

HYBRID THREATS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Summary of developments and state
response 2021-2024

Information support for practitioners
Chisinau 2024

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PREFACE

Hybrid threats represent a growing concern for contemporary societies, becoming increasingly common in recent decades and are expected to remain a major source of risk in the long term. These complex threats combine conventional and unconventional warfare techniques, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, economic and energy coercion, and political influence - all aimed at destabilising and compromising strategic targets. Part of these threats are new technologies, which facilitate the ability of hostile actors to operate from any corner of the world, propagating strategic narratives, influencing electoral processes, attacking critical infrastructures, or penetrating information networks.

The Republic of Moldova has begun to address the issue of resilience to hybrid threats in a structured manner relatively recently. The importance of this area was also highlighted in the new **National Security Strategy 2024-2030**, adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova on December 15, 2023. The document provides a long-term strategic vision, integrating multiple conceptual dimensions, and clearly defines the fundamental objectives and principles of national security. One of the central objectives is to strengthen national resilience to hybrid threats and fortify the national security culture.

In this context, this report seeks to summarise the evolution of hybrid threats faced by the Republic of Moldova between 2021-2024, providing a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon. Intended for academia, researchers and experts in the fields of public policy, security and resilience, the report provides a knowledge base to support the understanding and countering of these types of threats.

The work is based on public sources, official statements and reports, as well as recent studies and analyses carried out by research centres and experts. It provides a structured picture of developments and trends in the field, striving to support all stakeholders - from government authorities and public institutions to civil society organisations and citizens - in their efforts to build resilience against these challenges.

The report analyses and structures the evolution of hybrid threats faced by the Republic of Moldova, identifying critical vulnerabilities and proposing measures to strengthen the response capacity. The synthesis of these developments and phenomena is essential to align the volume of knowledge at all levels of society and to ensure a coordinated and effective response to these threats.

Understanding one's own vulnerabilities constitutes an essential foundation for effectively countering hybrid threats, which tend to be covert and subversive and target Moldova's strategic interests. This is a crucial step in efforts to build resilience, as identifying gaps in addressing hybrid threats allows for the development of robust defence strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has realised the importance of resilience in coping with the constantly evolving security environment. Today, complex security challenges are omnipresent and influenced by a few regional and global factors. The resurgence of war in Europe and instability in our neighbourhood generate significant pressure on national security. In this context, it is essential to understand the rise of hybrid threats in both frequency and impact and to develop effective countermeasures.

The term "**hybrid threats**" has become established in recent years, being used to define a "mixture of coercive and subversive activities, with conventional and unconventional methods (e.g. diplomatic, military, economic, technological) being applied by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives, without crossing the threshold of an officially declared war".¹

The common ground of actors using hybrid threats resides in the desire to undermine or disrupt democratic governments, countries or alliances, weakening public trust in institutions and hindering decision-making processes. In recent years, it has been observed that these threats endanger not only democratic values, but also individual governments, states and citizens.

Using the resources available in a free society, these actors transform the aforementioned tools into weapons to discredit the democratic model and contrast it with authoritarian regimes. This process is also used to gain other strategic and geopolitical advantages over Western democracies.

Russia's war in Ukraine clearly highlights the risks of not responding effectively to hybrid threats. These activities are particularly targeted at countries with democratic systems, especially those in the process of democratisation, such as the Republic of Moldova. For more than three decades, Russia has been carrying out hybrid actions in Moldova, ranging from destabilisation to coercion in various forms. The situation in Ukraine shows us that if these objectives are not achieved through hybrid actions, they can escalate into a conventional conflict.

Currently, the Republic of Moldova, firmly committed to the European integration path, is facing unprecedented security challenges since gaining independence. Hybrid threats have become a central concern in this context. Instability in the region, fuelled largely by the military aggression of the Russian Federation in Ukraine, contributes to an increasingly insecure environment. This instability not only negatively influences regional security, but also creates a climate of uncertainty, skilfully exploited by hostile actors.

State security services have reported attempts by foreign actors to influence and manipulate democratic exercises in Moldova. These actions were observed throughout 2023 in the local elections in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, in the general local elections, in the campaign leading up to the presidential elections, and in the 2024 Constitutional Referendum.

The aim of foreign actors, such as the Russian Federation, but also of some non-state entities, is to undermine trust in the institutions and democratic processes of the Republic of Moldova. They are trying to create a climate of instability and insecurity, favouring political orientations that serve their interests, for example, supporting pro-Russian or anti-Western parties, which could disrupt Moldova's pro-European direction. If these actions are not countered effectively and in a timely manner,

¹The EU Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats,
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0018>

they will also have an impact on the 2025 parliamentary elections.

Manipulatively, the authorities' measures to counter these phenomena are often presented as violations of democratic principles and described as authoritarian. They are part of a broader strategy to delegitimise government efforts to protect national interests and the integrity of electoral processes. Hostile actors seek to weaken public trust in the government and create a false perception of authoritarianism.

The impact of hybrid threats is not limited to the security sphere but also affects other areas of national importance. The increasing dependence on technology for essential services, such as banking, health or data protection, exposes citizens and institutions to additional risks. Cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns can weaken the state's ability to respond to these external threats. In this context, it is crucial for the Republic of Moldova to adopt proactive measures, strengthen critical infrastructure and improve crisis response capabilities. Educating the public on the nature and dangers of hybrid threats also becomes essential.

This report will use two analytical models developed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the Science and Knowledge Service of the European Commission, together with the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), namely (1) The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model² and (2) the Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem (CORE)³. These framework models have been developed to facilitate policymakers' decision-making by providing a systemic approach to managing hybrid threats and taking the whole of society into account.

The document will integrate these two analytical frameworks to assess the vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova, identifying the country's main weaknesses in relation to the Russian Federation. The report will provide a synthesis of the evolution of hybrid threats and foreign influence in the Republic of Moldova between August 2021 - June 2024, illustrated by concrete examples of hybrid attacks orchestrated by Russia. The document will focus on the actions of the main actor behind these hybrid threats (Russia), emphasising the instruments and sectors targeted. In addition, it will describe the key stages of the conduct of these hostile actions: preparation, destabilisation and coercion.

In practical terms, this report will provide Moldovan policymakers with the tools they need to assess how adversaries use hybrid threats to undermine democratic decision-making capacities, highlight how hybrid activities gradually undermine the democratic system by creating various types of pressures, and facilitate monitoring of dependencies and possible chain effects - essential aspects for identifying hybrid threats.

²The landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC123305>

³Hybrid Threats: A Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC129019>

1. PRESENTATION OF ANALYSIS MODELS

Hybrid threats aim to harm and undermine democratic systems by destroying the foundations that support them. These foundations are crucial to the resilience of democracies and strengthening them is essential to their protection against hybrid threats. At the heart of these foundations is trust, a vital element for maintaining healthy and strong democratic systems. Basically, trust acts as glue in society, providing greater predictability.

It is also fundamental to the reactions and transformations needed in times of change, as citizens are more likely to follow trusted leaders, thus facilitating the implementation of change. At the same time, trust influences the way people communicate and evaluate the honesty and veracity of what is communicated.

Actors launching hybrid threats focus their attacks on trust, exploiting vulnerabilities and using connections to weaken the foundations of democratic societies. Lack of trust affects a society's ability to absorb shocks, recover quickly, adapt, innovate and continue to develop, which can ultimately erode the foundations of the democratic system.

1.1. Conceptual Model:

The analytical framework of **Conceptual Model** was developed in 2021, focusing on four main pillars: actors (and their strategic objectives), domains, tools and phases. This framework is not limited to simply listing the pillars, but aims to identify the links between them, providing a flexible framework for analysis.

The Conceptual Model places particular emphasis on actors, seeking to understand their motivations and objectives. This deep understanding is essential for anticipating future activities. The model analyses both state actors (such as the Russian Federation) and non-state actors,

and the case studies included in the report illustrate the diversity of their activities and ways of operating.

The Conceptual Model also facilitates the identification of various tools used by state and non-state actors in the realisation of hybrid threats. In addition, the model will be used to describe the phases of hybrid threats. Knowledge of these stages is crucial to improving understanding of the processes involved in the generation and implementation of these threats.

Figura 1. Vizualizarea modelului conceptual al amenințărilor hibride bazat pe lucrarea lui Gianopoulos „Peisajul amenințărilor hibride”.

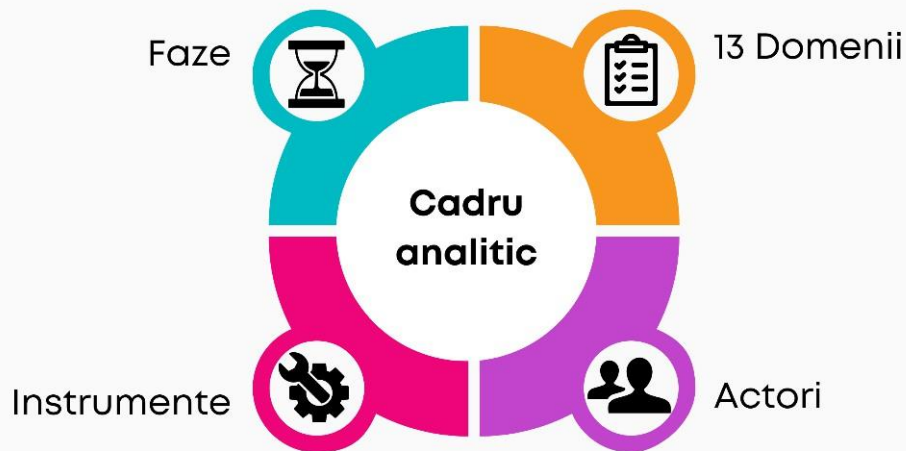


FIG. 1. Visualisation of conceptual model of hybrid threats based on Gianopoulos work “The Landscape of Hybrid Threats” : Phases, 13 Domains, ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK, Tools, Actors

1.2. The Comprehensive Model (CORE):

The Comprehensive Model (CORE) was developed in 2023 and expanded the concepts from the Conceptual Model to analyse the resilience ecosystem as a whole. At the core of this ecosystem there are seven **fundamental pillars** that support democratic systems. These pillars represent the main objectives of actors who launch hybrid threats to undermine them as part of their strategies.

Domains identified in the conceptual model are also essential for the CORE ecosystem. A well-developed resilience in these domains can act as an effective barrier against malicious activities, while a lack of

resilience can create vulnerability points exploited by hostile actors.

The CORE ecosystem includes the three main **sectors** of society: civic, governance and services. These sectors interact and contribute to the stability and resilience of the entire democratic system.

Also, the ecosystem layers represent various **levels** of society, from local to international, highlighting the complexity of interactions between the different components of the resilience ecosystem.

Figura 2. Ecosistemul cuprinzător de reziliență.

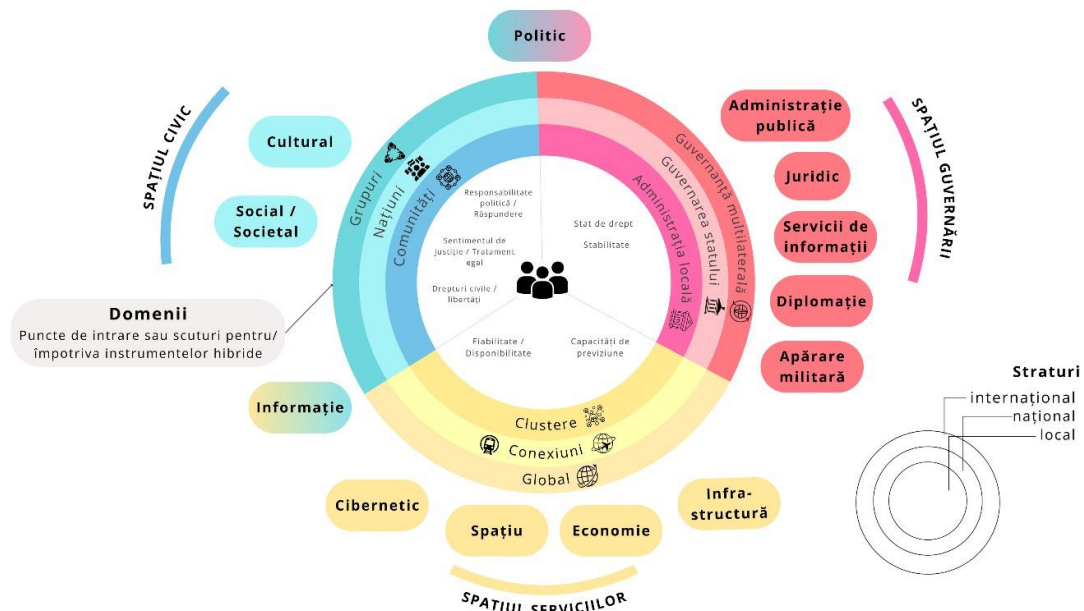


FIG.2 The comprehensive resilience ecosystem: *In blue colour: CIVIC SPACE Political, Cultural, Social/Societal, Information. Inside the circle: GROUPS, NATIONS, COMMUNITIES Political responsibility/Accountability, Feeling of justice/Equal treatment, Civil rights/freedoms DOMAINS: Entry points or shields for/against hybrid instruments. In yellow colour: SERVICES SPACE Cyber, Space, Economy, Infrastructure Inside the circle: GLOBAL, CONNECTIONS, CLUSTERS Reliability/Availability, Foresight capabilities In red colour: GOVERNANCE SPACE Public administration, Legal, Intelligence, Diplomacy, Military Defence Inside the circle: MULTILATERAL GOVERNANCE, STATE GOVERNANCE, LOCAL ADMINISTRATION Rule of law, Stability, LAYERS: international, national, local.*

Solid **foundations** are essential for building resilience against hybrid threats, as besides supporting technical capabilities and recovery, they also protect fundamental democratic processes. The CORE model is based on seven crucial foundations:

- Feeling of justice and equal treatment;
- Civil rights and liberties;
- Political accountability and transparency;
- Rule of law;
- Stability;
- Reliability/availability;
- Foresight capabilities.

These foundations constitute the bedrock of a resilient democratic society and are crucial for strengthening the capacity to confront hybrid threats.

In the CORE model, foundations are centrally located and surrounded by various layers of society, as well as domains that can function as both barriers to, and access points for, hybrid threat activities.

Domains analysed within the CORE model are identical to those in the Conceptual model and include:

- Political;
- Public administration;
- Legal;
- Information security;
- Diplomacy;
- Defence;
- Infrastructure;
- Economy;
- Space
- Cybernetic;
- Informational
- Social
- Cultural.

It is important to emphasise that the interconnections between these domains are essential for building resilience against hybrid threats. Once the interconnections are compromised, the effects of these threats can spread across different domains, and early detection of this dissemination is key to limiting the cascading effects. This does not mean disconnecting domains but rather strengthening the links between them to become more resilient.

The CORE model ecosystem includes **three essential spaces** – civic, governmental and services – which are fundamental to democratic resilience. The layers of the ecosystem reflect the different levels of society organisation:

- Local
- National
- International

In conclusion, the Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem (CORE) provides a deep understanding of how hybrid threat activities can erode democracy, generate unclear decisions, and cause cascading effects. This CORE model serves as a valuable tool for improving understanding of the hybrid threats effects and providing guidance on building resilience against them.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE ACTORS AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Hybrid threats involve a variety of actors, both state and non-state, that engage in activities aimed at interfering in the internal affairs of other states to advance their own strategic interests. These actors may include governments, intelligence agencies, terrorist groups, criminal organisations, hackers, etc. Identifying and analysing these actors is essential to understanding the nature and complexity of hybrid threats.

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats defines the Russian Federation as the main actor responsible for orchestrating hybrid threats to the security of the Republic of Moldova.⁴ For more than two decades, Russia's foreign policy has focused on regaining the influence lost in Eastern and Central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This strategy includes using a combination of economic, political, military, and cyber means to influence and destabilise governments in former Soviet republics and other countries in the region. In achieving these strategic goals, the Kremlin relies primarily on hybrid threat tools and military means, an approach contrasting with other regional powers that prefer "soft power" tools and economic cooperation.

One of the main strategic objectives of the Russian Federation in Moldova is to maintain and expand political influence. Its efforts are focused on keeping Moldova in a grey area, serving as a security buffer zone, with the aim of preventing the expansion of the European Union and NATO into this region.

The Kremlin perceives the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU and NATO

as detrimental to its interests, which is why it uses a wide range of hybrid threat tools to hinder Moldova's European path. These actions include destabilising the pro-European government in Chisinau with the aim of replacing it with one that serves Russian interests, as well as disinformation campaigns to undermine public confidence in the benefits of European integration, promoting instead the idea that close ties with Russia are in Moldova's interest.

Russia aims to control Moldova's foreign and domestic policy by supporting and financing pro-Russian parties. The support given to these parties is intended to promote policies that align Moldova more closely with Moscow's interests, thus countering the country's pro-European and pro-Western tendencies. The goal is to create a political crisis that would force the resignation of the pro-EU government and facilitate the rise to power of pro-Russian parties.

Russia supports paramilitary groups and separatist forces in regions such as Transnistria, using them as tools of destabilisation and pressure on the central government of Moldova.

These groups maintain a state of latent conflict that hinders the consolidation and development of the country.

Russia is investing significantly in disinformation infrastructures to spread narratives favourable to its interests. By controlling the media and online platforms, Russia can influence public opinion, manipulate elections, and advance a political agenda that serves its strategic objectives in Moldova.

⁴Hybrid CoE Working Paper 28: Moldova's struggle against Russia's hybrid threats <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-working-paper-28-moldovas-struggle-against-russias-hybrid-threats-from-countering-the-energy-leverage-to-becoming-more-sovereign-overall/>

3. EVOLUTION OF HYBRID ATTACKS ORCHESTRATED BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA (2021-2024)

2021

Year **2021** was marked by rising geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea region, with a direct impact on Moldova. The early parliamentary elections of July 2021 led to the formation of a pro-European government, which intensified the efforts of external actors, especially the Russian Federation, to influence the political and geopolitical direction of the country.

Shortly after the new government took office, the Russian Federation began to exert economic pressure on Moldova, resorting to energy blackmail and manipulating the prices of energy and other strategic resources. At that time, the Republic of Moldova was almost completely dependent on these resources, which further weakened its economic and political situation.

These economic pressures were accompanied by disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting pro-European authorities and generating internal social tensions.

Disinformation campaigns, orchestrated and financed from abroad, were implemented through local actors, such as pro-Russian politicians and parties, Russian media or those affiliated with these groups, and networks coordinated by anonymous actors, specialised in the dissemination of disinformation on a large scale.

The subversive actions also included cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and Moldovan government institutions, meant to disrupt their normal functioning and undermine public confidence in the pro-European government.

Thus, the year 2021 marked the beginning of a period of intense challenges for the Republic of Moldova, in the context of its efforts to move towards a pro-European trajectory, despite pressures and hybrid threats from the Russian Federation.

2022

Year **2022** was marked by the start of the Russian Federation's military offensive in Ukraine, having a significant and direct impact on Moldova. In addition to the unprecedented humanitarian challenges that affected the economy and the well-being of citizens, the Republic of Moldova continued to be the target of hybrid threats, which became more complex and coordinated, involving a variety of tactics.

In this context, energy blackmail and manipulation of energy prices continued, leading to a significant increase in gas and electricity costs.

This has put unprecedented pressure on the national budget and citizens. The Russian Federation, through Gazprom, has reduced the volume of gas needed for the heating season by up to 50%, complicating the country's gas supply. The artificial gas crisis fuelled protests organised by pro-Russian parties, designed to destabilise the government in Chisinau, with the purpose of creating an impression of widespread dissatisfaction and undermining the legitimacy of the authorities. The financing of these structures came largely from external sources, coordinated by the Kremlin.

In the same year, Moldova witnessed a series of false bomb alerts, which generated panic and insecurity among the population. 124 false alert cases were reported in July and August, compared to 25 cases recorded during the whole of 2021.⁵ This dramatic increase in false alerts had a significant impact on the resources and response capabilities of the authorities, disrupting daily activities and affecting citizens' trust in the government's ability to provide security.

Moldova has also been the target of sophisticated cyberattacks, including phishing, malware, and ransomware, targeting both the public and private sectors. A notable example was the attack on government networks, which highlighted the vulnerabilities of Moldova's cyber defence system. In September 2022, Moldova suffered large-scale DDOS attacks, which severely affected the country's digital infrastructure. These attacks were often announced in advance by Russian hacker groups such as Killnet⁶, and specifically targeted the Moldovan tax service website, blocking citizens' access to essential services. In addition, approximately 80 public websites were affected the previous summer, demonstrating the vulnerability of Moldova's cyber infrastructure to external threats.

In November 2022, the situation worsened with the emergence of a new website called Moldova Leaks, which began publishing alleged private Telegram conversations between high-ranking Moldovan officials.⁷ These leaks exposed sensitive and confidential discussions, endangering national security and compromising the

integrity of public servants. The Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service attributed these leaks to Russian actors, underlining Russia's direct involvement in the destabilisation of the country⁸.

In the Transnistrian region, supported by the Russian Federation, explosions and acts of sabotage have taken place, intended to create instability and strained relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol.⁹ These incidents have been used by Russia to justify its military presence in the region.

Disinformation has been a key component of Russia's hybrid war against Moldova. Fake news and conspiracy theories have been constantly disseminated through social media and Kremlin-controlled media. Russia's disinformation campaigns, disseminated through social media, pro-Russian online media and Moldovan politicians, have aimed to diminish public support for Ukraine¹⁰ and to spread the idea that Moldova is being drawn into the war by Ukraine or the European Union and NATO¹¹. These campaigns have sought to polarise society, create panic and undermine trust in the pro-European government. Examples include the spread of false information about impending economic crises, other alleged security threats and unfounded accusations against pro-Western political leaders.

The Russian Federation continued to support and finance pro-Russian parties and groups in Moldova, including through transfers of funds to electoral campaigns, the organisation of protests, and support for pro-Russian NGOs and media. There was an intensification of efforts to recruit local influencers and public figures

⁵<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/c%C3%A2t-a-spent-policy-due-to-false-alarms-with-bomb%C4%83-/32009115.html>

⁶<https://www.cyberthreat.report/russian-hackers-attacked-websites-of-moldova/>

⁷<https://cybernews.com/news/government-moldova-hack-leak-operation/>

⁸<https://newsmaker.md/ro/seful-sis-despre-scurgerile-from-the-telegram-seem-to-be-others'-special-services-are-the-first-suspects-the-russian-federation/>

⁹<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/what-russia%E2%80%99s-failed-coercion-transnistria-means-annexation-occupied-territory-ukraine>

¹⁰<https://stopfals.md/ro/article/falsuri-despre-moldova-in-the-context-of-the-Russian-military-invasion-ukraine-180690>

¹¹<https://dfirlab.org/2023/03/20/russia-builds-a-special-information-operation-around-transnistria/>

to promote pro-Russian messages and undermine support for the pro-European government.

2023

The year 2023 was marked by tensions and complex challenges for Moldova. Russian officials have issued numerous provocative statements, stirring up fears among the population. These statements have focused on issues such as the treatment of Russian-speaking minorities, the situation on the left bank of the Dniester River, and legislation on separatism. For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Moldova could suffer a fate similar to Ukraine¹². Dmitry Peskov also emphasised Russia's "responsibility" towards the so-called Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (RMN), drawing attention to the need to demilitarise the region.

The Russian Federation, through the Shor Party, orchestrated and financed demonstrations against the government. These protests became increasingly violent, and the authorities uncovered attempts to form paramilitary organisations and groups of provocateurs who were to create chaos and violence. Law enforcement agencies conducted searches and confiscated large sums of money illegally brought into Moldova, and arrested foreign individuals involved in these destabilisations.

Russia's involvement in the elections of the Bashkan of Gagauzia ATU also highlighted Moscow's efforts to politically influence and destabilise key regions in Moldova. Russia used methods such as financing, propaganda, and intimidation to support pro-Russian candidates, which led to political polarisation and undermined public confidence in the elections. This resulted in increased political polarisation and eroded public trust in the electoral processes,

¹²<https://www.intellinews.com/russian-foreign-minister-speaks-of-moldova-as-the-next-ukraine-268877/>

exacerbating tensions between Chisinau and Comrat and complicating the central government's efforts to maintain stability and national cohesion. Russia supports discourses and actions calling for greater autonomy for Gagauzia and promotes separatism, encouraging local pro-Russian leaders to demand more autonomy and challenge the authority of the central government. Moscow uses a combination of financial support, propaganda, electoral manipulation, and exploitation of ethnic and economic tensions to create conflict between the local administration in Gagauzia and the Moldovan government. These actions contribute to internal separation and disobedience, thus destabilising Moldova and keeping it under Russian influence.

In 2023, Moldova also faced sophisticated cyberattacks, targeting both government infrastructure and the private sector. On 1 June 2023, while Moldova was hosting the European Political Community (EPC) Summit, the Moldovan government was the target of a massive cyberattack that affected the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹³ This attack compromised thousands of sensitive documents, creating a significant vulnerability in the country's cyber defence system and undermining confidence in national security.

Throughout the year, cyberattacks continued to put pressure on public institutions. In September 2023, Moldova was the target of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, which targeted key government institutions, such as Chisinau International Airport, the National Agency

¹³<https://disinfo.md/institutiile-statului-tinta-unui-atac-massive-cyber-attack-on-the-eve-of-the-summit-in-bulboaca-deputy-step-confirms-the-attack/>

for Energy Regulation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, as well as the media. These attacks were claimed by the People's CyberArmy¹⁴ Telegram channel, a Russian group known for its coordinated and well-planned cyber operations against countries "unfriendly" to Russia.

In January 2023, the Information Technology and Cyber Security Service of Moldova (STISC) identified a wave of 1,330 phishing and scam emails targeted at government institutions.¹⁵ The aim of these emails was to compromise sensitive data and disrupt the normal activity of public institutions, representing a serious threat to the country's cybersecurity.

In the fall of 2023, the Russian Federation attempted to influence Moldova's local elections through a variety of hybrid tactics¹⁶, including illegal financing, information manipulation, and political corruption. Moscow provided significant amounts of money, from external sources, to support pro-Russian parties and candidates, particularly the "ȘANSĂ" Party affiliated with Ilan SHOR. These funds were used to corrupt voters and candidates, support election campaigns and organise protests against the government. In the run-up to the elections, suspicious transfers to social and infrastructure projects were made, presented as

beneficial for communities but having the aim of manipulating public opinion and influencing voting results.

President Maia Sandu has been the target of deepfake attacks designed to undermine her credibility. During the campaign for the local elections in the fall of 2023, deepfake videos emerged showing Maia Sandu making controversial statements, with the aim of discrediting her and influencing votes in favour of opposition parties. Although these videos were quickly taken down, they had been widely shared, causing temporary damage to her reputation.

Deepfake technology was later used to create several videos which suggested that Maia Sandu supported unpopular policies. One such video featured Sandu promising a strict alignment of Moldova's foreign policy with US and NATO interests, ignoring the country's neutrality. The purpose of this video was to alienate pro-Russian voters and create distrust of her real intentions. Those who orchestrated these attacks had a strong interest in undermining Maia Sandu's pro-European stance, using deepfake to spread disinformation and fuel a climate of distrust among citizens, making it difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

2024

In the first part of 2024, Moldova faced significant hybrid challenges that threatened political stability and social cohesion.

A major disinformation campaign has been orchestrated by Russia and its allies, aiming to spread panic among

Moldovan citizens and suggesting that the pro-European government would lead the country to war. This was part of a broader psychological warfare strategy meant to destabilise Moldova. Key elements of the campaign included spreading fear of war, fake mobilisation letters, protests of discontent

¹⁴<https://www.mapmf.org/alert/30740>

¹⁵<https://stisc.gov.md/ro/stisc-atentie-continua-valul-scam-and-phishing-type-cyberattacks>

¹⁶<https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Sdinner%20of%20influen%C8%9B%C4%83%202024-2025.pdf>

and the manipulation of public opinion regarding integration into the European Union.

The Gagauzia region has been a focal point of tensions, where external actors have attempted to undermine Moldova's sovereignty by inciting local unrest, promoting anti-government sentiment, and supporting separatist movements. The region's strategic importance and historical ties to Russia have made it vulnerable to hybrid threats.

In the Transnistrian region, new provocations meant to escalate tensions with the government in Chisinau have emerged, including military exercises and the movement of armed personnel. These activities have been accompanied by inflammatory rhetoric designed to generate a sense of insecurity and challenge the authority of the Moldovan government.

A new pro-Russian political platform, called "Victoria", was launched in Moscow, with the intention to strengthen pro-Russian sentiments in Moldova. This platform sought to attract support among the population, especially from segments with historical or cultural ties to Russia. The creation of this platform was a strategic step to influence Moldova's political landscape and counter pro-EU movements.

There have also been significant attempts to introduce funds into Moldova to support the electoral activities of pro-Russian parties. These funds were intended to support pro-Russian candidates and parties, thus influencing the democratic process in favour of foreign interests. The flow of illegal funds poses a serious threat to the integrity of Moldova's electoral system and its political independence.

In the run-up to the referendum on EU integration, Moldova faced extensive disinformation campaigns designed to discredit the pro-EU government and the European Union as a whole. These campaigns used social media and fake news to

spread false information and erode public trust in the EU. In May 2024, the Meta company deleted 1,326 Facebook accounts, 80 pages, a group and an Instagram account that engaged in "coordinated and inauthentic behaviour" towards the Moldovan public. The individuals behind this operation created fake accounts and promoted false information about political events in the country. According to the Meta report, the posts targeted controversial public figures, such as fugitive Ilan Shor and MP Marina Tauber, and criticised the current government and efforts to integrate into the European Union, including through parody videos about the President of the Republic of Moldova.

The anti-EU campaign, intended to influence the results of the referendum of October 20, 2024, focused on manipulative messages targeting sensitive topics for Moldovan society, including equal rights and LGBT policies, exploiting existing fears and tensions.

In June 2024, a disinformation campaign involved the distribution of fake videos on Russian pirated movie websites, using the logo of the Ministry of Education, to present school inclusion and LGBT topics, promoting false narratives about the work of the ministry. Another fake video announced the opening of a military camp for children, where they would learn to use weapons. The Ministry of Education denied this information and asked the authorities to identify the people responsible. These videos were released to exploit fears and prejudices in society and to discredit the idea of European integration, associating it with war and LGBT communities. The disinformation aims to create panic and distrust in the pro-European government, amplifying social and political tensions. Pro-Russian actors use sensitive topics to divide the population and undermine support for European integration.

4. AREAS VULNERABLE TO HYBRID THREATS

The Conceptual model identifies 13 domains essential for the functioning and security of the state, which can be targets of hybrid threats. These domains are fundamental for the state functioning and security and include sectors such as politics, public administration, legal, security, diplomatic, defence, infrastructure, economy, cyber, information, social and cultural. Each of these areas presents specific vulnerabilities that the Russian Federation exploits to destabilise the Republic of Moldova.

Political

- **Exploitation for destabilisation:** Russia uses its influence to destabilise the Republic of Moldova, having a significant impact on the political sphere, which is interconnected;
- **Political destabilisation:** Russia uses its influence to destabilise the Republic of Moldova, playing a key role in the hybrid threats targeting this country;
- **Control of political parties:** Over the years, Russia has exerted significant influence over several political parties in Moldova, controlling key aspects of foreign, defence, and domestic policy;
- **Post-election challenges:** The results of the 2020 and 2021 elections have considerably hampered Russia's ability to control the Moldovan political scene, causing a change in the political landscape;
- **Restoring influence:** Russia is making sustained efforts to regain its influence, supporting and financing affiliated political parties;
- **Exploiting social discontent:** Russia encourages pro-Russian opposition parties to take advantage of social discontent by organising anti-government protests, meant to generate a political crisis;
- **Illegal financing:** Illegal financing and political corruption constitute a major tool of Russian influence through which Russia directs resources to pro-Russian parties and individuals;
- **Support for pro-Russian parties:** Russia offers considerable support to pro-Russian parties,

including by providing political advisors and control over associated media channels;

- **Promoting relations with Russia:** Pro-Russian parties in Moldova openly advocate for closer relations with the Russian Federation, integration into the Eurasian Economic Union, and the promotion of Russian culture, media, and the Russian language;
- **Spreading Russian narratives:** These parties further pro-Russian narratives about the United States, the European Union, and the risks associated with Euro-Atlantic integration.
- **Hybrid instruments:** The Russian Federation uses a variety of hybrid tools to support destabilising activities, which include cyber, economic, cultural, administrative, legal, intelligence, diplomatic, and disinformation operations.

Public administration

- **The essential role:** Public administration is crucial to a country's governance and its resilience to hybrid threats. A stable administration functions as the first line of defence against attempts to undermine the government;
- **State of weakness:** Successive governments have kept the state of Moldova in a position of weakness, fostering corruption, oligarchic control, and political nepotism. This weakness has allowed Russia to exert political influence and conduct corrupt operations;
- **Lack of resources:** Moldova's public administration faces weak bureaucracy, inadequate procedures and a system of



insufficiently developed rule of law. Public institutions have limited administrative capacity due to insufficient human and financial resources, while the lack of qualified personnel leads to overstraining of existing employees;

- **Exploiting the situation:** Russia can exploit these weaknesses to highlight the inefficiency and instability of public administration. This situation hinders necessary reforms and modernisation efforts, especially in the judicial and political systems;

- **Impediments to reforms:** The chronic weakness of the public administration makes it difficult to implement meaningful reforms. Russia is taking advantage of this situation to maintain its influence and block modernisation, aiming to restore a preferred status quo if the pro-EU government is removed;

- **Reform efforts:** The Moldovan government has recently begun to reform its public administration to better integrate with the institutions of the European Union. However, this task is enormous and requires significant resources and commitments;

- **Key areas for improvement:** Among the areas requiring immediate attention are the low administrative capacity and the lack of experts in various sectors, which must be urgently addressed to improve the efficiency and stability of public administration.

Legal

- **Exploitation of the Transnistrian region:** Russia is taking advantage of the gaps and uncertainties related to the status of the Transnistrian region, which it de facto controls;

- **Legal uncertainties:** Legal uncertainties persist regarding the debt accumulated for gas deliveries to the Transnistrian region. Russia is using these debts as a coercion tool in negotiations with the Moldovan authorities;

- **Illegal activities:** The administrative line with the Transnistrian region represents a weak point, facilitating illegal activities, such as arms and drug trafficking;

- **Gagauz vulnerability:** The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia constitutes another legal vulnerability. Local authorities threaten with insubordination and separatism, exploiting distrust of the West to block progress in the process of accession to the European Union;

- **Protests and demands for autonomy:** Local politicians and the pro-Russian opposition are organising protests to gain more autonomy for Gagauzia. These actions are accompanied by threats of organising referendums to gain more powers;

- **Disloyalty:** The lack of loyalty of the Gagauz population towards the Republic of Moldova represents a long-term vulnerability, which may affect national stability and cohesion.

Information security

- **Russian Embassy as an operating centre:** The Russian Embassy in Chisinau functions as an operations centre for Russian secret services, which use their diplomatic immunity to carry out espionage, corruption, and political influence activities;

- **Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS):** The Russian Federation also carries out its subversive activities through research centres, such as RISS, which has offices in two main locations in Moldova: the Transnistrian region and the Russian Embassy in Chisinau;

- **Hybrid threat activities:** RISS coordinates a wide range of activities related to hybrid threats, which aim to destabilise the country;

- **Security incidents in the Transnistrian region:** Russia, through its secret services, orchestrated security incidents in the Transnistrian region to intimidate the Moldovan authorities and spread insecurity among citizens;

- **Anti-government protests:** The anti-government protests, organised by the SHOR Party in 2022-2023, were



orchestrated and financed by Russia, with the purpose of destabilising the political situation;

- **Subversive groups:** Russia attempted to introduce subversive groups and members of the Wagner Group into Moldova, with the intention of escalating tensions and organising a coup d'état.

Diplomatic

- **Russia's goals:** Russia uses diplomacy to support hybrid threat operations, seeking to keep Moldova in its sphere of influence and prevent its integration into Euro-Atlantic structures;
- **Interference in internal affairs:** Russian diplomacy is closely linked to political influence, using high-ranking politicians to interfere in Moldova's internal affairs;
- **The Role of the Embassy:** The Russian Embassy in Chisinau plays a key role in supporting Russia's strategic objectives in various fields, including politics, information, economy, and culture;
- **Exploitation of conflicts:** Russia uses the unresolved status of the Transnistrian conflict to control Moldovan governments, promoting diplomatic solutions that align with its geopolitical interests;
- **The 5+2 negotiations:** The Kremlin aims to federalise Moldova through the 5+2 negotiation process, thus ensuring its long-term control over the country. Russia plays a dual role in the 5+2 format, being both a mediator and a party to the conflict, a strategy like that used in the Ukraine conflict with the Minsk agreements;
- **Support for pro-Russian forces:** High-level visits by Russian politicians are used to support pro-Russian and anti-EU forces in Moldova, especially during election campaigns;
- **Credibility of pro-Russian forces:** Russian politicians and officials openly support pro-Russian forces in Moldova, increasing their visibility and credibility among voters;

- **Geopolitical threats:** High-ranking Russian politicians and diplomats frequently threaten Moldovan authorities regarding the country's geopolitical orientation.

Defence

- **Neutrality status:** Moldova's neutrality, stipulated in the Constitution, led to a neglect of the armed forces, contributing to their underdevelopment;
- **Underdevelopment of the armed forces:** The Armed Forces of Moldova are poorly developed, unreformed and face outdated equipment and organisational cultures;
- **Re-evaluation of defence policy:** The Russian-Ukrainian war led Moldova to reevaluate its defence policy, given the objective of joining the European Union;
- **Need for modernisation:** Modernisation of the Armed Forces is essential to face current challenges, including through the acquisition of modern equipment for monitoring and protecting airspace, countering drones, and securing critical infrastructure;
- **Cost estimation:** The Ministry of Defence estimates that Moldova needs approximately 250 million euros to modernise the armed forces;
- **Territorial control:** Moldova has partial control over its territory and borders due to the Transnistrian region, which is controlled by authorities subordinate to Russia;
- **Russian military presence:** Approximately 1,700 Russian soldiers are deployed on the left bank of the Dniester, as part of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) and the Peacekeeping Mission;
- **Combative value:** The combative value of Russian forces in the Transnistrian region cannot be accurately determined;
- **Exercising pressure:** Russia uses its military presence in the so-called RMN to exert pressure on the Moldovan government

instilling fear in society and maintaining its influence by threatening a possible escalation of the conflict;

- **The Cobasna warehouse:** The Cobasna ammunition depot, with outdated equipment, is used by Russia as a tool to maintain its influence and create tensions in the region;
- **Disinformation and manipulation:** Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has used the warehouse to create a divide between Ukraine and Moldova/RMN, promoting false narratives about a possible invasion of the Transnistrian region by Ukraine. Russia is also coordinating disinformation campaigns to discredit the Chisinau government's efforts of modernising the national army.

Infrastructure

- **Energy vulnerability:** The energy sector, especially gas and electricity, represents one of the most vulnerable areas of Moldova, being constantly subject to pressure from Russia;
- **Diversification of suppliers:** In the past, Russia was Moldova's sole gas supplier. However, thanks to diversification efforts and financial assistance from the European Union and the United States, Moldova can now purchase gas from multiple suppliers;
- **Russian energy blackmail:** Despite diversification, Moldova remains vulnerable to Russian energy blackmail, particularly through the Cuciurgan Power Plant, located in the Transnistrian region and managed by the "Inter RAO" Russian company. Any interruption in supplies from this power plant could affect the country's entire electricity system;
- **Critical electrical nodes:** The Transnistrian region, which is not fully controlled by the Moldovan constitutional authorities, hosts essential electrical nodes, representing a strategic vulnerability that could be exploited by Russia for acts of sabotage;

- **Russian control:** Russian companies own important strategic assets in Moldova, including MoldovaGaz, the country's largest energy company;
- **Efforts to reduce dependency:** The government has begun implementing measures to reduce dependence on Russia, such as separating the gas transportation system from Gazprom;
- **Transport infrastructure.** Moldova's underdeveloped transport infrastructure limits connectivity with the European Union and hinders the country's economic transformation;
- **Inadequate connections with Romania:** The lack of bridges and direct highway connections with Romania, together with an outdated Soviet-era railway system, restricts Moldova's ability to integrate into the EU;
- **Risks of paralysis:** Weak infrastructure makes Moldova more vulnerable to being paralysed by hostile actors during military or quasi-military operations, increasing dependence on neighbouring countries, especially Romania.

Economy

- **Weakening of Russia's influence:** Russia's economic influence on Moldova has declined in recent decades, especially in the trade, labour market, and energy sectors;
- **Economic independence:** Moldova has never been as economically independent from Russia as it is now, with the European Union becoming its largest trading partner and investor;
- **Positive trends:** Recent trends include diversifying energy sources, reducing dependence on Russian gas, and strengthening economic relations with the EU;
- **Increasing trade with the EU:** After signing the Association Agreement (AA/DCFTA) with the EU in 2014, Moldova's trade with the European Union increased significantly, with the EU accounting for 65.4% of Moldova's exports in 2023;



- **Decline in trade with Russia:** Although trade with Russia has steadily declined, Russia continues to manipulate trade restrictions to exert influence, especially in the agricultural sector;
- **Transnistrian economy:** The region, which is heavily dependent on free gas from Russia, has had to adapt following the war in Ukraine and the closure of its borders, moving more towards the EU economically;
- **Remittances:** Remittances from Moldovans working abroad represented 11.8% of GDP in 2023. The main sources of income have shifted from Russia to European Union countries;
- **Decreasing number of workers:** The number of Moldovan workers in Russia has decreased significantly, and their remittances now constitute only 8.8% of the total, compared to 54.2% from the EU;
- **Economic destabilisation:** Despite the loss of some economic leverage, Russia continues to use energy prices and volumes to destabilise Moldova, especially in the cold season, when energy consumption is high;
- **Impact of energy prices:** High energy prices represent a significant burden for Moldovan households, sometimes absorbing up to 70% of a family's monthly income;
- **Corruption and manipulation:** Endemic corruption in Moldova helps hostile actors, including Russia, undermine the government's efforts at democratisation. Russia maintains a complex network of patronage among oligarchs and officials to manipulate state institutions and policies;
- **Pro-Russian propaganda:** Pro-Russian forces use propaganda to emphasise the importance of economic relations with Russia, despite Moldova's significant orientation towards the EU. They argue that maintaining good relations with Russia is essential for Moldova's economic stability and prosperity, promoting the idea that severing ties with Russia would lead to economic collapse.

Cybernetic

- **High vulnerability:** Moldova's cyber domain is extremely vulnerable, with hackers affiliated with the Russian state having the ability to penetrate all 13 domains identified in the report;
- **Russian cyber tools:** Russia uses cyber tools to support intelligence operations and to infiltrate various areas, including political, judicial, social, cultural, economic, military and infrastructure;
- **Cybersecurity challenges:** Moldova faces significant challenges in addressing cybersecurity, due to inadequate protection of outdated software and hardware and poor cyber hygiene among state officials and civil servants;
- **Hacking social media accounts:** Incidents of hacking into decision-makers' social media and instant messaging accounts in November 2022 highlighted these vulnerabilities, although the leaked information was not extremely harmful, as it could be used for potential blackmail or smear campaigns;
- **Undermining public trust:** Information leaks, along with falsified data, have undermined public trust in authorities;
- **Limited financial resources:** Moldova does not have sufficient financial and human resources to significantly improve cybersecurity in the short and medium term;
- **Low cyber literacy:** The level of cyber literacy among state officials is very low, many of them using domains hosted by Russian companies, which increases their vulnerability;
- **Using pirated software:** Some officials use pirated or illegal software, which creates additional vulnerabilities because these systems cannot be properly maintained and updated;
- **Dependence on personal devices:** Many government employees are forced to use personal devices due to a lack of government-provided equipment, which affects information security;



- **Migration of IT experts:** Economic and financial conditions are driving many IT and cybersecurity experts to seek jobs abroad, with public sector salaries being uncompetitive;
- **The hybrid work model:** The government uses a hybrid work model, allowing IT experts to work part-time for both the government and the private sector, which creates new vulnerabilities related to conflicts of interest.

Information

- **Common tool of hybrid threats:** Manipulated information is a frequently used tool in hybrid threats, due to its low cost, significant impact and the recent development of defence measures against it;
- **Intelligence operations:** These operations can achieve various strategic objectives without requiring other hybrid threat tools;
- **Russia's goals:** Russia aims to undermine perceptions of security, reduce trust in state institutions, and polarise Moldovan society through information manipulation, fake news, and influence operations;
- **Change of Government:** The strategic objective is to change the government, stop cooperation with the EU and NATO, and reverse the European integration processes;
- **Pro-Russian media channels:** Russian-affiliated media channels, controlled by local pro-Russian political forces, oligarchs or Russian citizens, constitute the main tools for information manipulation;
- **Media competition:** Moldovan TV stations face fierce competition from Russian-affiliated channels, which benefit from considerable funding and rebroadcast big-budget Russian content, enjoying popularity among citizens, especially Russian speakers;
- **Dominance in the written press:** The same dominance is observed in the print media, where the most popular newspapers are local branches of Russian publications;

- **The spread of Russian narratives:** Russian narratives are propagated through social media platforms such as Facebook, Odnoklassniki.ru, Telegram, VKontakte, and through websites such as mail.ru, sputnik.md, and point.md;
- **Pro-Russian propaganda:** Pro-Russian actors in Moldova, including political figures and influencers, are rapidly adopting and spreading Russian propaganda;
- **Election campaigns:** During election campaigns, Russian media promote theories meant to discredit pro-EU parties, focusing on topics such as national identity, geopolitics, and the preservation of Moldovan culture;
- **Response legislation:** In response to Russian propaganda, in 2022, the Moldovan government adopted legislation banning certain foreign analytical and information programs, including those from Russia;
- **Suspension of licenses:** Authorities suspended the broadcasting licenses of six TV channels for spreading biased information regarding Moldova and the Russian-Ukrainian war;
- **The Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation** was established with the mission of identifying, preventing and combating disinformation at the national level.

Social

- **Social challenges:** Moldova faces numerous social problems, including poverty, extensive labour migration, sociocultural changes, and societal polarisation related to the country's geopolitical direction;
- **Exploitation of social issues:** Russia exploits these issues to create favourable conditions for its hybrid threat activities, aiming to divide and polarise Moldovan society;
- **Region control:** Russian military control over the Transnistrian region and political influence exercised in Gagauzia contribute to the general fragility of Moldovan society;
- **Russia's strategy:** Moscow's strategy is to mobilise these regions and their inhabitants against the central government in Chisinau;



- **Exploiting crises:** Russia uses crises to maintain divisions and polarisation, manipulating energy prices as weapons and supporting protest parties, such as the SHOR Party, to channel frustration into political action and social unrest;
- **Economic hardships:** Economic hardships are attributed to the current government's pro-EU policies, while Russia promises advantageous gas deals to opposition parties if they come to power;
- **Agricultural trade manipulation:** Russia manipulates agricultural trade by banning exports from Moldova while allowing trade with pro-Russian regions or districts;
- **Russian propaganda:** Russian propaganda focuses on identity politics, including anti-Moldovan and anti-Romanian narratives, using ethnic (Slavic), religious (Russian Orthodox Church) and cultural (former Soviet Union) identities to divide society;
- **Perception of the European Union:** The European Union is presented as a decadent organisation, with a hidden agenda to destroy the Orthodox faith and Moldovan customs, positioning Russia as the protector of traditional Moldovan society.

Cultural

- **Exploitation of cultural heritage:** Russia capitalises on Moldova's cultural and historical characteristics to influence its national identity, with particular emphasis on the Soviet legacy and the activities of the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC);
- **The concept of "Holy Russia":** Moscow perceives Moldova as part of "Holy Russia", a notion that goes beyond the religious dimension, integrating cultural and spiritual aspects;
- **The Role of the Moldovan Orthodox Church:** The MOC, considered among the most trusted institutions in the country, serves as the main instrument of Russian cultural influence, with over 90% of Moldovans identifying as Orthodox.

- **Promoting traditional values:** Representatives of the Metropolitanate of Moldova frequently promote "traditional values" and oppose Moldova's integration into the European Union, presenting it as a decadent entity;
- **Opposition to EU accession:** The Church undermines the Moldovan government's efforts to join the EU by opposing legislative reforms related to minority protection and other modernisation initiatives;
- **Political support for pro-Russians:** The Metropolitanate of Moldova actively backs up pro-Russian politicians, especially during election campaigns, supporting candidates from the Party of Socialists and the Party of Communists and discrediting pro-Western figures, such as Maia Sandu;
- **Disinformation:** The Church is spreading disinformation on topics such as the Covid-19 pandemic, 5G technology and the Russian-Ukrainian war, contributing to increased confusion among the population;
- **Russia-affiliated organisations:** Organisations such as Russkiy Mir Foundation promote the Russian language and are actively involved in the educational system, broadcasting pro-Russian media content;
- **Funding initiatives:** These organisations fund initiatives that disseminate Russian state media content, acting as centres of political and geopolitical influence in Moldova;
- **Social polarisation:** Russian cultural influence is manifested through Russian media in Moldova, symbolic economic and cultural cooperation with Gagauzia and the Transnistrian region, with the purpose of deepening social polarisation and discrediting pro-European groups.

5. HYBRID ATTACK TOOLS

When analysing the hybrid threat activities carried out by the Russian Federation, we have observed various ways in which it achieves its objectives. We can identify the most common tools used, which can be applied both individually and in combination, affecting various domains simultaneously.

For example, **cyberattacks** can directly target critical infrastructure, but also have effects on politics and the economy, generating panic and instability. **Disinformation and propaganda** are used to influence public opinion and diminish trust in state institutions. These strategies can be combined with diplomatic and economic efforts to maximise impact.

Exploiting social and cultural vulnerabilities can intensify polarisation and internal tensions, facilitating Russia's political and strategic influence. Thus, these tools do not operate in isolation; they are interconnected and often orchestrated to create a synergistic effect, increasing the impact on the targeted country.

By understanding how these tools are used and in what domains, we can develop more effective strategies to counter hybrid threats and protect national security and stability.

The most common tools used for this purpose in the case of the Republic of Moldova include:

Tools	Potential affected domains
Creating or exploiting economic dependencies	Economy, Diplomacy, Politics, Public Administration
Undermining the opponent's national economy	Economy, Public Administration, Politics, Diplomacy
Exploiting economic difficulties	Economy, Public Administration, Politics, Diplomacy
Cyber espionage	Infrastructure, Space, Cyber, Military/Defence, Public Administration
Cyber operations	Infrastructure, Space, Cyber, Social/Societal, Public Administration, Military/Defence
Airspace violation	Military/Defence, Social/Societal, Politics, Diplomacy
Conventional/sub-conventional operations of the armed forces	Military/Defence
Paramilitary (proxy) organisations	Military/Defence
Military exercises	Military/Defence, Diplomacy, Politics, Societal
Funding cultural groups and think tanks	Society, Culture, Politics, Diplomacy
Exploiting sociocultural cleavages (ethnic, religious and cultural)	Social/Societal, Culture
Promoting social unrest	Infrastructure, Social/Societal, Economy, Politics
Exploitation of vulnerabilities in public administration (including emergency management)	Public Administration, Politics, Social/Societal
Promoting and exploiting corruption	Public Administration, Economy, Legal, Social/Societal
Exploiting limits, gaps and uncertainties in legislation	Infrastructure, Cyber, Space, Economy, Military/Defence, Culture, Social/Societal,

	Public Administration, Legal, Information, Diplomacy, Politics, Information
Information gathering	Intelligence, Army/Defence
Embassies	Diplomacy, Politics, Intelligence, Social/Societal
Creating confusion or a contradictory narrative	Social/Societal, Information, Diplomacy,
Discrediting the leadership and/or candidates	Politics, Public Administration, Social/Societal
Support from political actors	Politics, Public Administration, Social/Societal
Coercion of politicians and/or the government	Politics, Public Administration, Legal
Media control and interference	Information, Infrastructure (Media), Social/Societal, Culture
Disinformation and propaganda campaigns	Social/Societal, Informational, Political, Cyber, Culture, Public Administration

6. HYBRID ATTACKS IMPACT EVALUATION

Next, we will use the **Comprehensive Ecosystem Model (CORE)** to analyse three case studies, focused on three essential domains: 1) European integration, 2) social cohesion and 3) economic resilience.

Applying this model will help us understand the impact of hybrid attacks on the entire ecosystem. Through CORE, we will assess how each domain is influenced by different hybrid threat tools and strategies, and how these interconnected influences can weaken the overall structure of the state.

- **European integration:** We will analyse how disinformation and propaganda are used to undermine public trust in the EU accession process and to destabilise political support for this endeavour.
- **Social cohesion:** We will examine how ethnic and religious tensions are exploited to divide society and create internal conflicts.
- **Economic resilience:** We will assess the impact of economic manipulation on financial stability and critical infrastructure.

Through these analyses, we will gain a clear picture of how hybrid attacks can undermine the functioning and security of the state, while providing essential information for strengthening defence and promoting long-term stability.

European integration

The evolution of the European integration process of the Republic of Moldova after 2020 has been marked by important steps and significant challenges, in a changing domestic political context and a tense regional geopolitical situation. In the 2020 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections, the citizens of the Republic of Moldova clearly showed their support for European integration, which is the civilizational choice of most of the population. The new government has adopted a reform agenda firmly oriented towards European integration, emphasising the consolidation of the rule of law, the fight against corruption and the improvement of governance.

In June 2022, the European Council granted the Republic of Moldova the status of candidate country for accession to the European Union. This decision was taken in the geopolitical context complicated by the war in Ukraine and the increasing pressure on Moldova. The granting of candidate status was a recognition of the significant progress made by Moldova in

implementing pro-European reforms and its firm commitment to European integration.

The European Union is providing financial, technical and political support for the Republic of Moldova to implement essential reforms in the judiciary, economy and public administration. These reforms are intended to improve transparency, reduce corruption and strengthen democratic institutions, helping Moldova move forward on its path towards European integration. In addition, the EU is promoting initiatives to strengthen human rights and ensure effective and accountable governance.

Although Moldova is making significant progress towards European integration, the Russian Federation is intensifying its efforts to influence and destabilise the country. Russia is using a hybrid influence strategy that includes disinformation, support for separatist groups and pro-Russian politicians, and exploitation of

economic and social vulnerabilities of Moldova. The purpose of these actions is to keep Moldova under its influence and prevent integration into Western structures.

Russian disinformation and propaganda intend to polarise Moldovan society, generating tensions between various ethnic and social groups. Russia economically and logistically supports political parties and movements that promote a pro-Russian orientation and oppose European integration, encouraging narratives based on historical, cultural and religious ties with the Russian Federation.

In its efforts to undermine Moldova's European aspirations, Russia supports so-called "statist" and anti-Western networks, using public diplomacy and interfering in internal crises. These actions are part of a broader strategy to hinder the consolidation of the democratic state and civil society in Moldova, while weakening its aspirations to EU membership. These efforts undermine public trust in democratic institutions and the reform process, generating political and social instability.

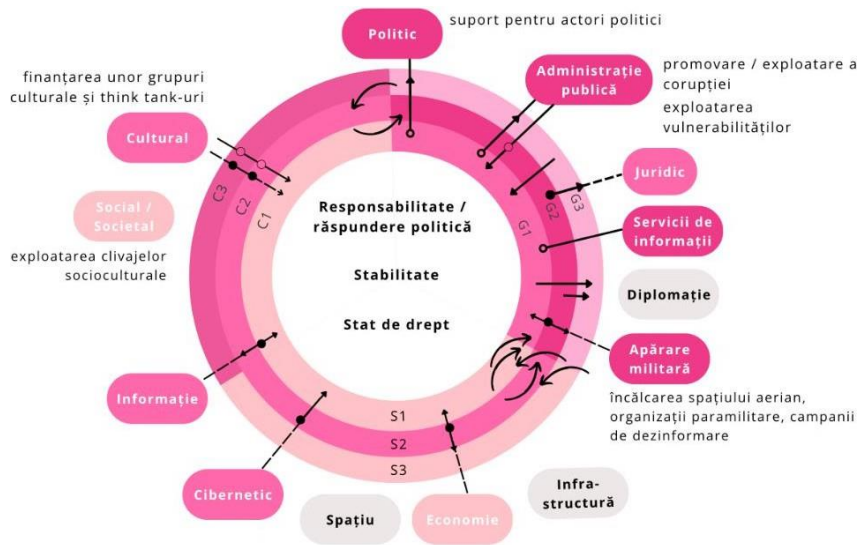
Russia is also offering economic and political alternatives to certain regions of Moldova, presenting them as easier to adopt and implement than the reforms demanded by the EU. The favourable conditions promoted by Russia at both the local and national levels aim to replace European standards and exercise control and influence.

The lack of transparency in financial flows from the Russian Federation to Moldova and the absence of adequate verification mechanisms exacerbate corruption and the capture of political and economic elites. Russian funds are often channelled through opaque structures, which creates difficulties in tracking and monitoring their use. These practices not only fuel corruption but also strengthen the ties between local leaders and those from Moscow, thereby consolidating Russian influence in the region.

Strategic corruption undermines stability and the rule of law, negatively affecting Moldova's ability to align with EU standards and advance on the European integration path. By corrupting local and national officials, Russia manages to block reform initiatives and keep Moldova in a state of dependence and vulnerability. This creates an environment conducive to manipulation and control, in which reforms required for strengthening democracy and economic development are often thwarted or delayed.

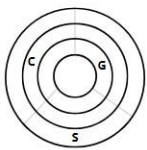
In conclusion, Russia's influence in Moldova, through its destabilising practices, represents a major obstacle to the consolidation of democracy and the country's European integration. It is essential that Moldova further strengthen its international partnerships and implement the necessary reforms to ensure a stable and prosperous future.

Figure 3. European Integration - CORE Analysis



LEGENDĂ

- A FUNDAMENTE:** Elemente esențiale ale democrației pe care actorii amenințărilor hibride doresc să le compromită și trebuie protejate.
- B SPAȚII ȘI STRATURI:** Ecosistemul este compus din trei spații cu trei straturi. Fiecare strat este reprezentat de litera capitală a spațiului (C, G, S) plus un număr corespunzător "localizării" sale (1, 2, 3).



- 1. Local
- 2. Național
- 3. Internațional

Spațiul civic	Spațiul guvernământă	Spațiul servicii
C1 - Comunități civile	G1 - Administrația locală	S1 - Clustere de servicii
C2 - Națiuni civice	G2 - Guvernarea de stat	S2 - Conexiuni de servicii
C3 - Grupuri civice	G3 - Guvernarea multilaterală	S3 - Servicii globale

- C DOMENII:** Plasate în jurul ecosistemului în funcție de spațiul cu care au cele mai puternice legături.

SĂGETI | Atac nou asupra ecosistemului care nu a avut loc anterior.

-----> Atac asupra ecosistemului.

————> Efecte în cascadă între spațiile/straturile compromise. Poate avea loc în cadrul unui spațiu (G1-G2), între spații (C1→G1) și între spații și straturi (S2-C1).

CULORI | Intensitatea compromiterii (evaluare calitativă)

- scăzut
- mediu
- mediu-înalt
- înalt
- foarte înalt

FIG. 3 *Outside the circle* **Political**, support for political actors, **Cultural**, financing of some cultural groups and think tanks, **Social/Societal**, exploiting sociocultural cleavages, **Information, Cyber, Space, Economy, Infrastructure, Military defence**, air space violation, paramilitary organisations, disinformation campaigns, **Diplomacy, Intelligence, Legal, Public administration**, promoting/exploiting corruption, exploiting vulnerabilities *Inside the circle* **Political Responsibility/ Accountability, Stability, Rule of Law**

LEGEND A. Foundations Essential elements of democracy that hybrid threat actors want to compromise and must be protected.

B. Spaces and layers The ecosystem is composed of three spaces with three layers. Each layer is represented by the capital letter of the space (C, G, S) plus a number corresponding to its location (1, 2, 3) 1. Local 2. National 3. International **Civic space:**C1 Civil communities, C2 Civic nations, C3 Civic groups **Governance space** G1 Local administration G2 State governance G3 Multilateral governance **Services space** S1 Service clusters S2 Service connections S3 Global services

C. Domains: placed around the ecosystem according to the space with which they have the strongest connections

Arrows

New attack on the ecosystem that has not occurred before. → Attack on ecosystem → Cascading effects between compromised spaces/layers can occur within a space (G1-G2), between spaces (C1→ G1), between spaces and layers(S2-C1)

Colours Compromise intensity (Qualitative evaluation) - Low, Medium, Medium-High, High, Very High.

Moscow's creation and exploitation of economic vulnerabilities aimed to affect the stability of the ecosystem. In this context, Russia used a series of tools to penetrate sensitive areas, with direct repercussions

on level S2 and eventually affecting levels S1 and S3 in the service space. This in turn had an impact on the political space at the local and national levels (G1/G2).

In terms of exploiting socio-cultural cleavages and promoting destabilisation and social unrest, Russia has invoked historical, linguistic and cultural ties, using them as a tool in artificially created crises. These unrests have affected societies at all three levels (C1/C2/C3).

Pro-Russian actors involved in hybrid actions against the pro-European government have used legal regulations, processes and institutions to undermine the rule of law and the development of democracy in Moldova. This has affected national governance and local public administrations (G2/G1), generating indirect effects at the G3 level.

Russia's cyber operations to destabilise the country have focused primarily on the S2/S1 level of service sector, directly impacting the G2 level of national public administration.

Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns have reinforced an anti-Western narrative, negatively influencing local and national societies (C2/C1), and ultimately affecting the entire region (C3).

Russia also conducted subversive operations during the election campaign for the local general elections in autumn 2023, aimed at sabotaging electoral processes and obstructing the work of public administrations, affecting local and regional political stability (G1/G2). These actions also aimed to influence regional relations at the G3 level.

Through paramilitary (proxy) organisations and criminal groups, Russia sought to undermine and generate mass destabilisation, provoking street violence and amplifying political and social instability in Moldova (G1/G2), with an impact on regional political stability (G3).

Economic resilience

In 2021, the Republic of Moldova witnessed an escalation of geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea region, significantly influenced by Russia. Early parliamentary elections in July 2021 led to the formation of a pro-European government, which prompted Russia to intensify efforts to influence Moldova's political and geopolitical direction.

Immediately after the new government took office, Russia began to exert economic pressure on Moldova. This pressure manifested itself through energy blackmail, manipulation of energy prices and other strategic resources on which Moldova was completely dependent. In this context, Moldova's economic and political vulnerability increased significantly.

Economic pressures have been accompanied by well-orchestrated disinformation campaigns, designed to discredit pro-European authorities and generate internal social tensions.

These externally funded disinformation campaigns were carried out through local actors, such as pro-Russian politicians and parties, Russian media, and anonymous networks specialising in the dissemination of disinformation on a large scale. The aim of these actions was to erode public trust in the pro-European government and undermine the reform process.

In 2022, economic pressures and energy blackmail continued, leading to a significant increase in gas and electricity costs. This put unprecedented pressure on the national budget and citizens. In addition, Gazprom reduced the volume of gas needed for the heating season by up to 50%, complicating the country's gas supply. This artificial crisis generated major economic instability, deeply affecting the daily lives of Moldovan citizens.

The crisis fuelled protests organised by pro-Russian parties with the purpose of destabilising the government in Chisinau. These protests were intended to create the impression of widespread discontent and undermine the legitimacy of the authorities.

The funding of these protests came largely from external sources, coordinated by the Kremlin, thus emphasising Russia's influence and interference in Moldova's internal affairs.

Figure 5. Economic Resilience – CORE Analysis

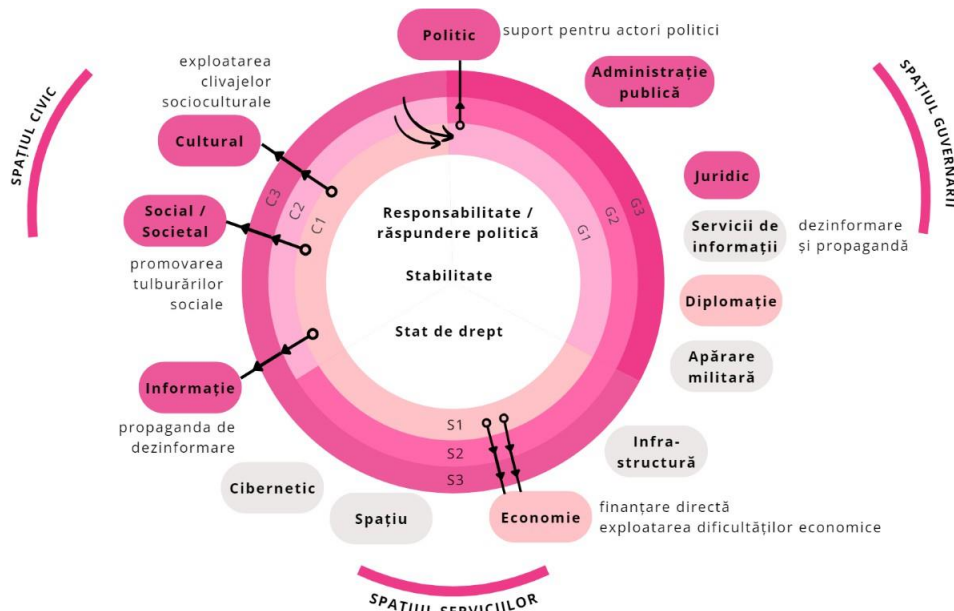


FIG.5 Outside the circle: **CIVIC SPACE** Political, support for political actors **Cultural**, exploiting sociocultural cleavages **Social/Societal**: Promoting social disorders. **Information**, Disinformation propaganda **SERVICES SPACE** Cyber, Space, **Economy**: Direct financing, exploiting economic difficulties, **Infrastructure**. **GOVERNANCE SPACE** Public administration, **Legal**, **Intelligence**: Disinformation and Propaganda **Diplomacy**, **Military Defence**. **Inside the circle:** Political Responsibility/ Accountability, Stability, Rule of law.

The economic pressure and energy blackmail exerted by the Russian Federation have primarily affected the government sector, especially the diplomacy and public administration domains. This has compromised the level of governance at the state level (G2), generating a cascading effect on national companies, represented in the service sector layer (S2).

In parallel, the Russian Federation has been conducting a disinformation campaign that has targeted the political, informational, and social spheres. This campaign has been particularly targeted at the poor and socially vulnerable groups, who can be easily exploited and manipulated, with the aim of increasing unrest in society. The effects of this campaign have been felt directly in the civic space, affecting the group layer (C1).

As a result of the disinformation campaign and the impact of economic

pressure in the (S2) layer, protests erupted across the country, with cascading effects on local (G1) and national (G2) governance levels. This instability also influenced the multilateral layer (G3), as internal polarisation of the state can affect multilateral international cooperation and foreign policy, especially the European integration vector.

Thus, the “Stability” pillar (represented at the centre of the ecosystem) was compromised. Although the most affected segments were at the local and national levels, there is a significant likelihood that the strategic objective of the Russian Federation, which is the author of this hybrid threat, is to create instability in the multilateral layer (G3). Targeting the national (G2) and groups (C1) segments, the “ultimate objective” was to compromise the European integration process by decreasing popular support for the pro-European government.

Social cohesion

The Russian Federation's involvement in the 2023 elections of the Bashkan of Gagauzia ATU underscores Moscow's efforts to exert political influence and destabilise regions in Moldova. Through methods such as financing, propaganda, intimidation, and electoral fraud, Russia has sought to ensure the victory of its favoured candidates and keep Moldova within its sphere of influence. This has led to increased political polarisation and undermined public trust in electoral processes, increasing tensions between Chisinau and Comrat and complicating the central government's efforts to maintain stability and national cohesion.

Russia supports discourses and actions that promote expanded autonomy for Gagauzia and separatism, encouraging local pro-Russian leaders to demand more autonomy and challenge the authority of the central government. Thus, Moscow uses a mix of financial support, propaganda, electoral manipulation, and exploitation of ethnic and economic tensions to counterpose the local administration of Gagauzia to the constitutional government of Moldova, generating premises for internal separatism and disobedience, thus destabilising the country and keeping it under Russian influence.

The tensions in the Gagauzia ATU are being exploited by the Kremlin in an attempt to undermine the integrity and functionality of local governance and democracy, with cascading effects in other districts of the country, in order to influence decision-making processes. Former leaders of the region and current politicians in Gagauzia have collaborated closely with the Kremlin administration, and reports by the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) indicate links between the attempts at destabilisation in Gagauzia and these Russian connections. Although the activities to influence and destabilise society are mainly taking place at the local level, the Russian Federation's targets are, in fact, national and international. Its aim is not to achieve an independent Gagauzia, but rather to generate deep and long-lasting internal instability in the Republic of Moldova, which would thwart efforts to integrate into the EU.

To reach this goal, Russia has resorted to various tools, including supporting local political actors and using proxies, polarising society and exploiting social divisions, promoting contradictory narratives, funding cultural groups and think tanks, discrediting state leaders, cyber operations, and direct investments in various dubious social projects.

Figure 4. Social cohesion - CORE analysis

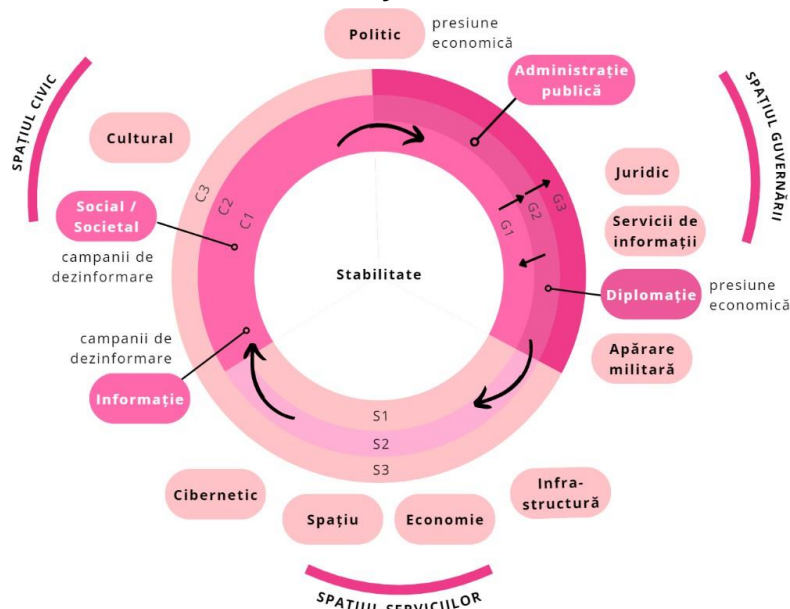


FIG.4 *Outside the circle:* **CIVIC SPACE** Political, economic pressure Cultural, Social/Societal: Disinformation campaigns Information, Disinformation campaigns **SERVICES SPACE** Cyber, Space, Economy, Infrastructure. **GOVERNANCE SPACE** Public administration, Legal, Intelligence, Diplomacy: Economic pressure, Military Defence. *Inside the circle:* Stability.

The Kremlin continued to **exploit the socio-cultural cleavages** in the Republic of Moldova, including ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and regional ones, to further polarise Gagauz society in relation to the rest of the country. This affected the C1 level of the ecosystem, and the instability emanating from Gagauzia became a problem for Moldovan society as a whole (C2/C3), indirectly influencing local and national politics (G1/G2).

By **supporting political actors** who back up or encourage separatist policies or disobedience towards the government in Chisinau, Russia has again affected the local governance level (G1). This has led to a national policy problem, impacting public administration and the national legal system (G2).

The Russian Federation has also used various tools to **exploit economic difficulties** in the Republic of Moldova, including in the Gagauzia ATU.

They include granting preferential facilities for the export of Gagauz products to the Russian Federation and indirect investments in illicit social projects (S1/S2). By exploiting loopholes in the legislation, Russia provides direct financial support to the authorities of Gagauzia ATU to finance civil servants and certain social categories, such as pensioners, bypassing the legal framework of the Republic of Moldova, which affects the legal field at the governance levels (G1/G2).

The disinformation and propaganda campaigns carried out by Russia intended to challenge the authority of the central government and polarise society at the C1 and C2 levels. The political influence exerted by the Russian Federation at the local level in Gagauzia directly affects the diplomacy field, calling into question the policy of European integration and threatening the right to secession in the event of a “loss of sovereignty” of the Republic of Moldova (G3).

7. MAIN STAGES OF HYBRID THREATS

The analytical framework of the conceptual model identifies three main phases of hybrid threats: **preparation, destabilisation and coercion**. These phases constitute a progression of actions that a malign actor, such as Russia, can use to achieve its strategic objectives. The transition from one phase to another is characterised by escalation and de-escalation of activities, which mask the actor's true intentions and complicate the target country's situational awareness.

The authors of the Hybrid CoE report "Moldova's Struggle Against Russia's Hybrid Threats"¹⁷ analyse how these phases are reflected in Russia's hybrid threat activities in Moldova. By examining concrete examples and case studies, a deeper understanding can be gained of the sophisticated strategies employed and the significant impact they have on Moldova's political stability, economic resilience, and social cohesion.

Preparation

Preparation phase (priming) represents the fundamental and widespread stage of hybrid threats. The main objective of the adversary is to maintain constant monitoring of the target country, keeping the society in a continuous state of insecurity, division and unrest. This is achieved by using hybrid threat tools, which are difficult to detect, applied in various domains.

Through the coordinated use of these tools, the adversary can manipulate societal dynamics, gaining influence over national processes and distorting the perceptions, values and shared norms of the population. This disruption hinders the normal functioning of the country and ensures that both the state and society remain in a constant state of vigilance and tension.

In the ideal scenario for the adversary, he can achieve goals such as changing the leadership of a country or influencing political decisions, without communicating directly with the target country. This manipulation causes or forces the country to adopt decisions that favour the adversary's geopolitical objectives, even if they are harmful to its own interests.

Since the victory of pro-European parties in the 2021 elections, Moldova has been continuously subjected to Russian preparatory activities aimed at undermining the government's EU integration efforts. These activities have affected various areas, generating persistent political, economic and administrative crises.

Russia manipulates the information space through controlled media, religious authorities and pro-Russian politicians, presenting the European Union as a threat to the lives and security of citizens. The widespread propaganda aims to implant in population consciousness the idea that integration into the EU implies the loss of sovereignty and the possibility of war. Proxy actors, who amplify these messages in the interests of Russia, focus in particular on ethnic and linguistic communities, such as Gagauz, Russian speakers and rural conservatives, with the purpose of creating divisions.

Another tactic used is to overload the state administration with artificial crises, such as pressures in the energy sector, trade bans, and providing aid and financial favours to certain regions to the detriment of the rest of the country.

¹⁷ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/20240129-Hybrid-CoE-Working-Paper-28-Moldovas-struggle-against-Russias-hybrid-threats-WEB.pdf>

These intentional actions seek to demonstrate the government's inefficiency.

A relevant example from the preparation phase is represented by the security incidents in the Transnistrian area and the false bomb threats, which are used to increase fear among citizens, exacerbating the situation in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Pro-Russian forces are mobilised through covert financial support to political groups, including transfers of funds to parties and organisations that promote Moscow's agenda. These funds are used to finance electoral campaigns, organise protests, and undermine Moldova's pro-European government. In addition, the money is allocated to support disinformation and propaganda activities meant to discredit pro-European leaders and create a favourable image for Russia.

Russian diplomats and politicians play a crucial role in these efforts, frequently visiting Moldova to meet with pro-Russian leaders and convey Moscow's messages. During these visits, they suggest abandoning the pro-EU direction and reunifying with Russia through initiatives such as the Economic Union.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) could solve Moldova's problems. These messages are being heavily promoted in Russian-controlled media and on social networks, with the aim of influencing public opinion and gaining support for the pro-Russian agenda.

Integration into Russian-dominated structures, such as the Eurasian Economic Union, is presented as beneficial for Moldova's economic and political stability. Moscow promises economic advantages, such as lower energy prices and access to Russian markets, to attract public support. The cultural and historical benefits of rapprochement with Russia are also emphasised, appealing to nostalgia for the Soviet era.

These coordinated actions represent the ultimate goals of Russia's hybrid threat strategy against Moldova. Through these tactics, Russia seeks to undermine Moldova's sovereignty, prevent its integration into the European Union, and bring it back under its direct influence. The ultimate goal is to transform Moldova into a puppet state, dependent on Moscow and obedient to its geopolitical directives, thereby strengthening Russia's strategic position in the region.

Destabilisation

Destabilisation phase is characterised by the intensification of activities through coordinated operations, designed to achieve a specific pre-planned objective. Unlike the preparation phase, which focuses on gathering information and testing strategies, the destabilisation phase has a clear and precise objective. The transition between these two phases is often difficult to detect, as the tactics used may appear similar until the destabilising effects become apparent.

During the destabilisation phase, activities become much more visible and aggressive, with the potential to include violent actions. These actions often exceed the limits of

acceptable and legal behaviour, moving from subtle manipulations to direct acts of sabotage and provocation.

At this stage, the adversary attempts to force decision-making under pressure, generating crises or a series of crises that force the target to react quickly and often inappropriately. This can generate errors that can be exploited later. If the desired effects are not achieved, the activity may return to the preparation phase in which the actor waits for a more favourable opportunity, refines strategies to make them more effective, or creates new vulnerabilities in the attacked target. Alternatively, if the actor believes the moment is propitious, the activity may escalate further, leading to

even more aggressive and destructive actions to achieve established strategic objectives.

Thus, the destabilisation phase is an essential component of hybrid threats, in which the hostile actor takes advantage of every opportunity to weaken the target and make it succumb to pressure.

Since 2021, Moldova has repeatedly been on the verge of destabilisation, orchestrated by Russia. The first significant escalation occurred in the autumn of 2022, in an already tense context due to the substantial increase in prices for energy resources. At that time, the SHOR opposition party, financially supported and coordinated by Russia, regularly organised protests in Chișinău, including setting up a tent camp in front of government buildings, affecting both the political and social domains. Investigative journalists revealed that the protesters were financially motivated to participate. The crisis was amplified when, in October 2022, Gazprom intentionally reduced gas exports to Moldova by up to 50%, which led to significant increases in energy prices. This reduction coincided with Russia's missile attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, forcing Kiev to stop all electricity exports to Moldova. This avalanche of crises and socio-economic shocks could have had dangerous consequences for the country's political stability. However, the destabilisation was stopped by the unprecedented solidarity of Western partners.

Without external aid, Moldova would have fallen victim to Russia's hybrid pressure. The combined efforts allowed the Moldovan government to survive the winter and the most difficult months of the energy crisis in Europe.

Another example of attempted destabilisation occurred in the spring of 2023 and involved additional hybrid threat tactics. After Moldova managed to weather the winter relatively well, securing alternative energy sources and financially supporting household consumers, Russia, through the SHOR political group, resumed mass protests. This time, the strategy was more aggressive, attempting to provoke unrest by infiltrating violent groups. The authorities were able to uncover these destabilisation plans, thwarting efforts to infiltrate the protests with foreign groups, such as Serbian "football fans" and Wagner mercenaries. The goal was to provoke incidents that would lead to massive anti-government unrest and, ultimately, the overthrow of the government.

However, the support of Western allies was again essential. Ukraine and Western countries revealed Russia's plans, providing classified information to the Moldovan government, and later to the press. These preventive measures helped avoid the escalation of the situation and allowed the Moldovan authorities to react promptly and justifiably to the imminent threat of a "coup d'état", thus maintaining the stability of the government.

Coercion (Compulsion)

When all the aforementioned hybrid threat tools and combined operations fail, the adversary can escalate the situation by using both covert and overt military forces. Hybrid threat tools applied below the threshold of detection and attribution, such as disinformation, cyber operations, economic pressure, corruption of politicians

With the beginning of the military intervention in Ukraine, Russia's strategic objectives became clearer, also considering Moldova. In April 2022, Russian military commander Rustam Minnekaev announced the intention of the Russian Federation to expand military operations on the official territory of the Republic of Moldova. According to his statements, the second phase of the military operation involved the establishment of a land corridor from Donbass to the Transnistrian region.

Deploying military forces near Moldova would have provided Russia with the final element needed to further escalate the security situation, which could have led to a takeover of the country. This escalation would have put significant pressure on Moldova, disrupting its political stability and security. However, Russia currently lacks the capabilities to escalate its hybrid threat activities against Moldova, primarily because its forces in the Transnistrian area cannot conduct such an operation. The operational capacity of these forces is limited, and their ability to project power beyond the region remains questionable.

and state officials, diplomatic activities, clandestine intelligence operations and provocations - are consolidated and amplified in this phase by direct military intervention. This stage of malicious hybrid operations represents the hard end of the spectrum of hybrid threat activity¹⁸ and is referred to as hybrid warfare.

This limitation does not mean, however, that Russia will abandon its maximalist plans to take over Moldova. It suggests, instead, that Russia may continue to use a combination of hybrid threat tools, maintaining pressure on Moldova in search of opportunities to advance its strategic objectives. The use of hybrid warfare allows Russia to keep Moldova in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability, using non-military means to destabilise the country and undermine its sovereignty.

As Moldova navigates this complex threat landscape, strengthening defence capabilities, improving cyber infrastructure, and securing a diversified energy source are essential steps in mitigating the risks posed by Russian hybrid warfare. While Russia does not have the immediate capacity to escalate to a full-scale military intervention in Moldova, the continued use of hybrid threats remains a significant challenge. The potential for future escalation persists, making it imperative that Moldova and its allies remain vigilant and prepared to counter these threats.

¹⁸ The landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC123305>

8. MOLDOVA'S RESPONSE TO HYBRID ATTACKS

Between 2021-2024, the Republic of Moldova faced unprecedented hybrid threats, requiring a combination of diplomatic strategies, emergency crisis management measures, and international support. These threats were diverse and complex, including cyberattacks, disinformation, economic coercion, and political influence, all aimed at destabilising and compromising national security and social stability.

Initially, Moldova's response to these hybrid threats was predominantly reactive. This was largely due to the overlapping of multiple crises in a short period of time, as well as limited administrative resources, including financial and human. These constraints resulted in a reduced capacity to detect and address new challenges effectively, while the lack of an early assessment of potential threats led to initial ad-hoc and improvised responses.

However, as the government gained experience and learned from the challenges encountered, the response processes improved significantly. The Presidency, Parliament and Government, together with the institutions responsible for security and public order, began to demonstrate proactive actions, meant to ensure responses in the medium and long term. A series of strategic measures were implemented to strengthen the country's capacity to respond to hybrid threats.

Measures against disinformation

Between 2022-2024, the Republic of Moldova started to take decisive measures against television channels that spread disinformation and propaganda, amid growing geopolitical tensions and external influence. In this context, the Audiovisual Media Services Code was amended to prohibit the rebroadcasting of news and analytical programs from countries that have not ratified the Convention on Transfrontier Television, including the Russian Federation.

In addition, the notion of "disinformation" was introduced, and sanctions were established to counter this issue. The law stipulates that 50% of the content broadcast by TV stations must come from the EU and the US states as well as the countries that have ratified the Convention on Transfrontier Television. These measures were implemented to reduce the influence of Russian propaganda and protect the public from information manipulation.

Suspension of TV stations' activity

The decision to suspend the activity of some television stations marked the beginning of a series of actions aimed at countering disinformation and strengthening the information security of the Republic of Moldova. At the end of 2022, the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE) suspended the activity of six TV stations: Primul în Moldova, TV6, Orhei TV, Accent TV, NTV Moldova and RTR Moldova, until the state of emergency in the country was lifted.

In October 2023, at the proposal of the head of the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), Alexandru Mustață, the CSE temporarily suspended the licenses of six other television stations: Orizont TV, 1TV,

Prime, Publika, Canal 2 and Canal 3.

On December 29, 2023, one day before the state of emergency expired, the Council for the Promotion of Investment Projects of National Importance decided to temporarily terminate the validity of the permissive acts of the companies that managed eight television stations with licenses suspended during the state of emergency. Subsequently, on May 24, 2024, the Council decided not to grant prior approval for investments of state security importance and to withdraw the permissive acts for television broadcasts and audiovisual services of three

companies: SRL “Telesistem TV” (Primul în Moldova, Accent TV), SRL “Archidoc Group” (Orizont TV) and SRL “Telestar Media” (Canal 2 and Canal 3)¹⁹. These companies violated the council’s requirements to provide a complete information file and

transactions confirming their affiliation with the Plahotniuc-Shor group were identified. These channels were known for spreading disinformation related to the war in Ukraine and promoting destabilising agendas.

Legislative initiatives

- **Establishing of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation:** On July 31, 2023, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova approved the establishment of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation. This centre is intended to support public authorities in the fight against foreign information manipulation and interference. Its goal is to coordinate efforts to combat disinformation and strengthen cooperation between state institutions.

- **National Security Strategy:** On December 15, 2023, Chisinau announced the draft decision for the approval of the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova²⁰. The new strategy aims to increase the state's capacity to prevent and counter risks to national security, while ensuring the process of European

integration and cooperation with partner states.

- **The Concept of Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation:** On December 22, 2023, the Parliament adopted the Concept of Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, Information Manipulation Actions and Foreign Interference for the Years 2024-2028²¹. Developed by the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, this concept presents the programmatic vision on how strategic communication will contribute to national security during the mentioned period. The document defines national interests, threats, risks, vulnerabilities and directions of action required to ensure national security and resilience.

International support

The European Union has stepped up its support to the Republic of Moldova through the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM), which provides expertise in crisis management and addressing hybrid threats. This international support is crucial to strengthening Moldova's capacity to respond effectively to the challenges of disinformation and propaganda.

Exposing hostile plans

The Moldovan government, with the help of its Western partners, managed to publicly expose the hostile plans of the Russian Federation to organise a coup. This tactic, based on the disclosure of classified information, allowed the Moldovan authorities to react quickly and effectively to the threats.

The exposure of the danger and the identification of the actors involved were carried out at the highest state level, emphasising the importance and imminence of these threats to national security.

¹⁹Decision of the Council for the promotion of investment projects of national importance of May 24, 2024 <https://gov.md/ro/content/trei-companii-din-domeniul-audiovisual-were-left-without-permitting-documents-for-emission-from-the-cause>

²⁰National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=141253&lang=en

²¹Concept of strategic communication and countering disinformation, information manipulation actions and foreign interference for the years 2024-2028 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=141254&lang=en

Moldova's Western partners, including Ukraine, as well as various NATO and EU countries, played a crucial role in providing information about Russia's plans. The decision to make this information public was a strategic one, designed to draw attention to the seriousness of the situation and mobilise international and domestic support. Thanks to this disclosure, the authorities were able to implement prompt measures, including intensifying border controls.

Between 2022-2024, the Republic of Moldova adopted strict measures to prevent the entry into its territory of individuals or groups suspected of planning destabilising actions or posing a risk to state security. The government has demonstrated an increased capacity to identify and neutralise hybrid threats before they cause significant damage. The actions taken included close monitoring of people flows at the borders, constant assessment of security risks, and strict enforcement of laws to prevent destabilising external influences.

Among the notable incidents in which state institutions acted proactively to anticipate and prevent possible destabilisations is the one in February 2023, when Moldovan authorities banned the entry of a group of fans from Serbia, suspected of links to extremist groups, who intended to participate in a sporting event in Chisinau.

This group was suspected of planning provocative actions intended to create public unrest during the protests organised by the Shor Party.

In the same year, there were reported attempts to enter the Republic of Moldova by members of the Wagner Group, known for its paramilitary activities and close ties to the Russian government. Following a risk assessment and existing security protocols, they were denied border crossing authorisation.

The exposure of Russia's hostile plans had a significant impact on the security of the Republic of Moldova. Through rapid and coordinated actions, the government managed to prevent an attempted coup d'état, which could have led to the overthrow of the pro-EU authorities and major instability. This decision had a positive effect on increasing transparency and public trust. The disclosure of information strengthened the trust relationship between the government and citizens, demonstrating the authorities' firm commitment to protecting national sovereignty and integrity.

The strategy also strengthened international collaboration. Joint actions with Western partners highlighted the importance of international cooperation in countering hybrid threats and fortified support for Moldova on the global stage.

Investigations and searches

During the reporting period, the National Anticorruption Centre (CNA) and the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) conducted searches and detained suspects in the case of illegal financing of the Shor Political Party. The investigation focused on the mobilisation of people for protests, the payment of salaries to activists and transporters, as well as the transfer of money through Russian bank cards. The authorities also investigated a scheme to illegally introduce foreign currency into the country, under which certain individuals were paid to travel to Moscow to receive significant amounts intended for illegal activities coordinated by Ilan Shor.

Diplomatic measures

In the context of intensifying geopolitical tensions and hybrid threats, the Moldovan authorities have repeatedly decided to declare several Russian diplomats in the Republic of Moldova persona non grata.

These measures were justified by activities considered incompatible with diplomatic status, including espionage and attempts to influence internal political processes, perceived as

direct threats to national security. The Moldovan authorities also banned the entry of political representatives from the Russian Federation, suspected of planning to intervene in the electoral process in the Gagauzia ATU and the Transnistrian region and to influence the results in favour of Russian interests. These measures were taken to ensure that the elections were held in a free and fair manner, without external interference.

These examples reflect some of the measures implemented as part of the Republic of Moldova's ongoing commitment to protecting information security and reducing external influences that threaten national stability. In the period 2022-2024, the Moldovan authorities demonstrated a firm determination to combat disinformation and enhance the country's resilience to hybrid threats.

Strengthening cybersecurity

Cyberattacks have prompted the Republic of Moldova to adopt a new Cybersecurity Law, supported by the European Union, to increase the resilience of state institutions and information security. After a significant increase in the number of false bomb alerts in 2022, the government has toughened security at Chisinau Airport, increased penalties for false alerts, and strengthened security and defence services. It has also proposed a new Security Strategy for Moldova, with the support of the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM).

Through these measures, the Republic of Moldova has proven its ability to respond effectively to the complex challenges of hybrid threats and to protect its sovereignty, thus continuing its path towards European integration.

Conclusions

In recent years, hybrid threats to the Republic of Moldova have increased exponentially, endangering national interests and even the existence of the state. These threats, which combine conventional and unconventional tactics, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure and political corruption, have become increasingly sophisticated. Hybrid threats constitute a real risk for the Republic of Moldova. To protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, as well as to maintain the European integration path, a concerted and sustained effort is needed to understand, anticipate and counter these threats effectively. Only through a comprehensive and collaborative approach can Moldova's long-term security and stability be ensured.

The complex challenges facing Moldova stem from persistent vulnerabilities in most of the areas analysed. These vulnerabilities are exploited by hostile actors, particularly the Russian Federation, which uses a variety of tools to undermine Moldova's internal stability and influence its geopolitical direction. Russia employs a variety of hybrid tactics to undermine Moldova's governance capacity and weaken citizens' trust in democratic institutions.

If these threats are not effectively countered, they can lead to long-term destabilisation of the country, eroding democracy and increasing distrust in democratic institutions, which can affect the state's democratic foundations. The polarisation of society is another major risk. The divisions created by disinformation campaigns and external influence can destabilise social cohesion, endangering the stability and integrity of the state. In addition, the compromise of national security is an imminent danger in the context of these hybrid threats.

As the elements of hybrid attacks analysed in this report are interconnected, resilience-building measures need to be thought of holistically. The report also emphasises that to build resilience against hybrid threats, it is essential to understand the root causes of these activities and the vulnerabilities that can be exploited in our society. Therefore, policymakers need to recognise the interdependencies between the various elements to build resilience against hybrid threats and detect malign activities early.

In recent years, Moldova has made significant progress in strengthening its sovereignty and resilience against hybrid threats, particularly those originating from Russia. By reducing its dependence on Russia's energy monopoly and confronting Russian-funded political actors, Moldova has implemented critical measures to protect its national security and political stability. These efforts demonstrate that eliminating the most dangerous hybrid threats can make the rest less relevant.

Moldova's dependence on Russian energy has long been a tool of political influence and economic coercion. However, by strategically diversifying its energy sources, Moldova has managed to reduce its dependence. Besides reinforcing the country's energy security this shift also reduces Russia's ability to exert pressure by manipulating energy supplies.

The government has also taken bold steps to confront local political actors funded by Russia. By exposing and limiting their influence, Moldova is ensuring that its political landscape is not manipulated by external powers. This action is essential for maintaining the integrity of democratic processes and institutions.

The Russian Federation's war in Ukraine has reduced Russia's ability to use its military presence in the Transnistrian area as a hybrid threat against Moldova. With Russia's military focus diverted, Moldova has identified a strategic opportunity to strengthen its defence capabilities and diminish the immediate threat posed by the Transnistrian conflict.

These geopolitical changes have allowed Moldova to implement significant reforms aimed at combating corruption and addressing state dysfunction. By addressing these internal problems, Moldova is not only improving governance but also strengthening its resilience against external threats. The reforms are part of a broader strategy to create a transparent and accountable government, less susceptible to manipulation by foreign entities.

Moldova's actions to diversify energy sources, confront domestic political manipulation, and implement comprehensive reforms collectively contribute to neutralising Russia's hybrid threat tools.

Moldova's recent measures reflect a proactive approach to protecting sovereignty and stability in the face of hybrid threats. By addressing both external and internal vulnerabilities, Moldova is charting a path to greater independence and resilience, setting an example for other countries facing similar challenges.

To address these challenges further, the Republic of Moldova must constantly adapt its policies and strategies. It is essential that the state continues to adjust and invest in preventive and reactive measures to protect national security and stability. This includes continued investment in cybersecurity, public education, and international collaboration. Only through an integrated and well-coordinated response can Moldova meet current and future challenges.

Recommendation

1. Strategic communication approach

- It is essential to adopt an integrated strategy that involves all state institutions to protect national interests, moving from a strictly governmental approach to one that includes the entire society.

2. Public involvement

- Education and awareness campaigns must be developed to help citizens better understand the impact of disinformation on national interests. Collaboration with various sectors will strengthen these efforts.

3. Transparency and support for democracy

- Ensuring transparency is crucial to maintaining a balance between freedom of expression and security, thus contributing to strengthening democracy.

4. Efficient synchronisation and coordination

- Clear objectives and a well-defined legal framework will facilitate coordination between institutions, ensuring a rapid and unified response to hybrid threats.

5. Systemic approach to hybrid threats

- A systemic strategy will include preventive, reactive, and proactive measures to anticipate threats and minimise their impact.

6. Strengthening information resilience

- Media education and training of civil servants are essential to develop the necessary skills in crisis management and effective strategic communication.

7. International cooperation

- Partnerships with international organisations and other states are vital to benefit from external support and expertise in countering hybrid threats.

8. Development and implementation of standards

- Establishing clear standards for assessing vulnerabilities and creating a tool (e.g.: National Information Resilience Index) that will allow for monitoring and continuous improvement of the response to threats;
- Developing a response ecosystem, in line with European External Action Service (EEAS) standards.

By implementing these measures, Moldova can create a society that is more resilient and better prepared to face current and future challenges, thus ensuring national security and stability.