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# Domestic Decay and Remote Capture: The Compromising of Moldova's Defense and Security

A critical perspective on theory and practice

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## Introduction

This analysis claims that the Republic of Moldova in particular, and the Eastern Europe in general, are facing an unobvious and *new strain* of Russian hybrid war. This obscure form of interstate aggression pioneered by Russia against its former satellites and the West, is deliberately designed to escape its timely detection by existing international law mechanisms. Therefore, the analysis points out that the process, widely labeled as hybrid war, is a model of stealthy political assimilation of new countries, as a modern replacement of territorial annexation. By focusing on the Republic of Moldova's case, the analysis examines and reveals the nuances and particularities of this obscure form of Russian aggression. To do so, it elicits important dynamics of the Russian model of hybrid aggression. In turn, this allows to generalize this type of aggression, suggesting it became a typical and widely used *war technology* in Russia's foreign policy against many countries. The only difference displayed by other European countries, in contrast to Moldova, is that they have specific levels of vulnerability, and thus trigger responses from Russia that are tailored to exploit that variation in their degrees of vulnerability.

The analysis examines the Moldova's defense and security environment and readiness. To be successful in this, it must explore a novel, more structured analysis of Russian ongoing "hybrid" model of aggression. By first clarifying this aggression model, the analysis opens the venue for building better tailored counter-measures and policy responses. Instead of embracing the general definition of hybrid war, which is rather obscure, it weights out its various elements and orders them, to draw out a clear mechanism of foreign aggression. To be able to do this, it had to engage in the abstract examination of the Russia's behavior in Moldova. Therefore, it is less of an empirical and descriptive document and more of an analytical and conceptual examination of the issue.

The document comes to the conclusion that ***the major effect of the Russian hybrid aggression is the paralysis of Moldova's national capacity to protect itself from external threats.*** This paralysis is only partially triggered by internal feuds among Moldova's political elites; however, to the largest extent these seem exploited but also incited from abroad, by Russia. Moreover, it is also the consequence of facing an unconventional and largely unfamiliar form of foreign aggression. Instead of marching with military forces across the border, it is exploiting and manipulating peoples' fears, grievances and loyalties. Finally, ***the paralysis of Moldova's defense and security capacity is the product of massive ignorance among both political elites and the population of the importance of national defense,*** in both its restrictive and wider meanings. In fact, ***while many domestic and foreign analysts may view the Russian factor in Moldova as one of its security challenges, this analysis argues that it is the only major challenge.***

A very naïve and simplified explanation of this new Russian strain of hybrid aggression against Moldova includes targeting all three pillars of Moldovan sovereignty. This includes i) the people – who are targeted by aiming to affect their loyalty towards the country – by deluding hearts and

minds; ii) the top political officials – by discrediting them and replacing with loyal politicians, who can serve as local Russian proxies; and iii) the governmental institutions, by penetrating them and encouraging mechanisms and behaviors that promote ineffective policies.

The analysis also attempts to further explain these claims and provide evidence to support them. While derived from the Moldova's context, the ideas promoted in this study are not only relevant to the Republic of Moldova. They may be also useful for the understanding of the security environments in the wider Eastern Europe and even in the Central Europe. In fact, according to the intuition of this research, the ongoing domestic crises in Poland, Hungary, and Romania might reflect foreign covert interventions, identical to the one described in the current analysis.

## The Challenge

July 2018 has been a symbolical breakthrough for the Moldovan defense and security sector. It was the month when the Moldovan Parliament finally approved the National Defense Strategy (NDS) – a document that was produced in partnership with Moldova's foreign partners and with the support of the NATO Defense Capacity Building Initiative. The vote was the culmination of a continuous frustrating process, which included over a half-year of deliberate delay and obstruction by President Igor Dodon of his purely procedural<sup>1</sup> feedback on the Strategy.

For the context, President Dodon has repeatedly revealed his preference for a strong rapprochement with the Russian Federation in all policy areas, including defense and security, while breaking ties with EU and NATO. He even mirrored publicly the Russian explanation of maintaining the Moscow's so-called peacekeepers in the Transnistrian separatist region of Moldova, "in order to avoid civil war".

This NDS obstruction, along with vetoing in 2017 by Dodon of the Moldovan National Army participation in a couple of multinational exercises, conducted in the framework of the NATO Partnership for Peace Program, raised eyebrows in the West. Moldova's partners in NATO perceived this as an emerging national division over the country's foreign policy and geopolitical orientation. Enthusiasm for supporting Moldova's defense and security sector modernization started to crumble. US and EU officials became skeptical of how secure their investments into Moldova's defense sector may be. Ongoing defense projects with Western partners started experiencing unclear delays and obstacles.

The perception that these actions of President Dodon are indicative of a national West-East polarization is dangerously misleading. It is a major mistake to think that there exists a division among Moldova's citizens between the choice of EU integration on one hand and the rapprochement with Russia, on the other. Instead, this analysis argues that the current situation reflects the fact that some of Moldova's state agencies – (i.e. the Presidency) were captured by

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<sup>1</sup> The procedure of approving the National Defense Strategy required collecting feedback from different state agencies, including the Presidential Administration. The Presidential Administration feedback has only an informative role, not prescriptive powers, and can be ignored by the Parliament. The document was kept at the Presidential Office much longer than then 30-day period, required by the relevant legal procedures.

the Russian Federation<sup>2</sup>. Russia managed this through the exploitation of Moldova's weak state institutions, instrumentalization of political corruption, of rudimentary political culture of its citizens, and of mediocre understanding by political elites of defense and security issues, among others.

Under these conditions, Moldova would need, at first glance, more Western assistance and support, not less. It can be argued Moldova would require an increasing amount of Western support to safeguard its state agencies against foreign capture, conducted short of a conventional war, and thus, protecting it from becoming a Russian satellite state.

Regretfully, the situation is less straightforward. A more pragmatic assessment would be to condition the Western support for Moldovan defense and security. The necessary condition is the existence of national political elites, which are genuinely willing to protect state institutions from Russian capture. Lacking these elites, any assistance (except education) from Moldova's Western partners would be equivalent to wasting resources.

Alternatively, any state or group of states in EU/NATO interested in confronting the Russian stealthy take-over of Moldova, could choose to work with civil society and political groups that maintain pro-European aspirations. However, this is a politically costly and risky endeavor, and would only be pursued if there was high interest in the West to protect Moldova from Russian hybrid capture. There is very limited indication of an appetite for such a risk among EU/NATO countries. Which, in turn, suggests that Moldova would very likely be forced to join the growing group of Russia's satellite-states<sup>3</sup>, following its Parliamentary elections in February 2019.

Before discussing the practical manifestations of Russia's hybrid aggression, it may be useful to consider its conceptual underpinnings. Or, one cannot design effective counter-measures without understanding the mechanism of the Russian aggression. The next section explores the existing recent examinations of Russia's hybrid war evolution, adjusting them to Ukraine's Donbas and Moldova's Transnistria contexts.

### **New strains of the Russia's hybrid war**

The main argument of this analysis is that Moldova is confronted with a *new strain* of the Russia's foreign aggression, familiarly described by the buzzword of "hybrid war". The term "hybrid war" has been used by some analysts to refer to Russia's stealth invasion of Ukraine's Crimea and the consequent control over Donetsk and Luhansk regions by the Russian military forces, disguised as local rebels. "Hybrid war" is more of a descriptive than an analytic term but will be used throughout this paper, because it is a widely recognized label. It has been defined by

<sup>2</sup> Moldovan Speaker A. Candu, for instance, insisted in an interview for a Ukrainian publication that President I. Dodon worked for Russia. See Censor.net: interview with Andrian Candu, 11 June 2018 (in Russian), [https://censor.net.ua/resonance/3070828/est\\_ideya\\_edinogo\\_iska\\_gruzii\\_ukrainy\\_i\\_moldovy\\_po\\_okkupirovannym\\_territoriyam\\_spiker\\_parlameta\\_moldovy](https://censor.net.ua/resonance/3070828/est_ideya_edinogo_iska_gruzii_ukrainy_i_moldovy_po_okkupirovannym_territoriyam_spiker_parlameta_moldovy)

<sup>3</sup> By Russia's satellite states this analysis implies the post-Soviet states, which ruling elites were either forced or co-opted to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union or Collective Security Treaty Organization, and usually ally with Russia in international fora.

various authors as combining military, political, economic, social and other tools of “influence”. However, any war is a combination of these various factors, to a varying extent. To improve the analytic value of the term, I will reconceptualize it, adding some nuances and logical boundaries.

A key attractive character of the “hybrid war” is that the perpetrator drastically diminishes both the political costs and the material costs of this type of foreign aggression. It can claim partial deniability (at least of the extent of the involvement). The aggressor also hides its material losses, diminishing its domestic audience costs. Hybrid aggression, thus, makes the coercive advancement of political goals abroad (through force) more attractive for state actors, since this allows to diminish the related costs. Because Russia did not have enough persuasive or soft power to attract Ukraine and Moldova, it relied on its coercive instruments, of which it had plenty. **In fact, it can be claimed that the aggressor in a hybrid war is able to project most of the aggression costs on the target country – forcing it to respond with various degrees of restraint on citizens’ democratic liberties.**

It is quite safe to assume that Russia’s aggression against Georgia in 2008, and the consequent failure of the West to generate response costs for Moscow<sup>4</sup>, has encouraged Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014. It is also reasonable to suggest that the Russian leadership did not expect the West to display a unity of economic sanctions, in response to the Kremlin’s aggression against Ukraine, and neither did it anticipate the severity of sanctions’ consequences. A cynical reader could also stress that the Western sanctions could have been much less serious, if not for the downing of the MH17 flight by the Russian military.

This would point out to the key role of the Russian leadership’s expectations of potential costs that its foreign aggression designs were likely to trigger in the West. Therefore, the ongoing calls among some EU-member states, and in the United States, to abandon sanctions against Russia, could alter the existing costs expectations. It would likely create the perception among the Russian political elites that the West is too “pragmatic” and egoistic to maintain sanctions for a longer period. Thus, if Russia attaches a very high importance to the ability to control Ukraine and Moldova, it may be willing to suffer a few years of sanctions, expecting them to be dropped eventually.

When thinking about hybrid war it is useful to compare the costs of different types of foreign aggression. Conventional war would bring both maximal costs and visibility. Proxy wars are very visible. Though, the perpetrator can obscure some of its costs, projecting them on the proxy actor, through which it perpetrates the foreign aggression. The hybrid war is more obscure, as it proliferates the foreign aggression through the imitation of different domestic processes of the target country, such as elections, civil unrest, civil conflict, rebellion, ethnic and religious tensions, etc. Imitation is of key importance, as the aggressor would often pick up and exploit processes that already exist in the society but are at a harmless and non-violent stage. The

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<sup>4</sup> Some Western countries and organizations even to some extent justified the Russian aggression by buying into its “peace-enforcement” argument. For instance, the Tagliavini report was criticized for failing to consider the larger context and the timeline of the escalation.

aggressor would then work to raise tensions and escalate the intensity and violent potential of these processes, like Russia did with anti-immigrant fears in Germany.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to notice that hybrid war process could encompass elements of those and other foreign policy tools, even in modest quantities, depending on the stage of the hybrid war. At final stages though, the hybrid war could be more violent, involving armed combat, if the target country attempts to oppose the aggressor's indirect take-over of its state institutions.

In the hybrid war context, it is frequently a challenge to distinguish whether an unwanted political process is unravelling naturally or under the control of a foreign aggressor. The key to this is to look for intervening foreign effect, which explores the *imitation* of domestic political processes. Imitation in warfare is as old as the war itself, taking usually the form of deception.

Generally, deception measures combine various actions aimed to deceive and create advantages – imitation, concealment, creating decoys, disinformation – thus reducing the costs of the deadly competition both in the social world but also in nature. And the emergence of modern technology, improved scientific knowledge about humans and society, and the revolution in data collection, have contributed to the increased effectiveness of deception, making for more obscure wars, with military element only in the operation's inner crisis-management role.

It is illustrative to read an excerpt from the discussion<sup>6</sup> between Jim Rutenberg, a New York Times political correspondent at that time, with Dmitri Peskov, Putin's press secretary:

*The transformation and acceleration of information technology, Peskov said, had unmoored the global economy from real value. Perception alone could move markets or crash them. "We've never seen bubbles like we've seen in the greatest economy in the world, the United States," he said. The same free flow of information had produced "a new clash of interests," and so began "an informational disaster — an informational war."*

*By way of example, he pointed to "this girl, from show business, Kim Kardashian." Kardashian is among the most popular people in all of social media, with 55 million Twitter followers, nearly 18 million more than President Trump. "Let's imagine that one day she says, 'My supporters — do this,' " Peskov said. "This will be a signal that will be accepted by millions and millions of people. And she's got no intelligence, no interior ministry, no defense ministry, no K.G.B." This, he said, was the new reality: the global proliferation of the kinds of reach and influence that were once reserved for the great powers and, more recently, great media conglomerates.*

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<sup>5</sup> Stefan Meister, "The "Lisa Case": Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation," *NATO Review Magazine*, 25 July 2016

<sup>6</sup> The New York Times, "RT, Sputnik, and Russia's New Theory of War," 13 September 2017.

*Even Peskov sounded slightly amazed considering the possibilities. “The new reality creates a perfect opportunity for mass disturbances,” he said, “or for initiating mass support or mass disapproval.”*

Given this new knowledge base that Russia has mastered, it can wage wars differently, while still being able to achieve the same goals as wars used to obtain in the past, but at lower costs.

To sum it up - why conquer the territory of a country, if in the modern age of legitimacy-yielding democratic elections it is possible to reap similar benefits, by hacking these elections and promoting loyal forces into power in foreign countries? The main value in today's international world is not territory or resources, but influence, as Putin's press secretary suggested. By having the ability to influence the domestic and foreign policies of a country, one can, for instance, get preferential deals in commerce, support for diplomatic initiatives in international affairs, or even endorsement for new international rules of the game.

Russia found a way to reduce costs for its aggressive foreign actions, which in essence are not different from a conventional war. It does this by obscuring its actions, disguising them as genuine elements of the democratic processes in the West: elections are one of the most obvious but not unique examples. These also include protests, inter-ethnic disputes, populism, demands for self-determination, claims of discrimination, free media, etc. This is so obscure and unexpected that even today many Western policymakers and analysts are not yet able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Having examined the latest Russian influence operations, which are illustrative of the Russia's new way of waging foreign aggression, this analysis concluded that many of these have a common trend. To describe that, it would be useful to explore another of the nature's examples, and in particular one of the brood parasites known as the common cuckoo. This bird, widespread in Europe, Asia and parts of Africa, lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. After hatching, the young chick will push other eggs or host progeny out of the host's nest, to be able to monopolize the food supply. The host birds feed and raise the cuckoo chick, like their own. To make sense of this metaphor, we have the example of one actor (aggressor) exploring a naturally familiar and thus accepted process by another actor (target), though replacing the substance or content of that process.

The aggressor thus uses the process familiar to the target as an engine to proliferate and spread its own control and interests. In Russia's hybrid operations these interests include specific ideas, interpretations, and solutions, among others. Russian war planners apply a mimicry of the Western democratic values and processes. They exploit them to obscure and camouflage their own ideas to give them legitimacy, get them accepted at least at the deliberative stage, and thus replace the ideas and solutions of the target governments with its own. As examples of these strategy consider the referendums in Moldova's Transnistria (unofficially and tacitly accepted in some Western states) and in Ukraine's Crimea (not accepted in the West). As a result, the targets

of Russia's hybrid operations often do not see through the misleading cover of the Moscow's cunning ideas and solutions, which otherwise they would have rejected.

Following its experience in Ukraine, where Russia understood that it misinterpreted the Western readiness to egoistically accept its military indirect invasion of its neighbor, it now looks to diminish and better conceal the use of military force. There is a new strain of the hybrid war that I referred to. A strain, which Russia is using now in Moldova, by capturing its key state institutions and national political processes, allowing Russia to bring into power its political proxies in Moldova.

### **The missed wake-up call**

Having laid down that obscure and deceptive mechanism, it is less surprising to see why this Russia's aggression strategy went under the West's radar.

Confronting an unfamiliar threat such as this, imposes several socio-political challenges. I will name just a few that I consider most essential. First, it is the identification problem – given the common understanding of foreign aggression and war, the modern civilization views war in traditional term of armies crossing borders. This is one of the reasons why the Russian occupation of Moldova's Transnistrian region has been long viewed by Moldovan political elites as an internal conflict between them and the “regional elites in Tiraspol”, which are nothing less than a Russia's proxy. Then, it is the classical collective action problem – countries that *do not feel* affected by the Russian new type of aggression are tempted to not get involved, considering this does not concern them. This is the reason why many of Moldova's Western partners are tempted to explore Moldova's vulnerability towards Russia in their own, national perceived benefit, often encouraging Moldova to “make a deal with Russia”.

It is also in this context that the West ignored Russia's obscuring of its early 1990s aggression in Moldova, when it initiated the Transnistrian conflict, and which it presented as a civil one.<sup>7</sup> It ignored a similar smoke-screen in Georgia in 2008, when Russia invoked “peace-enforcement” as *casus belli*. The West stayed idle while Russia's “green men” took over Ukraine's Crimea, and consequently annexed the peninsula following a “popular referendum”. Western countries continue, with small exceptions, to keep some distance from the war Ukraine wages with Russia, over its eastern regions. The West's strongest token of support was imposing economic sanctions on Russia, which Moscow perceived as Western apprehension to protect the rule-based international order.

There is little hope to suggest that things will change. Even the more recent revelations of the Russia's intention to take control over the Europe, reflected in the Clinton-Yeltsin talks in 1999, are unlikely to affect that. On 19 November of that year, President Yeltsin made a number of revealing statements in his discussion with President Clinton:

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<sup>7</sup> See D. Minzārari and V. Bucătaru, “Transnistrian Conflict Resolution at 25th Year of Impasse: Causes, Obstacles, and Possible Solutions,” APE Policy Brief (02/2018).



*I ask you one thing. Just give Europe to Russia. The U.S. is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans. Russia is half European and half Asian. ... Bill, I'm serious. Give Europe to Europe itself. We have the power in Russia to protect all of Europe, including those with missiles. ... Look, Russia has the power and intellect to know what do to with Europe.*"<sup>8</sup>

If Yeltsin had this view on Europe at those moments, while leading a weak Russia, one cannot but accept that this view has been preserved under President Putin, who is heading a much more stronger and revanchist Russia. In fact, during the same encounter Yeltsin told Clinton that Putin is going to be his successor and continue his policies.<sup>9</sup>

Provided these extensive and costly aggressive actions of the Russia's foreign policy, and despite facing continuous economic deprivation and deteriorating infrastructure at home, President Putin views his legacy in the re-consolidation of Russia's international influence, comparable to that of the USSR. This can be elicited from numerous speeches of President Putin and other high-level Russian officials, as well as from costly actions domestically (investments into defense and intelligence services) and internationally (attempts to control the policies of former USSR satellites and influence competitors).

Following the examination of the important "why?" questions about Russia's aggressive foreign policy, it is opportune to look at its practical manifestations in the Republic of Moldova.

## **The decay of Moldova's sovereignty pillars**

### ***Targeting population – deluding hearts and minds***

Any country is as strong and resistant to foreign threats as its domestic institutions are. In case of very strong domestic institutions, the only limitation is reflected by a country's maximum military capacities it can have. One way for an aggressive country to conquer another country is just to destroy its defenses and march unobstructed into its territory, taking over the governance of the domestic institutions, population and territory. Another way is to take control of a target country's domestic institutions remotely and rule its people and territory through a loyal local representative – a proxy.

There are a few obstacles towards reaching this goal. The first one – is the people. However, people are susceptible to manipulation. A recent empirical study published by Science indicated that groups of people with already existing perceptions about their surrounding realities, can be converted into accepting the perceptions of an outsider group, following specific informational intervention and coverage, with converted thresholds as low as 25-31 per cent<sup>10</sup>. This suggests

<sup>8</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin," Istanbul, Nov. 19, 1999, 562-564 pp, accessed at <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569>, accessed on 28 August 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.566-567.

<sup>10</sup> D. Centola et al., "Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention," *Science*, Vol. 360, Issue 6393, pp. 1116-1119, 8 June 2018.

the effectiveness of Russian propaganda and disinformation is much higher than thought before, under the conditions when the Russian-controlled media have a very free and large access to the Moldovan population. An investigation of Estonian law-enforcement found recently evidence for concerted influence operations of Russian government across post-Soviet area, including Moldova. Skype logs of a conversation between a Russian government-controlled media agency and their agent working in Estonia<sup>11</sup> revealed how Moscow was coordinating informational flows, including in Moldova:

*“In Moldova, the local Sputnik website was ordered to cover the dependence of the national currency on the Russian ruble, and the price of oil. It carried out the task by publishing a news piece headlined ‘The Diagnosis of Our Leu: Breaking Free of One Dependency Brings on Another.’”<sup>12</sup>*

Moldova, according to a number of targeted empirical studies, is supposedly the most exposed and vulnerable to Russian influence operations among countries in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> This may seem surprising, given that the Moldovan Parliament approved in December 2017 a law that modified the Audiovisual Code, aiming to counter the Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova<sup>14</sup>. There are problems with the implementation and enforcement of these legal changes, as well as plenty of loopholes of the law. For instance it ignores the Russian entertainment coverage, which carry an extremely heavy propagandistic load. Another source of Russian manipulation comes through social media such as Odnoklasniki<sup>15</sup> and vKontakte. Even Facebook is extensively used by the Russian Government for its influence operations in Moldova. Some of the key messages of the Russian influence operations in Moldova are attacking EU and generally the West for moral decay and hypocrisy. In contrast, they present President Putin (and Russia) as the only protector of Christian Orthodox values and democracy.<sup>16</sup>

What is the material effect of these information operations and what is Moldova’s vulnerability to them? To answer this, we should look at the dynamics of political power transitions in countries like Moldova, where many democratic institutions are only imitated. The legitimacy of any new political power comes (to a large extent, but not fully) from the elections exercise, which is the metaphorical boat that sails on the information flow (mass-media, social networks, etc.). When the dominant media (with largest coverage across the country) does not care about objective coverage of events and uses manipulation to mold peoples’ beliefs and perceptions, this creates an extremely favorable environment for foreign influence operations. Russian messaging is just hooked up to the existing media flows, in exchange for money. In addition, Russia-

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<sup>11</sup> Aleksandr Kornilov, a member of the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots in Estonia.

<sup>12</sup> Buzzfeednews.com, „This is How Russian Propaganda Actually Works in the 21st Century,” 31 August 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/holgerroonemaa/russia-propaganda-baltics-baltnews> accessed on 31 August 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, 2018, pp.209-235, [http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI\\_CEE\\_2018.pdf](http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf) accessed on 1 September 2018.

<sup>14</sup> President Dodon and de facto his Socialist Party opposed the law.

<sup>15</sup> O. Nantoi et al., “Russian Propaganda on ‘Odnoklasniki’. The Republic of Moldova’s Case” (in Romanian), Institute for Public Policies, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> “Russian Propaganda in Moldova. How does it Work?” (in Romanian), RFE/RL Moldova, 28 April 2017, <https://www.europalibera.org/a/propaganda-rusa-in-moldova/28457231.html> accessed on 25 August 2018.

controlled media outlets are created and presented as local. Some are placed under the fictional control of the pro-Russian Socialist Party, which operates as a façade.<sup>17</sup>

A reinforcing effect for Russian information operations in Moldova is promoted by the media organizations controlled by the incumbent Democratic Party (DP), perhaps as an unintended consequence. They criticize the pro-European extra-parliamentary opposition such as the Party of Action and Solidarity, as well as the Dignity and Truth Platform. These media signals contribute to the consolidation of anti-EU and anti-Western echo-chambers in the Moldovan society. This happens because these two biggest media conglomerates in the country (pro-Russian and DP-controlled) have a significant overlapping space of messages, creating a reinforcing effect. While the Russian (and the affiliated Socialist Party) media provides, as a rule, general criticism of EU and the West, the Democratic Party controlled-media seem to provide the domestic “practical examples” for this criticism. In tandem, this makes Russia’s anti-Western and anti-EU disinformation more credible.

### *Discrediting and replacing officials*

There is another hidden effect in place, though. A Russian strategy of choice is actively exploiting and even plotting to spark disagreements among domestic political forces in target countries. There is extensive evidence in this regard. For instance, in Poland, Russia exploited local businessmen to record and make public materials, discrediting the pro-European Civil Platform party. This cleaned the road to power for the populist and Euro-skeptic Law and Justice.<sup>18</sup>

In Moldova, Russia apparently not only instigated the infamous “Laundromat” scheme, but also exploited it to put pressure on the local officials involved in it. Thus, in July 2018 the Russian federal news agency “Rosbalt” published an article, which looked like a targeted and controlled leak to threaten Moldovan officials involved in the “Laundromat” scheme.<sup>19</sup> By mid-July the Moldovan authorities were enthusiastic to discuss Transnistrian negotiations<sup>20</sup> with the newly-appointed Special Representative of the Russian President for Russian-Moldovan economic and trade relations, Dmitry Kozak, the author of the notorious “Kozak Memorandum”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The socialists, led de facto by President Dodon, have allegedly the second largest control over the mass-media in the Republic of Moldova, following the Democratic Party, led by Vlad Plahotniuc. There have been frequent accusations that the Socialist Party receives funding from the Russian Federation, though the closest to a grounded public accusation is the study of the RISE investigative journalism network “Dodon’s Money from Bahamas” (in Romanian), 28 September 2016, <https://www.rise.md/articol/banii-lui-dodon-din-bahamas/> accessed on 25 August 2018. In addition to this, President Dodon frequently brings to Moldova famous Russian artists, who are known to request significant honoraria for their performance.

<sup>18</sup> See Project Syndicate, “Russiagate in Poland,” 14 September 2017, or The Guardian, “Russia Linked to 2014 Wiretapping Scandal in Poland,” 12 September 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Rosbalt, “‘Meat’ laundered \$21 billion out of Russia” [in Russian], 3 July 2018, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/moscow/2018/07/03/1714472.html>, accessed on 20 September 2018. The article referred to a senior Russian banker, who reportedly was ready to reveal to Russian authorities the names of the beneficiaries of the “Laundromat” scheme in Moldova.

<sup>20</sup> D. Minzarari, “Russia Refocuses its Efforts on Drawing in Moldova,” Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol.15, Issue 109, 23 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-refocuses-its-efforts-on-drawing-in-moldova>.

<sup>21</sup> Kommersant.ru, “Dmitry Kozak will Again Cover Moldova and Transnistria” [in Russian], 13 July 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3683838>, accessed on 19 September 2018.

The quarrels among the parties of the Moldovan pro-European coalition, built in 2009, were largely exploited by the Russian media in Moldova, and by its local Russian proxies. Moscow's interest in discrediting the pro-European coalition was not limited to only its weakening. The strategy behind it was to strengthen the credibility and influence of the Socialist Party of the current President Dodon, which was exactly what happened both during parliamentary elections in 2014 and presidential elections in 2016. The quarrels in the pro-European coalition also fed the massive Russian media disinformation campaign, which projected negative coverage on EU, since "it supported pro-Western corrupt politicians in Moldova".<sup>22</sup>

There are serious concerns that Russian intelligence services could have been involved in the coalition's discreditation, by exposing its dirty laundry. For instance, in a curious coincidence with the referred Polish case, the former prime minister Vlad Filat was publicly discredited in 2015, by leaking his phone conversations. Coincidentally, all Filat's conversations that were leaked were with Ilan Sor, a Moldovan businessman with connections to Russia, who got substantive coverage in a Kroll report that audited the disappearance of the \$1 billion from Moldovan banks.<sup>23</sup> At the time of these phone conversations with Sor, Filat was a member of parliament and the leader of one of the three governing coalition parties. The publication of the phone conversations exposed Filat as being involved in a shady affair with Sor, who reportedly paid him large sums of money.<sup>24</sup> It was after Sor's denunciation to the Office of the Prosecutor General that Filat was arrested in 2015 and sentenced in 2016 for abuse of office and corruption.

While the leaking of phone conversations played somewhat into the hands of the Democratic Party, the arch-rival of Filat and the current governing party, the situation reveals signs of a false flag operation. Even though jailing Filat did help the Democrats to fulfil their quest for limitless power domestically, it practically killed the pro-European coalition and the reputation of all its members, including the Democratic Party. It should not be a surprise if the Russian intelligence was pulling the strings behind the scenes, killing four birds with one stone: i) it destroyed any trust of the public in the pro-European coalition and its members; ii) it freed the road to electoral gains for the Russian proxy – the Socialist Party; iii) it heavily discredited the image of EU in Moldova; iv) and it prepared the ground for estranging the Democratic Party from EU, making Russia the only Democrats' option as a key foreign partner.<sup>25</sup> The rationale and expectation would be that after jailing Filat, the de facto leader of DP Vladimir Plahotniuc could realize that losing the elections could result in a scenario, when he gets a treatment from the opposition similar to what he gave Filat. That would have rationally forced Democratic Party to cling to

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<sup>22</sup> Vzglead.ru, "Moldova's Western Government was Caught Red-Handed" [in Russian], 6 May 2015, <https://vz.ru/world/2015/5/6/743663.html>, accessed on 29 September 2018. As another of many examples, see also Pravda.ru, "Moldovan President Clarified Why the West Supported the 'Corrupt Government' of the Country" [in Russian], 12 July 2017, <https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/formerussr/moldova/12-07-2017/1341668-moldova-0>, accessed on 29 September 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Kroll, "Project Tenor – Scoping Phase," Final Report, 2 April 2015, <https://www.rise.md/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kroll-Moldova-Shor-Melnic.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Adevarul.md, „Vlad Filat Sensed his Arrest in Discussions with Sor" [in Romanian], 19 October 2015, [https://adevarul.ro/moldova/actualitate/audio-vlad-filat-si-a-presimtit-arestarea-discutiile-ilan-shor-1\\_562549a1f5eaafab2cd4332f/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/moldova/actualitate/audio-vlad-filat-si-a-presimtit-arestarea-discutiile-ilan-shor-1_562549a1f5eaafab2cd4332f/index.html), accessed on 28 September 2018.

<sup>25</sup> See EDM, 23 July 2018.

power, and consequently run out of favor with EU. This in fact had happened, after the DP-controlled Moldovan courts invalidated the mayoral elections in Chisinau in June 2018.<sup>26</sup>

The jailing of Filat was unnecessary for the Democratic Party to consolidate its power. DP already controlled the most important national law enforcement bodies, the institution of prosecutors and other important governing tools. In fact, by targeting Filat, it damaged significantly its own political posture and created a precedent for jailing a top official. Moreover, the key actors involved in setting up Filat have strong and proven links to Russia. Ilan Sor has strong connections to Russia, where parts of his business are reportedly located. His wife, the pop-singer Jasmin, works in Russia. His confession that he gradually gave Filat over \$250 million in bribes and other legally-questionable payments, has been challenged. Reportedly, Sor is believed to have inherited only some \$40 million, which he was not very successful in preserving.<sup>27</sup> This would have made it impossible for Sor to offer so much money in bribes, at all or without external assistance.

Another key participant to this interaction, Renato Usatii, claimed he used a spying software to intercept Filat's conversations with Sor, before making them public. He then fled Moldova to Moscow, reportedly avoiding arrest by the Moldovan police for violating the privacy of correspondence, by publishing the intercepted conversations. In a puzzling development, even though this is a criminal offense, a Moldovan court ordered his release a few days later, after he was arrested in the capital's airport. Usatii owns a number of businesses, though one of his companies in Russia operates under the patronage of influential Russian officials and is a monopolist supplier of the Russian Railways state-own company.<sup>28</sup> Usatii also fled Moldova in 2014. Then, his party was accused of having received foreign funding from Russia, during the parliamentary elections, and banned from the polls.

There are too many unanswered questions in relation to these Moldovan oligarchs, who operate businesses that are strongly dependent on Russian government goodwill. There are also questions to the Moldovan government, after failing to prosecute them for obvious crimes. Ilan Sor, for instance, continues to have a suspended jail sentence of over 7 years for his key role in the \$1 billion bank fraud. Instead, he was allowed to compete and be elected as mayor of Orhei, a small town in central Moldova. He was also permitted to register a political party and is currently actively preparing to run for Moldovan Parliament in the forthcoming elections.

Until very recently, a large part of the population believed the incumbent government was pro-European and noticed that EU provided it with support. All the corruption scandals and the questionable actions of Moldovan courts could not have been ignored by the public. As pointed out, this was regularly covered by the Russian and local pro-Russian media. Negative images were created to portray EU and its policies in Moldova. We should not ignore the very positive

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<sup>26</sup> Reuters, "Despite Protests, Moldova Court Upholds Decision to Void the Mayoral Elections Result," 25 June 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Anticoruptie.md, "The Wealth of Ilan Sor" [in Romanian], 20 October 2015, <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/averea-lui-ilan-shor>, accessed on 26 September 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Ria Novosti, "Bio of Renato Usatii" [in Russian], 15 May 2015, <https://ria.ru/spravka/20150615/1069200105.html>, accessed on 29 September 2018.

coverage of Russian political and economic affairs, conducted by Russian Federation in Moldova, emphasizing stability. As a consequence, the Moldovan authorities (and, by proxy, EU and the West) represent “the crook” in the perception of many Moldovans. In contrast, Russia is massively portraying itself in Moldova as “the friend”. These are making Moldovan citizens less sensible to the Russian military presence in Moldova or to the Russian interference in Moldovan political processes. Technically, the process described earlier in detail is a critical part of the hybrid war dynamics, as it softens the target population towards Russian aggressive behavior, making this population either supportive, or at least passive about it<sup>29</sup>.

This section examined the Russia’s targeting of the Moldovan population loyalty, through the “deluding hearts and minds” strategy. However, it also revealed that the second target of the Russian influence operations in Moldova is discrediting the governmental institutions and agencies. Obviously, this is not a difficult task to do, due to the enough objective reasons that these agencies give for negative coverage.<sup>30</sup> Regretfully, this has a cumulative effect – it generates distrust in authorities, and consequently, less concerns when these authorities are replaced by a (Russian) proxy actor operating in Moldova, considered friendly.

### *Undermining the governing institutions*

Overall, these processes create extremely favorable conditions for Russia to interfere into and manipulate the Moldovan elections. Inability to erect defenses against this and other similar threats is a major vulnerability of Moldovan state institutions. In fact, this is suggested by the title of the analysis – that ***Russia’s design in Moldova is to i) actively contribute to Moldova’s state institutions decay, ii) remotely capture these weakened institutions, and then iii) make them incapable and unwilling to build a defense and security system against Russian aggression.*** In this section, the analysis will offer a general illustration of this particular situation in Moldova.

Related to this vulnerability, though conceptually distinct, is the reduced effectiveness of the most of Moldovan governing bodies. The largest challenge, then, is the classical one for transitioning countries with authoritarian traits – instead of their original goal of providing public goods for the population, they have reformed to generate rents for the governing class and their supporters. If we consider this effect, the unsanctioned blocking of the National Defense Strategy in the Presidential Administration for a period several times longer than the legally-allowed 30 days, does not seem puzzling any more.

What are other effects of this improper functioning of state institutions and bodies? Russian information operations create impact not only on the beliefs of the wider population, but also on the political elites and public functionaries. The malfunctioning media is poisoning the ability of state institutions to capture the objective reality, in particular in the area of defense and security.

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<sup>29</sup> See D. Mînzărari, „Conflict Technologies in Post-Soviet Area: The Challenges of Hybrid War against Moldova,” *Journal of Philosophy, Sociology and Political Science* (Revista de Filosofie, Sociologie și Științe Politice), Vol.2, Issue 171 (2016), pp.35-55.

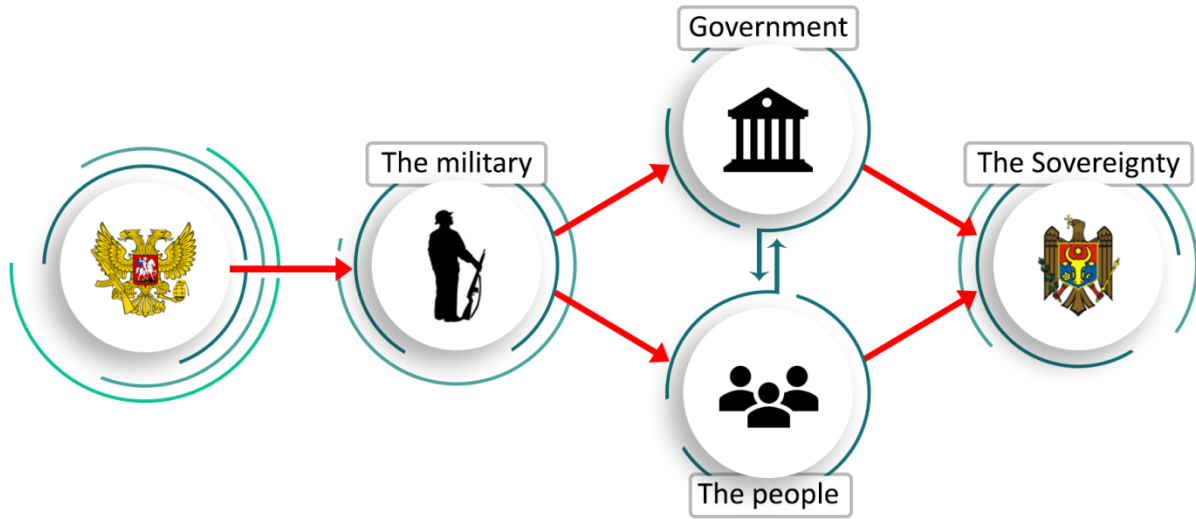
<sup>30</sup> These include cases of corruption, public servant incompetency, misconduct of law enforcement, etc.

Another factor affecting this is the very low level of professional competency and qualification – the governmental employees and experts that are supposed to be able to identify and propose counter-measure against foreign threats are just not able to do this. Even when the governmental agencies are able to recruit good specialists, their ability of early warning for threats is impeded by the existing managers at different levels in the government.

The recruitment of these managers is predominantly political, instead of competency-based, making them unwilling to “rock the boat” of the bureaucracy that feeds them. This leads to the emergence of a vicious circle. A circle that involves experts that lack incentives to properly do their jobs; managers that are benefiting from the status-quo, thus impeding low and middle-level reforms; and political elites that are exploiting the system for rent-seeking and not for generating optimal amount of public goods. ***The reduced efficiency of Moldova’s state apparatus and its systemic corruption would have only generated limited public goods and poverty, in a neutral situation; under the deliberate targeting of Russian hybrid aggression, these state institutions transform Moldova into a weak state and provoke its accelerated loss of sovereignty to the aggressor.***

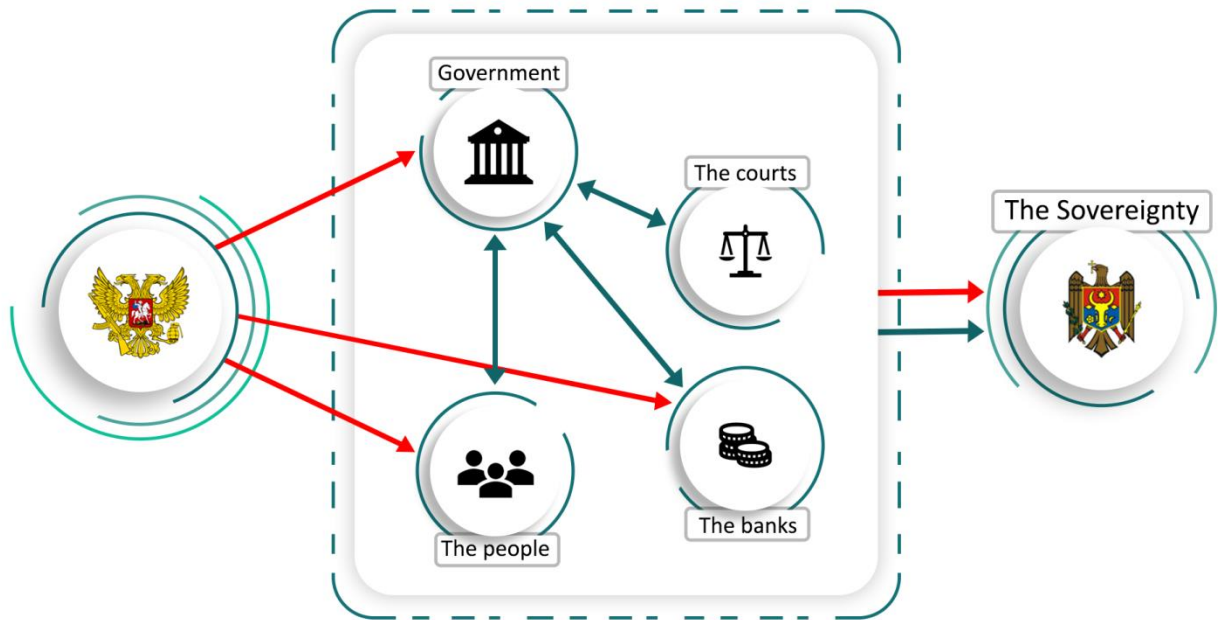
These factors explain the inability of the state institutions to identify and counter foreign threats. How does it exactly happen? The listed inefficiencies (lack of incentives, rent-seeking, political appointees, etc.) of the state institutions and bodies create entry points for foreign penetration of these institutions, and thus a favorable environment to be captured by a foreign country. Let us offer some illustrations, aggregating the examined Moldova’s vulnerabilities.

There is a significant difference between the mechanisms of foreign aggression showed in fig.1 and fig.2. The conventional war logic is well-known and supposes that once the aggressor defeats the opponent’s military, it is able to take over the government of the target country, replacing its governing actors and structures with its own or proxy ones. The aggressor, thus, starts to control the people, which are dependent on the delivery of public goods and services, and consequently takes over the territory and the sovereignty of the target country.



**Fig. 1 Conventional military aggression logical diagram**

A totally different logic emerges in the instance of a hybrid war-type of foreign aggression (fig.2). Here, the aggressor captures through influence operations (i.e. disinformation and propaganda) the support of a part of the population, or at least secures its indifference. This is also done through infecting with doubt, dissatisfaction, and even hatred the public's beliefs about the incumbent government. This makes the population less willing to mobilize against a foreign aggressor, in case foreign-supported “militia” or “green men” emerge at later stages of the hybrid aggression.



**Fig. 2 Hybrid war-type aggression logical diagram**



As another illustration, it is worth pointing out that these efforts have been supported by active measures conducted by Russia against the incumbent Moldovan authorities. In July 2012 Moldovan media pointed out that the Administration of the Russian President had posted a tender for a research on the “influence of financial-economic groups on the political process in the Republic of Moldova”. A similar study was ordered on Latvia.<sup>31</sup> The study had to be ready by the end of 2012. Perhaps, coincidentally, during 2012-2014 some massive money laundering schemes were run, involving banks in Moldova and Latvia, and beneficiaries in Russia.<sup>32</sup> It must be mentioned that this apparent active measures operation, aiming to undermine the financial system of Moldova and the trust of the population in the government, could not have been done without the involvement of corrupt Moldovan officials. Unsurprisingly, a Moldovan journalist investigation also pointed to the involvement of the relatives of high-level Russian officials in laundering some \$20 billion through these schemes.<sup>33</sup>

A number of corrupt Moldovan judges have reportedly been involved in that operation as well. That example also reveals that due to the lack of genuine separation of powers in Moldova and missing independent courts with judicial integrity, the country is vulnerable to Russian hybrid aggression.

## Conclusion

Following the Russian aggression in Ukraine, it has been widely accepted in the West that the Russian new approach to war has been shaped by hybrid-type intervention, through the obscure use of military force in form of “green men”. Consequently, there was an updating of this understanding, including the Russian cyber-attacks, in reaction to the hacker attacks on computer networks in Baltic States and some other countries.

This analysis argues that this is a descriptive, situational and hence limited understanding of the Russian hybrid-type foreign aggression arsenal. Instead, the analysis offers a conceptual understanding of the Russian hybrid war, so that we can distinguish various “strains” of this aggression strategy.

Using Moldova as an illustrative case, the paper also suggests that Russia has replaced the military take-over of foreign territories – a costly classical approach to foreign aggression – with a complex set of active measures, aimed at compromising Moldova’s political system, thus taking over various governing institutions and bodies. This desired end state of this process is the capturing of the political leadership of the country, and thus Moldova’s sovereignty. It is achieved either through creating vulnerabilities for these leaders and establishing their strong

<sup>31</sup> KP.md, “Russia is Interested to Learn who can Influence Moldovan Politics,” (in Russian), 1 August 2012, <https://www.kp.md/online/news/1212350> accessed on 20 August 2018. In addition to this, the tender requested a study on Ukraine’s federalization, on the foreign policies of countries of southern Caucasus and on the political elites of Central Asia countries.

<sup>32</sup> BNM.md, “National Bank of Moldova published a detailed summary of the second investigation report of the Kroll and Steptoe&Johnson companies,” 21 December 2017, <http://bnm.md/en/content/nbm-published-detailed-summary-second-investigation-report-kroll-and-steptoe-johnson> accessed on 21 August 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Rise.md, “Russian Laundromat: Moscow – Riga, via Chisinau,” 22 August 2014, <https://www.rise.md/articol/operatiunea-ruseasca-the-laundromat> accessed on 10 August 2018.

personal dependencies in relation to Moscow; or by remotely supporting a dependent domestic political force. This can happen following the taking over political power in Moldova (by hijacking and influencing national elections), which then will operate as a proxy actor for the Russian leadership.

This is usually done through creating dissatisfaction and distrust among the population towards the targeted incumbent government. The aggressor also aims at gradually weakening governmental agencies, making them dysfunctional, before taking control over them. The process, widely labeled as hybrid war, is a model of stealthy political assimilation of new countries, as a modern replacement of territorial annexation.

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