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# Moldova, a land of partnership missions for the European Union

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Sharing 939 kilometres of borders with Ukraine, Moldova is closest to the epicentre of the war that began on 24 February 2022. From the very first weeks onwards, the Moldovan authorities had to build reception facilities for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the fighting in the south and east of the country. In diplomatic and strategic terms, this war has also played a role in accelerating events, since in June 2022 Moldova was, against all expectations, recognised as [candidate country to the European Union](#). The credit for this European rapprochement goes largely to the leadership team headed by President Maia Sandu. He later, with her party (*Party of Action and Solidarity, PAS*), has led the nation's dynamic forces along this demanding path of transformation, despite the many difficulties that the country faces.

The war has already changed Moldova's geopolitical situation, which has to contend with a great number of hybrid threats from Russia. In other words, beyond the success of [the European Political Community Summit](#), organised at Castelul Mimi on 1 June last, and the many political signals received on this occasion, Moldova still needs assistance on the road to European transformation. This is why the Europeans decided to launch a [partnership mission](#) on 31 May last in Chisinau together with the High Representative Josep Borrell, the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Nicu Popescu and the then Home Affairs Minister, Ana Revenco.

## MOLDOVA FACES A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF HYBRID THREATS

Hybrid threats are defined as the set of tactics used by state or non-state actors to disrupt, destabilise or exert influence in a given region. These combine conventional and non-conventional, military and non-

military elements to achieve political, strategic or geopolitical objectives.

Since its independence in 1991, Moldova has had to deal with a short albeit unresolved separatist conflict in the east of the country (in Transnistria, from January to July 1992), but succeeded in resolving the problem in Gagauzia in the south (agreement on an autonomous status in 1994).

These two regions have special relations with Russia, and Transnistria even has Russian troops on its territory. Against this backdrop, the country's leaders have oscillated since independence between pro-Russian governments and others who would often like to see closer ties with Romania, and then with the European Union as the latter's centre of gravity has shifted eastwards. A significant share of public opinion is still convinced that it would be better not to move too far away from Russia[1], even though the latter is hostile to the current government. As President Maia Sandu points out, "*Using the full range of hybrid threats - including false bomb threats, cyber-attacks, disinformation, calls for social unrest and open corruption - they have sought to destabilise the government, erode our democracy and jeopardise Moldova's contribution to the security of Europe as a whole*"[2].

Internally, Russia still exerts a significant influence on Moldova's political system, through consultants, money transfers and corruption[3]. Two parties in particular act as relays for pro-Russian demands, the *Party of Socialists* (PSRM) and the *Şor Party*, led respectively by Igor Dodon[4] and Ilan Şor[5]. They are the focus of great suspicion, many investigations and convictions. In the most recent elections in

[1] According to the May 2023 iData Barometer, 52.6% of respondents were against the Republic of Moldova leaving the CIS, compared with 34.9% who wanted to leave and 12.5% who had no answer.

[2] Maia Sandu, "With the war next door, Moldova is accelerating its rapprochement with the EU", Robert Schuman Foundation, 30 May 2023,

[3] Florent Parmentier, "Moldova: a political system under pressure. Between European Aspirations and War in Ukraine", Ifri, May 2023.

[4] Igor Dodon is the current leader of the Socialist Party. After serving several terms as a Member of Parliament and Minister, he was President from 2016 to 2020.

[5] Ilan Şor is a Moldovan oligarch linked to the "stolen billion" scandal involving three banks in 2014. He was elected mayor of the town of Orhei from 2015 to 2019, and a MP in 2019, but was removed from office. He lives in exile in Israel, from where he continues to lead his party.

Gagauzia (30 April-14 May 2023), these two parties competed in the second round for the post of head of Gagauzia (the Bashkan), with victory going to Eugenia Gutsul of the Șor party. This victory was approved by the authorities in Chisinau, despite suspicions of electoral fraud and corruption that could not be documented.

We can expect a certain fluidity on the part of this political area in the next elections (municipal elections in the autumn, presidential elections in November 2024). On 19 June, the Șor party was banned following a decision by the Constitutional Court, on the grounds that it was destabilising the country, and indirectly because of its links with Russia[6]. In radical opposition to the government in power, it has worked to create political unrest and polarise society. The Moscow-affiliated Orthodox Church, which is followed by a majority in the country, promotes traditional values that are opposed to certain societal reforms, and finds points of convergence here with the opposition groups it supports.

Beyond the political sphere, Russia is also trying to use Moldova's economic vulnerabilities to exert a decisive influence over the country. Among the critical infrastructures, energy is certainly the most threatened, having been the subject of specific pressure since independence. Until recently, Russia has been Moldova's sole supplier of gas, which has led to crises such as that in autumn 2021[7] ; however, the latter has been able to reduce this dependence through a policy of diversification, with financial assistance from the European Union. For example, Transgaz, a Romanian operator, announced that it would acquire Gazprom's activities in Moldova at the beginning of September 2023. The electricity sector is no less fragile vis-à-vis Russia: the main power station (Moldavskaya GRES), located in Cuciurgan (Transnistria), belongs to the Russian company Inter RAO. Energy aside, trade relations with Russia have been on the wane in recent years, with exports largely redirected towards European markets following the conclusion of the [Association Agreement](#) of 2014. As the country's main trading partner and investor, the European Union is also attractive to the Transnistrian elites, who changed their behaviour long before the Ukrainian border was closed. What is more, Moldova is now less dependent than in the past on remittances from Russia: while total

remittances to Chisinau still account for nearly 15.5% of GDP, Russia's share has fallen sharply, from 60% in 2014 to 14%[8]. Inflation, which has exceeded 30% since the war, is also a major source of social discontent, fuelled by the pro-Russian camp, particularly through the propagation of fake news.

Among the other vulnerabilities that Russia uses to achieve its ends, disinformation and cyber-attacks are among the most significant. Disinformation operations are carried out at low cost but can have a major impact on the target country by helping to polarise the population and erode political confidence. Introducing appropriate legislation and measures to protect information from outside interference is a balancing act, since freedom of expression and freedom of the press must be defended at the same time. While for years Russian influence came mainly from television channels (PRIME, NTV, RTR Planeta) and the written press, it now also comes from social networks and information platforms (Facebook, Odnoklassniki.ru, Telegram, vkontakte). Finally, Moldova's cyber vulnerabilities are known in November 2022, the hacking of the data of certain authorities (Maia Sandu, the Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development Andrei Spinu, the Minister of Justice Sergiu Litvinenco, the Minister of the Interior Ana Revenco) is just one example. Russia can use these loopholes both as a means of blackmailing the political elites and as a means of undermining public confidence in the state. Intelligence is no exception: suspecting Russian wiretapping, Moldova demanded in July that 45 people working for the Russian embassy leave the country. There is a glaring lack of human and financial resources in this area, both at the highest level of government and in the wider administration.

## AMBITIONS AND LIMITS OF THE EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIP MISSION

Given the hybrid threats facing Moldova, the Europeans wanted to launch a civilian mission to support the government in this difficult period, particularly following Maia Sandu's televised speech in February, in which she denounced the threat of a coup d'état encouraged by Russia[9]. The crisis led to a change of head of government, with the Prime Minister, Natalia Gavrilita being replaced by [Dorin Recean](#)[10].

[6] The five MPs they include will nevertheless be able to continue to sit in Parliament, but unnamed, just like the new Bashkan.

[7] The issue of gas prices and gas debt pitted the authorities in Chisinau against Gazprom in October 2021: Moldova was forced not to apply European directives that could have weakened Gazprom's monopoly.

[8] Kamil Calus, "The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova : economic, political and social dimensions", April 2023.

[9] « Le plan de Poutine pour prendre la Moldavie », *Le grand continent*, 13 February 2023,

[10] Unlike Natalia Gavrilita, who had the profile of a reformist economist, Dorin Recean has a more security-oriented profile. He was Minister of the Interior (2012-2015), and previously Secretary of the Supreme Security Council of Moldova (February 2022 - February 2023).

It should be noted that this partnership mission is not the first European mission in Moldova: indeed, the [mission EUBAM](#) (*European Union Border Assistance Mission*) was launched in 2005 and has been renewed again since. The Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" (December 2004), the adoption of the EU-Moldova Action Plan as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy as well as the change in orientation of the Moldovan government in the wake of the general elections (February 2005) led to a favourable context for the revival of negotiations regarding the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict<sup>[11]</sup>. Its main aim was then to strengthen the control of the borders, customs, standards and trade practices of Moldova and Ukraine. More specifically, it aimed to support the Moldovan authorities in terms of strengthening border security and management, the combat to counter cross border crime, the facilitation of trade and the development of customs capabilities. Since then, the mission's base is still in Odessa, with a point of liaison in Chisinau, as well as six external offices: three on the Moldovan side of the joint border and three in Ukraine. The European Union also appointed a Special Representative for Moldova, Dutch diplomat Adriaan Jacobovits de Szeged (2005-2007). Following this, the mission aimed to strengthen the EU's contribution to the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. To do this the mandate aimed to enhance coordination with the OSCE, to follow political developments in the field closely, and to contribute to the prevention and settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. Jacobovits de Szeged's successor, Kalman Mizsei (2007-2011), witnessed the closure of this post due to a lack of concrete results, in contrast to the EUBAM which is still in operation.

The [EUPM](#) (*European Union Partnership Mission*), a civilian mission, operates under the Common Security and Defence Policy. Briefly, EU civilian missions generally comprise civilian experts, such as police officers, judges, prosecutors, legal advisers and security sector reform specialists. Their aim is to help beneficiary countries strengthen their institutions, promote the rule of law, improve governance capabilities, and support sustainable stability and development. In fact, the civilian mission in Moldova focuses on strengthening the resilience of the country's

security sector in the areas of crisis management and hybrid threats, including cyber security and the fight against information manipulation. As one of the countries most affected by the war in Ukraine, Moldova indicated its interest in receiving assistance from the European Union to strengthen its governance, security, and development in a letter from Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita to High Representative Josep Borrell on 28 January 2023. The deployment of this mission should be interpreted as a political signal from the European Union to the Moldovan authorities. The mission will provide strategic advice on the development of strategies and policies, as well as identifying capacity-building needs (early warning, detection, identification, attribution of threats and response to hybrid threats).

While the mission's ambitions are high, its limitations must also be emphasised. The first concerns timing: the mission's first mandate will only last for two renewable years. The mission came at the request of the Moldovan authorities, but the question is whether it will be maintained in the event of a change of government. Furthermore, the composite nature of hybrid threats means that the mission may be considered "political" by its adversaries. This is particularly the case if it ventures to intervene in matters relating to the rule of law. The second limitation is the scale of the challenges that this mission must tackle, which means that clear priorities must be established. The head of mission, Cosmin Dinescu, is an experienced diplomat, having been Romania's former ambassador to Lithuania and Latvia. The mission must be adaptable, depending on crises and the evolution of hybrid threats. However, how can we avoid the risks of dispersion for a team of around forty people whose task it is to build solid institutions? How can the EUAM cooperate efficiently with other players, international organisations and NGOs alike?

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The shockwaves of war in Ukraine have caused tectonic shifts across the countries of the region, generating new threats, but also attracting unprecedented attention from European players. The civilian mission is one response to the hybrid threats targeting Moldova,

<sup>[11]</sup> Florent Parmentier  
[Moldova, a European success  
for the Eastern Partnership ?](#)  
Robert Schuman Foundation,  
November 2010

whose authorities have unambiguously chosen Europe. Despite the progress made, the consolidation of its institutions is one of the main challenges in terms of European integration.

Among others France, thanks to a remarkable political rapprochement over the last two years, has every opportunity to play a constructive role in supporting Moldova's transformation. High-level meetings, whether at the presidency, the government, the National Assembly, or the Senate, took place before and after the European Political Community Summit. Since February 2022, the local presence of the French Development Agency has helped to diversify partnerships and foster new institutional cooperation.

The negotiation of a defence agreement, currently under study, is also working to strengthen France's position in the region, making Moldova a focus of its policy in the East. Moldova is not alone on its rocky road towards European integration.

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