



**STUDY**

# **DEMOCRACY UNDER SIEGE**

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

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



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

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

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# About PISA

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**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.

The study ***Democracy Under Siege: Challenges to National Security and Countering Hybrid Threats in the Republic of Moldova*** aims to identify the main hybrid threats faced by the Republic of Moldova in the 2020–2025 period, assess their impact on the functioning of state institutions and social cohesion, and formulate conclusions and recommendations relevant to strengthening national resilience. At the same time, it aims to contribute to raising awareness among the public, decision-makers, and international partners, particularly in the European Union and NATO, regarding the nature, scale, and possible scenarios generated by developments in a hybrid warfare context.

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## INTRODUCTION: FROM FRAGILITY TO RESILIENCE. PREMISES OF THE STUDY

**It is clear that the Russian Federation will not soon abandon its hostile actions against the Republic of Moldova anytime soon. Therefore, we will have to learn to live in the context of a long-lasting and high-intensity hybrid war**

*(National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, Decision No. 391 of 15.12.2023)*

### CONTEXT

In a geopolitical environment marked by uncertainty and growing tensions, the Republic of Moldova faces a wide range of hybrid threats, the effects of which include undermining the economic, social, and political stability of the state. These hybrid actions reflect a coherent strategy to expand the Russian Federation's influence in the region, seeking to consolidate ideological control, destabilize democratic institutions, and reduce Chişinău's ability to act independently domestically and internationally.

The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine was a defining moment for regional security, exposing and amplifying the vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova. This event prompted a rapid reassessment of the security environment, where the national response was initially largely reactive, based on the principle of learning by doing, in the absence of a proactive and coherent strategic framework. The simultaneous management of health, humanitarian, economic, and information crises, given limited institutional capacities, highlighted the lack of a holistic approach to national security and the absence of an effective prevention and early warning mechanism. This has been repeatedly highlighted in recent years, both in institutional reports and independent studies. For example, a study conducted in 2021 recommended the creation of an integrated and functional warning system, the systematic collection and analysis of data on hybrid risks, and investments in institutional capacity building—including training, logistical support, and modernization of the regulatory framework [1]. The Intelligence and Security Service has published several reports on foreign interference [2].

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[1] See: D. Mânzărari. An early warning model: Towards an early warning mechanism for the Republic of Moldova. [https://ipre.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RO\\_Studiu\\_Avertizare-timpurie\\_EWM\\_final\\_13.04.2021\\_final.pdf](https://ipre.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RO_Studiu_Avertizare-timpurie_EWM_final_13.04.2021_final.pdf)

[2] External interference in electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova. <https://sis.md/ro/content/imixtiunea-extern%C4%83-%C3%AEn-procesele-electorale-din-republica-moldova>

Although some recommendations have been implemented, the ongoing assessment of hybrid threats remains uncertain.

Response policies have been adapted along the way, taking significant risks and often being influenced by the pressure of hybrid threats, which has led to decisions being taken without prior strategic analysis. However, the institutional response has gradually strengthened, benefiting from the support of the EU member states, and NATO, and the opening in 2023 of the European Union Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova and its work in supporting crisis management and combating hybrid threats marked an essential step towards increasing the resilience of the security sector.

The adoption of a political and legal framework adjusted to the new security reality, including the explicit recognition of the Russian Federation as a major source of threat, and the approval of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) in December 2024 [3] established the development of an effective early warning system for hybrid risks and threats as one of the key objectives. At the same time, public and institutional perceptions of Moldova's security have changed, with greater attention being paid to the military dimension, even though there have been no credible indications of a direct military threat during the conflict in Ukraine. However, in view of the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025 and depending on the developments on the Ukrainian front, an intensification of destabilizing actions by the Russian Federation cannot be ruled out, which includes the deliberate transformation of the Republic of Moldova into a *gray zone*.

In a fragmented international environment, with significant changes in global geopolitical priorities, particularly in the Black Sea region, hybrid pressures on democracy and the rule of law are intensifying. Recent examples, such as that in Georgia, show the risk of internal actors being instrumentalised to undermine democracy – a scenario that highlights the urgency of strengthening the resilience of the civil society in the Republic of Moldova. Hybrid risks often manifest themselves in subtle or indirect ways, such as interference in electoral processes, as recently observed in Romania, highlighting the need to strengthen state institutions.

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[3] National Defense Strategy for 2024-2034 approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Decision No. 319 of 26-12-2024. [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=146655&lang=ro](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=146655&lang=ro)

## STUDY PREMISES

The Republic of Moldova is a relevant case study of direct, continuous, and multidimensional confrontation with the hybrid instruments used by the Russian Federation. Although the capacity to manage these challenges remains partially limited, a detailed analysis of hybrid threats from the perspective of the Republic of Moldova provides a practical understanding of current risks and useful lessons for adapting security policies, strengthening institutional capacity, and mobilizing society in the face of complex, persistent, and constantly evolving challenges. The premise of this study is that the experience gained by the Republic of Moldova is an important source of lessons, applicable not only at the national level but also in other similar contexts.

Thus, although the analysis focuses on the case of the Republic of Moldova, its illustrative nature provides a useful framework for other states' reflection. The vulnerabilities identified, the hybrid tactics used by the Russian Federation, and the responses of the authorities in Chisinau can constitute a set of useful lessons for strengthening resilience. The experience of the Republic of Moldova should not be viewed as an isolated case, but as a strategic laboratory from which relevant lessons can be learnt for anticipating, preventing, and countering contemporary forms of hybrid warfare.

In the specialized literature, numerous international analyses, including research by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, propose sets of general recommendations for countering hybrid threats [4]:

- **Balancing content moderation and protecting freedom of expression.** Combating information warfare requires strengthening a responsible partnership between public authorities, civil society, and digital platforms. This partnership should aim to identify and neutralize manipulation and disinformation campaigns while protecting the right to free expression and promoting democratic and balanced public discourse.
- **Developing multisectoral cooperation at both central and local levels.** The effectiveness of the response to hybrid threats depends on close collaboration between state institutions, civil society organizations, and private actors in order to manage emerging risks quickly and in a coordinated manner.

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[4] Russia's Hybrid Threat: Insights from Moldova. <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/russias-hybrid-threat-insights-from-moldova>

- **Strengthening institutional and social resilience.** Resilience to harmful external influence requires the implementation of essential structural reforms, including ensuring the independence of the judiciary, strengthening law enforcement capacities to combat organized crime, and allocating adequate resources to support vulnerable communities. Such measures help reduce the vulnerabilities exploited by Russian propaganda and disinformation.

The list formulated by this institute is valuable because it integrates/combines good practices validated in various contexts and provides a reference framework for the development of national policies. Its usefulness for the Republic of Moldova lies in the fact that these principles can be adapted to the specific internal vulnerabilities and geopolitical constraints of the state, serving both as an assessment tool and as a guide for strategic action. However, the implementation of these measures is hampered by significant limitations in terms of available resources and institutional capacity, which makes it necessary to formulate tailored, pragmatic, and proactive responses to the hybrid threats posed by the Russian Federation.

The Republic of Moldova has defined clear objectives in its strategic documents to combat hybrid warfare and counter hybrid threats. However, vulnerabilities remain complex being exploited depending on the internal and external context. These vulnerabilities are closely interconnected and shaped by the strategic intentions of the Kremlin regime, becoming instruments with the potential for major impact. The study identifies several types of vulnerabilities:

- **Economic and energy tools:** Although Russia's economic influence has declined in recent decades, it continues to be used through economic propaganda and energy threats.
- **Propaganda and disinformation:** Moldova remains exposed to information manipulation that amplifies social polarization and erodes public trust in democratic institutions and the country's defense capabilities.
- **Transnistrian separatism:** The presence of Russian troops in the Transnistrian region and the potential for their use for hostile purposes keep the frozen conflict as a constant source of instability.
- **Pro-Russian regions:** Gagauzia is another strategic area for Moscow's influence, as is the north of the country, which showed its vulnerability to electoral corruption in the context of the 2024 autumn elections.

- **The religious dimension:** Through this, **the Russian Federation influences the public sphere in the Republic of Moldova.** In a state such as the Republic of Moldova, where over 90% of the population identifies as Orthodox Christian, the Church holds symbolic capital and moral authority superior to many state institutions, according to opinion polls. The Orthodox Church in Moldova, canonically subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, becomes an effective tool for legitimizing anti-Western narratives, challenging democratic values, and promoting an alternative geopolitical identity - contrary to the European aspirations of the Republic of Moldova.

**The Russian Federation seeks to deliberately cultivate a sense of insecurity in the Republic of Moldova.** By exploiting internal vulnerabilities, the Kremlin authorities are trying to reinforce the narrative of *a weak or fragile state* that needs protection from an external power – in this case, the Russian Federation. To achieve this strategic objective, tactics such as *Mind Warfare*, which involves shaping collective perceptions in order to induce fear, mistrust, and decision-making paralysis, and *Reflexive Control*, a method by which the adversary is determined to make decisions that actually serve the strategic interests of the aggressor, are used. Both tactics aim to distort decision-making processes and weaken social cohesion, fuelling insecurity and confusion among the population and political elites.

The identification and continuous assessment of the tools and tactics used by the Russian Federation through *proxy* actors [5] is essential. These actors may include political organizations, economic groups, civic associations, opinion leaders, or religious structures that are influenced, financed, or coordinated to promote the strategic objectives of a foreign power and undermine national security from within. Systematic monitoring of these dynamics allows for the anticipation of emerging risks and the development of response mechanisms tailored to the specific hybrid threats facing the Republic of Moldova.

Regardless of developments in the conflict in Ukraine, the Russian Federation will continue to pose a major strategic threat to European security, particularly through the use of hybrid tools. In this context, it is essential that national and

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[5] NOTE: Local entities or individuals, formal or informal, acting on behalf of or in support of an external actor, masking their direct involvement.

European efforts focus on a deep understanding of these threats and on formulating effective responses based on evidence and validated best practices.

## STUDY OBJECTIVES

This study aims to identify the main hybrid threats faced by the Republic of Moldova in the 2020 - 2025 period and to assess their impact on the functioning of state institutions and social cohesion. The hybrid threats investigated combine conventional and unconventional means, aiming to manipulate perceptions, erode trust in institutions, and exploit systemic vulnerabilities.

The study aims not only to independently analyze the mechanisms and peculiarities of hybrid threats targeting the Republic of Moldova, but also to formulate conclusions and recommendations relevant to strengthening national resilience. At the same time, it aims to contribute to raising awareness among the public, decision-makers, and international partners, especially in the European Union and NATO, regarding the nature, scale, and possible scenarios generated by developments in a hybrid warfare context.

### Specific objectives of the study:

- Outline hybrid actors and instruments – identification of the state and non-state actors involved, as well as the means used (military, economic, informational, cybernetic, etc.) in exerting hybrid pressure on the Republic of Moldova;
- Highlight impact scenarios –analysis of the dynamics of possible developments of hybrid threats, depending on the internal and regional context;
- Highlight the need to develop and strengthen a functional early warning mechanism designed to enable the detection, monitoring, and coordinated management of hybrid threats.
- Formulate recommendations and response measures aimed at complementing and strengthening existing measures to counter hybrid threats, with medium- and long-term applicability.
- Propose a research and future action agenda –identification of priority areas for further study on hybrid warfare and strengthening a multidisciplinary network of expertise in the field of national security.

Each state or entity exposed to hybrid threats can build its own conceptual framework for assessment, tailored to its vulnerabilities and national context.

However, real effectiveness in countering these threats requires a common approach based on international cooperation and the exchange of expertise between partners. Systemic thinking is essential - this requires an integrated understanding of the tactical architecture and tools used by the Russian Federation in waging hybrid warfare.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Conceptual framework of the study

Understanding and effectively managing hybrid threats requires a solid conceptual foundation that encompasses the complexity of interdependencies between the various sensitive areas of national security architecture. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, these threats do not manifest themselves in isolation, but in an integrated and coordinated manner, generating cumulative effects on critical dimensions such as information, energy, economic, legal, and territorial security.

Building a coherent conceptual framework is an essential step in analyzing the internal logic of these phenomena, the causal relationships between them, and the mechanisms by which they can be amplified or, conversely, counteracted. For example, the information space (propaganda, disinformation) is closely linked to cybersecurity and democratic values. Online information attacks can undermine public trust in state institutions, polarize public discourse, and fuel social tensions that lead to anti-government protests or diminished social cohesion.

Similarly, energy security and the economic system are interdependent. Dependence on external sources and infrastructure vulnerabilities amplify economic and political risks. Major disruptions in the energy sector not only affect the functioning of critical services, but can also generate social and political instability, thus providing opportunities for hostile actors to accentuate the fragility of the state.



Corruption and the erosion of the rule of law are pressure points that hostile actors systematically exploit to undermine democratic institutions. By infiltrating and manipulating decision-making processes, illegally financing political parties, or discrediting electoral processes, these vulnerabilities become effective channels for influence and destabilization.

At the same time, military threats to the Republic of Moldova - including the use of unconventional tactics against defense capabilities (such as compromising military communication infrastructure or disinformation campaigns targeting defense personnel) - are deeply intertwined with *centrifugal territorial dynamics* [6] . This systemic and interconnected nature of hybrid threats highlights the need for an *integrated approach* that strengthens both sectoral resilience and the state's overall capacity to withstand hostile actions. Only an adapted, flexible national security architecture, based on inter-institutional cooperation and cooperation with civil society, can effectively respond to these complex and constantly evolving challenges.

## TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The study uses a number of terms that require conceptual clarification in order to prevent any terminological ambiguities:

**A threat** is the intention or capacity of an actor (state/non-state) to cause major damage to the state or the institutional system. It can be active or potential, visible or hidden, strategic or opportunistic. For example, a disinformation campaign orchestrated by the Kremlin to undermine confidence in elections and compromise EU accession.

**Hybrid threats** are conceptualized as a set of tactics that combine conventional and unconventional methods, used in a coordinated manner to exploit existing vulnerabilities in various sectors—military, economic, technological, informational, etc. These actions aim to achieve strategic objectives by generating direct risks to national security, constitutional order, critical infrastructure, and the well-being of the population.

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[6] NOTE: Processes or forces within a state that weaken territorial cohesion and promote the separation, autonomy, or even secession of regions.

**Risk** is the possibility that a threat will materialize and negatively affect strategic objectives, institutional stability, or social cohesion. The level of risk is determined by the interaction between existing vulnerabilities, the degree of exposure, and the response capacity of the actors involved. A relevant example is the likelihood that information manipulation will generate social instability in the run-up to elections.

**Vulnerability** is an internal characteristic of the state or society that can be exploited by a threat. It can be structural, institutional, social, or technological; it reduces resilience and exposes the state or society to risks and dangers. For example, the lack of an early warning mechanism and, as a result, limited rapid response capabilities.

**A hazard** is a situation or condition that can have a detrimental effect on the security of the state or the individual. It includes latent or obvious risks to the strategic interests of the state. A hazard can be imminent or realised and causes a reaction or losses. For example, the blocking of a critical institution through a cyber attack with effects on public order.

**Lawfare** is a newer term, which refers to the strategic and deliberate use of legal norms - national or international - as a tool to confront, coerce, or undermine a state for political, military, or ideological purposes. For example: (-) initiating unfounded legal actions to block government operations or international partnerships; (-) using international law to create narratives that justify aggressive actions (e.g., "protecting Russian citizens abroad").

## STUDY METHODOLOGY

To analyze the framework for hybrid threats in the Republic of Moldova, the study used a mixed methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The research process was structured in two main stages: **data collection** and **data analysis**.

### **Data collection:**

**Documentary analysis:** review of specialized sources, including academic studies, official reports, public policies, and national and international strategies relevant to the phenomenon of hybrid threats.

- **Semi-structured interviews:** conducting interviews with independent experts and representatives of relevant national institutions to obtain perspectives on the perception of hybrid risks, institutional response capacity, and the role of non-state actors.
- **Questionnaires and surveys:** using quantitative tools to assess the level of public and institutional perception of different types of hybrid threats.
- **AI analysis of online disinformation:** using artificial intelligence tools, manipulation and propaganda campaigns carried out in the digital environment with reference to the Republic of Moldova were identified and evaluated.

#### Data analysis:

- **Qualitative thematic analysis:** applied to interpret data from interviews, documentary sources, and observation, highlighting types of threats and patterns of institutional response.
- **Basic quantitative analysis:** the collected data were statistically processed to highlight significant trends and correlations.
- **Scenario modeling:** two prospective scenarios (one optimistic and one pessimistic [7] ) were developed regarding the possible evolution of hybrid threats in the Republic of Moldova until 2030, with a focus on the impact on national security.

Given the complexity of the phenomenon analysed, we took into account **the following structure within the chapters:** context and premises, tactics used (identified instruments and methods of operation), actors involved (state and non-state), countermeasures or response actions, probable scenarios, conclusions and recommendations.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS OF THE STUDY

This study on the types of hybrid threats to the Republic of Moldova was conducted in a complex methodological and operational context, subject to several objective limitations and practical constraints:

- **Limited access to classified or sensitive data:** The assessment of hybrid threat typologies was mainly based on open sources, which limits access to

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[7] NOTE: The scenario-planning method, which includes optimistic, realistic, pessimistic, and improbable variants, is frequently used in crisis analysis, risk management, and strategic planning. This approach helps prepare decision-makers for a wide range of possible developments by identifying critical points, vulnerabilities, and opportunities in each scenario. It is an accepted practice in areas such as national security, disaster management, economics, and organizational planning.

strategic, operational, or intelligence information that could reflect the actual level of vulnerability or institutional response.

- **Limited temporal validity:** The regional and national context is extremely volatile (e.g., developments in Ukraine, elections in the Republic of Moldova in 2025), which can rapidly influence the relevance of the findings and scenarios presented in the report.
- **Uneven assessment across domains:** Although the study covers several domains (economic, energy, military, etc.), the depth and availability of data vary significantly from one sector to another, which may affect the analytical balance and consistency of the cross-cutting assessment.
- **Updating risks:** Given the rapid dynamics of hybrid instruments (including AI, deepfakes, new electoral manipulation techniques) or based on certain considerations to avoid misinterpretations, it is possible that some emerging forms of threats have not yet been included in the present analysis.

Despite these constraints, the study provides a starting point for strategic reflection and contributes to understanding the mechanisms of action of hybrid threats in the context of the Republic of Moldova

# I. THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS: FROM MISUSED FREEDOMS TO WEAPONS OF DESTABILIZATION

## CONTEXT AND PREMISES

The Republic of Moldova is a young democracy, still marked by vulnerabilities in the functioning of democratic institutions and in the effective protection of human rights. Democratic values and human rights principles are still misunderstood by the population that grew up during the Soviet period (61% of the population born before independence), which hinders their integration into social and political life. This adaptation process has natural limits, but also significant risks, especially when fundamental rights and freedoms are distorted and exploited by external actors with the aim of undermining national security, discrediting democratic values, and eroding public confidence in state institutions.

Persistent geopolitical visions between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations continue to profoundly influence political and social life. Exploited through external influence campaigns, these divisions have created fertile ground for hybrid attacks aimed at destabilising democratic institutions that are still in the early stages of consolidation. Since its formation as an independent state, the Republic of Moldova has faced a major challenge to its sovereignty: the existence of the separatist region of Transnistria. This territory, which is outside the control of the constitutional authorities, is the main obstacle to the full integration of the country and its population. The Transnistrian region is a territory in eastern Moldova, located on the left bank of the Nistru River, where the constitutional authorities in Chişinău have not exercised effective control since 1992, following the armed conflict. This region functions de facto as a separate entity, self-proclaimed as the "Transnistrian Moldovan Republic," with its own administrative, security, and judicial structures, but it is not recognized internationally. The situation has led to a frozen conflict, maintained by the presence of Russian military forces and the lack of a sustainable political solution.

The absence of a unified legal system covering the entire territory of Moldova has prevented the consolidation of a coherent system for the protection and guarantee of fundamental human rights. In this region, which is outside the effective control of the constitutional authorities, the communities remain

vulnerable to violations of their rights, being subject to an uncertain legal regime that is often incompatible with international standards.

This lack of legal coherence is directly reflected in the conditions in detention facilities in the Transnistrian region, where abuses against individuals deprived of their liberty remain unpunished and difficult to document. A report by the Promo-LEX Association, published in 2025 [8], shows that the minimum space allocated to detainees remains below international standards, and any complaints of torture or ill-treatment are censored by the specify which? administration.

Furthermore, **the freedom of movement** of citizens, journalists, and farmers is undermined by an extensive network of checkpoints, set up under the pretext of a "terrorist alert code" [9]. Violations of fundamental rights include the arbitrary detention of journalists and cultural figures, abusive taxation of farmers in the Dubăsari district [10], and the lack of minimum procedural guarantees in case of any charges whatsoever. Intimidation practices, adopted by unconstitutional structures, also affect the educational sphere: Romanian-language schools in the region face excessive utility rates, financial pressure, harassment of teachers, and excessive militarization of education, a phenomenon frequently reported in schools subordinated to Tiraspol [11]. Thus, the lack of effective mechanisms to protect rights means that those who violate them are not held accountable, and the authorities in Tiraspol bear no responsibility. Under these circumstances, the legitimate authorities in Chisinau face obvious limitations: even if they want to ensure access to justice in the Transnistrian region, in practice they do not have the necessary means to do so. The table on the state of freedom in the Republic of Moldova highlights a clear polarization between the Republic of Moldova and the Transnistrian region, controlled by the Tiraspol administration.

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[8] Human rights in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova. retrospective of the year 2024. <https://promolex.md/raport-%D7%80-drepturile-omului-in-regiunea-transnistreana-a-republicii-moldova-retrospectiva-anului-2024/>

[9] The "red" code for terrorist threats vs. free movement and the Security Zone regime. <https://zonadesecuritate.md/codul-rosu-de-amenintare-terorista-vs-libera-circulatie-si-regimul-zonei-de-securitate>; Consolidation of illegal checkpoints under the pretext of the "terrorist alert code." In: Human Rights in the Transnistrian Region of the Republic of Moldova. Chisinau: Promo-Lex, 2025, pp. 36-37.

[10] Farmers in Dubăsari once again prevented by Tiraspol from carrying out agricultural work, AGROEXPERT, August 6, 2023. <https://agroexpert.md/rus/v-moldove/fermierii-din-dubasari-din-nou-impiedicati-de-tiraspol-in-lucrarile-agric>;

Farmers in Dubăsari on the taxes imposed by Tiraspol: "If the State does not get involved, I don't see how we can continue our work." <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/fermieri-din-dubasari-despre-taxele-impuse-de-tiraspol-daca-statul-nu-se-implica-nu-vad-cum-vom-continua-activitatea-/32788674.html>

[11] See: Romanian-language schools in the Transnistrian region are the target of a new smear campaign in the Tiraspol-controlled media. <https://promolex.md/scolile-cu-predare-in-limba-romana-din-regiunea-transnistreana-sunt-tinta-unei-noi-campanii-de-denigrare-in-mass-media-controlata-de-tiraspol/>

This structural discrepancy creates a paradox: even if the Republic of Moldova is assessed globally, the presence of an uncontrolled separatist region lowers the overall perception of the level of freedoms throughout the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

**Table 1. State of freedom**

State of freedom	Transnistria, uncontrolled region					REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA				
Status	Not Free					Partially Free				
Year	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
Level/degree of freedom	17	17	18	18	20	60	61/100	62	62	61
Political rights*	7	7	6	6	6	3	3	3	3	3
Civil liberties*	6	6	6	6	6	3	3	3	3	3
*Scoring Key (1 = best, 7 = worst)										

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from Freedom House *Moldova?* [12]

In this context, a critical aspect for understanding hybrid threats in the Republic of Moldova stands out:

- **Exploiting democratic vulnerabilities:** The Russian Federation exploits the lack of freedoms in Transnistria to promote the narrative of a fragile and divided state, justifying its own military presence as a "guarantor" of regional security.
- **Information warfare and international perceptions:** Transnistria's low score on freedoms fuels disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting Chisinau internationally.
- **The interconnection between freedoms and security:** The lack of civic space and freedom of expression creates fertile ground for manipulation, propaganda, and artificial mobilization of the population against Chisinau.

The lack of democratic values and fundamental freedoms in the Transnistrian region amplifies Moldova's vulnerabilities, undermining the political and social stability of the entire country. In an area where impunity and censorship prevail, there is fertile soil for illicit financial flows and the propagation of narratives that oppose human rights and democracy to so-called "traditional values."

[12] Moldova. <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=all&year=2025&country=MDA>

In this context, any measures to strengthen institutions and counter hybrid threats must include monitoring and sanctioning serious human rights violations on the left bank of the Nistru, where the situation is difficult to document without coordinated national and international support.

## **TACTICS OF HYBRID THREATS EXPLOITING HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES**

The central element of the tactics analysed in this chapter is the exploitation of fundamental rights and freedoms, combined with the vulnerability generated by the delayed response of institutions. These practices are part of a pattern of information warfare and destabilisation, in which democratic mechanisms themselves are turned against democracy. Thus, the freedoms intended to ensure pluralism, debate, and public participation become instruments of systemic undermining.

The pattern used has a dual purpose:

- Exploiting the limits of rights and freedoms in the interests of foreign powers;
- Transforming rights and freedoms into targets for countermeasures applied by public authorities.

The ultimate goal is to provoke a disproportionate response from the state, so that countermeasures appear repressive and directed against fundamental rights. In this way, the state is pushed into a rhetorical and political trap: any firm reaction risks being interpreted as a limitation of freedoms, and the lack of reaction is seen as weakness. Thus, rights and freedoms become not only a means of strategic penetration, but also a target, made vulnerable by the very measures intended to protect them.

One of the most widespread similar practices is the abuse of freedom of association. Various structures - from civil society organizations to political parties or blocs - have been established and managed to exert external influence and to coordinate or remunerate local actors.

In 2024, the non-commercial organization (NCO) "Evrazia" was used as a front to facilitate several illegal actions in the Republic of Moldova [13].

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[13] Republic of Moldova: Council lists further 5 individuals and 1 entity for destabilising actions. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/10/14/republic-of-moldova-council-lists-further-5-individuals-and-1-entity-for-destabilising-actions/>; U.S. Department of the Treasury, Russia-related Designations; Issuance of Russia-related General Licenses and Amended FAQ. In: Annual Report of Blocked Property. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20240913>

Through this organization, individuals were trained to participate in violent protests (see information below on undermining freedom of peaceful assembly) [14]. The resources of this organization were used to pay local service providers and executors [15]. ONC Evrazia, registered in 2024 in the Russian Federation, is a de facto non-governmental organization controlled by the Russian Federation government (GONGO), which operates in the Republic of Moldova, although it does not have an officially registered branch [16].

Freedom of association has been exploited mainly in the political sphere, being used to influence democratic electoral processes. To this end, several political formations have been launched and coordinated, as well as the campaigns and messages of several electoral candidates in the 2024 presidential elections [17]. Parties, political blocs, and independent candidates benefited from electoral corruption mechanisms which, according to sociologists' estimates, influenced up to 15-20% of voters [18]. A large-scale mechanism, coordinated from abroad by local agents, was put in place to support these candidates. The process was facilitated by entities such as "Evrazia," but also by other external logistical resources, including call-center networks [19].

→ **Delegitimization of freedom of peaceful assembly (including the right to protest)** in several ways:

l) recruiting paid participants for protests and simulating public support for certain political platforms or agendas;

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[14] more than 100 young people trained in Russia for mass unrest in Moldova will not be able to implement their plan: 88 searches in the country and a seizure of 1,600,000 lei. <https://procuratura.md/pccocs/pccocs/comunicate/comunicate-de-presa/cei-pestre-100-de-tineri-instruiti-rusia-pentru-dezordini-masa>

[15] Electoral fraud detected during the presidential elections and the Referendum. External interference in the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova, p. 8. <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport SIS Public Interferenta in procesul electoral.pdf>

[16] State Register of Legal Entities on Registered Non-Commercial Organizations. <https://www.asp.gov.md/sites/default/files/date-deschise/date-statistice/2025/rsud/RSON.xlsx>

[17] Electoral fraud identified during the presidential elections and the republican referendum. External interference in the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova, p. 2. <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport SIS Public Interferenta in procesul electoral.pdf>

[18] Sociologist Vasile Cantarji on the phenomenon of "button votes" in the Moldovan elections. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/in-esenta-sociologul-vasile-cantarji-despre-fenomenu-voturilor-de-la-buton-in-scrutinele-din-r-moldova/33172063.html>; What would have been the results of the October 20 elections if Șor had not existed? A sociologist's answer. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/care-ar-fi-fost-rezultatele-alegerilor-de-pe-20-octombrie-daca-nu-exista-sor-raspunsul-unui-sociolog/>

[19] Electoral fraud observed during the presidential elections and the republican referendum. External interference in the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova, p. 4. <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport SIS Public Interferenta in procesul electoral.pdf>

- II) spreading fear among socially vulnerable groups, using instigators of violence trained to confront law enforcement;
- III) generating a climate of insecurity and socio-political instability, turning initially peaceful gatherings into hotbeds of tension.

*Paid participation* in protests: Since 2022, there have been recurring cases of financial incentives for participation in gatherings. In recent years, the practice of paid protesters has intensified, being associated in particular with protests organized by representatives of Ilan Shor's network [20]. According to journalistic investigations, the amounts offered ranged from €20 to €100 per person, depending on the duration of participation in the protest, which could vary from 2-3 hours to 24-48 hours in the case of continuous demonstrations [21].

Another method of rewarding protest participants was through monthly payments distributed in a pyramid scheme. This system involved a scheme for illegally bringing money into the country and distributing it through coordinators to approximately 138,000 people mobilized through remuneration (confirmed by the police). The payments were made through Promsvyazbank PSB Bank, a bank owned by the Russian State [22]. The payment system also exploited vulnerabilities related to the financial permeability of the Transnistrian region. This complex scheme to influence participation in protests highlights not only the artificial nature of the mobilization and the discreditation of the exercise of freedom of assembly, but also the major risks it poses to the integrity of democratic processes. Meetings with paid participants intensify particularly during election campaigns or around sensitive political decisions. They simulate popular support in order to influence public perception or institutional decisions. Through their increased frequency and highly publicized messages, these gatherings create artificial information noise, intended to legitimize controversial agendas or discredit political opponents.

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[20]NOTE: Ilan Shor, a Moldovan-Israeli businessman and politician, former mayor of Orhei and leader of the Shor Party, was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison for fraud and money laundering following his involvement in the "billion-dollar theft" after fleeing the country in 2019.

[21]Protesters for hire. Undercover investigation by ZdG: We infiltrated Shor's protesters and show you, from the inside, how people brought to Chişinău in an organized manner are paid and how the protest machine works. <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/video-protestatari-in-chirie-investigatie-zdg-undercover-we-infiltrated-sor-s-protesters-and-we-show-you-from-the-inside-how-people-are-paid-to-come-to-chisinau-and-how-the-protest-machine-works/>

[22]Press briefing held by the head of the General Police Inspectorate. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/live-mai-multi-tineri-cu-finantarea-lui-ilan-sor-si-sub-paravanul-ong-ului-evrazia-au-trecut-instruiri-la-moscova-pentru-a-crea-destabilizari-in-r-moldova-spun-oamenii-legii/>

Paid participants contribute to filling the information space with a constructed narrative that may appear authentic in the absence of mechanisms to verify the sources and real motivations of the protesters.

*Organization and training for violent protests: Over time, the police have presented several cases of recruitment and training of instigators to generate violence and confrontations with law enforcement.* In 2023, seven people were arrested for preparing and coordinating a network of violent protesters. The seven individuals were convicted in 2024 for preparing mass disorder [23]. In the summer of 2024, over 300 young people from the Republic of Moldova were trained in the Russian Federation to organize violent protests. According to the police, the training included crowd control techniques, confrontation with law enforcement, as well as theoretical and practical aspects, and was supported by political experts affiliated with the United Russia party. Another group was trained in 2024 in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska, Banja Luka) in specialized camps, where they were prepared for various tactics, including the manufacture of explosives, the use of drones, and combat techniques. This training was carried out by instructors linked to the Russian private mercenary groups Ferma and Wagner [24]. The right to assembly benefits from a permissive legal framework, in which authorization from the public administration is not required. At the same time, Law 26/2008 on assemblies expressly prohibits, in Article 8, meetings that incite discrimination or public violence, seek to violate the rights and freedoms of others, commit crimes, violate public order, or incite war of aggression, national, racial, ethnic, or religious hatred. Violent meetings are rare in the Republic of Moldova. For example, the report "Freedom of Assembly 2024" prepared by CRP and Promo-LEX [25] notes that in 2024 there were no non-peaceful protests. Only in about 3% of the meetings monitored were there isolated cases of verbal or physical aggression. Starting in June 2025, paid participation in assemblies, as well as remuneration for participation in assemblies constitute offences [26] punishable by a fine and deprivation of the right to hold a certain position or to carry out a certain activity for a period of time if the assembly is intended for political advertising or illegal purposes.

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[23]The seven men arrested in March 2023 for preparing mass unrest have received their sentences. <https://www.procuratura.md/stiri-si-mass-media/comunicate-de-presa/cei-saptebarbati-retinuti-martie-2023-pentru-pregatirea>

[24]The more than 100 young people trained in Russia to cause mass unrest in Moldova will not be able to carry out their plan: 88 searches were conducted across the country and 1,600,000 lei were seized. <https://politia.md/ro/content/cei-pestel-100-de-tineri-instruiti-rusia-pentru-dezordini-masa-moldova-nu-si-vor-putea>

[25] Report. Freedom of assembly 2024, p. 6. <https://promolex.md/raport-libertatea-intrunirilor/>

[26] Art. 47/2 Corruption regarding organized meetings, Contravention Code. [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=150003&lang=ro](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=150003&lang=ro)

The Republic of Moldova has already had the tragic experience of protests turning into violent actions, as happened on April 7, 2009. On that day, initially peaceful demonstrations, generated by dissatisfaction with the results of the parliamentary elections, were infiltrated and manipulated by well-organized and trained groups, which deliberately provoked an escalation of tensions. The violent actions resulted in human casualties and extensive material damage, and essential symbols of the State were seriously affected. The Parliament and Presidency buildings were set on fire and devastated, and in the chaos that ensued, documents of historical and legal importance were destroyed, including the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova. These events demonstrated the critical vulnerabilities of the state in the face of hybrid destabilisation tactics, where genuine social discontent can be exploited and turned into major crises with political, institutional and symbolic impact.

→ **Abuse of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion:** Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, the foundation of a democratic society, has been abused to manipulate public opinion and influence electoral processes, with the aim of keeping large segments of society, especially in rural areas, under the influence of external factors that control the messages conveyed through religious cults. Representatives of religious denominations, particularly the Orthodox Church of Moldova, which is subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, were actively involved in the campaign for the presidential elections and the referendum on European integration. They promoted anti-Western messages, presenting the European Union as a threat to national sovereignty and identity; anti-LGBT messages, using rhetoric about "protecting traditional values" to mobilize the conservative electorate; **pro - Russian** – promoting the idea that closer ties with Russia would guarantee stability, peace, and "respect for tradition." For example, in the **2024** election campaigns, in several rural areas, priests distributed election materials, gave politically charged sermons, or invited believers to vote against the "immoral European orientation," associating Western values with "decadence" or "spiritual danger." In some cases, churches became distribution platforms for election leaflets or coordinated audio-video messages, synchronized with pro-Kremlin media narratives [27].

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[27] Reports that the pro-Romanian branch of Moldova's Orthodox Church accused clergy from the Moscow-aligned church of campaigning against an EU referendum. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/minority-wing-moldovan-orthodox-church-accuses-priests-lobbying-against-europe-2024-09-26/> Promo-LEX Observation Mission – Documents clergy involvement in electoral campaigns, notably favoring candidate Igor Dodon, in violation of constitutional provisions separating religion and state. <https://promolex.md/en/promo-lex-finds-an-increased-number-of-derogatory-materials-and-more-intense-black-pr-involvement-of-religious-cults-in-the-election-campaign-and-subtle-masking-of-donors/> Tandfonline article "The Role of Religion in Moldovan Populist Mobilization Strategies" – Offers academic insight into how religious messaging has been used to shape collective identities and political preferences. [https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A8%3A32760264/detailv2?](https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A8%3A32760264/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Acrawler&id=ebsco%3Adoi%3A10.1080%2F10758216.2022.2085578&link_origin=www.google.com)

Such messages often coincided with the platforms of **pro-Russian** or **conservative** candidates, as well as with online disinformation campaigns, reinforcing an integrated propaganda network. These practices highlight the risk that the religious sphere, lacking clear regulations on involvement in election campaigns, could become a tool for **external influence** and **the undermining of democratic processes**, especially in vulnerable communities where the church has overwhelming social and moral authority [28].

→ **Abuse of freedom of movement** for the purpose of illicit money transfers, training individuals abroad for violent protests and confrontations with law enforcement, illegal organized transportation of voters.

- **Transportation of money of obscure origin.** According to police investigations, during 2024, several people from the Republic of Moldova who participated in events in the Russian Federation transported cash when returning to the country. The amounts transported were up to EUR 10,000 per person – the maximum amount that can be brought into the country by an individual without it having to be declared. Although the amount itself does not exceed the legal threshold, the public authorities have flagged the suspicious nature of the origin of the funds and their use. On April 22, 2024, in a single day, the Moldovan police confiscated almost €1 million from participants who had returned to the Republic of Moldova from the launch event of the pro-Russian political bloc "Victory" held in the Russian Federation [29]. According to the police, the money came from obscure sources, and the transporters acted as couriers. After returning to the Republic of Moldova, the money was to be collected from the couriers and was intended, among other things, to finance paid protests and electoral corruption.
- **Organized transportation of voters.** Moldovan law prohibits the organized transportation of voters to polling stations on election day for the purpose of persuading them to exercise their electoral rights and is punishable by a fine. However, in the second round of the 2024 presidential elections, there were

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[28]Promo-LEX Mission to Observe the Presidential Elections and Constitutional Referendum of October 20, pp. 125–126. <https://promolex.md/raport-final-misiunea-promo-lex-de-observare-a-alegerilor-prezidentiale-si-a-referendumului-constitutional-din-20-octombrie-3-noiembrie-2024/>; Observation Mission. Presidential Elections and Republican Constitutional Referendum, October 20.

[https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Raportul-nr.4\\_MO\\_Alegeri-preziden%C8%9Biale-%C8%99i-referendum-constitu%C8%9Bional-2024.pdf](https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Raportul-nr.4_MO_Alegeri-preziden%C8%9Biale-%C8%99i-referendum-constitu%C8%9Bional-2024.pdf)

[29]New methods of illegal financing of political parties documented by PA and INI. <https://politia.md/ro/content/noi-metode-de-finantare-ilegala-unor-partide-politice-documentate-de-pa-si-ini>; Over 20,000,000 lei brought into the country by passengers on two flights arriving in Moldova from Moscow, for the benefit of an organized criminal group. <https://customs.gov.md/ro/articles/peste-20000000-lei-adusi-in-tara-de-pasagerii-a-doua-curse-avia-sositi-in-moldova-din-moscova-in-beneficiul-unui-grup-criminal-organizat-2049-ro>; Dozens of searches in a criminal case concerning the illegal financing of political parties, initiative groups, and electoral competitors. <https://www.procuratura.md/anticoruptie/en/comunicate/comunicate-de-presa/zeci-de-perchezitii-cadrul-unei-cauze-penale-privind-finantarea>

several incidents of organized transportation of voters within the country and to polling stations outside the country. Within the country, voters from the Transnistrian region (which is outside the control of the constitutional authorities) were observed to have been transported to polling stations located in the territory controlled by the constitutional authorities [30]. Outside the territory of the Republic of Moldova, the organized transportation by bus and plane of Moldovan citizens from abroad to polling stations in the Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus, and Turkey was observed [31].

This method of influencing election results is all the more worrying as it has the potential to decide the outcome of the election. For example, in the second round of the presidential election, a difference of 1% meant less than 15,000 votes cast.

→**Exploiting traditional values to delegitimize human rights and democratic values.** For several years--some politicians, religious leaders, and media outlets in the Republic of Moldova, close to the Russian Federation--have been promoting and exploiting the notion of "traditional values." The concept is promoted as a counterweight to what is perceived as Western influence or rapid social change and seeks to distort the institution of human rights and democratic values. The notion of "traditional values" is not clearly defined, being fueled by external narratives, particularly from Russia, where it is part of the ideology promoted by the state as an alternative to Western liberal values. Although "traditional values" may, in some contexts, be compatible with human rights and even support social justice, in practice they are frequently used by States, political or religious leaders to justify discrimination, exclusion, and violations of fundamental rights. References to family, religion, and national identity are often used to influence public opinion and polarize society, exploiting the fears and grievances of conservative groups, particularly with regard to respecting the rights of minorities such as the LGBTQ+ community. This rhetoric fuels confusion and suspicion about human rights and gradually shapes the social perceptions and political choices of a significant part of the population. By constantly presenting democratic values as "alien," "imposed from outside," or even "dangerous," an authoritarian vision of social order is reinforced, in which rights and freedoms are perceived as useless or harmful. This creates fertile ground for the rejection of democratic reforms, the weakening of solidarity with vulnerable groups, and the acceptance of political behavior based on exclusion, intolerance, and obedience to self-proclaimed "protectors" of tradition.

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[30] Promo-LEX mission to observe the presidential elections and constitutional referendum on October 20, p. 6, p. 95. <https://promolex.md/raport-final-misiunea-promo-lex-de-observare-a-alegerilor-prezidentiale-si-a-referendumului-constitucional-din-20-octombrie-3-noiembrie-2024/>

[31]Ibid., p. 94.

Over time, this process contributes to the erosion of civic spirit, the deep division of society, and the orientation of the electorate towards authoritarian, populist, or Eurosceptic political options.

→**Tactics applied in the Transnistrian region.** On the left bank of the Nistru, tactics of influence and destabilisation are implemented by a regime that operates outside the constitutional framework. Control over the population and the restriction of fundamental freedoms create a space conducive to the recruitment of forces and the propagation of hostile messages. The lack of transparency and opacity of the structures responsible for detention and security result in arbitrary detentions, inhumane treatment, and constant censorship, maintaining a climate of fear in which individual rights and freedoms are hijacked for political purposes and critical voices are silenced. At the same time, unconstitutional authorities apply tactics of financial coercion of local resources: illegal taxes at checkpoints, unauthorized posts blocking the movement of people and goods, and non-transparent financing networks [32]. The creation and maintenance of so-called local "customs rules" involves the payment of hefty duties by farmers and economic operators, which are then directed towards subversive activities. Tiraspol prohibits access to independent journalists and filters any critical voice, thus consolidating its information monopoly in the region [33].

Another tactic involves training groups of young people for violent actions. Paramilitary and security forces are directly involved in organizing training camps, influencing students through military-patriotic rhetoric. Recruiting personnel from among the younger generation, who are subjected to intense indoctrination, facilitates the hijacking of peaceful protests and the deployment of forceful actions aimed at creating instability [34]. In addition, the Transnistrian region stands out for the introduction of militaristic ideology in schools subordinated to Tiraspol. Restrictions on the right to education in Romanian, overtaxation of institutions operating under the national curriculum, and persecution of teaching staff transform education into a form of ideological control, hindering any initiative for integration with the rest of the country. From an early age, students are familiarized with rhetoric hostile to Chişinău and democratic values, paving the way for unconditional loyalty to separatist structures.

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[32]Radiografia ultimilor 17 ani de «combatere a extremismului» în regiunea transnistreană a Republicii Moldova, Document de opinie, Chişinău: Asociația Promo-LEX, 2024).

<https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Radiografia-ultimilor-17-ani-de-%E2%80%9Ecombatere-a-extremismului%E2%80%9D-%C3%AEn-regiunea-transnistrean%C4%83-a-Republicii-Moldova.pdf>

[33]Drepturile omului în regiunea transnistreană a Republicii Moldova, p. 41.

[https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort\\_2024\\_ro.pdf](https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort_2024_ro.pdf)

Another tactic involves training groups of young people for violent actions. Paramilitary and security forces are directly involved in organizing training camps, influencing students through military-patriotic rhetoric. Recruiting personnel from among the younger generation, who are subjected to intense indoctrination, facilitates the hijacking of peaceful protests and the deployment of forceful actions aimed at creating instability<sup>[34]</sup>. In addition, the Transnistrian region stands out for the introduction of militaristic ideology in schools subordinated to Tiraspol. Restrictions on the right to education in Romanian, overtaxation of institutions operating under the national curriculum, and persecution of teaching staff transform education into a form of ideological control, hindering any initiative for integration with the rest of the country. From an early age, students are familiarized with rhetoric hostile to Chişinău and democratic values, paving the way for unconditional loyalty to separatist structures.

All these tactics, carried out under the umbrella of a regime of impunity, highlight a veritable "laboratory" of hybrid manipulation, which is maintained through censorship, militarization, and the exploitation of economic vulnerabilities. By violating human rights, supporting paramilitary networks, and blocking access to independent media, the region is becoming a permanent source of potential destabilization for the Republic of Moldova, which can be activated at any time to undermine efforts toward European integration and the consolidation of the rule of law.

**Table 1. Hybrid Tactics and Strategic Countermeasures**

Target dimension	Hybrid threat	Impact	Countermeasures
<b>Threats to democratic institutions &amp; civic space</b>	Instrumentalisation of rights and institutional vulnerabilities to force disproportionate responses	Erosion of public trust, delegitimization of the state, polarization	Proportionate intervention protocols; proactive public communication; interinstitutional framework for protecting civic space
<b>Electoral process (2024→2025)</b>	Electoral corruption, externally coordinated networks (call centers, opaque funding), organized transportation of voters	Diversion of up to 15–20% of voter choices; influenced results; contestation of legitimacy	Financial investigations; sanctions against organized voter transportation; freezing/tracing of financial flows; expanded electoral monitoring

[34] Drepturile omului în regiunea transnistreană a Republicii Moldova, p. 41. [https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort\\_2024\\_ro.pdf](https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort_2024_ro.pdf)

<b>Front NGO</b>	The NGO “Evrazia” used for recruitment, funding, training, and propaganda	Creation of local influence networks and paid mobilization	Verification of legal status/ultimate beneficiaries; funding transparency; sanctioning subversive activities
<b>Organising and paying protesters to participate in protests</b>	Paid participation; infiltration by instigators; training young people for violence	Simulation of popular support; violent incidents; pretext for broad restrictions	Criminalization of payment for participation (Art. 47 <sup>^</sup> 2 CC, June 2025); identification and conviction of violent networks; standards for proportionate dispersal
<b>Threats to the information space &amp; “traditional values”</b>	Disinformation, propaganda, online campaigns; use of “traditional values” against human rights	Polarization, normalization of authoritarian options, discrediting of the European path	Information resilience & media literacy; support for independent journalism; sanctions against media outlets broadcasting external propaganda
<b>Transnistrian region – human rights</b>	Separatist regime with impunity, censorship, abusive detentions, checkpoints	Recruitment/training environment; restrictions on movement; pressure on journalists and cultural figures	Diplomatic pressure (OSCE/EU), monitoring access; referral to mediators; protection mechanisms for victims
<b>Education on the left bank of the Dniester</b>	Militarization/indoctrination, restriction of Romanian-language schools, punitive tariffs	Generations vulnerable to propaganda; hostility toward Chişinău	Financial support for schools; relaunch of the education working group; clarification of legal status; informing parents against “enlistment”
<b>Local economy &amp; farmers (Dubăsari)</b>	Illegal taxes (\$7–15/ton), pseudo-customs rules, non-transparent networks	Weakening of economic actors; financing of subversive activities	Compensation mechanism for farmers; public exposure of abuses; conditioning facilities on respect for human rights

Source: created by the author

## ACTORS

### 1. Ilan Shor and the network that he has created and maintained

Ilan Shor is a Moldovan-Israeli businessman and politician, known for his involvement in the biggest financial scandal in the history of the Republic of Moldova, known as the “theft of the billion.” A former mayor of Orhei and leader of the Shor Party, he was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison for fraud and money laundering after fleeing the country in 2019. Currently in exile, Ilan Shor continues to exert influence over Moldovan politics through pro-Russian political parties and is subject to international sanctions for actions aimed at destabilizing the country. Ilan Shor used a pyramid scheme to distribute financial resources to mobilize masses of people for protests and demonstrations designed to create the impression of a popular wave of discontent, exploiting the social and economic vulnerabilities of the population.

## 2. Political structures supported by the Russian Federation

Political structures supported by the Russian Federation, such as the "Victory" Bloc and affiliated groups, have been used as vehicles to promote anti-EU narratives, challenge the legitimacy of the Moldovan authorities, and erode public support for the country's European direction. Through populist rhetoric and systematic disinformation, these political entities have fueled social polarization and weakened democracy.

## 3. The ONC "Evrazia," a GONGO-type organization [35]

This entity played a key role in the hybrid influence architecture, functioning as an interface to facilitate financial flows from Russia, train activists, and build a local influence network. This entity was instrumental in organizing protests, financing disinformation campaigns, and recruiting young people for training in violent actions, carried out both in Russia and in other external locations. In particular, the recruitment and training of young people in specialized camps posed major risks to the internal security of the Republic of Moldova, creating the conditions for forthcoming destabilization actions.

**4. Political parties and blocs, including "independent" candidates.** These played a key role in the process of hijacking the electoral processes [36]. Supported by external resources and the Russian Federation's networks of influence, these groups promoted strategies to corrupt voters, organize the illegal transport of voters, and manipulate public opinion through aggressive propaganda messages.

## 5. The Orthodox Church, through representatives loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate.

Some representatives of the clergy were directly involved in amplifying illiberal narratives, contributing to the creation of anti-Western discourse and the consolidation of the electoral segment susceptible to external influences and the spread of messages that weaken social cohesion and democratic values.

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[35] NOTE: A GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization) is a structure that presents itself as a non-governmental organization (NGO), but is in fact created, controlled, or funded by government authorities. Usually, the main purpose of a GONGO is to promote the government's agenda, create the appearance of an independent civil society, or influence public and political discourse.

[36] Electoral fraud observed during the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum. External interference in the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova. [https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport\\_SIS\\_Public\\_Interferenta\\_in\\_procesul\\_electoral.pdf](https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport_SIS_Public_Interferenta_in_procesul_electoral.pdf)

## 6. Pro-Russian political actors in the Republic of Moldova.

**Pro-Russian political actors in the Republic of Moldova** are parties, political leaders, groups, or organizations that openly or subtly promote **the interests of the Russian Federation** in political, economic, cultural, or informational terms. They are characterized by a **geopolitical orientation towards the East**, opposition to European integration, and often by a discourse that emphasizes themes such as "traditional values," military neutrality, or historical and cultural ties with Russia. A phenomenon that has become increasingly visible in recent years is the change in tactics to legitimise pro-Russian discourse in the Republic of Moldova, by referring not only to the Russian Federation, but also to extremist or sovereignist leaders and parties in Europe and the US. Whereas, previously, pro-Russian actors in Moldova viewed Russia as a political role model, while the European Union and the United States were described as negative, "decadent," and "immoral" examples, pro-Russian discourse now aligns itself with extremist and anti-European currents within the EU that promote a sovereignist vision. Thus, political figures such as Viktor Orbán, Robert Fico, Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and George Simion are frequently cited by Moldovan politicians affiliated with Moscow's interests to justify their opposition to the country's European path.

## 7. Extremist and sovereignist parties in the European Parliament

Even though the sovereignist and Russia-oriented political parties within the EU do not directly target the Republic of Moldova in their agenda, they create a favorable environment for local pro-Russian actors. For example, in the European Parliament, parties belonging to the ID (Identity and Democracy) or ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) groups, which include the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), the National Rally party in France, the Brothers of Italy (Fdi) led by Giorgia Meloni, the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) led by Victor Orbán) — voted against several resolutions and decisions to support the Republic of Moldova, including financial aid packages and resolutions condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine [37]. In the 2023 vote on "Supporting reforms and resilience in the Republic of Moldova," over 130 MEPs, mostly from the aforementioned groups, voted against or abstained, demonstrating the existence of a hostile political front that indirectly affects the security of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, these parties block or sabotage initiatives in the EU Council or the European Commission, either through rhetoric or political pressure on member

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[37] Strengthening Moldova's resilience against Russian interference ahead of the upcoming presidential elections and a constitutional referendum on EU integration. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0016\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2024-0016_EN.html)

state governments, preventing a firm and unified EU response to attempts to destabilize the Republic of Moldova.

### 8. EU's national governments aligned with pro-Russian rhetoric

For example, the Hungarian government led by Viktor Orbán has repeatedly opposed sanctions against Russia and the conditioning of financial support for Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova [38], while Robert Fico has publicly challenged the legitimacy of Western support for Ukraine and Moldova [39], setting a dangerous precedent that fuels the anti-European discourse of pro-Russian Moldovan parties.

Pro-Russian political actors in the Republic of Moldova are actively using this new type of Western "references" to legitimize their own positions. They openly invoke the fact that "Europe itself" has leaders who "do not want to support Ukraine and Moldova," "do not want refugees," and "defend traditional values," thus presenting themselves as part of a majority European current. In this way, by aligning themselves with leaders such as Orbán, Meloni, or Le Pen, actors hostile to Moldova's European integration normalize their actions and discourse, claiming that they are not isolated but are following a "European" trend, thus amplifying confusion, disappointment, and Euroscepticism among the population. Below, we will describe the operating mechanism of the Evrazia organization, founded in 2024, as an instrument of Russian hybrid influence. Under the leadership of Ilan Shor, the coordination center in Moscow provides logistics, financing, and strategic support for destabilizing democratic processes in the Republic of Moldova. The organization recruits local ambassadors and influencers to promote pro-Kremlin propaganda and disseminate disinformation, while sabotage groups are trained for direct destabilization actions. Evrazia acts as a soft-power tool, promoting the Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative to Moldova's European integration, using disinformation and political influence.

Fig. 1. Presentation of the Evrazia project



Source: *Electoral fraud observed during the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum*, p. 16. [https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport\\_SIS\\_Public\\_Interferenta\\_in\\_procesul\\_electoral.pdf](https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport_SIS_Public_Interferenta_in_procesul_electoral.pdf)

[38] Orbán pulls out; the EU renews 17 sanctions packages against Russia for another six months, eunews, June 27, 2025. <https://www.eunews.it/en/2025/06/27/orban-pulls-out-the-eu-renews-17-sanctions-packages-against-russia-for-another-six-months/>

[39] See: Fico's victory in Slovakia is not good news even for those who voted for him (Marína Gálisová, journalist). <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/slovakia-condusa-de-robert-fico-se-va-opune-acceptarii-ucrainei-sau-r-moldova-in-ue-marina-galisova-jurnalista/32622436.html>; Robert Fico: West Used Ukraine in Failed Effort to Weaken Russia. <https://slovakmonitor.com/robert-fico-west-used-ukraine-in-failed-effort-to-weaken-russia/>; Slovakia's Fico doubts Trump's Ukraine plan. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovakias-fico-doubts-trumps-ukraine-plan-pushes-for-less-western-aid/>

The Shor project is coordinated by Ilan Shor, with the involvement of the Russian Federation, particularly through the security (intelligence) services (FSB). Ilan Shor plays a central role as the financier and leader of the Victory political bloc, which brings together pro-Russian parties and loyal local leaders. The non-governmental organization "Evrazia," controlled by Ilan Shor's allies, is used for recruitment, training, and propaganda in the Republic of Moldova. Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin's spokesman, and Alena Arshinova, MP in the State Duma, provide political and logistical support<sup>[1]</sup>. This project aims to discredit Moldova's European vector and has influenced the presidential elections and the referendum through hybrid methods.

Fig. 2. Presentation of the Șor project



Source: Electoral fraud identified in the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum, p. 16. <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport SIS Public Interferenta in procesul electoral.pdf>

## TRANSNISTRIAN ACTORS AND PARAMILITARY STRUCTURES

In the Transnistrian region, the real power is held by a number of unconstitutional institutions that operate without any external or internal oversight. The so-called ministries of internal affairs and security, combined with paramilitary structures, exercise quasi-total control over institutions and social life. By virtue of this illegitimate authority, these entities are directly involved in recruiting young people for various "patriotic" and military activities, under the pretext of defending the

[40] Fraudele electorale constatate în cadrul alegerilor prezidențiale și a referendumului republican, p. 16. <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport SIS Public Interferenta in procesul electoral.pdf>

region from foreign influence or perpetuating local traditions. Maintaining an atmosphere of fear is made possible by arbitrary detentions, brutal interrogations, and a prison system that lacks even minimal safeguards. At the same time, there are paramilitary associations and veterans' groups, which, under the guise of civic initiatives, promote anti-Western discourse, coordinate activities to prepare for armed combat, and maintain hostile rhetoric towards Chisinau.

Politicians and officials in Tiraspol also play an important role. Although they are not subjects of international recognition, they control the local economic network and administrative structures. They maintain links with organized crime leaders, whose interests sometimes extend to the right bank of the Nistru. Profits derived from taxing farmers, imposing illegal tariffs on the transit of goods, and businesses run by criminal groups are then channeled into financing mechanisms that support violent protest movements or the corruption of decision-makers. Through an almost total monopoly on the regional media space, these actors can spread defamatory narratives about the Republic of Moldova, the European Union, and any entity that does not recognize the legitimacy of the separatist structures.

In the same vein, a number of non-governmental organizations and youth organizations, sponsored and controlled by the local administration and its external partners, complete (complement?) the control apparatus. These groups participate in propaganda activities, contribute to the dissemination of anti-Western messages, and seek to radicalize certain segments of the population. They collaborate closely with various foreign secret services, extending their influence beyond the region's borders and providing additional support to external actors interested in destabilization [41].

In the religious sphere, the Orthodox Church, which is subordinated to the Russian Patriarchate, often cooperates with the Transnistrian authorities, promotes the idea of a region threatened by hostile forces, legitimises the militarisation of society and condemns democratic initiatives or the activities of Western-funded organisations. Clergy loyal to this line frequently make their appearance in the media, validating propaganda-style rhetoric, demonising individual rights and freedoms, and presenting democratic values as incompatible with local "traditions" [42].

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[41] Youth wing of the Obnovlenie party. <https://www.obnovlenie.info/molodezhnoe-krylo>

[42] Agreement on cooperation between the army and the Church signed in Transnistria. <https://pravoslavie.ru/54242.html>

In this environment, all these actors - paramilitaries, local political leaders, economic and religious interface - support one another, forming a power structure maintained through impunity and intimidation. Rejecting any external control and sabotaging dialogue with the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova become key mechanisms for preserving the existing balance. Moreover, maintaining a constant discourse about a "threat" to the region's security justifies both clandestine financing and underground cooperation with criminal networks, which take full advantage of the lack of independent oversight. Thus, the Transnistrian region provides a fertile environment for influence operations and cross-border criminal activities, which can be activated at any time to weaken or destabilize the Republic of Moldova.

## IMPACT

The impact of these strategies has been profound and multidimensional, undermining the foundations of democracy and national security. On the one hand, the Republic of Moldova has witnessed a systematic attempt to destabilize its democratic institutions by using protests as a tool for political pressure. On the other hand, illegal financial flows and electoral corruption have undermined the integrity of the democratic process, diverting a significant proportion of votes in favor of pro-Russian political actors. At the same time, the use of violent protests and the recruitment of young people for destabilising actions contributed to a climate of insecurity and amplified social divisions, thus accentuating Moldova's vulnerabilities to Russian hybrid influence. In essence, the impact can be summarised in the following steps:

- Artificial amplification of popular sympathy and support for certain ideas and interests.
- The creation of a favorable context for destabilizing public order by instigating violent demonstrations.
- Initiation by the government of measures (some only tentative) to restrict freedom of assembly, with effects on all assemblies.

Using external financial resources, influential groups and actors affiliated with the Russian Federation orchestrated a series of actions that distorted the electoral process, generating an artificial increase in popular support for certain parties and candidates. For example, in the 2024 presidential elections, There were documented schemes that managed to divert up to 20% of votes to the benefit of specific candidates, including through the organized transportation of voters and

paid participation in protests [43]. This electoral manipulation was supported by massive illegal financing, estimated at over 90 million lei, used for political corruption in 2024, propaganda, and destabilization activities [44].

The consequences for social and political stability are alarming. The Republic of Moldova has become the scene of violent and orchestrated protests, in which participants were instructed to provoke law enforcement and create chaos. In 2024, over 300 young people were trained in Russia for such actions, which led to incidents such as the vandalism of public institutions [45]. Moreover, these activities were supported by front non-governmental organizations, such as ONC "Evrazia," which used illegal methods of financing and mobilization, acting outside the legal framework of the Republic of Moldova [46]. These actions have created a climate of fear and insecurity among the population, fueling narratives of disinformation that pit (antagonize?) democratic values against so-called "traditional values" promoted by external actors.

Hybrid influence tools have also attempted to fragment national cohesion and undermine the country's European vector. By amplifying regional tensions, as in the case of Gagauzia, external actors have supported the creation of political enclaves loyal to Russian interests. For example, local elections in Gagauzia were manipulated through illegal financing [47] and pressure on local leaders, strengthening Russia's influence over the region. and pressure on local leaders, strengthening Russia's influence over the region. This pattern of intervention, combined with propaganda and attacks on human rights, has created fertile ground for long-term destabilisation. The above tactics have been enhanced by the infiltration and influence of the media and information space in the Republic of Moldova. Actors affiliated with the interests of the Russian Federation have taken control of some local institutions and med (media?), promoting narratives that undermine democratic values and the country's pro-European direction.

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[43]Electoral fraud observed during the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum. External interference in the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova. [https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport\\_SIS\\_Public\\_Interferenta\\_in\\_procesul\\_electoral.pdf](https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport_SIS_Public_Interferenta_in_procesul_electoral.pdf)

[44]Electoral corruption, illegal financing, and money laundering: 78 searches in several localities across the country and two people detained. <https://politia.md/ro/politia-actiune/corupere-electorala-finantare-ilegala-si-spalare-de-bani-78-de-perchezitii-mai>

[45] Idem.

[46]Council Decision (CFSP) 2024/2701 of October 14, 2024, amending Decision (CFSP) 2023/891 concerning restrictive measures in view of actions destabilizing the Republic of Moldova. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L\\_202402701](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202402701)

[47] Clarifications regarding the episode - the elections of the Bashkan of Gagauzia. <https://www.procuratura.md/anticoruptie/ru/comunicate/comunicate-de-presa/precizari-privind-episodul-alegerile-bascanului-uta-gagauzia0>

For example, several investigations have shown that in 2023, Ilan Shor spent over \$200,000 on social media advertising campaigns aimed at destabilizing local elections and hindering Moldova's European integration, despite sanctions imposed by the United States [48]. This manipulation of the information space contributed to the polarization of society and increased distrust in state institutions, thus facilitating the implementation of other destabilizing actions.

### **The impact of human rights violations in the Transnistrian region on national security**

The network of factors destabilizing the Republic of Moldova is greatly amplified by the situation in the Transnistrian region, where human rights are seriously violated. The absence of any constitutional control whatsoever, a high detention rate (391.67 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants compared to 235 on the right bank of the Nistru River) and minimal space allocated per prisoner (2 m<sup>2</sup> compared to the international standard of 4 m<sup>2</sup>) are elements that perpetuate impunity and favor hostile external influences [49]. These dysfunctions mean that the region ends up providing a training and recruitment ground for subversive actions that foreign interest groups can orchestrate against the Republic of Moldova. Documentation carried out in 2024 by Promo-LEX shows that 21.4% of all prisoners on the left bank of the Nistru River are in so-called "preventive detention" – an abusive measure which, in practice, is prolonged through purely formal procedures [50]. The lack of independent mechanisms for reporting ill-treatment (maltreatment?), coupled with the administration's systematic refusal to cooperate with international bodies, increases the risk that fundamental rights will be exploited for geopolitical purposes. Any critical voice in the region, whether it belongs to independent journalists or civic activists, is quickly neutralized through intimidation or arbitrary detention. As a result, propaganda and disinformation take root more easily in these conditions, and social tensions can be manipulated on demand to generate violent protests or political pressure.

Chronic underfunding of the illegal "prison system" (only \$20,913 spent in 2024 on medication and medical care, equivalent to approximately \$11.74 per prisoner per year) exacerbates the vulnerability of prisoners, directly endangering their health and lives.

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[48] A US-Sanctioned Oligarch Ran Pro-Kremlin Ads on Facebook—Again. <https://www.wired.com/story/ilan-shor-facebook-ads-moldova-elections/>

[49] Human rights in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova. p. 13. [https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort\\_2024\\_ro.pdf](https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort_2024_ro.pdf)

[50] Ibid., p. 15

At the same time, reports reveal that over 300 young people have been trained in violent actions, and approximately 53 checkpoints impede the free movement of people and goods [51]. These data show a region susceptible to being used as a testing ground for hybrid tactics aimed at destabilizing the Republic of Moldova.

Farmers in the Dubăsari district pay illegitimate taxes, and businesses are constantly monitored and constrained by the so-called local "legislation." The imposition (infliction?) of additional taxes (between \$7 and \$15 per ton of grain, for example) directly affects the survival of agricultural businesses and provides the Tiraspol regime with a financial flow that can be redirected to networks of influence or political pressure groups. Similarly, transporting goods across the administrative line involves negotiations with paramilitary structures, which further undermines trust in state institutions and prolongs the state of tension.

Another area of impact is marked by severe limitations on the right to education. In the eight Romanian-language schools in the region, utility rates are up to five times higher than in other institutions. In 2024, nearly 1,900 students faced a hostile environment, and investigations show that anti-Western rhetoric is intensifying in schools subordinated to Tiraspol, where the militarization of education and political indoctrination underpin the curriculum [52]. The direct consequence is the formation of a generation exposed to manipulation and hostile to the idea of national cohesion, which undermines the prospects for genuine reconciliation and reintegration.

In the social and cultural sphere, access to independent media products or democratic literacy programs is severely restricted. According to reports, nearly 200 young Russian speakers have requested to transfer to Romanian-language schools, but the support given to them has been limited, and Transnistrian administration have put pressure on them through direct threats to their families [53]. At the same time, large areas on the left bank of the Nistru remain virtually closed to NGOs and media outlets, which increases the risk that the regime will conceal massive human rights violations, including possible organized crime networks.

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[51] Human rights in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova, p. 14. [https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort\\_2024\\_ro.pdf](https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort_2024_ro.pdf)

[52] Ibid., p. 52

[53] Ibid., p. 59

## COUNTERMEASURES

Attempts by public institutions to counter hybrid threats that used paid participation in protests have turned freedom of assembly into the target of several restrictions.

- **Codification of legislation to punish paid participation in protests:** In June 2025, Parliament adopted a package of amendments [54] to modify certain legislative acts on the effective combating of electoral corruption and related issues. This package also included the adoption of a new article in the Code of Offenses (Article 47`2, Corruption relating to organized gatherings), which punishes with a fine and deprivation of the right to hold a certain position or the right to carry out a certain activity for receiving or/and giving financial means for the purpose of participating in organized meetings if such participation is intended to: a) violate public order or endanger the activity of public institutions; b) violate public morality, the fundamental rights or freedoms of other people; or c) political advertising.
- **Restricting or suppressing such paid protests,** with the direct consequence of restricting the right to freedom of assembly. For example, during the state of emergency (in October 2022, the Commission for Exceptional Situations amended the legal framework during the state of emergency (by temporary derogation from the European Convention on Human Rights under Article 15) by excluding local public authorities (LPAs) from the legal procedure for stopping and dispersing assemblies. Subsequently, on October 16, 2022, the police and Carabinieri intervened forcefully to stop and disperse a meeting organized by representatives of the Șor group (partially violating the right to peaceful assembly) [55] .
- **Identification and punishment of people preparing violent actions at public gatherings.** In September 2024, seven defendants accused of planning mass unrest were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 3 years to 3 years and 5 months in a semi-closed prison [56]. They had been detained in 2023 [57] on charges of recruiting, paying, and training other people to commit violent acts during public gatherings.

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[54] Law amending certain legislative acts (effective combating of electoral corruption and related issues) 100/2025 (Art. 47`2). [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=148941&lang=ro](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=148941&lang=ro)

[55] Report on the situation of freedom of assembly in the Republic of Moldova in 2022. <https://cpr.md/2023/02/11/raport-privind-situatia-libertatii-intrunirilor-in-republica-moldova-in-2022/>

[56] Press release. Prosecutor General's Office, 30.09.2024. <https://www.procuratura.md/stiri-si-mass-media/comunicate-de-presa/cei-sapte-barbati-retinuti-martie-2023-pentru-pregatirea>

[57] Criminal investigation completed in relation to the seven men detained on March 11 in connection with the mass disorder case. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=885351169198823>

→ **Stopping the illegal financial flows** that fueled paid participation The General Police Inspectorate uncovered a scheme for illegally transporting money from the Russian Federation, which was used, among other things, to finance paid participation in protests. As a result, the number and scale of protests suspected of involving paid participants decreased. This measure was the most effective in countering the use of paid protests [58].

→ An essential countermeasure against infiltration and influence in **the media space is the development and strengthening of mechanisms for information resilience and media literacy**. Investments in civic education and awareness campaigns can reduce the impact of disinformation and information manipulation. At the same time, state institutions such as the Information and Security Service (SIS) and the Audiovisual Coordination Council (CA) are trying to implement measures to quickly identify and sanction media institutions involved in disinformation and foreign propaganda. In 2024, the SIS recommended that state institutions intensify online monitoring and develop institutional capacities to counter foreign disinformation campaigns, considering that only an integrated approach can ensure the stability of the information environment and the consolidation of democracy in Moldova [59].

### Specific measures for the Transnistrian region

Although the regional context remains extremely complicated, the constitutional authorities of the Republic of Moldova and some international actors have initiated measures since 2022 to reduce human rights abuses in the Transnistrian region. Efforts intensified in 2024, when incidents with a major impact, such as the tightening of restrictions on free movement, increased pressure on farmers in the Dubăsari district, and the increasingly aggressive militarization of education, forced the authorities to rethink their intervention. Countermeasures focused on three priority areas: improving monitoring mechanisms, ensuring stronger levers for victim protection, and exerting coordinated diplomatic pressure on Tiraspol.

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[58] Police confiscated over €1 million from dozens of passengers arriving from Moscow. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/politia-a-confiscat-pestre-1-milion-de-euro-de-la-zeci-de-pasageri-veniti-de-la-moscova/32917227.html>

[59] Report on activities to prevent hybrid threats in the Republic of Moldova. <https://sis.md/rapoarte-activitate>; Report on media monitoring during the election campaign. Chişinău: CA, 2024, pp. 15-18.

A first step was the recent **relaunch of dialogue platforms, such as** working group meetings (on education, economy, and social protection [60]), after more than two years of stagnation. The direct involvement of farmers in the meetings of the working group on agriculture and the environment aimed to clearly expose the illegal taxes and abuses to which they are subjected, so that Tiraspol representatives could no longer deny the existence of these practices. At the same time, the Reintegration Policy Office (RPO) [61] repeatedly alerted international mediators (OSCE, EU) and observers of the "5+2" format, emphasizing that the new financial impositions, as well as the extensive network of checkpoints, blatantly contradict any effort to bring the two sides closer together.

In response to the practice of declaring people inconvenient to the regime "undesirable," in July and September 2024, the BPR requested that the issue be included on the agenda of the "1+1" negotiations, insisting on a clear commitment from Tiraspol to cease arbitrary detentions, confiscation of journalistic materials, and threats against cultural figures and journalists. At the same time, the Government of the Republic of Moldova notified partner states and international organizations, asking them to intensify monitoring and to react publicly when representatives of the media and civil society are prevented from entering the region.

In the field of education, the main countermeasure taken by the authorities was to provide financial support to Romanian-language educational institutions to help them cope with the discriminatory utility rates and high school transportation costs imposed by Tiraspol. The government allocated additional funds to cover minor repairs, compensate for transportation costs, and strengthen teaching teams, maintaining direct dialogue with school principals. Following insistence from the Ministry of Education and Research and the BPR, the task force on education met after a long hiatus, addressing issues including the recognition of diplomas and clarification of the legal status of school rental contracts [62].

[60] NOTE: Sectoral task forces for strengthening confidence-building measures are made up of relevant experts from Chisinau and Tiraspol, under the coordination of political representatives, and are tasked with developing proposals and mechanisms for resolving technical and current issues faced by residents on both sides of the Nistru River, contributing to the creation of conditions conducive to negotiations on the political settlement of the conflict. Each task force from Chisinau has a leader appointed at the level of a secretary of state of the responsible ministry/head or deputy head of the institution subordinated to the Government. Dialogue platforms in the negotiation process on the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. <https://gov.md/ro/informatii-utile>

[61] NOTE: The Bureau for Reintegration Policies (BPR) is a structure of the Government of the Republic of Moldova responsible for developing, coordinating, and implementing state policies on the territorial reintegration of the country in the context of the Transnistrian conflict settlement. The BPR reports directly to the Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, who is also the main political representative in the negotiation process with Tiraspol.

[62] First meeting of the task force on education this year. <https://www.gov.md/ro/comunicate-de-pres-a-bpr/prima-sedinta-grupurilor-de-lucru-pentru-educatie-din-acest>

To combat military "recruitment" policies targeting minors, in the fall of 2024, the BPR officially passed recommendations to school principals and parents regarding the possibilities of registering their children for military service on the right bank of the Nistru River, as well as the steps they can take to challenge any abuses by paramilitary structures. Similarly, the Ministry of Defense has been more active in informing parents about their rights, including the right to change the residence of children who do not want to be subject to forced conscription. Although these actions did not eliminate the pressure exerted by Tiraspol, the Government's initiative set a precedent for a firmer response, enabling more coherent legal action when parents report intimidation. In the area of freedom of movement, the government responded to the imposition of new illegal customs duties with a compensation mechanism for farmers in the Dubăsari district<sup>[63]</sup>. After initial testing in 2024, the mechanism was supplemented by additional allocations, ensuring that the costs incurred by farmers were covered. Although this solution is temporary, officials in Chişinău hope to turn it into a transitional tool, designed to keep the affected businesses viable until a negotiated solution is reached. At the same time, the BPR and the Ministry of Finance have analyzed the extension of the compensation project to other categories of economic agents, but by the end of 2024, these proposals were only at the level of inter-institutional discussions.

With regard to illegal detention and torture, the state's most frequent countermeasure remains the request for diplomatic intervention and international monitoring. To increase pressure, at the end of 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration prepared a set of legal arguments openly condemning Tiraspol's refusal to allow OSCE delegations access to prisons. The document was sent to international partners and agreed upon, at a declarative level, by several organizations, including the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which reiterated its concern about the failure to enforce cases concerning fundamental rights in the Transnistrian region. However, the implementation of countermeasures remains limited by the lack of a coherent strategy and a government institution strong enough to fully coordinate the Transnistrian issue. The BPR plays an essential role, but its current powers and administrative capacity do not allow for interventions commensurate with the violations in the region.

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[63] Drepturile omului în regiunea transnistreană a Republicii Moldova, p. 33. [https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort\\_2024\\_ro.pdf](https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/raport-dort_2024_ro.pdf)

The government's efforts to create a permanent mechanism for inter-institutional consultation and to make any form of incentives for businesses on the left bank of the Nistru conditional on respect for human rights are still met with aggressive reactions from Tiraspol, which uses internal border controls and Moscow's tacit support.

Beyond political negotiations, partial solutions, such as financial compensation mechanisms for farmers, budget increases for Romanian-language schools, and the strengthening of dialogue with OSCE mediators, show that the authorities in Chisinau are beginning to respond more firmly to structural abuses in the region. However, there is a lack of measures to directly address the issue of impunity, provide emergency legal assistance to victims, and create an expanded framework for international monitoring. In their absence, countermeasures remain, for now, predominantly reactive and insufficient to stop illegal practices and serious human rights violations on the left bank of the Nistru.

## SCENARIOS

**Scenario 1. Destabilization through paid participation in protests and incitement to violence:** A large number of paid protesters and subsequent media coverage can give the impression of a larger protest movement than is actually the case. Specially trained and/or paid individuals may infiltrate gatherings to provoke incidents: attacks on law enforcement, destruction of public property, and incitement to violence, provoking wider popular unrest (similar to the scenario of the April 7, 2009 protests in Chisinau).

**Scenario 2. Legislative measures restricting the right of assembly for the entire population.** To prevent paid participation and the risk of violence at protests, the government/parliament will introduce sweeping restrictive measures that will also affect other public gatherings, thereby disproportionately restricting the entire population's right to free assembly.

**Scenario 3. Influencing elections through subversive networks under the cover of civil society organizations.** Under the cover of civil society organizations, criminal networks and their public representatives could receive financial, logistical, and informational support to decisively influence the results of the 2025 parliamentary elections, thus facilitating the rise of political actors representing the interests of the Russian Federation.

**Additional scenarios:** Post-2025 parliamentary elections – If the law on foreign agents is passed by the new Parliament and implemented in the Republic of Moldova, coupled with attacks on USAID funding, this measure will trigger a wave of repression and persecution of civil society in the Republic of Moldova under the pretext of national security. This law, coupled with orchestrated attacks on international donors, would directly undermine the right to association, freedom of expression, and active participation in public life. At the same time, the confusion created between legitimate external financial support and malicious political "interference" could be exploited by authoritarian regimes or corrupt structures to limit criticism and consolidate control mechanisms. In the context of a society with democratic vulnerabilities such as the Republic of Moldova, such a legislative package could have serious consequences: marginalisation of organisations that monitor human rights violations, consolidation of the power of anti-democratic actors and intensification of intimidation of independent civic groups. One variation of this scenario would be for the law to fail adoption in the Parliament, but measures against civil society (controls, threats, denigration, etc.) would be tacitly applied so as not to blatantly contravene the European integration process, allowing the new government to continue to benefit from external support from the EU, but limiting the activities of civil society.

## CONCLUSIONS

The hybrid tactics analysed in this chapter are essentially based on the exploitation of fundamental rights and freedoms, using democratic principles and standards as a cover for hostile actions. The actors involved in such strategies infiltrate the civic space, taking advantage of constitutional and international guarantees on freedom of expression, the right of assembly, or public participation to promote manipulative messages and subtly destabilize trust in democratic institutions. These actions are amplified by institutional weaknesses, particularly the slow, inconsistent, or overly cautious response of authorities, who hesitate to intervene for fear of violating guaranteed rights or being perceived as repressive.

The fragmented information space and the lack of effective public communication allow hostile narratives to proliferate, often disguised as civic initiatives or legitimate demands. The legal and moral ambiguity of these actions makes them difficult to sanction, and the state's reactive responses often risk being late or disproportionate, further fueling feelings of polarization and mistrust.

In this context, it becomes clear that defending democracy cannot be achieved through traditional security mechanisms alone, but requires a coordinated, balanced, and resilient approach that strengthen institutions, protect authentic civic space, and effectively dismantle attempts to undermine democratic values.

The human rights situation in the Transnistrian region cannot be viewed solely as an isolated incident of violation of international norms, but also as a catalyst for vulnerabilities that can be exploited strategically. Without coordinated intervention at the national and international levels to limit abuses, combat censorship, and protect people subjected to illegal detention, the region continues to remain a major risk area for the entire Republic of Moldova, being used by external actors as a privileged channel for destabilization and influence peddling.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Avoidance of disproportionate responses and ensuring effective protection of fundamental rights:** Any restriction of rights must comply with the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality. This is the only way to avoid fueling narratives of victimization and persecution promoted by hostile actors, who exploit any institutional excess to reinforce their manipulative messages. Public authorities must develop clear intervention protocols to ensure that measures to counter hybrid threats do not arbitrarily affect freedom of expression, the right of assembly, or civic participation.
- **Strengthening the culture of democratic resilience:** Civic education and media literacy initiatives must be expanded and adapted. The public must be helped to understand how democratic values can be defended against manipulation without falling into the trap of radicalization or distrust of institutions. In this context, it is necessary to train public officials on the management of human rights and freedoms in a complex security context.

**Strengthening transparency and participation in decision-making:** Opening institutions to genuine public consultation and actively involving civil society in the development of policies on information security and the protection of democracy to prevent authoritarian abuses under the pretext of national security.

- Protecting pluralism and combating manipulative discourse:** Supporting
- independent journalism and media literacy to ensure a healthy democratic climate in which citizens can discern between legitimate expression and hostile manipulation. Authorities should avoid arbitrary measures against the media and promote transparency.

**Proactive institutional communication:** Public authorities should clearly and transparently inform the public about the risks associated with hybrid actions to prevent polarization and moral panic.

**Creation of an inter-institutional framework for protecting civic space:** Establishment of cooperation mechanisms between central authorities, local public administration, and civil society to monitor and prevent the abusive exploitation of rights for destabilizing purposes.

# I. CAPTURED ELECTIONS: ELECTORAL MANIPULATION AS A HYBRID WEAPON AGAINST DEMOCRACY

## CONTEXT AND PREMISES

In a modern democracy, the organization of elections every few years is a *sine qua non* condition. At the same time, the will of the people, being the basis of state power, is expressed through the organization of free and fair elections. Political struggle between various political forces and currents is natural and encouraged in order to identify the best solutions to community problems.

Political actors have always resorted to manipulation in election campaigns in order to gain the support, sympathy, and votes of the electorate. However, in the context of foreign interference and risks to national and regional security related to the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine and the hybrid war against the Republic of Moldova, electoral manipulation is an extremely serious problem for the future of the Republic of Moldova.

The polarization of Moldovan society remains a reality, and electoral manipulation is one of the most effective tools for continuing and maintaining a divided and antagonistic society, as well as a weak and poor state. Thus, electoral manipulation is becoming an increasingly serious vulnerability, widely used and effective in influencing elections through various techniques of disinformation, propaganda, or foreign interference and illegal financing from obscure sources.

The Republic of Moldova has perfect conditions for such phenomena, due to the realities related to the lack of control by constitutional authorities over (approximately 11%) part of the country's sovereign territory, namely the Transnistrian region, but also due to tense relations with the Gagauzian Autonomous Territorial Unit in recent years<sup>[64]</sup>. Electoral manipulation can contribute to influencing election results. This can affect the democratic process and undermine citizens' trust in democracy, the rule of law, and, implicitly, in elections. The factors contributing to the negative impact of this phenomenon are:

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[64] Relația dintre Chișinău și Comrat poate fi restabilită? Deputat: „Nu este o situație fără ieșire”  
<https://tv8.md/2025/06/11/video-relatia-dintre-chisinau-si-comrat-poate-fi-restabilita-deputat-nu-este-o-situatie-fara-iesire/283234?co>

## 1. Political and electoral corruption

Political and electoral corruption in the Republic of Moldova has become increasingly intense from one campaign to the next, seriously compromising the principles of free and fair elections, in particular equal opportunities for all electoral competitors. The origin and actual amount of financial resources used for electoral purposes have remained extremely limited, being practically always only estimated approximately, as they were spent in all possible social and political areas<sup>[65]</sup>. A prime example is the Șor Party, which was involved in multiple illegal financing campaigns with money from obscure sources, leading to it being declared as unconstitutional and to its dissolution in 2023<sup>[66]</sup>. Furthermore, in the 2020 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections, there were reports of organized transportation of voters from the Transnistrian region, accompanied by suspicions of money being offered in exchange for votes<sup>[67]</sup>. At the same time, there were attempts to corrupt various professional groups,<sup>[68]</sup> such as young people, priests, teachers, and farmers in the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit, through a Russian NGO (EVRAZIA). An extremely innovative and effective method was the activity of amusement parks in Orhei and the Gagauzia region, associated with the same political forces guided from Moscow by the controversial politician Ilan Șor, who organized numerous free activities and events<sup>[69]</sup> of political nature, camouflaged for various groups of citizens.

Another frequent phenomenon, which has become systemic, is the use of administrative resources by public officials to support political parties or certain candidates, thereby seriously violating the neutrality of public institutions.

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[65] Investigație RISE Moldova. <https://www.rise.md/video-bumerang-cu-bani-electorali/>; Cum a fost fraudat referendumul. Rețeaua lui Șor, de partea lui Stoianoglo. În slujba Moscovei (II): o nouă investigație ZdG sub acoperire. <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/video-cum-a-fost-fraudat-referendumul-reteaua-lui-sor-de-partea-lui-stoianoglo-in-slujba-moscovei-ii-o-noua-investigatie-zdg-sub-acoperire/>

[66] Hotărâre privind controlul constituționalității Partidului Politic „Șor” (sesizarea nr. 184h/2022). [https://www.constcourt.md/public/ccdoc/hotariri/h\\_10\\_2023\\_184h\\_2022\\_rou.pdf](https://www.constcourt.md/public/ccdoc/hotariri/h_10_2023_184h_2022_rou.pdf)

[67] În regiunea transnistreană s-au înregistrat multiple cazuri de transport organizat. <https://promolex.md/promo-lex-continua-sa-fie-inregistrata-transportarea-organizata-a-alegatorilor-la-cel-putin-32-de-sectii-de-votare-este-in-crestere-numarul-cazurilor-de-fotografiere-a-buletinelor-de-vot-si-au-fost/>; Ce spune CEC despre transportarea organizată a alegătorilor din Transnistria. <https://agora.md/stiri/54689/ce-spune-cec-despre-transportarea-organizata-a-alegatorilor-din-transnistria>; Oferirea de recompense și transportarea alegătorilor au caracterizat procesul electoral din regiunea transnistreană”. Promo-LEX despre cele 608 secții de votare. <https://newsmaker.md/ro/oferirea-de-recompense-si-transportarea-alegatorilor-au-caracterizat-procesul-electoral-din-regiunea-transnistreana-promo-lex-despre-cele-608-sectii-de-votare>; Poliția semnalează activități de transportare a alegătorilor la secțiile de votare din țară și de peste hotare. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/politia-semnaleaza-activitati-de-transportare-a-alegatorilor-la-sectiile-de-votare-din-tara-si-de-peste-hotare/33185692.html>; Constituirea secțiilor de votare pentru alegătorii din stânga Nistrului. [https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Policy\\_Brief\\_Constituire\\_SV\\_Transnistria.pdf](https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Policy_Brief_Constituire_SV_Transnistria.pdf)

[68] „Voluntarii” discreditării referendumului - cum Șor destabilizează situația din Moldova prin proiectul Eurasia. <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/investigatii/social/voluntarii-discreditarii-referendumului-cum-sor-destabilizeaza-situatia-din-moldova-prin-proiectul-eurasia>

[69] Atracțiile de la OrheiLand, unde accesul este gratuit pentru toți, îi ademenesc pe mii de copii și adulți. <https://www.infotag.md/rebellion-ro/318282/>

This phenomenon has been observed in all election campaigns and practically all political actors who have access to administrative resources abuse public resources and functions<sup>[70]</sup>. Election campaigns have also been marked by the distribution of "social gifts" – food packages or essential goods, including through "social" stores, which, although presented as humanitarian aid, actually mask attempts to corrupt voters<sup>[74]</sup>. In addition, there have been documented informal networks of people paid to bring and distribute money from external and obscure sources<sup>[73]</sup>, to recruit voters, including in the diaspora, which contributes to the serious alteration of the democratic process. These systemic practices prove that electoral corruption adapts each time and remains a major threat to the integrity of elections in the Republic of Moldova.

**2. Illegal financing** and financial resources from obscure sources, including from abroad. Numerous cases of money being transported from Russia by citizens acting as couriers, the use of cards and accounts in Russian banks in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova, the illegal and non-transparent involvement in the election campaign of groups not registered in accordance with the law, and the non-transparent activity of some media sources are indications that huge sums of money are being spent and that a large number of citizens are involved in the election campaign with money from obscure sources, including from outside the country<sup>[73]</sup>. The existence and operation of a parallel banking system, which is beyond the control of the constitutional authorities, facilitates the circulation of money from obscure sources and prevents the recording or accounting of the actual amounts spent for illegal and non-transparent electoral purposes. National and international observers, journalists, including investigative journalists, as well as representatives of State structures, reported or documented possible corruption of approximately 138,000 voters during the 2024 presidential elections,<sup>[74]</sup> representing 8.8% of the total number of voters (1,564,495

[70] Utilizarea resurselor administrative în campaniile electorale din Republica Moldova: lipsa reglementării legale explicite și structura fenomenului.

[https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Resurse\\_administrative\\_Policy\\_Paper.pdf](https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Resurse_administrative_Policy_Paper.pdf)

[71] Investigație RISE Moldova. <https://www.rise.md/prezidentiale2016/culisele-afacerii-magazine-electorale/>; Magazinele lui Șor: Business electoral pe spatele pensionarilor. <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/magazinele-lui-sor-sociale-sau-electorale/>; Finanțarea politică și electorală de către „părți terțe”.

[https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Document-de-politici\\_Finantarea\\_parti-terte\\_Promo-LEX.pdf](https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Document-de-politici_Finantarea_parti-terte_Promo-LEX.pdf)

[72] Activiștii lui Șor, prinși pe aeroportul de la Chișinău cu sume uriașe. Câți bani aveau în bagaje.

<https://info1.md/activistii-lui-sor-prinsi-pe-aeroportul-de-la-chisinau-cu-sume-urias-cati-bani-aveau-in-bagaje/>

[73] Curierul lui Șor la Moscova. <https://www.rise.md/articol/curierul-lui-sor-la-moscova/>

[74] Curierat de bani marca „Șor”: Peste 130 mii de dolari, aduși ilegal de la Moscova de peste 50 de pasageri.

<https://tv8.md/2024/05/15/video-curierat-de-bani-marca-sor-pest-130-mii-de-dolari-adusi-ilegal-de-la-moscova-de-pest-50-de-pasageri/257520>; Schemă de „curierat cu bani” de la Moscova: Zeci de perchezitii în privința oamenilor afiliați grupării Șor. <https://agora.md/2024/06/03/schema-de-curierat-cu-bani-de-la-moscova-zeci-de-perchezitii-in-privinta-oamenilor-afiliati-gruparii-sor-audio>

There were also reports of charter flights transporting Moldovan voters from Russia to polling stations in Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. It has also been estimated that over €200 million was spent on electoral purposes, originating illegally and non-transparently from foreign sources (the Russian Federation), which amounts to approximately €7 for each voter in the Republic of Moldova who participated in the election.

**3. Disinformation and fake news.** A society divided between East and West is extremely vulnerable to electoral manipulation and favors the conduct of disinformation campaigns, a phenomenon that is increasingly common in the Republic of Moldova and other countries. Numerous traditional media outlets and online groups that use social networks have access to non-transparent sources of funding, are very well-organized and coordinated, and contribute effectively to the dissemination of false or manipulative information. Disinformation and fake news can influence voters' opinions and ultimately the results of elections.

**4. Use of hate speech.** Hate speech contributes significantly to electoral manipulation, being used as a means of influencing voters through emotions, fear, or mistrust, with the aim of polarizing society and discrediting political opponents or competitors. Thus, the main targets of hate speech in election campaigns are members and supporters of political forces, but also certain social groups or citizens. Hate speech is amplified by fake news and the media, including online sources. It contributes to reducing or replacing public debate with the cultivation of feelings of fear, mistrust, aggression, and hatred. These, in turn, influence how voters cast ballots. Thus, "conscious voting" is replaced by "emotional voting," achieved through misinformation and electoral manipulation.

**Table 1: Electoral manipulation and countermeasures**

Targeted dimension	Hybrid threat	Impact	Countermeasures
<b>Political and electoral corruption</b>	Creation, organization, and maintenance of networks of paid individuals involved in various acts of protest, destabilization, dissemination of false information, and organized participation in elections.	Altering the principle of equal opportunities and equal voting in elections. Influencing election results.	Monitoring, analysis, plus effective and firm actions to educate citizens about the risks of this phenomenon and effective actions to stop electoral corruption.

<p><b>Illegal financing and financial resources from obscure sources</b></p>	<p>Illegal, non-transparent, and foreign interference in internal democratic processes. Use of foreign banking infrastructure illegally located in the territory not controlled by constitutional authorities (Transnistria).</p>	<p>Compromising democratic processes and public trust in state institutions, authentic democratic values, and the principles of the rule of law. The activity and generous funding of organized networks and groups capable of corrupting political actors and voters, thereby influencing the final results of the electoral process.</p>	<p>Information and civic education campaigns explaining the risks and illegality of using money from obscure sources for political purposes. Effective involvement of local leaders and various groups in efforts to communicate and combat electoral corruption.</p>
<p><b>Promotion of hate speech</b></p>	<p>Polarization of society and cultivation of distrust in justice and state institutions.</p>	<p>Replacing public debate with the induction of fear, aggression, mistrust, and hatred between various groups in society.</p>	<p>Monitoring hate speech, involving local leaders in education campaigns to preserve "conscious voting" and prevent "emotional voting."</p>
<p><b>Polarisation of society</b></p>	<p>Misinformation, propaganda, fake news in the media, promotion of hatred.</p>	<p>Undermining citizens' trust in elections, democratic processes, law, and public order. Polarization of society, mistrust between different groups in society. Maximum vulnerability to influencing election results.</p>	<p>Civic and electoral education, including through the media, identification and punishment of perpetrators of fake news, hate speech, and disinformation. Accountability of state institutions, the media, and political actors.</p>
<p><b>Territorialization of the phenomenon of manipulation</b></p>	<p>Methods of political and electoral manipulation are adapted to different regions.</p>	<p>Consolidation of enclaves that remain outside the control of constitutional authorities (Transnistria) and increased tensions between regional administrations (Gagauzia and some administrative-territorial units under the control of opposition political actors) and central authorities.</p>	<p>Clear, effective policies, measures, and messages for interaction, including adapting messages and communicating to the population in various regions through the media, civil society, and local leaders.</p>

Source: created by the author

## TACTICS USED

- **Disinformation and fake news:** False information and hate speech are spread to influence public opinion. False information targets various groups of citizens and voters.
- **Media propaganda:** Media outlets affiliated with or financed by obscure sources promote a particular political agenda, party, or candidate and denigrate opponents. Messages and information are tailored to each specific social category or group.
- **Corruption of voters:** Voters are well organized and coordinated, and are rewarded or, where appropriate, influenced with money, products, or favors.
- **Use of illegal financial resources from obscure sources:** Huge sums of money from obscure sources are brought into the country illegally and spent in a non-transparent manner during the election campaign.

## ACTORS INVOLVED

- **Political parties** and/or various groups of people, including individuals who are not registered as voters, resort to manipulation to obtain votes and support from voters and to influence the results of the elections.
- **Traditional media** and online resources help certain interest groups and political parties. They contribute to promoting a general state of mistrust and fear by spreading fake news and forming distorted opinions in society.
- **External factors** – generous, illegal, and non-transparent funding of a wide range of groups and factions, including media resources, which are directly or indirectly involved in socio-political, economic, social, and cultural processes, especially during the election period or to influence the campaign and election results, including by exploiting regional and administrative vulnerabilities in the Republic of Moldova<sup>[75]</sup>.

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[75] Bani rusești pentru Găgăuzia prin regiunea transnistreană. <https://zonadesecuritate.md/video-bani-rusesti-pentru-gagauzia-prin-regiunea-transnistreana/>

## TARGETS

- **Undecided voters** are the most vulnerable to manipulation through fake news, propaganda, and disinformation.
- **Young voters** are targeted online, mainly through social media with tailored messages.
- **Voters in rural or underdeveloped areas.** Limited access to alternative and independent sources of information, as well as poorly developed political culture or education, make this fairly large category a sure target for electoral manipulation efforts.
- **Voters in the diaspora.** Although this category of voters has always remained connected to the realities of the Republic of Moldova, in recent years we have seen messages being adapted for this category as well. Various media sources, controlled by certain internal and external political forces, aim to influence the decisions of these voters, who are increasingly numerous in the diaspora.

## IMPACT

Electoral manipulation has negative effects on society, contributing to the development of dangerous phenomena such as division, hatred, fear or mistrust, indifference, and emigration. All of these have a negative impact on the economic and social climate, with serious effects on democracy and political stability. Problems related to the efficiency of governance and corruption persist, despite official efforts and promises, as well as the support provided by the EU in the process of rapprochement and integration of the Republic of Moldova. These are some of the main causes of the serious social and demographic situation, as there is no sign of an end to emigration from the country.

The Republic of Moldova remains a country divided both territorially and socially, and electoral manipulation is a perfect tool for maintaining and exacerbating differences between various groups of citizens. A divided society will remain vulnerable to external security threats and will never be able to muster the energy needed for sustainable development. Political parties, or affiliated groups, that have access to generous obscure financial resources, as well as to the media, financed with illegal money, are favored in relation to other political formations and actors. Furthermore, the continued misuse of administrative resources for electoral purposes is a ubiquitous phenomenon in election campaigns, which contributes to favouring parties that have access to public money and resources.

For real efficiency and maximum credibility, combating and punishing electoral corruption must go hand in hand with the fight against cases of misuse of administrative resources.

Electoral manipulation methods aim to undermine confidence in electoral processes, in the institutions of the rule of law, in justice and in democracy in general, and to compromise, or at least to undermine, the process of European integration, which is vital for the survival of the Republic of Moldova. Undermining or delaying the European integration process would also mean a decline in the economic and investment interest and the potential of the Republic of Moldova, which would further weaken the security of this territory in particular, but also of the Black Sea region in general.

## RESPONSE MEASURES

***Electoral manipulation can be combated with the efforts and legal and effective instruments of state institutions and society.***

- **Adopting an appropriate legal framework** - involving all interested and relevant actors in consultations on the adoption of effective and clear legal norms and procedures for preventing, identifying, combating, and sanctioning negative phenomena aimed at electoral manipulation.
- **Regulating media activity** – creating a legal framework that ensures the independence of the press and at the same time effectively counteracts and sanctions misinformation. The activity and accountability of media sources, including online ones, must be regulated in order to enforce and comply with ethical rules, standards, and criteria that are mandatory for all participants and content producers.
- **Monitoring elections and democratic processes** – national and international organizations can contribute enormously to preventing electoral fraud and continuously improving the legal framework. Their recommendations remain extremely valuable for the process of rapidly improving the electoral legal framework.
- **Strengthening the institutions involved** – both the CEC and other state institutions involved in the electoral process need to strengthen themselves and adapt to political and social realities and challenges in such a way as to remain effective, credible, and independent institutions, capable of ensuring equal conditions for all electoral competitors and maintaining voters' confidence in democratic electoral processes.

- **Civic and electoral education** – the process of civic education must be effectively cultivated, starting with the education system. At the same time, voters must be constantly informed about the risks of manipulation and the importance of verifying information in order to obtain a conscious and responsible vote. Non-partisan electoral education efforts must be multiplied and carried out not only by non-governmental organizations or independent media institutions, but also by all relevant state structures.
- **Making political parties accountable** – financing parties from public funds could be an effective tool for conditioning, but also for imposing mandatory standards for the behavior of political parties. Both during and outside of election campaigns, political parties and their leaders should not allow the promotion or distribution of false, denigrating, or hateful materials, speeches, information, or messages.
- **Thorough investigation of reported or referred cases** – all cases recorded, reported, or referred by the competent state bodies and structures must be solved promptly and efficiently, with the application of sanctions provided for by national law to all electoral and non-electoral actors who violate legal norms, distribute or promote fake news and hate speech. Continuous strengthening of capacities for documentation, investigation, and effective legal accountability of individuals involved in cases of voter corruption, and regular reporting to society on the transparency of the process and progress in investigating cases of electoral corruption.
- **International cooperation.** In recent decades, the support and assistance of international partners has been very important and appreciated by the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. Given the advancements in the processes of European integration of the Republic of Moldova, the support of the EU and the contribution of international partners will continue to sustain society's efforts to combat electoral manipulation.

**Table 2. Tactics of electoral manipulation**

Tactics used	Actors involved	Targets	Impact on society	Response measures
<b>Disinformation and fake news – the deliberate spread of false information and hate speech.</b>	Political parties, informal groups, affiliated media, external sources.	Undecided voters, young people, rural voters, diaspora.	Social polarization, fear, hatred, mistrust.	Regulation and accountability of the media, civic education, sanctions against false sources.
<b>Media propaganda – promoting messages favorable to some and denigrating opponents.</b>	Traditional/online media, political parties, online influencers.	Voters from all categories (tailored messages).	Formation of distorted opinions, distrust of institutions.	Media monitoring, voter education, ethical standards.
<b>Voter corruption – rewarding or influencing voters with money, products, or favors.</b>	Political parties, organized groups, actors with obscure interests.	Vulnerable voters in rural areas and with low political education.	Erosion of trust in the electoral process, favouring corrupt parties.	Investigation and punishment of cases, accountability of parties.
<b>Use of illegal funds – obscure and non-transparent campaign financing.</b>	External factors, interest groups, parties.	The entire electorate (extensive campaigns).	Electoral imbalance, illegal influence on results, democratic stagnation.	Strengthening the CEC and control bodies, international cooperation, and financial transparency.

*Source: created by the author*

Possible scenarios for the upcoming elections include both optimistic prospects and significant risks. External interference is likely to persist, particularly through the use of substantial and non-transparent financial resources from obscure sources. Methods of influencing, supporting, and financing election campaigns, including forms of corruption and voter manipulation, will become increasingly sophisticated and adapted to the current context. At the same time, through sustained and consistent efforts, society can develop effective mechanisms to defend against electoral corruption and manipulation, through civil society efforts, journalistic investigations, and effective responses from state institutions.

Thanks to intensified public debate, civic education campaigns, and the involvement of authorities in preventing and punishing illegal practices, awareness of the illegal and dangerous nature of electoral corruption among the population is expected to increase.

The adoption of a robust regulatory framework, the strengthening of institutional capacities, the conduct of rigorous investigations, active electoral monitoring, civic education, and international cooperation constitutes essential measures for combating electoral manipulation and strengthening democratic resilience. Through sustained and coherent efforts, society can develop effective mechanisms to defend against the corruption of electoral processes.

## CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of electoral manipulation is not isolated and characteristic only of the Republic of Moldova. Its elements are becoming increasingly evident and frequent not only in some post-Soviet countries, such as Georgia or Ukraine, but also in European Union member states. This phenomenon is becoming an extremely effective tool of hybrid warfare, through which certain foreign forces or states attempt to influence the vote and the choice of voters and thus influence the results of elections. The methods chosen are adapted and applied differently for each election.

The Republic of Moldova remains extremely vulnerable to direct or indirect external interference in elections due to its territorial and societal divisions. Electoral manipulation is one of the perfect tools of hybrid warfare against the Republic of Moldova and poses a real and serious threat to the stability, democracy, and security of the Republic of Moldova. It could even be an existential threat to the Republic of Moldova. Thus, State authorities have an obligation to fight effectively in this information war and to combat electoral manipulation legally, transparently, and effectively. The efforts of State institutions will be supported by society and partners, but it is the authorities who must adopt a responsible, proactive, and effective approach. Only through effective education, information, awareness, monitoring, prevention, and communication measures can the electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova become freer, fairer, and more transparent.

### III. THE FRAGILE ECONOMY: FROM FINANCIAL BLACKMAIL TO HYBRID WEAPONS AGAINST SOVEREIGNTY

#### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

In analyzing the phenomenon of hybrid threats to the Republic of Moldova, the economic dimension emerges as an essential vector of systemic vulnerability. The structural weaknesses accumulated in the post-Soviet era, particularly in the areas of corporate governance, financial supervision, and energy autonomy, have created favorable conditions for external influence. Thus, a careful examination of how these economic vulnerabilities have been exploited in hybrid destabilization strategies is required.

The research findings highlight that large-scale banking fraud, non-transparent management of state-owned enterprises, and external dependencies—commercial, energy, and logistical—have been exploited by hostile actors to undermine economic sovereignty and institutional cohesion. These risks have been amplified by systemic interference such as economic blackmail, manipulation of supply chains, financial support for political networks affiliated with Kremlin interests, and the use of disinformation to erode trust in state institutions. In this context, the economic dimension of the Republic of Moldova not only reflects a fundamental fragility, but also represents a central member of the hybrid security equation that affects the stability and strategic orientation of the state.

Hybrid threats to Moldova's economy have manifested themselves through a set of subversive tactics applied by political-oligarchic interest groups, offshore companies, and externally supported economic actors. They have exploited the structural vulnerabilities of state institutions and the regulatory framework. The tactics identified include: large-scale financial fraud (including the misappropriation of bank funds), money laundering mechanisms, institutional capture, attacks on public assets through abusive takeovers (known as "raider attacks"), trade embargoes imposed by third countries, energy blackmail, and systemic corruption, which seriously affect corporate governance and decision-making transparency.

A strong, independent, and incorruptible banking system is an essential pillar of national economic security, acting as a shield against external interference and internal destabilization.

In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the reality has contradicted this theory. Recent threats have revealed serious structural deficiencies. Subsequent investigations have shown that financial and judicial supervisory authorities were either overwhelmed by the situation or captured by political interests, allowing fraud to take place with impunity.

Another relevant aspect is the lack of accountability among senior management. No banking or prosecution officials have been punished for the negligence or complicity that allowed these schemes to take place. Moreover, some of those directly involved were subsequently promoted to key positions. This lack of punishment highlights how systemic corruption and the politicization of justice have weakened the State's ability to protect critical national assets and maintain public trust.

The supervisory capacity of regulatory authorities has often been undermined by undue influence and controversial court rulings. In this opaque climate, hostile takeovers ("raider attacks") have become possible, facilitated by legislative and technical loopholes in the shareholder register, which have allowed fraudulent transfers of bank and company shares to new owners, seriously undermining property rights. Similar governance problems are also found in state-owned enterprises. In strategic sectors such as energy, transport, and telecommunications, many state-owned companies have been managed in a non-transparent manner, affected by political appointments to management positions and unclear privatization processes. Such practices have eroded public control over critical infrastructure and created conditions conducive to fraud, waste, and abuse of resources.

Overall, this deterioration in economic governance reflects a deep institutional vulnerability, with direct effects on national security and public confidence. The external vulnerabilities of the Moldovan economy have also been exploited by hostile actors. Energy dependence and a limited trade market have provided leverage for external economic pressure. For example, in 2013, against the backdrop of Moldova's rapprochement with an Association Agreement with the EU, the Russian Federation banned imports of Moldovan wines—a strategic export commodity—as a measure of political pressure. Officially, the Russian authorities cited sanitary reasons. At the same time, Moscow threatened to reduce natural gas supplies, on which Moldova was almost entirely dependent.

In the long term, Russia has used gas supplies and price variations as instruments of strategic economic pressure. This "energy weapon" perpetuated a dependency that weakens Moldova's economic sovereignty, generated controversial historical debts to Gazprom, and complicated efforts to integrate into the European energy market.

The first major test after 2014 was the trade restrictions imposed by Russia in response to Moldova's pro-European orientation (the signing of the Association Agreement and DCFTA in 2014). The Russian embargo on Moldovan agricultural products in 2014–2015 severely affected local agriculture, highlighting the risk of dependence on a single market and causing a sharp decline in Moldovan exports to the CIS, from around 30% in 2014 to less than 15% in 2023 (to Russia only 2–3%). These restrictions, combined with severe droughts (such as that of 2020), have demonstrated the need to diversify exports and increase the resilience of the agricultural sector. In this context, the strategic orientation towards the EU market (which currently accounts for 65% of exports, compared to 53% in 2014) has reduced external trade vulnerabilities.

These trade restrictions have been compounded by energy shocks, with Moldova being almost entirely dependent on Russian gas until 2022. Manipulation of supplies and sudden price increases by Gazprom in 2021, amplified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, caused a severe energy crisis, marked by frequent outages and a significant increase in the cost of living<sup>[76]</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains and the healthcare system, with the Republic of Moldova facing delays in imports and shortages of medicines and medical equipment. The situation worsened with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, which further disrupted supply routes and increased pressure on medical and social services due to the large influx of refugees.

The security crisis generated by the war in Ukraine has had complex economic effects on the Moldova, as Ukraine was previously one of its main trading partners. The closure of Ukrainian ports has forced the Republic of Moldova to redirect trade flows through Romania, in particular through the port of Giurgiulești, using alternative logistics corridors supported by the European

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[76]DG Trade.

[https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/92191a54-ce6f-4b22-916b-599db7ac4013\\_en?filename=EU-Moldova-factsheet-2024.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/92191a54-ce6f-4b22-916b-599db7ac4013_en?filename=EU-Moldova-factsheet-2024.pdf)

Union. However, persistent instability in the region continues to create economic uncertainty for Moldova. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has amplified these problems: import routes through the neighboring country have been disrupted, causing shortages of some medicines and forcing the authorities to resort to alternative logistics (redirecting transport through Romania, identifying new suppliers).

At the same time, the influx of over 100,000 Ukrainian refugees in 2022 has increased demand on social services and the local healthcare system, putting further pressure on an already fragile system. Overall, the tactics used by hostile actors, such as financial fraud, capture of institutions, endemic corruption, commercial and energy blackmail, as well as regional instability caused by war, exploited the systemic vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova. These vulnerabilities include lack of transparency, weak governance, and politicization of state structures. The impact of these actions has manifested itself in three major directions: the capture of public resources through the diversion of state funds and assets, the weakening of economic sovereignty through the creation of external dependencies and the loss of control over strategic sectors, and the erosion of citizens' trust in state institutions through their discrediting and obstruction. The accumulation of these risks has made the state increasingly vulnerable from within, and its economic security and sustainable development are exposed to serious and persistent threats.

Although the Moldovan economy has faced a multitude of conditions that could profoundly undermine its sovereignty and internal stability, the State has managed to maintain the direction of reforms and achieve notable progress. Despite these challenges, the Moldovan economy has shown remarkable resilience in the wake of recent crises, recording a positive recovery after the pandemic (+13.9% GDP in 2021) and macroeconomic stabilization in 2023 (+0.7% GDP). Structural reforms supported by the IMF, the European Union, and the World Bank have significantly strengthened the banking system, making the ownership structure more transparent and strengthening financial supervision. At the same time, the accelerated development of the IT sector and the growth of per capita income—from approximately \$2,800 in 2014 to about \$6,600 in 2023—reflect the significant latent potential of Moldova's economy, even if some structural challenges remain.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the connections between financial fraud, the vulnerability of the financial-banking system, dependence on external payment systems, poor management of State assets, and trade exposure as determining factors in the economic destabilization of the Republic of Moldova. By investigating the three essential pillars of financial fraud and money laundering, manipulation of public assets, and trade risks associated with supply chains, the research offers a critical perspective on how internal and external actors can influence the economic sovereignty of states in transition. The usefulness of this approach lies in highlighting the mechanisms through which economic vulnerabilities can be exploited, thus contributing to the development of more resilient public policies and institutional protection mechanisms adapted to the regional context.

In the context of the proliferation of hybrid threats targeting the Republic of Moldova, it is essential to systematically analyze the actors involved in these activities, their roles, and the means by which they operate. In the specialized literature, the typological approach to actors allows not only for understanding the architecture of influence networks but also for identifying vulnerabilities in the State's resilience structure. The table proposes a classification of relevant actors—internal and external—involved in hybrid operations, highlighting their main functions, instruments, and forms of manifestation in relation to the political, economic, and institutional context of the Republic of Moldova. This typology contributes to the theoretical foundation of the study and facilitates an integrated analysis of emerging security risks.

**Table 1. Classification of relevant actors in hybrid operations against the Republic of Moldova**

<b>Internal actor</b>	<b>Role and explanation (brief)</b>	<b>External actor</b>	<b>Role and explanation (brief)</b>
<b>Pro-Russian political parties</b>	Promotes anti-EU agenda and social destabilization.	<b>Russia</b>	Main coordinator of hybrid activities.
<b>Oligarchs and influential local groups</b>	Exploit corruption for their own and pro-Russian interests.	<b>Private actors and Russian intermediaries</b>	Illegally finance pro-Russian parties.
<b>Media outlets affiliated with the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova</b>	Constantly promotes Russian disinformation and propaganda.	<b>Russian-funded organizations and NGOs</b>	They finance pro-Russian cultural and social activities.
<b>Weak or corrupt public administration and institutions</b>	Allow external infiltration and Russian influence.	<b>Russian diplomats and politicians</b>	Exert direct diplomatic and political pressure.
<b>Autonomous or separatist regions (Transnistria and Gagauzia)</b>	Used as tools for internal destabilization.	<b>Gazprom and other strategic Russian companies</b>	Manipulate the economy and energy for political pressure.

*Source: created by the author*

The context of hybrid threats to the Republic of Moldova is the result of a strategy and conventional (traditional) tactics such as economic pressure, political influence, and diplomatic and unconventional (asymmetric, indirect) campaigns, such as disinformation, cyber attacks, and manipulation of public opinion, organized and coordinated by external actors, which has been amplified and took shape starting with key events, the "billion-dollar theft" and "Russian Laundromat" cases. These high-profile cases of bank fraud and massive money laundering have profoundly destabilized the Moldovan economy and financial system, highlighting the critical vulnerabilities of state institutions.

The identified vulnerabilities were then strategically exploited through tactics of continuous support for pro-Russian political parties, which receive direct financial and logistical support from private actors and Russian intermediaries close to the Kremlin. At the same time, local oligarchs and influential groups, using the levers of systemic corruption consolidated as a result of the "theft of the billion", actively facilitated Russian external influence in the political and economic spheres.

As a result, this interdependence between corrupt internal actors and strategic external support has reinforced a persistent state of vulnerability and undermined state sovereignty.

The manipulation of the information space plays an essential role in this strategy. The Russian-affiliated media in the Republic of Moldova has consistently used propaganda and disinformation to fuel internal tensions and influence public perceptions, and Russian-funded organizations and NGOs support this process through pro-Russian cultural and educational activities, amplifying social polarization.

At the same time, influence through diplomatic instruments manifests itself through direct pressure on State authorities, including in the form of political threats related to the national security and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. In this context, regions with cultural autonomy, such as Gagauzia, or separatist territories, such as Transnistria, are exploited as strategic levers of internal destabilization, amplifying the State's political and security vulnerabilities.

Economically, strategic control is exercised by Gazprom and other Russian companies, which manipulate the energy market by arbitrarily increasing prices and restricting energy supplies. This tactic aims to generate internal crises and social discontent in order to force the Moldovan government to make political decisions favorable to Moscow.

Thus, in the absence of effective countermeasures, the combination of internal corruption, support for certain political forces, and exploitation of regional tensions remains a vulnerability for the Republic of Moldova, with the potential to affect the political stability and security of the State.

## THE BANKING FRAUD SCANDAL AND THE "RUSSIAN LAUNDROMAT"

Over the past decade, Moldova has been at the center of two major financial scandals: the 2014 banking fraud and the "Russian Laundromat" money-laundering scheme. The bank fraud involved the loss of approximately USD 1 billion from three banks (equivalent to about 12% of the country's GDP), severely damaging the financial system and forcing the state to intervene. At the same time, between 2010 and 2014, up to \$70 billion from Russia was laundered through Moldovan banks via the "Laundromat," using forged court judgments on fictitious debts issued by compromised courts<sup>[77][78]</sup>. The "Laundromat" scheme facilitated the laundering of tens of billions of dollars from Russia through Moldovan courts and banks, using front companies in jurisdictions such as Cyprus and the United Kingdom. The consequences of these operations were profound: the government's image was tarnished in the public eye, the population's trust in financial institutions was eroded, and international partners and creditors expressed their concern.

These events exposed major vulnerabilities in Moldova's financial supervision framework and corporate governance, highlighting systemic corruption and political influence in the banking sector. The immediate impact was a loss of confidence among the public and international partners in financial institutions and in the capacity of Moldovan regulatory and supervisory authorities.

In the long term, the Moldovan banking sector was deeply affected, requiring the intervention of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, which made financial assistance conditional on the implementation of structural reforms. Stricter regulations on ownership transparency and bank governance were introduced, and the National Bank of Moldova initiated processes to strengthen supervision and monitor financial flows more closely.

However, despite these reforms, fundamental challenges remain and manifest themselves in several critical areas. First, limited transparency continues to hinder the rapid and effective identification of the real beneficiaries of complex transactions. This facilitates the perpetuation of money laundering and financial fraud schemes. Second, political influences remain pronounced. They affect management decisions and the supervision of financial institutions.

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[77] The Russian Laundromat Exposed, August 22, 2014. <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/the-russian-laundromat-exposed>  
[78] Idem.

This situation perpetuates the risk of institutional capture. Thirdly, the lack of real accountability of those involved in financial scandals remains a major problem. This contributes to maintaining a culture of impunity and encourages potential future fraud.

Recovery of the defrauded amounts has been minimal, and most of the key individuals involved have so far avoided significant legal consequences<sup>[79]</sup>. These problems indicate that structural vulnerabilities in Moldova's banking and judicial systems remain and require additional measures, including far-reaching legislative reforms, rigorous implementation of international anti-money laundering standards, strengthening the independence of regulatory and supervisory institutions, and reinforcing judicial mechanisms to ensure effective law enforcement and meaningful sanctions for those responsible<sup>[80]</sup>.

## MANIPULATION OF STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISES TO WEAKEN NATIONAL CONTROL OVER CRITICAL INDUSTRIES

### Why is the Moldovan case important?

State-owned enterprises in the Republic of Moldova, operating in strategic sectors such as energy, telecommunications, and transportation, have proven susceptible to manipulation, which has affected national control over these critical industries. The "Russian Laundromat" scheme demonstrated how vulnerable these entities can be to money laundering networks, directly involving state institutions in facilitating financial flows from unknown sources. This episode highlighted that in immature democracies and states affected by systemic corruption, weak public institutions can become key players in illicit financial operations. Between 2010 and 2014, government privatization attempts were marked by controversy, lack of transparency, and political interference. Notable cases included Banca de Economii (BEM) for massive fraud schemes involving fictitious loans and fraudulent transfers under the influence of private interests, and the concession of Chişinău International Airport, "MetalFeros," which was subject to political manipulation and dubious transactions.

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[79] Moldova – 6-Financial Sector.

<https://www.privacyshield.gov/ps/article?id=Moldova-Financial-Sector#:~:text=Foreign%20investors%27%20share%20in%20Moldovan,correspondent%20relationship%20with%20Moldovan%20banks; Republic of Moldova: Technical Assistance Report-Design Considerations for a New Bank Liquidation Framework.>

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/technical-assistance-reports/Issues/2024/07/12/Republic-of-Moldova-Technical-Assistance-Report-Design-Considerations-for-a-New-Bank-551452>

[80] Republic of Moldova: Sixth Reviews Under the Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility Arrangements.

<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2024/12/19/Republic-of-Moldova-Sixth-Reviews-Under-the-Extended-Credit-Facility-and-Extended-Fund-559769>

Notable cases included Banca de Economii (BEM) for massive fraud schemes involving fictitious loans and fraudulent transfers under the influence of private interests, and the concession of Chişinău International Airport, "MetalFeros," which was subject to political manipulation and dubious transactions.

The "Russian Laundromat" used the Moldovan judicial system to validate fictitious transactions, facilitating the laundering of huge sums of money. These events highlighted major deficiencies in governance and regulation, generating significant international pressure for institutional reforms and the governance of state-owned enterprises<sup>[81]</sup>.

In turn, MetalFeros was used by various influential groups and local oligarchs as a central mechanism for the illegal financing of political and economic activities, constituting a key element of the schemes associated with the "billion-dollar theft" and the "Russian Laundromat." The company was actively involved in schemes involving the illegal export of scrap metal and ferrous metals, often through front companies, to hide huge profits destined for the interests of oligarchs and influential groups.

Under the guidance of the EU (in particular through the 2014 Association Agreement), the Republic of Moldova began to align itself with international standards on the management of state-owned enterprises.<sup>[82]</sup> Amendments to the public procurement law extended certain transparency rules to public services and state-owned enterprises, and in 2018 minimum transparency standards for state-owned enterprises were introduced (e.g., the obligation to publish basic financial information). However, implementation remained a challenge. Recognizing the limited progress, the European Parliament and the Commission have repeatedly called for more far-reaching reforms. This external pressure, including the temporary freezing of EU macro-financial assistance in 2018, prompted the Moldovan government to adopt a roadmap for state-owned enterprise reform.

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[81] Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2014., Moldova Country Report.

<https://bti->

[project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2014\\_MDA.pdf#:~:text=The%20entanglement%20of%20political%20office,state%20capture%20and%20political](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2014_MDA.pdf#:~:text=The%20entanglement%20of%20political%20office,state%20capture%20and%20political)

[82] Insight: Billion dollar bank scam shakes faith in little Moldova's pro-EU leaders.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/insight-billion-dollar-bank-scam-shakes-faith-in-little-moldova-s-pro-eu-leaders-idUSKCN0QF1KA/>

Despite the reforms, significant challenges remain within Moldova's state-owned enterprises. As of 2024, the European Commission noted that reforms in this sector are still ongoing, urging the authorities to accelerate the privatization process and reduce state intervention in markets. Many large state-owned enterprises continue to suffer from low transparency and political influence. Although legislative measures have been adopted and international standards on transparency and corporate governance have been implemented, their enforcement remains partial and ineffective, maintaining the risk of misuse of public assets for private or political purposes. The recovery of funds misappropriated in the wake of the 2014 crisis remains limited, highlighting the need for urgent judicial reforms.

Current research, supported by other relevant analyses and reports, indicates that the Republic of Moldova has learned painful lessons from the manipulation of state-owned enterprises and public institutions in the context of banking fraud. In response, concrete measures have been introduced, such as a new legislative framework for corporate governance, mandatory audits, increased financial transparency, and initiatives to depoliticize boards of directors. At the same time, banking supervision has been strengthened by aligning with international standards, particularly with regard to identifying beneficial owners and holding the management of financial institutions accountable.

The role of the IMF, the World Bank, and the EU has been essential, as these institutions have made financial and technical assistance conditional on the implementation of structural reforms and improved governance. External pressures have accelerated the implementation of reforms and imposed higher standards than the previously existing ones.

However, the implementation of reforms faces major challenges, including persistent corruption, institutional resistance, and delays in the practical application of new regulations. Problems with accountability in major corruption cases and ongoing political interference indicate that the progress made so far is still fragile.

Thus, although the Republic of Moldova has taken important steps towards strengthening economic governance and preventing major financial fraud, real and sustainable transformation requires continued efforts to fully and effectively

implement reforms, depoliticise key institutions and strengthen institutional capacities. Only through strong political and institutional commitment can transparent and accountable governance be ensured in the long term.

### **TRADE, FINANCIAL MANIPULATION, AND SUPPLY CHAIN VULNERABILITIES IN MOLDOVA POST-2014**

There are also examples of positive external influence, and the European Union's initiatives in the field of economic governance and institutional reform demonstrate the ability of international actors to contribute to reducing systemic vulnerabilities. As a small and open economy, the Republic of Moldova is strongly affected by external influences in the trade sector. The European Union is currently the country's main trading partner, accounting for 53.7% of total trade in 2023, and in 2024, over 74% of Moldovan exports will go to the EU market, reflecting an increasingly pronounced Western orientation. Trade integration with the EU (through the DCFTA Agreement) has brought expanded access to the European market and the elimination of many tariffs, and Brussels has also adopted temporary measures for the total liberalization of imports for Moldovan agricultural products<sup>[83]</sup> (initially in July 2022, extended until July 24, 2025) – measures designed to support Moldova's economy in the context of the war in Ukraine.

There are persistent trade imbalances and risks of geopolitical influence. Moldova has chronic trade deficits, importing far more than it exports. For example, trade with China exceeded \$1 billion in 2023 and \$1.14 billion in 2024, but the trade balance is heavily deficient for Moldova (insignificant exports compared to import volumes). Such dependence on cheap imports can create economic vulnerabilities. Russia, once a key market for Moldovan products, has diminished its direct trade role but remains a risk factor<sup>[84]</sup>. . At the same time, the war in Ukraine—the second largest partner in terms of share—has severely disrupted export and supply routes, forcing Moldovan trade to be redirected (e.g., through Romania). Overall, dependence on a few major partners exposes Moldova's trade sector to both risks (external volatility, political constraints) and advantages (preferential access to foreign markets and assistance from them).

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[83] Moldova Trade Study: Analysis of Trade Competitiveness.

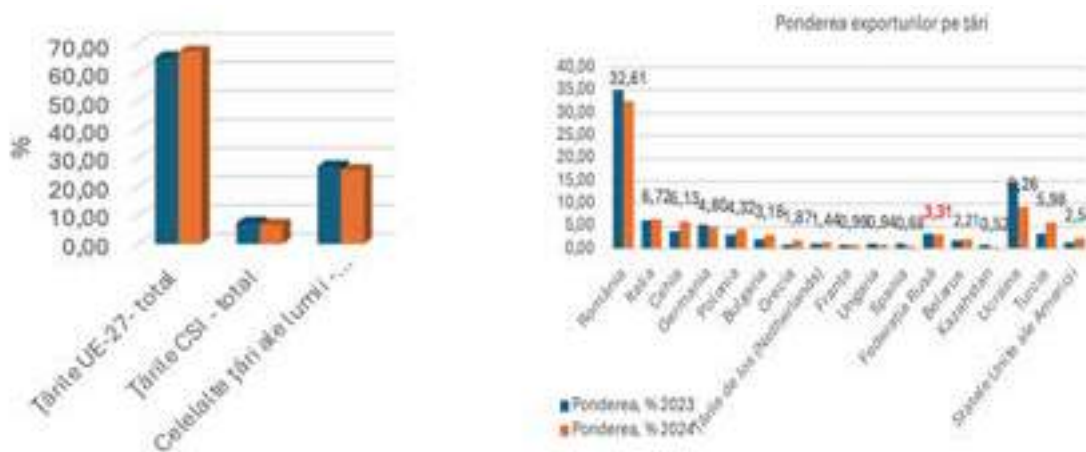
[84]Moldova fights back against Russia's food bans.

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/266831467999092058/pdf/103995-REPF-Moldova-Trade-Study-Note-1-Analysis-of-Trade-Competitiveness.pdf>

In conclusion, Moldova's trade profile is also influenced by certain external factors, both directly and indirectly, and managing these dependencies is essential for its economic security.

The agricultural and food sector is vital to Moldova's economy (accounting for around 10% of GDP and a large share of employment), but it is vulnerable to both climate phenomena and disruptions to market access. The Russian import bans of 2014-2015 illustrated the risk of excessive dependence on a single export market for agricultural products. When Russia closed its borders, Moldovan producers had to quickly find new markets<sup>[85]</sup>.

Fig. 1. Share of Moldova's exports (translation for the charts above)



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova<sup>[86]</sup>

These embargoes, combined with periodic droughts (e.g., a severe drought in 2020, the embargo in 2022), imposed sanitary restrictions and caused volatile agricultural incomes, highlighting the need for diversification. Various non-tariff barriers have also been used intermittently: selective listing of accepted companies, strict customs controls, and difficult-to-meet technical requirements, all aimed at discouraging direct trade.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, agriculture faced supply chain issues, such as delays in importing seeds combined with inputs and difficulties in transporting products to markets due to blockages. The vulnerability of the sector was further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine: historically, Moldova has used Ukrainian Black

[85]Trade and Economic Security. [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova\\_en#:~:text=,of%20Moldova%E2%80%99s%20total%20trade](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova_en#:~:text=,of%20Moldova%E2%80%99s%20total%20trade)

[86]Biroul Național de Statistică al Republicii Moldova. [https://statistica.gov.md/ro/comertul-international-cu-marfuri-al-republicii-moldova-in-luna-decembrie-2024-s-9539\\_61660.html](https://statistica.gov.md/ro/comertul-international-cu-marfuri-al-republicii-moldova-in-luna-decembrie-2024-s-9539_61660.html)

Sea ports (particularly Odessa) to export its surplus harvest. When these routes were blocked in 2022, Moldovan agricultural exports risked spoilage or being sold at great discounts. Moldova managed to redirect much of its trade through Romania—for example, through the Danube port of Giurgiulești, where freight traffic doubled in 2022<sup>[87]</sup>.

Energy security is undoubtedly the most sensitive issue. The state has no domestic fossil fuel resources and, historically, has depended almost entirely on natural gas imported from the Russian Federation. This dependence on gas also underpins electricity generation: a single Soviet-era gas-fired power plant in Transnistria has supplied most of Moldova's electricity, using gas effectively subsidized by Gazprom.

This setup left Moldova vulnerable to supply disruptions or price hikes. Russia has repeatedly used energy policies, especially for natural gas, as a way to put geopolitical pressure on countries that depend on imports. At the end of 2021, Gazprom<sup>[88]</sup> suddenly raised prices and threatened to cut off gas supplies to Moldova amid payment disputes and political tensions, prompting Moldova to declare a state of emergency and seek alternative sources of supply.

The large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 then triggered the worst-case scenario: traditional gas transit routes and electricity trade were disrupted. By the end of 2022, the Russian Federation had reduced and eventually stopped gas exports to Moldova. Simultaneous disruptions in Ukraine and Transnistria led to a decline in electricity imports. The result was an acute energy crisis—there were continuous power outages and electricity prices for consumers rose dramatically, contributing to a cost-of-living crisis.

The health sector in the Republic of Moldova is heavily dependent on imported medicines and medical supplies, a dependency that has become problematic during recent crises.

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[87] NRC Policy Brief: Socioeconomic Impact on the Moldovan Economy since the War in Ukraine September 2023. <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/socio-economic-impact-on-the-moldovan-economy/policy-brief.pdf#:~:text=Giurgiulesti%20port%3A%20Giurgiulesti%20port%20in,Ukrainian%20ports%2C%20global%20cereal%20prices>

[88] NOTĂ: Gazprom este o companie rusă controlată majoritar de către statul rus. Guvernul Federației Ruse deține peste 50% din acțiunile Gazprom prin intermediul Agenției Federale pentru Administrarea Proprietății de Stat (Rosimushchestvo). Astfel, controlul asupra Gazprom aparține în mod direct guvernului rus, care influențează deciziile strategice ale companiei, inclusiv politica de export și prețurile aplicate gazului natural livrat altor țări. Acest control permite Rusiei să folosească Gazprom și ca instrument de influență geopolitică.

At the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, disruptions in the global supply chain hampered the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators, and even certain pharmaceutical products.

The country's small size and limited influence over procurement meant that it often had to rely on international donors (the EU, WHO, UN agencies) for supplies of essential products such as vaccines and PPE. When Russia's war in Ukraine began in 2022, Moldova's drug supply chains faced additional stress. Before the war, a significant portion of Moldova's pharmaceutical imports and transit routes passed through Ukraine. The World Health Organization noted that Moldova's drug procurement and supply systems proved "non-resilient" in the face of the emergency, particularly because many supply chains were linked through Ukraine<sup>[89]</sup>.

The conflict disrupted deliveries of certain medicines and medical equipment, prompting Moldova to seek alternative logistics (e.g., rerouting deliveries through Romania or sourcing from different suppliers). In addition, the influx of Ukrainian refugees (over 100,000 hosted in 2022) has led to an increase in demand for medical services and medicines in the Republic of Moldova.

The health sector in the Republic of Moldova is heavily dependent on imports of medicines and medical supplies, which makes it vulnerable to external disruptions. Recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have highlighted the weakness of regional and global supply chains, affecting the stable supply of essential equipment, pharmaceuticals, and vaccines. The blocking of traditional routes through Ukraine due to the armed conflict has further exacerbated these vulnerabilities.

In addition, the Republic of Moldova has faced other crises that have increased pressure on the healthcare system. The energy crisis between 2021 and 2023, caused by reduced natural gas supplies from Russia, severely affected hospitals and medical institutions, highlighting the risk of energy dependence. At the same time, the significant wave of Ukrainian refugees that began in 2022 put additional pressure on healthcare infrastructure and medicine supplies.

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[89] WHO Operational Review of the Republic of Moldova's approach to noncommunicable diseases during the emergency response to the 2022 influx of Ukrainian refugees. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/380583/WHO-EURO-2025-11285-51057-77667-eng.pdf?sequence=1#:~:text=,chains%20were%20linked%20to%20Ukraine>

High inflation and the financial crisis of 2022-2023 also contributed to the decline in the affordability of essential medical products, generating additional dependence on external support. These multiple vulnerabilities were exploited by external actors, particularly the Russian Federation, through disinformation and propaganda campaigns aimed at undermining trust in national authorities and Western partners.

By exacerbating internal tensions and social destabilisation, the vulnerabilities of the health sector in the Republic of Moldova have become a subtle but effective lever in the geopolitical influence strategies of external adversaries. The crises that have overlapped since 2014 have led to a broad reform agenda in the Republic of Moldova, supported by extensive international assistance. These efforts have aimed to increase economic resilience—by expanding trade and financial options, strengthening the financial system, and securing supply chains—and to hold the governance accountable for the loopholes that made Moldova vulnerable in the first place.

Moldova's financial and banking sector has proven to be one of the most sensitive and vulnerable components of the national economy, exposed to both internal risks, and direct and indirect external influences. Recent crises and scandals, such as the "billion-dollar theft" and the "Russian Laundromat," have clearly highlighted the system's deep structural vulnerabilities. In the context of these events, identifying and understanding these vulnerabilities becomes essential for strengthening financial resilience and preventing new economic crises.

Thus, the main vulnerabilities of the financial and banking sector of the Republic of Moldova include:

- Fraud and corruption
- Political and oligarchic influence
- Excessive concentration of ownership and exposure to related parties
- Dependence on foreign correspondent banks
- Poor digitization
- Limited financial intermediation capacity
- Structural weaknesses in money laundering prevention
- Vulnerability to external geopolitical influences
- Ineffective implementation of reforms
- External control and manipulation

Key vulnerabilities include the existence of fraud and corrupt practices facilitated by the lack of effective corporate governance and low transparency of bank ownership. These issues have allowed massive fraud and money laundering schemes to flourish, profoundly affecting financial stability.

Political and oligarchic influence over Moldovan banks is another major vulnerability, as financial institutions' decisions are often dictated by private interests and influential groups, undermining the independence and efficiency of the system.

Excessive concentration of bank ownership and large exposures to related parties have generated significant systemic risks. These have materialized in the collapse of several major financial institutions, with a major impact on the entire economy. Furthermore, significant dependence on foreign correspondent banks has increased Moldova's vulnerability, especially when the reputation of the Moldovan banking system was compromised by financial scandals, limiting the country's access to international financial operations. The weak digitization of the Moldovan financial system restricts its adaptability and competitiveness, hindering the development of modern and efficient services. This situation exacerbates financial intermediation problems, limiting access to credit for SMEs and the population and slowing economic growth.

The Moldovan banking system also has significant structural weaknesses in the area of money laundering prevention, with insufficient capacity to monitor and detect suspicious transactions, making it vulnerable to cross-border financial crime.

At the same time, vulnerability to external geopolitical influences, particularly pressure and interference from the Russian Federation, is a constant source of instability and economic risk. These external influences include not only direct political and economic pressure, but also opportunities for control and manipulation through non-transparent shareholders and destabilizing financial speculation.

Finally, the inefficient and delayed implementation of necessary reforms in the financial and banking sector, as well as the inability of the judiciary to ensure the swift and effective prosecution of those involved in major fraud maintain these vulnerabilities and limit confidence in the authorities' ability to manage the financial sector correctly and transparently.

The 2014 banking crisis in the Republic of Moldova, known as the "billion-dollar theft," was a turning point for the country's economic and financial stability. Although the immediate impact was severe, the way in which the authorities and international partners managed this crisis offers valuable lessons and a positive example of how to manage a major financial crisis. Initially, the Moldovan authorities reacted quickly by closing the three banks directly affected (Banca de Economii, Unibank, and Banca Socială), thus preventing the immediate spread of the crisis.

Subsequently, in order to restore confidence in the banking system, Moldova received substantial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Union, and the World Bank. This external support was conditional on the implementation of significant structural reforms in the Moldovan financial and banking system.

Among the most important measures implemented were the strengthening of the independence of the National Bank of Moldova, the introduction of stricter standards of transparency and supervision of bank ownership, and the creation of a Single Central Depository to identify the beneficial owners of banks. These reforms have contributed to a drastic reduction in the risk of similar frauds being repeated. At the same time, the Moldovan authorities have attracted strategic foreign investors to the banking sector, who have brought with them experience, transparency, and international best practices in corporate governance. As a result, the Moldovan banking system has regained its stability and both domestic and international confidence.

To better understand the nature and extent of the vulnerabilities faced by Moldova's financial and economic system, Table 2 summarizes the main actions and events with a major impact, along with their effects and the countermeasures implemented by the authorities. Through comparative observation, it is possible to track how systemic risk manifested itself, what dimension of vulnerability was affected (economic, financial, institutional, or geopolitical), and to what extent the authorities' responses were reactive or preventive. It can be seen that many of the reforms were initiated in response to major crises (e.g., the 2014 banking fraud, money laundering scandals, or external pressures), which indicates a reactive model of governance. However, certain initiatives, such as the digitization of banking services or the diversification of trade routes, also reflect a more proactive strategic approach.

The conclusion that emerges from analyzing the data in Table 2 is that, although the Republic of Moldova has taken important steps toward strengthening its institutional framework and transparency, responses to systemic vulnerabilities often remain fragmented, slow, or contingent on the intervention of international partners.

The structural vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova are worsening under pressure from external and internal influences. Institutions are failing to manage economic and social crises effectively. Pro-Russian political parties and oligarchic groups actively exploit public discontent, generating widespread protests and social instability. The regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia are becoming centers of maximum tension, and separatist threats are escalating. At the same time, the media controlled by the Russian Federation intensifies its disinformation campaigns, further polarizing Moldovan society. In these circumstances, the Republic of Moldova risks falling back under Russia's dominant influence, undoing the progress made towards European integration and returning to a vicious circle of instability and systemic corruption.

Identifiable actions	Impact	Countermeasures implemented
Massive fraud in three Moldovan banks ("theft of the billion")	Loss of 12% of GDP; major financial collapse; decline in public confidence	Liquidation of the banks involved; international and national judicial investigations
Lack of transparency in shareholding	Creation of conditions for fraud and money laundering	Establishment of the Single Central Depository; introduction of the obligation to transparently identify beneficial owners
Political and oligarchic influence	Corruption of the decision-making system and undermining of financial stability	Legislative reform for the independence of the National Bank and regulatory institutions
Concentration of bank ownership and high exposure to affiliated parties	Systemic risk and financial fragility	Limiting lending to affiliated parties; attracting foreign investors and diversifying shareholding
Deficiencies in supervision and prevention of money laundering	Involvement in international money laundering schemes ("Russian Laundromat")	Strengthening the AML/CFT legislative framework; increased international cooperation in monitoring suspicious transactions
Weak technological capacity (limited digitization)	Inefficiency and limited access to modern banking services	Modernization projects and introduction of digital banking services, instant payments (e.g., MIA)
Dependence on foreign correspondent banks	International financial isolation and transactional difficulties	Restoring confidence through AML/CFT reforms and improving international reputation
Slow and incomplete implementation of initial reforms	Persistent vulnerabilities and risk of relapse	Technical and financial assistance conditional on real progress from the IMF, EU, and World Bank
External manipulation of the financial market and geopolitical influence	Economic instability and political pressure	Reduction of external influence through diversification of trade and financial relations; increased transparency and strict supervision
External trade restrictions and embargoes	Serious disruption of international trade and logistics chains; reduced agricultural income and major logistical difficulties	Diversification of trading partners; redirection of trade flows through other routes (Romania, Giurgiulești port); proactive measures to liberalize trade with the EU
Blockage of traditional transit routes (Ukraine)	Trade losses and severe logistical difficulties	Reorganization of logistic routes through regional alternatives; investments in port and logistic infrastructure

In an optimistic scenario, the Republic of Moldova will benefit from consistent and strategic support from the European Union and international partners to overcome structural vulnerabilities. Administrative and judicial reforms will be successfully implemented, leading to economic and political stability in the country. We note that in some areas, such as the economic and social spheres, and more slowly in the justice system, reforms are being successfully implemented, public institutions are becoming more resilient, and anti-corruption mechanisms are beginning to function effectively, even despite continued efforts by external actors to influence the situation and hinder the European path of the Republic of Moldova. This positive context leads to the consolidation of economic and social stability, reducing the ability of pro-Russian external and internal actors to destabilize the country.

At the same time, the Republic of Moldova is reducing its energy dependence by connecting to European networks, thus diminishing the influence of Gazprom, whose license has been withdrawn, and other strategic Russian companies. The withdrawal of Moldovagaz's license marks a significant break in direct gas ties between Chisinau and Moscow. Overall, ANRE's decision consolidates Chisinau's orientation towards European energy integration and weakens its dependence on Russia, but exacerbates bilateral tensions. The Russians are losing a significant gas customer and a vehicle of influence, while Moldova is taking on the logistics of new supply sources (including investments in stocks and complementary infrastructure). With these advances, social cohesion increases, Moldovan society becomes less vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda, and the process of European integration advances significantly, providing Moldova with a solid framework for security, economic development, and stable democracy.

The Moldovan economy has been deeply marked by structural vulnerabilities in key areas such as trade, the financial and banking sector, agriculture, energy, and health. High dependence on certain external partners, particularly Russia, has exposed Moldova to multiple direct and indirect influences, jeopardizing economic stability and national security. The shocks of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have exposed critical weaknesses in Moldova's supply chain—from food and fuel to medicines—but have also catalyzed efforts to address them. The experience has pushed Moldova to connect more quickly to European supply networks, either by changing trade routes (e.g., redirecting exports from Odessa to Romanian ports)

At the same time, support and cooperation with the European Union and other Western partners played a key positive role, helping to mitigate some of these vulnerabilities through trade liberalization measures, financial and technical assistance, and logistical and humanitarian support. However, effective and sustainable management of existing risks still requires deep and sustained structural reforms, greater institutional transparency, and strengthening resilience to internal and external challenges. Despite this notable progress, it is essential to continue structural reforms and maintain a firm and consistent commitment to international standards in order to strengthen the resilience and sustainable development of the Republic of Moldova.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is essential that the authorities continue their efforts to strengthen the independence and efficiency of financial and judicial institutions, prioritizing the enforcement of anti-corruption legislation and promoting transparency in decision-making.
- Expanding trade and energy relations with diverse partners is crucial to reducing vulnerability to external geopolitical and economic pressures.
- Investments in logistics, port, and transport infrastructure, together with the development of domestic production capacities, will reduce supply chain vulnerabilities and enhance overall economic stability.
- Accelerated implementation of digital solutions in the financial and banking sector will improve financial intermediation, reduce vulnerability to fraud, and strengthen the confidence of citizens and external partners.
- Continued, active, and sustained collaboration with the IMF, the European Union, the World Bank, and other international partners remains essential for the effective implementation of reforms and ensuring sustainable and inclusive economic development.

By implementing these recommendations, the Republic of Moldova will be able to significantly strengthen its economic resilience and ensure robust development, capable of successfully addressing complex internal and external challenges.

## IV. CORRUPTION AND JUSTICE: BETWEEN VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE

### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

In the Republic of Moldova, corruption is a structural element of the political and economic system, with profound ramifications for the way power is exercised and institutions are formed. International comparative analyses show that the level of corruption is closely linked to the architecture of the political regime, influencing the distribution of power, the degree of centralization of decision-making, and the effectiveness of governance mechanisms. Correlated data from Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indicate a consistent relationship between the intensity of corruption and the institutional configuration of the State: changes in public perception and integrity indicators tend to be associated with changes in the nature and functioning of the political regime.

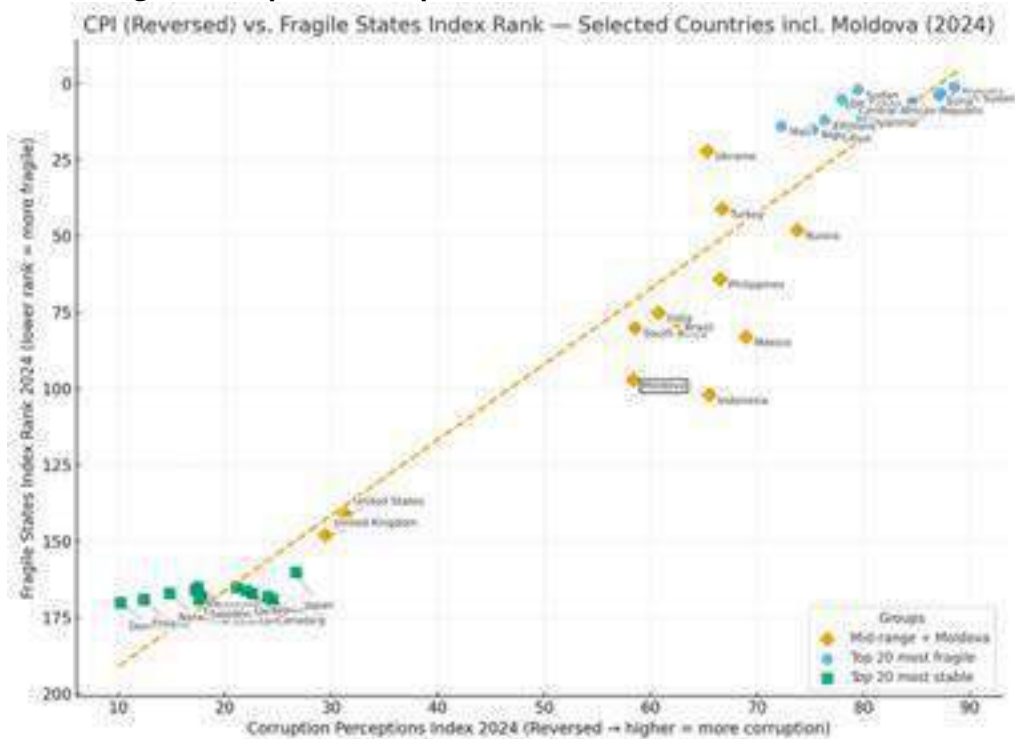
From an institutional theory perspective, corruption can be interpreted as an informal mechanism for redistributing resources and exercising influence<sup>[90]</sup>. In this sense, it acts not only in the economic sphere, by distorting markets and allocating resources inefficiently, but also in the political sphere, by shaping the behavior of elites and the relationships between institutions. Empirical studies on cross-country data sets show that significant variations in the CPI score over a relatively short period of time correspond, on average, to changes in the degree of political pluralism, judicial independence, and civic participation.

Applying this analytical framework to the Republic of Moldova, a number of quantifiable developments can be observed. Between 2012 and 2023, the CPI score rose from 36 to 42, in parallel with improvements in indicators such as budget transparency (from 7.64 to 9.41) and the expansion of digital public services. These changes cannot be interpreted in isolation, but must be analysed together with the dynamics of other factors, such as the independence of the judiciary, press freedom and the degree of institutional capture. Despite specific progress, indicators relating to the independence of the judiciary and media pluralism have seen only marginal increases, suggesting the persistence of informal structures influencing the decision-making process.

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[90] A se vedea: D.C. North. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; D. Acemoglu, J. A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012

**Fig. 1. Corruption Perceptions Index vs. Failed States Index (2023).**



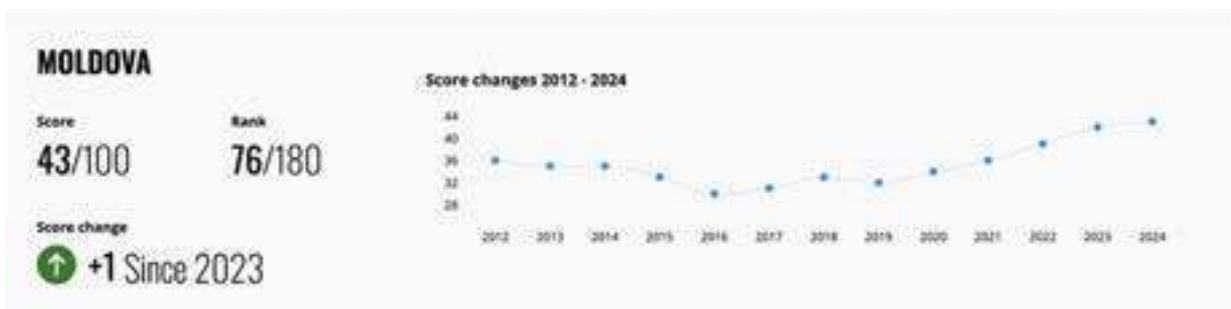
*Sursa: creat de autor*

### Strategic implications

For the Republic of Moldova, reducing corruption has a dual strategic relevance:

- Democratic consolidation and the reduction of kleptocratic networks increase real political competition and reduce the informal control of elites over state institutions.
- Reducing external vulnerability and ensuring more transparent administration and an independent judiciary limits the ability of external actors to destabilize the state through corruption, illegal financing, and capture of institutions.

**Fig.2 Corruption Perceptions Index for the Republic of Moldova**

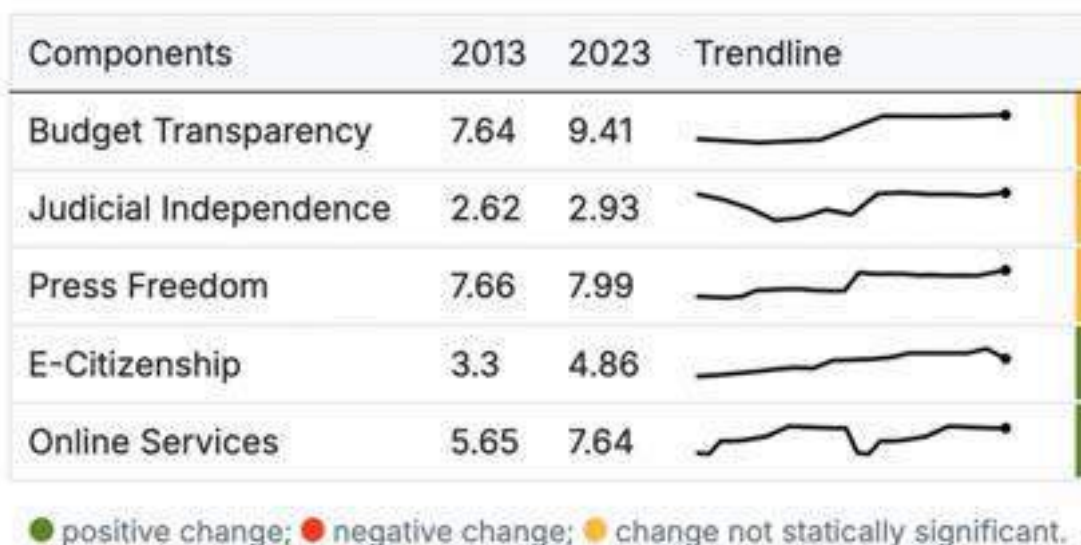


Source: Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index, 2012-2023*<sup>[91]</sup>

[91] Transparency International Moldova. [90] A se vedea: D.C. North. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; D. Acemoglu, J. A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012

The Corruption Perceptions Index chart shows a positive trend in reducing the perception of corruption in the Republic of Moldova from 2012 to 2023. The score rose from 36 in 2012 to 42 in 2023, and the Republic of Moldova ranks 76th out of 180 countries in 2023. This represents an improvement of 3 points compared to 2022, indicating continuous and effective efforts to combat corruption. Although these data suggest progress in the fight against corruption, the relatively low score and ranking emphasize the fact that Moldova still faces significant challenges in the area of justice, and the government's reform efforts must be sustained and intensified to strengthen public trust and improve governance.

**Fig. 3. Evolution of governance and democracy indicators in the Republic of Moldova between 2013 and 2023**



Source: Corruption risk forecast, Moldova<sup>[92]</sup>

This positive evolution of anti-corruption indicators is not just a statistical change, but signals a structural transformation: the diminishing networks of corrupt influence are eroding the authoritarian mechanisms that have slowed democratic progress. As the Republic of Moldova manages to continue reducing corruption, it not only moves closer to European standards, but also frees itself from the legacy of authoritarian practices and vulnerability to external manipulation. In practical terms, every point gained in international anti-corruption rankings means one more step towards a functional democracy and a more resilient state.

[92] Moldova. [91] Transparency International Moldova. [90] A se vede: D.C. North. Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; D. Acemoglu, J. A. Robinson. Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012

**Table 1. Hybrid tactics and strategic countermeasures**

Tactics	Main actors	Strategic impact	Proposed countermeasures
<b>Bribing politicians and officials</b>	Corrupt politicians, local oligarchs, pro-Russian agents of influence	Political decisions favorable to foreign interests; undermining of the pro-European agenda	Extended vetting for executive and legislative positions; active monitoring of assets and conflicts of interest
<b>Financing of pro-Russian parties</b>	The Shor Group, the Victory Bloc, structures affiliated with Moscow	Changing the political balance through illegal mechanisms; influencing electoral processes	Strict control of campaign financing; capping and transparency of donations; real-time inter-institutional checks
<b>Capture of the business environment</b>	Local and joint ventures controlled by pro-Russian networks	Economic dependence; blocking of independent economic initiatives	Strictly enforced antitrust legislation; independent audit of public contracts and concessions
<b>Manipulation of electoral processes</b>	Front NGOs, Transnistrian networks, infiltrated electoral commissions	Vote rigging; delegitimization of results	Creation of an Electoral Integrity Center; international observers with an extended mandate
<b>Disinformation and propaganda</b>	Pro-Russian media, indirectly controlled social networks	Social polarization; erosion of public trust in institutions	National Media Analysis Unit; daily fact-checking; regulation of transparency in media financing
<b>Influencing the judiciary</b>	Compromised judges/prosecutors, political intermediaries	Impunity for corrupt individuals; blocking of strategic cases	Continuation of vetting; automatic suspension mechanisms for incompatibility of integrity
<b>Money laundering and offshore transfers</b>	Opaque financial networks, "service providers"	Illegal financing of parties and protests; economic destabilization	Joint Financial Intelligence Task Force; operational agreements on data exchange with offshore jurisdictions
<b>Activities through diplomatic infrastructure</b>	Embassy and Consulate of the Russian Federation	Logistical and financial coordination of hybrid operations	Discreet monitoring; limiting the number of personnel with diplomatic immunity; international dialogue to reduce abuse of diplomatic status

Source: created by the author

## TACTICS

The Russian Federation has used corruption as a tool to influence Moldova's domestic and foreign policy since it gained independence from the Soviet Union. However, in recent years, the transformation of corruption into an instrument of Russia's hybrid warfare has intensified and involves the use of corrupt practices to influence strategic foreign policy objectives. The tactics used by the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova fit into a theoretical model that is well documented in studies on corruption as a tool for political control and geopolitical influence. The literature describes systemic corruption not only as a result of internal institutional weaknesses, but also as a deliberate mechanism for shaping a State's political regime and strategic orientation <sup>[93]</sup>.

The Russian Federation has used corruption in the Republic of Moldova to undermine the country's pro-Western political forces, to prevent its integration and cooperation in European and Euro-Atlantic structures, and to maintain its sphere of influence in the region. Corruption, as an instrument of Russia's hybrid warfare in Moldova, includes the following tactics:

- Bribing politicians and officials to influence political decisions in Russia's favor.
- Co-opting Moldovan businesses through corrupt practices to exert economic influence.
- Financing political parties that support Russia's interests. Engaging in money laundering and other financial crimes to undermine Moldova's economy.
- Corrupting voters and creating a pyramid scheme to rig the 2024 elections and referendum.
- Using political parties, NGOs, and media outlets advocating for Russian interests to spread divisive messages and obstruct anti-corruption reforms.
- Influencing key legal cases and ensuring that corrupt actors or those aligned with foreign agendas avoid accountability. The SIS report reveals that the Russian Federation is secretly financing parties and campaigns, using methods such as transfers through offshore accounts and the MIR payment system.
- Exploiting economic discontent to fuel disillusionment with democratic institutions and support pro-Russian alternatives.

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[93] A se vedea: J. S. Hellman, G. Jones, D. Kaufmann. *Seize the State, Seize the Day: State Capture, Corruption, and Influence in Transition*. In: Policy Research Working Paper No. 2444. Washington, DC: The World Bank. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/770861468739470707/seize-the-state-seize-the-day-state-capture-corruption-and-influence-in-transition>

- Interpol, international investigations into "carousel" corruption have uncovered illegal payments to officials to remove fugitives from the Interpol Red Notice list<sup>[94]</sup>, using mechanisms designed to protect asylum seekers. These tactics demonstrate the complexity of corruption networks and their international connections.

External influence in 2024 was achieved through the use of platforms, agents of influence, and tools typical of hybrid interference, according to the SIS report<sup>[95]</sup>. The main platforms used were the entity "Evrazia" and the so-called "Victorie" bloc; the agents of influence were and remain the organized crime group "SHOR," its affiliates, and other individuals subject to international sanctions, as well as those wanted nationally and internationally; the instruments used include clandestine financing by external subversive centers, disinformation, corruption, illegal financing of election campaigns, attempts at destabilization, sabotage, and others. Russian interference was exercised through multiple vectors, including:

- amplifying radical, separatist-autonomist tendencies;
- interference by the Russian Federation in the electoral process in the Republic of Moldova;
- subversive operations carried out by Russian special services;
- exploitation of organized crime elements.

In 2023, the scheme to influence the elections and destabilise the country was dismantled: In this context, the Information and Security Service, together with the National Anti-Corruption Center, the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs carried out several measures within the scope of criminal cases, in which the continuous nature of the subversive actions carried out by Ilan Shor and the group he led was established, with the following documentation:

- evidence was gathered in over 160 volumes of criminal files, of which 63 were sent to court;
- in the criminal case concerning illegal financing, data was documented on the use by the criminal group "SHOR" of approximately 200 million lei (10 million euros), money used including to finance street protests and destabilisation in the country;

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[94] Moldova. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/15/world/europe/moldova-interpol-fraud-scheme.html>

[95] Imixtiunea externă în procesele electorale din Republica Moldova. <https://sis.md/ro/content/imixtiunea-extern%C4%83-%C3%AEn-procesele-electorale-din-republica-moldova>

- the actions of the "Shor" group to create and finance several political parties in the country to act in concert have been documented, one example being ALDE, for which, according to public statements by Ilan Shor 1.5 million US dollars were spent on it;
- Over 2,500 employees of the National Investigation Inspectorate (INI), the National Public Security Inspectorate (INSP), and local police officers were trained, including, due to the large scale of the illegalities committed by Şor, were removed from their positions of ensuring public safety and order for their involvement in documenting these illegalities.

## ACTORS

The list of actors involved in the use of corruption as an instrument of influence in the Republic of Moldova includes both domestic entities—oligarchs, captive political and economic groups, affiliated media institutions, and external actors operating directly or through intermediaries. The main platforms used were the entity "Evrazia" and the so-called "Victorie" bloc; the agents of influence have been the organized criminal group "Shor," its affiliates, and other individuals subject to international sanctions, as well as those wanted nationally and internationally.

"Evrazia" is a non-commercial organisation that exists only within the legal framework of the Russian Federation and is subject to international sanctions. Its founder and director is the former accountant of the "SHOR" party, Nelli Parurenco. The coordinating council is headed by Aliona Archinova (MP in the State Duma of the Russian Federation, "Edinaya Rossia" party). Ilan Shor is a member of this Council, and through "Evrazia," he coordinates projects of subversive influence against the Republic of Moldova.

According to SIS reports on electoral interference, Ilan Shor, by illegally financing political parties, initially launching himself from the position of the "ŞOR" party (the party has been officially dissolved), created an organized criminal group that includes members of the Moldovan Parliament, public officials, business representatives, journalists, political leaders, and opinion leaders.

A distinct actor, with formal visibility but complex informal activities, is the Embassy and Consulate of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova. Officially, these entities have a diplomatic mandate limited by the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which grants them immunity and access to institutional channels of communication and influence.

In practice, however, their role often goes beyond the strictly consular or diplomatic sphere, functioning as coordination hubs for networks of political, economic, and media influence.

Their degree of operational autonomy derives from their diplomatic status, which allows them to carry out activities on Moldovan territory with a low level of transparency and legal protection from interference by local authorities. Analyses by European intelligence services (including public reports by the SIS) indicate that, in the context of hybrid warfare, diplomatic missions can function as platforms for:

- identifying and cultivating strategic contacts in the political, administrative, and economic spheres;
- providing logistical and financial support to pro-Moscow internal actors;
- channelling resources to disinformation and propaganda campaigns;
- facilitating coordination with Russian special services for sensitive operations.

This combination of official mandate and unofficial activities transforms the Embassy and Consulate of the Russian Federation into actors with a dual status: formal, in the eyes of international law, but informal in the way they intervene in the internal dynamics of the Republic of Moldova. In the context of the theory of corruption as an instrument of authoritarianism, these entities can be considered institutional levers through which local corrupt networks are maintained and reactivated, thus providing the infrastructure necessary to perpetuate a hybrid political model that is vulnerable to external interference.

Hybrid attacks are coordinated by a combination of external and internal actors:

- The Russian government, through its intelligence agencies and diplomatic channels, coordinates hybrid warfare efforts, often using financial incentives or coercion to influence Moldovan elites.
- Local oligarchs, corrupt politicians, and compromised judicial officials act as facilitators, prioritizing personal gain over national interests.
- Media organizations, civil society organizations, and religious institutions with opaque funding and pro-Russian leanings disseminate narratives and impede reforms. The SIS report highlights that the "Victory Bloc" and the SHOR group are being used as intermediaries for destabilization.
- Pro-European politicians, independent media, and anti-corruption advocates are frequently targeted to block progress and maintain the status quo favorable to foreign interests.

## IMPACT

The instrumentalisation of corruption and kleptocratic interests in the Republic of Moldova poses a significant threat to the country's national security, with the following consequences:

- **Election fraud through passive corruption**, receiving money to support a particular candidate, the General Police Inspectorate has announced that around 140,000 people will be prosecuted under the Contravention Code, with fines of up to 37,000 lei. The cost of corrupting voters is estimated at \$39 million<sup>[96]</sup>. In the last year alone, criminals from the Shor criminal organization have changed at least 5,6 forms of financing in the republic.
- **Stimulating political instability by using corruption** to influence political decisions and co-opt political actors leads to political instability and can undermine the legitimacy of the democratic institutions of the Republic of Moldova. Persistent instability undermines the Republic of Moldova's aspirations for European integration, leaving it vulnerable to further external manipulation. In addition, the 2024 SIS Report indicates increased risks of economic sabotage and energy manipulation as direct instruments of destabilisation.
- **Causing economic damage by using corruption** to undermine Moldova's economy can lead to economic decline, job losses, and increased poverty, which can ultimately affect national security.
- **The instrumentalisation of corruption erodes public trust** and undermines the country's ability to build a democratic and prosperous society.
- **A corrupt legal system perpetuates impunity**, discourages international investors, and fosters a climate of insecurity.

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[96]Şeful Poliţiei, Viorel Cernăuţeanu: „Vorbim despre peste 39 de milioane de dolari pentru coruperea alegătorilor”. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-justitie/video-seful-politiei-viorel-cernauteanu-vorbim-despre-pest-39-de-milioane-de-dolari-pentru-coruperea-alegatorilor/>

Law enforcement agencies have documented and confirmed activities aimed at identifying, corrupting, and illegally financing a large number of socio-political structures in the Republic of Moldova, regardless of their political orientation or ideology. The activities identified undermine democratic values and processes, manifesting themselves in corrupting political and opinion leaders, civil society representatives, the media, and citizens. The aim is to distort and influence the electoral process, undermining the constitutional order in the Republic of Moldova.

The instrumentalisation of corruption as part of hybrid warfare has led to protests and attempts at destabilisation by fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, with Russia's support against the government. Over several months, the Russian Federation has used the Party of Socialists and the Shor Party to implement its push-pull coercion strategy. This strategy has turned corruption into a central tool for political pressure, social destabilization, and maintaining external influence over the Republic of Moldova.

Society's trust in the authorities is based on the belief that officials act in the public interest and protect institutional integrity. This requires identifying and eliminating corruption risks, enforcing accountability, and applying sanctions for violations of standards.

## COUNTERMEASURES

*"Victorious warriors win first and then go to battle; defeated warriors fight first and then seek victory." (Sun Tzu, "The Art of War")*

The Republic of Moldova launched a comprehensive anti-corruption reform in 2019. Part of this reform consists of a vetting process for judges and prosecutors. The reform began in 2022 with the examination of candidates for the self-governing bodies of judges and prosecutors. The assessment of candidates for membership of the self-governing bodies of judges (CSM) and prosecutors (SCP) involves checking their financial and ethical integrity, carried out on the basis of Law No. 26/2022. This mechanism has been positively assessed by the Venice Commission<sup>[97]</sup>. This stage is not just a technical measure to clean up the system, but a strategic step in strengthening the rule of law and eliminating corrupt networks that can support authoritarian practices.

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[97] Avizul nr. 1069 / 2021 al Comisiei de la Venetia.

In the context of the research, this argument illustrates the direct link between reducing corruption in the justice system and the overall objective of the paper: increasing the democratic resilience of the Republic of Moldova and reducing its vulnerability to external hybrid influences.

In this regard, operational measures were taken against the Shor group's illicit financial schemes. The SIS requested the National Bank of Moldova and the Money Laundering Prevention and Combating Service to take action against cards issued to intermediaries and Transnistrian citizens, used in the Shor group's financing schemes. The institutions organized joint meetings with commercial banks to identify deficiencies and apply corrective measures. These actions demonstrate the need for proactive institutional cooperation to block the financial mechanisms that fuel criminal networks and reduce the State's economic vulnerability to corrupt influence.

The SIS monitored and reported on attempts by the Russian Federation to influence electoral processes, including the use of financial and human resources to manipulate elections. Preventive actions, such as denying access to "observers" suspected of links to Russian services, demonstrate an effective response.

## SCENARIOS

### **Scenario 1. Anti-corruption reforms continue and largely neutralize hybrid tactics**

In this scenario, Moldova manages to effectively apply the mechanisms introduced through judicial reform and the strengthening of the electoral framework, reducing the room for maneuver for pro-Russian actors.

#### **Features invisible to the general public:**

Electoral corruption does not disappear, but the logistical costs and risks for financing networks increase exponentially, which discourages Moscow's direct involvement. The local infrastructure used for vote buying and organized transportation of voters becomes fragmented, reducing the capacity for mass mobilization in favor of pro-Russian blocs. In addition, countermeasures by the SIS and CEC, including the exclusion of parties involved in illegal financing, may create a deterrent effect before election day.

#### **Pre/post-election risks:**

In the pre-election period, the volume of disinformation operations online and in

Moscow-affiliated media increases to compensate for the lack of direct influence through electoral bribery. After the election, there is a risk of contesting the results through litigation and coordinated protests, attempting to erode confidence in the electoral process.

### **Scenario 2. Stagnation of reforms and adaptation of Russian tactics**

Corrupt internal networks maintain their influence, and institutional control mechanisms fail to block opaque financial flows. Russia capitalises on the lack of response from institutions.

#### **Features invisible to the general public:**

Pro-Russian actors may use "civic" NGO structures as a front for electoral financing, avoiding direct detection by the CEC. The amount of cash payments and prepaid cards issued for intermediaries in Transnistria increases, making them difficult to track before the elections. Infiltration of local electoral commissions also allows for the manipulation of counting and validation processes.

#### **Pre/post-election risks:**

In the pre-election period, tactics include expanding vote-buying campaigns and manipulating the media agenda in the final weeks of the campaign. After the election, there is a risk of blocking the coalition-building process by corrupting newly elected MPs, steering the majority towards pro-Russian positions.

### **Scenario 3. Geopolitical reorientation and consolidation of Russian influence**

The failure of reforms and an election campaign marked by massive interference lead to a favorable outcome for pro-Russian forces. Corruption becomes the main channel through which Moscow dictates domestic policy.

#### **Features invisible to the general public:**

After obtaining a parliamentary majority, pro-Russian vectors can revise anti-corruption legislation to neutralize investigative tools, consolidating a hybrid regime. A legal "protective cordon" is created for actors involved in illegal financing, including through control of the prosecutor's office. At the same time, informal negotiations are taking place on the concession of strategic economic and energy sectors to companies close to the Kremlin.

#### **Pre/post-election risks:**

Before the election, there is massive infiltration of the information space with messages that normalize dependence on Russia. After the election, foreign policy is quickly aligned with Moscow's interests, and democratic standards decline, with the risk of international sanctions.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis presented has shown that corruption in the Republic of Moldova is not an isolated phenomenon, but a structural mechanism that influences the distribution of power, the functioning of institutions, and the strategic direction of the state. International comparative data confirm a direct correlation between the level of corruption, the quality of the democratic regime, and the vulnerability to external influences. The case study of Moldova shows an improvement in CPI indicators and institutional transparency, but critical areas remain—judicial independence, press freedom, and institutional capture—which limit structural progress.

### Key findings:

- Corruption is deliberately used by the Russian Federation as a hybrid warfare tool to undermine pro-European forces and maintain influence in the Republic of Moldova.
- Internal corrupt networks, connected to external actors, have involved politicians, businesses, the media, and religious structures, functioning as vectors of destabilization and blocking reforms.
- Russian diplomatic infrastructure in the Republic of Moldova can be used for the logistical, financial, and informational coordination of these operations.
- Anti-corruption countermeasures (vetting, financial measures, SIS and CEC actions) have demonstrated their ability to reduce the effectiveness of hybrid tactics, but are still vulnerable to adaptation by illicit networks.

These findings confirm the central hypothesis of the research: reducing corruption is not only an administrative priority, but a strategic condition for strengthening democratic resilience and reducing geopolitical dependence. Justice reform, electoral integrity, and blocking illicit financial flows are key factors in limiting the risks of subversion and strengthening the rule of law.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Permanent **institutionalisation** of vetting and its extension to executive and legislative positions with major decision-making powers.
- **Strengthening** the legal and operational framework for tracking suspicious financial flows, including those carried out through intermediaries and entities in separatist regions.
- **Strengthening** electoral resilience through mechanisms for the rapid detection and punishment of vote buying and illegal campaign financing.
- **Increasing** the capacity for media counter-influence to neutralize coordinated disinformation and propaganda campaigns from abroad.

## V. THE PERMANENT CRISIS: HYBRID BLACKMAIL AND THE ENERGY DEPENDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

Throughout its independence, the Republic of Moldova has faced multiple hybrid challenges and threats to its energy security, which has posed a significant risk by attempting to destabilize the national energy sector, influence decision-making, and, in certain situations, exercise indirect control over critical infrastructure. The wide range of threats was determined by the presence of several vulnerabilities in the national energy system, such as:

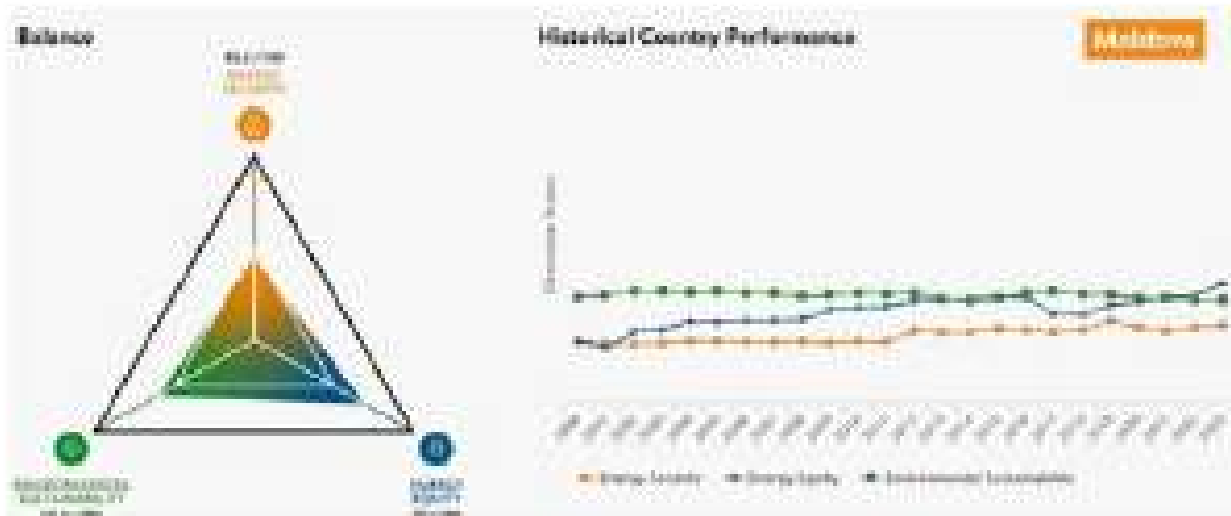
- total dependence on hydrocarbon imports;
- the excessive share of hydrocarbons in the national energy mix;
- insufficient local electricity generation capacity;
- insufficient interconnections between the national power system and neighboring countries;
- lack of significant energy storage capacity;
- low flexibility of the national power system;
- advanced attrition of energy infrastructure;
- insufficient development of the local energy market;
- excessive dependence on a single source of electricity generation.

The large number of vulnerabilities places the Republic of Moldova among the countries with the lowest level of energy security both regionally and globally. According to the Energy Trilemma Index, estimated by the World Energy Council, Moldova ranks 71st globally and among the lowest in the region in terms of energy security, scoring only 45.2 points out of 100 <sup>[98]</sup>.

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[98]World Energy Trilemma. World Energy Council. [90] A se vedea: D.C. North. Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; D. Acemoglu, J. A. Robinson. Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012

Fig. 1. Moldova's performance on the energy trilemma (2000-2023)



Source: World Energy Trilemma Index 2024

The score of 45.2/100 reflects not only an unbalanced performance in the three fundamental dimensions of the energy trilemma: energy security, energy equity, and environmental sustainability, but also a vulnerability of national security in a regional context marked by geopolitical tensions and hybrid threats. At the same time, the high level of vulnerability favors the intensification of these threats, providing actors involved in hybrid attacks with additional opportunities to expand their influence and compromise the country's energy security.

For a comprehensive analysis of hybrid threats to energy security, it is important to also examine the risk factors that contribute to increased security vulnerabilities: (-) the war in Ukraine, (-) separatism in the Transnistrian region, and more recently, (-) the isolationist policy and trade war triggered by the new US presidential administration. For example, the Russian Federation's attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure have reduced the possibility of storing natural gas in Ukraine's underground storage facilities, as well as the possibility of electricity deliveries from that country.

The absence of constitutional control over the territory on the left bank of the Dniester, where the main sources of electricity generation and some critical interconnections of the national power system are currently located, continues to keep the country's energy system in a vulnerable state. The isolationist policy of the new US presidential administrations has already resulted in the suspension of funding for several projects critical to Moldova's energy security, such as the construction of the 400 kV Strășeni-Gutinaș power line and the installation of

electricity generation and storage capacities in batteries. The new administration is continuing the policy of reducing contributions to the budgets of other international institutions. This would diminish external financial assistance and jeopardise other energy infrastructure projects planned for implementation in the Republic of Moldova.

## ACTORS

The state actor generating hybrid attacks from outside the country against the energy security of the Republic of Moldova is the Russian Federation. The attacks are carried out directly, through the Embassy of the Russian Federation <sup>[99]</sup> in the Republic of Moldova and other Russian state-owned companies, or indirectly, through attacks on the Ukrainian energy system, which is closely interconnected with that of the Republic of Moldova. The Russian Federation also hosts on its territory, or tacitly supports, political actors and opinion leaders from the Republic of Moldova who promote disinformation campaigns and populist messages about the possibility of supplying energy resources at low cost from the Russian Federation.

The category of non-state actors includes local political actors (e.g., supporters of fugitive Ilan Shor have made empty promises about the delivery of "cheap" gas to the north of the country in 2022 and gas at a "special price" for Gagauzia in 2023), opinion leaders <sup>[100]</sup>, media channels, content creators on social networks, local private companies <sup>[101]</sup>, operating in the energy sector. The Transnistrian region plays a distinct role in carrying out hybrid attacks on the country's energy security. By its very nature, the Transnistrian region is a risk factor with multiple effects not only on the country's energy security, but also on national security as a whole.

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[99] NOTE: For example, on January 6, 2025, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chisinau summoned a representative of the Russian Embassy in connection with the spread of false information about the energy situation in the Republic of Moldova after the expiration of an agreement for the transit of Russian gas. The Embassy of the Russian Federation issued a statement expressing its "concern about the rapid deterioration of the situation in Transnistria," promoting falsehoods that Kiev is responsible for stopping "the transit of Russian gas during the winter, thus condemning the population of Transnistria to suffering..." but also noting that "the situation on the left bank was artificially created by the collective West and Ukraine." See: Statement by the Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova on the situation in Transnistria.

[https://moldova.mid.ru/ru/news/press-center/zavavlenie\\_posolstva\\_rossiyskoy\\_federatsii\\_v\\_respublike/](https://moldova.mid.ru/ru/news/press-center/zavavlenie_posolstva_rossiyskoy_federatsii_v_respublike/); Response from the Russian Embassy regarding companies supplying gas to Moldova. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0x90cic-4Q>.

[100] NOTE: For example, Igor Dodon, former president, consistently supports the Kremlin's narratives about "cheaper Russian gas" and "the current pro-European government's betrayal of national interests"; Dodon criticizes the government for giving up Russian gas: "Moldovans are paying the price for geopolitics" (2023); Dodon claims that the debt to Gazprom was incurred during pro-European governments (December 2024). Ion Chicu, former prime minister – appears in public statements and broadcasts where he blames the government's decisions on energy diversification, suggesting that Moldova could have continued to rely on Russian gas; Chicu: "Gas from Gazprom was cheaper, the government is destroying the economy" (2022).

[101] NOTE: e.g. Nordgaz Furnizare SRL had its license suspended by ANRE on December 22, 2023, because it did not yet have any gas injected or reserved in the national natural gas system, but the company began unauthorized delivery of natural gas to its consumers, extracting volumes from the Moldovan gas system. By doing so, the company flagrantly violated the provisions of the Natural Gas Market Rules, approved by ANRE Decision No. 534/2019, and the Law on Natural Gas.

It should be noted that, **for the actors involved in carrying out hybrid attacks, undermining the energy security of the Republic of Moldova is not an end in itself, but rather a means of damaging the country's overall security and keeping the Republic of Moldova within the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation.**

## TACTICS

The actors involved in undermining the energy security of the Republic of Moldova resort to a wide range of hybrid tools and tactics, strategically exploiting the existing vulnerabilities of the national energy system, such as:

- economic and financial methods - manipulating energy prices, blocking access to energy markets, acquiring/controlling critical energy infrastructure;
- disinformation and information manipulation regarding the safety of certain energy sources, such as renewable energy sources or nuclear energy, or regarding the affordability of energy sources from the Russian Federation and member countries of the Eurasian Union;
- geopolitical pressure by reducing or even stopping natural gas supplies; imposing political conditions in exchange for natural gas supplies;
- corrupting and infiltrating loyal political actors and opinion makers to steer the country's energy policies in Moscow's favor;
- exploiting political and social divisions by supporting separatism - supplying the Transnistrian region with natural gas almost free of charge by the Russian Federation for three decades, which represents the most extensive and serious hybrid attack on the national security of the Republic of Moldova.

A distinct method of disrupting the stability of Moldova's energy system involves systematic attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure near the border with Moldova, including attacks on natural gas storage infrastructure in western Ukraine. These attacks have increased the vulnerability of the Moldovan energy system, which has many interconnections with the Ukrainian energy system.

Until recently, *energy blackmail* against Chisinau was an effective tool of geopolitical coercion used by Moscow, combining economic pressure, structural vulnerabilities of the energy system, and market manipulation tactics to influence Moldova's political decisions and external orientation.



Table 1 reflects the fact that the Russian Federation's tactics have evolved from direct coercion (clearly politically motivated interruptions) to more discreet market manipulation, generating both political and economic destabilization and legal challenges in defining the line between commercial practice and geopolitical aggression. This has prompted proactive strategic responses from both vulnerable states and the EU through diversification, contractual transparency, and effective regional cooperation.

Table 2 summarises the main hybrid attacks on the energy security of the Republic of Moldova in recent years. It highlights not only the nature and source of these attacks, but also their major impact on the functioning of the national energy system, including resource supply, critical infrastructure and decision-making. At the same time, the table includes the measures taken by national authorities to counter these threats, illustrating both immediate responses and medium-term actions aimed at reducing vulnerabilities and strengthening the country's energy security in the context of growing hybrid threats.

Table 2. Hybrid attacks, impact, and countermeasures

Hybrid attacks	Impact	Countermeasures
<p>Subsidizing the Transnistrian region with free natural gas from the Russian Federation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintaining the country's electricity system's dependence on power generation sources in the Transnistrian region;</li> <li>Undermining investments in the modernization of energy infrastructure on the right bank of the Dniester;</li> <li>Undermining the economic activity of enterprises on the right bank of the Dniester;</li> <li>Corruption of decision-makers and politics [103];</li> <li>Maintaining the separatist regime in the Transnistrian region in power;</li> <li>Systemic impact on national security.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of interconnections and diversification of natural gas and electricity supply sources;</li> <li>Cessation of direct purchases of natural gas from the Russian Federation for consumers on the right bank of the Nistru River;</li> <li>Cessation of electricity purchases from the Transnistrian region;</li> <li>Developing energy generation capacities on the right bank of the Dniester;</li> <li>Introduction of customs and environmental taxes for enterprises on the left bank of the Nistru;</li> <li>Facilitation of access for enterprises in the Transnistrian region to European natural gas markets through S.A. "Moldovogaz."</li> </ul>
<p>Revision of the terms of natural gas supply by Gazprom in the fall of 2021.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Triggering an energy crisis and increasing energy prices for end consumers;</li> <li>Triggering inflationary pressures on the national economy;</li> <li>Triggering a socio-economic crisis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of alternative natural gas import routes (Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline);</li> <li>Accessing alternative sources of natural gas and electricity imports;</li> <li>Use of alternative energy resources (fuel oil) for thermal and electrical energy generation;</li> <li>Establishment of a mechanism to compensate for energy costs.</li> </ul>
<p>The unilateral decision to reduce the volumes of natural gas delivered by Gazprom in the fall of 2022.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Temporary suspension of electricity purchases from MGRES;</li> <li>Triggering an energy crisis and increasing energy prices for end consumers;</li> <li>Triggering inflationary pressures on the national economy.</li> <li>Triggering a socio-economic crisis;</li> <li>Triggering of a political crisis and resignation of the Gavriliță Government.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in electricity purchases from Romania;</li> <li>Strengthening the regulatory framework for energy crisis management;</li> <li>Development of the mechanism for purchasing energy on international markets;</li> <li>Creation of natural gas stocks in neighboring countries (security stocks and reserve stocks);</li> <li>Acceleration of the implementation process for energy infrastructure projects.</li> </ul>

[103] NOTE: For example, the case of Vlad Plahotniuc also refers to corruption, being linked to the import of electricity from Transnistria. Context: Between 2016 and 2019, the Republic of Moldova imported a significant amount of electricity from Cucuruzari power plant (Transnistrian region) through offshore intermediary companies. Corrupt mechanism: The company "EnergoKapital" (registered in Gibraltar) acted as an intermediary between the Transnistrian supplier and Moldovenergo, and the price difference was redirected as profit to individuals close to former political leader Vlad Plahotniuc. It is estimated that hundreds of millions of lei were siphoned off in this way. In this context, a case was reported in the press in 2018-2019, referring to a corrupt official caught at the border with Ukraine, carrying a "special" phone which was used to receive direct instructions from Plahotniuc or his intermediaries. The official was involved in gas and energy import schemes.

Hybrid attacks	Impact	Countermeasures
<p><b>Attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instability and grid failure of the national power system;</li> <li>• Impossibility of purchasing electricity from Ukraine;</li> <li>• Increased purchases of electricity on the free market at higher costs;</li> <li>• Maintaining high prices for energy sources;</li> <li>• Maintaining the dependence of the national power system on electricity supplies from the Transnistrian region.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased imports of electricity from Romania and other European countries;</li> <li>• Increasing the share of security and reserve stocks of natural gas in Romanian storage facilities;</li> <li>• Accelerating the process of integration with the European energy market;</li> <li>• Facilitating investments and increasing local generation capacities from RES sources;</li> <li>• Mobilising external funds to launch national projects for generating energy from flexible sources.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Campaigns to misinform the public about more advantageous possibilities for importing energy resources from the Russian Federation.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public distrust of government policies aimed at increasing the resilience of the country's energy system;</li> <li>• Decreased social and political cohesion in society;</li> <li>• Negative impact on the results of the referendum on Moldova's accession to the EU.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening the regulatory framework on information security;</li> <li>• Creation of the Strategic Communication Center and combating disinformation;</li> <li>• Actions to counter sources of disinformation, including the suspension of broadcasting licenses for some media and mass communication outlets;</li> <li>• Implementation of an objective information campaign for the population;</li> <li>• Enhancing international cooperation on combating disinformation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Obstacles in the activity of some strategic enterprises in the energy sector SA "Moldovagaz", including alleged historical debts.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delays in the process of confirming the Coordinating Council of SA "Moldovagaz";</li> <li>• Delays in natural gas purchases and the formation of reserve stocks at favorable prices;</li> <li>• Increase in energy prices;</li> <li>• Resignation of decision-makers responsible for managing the energy sector in the Republic of Moldova;</li> <li>• The outbreak of political crises.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of the third energy package, including the separation of natural gas transmission, distribution, and supply activities;</li> <li>• Conducting an international audit of the alleged debts of SA "Moldovagaz";</li> <li>• Initiation of steps to nationalize SA Moldovagaz;</li> <li>• Liberalization of the gas market for large consumers and reduction of dependence on a single supplier;</li> <li>• Establishing a mechanism to compensate energy costs for businesses.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cessation of natural gas supplies to the Transnistrian region, January 2025.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triggering of an energy crisis in the Republic of Moldova;</li> <li>• Amplification of the vulnerabilities of the national energy system;</li> <li>• The onset of a major socio-economic crisis in the Transnistrian region;</li> <li>• Rising electricity and natural gas prices;</li> <li>• Potential impact on the parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova in the fall of 2025.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declaration of a state of emergency in the Republic of Moldova;</li> <li>• Approval of the new Regulation on emergency situations in the electricity sector and the related Action Plan;</li> <li>• Approval of the Action Plan to ensure the energy independence of the Republic of Moldova;</li> <li>• Mobilization of international financial support for the supply of natural gas to the Transnistrian region;</li> <li>• Use of the alternative natural gas transport route "Trans-Balkan Corridor" to supply the Transnistrian region;</li> <li>• Increasing electricity imports from Romania;</li> <li>• Reactivation of the energy cost compensation mechanism.</li> </ul>

## SCENARIOS

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has taken several actions aimed at reducing the vulnerability of the energy system and increasing its resilience to possible threats and hybrid attacks. These measures have focused on strengthening the regulatory framework for energy and security, developing energy infrastructure and diversifying energy supply sources, implementing energy efficiency measures and developing a competitive energy market, enhancing cybersecurity and combating disinformation, etc. However, a number of risks and threats remain, and the scale and probability of their occurrence are closely linked to the vulnerability of the security system, the actual capacity to counter hybrid threats, and the continued presence of risk factors. Managing these elements allows us to model multiple scenarios regarding potential risks and threats to the energy security of the Republic of Moldova. Below, we will analyze two basic scenarios—one pessimistic and one optimistic.

**The optimistic scenario** would involve the elimination of the most important risk factor contributing to the amplification of existing vulnerabilities in the national energy system—the armed conflict in Ukraine. Ending the military conflict triggered by the Russian Federation against Ukraine would provide the conditions for stabilizing energy prices in the region and securing electricity supplies, thanks to the possibility of diversifying import sources (including from Ukraine) and making the most of existing interconnections and ENTSO-E membership (European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity). The opportunity to create secure reserve stocks at more advantageous prices in Ukrainian storage facilities would also secure the supply of natural gas to the Republic of Moldova, which could also contribute to lowering prices for end consumers. Natural gas continues to play an essential role in electricity generation in the Republic of Moldova, accounting for about 75% of the total.

At the same time, the end of the armed conflict in Ukraine offers no certainty that hybrid attacks by the Russian Federation will diminish. The Russian Federation's exploitation of the Transnistrian risk factor remains highly probable, especially in the context of an election year. Even though, starting in January 2025, we no longer purchase electricity from MGRES, the national energy system remains dependent on the Cuciurgan energy hub until the new 400 kV Vulcănești-Chișinău power line is put into operation, and this continues to pose a risk and a potential threat to the country's energy security.

**The pessimistic scenario** would involve the perpetuation of the main existing risk factors, namely: the continuation of the armed conflict in Ukraine and the destruction of Ukrainian energy infrastructure, the reduction of external financial support for energy projects as a result of the Trump administration's isolationist policy, and the deepening of the social. This situation would continue to maintain certain vulnerabilities in the energy system, as well as the scale of hybrid threats to energy security. However, thanks to the measures taken in recent years to increase the resilience of the national energy system, an energy collapse could be avoided.

However, thanks to the measures taken in recent years to increase the resilience of the national energy system, an energy collapse could be avoided. At the same time, it will be very difficult to maintain or reduce energy prices. As a result, the national economy will face new inflationary pressures, with the risk of stagnation or even economic recession. The economic crisis will lead to a deterioration in living conditions for the population and an increase in the number of Eurosceptics among voters. This situation would create the conditions for an increase in hybrid attacks, generated both from outside and inside the country, especially as disinformation campaigns. The target of these hybrid attacks will be to manipulate the results of the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025 and bring pro-Russian parties back to power. The ultimate goal of these actions is to undermine the pro-European course of the Republic of Moldova and bring the country back under the control of the Russian Federation.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to mitigate potential risks, vulnerabilities, and hybrid threats to the country's energy security, several actions need to be implemented. This process requires further analysis, but in the short term and as a matter of urgency, the Republic of Moldova must:

- complete the construction of the 400 kV Vulcănești-Chișinău power line no later than the end of 2025. The implementation of this infrastructure project will eliminate potential blackmail by the Tiraspol regime, which currently has the technical capability to disconnect the only power interconnection line between the Republic of Moldova and Romania;
- develop flexible local electricity generation capacities that would cover at least the base load of approximately 200-250 MWh (approximately 20-25% of the country's maximum consumption), which is strictly necessary to maintain the stability of the entire power system and ensure the proper functioning of the country's critical infrastructure;
- to implement the second connection with Romania - LEA 400 kV Suceava-Bălți no later than the end of 2027. This project would strengthen the country's electricity supply security, which cannot be fully ensured if we depend solely on a single interconnection with Romania (400 kV Vulcănești-Chișinău), especially when this interconnection line also crosses a portion of Ukrainian territory, a country currently at war with the Russian Federation;
- to reduce the share of imported hydrocarbons in the energy mix by increasing local generation capacities from renewable energy sources (RES), biomass, and electricity and thermal energy storage. To this end, the Republic of Moldova must ensure that it achieves the strategic objective it has committed to with the Energy Community, namely a minimum of 27% of energy from RES in final consumption by 2030;
- accelerate the pace and scale of implementation of energy efficiency projects in the public and residential sectors that would optimize energy consumption at the national level. According to the National Public Building Rehabilitation Program (2024-2026), the target is set at a minimum of 3% of the total area of public buildings per year. Similar investments targeted at the residential sector through the Residential Energy Efficiency Fund (FEERM) allow for the annual rehabilitation of less than 0.5% of the total floor area. This pace of rehabilitation needs to be accelerated;
- ensure security and reserve stocks of natural gas (15% of total consumption) by the start of the heating season;

- adopt the necessary regulatory framework and create stocks of petroleum products. In this regard, the Republic of Moldova is falling short of expectations;
- Adopt the Energy Strategy 2050 and the Digital Transformation Strategy in the energy sector, which also incorporates components related to the cybersecurity of the energy sector.
- ensure that the withdrawal of US funds is fully replaced by funds from other financial institutions in order to continue energy infrastructure projects. Potential donors that could take over support for projects left without funding are the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank, and other international financial institutions;
- to streamline actions to combat disinformation and provide objective information to citizens about the situation in the energy sector.

The above helps us to understand the complex and multidimensional nature of hybrid attacks on the energy security of the Republic of Moldova. These attacks are not only aimed at disrupting the technical functioning of the energy system, but also have a profound impact on the economic, social, and political stability of the State. The consequences range from destabilizing the Transnistrian region to influencing election results and undermining the country's pro-European orientation.

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has begun to adopt a coherent set of political, technical, regulatory, and informational response measures that outline a process of strategic adaptation and strengthening of energy resilience. However, the authorities' reactions are often reactive, fragmented, and sometimes delayed in relation to the dynamics and versatility of hybrid attacks.

Therefore, an integrated and proactive approach is needed, combining infrastructure modernization, diversification of energy sources, strengthening the information security, and fortification of institutional capacities in order to effectively neutralize hybrid threats and strengthen the country's energy security.

## VI. DEFENSE IN THE GRAY ZONE: HYBRID PRESSURES ON THE MILITARY SECTOR

### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

Since declaring independence, the Republic of Moldova has faced a latent military threat, constantly generated by the Russian Federation. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 unequivocally confirmed Moscow's real intentions and demonstrated that the methods used against the Republic of Moldova are part of a regional expansion strategy that has been prepared and implemented for decades. Initially, this strategy aimed to block Chisinau's rapprochement with the Euro-Atlantic space, with the long-term goal of either eventual annexation or reintegration into a Soviet-style system.

The Russian Federation implemented a gradual and complex strategy to weaken the defense capabilities of the Republic of Moldova, using hybrid tactics designed to keep the state in a gray zone of insecurity. This strategy is not limited to conventional or overt actions, but is based on a combination of subtle measures implemented by proxy actors or the governments of the time, including: **(-) undermining the training and cohesion of the armed forces:** by influencing recruitment, training, and resource allocation processes, favoring stagnation and demotivation among military personnel; **(-) insufficient defense budget:** maintained at levels below the regional average, which limits the capacity for modernization and maintenance of equipment<sup>[104]</sup>; **(-) outdated military infrastructure:** with equipment inherited from the Soviet period and no coherent replacement plan; **(-) strategic dependence:** lack of a national defense doctrine adapted to new security realities and solid international partnerships.

The military dimension is a central element of the instruments for exercising a State's interests, alongside diplomacy, economy, and information<sup>[105]</sup>

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[104] NOTĂ: Începând cu anii '90, bugetul alocat sistemului militar și apărării a fost redus sistematic până la minimul istoric de sub 0,3% din PIB. Această alocare este foarte redusă, chiar și în comparație cu statele care își distribuie cheltuielile de apărare, cu atât mai mult față de cele cu statut de neutralitate. (Orbán Tamás, "Military modernisation in the Republic of Moldova (post-1991)", Danube Institute, 2022. [https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/military-modernisation-in-the-republic-of-moldova-post-1991?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/military-modernisation-in-the-republic-of-moldova-post-1991?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

[105] Joint Doctrine Note 1-18: Strategy – Defines the DIME model and the role of military power in achieving national security objectives. Joint Chiefs of Staff (2020). [https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jdn1\\_18.pdf](https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jdn1_18.pdf)

The deliberate weakening of this pillar has left the Republic of Moldova in a state of critical vulnerability, with the inability to develop a functional defense sector affecting the effectiveness of all other strategic areas.

The forms of military threat to the Republic of Moldova highlight its hybrid, gradual, and persistent nature, specific to a strategy aimed at destabilizing without triggering a direct confrontation. The Kremlin regime resorts to a wide range of tactics—from information manipulation and economic pressure to direct interference in the political and military space of the Republic of Moldova. Over time, these actions have intensified and gone beyond the classic framework of unconventional conflicts, culminating in the illegitimate Russian military presence on national territory and the illegal recruitment of residents of the Transnistrian region into the Russian Federation's army<sup>[106]</sup>.

The gravity of the situation is amplified by the fact that the Russian Federation, after being a belligerent party in the armed conflict in the Transnistrian region, subsequently assumed the role of mediator in the settlement process. This self-proclaimed mediator status is deeply problematic, undermining the principles of impartiality and international legality and giving Moscow disproportionate influence over the negotiations and resolution of the conflict. As a result, Moscow has managed to keep the Republic of Moldova in a state of strategic vulnerability, unable to adopt independent security and development policies. The inaction or lack of awareness of the danger on the part of the Moldovan authorities has been a key factor in the success of this strategy, allowing the Russian Federation to exercise multidimensional control over the Republic of Moldova<sup>[107]</sup>.

The existence of such techniques on the part of Moscow was amplified by the absence of a clear strategic vision for ensuring the security and military defense of the Republic of Moldova, especially in the context of a dysfunctional neutrality and a lack of clearly expressed interest in joining NATO. However, with the Russian Federation's military invasion of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova has been forced to deal with both direct and indirect threats, including the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, refugee flows, economic pressures, and information risks. These situations have revealed institutional vulnerabilities and a possible lack of preparedness in the face of complex hybrid challenges.

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[106] Drepturile omului în regiunea transnistreană a Republicii Moldova, Raporte pentru anii 2021, 2022, 2023. [https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RAPORT\\_DORT\\_RO\\_2023-1.pdf](https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RAPORT_DORT_RO_2023-1.pdf)

[107] G. Giannopoulos [et al.]. The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model(Public Version). Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg: 2021, p. 20.

The government had to develop and adjust its approaches in real time, based on lessons learned from recent experiences, taking certain risks or becoming the target of hybrid attacks, especially when decisions were made without sufficient strategic analysis or resources. Along the way, response processes have improved, and the government has moved on to medium- and long-term measures, with support from the European Union (EU), EU member states, and NATO.

The European Union has actively contributed to strengthening the security and defense sector of the Republic of Moldova, with some progress being made under the European Peace Facility. However, the European Commission's 2022 Report<sup>[108]</sup> highlights that there are significant capacity challenges (shortcomings in infrastructure, human capital, and results in terms of reforms and modernization are highlighted). At the same time, dependence on external support highlights a reduced capacity for autonomy in the security sector<sup>109]</sup>.

In this context, it should be noted that countering hybrid threats is becoming a topical issue as a priority in terms of defense in the process of Moldova's accession to the EU. Strategic defense planning documents needed to be revised, including in light of hybrid threats.

## ACTORS

The hybrid military threat involves a complex network of actors acting in a coordinated manner on multiple levels:

- The Russian political establishment, led by Vladimir Putin, which defines the strategic directions of influence over the Republic of Moldova.
- Pro-Russian individuals and national political entities, used as instruments of internal influence.
- Russian foreign intelligence services, actively involved in subversion, disinformation, and destabilization operations.
- The forces of the Russian Operational Group of Forces (GOTR) and the Russian "peacekeeping" contingent, maintained as an instrument of permanent military pressure and diversion of Chisinau's development vector.

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[108] Primul Raport al Comisiei Europene a fost publicat în 8 Noiembrie 2023. [1] Drepturile omului în regiunea transnistreană a Republicii Moldova, Raporte pentru anii 2021, 2022, 2023. [https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RAPORT\\_DORT\\_RO\\_2023-1.pdf](https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RAPORT_DORT_RO_2023-1.pdf)

[109] G. Giannopoulos [et al.], The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model (Public Version), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg: 2021, p. 20.

[2] N. Albu, N. Arnăuț, S. Bozeanu. Guvernarea sectorului de securitate în Moldova: Raport independent. Chișinău: CEP UPSC, 2024, p. 46.

- The separatist regime in Tiraspol, completely subordinated to Moscow and used as an outpost for the projection of Russian military (and other) efforts.
- Paramilitary groups/private security structures, which train Moldovan citizens to organize mass destabilization activities.
- Media and online platforms used to spread disinformation and shape public opinion in a manner favorable to the Kremlin.
- NGOs and foundations with hidden agendas, which act as proxies for promoting Russian interests, including military ones.
- The Orthodox Church subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate, used to promote anti-Western messages.
- The Moldovan diaspora influenced by Russian propaganda, used as a vector of influence and destabilisation in the country's information space.

## TARGETS

- The military and defense system of the Republic of Moldova, undermined by propaganda, underfunding, and the narrative of imposed neutrality.
- The government and policymakers being either influenced and corrupted to block the development of defense capabilities or attacked and denigrated if they do not align with Moscow's policy.
- Moldovan society manipulated into passively accepting Russian influence and rejecting pro-Western orientation.
- The economic sector, energy sector, and critical infrastructure, being targeted to maintain dependence on Russia and discourage market diversification and Western investment.
- The information space and media exploited to weaken public confidence in national institutions, including security and defense institutions.
- National and cultural identity eroded by pro-Kremlin religious and cultural propaganda.
- The Moldovan diaspora used as a vector of geopolitical influence.
- The Transnistrian region and Gagauzia used as bases for permanent destabilisation.
- The territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of the Republic of Moldova with Moscow's ultimate goal being to annex and bring it into Russian sphere of permanent influence.

## TACTICS AND IMPACT

The main military threats are generated by the presence of Russian Federation troops on the territory of the Republic of Moldova, regardless of their status (GOTR or Peacekeeping Forces), and the armed groups of the separatist regime – an existential challenge for the Republic of Moldova over the years. Moscow's strategic objective in maintaining these forces has been to consolidate its control over Chisinau and keep the Republic of Moldova within its sphere of influence.

Table 1 reflects the main military or quasi-military tactics used by the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova, particularly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Each line highlights a distinct tactic, its intended purpose, the specific means used, and the estimated impact on the national security of the Republic of Moldova.

**Table 1. Tactics used by the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova**

Tactic	Goal	Means used	Impact on the Republic of Moldova
<b>Demonstrations of force by the Russian Operational Group of Forces (ROGF) in the Security Zone</b>	Intimidation of Moldovan authorities and society	Military exercises with live ammunition, conducted regularly in the Security Zone	Defiance of sovereignty, psychological pressure, disruption of the so-called "pacification" process, increased tensions in the region
<b>Undermining the authority of the military and defense system of the Republic of Moldova</b>	Delegitimization of the country's defense capabilities	Propaganda, disinformation, blocking reform initiatives, promoting permanent neutrality and the uselessness of the National Army	Weakening confidence in the army, stagnation of modernization, vulnerability of the defense system
<b>Strengthening the military capabilities of the separatist regime in Tiraspol</b>	Increasing the combat capabilities of the separatist regime	Equipment, joint military exercises, forced recruitment of citizens.	Direct military threat to Chisinau, consolidation of Moscow's influence in the region
<b>Violations of the Republic of Moldova's airspace</b>	Testing of air defense, intimidation of Moldovan authorities and society	Launching missiles that fly over the Republic of Moldova, unauthorized drones, including drones that exploded on national territory	Exposure of the vulnerability of air defense, psychological pressure on the population, erosion of trust in security institutions

<b>Synergy between Russian and separatist troops</b>	Creation of a joint force, ready for aggressive actions	Joint exercises, operational integration, recruitment of Moldovan citizens from Transnistria	Strengthening of Moscow's control in the region, obstacle to the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, increased risks of destabilization
<b>Attempt to create a strategic corridor through Ukraine</b>	Ensuring land access to Transnistria	War in Ukraine, rhetoric of Russian officials, military planning	Risk of the conflict spreading to the Republic of Moldova, direct threat to the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova, indications of annexation intentions

Source: prepared by the author

The table highlights the following key aspects:

- **Diversity of means used** – from military applications with live ammunition to propaganda and airspace violations;
- **Strategic goals pursued** – intimidation and undermining of trust in institutions;
- **The degree of coordination** between the GOTR and the armed groups of the separatist regime in Tiraspol;
- **Direct implications for the sovereignty and security of the Republic of Moldova** – including the risk of the armed conflict spreading to the national territory.

The wide range of hybrid tactics applied by the Russian Federation combines direct military pressure with psychological, propaganda, and operational actions. These tactics are aimed not only at weakening the defensive capabilities of the Republic of Moldova, but also at inducing a chronic state of insecurity and strategic vulnerability.

The Russian Federation frequently uses the tactic of generating a sense of insecurity to destabilise target states by influencing public perceptions. This strategy aims to undermine public confidence in national authorities and their ability to ensure security and maintain internal stability <sup>[110]</sup>.

The *subject of war* is frequently used to fuel citizens' fears with the ultimate goal of undermining the population's trust in the government. A telling example of this manipulation was the approach to the issue of a possible nuclear accident in Zaporizhia: instead of focusing on the responsibility of the Russian Federation,

[110] A se vedea: Percepții publice asupra sistemului de securitate și apărare al Republicii Moldova. Studiu roneate în baza sondajului de opinie desfășurat în luna octombrie 2022. <https://pisa.md/publicatii/studii/>

instead of focusing on the responsibility of the Russian Federation, which controls the area and is militarizing the plant, the narrative is diverted towards discrediting the national authorities, accused of being unable to protect the population, including through the lack of civil protection shelters. Thus, the focus is deliberately shifted from the aggressor to the alleged failures of the state, reinforcing a climate of insecurity.

În this context, we cannot ignore the incidents involving Russian drones that have been detected on the territory of the Republic of Moldova as the war in Ukraine has progressed. Here we highlight in particular the issue that has sparked debate and raised many questions in the public sphere: the ability of the National Army's radars to detect such aircraft. The lack of communication with the population and of explicit information on this subject leads to multiple interpretations and inconsistencies or contradictions between the opinions of experts and representatives of state institutions<sup>[111]</sup>.

By repeatedly violating the airspace of the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation is deliberately seeking to test the protection, surveillance, and response capabilities of the national authorities, as clearly evidenced by the data presented in Table 1.

Map 1 illustrates the locations and trajectories of drones and missiles falling on the territory of the Republic of Moldova from October 2022 to February 2025. **The rate** of these drone crashes suggests that the risk to the Republic of Moldova was not episodic, but persistent and intermittent, with peaks correlated with air strike campaigns on Ukraine, highlighting **cross-border risks**.



The geographical distribution is also significant:

→**Northern area:** (-) Located near the northern cross-border corridor to the Chernivtsi region; (-) Relatively open terrain; trajectories following the border may accidentally deviate into the Republic of Moldova; (-) Early warning role: the first cases signaled the vulnerability of the country's airspace.

→**Central-Eastern Zone:** (-) Located near the sensitive political-military contact line : territories controlled by Chişinău vs. the Transnistrian region; (-) Possible interception/deviation trajectories from attacks launched against Ukrainian infrastructure in the East; (-) Chişinău: intrusion into a densely populated area, with political and civil security implications.

→**Southern area:** (-) In the strategic corridor between southern Bessarabia, the Black Sea, and Odessa; (-) The concentration of several incidents in short intervals suggests structural exposure: any massive wave of ammunition on southern Ukraine increases the likelihood of fragmentation on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

At the same time, **the possible consequences of the Russian Federation's attempt to create a strategic corridor to the Transnistrian region** must be taken into account. Essentially, these intentions aim at the annexation of the Republic of Moldova – the final stage of the Kremlin's strategy of progressive undermining through military threats. It should be recalled that the "Novorossiia Plan" also aimed to integrate the separatist region of Transnistria, along with other territories in southeastern Ukraine, such as Donetsk, Luhansk, Odessa, and Kharkiv, into a unified geopolitical space under the influence of the Russian Federation. This geopolitical vision had direct implications for the Republic of Moldova, as it would have led to its isolation from access to the Black Sea and strengthened Russia's presence on its eastern border, accentuating the State's security vulnerabilities.

Some sources and documents, which have accidentally become public, suggest that in Russian scenarios for regional expansion, the Republic of Moldova could have become a target for possible de facto annexation<sup>[112]</sup>. Therefore, the information that has appeared in the press, including the document attributed to the Russian services and dated July 2022, which details three specific scenarios for the destabilization and occupation of the Republic of Moldova, provides additional clues about the expansionist intentions of the Russian Federation in the region.

<sup>[112]</sup>Cele trei SCENARII pregătite de Rusia pentru a ATACA și ocupa R. Moldova: Document pregătit în iulie 2022. <https://www.ziarulnational.md/doc-cele-trei-scenarii-pregatite-de-rusia-pentru-a-ataca-si-ocupa-r-moldova-totul-a-fost-pregatit-in-iulie-2022/>

Although the authenticity and applicability of these plans require rigorous analysis, their mere existence in a strategic document reveals that the Republic of Moldova has been included in Moscow's geopolitical calculations, which requires a strengthening of defense capabilities and institutional resilience. It is conceivable that in the event of a swift victory for Moscow, Chisinau would face the imminent threat of a ground invasion. Even if this scenario did not materialize, the risk of aggression remains real, posing an existential threat to the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.

## **SOME RESPONSE MEASURES**

### **Institutionalization and consolidation of the strategic and operational framework in the field of national security and defense:**

- Developing and approving fundamental documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS);
- Preparation of sectoral documents: revision of the Military Strategy (new draft), with two draft laws currently awaiting approval: the Law on Crisis Management and the Law on National Airspace Security.

These provide a coherent framework for defense and security policies, clarifying strategic directions and instruments for ensuring national defense.

### **Paradigm shift in the approach to defense - doctrinal and institutional adaptation to new forms of conflict, through:**

- Incorporating the concept of hybrid warfare into strategic documents and national defense plans.
- Allocating funds to increase the defense budget and invest in military infrastructure (achieving a 1% budget increase by 2030 according to the SNA).
- Strengthening the inter-institutional mechanism for civil-military coordination, including through crisis simulations and exercises in responding to unconventional situations.

**Explicit identification of the source of the threat:** For the first time, the Russian Federation is officially designated as the main source of military and security threats. This clarity facilitates internal and external strategic communication and the orientation of defense priorities.

### **Strengthening international partnerships under constitutional neutrality:**

- Expanding active participation in NATO programs (such as the Partnership for Peace, Building Integrity, and Defense Education Enhancement Program). Reforming and modernizing the security and defense system is the main goal of the new Moldova-NATO Partnership Plan for 2025-2028.

- Accessing funds from the European Peace Facility (EPF) for the modernisation of military equipment and logistics.
- Establishing technical and operational partnerships in areas such as cyber defense, military mobility, and crisis resilience.

### **Initiating a gradual process of rehabilitation of defense infrastructure:**

- A national assessment of the state of military infrastructure has been launched with a view to modernizing barracks, depots, and logistics centers.
- Priority is given to air defense and operational mobility in response to repeated violations of national airspace. For example, the aforementioned draft law stipulates that unmanned aircraft illegally crossing the territory of the Republic of Moldova may be destroyed, neutralized, or their flight taken under control by the Air Force, subordinated to the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Moldova.

## **SCENARIOS**

Based on the above, two alternative scenarios for the evolution of Moldova's security and defense can be outlined. The first scenario, an optimistic one, assumes that Chisinau will consolidate its strategic position and move forward on the path to EU accession, strengthening its relations with the West. The second scenario, a pessimistic, one anticipates an intensification of hybrid threats from the Russian Federation, which could reach a critical point, generating instability and compromising national security.

### **Optimistic scenario: Strategic recovery and integration into the European Union**

This scenario outlines a development in which the Republic of Moldova consolidates its strategic position and moves forward with determination on the path to EU accession. In addition, it is assumed that the situation in Ukraine will be resolved in its favor. In this context, the Republic of Moldova assumes an active role within the international community and develops its defense and security capabilities in line with Euro-Atlantic standards.

Anticipated events: (-) Consolidation of the pro-European vector following the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025; (-) Adoption of a robust National Defense Strategy: Increase in the defense budget to at least 2% of GDP over the next two years; (-) Measures are adopted to strengthen defense capabilities and increase institutional resilience and national resistance;

(-) Strengthened partnership with NATO and the EU: Moldova receives advanced partner status with NATO; (-) Trends towards reintegration of the Transnistrian region: The separatist regime in Tiraspol, isolated and deprived of logistical support from Russia, returns to the negotiating table. nor possibile provocări sau escaladări simbolice.

Any scenario, including the *optimistic* one, can generate a polarized picture of reactions, which also implies a possible reaction, especially from certain actors, for example:

**Civil society and public opinion (in general):**

**Reaction:** Divergent, depending on region and exposure to influence

..Pro-European majority: Support for reforms, increased confidence in state institutions and defense capabilities.

..Vulnerable regions (Gagauzia, Transnistria): Possible reservations fueled by Russian propaganda; will require additional information and inclusion measures.

**Russian Federation**

**Reaction:** Hostile, through intensified hybrid measures

- Amplification of information and propaganda operations: attacks on the legitimacy of the government, conspiracy theories ("betrayal of neutrality," "militarization of the country," "Western dictates").
- Trends of logistical and financial support for pro-Russian parties in the Republic of Moldova, mobilization of proxy networks (NGOs, media, religious groups) for possible protests or incitement to destabilizing actions.
- Attempts to manipulate citizens on the left bank of the Dniester River to generate hostility towards reintegration reforms with the aim of possible provocations or symbolic escalations.

**Final consequences:** The risk of a major invasion or destabilisation decreases significantly. Although Moscow is forced to reconfigure its strategies in the region, it has not revised its strategic documents regarding its areas of interest.

**Pessimistic scenario:** Surrender to threats and irreversible loss of sovereignty  
This scenario explores a negative trajectory for the Republic of Moldova, in which the State fails to strengthen its defense capabilities and becomes vulnerable to hostile external influence. The scenario's assumptions are based

on a series of interdependent factors which, when combined, lead to a progressive deterioration of national security and sovereignty. Plus, the pessimistic scenario can develop in two different contexts depending on the results of the parliamentary elections:

**Alternative scenario I:** Consolidation of pro-European governance under pressure from hybrid tactics and controlled chaos. In this scenario, the parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025 are won by a pro-European coalition, which represents a strategic victory for democratic forces and a step forward on the path to European Union accession. However, the electoral success of pro-European forces does not lead to a reduction in hybrid threats. On the contrary, the Russian Federation intensifies its hybrid tactics, adopting a strategy of controlled chaos to destabilize the government in Chisinau and create favorable conditions for the return of pro-Russian forces to power.

**Anticipated events:**

Compromising the government: (-) Pro-Russian media and digital influence networks are activated to discredit the new pro-European government, spreading false narratives and polarizing society. (-) Demonstrations, including in Gagauzia, protests, and street movements financed or influenced by pro-Russian organizations are orchestrated, demanding the resignation of the pro-European government and a reorientation of foreign policy, invoking the betrayal of the "national interest." (-) Radical groups that support destabilization are promoted. (-) Security institutions are the target of "lawfare" attacks, in which their leaders are accused of fabricated abuses in order to discredit them.

**Exploitation of social and regional divisions through the construction of a dualistic rhetoric,** close to Manichaeism, in which reality is divided between "Good" and "Evil," "Sacred" and "Sin." In this construct, Russia is presented as a saving force, protector of traditional values and the Orthodox faith, in opposition to a West perceived as decadent and morally corrupt. Secessionist discourses are promoted in regions such as Gagauzia and Transnistria, fueling the perception of a "rootless" Moldova controlled by elites hostile to local identity. Local leaders are encouraged to challenge the constitutional authority of Chişinău. Social tensions are recoded into a "sacred" struggle to save national identity, in which Russian influence is not only legitimate but necessary.

**The theory of controlled chaos** – destabilisation and synchronised manipulation: The Moscow regime applies the theory of controlled chaos through a combination of economic and political pressure and controlled social conflicts, undermining the country's security and defense capabilities: (-) groups of provocateurs are prepared to create violent incidents during street protests, further destabilizing public order; (-) the separatist regime in Tiraspol is intensifying its aggressive rhetoric and mobilising resources to undermine the authority of the government in Chişinău.

**Public perception** of the security environment in the Republic of Moldova is deeply marked by uncertainty and mistrust. As the authorities in Chişinău attempt to implement stabilization or reform measures, new challenges orchestrated by pro-Russian influence networks are triggered, constantly undermining efforts to strengthen institutional resilience.

Against this unstable backdrop, the activation of a "black swan" scenario, analyzed as early as 2018 in a collective study, but which remains relevant today, cannot be ruled out<sup>[13]</sup>. The context is that Russia's plans for Novorosia, with access to Odessa and the Tiraspol region, cannot be ruled out. The weapons depot in the village of Cobasna, under the jurisdiction of the unrecognized authorities in Tiraspol, is located 2 km from the border with Ukraine. Although there is currently no concrete information on the volume of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment inherited from the Soviet period--and it is often mentioned that this depot does not pose a danger--the scenario involves deliberately creating an explosion with disastrous effects as a result of a terrorist attack by Moscow's proxy actors. It should be noted that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, so-called<sup>[14]</sup> attacks with insignificant consequences for security have allowed the authorities in Tiraspol to declare a red alert for terrorist threats three times in order to intensify security at high-risk targets and maintain increased control at checkpoints set up by those in the Transnistrian region. Therefore, this scenario involves not only a succession of isolated crises, but also reveals a systemic, hybrid, and multidimensional strategy. The danger of expanding the area of impact and creating conditions for intervention in the internal politics of the state and the seizure of state power is the basic goal of such a scenario.

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<sup>[12]</sup>Cele trei SCENARII pregătite de Rusia pentru a ATACA și ocupa R. Moldova: Document pregătit în iulie 2022. <https://www.ziarulnational.md/doc-cele-trei-scenarii-pregatite-de-rusia-pentru-a-ataca-si-ocupa-r-moldova-totul-a-fost-pregatit-in-iulie-2022/>

## Alternative scenario II – The rise of pro-Russian forces and a change in the strategic vector.

The parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025 are hijacked in favor of pro-Russian political forces, which promote a foreign policy of exaggerated neutrality and freeze relations with the European Union and NATO. This development reflects the risk to repeat the scenario similar to that in Georgia, where the consolidation of pro-Russian influence led to stagnation in the European integration process, social tensions, and a progressive erosion of democracy.

### Anticipated developments:

- **Obstruction of democratic reforms:** Legislative initiatives aimed at modernizing the security sector and deepening cooperation with the EU and NATO are systematically blocked, diluted, or diverted from their original purpose.
- **International isolation:** The lack of democratic progress and the deterioration of the rule of law are leading to a loss of support from Western partners, placing the Republic of Moldova in a position of geopolitical marginalization.
- **Neutrality as an ideological tool** is heavily promoted as the only security solution.
- **Neglect of the defense system:** The defense sector is treated as a marginal priority, lacking adequate budget allocations.
- **Exploiting internal divisions:** Russian propaganda fuels ethnic and regional tensions, instigating divisions between Romanian-, Russian-, and Gagauz-speaking communities, thereby undermining social cohesion.
- **Imposing a model of asymmetric federalization:** The Russian Federation supports a formula for federalization that grants Transnistria the status of an entity with veto power over national decisions, maintaining its direct influence and de facto control over the region.

The first alternative scenario analyzed assumes that, despite the pro-European government's efforts to implement reforms and consolidate the process of accession to the European Union, the Russian Federation resorts to hybrid tactics based on controlled chaos, generating a constant deterioration of internal stability and worsening the country's security situation.

In the second alternative scenario, the central authorities become mere instruments of Moscow's interests, and any prospect of European integration is compromised in the long term. And, in a context of regional crisis, the Russian Federation could launch a hybrid military offensive, aiming to create a land corridor between Odessa and Tiraspol. In both alternative scenarios, the end result indicates a significant loss of sovereignty for the Republic of Moldova, which would become a state with fragile democratic institutions.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this context, we can highlight some lessons learned:

- **Early recognition of the source of threat is essential.** Neglecting or hesitating to explicitly identify the aggressor can delay the development of an effective response strategy. Clarifying the status of the Russian Federation as the main source of threat has allowed Moldova to calibrate its defense and security policies more effectively.
- **Formal neutrality does not offer real protection against hybrid warfare.** Constitutional neutrality does not automatically protect against military and informational pressure. On the contrary, in the absence of security guarantees and functional strategic partnerships, neutrality can be exploited as a vulnerability.
- **Societal resilience is a critical component of the national defense.** Manipulation of perceptions, political polarization, and radicalization of social segments are frequently used tools in hybrid warfare. Strengthening internal cohesion, civic education, and strategic communication are becoming as important as investments in military equipment. Plus, there is a need to update the concept of national resistance in the context of war on the European continent.
- **Doctrinal and institutional adaptation must keep pace with new types of conflict.** Hybrid warfare requires a paradigm shift in strategic thinking. Institutions must anticipate unconventional scenarios, respond in an integrated manner, and develop flexible capabilities in areas such as cyber defense, mobility, intelligence, and countering disinformation.
- **International partnerships are indispensable for small and fragile States.** Support from the EU, NATO, and other relevant partners is crucial for the Republic of Moldova in its modernization and adaptation process.

Cazul Republicii Moldova demonstrează că în fața unui agresor hibrid, nici neutralitatea, nici lipsa de conflict deschis nu garantează securitatea. Statele trebuie să-și construiască reziliența pe toate palierele – militar, instituțional, societal și informațional – și să acționeze preventiv, nu doar reactiv. Ignorarea amenințărilor hibride nu le face să dispară.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS:

- **Review of the doctrinal and strategic framework:**

Sistemic update of defense doctrine/policy to integrate new developments in hybrid and information warfare, with a focus on countering hostile military presence and activity in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.

\_Full implementation of the National Defense Strategy and approval of the Military Strategy with a clear mechanism for inter-institutional monitoring and evaluation.
- **Strengthening the legal framework for military security:** (-) Reviewing legislation on national defense and the status of the armed forces to enable an effective response to asymmetric threats; (-) Clarifying the role and limits of constitutional neutrality in relation to international defense partnerships.
- **Increasing and streamlining the defense budget:**

\_Increase the defense budget with the aim of reaching a minimum threshold of 2% of GDP.
- **Prioritising investments in:** (-) functional military infrastructure (accommodation, warehouses, logistics points), (-) air defence and reconnaissance capabilities, (-) mobility, communications and combat support.
- **Professionalization of the armed forces:**
  - Replacing operational units with contract soldiers to strengthen combat capability, institutional continuity, and operational readiness.
  - Creation of military units/subunits specialised in cyber defence, logistical support and urban operations.
  - Expanding national and international military exercises, especially with NATO and EU partners.
- **Improving the command and control structure:**
  - Modernize the command, control, communications, and information (C4I) system to ensure rapid and effective response in crisis situations.
  - Developing integrated (civil-military) operational centers for managing emergencies and hybrid threats.

Finally, the need to integrate relevant actors and strengthen the resilience of the security sector are the topics discussed on the public agenda. At the beginning of the Russian Federation's military invasion of Ukraine, communication between the Ministry of Defense, security sector institutions, and civil society was relatively effective, managing to address some key aspects of national defense. However, over time, the intensity and consistency of these efforts have declined significantly. In some situations, communication seems to have been neglected, which can be attributed to internal factors or a lack of orchestrated strategic coordination. Thus, beyond strengthening communication with civil society actors, it is now necessary to develop national narratives that promote the country's cohesion and strategic interests. It is also necessary to increase citizens' confidence in their ability to deal with hybrid threats. And in accordance with the strategic documents adopted, there is a need to develop a program to ensure "national resilience" or "total defense." The involvement of all key actors in the public, private, and civil society sectors in crisis management and response to hybrid threats is vital in a democratic society.

## VII. CAPTURING THE INFORMATION SPACE: FROM DISTORTED PLURALISM TO HYBRID CONTROL TOOLS

### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

The Republic of Moldova was the target of intense hybrid information attacks between 2020 and 2025. Internal and external actors orchestrated disinformation campaigns with multiple objectives, aimed at undermining democratic institutions, discrediting the Republic of Moldova's pro-European orientation, polarizing public discourse, and cultivating mistrust in external partners and in the State's ability to ensure national stability and security. Propaganda efforts have focused on discrediting pro-Western authorities and Moldova's development partners by promoting anti-European and anti-democratic narratives, often presented as a reaction to alleged "external control" over the government. Disinformation campaigns were disseminated through a variety of channels—from traditional media to social networks—and were tailored to the specific characteristics of the target audience to maximize their manipulative impact. A central element of these operations is pro-Kremlin propaganda, which specifically targets Russian-speaking communities by exploiting cultural and linguistic affinities.

The national information space is characterized by deep fragmentation, determined by linguistic differences and the geopolitical orientations of media channels. While the Russian-speaking press predominantly promoted pro-Kremlin narratives and conspiracy theories, the Romanian-speaking media generally supported the pro-European vector. This narrative polarization has reinforced symbolic barriers between communities and amplified social divisions.

At the same time, recent crises—the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and Russian aggression in Ukraine—have been strategically exploited by Russian propaganda, which has turned them into instruments of destabilization and information manipulation, depending on the political and social context.

These topics have been used as catalysts for disinformation campaigns aimed at destabilizing the Republic of Moldova and maintaining the Russian Federation's strategic influence in the region.

Although bans on Russian television broadcasts have been imposed since 2022, propaganda narratives have shifted to the online space, amplified by social networks and supported by networks of influence affiliated with local oligarchs<sup>[115]</sup>.

The Republic of Moldova has initiated systemic measures to protect the information space, but these remain limited and uneven, reflecting institutional deficiencies and weak regulation. Reforms in 2021 aimed to strengthen the Audiovisual Council and establish a Center for Combating Disinformation, but progress remains fragile. Despite an increase in press freedom by 2023, public trust in the media remains low, fueled by a lack of transparency and persistent oligarchic influences.

The media landscape is fragmented along territorial and ethnic lines, with Gagauzia and Transnistria deeply anchored into the Russian information sphere. Television remains the dominant channel in rural areas, while cities have access to more pluralistic sources. Between 2021 and 2025, the press was influenced by politically controlled trusts and external factors, particularly the Russian Federation, while independent media benefited from Western support.

This fragmentation weakens national strategic communication and favors hybrid campaigns, including through fake websites, trolls, deepfakes, cyberattacks, and separatist propaganda. In this context, strategic communication becomes essential for strengthening societal resilience and protecting the country's democratic path.

**Table 1. Hybrid threats in the information space of the Republic of Moldova**

Hybrid attacks	Impact	Countermeasures
Disinformation and propaganda (fake news, anti-Western narratives)	Social polarization, decline in trust in authorities, and anti-EU narratives.	Blocking propaganda sources, sanctioning platforms, media education.
Fake websites and troll networks	Creating a false consensus, defaming leaders, inducing mistrust.	Eliminating fake accounts, digital investigations, collaboration with social platforms.

[115] E.Marzac. Disinformation in Moldova. In: Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe. <https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/E-book+Blurring+the+Truth.pdf/fd6abbb3-f49e-115b-090e-7c9f3a20dfc6>

Manipulation on social networks and deepfakes	Rapid and effective disinformation, influencing public perception.	Campaigns to dismantle, fact-checking, awareness, and rapid response by authorities.
Cyberattacks (hacking, data leaks)	Disruption of public services, decline in confidence in state security.	Strengthening cybersecurity, establishing agencies, partnerships with NATO and the EU member countries.
Regional separatist propaganda (e.g., Gagauzia)	Fueling separatist tensions, declining loyalty to the State.	Harmonization of legislation, media monitoring, international support for objective local media.
Malicious external funding (proxy parties and media)	Capturing the media space, corrupting the electorate, destabilization.	Strict laws, outlawing illegal groups, international cooperation to block funding.

Source: created by the author

## HYBRID THREAT TACTICS IN THE INFORMATION SPHERE

The disinformation tactics applied during this period were characterised by a diversified and coordinated approach. Malicious actors exploited social, economic, and identity vulnerabilities, using traditional media channels, digital platforms, and emerging technologies such as deepfakes, bot networks, and organized trolling to spread fake news, conspiracy messages, and anti-Western narratives. This tactical and operational adaptability allowed them to simultaneously reach diverse audiences, intensifying information confusion and fragmenting social perception.

The aims of these campaigns were to undermine trust in democratic institutions, manipulate public opinion, and polarize society. Recent electoral processes, including the 2024 elections and referendum, were used as opportunities to intensify hybrid operations. Key methods included visual manipulation, the creation of fake websites, cyberattacks, the dissemination of biased messages in minority languages, and multi-platform coordination to simulate massive public support. This combination of digital propaganda, psychological operations, and technical tools outlines a coherent model of information aggression with multidimensional impact, aimed at eroding the democratic resilience of the Republic of Moldova.

**Table 2. Summary of the main tactics identified during this period, their objectives, and relevant examples from the Moldovan media landscape**

Tactic	Description	Examples
Disinformation and propaganda	Spreading fake news, anti-Western narratives, and conspiracy messages through TV, online portals, and social networks.	RT, Sputnik, pro-Russian Telegram channels <sup>[116]</sup>
Creation of fake websites and trolling	Sites that mimic real media outlets and networks of trolls that amplify destabilizing or defamatory messages.	Fake websites such as news24.md, troll networks on Facebook <sup>[117]</sup>
Cyber attacks	Penetration of public institution and media networks for data theft or discrediting.	Cyber attacks whose main targets were the information systems of public institutions, including critical ones.
Fake news and deep fakes	Altered video/audio content spread online to manipulate public opinion.	Edited clips featuring Maia Sandu, fakes distributed massively on TikTok <sup>[118]</sup> .
Exploitation of linguistic minorities	Broadcasting content in Russian/Gagauz that isolates the audience from the national press.	Primul în Moldova, TV Găgăuzia, Sputnik content.
Use of religious or cultural networks	Traditionalist messages that combat European values and support authoritarianism.	Anti-LGBT messages in churches, pro-Kremlin religious programs
Discrediting independent journalists	Intimidation and defamation campaigns against critical media.	Attacks on Nokta.md, Ziarul de Gardă, Europa Liberă, TV8
Manipulation in election campaigns	Influencing the electorate through false narratives, conspiracies, or populist promises.	The TV6/Shor campaign in the 2021 and 2023 elections <sup>[119]</sup> .
Creation of proxy media (puppet media)	Stations that appear independent but serve foreign interests.	NTV Moldova, Accent TV retransmițând conținut rusesc.

*Sursa: creat de autor*

[116] L. Cravenco-Zaharia, The society-wide battle against disinformation in Moldova. [fh-pb\\_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation\\_Eng-v5.pdf](#)

[117] S. Mukherge. Meta removes fake accounts in Moldova ahead of presidential election. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/meta-removes-fake-accounts-moldova-ahead-presidential-election-2024-10-11/>

[118] Un nou deepfake cu Maia Sandu, publicat pe rețelele de socializare. Precizările Președinției. <https://moldova1.md/p/22282/un-nou-deepfake-cu-maia-sandu-publicat-pe-retelele-de-socializare-precizarile-presedintiei>; Deepfake cu folosirea imaginii Maiei Sandu și a unei bănci comerciale | Cauzele de corupție ar putea fi examinate de o instanță specializată. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/deepfake-cu-folosirea-imaginii-maiei-sandu-si-a-unei-banci-comerciale-cauzele-de-coruptie-ar-putea-fi-examinate-de-o-instanta-specializata/32708595.html>

[119] The Disinformation Warning Coming From the Edge of Europe. <https://moldova1.md/p/22282/un-nou-deepfake-cu-maia-sandu-publicat-pe-retelele-de-socializare-precizarile-presedintiei>

Information influence tactics in Gagauzia reflect a distinct model of hybrid attack, coordinated mainly by the Russian Federation and local political networks affiliated with Kremlin interests. These aim to destabilize the region and undermine national cohesion, negatively affecting trust in central authorities and Moldova's European path. One of the main tactics identified is the amplification of separatist sentiments, promoted through messages suggesting a so-called loss of autonomy for the Gagauzia region. The goal is clear: to divide the society and cultivate a climate hostile to the central authorities<sup>[120]</sup>. In addition to promoting propaganda, there is also an active campaign against the independent press, aimed at intimidating journalists and reducing the space for critical expression. The news portal Nokta.md has been the frequent target of cyber attacks and smear campaigns, as reported by international human rights organizations<sup>[121]</sup>.

These practices have been facilitated by the exploitation of a legislative vacuum: the lack of harmonization between Gagauz and national legislation allows local media to operate outside any effective regulatory framework, which drastically reduces the ability of central institutions to intervene legally.

## EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ACTORS

Russian Federation: The main external actor, acting through state institutions, intelligence services, and state-controlled media channels. The Kremlin has used TV channels retransmitted in Moldova (e.g., Pervii Kanal/"First in Moldova," NTV, RTR) and portals such as Sputnik or social networks. In December 2022, the Moldovan authorities suspended the licenses of six TV stations that were broadcasting disinformation about the war in Ukraine<sup>[122]</sup>. According to a public report by the Information and Security Service (SIS) of the Republic of Moldova<sup>[123]</sup>, Moldovan authorities identified the existence of an operational coordination center based in Moscow, involved in orchestrating systematic actions to influence the electoral process in the Republic of Moldova. This "command center" was allegedly coordinated by Ilan Shor and aimed to finance satellite parties, mobilize protests, and manipulate public opinion through networks of influence and disinformation with external logistical support.

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[120] Raport SIS. [https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport%20SIS\\_0.pdf](https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport%20SIS_0.pdf)

[121] Moldova. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2024>

[122] Some of the channels were owned by people affiliated with Ilan Schor, a fugitive Moldovan oligarch with pro-Russian sympathies.

<https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/19/six-tv-channels-suspended-in-moldova-amid-misinformation-ilegations#:~:text=Six%20television%20channels%20in%20Moldova,war%20in%20Ukraine%2C%20authorities%20said>

[123] Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse în procesele electorale din Republica Moldova în 2024-2025. <https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Scenarii%20de%20influen%C8%9B%C4%83%202024-2025.pdf>

Russian propaganda also exploited the war in Ukraine, blaming NATO and the US for the conflict and even spreading disinformation about alleged American biological laboratories in the region<sup>[124]</sup>. Russian secret services directly coordinated influence operations: a SIS report shows that a special "command center" was set up in Moscow to undermine the elections in the Republic of Moldova, with Ilan Shor appointed as the leader of this operation, which was financed and logistically assisted by Russia<sup>[125]</sup>. At the same time, Russian diplomacy and the network of pro-Kremlin influencers amplified accusations (*e.g.*, "Moldova promotes discrimination against Russian speakers," "The West controls Chişinău from the shadows") aimed at undermining public confidence in Moldova's pro-Western course<sup>[126]</sup>. Social media was a key tool: in 2024, the SIS documented a network of accounts on Telegram, TikTok, and YouTube that intensively distributed pro-Kremlin messages (including support for the war against Ukraine) to the Moldovan public<sup>[127]</sup>.

### Internal actors

*Pro-Kremlin parties and affiliated politicians:* The SHOR Party (led by fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor) and other **pro-Russian political leaders** (*e.g.*, *leaders of the Socialist and Communist Bloc, such as Igor Dodon*) played a major role. They amplified narratives coming from Moscow and initiated their own internal disinformation campaigns. For example, in 2024, Ilan Shor and his ally Veaceslav Platon heavily funded fake Facebook ads and posts promoting alarmist messages ("*Moldova is ruled by foreigners,*" "*the elections will be rigged,*" "*the West is dictating to us*")<sup>[128]</sup>. . In just one month (June 2024), the two spent over €55,000 on online propaganda, attempting to influence public opinion ahead of the autumn elections<sup>[129]</sup>.

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[124]L.Cravenco-Zaharia.The society-wide battle against disinformation in Moldova.

[https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb\\_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation\\_Eng-v5.pdf#:~:text=politicians%20and%20for%20their%20supporters%20frequently,by%20Russian%20troops%20in%20Mariupol](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation_Eng-v5.pdf#:~:text=politicians%20and%20for%20their%20supporters%20frequently,by%20Russian%20troops%20in%20Mariupol)

[125]Raport SIS: La Moscova ar fi fost creat un centru de comandă pentru a fraudă scrutinele din R. Moldova.

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/raport-sis-la-moscova-ar-fi-fost-creat-un-centru-de-comanda-pentru-a-frauda-scrutinele-din-r-moldova/33237815.html>

[126]Local elections in Moldova: new votes, old disinformation narratives. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/local-elections-in-moldova-new-votes-old-disinformation-narratives/#:~:text=Pro,of%20spreading%20propaganda%20and%20disinformation>

[127]Raport SIS: La Moscova ar fi fost creat un centru de comandă pentru a fraudă scrutinele din R. Moldova.

<https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/raport-sis-la-moscova-ar-fi-fost-creat-un-centru-de-comanda-pentru-a-frauda-scrutinele-din-r-moldova/33237815.html>

[128]Evaluarea campaniilor de dezinformare finanțate de Șor și Platon: impactul și reacția limitată a platformelor sociale.<https://watchdog.md/analyzes/208204/evaluarea-campaniilor-de-dezinformare-finantate-de-sor-si-platon-impactul-si-reactia-limitata-a-platformelor-sociale/#:~:text=Oligarhii%20fugari%20Ilan%20C8%98or%20C8%99i,mai%20mult%20pentru%20promovarea%20dezinfor>

[rm%C4%83rii](https://watchdog.md/analyzes/208204/evaluarea-campaniilor-de-dezinformare-finantate-de-sor-si-platon-impactul-si-reactia-limitata-a-platformelor-sociale/#:~:text=Oligarhii%20fugari%20Ilan%20C8%98or%20C8%99i,mai%20mult%20pentru%20promovarea%20dezinfor)

[129] Idem

The SHOR Party also organized anti-government protests in 2022–2023, using economic difficulties (inflation, energy crisis) as a pretext and spreading the idea on social media that the pro-EU government was to blame.

*Oligarchs and local interest groups:* In addition to Ilan Shor, other oligarchs such as Veaceslav Platon (known for subversive actions) have financed manipulative media campaigns. Their goal is to protect personal interests and maintain the influence of oligarchic groups, even if that means aligning with the Kremlin's agenda. Reports from the WatchDog.MD community show that Shor and Platon intensified their online efforts in 2024, and the official blocking of their Facebook/Instagram pages by META did not stop the phenomenon; disinformation content continued to circulate through anonymous pages and fake accounts, difficult to attribute directly<sup>[130]</sup>. Despite seemingly firm measures (account blocking), the threat of disinformation persists and evolves, becoming increasingly difficult to identify and combat. The year 2024 marks an intensification of these actions, raising alarm bells for society, the press, and authorities.

*Politically affiliated media:* A number of media outlets in the Republic of Moldova, politically or financially affiliated with actors known for supporting a pro-Russian geopolitical orientation, have played a significant role in amplifying information messages aligned with Russian Federation narratives. These channels include TV stations with national and regional coverage, such as Primul în Moldova, RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova, and Orhei TV, the latter two having documented links to the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and the ȘOR Party. These stations have been identified as consistently broadcasting pro-Kremlin content and as part of a media ecosystem that reflects the Russian Federation's indirect influence on the Moldovan information space.

In addition, publications such as *Komsomolskaia Pravda Moldova* and *Moldavskie Vedomosti*, along with a number of websites with unclear editorial status, have contributed to the dissemination of narratives that challenge Moldova's pro-European orientation and the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

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[130]Evaluarea campaniilor de dezinformare finanțate de Șor și Platon: impactul și reacția limitată a platformelor sociale. <https://watchdog.md/analyzes/208204/evaluarea-campaniilor-de-dezinformare-finantate-de-sor-si-platon-impactul-si-reactia-limitata-a-platformelor-sociale/#:~:text=Oligarhii%20fugari%20Ilan%20C8%98or%20C8%99i,mai%20mult%20pentru%20promovarea%20dezinform%C4%83rii>

These media entities have consistently promoted criticizing messages towards the national authorities and the European integration process, often reflecting recurring themes in official Russian discourse. For example, in the context of the 2023 local elections, several portals identified as affiliated with pro-Russian interests circulated narratives in which the current government was described as "authoritarian" or accused of "dictatorship," echoing similar claims made by the official Russian press.

Official measures to counter these phenomena were adopted in December 2022, when the Moldovan authorities temporarily suspended the licenses of several stations, including Primul în Moldova, RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova, TV6, Orhei TV, and Accent TV, citing risks to information security and the dissemination of manipulative information about the war in Ukraine.

*Bot networks, trolls, and Telegram channels:* Between 2022 and 2025, social networks and messaging applications became central channels for coordinated information operations aimed at influencing public opinion in the Republic of Moldova. Recent reports point to the intensive use of fake accounts, bots, and anonymous channels, especially on platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and TikTok, to disseminate messages aligned with Russian propaganda <sup>[131]</sup>.

Telegram, due to its encrypted nature and widespread accessibility among Moldovan citizens, has become a key tool for spreading manipulative content. According to a 2025 investigation by the Independent Press Association (API), anonymous Telegram channels, presented as "opposition," systematically distributed misleading or fabricated material, attacking pro-Western actors, civil society, and democratic institutions <sup>[132]</sup>.

Promo-LEX reports a significant increase in the frequency and impact of these channels between 2023 and 2024, noting that the narratives promoted—such as "NATO is to blame for the war," "Ukrainian refugees are destabilizing Moldova," or "the Sandu government is destroying pluralism"—reflect the Kremlin's rhetoric <sup>[133]</sup>.

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[131] Matrioșka în acțiune? O nouă campanie de dezinformare a luat amploare pe internet, mai 2025, <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/matrioska-in-actiune...>

[132] Idem

[133] Raport de monitorizare a dezinformării în alegerile locale 2023. <https://promolex.md>.

At the same time, attempts to compromise the StopFals.md project were identified through posts that dispute its legitimacy, accusing it of "serving Western interests"<sup>[134]</sup>.

Disinformation intensified in the context of the 2023 local elections and around social crises, using tactics such as spam, viral redistribution, unverified leaks, and manipulative video content, including in Matryoshka format. These activities targeted not only political elites, but also civic initiatives, independent journalism, and international actors present in the Republic of Moldova. A significant part of the influence operations were conducted on social networks and messaging applications. In a coordinated manner, hundreds of fake accounts and bots amplified propaganda content on Facebook, Odnoklassniki, YouTube, and TikTok, including through comment spam and viral distribution during key periods (election campaigns, crisis situations). However, Telegram became the central platform for spreading disinformation, due to its encrypted nature and popularity among Moldovans<sup>[135]</sup>. Anonymous or pseudonymous Telegram channels, some of which declared themselves to be "opposition" channels, published "leaks" of information (true or fabricated) about pro-Western leaders and institutions, distributed conspiracy theories, and incited hatred against the EU, the US, and Ukraine. In 2022, Promo-LEX noted an unprecedented increase in disinformation on Telegram, with many messages mirroring the Kremlin's propaganda narrative (examples: "*NATO is to blame for the war,*" "*Ukrainian refugees are causing chaos*")<sup>[136]</sup>. Aceste canale au vizat direct și societatea civilă – de exemplu, proiectul de fact-check StopFals.md al Asociației Presei Independente a fost ținta unor postări pe Telegram ce îi denaturau misiunea și finanțarea, acuzând ONG-urile pro-democrație că „*promovează agenda Occidentului*”<sup>[137]</sup>.

## TARGETS AND AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION

The democratic institutions of the Republic of Moldova, including the Presidency, the Government, the Parliament, and civil society, were targeted as a priority in information operations, as they symbolize the country's pro-European orientation and support for democratic reforms.

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[134] Atacuri informaționale împotriva societății civile: cazul StopFals.md. <https://stopfals.md>

[135] L. Cravenco-Zaharia. The society-wide battle against disinformation in Moldova. [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb\\_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation\\_Eng-v5.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation_Eng-v5.pdf)

[136] Idem

[137] Local elections in Moldova: new votes, old disinformation narratives. <https://euvdisinfo.eu/local-elections-in-moldova-new-votes-old-disinformation-narratives/#:~:text=Pro,of%20spreading%20propaganda%20and%20disinformation>

The purpose of these attacks was to undermine public confidence in the authorities, destabilize the internal political situation, and block the path to European integration. In the context of the 2020 presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, the information space was marked by the emergence of manipulative narratives designed to influence voters' perceptions of the candidates. A significant example is the spread, in the run-up to the second round of elections, of a claim that candidate Maia Sandu intended to "bring 30,000 Syrians" to the Republic of Moldova<sup>[138]</sup>. This information was widely shared on social media and picked up by media outlets close to certain political actors, without any factual evidence or official statements to support it. The content was later debunked by fact-checking organizations, which highlighted the speculative and unfounded nature of the claim. In an analysis conducted by the Independent Press Association and other sources specializing in combating disinformation, this narrative was identified as part of an effort to mobilize negative emotional sentiment toward the pro-European candidate in a polarized electoral context<sup>[139]</sup>. In 2024, according to the report presented by the Information and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova<sup>[140]</sup>, an operational command center was established in Moscow, coordinated by the Russian authorities and led by Ilan Shor, with the main purpose of compromising the referendum on accession to the European Union and the concurrent presidential elections. Within this network, organised vote-buying schemes have been documented, in which the network controlled by Shor allegedly offered direct financial incentives to Moldovan voters to influence the outcome of the vote in favour of pro-Russian options. The Moldovan authorities (with external support) managed to counteract some of these actions, thwarting plans to disrupt the elections<sup>[141]</sup>. However, the narrative of "stolen" elections was heavily promoted by Kremlin-affiliated sources, paving the way for them to contest any unfavorable results.

*The pro-European government and pro-Western policies were also directly targeted. Propaganda messages attempted to erode public support for the pro-EU/NATO course, constantly accusing the "West of ruling Moldova from the shadows" or claiming that "European integration will bring Moldova into war."*

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[138] Freedom on the Net 2021 – Moldova, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-net/2021>

[139] Dezinformare: Maia Sandu ar urma să aducă 30.000 de sirieni în Moldova. <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/1287>

[140] Raport SIS: La Moscova ar fi fost creat un centru de comandă pentru a frauda scrutinele din R. Moldova. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/raport-sis-la-moscova-ar-fi-fost-creat-un-centru-de-comanda-pentru-a-frauda-scrutinele-din-r-moldova/33237815.html>

[141] Idem

For example, the rhetoric that *"Moldova is ruled by foreigners"* – was intended to stigmatise pro-European officials as puppets of the US or the EU. Another recurring theme was the insinuation that support for Ukraine would turn Moldova into a military target, attempting to instill fear among the population and weaken Chisinau's determination to cooperate with Western partners. Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, stated in 2023 that the authorities of Chisinau had become the "logistical annex" of the regime in Kiev <sup>[143]</sup>, suggesting that the government was endangering the country through its alliance with Ukraine – a statement in line with Russian propaganda aimed at discrediting the pro-Western leadership<sup>[144]</sup>.

*The independent press and civil society* were also targeted by information attacks. Politically unaffiliated media organizations, investigative journalists, and pro-democracy NGOs (e.g., WatchDog.MD, Freedom House Moldova, Promo-LEX, the fact-checking community StopFals, etc.) were targeted by smear campaigns and conspiracy theories. Often, pro-Kremlin propaganda labeled them as "foreign agents" or "instruments of Soros/the West" in an attempt to undermine their credibility with the public. <sup>[145]</sup>. For example, Telegram channels associated with Russian influence have published lists of NGOs and their budgets, insinuating that these organizations are paid by the West to "manipulate public opinion." Such messages seek to disseminate distrust towards civil society and isolate the Republic of Moldova from external support. In addition, independent journalists have been harassed online by networks of trolls who were flooding the public space with slanderous messages to discourage them from debunking the falsehoods promoted by pro-Russian propaganda.

In information influence campaigns, older people and the rural population were targeted through segmentation strategies tailored to their media profile, relying on nostalgia for the Soviet era and reluctance to change. Traditional Russian-language

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[142] Evaluarea campaniilor de dezinformare finanțate de Șor și Platon: impactul și reacția limitată a platformelor sociale. <https://watchdog.md/analizes/208204/evaluarea-campaniilor-de-dezinformare-finantate-de-sor-si-platon-impactul-si-reactia-limitata-a-platfomelor-sociale/#:~:text=Oligarhii%20fugari%20Ilan%20%20C8%98or%20%20C8%99j,mai%20mult%20pentru%20promovarea%20dezinform%C4%83rii>

[143] Local elections in Moldova: new votes, old disinformation narratives. <https://euvdisinfo.eu/local-elections-in-moldova-new-votes-old-disinformation-narratives/#:~:text=Pro,of%20spreading%20propaganda%20and%20disinformation>

[144] E. Mârzac, R. Panța, S. Sandu Analiza dezinformării prezente în spațiul online al Republicii Moldova privind activitatea NATO și UE. <https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ANALIZA-DEZINFORMARII-PREZENTE-IN-SPATIUL-ONLINE-AL-REPUBLICII-MOLDOVA-PRIVIND-ACTIVATEA-NATO-SI-UNIUNEA-EUROPEANA-1.pdf>

[145] Local elections in Moldova: new votes, old disinformation narratives. <https://euvdisinfo.eu/local-elections-in-moldova-new-votes-old-disinformation-narratives/#:~:text=Pro,of%20spreading%20propaganda%20and%20disinformation>

media exploited these sentiments to generate resistance to democratic reforms and pro-European orientation. Ethnic and linguistic minorities—especially Russian speakers, Gagauz, and Bulgarians in the south—were targeted with messages invoking discrimination by Chisinau and claiming that only Russia could protect their interests.. A Freedom House report highlights that these Russian-speaking communities are deliberately targeted by disinformation efforts to fuel internal divisions and weaken national cohesion<sup>[146]</sup> . Young people and the urban population have been targeted through modern social networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) with anti-vaccine or anti-LGBT conspiracies (to exploit cultural divisions), anti-EU sentiment, fake news related to economic opportunities (to fuel disillusionment and emigration), or diversionary content on viral video platforms.

## IMPACT

Hybrid attacks on Moldova's information space have had profound effects on social cohesion, institutional trust, and the country's geopolitical orientation. The most visible result is the sharp polarization of society between pro-Russian and pro-European camps, fueled by manipulative narratives that limit democratic dialogue. Communities, such as the Gagauz and Bulgarian ones, which are mainly exposed to Russian sources of information, develop a perception of exclusion and support anti-European views, perceiving Russia as their "motherland." At the same time, trust in state institutions has declined, especially in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. Survey data<sup>[147]</sup> highlights massive distrust of Parliament and the Government, especially in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, where almost 90% of respondents express a negative attitude towards the authorities. Information attacks undermine public support for European integration, especially in times of crisis, when anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-Western narratives become dominant. At the same time, they create an unstable climate conducive to political manipulation, triggering protests and weakening government institutions, to the benefit of pro-Russian or populist forces, such as the Shor party and other proxy actors. In conclusion, the hybrid disinformation campaigns against the Republic of Moldova have been carefully calibrated to target distinct socio-demographic segments, seeking to undermine democratic institutions, discredit pro-European options, and erode social cohesion by exploiting perceived vulnerabilities in a systematic effort aimed at strategic destabilization.

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[146] J. Matveyenko. Assessing the Impact of Disinformation on Minority Communities in Moldova. [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/fh-pb\\_19-Disinformation-Moldova-Minorities\\_Eng-](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/fh-pb_19-Disinformation-Moldova-Minorities_Eng-)

[147].pdf#:~:text=Such%20malign%20efforts%20specifically%20target,division%20and%20fuel%20separatist;

[1]Studiu sociologic. <https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/CBS-Reasearch.pdf>

## COUNTERMEASURES

The Republic of Moldova has adopted a set of legal and practical countermeasures to combat hybrid threats. At the legislative level, the authorities have amended the legal framework to allow blocking propaganda sources, sanctioning platforms that host disinformation content, and the regulation of external funding for digital campaigns. In practical terms, the measures have been implemented through decisions by the Information and Security Service (SIS) and the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE), which have ordered the blocking of dozens of online portals and disinformation networks. Among the sanctioned platforms are Russian websites with a strong propaganda bias, such as *ria.ru*, *sputnik.md*, *eadaily.com*, *bloknot.ru*, *rubaltic.ru*, and *politnavigator.net*. Streaming and search platforms associated with the Russian digital ecosystem – *rutube.ru*, *yandex.ru*, *dzen.ru* – were also blocked, as they were considered vectors for spreading hostile narratives.

In addition to interventions in the online environment, the authorities also targeted the audiovisual segment. Starting in 2022, several TV and radio stations were suspended or had their licenses revoked, citing reasons related to foreign propaganda, lack of editorial pluralism, and connections to internationally sanctioned entities. These include *Primul în Moldova*, *RTR Moldova*, *NTV Moldova*, *Accent TV*, *TV6*, and *Orhei TV*, some of which are affiliated with the politics of fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor. These interventions were also motivated by the need to protect information security under the state of emergency declared at the national level<sup>[148]</sup>. Institutional capacities have been strengthened, particularly within the Information and Security Service, the Audiovisual Council, and the Central Election Commission. These institutions have implemented digital monitoring mechanisms, including disinformation analysis centers during election periods. Collaboration with international partners (e.g., StratCom EU, NATO StratCom COE) has provided access to expertise, training, and technological tools.

Civil society in the Republic of Moldova has played a key role in strengthening civic resilience and promoting media literacy, acting as a complementary actor to state institutions in efforts to combat disinformation. However, the implementation of

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[148] Rezultatele unei operațiuni complexe desfășurate de către SIS, în contextul războiului hibrid. <https://sis.md/ro/content/rezultatele-unei-opera%C8%9Biuni-complexe-desf%C4%83%C8%99urate-de-c%C4%83tre-sis-%C3%AEn-contextul-r%C4%83zboiului-hibrid>; Cum încearcă Republica Moldova să redobândească controlul asupra spațiului său informațional. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ro/cum-ncearca-republica-moldova-sa-redobndeasca-controlul-asupra-spatiului-sau-informatiional/>; Serviciile speciale, în luptă cu sputnikul rusesc. <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/serviciile-speciale-in-lupta-cu-sputnikul-rusesc>

programs remains characterized by uneven coverage at the national level, and their long-term sustainable impact depends on integration into coherent public policies and continued institutional support.

Despite these efforts, the impact of countermeasures is partial. Telegram networks and external digital influence channels continue to operate relatively unhindered, especially in rural and minority areas. Regulatory efforts are often outpaced by the speed of adaptation of hybrid actors, who quickly reconfigure themselves in the face of legislative roadblocks.

## SCENARIOS

### Scenario 1: Hybrid escalation (most likely)

In an unstable regional context, the Republic of Moldova could be the target of a coordinated information offensive, using AI, deepfakes, bots, and trolls. The objectives include delegitimizing pro-Western leaders, social polarization, and compromising elections. Cyberattacks and conspiracy narratives intensify, affecting societal cohesion and geopolitical stability.

### Scenario 2: Partial resilience (likely)

Institutions and civil society manage to mitigate attacks through regulation and media education, but vulnerabilities persist in peripheral regions. Hostile actors adopt subtle tactics, and propaganda adapts to local contexts. The pro-European direction continues, but with slow progress and risks of democratic stagnation.

### Scenario 3: Democratic consolidation (unlikely)

The Republic of Moldova strengthens its informational resilience through coherent policies, credible institutions, and civic engagement. External propaganda becomes ineffective, and the European path advances without major obstacles. Although unlikely in the short term, this scenario offers a desirable strategic vision.

## FINDINGS

Between 2020 and 2025, the Republic of Moldova took important steps to strengthen its information resilience, but the information space remains vulnerable to hybrid attacks, especially in regions with limited access to credible information and in communities where foreign propaganda dominates the media environment. Hybrid actors, particularly the Russian Federation, exploit the country's historical, linguistic, and economic fragilities to weaken trust in democratic institutions, divide society, and undermine the State's pro-European orientation.

The measures taken so far, such as the adoption of the legal framework, the establishment of the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, and the strengthening of institutional capacities, represent significant progress. However, their effects are limited in the absence of a coherent strategy combining education, effective communication, and institutional transparency. At the same time, the low level of security culture, the lack of broad societal consensus on democratic values, and declining mutual trust, both among citizens and between citizens and the state, exacerbate the risks. In such a context, developing social cohesion, promoting a democratic culture, and fostering a common understanding of security become important objectives for an effective response to hybrid threats in the field of information security.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen the national information defense framework by adopting a post-2024 National Information Security Strategy that provides for clear prevention, response, and sanctioning mechanisms. The strategy should be aligned with EU standards (e.g., the Digital Services Act) and explicitly aim to combat hostile propaganda without limiting freedom of expression.

- **Fully operationalize the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation**, with a clear mandate, adequate resources, and extensive partnerships with the media, NGOs, academia, and local authorities. The center should become a hub for responding to information threats.
- **Support independent press and media pluralism**, especially in vulnerable regions, by creating a national journalism fund, favorable tax policies, supporting content in minority languages, and combating media ownership concentration.
- **Expand media education and develop a culture of security** by integrating media literacy into schools and community programs, promoting critical thinking, and communicating in languages relevant to all communities. Media education should be part of a broader effort to promote democratic political culture and civic responsibility.
- **Increasing institutional transparency** and proactive communication in crisis situations to combat rumors and build trust. Authorities should be open, respond firmly to threats against journalists, and support public campaigns to understand the role of the media in a functioning democracy.

- **Develop social cohesion** and trust between citizens and institutions, including through public dialogue, community initiatives, and social reconciliation projects. Promoting an inclusive national narrative is vital to reducing divisions and preventing the exploitation of ethnic or linguistic differences.

Strengthening international cooperation with EU and NATO members and regional partners in combating cross-border propaganda, exchanging best practices, and conducting joint exercises on information crises. Participation in European programs dedicated to media education and institutional development will contribute to the integration of the Republic of Moldova into a democratic information space.

## VIII. INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF IDENTITY: RELIGION, LANGUAGE, AND HISTORICAL MEMORY IN THE HANDS OF PROPAGANDA

### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

The Republic of Moldova faces a complex security and social environment, in which hybrid influence tactics are used to undermine national stability and fragment society. These strategies include exploiting religious organizations and identity tensions, media manipulation, and using non-governmental organizations as fronts for foreign interests. The goal of malicious actors is to fuel internal dissent, erode public trust in democratic institutions, and hinder the country's pro-Western path<sup>[149]</sup>.

The social cohesion of the Republic of Moldova is vulnerable due to historical ethnic, linguistic, and identity divisions. Romanian-Moldovan identity, geopolitical orientation (West vs. East), and religious affiliations have often been exploited to generate tensions and mistrust among the population. For example, the issue of Transnistria—a separatist region controlled de facto by pro-Russian forces since the 1990s—remains a major source of national insecurity and a channel through which Russian influence is exerted directly on the Republic of Moldova<sup>[150]</sup>. At the same time, the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, inhabited predominantly by pro-Russian minorities, has been used as a ground of influence: in 2014, in an unconstitutional local referendum, over 98% of Gagauz voted for the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the Eurasian Customs Union (dominated by the Russian Federation)<sup>[151]</sup>, in an attempt to block the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU<sup>[152]</sup>. This historical background highlights how hybrid tactics are not a new phenomenon, but have evolved over the last decade alongside Chişinău's oscillations between East and West. Romanian-Moldovan identity, relations with the European Union and the Russian Federation, as well as religious affiliations are often exploited to generate tension and mistrust.

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[149] Sputnik Moldova and the Kremlin's Propaganda Machinery in Moldova's Information Space. <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/sputnik-moldova-and-kremlins-propaganda-machinery-moldovas-information>

[150] Moldova's election and referendum - what's at stake? <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Moldovas-election-and-referendum-whats-at-stake/#:~:text=Kremlin%20backed%20political%20parties%2C%20such,spreading%20Russian%20propaganda%20and%20creating>

[151] Russia is playing harder for Moldova. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-04-02/russia-playing-harder-moldova#:~:text=separatist%20tendencies%20in%20the%20Autonomous,on%20wine%20from%20Moldova%20and>

[152] Idem

## ACTORS

**External actors (States).** The main external actor applying hybrid tactics in the Republic of Moldova is the Russian Federation. The Kremlin plays an open and aggressive role in attempting to influence Moldova's political direction, considering the country an area of strategic interest in the East-West dispute<sup>[153]</sup>.

**Internal actors (state and political).** Internally, there are political and institutional forces that facilitate, voluntarily or involuntarily, Moscow's agenda of influence. Pro-Russian parties and politicians, such as the Party of Socialists (PSRM) led by Igor Dodon or the Shor Party of fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, have acted as local promoters of the Kremlin's narratives. They have promoted anti-Western rhetoric, challenged the government's pro-EU rhetoric, and organized protests aimed at destabilizing the rule of law. In 2022–2023, the Shor Party orchestrated large-scale protests demanding the resignation of the pro-European government, taking advantage of public discontent over rising prices (against the backdrop of the regional energy crisis)<sup>[154]</sup>. This party was subsequently outlawed, being declared unconstitutional in June 2023 due to its involvement in corruption schemes and its active role in attempts to destabilize the country<sup>[155]</sup>.

Another domestic actor with a considerable impact on social cohesion is the Orthodox Church of Moldova, especially its wing subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. As the institution in which citizens have the highest level of trust, the Church becomes an ideal vehicle for spreading messages with partisan political content. The Orthodox Church of Moldova has, thus, become a transmitter for the narratives promoted by the Russian Federation, from opposition to pro-European legislation (anti-discrimination law, Istanbul Convention, etc.) on the grounds that it would undermine national traditions, to active participation in international events of the pro-Russian conservative movement (such as the World Congress of Families organized in Chisinau in 2018) aimed at spreading anti-Western and anti-liberal messages. The role of the Orthodox Church in Moldova, as an influential internal actor in social cohesion, is ambivalent: on the one hand, it has moral

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[153] What to know about Russian malign influence in Moldova's upcoming election. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-to-know-about-russian-malign-influence-in-moldovas-upcoming-election/#:~:text=On%20October%2020%2C%20Moldova%20faces,trying%20to%20sway%20the%20outcome>

[154] Exiled politician announces new Moldova party after ban. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exiled-politician-announces-new-moldova-party-after-ban-2023-06-27/>

[155] Moldova's election and referendum – what's at stake? <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Moldovas-election-and-referendum-whats-at-stake/#:~:text=Yet%2C%20the%20fact%20that%20EU,attacks%2C%20and%20illegal%20political%20financing>

authority and could unify society, but on the other hand, its partisan involvement has deepened social divisions and weakened resilience to foreign propaganda. The Orthodox Church of Moldova has frequently been involved in public discourse with political messages. Promoting the idea of "traditional values"<sup>[156]</sup> as opposed to the "decadent West"<sup>[157]</sup>, the Orthodox Church of Moldova has often positioned itself against Moldova's rapprochement with the EU, fueling the division of society on cultural, moral, and political issues<sup>[158]</sup>. The church leadership has openly criticized pro-European government reforms—such as the anti-discrimination law, the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, and the initiative to change the official name of the state language in the constitution—considering them a threat to Moldovan "traditions"<sup>[159]</sup>. At the same time, the Orthodox Church in Moldova and the clergy affiliated with Moscow have shown political partisanship: in election campaigns, the church has supported pro-Russian candidates (PSRM, PCRM) and discredited pro-Western ones, including Maia Sandu. This mixing of religion and politics, encouraged by Kremlin propaganda, undermines the neutral character of religious institutions and turns them into megaphones for foreign influence. In the current geopolitical context, the Republic of Moldova faces significant challenges related to the influence of internal and external actors on social cohesion and national security. This involvement has fueled the division of society on cultural, moral, and political issues<sup>[160]</sup>. At the same time, the Orthodox Church of Moldova and the clergy affiliated with Moscow have shown political partisanship, supporting pro-Russian candidates (PSRM, PCRM) in election campaigns and discrediting pro-Western ones, including Maia Sandu<sup>[161]</sup>. In 2016, during the presidential elections, Metropolitan (archbishop) Vladimir urged believers to vote for Igor Dodon, the pro-Russian candidate<sup>[162]</sup>.

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[156]NOTĂ: Valorile tradiționale se referă la un set de norme, credințe și practici culturale, sociale și morale care sunt transmise de-a lungul generațiilor și care reflectă obiceiurile, identitatea și structura socială a unei comunități sau societăți.

[157]NOTĂ: Occidentul decadent este un concept utilizat mai ales în discursurile critice sau propagandistice pentru a caracteriza societățile occidentale ca fiind aflate în declin moral, cultural și social. Termenul sugerează existența unor fenomene percepute negativ, precum liberalismul excesiv, pierderea valorilor tradiționale, consumismul exacerbant, individualismul egoist, declinul spiritual și al coeziunii sociale.

[158] In Church, we trust. The case of the Moldovan Orthodox Church. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/09/07/in-church-we-trust-the-case-of-the-moldovan-orthodox-church>

[159]Обращение молдавской православной церкви о ратификации Парламентом Республики Молдова Стамбульской Конвенции. <https://pravoslavie.md/obrashhenie-moldavskoj-pravoslavnoj-cerkvi-o-ratifikacii-parlamentom-respubliki-moldova-stambulskoj-konvencii/>

[160] Biserica Ortodoxă între cultură și politică în Republica Moldova. <https://platforma.md/archiv/386512>

[161] „Tabla de șah” a propagandei rusești în Republica Moldova, Georgia și Armenia: regi, regine și pionieri. <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/investigatii/social/tabla-de-sah-a-propagandei-rusesti-in-republica-moldova-regi-regine-si-pionieri>

[162] Religion in Moldova. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_in\\_Moldova](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Moldova)

[163] V. Sprințeană, S. Bejenari. Religie și Societate în Republica Moldova. Studiu de caz: Congresul Mondial al Familiilor. [https://www.academia.edu/39198868/Religie\\_%C8%99i\\_Societate\\_%C3%AEn\\_Republica\\_Moldova\\_Studiu\\_de\\_caz\\_Congresul\\_Mondial\\_al\\_Familiilor](https://www.academia.edu/39198868/Religie_%C8%99i_Societate_%C3%AEn_Republica_Moldova_Studiu_de_caz_Congresul_Mondial_al_Familiilor)

The Orthodox Church of Moldova has been a major vector in promoting anti-Western narratives, presenting European values as being in contradiction with Moldovan traditions. It actively participated in events such as the World Congress of Families, held in Chişinău in 2018, which brought together leaders of the religious conservative right wing from several countries and promoted an agenda against LGBTQI+ rights, abortion, and gender equality<sup>[163]</sup>. Influential priests, such as Ghenadie Valuţa, have also campaigned against the LGBTQI+ community and anti-discrimination legislation, participating in protests and symbolic actions aimed at stigmatising these groups<sup>[164]</sup>.

The Metropolis (Archbishopric) of Bessarabia, subordinate to the Romanian Patriarchate, condemned the involvement of priests in politics and strongly supported the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the EU<sup>[165]</sup>. This division between the two Metropolises deepened the spiritual, social, and political fractures in the Republic of Moldova, contributing to the destabilization of Orthodox communities in the country<sup>[166]</sup>.

The involvement of the Orthodox Church of Moldova in political discourse and its support for pro-Russian narratives can be considered components of a hybrid threat that influences social cohesion and national security. By promoting anti-Western messages and supporting pro-Russian political forces, it contributes to weakening the resilience of Moldovan society in the face of external influences. For example, in 2024, the Metropolis of Bessarabia accused priests from the rival branch, linked to Moscow, of campaigning against a referendum on Moldova's accession to the EU, actions considered offensive and directed against the spiritual and national unity of the country<sup>[167]</sup>. As mentioned, there are two Orthodox jurisdictions in the Republic of Moldova: the Metropolis of Moldova (subordinate to Moscow) and the Metropolis of Bessarabia (subordinate to the Romanian Patriarchate). The rivalry between them is often fueled by external factors. The Russian Orthodox Church, through its local structures, promotes the idea that Moldovan identity must remain distinct and that the influence of the

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[164] Ghenadie Valuţa. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghenadie\\_Valu%C8%9Ba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghenadie_Valu%C8%9Ba)

[165] Mitropolia Basarabiei condamnă implicarea politică a clerului din Republica Moldova în campaniile electorale. <https://www.mitropoliabasarabiei.md/comunicat-mitropolia-basarabiei-condamna-implicarea-politica-a-clerului-din-republica-moldova-in-campaniile-electorale/>

[166] Mitropolia Basarabiei condamnă implicarea preoţilor în politică şi susţine cu fermitate integrarea R. Moldova în UE. <https://newsmaker.md/ro/mitropolia-basarabiei-condamna-implicarea-preotilor-in-politica-si-sustine-cu-fermitate-integrarea-r-moldova-in-ue>

[167] Minority wing of Moldovan Orthodox church accuses priests of lobbying against Europe vote. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/minority-wing-moldovan-orthodox-church-accuses-priests-lobbying-against-europe-2024-09-26/>

Romanian Church is undesirable. There have been statements and actions aimed at maintaining this separation, for example, opposition to the opening of parishes of the Metropolis of Bessarabia or rhetoric that only the church subordinate to Moscow is legitimate in Moldova. These confessional tensions create rifts in the community of believers, and the direct involvement of the clergy in politics (as seen in the elections) emphasizes these divisions.

**Non-state actors and informal networks.** An important part of the ecosystem of influence is made up of non-governmental organizations and civic groups indirectly controlled by Russian interests. The So-called front NGOs are entities that present themselves as independent civic organizations but in reality promote the Kremlin's agenda, benefiting from obscure funding. Such organizations have proliferated over the past decade, eroding public trust in the genuine associative sector. For example, there have emerged cultural or religious associations that advocate for the "protection of traditional values" or for the permanent neutrality of the Republic of Moldova, but which disseminate messages synchronized with Russian propaganda against the West.

Media outlets controlled by pro-Russian actors (including locally funded portals and Russian broadcasts) intensively disseminate messages that idealize the Soviet past and criticize Moldova's pro-European orientation. They subtly promote nostalgia for the USSR, presented as a period of stability and prosperity – in contrast to the present, marked by economic uncertainty. At the same time, the Kremlin-affiliated press instigates fear that rapprochement with Romania or the West would equate to a loss of sovereignty and identity. For example, during election campaigns, pro-EU candidates were labeled as "agents of Romania," fueling fears that unification with Romania would bring major disadvantages to the country (economic colonization, the dissolution of the statehood, etc.). This propaganda machine has succeeded in polarizing nationalist narratives: for one part of the population, Romania and the West are scapegoats for internal problems, while for the other, Russia and Soviet nostalgics are the main obstacle to progress.

Another non-state vector of influence is local influencers and opinion leaders in the online environment. On social networks such as Facebook, Odnoklassniki, Telegram, or TikTok, certain commentators, bloggers, or local activists with a significant audience retransmit pro-Kremlin narratives, contributing to the formation of public perceptions.

For example, Natalia Parasca, leader of a small local party called "Renaissance," posted alarmist statements on her Telegram channel claiming that European integration would "threaten Moldova's traditional values"<sup>[168]</sup>. Her messages were picked up and amplified by news channels affiliated with the pro-Russian opposition, thus reaching a much wider audience and fueling anti-EU sentiment. Similarly, in rural communities, where alternative sources of information are scarce, informal leaders such as mayors, teachers, or priests can act as propagandists if they are ideologically co-opted. The SIS warned that in 2022–2023 there were cases where local leaders were used as an interface for external influence, for example, promoting false messages in favor of pro-Russian candidates in elections. Such local actors, benefiting from their capital of trust in the community, can amplify the impact of hybrid tactics on social cohesion.

In summary, the hybrid influence architecture in the Republic of Moldova comprises a diverse range of actors: external state actors (Russia and its diplomatic and intelligence extensions), internal state actors (politicians and local authorities affiliated with Russian interests), internal non-state actors (the pro-Moscow Orthodox Church, controlled NGOs, partisan media), and individuals with a public platform (influencers and opinion leaders). Acting in concert or independently, these actors exploit Moldova's structural vulnerabilities to achieve their common goal: dividing society and keeping the country within the Russian Federation's sphere of influence. Religious organizations and traditional social networks in the Republic of Moldova are often used as instruments of influence by external actors seeking to manipulate public opinion, deepen social divisions, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. The Orthodox Church of Moldova (canonically subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate) plays a central role. As the institution in which citizens have the greatest trust, the Church becomes an ideal vehicle for propaganda messages. Over the years, Moscow has used the Church as a soft power tool to amplify the importance of relations with Russia and disseminate conservative pro-Kremlin narratives. In rural areas, where over 60% of Moldova's population lives, priests have a particularly strong influence, as they are local opinion leaders in a context of limited information. At the same time, other local figures such as mayors and teachers enjoy a relatively high level of cross-ethnic trust in their communities<sup>[169]</sup>.

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[168] Integrarea europeană, o amenințare pentru valorile tradiționale ale R. Moldova. <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/fals-integrarea-europeana-o-amenintare-pentru-valorile-traditionale-ale-r-moldova-180892>

[169] Studiu sociologic: percepții publice cu privire la securitate. <https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Studiu-sociologic.pdf>

These community leaders can act as vectors of influence in both directions: either as promoters of cohesion and accurate information, or – if they are ideologically co-opted – as vehicles for spreading divisive narratives. It is relevant that, according to surveys, general trust in central state institutions is very low (only 17% in Parliament and 19% in the Government<sup>[170]</sup>). Thus, people tend to base their perceptions more on trusted local actors, which gives these leaders increased influence in shaping public opinion<sup>[171]</sup>. Trust in priests and other local figures (e.g., mayors, teachers) is still present, but not significantly differentiated by ethnic criteria, which indicates the potential of these figures to influence public opinion across the board. Only 35% of respondents nationwide say they "can trust most people around them," with the rest expressing distrust. This reflects a low level of social cohesion, but also increases the relevance of locally known authority figures. Mayors, teachers, and priests are mentioned as examples of local figures in whom the population tends to have a reasonable level of trust, although no detailed percentages are provided for each category.

During 2022–2023, SIS<sup>[172]</sup> observed an intensification of attempts at external interference in the internal affairs of the Republic of Moldova. These actions included using local leaders to influence public opinion and disseminate misinformation in favor of certain political candidates. The report elaborates on how these networks contributed to socio-political polarization and weakened social cohesion in the country.

In the context of the 2023 local elections, Moldovan authorities identified attempts to influence the electoral process through local leaders. These actions included spreading disinformation and using external resources to influence election results in favor of pro-Russian candidates.

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[170] Studiu sociologic: percepții publice cu privire la securitate. <https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Studiu-sociologic.pdf>

[171] Idem

[172] Raport SIS. [https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport%20SIS\\_0.pdf](https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport%20SIS_0.pdf)

**Table 2. Hybrid threats and countermeasures**

Targeted dimension	Hybrid threat	Impact	Countermeasures
<b>Societal cohesion</b>	Disinformation and fake news in the media	Social polarization, mistrust between groups	Media education, sanctions against television stations spreading misinformation Collaboration with moderate religious leaders monitoring of discourse
	Religious manipulation by clergy affiliated with Moscow	Community radicalization, hostility towards the EU	
<b>National identity</b>	Promoting the narrative of "separate Moldovanism"	Identity confusion, cultural conflicts	Civic campaigns for inclusive identity, curriculum reforms
<b>Regional component (Gagauzia, Transnistria)</b>	Instigation of autonomy/secession in Gagauzia	Weakening of central authority, danger of destabilization	Interinstitutional dialogue and regional socio-economic integration
<b>National identity</b>	Linguistic controversies ("Moldovan language")	Interethnic tensions and perception of cultural alienation	Legal clarification of the status of the language, reconciliation policies
<b>Regional component</b>	Pro-Russian propaganda in Transnistria and Gagauzia	Consolidation of pro-Russian enclaves, territorial division	Support for independent local media, cohesion projects

Source: created by the author

## SUBMINATION TACTICS AND EFFECTS

Hostile actors, especially the Russian Federation, use hybrid tactics to erode social cohesion and national security in the Republic of Moldova, combining systematic disinformation, exploitation of identity and linguistic divides, instrumentalisation of religion and traditional values, and influencing local leaders. These methods, often applied simultaneously, undermine public trust in institutions, polarize opinion, and fragment the information space. Rural and Russian-speaking communities are particularly vulnerable due to limited access to pluralistic sources and dependence on Russian media, which amplifies the impact of pro-Kremlin narratives. Ethnic minorities (Gagauz, Bulgarians, Russians, Ukrainians) show higher levels of acceptance of disinformation and increased trust in pro-Russian leaders, which fuels opposition to the pro-European government and support for pro-Moscow parties. This information compartmentalisation creates parallel realities and reduces society's ability to respond to threats in a unified manner.

### Exploiting historical and identity divisions

The Romanian-Moldovan identity issue remains a structural vulnerability, methodically exploited by rewriting historical memory and the controversy over

the "Moldovan language" vs. the Romanian language. Pro-Russian narratives cultivate the idea of a distinct Moldovan identity, culturally separate from Romania, presenting European integration as a threat to sovereignty. This polarization is amplified by the "us versus them" rhetoric promoted by political extremes, creating a false East-West dichotomy and preventing the formation of a national consensus. Perceptions of discrimination against minorities, fueled or exaggerated by propaganda, increase their receptivity to external interference and to the narrative that the Russian Federation is the guarantor of their rights. Overall, the exploitation of these divisions undermines internal cohesion, strengthens the dependence of certain segments of the population on Russian propaganda, and weakens the resilience of the State in an unstable geopolitical context.

**Table 3. Hybrid tactics and recommended responses**

Tactic used	Recommended response
Disinformation in traditional and online media	Media monitoring, CA sanctions, promotion of independent press
Proliferation of front NGOs with a pro-Russian agenda	Transparency of NGO funding, audits, legal regulation
Political involvement of the Moscow-affiliated Orthodox Church	Separation of church and state, dialogue with moderate religious leaders
Instrumentalization of local leaders (mayors, priests, teachers)	Training for local leaders, partnerships for community cohesion
Inciting regional separatism (e.g., UTA Gagauzia)	Strengthening autonomy within the legal framework, regional integration projects
Spreading divisive messages on social media	Media literacy campaigns, verified counter-narratives
Campaigns to denigrate pro-European leaders	Support for strategic government communication, rapid responses
Identity manipulation (historical, linguistic, religious)	Civic education, public campaigns on shared history and identity

*Source: created by the author*

## SCENARIOS

**In the optimistic scenario**, the authorities in Chişinău successfully implement reforms and resilience measures, supported by Western partners. Institutions cooperate effectively to combat disinformation and external interference, while the government clearly communicates the benefits of European integration. The Civil society, media, and local leaders, including religious leaders, become promoters of unity and social cohesion.

Against the backdrop of a favorable geopolitical context, with Russian influence on the decline, the Republic of Moldova advances on the path to EU accession, and citizens' trust in institutions gradually increases.

**In the pessimistic scenario**, the lack of a firm response to hybrid threats allows pro-Russian propaganda to spread, fueled by multiple crises and institutional passivity. Misinformation, radicalization of public discourse, and social discontent generate protests, instability, and the rise of anti-European forces. In this context, the risk of inter-ethnic tensions and state fragmentation increases, and Moldova's European prospects become increasingly fragile.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen social cohesion and increase Moldova's resilience to hybrid threats, we propose a set of measures structured around three areas: inclusive identity and civic education, strengthening civil society, and countering propaganda and disinformation.

Strengthening inclusive national identity and civic education by promoting a national narrative that reconciles diverse historical memories and ethnic identities. Authorities and opinion makers should emphasize both the cultural ties with Romania and the multicultural heritage of the Republic of Moldova in a balanced and inclusive manner. School curricula and cultural projects could reflect the contribution of all ethnic communities (Moldovans/Romanians, Russians, Ukrainians, Gagauz, Bulgarians, etc.) to foster cohesion.

Combating religious manipulation and building constructive partnerships with religious groups through active dialogue with moderate religious leaders can help promote messages of tolerance, peace, and unity, including through the involvement of the Metropolis of Bessarabia in social and cultural projects. Messages against hatred and misinformation can be conveyed through sermons or activities with young people. At the same time, it is necessary to monitor the public discourse of the clergy and sanction any deviations.

At the community level, access to pluralistic information in vulnerable rural areas can be expanded through the Internet, public libraries, and information caravans to reduce vulnerability to propaganda.

## IX. WAR WITHOUT TANKS: CYBERSPACE UNDER ATTACK

### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

Despite recent modernization initiatives, Moldova's cybersecurity infrastructure remains significantly below NATO and EU standards, creating major vulnerabilities that can be exploited by hostile actors. Technical analysis highlights three critical deficiencies that increase the exposure of government institutions and critical infrastructure to sophisticated attacks:

- Structural deficiencies in security architecture due to the lack of network segmentation and modern multi-factor authentication mechanisms in government institutions expose sensitive data and critical systems to increased risks of unauthorized access, according to the findings of the OECD Digital Government Review – Republic of Moldova, 2023.
- Absence of a unified incident management framework. Many public institutions do not have standardized procedures for identifying, reporting, and investigating cyber-attacks, which delays operational response and increases post-incident recovery time, as shown by the ENISA National Capabilities Assessment, 2024.
- Outdated technological infrastructure and the widespread use of obsolete IT equipment and software (including operating systems without official support) limit the possibility of applying security updates, leaving multiple vulnerabilities exploitable by state and non-state actors, according to the Microsoft Digital Defense Report, 2024.



Source: created by the author

In 2022-2024, over 5,000 major cyber incidents were reported in the Republic of Moldova. This is the highest number recorded to date, with the largest increase coming from phishing attacks<sup>[173]</sup>. In the Republic of Moldova faces four predominant types of cyber threats. According to the Information and Security Service, these are: phishing attacks DDOS<sup>[174]</sup>, , phishing via government emails, brute force attacks to gain access to government information systems, and breaches of official websites. The most dangerous are considered to be DDOS (Distributed Denial of Service) attacks, which involve flooding a server or network with excessive traffic to make them unavailable. These have grown steadily in size and sophistication, but 2023 accelerated the growth trend at an unprecedented rate.

The accelerated digital transformation of public services and the widespread adoption of connected technologies, in the absence of robust national security controls, have significantly amplified Moldova's attack surface. This dynamic explains the correlation between the increased interconnectivity and the frequency/severity of reported incidents, a trend confirmed by the ITU-UN assessment of the lack, until 2023, of a mature national CERT and mandatory incident reporting, which has delayed the standardization of institutional defense and response.

Attacks range from phishing and ransomware<sup>[175]</sup> to advanced and persistent operations (APTs) targeting critical infrastructure, and the timeline of recent years shows an increase in intensity and synchronization with sensitive political moments: in October 2022, 80 government systems were targeted in DDoS waves,<sup>[176]</sup> in September 2023, several media sites were temporarily taken offline by coordinated DDoS attacks, and in March-May 2024, the pro-Russian group NoName057a claimed responsibility for over 50 web targets in the Republic of Moldova, and in October 2024, the Parliament's email server was compromised just before the elections and constitutional referendum.

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[173] NOTĂ: Phishing reprezintă o tentativă de furt a informațiilor cu caracter personal sau de obținere în mod fraudulos a accesului la conturile online

[174] NOTĂ: Denial of Service este un atac asupra unui computer sau asupra unei rețele cu scopul de a reduce/restricționa accesul utilizatorilor legitimi

[175] NOTĂ: Ransomware-ul este un tip de software rău intenționat sau malware pe care infractorii cibernetici îl utilizează pentru a bloca accesul, a distruge sau a publica datele critice ale unei victime dacă nu se plătește o răscumpărare.

At the same time, the SIS<sup>[177]</sup> documented hybrid interference in electoral processes (including cyber and information components). Politically motivated APT and "hack-and-lead" operations, attributed to pro-Russian actors in independent analyses, targeted the credibility of institutions and exploited unequal defensive capabilities. This development is in line with ENISA's findings<sup>[178]</sup> regarding the increase in the activity of state/proxy actors in the region and RUSI's assessments<sup>[179]</sup> about the intensification of cyber campaigns against the Republic of Moldova after 2022.

Table 1 presents data collected by the HTTPCS Cyber Map platform for the Republic of Moldova, ranked 76th globally in terms of the number and type of cyber threats detected. Noteworthy is the very high volume of malicious IP addresses identified – 1,703 – which indicates a constant presence of infrastructures used for attacks in the Moldovan digital space. The next largest category is vulnerable websites (420), followed by phishing websites (155) and malicious websites (87). Although the number of incidents involving malware providers (34) and hacked websites (27) is relatively small, they indicate successful attacks with the potential to deeply compromise the targeted infrastructure. The data indicates that the main vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova stem from the persistence of compromised infrastructures within national networks and the high exposure of institutional and commercial websites to attacks. This situation highlights the urgency of a national campaign to audit the cybersecurity of “.gov.md” and commercial “.md” domains, in parallel with the proactive blocking of detected malicious IP addresses.

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[176] Moldova's government hit by flood of phishing attacks.

<https://therecord.media/moldovas-government-hit-by-flood-of-phishing-attacks>

[177] External interference in electoral processes in the Republic of Moldova. <https://sis.md/en/content/external-interference-electoral-processes-republic-moldova?ut>

[178] 2024 Report on the State of the Cybersecurity in the Union. <https://www.enisa.europa.eu/publications/2024-report-on-the-state-of-the-cybersecurity-in-the-union>

[179] Battening Down the Hatches: Moldova's Cyber Defence. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/battening-down-hatches-moldovas-cyber-defence>

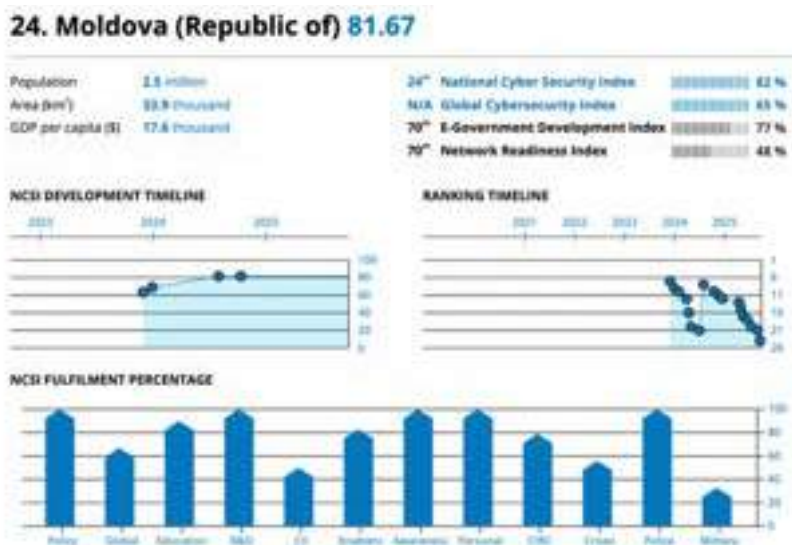
Fig. 1. Cyber attacks on the Republic of Moldova



Source: Cyber map, HTTPCS<sup>[180]</sup>, analysis of the Republic of Moldova.

According to the Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI), the Republic of Moldova **ranks 63rd**. The GCI classifies each country's level of development based on its legal, technical, and organizational measures, as well as its capacity building and cooperation in the field of cybersecurity. Although the GCI assesses Moldova's technical cybersecurity measures as "relatively strong," its organization and capacity development need improvement. Other recommendations from the GCI include developing a strategy for critical infrastructure protection and systematically implementing information security management systems, which will require an increase in the number of relevant ministries certified to the ISO 27001 standard. The implementation of ISO 27001 certification in government institutions would ensure a coherent information security management framework, significantly reducing the risk of data compromise and improving incident response capabilities, which would strengthen the confidence of international partners and align the Republic of Moldova with EU and NATO standards on cyber resilience.

Fig.4. Statistical profile of the Republic of Moldova in the field of cyber security



Source: Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI)<sup>[181]</sup>, Moldova

According to the USAID report and data provided by CERT-GOV-MD (Computer Emergency Response Team of the Government of Moldova), the number of cyber attacks has increased significantly in recent years<sup>[182]</sup>.

The table below summarizes the main cyber tactics identified as being used against the Republic of Moldova, both by state and non-state actors. These methods range from attacks with a direct impact on critical infrastructure (DDoS, APT, ransomware) to operations that exploit technical and cognitive vulnerabilities (exploitation of software vulnerabilities, automated disinformation). The data show a rapid increase in the volume and complexity of these tactics, with alarming figures such as 250 DDoS incidents in the first quarter of 2023 alone and significantly increased rates of ransomware and phishing over the last two years.

**Table 1. Cyberattack tactics**

Tactic used	Description
<b>DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service)</b>	Attacks that flood servers with traffic to make them unavailable. DDoS attacks have increased in intensity, with 250 incidents reported in the first quarter of 2023 alone.
<b>APT Advanced Persistent Threats</b>	Well-funded and orchestrated attacks, usually by states or organized groups. APTs are difficult to detect and can cause significant damage to critical infrastructure.
<b>Ransomware</b>	Malicious software that blocks access to data until a ransom is paid. Ransomware cases have increased by 50% in the last two years, affecting both public institutions and private companies.
<b>Phishing</b>	Fraudulent emails designed to obtain sensitive information from users. In 2023, there was a 45% increase in phishing attacks compared to the previous year.
<b>Malware and Ransomware</b>	The implantation of malicious programs in critical systems to block access or steal data.
<b>Exploiting Software Vulnerabilities</b>	Using security breaches in programs used by state institutions.
<b>Automated disinformation</b>	Using bots to amplify false narratives on social media.
<b>Attacks on supply chains</b>	Compromising IT service providers to gain access to critical national infrastructure.

Source: created by the author

Analysis of attack types reveals that the Republic of Moldova is exposed to a full spectrum of cyber threats, requiring an integrated defense approach that combines advanced technical measures, staff training, and international cooperation. Prioritizing defense against tactics with immediate impact and expanding real-time detection and response capabilities are essential for reducing risk and strengthening national cyber resilience.

**Spotlight** - Cases of attacks on communications within the Parliament in December 2024 and on the Presidential Administration (2023). Attacks on the CEC during the presidential elections and referendum in November 2024.

Analysis of the cyber tactics used against the Republic of Moldova demonstrates not only the diversity of attack vectors, but also their high degree of sophistication. A full understanding of the threat requires the precise identification of the actors behind these operations and the correlation of their modus operandi with their strategic objectives. Recent operational data and incident history confirm the direct involvement of the Russian Federation's special services and affiliated cyber groups. Below, we present an overview of the main state actors involved in cyber campaigns against the Republic of Moldova and its allies. The analysis combines data from open sources and information from operational reports by SIS and CERT-GOV-MD, correlated with attack patterns identified in other theaters of operations (Ukraine, EU, US). The overview provides essential context for understanding the motivations and methods used, as well as for anticipating future hostile actions. Key questions answered in this section are: Which are the main Russian special services involved and which cyber groups do they coordinate? What types of targets do they prioritize and what impact do their attacks have? How do these attacks align with the Russian Federation's geopolitical objectives in the region?

Fig. 2. Russian special services involved in cyber operations



Source: The cyber shafarat – membership only site.

<https://cybershafarat.com/2021/11/26/overview-of-russian-government-hacking-strategy-and-disinformation-arrows-in-the-quiver/>

## ACTORS INVOLVED

### 1. GRU (Military Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation)

In the context of hybrid warfare, the GRU is not limited to cyber operations. In addition to destabilizing democratic institutions, collecting sensitive information, and sabotaging critical infrastructure, the GRU also conducts information warfare activities, coordinates clandestine operations on the ground (physical sabotage, undercover operations), and provides logistical support to proxy actors in the region. This broad spectrum of actions allows cyber attacks to be integrated into more complex hybrid strategies, in which technical components are synchronized with political, economic, and informational pressures. Destabilization of democratic institutions, collection of sensitive information, and sabotage of critical infrastructure. Attacks on the IT infrastructure of government institutions, disinformation campaigns, and coordinated cyber attacks. Over 120 attacks reported in 2022 on IT infrastructure, rising to 150 in 2023. In 2024, and to date, 100 targeted attacks have been identified. According to SIS assessments and independent analyses (RUSI, CCDCOE), GRU's activity is responsible for over 40% of all cyber attacks attributed to state actors in the 2022–2024 period, having the greatest disruptive impact on government infrastructure and electoral processes. Unlike other entities (FSB, SVR), the GRU has a more aggressive and immediate-effect approach, which makes it more dangerous in critical phases of the domestic political cycle.

### FSB (Federal Security Service of Russia)

Cyber espionage and undermining the national security of the Republic of Moldova. Infiltration of communications networks, collection of confidential data, and manipulation of critical infrastructure. Between 2022 and 2024, 85 cases of cyber espionage linked to the FSB were identified.

### Hackers coordinated by Russian state actors:

- APT28 (Fancy Bear): Specialises in attacks on government institutions, political parties and independent media. Phishing campaigns and attacks on IT infrastructure to extract confidential information. Over 50 attacks reported between 2022 and 2023 on independent media networks. During the same period, APT28 was involved in coordinated DDoS campaigns against TV8 media sites and other pro-European journalism platforms in Moldova, targeted particularly on critical days, such as the publication of anti-corruption investigations and election coverage. These attacks were reported by press freedom monitoring organizations<sup>[183]</sup>.

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[183] Poșta electronică oficială a TV8, expusă unui atac cibernet. Precizările instituției.  
<https://mediacritica.md/posta-electronica-oficiala-a-tv8-expusa-unui-atac-cibernet-precizarile-institutiei/>

- **APT29 (Cozy Bear):** Focused on long-term cyber espionage. Deployment of sophisticated malware for unauthorized access and long-term data collection. Attacks reported in 2023 compromised the data of 12 government institutions.

## TARGETS

Cyber attacks target four main clusters: central/local public institutions, critical infrastructure, civic space and independent media, and the general public (through phishing and disruption of online services).

### **1) Government institutions (ministries, agencies, local authorities)**

– In October 2024, the Parliament's email servers were hit by a cyberattack around the time of the elections and the referendum, compromising some information, as publicly confirmed by the institution and reported by the cybersecurity press. The action was part of a broader wave of election-oriented interference<sup>[184]</sup>. The SIS officially reported, in the plenary session of the Parliament (2024), hybrid interference in electoral processes, including cyber and information components, with external vectors and local proxy actors<sup>[185]</sup>. Institutional response capabilities were assessed as insufficiently mature by the UN/ITU (CERT Assessment), highlighting the lack of an operational national CERT and standardized drills/reporting by 2023 — a factor that increases the risk in the public institutions segment <sup>[186]</sup>.

### **2) Critical infrastructure (energy, telecoms, finance and banking, health)**

– In March–May 2024, pro-Russian hacktivists NoName057 (16) claimed responsibility for a DDoS campaign against Moldova, with over 50 web targets (including telecoms and online public services), confirmed by independent analysis<sup>[187]</sup>. The financial sector in the region (including Moldova in the scope) saw an increase in availability attacks and incidents with operational impact (Jan. 2023–June 2024), according to the ENISA report – Finance Threat Landscape 2024. This European trend, which is also relevant for neighboring markets, highlights the need to test resilience at the national level<sup>[188]</sup>. On early voting day, the voteaza.md portal suffered a DDoS attack that degraded availability, with authorities (STISC) announcing that the threat had been neutralized and data integrity ensured. The case illustrates the vulnerabilities of digital services of public interest at critical moments

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[184] Unprecedented' interference targets Moldova's elections. <https://therecord.media/unprecedented-interference-moldova-elections-cyberattack>

[185] Imixtiunea externă în procesele electorale din Republica Moldova. <https://sis.md/ro/content/imixtiunea-extern%C4%83-%C3%AEn-procesele-electorale-din-republica-moldova>

[186] Assessment Report of Moldova. National Computer Incident Response Team (CIRT-MD) December 2022. <https://moldova.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/CIRT-Assessment-Moldova-final.pdf>

[187] Moldova Faces a Wave of DDoS Attacks. <https://www.netscout.com/blog/asert/moldova-faces-wave-ddos-attacks>

[188] Enisa threat landscape: finance sector. [https://www.enisa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-02/Finance%20TL%202024\\_Final.pdf](https://www.enisa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025-02/Finance%20TL%202024_Final.pdf)

**3) Civil society and independent media.** SIS and the European Parliament have reported Russian hybrid interference, including cyber and disinformation components targeting pro-European actors and democratic institutions — a context that explains why independent media outlets and NGOs are recurring targets <sup>[190]</sup>. In the context of the 2024 DDoS waves, media sites and NGOs reported temporary interruptions/access difficulties, correlated with hacktivist claims and sensitive moments on the public agenda (investigations, campaigns). NETSCOUT documents the intensification of targeting of civic/informative sites in Moldova <sup>[191]</sup>.

**4) The general public: disruption, phishing, erosion of trust**

– STISC warned (June 2025) about phishing campaigns abusing the "CERT-GOV-MD" brand, targeting citizens with false messages and coercive response deadlines — typical tactics for data collection/malware installation <sup>[192]</sup>. At the European level, ENISA Threat Landscape 2024 notes that threats to availability (e.g., DDoS) and ransomware dominate, which, transposed to Moldova, explains why attacks on public online services during sensitive political periods have a disproportionate effect on trust in institutions <sup>[193]</sup>. The combined targeting of institutions, critical services, and civic space aims to gradually degrade the state's ability to provide services and social consensus on the European direction. Documented cases (Parliament/email, CEC/voteaza.md, DDoS waves on services and media) indicate a pattern of synchronization with electoral moments and national security issues. The optimal response involves (i) hardening and continuity measures for critical public services (including electoral portals), (ii) rapid sharing of IoC/TTP at regional level (ENISA, NATO), (iii) targeted cyber literacy for journalists/NGOs, and (iv) an EU-aligned regulatory framework for incident reporting and resilience testing (NIS2/DORA).

## IMPACT

The impact of hybrid attacks on the Republic of Moldova deeply affects all aspects of society and the economy. The blocking of essential public services through DDoS attacks has led to significant disruptions in government activity and the inability of citizens to access critical services at the right time.

[190] SIS a acționat pentru a contracara tentativele de interferență străină și destabilizare. <https://sis.md/ro/content/sis-ac%C8%9Bionat-pentru-contracara-tentativele-de-interferen%C8%9B%C4%83-str%C4%83in%C4%83-%C8%99i-destabilizare>; Parliament condemns Russia's interference in Moldova. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241003IPR24421/parliament-condemns-russia-s-interference-in-moldova>

[191] Moldova Faces a Wave of DDoS Attacks. <https://www.netscout.com/blog/asert/moldova-faces-wave-ddos-attacks>

[192] STISC atenționează: mai mulți cetățeni au primit mesaje false, cu utilizarea ilegală a denumirii CERT-GOV-MD. <https://www.moldpres.md/rom/societate/stisc-atentioneaza-mai-multi-cetateni-au-primit-mesaje-false-cu-utilizarea-ilegala-a-denumirii-cert-gov-md>

[193] Enisa Threat Landscape: finance sector. [https://securitydelta.nl/media/com\\_hsd/report/690/document/ENISA-Threat-Landscape-2024.pdf](https://securitydelta.nl/media/com_hsd/report/690/document/ENISA-Threat-Landscape-2024.pdf)

These security breaches have exposed institutional weaknesses, increasing public frustration and diminishing citizens' confidence in the State's ability to protect its digital infrastructure. In addition, the economic losses resulting from ransomware attacks have destabilized financial institutions, leaving deep scars on the budgets of affected organizations and the national economy.

Beyond the economic impact, these attacks have compromised national security, with access to sensitive data weakening Moldova's ability to defend itself against other threats. Disinformation has polarized the society and deepened political and social divisions. Meanwhile, attacks on energy infrastructure have created serious vulnerabilities for public safety. Massive power outages underscore the dependence on well-protected infrastructure. The impact of these attacks reflects the need for urgent and coordinated measures to improve the State's cyber resilience.

## RESPONSE MEASURES

In a cybersecurity environment characterized by increasingly sophisticated attacks synchronized with sensitive political or economic events, Moldova's ability to respond quickly and effectively becomes a critical element of national resilience. The measures implemented so far reflect both domestic efforts and international collaboration, but their effectiveness depends on consistent implementation, modernization, and interoperability.

**1. The National Cybersecurity Strategy**, a framework document that includes critical infrastructure protection, CERT capability development, and increased cybersecurity literacy. Although the strategy has created a policy framework, implementation has been uneven, with delays in adopting mandatory standards for critical sectors. According to the ITU-GCI 2023 assessment, Moldova has made progress on the "technical measures" dimension but lags behind on "organization and capacity development."

**2. Creation of CERT-GOV-MD** to respond to cybersecurity incidents, providing technical support, forensic analysis, and coordination with other teams in the region. Since 2022, CERT-GOV-MD has handled over 5,000 reported incidents, mostly phishing and DDoS attacks. However, current human and technological resources are insufficient to cover the needs of all public institutions, especially in scenarios of simultaneous attacks on multiple sectors.

**3. International collaboration** through active partnerships with NATO, the EU, and the US has enabled rapid exchange of indicators of compromise (IoC) and access to exercises such as "Cyber Europe" (ENISA) and "Locked Shields" (NATO CCDCOE). These collaborations have improved the response capacity to large-scale DDoS attacks (e.g., the NoName057(16) wave in March–May 2024), but there are still gaps in the integration of international procedures into domestic legislation and operations.

## CONCLUSION

Cyber resilience is the ability to withstand, absorb, and recover quickly from cyber attacks, minimizing critical disruptions and operational losses. In the Republic of Moldova, developing this resilience is a strategic priority, given that critical infrastructure—energy networks, financial systems, and communications—still use technologies that are on average more than 10 years old, according to an audit conducted by STISC in 2023. The lack of security updates and dependence on end-of-life software increase the risk of exploitation by hostile actors. An illustrative example is the incident in March 2024, when a series of DDoS attacks on the telecommunications network management system caused temporary degradation of services for over 200,000 users, according to the CERT-GOV-MD report. The lack of a redundant backup architecture and fully automated failover procedures prolonged the recovery period to nearly 9 hours.

**Fig.3. Pillars of cyber resilience (translation needed)**



Source: Prepared by the author

To reduce this risk, it is essential to implement strict security protocols, perform regular penetration tests, and adopt distributed backup systems. Continuous security audits, in accordance with standards such as ISO 27001 and NIST Cybersecurity Framework, would increase compliance with international best practices.

The ability to respond quickly and effectively can be strengthened by expanding CERT teams at the national level, equipping them with state-of-the-art resources and technology (including AI-based detection systems), and organizing regular exercises and simulations, such as "Cyber Europe" (ENISA) or "Locked Shields" (CCDCOE/NATO). These international partnerships not only provide access to critical information and expertise, but also facilitate the exchange of indicators of compromise (IoC) and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) in real time.

With hybrid and cyber attacks on the rise, cyber resilience must be treated as a central element of national security. Investments in modernizing critical infrastructure, training specialists, and interoperability with EU and NATO cyber defense networks will determine Moldova's ability to withstand and adapt to emerging threats.

## X. CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER PRESSURE: FROM DELEGITIMIZATION TO COERCION

### CONTEXT AND PREMISES

Civil society organizations (CSOs), as formal structures of society, have been and continue to be an important agent of change in the Republic of Moldova. Over the past twenty years, CSOs have been the driving force behind change in promoting and protecting democratic institutions and human rights. Despite these contributions to public perception, the activities and results of the associative sector are insufficiently known and still misunderstood by most in the society. The associative sector in the Republic of Moldova emerged and took shape after the breakup of the Soviet Union, and its development has been supported significantly by the Republic of Moldova's international partners.

Due to the influence of CSOs in bringing about social change, they have become the target of constant campaigns of undermining and marginalization by those who want to reduce their role in society. In recent years, attacks against CSOs and institutions specializing in the defense of human rights (HRDs) have intensified.

The tactics directed against the associative sector aim to discredit civil society organizations (CSOs) and reduce their capacity for action through hybrid attacks on their reputational, financial, and informational resources, as well as by diverting their functions for illicit purposes. Civil society organizations are a pillar of democratic functioning and social cohesion in the Republic of Moldova, making essential contributions in areas such as local development, social inclusion, civic education, human rights defense, and the promotion of European values. They manage networks of medical and social assistance services for vulnerable segments of the population, organize educational programs, and train pro-European political leaders, including current members of the government and parliament. However, due to the limited trust placed in certain organizations by direct beneficiaries, the associative sector has failed to consolidate a robust public image, which makes it vulnerable to systematic smear campaigns carried out by actors hostile to democracy, particularly from the Russian Federation. Sabotaging the work of CSOs affects not only the entities targeted, but also society's ability to respond to challenges in a unified manner, thus, undermining the state's resilience to hybrid threats and eroding the foundations of civic participation.

## ATTACK TACTICS USED AGAINST CIVIL SOCIETY

**Denigrating civil society organizations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs) is a threat to the reputation and trust of CSOs in society.** This tactic manifests itself through the spread of accusations that promote falsehoods about the activities, goals, and funding of CSOs and HRDs, often using hate speech and messages that stigmatize the LGBTQ+ community. Civil society organizations are portrayed as instruments of influence and interests that destabilize the country, undermine sovereignty, and promote foreign values. The purpose of these narratives is to create and maintain a negative image of the associative sector, applying labels such as "Sorosists," "coffebreakers," and "foreign agents."

The narratives are usually reproduced through articles in the media, posts on social networks, messages distributed through communication applications, news channels, statements at public events, press conferences or live broadcasts on networks, which are then picked up by various media outlets. These attacks increase in intensity around political events, democratic reforms, and initiatives to promote European integration, suggesting a deliberate intention to undermine efforts that support transparency, accountability, and democracy. For example, in 2024, approximately 50 episodes of attacks against CSOs and ADOs were recorded and documented<sup>[194]</sup>.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) is a tactic typically used by politicians against the media (including non-commercial organizations). The purpose of SLAPP is to intimidate and silence media outlets that express public opinion through costly and lengthy lawsuits. SLAPP discourages public participation in matters of public interest by creating a financial threat or consuming time and resources that media outlets find difficult to cope with<sup>[195]</sup>. Between 2019 and 2023, out of the 37 cases against the media resolved by the Supreme Court of Justice, 70% were dismissed, suggesting that they were attempts to silence the media (SLAPP)<sup>[196]</sup>. The high frequency of these cases, which were subsequently dismissed by higher courts, indicates a clear trend of using the justice system as a tool to intimidate and control inconvenient media outlets.

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[194] [Radiografia atacurilor asupra Organizațiilor Societății Civile și Apărătorilor Drepturilor Omului din Republica Moldova 1 ianuarie 2024 - 28 februarie 2025.](#)

[195] [Indicele privind situația presei din Republica Moldova în anul 2024 \(2025\).](#) <https://cji.md/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Indicele-privind-Situatia-Presei-din-Republica-Moldova-in-anul-202.pdf>

[196] [Libertatea de exprimare a mass-mediei în fața justiției, \(2024\),](#) <https://crjm.org/libertatea-de-exprimare-a-mass-mediei-in-fata-justitiei-cum-combatem-procesele-judiciare-menite-sa-reduca-la-tacere-jurnalistii/23189/>

**Withdrawal of international funding for CSOs.** According to the Contact Center survey, "Survey: What do Moldovans think about CSOs?"<sup>[197]</sup> 73% of civil society organizations in the Republic of Moldova are dependent on international donors. Alternative funding instruments are underdeveloped and cover only a small part of the funding needs of CSOs in Moldova. The withdrawal of international funding would be equivalent to a collapse of the sector. Although there have been no legislative initiatives such as the "law on foreign agents" under the pro-European leadership in Chisinau in recent years, such initiatives were proposed under previous illiberal and pro-Russian governments. The cessation of US funding in early 2025 led to the partial materialisation of the threat of withdrawal of international funding and put several CSOs and non-profit media outlets whose activities depended on these resources in difficulty. As a result, some organizations ceased their activities, projects and initiatives with potential beneficial impact on the population were halted, and a significant segment of employees in the sector was temporarily left without income. The large-scale cessation of international funding leads to the depletion of resources and the weakening of civil society initiatives. As experience in the Russian Federation, the Republic of Belarus, and Azerbaijan shows, prolonged underfunding of the associative sector has made it deeply vulnerable and turned it into an actor with no influence in public life.

In April 2025, a group of parliamentarians from the Communist and Socialist Bloc registered a draft law on the status of foreign agents in the Republic of Moldova, which targets organizations receiving international funding. The bill provides for mandatory registration, quarterly reporting, public labeling of materials with the label "foreign agent," sanctions, and drastic controls, including the suspension or dissolution of CSOs receiving international funding.

Essentially, the draft law is designed to restrict civic space and silence independent voices in civil society. It would significantly affect the legal and financial viability of CSOs, their reputation, public support, and ability to fulfill their role in a democratic society. The law would effectively exclude CSOs from political and civic life, thereby violating freedom of association, freedom of expression, and the right to participate in decision-making.

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[197] Sondaj: Ce cred moldovenii despre OSC-uri?, 2024, <https://contact.md/sondaj-pestre-50-la-suta-dintre-moldoveni-au-incredere-in-osc-uri/>

Although there is little chance that the bill will be adopted by the pro-European parliamentary majority, it represents a significant threat to civil society and democratic principles. In view of the parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2025, this bill indicates the direction taken by parties with anti-EU agendas and a preference for the liberal model applied by other states in the region.

The bill is part of a broader pattern of actions observed in several countries in the region (most recently Georgia) where the adoption of legislation on "foreign agents" marked an essential step in the process of systematically restricting, through legal means, the scope of action of non-commercial organizations. Such legislative initiatives have been used to discredit civil society, reduce its access to external resources, and undermine the ability of organizations to monitor governance, promote human rights, and participate in the democratic process.

### **Misuse and exploitation of CSOs for illicit purposes**

A series of illegal actions aimed at supporting and promoting the interests of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova were carried out through a non-governmental organization organized by the Russian government<sup>[198]</sup>. Evrazia was registered in April 2024 in the Russian Federation and began its activities immediately in the same year. The organization is led by individuals associated with a convicted criminal (Ilan Shor), who is a fugitive in the Russian Federation.

Initially, the organization carried out seemingly harmless cultural and social activities in the Republic of Moldova, such as study visits and participation in cultural and social events in the Russian Federation for Moldovan citizens<sup>[199]</sup>. Evrazia became notorious after the General Inspectorate of the Police<sup>[200]</sup> discovered that it was involved in illicit schemes that included illegal financing and influencing elections by facilitating the transport of money for destabilizing activities and vote buying, and training young people for destabilization<sup>[201]</sup>: Evrazia sent over 300 young people from Moldova to Moscow, where they were trained in techniques for provoking and organizing mass unrest.

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[198] Evrazia. <https://evrazia.su/>

[199] Cum sute de tineri moldoveni sînt duși în vizite la Moscova de o organizație a lui Șor (2024). <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cum-sute-de-tineri-moldoveni-sunt-dusi-la-moscova-de-o-organizatie-a-lui-sor/33058106.html>; Voluntarii" discreditării referendumului - cum Șor destabilizează situația din Moldova prin proiectul Eurasia. <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/investigatii/social/voluntarii-discreditarii-referendumului-cum-sor-destabilizeaza-situatia-din-moldova-prin-proiectul-eurasia>

Furthermore, the organization hosted two call centers used to contact voters and influence the vote in the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum in October 2024<sup>[202]</sup>.

Non-commercial organizations in the Russian Federation can thus be a tool for hybrid attacks in other states, by carrying out illegal activities of financing, electoral manipulation, and destabilization, under the cover of cultural and social activities. The more unlikely it seems for these non-commercial organisations to carry out such actions, the more effective their instrumentalization is. This aims not only to achieve the element of surprise, but also to turn the entire associative sector into a legitimate target for countermeasures by national authorities.

### **Draft law on the status of foreign agents in the Republic of Moldova**

In April 2025, a group of parliamentarians from the Communist and Socialist Bloc registered a draft law targeting organizations that receive international funding. The draft law provides for mandatory registration, quarterly reporting, public labeling of materials with the label "foreign agent," sanctions, and drastic controls, including the suspension or dissolution of CSOs that receive international funding. Essentially, the bill is designed to restrict civic space and silence independent voices in civil society. It would significantly affect the legal and financial viability of CSOs, their reputation, public support, and ability to fulfill their role in a democratic society. The law would effectively exclude CSOs from political and civic life, thereby violating freedom of association, freedom of expression, and the right to participate in decision-making.

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[200] Noi metode de finanțare ilegală a unor partide politice documentate de PA și INI, 03.10.2024, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/live-mai-multi-tineri-cu-finantarea-lui-ilan-sor-si-sub-paravanul-ong-ului-evrazia-au-trecut-instruiri-la-moscova-pentru-a-crea-destabilizari-in-r-moldova-spun-oamenii-legii/>;

Briefing de presă susținut de șeful Inspectoratului General al Poliției, 24.10.2024, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/live-mai-multi-tineri-cu-finantarea-lui-ilan-sor-si-sub-paravanul-ong-ului-evrazia-au-trecut-instruiri-la-moscova-pentru-a-crea-destabilizari-in-r-moldova-spun-oamenii-legii>

[201] Cei peste 100 de tineri instruiți în Rusia pentru dezordini în masă în Moldova nu-și vor putea implementa planul: 88 percheziții în țară și o captură de 1.600.000 lei. <https://procuratura.md/pccocs/ru/comunicate/comunicate-de-presa/cei-peste-100-de-tineri-instruiti-rusia-pentru-dezordini-masa>

[202] În spatele grupării Șor se află serviciile secrete ruse: Licența primită de „Evrazia” de la FSB, casa în care locuiește oligarhul fugar și vecinii condamnatului. <https://www.ziarulnational.md/dovezi-in-spatele-gruparii-sor-se-afla-serviciile-secrete-ruse-licenta-primita-de-evrazia-de-la-fsb-casa-in-care-locuieste-oligarhul-fugar-si-vecinii-fugarului/>

Although there is little chance that the bill will be adopted by the pro-European parliamentary majority, it represents a significant threat to civil society and democratic principles. In view of the parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2025, this bill indicates the direction taken by parties with anti-EU programmes and their preference for the liberal model applied by other States in the region.

The bill is a clear attempt to restrict civic space and intimidate CSOs that receive international support. Its emergence signals a real risk of democratic backsliding and a possible future shift towards repressive models in the region.

**Table 1. Summary of hybrid attacks on CSOs, their impact, and countermeasures applied**

Hybrid attacks	Impact	Măsurile de contracarare
<b>Denigration of civil society organizations (CSOs) and human rights defenders (HRDs)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decreased public trust in CSOs</li> <li>- Decreased public trust in CSOs and HRDs.</li> <li>- Isolation of these actors in the civic and political space.</li> <li>- Human rights defenders becoming vulnerable to attacks and harassment.</li> <li>- Demobilization of citizens and discouragement of civic engagement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Public campaigns to actively promote the positive impact of CSOs in communities.</li> <li>· Creation of solidarity coalitions between CSOs and independent journalists.</li> <li>· Promotion of draft laws to protect CSOs and ADOs (e.g., the Law on the Protection of ADOs, the Law on Anti-SLAPP Measures).</li> </ul>
<b>Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intimidating activists and organizations through costly and lengthy lawsuits.</li> <li>- Inhibition of freedom of expression and self-censorship.</li> <li>- Redirecting resources to legal defense at the expense of civic activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Promoting a bill that prevents and punishes abuse of procedural law (Law on anti-SLAPP measures based on the model of the "Daphne Law" / EU Directive 2024/1069)</li> <li>· Grant specialized legal assistance for SLAPP victims.</li> <li>· Reporting SLAPP cases to external partners.</li> </ul>

<p>Withdrawal of international funding for CSOs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reduced capacity to implement social, educational, or advocacy projects.</li> <li>- Increased dependence on unstable or unethical sources of funding.</li> <li>- Disappearance of some organizations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Promoting an increase in tax deductions for philanthropic donations and sponsorships to a level that provides real benefits for philanthropic activity;</li> <li>· Promoting changes to the legal framework to ensure funding instruments (crowdfunding, local partnerships, own revenues);</li> <li>· Maintaining constant dialogue with international partners to explain the context and real needs.</li> </ul>
<p>Misuse and exploitation of CSOs for illicit purposes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discrediting the associative sector as a whole.</li> <li>- Public confusion between genuine and fake CSOs.</li> <li>- Loss of trust among donors and authorities in the entire sector.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Internal verification and transparency mechanisms (public reports, audits).</li> <li>· Public distinction from "fake" or front organizations.</li> <li>· Self-regulation and internal codes of ethics at sector level.</li> <li>· Collaboration with journalists and authorities to identify and sanction cases of abuse.</li> </ul>
<p>Draft law on the status of foreign agents in the Republic of Moldova</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stigmatization and marginalization of CSOs receiving external funding.</li> <li>- Setting the public and political agenda to adopt the model of actions applied by other illiberal states in the region (Georgia, Belarus, Russia)</li> <li>- Public legitimization of restrictions on freedom of association, expression, and participation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Broad CSO coalitions for advocacy and unified response, including contributions to the decision-making process.</li> <li>· Mobilising civil society and communicating the benefits to communities.</li> <li>· Collaboration with European and international institutions for diplomatic pressure.</li> <li>· Strategic domestic and international litigation, if the law is adopted.</li> </ul>

Source: created by the author

## ACTORS INVOLVED IN SMEAR CAMPAIGNS

**1. Politicians who favor an authoritarian regime**, with increased state control over society, restrictions on civil liberties, and the concentration of power in the hands of a dominant leader or party.

Campaigns to discredit CSOs are promoted by politicians with illiberal views. Some of them have long assumed the image of vehement opponents of CSOs. The list of such politicians includes the Mayor of Chişinău, Ion Ceban, former President

Igor Dodon, Member of Parliament for the Socialist and Communist Bloc Bogdan Țirdea (author of an 800-page book of invective against CSOs)<sup>[203]</sup>, and Member of Parliament for the "Victoria/Pobeda" parliamentary group Vasile Bolea. The anti-CSO discourse, initially promoted by pro-Russian parties, has recently been adopted by pro-European politicians, such as former Prime Minister Vlad Filat.

## 2. Bloggers and vloggers affiliated with illiberal politicians

They play an active role in campaigns to discredit civil society organizations. These content creators, usually without journalistic standards or verification of information, amplify populist and conspiratorial messages about CSOs. They constantly promote similar narratives and invectives about CSOs, which they present as instruments of foreign interests or as parasites living off "other people's money." Through inflammatory and often aggressive language, they contribute to reinforcing a negative image of the associative sector, influencing public perception, especially among young people who are active online. These influencers frequently resort to generalizations, personal attacks, and conspiracy theories.

## 3. The non-commercial organization "Evrazia"

The organization has been used as a tool and front for illegal activities. It is run by individuals associated with a convicted criminal (Ilan Shor), who is a fugitive in the Russian Federation. The organization has connections to political parties and local leaders with pro-Russian and anti-European agendas. Although it presents itself as a non-commercial organization, it has close ties to institutions in the Russian Federation. Journalistic investigations have shown that "Evrazia" has received a license from the FSB for access to state secrets and operates from premises belonging to oligarch Roman Abramovich<sup>[204]</sup>.

## 4. The Communist and Socialist Bloc – opposition parliamentary group

The bloc consists of two pro-Russian parties – the Party of Communists and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova. These parties promote a conservative, anti-Western ideology that is contrary to the country's European path.

[203] Bogdat Țirdea a lansat o carte cu acuzații grave în adresa ONG-urilor și mass-media din Moldova. „Autorul a alunecat în atacuri grosolane la adresa societății civile din Moldova”. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/bogdat-tirdea-a-lansat-o-carte-cu-acuzaatii-grave-in-adresa-ong-urilor-si-mass-media-din-moldova-autorul-a-alunecat-in-atacuri-grosolane-la-adresa-societatii-civile-din-moldova/>

[204] În spatele grupării Șor se află serviciile secrete ruse: Licența primită de „Evrazia” de la FSB, casa în care locuiește oligarhul fugar și vecinii condamnatului. 30.10.2024). <https://www.ziarulnational.md/dovezi-in-spatele-gruparii-sor-se-afla-serviciile-secrete-ruse-licenta-primita-de-evrazia-de-la-fsb-casa-in-care-locuieste-oligarhul-fugar-si-vecinii-fugarului/>

The bloc has been notable for its rhetoric and legislative initiatives aimed at limiting the influence of independent non-commercial organizations, which it considers to be "instruments of foreign influence." The bloc's direct contribution to attacks on civil society was manifested in April 2025 through the promotion of a draft law on the status of foreign agents. Through this initiative, the Communist and Socialist Bloc aligned itself with the authoritarian tactics applied in countries such as the Russian Federation, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and Georgia, contributing to the creation of a hostile climate towards civil society and the erosion of civic space in the Republic of Moldova.

## TARGETS

- The associative sector (as a whole) is targeted by attempts to undermine its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the public, in particular through narratives associating it with foreign interests or ideologies hostile to traditional values.
- CSOs and ADOs (in particular) are becoming direct targets of smear campaigns, disinformation, and intimidation because of their active involvement in promoting human rights, the rule of law, institutional transparency, and European integration. They are often falsely accused of undermining sovereignty or public order and labeled as "agents of foreign influence."
- The media, including newsrooms registered as non-profit organizations, are targeted by disinformation and smear campaigns designed to discredit their professionalism and impartiality. Abusive lawsuits (SLAPP) designed to intimidate journalists and discourage them from investigating topics of public interest, and cyberattacks aimed to compromise the technological infrastructure of newsrooms, steal data, or block access to information.

## IMPACT

Campaigns to discredit CSOs have led to the normalization of anti-CSO discourse and its adoption by the general public. Implicitly, public trust in CSOs has declined steadily in recent years—from 24% in 2022 to less than 20% in 2024. <sup>[205]</sup> A significant portion of public opinion accepts and supports negative narratives about civil society organizations. As a result, critical and independent voices in civil society are delegitimized, weakening its ability to function as an essential pillar of democracy.

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[205] Barometrul Opiniei Publice, octombrie 2024. <https://ipp.md/2024-10/barometrul-opiniei-publice-2024/>

Attacks can create a climate of fear and self-censorship, limiting the impact of civil society in defending human rights and democratic values. Reduced public support for organizations that promote democratic values and the formation of a civic vacuum pave the way for authoritarian influence and external interference.

The hijacking orchestrated by ONC Evrazia contributed to jeopardizing the electoral process and affecting the results. It also contributed to amplifying threats of destabilization through violent protests, undermining public order and national security.

The withdrawal of US financial support has negatively affected the financial capacity of several CSOs to implement essential projects and programs. There has also been a negative impact on the image of CSOs, which have been negatively labeled as "criminals" by anti-Western politicians<sup>[206]</sup>, following statements by US officials that USAID is a criminal organization<sup>[207]</sup>.

Cutting off access to resources and reducing public support for civil society organizations can create a civic vacuum that is conducive to authoritarian and foreign influence.

## RESPONSE MEASURES

### Legislative measures:

- Initiation of a bill to protect ADOs, currently in the early stages of development.
- Drafting a bill to prevent and punish procedural abuse (the so-called Anti-SLAPP Law modeled on the "Daphne Law" / EU Directive 2024/1069).
- Denunciation by CSOs of the draft law on "foreign agents" as illegal and unconstitutional, violating freedom of association.

### Informing and raising public awareness

- Reports and Resilience actions by or with the support of CSOs, combating and sanctioning hate speech.
- Media outlets published two undercover journalistic investigations<sup>[208]</sup>, which partially revealed the *modus operandi* (Latin phrases are italicized) and relationship of the "Evrazia" organization with groups affiliated with political parties, such as the network around Ilan Shor, used to organize protests and other illegal activities.

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[208] Cum a fost fraudat referendumul. Rețeaua lui Șor, de partea lui Stoianoglo. În slujba Moscovei (II): o nouă investigație ZdG sub acoperire. <https://www.zdg.md/video/video-cum-a-fost-fraudat-referendumul-reteaua-lui-sor-de-partea-lui-stoianoglo-in-slujba-moscovei-ii-o-noua-investigatie-zdg-sub-acoperire/>

### Coercive measures and sanctions

- The police investigated<sup>[209]</sup> the illegal activity of the Evrazia organization and its relations with other public actors and periodically published the information gathered. The Evrazia organization is not legally registered in the Republic of Moldova and, therefore, public institutions have little control over it.
- In September 2024, the United States imposed sanctions <sup>[210]</sup> on the organization "Evrastia" and its director, Nelli Parutenco, for their involvement in actions to destabilize the Republic of Moldova in the context of the elections.

### Measures for the financial sustainability of CSOs

CSOs promote solutions for the financial sustainability of CSOs (development of alternative sources of funding through philanthropy and sponsorship):

- Expanding and optimizing the 2% mechanism for redirecting income tax
- Increasing tax deductions for philanthropic donations and sponsorship to a level that provides real benefits for philanthropic activity;
- Amending the legal framework to ensure financing instruments (crowdfunding, local partnerships, own revenues).

## SCENARIO

**The pessimistic scenario** assumes an accelerated deterioration of civic space in the Republic of Moldova due to the current Parliament's failure to adopt the legislation on protection of human rights defenders (HRDs) and combating SLAPP. The lack of this legal framework encourages the infiltration of organizations with subversive agendas, such as ONC "Evrastia," while the State's countermeasures affect the entire associative sector. The anti-CSO theme becomes central to the election campaign, fueling public mistrust and paving the way for an anti-EU coalition, which, after the 2025 elections, adopts a restrictive law on "foreign agents." This leads to the dissolution of numerous CSOs, especially pro-democracy ones, and intensifies smear campaigns, the blocking of European funds, and the harassment of activists. The independent press is silenced and civic space collapses, with Moldova heading towards an illiberal authoritarian regime, similar to Belarus or Russia.

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[209] Poliția Republicii Moldova, Cei peste 100 de tineri instruiți în Rusia pentru dezordini în masă în Moldova nu-și vor putea implementa planul: 88 percheziții în țară și o captură de 1.600.000 lei, (2024). <https://procuratura.md/pccocs/ru/comunicate/comunicate-de-presa/cei-pest-100-de-tineri-instruiti-rusia-pentru-dezordini-masa>

[210] U.S. Department of the Treasury, Russia-related Designations; Issuance of Russia-related General Licenses and Amended FAQ. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20240913>

**The optimistic scenario** describes an effective mobilization of civil society in the face of authoritarian pressures, with the support of independent media and pro-democracy actors. Through public campaigns and strategic alliances, trust in CSOs grows, and the law on "foreign agents" is rejected in Parliament, including under pressure from European partners. The Republic of Moldova obtains financial support conditional on concrete measures to protect ADOs, and civil society develops alternative sources of funding and self-regulation initiatives. The non-profit press goes digital, defends its information space, and benefits from effective anti-SLAPP legislation. In 2026, against the backdrop of progress in the EU accession process, CSOs become key actors in supporting reforms, consolidating their role as a central pillar of Moldovan democracy.

## CONCLUSIONS

Threats to CSOs aim to weaken their capacity for action by reducing public support and, at the same time, diminishing their financial resources. The instrumentalisation of these attacks may have the long-term goal of paving the way for the legal sanctioning (such as the "Law on Foreign Agents") of CSO activities that support and promote public policies in sensitive areas, such as monitoring democratic elections, justice reform, administrative reform, or anti-corruption. Systematic attacks, including SLAPP and smear campaigns, serve to erode public support and trust. At the same time, given the sector's dependence on external funding, measures to withdraw international financial support could have a devastating effect on CSOs and ADOs and, implicitly, on the crucial role they play in supporting democratic institutions and protecting human rights in the Republic of Moldova.

Civil society and independent media are key elements of internal resilience in the face of hybrid warfare. Weakening the capacity of civil society and the independent press undermines not only democratic resilience, but also the State's ability to identify and counter hybrid threats and external interference in a timely manner. The lack of institutional protection measures and a clear framework for differentiating between genuine and front organizations contributes to public confusion, which favors the strategies of hostile actors to compromise the civic space from within. Under these circumstances, the lack of clarity, ambiguity, or selective enforcement of regulations risks becoming a tool for intimidation and political control over independent voices, rather than strengthening democratic security.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Complete the legal framework for the protection of civil society with legislation to prevent the legal harassment of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and the media, including by adopting an anti-SLAPP law in line with European standards (e.g. EU Directive 2024/1069), as well as a law on the recognition and protection of human rights defenders.
- Ensure the financial sustainability of CSOs by creating a legal framework conducive to philanthropy, and sponsorship by introducing significant tax incentives for donors, individuals, and legal entities, expanding the percentage designation mechanism, and diversifying funding sources, including by regulating crowdfunding and contracting social services by the state.
- Preventing restrictive legislation against civil society by automatically rejecting any legislative initiatives that seek to stigmatize civil society organizations as "foreign agents" or that unjustifiably restrict freedom of association, freedom of expression, and access to domestic or foreign funding.
- Increasing the legitimacy and public trust in civil society organizations by promoting the visibility and recognition of CSO activity focused on the impact and results of the associative sector, as well as by integrating civic education in schools and communities, with an emphasis on the role of civic initiatives in a democratic society and the importance of citizen participation in decision-making processes.

## FINAL THOUGHTS: THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA – A “TEST BED” FOR HYBRID THREATS

### FINAL FINDINGS

Between 2020 and 2025, the Republic of Moldova went through a critical phase in consolidating its democracy and national resilience, facing a complex range of hybrid threats designed to exploit structural vulnerabilities and internal divisions. The analysis conducted as part of the study demonstrated that the Russian Federation remains the primary external actor involved, employing a coordinated arsenal of influence tools—ranging from propaganda and disinformation, the manipulation of religion and historical memory, to electoral interference and the promotion of social destabilization movements—with the aim of undermining democratic institutions, dividing society, and hindering the country’s European orientation. These hybrid pressures adapt rapidly, leveraging emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and advanced cyberattacks.

Despite the extremely volatile regional context and institutional limitations, the Republic of Moldova’s response has evolved significantly. More effective inter-institutional coordination has been established through the creation of the National Crisis Management Center, capable of reducing bureaucratic barriers in emergency situations. The legislative framework has been modernized: the National Security Strategy and a new Law on the Intelligence and Security Service have been adopted—demonstrating that democracies can strengthen their defense capabilities without compromising fundamental rights. At the same time, new specialized institutions were created, such as the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation and the National Agency for Cybersecurity, indicating a greater capacity to adapt to the needs of ensuring national security. From a predominantly reactive, fragmented response based on learning through crisis, the state has begun to build more coherent strategic mechanisms, supported by European and Euro-Atlantic partners. This process has demonstrated the Republic of Moldova’s ability not only to withstand pressure but also to actively contribute to European security through the experience gained in managing hybrid threats.

The Republic of Moldova’s experience serves as both a warning and a source of inspiration for the European community.

On the one hand, it highlights the high level of complexity of contemporary hybrid warfare; on the other hand, it provides concrete examples of institutional adaptation and societal mobilization in the face of external challenges. The country has transitioned from being a passive victim of hybrid threats to an actor capable of adapting, evolving from structural vulnerability to the role of a laboratory of democratic resilience and transforming hybrid pressures into strategic lessons relevant to other states facing similar situations.

The scenarios analyzed in the study are based on the premise that the Republic of Moldova is at a decisive juncture: either it capitalizes on European support and its own lessons learned to become a resilient and secure state in the face of hybrid threats, or it remains vulnerable to an undeclared but ongoing war. Its democratic future depends on its ability to combine strategic vision, inter-institutional cooperation, and societal engagement into an integrated and proactive response.

## LESSONS FOR EUROPEAN PARTNERS

The case of the Republic of Moldova shows that democratic governments must adopt a rapid response capability and operational flexibility to respond quickly to hybrid threats. Traditional bureaucratic procedures—slow and rigid—cannot keep pace with the fast-moving nature of modern hybrid campaigns; delays and hesitation give adversaries precious time to achieve their objectives. Reactive and fragmented approaches cannot cope with coordinated, multidimensional attacks.

Strengthening societal resilience requires sustained efforts and long-term investments in education and information, including expanding media literacy, fostering critical thinking among citizens, and conducting awareness campaigns on democratic values. Equally essential is the promotion of a shared vision for the state's development and the strengthening of a sense of civic belonging and identity. Only through these long-term investments can democracies develop robust immunity to malign informational influences.

One of the most difficult challenges highlighted in the Republic of Moldova and increasingly visible across Europe is the fragmentation of public discourse into parallel, nearly incompatible information spheres.

When different groups of citizens operate based on completely divergent sets of “facts” and perceptions of reality, it becomes extremely difficult to maintain a coherent democratic process. Functioning democracies require a common core of truths shared by the majority of society.

Threats acting simultaneously on the informational, cyber, economic, and social fronts cannot be effectively countered through isolated sectoral approaches. Integrated responses are needed, combining tools from all domains—from cyber defense and counterintelligence to economic policies, public communication, and international cooperation. Furthermore, transparency and maintaining public trust are just as important as technical security measures: without democratic legitimacy and clear communication, even the most sophisticated countermeasures can fail.

## THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Although it remains vulnerable to hybrid pressures, the Republic of Moldova is beginning to be seen not only as a target of such pressures but also as a credible partner in efforts to counter them. The country has gained valuable practical experience in identifying, managing, and thwarting operations that other European democracies might also face, thus becoming an important source of expertise for its partners.

Moldova’s location on Europe’s eastern border has placed it on the front lines of hybrid warfare, making it a key contributor to European security. Vulnerabilities such as energy dependencies, information manipulation, or societal divisions, evident in Moldova, exist—to varying degrees—in other countries across the continent as well. Therefore, the lessons learned here about democratic resilience under pressure can inspire more effective responses at the European level.

Moldova’s willingness to share its accumulated experience—both successes and failures—represents a strategic resource for the European community. Real-time expertise can support the development of more tailored public policies, improve joint training programs, and facilitate international cooperation in mitigating hybrid risks at the regional level.

## STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Prevention and early warning must be developed and strengthened through modern monitoring and alert systems in partnership with the private sector and civil society, as well as through the integration of predictive analysis mechanisms and the use of advanced technologies to detect emerging hybrid campaigns.

Ensuring integrated inter-institutional cooperation through: (-) the full operationalization of the National Crisis Management Center as a coordination platform across the domains of national security, economy, energy, cyber, and information; (-) the establishment of clear intervention protocols for emergency management, with well-defined responsibilities and rapid communication flows.

Enhancing societal resilience and strategic communication through: (-) integrating civic education and media literacy into school curricula and community programs; (-) providing ongoing training for public officials in human rights, strategic communication, and disinformation management; (-) protecting media pluralism and the independent press through anti-SLAPP laws and incentives for NGOs and journalists; (-) strengthening strategic communication by providing the public with transparent and timely information and clear messages, while promoting unity, resilience, and European integration.

Economic and energy security remains a priority on the national agenda, requiring: (-) the diversification of trade and energy partnerships, with an emphasis on increased interconnection with Romania and the European Union; (-) investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and strategic reserves to reduce dependence on external pressures; (-) the creation of an economic security framework capable of preventing the exploitation of financial vulnerabilities as a tool for external influence.

At the same time, the defense and cybersecurity sectors must be strengthened by: (-) gradually increasing the military budget and professionalizing the armed forces; (-) modernizing defense infrastructure and developing rapid response capabilities in cyberspace; (-) expanding and strengthening CERT teams, integrating them into European networks in cooperation with European and NATO centers.

A critical factor remains the situation in the Transnistrian region, which, due to the lack of constitutional control and the Russian military presence, constitutes a source of strategic vulnerability. This reality requires careful monitoring and the incorporation of associated risks into national security policies.

Finally, regional instability is not an isolated risk, but a factor that can affect the country's entire security architecture, fueling internal tensions and economic or political pressures. Managing these risks requires a comprehensive approach: protecting human rights, supporting civil society, actively involving international organizations in monitoring, and keeping the issue on the European diplomatic agenda to limit the separatist regime's impunity and external influence over the Republic of Moldova.

## FOR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

The main lines of action focus on strengthening international cooperation and supporting vulnerable communities:

- Strengthening platforms for sharing information on hybrid threats to facilitate early risk identification and coordinated responses.
- Organizing joint exercises based on hybrid warfare scenarios to test response capabilities and cross-border collaboration.
- Developing synchronized alert and response mechanisms, including through the formation of regional joint teams capable of rapid intervention in crisis situations.

Directing external support toward local resilience and social cohesion programs, through objective information campaigns, economic development projects, and human rights protection mechanisms.

By combining these efforts with domestic security and reform measures, the Republic of Moldova can strengthen its strategic position and its ability to withstand hybrid and geopolitical pressures. Furthermore, through close cooperation, mutual learning, and mutual support, the Republic of Moldova and its external partners can transform the challenges of hybrid warfare into an opportunity to strengthen both the rule of law and democratic solidarity at the European level.

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