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AN INVISIBLE WAR – RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE AGAINST THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA*

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| Abstract: | <i>Russian hybrid warfare has remained one of the most critical threats in Eastern Europe, especially since the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022. This threat extends to the Republic of Moldova, as evidenced by President Maia Sandu's February 2023 press conference, where she claimed that Moldovan security services had foiled a Russian attempt to carry out a coup against the government in Chişinău.</i> <i>This study aims to demonstrate that the Russian Federation conducted an ongoing hybrid operation against the Republic of Moldova between October 2021 and October 2023. To this end, military, economic, and sociopolitical dimensions are analyzed within the framework developed by Michael D. Reilly, which is based on the Clausewitzian Center of Gravity theory. The findings aim to identify the presence of elements from the Gerasimov model and to provide an outlook on Russian hybrid operations in Moldova.</i> |
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Introduction

While the world focused on Ukraine, its small neighbor, the Republic of Moldova, was engaged in an invisible struggle for its sovereignty. On February 13, 2023, Maia Sandu, President of Moldova, announced that the Russian Federation planned to execute a coup against the government in Chişinău, a significant component of Russian hybrid operations ongoing since late 2021¹. This study aims to demonstrate that the Russian Federation carried out new generation operations against the Republic of Moldova and analyze the nature of such operations between October 2021 and October 2023. To offer an outlook, it is also an objective to determine possible future scenarios of these operations.

Given the complexity of the question, multiple dimensions of the strategic environment are investigated, based on the common aspects of the U.S. DIME/PMESII² and the Russian VPO³ (also, please decipher the

* This study is based on the author's research submitted to the 37th National Student Research Conference 2025 competition in Hungary.

¹ Wilhelmine Preussen, *Russia is planning a coup in Moldova, says President Maia Sandu*, 13.02.2023., <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-president-maia-sandu-russia-attack/> (11.08.2025)

² DIME and PMESII are frameworks used in strategic analysis to assess strategic environments and the instruments of national power. DIME represents the four main instruments of national power: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic. PMESII represents the six key aspects of an operational environment: Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, and Infrastructure.

³ The VPO (Военно-политическая обстановка, Voenno-Politicheskaya Obstanovka) is an abbreviation referring to the Military-Political Situation, a key concept in Russian military planning. It is a methodology used to analyze the current geopolitical and strategic environment.

abbreviation.) methodologies, which are the military, the economic, and the social-political dimensions^{1,2}. Through these frameworks, relevant events and features are identified and comprehensively analyzed. For the latter, the study employs the model developed by Russian General Valery Gerasimov and the 6-step methodology of Michael D. Reilly for analyzing hybrid threats, grounded in the Clausewitzian theory of the Center of Gravity^{3,4}.

Despite striving for the highest level of representativeness, several methodological limits and barriers must be acknowledged during the interpretation of results. First, the analysis relies solely on publicly available, open sources. Also, the Russian Federation is considered a rational actor, even though its highly centralized internal political system, especially the significant influence of siloviki elites⁵, can overly securitize certain issues, potentially introducing bias into Moscow's decision-making. Finally, as the study addresses an ongoing operation, the lack of closure complicates a comprehensive understanding of the Russian Federation's activities.

Theoretical Background

The concept of hybrid warfare has been a subject of interest within international research communities since the early 2000s, gaining significant attention following Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Despite extensive research, there remains a lack of academic consensus on its precise definition⁶. The term "hybrid warfare" was developed by the West to describe the new Russian approach to war⁷. Even within Russian academic literature, consistent terminology is absent. For instance, authors Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov referred to "new-type warfare" between 2012 and 2017⁸. Following the publication of General Valeriy Gerasimov's influential 2017 article, the term "new-generation warfare" became more prevalent⁹. Concurrently, the concept of non-linear warfare, developed by Putin's right-hand man, Vladislav Surkov also entered the academic discourse. Additionally, multiple Russian theoreticians addressed the issue from a sociopolitical perspective: Aleksandr Dugin used the term "net-centric war", Evgeny Messner described it as "subversion war", while Igor Panarin wrote about "information wars"^{10,11}.

As mentioned earlier, definitional frameworks also vary considering English, Hungarian, and even Russian literature. Definitions in Western academic discourse focus mainly on the synergy of regular and irregular tools

¹ Dean S. Hartley III, *Practical VV&A for DIME/PMESII*, "Phalanx", Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 33-39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24910681> (11.08.2025)

² Clint Reach, Alyssa Demus, Eugeniu Han, Bilyana Lilly, Krstyna Marcinek, Yuliya Shokh, *Russian Military Forecasting and Analysis*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 2022, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR100/RR198-4/RAND_RRA198-4.pdf (11.08.2023)

³ Valeriy Gerasimov, *The Value of Science Is in the Foresight – New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations*, "Military Review", January-February 2016, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf, (12.08.2025)

⁴ Michael D. Reilly, *Hybrid Threat COG Analysis*, "Joint Force Quarterly", Vol. 84, No. 1, 2017, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-84/jfq-84_86-92_Reilly.pdf (09.08.2025)

⁵ Siloviki elites include officials in high-level Russian decision-making roles, primarily with backgrounds in the security services, mainly the former KGB.

⁶ Zoltan Somodi, Almos Peter Kiss, *A hibrid hadviselés fogalmának értelmezése a nemzetközi szakirodalomban*, "Honvédségi Szemle", 2016, pp. 22-28 <https://kiadvany.magyarhonvedseg.hu/index.php/honvszemle/article/view/207/199> (28.12.2025)

⁷ Andras Racz, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine – Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist*, FIIA Report, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, 2022, p. 34, <https://www.fia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiiareport43.pdf>, (28.12.2025)

⁸ Timothy Thomas, *The Chekinov-Bogdanov Commentaries of 2010-2017: What Did They Teach Us About Russia's New Way of War?*, MITRE Corporation, 2020, p. 5, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1141587.pdf> (28.12.2025)

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 13

¹⁰ Andras Racz, *Op. cit.*, pp. 37-41

¹¹ Markus Göransson, *Understanding Russian thinking on gibrdnaya voyna*, in Mikael Weismann, Niklas Nilsson, Björn Palmertz, Per Thunholm (Eds.), *Hybrid Warfare: Security and Asymmetric Conflict in International Relations*, Bloomsbury Collections, London, 2021, p. 85, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1593245/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (28.12.2025)

which are believed to shorten the duration of operations^{1,2,3}. In contrast, this article posits that the synergy of the mentioned tools extends the operational timeframe. Despite the duration of military engagement being reduced, other dimensions – political, economic, social, etc. – prolong the overall operation, evidenced by the events in the Republic of Moldova.

This perspective is also supported by relevant Russian literature. Chekinov and Bogdanov consistently highlight the inseparability of military and non-military phases of hybrid operations, emphasizing the superiority of the latter.⁴ They argue that aggressors achieve their political objective well before the deployment of military force.⁵

New-generation warfare signifies a substantial shift in Russia's foreign policy enforcement. As demonstrated by the war in Georgia in 2008 and the escalation periods of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2014-2015 and 2022, Moscow has abandoned the objective of physically and fully controlling adversary territory.⁶ Instead, the Kremlin seeks to abolish the adversary's statehood and sovereignty to gain full control over its political leadership and society. This strategic shift is evident in post-2014 publications by Chekinov and Bogdanov, who underscore the importance of achieving absolute control over both the adversary and the chaos induced by hybrid operations.⁷

While Valeriy Gerasimov's article is more of a summary than an in-depth analysis of new-generation warfare, the general's operational model serves as a foundational framework for understanding Russia's new approach to warfare.⁸ According to this model, hybrid operations encompass six phases: covert origin, strains, initial conflicting actions, crisis, resolution, and reestablishment of peace. The previously mentioned emphasis on non-military means is clearly demonstrated by these phases: armed forces are only employed in the final three, with a non-military to military tools ratio of 4:1⁹

¹ Istvan Resperger, *A válságkezelés és a hibrid hadviselés*, Dialóg Campus Kiadó, Budapest, 2018, p. 21, https://nbi.uni-nke.hu/document/nbi-uni-nke-hu/Resperger%20István_A%20válságkezelés%20és%20a%20hibrid%20hadviselés.pdf, (28.12.2025)

² Imre Porkolab, *Hibrid Hadviselés: új hadviselési forma, vagy régi ismerős?*, "Hadtudomány", No. 3-4, 2015, p. 41, https://www.mhht.eu/hadtudomany/2015/3_4/2015_3_4_5.pdf, (28.12.2023)

³ Krisztian Jojart, *A hibrid hadviselés és a jövő háborúja*, "Honvédségi Szemle", No.1, 2020, p. 5, http://real.mtak.hu/105872/1/JojartKrisztian_Ahibridhadviselesesajovohaboruja.pdf, (28.12.2023)

⁴ Sergey Chekinov, Sergey Bogdanov, *The Evolution of the Essence and Content of 'War' in the 21st Century*, "Voennaya Mysl", No. 1, 2017, p. 42

⁵ Sergey Chekinov, Sergey Bogdanov, *Asymmetric Actions in Support of the Military Security of Russia*, "Voennaya Mysl", No. 3, 2010, p. 21

⁶ Nataliya Bugayova, Kateryna Stepanenko, Frederick W. Kagan, *Weakness is Lethal: Why Putin Invaded Ukraine and How the War Must End*, 01.10.2023., <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/weakness-lethal-why-putin-invaded-ukraine-and-how-war-must-end> (11.08.2025)

⁷ Timothy Thomas, *Op. cit.*, p. 11

⁸ Jozsef Holecz, *A Geraszimov-doktrína – Egy másik megvilágításban*, "Felderítő Szemle", Vol. 16, No. 3-4, p. 7, <https://www.knbsz.gov.hu/hu/letoltes/fsz/2017-3-4.pdf>, (11.08.2025)

⁹ Valeriy Gerasimov, *Op. cit.*, p. 28

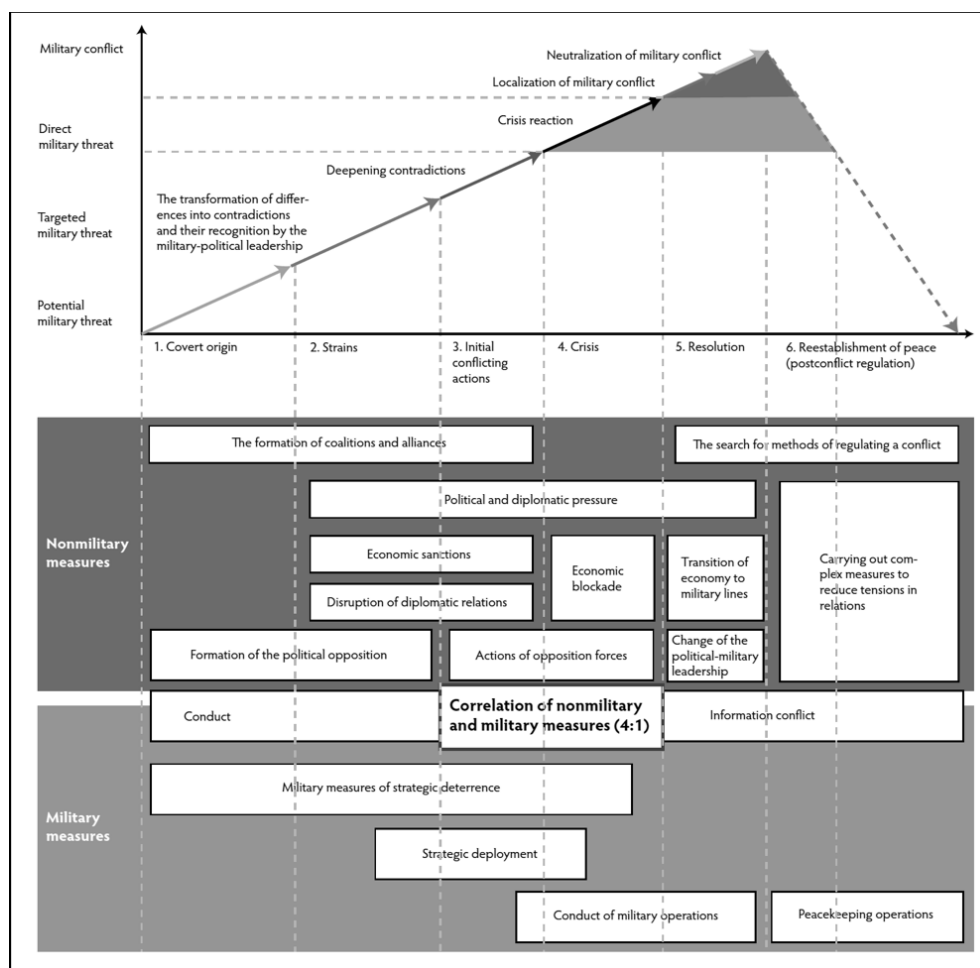


Figure 1. The Gerasimov model¹

As for theoretical clarification, this article argues that hybrid operations, including those against the Republic of Moldova, should be understood as a homogenous process wherein the non-military and the military periods are integrated components. Furthermore, the shift towards achieving absolute control in Russian objectives should serve as the framework for interpreting operations against Chişinău.

Aspects Of Russian Hybrid Warfare Against the Republic of Moldova

Military

Although this study emphasizes the dominance of non-military means in Russian hybrid warfare, conventional tools remain significant and cannot be overlooked. The Gerasimov model demonstrates that new-generation operations do not exclude the use of conventional tools; rather, the ratio of non-military and military actions shifts throughout different phases. Therefore, examining military aspects is essential. From a geopolitical perspective, the Republic of Moldova holds significant strategic importance for both the Russian Federation and the West. Moldova's location in the post-Soviet space and its membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) make it a fundamental part of Russia's Near Abroad. This is evidenced by the fact that the Federal Security Service (FSB) handles intelligence operations in the country, rather than the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR)².

¹ *Idem*

² Nick Reynolds, Jack Watling, *Ukraine Through Russia's Eyes*, 25.02.2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-through-russias-eyes> (11.08.2023)

Since Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Western allies have also increased their attention to Chişinău. Moldova shares a border with NATO member Romania and NATO ally Ukraine, highlighting Western interests in the region. Also, Chişinău's European aspirations further enhance its strategic value: the European Union Association Agreement, which opened the common market to Moldovan goods, underscored the Union's direct interest in preserving the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Moldova's exposure to conventional threats also plays a significant role in the military dimension. According to the 2024 Global Firepower Index, Moldova ranks among the weakest military powers globally, second to last out of 145 countries¹. This vulnerability is well demonstrated by its lack of tanks and air force. Moldova is characterized by the absence of human resources: it has only 3,200 active personnel out of its 3.3 million of population². Moldova's military expenditures have also stagnated since 2010, with defense spending at just 0.3-0.4% of GDP according to SIPRI data³.

Moldova's lack of military resilience is not solely due to material deficiencies. Ianac Deli, commander of Moldova's KFOR delegation, accentuates the shortcomings of strategic documents in terms of clear directives for the military and the lack of professionalism⁴. This reflects the broader absence of political will to strengthen Moldova militarily. Since the 1992 Transnistrian war, Moldova's principle of non-alignment has been the foundation of Moldova's foreign policy – codified in both strategic documents and the constitution – impacting the country's resilience⁵. The mentioned military shortcomings are far more concerning in the context of the separatist Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR). Transnistria obtains almost the same number of human resources as Chişinău, despite its much smaller population. According to the questionably representative 2015 Transnistrian census, it has 4,500 active military personnel. The Transnistrian leadership claims to possess 18 T-64 tanks, eight helicopters, and four aircraft, although the operational status of this equipment is unclear⁶.

The threat posed by the PMR is exacerbated by the presence of legally and illegally deployed Russian troops. Russia's military presence dates to World War II and it played a significant role in the formation of the separatist Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic (PMR). Following the 1992 war, Russian troops remained in the country, partly as peacekeepers enforcing the ceasefire, partly illegally. Despite international efforts to alter the status quo, including the 5+2 format and the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, 1,200-1,500 troops are still deployed in Transnistria⁷.

The Russian Federation also has great influence over Transnistrian intelligence services. For instance, Vladimir Antufeyev headed the Ministry of National Security until 2012 and later became a deputy prime minister in the Donetsk People's Republic. After Antufeyev, Valery Gebos, a former KGB and FSB agent, assumed his position⁸. The escalation of the war in Ukraine further increased the PMR's significance for Russia. Since one of Moscow's subordinate main efforts was toward the northwestern coast of the Black Sea, especially Odessa, creating

¹ Global Firepower, *2023 Moldova Military Strength*, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=moldova (11.08.2023)

² IISS, *Military Balance*, 2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tmib20/123/1?nav=tocList>, (05.08.2024)

³ World Bank, *Military expenditure (% of GDP) Moldova*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=MD> (11.08.2023)

⁴ Ianac Deli, *Assessing Military Readiness in National Army of Republic of Moldova's Units – Methods and Challenges*, "Journal of Defense Resources Management", No. 1, 2022, pp. 106-183, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1049499>, (20.02.2024)

⁵ Tamas Orban, *Military modernisation in the Republic of Moldova (post-1991)*, 30.06.2022. <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/research/military-modernisation-in-the-republic-of-moldova-post-1991> (20.02.2024)

⁶ Pridnestrovskaja Moldavskaja Respublica, *Law enforcement and armed forces of Pridnestrovie*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091104073203/http://pridnestrovie.net/armedforces.html> (20.02.2024)

⁷ Ion Tăbărta, *Russian Military Presence in Moldova – A Sensitive Issue for the Future of Relations Between Chişinău and Moscow*, "Bulletin of Power, Politics, and Policy", No. 8, 2020, p. 3, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/viewpdf?id=1022266>, (20.02.2024)

⁸ Kamil Calus, *The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova: economic, political, and social dimensions*, Hybrid CoE Working Paper, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, p. 18, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/20230413-Hybrid-CoE-Working_Paper-23-Moldova-WEB.pdf, (20.02.2024)

a land corridor between the area and Transnistria has also been mentioned by high-level Russian officials as a possibility¹. This would have provided Moscow with an access to the Soviet ammunition depot in Cobasna².

Despite the strategic value of the PMR to the Russian Federation, the entity's loyalty to the Kremlin remains uncertain. As Foster notes in his 2024 study, the Transnistrian leadership's stance on Russian operations against Ukraine is rather unclear. Tiraspol's standpoint was dominated by a neutral approach in the investigated period, mainly due to the interests of the local elites. Foster suggests that the Transnistrian entity's troops would obviously prefer local command to Russian control if forced to choose³. During the examined period, Transnistria's approach altered only once, after the terrorist attacks against government facilities in Tiraspol in April 2022. While Russian media claimed that the attacks were carried out by Ukrainian militants, Western experts identified the events as Russian false flag operations aimed at drawing Tiraspol into the war during the most active phase of operations in southwestern Ukraine⁴. In conclusion, it is evident that the territory of the Republic of Moldova is especially important to the Kremlin due to its geostrategic setting as well as the presence of Transnistrian and Russian troops. This is also demonstrated by the 1995 presidential decree, which declared that the PMR was a region of special interest to Russia⁵. All in all, the military presence and potential of Russia in Moldova pose a significant threat to Chişinău's sovereignty, which can become even more serious if complemented by political, legal, and economic influence.

Economy

Hybrid operations against the Republic of Moldova must also be examined from an economic perspective, as new-generation warfare is predominantly characterized by economic and political tools during the initial, non-conventional phases. This section investigates Russia's actions from two viewpoints: first, the internal economic features of Moldova, which constitute the operational environment exploited by the Russian Federation through sanctions and coercive trade policies; second, energy security, focusing on aspects such as natural gas imports and electricity supply, which played a significant role during the research period. Despite modest GDP growth since the millennium, the Republic of Moldova remains one of the poorest countries on the European continent⁶. According to World Bank data, in 2022, the GDP per capita was only \$5,714, approximately 10% of the European Union average^{7,8}. This is compounded by the low purchasing power parity of the Moldovan leu and stratospheric inflation rates.⁹ The National Bank of Moldova reported that inflation began to skyrocket in September 2021 (6.68%) and peaked a year later. In October 2022, rates rose to 34.62%, far exceeding the target of 5%. This economic fallback

¹ Andrew Roth, *Russian commander suggests plan is for permanent occupation of south Ukraine*, 22.04.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/22/ukraine-south-occupation-russian-military-chief-rustam-minnekayev> (17.03.2024)

² Ilie Gulca, *Cobasna: Russia's 'MacGuffin' Between Ukraine and NATO*, 20.03.2023., <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/20/cobasna-russias-macguffin-between-ukraine-and-nato/> (20.02.2024)

³ Shaun D. Foster, *Pridnestrovie for Peace: Accounting for Transnistrian Divergence from the Russian Position vis-à-vis the Russo Ukrainian War*, "Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice", No.1-15, 2024, pp. 1-15, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/10402659.2024.2311691?needAccess=true>, (20.02.2024)

⁴ Will Baumgardner, *What Russia's Failed Coercion of Transnistria Means for the Annexation of Occupied Territory in Ukraine*, 20.09.2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/what-russia's-failed-coercion-transnistria-means-annexation-occupied-territory-ukraine> (20.02.2024)

⁵ Volodymyr Nikiforenko, Yurii Kuryliuk, *Current Issues of Peace and Security Taking Into Account Aggressive Policy of the Russian Federation*, "Przegląd Strategiczny", No. 16, 2023, p. 285, http://studiastrategiczne.amu.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/19-Nikiforenko_Kuryliuk-3.pdf (20.02.2024)

⁶ World Bank, *GDP (Current US\$) – Moldova*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=MD> (20.02.2024)

⁷ World Bank, *GDP per capita (Current US\$)–Moldova*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=MD> (20.02.2024)

⁸ World Bank, *GDP per capita, PPP (Current international \$)–European Union*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=EU> (20.02.2024)

⁹ World Bank, *GDP per capita, PPP (Current international \$) – Moldova*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?end=2022&locations=MD&start=1995&view=chart> (20.02.2024)

was utterly dangerous for the stability of the country as it led to an over-the-top cost of living¹. The latter provided the Russian Federation with an opportunity to exacerbate social tension and weaken Chişinău's resilience.

Despite the tertiary sector being the most significant in Moldova's domestic economy, exports are dominated by the electronics industry and, to a greater extent, agriculture^{2,3}. This economic distortion originates from Soviet-era policies that industrialized the Transnistrian, Russian-speaking parts of the country, leaving the areas west of the Dniester predominantly agricultural.⁴ Consequently, Moldova's trade is highly import-dominated; in 2021, imports were double the value of exports. Chişinău's major trade partners include its neighbors, such as Romania, Ukraine, and indirectly, the Russian Federation, making the country highly susceptible to their influence⁵. The Kremlin leveraged of its role in Moldova's economy on several occasions over the past decades. For instance, between 2006 and 2013, Russia imposed an embargo against Moldovan and Georgian wine products, citing alleged food safety concerns. These embargoes heavily impacted the Moldovan wine industry, as Russia accounted for nearly 90% of its exports⁶. According to Dan Amonte (2010), the embargo was politically motivated, likely in retaliation for Moldova's participation in the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM)⁷. A similar situation occurred in 2014, which Kamil Caľus (2014) attributed to Moldova's Association Agreement with the European Union. During the examined period, Moscow imposed politically motivated trade regulations again in August 2022, from which pro-Russian Transnistria and Gagauzia were exempted⁸.

Despite the embargo, Russian firms are less affected by economic sanctions against the Republic of Moldova. By 2018, the share of legal Russian businesses fell to 4%, and the share of Russian foreign direct investment (FDI) decreased to 22% in the country.⁹ While this might suggest a reduced Russian influence, the smaller number of Russian companies facilitates economic warfare with minimal sacrifices.

In contrast, Transnistrian businesses are highly affected by the Kremlin's actions. The Sheriff Corporation, founded by former KGB officer and Russian oligarch Viktor Gushan, dominated the PMR's economy, accounting for 60% of its economic activity in 2021¹⁰. This economic power translated into political influence within the pseudo-state¹¹.

Despite Gushan's pro-Kremlin and KGB background, Will Baumgardner points out an enormous conflict of interest between Moscow and the Sheriff. Ukraine's border closures due to the Russian invasion forced Transnistrian goods to be exported through Chişinău's customs to the European market, highlighting the instability of Tiraspol's loyalty to Moscow¹².

¹ Moldova National Bank, *Annual inflation*, <https://www.bnm.md/en/content/inflation> (20.02.2024)

² Lloyds Bank, *Moldova: Economic and Political Overview*, <https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/moldova/economical-context> (20.02.2024)

³ Trading Economics, *Moldova Exports by Category*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/moldova/exports-by-category> (20.02.2024)

⁴ Andras Olah, *A transznysztiai konfliktus két évtizede és megoldatlanságának okai I.*, "Nemzet és Biztonság", No. 5, 2014, p. 91

⁵ GlobalEDGE, *Moldova: Trade Statistics*, <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/moldova/tradestats> (20.02.2024)

⁶ BBC, *Russian wine more draws protests*, 30. 03. 2006., <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4860454.stm> (20.02.2024)

⁷ Dan Amonte, *"Wine" Warfare at the Doorstep – Nothing New Just Business for Russia*, "Moldova's Foreign Policy Statewatch", Insitute for Development and Social Initiatives "Viitorul", August 2010, pp. 1-6, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/121707/IDIS_8.pdf (20.02.2024)

⁸ Kamil Caľus, *Russia's embargo on Moldovan goods is extended*, 23. 07. 2014., <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-07-23/russias-embargo-moldovan-goods-extended> (20.02.2024)

⁹ Ion Butmalai, Tatiana Lariusin, Ion Preașca, *Russian Economic Footprint in Moldova*, "CAPE – CSD – CIPE", <https://corrosiveconstructivecapital.cipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Russian-Economic-Footprint-in-Moldova-Study.pdf> (26.02.2024)

¹⁰ Evan Gershkovich, *In Separatist Transnistria, Sheriff Calls the Shots*, 27.09.2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/27/in-separatist-transnistria-sheriff-calls-the-shots-a75149> (26.02.2024)

¹¹ Matt Ford, *Sheriff Tiraspol: Moldova, Transnistria – or dreamland?*, 29. 09. 2021., <https://www.dw.com/en/sheriff-tiraspol-the-champions-league-club-without-a-country-but-now-in-dreamland/a-59177975> (26.02.2024)

¹² Will Baumgardner, *What Russia's Failed Coercion of Transnistria Means for the Annexation of Occupied Territory in Ukraine*, 20. 09. 2022. <https://www.aei.org/articles/what-russias-failed-coercion-of-transnistria-means-for-the-annexation-of-occupied-territory-in-ukraine/> (26.02.2024)

Energy supply and security are crucial factors for Moldova's stability and resilience. The country relies entirely on natural gas imports¹. Until 2021, both Chişinău and Tiraspol purchased natural gas from Moldovagaz, a company 50% owned by the Russian Gazprom, 35.33% by the Moldovan government, 13.4% by the Transnistrian leadership, and 1.23% by private ownership².

Until 2021, the required natural gas was entirely provided by the Russian Federation, based on a 2006, annually renewable deal between the two countries which employed network-based indexation for pricing in the second and third quarters and oil price-based indexation during the coldest months of the year. The gas contract between the parties expired at the end of September 2021; the Russian Federation sought to renegotiate terms to blackmail Moldova into not implementing the European Union's Third Energy Package, which promotes the diversification of the internal energy market³. Although Gazprom extended the supply for two months in September 2021, prices were increased by more than 40% and pressure in pipelines was reduced dangerously, which forced Chişinău to declare a state of emergency by the end of October. As a solution, the Moldovan government tried to obtain natural gas from alternative sources (for example, Romania) but diversification efforts seemed solely temporary. Despite multiple renewal attempts by the Moldovan government in 2021, the parties could only agree on a new deal on 29 October, due to high energy prices across Europe and Russian claims of the \$709 million Moldovan and the \$7 billion Transnistrian debt⁴.

In the fall of 2022, the energy crisis worsened again when Gazprom cut gas supplies by 30%, for both Moldova and the Transnistrian entity⁵. This reduction had severe implications, as Moldova's electricity supply comes entirely from the natural gas-operated Cuciurgan power plant, located on Transnistrian territory⁶. Because of Russian gas supply reductions, Tiraspol cut electricity transfers to Moldova by 73%, doubling prices⁷. Simultaneously, Russian missile attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure paralyzed electricity supply from Ukraine, forcing Chişinău to purchase electricity from Romania at a much higher price rate until December 2022. Eventually, a deal was struck, in terms of which Transnistria received the entirety of Russian gas supplies in exchange for providing Moldova with electricity until October 2023, while Chişinău sought alternative gas suppliers⁸.

After two years of crisis, the Moldovan government was better prepared for winter in 2023. Prime Minister Dorin Recean announced in May 2023 that Moldova permanently ceased purchasing Russian gas, diversifying its suppliers with European partners⁹. Additionally, implementing the third energy package terminated the operating license of the Gazprom-owned transmission company, Moldovatrangaz, replaced by the 75% Romanian and 25% EBRD-owned Vestmoldtransgaz¹⁰.

Even though the natural gas issue appeared to be fixed by the end of the examined period, it did not mean a comprehensive solution for the energy security of Moldova. Despite the March 2022 synchronization of Moldovan

¹ IEA, *Energy Security*, <https://www.iea.org/reports/moldova-energy-profile/energy-security> (26.02.2024)

² Interfax, *Vestmoldtransgaz becomes temporary operator of Moldova's entire gas transmission system*, 10.07.2023., <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/92384/> (26.02.2024)

³ Jakub Pienkowski, Maciej Zaniewicz, *The Moldovan Gas Crisis: Causes and Consequences*, 26.11.2021., <https://www.pism.pl/publications/the-moldovan-gas-crisis-causes-and-consequences> (26. 02.2024)

⁴ Katja Yafimava, *Moldova's Gas Crisis and Its Lessons for Europe*, 5.11.2021., <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85721> (26.02.2024)

⁵ Interfax, *Gazprom reduces daily gas supplies to Moldova by almost one-third – Moldovan deputy PM*, 03.10.2022. <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/83485/> (26.02.2024)

⁶ Infotag, *Moldavskaya Gres Warned on Cutting/Termination Electricity Supply to Moldova from October 11*, 08.10.2021., <https://www.infotag.md/economics-en/294575/> (26. 02. 2024.)

⁷ Reuters, *Most Moldovan power supplies restored after Russian strikes on Ukraine*, 23.11.2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/half-moldova-without-power-after-russian-strikes-ukraine-deputy-pm-2022-11-23/> (26.02.2024)

⁸ Carolin Bosch, *Moldova is making some progress on energy security*, <https://www.german-economic-team.com/en/newsletter/moldova-is-making-some-progress-on-energy-security/> (26. 02. 2024.)

⁹ Leo Litra, *The final frontier: Ending Moldova's dependency on Russian gas*, 01. 11. 2023., <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-final-frontier-ending-moldovas-dependency-on-russian-gas/> (26.02.2024)

¹⁰ Catalina Mihai, *Transgaz Romania takes over Gazprom's operations in Moldova*, 06.09.2023., <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/transgaz-romania-takes-over-gazproms-operations-in-moldova/> (26.02.2024)

and European electricity networks and Chişinău's efforts to build two power plants by 2025, the country's electricity supply is still dependent on Tiraspol, and indirectly on Moscow. This maintains, albeit in a more limited way, the Kremlin's possibility to exploit energy dependence as hybrid means. In conclusion, it is evident that Moscow was engaged in active warfare in the fields of trade and energy security. Demonstrated by both the embargoes and actions provoking an energy crisis, the Kremlin aimed to inflict the greatest damage and reduce Moldova's resilience to the largest extent.

Economic warfare against Moldova is ruinous on its own as well, but its contextual importance is much larger. The social discontent brought about by the energy and livelihood crisis resulting from Russia's actions contributed significantly to the Kremlin's indirect political influence discussed in the next chapter. This connection between political and economic dimensions is a cornerstone of Russian hybrid warfare against Moldova and proof of the operation's complexity.

Society and politics

Evidenced by the events of the examined period, trade and energy security highly impact the internal stability of Moldova and remain sources of political tension in the country. Consequently, the study focuses on social and political aspects of Russian hybrid operations, including unstable elements of the operational environment, long-term social trends, and pro-Russian actors.

Moldova is a parliamentary republic with a strong presidential political system. Since 2016, the president has been elected directly due to an internal political crisis between September 2009 and March 2012, during which the parliament could not reach a consensus on the issue¹. The president holds a key role in initiating legislation and foreign policymaking, which makes the position crucial in responding to Russian coercive operations, demonstrated by Maia Sandu's national security policy².

The internal structure of the state provides Russian operations with great opportunity, as manifested in the form of the pro-Russian Gagauzia and the so-called Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (ATUG) enjoys a high level of autonomy within the Republic of Moldova: based on a 1994 law, Comrat may determine its own legislation and executive power³. The autonomous territory is led by the bashkan, pro-Russian Evghenia Guţul of the Şor Party since May 2023⁴. Guţul clearly opposes the central government of Chişinău. Gagauzia's pro-Russian stance is not surprising: even though ethnically the Gagauz people has Turkish origins, everyday life is dominated by the Russian language, and the most popular religion is Orthodox Christianity, with 96% adhering to the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC)⁵.

Although the statehood of the Transnistrian entity remains unrecognized by either the international community or Russia, the de facto country poses a serious political challenge to the pro-Western Chişinău leadership. The idea of reintegrating the Transnistrian region, which could greatly increase Moldova's energy security and resilience, has been raised again with the start of the EU accession process, but this conflicts with the interests of both Moscow and Tiraspol.⁶ Galiya Ibragimova points out that the Moldovan government has sought to corner Tiraspol and increasingly control the Transnistrian area during the examination period, mainly by criminalizing separatism and by starting to integrate its customs policy into the European system.⁷ Past examples

¹ Brian Mefford, *Moldova's Presidential Election Pits Pro-Europe Candidates Against Pro-Russia Ones*, 07.04.2016., <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/moldova-s-presidential-election-pits-pro-europe-candidates-against-pro-russia-ones/> (26.02.2024)

² Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, *The status and powers of the President of the Republic of Moldova*, <https://presedinte.md/eng/statutul-si-atributiile> (26.02.2024)

³ Laszlo Csulak PhD, Agnes Visegradi PhD, *A gagauz autonómia alkotmányjogi berendezkedése alapjainak elemzése*, "Magyar Jog", 2010/12, pp. 756-768, <https://szakeikkadatbazis.hu/doc/2875152> (05.03.2024)

⁴ Denis Dermenji, *Candidata Partidului Şor care câştigă în Găgăuzia promite să deschidă o reprezentanţă a regiunii la Moscova*, 15. 05. 2023., <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/candidata-partidului-sor-care-castiga-in-gagauzia-promite-sa-deschida-o-reprezentanta-a-regiunii-la-moscova-/32412100.html> (05.03.2024)

⁵ Milan Mayer, *Gagauz people – their language and ethnic identity*, "Kulturní studia", No. 2, 2014, pp. 39-54, <https://kulturnistudia.cz/gagauz-people-their-language-and-ethnic-identity/> (05.03.2024)

⁶ Анна Выприцких: *Санду: Молдова не отказывается от Приднестровья на пути вступления в ЕС*, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/sandu-moldova-ne-otkazyvaetsya-ot-pridnestrovyya-na-puti-vstupleniya-v-es> (05.03.2024)

⁷ Galiya Ibragimova, *Is Moldova Ready to Pay the Price of Reintegrating Transnistria?*, 24.01.2024., <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/91460> (05.03.2024)

demonstrated that the Kremlin and Transnistrian leaders were not averse to reunification, but they have a vision contradicting Chișinău. The 2003 proposal of the Kozak Memorandum is the most accurate demonstration of this vision, providing Tiraspol with great autonomy and a veto over central decisions. This de facto federalization of the country would empower the Russian Federation with a new level of indirect influence over Moldova, paralyzing Chișinău's exercise of sovereignty. In addition to the Moldovan domestic political system, pro-Moscow long-term trends and attitudes of the society contribute to a favorable operational environment for Russian hybrid warfare.

One significant factor is the ageing of society: Moldovan National Statistics Office data suggest that the ageing rate (i.e. the ratio of citizens aged 60 and over per 100 inhabitants) increased to 22.5 in 2021, compared to 21.7 in 2020¹. The emigration of the younger population is a contributing driver to this; the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that approximately 1.1 to 1.2 million citizens were living abroad in 2021, while 15.8% of the country's GDP is remitted by expatriates, according to the World Bank².

The ageing of society leads to a rise in nostalgia for the Soviet era. Ion Marandici's 2020 study points out that this phenomenon is mainly observed in the North and some Southern regions, including Gagauzia, correlating with the territorial distribution of the Russian-speaking population. Marandici also proves that Eurosceptic political parties internalizing Soviet nostalgia are most popular among ethno-cultural minorities that suffered socio-political and economic decline after Moldovan independence. These minorities are practically the same groups previously favored by the Soviet Union³. The economic situation and living standards of these minorities can be exploited by pro-Russian parties, especially during the cost-of-living crisis observed through 2021 and 2022. The momentum of these political forces obviously works in the Kremlin's favor along with the polarization of society increased by the pro-European policies of the Sandu presidency⁴.

Political polarization can also contribute to the success of information space influence operations, facilitating the advancement of Moscow-backed parties⁵. The presence of Russia in the Moldovan information space is not a novel phenomenon; for instance, Todor Galev highlighted in 2018 that Moscow not only utilized media ownership to gain influence but also used indirect measures, such as firms contracted to disseminate Russian news, certain social media profiles, and media representation of pro-Russian politicians⁶. This is also confirmed by Dumont and her colleagues who found that out of the twenty different types of platforms they studied, five were supposedly owned by Russia, four had proven Russian connections, and one was under direct control of Moscow⁷. These channels provide the Kremlin with access to the aforementioned social groups that are open to Russian ideology.

Additionally, the presence of Orthodox Christianity is also an important socio-political factor in the Republic of Moldova. 96% of Moldovans identify as Orthodox Christian; 88% belong to the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC) and 8% to the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (BOC)⁸. The former falls under the authority of the Moscow Patriarchate, while the latter is patroned by the Bucharest Patriarchate, illustrating the divisions induced by

¹ Statistica Moldovei, *Numărul populației cu reședință obișnuită pe sexe și grupe de vârstă la 1 ianuarie 2021*, 12.07.2021., https://statistica.gov.md/ro/numarul-populatiei-cu-resedinta-obisnuita-pe-sexe-si-grupe-de-9578_50073.html (05.03.2024)

² Kanat Makhanov, *Emigrant Moldova and the Changing Concept of Migration*, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/emigrant-moldova-and-the-changing-concept-of-migration/> (05.03.2024.)

³ Ion Marandici, *Nostalgic Voting? Explaining the Electoral Support for the Political Left in Post-Soviet Moldova*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics", Vol. 63, No. 4, pp. 522-536, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.1918565>, (06.03.2024)

⁴ Polina Dvornikova, *Foreign Influence and Disinformation in Moldova*, "The Peace and Security Monitor", August 2023, p. 30, <https://peacehumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-Peace-and-Security-Monitor-SEE-BSR-Issue-9.pdf#page=30>, (06.03.2024)

⁵ Denis Cenușă, *Moldova's handling of Russian disinformation: building new tools and uprooting old patterns*, <https://www.eesc.lt/en/publication/moldovas-handling-of-russian-disinformation-building-new-tools-and-uprooting-old-patterns/> (06.03.2024)

⁶ Todor Galev, *Tackling Russian Propaganda through Investigating Russian Influence in the Media Sector*, 4.12.2018, https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/events_library/files/2018_12/Presentation_Todor_Galev.pdf. (06.03.2024)

⁷ Emily Dumont, Jonathan Solis, Lincoln Zaleski, *Moldova: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Influence Channels*, AidData, 2022, pp. 5-7, <https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/media-resilience/mda/Moldova-Profile-of-Media-Ownership-and-Potential-Foreign-Influence-Channels.pdf>, (19.03.2024)

⁸ Classroom Country Profiles, *Moldova*, <https://jsis.washington.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/moldova.pdf> (06.03.2024)

geopolitical shifts in the region¹. The predominance of the Moldovan Orthodox Church also has contributed to the Kremlin's influence, as Moscow has used religion as a soft power tool and as a connecting link in the post-Soviet near abroad for decades². This is evidenced by Patriarch Kirill's statements claiming that Moldova was a part of the 'Holy Rus', which can be interpreted as the center of the Russian world ('Russkiy Mir')³.

The concept of the Russkiy Mir can be also observed throughout the conflict between the Moldovan and the Bessarabian Orthodox Churches, despite former MOC-leader Metropolitan Vladimir's rather restrained statements on the Russo-Ukrainian war and Moldova's European integration.⁴ Nevertheless, other representatives of the MOC sharply criticized the European Union and the Sandu administration for their preference for 'Western values', including LGBTQ+ rights⁵. The ideology of Russian politics is closely correlating with values of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, evidenced by a statement by the Bishop of Balti suggesting that Russia is a 'defender of Christian values'⁶. This comment implies also the Katechon theory and the presence of Slavic paternalism, which are constituent elements of the Kremlin's foreign policy⁷. The mentioned social factors, complemented by the presence and popularity of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, provide the Russian Federation with a wide range of opportunities for influence, but the activity of pro-Russian parties in the political arena is essential to exploit these.

Implied by the significance of Soviet nostalgia in the Moldovan society, the pro-Russian political ideologies have been represented by the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova in the last decade. Communists were able to form a government between 2001 and 2009, under the presidency of Vladimir Voronin, whose foreign policy was characterized by a more balanced approach. Politico described Voronin as an "opportunistic communist" because he refused to sign the Kozak Memorandum solely due to political pressure from the EU and the United States⁸. Prior to the examined period, the Socialist Party unquestionably dominated the political scene of Moldova. Voronin's attempt of a balanced foreign policy was abandoned by Socialist president Igor Dodon, who came to power in 2016. Dodon opted for a pro-Russian approach, evidenced by his election campaign, which incorporated photos with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Dodon⁹. Prior to the 2020 presidential election, President Dodon faced several scandals, leading to a loss of credibility among his people¹⁰. For instance, in 2019, a recording was published of the incumbent president admitting that his party received approximately 700 thousand to one million dollars as funding from the Kremlin¹¹.

¹ Andrei Soldatov, Irina Borogan, *Putin's Useful Priests*, 14.09.2023., <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-useful-priests-russia-church-influence-campaign> (06.03.2024)

² Martin Solik, Vladimir Baar, *The Russian Orthodox Church: An Effective Religious Instrument of Russia's „Soft” Power Abroad*. The Case Study of Moldova, "Acta Politologica", No 11, 2019, pp. 13-41, <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=802107>, (06.03.2024)

³ *Ibidem*, p. 29

⁴ Paul Goble, *Clash of Moldova's Two Orthodox Churches Complicates Chisinau's Turn to the West*, 17. 08. 2023., <https://jamestown.org/program/clash-of-moldovas-two-orthodox-churches-complicates-chisinaus-turn-to-the-west/> (06.03.2024)

⁵ Anastasia Pociumban, *In Church we trust. The Case of the Moldovan Orthodox Church*, "New Eastern Europe", 2020/5, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/09/07/in-church-we-trust-the-case-of-the-moldovan-orthodox-church/>, (06.03.2024)

⁶ The New York Times, *In Expanding Russian Influence, Faith Combines with Firepower*, 14.09.2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/world/europe/russia-orthodox-church.html?_r=2. (06.03.2024)

⁷ The Katechon theory is based on Russia's self-portrayal as the restrainer of evil (in this case, the so-called 'collective West' and the saviour of Orthodox Christian values. The theory became widespread during the early 2010s, especially after the annexation of the Crimea. The theory is attributed to Alexander Dugin, the ideologue of President Vladimir Putin. See for further information: Maria Engström, *Contemporary Russian Messianism and New Russian Foreign Policy*, "Contemporary Security", Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 356-379

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13523260.2014.965888>, (06. 03. 2024.)

⁸ Alexandru Eftode, *Opportunistic Communist*, 22.07.2009, <https://www.politico.eu/article/opportunistic-communist/> (06.03.2024)

⁹ Galiya Ibragimova, *Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Has Rocked Moldovan Politics*, 09.08.2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90356> (06.03.2024)

¹⁰ Nadja Douglas, *Moldova's presidential election: little trust in the political class*, 04.11.2020., <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/moldovas-presidential-election-little-trust-in-the-political-class> (06.03.2024)

¹¹ Madalin Necsutu, *Moldovan President Probed over 'Illegal Russian Funding' Claim*, 11.06.2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/11/moldovan-president-probed-over-illegal-russian-funding-claim/> (06.03.2024)

What is particularly interesting about the case is that the footage was released by Publika TV, owned by businessman and then-president of the centrist Democratic Party Vlad Plahotniuc, who also appeared on the recording. Plahotniuc's media platforms' licenses, including Publika TV, were withdrawn by the Moldovan government in October 2023 for the dissemination of Russian propaganda¹. The radical decline in Dodon's popularity resulted in his loss in the presidential elections to pro-European Maia Sandu and his arrest in 2022 on charges of treason and corruption². With Dodon's fall from power, Russia was left with no significant agent in Moldova.

During the research period, Moscow considered the Șor Party a major pro-Russian party with large potential³. Its predecessor was established in 1998, but it only gained trust and support in 2016 when former Orhei mayor Ilan Șor took over as president of the party⁴. Șor was born in Israel, but spent most of his childhood and youth in Moldova, acquiring many businesses, including the duty-free shop at the Chișinău airport and several television channels⁵. By the time Șor was promoted to party leader, he had already been under house arrest, named as the prime suspect in the notorious case of 1 billion dollars disappearing from Moldovan banks⁶. Șor left the country without permission in 2017 and fled to Israel, from where he actively organized protests the Sandu administration during the investigated period. Nonetheless, according to Interpol, Șor left Israel in November 2023, and his location has remained unknown since⁷.

Despite Șor being a fugitive, his party actively orchestrated anti-government protests, particularly during the energy and cost-of-living crisis in the fall of 2022. Center for Insights in Survey Research October-November 2022 data suggest that Șor became the fourth most popular politician in Moldova, just a single percent behind President Sandu⁸. The series of protests began in September 2022, when a Șor Party demonstration drew 20,000 people to the streets of Chișinău⁹. The public turmoil continued until June 2023, when the Supreme Court of Moldova banned the party from operating.¹⁰ The activities of the Șor Party, as Cașus notes, were aligned with Russian interests; the demonstrations were often attended by socialist and communist politicians, and protesters blamed the pro-Western administration's foreign policy towards the Russian Federation for the livelihood crisis.¹¹ However, it was revealed that the party's protests were not only aligned with Moscow's objectives but also actively supported by the Kremlin. An investigative report in the Washington Post elucidated that Kremlin strategists had been helping Șor's team to operate since 2021¹². Additionally, the Chance Party, an alliance created by Ilan Șor, received Russian financial support through third-country nationals, according to CEPA¹³. In October 2022,

¹ Chris Dziadul, *Moldova blocks more Russian media outlets*, 31.10.2023, <https://www.broadbandtvnews.com/2023/10/31/moldova-blocks-more-russian-media-outlets/> (06.03.2024.)

² Euronews, *Former Moldovan President Igor Dodon arrested on suspicion of corruption*, 29.05.2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/05/24/igor-dodon-former-moldovan-president-arrested-on-suspicion-of-corruption> (06.03.2024.)

³ Kamil Cașus, *Op. cit.*, p. 14

⁴ Partidul Șor, Party History, <https://partidulsor.com/en/partid/istoria-partidului.html>. (06.03.2024)

⁵ Mark Baker, *Moldova's Mysterious Magnate*, 06.05.2015., <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-mysterious-magnate-ilan-shor-scandal/26998388.html> (06.03.2024)

⁶ Cristi Vlas, *Appeal Court decides that Ilan Șor stays under house arrest*, 05.08.2016., <https://www.moldova.org/en/court-decides-ilan-shor-stays-house-arrest/> (06.03.2024)

⁷ Alexander Tanas, *Fugitive Moldovan magnate has left Israel, Interpol says*, 09.11.2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/fugitive-moldovan-magnate-has-left-israel-interpol-says-2023-11-09/> (06.03.2024)

⁸ Center for Insights in Survey Research, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova – October – November 2022*, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Moldova-Poll_Public-Release.pdf (06.03.2024)

⁹ Alexander Tanas, *Thousands take part in anti-government protests in Moldova*, 18.09.2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-take-part-anti-government-protest-moldova-2022-09-18/> (06.03.2024.)

¹⁰ Redacția Unimedia, *Ultima oră! Partidul Șor, declarat neconstituțional de Înalta Curte*, 19.06.2023, <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/c340c25e978ce8cc/ultima-ora-partidul-sor-declarat-neconstitutional-de-inalta-curte.html> (06.03.2024)

¹¹ Kamil Cașus, *Op. cit.*, p. 13

¹² Catherine Belton, *Russia's security service works to subvert Moldova's pro-Western government*, 28.10.2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/28/russia-fsb-moldova-manipulation/> (06.03.2024)

¹³ Marija Golubeva, *Russia's Hand Seen in Moldovan Local Elections*, 13.11.2023., <https://cepa.org/article/russias-hand-seen-in-moldovan-local-elections/> (06.03.2024)

Moldovan prosecutors found \$233,000 in cash of unknown origin in Șor Party offices, which the party's staff had likely used to pay protesters¹. Although corruption and buying votes are not unknown phenomena in Moldova (locally called 'Grechka'), according to the European Council on Foreign Relations, the level of bribery reached unprecedented proportions in this case².

Thus, summarizing the factors impacting society and politics, the operational environment in the Republic of Moldova has distinctly favorable characteristics for Russian hybrid warfare. These include the nostalgia of an ageing and economically struggling society for Soviet times, and as a result, its receptivity to populist ideologies, the constitutional issues of Gagauzia and Transnistria, and the presence and active contribution of the Moldovan Orthodox Church to Russian influence. However, the Kremlin can only truly exploit these advantages of the operational environment through active political agents, which are embodied by the Șor Party.

The ban on the party and some of Ilan Șor's media outlets in 2023 may curtail its activity in the short term, but it will not solve the country's lack of resilience against Russian social-political hybrid threats in the long run. Additionally, it raises questions that require further research, such as the compatibility between the preservation of democratic pluralism and freedom of expression while defending the sovereignty of a state in the face of acute hybrid threats.

Comprehensive Analysis of Russian Hybrid Operations Against the Republic of Moldova

Considering the investigated aspect of the research period, in the following, the study focuses on the comprehensive assessment of Russian new generation operations against the Republic of Moldova. For this, the six-step methodology by Michael D. Reilly is utilized. It is important to emphasize that Reilly's methodology combines the Clausewitzian Center of Gravity (COG) and Joe Strange's four-pronged analysis, even though the former was developed in the era of conventional warfare. Nonetheless, Reilly argues that if the Center of Gravity is understood as the main effort of the actor, rather than the "source of greatest strength", the theory can be applied to the analysis of non-conventional hybrid operations³.

Identifying observed modalities

Considering the observed events, three of four modalities (conventional warfare, irregular warfare, terrorism, criminal behavior) outlined in the definition by Frank Hoffman, and utilized by Reilly, have been identified. Criminal behavior appeared mainly in the socio-political scene. The illegal funding provided by the Russian Federation to the socialists and communists of Moldova is noteworthy. The first paragraphs of Article 39 of the Moldovan Electoral Code state that parties are prohibited from using financial support by "foreign countries, foreign, international or joint enterprises, institutions, organizations, as well as by individuals who are not citizens of the Republic of Moldova"; which makes the aforementioned funding criminal behavior⁴. Terrorism as a modality was identified during the analysis of the military aspect. Despite the small-scale terrorist attacks in April 2022 being attributed to Ukrainian militants by Tiraspol, Western experts suggested that the events could be interpreted as Russian false-flag operations designed to draw the Transnistrian entity into the war in Ukraine. Transnistria becoming a belligerent party against Ukraine would have served Moscow's interests, especially during the most active phase of fighting in Southern Ukraine.

The third observed modality was irregular warfare. According to a definition by Zoltan Somodi, irregular warfare must be separated from traditional warfare as it seeks to achieve its objectives through the population (using their influence over the political leadership) indirectly, without the need for military utilization of irregular forces⁵. This definition includes, for instance, Moscow obstructing the renewal of the natural gas contract between the Chișinău government and Gazprom, the unilateral radical reduction of gas supplies in October 2022, and even the direct support for the Șor Party demonstrations.

¹ Kamil Cașus, *Op. cit.*, p. 13

² Andrew Wilson, *Democracy under siege: Tackling Russian interference in Moldova*, 08.12.2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/democracy-under-siege-tackling-russian-interference-in-moldova/> (06.03.2024)

³ Michael D. Reilly, *Op. cit.* pp. 88-89

⁴ *Article 39 on Banning foreign subsidies, Electoral Code of the Republic of Moldova*, https://a.cec.md/storage/ckfinder/files/Cod_Electoral_ENG_2020_16_09_2020.pdf, (17.03.2024)

⁵ Zoltan Somodi, *Nem hagyományos hadviselés az országvédelemben*, "Honvédségi Szemle", 2021/1, pp. 16-18, <https://real.mtak.hu/120530/1/SomodiZoltan.pdf>, (14.03.2024)

Therefore, it can be concluded that the Russian Federation only excludes the employment of conventional military force in the case of Moldova. The lack of conventional means is a consequence of the developmental state of the operation, as the Gerasimov model suggests that military force is only utilized for conventional military operations at the end of the third phase and during the fourth and the fifth phases. In this sense, it is evident that the Russian operation in Moldova has not yet reached these phases.

Identifying adversary's assessed objectives and limitations

To identify Moscow's objectives, it is essential to define the role of Moldova in Russian foreign policy, considering historical tendencies and reviewing current geopolitical trends. Elias Götz suggests that the post-Soviet space is of great importance for Russia, due to both internal and international political interests.¹ Russian foreign policy towards Moldova can be exclusively interpreted in this context, as Moscow considers the country an essential part of the Near Abroad². In this sense, maintaining control over the Near Abroad must be considered one of Russia's main goals, as it is a fundamental determinant of Moscow's regional and great power policy.

The preservation of Russian dominance can be achieved through a wide range of instruments; therefore, historical experience must be considered to decode the playbook envisaged by the Kremlin. One of the most effective means of exerting pressure on Moldova has been the issue of Transnistrian separatism. In this case, Moscow occupies an advantageous position; as boots of the 14th Russian Army (now known as the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria – OGRF) remained on the ground, it can pressure the Moldovan and the Transnistrian leaderships, while cornering the international community into a situation where it must accept that without the Federation, the issue cannot be resolved. This is evidenced by the Kremlin's presence during all attempts to alter the status quo, including the 1998 Odessa Agreement³ and the 1999 Kyiv Agreement⁴. From a historical perspective, Russia's objectives for Moldova are best represented by the 2002 Kozak Memorandum, which proposed a federal transformation of the country, with a de facto veto right for Transnistria and Gagauzia. The federalization would ensure the Kremlin's long-term influence over Chișinău in a sustainable and low-cost way, as both Transnistria and Gagauzia are considered pro-Russian actors in the region.

The advantageous character of federative solution for Russia is evidenced by the geopolitical situation during the period under review. Given that Russian foreign policy has been determined by the war in Ukraine since February 24, 2022, Moscow is not able to devote an infinite number of forces to operations in Moldova. As a result, deploying additional forces to the 14th Russian Army would be counterproductive not only from an international legal viewpoint but also in terms of resources. The economic effectiveness of further deployments for Russia is also reduced by the lack of a direct border with Moldova, making the integration of the territory into Russia much harder. The latter would be rather inconvenient for Russia anyway as it would create a new NATO-Russia border in the western part of what is now called Moldova. In this context, Moscow's main objective is to maximize its control over the political leadership in Chișinău, which can be achieved in the short term by bringing a pro-Russian president to power, and in the long term by a federal transformation of the country. This would prevent Moldova's further re-approachment with the West and promote the development and stabilization of Chișinău's pro-Russian orientation.

Several factors limit Moscow's ability to fulfill these objectives. For instance, Mary Glantz suggests that the Russian Federation has to face many long-term problems at the military, economic, and even social levels because of the 2022 invasion⁵. In addition to the internal challenges, the aggression against Ukraine has also had

¹ Elias Götz, *Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia*, "Europe-Asia Studies", Vol. 74, No. 9, pp. 1529-1550, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2133086> (17.03.2024)

² Octavian Țicu, *Moldova Between the Near Abroad Policy of the Russian Federation and the Neighbourhood Policy of the European Union*, "Eurolimes", 2008/6, pp. 160-167, <https://eds.p.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=3c9cbb5d-bb9a-4482-b749-c6df7b5a5d47%40redis> (17.03.2024)

³ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Agreement on Confidence Measures and Development of Contacts between the Republic of Moldova and Transdniestria*, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/d/42310.pdf> (17.03.2024)

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, *Joint statement of Participants in the Kiev Meeting* <https://mid.gospmr.org/en/FBs>, (17.03.2024)

⁵ USIP, *Ukraine war takes toll on Russia*, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/03/ukraine-war-takes-toll-russia> (17.03.2024)

negative consequences for Russia's position in the international arena, as Moscow's diplomatic isolation and the spotlight on its military shortcomings have significantly damaged the Russian great power reputation¹. All the above contribute to the Kremlin's diminishing capability to project force, which is essential for maintaining its influence over the Republic of Moldova. Maia Sandu's Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) also represents an obstacle for Moscow. The Sandu administration is the flagship of the country's European integration efforts, resulting serious efforts to combat Russian hybrid operations. For instance, Chişinău has reduced its dependence on Russian natural gas and has also managed to limit the activities of Russian agents such as the Şor Party during the examination period.

In conclusion, Moscow's primary goal is to build and maintain its influence over Moldova, thus preventing the country's integration with the West. This objective is highly affected by the resource demands of the war in Ukraine and its impact on Moscow's force projection ability, while also being constrained by the leverage of Western-oriented political forces led by Sandu.

Identifying critical capabilities

The political nature of the identified Russian objective makes control over pro-Russian political forces in Moldova a primary critical capability for Moscow. During the investigated period, Moscow mobilized its resources to gain full oversight of these forces; communists, socialists, and even the the Şor Party depended heavily on financial support from the Kremlin for their survival and thus operated in accordance with its interests. This worked equally well for the autonomous Gagauzia, as both former leader Irina Vlah (socialist, then independent) and current bashkan Evghenia Gutul (Şor Party) explicitly governed the territory in favor of Moscow. Paradoxically, Transnistria's position was questionable regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war, despite the separatist entity's high dependence on Russia².

The second most significant critical element of Russian hybrid operations is the Kremlin's capability to maintain their economic influence over Moldova. This is especially relevant for the energy sector, considering that during the first half of the examined period, the energy crisis caused a decrease in the living standards of society, resulting in growing discontent against the current government. Despite Chişinău's successful energy diversification policy, the electricity supply remains a tool of blackmail for Moscow, via the Cuciurgan powerplant in Transnistrian territory.

Another key factor is Russian strategic communication towards Moldovan society. Media outlets with Russian connections or under direct control of the Kremlin, and even the Moscow-patroned Moldavian Orthodox Church, provide tools for the Russian Federation to influence social discourse in the Republic of Moldova.

Finally, military capabilities must be highlighted. Russian boots on Transnistrian ground deter the Chişinău government and its allies from attempting to alter the status quo by force and compel Tiraspol to prioritize Moscow's interests even before its own. Despite the Gerasimov doctrine suggesting that non-military means are four times more important than conventional military tools, their presence in the model cannot be neglected. Even though the identified modalities indicate that Russian operations against Moldova did not involve the conventional utilization of military force during the research period, the presence of the 14th Russian army is the guarantor of Moscow's interests being considered in the region.

Identifying the Center of Gravity

The identification of the used modalities clearly demonstrated that irregular elements were predominant in the examined Russian hybrid operation against Moldova; this study considers them the primary modality, namely the Clausewitzian Center of Gravity. However, within the category of irregular warfare, a shift could be observed as the investigated operation progressed. During the first half of the period under review, economic tools, including gas supply-related events, were prevalent, while later, political means like supporting the Şor Party took over. There is a direct link between economic and political elements making this shift possible, evidenced by the Şor Party's high dependence on the social discontent resulting from high energy prices and the cost-of-living crisis.

The secondary modalities, namely criminal behavior and terrorism were mainly intended to support the primary modality. This was obvious in the case of criminal behavior, while terrorist acts, such as the Tiraspol bombings, served indirectly to maintain Moscow's aforementioned critical capabilities, including the control over

¹ Janko Šćepanović, *Still a great power? Russia's status dilemmas post-Ukraine war*, "Journal of Contemporary European Studies", Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 88-95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2193878>, (17.03.2024)

² Shaun D. Foster, *Op. cit.*, pp. 1-15

pro-Russian political forces and Transnistria. Alongside identifying the evolution of the Center of Gravity, it can be concluded that – in terms of the Gerasimov model – operations against Moldova reached the stage of the third phase during the investigated period, as no military force had been used so far but the activity of the political opposition had reached the level of the initial conflict.

Identifying critical requirements

Critical requirements encompass the factors without which operations against the Republic of Moldova would not be feasible. They largely derive from the status quo in Moldova. Since the primary modus operandi of the Russian Federation irregular warfare was focused on social pressure during the period under review, the factors that provide Moscow with a critical advantage should not be ignored. These include the observed social divisions, as their absence would make the revival of the political opposition much more costly for the Kremlin. This is closely linked with the receptiveness of some Moldovan social groups to Russian ideology, particularly the issue of the ‘Russkiy Mir’. Another significant requirement is Moscow’s authority over the Moldovan Orthodox Church, offering the Kremlin an irreplaceable network for conducting certain disinformation campaigns. Additionally, the Russian presence in the Moldovan information space is also a critical requirement for Moscow’s hybrid operations.

Given the significant predominance of economic warfare during the first half of the investigated period, Russia’s role in Moldova’s energy supply security and the Moldovan economy is also a critical requirement. This was evidenced by Russia’s embargo policy prior to 2021 and by the gas supply issues between 2021 and 2023. In this respect, the willingness of Gagauzia and Transnistria to cooperate is of particular importance, as the latter plays a key role in Moldova’s electricity supply, which the Russian Federation may utilize to exert decisive pressure on Chişinău, even in the absence of natural gas dependence.

Gagauzia’s and Transnistria’s collaborative stance towards Russia remains an important factor as well. These territories play a cardinal role in the subsequent phases of the hybrid operation, especially in consolidating any gains that Moscow may make, including the federalization of Moldova. Moreover, the PMR, and especially the Transnistrian conflict provide an essential international legal basis for the presence of some of the Russian troops deployed in the pseudo-state.

Finally, the existence of pro-Russian parties in Moldova and their willingness to cooperate with Moscow must be highlighted, as their activities were the essence of the main modality during the second half of the period under review.

Identifying critical vulnerabilities

Critical requirements identified earlier are also critical vulnerabilities of the operation structure. In the following, the study summarises these elements.

Moscow’s role in Moldova’s energy supply has several weaknesses, evidenced by the success of Chişinău’s energy diversification measures¹. Although the country has not yet achieved full independence from Russian energy supplies due to the aforementioned issue of electricity supplies from Transnistria, Moscow’s options have been significantly reduced. For its ability to blackmail Chişinău with energy supplies, Moscow must exert pressure on the Transnistrian entity, which is another uncertain element of the operation.

The problem of control over Tiraspol is another vulnerability. Although the presence of Russian troops is meant to ensure the Transnistrian government’s obedience to Russian interests, Tiraspol’s attitude towards the invasion of Ukraine was not satisfactory to Moscow, raising questions about the PMR’s loyalty. Nevertheless, the Transnistrian leadership has little room for maneuver, given its high economic dependence on the Russian Federation. Still, the observed trends do not rule out the possibility of Transnistria taking independent actions, making it a point of vulnerability to Russian hybrid operations.

The presence of pro-Moscow political forces was central to the Russian operations during the second half of the examined period, yet it has become another uncertain factor. Although the Kremlin was able to restructure the political forces representing its interests by preferring the Şor Party after the fall of socialists and communists, Moscow faced a significant problem when the Şor Party was banned in 2023.

Chişinău’s measures to limit Russian influence pose a serious risk to hybrid operations, especially in the information space. The Sandu administration not only banned the Şor Party but also several media platforms owned

¹ Euractiv, *Moldova no longer needs Russian gas*, minister says, 16.03.2023., <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/moldova-no-longer-needs-russian-gas-minister-says/> (17.03.2024)

by Ilan Șor and his circle, which greatly contributed to the party's political popularity and Russian influence. The Moldovan government's actions against these media outlets took place at the end of the examined period, so their full impact requires further investigation. Nonetheless, it has been demonstrated that the Sandu Administration can exercise a certain degree of control over the Moldovan media environment, which could force the evolution of Russian operations on a different course in the future¹. Altogether, the critical vulnerabilities are evidenced to occur in the same areas as the critical requirements, indicating the instability of Russian hybrid operations against the Republic of Moldova.

| | | |
|----|---|--|
| 1. | Identifying observed modalities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Irregular warfare: Russian gas supplies to Moldova, activity of pro-Russian parties - Criminal behavior: illegal funding of pro-Russian parties - Terrorism: bombings in Tiraspol |
| 2. | Identifying adversary's assessed objectives and limitations | <p>Moscow's primary objective is to develop and maintain its influence over the political leadership of Moldova.</p> <p>This is constrained by the Kremlin's diminished ability of force projection due to the war in Ukraine and the measures taken by the ruling Moldovan government.</p> |
| 3. | Identifying critical capabilities | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The ability to control pro-Russian political forces 2. The ability to blackmail and exert pressure on the Moldovan government 3. The ability to influence the society of Moldova 4. The ability to maintain military superiority over Moldova |
| 4. | Identifying the Center of Gravity | The primary modality was irregular warfare. The first half of the examined period was dominated by economic warfare, while during the second half, actions of pro-Russian political parties were prevalent. |
| 5. | Identifying critical requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social division, receptiveness to Russian ideology within the Moldovan society - Russia's role in the energy supply of Moldova - Transnistria's and Gagauzia's willingness to cooperate with Moscow - The presence of pro-Russian political parties and their willingness to cooperate with the Kremlin |
| 6. | Identifying critical vulnerabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Chișinău's measures to diversify energy resources - Transnistrian attitudes towards the war in Ukraine - Chișinău's measures to combat Russian influence in the country, including the ban of the Șor Party and pro-Russian media outlets |

Table 1. Center of Gravity analysis of Russian hybrid operations in the Republic of Moldova²

Conclusions

Regarding the elements of Russian hybrid warfare, the case of Moldova incorporated non-military and military components, mostly found in the first phases of the Gerasimov model. These include the formation of the political opposition (in this case, the Șor Party) and their activities, certain economic sanctions (such as Russia's unilateral reduction of gas supplies to Moldova), political and diplomatic pressure (whether through Transnistria or Gagauzia), and strategic deterrence (via the presence of the 14th Russian Army in Transnistria). On this basis, it can be stated that the Russian operation reached the beginning of the third phase of the Gerasimov model by the end of the period under review.

Additionally, it should not be neglected that the Gerasimov model is mainly focused on the actions of the aggressor, rather than the elements of the strategic environment. In this context, it should therefore be stressed that the operational space represented by Moldova has social and economic qualities that greatly facilitate Russian

¹ Alexander Tanas, *Moldova bans pro-Russian Șor party after months of protests*, 19.06.2023., <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-bans-pro-russian-shor-party-after-months-protests-2023-06-19/> (17.03.2024)

² Based on the author's research

penetration. Due to these characteristics, it is particularly difficult for the Moldovan government to develop social and economic resilience against Moscow's hybrid operations.

Regarding an outlook for Russian hybrid operations in the country, Moscow must decide whether it aims to escalate the situation. Taking the operation to the next level would provoke a large-scale escalation, as the next stages of the already ongoing third phase require the conventional use of military force. In this sense, the resource demands of the Russo-Ukrainian war should not be overlooked, which greatly reduce the Kremlin's ability to mobilize, making success doubtful¹. The establishment of unquestionable military superiority was previously envisaged by combining forces in Southern Ukraine and Moldova, but once the eastern parts of Ukraine became primary in Russian strategy, the previously mentioned scenario was unable to materialize.

At the same time, an open offensive against Moldova would not only be disadvantageous for Moscow in terms of resources. Just like the invasion of Ukraine, an operation to take over Moldova could instantly become part of Moscow's domestic political agenda, which would risk losing face for President Vladimir Putin, who was ahead of presidential elections at the end of the examination period. As a result, it can be argued that the use of conventional military forces in Moldova could, if successful, bring rapid and large-scale profits for the Kremlin, as absolute control over Moldovan political leadership could prevent the country from drifting westwards.

In contrast, Moscow can continue to weaken Moldova by hybrid means while maintaining the current status quo. In this case, by using tools that fit the Gerasimov model and by exploiting social and economic characteristics of the operational environment, the Russian Federation can preserve its position in Moldova and begin to address the weaknesses that emerged at the end of the investigated period. The most important of these drawbacks is the loss of its most important agent, the Sor Party. Consequently, the Kremlin needs to seek or create a new political satellite, as has happened after the failure of the communist and socialist political forces. The presence of pro-Russian political forces is practically the center and genesis of the hybrid instruments utilized by Moscow, without which the full control over Moldova cannot be achieved. The importance of this is further enhanced by Moldova being on the verge of municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections at the end of the investigated period, which provides the Russian Federation with an opportunity to further increase its influence over the country. Maintaining the status quo thus requires a slow and systematic continuation of Moscow's actions to achieve the outlined objectives, which spares Russia the consequences of the risks of the escalation scenario. At the same time, it is uncertain whether the Kremlin will be able to avoid the effects of the measures introduced by the Sandu administration and the implications of the war in Ukraine, as the time is running out and Chişinău moves closer to EU accession day by day.

In conclusion, the research findings outlined in this study suggest that the Russian Federation had an ongoing hybrid operation in the Republic of Moldova between October 2021 and October 2023. This operation has reached the beginning of the third phase of the Gerasimov model. As for Moscow's further options, I have concluded that the Kremlin is forced to decide whether to take a great risk and escalate the situation in Moldova, or preserve the status quo, despite the country's European aspirations.

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¹ Dan White, *Ukraine Can Win a War of Attrition*, 25.01.2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraine-can-win-war-attrition> (17.03.2024)

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