Policy Brief

MOLDOVA UNDER GEOPOLITICAL PRESSURE: DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND HYBRID CHALLENGES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

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In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has become both a frontline state and a testing ground for hybrid warfare tactics in Europe. In a context defined by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, energy pressure, disinformation campaigns, and attempts at electoral interference, Chișinău has nonetheless managed to maintain a pro-European trajectory and to conduct competitive elections whose legitimacy has not been compromised. This experience offers both a warning and a set of concrete lessons for strengthening democratic resilience across the European space.

Geopolitics is not a neutral backdrop to political life in the Republic of Moldova, but a structural determinant of how democracy functions. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped the security environment, reinforcing public perceptions of a potential spillover of the conflict into Moldova. A security perception survey conducted by PISA and CBS-Axa shows that approximately

70% of citizens fear the re-eruption of a regional conflict, and this anxiety is systematically exploited in information campaigns that link the European integration path to war and instability.

In parallel, energy has been used as a tool of coercion. Moldova's long-standing dependence on Russian gas and on electricity generated in the Transnistrian region has turned every foreign policy decision into an immediate source of social pressure: utility bills, jobs, and the risk of blackouts. Under these conditions, European integration is no longer perceived merely as a technical or economic process, but as a strategic choice with existential stakes. This has generated a clear political mandate in favor of reforms, while simultaneously intensifying the pressure on institutions, which remain continuously exposed to disinformation, political interference, and energy blackmail.

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At the same time, domestic factors - political, institutional, and societal - have been decisive in shaping the country's trajectory. After 2021, the Republic of Moldova benefited from a pro-reform mandate focused on combating corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and advancing closer to the European Union. The PISA study "Democracy Under Siege: Challenges to National Security and Countering Hybrid Threats in the Republic of Moldova" highlights how institutional responses have evolved from fragmented, ad hoc reactions to more structured mechanisms:

- strengthening the Audiovisual Council,
- establishing the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation,
- and developing a security architecture that explicitly incorporates hybrid threats and
- enhances interinstitutional coordination.

Civil society and independent media have likewise played a critical role.

> Despite discreditation campaigns and economic pressure, investigative journalists, NGOs, and fact-checking initiatives remain central actors in explaining reforms, dismantling manipulative narratives, and monitoring public institutions.

Freedom House assessments and observations from other international organizations confirm that independent media and civil society are among the principal defenders of democratic accountability in the Republic of Moldova.

Surveys conducted in recent years indicate a growing public demand for stability, rule of law, and predictable governance, accompanied by a clear fatigue with corruption and oligarchic capture. This societal backdrop has enabled the adoption of difficult yet necessary reforms in the context of European integration. At the same time, the Republic of Moldova remains a small administration with limited resources and insufficient expertise in specialized fields, particularly at the intersection of security, technology, and strategic communication. These constraints affect both the pace and the depth of the country's adaptation to sophisticated hybrid threats.

These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the fragmentation of the information space. Rural audiences and older populations rely primarily on Russian-language television, while young people and urban audiences consume mostly online content. Regions such as Gagauzia and Transnistria remain strongly influenced by media ecosystems dominated by the Russian Federation. In practical terms, Moldova's information landscape is segmented into several ecosystems that function almost autonomously, with limited interaction and weak mechanisms for dialogue and trust-building between them.

PISA analyses and public opinion surveys indicate that approximately 60% of citizens encounter disinformation at least once a month, while only one-third report confidence in their ability to identify it.

This gap between exposure and filtering capacity is systematically exploited by hostile actors through fabricated news, deepfakes, cloned websites, and stigmatization

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campaigns targeting journalists and NGOs, often labeled as "foreign agents."

In the energy domain, fears of price increases and supply disruptions have likewise been major channels through which propaganda has attempted to convert economic anxiety into political destabilization.

The impact of these tactics is not limited to the volume of malicious content, but is reflected in behavioral effects: whether people change their vote, withdraw from participation, or disengage entirely from their relationship of trust with institutions. Available data show that, in contexts where media literacy programs and transparent public communication have been sustained, exposure to propaganda no longer leads automatically to panic, demobilization, or radicalization. This is, arguably, one of the strongest indicators of democratic resilience in the face of information warfare.

Within this context, the support provided by the European Union and its Member States has delivered clear added value. Energy security, information security, and democratic security are increasingly interdependent, and small states can function as early-warning systems whose vulnerabilities reveal emerging tactics, while the responses they develop can be transformed into good practices and policy tools for others.

To contribute to European security, Moldova maintains strong relations with its neighbors and other candidate countries through bilateral, trilateral, and regional initiatives.

Regular exchanges take place with Ukraine and the Western Balkan states on the accession process. In the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Moldova has strengthened and expanded its cooperation with Ukraine and Romania, including in trilateral formats- particularly in the fields of energy security, transport, and connectivity at both technical and high-level tiers. The Government of Moldova has consistently aligned itself with international statements condemning Russia's military aggression and has demonstrated firm solidarity with Ukraine.

In this context, the European Democracy Shield initiative, launched by the European Commission on 12 November 2025, provides a valuable framework for strengthening democratic resilience and countering external interference. The case of the Republic of Moldova can offer substantial input for the design and implementation of this instrument, particularly with regard to cooperation with digital platforms, support for civil society, and the protection of electoral processes in a hostile information environment.

> EU enlargement can no longer be viewed as a strictly technical process of acquis adoption, but rather as an integral component of a broader strategy to safeguard the European project. Every democracy anchored within the EU strengthens collective resilience and reduces the room for maneuver of authoritarian actors.

The experience of the Republic of Moldova demonstrates that reforms in justice, governance, and anti-corruption simultaneously reinforce national institutions and the Union's collective capacity to withstand hybrid pressures. At the same time, an enlargement approach that fails to take the security context into

account risks generating fragility, just as a security policy pursued without democratic consolidation risks creating dependency. Russia's aggression and the hybrid warfare conducted against Ukraine and Moldova have made it unequivocally clear that security and enlargement are inseparable.

Moldova has been a testing ground for hybrid attacks from disinformation and electoral interference to energy blackmail yet it has demonstrated that democracy can prevail even under intense pressure. The recent parliamentary elections were a genuine test of our resilience: despite attempts at manipulation, illicit financing, the use of cryptocurrencies, and vote buying, the citizens of Moldova stood firm and delivered a clear message: they choose peace, stability, and a European future.

In this context, EU–Moldova relations in recent years have demonstrated that enlargement can advance both democratic consolidation and security resilience. Timely political signaling—most notably the decision to grant Moldova candidate status in 2022, amid a regional war—shifted public expectations and generated a domestic mandate for reform, with support for EU accession remaining above 60%. EU assistance in energy diversification, including emergency support for electricity, the Energy Vulnerability Reduction Fund, and integration into ENTSO-E, has substantially reduced the leverage of external actors and effectively ended the use of energy as a political weapon. Conditionality in the areas of justice and governance has enabled reforms that

would have been difficult to implement in isolation, while cooperation on countering disinformation and the support provided by missions such as EUPM, the Hybrid Rapid Response Teams, and the Cyber Rapid Response Teams have been essential during the 2024–2025 electoral cycles, exposing foreign interference and strengthening institutional resilience.

At the same time, several structural gaps continue to limit the EU's impact. The persistent distance between strategic ambition and operational implementation undermines credibility in an environment where Russian-language media and hostile narratives systematically exploit delays. Investments in societal resilience independent media, fact-checking alliances, and civic and digital literacy remain insufficient relative to the scale of hybrid threats that affect more than half of the population every month.

Moldova is often assessed against idealized reform benchmarks that do not fully reflect hybrid pressure, the dynamics of the frozen conflict, or cross-border influence operations. Regional vulnerabilities—the Transnistrian file, Russia-linked networks in Gagauzia, criminal-financial structures, and influence operations targeting Moldova and Romania simultaneously—are not yet fully integrated into a coherent EU approach.

For the European Union to ensure that reforms undertaken by candidate countries are followed by clear political decisions, progress must be linked to predictable and merit-based steps. Advancements in justice, governance, anti-corruption efforts, and other key reforms should be assessed in a spirit of

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objectivity and partnership, and the Union must accompany these efforts with timely and credible responses including, where appropriate, by opening negotiation chapters, providing tailored support, and advancing clear integration benchmarks.

For reforms to be sustainable, it is essential that progress achieved by candidate states be assessed objectively and followed by clear political decisions from the Union: the opening of negotiation chapters, targeted support, and well-defined intermediate integration deliverables. Any unjustified delay creates space for external interference, reinforcing the narrative that "the EU promises much but delivers little." In an information environment where disinformation is pervasive, the credibility of European decisions becomes a strategic resource in its own right.

Every delay in the enlargement process widens the space for external interference; when Europe hesitates, other actors move quickly through disinformation, corruption, and coercion. Moldova's recent electoral experience illustrates the risks that Europe itself may face tomorrow, turning enlargement into an act of collective self-defense that prevents the emergence of grey zones vulnerable to authoritarian influence.

Effective communication, as well as the active countering of foreign information manipulation and interference including disinformation constitutes a strategic priority, as these phenomena represent growing security threats both for the EU and for underlined enlargement candidate countries.

In this context, treating Moldova as a frontline state in hybrid defense requires the direct integration of rapid-response mechanisms, cybersecurity support, tools for safeguarding electoral integrity, and the monitoring of illicit financing into the enlargement process.

Moldova can be gradually anchored into the EU's security structures—from early-warning systems and civil protection mechanisms to platforms for countering hybrid threats—while EU support should expand the capacity of local communities, youth, women's organizations, and regional actors in Gagauzia and Transnistria.

In conclusion, the Republic of Moldova's recent trajectory demonstrates that geopolitical pressure and democratic development are deeply interconnected, and that hybrid warfare exploits any fracture between security, democracy, and social cohesion. Available surveys and studies depict a complex reality: high exposure to disinformation, fear of conflict, and information fragmentation, but also a genuine capacity for adaptation when institutions act, citizens are informed, and international partners remain engaged. Supporting a small democracy under hybrid pressure is not merely an act of solidarity—it is a direct investment in European security and in the credibility of the European Union's enlargement policy.

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