few take an active stance in the Transnistria conflict. Sharing a border, a language and common culture with Moldova, Romania is among the most engaged actors. While it has not always played a constructive role within the EU because of its very fierce anti-Russian stance, relations are becoming more pragmatic than in the past. Poland and Lithuania as well as Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria have strengthened their cooperation with Moldova following the political change in Chisinau. However, aside from Romania, none of these countries has been very active in the Transnistrian conflict over the past years.

In conclusion, the general trend in the international area is a remaining strong Russian (and Transnistrian) will to keep the status quo of the conflict, contrasted by an increasingly active advocacy for conflict resolution both from EU institutions and from Germany, an emerging interest from Central Europe, and less indif-

ference in other parts of Europe. Taking into account these circumstances and the German-French interests outlined before, the following chapter aims to establish a feasible policy proposal for a strategic cooperation in the Transnistrian conflict, allowing for an improved climate to resolve the conflict.

4. POLICY PROPOSAL FOR A FRENCH – GERMAN INITIATIVE ON THE TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT

Based on the above-mentioned analysis, the following chapter sets out a detailed proposal for a French-German initiative on the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict. We divide our recommendations into two dimensions, namely a strategic cooperation level and a policy level with practical steps that could be undertaken by French and German policymakers within 24 months. This analytical division is in accordance with the following two main objectives of our proposal:

1. Spill-over effect on EU neighbourhood policies

A strategic French-German initiative on Transnistria shall serve as a catalyst for overcoming the Southern vs. Eastern neighbourhood division within the EU, thereby contributing to an increased effectiveness of the EU's foreign policy in its immediate environment. To achieve this, the proposed initiative must actually deliver and lead to an

2. Improvement of the situation in the Transnistrian conflict, allowing for a full-fledged and acceptable conflict resolution in the mid-term.

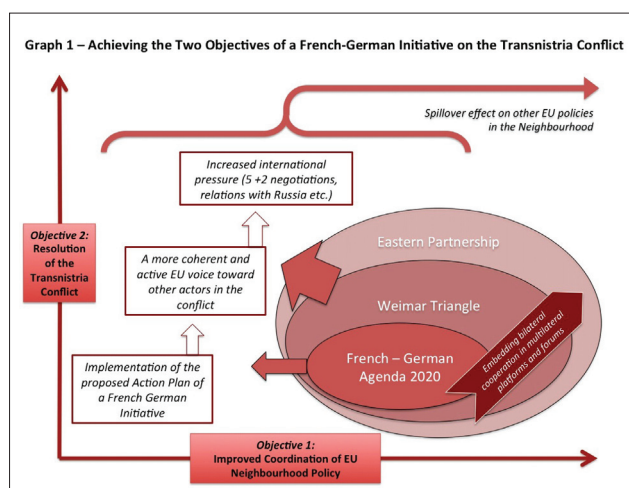
As several valuable policy proposals on the Transnistria conflict have been elaborated over the past two years (see for example Litra/Popescu 2012), our recommendations focus on the added value of French-German cooperation in this regard. We believe that there is significant potential for achieving both objectives if policymakers agree on the initiative and its implementation (see graph 1).

4.1 Platforms for cooperation: where France and Germany should address the Transnistrian conflict

With regards to possible platforms for a strategic French-German initiative on Transnistria, we believe that it makes most sense to build on existing cooperation mechanisms including other European actors. Some of the platforms mentioned below suffer from a lack of visible achievements in the past and would thus profit from a successful French-German initiative on the Transnistria conflict (contribution to objective one). Besides, the conflict issue itself will gain momentum if it is raised in these forums, which in turn would increase pressure on other international actors to move forward (contribution to objective two).

1) Using the French-German Agenda 2020 as a framework for an initiative

The French-German Agenda 2020 was concluded in 2010 and represents a broad strategic document structuring French-German cooperation in numerous policy areas (Présidence de la République 2010). Both countries take stock of the progress every year,



and while in early 2013 German State Minister Link declared that the first overall assessment of the Agenda's implementation would be positive (Auswärtiges Amt 2013), analysts agree that especially in the field of foreign and security policy, objectives have not been met and "fundamental differences" between France and Germany prevail (Clouet/Marchetti 2011). Against this background, the Agenda 2020 represents an ideal starting point for a specific French-German initiative on Transnistria.

The initial document already mentions several priorities directly concerned with Moldova. For instance, it stresses the need for a better cooperation on the ENP (Présidence de la République 2010: 7) as well as an increased incorporation of the Weimar Triangle (an informal group consisting of France, Germany and Poland) in civil and military crisis management in the region (Ibidem: 6). In spring 2013, France and Germany plan to further elaborate the strategy and the foreseen initiatives therein. During this process, it seems feasible and beneficial for both countries to add the proposal for an initiative on the Transnistria conflict outlined in the Action Plan below.

2) Enlarging the group of supporters within the EU: the Weimar Triangle

Beyond setting out the basic initiative on Transnistria in the Agenda 2020 bilaterally, Germany and France should include Poland through the format of the Weimar Triangle as early as possible. Over the past years, Poland has not only gained importance within the EU in general but has also become an ever more important actor in the post-Soviet space, which in turn increased the importance of the Weimar Triangle itself (Meister 2011).

An inclusion of Poland will thus be a key determinant of achieving the first objective (spill-over effect within the EU), as it would facilitate reaching out to all EU member states, e.g. Poland could better coordinate the position of Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and other like-minded EaP supporters (such as Sweden or the Baltic states).

A common and proactive voice of the Weimar Triangle on Transnistria would increase the prioritisation of the conflict within the EU in general.

3) The EaP: Revitalisation through incorporation

Although the EU's EaP is not directed towards security issues per se, it includes several dimensions that are relevant in the Transnistrian conflict, especially with regards to trade (DCFTA), visa liberalisation and civil society issues. Besides, three years into its rather unsuccessful implementation, the EaP definitely needs more political support especially from Southern-leaning EU member states such as France. Thus, the civil society and trade-related measures proposed in the Action Plan below should partly be channelled through EaP mechanisms in order to revitalise the programme. With four of the six EaP countries facing unresolved frozen conflicts (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova), there is significant potential for positive spill-over effects of a successful initiative in Transnistria.

4.2 Breathing life into a French-German initiative: A 24-months action plan

How can a French-German initiative that makes use of the above-mentioned platforms and mechanisms contribute to the objective of an improvement of the situation in the Transnistria conflict, allowing for a full-fledged conflict resolution in the mid-term? What are the specific policy measures that could breathe life into such an initiative and ultimately lead to the achievement of its objective?

There is general consensus among scholars and policy-makers in Moldova and the EU that - because of the current status quo on the international level (see chapter 3.2) - there are no measures that could contribute to a solution of the Transnistria conflict in the short-term. Instead, most stakeholders recommend a policy of bottom-up, de-facto reintegration of Moldova and Transnistria over the

mid-term (Litra/Popescu 2012). According to this view, the declared goal should be to expand the EU's and Moldova's interaction with Transnistrian authorities and civil society through joint projects.

In general, we agree and propose an Action Plan following this logic, however, we add several recommendations beyond bottom-up measures, especially with regard to Moldova's Europeanisation process.

1) People-to-people contacts: making use of the French-German model of reconciliation

Generally, reconciliation is a comprehensive process including large parts of society, public institutions, political majority and opposition. However, especially in cases when “elites or other societal forces have damaged or severed the relationships connecting individuals” between two conflict sides, people-to-people contacts become even more important for conflict resolution (USAID 2011: 5)

The reconciliation process has been essential in French-German relations since 1945, combining moral imperative with pragmatic interests and most importantly, putting emphasis on people-to-people measures. For a common initiative on the Transnistrian conflict, this experience represents a crucial added value of French-German engagement.

As in other frozen conflicts, success of people-to-people-based reconciliation between Chisinau and Tiraspol depends on numerous factors, including interpretation of history, education, cultural understanding and use of language but also on the structure of institutions, leadership as well as the overall international context. In the Transnistrian conflict, the majority of people from both sides of the Nistru do not recognise the narratives of the other conflict party. At the same time, institutional relations have been infrequent for years and the leadership level has only recently showed its will to engage in discussions, while third parties are at best benevolent (EU), or hostile to reconciliation (Russia).

In light of the rather complicated situation, France and Germany should implement the following measures based on their own reconciliation process:

- Creation of a “**Moldovan-Transnistrian youth office**”: a similar institution has proven to be crucial in French-German reconciliation and would stimulate interest and curiosity for the other side also in the Transnistria conflict. A youth office should encourage and support intercultural learning through various means. It could include activities at university level such as crisis simulations and should make extensive use of social networks that are widely popular on both sides of the Dniester River.
- Establishing a **town/village-twinning mechanism** between Moldova and Transnistria, and associate one or several cities from EU Member States. In France and Germany, this mechanism has led to numerous high-school exchanges and other activities in the mid-term.
- Organising an **annual prize for an initiative supporting reconciliation**, during a day specially dedicated to the issue.
- Promoting a **mechanism allowing for student exchanges** and/or summer schools between the two banks, notably through financial support.

2) Rethinking civil society's role in the conflict: Increasing local and sectorial support

Civil society promotion in the EaP countries in general and in Moldova in particular has at most been partly effective over the past years with Western-funded organisations creating an “NGO-crazy” promoting well-educated professionals “disconnected from the public at large” (Lutsevych 2013). Consequently, a successful and inclusive bottom-up solution of the Transnistria conflict will require further strengthening of civil society measures outside this ‘NGO-crazy’ on both sides of the Dniester River. With their long-standing experience in cross-border grassroots organisations, France and Germany could act as a role model for a decentralised civil society approach in Moldova, thereby further promoting conflict-related bottom-up measures by the EU. Through their enhanced support, Germany and France could build on an already developed set of

recommendations for local level civil society measures in Moldova and Transnistria (e.g. Chirila 2013, Litra/Popescu 2012). In particular, both countries should promote and fund joint projects in sectors where the political climate allows for effective cooperation on the local level. For instance, mutual ecological programs such as the “Bridge of Trust” project for the preservation of the Dniester River have proven to be easier and effective to implement in the short-term, as the Transnistrian side often blocks more political projects (Mikhelidze/Pirozzi 2008: 38). Also, framing civil society projects as sectorial issues, e.g. targeted at ecological problems, rather than as conflict resolution measures increases the outreach in the population, as few people and civil society organisations in Moldova prioritise the Transnistria conflict itself in their work. Germany and France should combine such funding of local projects with the promotion of a broader participation of selected NGOs in the EaP Civil Society Forum. The Civil Society Forum has only been partly successful to date (Hahn-Fuhr/Mey 2012) and would profit from a more active NGO participation especially from conflict areas such as Transnistria.

In addition, it has been underlined repeatedly that especially in the post-Soviet space, successful civil society engagement does not only require close links to the NGO level but also the inclusion of various interest groups, such as farmers, trade unions and others (European Economic and Social Committee 2012). In funding civil society projects, Germany and France should address these groups as they have been largely excluded from the conflict resolution process to date. Joint seminars and workshops on experience exchange between groups with similar interests on both sides of the Dniester should be a starting point in this regard and would add value to sectorial projects with NGOs.

3) Targeting corruption and increasing fund absorption capacities

Despite the need for scaling up civil society measures, it has to be emphasised that over the past few years, many problems regarding the absorption capacities of funds for bottom-up projects on the Transnistria conflict have emerged. Reality on the ground shows that in many cases,

capacities for programming and implementing funds are limited and/or corruption leads to the use of funds for personal enrichment. Clearly, the gap between the “Europeanising” legal framework and the political reality in Moldova is most visible in the on-going high-level corruption. The extent of such corruption in Moldova became evident in the events leading to the non-confidence vote for Filat’s government in March 2013 (Minzarari 2013). In Transnistria, the situation is even worse, with a small elite controlling most parts of the economy, e.g. through the monopolist company “Sheriff”.

Thus, France and Germany should not simply increase funding for bottom-up projects but rather combine their initiative with more rigorous anti-corruption measures and improved monitoring of funds. Existing initiatives at the local level such as the Eurasia Foundation’s “Preventing Corruption for Better Governance” Programme (Eurasia Foundation 2013) should be consulted to identify possibilities for cooperation particularly in Transnistria.

Regarding absorption capacities, France and Germany should make sure that increased funding for conflict resolution projects goes hand in hand with support for organisational capacities at the local level. It has been repeatedly underlined that besides capacity development measures, a structural prerequisite for improved fund absorption in Moldova are sufficient incentives for well-qualified personnel to actually work in relevant organisations (Gaibu et al. 2011: 49). A first step in this regard would be financial support for identified NGOs to provide higher compensation to employees, thereby allowing them to attract better-qualified personnel.

4) Reintegration through Europeanisation: Using the DCFTA and visa liberalisation as tools for reconciliation

In addition to the bottom-up approach mentioned above, several measures targeted at the governance level remain crucial for an initiative on the Transnistrian conflict. Most importantly, France and Germany should understand the link between EaP-related incentives (e.g. DCFTA and visa liberalisation) and the conflict and take according action. While the currently

negotiated DCFTA is one of the most important impetuses for reforms in Moldova, also Transnistria would profit from it to a large extent as up to 50% of Transnistria's exports actually go to the EU (Konończuk/Rodkiewicz 2012: 2). Although formerly invited to every DCFTA negotiation round between Moldova and the EU, to date Transnistria only participates with one state official in the meetings. At the moment, Russia exerts enough influence over Transnistrian business elites to keep them from pushing for further political engagement in the negotiations. At the same time, politicians in Tiraspol have made the economic and political integration with Russia's Customs Union, and later the Eurasian Union, its top priority (Calus 2012). Related to the reluctance of a Transnistrian involvement in current negotiations with the EU, there are increasing worries in Moldova that the benefits of a DCFTA and visa liberalisation will only be possible to reap at the cost of a widening gap between Chisinau and Tiraspol (e.g. Moldova might have to set up check-points at its "border" with Transnistria in order to fulfil requirements of the EU *Acquis Communautaire*).

To address these challenges, France and Germany should first launch an information campaign within the EaP framework to better explain and promote the benefits of the envisaged agreements both to policy-makers and to the general public of Transnistria. To reach a broad audience, this campaign could be implemented via widely used social media networks in Transnistria such as Vkontaki and Facebook (Kosienkowski 2012b).

Second, France and Germany should commission a study on the benefits of an EU-Moldova Association Agreement (including DCFTA & visa liberalisation) specifically for Transnistria. While several DCFTA impact assessments for Moldova have been drafted already (e.g. Ecorys 2012), there is no wider analysis on the impact of all envisaged agreements between Moldova and the EU on Tiraspol.

Third, France and Germany should lobby the EU to set up a small working group of national and international experts with the goal to identify the impact of envisaged EU-Moldova agreements on the Transnistrian conflict. Specifically, this group should analyse Mol-

dova's possibilities of adopting further parts of the EU's *acquis communautaire* (necessary e.g. in the process of DCFTA negotiations) without widening the gap with Transnistria and thereby making reintegration more difficult in the mid-term. The results of this working group could be shared with other interested EaP countries facing frozen conflicts.

5) Capacitating and incentivising policymakers involved in the Transnistrian conflict

Western diplomats based in Chisinau have repeatedly emphasised that there are too few incentives for high-skilled Moldovan policy-makers to work in the area of conflict resolution with Transnistria. Beyond general challenges in Chisinau's public administration (low wages, corruption etc.), departments and organisations dealing with the Transnistrian conflict attract even fewer people as the issue itself is not a political priority in Moldova and as there are less benefits to reap compared to other fields.

France and Germany should address this problem by incentivising well educated, young Moldovans to work on the Transnistrian conflict. A possible launching platform for this would be the existing EU High Level Policy Advice Mission (EU Delegation to Moldova 2010) that could be expanded further under a French-German initiative. At the same time, currently involved policymakers should be capacitated through joint seminars that could be organised via the EaP and should also include policymakers working on related issues in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

6) Targeting rural areas: the role of agriculture in the conflict resolution

While the proposed civil society measures outlined above address problems at the rural level, France and Germany should furthermore implement specific measures in the agricultural sector. The Moldovan population mainly lives in rural areas, where poverty remains high compared to urban areas. The agro-industry is essential for the Moldovan economy (exclud-

ing Transnistria), accounting for 52% of all exports in 2010 and for 32% of exports to the EU, while the food processing industry makes up for about 40% of the domestic industrial production. A successful transformation of Moldova's rural, agriculture-based areas would strongly influence similar areas in Transnistria (e.g. Camenca, Dubossari, Grigoriopol, Slobozia), where Moldovan Romanian-speakers are relatively numerous and may thus be influenced by such developments in the mid-term.

While Germany has already made decentralisation a cornerstone of its development agenda in Moldova, together with France there are possibilities to strengthen this effort especially in the agriculture sector, e.g. through assisting in the restructuring and modernisation of the wine sector and increasing the support for the development of local SMEs in the agriculture sector.

7) Cultural policy as a tool to overcome tensions

Finally, France and Germany should expand their cultural policy especially in Transnistria. Cultural events do not only target a broad audience and contribute to people-to-people contacts but they also represent a crucial platform for closer engagement with Transnistrian authorities, which have become ever more interested in arts, film or music events organised by Western actors. Over the past years, Germany and France have staged an increasing amount of cultural events (e.g. French Film Festival, concerts, screening of German movies) in Tiraspol and beyond. However, most of these events were planned on an ad-hoc basis and did not follow a broader plan on how to make use of culture as a policy tool in the Transnistrian conflict.

The French-German Agenda 2020 would represent an ideal framework for scaling-up both countries' cultural engagement in Transnistria as the document puts emphasis on an expanded and more coherent French-German cultural policy in general (Baumann 2012). Parallel to structuring and scaling up their own cultural policy in Transnistria, France and Germany should share their experience of intercultural management with Moldovan stakeholders.

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