

DEMOCRACY UNDER SIEGE

**CHALLENGES TO NATIONAL
SECURITY AND COUNTERING
HYBRID THREATS IN THE
REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

KEY FINDINGS

**STUDY CONDUCTED BY PISA AS PART OF THE DCAF PROJECT – STRENGTHENING SECURITY
SECTOR GOVERNANCE IN MOLDOVA, FUNDED BY SWEDEN**

**Democracy under siege.
Challenges to national security and
countering hybrid threats in the
Republic of Moldova**

Key - findings

**Study conducted by PISA as part of the DCAF project –
Strengthening Security Sector Governance in Moldova,
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About PISA

The Platform for Security and Defense Initiatives (PISA) is an independent non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting a secure and resilient Moldova. PISA provides expertise through analysis, training, publications, and events, contributing to democratic oversight and public engagement in the security and defense sector. Through education, research, and advocacy, the organization supports institutional and societal capacity building, civil society involvement in governance, increased awareness of security issues, and improved efficiency of public policies and international assistance, with a focus on areas such as Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), strategic communication, security sector reform, and democratic governance.

Key findings of the study Democracy under Siege. Challenges to National Security and Countering Hybrid Threats in the Republic of Moldova is a summary of the extended study, which highlights the complexity and persistence of hybrid threats to Moldova in the period 2020–2025.

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List of abbreviations

HRD	Human Rights Defenders
NERA	National Energy Regulatory Agency
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EIB	European Investment Bank
WB	World Bank
NBM	National Bank of Moldova
CCA	Coordinating Council for Audiovisual Media (previously used name for CA)
CEC	Central Election Commission
CoE	Council of Europe
DDoS	Distributed Denial of Service
GOTR	Russian Operational Group of Forces (illegally stationed in Transnistria)
MGRES	Moldavskaia GRES (power plant in Cuciurgan, Transnistria)
CSO	Civil Society Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PAS	Action and Solidarity Party
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ISS	Intelligence and Security Service
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
SPCSB	Money Laundering Prevention and Combating Service
StratCom EU	European Union Strategic Communication Division
StratCom COE NATO	NATO Center of Excellence for Strategic Communication
EU	European Union
UTAG	Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia

Introduction. From fragility to resilience: the premises of the report

This executive summary presents the main findings and conclusions of the study **Democracy under Siege. Challenges to National Security and Countering Hybrid Threats in the Republic of Moldova**. The summary points to the existing vulnerabilities, hybrid tactics used, and the response measures adopted, providing an overview of the national security context. A detailed analysis and extensive argumentation can be found in the full version of the study.

The study begins from the premise that the experience of the Republic of Moldova provides valuable lessons for other states, serving as a genuine "strategic laboratory" for examining how hostile actors exploit critical vulnerabilities. Between 2020 and 2025 – the period analysed by the authors, Moldova faced constant and multifaceted hybrid threats, primarily from the Russian Federation, which seeks to expand its influence in the region by destabilizing democratic institutions, cultivating a sense of insecurity, and undermining social cohesion.

The invasion of Ukraine amplified Moldova's existing internal

vulnerabilities, exposing the shortcomings of a fragmented response and the absence of effective early warning mechanisms. The threats examined in this study—ranging from cyber intrusions and information manipulation to financial corruption and social engineering—are mutually reinforcing, generating multiplier effects.

Russian operations in Moldova illustrate a remarkable capacity for adaptation, marked by continuous learning from failed attempts, exploitation of emerging vulnerabilities, and adjustment of tactics in response to real-time feedback. The study underscores how methods such as "mental warfare" and "reflexive control" have been complemented by asymmetric technologies, including the use of cryptocurrencies and the corruption of electoral processes during the 2025 parliamentary elections.

A recurring feature of hybrid aggression is the use of artificial intelligence in disinformation campaigns—through micro-targeting, bots, deepfakes, and fabricated articles—within a "Matryoshka"- style

information cycle designed to draw even very young audiences into parallel, segregated information spaces. At the same time, Russia has used sabotage – including arson, hooliganism, false bomb alerts, orchestrated protests with potential for violence, and cyberattacks – all integrated into a broader strategy aimed to reduce voter turnout, undermine the legitimacy of elections, and erode public trust in state institutions.

Moldova's experience demonstrates that traditional fact-checking and debunking are inadequate to counter modern disinformation campaigns. The sheer volume of false content, combined with its cumulative psychological impact and the sophisticated targeting of emotional triggers, creates an environment in which the truth struggles to compete with persuasive narratives. One of Moldova's most serious challenges—shared across Europe—is the fragmentation of public discourse into mutually incompatible realities. Yet functional democracy depends on a shared understanding of basic facts.

Despite initial shortcoming, Moldova's institutional response has advanced in a constructive direction – marked by regulatory innovation, the establishment of specialized bodies, enhanced inter-institutional cooperation, and the active involvement of civil society. In recent years, key steps were taken to

strengthen resilience, including the explicit designation of Russia as a hostile actor in the 2023 National Security Strategy, the adoption of a National Defense Strategy in 2024, the launch of the European Union Partnership Mission, and the consolidation of strategic partnerships. Moldova's experience underscores that countering hybrid threats effectively requires unprecedented coordination among state institutions.

The study maps the actors involved and the hybrid instruments they employ, examines potential impact scenarios, and formulates concrete recommendations for strengthening institutional and national resilience. It advocates a systemic approach that integrates the informational, energy, economic, military, and legal dimensions of security, while stressing the importance of rule of law. The study also underlines the need for international cooperation, expertise sharing, and a stronger role for civil society in countering hybrid threats.

The study's **methodology** combines documentary research, expert interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and AI-based tools for assessing online disinformation. The data collected is analysed using both

qualitative and quantitative methods, and prospective scenarios outline optimistic and pessimistic trajectories depending on post-election developments. Nonetheless, the study's findings are constrained by limited access to classified data, the short-lived relevance of certain information, and the rapid evolution of hybrid techniques.

Structure and relevance of the study

The study is organised into ten thematic chapters, each addressing a key area of vulnerability: protests and democratic values, electoral manipulation, corruption and justice, energy security, the economy and the banking sector, military defence, cybersecurity, the information space, social identity, and civil society. Each chapter concludes with a set of findings and strategic recommendations intended to assist decision-makers in Chisinau, as well as European and Euro-Atlantic partners, in better understanding the mechanisms of hybrid threats in the Moldovan context.

The relevance of the study extends beyond the national level. Today, the Republic of Moldova serves as a case study for the entire region. Its success – or failure – in addressing hybrid threats may set a significant precedent

for other Eastern Partnership countries and even European Union member states. Accordingly, this document goes beyond a mere analysis of Moldova's hybrid threats landscape; it provides insights to inform strategic planning and is a valuable resource for the government, international partners, and institutions engaged in regional security.

The study's general conclusions underscore that, irrespective of developments in the conflict in Ukraine, the Russian Federation will continue to pose a major strategic threat to both Moldova and European security. Democratic, economic, energy, and informational vulnerabilities remain highly susceptible to exploitation for destabilization purposes. Defending democracy is not limited to the formal guarantee of fundamental rights; it requires substantial investment in institutional and social resilience, the reinforcement of public trust, and the maintenance of robust international partnerships.

Traditional bureaucratic responses are often too slow to match the rapid pace of contemporary hybrid campaigns. Moldova's experience highlights that democratic governments must operate like "agile start-ups" to counter hybrid threats effectively. This requires integrated approaches that emphasise not only protection but also transparency and civic participation. Strengthening societal resilience entails long-term investments in media literacy, critical thinking education, and public awareness initiatives.

In an era where hybrid threats transcend borders, the lessons drawn from Moldova's experience can help European democracies bolster their own resilience. Moldova is not merely a vulnerable case, but an active strategic partner, able to contribute flexible and innovative solutions to European collective security. In addressing these challenges, institutional resilience, social cohesion, and international cooperation emerge as indispensable components for effectively countering hybrid warfare.

Chapter 1

The instrumentalization of democratic rights: from hijacked freedoms to weapons of destabilization

Democratic values and political stability are the pillars of Moldova's sovereignty and serve as key criteria for European integration. These very foundations, however, are targeted by hostile actors, who exploit freedoms – such as the freedom of expression and the right to protest – to weaken institutions and project the image of a fragile state.

1.1. Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Social and identity polarization.** The differences between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations are amplified by protests and information campaigns.
- **Real economic discontent.** The energy crises and inflation of 2022–2023 provided a backdrop conducive to street mobilizations, which hostile actors turned into anti-government protests.
- **Fragile democratic institutions.** Lack of trust in the justice system and perceptions of corruption reduce the legitimacy of the state and encourage the use of protests as political pressure.
- **The role of religious and civic actors.** Some religious institutions and CSOs spread anti-Western narratives, indirectly legitimizing destabilizing actions.

These vulnerabilities are exploited to create the impression of a "state in permanent crisis."

1.2. Hybrid tactics used

- **Illegal financing of demonstrations** through parties and networks with foreign connections.
- **Infiltrating protest groups** with provocateurs to generate incidents and a perception of instability.
- **Exploitation of the media and social networks** to artificially amplify the scale of protests and present them as "massive national movements."
- **Distortion of democratic values.** Protests are presented as evidence of an alleged "pro-European dictatorship."

These tactics aim to gradually erode political stability and prepare the ground for contesting election results.

1.2.1. Tactics used in the Transnistrian region

- **Political and social control.** The population is subjected to a climate of fear through restrictions on freedoms, arbitrary detentions, and censorship.
- **Economic coercion.** Farmers and economic operators are forced to pay illegal taxes, with resources subsequently redirected to subversive activities.
- **Information monopoly.** The independent press is banned, ensuring total control over the media space.
- **Recruitment and militarization.** Young people are trained in paramilitary camps and indoctrinated with rhetoric hostile to Chisinau.

1.3. Impact on democracy and political stability

- **Discreditation of genuine civic movements.** Real protests lose legitimacy in the eyes of the public.
- **Erosion of trust in institutions.** The authorities are depicted as either repressive or incapable of maintaining public order.
- **Fragmentation and polarization of civil society.** Organizations are labelled as either "pro-European" or "pro-Russian" weakening their mediating role between state and citizens.
- **Instrumentalization of fundamental rights.** Freedom of expression and the right of assembly become tools of destabilization.

1.4. Response measures

The Republic of Moldova has introduced measures to counter paid protests and destabilising actions. In 2025, a legislative package was adopted to criminalize the corruption of assemblies, and law enforcement agencies identified and convicted groups involved in violent actions. While halting illicit financial flows from the Russian Federation has reduced the scale of

protests, it has also raised the risk of disproportionate restrictions on freedom of assembly.

At the same time, the authorities intensified efforts to counter disinformation. The Intelligence and Security Service and the Audiovisual Council strengthened media monitoring, and media literacy campaigns sought to enhance societal resilience.

Specific measures were introduced for the Transnistrian region, including financial support for Romanian-language schools, compensation for farmers affected by illegal taxation, and notifications to international partners regarding arbitrary detentions. Parents and students were further informed to mitigate the risk of forced recruitment into local paramilitary structures.

1.5. Conclusions to Chapter 1

Democratic values, which are fundamental to Moldova's European path, constitute both resources and vulnerabilities that hostile actors exploit. Social polarization, economic grievances, and institutional fragility can transform protests from a legitimate form of civic participation into instruments of destabilization.

Hybrid tactics—such as covert financing, infiltration of radical groups, media manipulation, and the distortion of fundamental freedoms—erode the trust in institutions and weaken social cohesion. In the Transnistrian region, these dynamics are amplified by entrenched political control, economic constraints, and information monopoly.

Although countermeasures have partially reduced some destabilizing effects, they also risk imposing

excessive restrictions on civic freedoms. With the 2025 elections approaching, the instrumentalization of protests remains a significant concern.

Key finding: defending democracy extends beyond the formal guarantee of fundamental rights; it also requires reinforcing institutional, social, and informational resilience. Freedoms such as protest and expression must be safeguarded as intrinsic values, but also protected from exploitation by hostile actors.

Chapter 2

Captured elections: electoral manipulation as a hybrid weapon against democracy

The electoral process, which is fundamental for expressing the popular will and consolidating democracy, has become a vulnerable target in the Republic of Moldova for hybrid mechanisms designed to distort the outcome of the vote and erode trust in institutions. Electoral fraud, whether through corruption, disinformation, or organized mobilization, undermines democratic legitimacy and advances the strategic objectives of hostile actors.

2.1. Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Non-transparent party financing.** Parties led by Ilan Shor and other pro-Russian groups have benefited from massive resources from abroad, disguised as offshore companies or cash transfers. In 2022, the authorities discovered over 20 million lei illegally brought into the country for protests and election campaigns.
- **Fragile electoral institutions.** The Central Electoral Commission and the courts have limited resources to investigate complex fraud, which has allowed front groups to participate on behalf of foreign interests.
- **Low level of civic education.** Vulnerable voters, especially in rural areas, are prone to electoral corruption through the distribution of money or goods.

- **Media polarization.** Media outlets affiliated with foreign or oligarchic interests present the election campaign in a biased manner, promoting anti-European narratives and inducing the perception that closer ties with the European Union would bring "war and poverty."

2.2. Hybrid tactics used

Electoral manipulation follows clear patterns of hybrid warfare:

- **Vote buying.** The distribution of money and gifts in vulnerable communities has become a common practice, documented by monitoring organizations such as Promo-LEX.
- **Use of cryptocurrencies.** In 2025, an estimated €100 million was allegedly directed from the Russian Federation for electoral interference through mechanisms that are difficult to trace.
- **Cross-border mobilization of voters.** Voters from the Transnistrian region were transported in an organized manner to vote in favour of pro-Russian parties, with some being paid directly.
- **Disinformation campaigns.** False narratives—such as the closure of churches at the request of the EU (2020) or mobilization for war as NATO approaches (2021)—circulated widely online.

- **Cyberattacks and information leaks.** Pro-European parties and institutions have been targeted by cyberattacks, followed by the publication of compromising material, some of which was fabricated.
- **Delegitimization of electoral institutions.** Hostile actors constantly spread messages that the Central Election Commission and the Constitutional Court are politically controlled, paving the way for contesting the results.

2.3. Impact on democracy and political stability

■ **Reduced legitimacy of institutions.**

Part of the population considers the electoral process to be rigged, which weakens the authority of those elected.

■ **Recurring political crises.** Each election is followed by allegations of fraud, protests, and legal challenges. After the 2019 elections, Parliament was blocked for months.

■ **Division of society.** Voters become captive to antagonistic narratives,

and political dialogue turns into a permanent confrontation. In rural areas, voting is often perceived as a commodity, while in urban areas frustration and scepticism are growing.

■ **Strategic uncertainty.** Electoral manipulation keeps the Republic of Moldova in a state of vulnerability and reduces the confidence of international partners in the country's political stability.

2.4. Response measures

Moldova has adopted measures to limit electoral fraud and increase the transparency of the democratic process:

- A clearer legal framework for preventing and punishing fraud;
- Extended electoral monitoring through the involvement of national and international organizations;
- Strengthening of the Central Election Commission and related institutions;
- Civic education campaigns for a more resilient electorate;
- Making parties accountable by making public funding conditional on compliance with legal standards;
- Prompt punishment of cases of electoral corruption and disinformation;
- Increased cooperation with the European Union and other external partners to protect the integrity of elections.

However, the implementation of these measures remains fragmented and insufficient, allowing manipulative practices to continue.

2.5. Conclusions to Chapter 2

The electoral process, as the foundation of democracy, has become a prime target of hybrid warfare in the Republic of Moldova. Interference - through external funding, vote buying, cross-border mobilization, disinformation, cyberattacks, and the delegitimization of institutions - undermine both the fairness of elections and citizens' trust.

The impact is manifold: delegitimization of institutions, recurring political crises, societal polarisation, and increased vulnerability of the European path. Response measures, such as legal reform, enhanced monitoring, civic education, and cooperation with international partners represent important advances, but remain insufficient without firm and consistent enforcement.

Key finding: Free elections depend on a coherent democratic ecosystem: independent and resilient institutions, clear and consistently enforced rules, an informed electorate, and strong external partnerships.

Chapter 3

Fragile economy: from financial pressure to hybrid weapons targeting sovereignty

3.1. Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Captured state-owned companies.** Strategic enterprises such as Moldovagaz, Metalferos, and Chisinau International Airport have been controlled by oligarchic and external interest networks. In the case of Metalferos, the monopoly on metal exports allowed hundreds of millions of dollars to be drained into political networks. Chişinău Airport was leased in 2013 to an obscure Russian company, resulting in the loss of state control over critical infrastructure.
- **Dependence on remittances.** Over 15% of Moldova's gross domestic product comes from remittances sent by the diaspora. This dependence makes the economy extremely vulnerable to external fluctuations and creates constant pressure on the exchange rate and trade balance.
- **Fragile banking system.** The 2014 banking fraud, when USD 1 billion was extracted through fictitious loans from three banks (Banca de Economii, Banca Socială, and Unibank), demonstrated institutional vulnerability and the complicity of supervisory authorities. This episode showed how banks can be turned into instruments for financing oligarchic networks and macroeconomic destabilisation.

- **Trade dependence on external markets.** Moldovan exports were dependent on the Russian market until 2013. Moscow's embargoes on wine, fruit, and agricultural products demonstrated how easily trade barriers can be used as a tool for political pressure. Although exports to the EU have increased, diversification remains incomplete.

3.2. Hybrid tactics used

- **Capturing state-owned companies through corruption.** Oligarchic groups have used public office to appoint loyal directors and manipulate contracts. In the case of Moldovagaz, Gazprom's control over the majority stake allowed it to use the company not only as an energy supplier but also as an instrument of political influence.
- **Money laundering through the banking system.** The "Russian Laundromat" (2010–2014) used Moldovan banks to illegally transfer over \$20 billion to Europe. Moldovan judges issued rulings validating fictitious debts, and banks processed the transfers. This mechanism revealed the complicity between the judicial and banking systems in transnational networks.

- **The use of embargoes as political leverage.** Moscow introduced trade bans between 2006 and 2013, when Chisinau advanced its relations with the EU. These embargoes were accompanied by disinformation campaigns aimed at convincing farmers and entrepreneurs that European integration was a mistake.
- **Politically controlled investments.** Foreign capital from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was used to buy strategic economic assets. Some logistics and infrastructure companies, ostensibly private, functioned as extensions of the Kremlin's networks of influence.

3.3. Impact on the state and society

- **At the macroeconomic level.** Vulnerabilities in the banking sector and captured state-owned companies inflicted substantial losses on the national economy. Bank fraud triggered a financial crisis compelling the government to cover the \$1 billion shortfall through the issuance of government bonds, straining the public budget and imposing costs on future generations. These contributed to rising public debt and a decline in international credit ratings.
- **At the institutional level.** State-owned companies turned into hubs of corruption, weakened state's ability to deliver public services and eroded citizens' trust. The long-term lease of Chisinau Airport under non-transparent conditions has become emblematic of the loss of control over strategic infrastructure.
- **At the social level.** Trade embargoes and economic volatility have had direct consequences for the population. Farmers have lost access to export markets, incomes have declined, and economic migration has intensified. This increased dependence on remittances, reinforcing the structural vulnerability of the national economy.
- **At the geopolitical level.** Economic instability and corruption have continuously offered the Russian Federation opportunities to maintain its influence over Chisinau. Whenever the Republic of Moldova advances toward European integration, these economic vulnerabilities are leveraged as instruments of pressure.

3.4. Response measures

The Republic of Moldova has responded to hybrid economic threats with a series of stabilization and reform measures.

- In the banking sector, fraudulent institutions were liquidated, the independence of the National Bank was strengthened, and shareholder transparency was introduced.
- State-owned enterprises underwent reform and mandatory audits.
- Trade and logistics have been reoriented towards the EU and Romania.
- Energy dependence on Gazprom was reduced through interconnections with European networks.

While these measures have partially mitigated vulnerabilities, they have largely been reactive and reliant on external support.

3.5. Conclusions to Chapter 3

Moldova's structural economic vulnerabilities – including captured state-owned enterprises, reliance on remittances, a fragile banking system, and exposure to external embargoes – have created fertile ground for hybrid threats. These weaknesses have been exploited through money laundering, institutionalized corruption, and the strategic use of trade and energy as instruments of geopolitical pressure.

The impact has been profound:

macroeconomic losses and increased public debt following the banking fraud, declining public trust in institutions, rising economic migration, and the consolidation of external influence over Chisinau. While steps like bank liquidations, enterprise reforms, trade diversification, and reduced energy dependence have been taken, they remain largely reactive and heavily dependent on international support.

Key finding: economic security and European integration cannot be ensured without independent, transparent, and resilient institutions. The capture of state-owned enterprises, systemic corruption, and external dependencies cannot be addressed on an ad hoc basis; they require a coherent strategy focused on professionalizing management, diversifying trade and energy sources, and full integration into the European economic area. Only through such measures can the economy transform from a structural vulnerability into a pillar of stability and national sovereignty.

Chapter 4

Corruption – a hybrid weapon against reform: between vulnerability and resilience

In the Republic of Moldova, systemic corruption and a fragile justice system are major vulnerabilities that weaken the rule of law and foster dependence on internal and external influences. Cases such as the 2014 banking fraud and the "Russian Laundromat" illustrate how high-level corruption can compromise economic security, undermine institutional credibility, and influence the country's geopolitical orientation.

4.1 Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Culture of impunity.** High-profile cases of large-scale corruption, including those involving former prime ministers or leaders of oligarchic parties, have often been closed prematurely or delayed. Notable examples include the investigations against Vlad Filat and Ilan Shor, where partial convictions or the defendants' flight from the country have shown the judiciary's limited capacity to conclude complex corruption cases. This impunity sets a dangerous precedent: the political elite come to view the law as negotiable, while citizens lose confidence in the justice system.

Capture of judicial institutions. The appointment and promotion of judges and prosecutors have frequently been subject to political control. For instance, the Superior Council of Magistrates has faced repeated allegations of complicity in appointing judges involved in

corruption schemes. This institutional capture enabled ruling parties to secure legal protection and manipulate the justice system against political opponents until 2019.

- **Exploiting the courts for money laundering.** The "Russian Laundromat" was made possible by the complicity of Moldovan judges who issued rulings validating fictitious debts between offshore companies. Thus, vast sums of illicit funds were effectively "legalized" through the judicial system and subsequently moved to European banks. This mechanism transformed Moldova into an unwitting player in transnational criminal financial networks.
- **Administrative and economic corruption.** State-owned enterprises, such as Metalferos or Chisinau International Airport, were captured by interest groups that funnelled profits to oligarchic networks. Public contracts were manipulated, and state resources were diverted to finance political parties and election campaigns.

4.2 Hybrid tactics used

- **Economic infiltration through corruption.** External actors, particularly the Russian Federation, used front companies and local intermediaries to gain control over strategic sectors. One prominent example is Gazprom's sustained majority stake in Moldovagaz, which facilitated both energy blackmail and the channelling of profits into domestic political influence networks.
- **Direct and experimental mechanisms for buying votes.** Russia utilizes local networks and political intermediaries to distribute money and goods disguised as "social assistance." These practices were first tested in Gagauzia, as an "electoral laboratory," and later expanded nationwide during the 2023 local elections, the 2024 referendum and presidential election, and in preparation for 2025 parliamentary elections. These operations are supported by massive illicit financing, estimated at over €100 million, routed through opaque channels, cryptocurrencies and offshore networks.
- **Selective justice.** The prosecution and the courts have been used to protect individuals in oligarchic circles and to persecute opponents. The case of "political files" brought against investigative journalists or civic activists has demonstrated how the law can be applied arbitrarily to silence critical voices. At the same time, high-level corruption cases

involving influential figures were blocked.

- **Legislative manipulation ("lawfare").** Sudden changes to electoral or economic legislation were used to benefit parties aligned with foreign interests. For example, the 2017 shift to a mixed electoral system was widely seen as favouring oligarchic parties and reducing the chances of pro-reform forces.
- **Obstruction of European reforms.** Corruption networks were used to block the implementation of EU standards in the field of justice and economy. By controlling the courts and key institutions, hostile actors managed to delay or compromise vetting processes, thus maintaining a status quo favourable to their interests.

4.3 Impact on the state and society

- The impact of corruption on the Republic of Moldova is multidimensional and profound. Politically, corruption undermines governance legitimacy, as citizens perceive institutions as being controlled by obscure interests. This fosters electoral apathy and reduces participation to democratic life.
- Economically, corruption has imposed costs of billions of dollars on Moldova, both in direct losses and missed opportunities. The 2014 banking fraud led the International Monetary Fund and the European Union to temporarily suspend assistance programs, severely undermining the country's financial stability.
- Socially, corruption fosters a culture of cynicism and mistrust. Citizens increasingly see anti-corruption reforms as electoral promises without real effect. This perception is exploited by pro-Russian propaganda, which portrays liberal democracy as inherently corrupt and inefficient, implying that stability can only be secured through authoritarian governance.

4.4 Response measures

In 2019, the Republic of Moldova launched a comprehensive anti-corruption reform, with the vetting of judges and prosecutors as its centrepiece. The process effectively began in 2022 with the verification of the financial and ethical integrity of candidates for the Superior Council of Magistrates and the Superior Council of Prosecutors, in accordance with Law No. 26/2022—a mechanism praised by the Venice Commission. The vetting is not merely technical but strategic, aiming to strengthen the rule of law, dismantle corrupt networks that could enable authoritarian practices, and directly enhance democratic resilience while reducing vulnerabilities to external hybrid threats.

Simultaneously, authorities have taken action against the illicit financial schemes of the Șor group. The SIS, in cooperation with the National Bank of Moldova and the Money Laundering Prevention and Combating Service, blocked cards issued in the names of intermediaries and Transnistrian citizens used for illegal financing. Joint meetings with commercial banks identified deficiencies and led to corrective measures, highlighting the importance of proactive inter-institutional cooperation in combating criminal networks.

At the same time, the SIS monitored and countered attempts by the Russian Federation to influence

elections through financial and logistical support, implementing preventive measures such as banning access to so-called observers connected to Russian services. These actions demonstrated the state's ability to respond quickly to external interference and protect democratic processes.

4.5 Conclusions to Chapter 4

Systemic corruption in the Republic of Moldova has transformed the justice system and the economy into weak links in national security. The 2014 banking fraud and the "Russian Laundromat" have shown how captured institutions can become tools for oligarchic networks and external influence, generating massive economic losses and undermining citizens' trust in the state. The capture of state-owned companies, a culture of impunity, and selective justice have created a vicious circle in which corruption not only weakens institutions but also becomes a hybrid leverage point for hostile actors.

The responses undertaken—particularly the comprehensive anti-corruption reform and the vetting of judges and prosecutors—mark an essential step towards reinforcing the rule of law. Additionally, operational measures targeting illicit financial networks and monitoring attempts at external interference have shown that Moldovan authorities are increasingly capable of responding swiftly and in a coordinated manner to hybrid threats.

Key finding: the fight against corruption is not just an internal concern, but a fundamental prerequisite for democratic resilience and national security. Independent institutions, transparent mechanisms, and the equal application of the law are essential to limiting oligarchic and external influence. Continuing and deepening anti-corruption reforms, especially the vetting process, remains central to Moldova's European integration and the transformation of the state from a zone of vulnerability into a stable and predictable actor.

Chapter 5

The permanent crisis: hybrid blackmail and Moldova's energy dependence

Moldova's energy security remains one of its greatest strategic vulnerabilities, marked by its historical dependence on Russian energy resources and limited infrastructure for interconnection with Europe. The crises of 2021–2022 highlighted the use of energy blackmail and the Transnistrian region as hybrid levers of pressure on Chisinau, affecting the political and economic stability of the state.

5.1 Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Dependence on Russian gas.** Until 2021, almost 100% of Moldova's gas consumption came from Gazprom. Contracts were negotiated in a non-transparent manner, with clauses that favored the Russian side and allowed price manipulation depending on the political situation.
- **Controlled electricity production in Transnistria.** The Cuciurgan power plant, run by Moldavskaia GRES (MGRES) (in Russian: Молдавская ГРЭС), uses gas supplied by Gazprom that isn't paid for by the Transnistrian administration. As a result, the region has accumulated gas debts of over \$8 billion, but continues to supply energy to the right bank of the Dniester at lower prices. This mechanism doubles both the economic and political vulnerability of the Republic of Moldova.
- **Insufficiently interconnected infrastructure.** The Republic of Moldova has remained isolated in terms of energy for decades. Until the commissioning of the Vulcănești–Isaccea interconnection line and other projects with Romania, the state depended almost exclusively on eastern networks. The lack of immediate alternatives allowed the Russian Federation to maintain control.
- **Weak regulation and corruption in the sector.** The Moldovagaz administration and the National Energy Regulatory Agency (ANRE) have often been accused of a lack of transparency and of favouring Gazprom's interests. Corruption in the sector has delayed the implementation of energy diversification projects and maintained dependence on the Russian Federation.

5.2 Hybrid tactics used

- **Contractual blackmail.** In 2021, Gazprom reduced gas deliveries and threatened to stop them altogether, accusing the Republic of Moldova of "late payments." In reality, this pressure coincided with the Chisinau government's decision to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and to move closer to Romania in terms of energy.

- **Price manipulation.** Gazprom applied non-transparent contractual formulas, suddenly increasing the price of gas from around \$250 to over \$800 per thousand cubic meters. This price increase led to an economic crisis and social protests, which were subsequently exploited by pro-Russian parties to demand a change of government.
- **Using Transnistria as leverage.** The supply of electricity from Cuciurgan was politically conditioned.

Every time Chisinau tried to reduce its dependence on Gazprom, Tiraspol threatened to cut off supplies, amplifying the state's vulnerability.

- **Political influence through economic elites.** Some local actors in the energy sector, connected to corruption networks, acted as intermediaries for foreign interests. Through disadvantageous contracts and opaque tariff policies, they perpetuated energy dependence and blocked the diversification of energy sources.

5.3 Impact on the state and society

■ Energy crises have had devastating effects on the economic and political stability of the Republic of Moldova. During the winter of 2022–2023, surging gas and electricity bills severely affected living standards and triggered massive protests orchestrated by Kremlin-affiliated parties. These demonstrations served as platforms for political pressure, framing the government as incapable of managing the crisis.

■ Economically, energy instability reduced the competitiveness of local companies and discouraged foreign investment. Supply uncertainty and price volatility reinforced Moldova's image as a high-risk environment.

■ At the geopolitical level, Moldova's energy dependence has consistently been used by the Russian Federation to obstruct its rapprochement with the European Union. Each step towards closer alignment with the EU was met by Kremlin with energy blackmail, with gas and electricity weaponised as tools of foreign policy.

5.4 Response measures

Moldova has responded to hybrid pressures in the energy sector by building the 400 kV Vulcănești-Chișinău power line interconnection (scheduled for completion in 2025) and launching the 400 kV Suceava-Bălți power line project (2027), by creating gas stocks (15% of consumption) and developing flexible local capacities of 200–250 MWh, designed to cover 20–25% of peak consumption. At the same time, the goal of 27% renewable energy by 2030 has been set, along with accelerating the energy rehabilitation of 3% of public buildings annually and consolidating oil reserves. The Energy Strategy 2050 and the digitization of the sector, complemented by combating disinformation and attracting external funds (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – EBRD, European Investment Bank – EIB, World Bank – WB), reflect an approach geared towards European integration and reducing Gazprom's influence.

5.5 Conclusions to Chapter 5

For three decades, Moldova's energy security has represented one of its gravest strategic vulnerabilities, systematically exploited by the Russian Federation through contractual blackmail, price manipulation, and the use of Transnistria as a lever of control. Until 2021, the country was 100% dependence on Russian gas, while the Transnistrian region accumulated over \$8 billion in debt. At the same time, the insufficiently interconnected energy

infrastructure left Moldova in a position of chronic fragility. The crises of 2021–2022 starkly demonstrated how energy can be weaponised, with direct repercussions on the economy, social stability, and the country's geopolitical orientation.

Recent measures, however, point to a paradigm shift. Strategic investments such as the Vulcănești-Chișinău (2025) and Suceava-Bălți (2027) power lines, the creation of gas reserves equivalent to 15% of national consumption, the development of flexible generation capacities of 200–250 MWh (20–25% of peak demand), the commitment to achieve 27% renewable energy by 2030, and the commitment to rehabilitation 3% of public buildings annually – signal a move toward resilience. These are complemented by the adoption of the Energy Strategy 2050, the digitization of the sector, and the intensified cooperation with European and international institutions (EBRD, EIB, WB).

Key finding: energy security cannot rest on dependence and ad hoc crisis management solutions, but must be built on diversification, modernization, and European integration. Only sustained investments in infrastructure, renewable sources, and interconnections with the EU can neutralize Russia's energy leverage and transform vulnerability into national resilience.

Chapter 6

Defense in the grey zone: hybrid pressures on the military sector

Although constitutionally neutral, the Republic of Moldova faces a major strategic vulnerability due to the illegal presence of Russian troops in Transnistria. Underfunded and poorly equipped, the Armed Forces, remain unprepared for a conventional conflict, leaving the state exposed in a regional context shaped by Russia's war against Ukraine.

6.1 Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Constitutional neutrality.** Although enshrined in law, neutrality offers no security guarantees. The Russian Federation maintains around 1,500 troops in Transnistria, contrary to Chisinau's wishes, and controls the Cobasna arms depot, one of the largest in Eastern Europe, with approximately 20,000 tons of ammunition. This arsenal represents both a security threat and a tool for political pressure.
- **Limited military capabilities.** The Armed Forces of the Republic of Moldova have approximately 6,000 active military personnel and equipment that is largely outdated from the Soviet era. The lack of modern air defense systems, armored vehicles, or high-performance artillery makes the Republic of Moldova unable to defend its territory in the event of an attack.
- **Insufficient budget.** Until 2021, defense allocations did not exceed

0.4% of GDP, four times below NATO recommendations. This has limited the modernization of the army and created a dependence on foreign donations for equipment and training.

- **Dependence on the Transnistria region.** In addition to the presence of Russian troops, Transnistria has military, industrial, and logistical infrastructure that is not under Chisinau's control. This region can be used as a platform for hybrid or conventional military operations.

6.2 Hybrid tactics used

- **Maintaining Russian troops in Transnistria.** The presence of the Russian Operational Group of Forces (ROGF) violates constitutional neutrality and international agreements, but provides Moscow with a constant means of pressure. Through joint military exercises with separatist forces, Russia sends messages of intimidation to both the Chisinau authorities and the population.
- **Control of the Cobasna storage facility.** The Russian Federation uses the existence of the storage facility as a means of political blackmail, suggesting that destabilization of the region could lead to a humanitarian and ecological disaster in the event of an explosion.

- **Military-information influence operations.** Russian propaganda narratives portray the Moldovan army as "non-existent" and "incapable," suggesting that the only real protection would come from Russia. During election campaigns, fear of mobilization is exploited, claiming that closer ties with NATO would mean sending young

Moldovans to the front lines in Ukraine.

- **Dependence on foreign donations.** Moscow exploits the public perception that Moldova's army survives only thanks to Western aid. This dependence is used to fuel scepticism about partnerships with the EU and NATO.

6.3 Impact on the state and society

- The presence of Russian troops and the arsenal in Cobasna poses a direct threat to sovereignty. In the event of a wider conflict, Transnistria could be activated as a secondary front against Ukraine or as a lever to destabilize the Republic of Moldova.
- At the societal level, the weakness of the army fuels a culture of mistrust. Many citizens perceive neutrality and the absence of a strong military as safer guarantees than closer ties to collective security structures.

Russian propaganda exploits these fears, amplifying narratives that discourage defence reforms and international cooperation.

- At the geopolitical level, Moldova's inability to defend itself makes it a vulnerable buffer zone between the EU/NATO and the Russian Federation. The absence of credible security guarantees undermined investor confidence and reduces the country's position in international negotiations.

6.4 Response measures

The Republic of Moldova has entered a phase of strategic and institutional consolidation in the field of national security and defense. The development and approval of fundamental documents—the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy—along with new legislative projects on crisis management and airspace security, provide a coherent framework for defense policies. They also mark a

paradigm shift, by integrating the concept of hybrid warfare into strategic planning, gradually increasing the defense budget to 1% of GDP by 2030, and developing civil-military coordination mechanisms through exercises and crisis simulations. For the first time, the Russian Federation is officially designated as the main source of military and security threats,

which clarifies the directions of strategic communication and defense priorities. At the same time, international partnerships are being strengthened under constitutional neutrality through extensive participation in NATO programs, access to European funds for the modernization of logistics and military equipment, and the development of cooperation in areas such as cyber defense, military mobility, and crisis resilience.

At the same time, a gradual process of rehabilitation of defense infrastructure has been initiated, with a focus on modernizing barracks and logistics centers, as well as strengthening air defense. One example is the provision in the new draft law that allows for the neutralization or takeover of control of drones that illegally enter national airspace, a measure that reflects adaptation to new types of threats. Overall, these developments mark a decisive step towards the modernization and resilience of the Republic of Moldova's defense sector.

6.5 Conclusions to Chapter 6

Moldova faces a unique structural vulnerability: constitutional neutrality, intended as a guarantee of security, has become a weakness exploited by the Russian Federation through the maintenance of troops and arsenal at Cobasna in Transnistria. The Armed Forces, with only 6,000 active military personnel and outdated Soviet equipment, remain insufficiently prepared for a conventional conflict.

Reduced budgets, below 0.5% of GDP until 2022, have delayed modernization and fueled the public perception that neutrality is a safer option than strengthening military capabilities. This perception is exploited through propaganda, undermining confidence in partnerships with the EU and NATO.

Recent measures—the adoption of the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, the integration of the concept of hybrid warfare, the gradual increase of the defense budget to 1% of GDP, and the strengthening of international cooperation—mark a paradigm shift. For the first time, the Russian Federation is officially designated as the main source of threat, which clarifies defense directions and strategic communication. At the same time, investments in infrastructure, air defense, and civil-military coordination mechanisms reflect adaptation to new risks.

Key finding: neutrality, without military capabilities and solid partnerships, does not provide real security. Resilience in the field of defense cannot be based on legal symbols, but on the modernization of the Armed Forces, increased investment, infrastructure consolidation, and cooperation with Western partners. Only through a small but professional army, supported by European and transatlantic backing, can the Republic of Moldova ensure its sovereignty and protection against hybrid and conventional threats.

Chapter 7

Capturing the information space: from distorted pluralism to hybrid control tools

The information space of the Republic of Moldova remains dominated by Russian influence and polarized between pro-European and pro-Russian narratives. This fragmentation fuels social division and political instability. With the war in Ukraine disinformation campaigns have intensified, transforming information into a strategic weapon aimed at eroding trust in state institutions and the country's European trajectory.

7.1 Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Dependence on Russian television.** Until December 2022, channels such as RTR, NTV Moldova, and Pervîi Kanal dominated audiences, broadcasting daily propaganda and pro-Kremlin narratives consumed by millions of citizens.
- **Politicization of the domestic press.** Oligarchs and pro-Russian groups have turned television stations and online platforms into tools of electoral manipulation and geopolitical influence. This has eroded pluralism and diminished public trust in the independence of the media.
- **Penetration of social networks.** Platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok are used to distribute coordinated messages through networks of trolls and fake accounts, which are difficult to regulate but enable rapid manipulation of public opinion.

- **Low level of media literacy.** In rural areas in particular, the absence of fact-checking practices facilitates the spread of myths and misinformation – such as claims that "the EU will bring war," "NATO will mobilize young people," or "Romania intends to annex Moldova". This vulnerability amplifies the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns and undermines trust in democratic choices.

7.2 Hybrid tactics used

- One of the central tactics is the imposition of **orchestrated geopolitical narratives**. For example, in the context of the 2022 energy crisis, Russian propaganda intensively promoted the message that "price increases are the result of rapprochement with the EU, not Gazprom's blackmail." These narratives were taken up by various television stations affiliated with pro-Russian parties and multiplied on social media, turning the energy issue into a political weapon.
- Another tactic is the **coordination of online campaigns through troll networks**. Thousands of nearly identical messages are disseminated simultaneously on Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok.

Independent analyses indicate that these messages originate from fake accounts managed abroad but embedded in local groups to create the illusion of authenticity and grassroots support.

- Propaganda relies on **exploiting fear and identity**. Religion and traditions are constantly invoked to oppose European integration. A recurring narrative claims that the EU seeks to impose "gay marriage" and compel Moldova to abandon "Christian values." At the same time, the Russian Federation is portrayed as the "defender of Orthodoxy" and "the only protector of traditions." These emotional narratives are more effective than rational arguments and create a psychological resistance to European integration.
- **Delegitimizing institutions** is a core objective of hostile information campaigns. The government, parliament, and presidency are portrayed as being "controlled by the West" and incapable of protecting citizens. This tactic erodes not only the image of political leadership but also the very legitimacy of the state, fostering widespread mistrust.
- The information **influence tactics deployed in Gagauzia** reflect a distinct model of hybrid attack, coordinated by the Russian Federation in cooperation with local political networks linked with Kremlin interests. They aim to destabilize the region and weaken national cohesion, ultimately undermining confidence in central authorities and

Moldova's European trajectory. A key tactic is the amplification of separatist sentiments, through narratives claiming the erosion of Gagauzia's autonomy.

An emerging tactic is the **use of artificial intelligence to fuel disinformation campaigns**.

Techniques include micro-targeting, automated amplification of messages, deepfake production, generation of fake articles, and use of bot networks for coordinated comments. This creates a full cycle of disinformation – often described as "Matryoshka" or "Călin Georgescu" model, where narratives are layered and mutually reinforcing. Such tactics allow hostile actors to capture new, younger audiences, starting from the age of 12, pulling them into parallel and segregated information ecosystems. The outcome is a deep segmentation of society, reinforced by regionalisation and the creation of isolated "information bubbles" across social networks.

Another mechanism is the **systematic fabrication and dissemination of fake news**. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian propaganda and Telegram channels spread claims that vaccines "are experimental" and "will sterilize the population." During election campaigns, rumours circulated that pro-European leaders intended to "cede territory to Ukraine" or "close churches." Even when disproven such narratives remain in circulation, shaping collective perceptions and fuelling long term mistrust.

7.3 Impact on the state and society

- At the political level, disinformation directly influenced the elections. Pro-Russian parties gained electoral support through populist messages amplified by the media. The 2014 and 2019 elections demonstrated how propaganda and media manipulation can change electoral choices, despite the pro-European tendencies of a significant part of the population.
- At the institutional level, delegitimization campaigns have severely eroded trust in state authorities. Citizens who consume predominantly Russian media often display near-total distrust of the state, perceiving institutions as illegitimate, incompetent or externally controlled. This undermines the state capacity to mobilize society in times of crisis and ensures that government measures – whether economic, security related or social – are viewed with suspicion, if not outright rejection, as being imposed from abroad.
- At the societal level, the impact is even more profound. The population is split between two parallel information ecosystems: one shaped by pro-Russian narratives and the other aligned with independent and Western sources. This division polarises society and reduces social cohesion. Instead of a consensus on the national interest, there are antagonistic camps accusing each other of "treason."
- At the geopolitical level, the Russian Federation instrumentalizes Moldova's information space as part of its broader regional strategy. By keeping it unstable and divided, Moscow seeks to prove that the European model is unviable and that post-Soviet states are destined to remain within Russia's sphere of influence.

7.4 Response measures

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has developed a complex framework of countermeasures to combat hybrid threats, particularly in the information sphere.

At the legislative level, regulations have been introduced to block sources of propaganda, sanction platforms that host disinformation content, and limit external funding for digital campaigns.

In practice, the Intelligence and Security Service and the Commission for Exceptional Situations have ordered the blocking of dozens of Russian propaganda portals and networks—such as ria.ru, sputnik.md, eadaily.com, rubaltic.ru, rutube.ru, yandex.ru, dzen.ru – and revoked the licenses of several TV and radio stations (RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova, TV6, Orhei TV) accused of lack of

pluralism and links to sanctioned actors.

Key institutional capacities have been strengthened, including the SIS, the Audiovisual Council, the Central Election Commission, and the newly established Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, which functions as a coordination hub for monitoring, analyzing, and responding to hostile narratives. These institutions have implemented digital monitoring mechanisms and disinformation analysis centres, particularly active during election campaigns. Collaboration with international partners—such as StratCom EU and NATO StratCom COE—has provided additional expertise and technological resources. At the same time, civil society organisations have contributed by promoting media literacy and enhancing civic resilience, complementing state's efforts. However, these programs remain uneven in coverage and heavily reliant on continued institutional support.

7.5 Conclusions to Chapter 7

Moldova's information space has proven to be one of the most fragile dimensions of national security and, at the same time, a central battleground of hybrid warfare. Dependence on Russian media, the politicization of domestic press, and the penetration of social networks through coordinated campaigns have created **two parallel information realities** that divide society and undermine national cohesion. Russian

propaganda has succeeded in exploiting identity, religious, and socio-economic fears, undermining state institutions, and influencing electoral choices.

Response measures—including the blocking pro-Kremlin portals and television stations, strengthening institutional capacities through the SIS, the Audiovisual Council, and the Central Electoral Commission, and the creation of the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation—represent important steps toward a more coherent framework for information protection. Cooperation with international partners (StratCom EU, NATO StratCom COE) and the involvement of civil society in promoting media literacy have contributed to increased resilience, albeit with uneven coverage and still partial impact.

Key findings: information security cannot be ensured through reactive measures alone, but requires a long-term approach based on media literacy, support for independent media, and strong institutions capable of constantly monitoring and countering disinformation. Strengthening information resilience and integrating this area into national security strategies are becoming essential conditions for protecting democracy and the country's European path.

Chapter 8

Instrumentalization of identity: religion, language, and historical memory in the hands of propaganda

The social and identity dimension of the Republic of Moldova, marked by its Soviet legacy and ethnic and linguistic diversity, remains one of the most sensitive vulnerabilities of national security. This complexity is exploited by external actors, who transform identity into an instrument of polarization and social division through manipulative narratives.

8.1 Exploited vulnerabilities

- **The identity divide between Romanians and Moldovans.** Ambiguities regarding national identity persist, fuelled by Soviet and post-Soviet propaganda, which facilitates geopolitical manipulation.
- **Bilingualism and the role of the Russian language.** Although Romanian is the official language, Russian continues to dominate the media, commerce, and local administration in certain regions, reinforcing the influence of Russian propaganda.
- **Marginalized social segments.** Pensioners, the rural population, and low-income groups are vulnerable to populism and external promises of "stability" due to economic dependence and limited access to media education.
- **Mass migration and depopulation.** The departure of over a million citizens abroad weakens social cohesion and leaves behind an aging population that is susceptible to manipulation and vulnerable to

external pressures.

8.2 Hybrid tactics used

One of the most effective tactics is the exploitation of "Moldovanism" as an identity separate from Romanianism. School textbooks, Kremlin-affiliated media, and the rhetoric of pro-Russian parties constantly promote the idea that Moldovans have a distinct identity that is threatened by Romania and the EU. In election campaigns, the message "we defend Moldovans from union with Romania" is used for electoral mobilization.

Exploitation of the influence of the Orthodox Church subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. Places of worship and civic infrastructure associated with churches are transformed into channels of social and political mobilization, facilitating the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives and amplifying distrust of democratic institutions. Religious networks are used both to organize protests and influence campaigns and as logistical cover for illegal activities, including the distribution of financial and electoral resources. This instrumentalization of faith contributes to the consolidation of social and regional segregation, fueling divisions and providing the Kremlin with an additional vector for destabilizing national cohesion.

Another tactic is the instrumentalisation of the Russian language as a political weapon. Whenever the authorities attempt to promote the Romanian language in education or administration, pro-Russian parties organise protests and media campaigns, presenting these measures as "discrimination against minorities". This polarisation transforms a cultural and linguistic issue into a political one.

Religion is used as an identity and geopolitical tool. The Orthodox Church in Moldova, under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, often promotes pro-Russian political narratives, disguised as religious discourse. Themes of "defending the Orthodox faith" and "rejecting the decadent values of the West" are used to block social reforms and fuel fears of European integration.

Vulnerable social segments are also mobilized through populist narratives. Pensioners are often convinced that only the Russian Federation can ensure "low gas prices and decent pensions," and the rural population is exposed to disinformation campaigns through Russian television and social media.

Another important mechanism is the exploitation of migration. Russian propaganda presents the mass departure of Moldovans to the West as proof of the "failure of the European model," ignoring the internal causes of migration and presenting Russia as a closer and "natural" destination.

8.3 Impact on the state and society

■ At the political level, identity fractures generate instability and deadlock. Pro-Russian parties constantly mobilize the electorate on the basis of identity, blocking debate on public policies and turning elections into a permanent referendum on the country's geopolitical orientation.

■ At the societal level, identity polarization reduces social cohesion. Linguistic and ethnic communities end up perceiving the state differently: for some, the Republic of Moldova is part of the Romanian and European space; for others, it is a distinct state with "natural ties" to the Russian Federation. This divergence not only weakens national consensus but also hinders the formation of a common civic identity.

- At the economic and social level, vulnerable groups end up being exploited in manipulation processes. Pensioners and rural residents are often persuaded to participate in paid protests organized by parties affiliated with the Kremlin.
- At the geopolitical level, identity fractures turn the Republic of

Moldova into a gray area. In the absence of a clear national consensus, the state becomes vulnerable to external pressures and lacks the capacity to make firm decisions. The Russian Federation exploits these divisions to maintain indirect control and prevent progress on the European path.

8.4 Response measures

The authorities have taken action through media education, civic campaigns, and curriculum reforms aimed at promoting an inclusive national identity and reducing the effects of disinformation. Interinstitutional dialogue and the socio-economic integration of vulnerable regions play an important role, as do monitoring the discourse of the clergy and sanctioning misconduct.

At the same time, mechanisms for monitoring the media, sanctions for disinformation outlets, and measures for transparency in the financing of CSOs have been introduced. The strengthening of the independent press, the promotion of counter-narratives, and support for strategic government communication are also targeted. At the local level, the training and education of community leaders—mayors, teachers, or priests—is seen as essential for social cohesion, along with expanding access to pluralistic information, especially in rural areas.

8.5 Conclusions to Chapter 8

The analysis shows that the identity and social dimensions of the Republic of Moldova constitute both a structural vulnerability and a very effective lever exploited by external actors, especially the Russian Federation, to undermine national stability. The Romanian vs. Moldovan divisions, the role of the Russian language, the influence of the Moscow-affiliated church, and the fragility of vulnerable social groups are factors that have fuelled polarization and prevented the consolidation of a unified civic consensus.

The response measures adopted—media education, civic campaigns, sanctions against disinformation in the media, dialogue with moderate religious leaders, and training for community leaders—represent the early steps of an integrated strategy. However, the success of these

initiatives depends on their coherent and consistent application in the long term.

Key findings: identity must be rebuilt on civic and democratic foundations, not on ethnic or geopolitical criteria. Identity security cannot be ensured through ad hoc measures, but through a complex approach that combines education, socio-economic integration, strategic communication, and the strengthening of the independent press. Only the construction of an inclusive and resilient civic identity, based on democratic values and European orientation, can transform Moldova's diversity from a hybridly exploited vulnerability into a resource for national unity and stability.

Chapter 9

Războiul fără tancuri: spațiul cibernetic sub atac

Moldova's cybersecurity is highly vulnerable due to limited resources and outdated infrastructure, exposing the state to increasingly frequent attacks on critical institutions and infrastructure. These attacks, which have intensified with the war in Ukraine and are attributed to Russian-affiliated groups, are turning cyberspace into a hybrid weapon of destabilization.

9.1 Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Outdated digital infrastructure.** Many government institutions use old IT systems without regular security updates. For example, in 2020, an audit by the Ministry of Finance showed that over 60% of the IT infrastructure in public administration was using outdated software.
- **Lack of specialized personnel.** The Republic of Moldova has an acute shortage of cybersecurity experts. Most well-trained IT specialists prefer to emigrate or work for private companies, leaving public institutions poorly protected.
- **Fragmented institutional coordination.** The Center for Cybersecurity, the Intelligence and Security Service, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs have parallel competences, but cooperation between them is often lacking. This fragmentation allows attackers to exploit the lack of a unified response.

- **Dependence on external infrastructure.** Many digital services (hosting, email, databases) are managed by private companies or stored in external clouds. This creates risks regarding unauthorized access and control over sensitive data.

9.2 Hybrid tactics used

- **Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks.** In 2022, during the energy crisis and protests, several government websites—including the Presidency and Government portals—were targeted by massive DDoS attacks, claimed by the pro-Russian group Killnet. The aim was to block citizens' access to official information and create the impression of chaos.
- **Phishing campaigns and data leaks.** In 2021 and 2022, several public institutions and pro-European parties were targeted by phishing campaigns. Some attacks led to the leak of emails and internal documents, which were subsequently exploited by the Kremlin-affiliated media to discredit the government.
- **Defamation through the publication of false data.** Some attacks combined real data with fabricated information. For example, around the time of the 2021 elections, documents

allegedly from the emails of the electoral staff of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) were published online, mixed with fakes to create artificial scandals.

- **Attacks on critical infrastructure.** In 2022, Moldelectrica reported attempts to attack Supervisory

Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems used to manage electrical networks. Although the attacks did not cause major disruptions, they demonstrated the vulnerability of critical infrastructure to hostile cyber operations.

9.3 Impact on the state and society

- At the institutional level, cyber attacks undermine the state's ability to communicate effectively with citizens. DDoS attacks on government websites send the message to the population that the authorities cannot ensure the functioning of digital services, amplifying distrust in the government.
- At the political level, data leaks and the publication of falsified documents directly affect the legitimacy of pro-European parties. Even when the fakes are refuted, the media impact and public perception remain negative.

- At the economic level, attacks on critical infrastructure can cause massive losses. A possible compromise of energy management systems could cause power outages, with direct effects on industry and the population.
- At the societal level, cyber attacks are used to fuel fear and uncertainty. The population ends up perceiving the digital space as an unsafe environment, which reduces the use of online government services and blocks the digitization of public administration.

9.4 Response measures

The Republic of Moldova has adopted several measures to respond to cyber threats. The National Cyber Security Strategy provides a framework for critical infrastructure protection, CERT development, and digital literacy. However, implementation is uneven, and standards for critical sectors are lagging.

CERT-GOV-MD plays a central role, managing incidents and supporting

public institutions. Since 2022, it has processed over 5,000 cases, mainly phishing and DDoS. However, human and technical resources are insufficient for complex or simultaneous attacks.

International collaboration with NATO, the EU, and the US has led to data exchanges and participation in exercises such as "Cyber Europe" and "Locked Shields." These have improved the response to large

attacks, but integrating external procedures into national legislation remains difficult.

In 2023, mandatory reporting of cyber incidents within 24 hours was introduced for critical institutions and providers. However, only 70% comply with this rule, which reduces the effectiveness of the coordinated response.

9.5 Conclusions to Chapter 9

Cybersecurity in the Republic of Moldova is currently both a strategic area of resilience and a dynamic battlefield of hybrid warfare, where internal vulnerabilities intersect with external pressures. DDoS attacks, data leaks, phishing campaigns, and attempts on critical infrastructure show that the digital space has become a key arena of political and strategic influence.

Cyberattacks have demonstrated that Moldova's digital space is a major vulnerability, constantly exploited for political destabilization, erosion of public confidence, and pressure on critical infrastructure. While important measures have been implemented—such as the National Cybersecurity Strategy, the operationalization of CERT-GOV-MD, mandatory incident reporting, and cooperation with Western partners—their effectiveness remains constrained by limited resources, fragmented coordination, and uneven application of standards.

International cooperation is essential. Through EU- and US-funded projects, Moldova has begun to develop capabilities to monitor and respond to cyber incidents. Expanding this support and integrating Moldova into European cybersecurity networks could transform cybersecurity from a vulnerability into a pillar of national resilience.

Key findings: cyber defense can no longer be approached exclusively from a technical perspective, but must be coherently integrated into the overall architecture of national security policy. Strengthening capabilities in this area requires sustained investment, the development of human capital through specialized education, and the leveraging of international partnerships. Only through such an approach will the Republic of Moldova be able to protect its critical infrastructure and transform the digital space from a potential vulnerability into a strategic resource for resilience.

Chapter 10

Civil society under pressure: from delegitimization to coercion

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Republic of Moldova are crucial actors in promoting democracy, human rights, and social cohesion, yet they remain poorly understood by the broader public. In recent years, they have become targets of hybrid campaigns aimed at discrediting and marginalizing them, particularly from the Russian Federation. These attacks focus on reputational, financial, and informational resources, weakening the resilience of the state and undermining the foundations of civic participation.

10.1 Exploited vulnerabilities

- **Financial dependence on external donors.** Over 70% of CSO funding comes from international sources, which makes them vulnerable to sudden cuts in funding and campaigns challenging the legitimacy of external support.
- **Fragile public image.** Low awareness and limited knowledge of CSO activities among citizens facilitates denigration and stigmatization.
- **Polarized political context.** The intensification of attacks around elections and pro-European reforms shows the exploitation of political vulnerability and social divisions.
- **Legal and institutional weaknesses.** The use of SLAPP shows how the justice system can be instrumentalized for intimidation in

the absence of robust mechanisms to prevent abuse.

- **Unconsolidated civic space.** The lack of alternative funding instruments and dependence on political support create risks for the sustainability of CSOs.
- **Penetration through front CSOs.** Fictitious or externally controlled organizations can be used for illegal financing and electoral manipulation, undermining trust in the entire sector.

10.2 Hybrid tactics used

- **Denigration and stigmatization.** CSOs and ADOs are targets of smear campaigns through false accusations, hate speech, and labels such as "foreign agents" or "Sorosists."
- **SLAPP.** Abusive lawsuits initiated by politicians against critical media outlets for the purpose of intimidation; most are dismissed by the courts.
- **Financial dependence.** Over 70% of CSO funding comes from external sources; the cessation of some funds in 2025 has led to closures and project suspensions.
- **Restrictive legislative initiatives.** The draft law on "foreign agents" threatens freedom of association and civic participation.
- **Front CSOs.** Organizations such as "Evrazia" have been used for illegal financing, electoral manipulation, and training young people in destabilizing actions.

10.3 Impact on the state and society

- At the institutional level, smear campaigns and restrictive legislative projects undermine the ability of CSOs to function as pillars of democracy. Stigmatization through labels such as "foreign agents" or "Sorosists" erodes the legal and reputational legitimacy of the sector.
- At the political level, the hijacking of organizations through front structures such as "Evrazia" has affected electoral processes through illegal financing, vote buying, and incitement to violent protests. These actions have compromised public confidence in democratic integrity and fueled political instability.
- At the economic level, the withdrawal of international funding—including the suspension of US support in 2025—has drastically reduced the capacity of CSOs to implement essential projects and programs. The closure of some organizations and the loss of jobs have diminished the sector's contribution to social cohesion and community development.
- At the societal level, anti-CSO rhetoric has become normalized, causing public trust to fall below 20% in 2024. This trend has created a climate of fear and self-censorship, delegitimizing critical voices and reducing civic engagement. The civic vacuum thus created favors external interference and the consolidation of authoritarian influence.

10.4 Response measures

The Republic of Moldova has initiated a set of measures aimed at strengthening the resilience of civil society and limiting destabilising actions.

At the legislative level, bills have been introduced to protect human rights defenders and prevent procedural abuse (anti-SLAPP), alongside strong opposition from CSOs to the draft law on "foreign agents," which is considered unconstitutional.

In terms of public information, CSOs have published reports and resilience actions, and the press has conducted undercover journalistic investigations, revealing the links between the "Evrazia" organization and networks affiliated with Ilan Shor.

In terms of coercion and sanctions, the police investigated the illegal activities of the Evrazia organization,

and in 2024 the United States imposed sanctions against it and its director, Nelli Parutenco, for involvement in destabilizing actions.

the Republic of Moldova against hybrid warfare.

With regard to the financial sustainability of CSOs, solutions such as extending the 2% tax redirection mechanism, increasing tax deductions for donations, and adapting the legal framework for crowdfunding, sponsorships, and own revenues are being promoted.

10.5 Conclusions to Chapter 10

Threats to CSOs aim to erode public support and reduce financial resources, paving the way for restrictive legislation, such as the "Foreign Agents Law," in the long term. Smear campaigns and SLAPP lawsuits erode public trust, while the dependence on external funding amplifies the risk of a sectoral collapse if international support is withdrawn. The weakening of civil society and the pressures on an independent press undermine democratic resilience and the state's capacity to respond to hybrid threats. At the same time, the absence of clear regulatory frameworks allow for the political instrumentalization of civic space, exacerbating vulnerabilities in both governance and social cohesion.

Key findings: protecting civil society and the independent media is essential for strengthening democratic resilience, preventing state capture, and defending

Informative table

Mapping of target areas of hybrid attacks and response measures

Area	Vulnerabilities	Tactics	Impact	Response measures
Rule of law	Identity polarization Economic discontent Fragile institutions Religious actors/CSOs with anti-EU narratives	External funding Infiltration of provocateurs Media/social media manipulation "Pro-EU dictatorship" rhetoric	- The discrediting of authentic civic engagement - Erosion of trust in institutions - Fragmentation of society - Instrumentalization of rights	Law (2025) against corruption in assemblies Stopping illegal money flows SIS & CCA monitoring Media campaigns & civic education
Transnistrian region	Political control and censorship Economic coercion Information monopoly Militarization of young people Educational indoctrination	Repression and fear Taxes and trade barriers Total propaganda Paramilitary camps	- Human rights violations - Economic pressure - Capture of the information space - Consolidation of separatism	Dialogue on education/agriculture Support for Romanian schools Compensation for farmers in Dubăsari Referral to the OSCE/EU/CoE Informing parents/students
Electoral	Non-transparent party financing (external networks, offshore, cash) Electoral institutions with limited resources (CEC, courts) Low level of civic education (vulnerable, rural electorate) Media polarization (pro-Russian TV and media, anti-EU narratives)	Vote buying (money, goods, services) Mobilization of voters in Transnistria Disinformation campaigns (e.g., "Sandu is closing churches") Cyberattacks and data leaks Delegitimization of electoral institutions (CEC)	- Reducing the legitimacy of the government - Recurring political crises after each election - Division of society (rural vs. urban, pro-EU vs. pro-Russia) - Entrenchment of the idea that votes are "commodities" - External exploitation of vulnerabilities (Russia)	Clearer anti-fraud legal framework and sanctions Extensive national and international monitoring Strengthening the CEC and electoral institutions Media independence and combating online disinformation Civic education campaigns and party accountability Cooperation with the EU and external partners
Economic	Capture of state-owned companies (Moldovagaz, Metalferos, Chisinau Airport) Dependence on remittances (>15% of GDP) Fragile banking system (bank fraud in 2014) Trade dependence on Russia and embargoes	Corruption and capture through political appointments "Russian laundromat" (laundering >\$20 billion) Embargoes as political leverage (2006–2013) Politically controlled investments in strategic assets	- Financial crises (USD 1 billion hole, increase in public debt) - Loss of control over strategic infrastructure - Impoverishment of the population, migration, dependence on remittances - Maintaining Russian geopolitical influence	Liquidation of banks involved in fraud Strengthening the NBM and transparency of shareholding Audit and reform of state-owned companies Reorienting trade towards the EU/Romania Reducing energy dependence on Gazprom

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Corruption	Culture of impunity (major cases closed/delayed) Capture of judicial institutions (Superior Council of Magistracy, politically controlled prosecutors) Courts used for money laundering ("Russian Laundromat") Administrative and economic corruption (Metalferos, Chişinău Airport)	Economic infiltration through front companies (e.g., Gazprom–Moldovagaz) Selective justice (political cases, protection of oligarchs) Legislative manipulation ("lawfare," e.g., mixed system 2017) Obstruction of EU reforms through institutional control	- Undermining political legitimacy and civic apathy - Economic losses amounting to billions (bank fraud, rigged contracts) - Social cynicism, perception that reforms are just promises - Pro-Russian propaganda exploits corruption to discredit democracy	Vetting of judges and prosecutors (Law No. 26/2022, with the support of the Venice Commission) Investigation and blocking of the Shor group's financial schemes Cooperation between SIS, NBM, and SPCSB to combat money laundering Preventive measures against external interference (prohibition of observers connected to Russian services)
Energy	Dependence on Russian gas (up to 100% in 2021) Electricity controlled from Transnistria (MGRES, debts >\$8 billion) Poorly interconnected infrastructure with Romania/EU Opaque regulations and corruption (Moldovagaz, ANRE)	Contractual blackmail (gas cuts/shutdowns) Price manipulation (250 → 800 USD/1000 m³) Conditioning of deliveries from Transnistria Corrupt local intermediaries blocking diversification	- Social crises (high bills, protests 2022–2023) - Declining competitiveness and investment - Geopolitical vulnerability to Russia - Energy used as a political weapon	Vulcăneşti–Chişinău (2025) and Suceava–Bălţi (2027) interconnections Gas stocks (15% of consumption) and flexible capacities (200–250 MWh) 27% renewable energy by 2030 and rehabilitation of 3% of buildings/year Energy Strategy 2050, digitalization, and cooperation with the EBRD, EIB, and WB
Military and defense	Constitutional neutrality exploited by Russia (GOTR troops, Cobasna ~20,000 tons of ammunition) Limited capabilities (6,000 military personnel, Soviet technology, lack of air defense) Insufficient budget (0.4% of GDP until 2021)	Maintenance of Russian troops and joint exercises with separatists Control of the Cobasna depot as leverage for blackmail Influence operations (propaganda: "non-existent army," "NATO = war") Exploiting dependence on foreign donations to undermine trust in the EU/NATO	- Direct threat to sovereignty and risk of activating Transnistria as a secondary front - Culture of mistrust and perception that neutrality is a "guarantee" of security - Moldova as a vulnerable buffer zone with low credibility in international negotiations	National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy (new legislative framework) Increase in the defense budget to 1% of GDP by 2030 Integration of the concept of hybrid warfare into planning Strengthening civil-military coordination through exercises and simulations

Area	Vulnerabilities	Tactics	Impact	Response measures
Information	Dependence on Russian television stations (RTR, NTV, Pervii Kanal) Politicisation of the domestic press by oligarchs/pro-Russians Penetration of social networks (Telegram, trolls, fake accounts) Low level of media literacy, especially in rural areas	Imposition of geopolitical narratives ("price increases due to the EU, not Gazprom") Troll networks and coordinated campaigns on Telegram/Facebook/TikTok Exploitation of fear and identity (religion, traditions, "the EU will impose gay marriage") Delegitimization of state institutions - Amplification of separatism in Gagauzia Fabrication and distribution of fake news (COVID, ceding of territories, closure of churches)	• Influencing elections (e.g., 2014, 2019) in favor of pro-Russian parties • Weakening trust in institutions • Division of society into antagonistic "information bubbles" • Keeping Moldova vulnerable to Russia's regional strategy	Blocking Russian portals and networks (sputnik.md, ria.ru, etc.) and withdrawing TV licenses (RTR, NTV, TV6, Orhei TV) Creation of the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation Strengthening the SIS, CA, and CEC for monitoring and countering Collaboration with StratCom EU and NATO StratCom COE Media education and civic resilience programs supported by CSOs
Identity	Historically fuelled division between Romanians and Moldovans Marginalized social segments (pensioners, rural) Mass migration and depopulation (weakening cohesion)	Promotion of "Moldovanism" distinct from Romanianism Instrumentalization of the Russian language as a political weapon Religion as a geopolitical vector (the Church under the Moscow Patriarchate) Economic populism ("Russia = cheap pensions and gas") Exploiting migration as "the failure of the EU"	• Political instability, polarized elections based on identity • Reduced social cohesion and lack of common civic identity • Instrumentalization of vulnerable groups in paid protests - Moldova as a vulnerable geopolitical "gray zone"	Media education and curriculum reforms for inclusive identity - Civic campaigns and interinstitutional dialogue Monitoring and sanctioning religious and media abuses Support for independent media and counter-narratives Training local leaders (mayors, teachers, priests) and expanding access to pluralistic information

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Cyber	Outdated IT infrastructure (60% of systems obsolete in 2020) Lack of specialized personnel (brain drain in IT) Fragmented coordination (SIS, MAI, Cyber Center) Dependence on external infrastructure (cloud, hosting)	DDoS attacks on government websites (Killnet, 2022) Phishing and data leaks exploited by the media Publication of falsified documents (PAS 2021 campaign) Attacks on critical infrastructure (Moldelectrica, SCADA)	- Undermining the state's ability to communicate online - Erosion of the legitimacy of pro-EU parties through leaks/fakes - Economic risks through attacks on energy - Creation of a perception of digital insecurity in society	National Cyber Security Strategy - CERT-GOV-MD (5,000 cases handled since 2022) NATO/EU/US collaboration and exercises ("Cyber Europe," "Locked Shields") Mandatory incident reporting (24 hours, partially complied with ~70%) Investments in digital literacy and critical infrastructure
Civil society	Dependence on external donors (>70%) - Fragile public image, stigmatization Political polarization and attacks during campaigns - Legal weaknesses (SLAPP lawsuits) Lack of alternative funding mechanisms Front CSOs used for illegal financing	Smear campaigns ("foreign agents," "Sorosists") Abusive SLAPP lawsuits against the media Funding cuts (e.g., US 2025) → CSO closures Restrictive legislative projects ("foreign agents") Front CSOs ("Evrazia") involved in electoral manipulation	- Weakening of the role of CSOs as pillars of democracy - Illegal financing and electoral manipulation through front CSOs - Reduction of sector resources, closures, and job losses - Erosion of public trust (<20% in 2024), self-censorship, and civic vacuum	Anti-SLAPP initiatives and opposition to the "foreign agents" law Media reports and investigations exposing illegal networks Investigations and sanctions against "Evrazia" Promotion of financial sustainability: 2% mechanism, tax deductions, crowdfunding, own revenues