

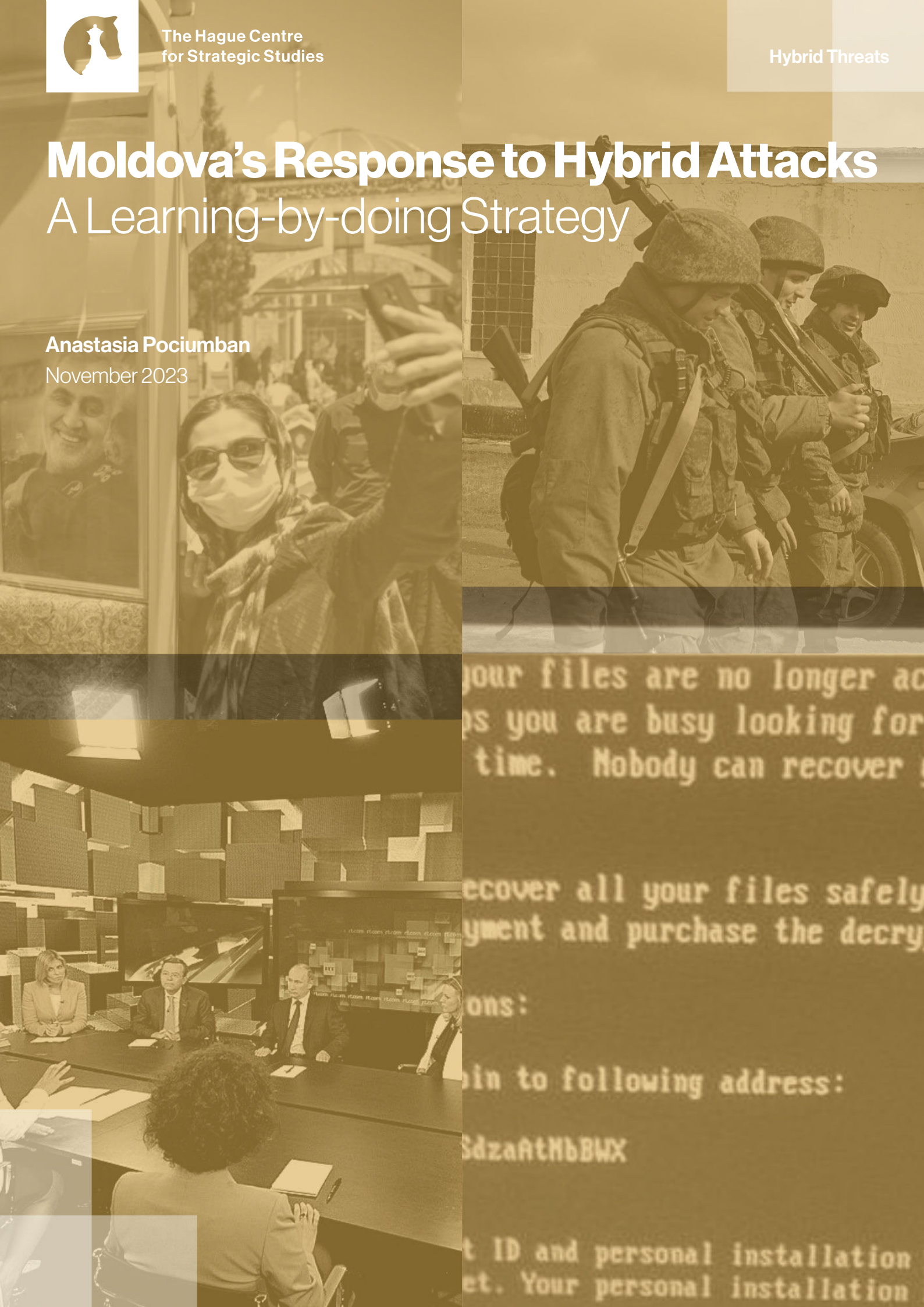


Moldova's Response to Hybrid Attacks

A Learning-by-doing Strategy

Anastasia Pociumban

November 2023



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Author:

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Summary | IV |
| Moldova's vulnerabilities – the targets of hybrid attacks | 3 |
| 1. Dealing with disinformation | 3 |
| 2. Anti-government demonstrations and cyber attacks | 5 |
| 3. Cyber security challenges | 6 |
| 4. Transnistria, a battleground for hybrid threats and energy blackmail | 7 |
| Building resilience, strengthening security, and the ability to respond to crises are key to address hybrid threats. | 9 |
| Conclusions and Recommendation: long term, consistent, targeted support is key | 11 |

Summary

This paper provides an empirical review of Moldova's counter-hybrid campaign and is part of the HCSS Counter-Hybrid Campaign Project. The case study of Moldova brings insights into Moldovan context and lines of response to the hybrid threats, that significantly increased following Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. The example is relevant as it shows the importance of preventive policies that build resilience and strengthen security and defence of the country, in order to be able to identify and respond to hybrid threats.

The commencement of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 had immediate repercussions for Moldova. Moldova found itself in a very dangerous situation, with the looming threat of the conflict spreading and the potential for military assaults originating from Russia to the south and through Transnistria.¹ Transnistria, with a population of approximately 350,000 people, Russian troops on its territory, and the largest military depot in Cobasna is a particularly vulnerable area. Although there was no rotation of the Russian army units based there, and most residents of Transnistria have a Moldovan ID and no will to be mobilised, the politics of the region is *de facto* controlled from the Kremlin. While Russia's army was prevented from reaching Moldova due to Ukraine's defence efforts, Moldova nevertheless became a theatre for Russia's hybrid warfare operations, which had been occurring since the country's independence but then escalated to a new level in 2022.

The commencement of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 had immediate repercussions for Moldova.



Image source

¹ By Transnistria I refer to the Transnistrian region of Moldova. Transnistria is the name used in Moldova for the secessionist region on the left bank of the river Nistru (Dnestr in Russian). The name in Russian and used by the Transnistrian authorities is Pridnestrovie.

In addition to the potential risks coming from Transnistria, Moldova has witnessed a series of new challenges over the past year and a half, ranging from false bomb alerts, cyber-attacks, and explosions in Transnistria to energy blackmail, paid protests, and Kremlin proxies operating in the autonomous region of Gagauzia. This is all alongside continuous disinformation campaigns. Had the Moldovan government taken earlier measures, such as reinforcing security and defence systems, diversifying energy sources, and establishing a robust mechanism to counter disinformation, the country would have been more resilient and better equipped to address these challenges. Instead, it has found itself in a position of dealing with multiple crises simultaneously.

Moldova's response to hybrid threats has been reactive and with a strategy of "learning by doing". Initially, there was no preparation and assessment of the range of possible threats, due both to a multitude of crises and a lack of administrative resources. This culminated in a weakened ability to detect and address new challenges. These processes have improved since and the government has shifted to medium- and long-term responses, with support from the EU, individual member states, and the US.

Perhaps the most noteworthy achievement of the Chisinau authorities is that they have managed to maintain relations with the de-facto authorities in Tiraspol (Transnistria) and avoid escalation. This, coupled with the government's management of the refugee and energy crises, represents a significant accomplishment. Accordingly, In June 2022, Moldova received EU candidate status – a strong signal of support for its efforts. Furthermore, on June 1, 2023, the country hosted the European Political Community (EPC) summit, which secured more support from the EU and backing from its Member States,² and bolstered the bilateral commitments of other European States, such as UK and Norway.

However, the country remains in a fragile state. The government is racing against time to address hybrid threats in a sustainable manner while concurrently pursuing reforms and ensuring Moldova's economic recovery. Hybrid warfare encompasses an array of conventional and unconventional tactics and policies employed by Russia and its proxies, targeting the country vulnerability and with the intent of destabilising Moldova and further polarising the population, with the view that Moldova is part of Russian sphere of influence. This paper delves into Moldova's counter-hybrid measures against Russian hybrid threats, with a specific focus on the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The paper also evaluates external support extended to Moldova and concludes with recommendations for the EU and its member states regarding further assistance for the country.

The Chisinau authorities have managed to maintain relations with the de-facto authorities in Tiraspol (Transnistria) and avoid escalation.

² European Commission, "Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Moldovan President Sandu", May, 31, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_2995, accessed 22/09/2023

Moldova's vulnerabilities – the targets of hybrid attacks

1. Dealing with disinformation

Moldova has been a target of Russian disinformation since gaining its independence. This is enabled especially by Russian language influence efforts directed toward the local population. Following the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the Russian embassy and officials from Moscow have issued numerous statements in regards to the activities of the Moldovan authorities, further fuelling a sentiment of fear among population. Statements concerned the treatment of Russian minorities, the state of affairs in Transnistria, and Moldova's legislation regarding separatism. For example, in response to Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean's comments on the demilitarization of Transnistria,³ Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary for Russian President Vladimir Putin, advised caution to the Moldovan government and asserted that Russia maintains responsibility for Transnistria.⁴ Russian claims suggesting that Ukraine was planning a false flag operation in Transnistria also had to be refuted by both Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities.⁵

Russia's disinformation campaigns, disseminated through social media, pro-Russian online media and Moldovan politicians, aim to diminish public support for Ukraine and spread the narrative of Moldova being dragged into the war by Ukraine or the EU. As a result of these efforts, after more than one year and a half of Russia's war in Ukraine, more than 57% of the Moldovan population think that President Maia Sandu should negotiate better gas prices with Russia and more than 47% do not see Russia as a threat to Moldova.⁶ One-third of Moldovans

3 Ursu Irina, "Prim-ministrul Dorin Recean: „Este o atitudine iresponsabilă să ignorăm pericolele și să inducem în eroare societatea că aceste pericole nu ar exista”, Ziarul De Gardă, March 6, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/prim-ministru-dorin-recean-este-o-atitudine-iresponsabila-sa-ignoram-pericolele-si-sa-inducem-in-eroare-societatea-ca-aceste-pericole-nu-ar-exista/>, accessed 01/08/2023

4 Тасс, "Песков Рекомендовал Молдавским Властям Быть Осторожными в Оценках По Теме Приднестровья," February 20, 2023, <https://tass.ru/politika/17093241>, accessed 01/08/2023

5 Тасс, "Kremlin Concerned about Situation in Transnistria, Keeping an Eye on Developments," February 27, 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1582019>, accessed 01/08/2023

6 "Al patrutea sondaj de opinie privind percepția dezinformării și preferințele politice ale populației" Wachdog. md, June, 27, 2023, <https://watchdog.md/polls/207714/comunitatea-watchdog-md-a-prezentat-rezultatele-celui-de-al-patrutea-sondaj-de-opinie-privind-perceptia-dezinformarii-si-preferintele-politice-ale-populatiei/>, accessed 01/08/2023

believe the Russian narrative that Russia is defending Donbas from Ukrainian attacks, is 'liberating Ukraine from Nazism', and that Russia is fighting NATO through this war.⁷

To deal with disinformation, the Moldovan government suspended in March 2022 the retransmission of news and political shows from Russia.⁸ At the end of 2022 the authorities banned a further six TV channels linked to the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor and former President Igor Dodon that were spreading disinformation about the war.⁹ However, these channels are still active online and available via cable in Gagauzia.¹⁰

To step up its response, on 31 July 2023 the Moldovan Parliament approved the setup of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation. The centre is supposed to consolidate inter-institutional cooperation to fight disinformation, manipulation, and foreign interference that can undermine state security.¹¹ It will serve as a support body for public authorities and can come up with recommendations for legislative frameworks, as well as notify law enforcement bodies in the case of potential infringements of national legislation.¹² It has modelled its efforts on the expertise of the Baltic states in dealing with Russian disinformation.

The competences of the Audio-Visual Council were also extended, and the word disinformation was introduced into legislation. The law stipulates a more comprehensive application of norms to combat disinformation.¹³ Additionally the law on the concept of information security that has been in place since 2018 serves as a legal baseline to deal with the issue of disinformation. The EU is supporting Moldova's fight against disinformation through the new EU Partnership Mission (EUPM), which draws on the expertise of international community to deal with crisis management and address hybrid threats.

While the response to disinformation is going in the right direction, there is still a need to prepare and operationalise the work of the new Centre for Strategic Communication, as well as better coordinate the division of work and response from different state institutions. Therefore, disinformation remains one of the key priorities and the efforts to address it are still its early stage.

7 "Al patrulea sondaj de opinie privind percepția dezinformării și preferințele politice ale populației", Wachdog.md., accessed 01/08/2023

8 "FOR STATE OF EMERGENCY PERIOD, MOLDOVA SUSPENDS RETRANSMISSION OF TV NEW AND POLITICAL PROGRAMS FROM RUSSIA," Infotag.Md, March 2, 2022, <https://www.infotag.md/culture-en/297783/>, accessed 01/08/2023

9 Alexander Tanas, "Moldova to Temporarily Ban Six TV Channels over Broadcasts about War," Reuters, December 16, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/moldova-temporarily-ban-six-tv-channels-over-broadcasts-about-war-2022-12-16/>, accessed 10/08/2023

10 Vadim Cheptanaru, "„Spălătoria de creieri” a Găgăuziei: cine protejează canalele rusești de propagandă," Anticoruptie.md, April 27, 2023, <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/investigatii/social/spalatoria-de-creieri-a-gagauz-iei-cine-protejeaza-canalele-rusesti-de-propaganda>, accessed 10/08/2023

11 Moldovan Parliament, Law related to the establishment of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, July 31, 2023, <https://presedinte.md/app/webroot/uploaded/Proiect%20Lege%20Centrul%20CSC%20Dezinformare%2005.07.23.pdf>, accessed 10/08/2023

12 Moldovan Parliament, "Law related to the establishment of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Misinformation", accessed 10/08/2023

13 Law on the amendments of the Audiovisual Media Services Code, July 31, 2023, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=138540&lang=ro, accessed 10/08/2023

2. Anti-government demonstrations and cyber attacks

Ilan Shor's "Șor Party", associated with a fugitive Moldovan oligarch who also holds an Israeli passport, and subject to sanctions from both the US and EU, has spearheaded anti-government protests in Moldova. In the backdrop of elevated costs, inflation, and an unstable security climate, his own political force has pledged affordable energy and reduced prices. Emerging as a competitor for pro-Kremlin narratives to Igor Dodon's Socialist Party, the Shor Party has orchestrated and financially supported demonstrations against the government. The prosecutor's office conducted searches and seized substantial sums of money that had been unlawfully brought into Moldova.¹⁴ Ilan Shor, convicted in Moldova for bank fraud, is now on the sanctions list of the European Union, as well as the US Treasury Department for attempts to undermine and destabilise the country.¹⁵ Earlier in 2023, Kremlin plans for Moldova were leaked, dating from 2021, which emphasised using pro-Russian groups to destabilise the country and bring it under their control, Shor being specifically named as a trusted partner of Moscow in this effort.¹⁷

An important target for Russian destabilization is the autonomous region of Gagauzia (approx 4,66% of the population of Moldova)¹⁸, where Evghenia Gutul, Shor nominated candidate won the Bashkan (local governor) elections earlier this spring. She promised low prices and pledged closer relations to Russia, including opening of Russian consulate in Comrat (which would not be possible without the Moldovan MFA). There were electoral frauds observed during Baskhan elections¹⁹, which raised concerns about the potential recurrence of such practices in the upcoming local elections.

In response to the risks presented by Shor and his party, the party was declared unconstitutional, on the grounds of undermining democracy and the rule of law and acting against the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.²⁰ Consequently, the party was dissolved, an unprecedented measure in Moldova, and the parliamentary members associated with it have transitioned to an independent status. They are further prohibited from affiliating with any other political party. Some people formerly affiliated with the Shor party were be banned from running for local elections due to amendments to the local electoral code from 5 October specifying that people "Suspected, accused, or charged with committing offenses that have been mentioned by the Constitutional Court as arguments in the context of declaring the unconstitutionality of the political party" cannot run

14 Cotidianul.ro, Suma de bani confiscată de la reprezentanți ai Partidului ȘOR, March 11, 2023, <https://www.cotidianul.ro/suma-de-bani-confiscata-de-la-reprezentanti-ai-partidului-sor/>, accessed 01/08/2023

15 Official Journal of the European Union, COUNCIL IMPLEMENTING REGULATION (EU) 2023/1045 of 30 May 2023 implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/888 concerning restrictive measures in view of actions destabilising the Republic of Moldova, 30/05/2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32023R1045>, accessed 01/08/2023

16 U.S. Department of the Treasury, Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova, October 26, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049>, accessed 01/08/2023

17 Rise Moldova, "Kremlin's plan for Moldova - Rise Moldova," March 17, 2023, <https://www.rise.md/english/kremlins-plan-for-moldova/>, accessed 01/08/2023

18 Statistica.gov.md, Populatia cu resedinta obisnuita pe sexe si medii la inceputul anului, 2014-2023, 01.01.2023, https://statistica.gov.md/ro/statistic_indicator_details/25#excel_tables_pages, accessed 01/08/2023

19 Victoria Borodin, "VIDEO/ Fraudă electorală în Găgăuzia. Votul etnicilor bulgari din R. Moldova, cumpărat de oamenii lui Șor pentru un partid pro-turc de la Sofia," Ziarul De Gardă, September 5, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/investigatii/ancheta/frauda-electoral-a-in-gagauzia-votul-etnicilor-bulgari-din-r-moldova-cumparat-de-oamenii-lui-sor-pentru-un-partid-pro-turc-de-la-sofia/>, accessed 05/09/2023

20 Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova, "HOTĂRÂRE privind controlul constituționalității Partidului Politic „Șor” (sesizarea nr. 184h/2022)", June 19, 2023, https://www.constcourt.md/public/ccdoc/hotariri/h_10_2023_184h_2022_rou.pdf, accessed 10/08/2023

for elections.²¹ Moreover, on 3rd November, just two days before local elections, the Shor-affiliated party 'Sansa' (Chance) was removed from the electoral lists due to its alleged manipulation of elections in favor of Russian interests.

The central challenge in addressing the impact of Ilan Shor's party and its influence lies in managing the illicit financial streams within the country, which are used to incentivize individuals to participate in and orchestrate demonstrations.²²

3. Cyber security challenges

Existing issues have been exacerbated over the past year by a series of cyber-attacks, bomb alerts, and the leaking of confidential emails and conversations. Notably, the Moldovan government faced several cyber-attacks, with a massive targeting of the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs just ahead of the EPC summit, resulting in thousands of documents being affected.²³ Just afterwards, it was uncovered that the Russian embassy has been using rooftop antennas and dishes to intercept information.²⁴ Moldova remains a target for cyber-attacks, with a recent Distributed Denial of Service DDoS attacks on 25 and 25 September targeting governmental institutions (among which Chisinau International Airport, the National Energy Regulatory Agency, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration) and mass media, the responsibility was claimed by the telegram channel People's CyberArmy. Previously Moldova was already a target of DDOS attacks, some of which were preannounced by a Russian hacker group named Killnet.²⁵ Their targets included the Moldovan tax service website and around 80 public websites during the previous summer. In January of 2023 a surge of phishing and scam emails, totalling 1330 messages, was directed towards governmental institutions, an effort uncovered by the Moldovan Information Technology and Cyber Security Service (STISC).²⁶ In November 2022, a newly established website called Moldova Leaks emerged, publishing private Telegram conversations between high-ranking officials.²⁷ The head of the Moldovan Security Service attributed the leak to Russian actors.²⁸ Later this year the same service uncovered a network of agents providing information to the Russian FSB. At the end of July 2023, in response to this series of actions, Moldova expelled 45 Russian diplomats and embassy staff.²⁹

Previously Moldova was already a target of DDOS attacks, some of which were preannounced by a Russian hacker group named Killnet.

21 Ziarul de Garda, "Aprobat în a doua lectură. Unii dintre reprezentanții fostului partid Șor nu vor putea participa la alegerile generale locale din 5 noiembrie", October 4, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/update-aprobat-in-a-doua-lectura-unii-dintre-reprezentantii-fostului-partid-sor-nu-vor-putea-participa-la-alegerile-generale-locale-din-5-noiembrie/>, accessed on 23/10/2023

22 Cotidianul.ro, "Suma de bani confiscată de la reprezentanți ai Partidului ȘOR", accessed 01/08/2023

23 Disinfo, "Instituțiile statului, ținta unui atac cibernetic masiv în ajunul summit-ului de la Bulboacă. Deputat PAS confirmă atacul," July 24, 2023, <https://disinfo.md/instituțiile-statului-tinta-unui-atac-cibernetic-masiv-in-ajunul-summit-ului-de-la-bulboaca-deputat-pas-confirma-atacul/>, accessed 01/08/2023

24 Sergey Kanev, "Rooftop spooks: How GRU and SVR monitor Moldovan authorities using Russian embassy rooftop antennas," The Insider, July 24, 2023, <https://theinsider.ru/en/politics/263675>, accessed 01/08/2023

25 Katalin Béres, "Russian Hackers Attacked Websites Of Moldova," CyberThreat.Report, August 27, 2022, <https://www.cyberthreat.report/russian-hackers-attacked-websites-of-moldova/>, accessed 01/08/2023

26 STISC, "STISC: ATENȚIE - continuă valul atacurilor cibernetice de tip scam și phishing," Serviciul Tehnologia Informației Și Securitate Cibernetică, February 6, 2023, <https://stisc.gov.md/ro/stisc-atenție-continua-valul-atacurilor-cibernetice-de-tip-scsm-si-phishing/>, accessed 01/08/2023

27 Gintaras Radauskas, "Government of Moldova shaken by big hack-and-leak operation", Cybernews, November 16, 2022, <https://cybernews.com/news/government-moldova-hack-leak-operation/>, accessed 01/08/2023

28 Stela Untila, "Șeful SIS, despre scurgerile de pe Telegram: Par a fi serviciile speciale a altor state, primii suspecți - Federația Rusă," NewsMaker, November 14, 2022, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/seful-sis-despre-scurgerile-de-pe-telegram-par-a-fi-serviciile-speciale-a-altor-state-primii-suspecti-federatia-rusa/>, accessed 01/08/2023

29 BBC News, "Moldova Expels 45 Russian Diplomatic Staff in Spy Row," BBC News, July 26, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66320894>, accessed 01/08/2023

The digital and cyber-attacks pushed Moldova to adopt a new cybersecurity law, which was supported by the EU as part of an effort to build resilience against cyber threats.³⁰ The law aims to increase the resilience of state institutions to deal with cyber-attacks and the security of information. This aims to rectify the current situation, wherein there are no uniform rules across institutions on hardware and software security.

Furthermore, 2022 saw a significant rise in false bomb alerts, with 124 instances recorded during the months of July and August alone, in stark contrast to the total of 25 registered in the entirety of 2021.³¹ In order to address this issue, the government has strengthened security at the Chisinau airport, as well as increasing the penalty for false bomb alerts and taking measures to strengthen the security services and defence (also with the EUPM support), including the proposal for a new Security Strategy of Moldova.

The digital and cyber-attacks pushed Moldova to adopt a new cybersecurity law, which was supported by the EU as part of an effort to build resilience against cyber threats.

4. Transnistria, a battleground for hybrid threats and energy blackmail

The Transnistrian region represents a vulnerable spot for Moldova's security and a playground for hybrid attacks and disinformation. The danger of the Russo-Ukraine war spilling over to the separatist region remains, even if it has significantly reduced after Ukrainian defences stopped Russia from advancing further south towards Odesa. Despite ongoing provocations, including explosions in Transnistria, bomb alerts, and an attempted false flag operation³², as well as a continuously spread false narrative that Ukraine and the EU want to drag Moldova and Transnistria into the war – there has been no escalation.

Both Chisinau and Tiraspol have actively worked despite the war to prevent the escalation of tensions, maintaining 1+1 format meetings as the sole engagement platform, given the impossibility of the 5+2 format (including Moldova, Transnistria, EU, OSCE, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States) meeting in the foreseeable future. However, Russia's interest to prevent any major changes in Transnistria and maintain the status quo remains.

Simultaneously, as a result of the war, the increasing economic and energy interdependence between Chisinau and Tiraspol has come to the fore, reigniting discussions regarding the Transnistrian conflict and the necessity to address it. The closure of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border from the Transnistrian side has resulted in Transnistria becoming entirely reliant on Moldova for its exports, imports, and the movement of people. Consequently, the EU market has become key for Transnistria, with 67% of Transnistria's exports being directed towards the EU (a 10,2% increase since 2021).³³

30 Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, "Moldova Adopted the EU-Backed Cybersecurity Law | EEAS. May 11, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/moldova/moldova-adopted-eu-backed-cybersecurity-law_en?s=223, accessed 01/08/2023

31 Virginia Nica, "Cât a cheltuit Poliția din cauza alarmelor false cu bombă," Radio Europa Liberă, August 29, 2022, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/c%C3%A2t-a-cheltuit-poli%C8%9Bia-din-cauza-alarmelor-false-cu-bomb%C4%83-/32009115.html>, accessed 01/08/2023

32 Will Baumgardner, "What Russia's Failed Coercion of Transnistria Means for the Annexation of Occupied Territory in Ukraine", Critical Threats, September 20, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/background-er/what-russia%E2%80%99s-failed-coercion-transnistria-means-annexation-occupied-territory-ukraine>, accessed: 01/08/2023

33 Infotag, "UNIUNII EUROPENE ÎI REVIN 67% DIN EXPORTURILE ȘI 50% DIN IMPORTURILE TRANSNISTRIEI," February 7, 2023, <https://www.infotag.md/economics-ro/304768/>, accessed 01/08/2023

On the other hand, Moldova's dependency on Russian gas supply and electricity delivery from Transnistria has provided Russia with the opportunity to use energy blackmail as part of its hybrid attacks against Moldova. After the 2021 energy crisis³⁴, Moldova's state energy company Energocom has been buying gas for storage, which is then kept in Romania and Ukraine. This has created a safety pillow if the gas supply should stop, but the main challenge has been related to the supply of electricity.³⁵ Currently, all the gas supplied by Gazprom, a daily amount of 5.7 million cubic meters, which is less than 50% of Moldovan (including the Transnistrian region) needs, is directed to Transnistria. In exchange, the Transnistrian Cuciurgan power station (operated by the Moldovan firm GRES, a 100% subsidiary of Russian Inter RAO UES) is selling electricity back to the right bank of the Nistru. This amount is covering around 80% of Moldova's needs in terms of electricity. The issue of electricity supply, which held significant prominence in the winter of 2022, remains a challenge for the upcoming season due to high prices. In 2022, the Moldovan government moved to subsidize electricity and energy consumption with the support of EU, its member states and the US.

In order to put more pressure on Moldova, Russia could totally discontinue this gas supply, which will drastically affect the cost of electricity and will have swift repercussions for the Transnistrian region. Transnistria's budget is dependent on subsidized gas and the potential halt of its delivery risks a humanitarian catastrophe (most Transnistrian residents have Moldovan passports). The Moldovan government has been preparing scenarios in the event of Russia halting gas delivery; international support might be needed to adequately prepare for this outcome.³⁶

The construction of the Vulcanesti-Chisinau and the launch of the project Suceava-Balti high-voltage lines bypassing Transnistria, once ready, will diversify Moldova's sources of electricity procurement. This measure along with Moldova's procurement of electricity from the spot market in Romania (due to synchronization with ENTSO) and its initiatives to diversify energy sources will further de-leverage Transnistria and make Moldova more resilient in terms of energy supply.

Investment in green energy and renewables can bring Moldova further in its energy decoupling from Russia. In 2020, the share of renewables in the gross final energy consumption amounted to 25% and Moldova has a high potential for investing in solar and wind energy.³⁷ In order to improve the current system, additional investment in infrastructure and processes is needed in order to allow the production and storage of renewable energy, as well as to secure high-power system capacities and more flexible options for storage.³⁸

Therefore, it remains crucial to assist the Moldovan authorities in securing funding for such a major economic transition, and potentially extend such support to Transnistria, while also formulating reintegration scenarios in discussions of the possible outcomes of the war in Ukraine.

34 Carolin Busch, "Moldova is making some progress on energy security", German Economic Team, May-June 2023, <https://www.german-economic-team.com/en/newsletter/moldova-is-making-some-progress-on-energy-security/>, accessed 12/09/2023

35 Infotag, "ENERGOCOM USES FIRST TRANCHE FROM EBRD LOAN TO REPLENISH GAS RESERVE," November 3, 2022, <https://www.infotag.md/economics-en/302796/>, accessed 01/08/2023

36 Евгений Шоларь, "Moldova revine la gaze naturale de la „Gazprom”? Trei scenarii pentru sezonul de încălzire 2023-2024," NewsMaker, August 4, 2023, <https://newsmaker.md/ro/moldova-revine-la-gaze-naturale-de-la-gazprom-trei-scenarii-pentru-sezonul-de-incalzire-2023-2024/>, accessed 04/08/2023

37 UNECE Renewable Energy Uptake, "Factsheet: Renewable Energy in Moldova. Status of Renewable Energy Deployment", June 2022, https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/UNECE-REUptake_Factsheet_Moldova_Final.pdf, accessed 01/08/2023

38 Stratulat Albulescu Attorneys At Law, "Renewables in Moldova," June 12, 2023, <https://ceelegalmatters.com/renewable-energy-2023/renewable-energy-moldova-2023>, accessed 01/08/2023

Investment in green energy and renewables can bring Moldova further in its energy decoupling from Russia.

Building resilience, strengthening security, and the ability to respond to crises are key to address hybrid threats

The primary challenge faced by the present government is the race against time, given the upcoming local elections scheduled for 5 November 2023, followed by the presidential elections next year, and the parliamentary elections in 2025. In the long term, the crucial approach for the country to counter hybrid threats remains the cultivation of resilience and steadfast support for the ongoing reform process and European Union integration, including economic and financial support. Resilience, as defined by the EU, pertains to “the capacity of an individual, household, community, country, or region to endure, manage, adapt, and promptly recover from pressures and shocks such as violence, conflict, drought, and other natural disasters, without jeopardising sustained progress.”³⁹

Since the outbreak of the full-scale war, security has emerged as a paramount concern (46% of the population perceive a war in the region as one of the main worries⁴⁰), prompting the Moldovan government to fortify its security services and defence capabilities. Earlier this October, at the National Supreme Council Maia Sandu presented the project for the Security Strategy of Moldova – it focuses on investments and strengthening the defence and security sector; gradual progress towards resolving the Transnistrian conflict; security partnerships with the most developed and prosperous democratic countries in the world; the fight against corruption, and establishment of strong institutions to enforce the law.⁴¹ Moreover, a recent amendment to the law, regarding the Moldovan Security and Intelligence Services (SIS) adopted by the Moldovan parliament, led to a revision of the roles and responsibilities of SIS

39 European Commission, “Building Resilience: The EU’s approach FACTSHEET”, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/EU_building_resilience_en.pdf, accessed 01/08/2023

40 “Al patrunea sondaj de opinie privind percepția dezinformării și preferințele politice ale populației”, Wachdog. md., accessed 01/08/2023

41 Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, “President Sandu sets out Moldova’s new security agenda amidst regional turmoil”, October, 11, 2023, <https://presedinte.md/presa/presedinta-maia-sandu-a-prezenta-proiectul-strategiei-securitatii-nationale>, accessed on 23/10/2023

On the defence front, the Moldovan army is small and weak, amounting to around 6,000 people.

⁴² Following feedback from the Venice Commission that highlighted ambiguities and after incorporating insights from national consultations, the law was adjusted with the intention of strengthening the security services, by offering them more powers and competences.

On the defence front, the Moldovan army is small and weak, amounting to around 6,000 people. Though the defence budget was increased by 68,2%, it still represents only 0,55% of national GDP. Through the European Peace Facility Instrument, Moldova is currently receiving 40 million euros over a 36-month period. This funding is designated for non-lethal equipment, supplies, training, as well as surveillance and cyber defence. This assistance is in addition to a previous allocation of 40 million in June 2022 and a further 7 million in December 2021.⁴³

The newly established EU Partnership Mission (EUPM) is supposed to help the government tackle the range of hybrid threats detailed above. The mission's role is to contribute to strengthen its crisis management structures and enhance its ability to tackle hybrid threats, including Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and cybersecurity.⁴⁴ The mission aims to foster resilience and in terms of hybrid threats and focuses on detecting, analysing and responding to nascent threats.⁴⁵ The mission aims to help coordinate EU and other donors' support to Moldova and integrate EU best practices, in order to address the challenges in a more efficient way. Moldova's security and defence are also enhanced through other platforms such as the EU-Moldova High Level Political and Security dialogue, the EU-Moldova Support Hub for Internal Security and Border Management, the EU Border Assistance Mission, Frontex, Europol, Eurojust and CEPOL, and the European Peace Facility.⁴⁶ The Moldovan government has made security and defence one of the top priorities and receives external support that is crucial. However continuous support and expertise exchange is needed in order to continue the reform process.

42 Milena Onisim, "DOC/ Proiectul de lege privind SIS, adoptat de Parlament," Ziarul De Gardă, June 8, 2023, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/doc-proiectul-de-lege-privind-sis-adoptat-de-parlament/>, accessed 01/08/2023

43 Council of the EU, "European Peace Facility: Council adopts assistance measures to support the defence sector of the Republic of Moldova and Georgia", May 4, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/04/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-assistance-measures-to-support-defence-sector-of-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia/>, accessed 01/08/2023

44 Council of the EU, "Moldova: EU launches civilian mission to strengthen the resilience of the security sector in the areas of crisis management and countering hybrid threats", May 22, 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/05/22/moldova-eu-launches-civilian-mission-to-strengthen-the-resilience-of-the-security-sector-in-the-areas-of-crisis-management-and-countering-hybrid-threats/>, accessed 22/09/2023

45 European External Action Service, "European Union Partnership Mission Moldova (EUPM)", June 2023, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/Factsheet%20-%20EUPM%20Moldova.pdf>, accessed 01/08/2023

46 These platforms are important for Moldova, as they provide mechanisms for strengthening Moldova's capabilities and an exchange of practices, as well as EU support.

Conclusions and Recommendation: long term, consistent, targeted support is key

Moldova's response to hybrid threats has been a learning by doing exercise. If assessing its efforts in line with the HCSS guidelines for dealing with hybrid threats⁴⁷, these efforts lacked sufficient preparation, were not consolidated, and rather reactive. Since winter 2022, the Moldovan government has made progress with better preparation for, detection, and attribution of hybrid threats, also in coordination with external actors. However, more coordination is needed between institutions tasked with the response to security and cyber threats as well as more oversight on the existing initiatives and donor support, in order to avoid duplication and overlap between roles and responsibilities. Considering the state's low administrative capacity, including in the security and defence field, better coordination is needed to make processes and use of staff more efficient.

Due to the unstable situation in the region and with Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, it remains challenging to fully assess the results of counter-hybrid measures pursued by the Moldovan authorities, as the work on strengthening resilience is in progress. The external support secured by Chisinau shows that donors trust Moldova's ambition to pursue reforms quickly, to strengthen and enhance resilience and strengthen security institutions. Yet, the domestic political situation remains fragile. The reforms to date are not tangible to the wider population, which is also confronted with disinformation. Finally, increasing the overall quality of life and state economic situation remains an overarching priority. The next presidential and after parliamentary elections will be a test for the current government.

In line with what has been presented thus far, the following recommendations can be identified:

1. One of the key issues that Moldova is dealing with is the stretch of administrative capacity and working against the clock. Due to a limited number of security qualified personnel, the Moldovan government needs to better streamline the processes related to hybrid threat response, such as centralizing and pooling detection, analysis and response capabilities to increase agility and responsiveness.
2. There is a need to better define responsibilities and roles related to hybrid response, in order to switch to a proactive response to hybrid threats. The roles and responsibilities

⁴⁷ Mattia Bertolini, Raffaele Minicozzi and Tim Swejts, "Ten Guidelines for Dealing with Hybrid Threats. A Policy Response Framework", The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, April 2023, <https://hcsc.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Guidelines-for-the-Deterrence-of-Hybrid-Threats-HCSS-2023.pdf>, accessed 01/07/2023

between the new Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation, the envisaged National Cyber Security Agency under the Ministry of Economy as well as the Security and Intelligence Service, Ministry of Defence, and Ministry of Interior, and the Supreme Council overlap in some areas. This both increases the amount of work and engagement of the already scarce security personnel.

3. There is a need to better coordinate donor activities in the security and defence sector, especially as bilateral and multilateral support has significantly increased since February 2022. As current coordination capabilities are low, it would be useful to have centralised coordination related to donor support in order to avoid duplication.
4. Considering the low salaries in the public sector and the high amount of work, it remains difficult to attract qualified personnel. Support to the implementation of the new law on public administration and institutional support to Moldova remains crucial. There is a continuous need to support capacity building of security institutions, including Ministry of Interior and the new Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating the Disinformation.
5. Use of the European Peace Facility Instrument to support Moldovan defence long term (rather than on yearly basis) should be more routine and active.
6. The EU could consider extending security commitments to Moldova, to help build Moldovan resilience against destabilisation.
7. It is important that Moldova continues receiving lasting support from the EU and its member states for energy cost subsidies, investments in green energy, and the energy transition. High prices and 2022's inflation rate of 30% makes people more susceptible to join anti-government demonstrations or accept payments for votes.
8. It remains key to maintain stable relations with the *de facto* authorities from Tiraspol. The EU could play a bigger role in the 1+1 negotiations and support the Moldovan government in its initiatives related to the reintegration of the Transnistrian region.
9. Adding Ilan Shor and Vladimir Plahotniuc, as well as other political and business players related to them, to the EU sanctions list legitimises the actions of the Moldovan government. The sanctioning of individuals who undermine the sovereignty of Moldova should continue.
10. Ensuring Moldova's connectivity with the European Union and continuing investments in infrastructure and transport is needed. It can help Moldova play a greater role as a transport hub between Ukraine and the EU, as well as reducing leverage from Moscow over Transnistria.

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