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Moldova on the Brink: Safeguarding Against Russian Aggression

This article explores the key factors that could lead to a potential spillover of the conflict from Ukraine into Moldova. It also proposes strategies for Moldova to mitigate this risk and safeguard its stability against Russian aggression. By utilizing a mixed methods approach that combines qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews and quantitative analysis of institutional indices, migration and demographic data, also defense budget figures, the article provides a comprehensive evaluation to address the research question. The theoretical framework is based on the cross-border conflict theory, specifically employing the concept of securitization to frame Moldova's response to security challenges. While the article does not predict outcomes, it highlights Moldova's options to mitigate vulnerabilities and collaboratively enhance stability. Prioritizing the strengthening of the national security framework and proactive diplomatic initiatives emerges as essential.

Introduction

The Republic of Moldova, a small landlocked country located in Eastern Europe with a population of 2.6 million citizens, has become the subject of discussions due to its proximity to the border of Ukraine and, therefore, the ongoing war in Ukraine. The two former Soviet states share a long border of over 1200 km, about 450 km of which is occupied by Transnistria, Moldova's breakaway region, also known as the Dniestr region¹, was formally an autonomous area within Ukraine before 1940, when the Soviet Union combined it with Bessarabia² to form the Moldavian Soviet Socialist

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Republic (MSSR). The region (with its capital Tiraspol) unilaterally declared independence from Moldova in 1990; however, it has never been recognized as an independent state by any United Nations (UN) member. Only Abkhazia, the Republic of Artsakh, and South Ossetia, which are also states with limited recognition, recognize Transnistria's independence. Despite having lost any effective control over the region, Moldova continues to assert that Transnistria is part of the nation. After Moldova gained independence in 1991, the Russian Federation swiftly intervened in Transnistria by positioning itself as a so-called "peacekeeping force," deploying troops to support pro-Moscow separatists in the region (Borsi, 2007, p. 46).

Since the beginning initiation of the Russian aggression on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Moldova has been in a state of emergency, warning that the war might spread on its territory through Transnistria. The prevalent question that dominates not only in Moldova but across the world is whether Moldova is Russian President Putin's next target. In this also lies the actuality of the chosen topic. It addresses an issue that is currently relevant and of interest not only to Moldova but to the international community as well. It is also based on real-time updating events, debates, and discussions, which makes it relevant for further research purposes. This research could help to contribute to this important ongoing discussion and elucidate potential strategies for preventing future conflict and instability in Moldova.

In the past, some authors argued that Moldova might become the next Ukraine, as Russia has always been trying to exploit "frozen conflict" zones and impose its imperial role, as in the case of Georgia and Ukraine (Studzińska, 2015, p. 25). Moscow destabilized the former Soviet countries through a combination of economic pressure and propaganda (Hill, 2018, p. 2), and it has had a huge influence on Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria (Goltsov, 2020, p. 155), (Cebotari, 2022, p. 5). Other researchers suggested that Moldova's pro-Western orientation and its aspirations for EU membership and NATO integration could make it a target for Russian aggression (Vardanean, 2018, p. 14). Strategies have been proposed for preventing potential Russian aggression in Moldova, such as strengthening Moldova's political and economic institutions to reduce its vulnerability to external influence, increasing international pressure on Russia to respect Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Catan, 2021, p. 7) or improving Moldova's security and defense capabilities through increased cooperation with NATO and other Western partners (Popilevski, 2022, p. 46).

Despite all these insights, a consistent assessment of the Russian threat to Moldova after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and a comprehensive analysis of the risk mitigation measures was lacking. This article is aimed to

fill that gap. The purpose of the article is to identify and analyze the key factors that could lead to the potential spread of conflict from Ukraine to Moldova and to propose strategic measures that Moldova should implement to ensure its stability in the face of potential Russian aggression. To do so, the tasks of the study can be identified as follows:

- Explore Moldova's concerns regarding the possibility of Russian aggression;
- Examine the internal vulnerabilities within Moldova that weaken its ability to respond effectively to external threats;
- Analyse how Russia is exploiting Moldova's internal vulnerabilities to exert influence and destabilize its pro-European government;
- Identify and propose preventive measures that Chisinau should employ to mitigate the risk of conflict and safeguard its stability;
- Assess the risks of possible Russian aggression.

The article adopts a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured interviews conducted between March 6–2th, 2023, in Moldova. The purpose of these interviews is to gather qualitative insights on strategies to mitigate the risk of conflict spillover from Ukraine and assess the potential of Moldova becoming Russia's next target. The selection of interviewees is deliberate, and the legitimacy of these ten participants is established by their professional backgrounds and roles, which are directly tied to the topics under investigation (see Appendix I). Their firsthand involvement in economic, political, security, and academic spheres positions them as credible sources with valuable insights into the potential risks and mitigation strategies. The language used during the interviews was mostly Romanian, but in some cases, the Russian language was used too. The analysis includes institutional indices data such as the Freedom index of Moldova and Transnistria and Corruption Perception index of Moldova, migration and demographic data of Moldova, and defense budget data of Moldova compared to other states of similar dimensions, as well as public perceptions of corruption and social surveys data regarding ethnicity and linguistic self-identification in Moldova.

The combined insights from statistical trends and expert opinions contribute to a comprehensive evaluation of the research questions:

- What are the key factors contributing to the potential spillover of the conflict from Ukraine to Moldova?
- How can Moldova strategically address these factors to safeguard its stability against possible Russian aggression?

This article is structured into four main parts. Initially, it introduces the cross-border conflict theory, applying it to analyze Moldova's situation amidst an ongoing war near its borders and the associated risks of spillover effects.

Scholars such as Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde contribute to this understanding through the concept of securitization. The second part explores Moldova's internal vulnerabilities, which collectively expose Moldova to external threats. The third part delves into hybrid threats, specifically examining Russia's actions against Moldova, emphasizing the need for proactive measures. Finally, the fourth part introduces pivotal strategies to safeguard Moldova's national security.

1. Theoretical Framework: the Cross-border Conflict

Cross-border conflict theory refers to the study of disputes that develop between two or more states or non-state actors that are situated across national borders. This theory has gained significant attention from scholars in recent years due to the growing prevalence of conflicts that span national borders. In particular, it has been used to explain conflicts such as territorial disputes, cross-border terrorism and transnational criminal activities. These examples of conflicts can have significant negative impacts on neighboring countries and the international community. By understanding the underlying causes and dynamics of these conflicts, policymakers can develop more effective strategies for preventing and resolving them.

B. Buzan, O. Waever, and J. De Wilde (1998) have strongly contributed to the development of cross-border conflict theory. Their work on the concept of securitization provides a valuable framework for understanding how issues are transformed into security concerns and how this process contributes to the understanding of cross-border conflicts and international politics. Researchers argue that the concept of security is socially constructed, meaning that the definition of an issue pertaining to security depends on the framing that political actors choose to implement. They believe that securitization is the process through which an issue is transformed into a security concern, elevating it to a level where extraordinary measures and exceptional politics are deemed necessary to address the perceived threat. Moreover, they propose a three-stage process of securitization in their work: problem definition, interpretation of the problem as a security issue, and mobilization of a response. In the first stage, a political actor defines an issue as a problem that requires urgent action. However, at this point, the issue is not necessarily framed as a security concern. It is perceived as a challenge that can be addressed through ordinary political and policy measures. In the second stage, the issue is framed as a security threat that requires exceptional measures to be taken in order to safeguard the referent object (the entity or object that is under threat). Finally, in the

third stage, the state mobilizes resources and develops policies to address the security threat that has been identified.

Therefore, the concept of securitization provides a systematic way to analyze how issues are elevated to the realm of security concerns and how this process shapes political agendas, policy decisions, and international relations. In the context of the cross-border conflict theory, the securitization framework is particularly useful for understanding how conflicts can escalate when issues such as territorial disputes, terrorism, or criminal activities are portrayed as security threats, justifying more aggressive and exceptional responses from the involved parties.

In this regard, understanding the factors behind conflict spillover is crucial, with political, economic, and social instability identified as key drivers (Hegre et al., 2001, p. 38). Political instability, usually marked by weak institutions and a lack of democratic governance, creates fertile ground for insurgent groups to flourish, employing violence to assert dominance. As conflicts escalate, they often exhibit transboundary extension into neighboring states, as disparate groups endeavor to augment their sphere of influence. Economic instability can disrupt trade and commerce, resulting in decreased economic growth, which can exacerbate existing social and political tensions, leading to increased conflict and violence. Social instability, driven by deep-seated ethnic, religious, or cultural divisions, can also provide a volatile environment prone to violence. Non-state actors exploit these divisions to incite conflict and gain support, leading to significant displacement of people and potential strain on the resources of host communities, escalating tensions and conflict.

In addition to the political, economic, and social factors contributing to conflict spillover, certain developments heighten the likelihood of conflicts spreading across borders. Notably, the movement of refugees is a significant factor, as large displacements of people fleeing violence can intensify social and economic tensions in receiving nations (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006, p. 347). The presence of porous borders, characterized by poor definition or easy crossing, also plays a role in conflict expansion. Regions with porous borders are susceptible to the easy spread of conflicts as militants and weapons can traverse them effortlessly, contributing to regional instability by further weakening already fragile states (Atzili, 2007, p. 158).

The concept of securitization also offers a systematic lens through which to examine how issues are not only framed as security concerns but also how this framing can impact fundamental principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. State sovereignty refers to the supreme authority of a state over its territory and people. This authority is grounded in the idea of the state

as an autonomous, self-governing entity that has the right to make decisions without external interference. Territorial integrity refers to the inviolability of a state's borders and the prohibition of the use of force to change them. It is a necessary precondition for state sovereignty, as a state cannot exercise authority over its territory if its borders are not secure (Lapidoth, 1992, p. 337). Based on these assumptions, the next chapter will explore Moldova's key internal vulnerabilities which may be exploited by Russia and cause damage to Moldova's national security if not coped with in the near future.

2. Internal Vulnerabilities of Moldova

Since gaining independence, the Republic of Moldova has faced serious threats, and its vulnerabilities affect the country's national security, which is defined as the protection and preservation of a nation's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the well-being of its citizens. In the case of Moldova, individuals, society, and the state are exposed to the threats related to such issues as permanent neutrality of Moldova's security strategy, regional instability in the Transnistria region, political instability within the whole country, and the lack of social cohesion. These problems are analyzed one by one in the next sub-chapters.

2.1. The Problems of Permanent Neutrality as a Security Strategy

In today's complex geopolitical landscape, the pursuit of a comprehensive security strategy is crucial for nations seeking to safeguard their interests and maintain stability. For the Republic of Moldova, a country facing numerous challenges, including regional conflicts and territorial disputes, the concept of permanent neutrality emerges as a viable security strategy. After the declaration of independence, the Republic of Moldova hoped that the principle of permanent neutrality, fixed in the Constitution and in the main strategic documents, would contribute to the minimization of threats to the state's national security. However, the hopes related to neutrality were not realized, as today, the Republic of Moldova faces the same threats to its national security as it did three decades ago, and the strategy of neutrality threatens to become a serious obstacle for the state to achieve its strategic goals.

The military invasion of Ukraine by Russia has put the concept of state neutrality at the forefront of public debates in Moldova. Questions concerning the viability of neutrality for European states in the context of the conflict

in Ukraine have arisen as a result. On March 17, 2023, during an interview at the Moldovan TV show "Good Evening" on the channel Moldova1, President Maia Sandu emphasized that neutrality only works when other countries respect Moldova's sovereignty, which is not the case with the Russian Federation, which currently has troops stationed on Moldovan soil (Strajescu, 2023, p. 2). Moldova's decision to pursue permanent neutrality was influenced by Russia's actions, particularly in the Transnistrian dispute, when Russian armed forces were stationed in the region. The refusal of neutrality at that time could have determined both the use of the armed forces of the Russian Federation and the definitive separation of Transnistria from Moldova. Chisinau also hoped that its neutrality status would lead to the demilitarization of Transnistria by the Russian Federation. Therefore, neutrality was seen as a means to coexist with both separatist Transnistria and Russia (Kirvelytè, 2010, p. 162).

The concept of neutrality, as defined in international law, is based on the Hague Convention of 1907, which prohibits belligerent states from using the territory of a neutral state for military purposes (Baker, 2009, p. 681). Permanent neutrality denotes a state's commitment to remain non-aligned and avoid military alliances, aggression, or the possession of weapons of mass destruction while pursuing peaceful cooperation and friendly relations with all countries. The Republic of Moldova declared its permanent neutrality on July 29, 1994, through Article 11 of the Constitution, which states that "(1) the Republic of Moldova proclaims its permanent neutrality. (2) The Republic of Moldova shall not allow the dispersal of foreign military troops on its territory." (Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, 1994).

However, Moldova's neutrality lacks international recognition and security guarantees due to the presence of Russian troops on its territory. In addition to that, neutrality status remains unilaterally declared and lacks international recognition, as no legal agreements or UN resolutions explicitly acknowledge it. Consequently, Moldova has not taken substantial actions to secure recognition of its neutrality status on the international stage, leaving it without security guarantees from the international community (Socor, 2022, p. 1). Thus, despite Moldova's neutrality, Russian military forces continue to be stationed on Moldovan territory, defying the constitutional commitment by the Russian Federation to respect agreements and withdraw troops. All in all, according to Interviewee n°6, an ex-head of the Service of Internal Protection and Anticorruption (SPIA), Moldova's neutral status did not ensure its security, especially in the presence of Russian military forces on the left bank of the Dniester. Interviewee n°6 emphasized that the idea of neutrality, enshrined in the Constitution, has not protected Moldova from the threat of military

actions, stating that “in the current situation, Moldova is facing challenges. The idea of staying neutral doesn’t really protect us (Moldovans) from the possibility of military actions. We’ve had missiles flying over our country, and that’s scared people because some parts of those missiles fell. Right now, we have Russian army on our land and even though we put the idea of neutrality in our Constitution, it hasn’t helped us get rid of this foreign army that’s still here” (Interviewee n°6, March 14, 2023).

This relates to another critical condition associated with neutrality, namely the necessity for a robust defense capacity, as neutrality does not preclude a state’s right to self-defense. Constitutional Court Decision No. 14 of 2017, interpreting Article 11 of the Constitution, reaffirms the rights of a neutral state, including the right to individual and collective self-defense against threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Republic of Moldova Constitutional Court, 2017). This underscores the Republic of Moldova’s ongoing obligation to enhance its national security apparatus, with a particular focus on strengthening the role and readiness of its National Army. Additionally, the absence of Moldova’s membership in the European Union or NATO diminishes its capacity to rely on direct support from other nations during tense situations. Consequently, a neutral state must maintain well-equipped armed forces to safeguard its territorial integrity.

The pursuit of permanent neutrality in Moldova faces several challenges. First, it falls short of achieving its primary aim of ensuring long-term national security, perpetuating insecurity, given the presence of Russian forces in Transnistria. This undermines the realization of the country’s national interests in security partnerships and access to collective defense mechanisms. Second, permanent neutrality limits Moldova’s ability to build and maintain strong defense capabilities, hindering its capacity to safeguard territorial integrity and national security. The absence of defense alliances or partnerships may hinder Moldova’s access to collective security guarantees. Third, Moldova’s choice of permanent neutrality introduces potential vulnerabilities to hybrid threats due to the absence of strong military alliances or security partnerships. Thus, the imperative for Moldova lies in the development of comprehensive capabilities to effectively counter hybrid threats, strengthen resilience, and foster cooperation with international partners in safeguarding its security interests.

2.2. Regional Instability: Transnistria

The frozen conflict in Transnistria stands as a long-standing territorial dispute within the borders of Moldova, with its roots tracing back to the early 1990s. This unresolved conflict has resulted in a protracted stalemate, characterized by a de facto separation between the internationally recognized government in Chisinau and the self-proclaimed breakaway region of Transnistria, centered around the city of Tiraspol. The frozen nature of the conflict has created a complex situation with political, security, and socioeconomic implications for both Moldova and the Transnistrian region. The roots of this conflict can be traced back to various causes, which are strongly connected.

The historical backdrop of Moldova, including Transnistria, reveals a complex legacy of shifting control from the Ottoman Empire to the Russian Empire and later Romania, followed by Soviet annexation. The Soviet era saw policies promoting a unique “Moldovan Socialist Nation,” including linguistic changes and cultural shifts such as adopting the Cyrillic alphabet for the “Moldovan” language and expunging references to Romania from literary works studied in schools, sowing the seeds of future divisions (Charles, 2000, p. 27). Linguistic and cultural dissonances, exacerbated by a Russian-speaking population’s notable presence within the Transnistria region, contributed substantively to heightened tensions. The language dispute, stemming from Moldova’s adoption of Romanian as the official language in 1989 without granting the same status to Russian, became a focal point for Russian-speaking minorities in Transnistria, intensifying their struggle for rights and identity and contributing to the Transnistrian conflict (Balan, 2002, p. 4).

The situation escalated in 1990 due to fears of Moldova’s reunification with Romania, culminating in Transnistria’s self-declaration as a separate entity within the USSR (Gorincioi, 2020, p. 160). According to Interviewee n^o9, a former representative of the Ministry of National Security of the Republic of Moldova, “the culmination of the political confrontation with Chisinau was the proclamation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR on September 2, 1990” (Interviewee n^o9, March 17, 2023). This proclamation entailed the withdrawal of the Republic of Moldova from the left bank of the Dniester River and the city of Bender, alongside the self-declaration of Transnistria as a distinct entity directly accountable to Moscow.

The armed confrontation between Moldovan and Transnistrian forces began on March 2, 1992, and lasted for approximately five months (Kostash, 2010, p. 2). The conclusion of this conflict resulted in a ceasefire bilateral agreement³ signed by presidents Mircea Snegur and Boris Yeltsin on July 21, 1992 (UN Peacemaker, 1992). This agreement introduced Russian peacekeeping

forces into the combat zone. However, these forces have remained in the region long after the cessation of hostilities, raising questions in regard to their role and intentions. Nowadays, the region hosts approximately 1,500 Russian soldiers. The so-called Limited Contingent of Russian Troops is the successor of the 14th Soviet Army. Even though they are designated as "Russian," Interviewee n°4, a political analyst and former representative of Moldova in the Council of Europe and in the UN stated that, in fact, "2/3 of the troops are local residents, because after the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine in 2014, Russia lost the opportunity to rotate its army in Transnistria and they had to mobilize local residents with Russian citizenship into this contingent" (Interviewee n°4, March 11, 2023).

In this sense, along with the Cobasna ammunition depot, this represents a remnant of the military structure of the Cold War, and its presence in this place violates the principle according to which foreign military forces cannot be stationed on the territory of a sovereign state, without his consent.⁴ In this regard, during the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, President Maia Sandu gave a speech reiterating the issue of the deployment of the Russian army in the Transnistrian region: "The illegal presence of Russian military troops in the Transnistrian region violates our neutrality and increases the security risks for our country. We demand the complete and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops. We call for the destruction of ammunition in Cobasna stockpiles, which pose a threat to the security and the environment of the entire region." (United Nations General Assembly, 2022) The Moldovan government has long sought the withdrawal of these troops because their presence not only raises security concerns but also grants Russia significant influence over the region, reinforces separatist sentiments in Transnistria and hinders Moldova's reintegration efforts.

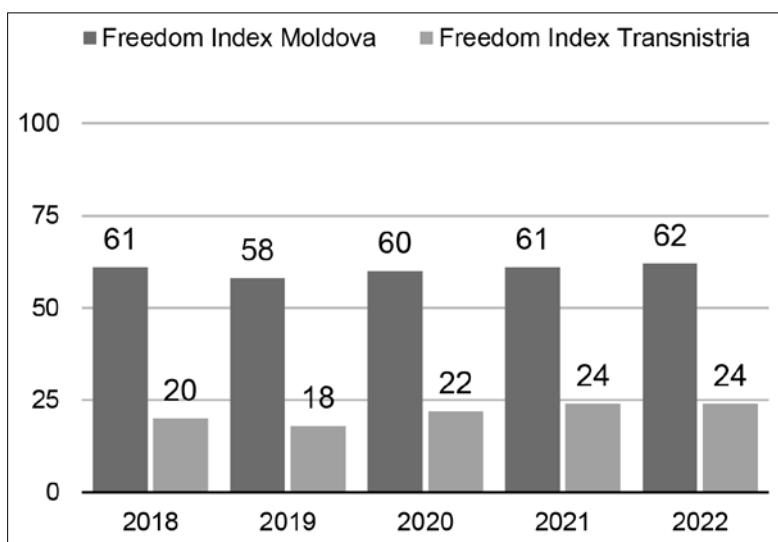
This unresolved conflict also leads to negative consequences in the field of "soft security." The existence of an unrecognized and relatively illegal political-territorial region, especially in a geographical region where important trade routes intersect, serves as a perfect platform for the prosperity of organized crime. A 2021 study by UNICRI analyzed illicit financial flows and organized crime in Moldova. The main criminal activities in Moldova are identified as being "corruption, tax evasion, illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, tobacco smuggling and the smuggling of illicit goods" (UNICRI, 2021, p. 14). This creates a favorable environment for international terrorist groups and drug traffickers to penetrate and has economic consequences for legal business in neighboring countries.

Moreover, Transnistria's sociopolitical landscape is marked by a monopolistic system dominated by the "Obnovlenie" (Renewal) party, which

controls all facets of governance with backing from the powerful Sheriff company. This control extends to the legislature, executive, judiciary, and media, stifling political competition and dissent. “Obnovlenie” is financed by Sheriff Company, one of the largest companies in Transnistria, which holds immense control over the region’s economic and political spheres. Founded in the early 1990s, the company has evolved into a conglomerate with extensive interests in various sectors, including retail, media, telecommunications, and construction. It has become a powerful economic force that permeates nearly every aspect of life in Transnistria (Sceresini, 2023, p. 1).

Opposition figures and independent candidates face harassment and restrictions, while the dominance of Renewal in the legislative and presidential elections further limits political pluralism. Concerns about democratic processes and political rights persist, with the central election commission facing criticism for a lack of impartiality. Transnistria’s concentration of power also has economic repercussions, discouraging foreign investment and stifling economic competition. The dominance of the Sheriff company prevents smaller businesses from thriving, limiting economic diversification and innovation. Reforming this monopolistic sociopolitical system is essential for fostering economic development and democratic progress in Transnistria, as highlighted by Anatoly Dirun, an aspiring presidential candidate (Negura, 2021, p. 2). This system has contributed to Transnistria’s low Freedom Index score, averaging 22/100 in the last five years, in contrast to Moldova’s partly free status, with an average score of 61/100 during the same period (Figure 2).

Figure 2. (2018-2022) Freedom Index Moldova VS Transnistria (Freedom House)

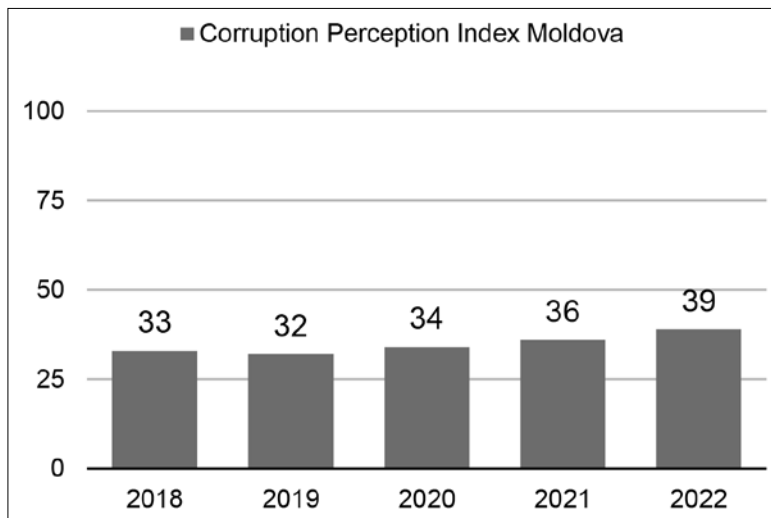


2.3. Political and Social Instability

Moldova's political landscape has been marked by division and polarization among various parties, leading to political instability and difficulty in forming lasting governments. The period following the end of Communist Party rule in 2009 witnessed frequent shifts in power and alliances, undermining governance and policy continuity. Pro-European coalitions governed from 2010 to 2019; however, the election of pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon as president in 2016 with the support of oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc introduced political complexities (Hajdari, 2019, p. 1). Subsequently, a coalition government was formed between Dodon's Party of Socialists and the pro-European ACUM coalition, led by Maia Sandu, who became Prime Minister. However, Sandu faced a constitutional crisis and was removed from office in 2019. In the 2020 presidential election, Sandu won; however, challenges in working with a parliament controlled by Dodon resulted in debates concerning dissolving the parliament, eventually resulting in snap elections in July 2021. Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity secured a pro-European mandate, seen as a significant victory for anti-corruption efforts and democratic development (Leontiev, 2021, p. 2).

Corruption has deeply permeated Moldova's governance, economy, and society, stemming from the tumultuous transition from a Soviet republic to an independent nation in 1991, marked by weak institutions and a culture of corruption. State assets were privatized opaquely, and public officials engaged in corrupt practices. Despite these historical challenges, Moldova has demonstrated a commitment to combating corruption in recent years. The Corruption Perception Index for 2022 by Transparency International showed a slight improvement, ranking Moldova 91st out of 180 countries with 39 out of 100 points (Figure 3). This progress is attributed to legislative reforms, the establishment of anti-corruption organizations, and the adoption of laws to enhance transparency and integrity in public administration, including the formation of the National Anti-Corruption Center in 2002 (Transparency International, 2022).

Figure 3. (2018-2022) Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International Moldova)



In 2016, Moldova introduced comprehensive anti-corruption legislation, focusing on enhancing transparency, asset declaration requirements for public officials, and conflict of interest prevention, although certain implementation procedures and guarantees were lacking (COE, 2016). President Maia Sandu announced plans to establish a new court for major corruption cases in March 2023, emphasizing the need for an independent judiciary system to rebuild trust in justice (Balkan Insight, 2023). International partners, including the European Union and the United States, have supported Moldova's anti-corruption efforts by providing financial assistance, capacity building, and monitoring through organizations like the Council of Europe's GRECO and the EU's CVM (Council of Europe Experts, 2021). However, despite progress, corruption remains a significant challenge, affecting multiple sectors and eroding public trust. The infamous "Billion-Dollar Theft" case in 2014, involving the embezzlement of \$1 billion from Moldovan banks, exposed deep-rooted corruption and led to public protests (Rapoza, 2016, p. 5). Key issues include ineffective enforcement, political interference, and perceptions of selective anti-corruption efforts influenced by politics.

The lack of social cohesiveness in the Moldovan environment is a significant barrier to the country's stability and development. This divide is most evident in the differing perceptions of the country's development path, with a notable portion of the population showing loyalty to the Russian Federation over Moldova. This division complicates the government's ability to address subversive activities or protests, as taking actions such as banning

pro-Russian parties or Russian media outlets can be seen as undemocratic limitations affecting a large number of citizens. Simultaneously, these actions might be interpreted as non-democratic, given that a significant part of society considers Russian subversive activities as legitimate.

The non-integration of ethnic minorities, particularly in regions with a high population density of specific minority groups such as Găgăuzia or Taraclia, further exacerbates this vulnerability. Moldova's diverse ethnic composition includes Moldovans, Romanians, Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Gagauz, and Roma. Inter-ethnic tensions exist, and each ethnic group perceives everyday reality differently, influenced by factors such as education level, place of residence, and group affiliation. Linguistic divisions are also evident, with Romanian as the official language, but significant portions of the population identifying Russian as their mother tongue. This linguistic diversity hinders effective communication and integration. Russian media is predominantly consumed by national minorities, while the majority population favors Romanian-language media. Despite linguistic divisions, both majorities and minorities identify with Moldova as their home and state. However, Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns exacerbate these divisions by fuelling conflicts along ethnic and linguistic lines, perpetuating mistrust among different communities and undermining efforts to build inclusive and united societies (CIVIS, 2020, p. 5).

3. External Dimension: Russia's Caused Hybrid Threats

The Republic of Moldova, neighboring Ukraine and deeply affected by Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine, has faced an array of complex hybrid threats. These threats, intertwined with conventional military tactics, include economic coercion through manipulation of energy exports and trade, political manipulation by supporting certain Moldovan political entities with pro-Russian agendas and fostering instability in the Transnistrian region. Additionally, Russia has employed disinformation and propaganda campaigns via media outlets and social networks to shape public opinion, sow political discord, and fuel divisions within Moldovan society. Cyberattacks attributed to Russian-backed hackers have further targeted critical infrastructure and governmental institutions, seeking to disrupt operations and access sensitive information. These multifaceted hybrid tactics challenge Moldova's sovereignty and security, creating a complex and demanding threat landscape for the country.

3.1. Russia's Economic Pressure

After declaring independence in 1991, the Republic of Moldova has struggled to achieve energy independence, leaving it highly vulnerable to Russian influence due to its dependence on Russian gas and electricity imports. This energy reliance has allowed Russia, primarily through Gazprom, to wield gas as a political weapon, impacting Moldova's economy and security. Gazprom, holding a dominant position in Moldova's energy sector, controls the gas distribution network through its majority stake in Moldovagaz, the country's main gas company. This dependency has resulted in significant debts, with Gazprom claiming over \$700 million owed by Moldova (Yafimava, 2021, p. 3). Furthermore, Transnistria, a separatist region supplied with gas through Moldovagaz, has accumulated a debt of over 9 billion USD for gas supplies, subsidizing its economy while adding to Moldova's energy challenges (Tanas, 2023, p. 2). Rising gas prices since October 2021 have further strained Moldova, particularly impacting vulnerable residents who spend more than 10% of their income on energy bills (Energy Community, 2022), highlighting the urgent need for energy diversification and independence.

Moldova has been taking steps to diversify its energy supplies and reduce its dependence on Russian gas. These measures include signing the Energy Community Treaty in 2010, participating in the Initiative to Connect Gas Networks in Central and South-Eastern Europe (CESEC) in 2015, and supporting the expansion of CESEC's activities to include electricity and renewable energy in 2017. Moreover, the construction of the Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau gas pipeline, completed in 2020, allowed Moldova to access Romanian gas through a 150-kilometer-long pipeline, 110 kilometers of which are in the Republic of Moldova, reducing its reliance on Russian imports. However, the country has not fully utilized this pipeline due to the lower cost of Russian gas.

Moldova's dependence on Russian gas and electricity supply is closely linked with the Moldavskaya GRES power plant in Transnistria, controlled by Russia's Inter RAO, providing 70-80% of electricity to Moldova's right-bank region. Interruptions in Transnistria's electricity supply force right-bank Moldova to import power from Romania at higher costs, as seen in the 2022 electricity crisis caused by gas supply cuts. Efforts to strengthen energy connections with Romania, including the construction of a high-voltage power line, are ongoing to reduce Moldova's reliance on Ukraine's energy transmission system. Achieving energy independence and diversification remains a work in progress, with the need to accelerate interconnection projects with the European Union and explore gas procurement options in collaboration with EU member states. A significant milestone in European energy integration

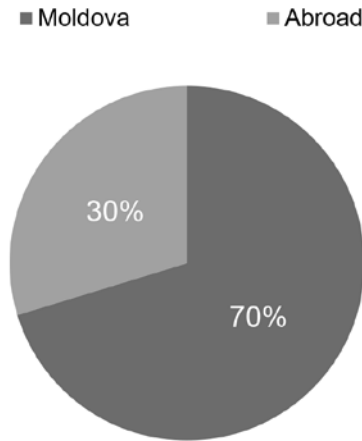
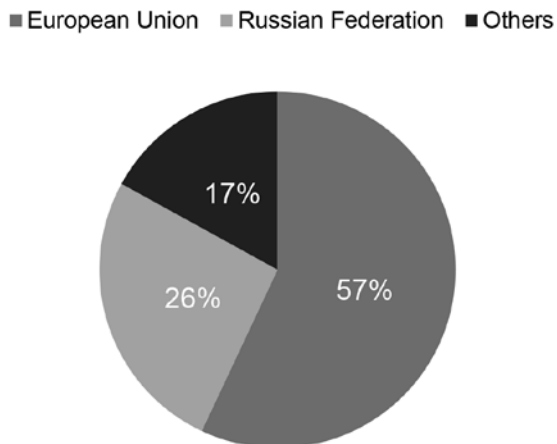
was achieved on March 16, 2022, with the successful synchronization of the electricity grids of Moldova and Ukraine with the European networks, which ensured stable electricity systems and uninterrupted services for consumers in both countries (European Commission, 2022). In this regard, interviewee n°2, a former Rector of the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, underlined the necessity to speed up energy interconnection with Romania and seek viable resolutions for the procurement of gas and electricity in collaboration with EU member states (Interviewee n°2, March 10, 2023).

Moreover, Moldova, as a former Soviet republic, historically maintained close trade relations with Russia, but the share of trade with Russia has decreased over the years due to diversification and Russia's actions in Ukraine. While Russia's significance for Moldovan exports has diminished, it remains crucial for certain sectors like fruit producers. In 2022, Russia banned Moldovan fruit exports, except for Transnistria, leading to concerns that it might be politically motivated (Necsutu, 2022, p. 2). Moldova's economy also heavily relies on remittances from Moldovan citizens working in Russia, but recent years have seen a significant decline in remittances, challenging the argument for maintaining close ties with Russia for labor migration.

According to IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), Moldova has a significant migrant population, with over 1.1 million Moldovans living abroad, making up about 30% of the total population (Figure 4). Figure 5 shows that most Moldovan emigrants head to the European Union (57%), while Russia is the second preferred destination (26%), contributing to substantial remittances (MFAEI, 2021). In 2021, Moldovans sent at least \$1.611 billion, equivalent to 12% of the country's GDP, to their families. This high emigration rate has made Moldova one of the world's leading countries for labor and youth emigration (Infotag, 2022).

3.2. Pro-Russian Parties and Institutions

Russia is using internal, pro-Russian oligarchs and political forces to destabilize the political situation in the country. The Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and the "Șor Party" have been the primary sources of political influence in Moldova for the past two decades. They played significant roles at different times until the early 2021 elections, where their electoral alliance suffered a decisive defeat by the pro-European Action and Solidarity Party (PAS).

Figure 4. **Moldovans Living in the Country and Abroad (GMDAC, 2021)**Figure 5. **Distributions of Moldovan Emigrants Abroad (MFAEI, 2021)**

The Kremlin's influence in Moldova's politics has evolved through pro-Russian parties gaining prominence. Notably, during Vladimir Voronin's presidency (2001-2009), the Communist Party adopted a pro-Russian stance. Subsequently, Igor Dodon and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) emerged as a new vector of Kremlin influence. The PSRM, established in 1997, is a social-democratic and pro-Russian party, advocating closer ties with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union while opposing Moldova's EU and NATO aspirations. Russia provided substantial support to the PSRM, including potential collaborations with Russian consultants linked to the Federal Security Service (FSB), financial backing allegations, and

leaked recordings suggesting monthly Russian contributions of up to USD 1 million. However, the PSRM's popularity dwindled by the end of 2022, and its supporters shifted allegiance. Despite this, Moscow still sees the PSRM as a valuable tool for influencing Moldova's political landscape, aiming to rejuvenate its image and regain support among the pro-Russian electorate (Calus, 2022, p. 1).

The Șor Party, founded by Ilan Șor in 2016, has gained prominence in Moldovan politics for its populist and pro-Russian stance, advocating for closer ties with Russia and criticizing Moldova's pro-European integration policies, expressing support for the Eurasian Economic Union. While the party focuses on issues like fighting corruption, improving the business environment, and promoting social welfare programs, critics have accused it of having a populist and opportunistic approach, raising concerns about alleged connections to corruption and alignment with Russian interests. Despite these criticisms, the Șor Party secured representation in the Moldovan Parliament, maintaining support ranging from approximately 10% to 17%. However, recent allegations suggest the party has actively recruited individuals to participate in anti-government protests, offering financial incentives, which Chisinau views as part of the Kremlin's plan to destabilize Moldova's government (Rankin, 2023, p. 1). Consequently, the Moldovan government initiated procedures to outlaw the Șor Party, leading to its liquidation by the Constitutional Court in June 2023, with calls for EU sanctions on Ilan Șor, who is accused of aiding Russia in spreading social unrest and corruption (Tanas, 2023, p. 2).

Pro-Russian parties in Moldova strategically capitalize on the strong religious and cultural ties between the Moldovan population and the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC), a subordinate of the Moscow Patriarchate. The MOC, serving as a key instrument of Russian soft power in Moldova, facilitates the dissemination of pro-Russian messages, fosters cultural affinity with Russia, and advances policies aligning with Russian objectives. With Orthodoxy as the dominant religion in Moldova, representing 90% of the population, the MOC wields significant influence and trust, particularly in rural areas where over 60% of Moldovans reside (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2014). The MOC's role extends beyond religious affairs, with its leaders and clergy holding considerable authority and respect. However, the church has not shied away from intervening in political matters, as demonstrated when Archbishop Marchel urged the faithful to vote for the pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon in the 2016 presidential elections while criticizing the pro-Western Maia Sandu and, more recently, by spreading false information about COVID-19 vaccination and failing to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Mosneag, 2016, p. 4).

3.3. Disinformation, Propaganda, and Cyberattacks

The Russian Federation has employed various methods, including provocation, disinformation, and cyberattacks, to undermine the stability and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova. Disinformation campaigns seek to undermine support for Ukraine and the EU while promoting destabilization. Russia uses front organizations, cultivates pro-Russian groups, and aims to revive its dependence on Russian energy. Moldova's vulnerability to propaganda stems from its citizens' reliance on Russian news sources despite being Romanian speakers. Measures to counter disinformation have had limited impact, with over 20% of Moldova's population supporting Russia's actions in Ukraine (IPP, 2022).

The country also faces significant cyber threats, including cyberattacks and incidents like "Moldova Leaks," contributing to political controversies. Cyberattacks have increased due to the country's alliance with Ukraine, making it an attractive target for pro-Russian hackers. Legislation for cybersecurity, set to be effective from January 1, 2025, identifies critical service providers obliged to maintain cybersecurity and report significant incidents to Moldovan authorities. These attacks aim to overwhelm information systems, originating from compromised equipment and networks outside Moldova (Petkauskas, 2023, p. 2).

The Kremlin's extensive disinformation tactics in Moldova involve infiltrating Russian media into the information space, supporting pro-Russian outlets, and promoting Russophobia. Websites like zdg.md, noi.md, and newsmaker.md quotes Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to foster dissatisfaction with Moldova, the EU, and the US. Despite efforts to block such sites, many bypass bans via social media platforms. Counteracting Kremlin propaganda and disinformation can help reduce divisions over Russia's actions against Ukraine, with some blocked sites appearing on euvsdisinfo.eu's debunking list. As Moldova faces ongoing cyber threats, it must expand measures to protect against misinformation (Zdg, 2022, p. 2).

Amid the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Moldova, disinformation campaigns have sought to create tension and promote hate speech. President Maia Sandu warned of a widespread campaign spreading false information about aggressive and opportunistic Ukrainian refugees, highlighting the potential destabilization caused by generalized negative perceptions (Vasilache, 2022, p. 1). Media outlets, human rights experts, and organizations have observed and reported on narratives that manipulate public discourse surrounding refugees. The Promo-Lex Association monitored hate speech and discrimination incitement during the Russian Federation's war against

Ukraine, noting the use of platforms like Telegram and TikTok to portray Ukrainian refugees negatively and spread misleading information (Promo-LEX, 2022).

Moldovan politicians like Igor Dodon expressed concerns about Ukrainian refugees, suggesting some might violate Moldovan law without providing evidence. This raises issues of their claims' veracity in a country governed by the rule of law (Barbarosie, 2022, p. 3). Meanwhile, Chisinau's general mayor, Ion Ceban, portrayed Ukrainian immigrants negatively, labeling them a "risk for public security" based on unspecified incidents (Cosoi, 2022). Additionally, Socialist Party member Vladimir Odnostalco criticized the allocation of resources for Ukrainian refugees, omitting the fact that they receive international aid (Dragan, 2022, p. 1).

However, politicians aren't the only ones who promote propaganda. Russian-language teachers in Moldova have reportedly promoted pro-Russian ideas in their classes, as described by Interviewee n°10, a researcher of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences at Moldova State University in Chisinau, who for a few months hosted a family of Ukrainian refugees. Interviewee n°10 argued that "as soon as the Ukrainian family arrived in Moldova, the 12-year-old guy started going to a Russian-language school in Chisinau as it was easier for him to learn and speak Russian than Romanian. After a couple of weeks, he stopped wanting to go to school and started feeling very anxious. He told us that during civic education classes, the professor was talking about Russia's values as well as Russian history and culture instead of following the program. The same thing happened during history classes, when the teacher propagated ideas such as Crimea belongs to Russia and that Russia is not an aggressor state" (Interviewee n°10, March 20, 2023).

The media in Moldova's Transnistrian region reflects Russian mass media in its portrayal of political and socio-economic events, propagating pro-Russian sentiments and negative views toward Moldova, Romania, the EU, the US, and NATO. In the same interview, the student highlighted the significant influence of local television, primarily state-run and Russian language, on the older population in the region, who rely on it as their sole information source. Major local TV stations include the First Transnistrian TV channel and TSV (Free Choice Television), both sharing a similar editorial approach. Other stations, like Dnestr TV, Bender Municipal Television, and Lik TV, adopt a more balanced approach by providing information about both sides of the Dniester River. The print media in the region is largely rooted in the Soviet era, with newspapers often reflecting a bias towards Tiraspol and Moscow, lacking impartiality when covering topics related to the right bank of the Dniester River (Interviewee n°10, March 20, 2023).

Tiraspol's propaganda, in alignment with Russian narratives, falsely portrays Chisinau as uncooperative in negotiations and accuses it of avoiding dialogue. This disrupts Moldova's educational system and restricts movement to and from Transnistria. Economically, Tiraspol's propaganda wrongly blames Chisinau for hindering economic activities in Transnistria, particularly regarding the Râbnîța Metallurgical Plant. The military perspective includes allegations of Moldova aligning with NATO standards and militarization. Tiraspol also portrays Chisinau's interactions with Gagauz autonomy negatively, implying the deteriorating situation of the population. Finally, it accuses Chisinau of violating the Moldovagaz-Gazprom agreement and claims that Moldova is reducing gas deliveries to Transnistria. However, Tiraspol neglects to mention the reduced gas deliveries since October, leading to a decrease in electricity supplies to Moldova's right bank, largely due to Moscow's influence over Transnistria's authorities (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

4. Strategies to Prevent Conflict Spillover from Ukraine

Based on the analysis made so far, we can affirm that Moldova's internal vulnerabilities and Russia's hybrid threats pose a real threat to the country's security. Following Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde's securitization concept (1998), the problem of Russia's aggression on Ukraine is first defined as a significant threat to Moldova's security due to its internal vulnerabilities. Russia exploits these vulnerabilities to influence Moldova's pro-European leadership, employing tactics such as provoking political crises, supporting pro-Russian forces, and exacerbating economic and social crises. Hegre, Ellingsen, Gates, and Gleditsch argue (2001), that as Moldova is politically, economically, and socially unstable, this heightens the potential for conflict spillover. The refugee movement from Ukraine further contributes to social and economic instability, as outlined by scholars like Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006). Moreover, Moldova's porous borders, as noted by Atzili (2007), expose it to transnational criminal activities, exacerbating security concerns. Measures that Moldova still possesses to mitigate the threats are analyzed in the next subchapters.

4.1. Strengthening of the National Defense System

Moldova's top priority in preventing Ukraine's conflict spillover is to bolster its national defense capabilities. Concerns about potential Russian aggression through Transnistria have risen, particularly after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov hinted that Moldova could face a situation like Ukraine (Bne Intellinews, 2023). Moldova is also alarmed by the Kremlin's cancellation of a 2012 decree in February 2023, which previously ensured the observance of Moldova's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and neutrality in the context of Transnistria's special status (President of Russia, 2023). Interviewee n°1, ex-Deputy of the Supreme Council of Transnistria, highlighted the low likelihood of immediate direct aggression due to limited Russian troops, their training, and Ukraine's strong defense capabilities with international support. Nevertheless, Moldova should efficiently use this time to prepare for defense, as readiness is a continuous and vital task requiring systematic planning and execution by the country's political and military leadership (Interviewee n°1, March 6, 2023).

Moldova's defense system hasn't undergone comprehensive reform since independence due to political indifference, lack of security understanding, and resistance from pro-Russian forces. However, with regional conflicts and closer ties to the EU and NATO, defense reform is essential. Modernizing the defense establishment is crucial for national security. Moldova's defense budget has been historically low at around 0.38% of GDP, but it increased significantly to 0.55% of GDP in 2023, totaling approximately 1.7 billion lei⁵ (Ministry of Defence, 2022). While this is an improvement, it remains lower than similarly sized countries like Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, which allocate over 2% of GDP to defense (NATO, 2022). The increase reflects Moldova's need to counter Russia's aggressive policies toward former Soviet countries and defend against potential armed aggression.

The Ministry of Defense in Moldova emphasizes the need to modernize the National Army to fulfill three main roles: protecting state sovereignty and territorial integrity, assisting during crises, and contributing to international peacekeeping missions. Given resource limitations, external partnerships, particularly with NATO, are crucial for defense modernization. These collaborations aim to align with modern military standards, competence requirements, and operational capacities. The country actively collaborates with NATO through the Partnership for Peace Program, using various initiatives like the Individual Partnership Action Plan, Building Integrity Program, Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process, and Defense and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative. NATO's assistance has significantly contributed to modernizing the National Army, aligning it with international

and democratic standards (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2022).

In 2019-2020, Moldova initiated the first-ever military transformation process through a long-term plan spanning 2020-2030, with the aim of creating a modern, self-sustaining National Army. Coordination between military and civilian authorities is vital to achieving this goal, as emphasized by Interviewee n°3, an ex-security and intelligence officer of the Ministry of National Security of the Republic of Moldova, who stated that “the continuous transformation of the National Army should be a primary political goal for Moldova, and the military and civilian personnel responsible for defense planning need to recognize the importance of coordinating the efforts of all state institutions to accomplish state’s aim” (Interviewee n°3, March 10, 2023).

The Republic of Moldova is actively enhancing its defense capabilities through cooperation with the European Union (EU), in addition to its partnership with NATO. The EU has approved a 40 million euro assistance package, allocated under the European Peace Facility (EPF) to the country, aimed at modernizing the Armed Forces. This assistance includes equipment upgrades in logistics, mobility, command and control, cyber-defense, unmanned aerial reconnaissance, and tactical communications. This demonstrates the country’s commitment to strengthening partnerships to boost its defense capacity while maintaining its neutral status (Delegation of the EU to the RM, 2023). Moldova’s partners, including the EU, respect its constitutional neutrality and provide assistance within existing collaborative relationships, showing that permanent neutrality doesn’t hinder its participation in international security efforts. This aligns with international law, principles, and shared values, allowing Moldova to actively engage with international structures focused on collective and cooperative security.

4.2. Collaboration with the International Community

Collaboration with the international community is crucial for Moldova, extending beyond the defense sector. Engaging with international organizations like the European Union, NATO, and strategic partners such as Romania, Ukraine, and the USA can lead to joint energy and infrastructure projects, assist in Moldova’s path to European integration, strengthen democratic institutions, and enhance security.

In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, several states have adapted their relationships with NATO. The Republic of Moldova is one such state that has significantly advanced its ties with NATO since February 2022. NATO is increasing its political and security support for Moldova. This

includes reinforcing support for Moldova's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic development, with Moldova participating in previously inaccessible alliance activities like the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July 2023. High-level visits and discussions demonstrate NATO's commitment to providing even greater political support to Moldova. For instance, Admiral R. Bauer's recent visit marked the first visit by a Chair of the NATO Military Committee to Moldova, underscoring Moldova's priority for support (NATO, 2023). Moreover, NATO demonstrated its support for Moldova during the European Political Community summit in Bulboaca by enhancing surveillance and security measures using NATO resources. This summit set a positive precedent for future collaboration with NATO and aimed to educate Moldovan society about the benefits of this alliance. As collaboration strengthens, society becomes more accepting of this new partnership.

The future of Moldova's relationship with NATO will also be influenced by the outcome of the Ukraine war. If Ukraine succeeds in liberating its occupied territories, it will strengthen Moldova's ties with NATO. As Interviewee n°7 stated, "even partial liberation of occupied territories would positively impact cooperation with NATO, as it would increase society's trust and bolster collective defence" (Interviewee n°7, March 14, 2023). However, if combat actions cease under different conditions, it might provide opportunities for Russian manipulation of information and potentially slow down Moldova's progress with NATO.

Moldova has strong relations with the European Union as well, based on the EU-Moldova Association Agreement since 2014. The EU has mobilized €1.2 billion to help Moldova face challenges due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Moldova remains committed to pro-European reforms. In March 2023, the European Council initiated a support package to strengthen Moldova's resilience, security, economy, and energy supply. This package aims to support Moldova's path to EU accession, counter disinformation, and promote economic development. It reflects Moldova's dedication to deepen its ties with the EU and advance toward European integration (European Commission, 2023).

The inclusion of Romania as a strategic partner also offers a viable solution for Moldova to break free from Russia's sphere of influence. With shared historical, cultural, and linguistic ties as well as over one million Romanian citizens registered in the country, accounting for approximately 40% of the total population, Romania plays a crucial role in supporting Moldova's European aspirations. A key aspect is the easy accessibility of Romanian passports to Moldovan citizens, enabling them to work and travel within the EU. This facilitates economic opportunities, cross-border movement, and cultural exchange, aligning with Moldova's desire to deepen connections with the EU.

Both countries have a strategic partnership focused on Moldova's European integration, backed by crucial reforms and Romania's expertise in the EU accession process. Romania's commitment to Moldova's European integration is robust, stemming from their bilateral strategic partnership declared in 2010. It places Moldova's interests at the forefront, focusing on democratic reforms and EU integration. In addition, its substantial investments in Moldova, unique geographical proximity, and wealth of EU experience make it a pivotal partner for Moldova's journey toward European integration.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine underscores the need for stronger Moldova-Ukraine relations too. Moldova's support for Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine's military efforts indirectly benefit Moldova's security. In the event of Ukraine's victory, Moldova could tap into reconstruction opportunities. Strong neighboring armies enhance Moldova's security and foreign investment appeal. Collaborating with Ukraine is crucial for Moldova's stability and security while limiting the Russian army's presence. To ensure this, Moldova must focus on strengthening friendly relations, addressing state border issues, establishing effective mechanisms, and cooperating on the Transnistrian issue within the current security context.

Finally, placing the Republic of Moldova among the US partners is vital for its security, defense, and economic development. The strategic partnership between Romania and the US, evidenced by US military bases in Romania and significant American investments, is a promising model for Moldova. To achieve this, the National Security Strategy should outline a vision for a strategic partnership with the US. The US is planning security initiatives, including small modular reactors for clean energy, which could extend to Moldova. The US has already invested around \$2 billion in Moldova, becoming a major donor and investor, paving the way for prosperity. Furthermore, Moldova's modernization of its National Army would benefit from US expertise and assistance.

4.3. Resolution of the Transnistria Conflict

The Transnistrian region remains a persistent vulnerability for Moldova, hindering state and economic strengthening, especially amid the Ukraine war. The inability to control this separatist region further accentuates Moldova's incomplete statehood. Over three decades, international attempts to resolve the conflict have often been influenced by self-interest. Geopolitical factors have hampered progress in reaching a political resolution (Teosa & Dirun, 2020, p. 12). Various negotiation processes, such as the Moscow Memorandum, Kozak Plan, Poroshenko's plan, and the "5+2 format," have been tried, but the Ukraine

war has rendered the latter non-functional. Despite past failures, the changing political and social landscape due to the Ukraine conflict underscores the need to reevaluate the costs of maintaining the status quo and the prospects for a solution. The negotiations continue, driven by the goal of achieving stability and peace in the region.

Ukraine's involvement is vital for resolving the Transnistrian conflict. President Zelensky noted at the EPC Summit that a resolution hinges on Ukraine's victory over Russia. This positions Ukraine as a key player in shaping future conflict settlement mechanisms (IPN Press Agency, 2023). Decision-makers in Chisinau have consistently underscored the link between Ukraine's war victory and peaceful, territorial integrity, respecting conflict resolution (Calugareanu, 2023, p. 1). The former representative of the Ministry of National Security of the Republic of Moldova, V. G., had the same opinion. During the interview I conducted on March 17, 2023, he stated that "if Ukraine achieves victory, it is unlikely that the separatist Transnistrian region will maintain its current status quo of the past 32 years. Russia's role would diminish, and the reintegration of the region into Moldova would become more likely. Ukraine is unlikely to want a separatist region on its coast, as it currently deploys troops along the Transnistrian border to prevent surprise attacks."

The Transnistrian conflict demands a European solution, necessitating the European Union's (EU) deeper involvement in the resolution process. The EU has consistently supported Moldova's territorial integrity and a peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian dispute through diplomatic means. Interviewee n°8, a former adviser to the President of the Parliament, stated that to strengthen the EU's position in the region, "negotiations should be relaunched with the EU as an active participant, appointing a Special Representative for post-Soviet conflicts. Given the ongoing war in Ukraine, the EU may reconsider its role in the negotiations and invest more efforts in developing a new format, in close cooperation with Chisinau, involving EU member states and European diplomacy to address the Transnistrian conflict effectively" (Interviewee n°8, March 16, 2023).

Resolving the conflict should entail Moldovan state institutions' active participation and essential changes in the country's approach to the problem. It necessitates long-term internal reforms and efforts to break the informational blockade imposed by the Tiraspol regime to inform and influence the Transnistrian population. This strategy should address the fears of Moldova reuniting with Romania and concerns of linguistic discrimination of Russian speakers while preparing a language integration program. Furthermore, Moldova must create a civic identity that transcends ethnic boundaries to make the state more attractive to the Transnistrian population, undermining

Tiraspol's efforts to discredit the Moldovan state.

The resolution of the Transnistrian conflict is a significant regional challenge with the potential to disrupt EU borders and empower Russia's international interests. The current international landscape complicates the conflict's settlement since key players are concurrently involved in efforts to establish peace in Ukraine. Ukraine, a direct neighbor of Moldova, holds a vital stake in resolving the Transnistrian issue due to its control over the 450 km stretch along the Dniester River's left bank. Transnistria's landlocked status further complicates the situation, as all trade flows necessitate passage through Ukrainian territory. This presents challenges for border control and the development of a legal framework for both Moldova and Ukraine.

4.4. Effective Strategic Communication of Russia Caused Threats

Moldova must enhance its strategic and informational communication to effectively counter Russia's hybrid threats, foster resilience, and strengthen public trust. Establishing national-level strategic communication is a long-term strategy to address these challenges, enhance resilience, and promote societal unity. Strategic communication serves as an essential tool for Moldova's national authorities to realize political, economic, social, security, and defense objectives. In the current geopolitical landscape, strategic communication plays a pivotal role in gaining support from Moldovan citizens, contributing to successful reforms, and countering Russia's hybrid warfare while preventing conflict spillover from Ukraine.

Furthermore, responding to potential conflict threats requires the active involvement of not just state institutions but also the private sector, mass media, and civil society. Moldova's defense and security institutions should enhance transparency and proactively engage with the mass media to inform the public about their work and promote defense and security issues. Collaborating with civil society is essential to build a positive image of these institutions and counter existing biases, ensuring a collective effort to prevent negative outcomes.

Strategic communication, as noted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, involves understanding the information landscape and how hybrid threats are perceived and interpreted. Every government action or inaction conveys a message, making all government personnel communicators. To address these threats, a national strategy with consensus among the population and top-down political support is crucial. NATO's approach to Strategic Communication recognizes that "everything

communicates,” including words, actions, and silence. This affects the perceptions and decisions of various audiences, encompassing strategic objectives like deterrence, coercion, and reassurance. Understanding decision-making dynamics within the information environment is central to the Strategic Communication process, involving various functions in coordinating government communication actions and conducting communication activities (Aday S., Andžāns M., et. al., 2019, p. 72).

In recent years, the European Union has been actively supporting Moldova in enhancing its strategic communication capabilities and countering disinformation, with a focus on independent media. As the influence of misinformation and propaganda grows due to increased reliance on information technologies, there’s a need to address this threat comprehensively (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, 2023). To strengthen the integrity of the information space, certain measures are recommended:

- Preventing illegal financing of Moldovan media institutions, ensuring these measures are proportionate and do not infringe on press freedom;
- Enforcing advertising transparency through legal means and combating disinformation on social networks, which may require legislative intervention;
- Maintaining autonomy and minimizing state interference in decisions to restrict harmful content on social platforms, while also establishing mechanisms for enforcement;
- Promoting a unified stance among public and private media, civil society, and political parties in support of Moldova’s European and democratic development. Any deviation toward Russian integration should be considered anti-national and anti-constitutional, with a focus on denouncing Russian aggression and advocating for European integration. Additionally, work is needed to address perceptions among ethnic minorities that their rights could be affected by the country’s Western orientation.

Conclusions

Considering what has been analyzed, the Republic of Moldova has emerged as a vulnerable state since the Russian aggression on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which has placed the nation on alert for potential conflict spillover via Transnistria. The successful resistance of Ukraine against the Kremlin’s attacks has temporarily acted as a protective barrier for Moldova, lowering the immediate risk of invasion. However, the research acknowledges the necessity for Moldova to adopt a proactive stance in preparing for potential

escalation in the medium to long term. Based on the initial tasks of the article, the following results emerged:

- Moldova's decision-makers have compelling reasons to raise and address concerns about possible Russian aggression, as Moldova's rising concerns regarding the possibility of Russian aggression are well-founded and multifaceted. First, the nation's geographical proximity to the conflict in Ukraine exposes it to the potential spillover of hostilities. Second, Moldova's pro-European orientation further exacerbates these concerns, as it presents a challenge to Russia's strategic interests in the region. Third, Russia's history of aggressive interventions in post-Soviet states, as evident in Georgia and Ukraine, underscores its unpredictable nature and willingness to employ military force to achieve its objectives. Fourth, the unresolved Transnistria conflict also serves as a potential leverage point for Moscow to exert pressure on Moldova;
- Internal vulnerabilities within Moldova weaken the country's ability to respond effectively to external threats. The Permanent Neutrality Strategy, though intended to safeguard Moldova's interests, has proven inadequate in effectively shielding the country from emerging threats. The presence of Russian troops and the potential for localized conflicts and weapons proliferation within Transnistria pose a challenge to Moldova's territorial integrity. In addition to that, the persisting political instability due to corruption hinders effective decision-making, while the lack of social cohesion due to the presence of non-integrated ethnic minorities and the significant segment of Moldovan's alignment with the Russian Federation strains the country's development trajectory and further exacerbates the country's vulnerability to Russia's threats;
- As of external factors, Russia is exploiting the country's internal vulnerabilities to impose a docile regime on its pro-European leadership. Through various actions such as systematic dissemination of disinformation, propaganda, and cyberattacks, political manipulation through the support of Pro-Russian parties, and support for separatist movements in Transnistria, Russia poses imminent risks to Moldova's stability and creates an additional reason for concern for the country's security. In addition, the Russian aggression in Ukraine had a very negative impact on Moldova's economy due to the huge Ukrainian refugee movement to the country, disruption in trade relations between Russia and Moldova, high inflation, and energy crises;
- To counter the risk of conflict and safeguard Moldova's stability and security, Chisinau should bolster the national defense system through the modernization of the defense capabilities of the national army. Second,

collaboration with international organizations like the European Union and NATO, alongside strategic allies such as Romania, Ukraine, and the USA must be accelerated in order to foster European integration, reinforce democratic institutions, and amplify overall security. Third, the resolution of the long-standing Transnistria conflict would not only mitigate potential vulnerabilities exploited by external actors but also pave the way for smoother European integration. Lastly, strategic and informational communication would empower Moldova to effectively counter disinformation campaigns and propaganda, fostering public trust.

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Notes

- 1 It takes its name from the Dniestr River, which separates Transnistria from the rest of Moldova.
- 2 Historical name of the region between the Dniester and Prut Rivers. Today, most of Bessarabia is in the Republic of Moldova, with northern and southern districts in Ukraine.
- 3 Agreement on the Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Region of the Republic of Moldova.
- 4 This principle is contained in the “Agreement on the Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Armed Conflict in the Dniester Region of the Republic of Moldova” signed by presidents Mircea Snegur and Boris Yeltsin on July 21, 1992.
- 5 1.7 billion lei represents approximately 89.000 euro

Appendix I. List of the interviewed persons.

1. Interviewee n°1, ex-Deputy of the Supreme Council of Transnistria, interviewed on March 6, 2023;
2. Interviewee n°2, former Rector of the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, interviewed on March 10, 2023;
3. Interviewee n°3, ex security and intelligence officer of the Ministry of National Security of the Republic of Moldova (MNB), interviewed on March 10, 2023;
4. Interviewee n°4, political analyst and former representative of Moldova in the Council of Europe and in the UN, interviewed on March 11, 2023;
5. Interviewee n°5, ex Judge at the European Court of Human Rights and Minister of Justice in Moldova, interviewed on March 13, 2023;
6. Interviewee n°6, ex head of the service of internal protection and anticorruption (SPIA), interviewed on March 14, 2023;
7. Interviewee n°7, scientific researcher at Moldova State University, interviewed on March 14, 2023;
8. Interviewee n°8, former adviser to the President of the Parliament and participant in the Transnistrian conflict, interviewed on March 16, 2023;
9. Interviewee n°9, former representative of the Ministry of National Security of the Republic of Moldova, interviewed on March 17, 2023;
10. Interviewee n°10, researcher at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences at Moldova State University, interviewed on March 20, 2023.