



Strengthening Resilience in Moldova Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Jakob Hedenskog
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Executive Summary

A potential weakening of Ukraine's independence and sovereignty as a result of a hypothetical military defeat against Russia poses an existential threat also to Moldova's survival as an independent, sovereign and democratic state.

The Russian hybrid warfare against Moldova includes various forms of pressure, disinformation, support for riots and anti-government protests, illegal financing of political parties and opposition politicians, and even attempts to organize a coup d'état. In addition, Moscow still controls the separatist region in Transnistria, where it maintains a military operational group against Chişinău's will.

The Moldovan authorities have recently been relatively successful in taking steps to strengthen the country's resilience, notably by abandoning dependence on Russian gas and redirecting its energy imports, with the help of funding from Western institutions. Moldova is also in the process of adopting a new national security strategy, which will include a more realistic assessment of Russia.

However, to strengthen Moldova's resilience against both Russia's military and hybrid threats and to ensure progress in Moldova's coming EU membership negotiations, more western support must come in the form of financial support, technical assistance to support public administration, support for various reforms, and for capacity building of Moldova's armed forces. This will be even more important given the coming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024-25.

Introduction

On 14 December 2023, the European Council took the historic decision to open accession negotiations with Moldova and Ukraine. The European path of both countries has been closely intertwined since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Both countries applied for membership in March 2022 and were together granted candidate status in June the same year.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a direct threat to Moldova. Statements by Russian generals and political leaders confirm that Russia's original military aim was to carve out a land corridor to Moldova by occupying the coast of Ukraine to the Black Sea and link Transnistria to Russia's occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea.

Long after Russia was forced to abandon these plans, at least for now, Russian officials, such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, continued to threaten Moldova.¹ Furthermore, in February 2023, President of Moldova Maia Sandu, based on information from the Ukrainian security service, accused Russia of plotting a coup against Moldova in an attempt to replace the pro-European government with a pro-Russian one, by exploiting anti-regime protests in Chişinău

¹ Calugareanu, Vitalie and Schwartz, Robert (2023) "Russia steps up threats against Republic of Moldova", DW, 4 February, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-steps-up-threats-against-republic-of-moldova/a-64612019>.

financed by the pro-Russian exiled oligarch, Ilan Shor. This led Sandu to make changes in the government and appoint Dorin Recean, her security advisor and former interior minister, to the post of prime minister in order to increase the security profile of the government. Eight months later, Sandu disclosed that the Wagner Group and its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, had been directly involved in the coup plot.²

Russia's continuing threat to Moldova has forced the Moldovan authorities to reduce the country's dependency on Russia and to take serious and unprecedented steps to strengthen its resilience. Resilience, as defined in a NATO context, refers to the capacity to prepare for, resist, respond to and quickly recover from shocks and disruptions.³ One important measure in strengthening conceptual awareness of state functions in Moldova has been to develop a new National Security Strategy (NSS).

Moldova's National Security Strategy: a Threat Assessment

A draft of the new Moldovan National Security Strategy was submitted to parliament for consideration and adoption on 24 November 2023.⁴ Two particular aspects of the drastic changes in the security situation around Moldova formed the rationale for the creation of a new NSS. First and foremost is Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. The 2011 NSS had listed Russia among Moldova's "strategic partners", albeit behind the European Union (EU), the United States and Romania. The second is Moldova's current integration process into the EU. At the time of the previous strategy, Moldova did not even have an association agreement with EU and the current strategy reflects the country's more ambitious EU-related agenda.

The new NSS identifies the *threats*, *risks* and *vulnerabilities* that affect or might affect Moldova's national security. It is the first document by an independent Moldova to characterize Russia as an adversary, acknowledges the threats as existential and outlines a strategy for dealing with those threats. The main threats to Moldovan national security are all linked to the activities of Russia:

- ✦ The military aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the aim of the Russian government to create a land corridor to Moldova by military means, which would create the conditions for the violent change of the constitutional order and the liquidation of the Moldovan state.
- ✦ Hybrid operations conducted by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova in the political, economic, energy-related and social fields, including information and cyber operations, with the aim of undermining the constitutional order, derailing the European course of the country and/or disintegrating the state.
- ✦ The illegal military presence of the Russian Federation in the Transnistrian region and its control over the separatist entity.

2 Ostiller, Nate (2023) "FT: Moldova president says Prigozhin attempted coup in Moldova", The Kyiv Independent, 6 October, <https://kyivindependent.com/sandu-prigozhin-attempted-coup-in-moldova/>

3 NATO "Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3", https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_132722.htm

4 President of the Republic of Moldova (2023) https://presedinte.md/app/webroot/uploaded/Proiect%20SSN_2023.pdf. Unofficial translation to English.

The term resilience (*reziliența*) is frequently used in the new NSS, in particular in the *lines of action* set out to counter threats, risks and vulnerabilities, for instance on harmonising national legislation with EU legislation on the resilience of critical entities. The NSS does not, however, refer to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in connection with resilience. The NSS makes no mention of any intention to change Moldova's constitutionally enshrined neutrality, but instead set limits on advancing and strengthening cooperation with NATO. However, it does note the important trend for "states bordering the Russian Federation, with a long tradition of neutrality, to renounce this status and join the NATO military alliance to guarantee their security in a collective defence format".

Russia has always interpreted Moldova's neutrality as meaning that it cannot have any contact with NATO and should have no military capability of its own. In addition, Russia's own military presence in Transnistria – an operational group of military forces, probably of less than 1,500 personnel – openly contradicts Moldova's neutrality and continues despite Chișinău's complaints. Furthermore, in its war against Ukraine, Russia has on several occasions launched cruise missiles aimed at western Ukraine from the Black Sea, crossing Moldovan airspace. This also undermines Moldova's neutrality and has been condemned by Moldova as a violation of international law.

Although the discussion is slowly taking shape in Moldova – Sandu even mentioned membership of a "larger alliance" in a January 2023 interview⁵ – the country is unlikely at present to abandon its neutrality for constitutional reasons and due to a lack of support for such a policy among the Moldovan population.

Concrete Steps to Increase the Resilience of Moldova

Since its landslide victory in the July 2021 parliamentary elections, and especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Moldovan government under the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) has taken several steps to increase the resilience of Moldova and limit any vulnerabilities that might be exploited by Russia.⁶

These measures can be divided into four areas, the most important of which was that Moldova abandoned its reliance on Russian gas in December 2022. Until then, Moldova had been nearly 100 per cent dependent on the Russian state energy corporation, Gazprom, which had threatened to withhold gas supplies to Moldova at any time if Chișinău failed to meet its contractual obligations. This was in a context where Gazprom had increased its tariffs more than sixfold between October 2021 and November 2022. In early 2023, with the help of a €300 million loan from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Moldovan state energy company, Energocom, was able to accumulate 300 million cubic metres of gas in underground reservoirs in Romania and Ukraine. However, Moldova remains vulnerable to Russian energy pressure when it comes to electricity supplies from a power plant in Transnistria owned by the Russian state-owned electricity company, Inter RAO.⁷

5 Lynch, Suzanne (2023) "Time to join NATO? Moldova eyes joining a 'larger alliance'", Politico, 20 January, <https://www.politico.eu/article/maia-sandu-moldova-nato-alliance-joining-ukraine-war-russia-invasion/>

6 Hedenskog, Jakob (2022) "How the EU can Reduce Russia's Exploitation of Moldova's Vulnerabilities, SCEEUS, 30 November, [How the EU can Reduce Russia's Exploitation of Moldova's Vulnerabilities - SCEEUS](#)

7 Catus, Kamil (2023a) "The Russian hybrid toolbox in Moldova: economic, political and social dimensions", Hybrid CoE Working Paper 23, April, pp. 7-8.

The second measure taken by the Moldovan authorities was to put additional pressure on separatist Transnistria. The diversification of gas supplies and the emergence of opportunities to import electricity from the EU, following connection to the European electricity grid in March 2022, resulted in Chişinău becoming significantly more assertive in its relations with Tiraspol. This new assertiveness was not only on trade and gas transmission, but also its attitude to separatism, for instance when Moldova adopted a new so-called separatism law in February 2023. Chişinău had previously largely refrained from pressuring Tiraspol, due to fear of Moscow's reaction.⁸ This new assertiveness was also facilitated by Ukraine closing the border with Transnistria a few days after Russia's invasion, leaving the self-proclaimed separatist authorities in Tiraspol isolated and more economically dependent on Chişinău.

The third measure was to limit access to Russian propaganda and disinformation in Moldova. Already in April 2022, the Moldovan parliament had voted for a public ban on Russian invasion symbols, including the "Z" and "V" signs, as well as Russian St. George ribbons, as these symbols are viewed as manifestations of support for Russian aggression and as warmongering.⁹ The authorities in Chişinău also blocked access to several Russian websites, banned Russian radio stations and television channels, and revoked the broadcast licence for Moldovan television channels that rebroadcast Russian channels.¹⁰ Except for in the separatist region of Transnistria, pro-Russian sentiments in Moldova are very common in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia in the south, as well as in parts of northern Moldova.¹¹

The fourth measure was to increase the level of integration with the EU on matters of resilience. The aim is to strengthen Moldova's resilience by enhancing the capacity of its armed forces. This includes an increased ability to provide services to civilians in crisis or emergency situations, and the capacity to contribute to military missions and operations under the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Since 2021, the EU has adopted three assistance measures at a cost of €87 million under the European Peace Facility (EPF) to support the Moldovan Armed Forces with the purchase of non-lethal equipment and services intended to strengthen medical, engineering, logistics, tactical communications, unmanned aerial surveillance, command and control, mobility and cyber-defence units.¹² The Moldovan Armed Forces comprise just 6,500 personnel divided into a Land Forces Command and an Air Forces Command, both equipped with Soviet-era weapons.

This financial support from the EU has made it possible for the Moldovan government to reallocate funds for the purchase of equipment from its western partners on a bilateral basis, such as the GM 200 Radar System from France and Piranha IIIH armoured personal carriers from Germany, as well as drones, ammunition, and other equipment from various countries. It

8 Catus, Kamil (2023b) "More independence, less fear. Moldova's perspective on Russia after a year of war in Ukraine", *OSW Commentary*, No 490, 20 February.

9 Catus (2023b).

10 Necsutu, Madalin (2023) "Moscow Accuses Moldova of 'Russophobia' Over Proposed Ban of Websites", *Balkan Insight*, 25 October, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/10/25/moscow-accuses-moldova-of-russophobia-over-proposed-ban-of-websites/>

11 Hedenskog (2022), pp. 7-8.

12 European Commission (2023) "EU-Moldova: European Peace Facility deliveries of medical and engineering equipment for the Armed Forces of the Republic of Moldova", 14 December, https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/news-1/eu-moldova-european-peace-facility-deliveries-medical-and-engineering-equipment-armed-forces-2023-12-14_en

has also made it possible to end the chronic underinvestment in the Moldovan armed forces by increasing the defence budget in 2023 by 68.2 per cent to around €85 million, albeit still at a modest level of 0.55 per cent of GDP.¹³ However, the new NSS foresees a gradual increase in budget allocations for national defence, with the aim of reaching 1 per cent of GDP in the current decade.

Support from the West is also strengthening Moldova's resilience against hybrid threats. In April 2023, at the request of the Moldova government, the EU established the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM) in Chişinău, the first ever civilian CSDP mission in Moldova. The aim of the mission is to enhance the resilience of the security sector in crisis management, while also enhancing resilience to hybrid threats in the area of cybersecurity, and countering foreign information manipulation and interference.¹⁴

The need to increase Moldova's resilience to Russian hybrid threats, such as electoral influence, propaganda, and disinformation, and to counter Russian attempts to fuel and exploit social and regional divisions is urgent as Moldova enters a crucial electoral cycle with local elections in November 2023 followed by a presidential election in 2024 and parliamentary elections in 2025. Given the experience of Russian attempts to interfere in the most recent local elections, which included inciting anti-government protest, establishing and illegally funding the "fake" Chance Party, and illegal payments to local public administrations in the regions, the coming elections are likely to be very tough.¹⁵ The current opposition to the pro-European government is a bloc of communists and socialists, and potential pro-Russian populist parties, such as the recently banned Shor and Chance parties, established by exiled oligarch Ilan Shor, who has been sanctioned by the US Department of the Treasury for corruption and illegal malign influencing operations in Moldova.¹⁶ He has also been sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison for involvement in the theft of US\$1 billion from the Moldovan banking system in 2014. A victory for the pro-Russian and Eurosceptic opposition parties in the 2025 parliamentary elections would have serious and even irreversible consequences for Moldova's EU membership negotiations.

13 Catus, Kamil (2023c) "Moldova: enhancing military cooperation with the West", OSW Analyses, 25 September.

14 Council of the EU (2023) "Moldova: EU launches civilian mission to strengthen the resilience of the security sector in the areas of crisis management and countering hybrid threats", 22 May, <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/>

15 Golubeva, Marija (2023) "Russian Hand Seen in Moldovan Local Elections", CEPA, 13 November, <https://cepa.org/article/russias-hand-seen-in-moldovan-local-elections/>

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

Recommendations to the EU and Western Partners

Most importantly, the EU and western institutions must continue to support Moldova financially. It is thanks to this support that Moldova was able to survive Russia's energy blackmail in 2022. Moldova will need additional funding to continue its energy diversification strategy, and in order to overcome Russia's hybrid threats to critical infrastructure and support Moldova with countering the negative effects of Russia's war in Ukraine.

The EU should increase its technical assistance in support of public administration in Moldova in connection with the start of EU membership negotiations. The overall objective should be to enhance the institutional capacity and human resources of central and local public administration, to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of a high-quality administration service in line with European principles of public administration.

Western partners of Moldova should assist the country to establish basic defence of its airspace. A precedent was set when a specialist NATO electronic warfare jet flew for several hours above Moldova on 1 June 2023 to protect the 45 heads of state and government, as well as the leaders of the EU institutions, attending the second Summit of the European Political Community (EPC) in Chişinău. This was the first acknowledged air reconnaissance mission by NATO over a former-Soviet republic.¹⁷

Western partners should use their intelligence bodies to further enhance the capabilities of the Moldovan Security and Intelligence Service, as well as efforts to reform and democratise this body. Support with investigating illegal funding, for instance, to strengthen resilience in countering Russian election influence will require further expertise from the EU.

The EU institutions and individual member states should also help to support the revitalisation of Moldova's stalled financial decentralisation reform. The success of the decentralisation reform in Ukraine, which increased the efficiency of public administration and increased the engagement and resilience of the population at the local level, should serve as an excellent point of reference.

¹⁷ Korshak, Stefan (2023) "NATO Spy Plane Makes First-Time Flight Over Moldova", Kyiv Post, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/17806>



Jakob Hedenskog

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

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