

# UNDERSTANDING HYBRID THREATS AND THEIR SOCIETAL IMPACT – REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*Hybrid threats undermine societies and foster unrest. Russia’s brutal and unjustified war against Ukraine has changed Moldova’s geopolitical situation. As President Maia Sandu states “using the full range of hybrid threats - including false bomb threats, cyber-attacks, disinformation, calls for social unrest and open corruption – Russia has sought to destabilize the government, erode our democracy and jeopardize Moldova’s contribution to the security of Europe as a whole”. Through consultants, money transfers, and fostering corruption, Russia is interfering in Moldova’s political landscape. However, the international community is highly concerned and supports the Republic of Moldova through a wide range of measures and instruments. The goal of this article is to highlight the main hybrid actions, their impact on Moldovan society, and the state authority’s response in responding to these hybrid threats. Consequently, this article emphasizes the difficulty of ensuring political sustainability amid an intense hybrid warfare.*

**KEYWORDS:** hybrid threats, resilience, security, society

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the impact of Russian hybrid warfare on Moldovan society by highlighting real-life examples of hybrid threats impacting the country to illustrate their consequences while considering the unique geopolitical and social factors. Having in mind the immediate proximity to the war in Ukraine, it is imperative to understand how hybrid warfare hampers the internal stability and national security of a small, economically fragile, and ideologically divided country.

Is political sustainability still achievable in the current security environment profoundly affected by hybrid warfare? This question is the topic of

vibrant debates and considering what is at stake, a careful assessment to determine whether the scientific foundations could explain the trajectory or predict how these types of actions (hybrid) could be prevented or countered is needed.

This article reviews the empirical evidence and theoretical literature to answer this question. The conclusion is that there is consistent empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis of a decoupling of political sustainability from the current security environment in the Republic of Moldova. Political divisions, economic challenges, and technological gaps make the Moldovan society susceptible to hybrid threats.

## 2. Context

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine shattered decades of peace in Europe. It has fundamentally changed European common security, but not only, spillover effects of the war, mainly financial implications are impacting even other continents. The war has caused huge economic and social pressure on the Republic of Moldova while the Russian missiles, launched against Ukraine, represent a direct danger to the security of the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, through complex disinformation campaigns, Russia is fuelling social tensions and public order disruption. The end goal is to reclaim control of the 2.5 million people landlocked ex-Soviet country.

The Moldovan government continues to focus on an ambitious democratic reform agenda, the European integration process, stimulating economic growth and enhancing national defense capacities. Simultaneously, the authorities are coping daily with hybrid pressures coming from Russia and its local proxies. These challenges come in the form of unceasing energy blackmail, electoral interference, illegal financing, corruption, and cyberattacks.

During the years, Russia has employed various tactics to hinder Moldova's efforts to become part of the European Union, exerting influence over the easternmost regions of the country through the illegal stationed Russian troops and proxies, disrupting Moldova's economy and creating societal rifts. After the 1992 conflict between Transnistrian forces and central authorities, a peace agreement was concluded which allowed Russia to have around 1,500 soldiers divided into "peacekeepers" (with legal status) and the Operative Group of the Russian Troops, OGRT (illegally stationed), who guard the ammunition depot in Cobasna.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, speculations over whether Transnistria will be dragged into the conflict have been floating in the public

space as have discussions about a final settlement of the separatist conflict, which would likely include Transnistria's reintegration into Moldova. Moldovan president Maia Sandu seems to have formalized its strategy for Transnistrian region reintegration through Moldova's candidacy for the European Union.

Paradoxically, the ongoing war in Ukraine has catalyzed for Moldova to increase investment in the national defense and security sector and reassess its foreign policy options, seeking EU membership by 2030. On 1 June, Moldova hosted the second meeting of the European Political Community. The Summit, preceded by a government-organized pro-European rally in Chisinau, sent a strong signal of support to Ukraine and Moldova's European future.

President Sandu represents the driving force towards the country's pro-Western orientation. In her address to the UN General Assembly, she emphasized the importance of the EU integration for Moldova: "*Enlarging the EU is the only way to ensure that our neighborhood remains anchored in the free world and that we provide a better life for our citizens*" (Press Releases – Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2023). President Sandu reminded that the country's safety depends on the good training and equipment of the National Army and emphasized the need to ensure adequate budget allocations for defense modernization.

## 3. Understanding Hybrid Threats

According to NATO website, threats and challenges from both state and non-state actors who use hybrid actions to target political leadership and state institutions, manipulate public opinion, and undermine the security, are overwhelmingly frequent and intense. Hybrid methods of warfare – such as propaganda, deception, sabotage, and other non-military tactics – have long been used to destabilize adversaries. The novelty about these attacks is their speed, scale, and intensity, facilitated by

rapid technological change and global interconnectivity (NATO, 2023).

According to the Helsinki Centre of excellence on hybrid threats, “*the term hybrid threat refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state, or institutional level. Such actions are coordinated and synchronized and deliberately target democratic states’ and institutions’ vulnerabilities. Activities can take place, for example, in the political, economic, military, civil, or information domains*” (Hibrid CoE, 2023). Moreover, according to the aforementioned Centre, a hybrid action is also characterized by ambiguity as complicates attribution and response. In addition a hybrid warfare is economically efficient by converting the weaknesses of the target into a direct advantage for the attacker.

In Moldova’s case, the most frequent means utilized are disinformation and interference in national politics, especially prior to or during elections, cyber operations, and different forms of criminal activities. Last winter, energetic blackmail was the most prominent and acute disturbance as the critical infrastructure in Ukraine, to which Moldova is still connected, was targeted by Russian missile attacks.

Some authors argue that “*hybrid warfare has been an integral part of the historical landscape since the ancient world, great powers throughout history have confronted opponents who used a combination of regular and irregular forces to negate the advantage of the great powers’ superior conventional military strength*” (Martin, 2013). In Murray & Mansoor’s work (2012), Mansoor claims that hybrid warfare is not new, but has been and continues to remain a part of the warfare even in modern times.

Frank Hoffman (2007), in his paper on hybrid wars, notes that today’s enemies and tomorrow’s will employ combinations

of warfare types. Nation-states may well engage in irregular conflict with conventional types of warfare to achieve their goal. Hoffman’s perspective on the future indicates that upcoming adversaries will be more intelligent and less likely to confine themselves to employing just one method. Traditional, unconventional, and terrorist threats won’t be clearly defined categories; they will manifest simultaneously in various ways.

John Arquilla (2007) also draws attention to the complexity of hybrid actions stating that coping with networks that can operate in such diverse manners triggering countless hybrid forms of conflict is challenging and requires a great amount of innovative thinking. Hybrid threats now leverage advanced technology, including artificial intelligence, to amplify the impact of cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and espionage. This makes them more sophisticated and harder to detect. Furthermore, these threats are evolving and with the use of technology perpetrators increasingly hide their identities or use proxies, making it difficult to attribute actions to specific entities.

Faced with such a complex phenomenon, many nations have developed formal hybrid warfare doctrines, outlining strategies for combining conventional and unconventional methods. This approach is becoming more systematic and institutionalized. The United States has included these types of actions in their strategic documents for many years acknowledging the overwhelming and multifaceted impact of these attacks. The terrorist attacks on September 11 prove the amplitude of such actions.

With a young generation hooked on Social Media, online platforms become battlegrounds for information warfare, with adversaries spreading disinformation, sowing discord, and manipulating public opinion on a massive scale. Recent years abound in examples of such large-scale

manipulation through social platforms. Perhaps the most eloquent one is the COVID-19 disinformation campaign. In short, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms and media outlets were saturated with false facts about the virus's source, treatments, and vaccines. This led to vaccine hesitancy and confusion among the public. This example shows how one can use social platforms to spread narratives and shape international opinion. False information and divisive content can spread rapidly on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and Telegram.

Hybrid actions also regard the economic sphere and nowadays we all experience some kind of economic pressure due to the spillover effects of the war. Economic tools, such as sanctions trade restrictions, energetic/resources blackmail, etc. are increasingly used as part of hybrid strategies to exert pressure on adversaries, affecting not just governments but also businesses and individuals.

#### **4. Political Sustainability – Conceptual Determination and Relevance**

In a broad sense, this article considers political sustainability as the ability of a political system to maintain stability, continuity, and effectiveness during its tenure. There isn't much theoretical research regarding this concept, nevertheless, in our opinion, political sustainability is vital for ensuring the long-term stability and prosperity of a country. The concept encompasses all the vital aspects of a viable government and focuses on creating policies and practices that ensure long-term well-being for both current and future generations. Scientific studies related to sustainability in politics include research on environmental policies, climate change mitigation, social justice, and economic sustainability

This concept of sustainability is analysed through different lenses leading the authors to debate if today's politicians

are giving priority to sustainable policies over other legitimate concerns (Birnbacher & Thorseth, 2015). In the current context "sustainability" meaning has transcended to a balanced policy mostly applicable in an open democratic society as it regards the rule of law, welfare, and functional structural institutions. Another key aspect of political sustainability is the ability of a government to manage conflicts and maintain peaceful relations with other countries and international organizations. The concept has great relevance for this research paper as it enables the understanding of efforts undertaken by the Moldovan government to maintain social order, promote the rule of law, and ensure political institutions remain functional even when faced with intense hybrid warfare.

#### **5. Key Hybrid Threats to the Republic of Moldova and Authorities' Response**

The overall internal security situation remains stable, but fragile due to regular incidents such as bomb hoaxes and missiles or missile debris falling on Moldovan territory. Moldovan Parliament re-extended the state of emergency for another 60 days at the beginning of October 2 (Moldpres, 2023). This vote has become routine as the government indicated that the state of emergency will continue until the war in Ukraine and hybrid threats from Russia are over.

One of the most significant security incidents in Moldova with a reverberating impact occurred in June when a Tajik citizen was refused entry to Moldova and while being escorted, the man disarmed to shoot dead two officers. The investigation found numerous gaps in security procedures and immediate actions were implemented by authorities to prevent future incidents and new SOPs created.

On 25 September, authorities reported that S-300 missile debris fell in the Transnistrian region, following a missile

attack on Odessa Region. The incident was handled with great prudence as the missile fell with its warhead intact in a house garden but did not explode. To ensure better visibility and management of the national airspace, the Ministry of Defence is in the process of procuring air identification radars (early warning systems) which will cover the whole country by the end of this year. Other types of military equipment are not being discussed for the time being due to a lack of resources and the geography of the country.

Furthermore, the repeated Russian drone attacks on the Ukrainian ports on the Danube River have impacted the Moldovan grain market as well. The transited volume will increase, but so will waiting times for carriers. To avoid overburdening the Giurgiulesti Port, the Moldovan authorities are looking to increase rail options for Ukrainian grain transit. Development of critical logistical infrastructure is ongoing with the support of external development partners. Interconnectivity is at the core of this long-term project.

With not one but two separatist regions on its territory, the Republic of Moldova faces a multitude of additional challenges that can vary from ideological disputes to military threats. The breakaway separatist region of Transnistria and the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, both being under de facto control of Russia are exerting a great amount of pressure on the Moldovan central authorities who treat national security as a top priority for the country. Moscow's efforts to exert influence have been notably persistent in the two historically pro-Russian regions of Gagauzia, where last's April elections were corrupted, and the Transnistrian region, where an opposition leader, Oleg Khorzhan, was assassinated. To counter this large-scale interference, Moldova continues to deny a large number of people from entering the country daily. Further efforts to counter Russian malign interference are

planned to be implemented in the upcoming period. A Cyber Security Agency is being established aiming to ensure an adequate response to cyber incidents, consolidate cyber security, and contribute to the improvement of the regulatory framework for the protection of cyber infrastructure. The new Agency will be subordinated to the Ministry of Economic Development and Digitalization.

As concerns "the Transnistrian region's" security situation, the overall atmosphere remains calm. The "5+2" process remains frozen since Russian aggression against Ukraine, however, "1+1" (central authorities + transnistrian representatives) discussions continue enabled by Tiraspol's utter isolation and economic dependence on Chisinau, although less frequently than before. Moldova's leadership seems to have confidence that the resolution of the frozen conflict is not a condition for Moldova's EU ascension. Josep Borrell EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, while in Moldova, discussed the usefulness of the "Cypriot model" for Moldova reinforcing Moldovan views.

While the Moldovan government's conceptual framework for the reintegration of the region remains to some extent unknown, the authorities emphasize and pursue an economic integration approach as the strategy to reintegrate the region in the coming period. The war in Ukraine had an enabler effect for strengthening economic ties with the region, which now exports approximately 70 % of its products to the EU market (Pleșca & Dastros-Pitei, 2023).

Even though the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia is an integral part of the country, it remains under the de-facto influence of Russia. The top two slots in the territory's recent elections were taken by pro-Russian candidates. Yevgeniya Gutul, Gagauzia's new leader (so-called Bashkan) was elected on behalf of the party

of Ilan Shor, the fugitive oligarch sentenced to 15 years in April 2023 for his part in a mass fraud. Numerous other allegations of electoral corruption are under investigation by authorities. The region continues to struggle politically and economically as the new Baskan obtained the People's Assembly approval for the Executive she proposed only after a long period of negotiations and nine repeated rounds of voting. However, she, herself is not yet part of the cabinet of ministers of the Republic of Moldova as the President announced she will not sign the appointment decree as long as investigations are still in progress. Gagauzia may not play a significant role in the current security context, but it could become a potential flash point during a crisis having in mind the overwhelming Russian influence over the local institutions.

Conceivably the most vulnerable parts of Moldova are the two separatist regions. They are at the same time both victims and perpetrators of hybrid warfare. Russian media are viral in these two regions as most of the population relies on Russian-language media sources, which are either directly controlled by the Kremlin or affiliated Socialist Party (PSRM) and Shor Party (owned by convicted in absentia, fugitive oligarch, Ilan Shor). Most residents get information from social media such as Telegram channels. The elderly, who feel great nostalgia about the Soviet times, are more prone to become victims of false news. Furthermore, the 2023 elections in Gagauzia won by Evghenia Gutul, Shor's party candidate, in a runoff with Grigori Uzun, supported by the Party of Socialists show that the Russian grip is still strong. At the same time with upwards of 90 % of Transnistrian residents holding Moldovan citizenship, Moldova, which counts about 2.5 million inhabitants, is faced with around 300,000 voters, many of whom have Russian sympathies and could easily influence the results of elections.

Beyond instrumenting the two regions, Russia is also attempting to exploit Moldova's economic weaknesses in order to establish significant influence over the national internal and external policies. Energy, among the essential infrastructures, has been a specific target for pressure since Moldova gained independence, having in mind that the country completely lacks the means to produce it. The economic situation remains fragile, with the state budget deficit reaching \$549.4 million which is almost three times more than in 2022. Considering other economic factors, the National Bank is forecasting a 2023 yearly average inflation of 13.3 % and a 2024 yearly average of 4.8 %. The national average salary amounts to 11,500 lei/month (~598 euro) (InfoMarket, 2023).

The authorities have taken effective measures to consolidate national energy security. Currently, Moldova buys gas on the open market for \$420/1000 cubic meters which is cheaper than the price offered by Gazprom of \$700. According to official statements, Moldova has gas reserves sufficient until February, and coal and fuel oil reserves are being replenished. Preparing for the cold season, Moldovan authorities are working on a new energy subsidy scheme as 80 % of households in the country fell into the "very vulnerable" category. Energy experts maintain that despite recent attempts to become energetically less dependent on Russia, Moldova remains at risk of being destabilized by malign actors and vested interests linked to Russia relying on a single power plant in the Transnistrian region for 85 % of its electricity. There is almost no foreign investment in the energy sector. In the short term, the rest of the energy needs, besides the one produced from renewable sources and thermal power stations (CETs), will be contracted from Ukraine, Romania, and the OPCOM exchange (Moldpress, 2023).

Perhaps the most important and relevant threat to Moldova's security, especially having in mind our research question, is the political interference aiming to take down the current pro-European leadership. It is worth mentioning that for the first time, the Republic of Moldova has the entire leadership chain aligned in terms of pro-Western policy.

According to international NATO experts' assessment, Moldova doesn't face an immediate military threat, however being targeted by Russia's hybrid action, the country is facing considerably more intricate problems which add additional pressure on the government (NATO – Mircea Geoana's Speech, 2023). Since taking office, PAS (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate – Action and Solidarity Party) has been facing mounting political pressure from Moscow.

Waves of instrumentalized political protests by the country's pro-Russian Shor Party and Russian sympathizers, plummeting inflation and deteriorating living conditions have had a devastating impact on the already impoverished population. To obtain political sustainability, the Moldovan government took measures to limit and prevent Russian influence in the country, banning symbols associated with Russian aggression, rebroadcasting Russian TV channels, and entry into the country of Russian representatives. *"There is no doubt that in the long run, Moscow is counting on pro-Russian forces to seize power in Moldova,"* an international analysis center on hybrid warfare, HybridCoE (2023), reported in a March study of Russia's activities. Russia not only tried to provoke riots but even attempted a coup which the Moldovan government countered with the support from Ukrainian partners.

To tackle Russian interference, on 19 June 2023, the "Șor" party was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova. However, the Shor-affiliated Sansa (Chance) party is

making a comeback to promote Shor's populist agenda. Political turmoil is to be expected in the run-up to the upcoming rounds of elections (local election on the 5th of November 2023, followed by Presidential election in 2024 and Parliamentary in 2025).

An important step in gaining political independence is the creation of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation. The Centre will be tasked to issue recommendations to state institutions and the private sector. It will also have the power to address any coordinated actions to spread narratives, regardless of their origin, which may be considered a threat to national security.

The new National Security Strategy will be adopted by the end of the year and will identify Russia's aggressive policy as the main threat to the country, according to Prime Minister Dorin Recean. Once adopted, the authorities will develop an interagency implementation plan to ensure strategic alignment.

International support proved to be essential in obtaining political independence. In recent years, Russia's influence over Moldova has significantly diminished due to the strong aversion of many Moldovans towards the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine and the weakening of Russia's control over Moldova's economy.

In the same time, the Russian invasion could be considered as a catalyst, fortifying the relationship between Ukraine and Moldova and shaping the development of a strategic cooperation between the two nations. Addressing the UN General Assembly, President Sandu praised Ukraine for its efforts to resist Russia's brutal invasion, which makes Moldova stronger and more resilient. For Chisinau, Ukraine has emerged as a pivotal element in its security considerations, and likewise, Kyiv acknowledges the strategic value of its neighboring country in terms of social, transportation, and logistics aspects.

The European Union's expansion policy toward Moldova and Ukraine also fosters closer ties between the two nations. Moldova plays a substantial role in facilitating the transportation of Ukrainian grain to Western markets. In fact, Russia's Foreign Ministry even accused Moldova of becoming a "logistical extension" of Ukraine.

As Moldova becomes more resolute in decoupling from Russia and countering Moscow's sustained campaign to regain political and economic control in Moldova, bilateral relations remain tense. In August, 45 employees of the Russian Embassy were ordered to leave Moldova to achieve "diplomatic parity" between the two countries' diplomatic missions. This decision was part of the fallout of the spying and electronic warfare allegations. Further firm actions followed and Vitaly Denisov, director of Russian news outlet "Sputnik" in Moldova, was expelled and banned from the country for 10 years.

## 6. Conclusions

The repercussions of the conflict in Ukraine have led to significant changes throughout the region, giving rise to fresh challenges and a transformed security landscape. At the same time, the war has helped attract unprecedented attention from major international actors. Moldova has made a huge step forward on the European path and has received exceptional support from external partners. Nevertheless, continual Russian influence campaigns within the country have demonstrated that advancements can be delicate, emphasizing that Moldova's path toward Europe is not irreversible. In this regard, the European Union (EU) has made numerous efforts to help Moldova end its reliance on Russian energy and deployed a civilian mission to the country. The EU has developed a variety of assistance projects covering essential areas such as countering hybrid threats, including defense through the European Peace Facility instrument.

The measures taken by the Moldovan government, civil society, and international partners to counter hybrid threats and their effectiveness are commendable. With limited human resources and scarce financial means, the government fought back Russian interference as much as possible in given circumstances. Is it enough to obtain political stability in light of the upcoming rounds of election (local – November 2023, presidential – 2024, parliamentary – 2025) against the backdrop of the above-described hybrid warfare? Probably not, but concrete, consistent, and sustainable measures were taken, and backed by massive external support and having a European Union membership perspective, Moldova can prevail in its efforts to become "*part of the free world*" (Maia Sandu).

A straight yes or no answer to our initial question is not feasible at this stage, however, we can firmly maintain that the Republic of Moldova is on the right track to achieve political sustainability even against the backdrop of Russian malign interference. More is still to be done, and the level of implementation varies. The next rounds of elections will test the political maturity of the country and its institutional resilience. It is worth mentioning Moldova is also looking to increase its contribution to peace missions and therefore become a credible security provider. A stable, secure, and European Moldova will strengthen the security and stability of the region and the European Union at large.

## 7. Way Forward – How to Improve Defense and Deterrence against Hybrid Threats

Deterring hybrid aggressors remains a difficult task. Adversaries are quick to adapt to evolving defense strategies, requiring constant innovation in countermeasures. Overall, the evolution of hybrid threats highlights the need for a holistic approach to security that combines



a variety of means such as diplomatic, military, and economic to mitigate effectively these complex challenges.

In the medium to long term, Moldova should seek to progressively enhance its situational awareness and develop capabilities to prevent and minimize damages/effects from hybrid threats. A range of policies should be created to increase resilience and bolster defense and security capabilities. As an example of an effective tool, I would mention the NATO-Ukraine Platform on Countering Hybrid Warfare (decided during NATO Summit in

Warsaw, 2016). This is an important instrument that offers a means to enhance the detection of hybrid threats and to develop capabilities for addressing vulnerabilities and bolstering the resilience of both the state and society. The Platform has a building capacity component as well and offers trainings and expert consultations (Hybrid CoE, 2023). Moreover, Centres of Excellence offers a variety of trainings, workshops, and other types of programs that can support Moldova in increasing its resilience against hybrid threats.

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