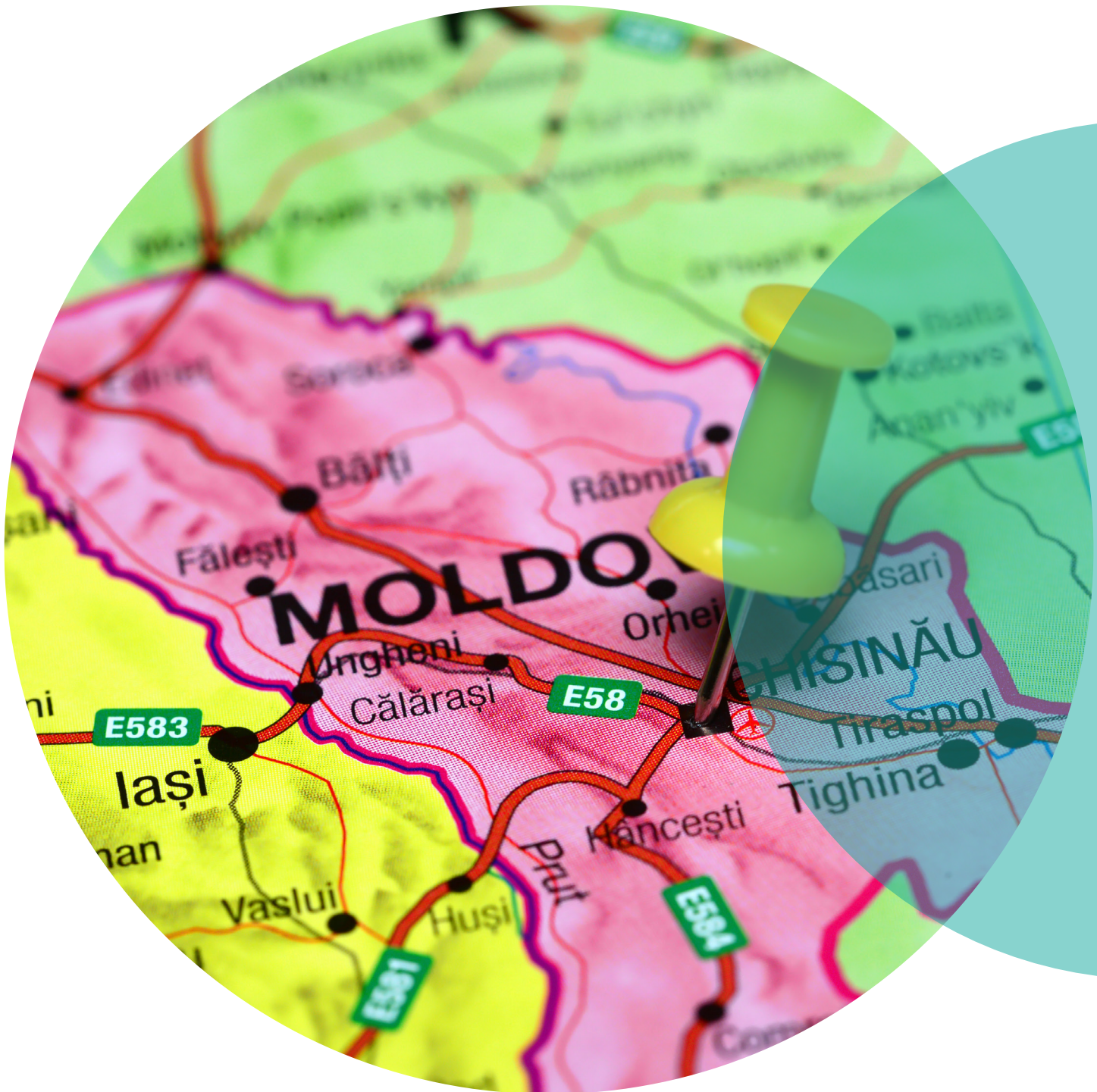


Moldova's struggle against Russia's hybrid threats: from countering the energy leverage to becoming more sovereign overall



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The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats

tel. +358 400 253800 | www.hybridcoe.fi

ISBN 978-952-7472-90-3 (web)

ISBN 978-952-7472-91-0 (print)

ISSN 2670-160X (web)

ISSN 2814-7235 (print)

January 2024

Cover photo: Dmitrijs Kaminskis / shutterstock.com

Hybrid CoE's mission is to strengthen its Participating States' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats, and by enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in this respect. The Centre is an autonomous hub for practitioners and experts, located in Helsinki, Finland.

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Executive summary

From Russia's point of view, Moldova belongs to its "privileged zone of influence", and Russia intends to uphold its political and economic sway over the region. The zone plays an important role in Russia's geopolitical ambitions to reaffirm its importance as one of the leading international players. In this context, the Kremlin will likely use all hybrid threat tools and leverage at its disposal to sabotage Moldova's integration into EU structures and to impose a Moscow-controlled "limited sovereignty" on Chisinau.

Given Moldova's struggle to reform the country and its long history of oligarchic capture, the most serious threats to its successful transformation and integration into the EU are currently systemic deficiencies in the state structures. In its hybrid threat operations against Moldova, Russia has targeted precisely these existing vulnerabilities in each domain of state activity: infrastructure, cyber, space, economy, military/defence, culture, social/societal, public administration, legal, intelligence, diplomacy, political, and information.

One of Moldova's main vulnerabilities identified in this report remains the weakness of public administration, which should constitute the backbone of the country's resilience to malign influences. Moldova lacks a well-developed rule of law system in which bureaucracy functions as a state subject with consolidated procedures, legislation, and codes of conduct. Instead, the public administration is subordinated to the political power, and does not provide legal protection for its functionaries. Another key problem for Moldova is closely linked to identity issues. Basic questions regarding the country's history, heritage, and the nationality and identity of its citizens remain unanswered or deeply conflicting within society.

Many people do not recognize the authority of the central government in the country, while others do not believe that the state will survive in the long run.

The above-mentioned issues constitute the basis of Moldova's weaknesses, which are particularly visible when it comes to fighting corruption, reforming its administration, or defending itself against political interference from Russia or Russia-sponsored political forces.

Moldova's struggle with Russia's hybrid threat destabilization efforts showed that if the most destructive tools are removed, the rest may become much easier to shake off. Since Moscow lost its energy leverage against the country and could not wield its military force in the region, the Moldovan government has been able to become more sovereign in its internal and external policies, taking increasingly decisive measures against the Kremlin's interference in the political, diplomacy, economy, information, infrastructure, military, and culture domains, for example.

For the moment, Russia does not have the capabilities to intervene directly in Moldova to prevent its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, as it has been continuously losing its hybrid threat tools designed for that purpose. This moment of weakness creates a unique window of opportunity for the country to finally free itself from Russia's perceived "sphere of influence". In order to do that, however, Moldova needs long-term assistance and financial help from the EU. In this endeavour, the EU should focus primarily on addressing state weaknesses, which translate into vulnerabilities exploited by Russia. If left alone and isolated, Moldova might again fall prey to Russia's hybrid threat operations.

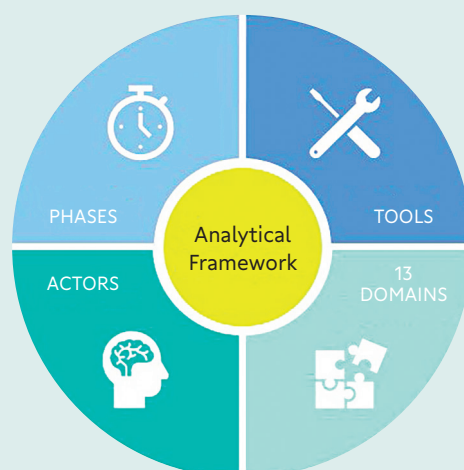
Introduction

Given the current state of international politics, with the intensifying confrontation between autocratic countries on one side (e.g., China, Russia, Iran) and democracies on the other (most often referred to as the “West”), the significance of hybrid threats is set to increase. In this context, Hybrid CoE identified Moldova as the next area where these two sides could potentially clash. Countries with nascent democratic institutions, which are only in the early stages of developing their democratic governance and organizational culture, are at high risk of being targeted by hostile actors. Moldova is in a specific situation, as Russia has long claimed

special rights to the country, placing it within its so-called “privileged sphere of influence”. As the Moldovan government is clearly following the path of EU integration, Russia is redoubling its efforts to prevent this from happening.

This Hybrid CoE Working Paper utilizes Hybrid CoE’s conceptual model, analytical framework and its elements to map out and examine the hybrid threats posed by Russia to Moldova. The analytical framework was first introduced in *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats*, a Hybrid CoE flagship project,¹ which aims to support the design of actions to address and counter hybrid threats.²

Figure 1. Visualization of the hybrid threat conceptual model. Based on Giannopoulos et al., ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats’.



1 Georgios Giannopoulos, Hanna Smith, Marianthi Theocharidou, ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model’, Hybrid CoE, 2021, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/the-landscape-of-hybrid-threats-a-conceptual-model/>.

2 Ibid., p. 6.

This paper uses the framework to analyze Moldova's vulnerabilities, which helps to map out the country's main weaknesses vis-à-vis Russia. The paper follows the structure of the analytical framework, focusing on the actor (Russia), and the tools and domains exploited in the successive stages of malign action (priming, destabilization, and coercion).

The main goal of the paper is to raise awareness of the situation in Moldova, especially among decision-makers in EU and NATO countries. To this end, the paper examines Moldova's weaknesses and Russia's hybrid threat actions in all 13 domains described in Hybrid CoE's conceptual model. The research largely focuses on the period from the victory of the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) in the Moldovan election in 2021, as this clearly marks the onset of intensified Russian hybrid threat activities. The study's cut-off date is 15 September 2023, showing how Russia's hybrid threat actions have played out along the escalation path from priming towards destabilization. The paper argues that as of now, Russia is not capable of waging a full-scale hybrid war against Moldova.

Moreover, the paper aims at establishing a common understanding of Moldova's needs among different Western organizations.

These needs have been identified during encounters with relevant individuals and institutions in the EU and Moldova as part of the project. This in turn should provide the basis for developing new, more robust and active policies and strategies to enhance Moldova's resilience in the long run. In-depth knowledge of Moldova's vulnerabilities and strengths should help the EU to prepare effective crisis management mechanisms and to fortify Moldova in resisting any future attempts by Russia to take control of the country.

The paper owes its key findings and many of its conclusions and recommendations to a closed expert workshop organized by Hybrid CoE in Warsaw in March 2023, and numerous interviews conducted during a research trip to Moldova in August the same year. Several experts from countries including France, Sweden, Romania, Moldova, and Poland participated in the workshop. During the research trip, interviews were conducted with experts from the diplomatic corps, NGOs, the media, government circles, and EU institutions. Additional interviews were also arranged with local activists and researchers, including in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia.

Russia's strategic objectives regarding the Republic of Moldova

The main goal of this section is to present Russia's attitude towards Moldova (and towards other countries to which Russia claims "special rights"), and the Kremlin's geostrategic thinking regarding its neighbourhood. It shows how Russia is fixated on the idea of regaining the influence it lost in Eastern and Central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia has ambitions to dominate the region and to restore the glory of its former empire, as it seems unable to define its state project in any other way. To this end, the Kremlin mainly relies on hybrid threat instruments and military means (in the absence of other effective tools such as soft power and economic cooperation). In this context, Moscow has never stopped considering the EU and NATO as a threat, as the engagement of these two organizations with regional countries thwarts its revisionist efforts.³ Russia still does not regard small neighbouring countries as independent actors with the right and ability to make their own decisions regarding their geopolitical course. Rather, it sees them as pawns in the great game between global powers.

From Russia's perspective, Moldova belongs – as do all former Soviet republics⁴ – to what the Kremlin likes to call a "privileged sphere of influence".⁵ From Russia's point of view, this perceived zone serves several purposes. Firstly, it is a security buffer zone that provides the country with strategic depth and walls it off from NATO/EU countries (perceived

as enemies). Secondly, this zone is crucial in Russia's political thinking because it confirms its great-power status. Thirdly, Russia regards Moldova and other former Soviet republics as part of the so-called *Russskiy Mir* (Russian World), which confirms its claims of being the centre of a unique civilization project.

Russia's above-mentioned ambitions for Eastern and Central Europe and its fear of losing its great-power status are closely linked to Russia's objectives in the global arena. Russia considers that the international system has been undergoing a period of transition from a unipolar to a multipolar system. Hence, during this transformational process, Russia seeks to reaffirm the importance of its geopolitical interests and its significance as one of the leading international players. Accordingly, Moldova is just another battleground for influence and domination between Russia and the West, as a new world order is emerging and new borders between superpowers are being created. Moreover, Russia believes that in this process, the US (or more generally "the West") is in decline, whereas Russia sees itself as a resurgent great power.⁶

An important element of Russia's strategic objectives regarding Moldova, as well as other countries deemed part of *Russskiy Mir*, is its quest to gather them all within the framework of regional integration projects, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). These

3 Lorenz Wojciech, 'Re-Building European Security: Against Russia, Not with It', *Point of no return?*

The transformation of the global order after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, PISM, May 2023, pp. 7–11.

4 With temporary exclusion of the three Baltic states. During the time of the USSR, the privileged zone of influence also included all the so-called satellites countries of the Warsaw Pact.

5 Elias Götz & Jørgen Staun, 'Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 2022, p. 486.

6 For more details, see: Samuel Charap, Dara Massicot, Miranda Priebe, Alyssa Demus, Clint Reach, Mark Stalczyński, Eugeniu Han, Lynn E. Davis, 'Russian Grand Strategy. Rhetoric and Reality', Research Report, RAND corporation, 2021, pp. 17–32.

Russian-led integration projects are crucial for Moscow to strengthen its bid to secure its role as one of the leaders (pillars) of the new multipolar world.⁷

In their geopolitical zero-sum game thinking, Russia's leaders completely disregard the sovereignty and subjectivity of the former satellite countries and Soviet republics. For Moscow, the integration of Central and Eastern European countries into the EU and NATO has nothing to do with the aspirations of their societies or their geopolitical choices. On the contrary, Russia's leaders believe that these countries

were merely absorbed by the West, which expanded its zone of influence at the expense of Russia.⁸

In the above-mentioned context of Russia's thinking and geopolitical ambitions, the Kremlin will likely use all hybrid threat tools and leverage at its disposal to sabotage Moldova's integration into EU structures. In Russia's preferred scenario,⁹ these hybrid covert activities will bring about a change of government in Moldova, allowing Moscow to impose "limited sovereignty" on Chisinau.¹⁰

7 Ibid., p. 22.

8 For more on Russia's thinking vis-à-vis former Soviet republics and the West, see: Jukka Aukia, Lucjan Kubica, 'Russia and China as hybrid threat actors: The shared self-other dynamics', Hybrid CoE Research Report 8, 2023, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-research-report-8-russia-and-china-as-hybrid-threat-actors-the-shared-self-other-dynamics/>, pp. 21–38.

9 John Zachau, 'Russia's Instrumentalisation of Conflict in Eastern Europe – the Anatomy of the Protracted Conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova', SCEEUS, November 2021, p. 5.

10 Jakob Hedenskog, 'How the EU Can Reduce Russia's Exploitation of Moldova's Vulnerabilities', SCEEUS REPORT NO. 6 2022, p. 4.

The 13 hybrid threat target domains in the context of Moldova

Hybrid CoE’s analytical framework identifies 13 domains of state activity that may be subject to hybrid threats. This section describes each of these domains in the context of Moldova. Although the domains are treated separately for the purpose of this paper, they should not be considered in isolation, as hybrid threat activities typically target multiple domains, using

different combinations of tools and exploiting vulnerabilities across various domains.

In many cases, a tool described and applied in one domain may easily be used in three or four other domains. The boundaries between domains are fluid, while Russia’s hybrid tools and influence overlap and interpenetrate across domains.¹¹

Figure 2. Domains of the conceptual model adapted from Giannopoulos et al., ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats’.



11 Giannopoulos et al., ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats’, p. 26.

Infrastructure

One of the most vulnerable parts of Moldova's critical infrastructure, which is under constant Russian pressure, is the energy sector, especially gas and electricity. Until recently, Russia was Moldova's sole gas supplier. However, thanks to its diversification policy and financial assistance from the EU and the US,¹² Moldova has been able to break Russia's monopoly. Currently, Chisinau can choose between different suppliers and, in the event of disruptions, easily replace Russian gas, much of which goes to the separatist Transnistria region in any case.¹³

Despite these improvements, Moldova remains vulnerable to Russian energy blackmail. There is still some scope for the Kremlin to manipulate energy deliveries in order to put additional pressure on the Moldovan electricity system to create social discontent. That was the case during the 2022–2023 winter season, which was characterized by ever-increasing energy prices. Russia played with the fact that alternative non-Russian gas deliveries remained expensive, overstressing Moldova's budget, duly preventing the state from decreasing prices for the population. During the period of high prices, the Kremlin pushed loyal pro-Russian parties to seize the momentum to stage social protests against the government.

In the electricity sector, Moldova remains even more vulnerable. The state buys around 70–80% of its electricity from a gas-fired power plant (Moldavskaya GRES), which is situated in the separatist Transnistria region and is controlled de facto by Russian company Inter RAO. The power plant is based on a gas agreement between Moldova and Russia. Any disruption in deliveries from the power plant would immediately jeopardize the functioning of the whole Moldovan electricity system.

The separatist region of Transnistria and the division of the country create further vulnerabilities in the critical energy infrastructure, as the Moldovan authorities do not have full control over their own electricity lines. Transnistria is home to important electricity nodes responsible for transporting energy, for example from Romania to Moldova, which remain de facto under Russian control. This is another strategic infrastructure weakness that could easily be weaponized against Moldova in the form of sabotage. Transnistria had already experienced some serious security incidents back in April, May and June 2022, including the firing of hand grenade launchers at separatist authority buildings in Tiraspol, and the detonation of explosives at local airports and Russian radio towers.¹⁴

12 RELM, 'SUA oferă încă 42 milioane de dolari pentru securitatea energetică a R. Moldova' [US offers another 42 million dollars for the energy security of the Republic of Moldova], 14 December 2022, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/sua-ofera-42-milioane-de-dolari-pentru-securitatea-energetic%C4%83-a-r-moldova-/32176092.html>.

13 For more details, see: Kamil Catus, 'The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova: economic, political and social dimensions', Hybrid CoE Working Paper 23, 2023, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-23-the-russian-hybrid-threat-toolbox-in-moldova-economic-political-and-social-dimensions/>.

14 For more on this, see: Lucjan Kubica, 'Eastern Partnership countries in flux: From identity politics to militarization of foreign relations', Hybrid CoE Trend Report 9, 2023, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-trend-report-9-eastern-partnership-countries-in-flux-from-identity-politics-to-militarization-of-foreign-relations/>, pp. 27–29.

Another vulnerability of the Moldovan infrastructure is the ownership of some strategic assets by Russian companies. The most prominent example is again the energy sector. Moldova's largest and most important energy company, Moldovangaz, is owned by Russian gas giant Gazprom. Only recently, the Ministry of Energy announced that the transportation system would be separated from Gazprom and managed by a Romanian company under a five-year tender.¹⁵ Similarly, in the transport sector, in 2022 the state took back control of the main airport in the capital Chisinau from a company owned by Russian millionaire Andrey Goncharenko.¹⁶

Experts underline the general weaknesses of the Moldovan transport infrastructure. The underdeveloped transport infrastructure does not allow the country to fully connect with the EU and to make the most of EU funds and investments. This includes basic issues such as the insufficient number of bridges (border crossings) on the River Prut linking the country to Romania, or the lack of a direct highway connection to Romania. These deficiencies in turn slow down the economic transformation of the country. One example of that is the railway system, which was an integral part of the former Soviet railway network. This means that it has a larger track gauge compared to the rest of Europe, further constraining interconnectivity with the EU. At the same time, the poor infrastructure makes it easier for malign actors to paralyze the country in the event of military or

quasi-military operations. Moreover, the lack of properly developed infrastructure makes the country dependent on its neighbours, which in Moldova's case generally means Romania.

What the EU should do

- First and foremost, the EU and EU-associated organizations must continue to support Moldova economically. Thanks to substantial financial aid from the EU, Moldova was able to survive Russia's energy blackmail in 2022 and even break Gazprom's monopoly. This is low-hanging fruit given that limited funds considerably improved the situation in the country.
- Taking into account the ongoing energy transition, the EU should pay particular attention to energy efficiency projects. Speeding up Moldova's green transition (solar and wind energy) and helping to develop local power generation capacities will contribute to the increased resilience of the Moldovan energy sector, especially given that electricity consumption in Moldova is projected to grow. To this end, however, Moldova needs assistance in preparing and drafting appropriate legislation that would enable the development of the green sector.
- Moldova remains vulnerable to Russia's hybrid threats in the critical infrastructure domain. EU funding would help to secure the improvements already achieved in the long run. A good example of this policy is associating Moldova to the Connecting Europe

15 David Smith, 'Weekly Roundup: September 7, 2023', <https://moldovamatters.substack.com/p/independence-day-and-more-catching>.

16 Nicoleta Banila, 'Moldova takes back control of Chisinau Airport', <https://seenews.com/news/moldova-takes-back-control-of-chisinau-airport-minister-805816>. For more details, see also: Radio Moldova, 'Avia Invest challenges the Republic of Moldova at the Swedish Court of Appeal', 14.11.2022, <https://trm.md/en/economic/avia-invest-a-atacat-republica-moldova-la-curtea-de-apel-a-suediei>.

Facility (CEF) programme, which will open up funding in the transport, energy, and digital realms, improving the country's connectivity with its EU neighbours.¹⁷

- Russia's war against Ukraine is having an adverse effect on Moldova's critical infrastructure, as Russian strikes against the Ukrainian energy sector directly impact Moldovan grids. What is more, the war in the neighbouring country is driving away potential investors. Therefore, the EU should consider providing financial guarantees to those foreign investors who decide to invest, for example, in Moldovan infrastructure. This solution might convince those companies that are hesitant to engage in Moldova, or even attract new companies. Investments in upgrading the Moldovan energy power grid to make it compatible with that of the EU are particularly needed.¹⁸
- Romania is Moldova's closest EU neighbour. The EU should explore to what extent it would be possible to combine infrastructure (highways) and modernization (railway network) projects in Romania with critical infrastructure developments in Moldova. That might truly facilitate Moldova's access to European transportation networks of goods and people. Additionally, due to its location, Moldova might be considered one of the hubs in the future rebuilding of Ukraine. That would not be realized, however, without prior

investment in the roads, railways, and energy infrastructure.

- The EU should assist Moldova in preparing an analysis of the vulnerabilities in its national supply systems and the requirements for their protection.¹⁹ As examples from Ukraine show, this knowledge will help to manage crisis-like situations and mitigate the negative effects of foreign interference. However, Moldova does not have sufficient resources and capabilities to conduct this kind of analysis on its own.

Cyber

The cyber domain is one of the most vulnerable in Moldova. Russian state-affiliated hackers are able to penetrate all 13 domains described in the report. The Kremlin utilizes cyber tools to support Russia's intelligence operations and to infiltrate Moldova's political and judicial systems, society, culture, economy, military, infrastructure, and public administration, along with space-based services and the information domain. Cyber tools help Russia's diplomacy, which targets Moldovan political elites as well as the separatist regime in Transnistria and leaders of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, the latter particularly when it comes to evoking secessionist sentiments. While Moldova struggles to address cyber-security challenges like any other country, the situation is further aggravated by the lack of adequate

17 European Commission, 'European Commission further integrates Moldova into EU Single Market through the Connecting Europe Facility for infrastructure funding', 9 May 2023, https://transport.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/european-commission-further-integrates-moldova-eu-single-market-through-connecting-europe-facility-2023-05-09_en.

18 Hedenskog, 'How the EU Can Reduce Russia's Exploitation', p. 6.

19 Government Centre for Security, 'Possible mitigation measures resulting from the analysis of the Ukrainian resilience to hybrid threats and the military aggression', 2023, pp. 12, 19.

cyber protection, the poor condition of software and hardware in the state apparatus, and low cyber hygiene among state officials.

The hacking of the social media accounts and instant messaging systems of key Moldovan decision-makers in November 2022 was just one example of the state's major cyber vulnerabilities.²⁰ Private and sensitive conversations of top politicians (e.g., President Maia Sandu, former Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development Andrei Spînu, former Minister of Justice Sergiu Litvinenco, and Minister of the Interior Ana Revenco) were leaked and published online. Experts argue²¹ that the leaked information was not particularly damaging for the hacked individuals and no sensitive information was disclosed. However, it is likely that the most compromising materials have been retained for later use in either blackmail or smear campaigns. The leaked and published information, combined with falsified data, also served to undermine the public's already low level of trust in and among authorities.

Moldova does not possess sufficient financial and human resources to significantly improve the situation in the short to medium term. Cyber literacy among state officials is very low. Many government employees still use domains hosted by Russian companies (Yandex, mail.ru), making them even more vulnerable to Russia-affiliated hackers. What is more, several interviewees indicated that some officials in Moldovan institutions use pirated or illegal software versions, which creates another

vulnerability as such systems cannot be properly maintained and updated (a paradise for hackers).²² Others are forced to use personal computers and laptops at work, as there are not enough devices to go round.

On top of that, under the current economic and financial conditions, most cyber and IT experts choose to move and work abroad. With the salaries offered by the state, it is almost impossible to find specialists willing to work for the public administration. The private sector (for example in Romania, but also in any other EU countries) offers better job and salary prospects in a much friendlier environment. The government uses a hybrid working formula, allowing IT experts to work part-time for the government and the rest of the time for the private sector. This creates new vulnerabilities, however, in terms of conflicts of interest or divided loyalties.

What the EU should do

→ Given the poor level of software and hardware in the Moldovan public administration (e.g., outdated Soviet-era infrastructure, basic programs, low level of digitalization), the EU can considerably improve the cyber-security environment with relatively few resources. Modern equipment combined with legal and up-to-date software will significantly increase Moldova's ability to ward off foreign intrusion. This effort should be reinforced by further digitalization of Moldovan state services.

20 Madalin Necsutu, 'A Moldovan minister tells BIRN that the cyber-attacks facing Moldova since Russia's invasion of Ukraine are on a whole new level', *Balkan Insight*, 20 December 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/20/telegram-hack-exposes-growing-russian-cyber-threat-in-moldova/>.

21 Closed expert seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

22 Research trip to Chisinau and Comrat, August 2023.

- As Moldova is struggling with a very low level of awareness of cyber threats and a lack of experts to cover existing security gaps, the EU can assist with expertise in the form of training and exercises for the Moldovan public administration (starting with basic training on cyber culture and cyber hygiene).
- Setting up the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM) under the Common Security and Defence Policy is a step in the right direction, as the main objective of the mission is to enhance the resilience of the security sector (crisis management, hybrid threats, cyber-security), and to counter foreign information manipulation and interference.²³ Moldovans need considerable assistance, especially at the operational level, so the EUPM should be composed largely of experts ready to work on the ground with their Moldovan counterparts in the fields of cyber security, legal solutions, strategic communications, and so forth. At this stage, Moldova does not need more “strategic advisors”.
- In Chisinau, the authorities currently lack effective tools to combat cyber threats. The Information Technology and Cyber Security Service (STISC), which is responsible for security in this sector, employs only a few dozen people. The new cyber-security legislation approved in March 2023 envisions the creation of a new institution responsible for cyber threats, starting on 1 January 2025. Taking into account the limited resources, the EU should assist Moldova in bringing this institution to life, again with EU experts ready to work with Moldovan partners at the operational level.
- The EU should assist Moldova in increasing the state’s ability to provide public services at the central and local level, even under pressure from malign cyber actors. An important aspect of this process is ensuring connectivity, information security and cyber-security for the public administration (e.g., the unification of hardware and software used by the public administration).²⁴ This will require further EU investment in Moldova’s digital resilience (cloud-based systems, data warehouses, anti-virus protection, diversification of data backups) and legislation.²⁵

Space

Space-based technologies provide services to national institutions and their populations on a daily basis, in areas such as navigation, communications (satellites), financial systems, remote sensing, science and exploration.²⁶ The war in Ukraine has also highlighted the importance of space-based technologies and the role of commercial providers. The disruption or complete loss of space-based capabilities would have wide-scale effects on the functioning of the whole country, especially in times of crisis or war-like conditions. Without proper and timely communication and information flow, authorities would not be able to communicate with their citizens, debunk hostile disinformation, mobilize citizens, and defend against hostile aggression. Without access to space-based services, no modern military would be able to

²³ Council of the EU, Press Release, 24.04.2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/04/24/moldova-eu-sets-up-a-civilian-mission-to-strengthen-the-resilience-of-the-security-sector/>.

²⁴ Government Centre for Security, ‘Possible mitigation measures’, pp. 7–8.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 11–12, 15.

²⁶ Giannopoulos et al., ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats’, p. 28.

perform its tasks (operating drones, navigating, targeting, control and command).²⁷ Moreover, the absence of these services can cause disruption in basically all 13 domains described in the Hybrid CoE conceptual model.

In Ukraine, commercial providers of space-based services (satellite capacity, communications, internet services) and equipment (terminals), with SpaceX being the most well-known, have played a crucial role in maintaining the resilience of society and the military. Experts underline that this has been particularly evident in providing connectivity for the general population, as well as in the areas of command and control, intelligence, reconnaissance, and situational awareness. Since the start of the war, Starlink connections have been used to monitor and coordinate artillery fire and unmanned aerial vehicles, to transmit video streams and data from drones, and to enable precision fire and drone strikes.²⁸

In Moldova, the Russo-Ukrainian war highlighted the fact that it is not the ownership of technology, but access to its capabilities that is crucial in sustaining the state and society's resilience. This could be achieved through cooperation with commercial entities, even allowing developing countries such as Moldova to gain access to them. Cooperation with commercial

entities should prevent a complete shutdown in the event of a hostile hybrid threat operation. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that relying on commercial providers creates other vulnerabilities and dependencies, for example on wealthy individuals or other countries that might have their own political agenda.²⁹

What the EU should do

- In the event of a scenario such as an acute crisis, the EU should be ready to provide Moldova with at least basic space-based services (e.g., communications). In the meantime, Moldova needs EU assistance in developing its space-based capabilities. This is not only about money, but also advice, guidance, and capacity-building. In many sectors, the Moldovan authorities are not aware of what they need and what is required to secure space-based services for the state in a crisis situation.
- The EU has already started to help Moldova fill its space-based technology gap by allocating EUR 40 million for the purchase of a long-range mobile ground surveillance radar for military purposes.³⁰ This is a good step towards improving Moldova's security and defence capabilities (see section on military/defence). There are at least a few other areas that might benefit from EU-funded/supplied

27 For more on this topic, see: Marko Höyhty & Sari Uusipaavalniemi, 'The space domain and the Russo-Ukrainian war: Actors, tools, and impact', Hybrid CoE Working Paper 21, 2023, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-21-the-space-domain-and-the-russo-ukrainian-war-actors-tools-and-impact/>.

28 Höyhty & Uusipaavalniemi, 'The space domain and the Russo-Ukrainian war', p. 18.

29 Andrea Dudik, 'Elon Musk Sets Off Uproar in Ukraine by Tweeting His "Peace" Plan', 4 October 2022, *TIME*, <https://time.com/6219480/elon-musk-ukraine/>.

30 The radar along with supportive equipment (tactical vehicles, communication equipment, anti-hacking hardware, etc.) will enable Moldova to monitor its airspace. The decision was taken after Russia violated Moldovan airspace and fired several missiles through its territory to hit targets in Ukraine. For more on this, see: Bogdan Nigai, 'EU buys radar for the Republic of Moldova, after Russian missiles flew over its airspace several times', *radiomoldova.md*, 15 March 2023, <https://radiomoldova.md/p/8180/eu-buys-radar-for-the-republic-of-moldova-after-russian-missiles-flew-over-its-airspace-several-times>.

equipment, with border protection being one of them.

- The EU should help Moldova to conduct a risk assessment of its space-based communication infrastructure, which would lead to better crisis management and response capabilities. All of these functions are closely connected with improving cyber security in general.

Economy

Russia has been losing its economic grip on Moldova for years (in areas such as trade, the labour market, and energy). According to experts,³¹ the country has never been as economically independent from Russia as it is now. This trend is deepening and Russia's economic leverage over Moldova is steadily weakening.

The positive trends in the energy sector were already described in the first part of this chapter. In terms of trade relations, the figures are also in Moldova's favour, as its exchange with Russia is steadily decreasing, although overall exports are on the rise.³² In 2014, Moldova signed an Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA) with the EU, boosting political and economic ties between Chisinau and Brussels. Over the years, the EU has become Moldova's largest trading partner and biggest investor in the country. As early as 2018, it accounted for 70% of Moldova's total exports and 56% of Moldova's total trade, outpacing Russia, the country's longstanding main trade partner.³³

Positive changes have also been observed regarding the Transnistria region. The whole business model developed by the so-called Transnistrian authorities has been based on free gas deliveries from Russia. This has allowed their products (e.g., in the metallurgical sector) to be competitive in other markets. At the same time, however, this business model allows the Russians to maintain significant economic and energy leverage in the region. The 2014 AA/DCFTA agreement introduced some new dynamics into Transnistrian business. It allows Transnistrian companies interested in trading with the EU to legalize their businesses by registering them in Moldova. Since then, trade and business relations with the EU have been playing an increasingly significant role. The process visibly accelerated after the Russo-Ukrainian war started and the border with Ukraine was closed. This seriously disrupted many business schemes that Transnistria was carrying out under the patronage of Odessa criminal circles. Therefore, paradoxically, the war pushed Transnistria closer to the EU in terms of economic links.³⁴

Another area that has traditionally been put in the spotlight when discussing Russian leverage concerns remittances from Moldovans working abroad. According to 2021 data, they accounted for as much as 15.5% of GDP, as almost one million Moldovans work abroad.³⁵ Given the restrictions on entering the EU, Russia was for many years the most favourable destination for Moldovan labour migrants. In 2014, around 600,000 Moldovans worked

31 Expert seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

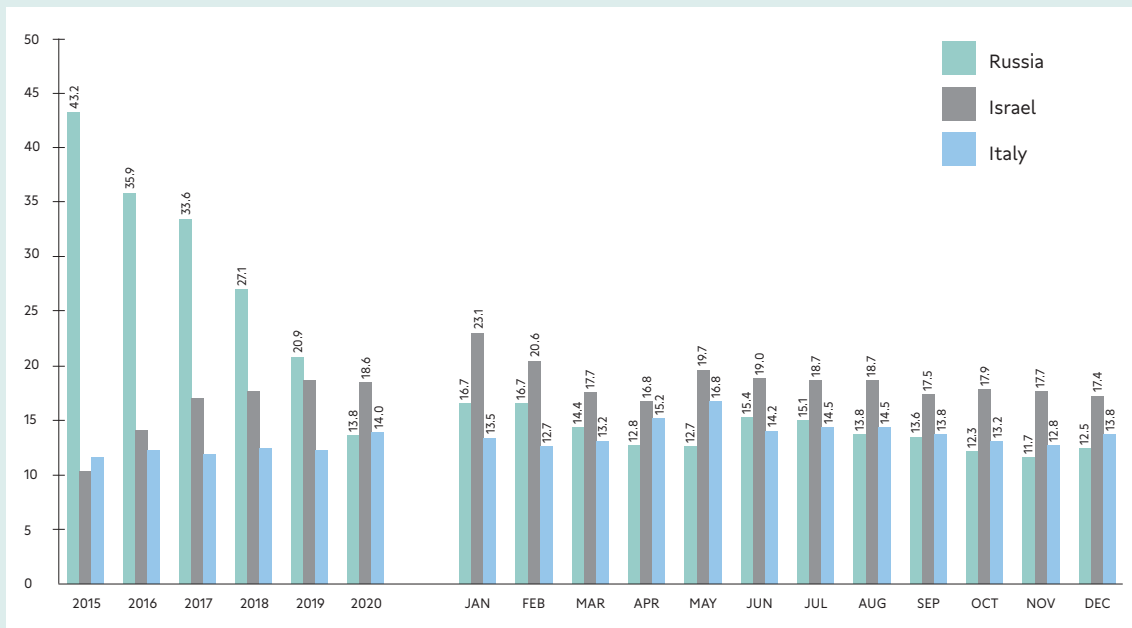
32 Catus, 'The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova', p. 9.

33 Council of the EU, 'Facts and Figures about the EU-Moldova relations', <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/moldova/>.

34 Expert seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

35 The World Bank Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=MD>.

Figure 3. Dynamics of remittances from the top three states to natural persons in Moldova (2015–2020 annually; 2020 monthly), in percentages. Source: National Bank of Moldova.



in Russia, and their remittances accounted for 60% of all money transferred to the country.³⁶ However, thanks to the changes in migrant destinations and depreciation of the rouble, these figures decreased dramatically. As of 2020, only 14% of all remittances came from Russia, with around 80,000 workers still living there. Currently, the majority of remittances come from Israel and EU countries.³⁷

Despite all the above-mentioned developments, Russia continues to use all economic means to exert political and economic pressure on the Moldovan authorities. First of all, Russia can still exploit energy prices and manipulate supply volumes to destabilize the situation in the country, especially in the winter season when prices and consumption are higher. In this regard, the electricity sector remains particularly vulnerable. High energy prices

(gas and electricity) are a heavy burden on Moldovan society. In late 2022, President Maia Sandu claimed that in some cases energy bills absorbed as much as 70% of a family's income.³⁸

Secondly, Russia has not stopped playing with import-export restrictions to influence the domestic situation in the country, even though its role in overall trade has diminished. This is particularly true of agriculture, which has been the main pillar of the Moldovan economy and accounts for half of the country's exports to Russia. Russia has manipulated the situation by placing import embargoes on fruit and some other agricultural products to promote certain regions of the country over others. Hence, while the embargoes are declared for the whole country, some territories have been granted the right to continue trading with Russia.³⁹ This was the case with the traditionally pro-Russian

36 Cațus, 'The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova', p. 10.

37 National Bank of Moldova, <https://www.bnm.md/ro/content/evolutia-transferurilor-de-mijloace-banesti-din-strainatate-efectuate-favoarea-33>.

38 Euroactiv, 'Moldova facing dark winter as energy crisis bites', 9 November 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/moldova-facing-dark-winter-as-energy-crisis-bites/>.

39 Reuters, 'Russia restricts imports of agriculture products from Moldova', 9 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/russia-restricts-imports-agriculture-products-moldova-2022-08-09/>.

Gagauzia region, Transnistria and some municipalities governed by pro-Russian political forces.⁴⁰ Such efforts are typically made by Russia to turn citizens in these regions against the central government.

Thirdly, other problems pertaining to the Moldovan economy, particularly the endemic corruption and nepotism, serve malign actors like Russia or Russia-affiliated businesspeople well in undermining the government's democratization efforts. "Corruption is the lubricant"⁴¹ in Russia's system of influence, enabling the exploitation of state resources to subject Moldova to state capture. Russia cultivates an opaque patronage network among oligarchs and certain officials, which allows it to manipulate critical state institutions and bodies responsible for the state's domestic and foreign policy. In the case of Moldova, the judicial system is often cited as an example of an immutable institution that has been abused in the past by undemocratic forces for political purposes,⁴² and by Russian entities in money laundering schemes.⁴³

Lastly, Russia and pro-Russian forces seek to leverage the alleged importance of economic ties with Russia in their propaganda and disinformation efforts. Many Moldovans continue to regard Russia as the country's most important economic partner. Somehow, a large part of society is not aware of the shift that has taken place over the last ten years. Indeed,

pro-Russian media outlets argue that maintaining good relations with Russia is crucial for Moldova's economic stability and prosperity, while also securing the Russian labour market for Moldovan workers. In the same vein, pro-Russian groups declare that severing ties with Russia will cause the country's economic collapse.

What the EU should do

- Moldova needs further EU assistance in introducing innovation and modernization, especially in the agricultural sector. This could open new markets for Moldovan products and reduce dependence on Russia. After an in-depth analysis, the EU should consider lifting import tariffs on Moldovan agricultural products destined for the EU market. In the meantime, the EU can assist in the modernization of the Moldovan agricultural sector, which should aim at improving product quality and packaging.
- Continued macro-financial assistance to help Moldova survive under the current economic and geopolitical circumstances is crucial.⁴⁴ This needs to be accompanied by further pressure on the government to continue anti-corruption reforms.
- The EU should continue its support for the professionalization of the Moldovan public administration and public services, with a constant push against corruption and other

40 For more details, see: Catus, 'The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova', p. 9.

41 Heather A. Conley & Ruslan Stefanov, 'The Kremlin Playbook', CSIS, 2016, p. X.

42 Infotag, 'General prosecutor: some judges continue working for Plahotniuc', 20 September 2020, <https://www.infotag.md/populis-en/286712/>.

43 Luke Harding, 'The Global Laundromat: how did it work and who benefited?', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/20/the-global-laundromat-how-did-it-work-and-who-benefited>.

44 Council of the EU, Press Release, 4 April 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/04/04/council-adopts-150-million-assistance-to-the-republic-of-moldova/>.

malfunctions of the state. Additionally, the EU needs to help Moldova to adopt comprehensive legislation, which would safeguard the country against a resurgence of oligarchic influence in the economy and politics. According to several interlocutors, the infamous oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc is still attempting to influence the Moldovan political scene.⁴⁵

- The EU should continue to facilitate Transnistria's integration into Moldova's economic and legal space, as this may create favourable conditions for conflict resolution in the long term.⁴⁶ During this process, the EU needs to guarantee that information regarding trade and business with Transnistria is shared fully and transparently with the Moldovan authorities. This should help to limit any attempts by Transnistria and corrupt individuals to exploit the situation for their own ends (e.g., through creative accounting, bypassing Moldovan customs controls, exploiting limited state capabilities, establishing offshore companies and shady intermediaries).

Military and defence

The Russo-Ukrainian war has forced Moldova to rethink its defence policy. For years, as a country with a neutral status confirmed in its constitution, Moldova did not pay much attention to its armed forces. Moreover, it was taken for granted that neutrality would provide some

form of immunity against possible military aggression. Therefore, the Moldovan Armed Forces (MAF) are not only small in number⁴⁷ but remain underdeveloped, unreformed, and burdened with Soviet-era equipment and organizational culture.

The reform and modernization of the MAF is increasingly important as Moldova has confirmed its goal of joining the EU. It is crucial to make the armed forces fit for the current challenges, even if the costs of this policy appear high. Moldova has only recently realized that it needs modern equipment to monitor and protect its airspace and borders, as well as technology that will enable it to counter hostile unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and secure its critical infrastructure. All these elements turned out to be crucial in the current Russo-Ukrainian war. The Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Moldova estimates that the country will need at least EUR 250 million to modernize its armed forces.⁴⁸

Besides the inadequacy of the MAF, another vulnerability that Russia could easily weaponize in the military domain is the fact that Moldova has only partial control over its territory and external borders. The Transnistrian separatist quasi-state is controlled by people subordinated to Russia, with approximately 1,700 Russian soldiers stationed on its territory. They are part of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) in Transnistria (around 1,200 personnel)

45 Interview conducted in Chisinau, August 2023.

46 Hedenskog, 'How the EU Can Reduce Russia's Exploitation', p. 9.

47 According to the 2018 data, the MAF consists of around 6,500 military personnel. For more on this, see: Ianac Deli, 'Optimal structure for the infantry units of the National Army of the Republic of Moldova', Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2019.

48 Alexander Tanas, 'Moldova needs \$275 million to modernize armed forces, defense official says', Reuters, 13 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-needs-275-mln-modernise-armed-forces-defence-official-2023-04-13/>.

and the so-called Peacekeeping Mission (around 500 personnel). The OGRF's main official task is to protect the Soviet-era ammunition depot at Cobasna, which allegedly stores around 22,000 tons of ammunition, whereas their de facto main task is to maintain the status quo regarding the division of the Republic of Moldova by supporting the local Transnistrian military forces (around 5,000 personnel).

Experts highlight that the combat value of Russia's forces in Transnistria is low,⁴⁹ and they cannot be used as an offensive force in any military operation against Moldova or Ukraine. Between 70 and 80% of the military personnel of these forces are local citizens with Russian passports. Every six months, personnel rotate between the OGRF, the peace-keeping mission and the Transnistrian forces. There is an information gap regarding their training, equipment, morale, and loyalty. Nevertheless, given the isolation of these forces, difficulties with rotation⁵⁰ and the lack of new equipment, it is highly likely that their greatest utility would be in securing logistics, transportation, and provision in the event of Russian forces reaching Moldova (as planned in the first phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine).⁵¹

Thanks to Ukraine's successes in the war with Russia, it is currently highly unlikely that

the Transnistria-based forces would be used in any military-like scenario against Moldova. Nevertheless, Russia is constantly trying to use its military presence in Transnistria to exert pressure on the Moldovan government, increase the fear factor in society, artificially divide Moldovans, and infiltrate the country through the so-called administrative line that separates Moldova from Transnistria. For years, Russia has been able to use the idea of unfreezing the conflict as one of the most powerful and efficient levers for keeping Moldova in its sphere of influence.⁵² The famous ammunition depot in Cobasna played the same role, even though its military value is probably negligible as most of the ammunition has already reached the end of its shelf life.⁵³

Nevertheless, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Cobasna has been used to drive a wedge between Ukraine and Transnistria/Moldova. The Russians have consistently warned that Ukraine is about to invade Transnistria in order to seize the depot. The alleged threat of an imminent Ukrainian invasion has been used to consolidate and mobilize Transnistrians against "Nazi" Ukrainians or "hostile" NATO forces, as they have been painted in the propaganda.

49 Seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

50 Nadalin Necsutu, 'Moldova Defends Action, Blocking Russian Troop Rotation in Transnistria', *BalkanInsight*, 22 July 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/22/moldova-defends-action-blocking-russian-troop-rotation-in-transnistria/>.

51 Rob Picheta, 'How Transnistria, a Russian-backed region in Moldova, is getting pulled into the war in Ukraine', CNN, 27 April 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/27/europe/transnistria-moldova-ukraine-russia-war-explainer-intl/index.html>.

52 Adrian Nae, 'Russian propaganda messages on the developments and prospects of the Transnistrian conflict: "Moldova otkazalas' ot Pridnestrov'ya" vs. „Status Pridnestrov'e v sostave edinoj Moldovy"', Conference "The Dniester War of 1992: 30 years after...", Chisinau, Moldova, March 2022.

53 Especially given the typical Soviet negligence and low military organizational culture in maintaining equipment. Moreover, the most valuable ammunition has already been withdrawn to Russia or sold on the black market.

What the EU should do

- The EU has already started to provide military assistance to Moldova under the umbrella of the European Peace Facility,⁵⁴ recognizing that a capable army is an important contributor to the country's overall resilience. This support should be continued, in particular by helping Moldova to secure its border with Transnistria. To begin with, Moldova needs modern surveillance equipment to continue monitoring its border 24/7, and assistance in training more personnel.
- The EU should encourage some of its member states to assist Moldova in modernizing its military equipment. The donations of military equipment by Germany⁵⁵ and Poland⁵⁶ are a good example of this policy.
- As observed in Ukraine, modern military equipment and training play a crucial role on the battlefield. Therefore, as in Ukraine after 2014, EU/NATO countries should consider launching separate funds (on a voluntary basis)⁵⁷ to help modernize and equip the MAF (e.g., with encrypted means of communication, sensors, computers, military surveillance

equipment), and engage their resources in providing training. Establishing secure communication channels is also crucial in the public administration domain.

Culture

In the culture domain, Russia has been exploiting several characteristics of Moldovan culture and history to influence the basic elements of its identity. In this context, Soviet heritage (history, language, education, and cultural themes) and the activities of the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) remain the most important.

Although Moldova is a non-Slavic country, Russia considers it an integral part of "Holy Russia", which consists of territories under the canonical jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).⁵⁸ In geopolitical terms, the concept is better known as the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*), alluded to earlier. In the Kremlin's understanding, however, *Russkiy Mir* extends far beyond religion or state borders, including not only compatriots living abroad, but also all foreign citizens who speak, learn, and teach Russian,⁵⁹ or just those who "have

54 E.g., by providing non-lethal equipment, technical training, air surveillance, mobility and transportation, logistics, command and control and cyber-defence equipment. Council of the EU, 'European Peace Facility: Council adopts assistance measures to support the defence sector of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia', Press Release, 4 May 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/04/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-assistance-measures-to-support-defence-sector-of-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia/>.

55 Joe Saballa 'Moldova Receives First Piranha-3H Armored Vehicles From Germany', *The Defence Post*, 16 January 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/01/16/moldova-piranha-vehicles-germany/>. Moldova had already received the third batch of armored vehicles from Germany in April 2023.

56 Polskie Radio, 'Poland donates police weapons, equipment to Moldova', 1 June 2023, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/9766/artukul/3180749,poland-donates-police-weapons-equipment-to-moldova>.

57 After the first Russian invasion in 2014, so-called NATO Trust Funds were established to help, among other things, to set up a secure communications system for the Ukrainian army.

58 Romeo Cermirtan, 'Russian Orthodox Church and regional geopolitics', The Institute for Russian and Eurasian Studies (IRES), Uppsala University (Sweden).

59 Vasile Rotaru, 'Forced Attraction?', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2018, 65:1, 37–48, DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2016.1276400.

taken the cultural and spiritual component of this world as their own”.⁶⁰

Moldova, with its Soviet legacy, Orthodox faith and Russian-speaking minority, is – in the eyes of the Kremlin – “bound by Russian spiritual and cultural traditions”,⁶¹ which allegedly comprise a crucial part of Moldova’s national identity. The Russian Orthodox Church, and the Moldovan Orthodox Church subordinated to it, position themselves as the main defenders of this special bond. For years, Russia has been using the ROC and MOC as soft-power tools to manipulate the information domain in Moldova and to amplify the importance of relations with Russia.⁶²

The MOC, as the most trusted institution in the country,⁶³ is simultaneously the most prominent instrument of Russian cultural influence in Moldova. Over 90% of Moldovans declare themselves Orthodox and almost all of them (97%) belong to the Metropolis of Chisinau and All Moldova, which is under the canonical jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate.⁶⁴ In effect, the MOC is “an important factor shaping the views of Moldovans not only in the religious sphere, but also in the social or political field (this is especially true in rural areas, where more than 60% of the country’s population live)”.⁶⁵

The MOC is the most fervent adherent of *Russkiy Mir* in Moldova and a promotor of

“traditional values”, portrayed as an alternative to the decadent West. It serves as a convenient vehicle for opposing integration with the EU, dividing and polarizing Moldovan society on cultural, political, and moral issues. The MOC has tried to undermine the current government’s efforts to implement the structural reforms associated with EU accession.⁶⁶ To this end, it opposes any legislative changes that it considers will endanger the traditional values of Moldovan society, such as the anti-discrimination law on the protection of sexual minorities and other minority groups, the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, or even legislation to change the official name of the state language.

The MOC openly expresses its negative stance towards integration with EU structures and frequently verbally attacks the public image of pro-Western groups. At the same time, the MOC is actively engaged in promoting pro-Russian politicians. This is particularly visible during election campaigns, as the Church endorses pro-Russian candidates, mostly from the Party of Socialists and the Party of Communists, while discrediting pro-Western Maia Sandu and her associates.

What is more, the MOC has been involved in spreading disinformation along Russian lines on issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic,

60 *Russkiy Mir* Foundation Information Service, ‘The Russian World is a special civilization – Patriarch Kirill’, 9 September 2014, <https://ruskiymir.ru/en/news/149812/>.

61 Rotaru, ‘Forced Attraction?’.

62 Holger Roonemaa & Anna Gielewska, ‘Secret Kremlin document: how Russia plans to overturn Moldova’, *VSquare*, 14 March 2023, <https://vsquare.org/secret-kremlin-document-how-russia-plans-to-overturn-moldova/>.

63 Vasile Rotaru, ‘The bumpy road ahead. The domestic challenges for Moldova’s EU integration’, Hybrid CoE Background Paper (unpublished), December 2022, p. 10.

64 Rotaru, ‘The bumpy road ahead’.

65 Catus, ‘The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova’, p. 15.

66 Rotaru, ‘The bumpy road ahead’.

5G technology, Bill Gates,⁶⁷ and the Russo-Ukrainian war.⁶⁸

In addition to the MOC, Russian state-affiliated organizations and NGOs, such as the well-known Russkiy Mir Foundation, are active in Moldova. They promote the Russian language (used as a first language by around 16% of Moldova's population and even more widely in public)⁶⁹ as the language of inter-ethnic communication, and actively engage in the education system, where they organize Russian language courses for experts and teachers.⁷⁰ They fund or co-fund multiple initiatives and organizations that basically serve as a conduit for Russia's state media content, which is then disseminated throughout the country. Several Russian cultural centres in the country act as centres for dialogue, while they are largely involved in political and geopolitical debates and in spreading fear and anxiety among Moldovans (e.g., regarding EU integration, Ukrainians, and Covid). For the Romanian-speaking population, most of the culture-related pro-Russian activities are conducted through Romania-based organizations.

Russian cultural influence is mainly exerted through the Russian mass media (press and TV stations), which are popular in Moldova (see the section on Information for more on this).

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, some Russian regions and cities seek to maintain direct economic and cultural cooperation with Moldovan regions, mainly Gagauzia⁷¹ and Transnistria (e.g., the Republic of Tatarstan). This collaboration is generally symbolic, serving primarily political and propaganda purposes rather than economic or cultural ones.

The main goal of activities conducted by Russia's cultural organizations remains the same: to deepen polarization in society over controversial political and social issues, promote Russia's point of view, expand its influence, and slander pro-European groups.

What the EU should do

- In its policy towards Moldova, the EU must consider the sensitivities and cultural differences within Moldovan society. Familiarizing Moldovan society with the cultures and societies of other European countries will take many years, not just a few months.
- Grants and scholarships for Moldovan writers and artists are a good way to invest in culture and to give an additional boost to the cultural development of the country. The same goes for historical studies. Promoting and exploring Moldova's European past will

67 Rotaru, 'The bumpy road ahead'.

68 Catus, 'The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova', p. 16: "On 9 May 2022, during a Victory Day march, Archbishop Marchel pinned a St George ribbon to his chest, even though this (along with other symbols expressing support for Russian aggression against Ukraine) had previously been banned by law by the Moldovan parliament. The gesture was clearly a provocation".

69 Seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

70 The Russkiy Mir Foundation is financing the Scientific Center of Russkiy Mir at the State University of Moldova. The Center is responsible, among other things, for organizing language courses.

71 Gagauzinfo.md, Ирина Влах встретилась с Раисом Татарстана Рустамом Миннихановым. Что они обсудили? [Irina Vlah met with President of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov. What did they discuss?], 20 May, 2023, <https://gagauzinfo.md/news/politics/irina-vlah-vstretilas-s-raisom-tatarstana-rustamom-minnikhanovim-ch-to-oni-obsudili>.

serve as a timely reminder of the country's deep connection with the rest of Europe.

- Four out of five of the approximately 14,500 Moldovan students in the EU are studying in Romania alone.⁷² This indicates that there is huge untapped potential for the rest of the EU member states to create opportunities for students from Moldova.
- The promotion of some EU legal solutions, such as equal rights for LGBTQ minorities, should be preceded by information and promotion campaigns and should not just be limited to new legislation, which is then perceived by Moldova's conservative rural population (60% of society) as alien and imposed.

Social/societal

Moldova is a country with many challenging societal areas, which Russia has been exploiting to create favourable conditions for its hybrid threat activities. In this context, some contentious issues such as poverty, extensive work-related migration, sociocultural changes, or societal polarization regarding the geopolitical course of the country have been a target of Russian malign influencing (see also the sections on Culture and Information). In addition, the division of the country has contributed to the general fragility of Moldovan society – with the breakaway region of Transnistria remaining under Russia's military control and the autonomous Gagauzia region remaining under Russia's political influence.

Russia is particularly interested in exploiting crises that can create or sustain divisions and polarization in Moldovan society. To this end, Russia has weaponized energy and food prices by sponsoring and supporting protest parties (e.g., the SOR Party), which channel people's frustration into political action, social unrest, and further divisions (see also the Political section). During the process, the economic difficulties are mainly blamed on the pro-EU policy of the current government. At the same time, Russia offers a remedy by promising favourable gas deals to the opposition parties once they are in power. To the same end, the Russian authorities banned the export of certain agricultural products from Moldova but allowed the trade to continue with selected districts ruled by pro-Russian figures (see also the section on Economy).⁷³

Russian propaganda and disinformation never cease to divide Moldovan society over the different identity politics, focusing for the most part on the issue of the country's integration with the EU. In order to undermine the democratization processes and EU accession, Russia has employed identity politics based on ethnic (Slavic), religious (Russian Orthodox Church) and cultural (former Soviet Union and a conservative set of values) identities.⁷⁴ Basically, the EU is presented as a decadent organization, whose hidden agenda is to destroy the true Orthodox Christian faith, Moldovan customs, and the Moldovan way of life. At the same time, the only force capable of protecting traditional

72 EU NeighboursEast, 'Romania leads European Union in the number of Moldovan students', 20 February 2023, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/romania-leads-european-union-in-the-number-of-moldovan-students/>.

73 Madalin Necsutu, 'Pro-Russians Battle it out in Elections in Moldova's Gagauzia', 28 April 2023, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/28/pro-russians-battle-it-out-in-elections-in-moldovas-gagauzia/>.

74 Kubica, 'Eastern Partnership countries in flux', pp. 24–26.

Moldovan society is Russia (see also the section on Information).

The separatist region of Transnistria as well as the autonomous region of Gagauzia serve as a convenient tool for Russia to aggravate the societal divisions in Moldova in all of the above-mentioned aspects, be they economic or related to identities and personal beliefs. The most common Russian strategy is to pit these regions as well as the people living there against the central government in Chisinau.

What the EU should do

- Poverty is reinforcing social divisions. Tackling socio-economic problems could win the hearts and minds of many Moldovans. With relatively modest resources invested in infrastructure, education and the Moldovan economy, the EU could alleviate many social divisions and issues. Fighting corruption and generally making the Moldovan state more “citizen-friendly” could be the best way to mitigate or, in many areas, eliminate the social divisions.
- The EU should consider reaching out more to unfriendly pro-Russian groups, such as Gagauzian communities. Many members of the European Parliament are fluent in Russian and could talk about their countries’ experiences of transformation, about the EU and its policies, and so forth. Wider EU engagement in the region could also facilitate the dialogue between Chisinau and Gagauzia.⁷⁵
- The EU could assist Moldova in developing a coherent policy towards national minorities, which would take into account their rights

and specific cultural characteristics (customs, language, social structure, and institutions).

Public administration

Public administration constitutes the backbone of a country’s governance structure. Its professionalism contributes to the general resilience of the country against hybrid threat activities. Experts have identified it as the first line of defence against hostile attempts to undermine the authority of the central government.⁷⁶ Indeed, targeting public administration allows malign actors to weaken the state from within and facilitate its hostile hybrid threat operations.

In the case of Moldova, the main goal of successive governments for many years, practically since independence, was to keep Moldova in a state of permanent weakness. The weak public administration has facilitated wide-scale corruption, oligarchic capture of the country, and political nepotism. All this effectively helped Russia to keep the country under its political influence, while capitalizing on its weakness through money laundering operations, among other things.⁷⁷

However, in the case of Moldova’s public administration, the problem is much more fundamental than the poor performance of the state administration and its struggle with underfunding and understaffing. The public administration in Moldova does not function as one of the state’s subjects with a consolidated bureaucracy and well-functioning procedures, legislation, codes of conduct, and legal and organizational culture. The public administration

⁷⁵ Hedenskog, ‘How the EU Can Reduce Russia’s Exploitation’, p. 9.

⁷⁶ For more details, see: Giannopoulos et al., ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats’.

⁷⁷ Harding, ‘The Global Laundromat’.

in the country is subordinated to the political power and does not provide legal protection for its functionaries. Basically, Moldova lacks a properly developed rule of law system. In effect, Moldovan public servants are afraid of making decisions or taking responsibility for reforming the state as there is no administration or bureaucracy that would defend them in the event of a change of power in the country.⁷⁸ In the past, public servants have been dismissed, imprisoned, or forced to leave the country when a new political power has formed a government.

Only recently has the Moldovan government taken steps to strengthen and reform the state administration in a general effort to integrate with EU institutions. However, given the chronic shortcomings, it is a herculean task, which requires resources, time, and commitment.

There are at least a couple of areas that require immediate attention, starting with the low administrative capacity. It is very difficult to find and hire experts in Moldova in the field of European integration or cybersecurity. If such experts exist, the state is not able to attract them or offer them adequate remuneration. Hence, they choose the private sector or migration. As a result, there is a huge human resources gap in the public administration, especially at the middle level, which is mainly responsible for implementing EU-recommended reforms. These deficiencies hamper the absorption of EU financial subventions and isolate the capital, Chisinau, from the rest of the country, where the administrative deficiencies are even more acute. These deficiencies are exacerbated

by the lack of any coordination strategy regarding Moldova's policy vis-à-vis the EU.

Due to the serious shortage of administrative personnel, many institutions (including those responsible for dealing with hybrid threats or integration with the EU) are severely understaffed. Some officials, including ministers, perform several different functions at the same time. They do not have a sufficient number of secretaries and assistants, and as a result are unable to build institutional cooperation among themselves or adequately coordinate the work of ministries, agencies, and so on. In many cases, intergovernmental communication is based on social media tools and person-to-person communication between individual ministers. This creates specific cyber-related vulnerabilities (lack of appropriate, secure inter-governmental means of communication) as well as circumstances in which personal animosities between officials may paralyze inter-ministerial cooperation.⁷⁹

People working for the government are both overloaded and overstressed. This applies to government personnel at all levels, from the lowest level right up to the ministers themselves. In addition to the general staff shortage, the competence of at least part of the Moldovan administration is often a problem. A significant proportion of the current high- and middle-level officials come from civil society and lack experience in state administration.⁸⁰ This general weakness of the Moldovan public administration hinders necessary reforms and slows down modernization efforts in many critical areas, including the judiciary and the

78 Research trip to Chisinau and Comrat, August 2023.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

political system. For years, the financial-political practice in Moldova has been to invest in a political party and, once installed in power, to capitalize on this investment by instrumentalizing public resources for its own benefit. In the case of the judiciary, it was not only connected with politics (e.g., in politically motivated processes) but served as a tool in the illegal acquisition of private businesses (so-called “raider attacks” facilitated by corrupt bureaucrats and police officers) and money-laundering schemes.⁸¹

For many years, Russia has exploited the chronic weakness of Moldova’s public administration to engage in state capture, keeping the country under its influence and preventing it from undertaking significant reforms or modernization. The weak Moldovan state allows Russia’s malign actors to maintain their influence and hamper pro-EU changes in the hope of reverting to business as usual once the pro-EU party is out of office.

What the EU should do

- Moldova needs considerable help when it comes to capacity-building efforts for its public administration, as the country has difficulties in absorbing EU assistance. Sending EU experts (Romanian or Russian speakers) to support the Moldovan public administration at the operational level could help to overcome the most difficult phase of transition. The EU should also explore other possibilities to stimulate the development of the human resource potential in the Moldovan state administration. One of the proposed solutions could be the co-sponsoring of a number of positions in the Moldovan public administration for a certain period of time (e.g., 3–4 years).
- If the EU were to provide equipment and help improve the infrastructure of the state administration (e.g., computers, legal software), Moldova might be able to channel additional funds to increase the salaries of state officials and thus attract more experts to work for the government.
- As in the other domains, the EU could provide Moldova with expertise and advice. Given the low level of professionalism in the public administration, Moldova not only needs more guidance on how to implement the reforms, and on how to categorize priorities and identify gaps and needs, but also people to actually work on these issues. This could be one of the tasks of the newly established EUPM (providing assistance at the operational level). Additionally, establishing the EUPM also allows the EU to consolidate all EU-related programmes in Moldova under one umbrella. This is particularly important given the weak administrative capabilities of the Moldovan administration.
- The EU could further assist Moldova in reforming and strengthening state structures (especially in such areas as justice reforms, fighting corruption, and the vetting process). It seems that strategic advice is provided at a sufficient level, but more direct assistance is required, for example in the formulation of concepts, plans and strategies, in their implementation, and in overseeing their execution.

⁸¹ Research trip to Chisinau and Comrat, August 2023.

Legal

The legal domain may be abused by a hostile country in many ways,⁸² but what Russia has been doing in Moldova can largely be summed up as exploiting legal thresholds, gaps, complexity, and uncertainty regarding the break-away region of Transnistria. Despite its separation from the rest of Moldova, Transnistria remains connected and interlinked with the rest of the country on many levels. De jure, the entity is (according to Moldovan law) an autonomous region within the Moldovan state, but de facto, Moldova has zero control over it and Transnistria acts as a quasi-state under the Russian protectorate. This situation creates many legal uncertainties, which Russia exploits against the Moldovan government.

Firstly, legal uncertainty is created by the energy entanglement, referred to in previous sections. Its legal aspects concern the recurring topic of the gas debt, which is leveraged by Russia every time Moldova needs to negotiate a new gas agreement. Transnistria has been receiving gas for free for many years (which is the basis of its economic survival), while Gazprom has accumulated a huge gas debt,⁸³ which it expects Moldova to settle.

Moldovans living in Transnistria and de facto separated from the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova have retained the right to vote in Moldovan elections all these years since their separation, as they have been treated by Chişinău as legitimate citizens. This has been abused

on many occasions by pro-Russian parties, who have bussed in people from Transnistria to vote for selected candidates. Around 28,000 people from Transnistria voted in the last election, with about 70% of them voting for pro-Russian parties.⁸⁴

The legal uncertainties surrounding the status of Transnistria create other vulnerabilities for the state, for example with regard to border control or products and companies from Transnistria. This issue was only partially resolved when Transnistrian companies started to register in Moldova in order to be allowed to export their products to the EU (see also the section on Economy).

The administrative line (the “unofficial” border) with Transnistria constitutes another weakness of the state. The region is known to be a base for many illegal undertakings, from arms and drug smuggling to other shady activities, which Ukraine’s services tried to control at one point.⁸⁵ The porous and largely unprotected administrative line with Moldova facilitates illegal operations, creating another vulnerability that can easily be weaponized during hybrid threat operations.

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia affords another opportunity to instrumentalize the legal domain. In 2014, the Gagauzian authorities announced an illegal referendum in response to the AA/DCFTA signed with the EU. In the referendum, 98.5% of Gagauzians voted in favour of Moldova’s integration into

82 Giannopoulos, ‘The Landscape of Hybrid Threats’, p. 30.

83 Estimates put the gas debt at USD 8–10 bn.

84 Catus, ‘The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova’, p. 17.

85 Robert O’Connor, ‘Transnistria Isn’t the Smuggler’s Paradise It Used to Be’, *Foreign Policy*, 5 June 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/05/transnistria-isnt-the-smugglers-paradise-it-used-to-be-sheriff-moldova-ukraine-tiraspol/>.

the Customs Union⁸⁶ led by Russia. The Gagauzian authorities repeatedly emphasized that if Moldova lost its independence, for example by being incorporated into Romania, Gagauzia would declare its own independence, having already done so once. Back in 1990, Gagauzia declared itself one of the republics within the Soviet Union. It took another four years for the Gagauzian authorities to recognize the authority of the Republic of Moldova. Experts underline that Russia is trying to instrumentalize traditional Gagauzian distrust towards the West and its pro-Russian attitude to block the EU accession processes, potentially by using the threat of separatism as leverage. Local politicians and the pro-Russian opposition regularly organize protests and rallies, demanding more power for Gagauzia at the central level and threatening to hold another referendum on the future of autonomy.⁸⁷

In this context, structures are already in place that may serve as facilitators in the future in any separatism-like scenarios. In July 2022, Viktor Petrov,⁸⁸ deputy of the local parliament, announced the creation of the People's Union of Gagauzia, a socio-political movement with a clear anti-government and pro-Russian agenda.⁸⁹ The movement organizes protests and spreads disinformation about the central authorities, while promoting good relations with Russia and the EAEU countries at the same time.

Experts underline, however, that the Gagauzians themselves are in no mood for separatism. At least not on the scale observed in Crimea in 2014 or in some parts of Eastern Ukraine, where part of the population was eager to support Russian-sponsored violence. Gagauzia does not currently pose a significant problem for Moldova's security while the region remains wholly dependent economically on financial transfers from the state. There is neither industry nor economic base that would enable the independent functioning of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (as in the case of Transnistria). However, this does not alter the fact that Gagauzians in general do not feel loyalty to the Moldovan state and do not recognize its right to independence, believing instead that the whole country should become part of the Russian Federation as one of its republics.⁹⁰

What the EU should do

- The EU should consider deeper engagement with Gagauzia. Special programmes, which are normally reserved for poorer regions of the EU, including educational programmes, could be adapted for this region.
- At the same time, the EU could support the Moldovan government in preparing a short-, medium-, and long-term comprehensive strategy to better integrate Gagauzia with the rest of the country. As part of this effort, the EU should provide assistance

⁸⁶ The organization now functions as the Eurasian Economic Union.

⁸⁷ RELM, 'Șor promite un referendum: Rusia sau Europa?' [Shor promises a referendum: Russia or Europe?], 22 May 2023, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/sor-promite-un-referendum-rusia-sau-europa-/32422304.html>.

⁸⁸ In 2023, V. Petrov was one of the pro-Russian candidates in the last local election for the new governor of the autonomous region of Gagauzia (so-called "Bashkan").

⁸⁹ Kamil Catus, 'Separatism and gas: Russian attempts to destabilise Moldova', OSW Commentary, 23 August 2022.

⁹⁰ Interviews conducted in Comrat and Chisinau, August 2023.

and mediate in Moldova's stalled decentralization reforms, taking into account sensitivities on both sides.⁹¹

- In the context of the current Russo-Ukrainian war, a diplomatic resolution of the Transnistrian conflict does not seem possible in the short to medium term. Therefore, being aware of all circumstances,⁹² the EU should seek ways to encourage all sides to continue the dialogue. At the same time, the EU could explore possibilities to directly engage the Transnistrian population in order to make them more aware of what the EU is.
- Moldova needs EU assistance in preparing contingency plans regarding Transnistria. Taking into account the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, an unforeseen collapse of the so-called Transnistrian authorities cannot be ruled out. Ukraine has already announced that it does not intend to extend the existing gas transit deal with Russia, which expires at the end of 2024. Moreover, the Ukrainian authorities could cut off the gas transit at any moment and force the accelerated collapse of the local pro-Russian regime. Without gas deliveries from Russia, Transnistria cannot survive as a sovereign entity. This scenario would put enormous pressure on the Moldovan state in basically all of the described domains. The potential integration of Transnistria into Moldova would require many resources. Additionally, the whole process is likely to entail numerous security risks, for example regard-

ing former employees of the Transnistrian security apparatus. Above all, professionally prepared contingency plans for Transnistria could provide leverage towards Russia and help resolve the conflict.

Intelligence

There are two main aspects that should be considered in the Moldovan intelligence domain. Firstly, the activities of Russia's intelligence and security services (RISS), and secondly, the condition of the Moldovan Security and Intelligence Service (SIS).

RISS operate from two main locations in Moldova: separatist Transnistria and Russia's embassy in Chisinau. In Transnistria, RISS not only have a free hand to operate throughout the whole territory of the separatist republic, they also have the final say in all matters relating to the security of the entity. RISS are deeply connected with all businesses operating in Transnistria. Among all Russia's services, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) is in charge of all security institutions in the separatist territory, while military intelligence (GU) takes care of all military-related issues.⁹³

Another base for Russia's intelligence operations in Moldova is the Russian embassy in Chisinau, which has recently seen its staff reduced from around 70 to 25.⁹⁴ Experts highlight that Russian diplomats have been very active in the country. They travel extensively around Moldova, especially to Transnistria and

91 Hedenskog, 'How the EU Can Reduce Russia's Exploitation', p. 9.

92 It should not be forgotten that the Transnistrian authorities are strictly controlled by the Russian Security and Intelligence Services.

93 Seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

94 RFERL, 'Forty-Five Members Of Russian Embassy Staff Leave Moldova On Chisinau's Orders', 14 August 2023, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/de-diplomati-rusi-si-angajati-ai-ambasadei-ruse-au-parasit-r-moldova-/32546991.html>.

Gagauzia.⁹⁵ For example, every year the Russian embassy donates medical equipment to Gagauzia, and in 2023 they directly donated money (USD in cash) to the poorest families in the region.⁹⁶ Russian diplomats also commute frequently between Moscow and Chisinau, in all likelihood using their diplomatic immunity to funnel unregistered money into the country to support pro-Russian organizations.⁹⁷

Since Russia's original plans for a military intervention in Moldova through Ukraine's Odessa region failed after the collapse of its offensive in Southern Ukraine,⁹⁸ the Kremlin has focused more on its efforts to overthrow the pro-European Moldovan government from within the country. In this context, RISS have a leading role in coordinating all tools and operations aimed at taking over the country – from corruption, through cyber operations to pro-Russian politicians and businesspeople. As RISS support a wide range of hybrid threat

activities, their operations are often connected to other domains, such as the information and political domains (see below for more details regarding RISS support for pro-Russian political parties), or cyber, as the most active and successful cyber-criminal groups are linked to or run by RISS officers.

It is highly likely that RISS were behind the series of security incidents in Transnistria⁹⁹ in 2022, for which Ukraine and Moldova were blamed (see Infrastructure domain). The events served multiple goals: they intimidated and put the Moldovan authorities on high alert,¹⁰⁰ spread a sense of insecurity among citizens, invigorated new disinformation campaigns aimed at Moldova and Ukraine, and attempted to pit Kyiv and Chisinau against each other.¹⁰¹

The second line of effort in which RISS were very likely to have been involved was the anti-government protest organized by the SOR Party but funded by Russia in the second half

95 Seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

96 Elena Celak, 'В Гагаузии раздают доллары от посольства России: кому и зачем?' [In Gagauzia, they are handing out dollars from the Russian Embassy: to whom and why?], *Nokta*, 16 June 2023, <https://nokta.md/strong-v-gagauzii-razdajut-dollar-ot-posolstva-rossii-komu-i-zachem-strong/>.

97 Madalin Necsutu, 'Moldova is resisting Moscow's maskirovka. Can the Western security shield protect it?', *Euronews*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/08/moldova-is-resisting-moscows-maskirovka-can-the-western-security-shield-protect-it>.

98 Picheta, 'How Transnistria is getting pulled into the war in Ukraine'.

99 Crisis24, 'Moldova: Explosions reported near Transnistria Ministry of Security in Tiraspol April 25', 25 April 2022, <https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2022/04/moldova-explosions-reported-near-transnistria-ministry-of-security-in-tiraspol-april-25>; *The Telegraph*, 'Russia hints at Moldova invasion, as unexplained attacks create "hotbed of tension"', 26 April 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/04/26/pro-russian-region-moldova-raises-terror-threat-attacks-near/>; *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, 'Unidentified drone drops explosives on peacekeepers' vehicle fleet in Transnistria', 6 June 2022, [Unidentified drone drops explosives on peacekeepers' vehicle fleet in Transnistria \(novayagazeta.eu\)](https://www.novayagazeta.eu/en/unidentified-drone-drops-explosives-on-peacekeepers-vehicle-fleet-in-transnistria).

100 EURACTIV, 'More blasts in Transnistria: Moldova convenes its security council', 26 April 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/more-blasts-in-transnistria-moldova-convenes-its-security-council/>.

101 Dumitru Minzarari, 'Security Incidents in Moldova's Transnistrian Region: Pretext for Escalation or Smokescreen?', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 19 Issue: 64, <https://jamestown.org/program/security-incidents-in-moldovas-transnistrian-region-pretext-for-escalation-or-smokescreen/>.

of 2022 and the first half of 2023. As the protests had not produced the expected results,¹⁰² despite paying people to attend,¹⁰³ Russia changed its tactics and tried to engage outside help to further inflame the situation. RISS attempted to bring some violent groups (known as *titushki*) to Chisinau, using their connections to pro-Russian organizations in Serbia and to the criminal world. Several Serbian individuals¹⁰⁴ and suspected Wagner group members¹⁰⁵ were detained at the border in February 2023, in what was described by the Moldovan authorities as a coup attempt.¹⁰⁶ Another group of people, linked to Wagner and RISS, operated from within the country (arriving earlier largely as tourists). They organized training on how to deal with riot police and, according to the US authorities, were preparing to capitalize on ongoing protests to seize the Moldovan Government House and launch a coup against the Moldovan authorities.¹⁰⁷

Another important dimension of the intelligence domain is the status of the Moldovan

Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), which requires overarching reforms. For years, the service served as a close counterpart to RISS, then as a highly politicized institution, protecting the oligarchic capture of the country. The service is still burdened by post-Russian techniques, tactics, and procedures (lack of transparency, corruption, politicization, connections to the criminal world).¹⁰⁸ Only recently has the SIS started to modernize and professionalize with the help of intelligence services from NATO/EU countries. However, there are still a number of issues that ought to be addressed. For example, along with granting the service more prerogatives regarding intelligence and counterintelligence operations, Moldova needs to strengthen civilian control and parliamentary supervision over the SIS. The whole process, however, should be viewed as a long-term effort.¹⁰⁹

A professional and capable intelligence and security service will enable the state to develop and maintain situational awareness, which is crucial for the Moldovan government under the

102 The primary purpose of protests, which were organized regularly in Chisinau in 2022, was to capitalize on the general economic difficulties in the country and rising energy and foodstuff prices. The organizers hoped to mobilize society around economic-related slogans and provoke massive protests with possible street violence that would lead to the overthrow of the government.

103 Participants were paid around €10–20 (200 Moldovan Lei) to take part in the protest. For more details, see: Roonemaa & Gielewska, 'Secret Kremlin document'.

104 Reuters, 'Moldova bars fans from soccer match with Serbia amid Russia coup plot concerns', 14 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-bars-fans-soccer-match-with-serbia-amid-russia-coup-plot-concerns-2023-02-14/>.

105 Mark Krutov, 'Russia's Wagner Group Plotted To Spark Violence In Moldova, U.S. Document Leak Shows', 28 April 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-wagner-russia-violence-unrest-leaked-documents/32383954.html>.

106 BBC, 'Moldova's pro-EU President Sandu accuses Russia of coup plot', 13 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64626785>.

107 U.S. Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Sanctions Russian Intelligence-Linked Malign Influence Actors Targeting Moldova', Press Release, 5 June 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1522>.

108 Mark Galeotti, 'The secret battlefield: how the EU can help Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine protect against Russian subversion', ECFR, December 2021.

109 Research trip to Chisinau and Comrat, August 2023.

current geopolitical conditions. Additionally, it will serve as the first line of defence against foreign intelligence operations in the country. Thus far, the SIS has largely functioned as a pre-eminent police force with developed counterintelligence and surveillance capabilities. However, the service lacks the skills to analyze data and prepare risk assessments related to the rapidly changing geopolitical situation of the country. The SIS also lacks a dedicated professional training programme, and hence its officers rely on their previous experience, generally acquired from other security forces, such as the police, border guards or the military.¹¹⁰

What the EU should do

- As evidenced by the events of 2023, Moldova remains vulnerable to destabilization efforts planned and carried out by RISS and its proxies. Cooperation with the EU/NATO intelligence community is crucial in countering these threats. Expertise and information provided by the Western counterpart remains crucial in increasing SIS capabilities vis-à-vis RISS. Timely intelligence provided by partners played a decisive role in preventing pro-Russian activists from entering Moldova in February 2023 in the alleged coup attempt. Hence, the Western intelligence community should continue its engagement with the SIS to secure positive reforms in the Moldovan service in the long term as well.
- The EU and NATO should engage their intelligence bodies – NATO JISD and EU INTCEN – to enhance the SIS’s capabilities and expertise by providing training, sharing information, and engaging the Service in their international cooperation. On a bilateral basis, EU/NATO countries could help to build the SIS’s technical capabilities.
- The EU has capabilities as well as experience in helping other countries, such as Ukraine, to reform their intelligence and special services. This knowledge could be used to assist the SIS. The war in Ukraine and Russia’s intense hybrid threat activities should serve as an additional catalyst in the process. It is not only about intelligence-related assistance, as corruption and excessive competencies that allow overlap with other law enforcement agencies are also impediments in acquiring full professionalism.¹¹¹
- The assistance of some Western intelligence services in reforming the SIS is crucial. However, there are many other services, especially from former Warsaw Pact countries, that may provide unique knowledge and experience in modernizing and democratizing the country’s intelligence structures. In particular, the Moldovan authorities need to ensure democratic control over the service so that it is no longer abused by politicians for their own purposes.
- Given the overall weak state of the Moldovan economy, the EU/NATO as well as individual countries should consider providing the SIS with modern equipment and appropriate training, which could considerably increase the SIS’s capabilities to detect and deter Russia’s malign intelligence operations.
- To better counter foreign espionage efforts, Moldova needs assistance in implementing regulations that clearly define all terms

110 Closed expert seminar in Warsaw, 30 March 2023.

111 Galeotti, ‘The secret battlefield’.

related to foreign malign activities, such as “act of espionage”, “date placement and transfer”, or “acts of sabotage”.¹¹²

Diplomacy

Diplomacy, especially in the case of authoritarian states like Russia, plays an important supporting role in hybrid threat operations. In the case of Russia, diplomacy is subordinated to the Kremlin’s strategic goals of keeping Moldova within its perceived zone of influence and preventing any integration of the country into Euro-Atlantic structures. This domain is closely related to the political domain, as Russia uses its high-profile politicians to meddle in the internal political scene in Moldova.

For years, Russia has been leveraging the unresolved status of Transnistria to keep all successive Moldovan governments in check and to push for a diplomatic solution favourable to its geopolitical goals. For this purpose, the Kremlin exploited the 5+2 negotiation process¹¹³ and even established a Transnistrian “diplomatic office” in Moscow in January 2019. Russia’s long-term goal has been to create some kind of federation that would reintegrate Transnistria with Moldova and Gagauzia into a single state, with Tiraspol and Comrat having a veto on Chisinau’s strategic political decisions. This solution would

ensure Moscow’s long-term control/influence over the country.¹¹⁴

In this context, it is worth underlining that Russia has actually played a dual role in the 5+2 format and that this role was accepted by all sides, proving the effectiveness of Russia’s diplomatic hybrid threat tools. Russia was, in fact, both mediator and one of the parties to the conflict. The same ploy was successfully repeated in 2014–2015 in Ukraine, where Russia was the aggressor, hiding behind the so-called People’s Republics, and then engaged, this time officially, as the Russian state in the negotiation process (the Minsk agreements). Yet once again, this set-up was accepted by all negotiating parties.

Another diplomatic hybrid threat tool frequently exploited by Russia in Moldova concerns high-profile visits by Russian politicians to support pro-Russian/anti-EU forces in the country. This is largely carried out in the context of electoral campaigns and other important votes, for example. Only recently, recognizing this threat, Moldova banned the entry of Rustam Minnikhanov, the head of Tatarstan, a republic in the Russian Federation. He was planning to participate in the international “Friendship of Peoples – 2023” congress in Gagauzia, organized by Victor Petrov, deputy of the local parliament in Gagauzia.¹¹⁵

112 Government Centre for Security, ‘Possible Mitigation Measures’, p. 14.

113 The 5+2 format is the only official forum for peace negotiations regarding the conflict in Moldova. It consists of Moldova and Transnistria as the two parties to the conflict and then Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE as mediators, and the EU and US as observers.

114 Jakub Pieńkowski, ‘Renewal of Negotiations on Resolving the Transnistria Conflict’, No. 126 (1066), 19 December 2017, PISM.

115 Rustam Minnikhanov is one of the leading members of the Russian political elite loyal to Putin. He is on the US sanctions list. For more, see: Madalin Necsutu, ‘Pro-Russians Battle it out in Elections in Moldova’s Gagauzia’, 28 April 2023, *BalkanInsight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/04/28/pro-russians-battle-it-out-in-elections-in-moldovas-gagauzia/>.

Russian politicians and high-level officials take every opportunity to express their support for selected pro-Russian forces in Moldova. This in turn increases their visibility and credibility among the Moldovan pro-Russian electorate. In 2022, representatives of the SOR and the Socialist Party were received on two separate occasions by Leonid Slutsky, Chair of the Russian State Duma's International Affairs Committee. During the meetings, SOR delegates managed to secure some trade ban exemptions for selected Moldovan regions governed by SOR representatives. Also, during the meetings, Russia's representatives gave assurances that once the pro-Russian parties were back in power, Gazprom would lower the gas price for the country.¹¹⁶

In addition to the above-mentioned coercive diplomatic hybrid threat tools, top Russian politicians/diplomats constantly threaten Moldovan authorities in the context of the current geopolitical course of the country. Just recently, former President Dimitry Medvedev, commenting on the entry ban for some Russian politicians, said that Moldova had been sold to Romania.¹¹⁷ Earlier, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Moldova not to pose any threat to Russia's

military contingent in Transnistria, as this would be considered an act of war.¹¹⁸ He also accused Moldova of sabotaging the peace process and of seeking non-diplomatic solutions to the conflict resolution.¹¹⁹ Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova commented on Moldovan internal politics by condemning legislation that officially renamed the artificially created "Moldovan" language "Romanian";¹²⁰ while Russia's ambassador to Moldova criticized an exhibition depicting Soviet deportations as "Russophobic".¹²¹

These diplomatic activities are reinforced by the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Chisinau. Russian diplomats accredited in Moldova are engaged in a number of undertakings that support Russia's strategic objectives towards Moldova across most of the domains: diplomacy, political, information, economy, culture, social/societal, legal, intelligence, politics, and economy.

What the EU should do

→ Moldova needs clear diplomatic support from the EU institutions and EU member states. In response to Russia's discrediting, firm language is needed confirming Moldo-

116 Vladimir Socor, 'Moldova's Russophile Left: A Complicated Picture', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 19 Issue: 156, <https://jamestown.org/program/moldovas-russophile-left-a-complicated-picture/>.

117 Tass, 'Medvedev sees no reason for Russia to hold talks with Moldova's current leaders', 28 April 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1611021>.

118 Reuters, 'Russia warns Moldova not to threaten its troops in breakaway region', 1 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-warns-moldova-not-threaten-its-troops-breakaway-region-2022-09-01/>.

119 Maximilian Ohle, 'Implications of the Moldovan-Transnistrian Dispute for EU Security in the Context of the War in Ukraine', Conference "The Dniester War of 1992: 30 years after...", Chisinau, Moldova, March 2022.

120 Novinite, 'Zakharova: The Romanian Language should be renamed Moldovan, not the other way around', 19 March 2023, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/219309/Zakharova%3A+The+Romanian+Language+should+be+renamed+Moldovan%2C+not+the+other+way+around>.

121 Madalin Necsutu, 'Moldova Denies Soviet Deportation Exhibition is "Russophobic"', *Balkan Insight*, 14 July 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/14/moldova-denies-soviet-deportation-exhibition-is-russophobic/>.

va's sovereignty. This is particularly the case as Russia is not the only country inclined to deny former Soviet countries international recognition and subjectivity.¹²²

- A good example of an effective diplomatic tool used by the EU to support Moldova concerns the restrictive measures imposed on individuals who pose a threat to Moldova's democracy, rule of law, stability, and security. Brussels introduced a travel ban to the EU and an asset freeze on five Moldovan citizens responsible for actions that undermined or threatened the sovereignty and independence of the state.¹²³ For this policy to be effective, it would have to go much deeper, listing many more individuals who were proven to be involved in destructive activities against Moldova, and in most cases paid and instructed by RISS. An extended list would likely serve as an effective deterrent to other corrupt individuals.
- Another good example of clear diplomatic messaging was the organization of the 2nd European Political Community Summit in Moldova in June 2023, confirming Moldova's growing importance and its place and subjectivity among other European countries. The EU should continue to include Moldova in similar initiatives to underline the importance of the country.

Political

The political domain remains the most crucial for Russia's hybrid threats, and the one where all the other domains converge. Due to its extensive influence on many Moldovan political parties, Russia was able to control Moldovan foreign, defence and domestic policy for years. Matters became complicated for the Kremlin with the victory of pro-European Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) in 2021. Nevertheless, Russia still pins its hopes on "getting Moldova back" by helping Russia-sponsored parties to take power in the country.

In the best-case scenario, from Russia's perspective, Moldovan pro-Russian opposition parties would capitalize on social discontent through anti-government protests and trigger a state crisis in which the pro-EU party would be forced to cede power (e.g., in an early election). For this reason, Russia does not hesitate to invest money and experts from RISS to help foment popular discontent.¹²⁴ RISS have channelled tens of millions of dollars through Russia's largest state-owned companies to cultivate a network of Moldovan politicians and reorient the country back towards Russia.

As mentioned above, Russia's main leverage in the political domain has been the transfer of money to selected pro-Russian parties and individuals in political corruption schemes

122 *Le Monde*, 'Chinese envoy to France's remarks on ex-Soviet states provoke outrage in Europe', 25 April 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/04/24/chinese-ambassador-s-remarks-on-crimea-provoke-outrage-in-europe_6024027_4.html.

123 EU Sanctions Map, <https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main/details/55/lists?search=%7B%22value%22:%22%22,%22searchType%22:%7B%7D%7D>.

124 For more details on how Russia funds and provides expertise to pro-Russian parties in Moldova, see: Căţuş, 'The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova', pp. 11–16.

facilitated by RISS (see the Intelligence domain).¹²⁵ Under Moldovan law, foreign funding of political parties is illegal. The most notorious cases of political corruption concern former president and leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), Igor Dodon. In 2022, he was charged by the Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office with passive corruption, accepting financing from a criminal organization and illicit enrichment.¹²⁶ In an infamous leaked video recording, Mr Dodon accepted the money from oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc and his confidant, Serghei Iaralov. In the recording, Dodon admits to receiving one million dollars every month from Russia to run his party.¹²⁷ In addition to receiving money, Dodon worked closely with Russian political technologists and FSB officers. They advised him during the 2020 Moldovan presidential election, promised support from the Russian Presidential Administration, and facilitated money transfers using the Tether cryptocurrency.¹²⁸

After the lost presidential election, Russian RISS-affiliated individuals and high-level businessmen (e.g., Igor Chayka,¹²⁹ son of Russia's former Prosecutor General) continued their efforts to facilitate the return of a pro-Russian

government to power in the 2021 parliamentary election. To that end, they also tried to engage with other opposition parties, the National Alternative Movement (NAM) and the SOR Party. Igor Chayka's companies were used to transfer money to the above-mentioned political parties. This money was subsequently used for bribes and information operations in cooperation with the infamous troll factory known as the Internet Research Agency.¹³⁰

Since the 2021 election, Russia has directed most of its support exclusively to the SOR Party, as its best chance of creating political unrest in Moldova, polarizing society, and undermining the pro-European course of the country. This support includes a team of FSB political advisors to guide the party as well as the transfer of control over the main pro-Russian TV channels to Ilan Șor's associates.¹³¹ Hybrid threat tools from other domains were also used to reinforce Șor's malign activities aimed at destabilizing the country (see sections on Cyber, Economy, Culture, Public administration, Legal, Intelligence, Diplomacy, and Information).

Despite efforts by the government to expose Ilan Șor's links to Russia and delegitimize his

125 Catherine Belton, 'Russia's security service works to subvert Moldova's pro-Western government', *The Washington Post*, 28 October 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/28/russia-fsb-moldova-manipulation/>.

126 Madalin Necsutu, 'Moldova's Ex-President Dodon Indicted for Corruption, Illicit Enrichment', 7 November 2022, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/07/moldovas-ex-president-dodon-indicted-for-corruption-illicit-enrichment/>.

127 PublicaMD, 'Probe video: Igor Dodon dictează planul de federalizare a republicii Video evidence', [Igor Dodon dictates plan to federalize the Republic of Moldova], YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ny76PX-zgsIM>.

128 U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova', Press Release, 26 October 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049>.

129 U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Targets Corruption'.

130 U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Targets Corruption'.

131 Hedenskog, 'How the EU can reduce Russia's Exploitation', p. 6.

party,¹³² within days he was able to replace it with a new political grouping called S.O.R (an acronym from the Romanian words for chance, obligations, achievements).

In return for the funding and all-encompassing support (from diplomatic declarations through information operations to RISS engagement), pro-Russian parties (PSRM, SOR/S.O.R, Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova) have openly called for closer relations with Russia, integration into the Eurasian Economic Union, and support for the presence of the Russian culture, media and language in Moldova. They also willingly repeat most of the Russian propaganda lines regarding the US, the EU, and alleged threats connected with Euro-Atlantic integration.

What the EU should do

→ It is no longer possible for political parties in Moldova to build large public support solely on the pro-Russian agenda. Consequently, Moldovan parties have included some nuances in their programmes on possible EU integration, pro-EU reforms, and so forth. Whether this is a genuine aspiration or just a political game to attract more public support is a different matter. What is important, however, is the fact that there is a growing support base in Moldovan society for transforming and reforming the country with EU assistance. What Moldovans are lacking is a properly functioning state, which they hope to find through integration with the EU.

Hence, the EU should continue to support the transformation of the country (fighting corruption, building a more efficient administration, improving infrastructure) as that would be the best remedy for countering the illicit Russian funding and malign influencing of political parties.

- To promote pro-EU views and broaden the support base for integration, the EU should reach out to other political parties and organizations (not just the ruling PAS) and build good relations while encouraging political pluralism.¹³³
- Now that Moldova's electoral legislation has been reformed to increase transparency in line with democratic standards, the Moldovan government needs the EU's help in strengthening the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), which verifies party funding, among other things. In this context, it is worth paying attention to whether the CEC applies and enforces the state legislation on political parties properly.

Information

Weaponized information is the most common and frequently utilized hybrid threat instrument. There are many reasons for its popularity, the most salient being that dis- and misinformation operations are cheap to implement, have a considerable impact on the target nation/groups, and countries have only recently started to develop legislation and other measures to defend their information spaces against foreign

132 Ilan Sor is a Russian-allied oligarch who was sentenced to 15 years in prison for his involvement in the infamous "Theft of the century". He currently lives in Israel and is on US and EU sanctions lists. The SOR Party was declared illegal by the Constitutional Court on 19 June 2023, accused of the illegal financing of criminal circles and attempts to destabilize the legitimate power in Moldova through mass protests sponsored by Russia.

133 Hedenskog, 'How the EU can reduce Russia's Exploitation', p. 9.

interference. A malign actor may achieve many of its strategic goals against a country through information operations alone, and without the need to resort to other hybrid threat tools.

Russia's information operations in Moldova have similar goals as in other countries, basically to undermine the perception of security, reduce trust in the state/public institutions, and confuse and polarize society, which is then easier to manipulate with fake news and influence operations. In the case of Moldova, Russia's information operations serve the overall strategic goal of bringing about a change of government that will cut short the current cooperation with the EU and NATO and reverse the ongoing integration processes.

The main conduit for Russia's information and manipulation comprises Russian-affiliated media outlets. Many of these are controlled by local pro-Russian political forces, such as the PSRM or S.O.R. bloc, or oligarchs or simply Russian citizens.¹³⁴ Moldovan TV stations with their underfinanced and low-quality productions cannot really compete with Russian-affiliated ones, which retransmit commercial, big-budget Russian content. These Russian re-transmitters are among the most popular Moldovan TV channels (e.g., PRIME channel, NTV, RTR Moldova). The same Russian dominance is observed in the print media, where the two most popular newspapers are basically local branches of Russian publications (*Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove* and *Argumenty i fakty v Moldove*). TV and

newspapers are the most popular sources of information in Moldova.¹³⁵

Russian information operations continue on the internet. This medium is not as significant as the two mentioned above, but it is playing an increasingly prominent role due to government efforts to limit the influence of pro-Russian TV and press. As in other countries, Russian narratives are spread through social media (Facebook, Odnoklassniki.ru, Telegram, VKontakte) and internet information platforms such as mail.ru, sputnik.md, and point.md. All Russian propaganda lines and narratives are quickly picked up by pro-Russian actors in Moldova and spread further in society (e.g., by pro-Russian political figures, high-profile influencers, and MOC clerics).

Russia has abused the information domain in the Moldovan media sphere to compromise the current government and promote pro-Russian parties and the main themes of *Ruskiy Mir*. This is particularly visible during election campaigns when Russian-based media outlets promote every possible theory to discredit the pro-EU parties (evoking such themes as identity, geopolitics, clash of civilizations, and preservation of the Moldovan state and culture).¹³⁶

The ubiquitous Russian propaganda regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war finally prompted the Moldovan government to retaliate. In 2022, the Moldovan authorities adopted new legislation banning the broadcasting of analytical and information programmes from certain third

134 Mold-street, 'Cine sunt beneficiarii celor șase posturi de televiziune a căror licență a fost suspendată' [Who are the beneficiaries of the six television stations whose license was suspended], 19 December 2022, <https://www.mold-street.com/?go=news&n=15220>.

135 Rotaru, 'The bumpy road ahead', pp. 9–10.

136 EuvsDisinfo, 'A Russian Psychological Operation Pressures Moldova', 3 March 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/a-russian-psychological-operation-p pressures-moldova/>.

countries, including Russia.¹³⁷ The new law also allows for a ban on some war films and other productions that may include propaganda. The Moldovan policy of restricting Russian propaganda was reinforced later in the year when the authorities decided to suspend the broadcasting licences of six TV channels for disseminating biased information about the country and the Russo-Ukrainian war.¹³⁸ In 2023, President Sandu announced the creation of the National Centre for Information Defence and Combating Propaganda. The centre's mission is to "identify, prevent and combat disinformation at the national level" through professional strategic communications and information security.¹³⁹

What the EU should do

- The EU should improve its strategic communication with Moldovan society. If the EU wants to change the perception of itself among the local population, it needs to engage people and explain to them how the EU works, what its objectives are, and what kind of values it promotes. This would, however, require defying and challenging the Russian narratives presented by local media outlets.
- The EU should consider launching and funding an actual, full-fledged pro-EU campaign (thus far, there has been only one such project funded by USAID) to expose Russia's disinformation with facts and confront the Russian narrative at the level of history, identity, and values. This should be done on a long-term and sustainable basis, reaching out to Russian, Romanian and Gagauz speakers.
- The Moldovan media sphere needs EU support in the form of funds and expertise to develop and create content that could serve as an alternative to Russian productions. As the EU has also only recently started to realize the significance of the threat posed by Russian information operations in Europe, both sides can learn from each other on this issue.
- To counter Russian disinformation, Moldova needs money and people to prepare narratives, organize de-bunking, and expose fake news. In Ukraine, most of this work has been done by patriotically motivated and dedicated civil society activists. In Moldova, however, the third sector is not developed enough to carry out a task of this size independently.
- The EU needs to provide long-standing operational assistance to enable the newly established National Centre for Information Defence and Combating Propaganda to become fully operational. The new centre should take on the task of setting up a professional strategic communications team responsible for state information strategies.

137 Interfax, 'Moldova passes legislation banning broadcasts of Russian news, military, political TV programs', 2 June 2022, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/79822/>.

138 RFE/RL, 'Moldovan Government Suspends Licenses Of Six TV Stations To "Eliminate Propaganda"', 17 December 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-ilan-shor-tv-stations-licenses-suspended-russia-war/32180842.html>.

139 Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 'President Maia Sandu's message about the initiative to create the National Center for Information Defense and Combating Propaganda – PATRIOT', 29 May 2023, <https://presedinte.md/eng/presa/mesajul-presedintei-maia-sandu-despre-initiativa-de-creare-a-centrului-national-de-aparare-informationala-si-combatere-a-propagandei-patriot>.

The centre could also work on a new national communication strategy to help create proactive and consistent public intergovernmental communications. It could serve as a hub for coordinating the information exchange within the central administration.¹⁴⁰ To this end, the EU should ensure that the centre serves the state and not just the PAS.

→ It is important for the state-owned and commercial Moldovan media to be able to reach local populations and minority groups, now dominated by the Russian-led outlets, with alternative messages. In this vein, the EU could assist Moldovans in reforming and professionalizing their media companies and public television. There are several private pro-EU channels (e.g., ProTV Moldova, Jurnal TV), including some in Russian (e.g., Current Time TV), which could also make use of additional assistance.

140 Government Centre for Security, 'Possible Mitigation Measures', p. 17.

Russia's hybrid threat operations against Moldova – from priming through destabilization to coercion

In the analytical framework of the conceptual model, Hybrid CoE identifies three main phases of hybrid threats: priming, destabilization and coercion.¹⁴¹ A malign actor can move from one phase to the next by escalating and de-escalating the situation, hampering situational awareness, and disguising the real aims of its actions.¹⁴² In the section below, the paper summarizes how these phases are reflected in Russia's hybrid threat activities towards Moldova.

Priming

Priming is the most basic and most common phase of hybrid threats. The main goal of the adversary is to keep the targeted country constantly in check and society in a permanent state of insecurity; divided and unsettled, on edge. This is achieved by activating hybrid threat tools below the threshold of detectability in all domains (infrastructure, cyber, space, economy, military, culture, social/societal, public administration, legal, intelligence, diplomacy, political and information). All of these activities combined allow the adversary to manipulate society, gain influence over societal processes in the country and distort its views, values, and shared norms to the extent that it disturbs the normal functioning of the country. In this way, the country and its society can be kept in a constant state of alertness.

In the desired end state, the adversary can achieve its goals, such as a change of minister, or the whole government, or a desired decision on foreign, domestic or defence policy, from within, without directly "communicating" with the targeted country. In effect, the attacked

subject will make harmful choices and decisions unfavourable to its state interests, but in line with the geopolitical goals of the adversary.

Taking into account the above description of the priming phase, it can be said that **Moldova has been under constant Russian priming since the pro-European parties won the election and created the government in 2021.** Moscow has focused its hybrid threat activities in particular on derailing the government's efforts to integrate the country into the European Union. Malign activities have been observed in literally all of the above-mentioned domains and have helped Russia to keep Moldova in a permanent state of political/economic/administrative crisis. The first line of effort focuses on compromising the EU and the pro-EU agenda of the current government (information domain). This is achieved by extensive manipulation of the information space with the help of the Russian-controlled media, religious authorities, and pro-Russian politicians (culture and political domain). In the information space, the EU is presented as an existential threat to Moldovans and their way of life. This message is reinforced by intelligence and cyber operations (hack-and-leak operations against top Moldovan politicians, targeting the public administration). Russia's proxies use its narratives to reach individuals and communities that do not feel involved in the country's decision-making (e.g., Gagauzians; rural, more conservative communities).

Another line of effort focuses on disrupting and overloading the state administration, thereby proving that the government is

141 Giannopoulos et al., 'The Landscape of Hybrid Threats', pp. 36–45.

142 Ibid, p. 36.

inefficient and leading the country to collapse (public administration, economy, and infrastructure domains). To this end, Russia exploits its dominant position in the energy sector to impose high prices and introduce trade bans in selected sectors of the economy. As the economic situation of society deteriorates, Russia provides direct financial help to selected communities (social/societal domain).

The security incidents in separatist Transnistria as well as the wave of false bomb alerts contributed to the rising anxiety and fear in society, which was already amplified by the Russo-Ukrainian war in the neighbourhood (military domain). The whole effort is reinforced by the mobilization of pro-Russian and anti-EU forces and people affected by the inefficiency of the state (largely due to secret money transfers to selected political parties/organizations/individuals). At the same time, Russian diplomats and top-level politicians (diplomacy domain) clearly communicate to Moldovan society that the solution to their problems lies in abandoning the current pro-EU geopolitical course and reunifying with Russia in its reintegration projects (e.g., in the Eurasian Economic Union, EAEU). This reunification and reintegration is the ultimate objective of Russia's hybrid threat operation in and against Moldova.

Destabilization through operations and campaigns

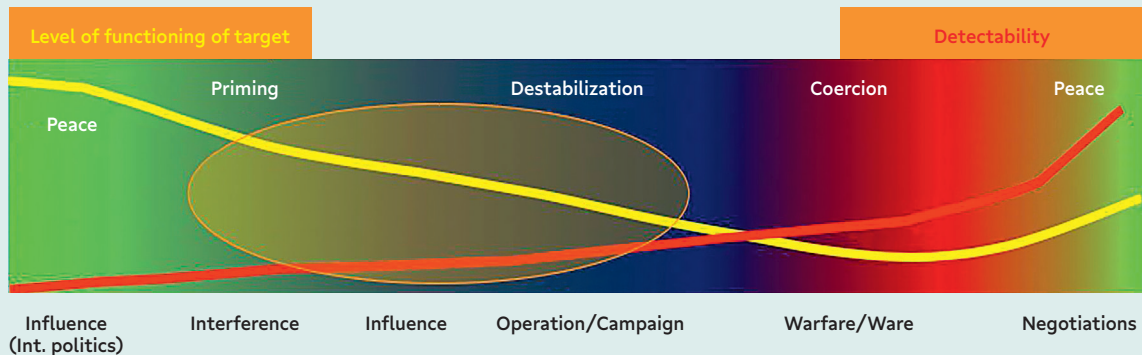
In the next phase, the hybrid threat actor intensifies its hybrid threat operations in the form of a pre-planned much more visible, aggressive, and very often violent operation, or multiple

operations or campaigns. This might happen when the adversary sees an opportunity to achieve its goals through more decisive action or when it is frustrated with the lack of results from priming the targeted country. In the destabilization phase, the malign hybrid threat actor will continue to try to hide its actions behind plausible deniability, even if they are much more visible. Most of the time, however, attribution is virtually impossible if based solely on publicly available information. As this phase is much more aggressive, it requires a concrete reaction from the targeted country, either by counter-reacting to the hybrid threat operation by defending the country, or by giving in and accepting the adversary's demands. "If the desired effects are not achieved, the activity either reverts to priming to wait for another and better opportunity, to tailor a better combination or create new vulnerabilities, or then escalation will ensue. This depends on several factors: the importance of strategic goals, responses, and further opportunities."¹⁴³

In the last 12–15 months, Russia escalated the situation in Moldova at least twice by moving from the priming to the destabilization phase. The first instance was observed in autumn 2022. The situation in the country was already tense as the opposition party – SOR (funded and guided by the Russian Intelligence and Security Services) organized regular protests in Chisinau and set up a tent city in front of the government buildings (political and social/societal domains). People were motivated to take part in the protest by high energy prices. They were also encouraged by daily

143 Ibid, pp. 40–41.

Figure 4. Phases of hybrid threat activities. Source: Giannopoulos et al., 'The Landscape of Hybrid Threats'



payments provided by the SOR Party. The crisis was reinforced by other hybrid tools: information operations and diplomatic activities (the Russian authorities promised cheaper gas once the opposition was in power). As energy prices peaked again on European markets, Russia tried to strike the decisive blow. In October 2022, Gazprom cut gas exports to Moldova firstly by 30%, and then by even more (economic domain). This caused energy prices to rise even higher (in some cases energy bills accounted for up to 70% of household budgets) and also caused electricity shortages and blackouts (Moldova gets most of its electricity from a gas-fired power plant). The cut-off corresponded with Russia's missile campaign against Ukraine's energy infrastructure, which forced Kyiv to suspend all electricity exports to Moldova.

If Moldova had been left alone, it would have become a victim of Russia's hybrid threat pressure. However, a perfectly designed Russian hybrid threat destabilization campaign aimed at a change of government was disrupted thanks to the solidarity of European allies. Romania exported electricity to Moldova at favourable prices, while the US and EU provided

financial assistance, which helped Moldova to secure alternative gas and electricity deliveries and stabilize the state budget. These actions allowed the Moldovan government to survive the winter and the worst months of the Europe-wide energy crisis.

In the second attempt, Russia employed some additional hybrid threat tools that were missing during the previous destabilization operation (intelligence domain). In spring 2023, all the previously mentioned elements were still in place. People were tired of the high energy prices and the opposition mobilized (and even paid) them to protest against the government. Russia could no longer exert energy leverage as Moldova had secured alternative supplies from other sources. This time, however, Russia tried to use violent groups ("football fans" from Serbia, Wagner mercenaries) that were supposed to mingle with the crowd of regular protesters and provoke incidents that would lead to massive anti-government unrest and, in effect, the dismissal of the government.

Once again, the allies' help proved crucial. Russia's destabilization operation was exposed by Ukraine and Western countries, which decided to leak classified information about

Russia's plans, first to the Moldovan government, and later to the press. Moldovan border guards stopped dozens of pro-Russian supporters at the border, while some Wagner elements were found to already be in the country. The government later labelled the whole operation a coup attempt, and indeed, if successful, it might have led to widespread unrest and forced the pro-EU authorities to resign.

Coercion

When all of the above-mentioned hybrid threat tools and combined operations fail, the adversary may escalate even further by using covert and overt military forces. All the previously mentioned hybrid threat tools applied below the threshold of detection and attribution (e.g., disinformation, cyber operations, economic pressure, corrupt politicians and state officials, diplomatic activities, clandestine intelligence operations, provocateurs) are reinforced and amplified in this phase by direct military intervention. This phase of the malign hybrid

operation “presents the *hard end* of the escalation spectrum of hybrid threat activity”¹⁴⁴ and is labelled hybrid warfare or hybrid war.

In April 2022, just two months after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when it still looked as if Russia would seize a large part of Ukrainian territory, Russian military commander Rustam Minnekaev admitted that the second phase of the military operation was focused on establishing a land corridor from Donbas to Moldova, “where there are also facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population”¹⁴⁵. The deployment of military forces next to Moldova would have given Russia the last missing element, enabling further escalation of the security situation and, in consequence, taking over the country. As of now, Russia lacks the capabilities to take its malign hybrid threat activities against Moldova to the next stage, as Russia's forces in Transnistria are not capable of conducting such an operation. This does not mean, however, that Russia will abandon its maximalist plans to take over Moldova.

144 Ibid., p. 41.

145 Barbie Latza Nadeau, ‘Russian General Lets Slip a Secret Plan to Invade Another Country and Seize Ukraine's Entire Coastline’, *The Daily Beast*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-general-lets-slip-a-secret-plan-to-invade-moldova-and-seize-ukraines-entire-coastline>.

Conclusions

- Assessing the geopolitical situation around Moldova and its internal struggle to reform the country, one may conclude that the most serious threats to Moldova's successful transformation and integration into the EU at present are systemic deficiencies in the state structures. One of Moldova's main vulnerabilities remains the weakness of its public administration, which should constitute the backbone of the state structure and the heart of the country's resilience. But the problem is much more fundamental than just the poor performance of the state administration and its struggle with underfunding and understaffing. Moldova's public administration does not exist in the way that developed democratic countries understand it. In Moldova, it does not function as one of the state's subjects, as a consolidated bureaucracy with its own procedures, legislation, and codes of conduct embedded in the country's legal and organizational culture. The public administration is wholly subordinated to the political power and does not provide any legal protection for its functionaries. As a result, the vast majority of Moldovan public servants are afraid to take meaningful decisions or take any responsibility for reforming the state, as there is no administration or bureaucracy to defend them in the event of a change of power in the country. In the past, public servants have been dismissed, imprisoned, or forced to leave the country when a new political power has formed a government. This means that once in power, the Russia-funded opposition forces might attempt to undo all the achievements of the current government, making the country more dependent on Moscow once again. This scenario is more than plausible given Moldova's recent history and the polarization of society regarding the country's past, identity, and geopolitical choices.
- Another key problem in Moldova's efforts to build a strong state is closely connected with identity issues. Basic questions regarding the country's history, heritage, nationality, and the identity of its citizens remain unanswered or deeply conflicting within society. Many people do not recognize the authority of the central government over the country, while others do not believe that the state will survive in the long run. Taking these factors into account, it is extremely difficult to find people with the dedication and conviction to believe in the idea of Moldova as a nation and as a state; people who would be willing to sacrifice their private time, career, and resources to build a strong state; political and cultural elites who would coalesce around a vision for Moldova in five, ten or fifty years. Those who are truly committed to this work are overburdened and frustrated with what seems like a Sisyphean task. As a result, there is no consensus in society and among elites regarding the geostrategic course of the country, as this would require a comprehensive strategy and vision.
- As shown in Moldova and in Ukraine, hybrid threat operations and their specific combi-

nations of tools do not necessarily lead to the planned outcome. Paradoxically, they can even produce the exact opposite of the intended results. Russia's gas cut-offs and staged protests designed to bring about the collapse of the pro-EU government led, in effect, to Moldova's successful diversification and independence in the energy sector. Russia's attempts to turn paid protests into violent unrest that would lead to the collapse of the government prompted the Moldovan authorities to strengthen their security policy by, inter alia, decreasing the number of Russian diplomats in the country and banning the main pro-Russian and Russian-funded SOR Party. To effectively counter hybrid threats, solidarity between like-minded states is crucial for Moldova. If left alone and isolated, Moldova would easily become a victim of Russia's hybrid threat operation, with all the negative consequences that would entail. However, thanks to assistance from the EU countries, Moldova survived the gas blackmail and was finally able, after years of entrapment, to break Russia's monopoly over the energy sector. It was not only about money, but also about the willingness of some European energy companies to sign a gas contract with Chisinau. Thanks to intelligence-sharing by several partner nations, Chisinau learned in advance about Russia's plans to stage violent anti-government protests aimed at changing the government. Wherever Russia tried to strike the Moldovan state, the EU and EU countries reacted immediately by supporting the government

and sending money and people to strengthen Moldovan resilience.

- Moldova may serve as another example of a successful "spy-and-leak" operation, which has become an important tool for democratic countries in the face of hostile hybrid threats. The timely leak of classified information about Russia's attempts to organize a coup in Chisinau allowed the government to react quickly, and at the same time exposed the whole operation, leading to its failure and, conceivably, maybe even to the salvation of the country's independence. The same was observed before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The intelligence community did not repeat the mistake of 2014 when it appeared shocked and surprised by Russia's annexation of Crimea. This time, all sides were warned well in advance about Russia's plans. Moldova's case proves that there was indeed a policy change within the intelligence community in EU and NATO countries, which again decided to make public its classified information to warn governments and the general public about Russia's planned malign hybrid operations.
- Not all hybrid threat tools and levers carry the same weight. Moldova's struggle with Russia's hybrid threat destabilization efforts proved that if the most devastating ones are removed, the rest may become somewhat irrelevant. In 2022, Moldova broke away from Russia's energy monopoly and openly named and challenged Russian-funded political

actors. Moreover, due to the course of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Russia could no longer use its military deployment in Transnistria as a viable hybrid threat instrument. Without these tools, Moscow was no longer able to blackmail the country with a complete energy shutdown or military intervention. In effect, Moldova did more to strengthen its state in 2023 than it did during the previous 30 years of its independence. In principle, Moldova has become more sovereign in its internal and external policies, taking increasingly decisive measures against corruption, state dysfunction and, most notably, Kremlin interference. The government has not only initiated reforms in the country but is also continuing to neutralize Russia's hybrid threat tools. The most profound examples of this involve reducing staff levels at the Russian embassy in Chisinau, introducing the third energy package in the energy sector, withdrawing from Commonwealth of Independent States organizations, and challenging Russia's narratives about the country's language (renaming the official language) and history (e.g., reviving historical studies on Russian crimes during the Second World War).

- It seems that at this stage of the hybrid threat confrontation with Russia, Moldova has received ample strategic and recommendatory support from the EU. The Moldovan administration does not currently need advice on how to build resilience to hybrid threats. What they do need is operational

support in the form of experts on the ground who are ready to work hand in hand with them, helping them to develop strategies and write narratives, build institutions, and facilitate inter-institutional cooperation.

- It would appear that Ukraine's success in defending its territory against Russia's military invasion has thus far saved Moldova's pro-EU government and the country's sovereignty. For the moment, Russia lacks the capabilities to intervene directly in the country to hinder its integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, as it has continuously been losing the hybrid threat tools designed to do just that. This moment of weakness creates a unique window of opportunity for Moldova, and possibly other former Soviet Union countries, to finally break free from the "post-Soviet" label and free itself from Russia's perceived "sphere of influence". The existing window of opportunity for Moldova will not remain open indefinitely, however. During this time, the Moldovan government and the EU should focus primarily on addressing state weaknesses. At the same time, Moldovan society needs to recognize that reforms and EU-inspired changes are yielding positive results: a better functioning state, stability, and prosperity. Only then will Moldovans be ready to stand up and defend these achievements, refusing to allow their country to be taken over by corrupt oligarchs or pro-Russian malign political actors.

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