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Soft Borders, Hard Lessons: Moldova, Hybrid Warfare and the New Eastern Threat

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Introduction

Located between Ukraine and Romania, the Republic of Moldova has become a critical turning point in Europe's fight against Russian hybrid warfare (Baena, 2024). Moscow utilises a coordinated strategy of disinformation, cyberattacks, political interference, energy coercion and the exploitation of frozen conflicts in order to destabilise Moldova and to further complicate its Euro-Atlantic integration (Wesslau, 2024; Maitland et al., 2025; Dhojnacki, 2025). Russian campaigns had targeted Moldova's 2024 presidential elections, as well as its EU referendum, by spreading fake news with the goal to diminish public trust and deepen societal divisions (Maitland et al., 2025; OpenMinds, 2024).

Beyond information manipulation, Russia has also leveraged Moldova's substantial energy dependence and unresolved tensions in Transnistria and Gagauzia in order to preserve long-term political and economic influence (Dhojnacki, 2025; Strazzari et al., 2024). These hybrid tactics are intended to weaken Moldova internally, whilst challenging NATO's southeastern flank and fragment European cohesion without resorting to military confrontation (Runde et al., 2024; Dhojnacki, 2025).

As a response, NATO has increased defence capacity-building and its hybrid resilience initiatives, while the EU has focused more on governance reforms and institutional strengthening, via the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (NATO, 2024a; European Council, 2023). However, gaps continue to persist between their strategies, emphasising the need for stronger EU-NATO coordination (European Commission, 2025c; Linn, 2025; NATO PA, 2025).

1. Russia's Hybrid Toolkit in Moldova

Russia's hybrid warfare strategy in Moldova relies on coordinated, low-visibility tactics aimed at destabilising governance, undermining public trustand deterring Euro-Atlantic integration — all without provoking conventional confrontation (Wesslau, 2024). This approach operates on disinformation, cyber interferences, political funding, economic pressure and the manipulation of unresolved territorial conflicts (Wesslau, 2024).

1.1 *Disinformation and Media Mimicry*

Attempts of Russian disinformation in Moldova have thoroughly increased over the years, more prominently in 2024, during Moldova's presidential election and EU referendum, which has been marked as one of the most aggressive influence operations Moscow has executed in the state to date (Maitland et al., 2025). Over the span of three months, the coordinated campaign known as Operation Matryoshka released 39 false narratives which imitated the style of media outlets such as the BBC and Euronews, by spreading fabrications about President Maia Sandu's integrity and affiliations (Maitland et al., 2025).

Pro-Russian Telegram channels, balkancentre and gagauznewsmd, promoted and spread conspiratorial posts depicting both NATO and the EU as pragmatic threats to Moldovan sovereignty and identity (OpenMinds, 2024). Additional disinformation aimed at a younger audience was launched, through misleading ads rooted in pirated streaming content, combining claims vis-à-vis a 'patriotic tax' on remittances and LGBTQ+

indoctrination in schools, thus purposefully targeting cultural anxiety (EUvsDisinfo, 2024).

1.2 *Cyber Operations*

Russia's hybrid warfare campaign in Moldova incorporates coordinated cyber operations designed to undermine institutional trust and destabilise government functionality (CERT-EU, 2024). It was found that, in 2024, an increase in phishing campaigns – much of the deployed malware targeting government agencies, election databases, even energy infrastructure systems – was synchronised with disinformation campaigns to increase panic and diminish confidence in public institutions during sensitive political events, including Moldova's 2024 EU accession referendum (CERT-EU, 2024; European Parliament, 2024). The sophistication of these interferences highlights Moscow's strategic objective: to overwhelm Moldova's limited cyber resilience capacity, while also exploiting its reliance on outdated infrastructure (Bryjka, 2024).

1.3 *Political Interference and Electoral Manipulation*

Besides cyber operations, the Russian Federation has heightened its political interference in Moldova with the objective of influencing governance outcomes and prevent deeper Euro-Atlantic integration (Samorukov, 2024). In the lead-up to the 2024 presidential elections and referendum on EU membership, Moldovan security services discovered that an extensive Russian-backed financing network was funnelling over $15 million through exiled oligarch Ilan Shor, with the goal of weakening pro-European parties and promoting pro-Russian candidates (Gavin, 2024).

Investigations disclosed that funds were routed via offshore shell companies and cryptocurrency platforms, therefore allowing Moscow to conceal its direct involvement and bypass international sanctions (European Parliament, 2024; Kennedy et al., 2025). Regarding financial manipulation, pro-Russian political actors synchronised widespread protests in Chișinău, mobilising thousands of citizens through false claims about NATO's 'occupation plans' and EU-driven 'economic slavery' (OpenMinds, 2025). Electoral monitors acknowledged noteworthy instances of vote-buying across rural regions, where residents were offered up to €100 per ballot to reject EU-aligned candidates and policies (Samorukov, 2024). The systemic interference did not stop with the elections, but continued beyond them, with Russian-linked networks launching media portals that encouraged populist agendas, weakened institutional legitimacy and augmented ethnic divisions, specifically targeting Russian-speaking minorities (Strazzari et al., 2024).

Together, these operations exhibit Moscow's hybrid objective of producing long-term institutional fragility, by ensuring Moldova's democratic processes are constantly being contested and left vulnerable (Wesslau, 2024).

1.4 *Energy Coercion and Economic Pressure*

Energy dependence persists as one of Moldova's most exploitable vulnerabilities, making it a vital pillar of Russia's hybrid strategy (Van Der Togt, 2025; Dhojnacki, 2025). Moldova is historically reliant on Gazprom for over 70% of its natural gas imports, and has frequently encountered politically-motivated supply disruptions, including the suspension of deliveries in January 2025, at the peak of demand during winter

(Dhojnacki, 2025). Experts contend that these cuts were not market-driven, but that they were part of Moscow's coordinated pressure campaign to undermine President Maia Sandu's pro-European government and discourage further integration with European-aligned structures (Dhojnacki, 2025). These disruptions forced Moldova to speed up diversification efforts, incorporating the activation of emergency reserves and the import of gas through Romania, by broadening its reach via the Iaşi–Ungheni interconnector. With all taken into consideration, however, infrastructurerestrictions continue to constrict energy resilience (Dhojnacki, 2025; Runde et al., 2024).

Additionally, Moldova's energy market liberalisation policies have been systematically targeted by Russian-backed actors, who are intensifying the spread of narratives cautioning of 'Western-imposed price climbs', to ignite public discontent (Runde et al., 2024). False narratives, such as statements from Transnistrian media, have reported that Gazprom halted its supplies to the region in virtue of the fact that Moldovagaz did not pay its debts (Necsutu, 2025).

Thus, energy manipulation,as well as strategic disinformation, depict the economic aspects of hybrid warfare and showcase how Russia leverages critical infrastructure vulnerabilities to accomplish political objectives without having to deploy military force (Runde et al., 2024; Dhojnacki, 2025).

1.5 *Frozen Conflict Leverage: Transnistria and Gagauzia*

Russia has resumed in weaponising unresolved territorial conflicts with the aim of destabilising Moldova and limit its Western alignment (Strazzari et al., 2024; Wesslau, 2024). In Transnistria, it continues to uphold an estimated 1,500 troops under the appearance of peacekeeping operations, whilst providing the region with weapons, disinformation networks, as well as financial aid, essentially creating a state-within-a-state (Ali, 2025; Deen et al., 2022). This military grip constrains Moldova's sovereignty and provides the Kremlin with a springboard for operations against NATO-aligned partners in the Black Sea region (Sabanadze & Dalay, 2025).

Similarly, Gagauzia's pro-Russian leadership has been strategically leveraged to challenge Chişinău's authority and rally public opposition towards NATO cooperation (SEED, 2022).In 2025, Governor Evgenia Gutsul was convicted for accepting Kremlin-backed funds with the aim to arrange anti-EU demonstrations and block Moldovan participation in NATO, along with European partnership programs (Fornusek, 2025).By preserving permanent instability in both regions, Moscow successfully averts governmental resources, fractures political consensus and destabilises Moldova's negotiation power in EU and NATO discussions (Strazzari et al., 2024).

This use of frozen conflicts showcases the diverse nature of Russia's hybrid toolkit, combining territorial power, political manipulationand economic coercion to amplify destabilisation at a minimal expense (Strazzari et al., 2024).

2. NATO's Strategic Response and Moldova's Geostrategic Role

2.1 *NATO's Prioritisation of the Black Sea and Eastern Flank*

NATO increasingly observes Moldova's position as a geostrategic shift within its broader Bwqwasasalack Sea security architecture, given the state's proximity to Romania, Ukraine and the Danube corridor (NATO PA, 2025). After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Black Sea has been awarded a key role for NATO's stance on deterrence, therefore integrating Moldova into its strategic calculations, notwithstanding the state's constitutional neutrality (NATO PA, 2025). The Alliance has emphasised that Moscow's destabilisation of Moldova embodies not only a threat to Chișinău's sovereignty, but also a larger challenge to Euro-Atlantic control of maritime corridors and the energy infrastructure in the Black Sea (NATO PA, 2025). As a result, NATO has expanded its operational discussions with Romania and Bulgaria, both members of the frontline, whilst heightening information-sharing structures with Moldova, with the goal of diminishing risks stemming from hybrid pressure on its southern flank (NATO, 2025; NATO, 2024).

2.2 *Defence Capacity Building and Hybrid Resilience*

By the means of the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative, NATO has released tailored programs with the goal of developing Moldova's military readiness, broader management and crisis-response mechanisms (NATO, 2024a). This support has encompassed the distribution of secure communications systems, strategic planning capabilities and intelligence-sharing arrangements intended to improve Moldova's early-warning position against cyber and disinformation threats (NATO, 2024a). Outside of conventional defence support, NATO has prioritised hybrid resilience through deploying cybersecurity expertise, organising counter-disinformation responses, as well as funding technical upgrades for Moldova's critical energy infrastructure (NATO, 2024a). These actions are accompanied by an increased engagement between NATO and Moldovan institutions, with the aim of encouraging strategic awareness. This indicates that the prevention of destabilisation is as critical as responding to kinetic aggression (NATO, 2025b).

2.3 *Integrating Moldova into NATO's Eastern Flank Strategy*

Although Moldova remains outside NATO's formal security guarantees, it has strategically positioned itself within NATO's broader eastern flank response framework (NATO PA, 2025a). Moldova's geographic position makes it critical that efforts are directed at containing Russian influence and guaranteeing uninterrupted operational mobility across the Black Sea corridor (NATO PA, 2025). At the moment, NATO's cooperation with Chișinău includes joint scenario-based planning exercises and multilateral coordination together with Ukraine and Romania, allowing for synchronised crisis management without violating Moldova's constitutional neutrality (NATO, 2024a; Linn, 2025). This approach showcases NATO's adaptability in engaging with a non-member, while also preserving understanding towards Moldova's societal divisions and domestic policies (NATO PA, 2025).

2.4 NATO's Comparative Advantage Over EU Responses

Compared to the European Union, NATO has showcased more agility and long-term strategy in supporting Moldova's security environment (NATO PA, 2025). Although the EU's MoldovaSupport Platform has largely improved the process of organisation financially and introduced resilience-building frameworks, its slow consensus-building process restricts its capability to pre-empt hybrid attacks (Împreună suntem, 2023). NATO, on the other hand, has swiftly operationalised defensive measures, by delivering equipment, sharing real-time intelligence and embedding hybrid defence experts directly within Moldovan ministries (NATO, 2024b; NATO, 2024c). This comparative advantage emphasises NATO's capacity and capability to fill critical security gaps, in addition to complementing EU initiatives and accentuate its advancing role as the main stabilising force in Moldova's immediate security environment (EEAS, 2023).

3. EU and NATO: Divergent Approaches to Hybrid Threats

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, The EU has continued to increase its security engagement with Moldova, yet its institutional limitations held back its effectiveness against hybrid aggression (European Council, 2025). Launched in April 2023, The EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova) is the first CSDP civilian mission explicitly concentrated on heightening Moldova's resilience to hybrid threats, including cyberattacks and foreign information manipulation (European Council, 2023). Although institutional reforms, such as establishing a National Crisis Management Centre, Cybersecurity Agency, as well as a Strategic Communications centre have been supported by the EUPM, their status persist as optional and dependent on Moldovan implementation, along with staffing (EEAS, 2025).

The EU also deployed a Hybrid Rapid Response Team, and led a digital stress test in June 2025 with tech platforms such as Google, Metaand TikTok, to boost election resilience (European Commission, 2025). Despite these initiatives, the EU's hybrid toolbox remains vulnerable to bureaucratic deployment and lacks in terms of an operational rapid-response mechanism for unexpected outbursts of disinformation or cyberattacks (Lasoen, 2022). Moreover, the EU may have introduced instruments like the hybrid toolbox, cyber diplomacy toolkit and the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) — all of them designed for coordinated crisis action, but they must all succumb to multifaceted, inter-institutional coordination, in addition to slow decision-making (European Council, 2025; Lasoen, 2022). The European Parliament has pushed for deeper contributions and accelerated deployment of the EUPM, even suggesting a Hybrid Rapid Response Team, but approval among member states remains uneven (Mikser & European Parliament, 2025).Furthermore, EU capabilities, such as the European Peace Facility, Neighbourhood Instrument (NDICI)and Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) have provided vital cyber, infrastructure, and resilience funding to Moldova: however the timelines of their implementation are slow, in contrast to NATO's urgent advisory role (Devuyst, 2025). In comparison, NATO's military structure allows quick operational support, intelligence-sharing and capacity-building through initiatives like the Defence Capacity Building (DCB) framework and Hybrid Threats Division (NATO, 2024a). NATO specialists have worked directly with Moldova in regard to cyber training, crisis simulations and hybrid deterrence exercises with neighbouring states (NATO, 2024c; NATO, 2023). This operational flexibility showcases NATO's

advantage in tackling novel, high-velocity threats (NATO, 2024a). The EU's slower response time has proven costly, as studies show that successive waves of disinformation and cyber-attacks prior to elections were often recognised only after major public pressure (European Commission, 2025; Dickson & Council of Europe, 2025). Whereas, NATO's pre-event planning and countering hybrid threats deliver consistent, real-time resilience advances through coordination with Romanian and Ukrainian counterparts (NATO, 2024a).

Ultimately, while both the EU and NATO seek to defend Moldova's sovereignty, NATO's institutional flexibility, military infrastructure, as well as its intelligence capabilities make it a more receptive and robust partner against hybrid aggression, specifically in the evolving security environment of the Black Sea region (Sabanadze & Dalay, 2025).

4. Policy Recommendations

Moldova's exposure to hybrid threats underlines urgent policy imperatives for the EU, NATO, and Chișinău itself. The aim is not only to strengthen Moldova's resilience but, likewise, to reinforce collective security across the wider Black Sea region, where instability affects European strategic autonomy and NATO's stance on deterrence (EEAS, 2025).

4.1 *Strengthen EU-NATO Coordination on Hybrid Threats*

Although the EU and NATO share threat assessments on disinformation, cyberattacks and energy coercion, their operational responses are at crossroads (European Council, 2025). A structured EU-NATO Moldova Task Force should be established, in order to coordinate intelligence-sharing, synchronise cyber capacity-building, and develop integrated early-warning mechanisms for hybrid events (EEAS, 2024; Linn, 2025). NATO's capability in cyberdefence and strategic communications, in combination with the EU's funding and governance tools, would allow a layered deterrence stance tailored to Moldova's vulnerabilities (NATO, 2024b; Mikser & European Parliament, 2025).

Additionally, NATO should expand its Hybrid Analysis Branch engagement with EU bodies under the Strategic Compass framework, thus granting rapid detection of coordinated Russian information operations (European Council, 2025a). All in all, hybrid events in Chișinău have direct operational consequences for NATO's southeastern flank, thus making profounder alignment between the EU and NATO imperative (Dupuy, 2023).

4.2 *Enhance Moldova's Digital and Electoral Resilience*

Disinformation campaigns continue to be Russia's most powerful weapon in Moldova, particularly during elections (Maitland et al., 2025). The EU should implement a permanent Hybrid Rapid Response Team (HRRT) in Chișinău under the EUPM mandate, in order to counter fake news operations in real time (European Council, 2024). Leveraging EU-funded platforms, such as EUvsDisinfo, in addition to NATO's StratCom COE in Riga, would allow swift exposure of deepfakes, media impersonations and election manipulation campaigns (NATO StratCom COE, 2025).

Moreover, Moldova's Central Electoral Commission should have joint EU-NATO cybersecurity assistance ahead of the 2026 parliamentary elections, incorporating vulnerability assessments, infiltration testing and encrypted infrastructure upgrades (Mikser & European Parliament, 2025). This would help prevent directed Russian attacks similar to those seen during the 2024 presidential elections, where phishing efforts targeted government officials, along with manipulated voter databases (CERT-EU, 2024).

4.3 *Expand Energy Security Measures*

One of Moscow's most effective tools for destabilising Moldova is energy coercion, as the country is heavily dependent on Russian gas supplies, which are transmitted through Transnistria (Solovyov, 2025). The EU must quicken integration of Moldova into the European Energy Union, offering direct financial and technical support to serve as divergence from Gazprom dependency (European Commission, 2025b). NATO can complement these efforts through its Energy Security Centre of Excellence (ENSEC COE), by supporting development for supply disruptions – thus improving energy infrastructure resilience – and coordinating responses to cyberattacks which are targeting Moldova's critical power grid (NATO ENSEC, 2024). Joint EU-NATO exercises simulating energy blockades would additionally help Moldova to prepare for crisis scenarios, whilst fortifying operational interoperability (NATO, 2025c).

4.4 *Address Transnistria and Regional Security*

Russia's established military presence in Transnistria remains the most prominent structural challenge to Moldova's sovereignty (Ali, 2025). Although a resolution seems unlikely to arrive soon enough, Moldova's Western partners need to implement a dual-track approach: maintaining pressure on Moscow through sanctions, as well as supporting confidence-building methods between Chișinău and Tiraspol (Douglas & Wolff, 2023). At the same time, NATO should deepen regional security cooperation by integrating Moldova holistically into the Black Sea defence dialogues alongside Romania, Ukraine and Bulgaria (Cozma & Pleșca, 2025, 2025). Such integration would improve Moldova's situational awareness, provide access to NATO maritime intelligence and emphasise its role as a geostrategic shift between Ukraine and the Black Sea (Cozma & Pleșca, 2025; EEAS, 2025b).

4.5 *Invest in Strategic Communications and Public Trust*

Lastly, conquering hybrid threats in Moldova necessitates countering Russia's narrative dominance within Moldovan society. EU programs under the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) should distribute larger budgets to media literacy, independent journalism funding and multilingual counter-disinformation campaigns targeted at Russian-speaking audiences (EEAS, 2022). NATO, via its public diplomacy division, can supplement these efforts by increasing success stories of Moldovan collaboration with the Alliance, which in turn would bolster public awareness of NATO's non-military support and address misconceptions manipulated by pro-Kremlin actors (NATO, 2022).

Conclusion

Over the past three years, the escalation of the situation in Moldova has stressed the evolving nature of security challenges in Europe's eastern neighbourhood, where conventional deterrence alone is insufficient against tenacious hybrid threats (Wesslau, 2024). The Kremlin's coordinated use of disinformation, cyberattacks, energy coercion and political interference reveals a long-term strategy: to weaken Moldova from within, delay its European integration and diminish NATO's southeastern flank without provoking a full-scale confrontation (Runde et al., 2024; Dhojnacki, 2025).

With regard to NATO, Moldova symbolises more than just a vulnerable neighbour: it is a key shield between the Black Sea and the wider European security framework (NATO PA, 2025). The Alliance has demonstrated adaptability, by increasing defence capacity-building initiatives, improving cyber resilienceand integrating Moldova into strategic dialogues with Ukraine and Romania (NATO, 2024a; Linn, 2025). NATO's operational proficiency in resilience-building must be balanced with the EU's economic instruments, legal frameworksand governance tools, to establish a comprehensive stance on hybrid defence (NATO, 2024b; Mikser & European Parliament, 2025).

The EU's CSDP mission and Moldova Support Platform mark noteworthy steps forward, yet their disjointed implementation and restricted funding have a constrained effectiveness (European Council, 2023; Rodrigues, 2024). Russia's continuous manipulation of Moldova's political divides, in combination with energy dependence and unresolved conflicts in Transnistria, demonstrate that fragmentary policies cannot counter systemic destabilisation (Strazzari et al., 2024; Samorukov, 2024). Rather, Moldova's national security requires a layered, multilateral response, that leverages NATO's strategic future, EU resilience programmingand Moldova's own institutional reforms (NATO, 2024b; Mikser & European Parliament, 2025).

Looking ahead, Moldova will remain a critical test for Europe's ability to defend its neighbourhood against hybrid warfare. Failure to sufficiently support Chişinău could encourage Russia to extend destabilisation tactics beyond Moldova, threatening Ukraine's posterior security and undermining NATO's Black Sea strategy (Brender, 2025; NATO PA, 2025). In contrast, continuous investment in Moldova's resilience, across energy security, digital infrastructure, counter-disinformation and regional defence coordination could strengthen Europe's deterrence architecture and indicate strategic resolve (European Commission, 2025c).

Protecting Moldova is not only about defending a small Eastern European state, but also about safeguarding the integrity of Europe's security order. By heightening EU-NATO integration, closing strategic gaps and prioritising Moldova within the Black Sea strategy, Brussels can go from reactive containment to proactive resilience-building, a move crucial for the stability of the entire Euro-Atlantic environment (European Commission, 2025c; Linn, 2025; NATO PA, 2025).

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