

## THE NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CONTEXT OF INTENSIFYING NEW HYBRID THREATS

# Summary



## HYBRID THREATS AND KEY SOLUTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING NATIONAL RESILIENCE

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The Republic of Moldova is extremely vulnerable in terms of resilience to hybrid threats emanating from the Russian Federation. This is due to deficiencies in the public administration system and the disregard for the principles of the rule of law, which should serve as the foundation for resistance against external influences. Weaknesses in the fight against corruption, public administration reform, or third-party interference in the country's political processes are exploited by hostile actors to influence the country's development trajectory in a direction favorable to their interests. Furthermore, issues related to national identity also pose a significant challenge, with unresolved questions about the country's history, the identity of its citizens, and the language they speak, which cause profound conflicts in society and create space for external manipulation<sup>1</sup>. The popularity of Russian television channels in the Republic of Moldova has created the perfect environment for the promotion of Russian propaganda. Due to the relatively small size of the media sector in Moldova, developing television stations with programs in the Russian language becomes quite challenging compared to the quality of programs transmitted from the Russian Federation. Additionally, the oligarchic factor plays an extremely important role in disseminating information, as a large portion of television and news stations are controlled by various clans that promote their own political interests and contribute to the spread of Russian propaganda.

Maia Sandu's government is a frequent target of false news attacks, which have intensified since Moldova was granted candidate status for the EU in 2022. Deep fakes are increasingly spreading online, depicting the president delivering speeches with humorous accents, as well as derogatory remarks about the country. For example, there are manipulated videos about the EU integration referendum<sup>2</sup>. These videos are benefiting from promotions worth thousands of euros to be viewed by as many people as possible, with the aim of undermining trust in state institutions and promoting division in society. In this context, it is important for authorities to communicate effectively with citizens regarding the risks of spreading such messages and to make efforts to limit their publication and track their sources of funding to prevent criminal groups from intervening in the country's political processes.

The narratives heavily promoted by Moscow in the information space, especially since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, refer to a so-called drawing of Moldova into the "war waged by the West against Russia"<sup>3</sup>. Russian officials are increasingly leveling sharp accusations against the government in Chisinau, insinuating that through the territory of the Republic of Moldova,

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<sup>1</sup> Kubica L. Moldova's struggle against Russia's hybrid threats: from countering the energy leverage to becoming more sovereign overall. Hybrid CoE Working Paper 28, January 2024, p.5-6.

<sup>2</sup> A new deepfake with Maia Sandu regarding the referendum // <https://stiri.md/article/politica/un-nou-deepfake-cu-maia-sandu-privind-organizarea-referendumului>

<sup>3</sup> Lavrov S.: The Republic of Moldova is about to become the next victim of the hybrid war that the West will wage against Russia, after Ukraine // <https://tvr Moldova.md/article/d755300be2855b5b/serghei-lavrov-dupa-ucraina-r-moldova-e-pe-cale-sa-devina-urmatoarea-victima-a-razboiului-hibrid-pe-care-occidentul-l-ar-duce-impotriva-rusiei.html>

arms and ammunition are allegedly to be delivered to Ukraine, despite Moldova's neutral status<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the dichotomy between neutrality and NATO accession is exploited, a topic that resonates well within Moldovan society and is often seized upon by local political forces to manipulate public opinion and gain electoral points. Following the onset of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, residents of the Republic of Moldova are periodically exposed to narratives suggesting that our country is being drawn into the war, that NATO bases are being built on its territory, or that detachments of Ukrainian special forces are being trained here. These narratives are transmitted and promoted by pro-Kremlin politicians, activists, and media institutions. Former President Igor Dodon commented in January 2023 that, in the current situation, Western countries are using Moldova as a transit zone for the delivery of fuels and weapons, claiming that the West needs a united anti-Russian front so that there is an additional voice against Russia in all international forums. However, Dodon did not present evidence for his claims<sup>5</sup>.

Typically, statements about "drawing Moldova into war" are accompanied by calls to abandon cooperation with NATO. On January 23, the "Renaștere-Возрождение" Party, affiliated with Ilan Sor, criticized the authorities for the alleged participation of Moldovan soldiers in NATO's largest military exercises involving 90,000 troops. The party's press release asked: "What are they preparing us for? Why is the 'yellow' regime deliberately trampling on the Constitution, violating the status of permanent neutrality?" In response, the Ministry of Defense denied the information in question<sup>6</sup>.

Messages with disinformation are also targeted at compromising the bilateral relations of the Republic of Moldova with its partners. Particularly, with the onset of the war in Ukraine, there has been an increasingly frequent promotion of anti-Ukrainian messages among sympathizers of the Russian invasion. In January, the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) stated that it had obtained information indicating that a group of individuals, including former intelligence officers, were preparing to launch into the public space a narrative accusing state institutions of actions against Ukrainian citizens. The Service communicated that such actions fall within the set of tools of the hybrid warfare waged by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova and warned that the frequency of these manifestations will increase during the years 2024-2025.<sup>7</sup> Two days later, journalist Natalia Morari published a report about an alleged surveillance, initiated by the SIS, of Ukrainian diplomats in Moldova on the eve of the European Political Community Summit. Morari also published a document, purportedly a surveillance report of a Ukrainian diplomat. The journalist claims to have received it from her sources within the Ukrainian intelligence services. The Ambassador of Ukraine to the Republic of Moldova, Marco Shevchenko, described the journalist's statements as contradictory, stating, "There is a third country in the middle."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Russian propaganda: Moldova has been turned by the United States into a springboard for the supply of weapons to Ukraine. Chisinau is dragged into the war // [https://www.defenseromania.ro/propaganda-rusa-r-moldova-transformata-de-sua-in-trambulina-de-armament-pentru-ucraina-chisinaul-atras-in-razboi\\_624253.html#google\\_vignette](https://www.defenseromania.ro/propaganda-rusa-r-moldova-transformata-de-sua-in-trambulina-de-armament-pentru-ucraina-chisinaul-atras-in-razboi_624253.html#google_vignette)

<sup>5</sup> Dodon I., January 13, 2023 // <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EuIE2thnUgiNYfB4d4ZWG9w8HMctNsjZ/view>

<sup>6</sup> Renaissance Party // [https://www.facebook.com/moldovarenastete/posts/281739978258262?ref=embed\\_post](https://www.facebook.com/moldovarenastete/posts/281739978258262?ref=embed_post)

<sup>7</sup> Press release // <https://sis.md/ro/content/comunicat-3>

<sup>8</sup> Ambassador Shevchenko refuted Natalia Morari's "revelations" about the "promotion" of Ukrainian diplomats of the SIS // <https://disinfo.md/ambasadorul-sevchenko-distruge-dezvaluirile-nataliei-morari-despre-filarea-diplomatilor-ucraineni-de-sis/>

The primary objective of these hybrid operations is to undermine the European Union and the pro-EU position of the current government in Chisinau, primarily through manipulation and propaganda. This effort involves the extensive use of Russia-controlled mass media and sympathetic politicians to shape narratives portraying the EU as a threat to Moldovan identity and values. The EU is depicted as a community of states that degrade morals, while according to Russian propaganda, the US and NATO aim only for destabilization and war. The Kremlin wants Moldova not to align with Ukraine, the country opposing Russian aggression, but to maintain a state of absolute neutrality. The dissemination of these narratives targets individuals and conservative communities who may feel disconnected from decision-making processes at the national level.

To combat hybrid threats, the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy launched the European Union Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova (EUPM Moldova). The institution aims to strengthen the resilience of the country's defense sector, paying particular attention to countering hybrid threats. In this regard, the Mission will provide strategic advice and identify capacity development needs<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, notable is the activity of the EU Security Hub for internal security and border management in the Republic of Moldova, hosting regular meetings between EU representatives, European agencies, EU member states, and Moldovan authorities to support cooperation in European security and border management. The Hub contributes to enhancing Moldova's security by reducing risks in areas such as illegal trafficking of weapons and prohibited substances, illegal migration, and cybercrime<sup>10</sup>.

To effectively combat misinformation, the Center for Strategic Communication and Disinformation Combat has been established. The Center's mission is to strengthen cooperation between institutions in the fight against misinformation, manipulation of information, and foreign interference, which pose a danger or may harm national security and jeopardize the achievement of national interests. The institution will implement the necessary measures to ensure the security of the information space and increase the resilience of society to threats<sup>11</sup>.

The upcoming electoral scrutiny in the fall will represent a serious test of national resilience and will either contribute to societal consolidation or deepen divisions further. The geopolitical implications of this electoral exercise, especially amidst the simultaneous conduct of the referendum on European integration, increase the stakes for maintaining state security and ensuring adherence to the pro-European course. Interference in the electoral process by hostile forces to the current government is expected, aiming to undermine trust in the EU accession process and jeopardize the credibility of parties campaigning under pro-Western slogans. Therefore, it is crucial for pro-EU-oriented parties to recognize the stakes of this scrutiny for the country's future, including the imperative of not allowing external actors to decide the country's development trajectory.

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<sup>9</sup> EU civilian mission starts its activities in the Republic of Moldova // <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/misiunea-civila-a-ue-isi-incepe-activitatea-in-r-moldova-/32422638.html>

<sup>10</sup> EU Security Hub // <https://maisigurinue.md/hub/>

<sup>11</sup> The Center for Strategic Communications and Countering Disinformation has been established <https://multimedia.parlament.md/a-fost-instituit-centrul-pentru-comunicare-strategica-si-combatere-a-dezinformatiilor/>

## HYBRID THREATS IN THE NORTH OF MOLDOVA

VICTOR GAIDEEC,  
NORD NEWS

One of the mechanisms through which pro-Russian, anti-European, anti-Western, and anti-Ukrainian ideas are ingrained in the minds of the population is through mass media, messengers, and social networks. Regarding the northern part of the Republic of Moldova, a significant role in this process is played by the most popular Telegram channel in the north, "Balti-online," which had over 10,000 subscribers at the beginning of 2024. Since the summer, the channel has actively promoted Ilan Sor, Marina Tauber, and their team, constantly mentioning them in positive terms and omitting references to the fact that the leader of the movement was sentenced in April 2023 to 15 years in prison for the theft of the billion and that he should return over 5 billion lei to the state budget. This Telegram channel also spreads news discrediting the Moldovan authorities, including obvious false news<sup>12</sup>. "Balti-online" actively promotes Moscow's position in the Russo-Ukrainian war, spreading news about Ukraine only in a negative light, without mentioning rocket bombardments, strikes on civilian infrastructure, and civilian casualties. In this context, real fake news is quite often used; for example, on December 1, three pieces of news about an invented visit by Ruslan Stefanchuk, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, to Balti, were published<sup>13</sup><sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup>, which supposedly created inconveniences for drivers. Such messages are supported by a large number of subscribers to this platform, exacerbating the negative sentiment of the population in the northern part of the country towards Ukraine, the European Union, Romania, and promoting a positive opinion about Russia.

"Balti-online" also conducts an active campaign against mass media that do not share their position, skillfully playing on the fears they themselves spread among the population. "*The head of the Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure, Andrei Spinu, said in an interview with one of the Soros-sponsored media in Balti*" - this is how they described NordNews<sup>16</sup>. "*It is evident that knowing about the funding of so-called "independent" media by the international scammer Soros, as well as from the Romanian and American governments, it is much easier to talk about "independent Moldovan press" - and they responded to other media*"<sup>17</sup>. A little later, "Balti-online" moved on to personal attacks, mentioning journalist Constantin Hairetdinov: "*Meanwhile, the journalist from Balti, Constantin Hairetdinov, considers that the statement about high gas prices in Moldova is false, about which he wrote an entire article a week ago*"<sup>18</sup>.

Pressure on the press is also exerted by politicians, such as in 2023 when Maxim Morosan and his team came to the headquarters of NordNews to film a video with accusations against the press<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/9449](https://t.me/balti_online/9449)

<sup>13</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/9785](https://t.me/balti_online/9785)

<sup>14</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/9787](https://t.me/balti_online/9787)

<sup>15</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/9788](https://t.me/balti_online/9788)

<sup>16</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/10802](https://t.me/balti_online/10802)

<sup>17</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/10625](https://t.me/balti_online/10625)

<sup>18</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/10986](https://t.me/balti_online/10986)

<sup>19</sup> NordNews // <https://nordnews.md/foto-video-oamenii-hotului-in-lege-grigore-caramalac-alias-bulgaru-intimideaza-jurnalistii-nordnews/>

It should also be mentioned that Ilan Sor actively uses the Facebook social network to promote his position and spread false news, including by promoting posts through advertising, and sanctions do not prevent him from doing so<sup>20</sup>.

### **Elements related to Russophobia**

"Balti-online" also contributes to exacerbating the linguistic division in society, which began as early as the summer with the scandal at the Chisinau Hospital, actively fueled by pro-Russian politicians. The decision of the authorities to change the legislation, according to which laws will no longer be translated into Russian in the Official Gazette, also stirred widespread discontent in the northern part of the country. A message from December 1st in this Telegram channel, stating that Ilan Sor's main collaborator, Marina Tauber,<sup>21</sup> expressed her opposition to this initiative, was supported by the majority of subscribers who reacted<sup>22</sup>.

At the beginning of February, messages about threats of terrorist attacks in educational institutions in Balti, where Russian-speaking children study, began to circulate online. The source was the Telegram channel "Balti Game." The posts were written in Russian, supposedly by socialist nationalists, characterized by Russophobia and antisemitism. This frightened both parents and children in the city of Balti<sup>23</sup>. The police were forced to intervene:

*"We call on parents and children from Balti to remain calm regarding the recent spread of false information on an anonymous Telegram channel, where threats have been made against several educational institutions in Balti. The police describe these actions as a hybrid attack, intended to worry citizens and sow panic in society. All relevant state institutions have taken appropriate measures,"* said spokesperson Diana Fetco, Head of the Communication and Protocol Department of the General Police Inspectorate.

The situation is complicated by the fact that many Russian speakers in the north sometimes feel discriminated against. They say this happens both in communication with people and in contact with representatives of authorities and public officials<sup>24</sup>.

### **The opinion of residents in northern Moldova leans strongly towards Moscow.**

A significant proportion of the population in northern Moldova are Russian speakers, who were largely raised during the Soviet era with the full set of Soviet propaganda clichés. Over the years of independence, they have received information in Russian from Russian or Moldovan media outlets, but with a pro-Russian bias. An anti-European and pro-Russian stance has been firmly established. With the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the increasing threats to our country's security, this issue has become even more relevant. Correcting the situation will require many

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<sup>20</sup> NewsMake // <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/rassledovanie-v-2023-godu-shor-potratil-na-propagandu-v-facebook-bolee-200-tys-nesmotrya-na-sanktsii-ssha/>

<sup>21</sup> M. Tauber's Facebook page // <https://www.facebook.com/MarinaTauberOfficial/posts/pfbid02zfBALuXYXsygbwyAWK144niFZ7A3Lmyo86VX75BTHkLMepBnLrTG7ZN9h239i58jl>

<sup>22</sup> Telegram // [https://t.me/balti\\_online/9791](https://t.me/balti_online/9791)

<sup>23</sup> Alarm in schools in Balti. What the authorities say about threats on Telegram against Russian schools // <https://tvn.md/ru/video-trevoga-v-shkolah-belcz-cto-govoryat-vlasti-ob-ugrozah-v-telegram-v-adres-russskih-shkol/>

<sup>24</sup> NordNews report - Discrimination "every day": is it true that Russian-speakers are discriminated against in Balti? // [https://youtu.be/5aNO4F\\_I-SY](https://youtu.be/5aNO4F_I-SY)

years. The measures taken by the state to revoke licenses and block channels, media outlets, and websites, such as Orizont TV, ITV, Prime, Publika TV, Canal 2, Canal 3, Sputnik Moldova, cannot provide an immediate effect, especially since blocking can always be circumvented, and the viewing of Russian channels can continue.

## **THE NEW HYBRID THREATS AND POTENTIAL RISKS TO THE INFORMATION SPACE IN ATU GAGAUZIA**

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“PRO-EUROPA” IN COMRAT**

Taking into account the "Soviet past" and the regional specificity, it can be stated that in Gagauzia, the Russian news agenda has always predominated. However, the geopolitical position of the country and the ATU Gagauzia region, together with the onset of the war in the neighboring country in February 2022, could not fail to reflect on the political, economic, and social sectors of the country, as well as on the information field. It should be noted that the national authorities have clearly expressed their position on the war between Russia and Ukraine and completely condemn the actions of the Russian authorities, supporting the opinion of the majority of the international community.

The analysis conducted on the most read media in ATU Gagauzia, which write about the situation in Ukraine and generally about the relationships between authorities within the country, demonstrates that the propagation of provocative themes, distortion of facts, various manipulations, and taking out of context are present on some media portals. At the same time, there are also websites that debunk fake news, provide information from various sources, and adhere to the principles of the Journalists' Code of Ethics.

One of the first and most popular sites in the region is **[gagauzinfo.md](http://gagauzinfo.md)**. In recent times, news about the war in Ukraine does not appear at all, and news about Ukraine is very rare on this portal (the last news item was 3 months ago). Also, these news items have no connection with Russia's military actions against Ukraine or with the regional authorities' reaction to these events.

The main subject of the news, considering the upcoming presidential elections, consists of the criticisms leveled by the former head of Gagauzia against the national authorities, against the PAS party, and in news about energy. Journalists from Gagauzinfo often refer to websites such as [point.md](http://point.md), [noi.md](http://noi.md), as well as to Telegram channels like Sputnik Moldova, Gagauznews, which have been repeatedly caught publishing disinformation. It is worth mentioning that the Gagauzinfo website has entered the top of the sites in Moldova regarding<sup>25</sup>. The second longest-standing and popular news portal in Gagauzia is **[nokta.md](http://nokta.md)**. The website actively covers the war in Ukraine from its beginning to the present. It is important to mention that the portal's narrative regarding the war coverage focuses on the international reaction to events, reports on city bombings and the number of victims, information about aid provided to Ukraine, etc. Additionally, over the past year,

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<sup>25</sup> Top Sites That Spread Fakes and Manipulations in 2023 // <https://stopfals.md/ru/article/top-saitov-rasprostranyavshikh-feiki-i-manipulyacii-v-2023-godu-180905>

journalists from Nokta have frequently published news articles debunking fake news and misinformation related to the tense situation between regional and national authorities, which often appear on Telegram channels and on the pages of regional authorities' representatives. However, public opinion about the site is divided because this portal does not promote the "Russian world", criticizes the policies pursued by regional authorities in the region and those of national authorities. Often, journalists from Nokta face difficulties.

The website **laf.md** covers the main news related to the region and the country in general. The news portal Laf.md has actively published news about the war in Ukraine since its beginning, even having a special section called "The War in Ukraine", but in the last year, there have been no more news about the war. It has been noted in the editorial office of the website that this fact is due to the decreased interest of readers in news related to the war in the neighboring country, with residents feeling fatigued by the war. It is worth mentioning that this site also publishes and debunks fake news, objectively covers news supported by facts and expert opinions. It does not promote propaganda and manipulation of public opinion, and periodic analyses of the situation between the region and central authorities are conducted, with invited experts expressing their opinions and sharing recommendations. Unfortunately, the management and journalists of the website have repeatedly been subjected to online attacks and threats from representatives of regional authorities. Thus, at the beginning of 2024, journalists from the Laf.md and Nokta editorial offices issued an open appeal to the authorities of Moldova and the deputies of the People's Assembly of Gagauzia, aiming to draw attention and take appropriate measures regarding the threats and intimidation against journalists from these portals. This appeal was both supported and criticized by several non-governmental media organizations together with the Independent Press Agency, which expressed solidarity with the journalists of these portals and demanded an immediate cessation of threats and intimidation against their colleagues.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the **Public Broadcasting Company GRT (Gagauzia Radio Television)** operates in the region. This is the main public broadcasting company in ATU Gagauzia. It is the only broadcasting organization in the world where Gagauz is predominantly spoken. In September 2023, the Observer Council of the public broadcasting company GRT in Gagauzia elected the new executive director. It is remarkable that the winner of the competition was a person who worked as a lawyer in the Public Organization "For Orhei" since 2019, an organization registered in the city of Orhei and having a direct connection with the activities of the party, which was declared unconstitutional. This appointment immediately produced "results". The company started broadcasting propaganda materials and violating its "public" status. According to the former director of GRT, the public broadcasting status of GRT was obtained in 2007, and before that, it was state-owned. State broadcasting "has always received certain instructions from the governing authority," while the status of public television presupposed independent activity of the company, with funding from the budget. Currently, GRT is a place where authorities achieve all their ambitions and political objectives. Today, GRT is the mouthpiece of authority, noted the former director of GRT for the Nokta portal<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> "Today, GRT is the mouthpiece of the government, and this is shameful" – ex-director of the company // <https://nokta.md/segodnya-grt-eto-rupor-vlasti-i-eto-pozorno-eks-direktor-kompanii/>



In January 2024, disputes and accusations of violating legislation erupted again around the GRT television channel. It is noted that the television channel actively broadcasts television programs that were previously banned by the Audiovisual Council. Ziarul de Garda also published an article with the opinion of the head of the Independent Press Association stating that "the broadcasting of programs by the Primul in Moldova channel is further evidence that Sor owns GRT"<sup>27</sup>. The journalists at nokta.md attempted to obtain a comment from representatives of GRT regarding their "collaboration" with the Primul in Moldova channel, but they have not received a response yet. Therefore, they sent a series of questions to the Board of Observers of the GRT channel. The former president of the GRT Board of Observers, now an advisor to the head of Gagauzia for public relations and media, stated to nokta.md that he would review the situation and then provide a comment, but later ceased to respond to phone calls. Despite GRT being considered a regional Gagauz channel, its programs are broadcasted by the largest communication networks in Moldova. This has sparked the interest of regulators, and the process of monitoring the activities of the Gagauz television has begun.

In January, the Audiovisual Council began verifying the GRT channel to check if it adheres to its declared concept<sup>28</sup>. If the verification finds that the channel's content differs from the declared concept, the Council can impose a fine. For a first offense, the fine can range from 5,000 to 10,000 Moldovan lei. The threat of sanctions from the National Coordination Council could cast doubt on the channel's activities and the work of many journalists. Meanwhile, within the GRT company, they deny the accusations, stating that their content is created in accordance with the law and is regulated by editorial independence.

If we analyze the current situation in the region, it must be noted that the trend of increasing risks associated with hybrid threats in Gagauzia is evident.<sup>29</sup> The regional community, due to the information policy, is in an informational bubble, and there is no positive dynamic regarding its exit from it in the near future. This is because we observe that the regional authorities do not react in any way to the existing threats, but instead introduce new threats, undermining the functioning of important media outlets for the region in favor of their own interests.

The recommendation for reducing the risks associated with these threats is to support independent media outlets in the region and provide them with the necessary assistance. Central authorities should conduct an explanatory policy of their strategies and actions among the population of the region through this type of independent media. It is necessary to organize media literacy courses for active journalists so that the population receives quality news and actively interacts with the non-governmental sector of the region to promote and explain the benefits of European integration for the region and the country as a whole.

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<sup>27</sup> The Sor-linked TV channel Primul in Moldova, whose broadcasting license was suspended, "switched" to public television in Gagauzia // <https://www.zdg.md/ru/?p=138363>

<sup>28</sup> GRT Gets Into Scandal: Television and Radio Council Conducts Inspection // <https://gagauzinfo.md/news/politics/grt-popal-v-skandal-sovet-po-televideniyu-i-radio-provodit-proverku>

<sup>29</sup> Political scientist: Risks of destabilization come from Gagauzia, not Transnistria // <https://gagauzinfo.md/news/politics/politolog-riski-destabilizacii-ishodyat-iz-gagauzii-a-ne-iz-pridnestrovyia>

## **HYBRID THREATS IN THE TRANSNISTRIAN REGION AND THE LOCALITIES OF THE SECURITY ZONE**

**VITALIE GUTU,  
SECURITY ZONE**

Hybrid warfare is not a new concept for the Republic of Moldova. With the ceasefire in 1992, the territory of the Republic of Moldova saw the activation of political, economic, and energy warfare<sup>30</sup>. All these have been and are, depending on the periods, presented in various forms. An important aspect in thwarting hybrid warfare is the preparation of state institutions to withstand this war and contribute to countering it. However, today, we can observe that with the onset of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova is the direct target of this war, and state institutions have demonstrated that they are not yet sufficiently resilient to new threats.

Among the potential hybrid risks are highlighted:

- The alleged terrorist attacks that have been established in the left bank of the Dniester, likewise, are part of the scenario of hybrid threats and destabilization of the situation in the region:
  - Scenarios of terrorist attacks organized on the left bank of the Dniester are used as propaganda tools to justify the control of the separatist authorities.
  - The absence of concrete evidence and the speculative nature of these alleged attacks raise doubts about their veracity.
  - Combating disinformation and promoting an atmosphere of calm and trust are necessary to counteract manipulations.
  
- Propaganda disseminated by local channels in the Transnistrian region, as well as those relayed from Russia on the left bank of the Dniester River:
  - Local media channels in the Transnistrian region and those relayed from Russia heavily promote anti-Western and anti-EU propaganda.
  - Disinformation, hate speech, and false narratives are employed to manipulate public opinion and divide society.
  - Supporting critical thinking and access to verified information are necessary to counter propaganda and strengthen resilience to misinformation.
  
- Anti-EU narratives and narratives portraying the Republic of Moldova and the European Union as real enemies of the population on the left bank of the Dniester River.
  
- Protests against changes to the Customs Code of the Republic of Moldova.
  - Protests organized against changes to the Customs Code of the Republic of Moldova could be used by separatist forces to create tensions.

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<sup>30</sup> Evolution of Transnistrian Conflict Regulation / Evolution of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Moldova 1998-2008. – Chisinau: Editura CARTDIDACT. 2009. P. 153-156.

- Economic manipulation and social instrumentalization could be used to destabilize the region and undermine the authority in Chisinau.
  - Constructive social dialogue and compromise solutions are necessary to address the legitimate concerns of the population and maintain social peace.
- The organization of presidential elections in Russia and the opening of polling stations on the left bank of the Dniester River without the agreement of Chisinau.
  - The organization of presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova and simultaneously holding a referendum on joining the European Union: how citizens of the Republic of Moldova on the left bank of the Dniester River will be involved.

### **Disinformation and false news on the left bank of the Dniester River**

The TV stations on the left bank of the Dniester River constantly broadcast derogatory materials about the North Atlantic Alliance. These news items have one purpose - to disinform and manipulate. That's why the Security Zone team has launched a series of materials called "NATO, for real!", in which we will debunk the myths promoted by the Kremlin's propaganda machinery in Tiraspol. Myth 1 - the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and NATO contradicts the country's neutral status. Myth 2 - getting closer to NATO means war. Myth 3 - the Republic of Moldova is forced to join NATO. Myth 4 - NATO wants to establish military bases here. Myth 5 - Joint exercises with NATO are aimed at attacking the Transnistrian region. All these myths have been debunked for the Security Zone by Deputy Secretary-General Mircea Geoana<sup>31</sup>.

An interesting detail from Krasnoselski's message regarding the alleged dissatisfaction with the introduction of customs duties is that it violates the democratic and European principles that Moldova aspires to. As an "argument," he mentioned the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement between the EU and the Republic of Moldova, through which the Transnistrian region exports about 70% of its products to the EU<sup>32</sup>. Krasnoselski, however, juggled with half-truths and excluded Chisinau's role in this project. "The EU has granted Transnistria the right, through the DCFTA program, to conduct economic activity with the European Union, and I thank them for that. What has Chisinau done? They have done everything to sabotage it. You are the ones who do not open bank accounts for our enterprises registered in Moldova. You paralyze the banking system (...) You are the ones who violate all European values." The truth is that the constitutional authorities proposed that the region be included in the agreement, arguing that the region is part of the Republic of Moldova; otherwise, the region would not have been able to export to the EU.

- A new misinformation campaign from Tiraspol. The alleged Ministry of Security of the Transnistrian region (MGB) issued a press release announcing the presence of "special groups" of soldiers from Ukraine who are supposedly preparing to carry out "terrorist attacks" in the region. The Bureau for Reintegration Policies denied the announcement. "These are provocative and

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<sup>31</sup> Mircea Geoana debunks the five main myths about NATO created in Tiraspol // <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJhKaCztE7Y>

<sup>32</sup> Lozovanu V. Implementation of ALSAC in the Transnistrian Region: Progress or Rhetoric // <https://dcfta.md/uploads/0/images/large/5436294-md-implementare-z.pdf>

propagandistic statements. We reiterate the recommendation to rely on information from official public sources provided by constitutional authorities," the response from the Office for the Security Zone stated. The announcement from Tiraspol regarding alleged exercises in the Republic of Moldova was picked up by the media in the Russian Federation. This information comes against the backdrop of the extension, by the head of the separatist group, Vadim Krasnoselski, of the yellow terrorist alert code in the left bank of the Dniester. The decree was signed on January 12, with the term extended until March 14, 2024. In the left bank of the Dniester, the terrorist alert was instituted in April 2022 and extended until March.

The press in Tiraspol continues to publish false news regarding customs duties that economic agents from the left bank of the Dniester are supposed to pay. Journalists from the left bank of the Dniester describe these actions as "economic genocide" against Tiraspol by Chisinau. In the region, during this entire period, there has been talk of alleged embezzlement from the Transnistrian budget, accompanied by manipulative headlines and statements. The press there, through the voice of Vadim Krasnoselski, claims that the region was not aware of the new changes that came into effect on January 1, 2024, and that commercial entities in the region did not expect such taxes. Thus, Krasnoselski did not stop at appeals and did not limit himself to the local press but offered manipulative comments to the Russian state agencies TASS and RIA Novosti. But here's the truth: the new Customs Code was adopted in August 2021 and was published at the same time, almost two and a half years before it came into force. The Customs Service announced that from the moment of adoption until the entry into force, no changes were made to the legal regime of economic agents from the left bank of the Dniester. It seems that economic agents in the region were already aware of the new rules and even followed them.

Thus, Russian propaganda remains a factor in isolating residents of Transnistria from reality. Hybrid threats continue to escalate in the Transnistrian region at political, economic, social, and energy levels. It is considered important to create opportunities for diversifying the informational space on the left bank of the Dniester with balanced media content. This can be achieved by providing at least the public television and radio channels Moldova 1, as well as Radio Moldova, in the Transnistrian region.