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Introduction

On the occasion of the establishment of the civilian CSDP EU Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova (EUPM) in April 2023, Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) noted: “As one of the countries most affected by the fallout of Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, we witness increased and continued Russian attempts to destabilise Moldova with hybrid actions” (Council of the EU, 2023). In light of geopolitical tensions and persistent threats from Russia, Moldova and the EU are seeking to establish greater cooperation in the field of security in defence. After the deployment of the EUPM in May 2023, the representatives from the EU and Moldova signed the Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) on 21 May 2024. Moldova is the first third state to sign such an agreement with the EU (Euractiv, 2024). The Partnership is envisaged to enhance the resilience of the country, allowing the EU and Moldova to jointly address shared security challenges and explore new areas of cooperation and dialogue (EEAS, 2024). The EU’s goal is to create a network of selected partners in the field of security and defence, boosting cooperation in fields ranging from cyber security, hybrid threats, disinformation, training, and capacity building (Benakis, 2024; Euractiv, 2024). Moldova’s alignment with European standards, fostering interoperability and robust cooperation, is important for reinforcing regional security and advancing Moldova’s European integration aspirations. This paper gives a comprehensive overview of EU-Moldova cooperation in security and defence. It proceeds as follows: The first section briefly outlines the relations between Moldova and the EU against the background of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The second part explores and contextualizes the newly established Security and Defence Partnership.

EU-Moldova relations amidst geopolitical tensions

The EU and Moldova cooperate in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its eastern regional dimension, the Eastern Partnership (EaP). As one of the six EaP countries, Moldova signed its Association Agreement (AA) with the EU in 2014 (Council of Europe, 2014). With the evolving geopolitical situation and deteriorating security environment in Europe after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moldova was granted the status of candidate for EU membership in June 2022. The European Council gave the green light to open the accession negotiations with Moldova in December 2023 (EEAS, 2024).

Moldova, while not a member of either the EU or NATO, has vocally opposed Russia since the latter’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Jensen & Rupert, 2024; Ngendakumana, 2024). The tensions between Moldova and Moscow have intensified in the following years. In 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed support for Gagauzia, Moldova’s autonomous region, after a meeting with its pro-Moscow leader who raised concerns about being marginalized in a Europe-aligned Moldova (Jensen & Rupert, 2024; Ngendakumana, 2024).

Additionally, in February 2024, pro-Russian officials from Moldova's self-declared breakaway region of Transnistria requested protection from Russia. Through its military presence, amounting to over 1.000 stationed troops, as well as intelligence-gathering and loyal local elites, Russia exercises undeniable control over Moldova's breakaway region (Jensen & Rupert, 2024). The request for protection came after Moldova extended import-export taxes to Transnistria in line with its EU trade agreement. After closing the border with Ukraine following Russia's invasion, Transnistria relied entirely on Moldova for trade (Jensen & Rupert, 2024). This sparked fears among Western analysts of an aggressive Russian response, raising concerns about Moldova's strategy to push Transnistria toward reintegration (Jensen & Rupert, 2024). The Kremlin itself outlined that any attempt to resolve the issue of Transnistria by force would be seen as a direct assault on Russia, threatening Moldova with a military scenario (Necsutu, 2024). In light of geopolitical threats and rising tensions, Moldova is seeking to deepen its security and defence cooperation with Western allies to accelerate its integration into the EU.

Security and Defence Partnership

Moldova signed the Security and Defence Partnership with the EU on 21 May, during the eighth meeting of the Moldova-European Union Association Council where the two discussed preparations for opening accession negotiations (Benakis, 2024). Together with Moldova's Prime Minister Dorin Recean and HR/VP Borell, the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, also took part in the meeting. The Partnership represents the first such initiative in the EU's attempt to create a security and defence network with selected third countries, with Moldova being the first to join (Benakis, 2024).

The Partnership acknowledges that both sides "face an increasingly challenging security environment inter alia due to ongoing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine" and thus aims at strengthening mutual ties in security and defence cooperation (EEAS, 2024). The Partnership will be reviewed regularly in the framework of the EU-Moldova Security and Defence Dialogue which will report to the EU-Moldova Association Council on progress made and explore the potential ways to further strengthen the cooperation (EEAS, 2024). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova (2024) noted that the Partnership is in accordance with the objectives established in the National Security Strategy of the country and that it will function as an umbrella arrangement for security and defence activities, most of which are already being carried out in practice. From the SDP document, one can identify three thematic groups of cooperation:

1. CSDP missions and operations and capacity building

Third-country participation in EU missions and operations is one of the key features of CSDP. Involvement of non-EU member state countries can strengthen the EU's cooperation with its partners, expand the scope of the missions and often compensate for the EU's own shortcomings in terms of human resources (Velimirovic, 2022).

Moldova started contributing to CSDP missions in 2014, following the signing of its Association Agreement (Dobrescu, 2023). The preamble of the AA envisages strengthened cooperation in the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and CSDP, Articles 6 and 7 specifically refer to practical cooperation in CSDP, conflict prevention and crisis management, particularly in EU-led civilian and military crisis management missions and relevant exercises and training (Council of Europe, 2014).

Moldova has participated in the EU Military Advisory Mission in the Central African Republic (EUMAM CAR) and the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) (European Commission, 2023). However, the country's contribution so far has been rather marginal: Moldova provided a total of eight experts to EUTM Mali and the EU Training Mission in Central African Republic (EUTM RCA) between 2014 and 2020 (Dobrescu, 2023). Moldova has expressed interest in contributing to Operation ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the EU Training Mission in Somalia (EUTM Somalia), which was welcomed by the EU (European Commission, 2023).

The Partnership envisages Moldova's continuous participation in CSDP initiatives, development and strengthening of Moldova's military forces and capabilities, as well as civilian capacities. To progress on its European path and enhance military interoperability with European partners, Moldova needs to modernise its equipment and boost its peacekeeping capabilities (Mitrea & Oltei, 2024). Building on the European Peace Facility (EPF), the EU aims to continue its support for the Moldovan Armed Forces to enhance their operational effectiveness, accelerate compliance with EU standards and interoperability, and thereby better protect civilians in crises and emergencies (EEAS, 2024). On 4 April, the Council adopted assistance measures under the EPF in support of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Moldova amounting to €41 million over a period of 40 months. The assistance will finance the provision of non-lethal equipment in the following areas: mobility, air surveillance, electronic warfare, and logistics equipment (Council of the EU, 2024).

The Partnership also opens the possibility for Moldova's contribution to the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), a special CSDP unit envisaged to be operational by 2025 as per the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (EEAS, 2022). Moldova will continue its training and education in relation to CSDP, including participating in European Security and Defence College (ESDC) activities. Finally, the possibilities to participate within the framework of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and consultations with the European Defence Agency (EDA) will be further explored within the Partnership (EEAS, 2024).

2. Countering hybrid threats, FIMI, and cybersecurity

Over the past year and within the framework of the EPF, the EU and Moldova have been working together to address hybrid threats and cybersecurity, counter disinformation and strengthen strategic communication (European Commission, 2023). In light of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, Moldova has been tackling unprecedented challenges, including hybrid actions such as foreign interference, information manipulations and cyberattacks (European Commission, 2023).

Chatham House data suggests that Moscow is targeting the Moldovan public information space with toxic disinformation, seeking ways to undermine the country's social cohesion (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). Initial research shows that Moldova has strong societal support for democracy, but weaker support for EU integration. On its part, the Kremlin sees Moldova as a "historical Russian territory" as evident from President Putin's speeches, Russia's actions and official doctrine (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024). Primarily destabilization means in Putin's toolkit include exploiting corruption through his billionaire allies in Moldova, and influence over two regions: Gagauzia with ethnically Turkic, Russian-speaking, Orthodox Christians in the south, and the break-away Russian-speaking and Russian-speaking Transnistria, located at Moldova's eastern border (Jensen & Rupert, 2024).

The latest assessments show that Moldova's geopolitical context coupled with Ukraine's latest accomplishments on the battlefield make a direct military assault from Moscow highly unlikely. However, it cannot be excluded as impossible (Gavin, 2024). Still, Russia is seeking to destabilize Moldova through hybrid means, including information campaigns, cyberattacks and online disinformation, most notably during the 2023 local elections in Moldova (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024; Wilson, 2023). Put in numbers, Russia's destabilisation efforts at the time allocated more than \$55 million, according to Moldova's security chief (Wilson, 2023). This represents a huge shift in the amount and goes far beyond the small-scale voter bribery Moldova was used to in the past (Wilson, 2023). This vicious trend seems likely to continue, with Moldova's Intelligence and Security Services (SIS) warning of unprecedented interference from Moscow, claiming it gathered data indicating Russia's plans to launch vast hybrid attacks against Chisinau throughout 2024 and 2025 to try to bring the country back under Moscow's influence (Euronews, 2024). Three upcoming votes are vulnerable to these attacks: the presidential elections in October 2024, the referendum on Moldova joining the EU in the same month, and the parliamentary elections nine months later (Jensen & Rupert, 2024). All represent an opportunity for Moscow to strengthen its influence over Moldova and manipulate its potential EU integration (Lutsevych & Pasha, 2024).

Given the extent of the Russian threat, the Security and Defence Partnership envisages deepening and strengthening the existing EU-Moldova cooperation in the fields of cybersecurity, hybrid threats and FIMI. This also includes the operationalisation of the established Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation.

The Centre is training Moldovan authorities to recognize and combat disinformation, exposing it in its early stages (Euronews, 2024). Moreover, the EU's partnership mission in Moldova (EUPM) is intended to contribute to the outlined objectives with strategic advice and operational support on the ground (EEAS, 2024).

3. Other areas of cooperation

Partnership states that the EU and Moldova will deepen consultations on non-proliferation, disarmament, and conventional arms, including small arms and light weapons (SALWs) (EEAS, 2024). Moldova participates in the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Hague Code of Conduct and the Arms Trade Treaty. However, Moldova is not a participant in the Wassenaar Arrangement, an initiative that promotes transparency and greater responsibility in transfers of conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies, and is yet to join the Australia Group, an informal export-control arrangement of chemical and biological weapons and does not have a separate national strategy for SALWs (European Commission, 2023). Moreover, the EU and Moldova will work on the potential for cooperation on Counterterrorism (CT) related issues, such as in addressing the online dimension of radicalisation or the community policing approach to countering violent extremism (EEAS, 2024). SDP envisaged cooperation in the external dimension of integrated border management, including irregular migration/human trafficking and the fight against transnational organised crime and arms trafficking. In all the areas of cooperation, the EU and Moldova will be committed to exchanging good practices for implementing the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (EEAS, 2024).

Conclusion

Moldova is taking significant steps to strengthen its resilience and navigate its internal vulnerabilities, overshadowed by Russia's threat in the complex geopolitical landscape. As the country prepares for significant political events in 2024, including presidential elections and the referendum on EU membership, continued support and strengthened collaboration with the EU remains key in countering Russia's hybrid manipulation attempts, including disinformation and cyberattacks. In this regard, the signing of the Security and Defence Partnership represents an important milestone for Moldova's further alignment with EU standards as well as their cooperation and sets a precedent for the EU in forging alliances alike. It envisages stronger collaboration across multiple fields, from CSDP missions and operations to capacity building and countering hybrid threats. In addition, the EUPM which marked its first anniversary in May 2024 will contribute to the implementation of certain aspects of SDP – particularly in relation to cybersecurity and countering FIMI (EUPM, 2024). Both the Partnership and EUPM represent the EU's commitment to Moldova's and regional security and set the stage for Moldova's further integration into the European security framework, thereby enhancing stability and resilience in the Eastern neighbourhood.

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