POLICY BRIEF

THE NEXT WAR: HOW RUSSIAN HYBRID AGGRESSION COULD THREATEN MOLDOVA

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SUMMARY

- Russia could target Moldova by embarking on a limited-scope but overt military invasion; or by pursuing more covert hybrid aggression scenarios.

- The three most plausible Russian aggression scenarios are: a military action launched from Transnistria; a local, elite-focused rebellion similar to Russia's exploits in Donbas in 2014, likely centring on the Moldovan region of Gagauzia; and popular unrest stoked by Russia and containing violent elements.

- The EU and Moldova underestimate the risk of one or more of these happening.

- The EU's preferred "resilience" approach to hybrid threats lacks an active component that can effectively respond to, and repel, Russian aggression.

- Moldova should draw on Western support to implement an "active resilience" policy to better confront and undermine Russian actions.

- The EU should set up a CSDP mission in Moldova comprising both civilian and military components that helps the Moldovan authorities plan and conduct security threat assessments and protect against military and hybrid risks.

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted policymakers in the region and beyond to examine the chances of Moscow embarking on a similar action elsewhere in the neighbourhood. High on the list of at-risk states is Moldova.

As a former Soviet republic, Moldova regularly finds itself subject to senior Russian figures' suggestions that the country lies within Russia's supposed "sphere of influence". Despite this, Western policymakers and Moldovan officials alike currently underestimate the likelihood of Russian action. This paper describes potential scenarios of Russian aggression in Moldova. It demonstrates that Russia not only intends to undermine the Moldovan state but also that it has the capabilities to do so. The paper sets out three scenarios that Russia could pursue. The first involves a military invasion from Transnistria, with Moscow drawing on the presence on Moldova's territory of Russian and Transnistrian troops. The second and third scenarios, or variants thereof, would play out below the threshold of conventional war but still meet the Kremlin's goal of incapacitating the Moldovan state or even acquiring partial or full control of it.

Russia has numerous openings to exploit in Moldova. The country has long been caught between pursuing greater integration with the European Union, on the one hand, and political elements, on the other, that are keeping the country under Russian influence (and which have some popular support). Moldova's recently acquired EU candidate status may encourage Russia to jumpstart a train of events, perhaps in the name of "protecting" local minorities. Another difficult factor lies in current social conditions in Moldova, with high inflation affecting vulnerable parts of the population. And Moscow has already used gas supplies as a tool to cause problems for Chisinau. Indeed, it is yet to push this issue as much as it could do, with a risk to the Moldovan authorities of heightened social tensions if prices soar further. Moscow also has an opening in the form of Moldova's existing major exposure to Russian influence operations through traditional and social media.

With war raging next door – still, according to the Kremlin, proceeding as a "special operation" – Moldova can neither look on Ukraine as a convenient buffer nor rely on its future military success. Chisinau can best retain its control of Moldovan territory by rapidly upgrading the EU's preferred hybrid threat approach, which focuses on "resilience," to an "active resilience" response. It should work with Western partners to add new, more combative components to its defences.

Policymakers need to understand the logic guiding Russian decision-making on states such as Moldova and take steps accordingly. A good first move would be for the EU to establish, on

Moldovan territory, a long-term assistance force under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This mission should work quickly to assess the failings in Ukraine that emboldened Russia to invade and implement these lessons in Moldova, with the accompanying funding and political support to provide a true deterrent.

The Russian threat to Moldova

Current debates over the risk to Moldova – both inside the country and among its Western partners – have so far largely concluded that the risk of Russian aggression is minimal. During this year's NATO summit in Madrid, the alliance's deputy secretary general, Mircea Geoana, insisted on calm because the Russian military was unable to form a land bridge to Moldova from positions in Ukraine. Moldova's top public officials have also voiced similar conclusions since the start of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The country's president, Maia Sandu, has said there is little indication of a military threat from Russia. Her prime minister, Natalia Gavrilita, has even suggested that Moldova's neutrality should be enough to forestall a Russian invasion.

However, observers should set to one side the question of whether Russia could build a land bridge and focus instead on the Kremlin's other options. If Russia should decide to acquire control over Moldova – including indirect control, or stymying its governing institutions so that they are effectively unable to take sovereign decisions in contradiction to Russia's wishes – then it will pursue any and all means to reach these ends. Indeed, Russia's patchy progress in Ukraine reduces the likelihood of a full-scale military invasion of Moldova through the Odesa region, making it even more important to understand what else it could do.

Recent history is instructive here. While Russia's current open military aggression against Ukraine may consist of 90 per cent kinetic or military activities and only 10 per cent information operations, its annexation of Crimea in 2014 shows that Moscow is able to slide along a spectrum of options; before the eventual takeover, its Crimea action comprised in essence some 90 per cent information operations and 10 per cent kinetic or military activities. But both routes have paid Moscow similar dividends in the form of territorial losses for Ukraine and difficulty for Kyiv in carrying out its governing functions. For Moldova, Russian actions that fall short of all-out invasion could prove just as disastrous, because their ends are identical: to control Moldova's territory, policies, or both

To understand the risk to Moldova, it is worth considering whether Russia has an intention and the capabilities to launch an action. If its intention is real and Russian capabilities are adequate to the task, the risk is likely to be significant.

Intention: Would Russia initiate an attack on Moldova?

Many Russian officials' statements on Moldova echo the views they articulated about Ukraine both prior to and since the 2022 invasion. For instance, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, recently suggested that Moldovan authorities are anti-Russian and are attempting to 'cancel all that is Russian'. This came in response to attempts by Chisinau to curb Russian influence operations conducted through the mass media in Moldova.

Even while the Russian president's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said that Moldova's receipt of EU candidate status constitutes "internal European affairs", he also subtly suggested that the Kremlin views this step as "anti-Russian". The deputy chair of Russia's Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, went further, comparing Moldova's EU integration with being "swallowed up" by Romania. In the context of Moldova, this is a highly charged statement: in the 1990s, Russia triggered the violent stage of the Transnistrian conflict by warning of possible unification between Moldova and Romania, sounding the alarm over the alleged resulting danger for local Russian speakers. Recently, even the former head of the Carnegie Moscow Center think-tank Dmitri Trenin – now of hawkish pro-Kremlin views – said that Russia would likely annex Transnistria (and the region of Gagauzia) if it were to acquire control over Ukraine's Odesa region. And, during the decades of negotiations that have taken place over the conflict, Russia aggressively forced on Moldova the conditions that would dictate that Transnistria and Gagauzia should become independent "if Moldova loses its sovereignty".

Together, such statements from senior Russian officials and commentators exemplify the key "grievances" that Russia has voiced as justification for its war on Ukraine: threats to Russian speakers and their rights; the "loss of sovereignty" of former Soviet states derived from integration into the EU or NATO; and a state becoming "anti-Russian". Any of these could form a *casus belli* for a Russian intervention in Moldova.

Capabilities: Could Russia attack – and could Moldova defend itself?

One of the main reasons leading policymakers believe the risk of an overt Russian military threat to Moldova is low is because they have assessed Russia's capabilities to be inadequate. They have also long regarded Ukrainian territory as insulation from such threats. Placed together with the expectation that Russia is unable to take Ukraine's Odesa region, this has led to an underestimation of the danger.

These judgments may be correct contextually, on their own terms, but Russia has forces

stationed on Moldovan territory, in Transnistria, which have the latest Russian equipment. Sources in Moldovan government agencies suggest that even the military troops under the formal command of the Kremlin's local proxy – the Transnistrian "authorities" – have acquired Russian equipment and are de facto integrated into Russia's military structures. And, since Moscow began its aggression in Ukraine in 2014, these sources also suggest that the number of military activities in Transnistria – involving the Russian forces, the local armed structures, or both – has increased from 30 per year to over 300 per year. These have also been conducting more frequent and more effective live-fire exercises. Civil society experts in Moldova have sought to monitor Russian military activities and have corroborated these growing military training trends. Sources in the Moldovan government confirmed this evolution and have suggested the figure is in fact more than 300 a year.

In addition, Moldova's military forces are relatively small, estimated at roughly 3,000 military personnel, who are inadequately trained and poorly equipped. Even though the ministry of interior's Carabineri troops are officially designated as part of the country's defence capabilities, they are unsuitable for combat operations. Carabineri units protect government installations, maintain public order, and ensure public safety. They are not trained to engage in lethal combat with enemy armed forces. Furthermore, the Moldovan defence ministry has recently acknowledged that its forces are equipped with hardware largely produced between the 1960s and 1980s. And, in terms of training, the Moldovan military rotates just a few small units into various NATO Partnership for Peace exercises. The bulk of its troops typically fire just a handful of live ammunition rounds during the whole duration of conscripts' year-long military service.

With the troops it controls on Moldova's territory, and given the current state of the Moldovan armed forces, Russia could use even limited military means to disrupt Moldova as a functioning state. Despite this, it should still be possible for the Moldovan armed forces to improve their combat capabilities and effectively resist a military threat originating from Transnistria.

Scenarios of Russian aggression

Russia has already shown it can implement strategies other than overt military aggression that allow it to achieve control of foreign territory or centres of power. The Russian operations in Donbas and Crimea are examples of 'hybrid war', with the outcome being Ukraine's loss of administrative and political control over these territories. An act of aggression can be successful even if not driven by overt, full-scale military attacks, although some form of armed component (or violence) is still important if the act is to succeed. It is

difficult to conquer the territory of a country or to force it to change key policies merely by conducting cyber-attacks or by interfering in elections.

Beyond the pursuit of all-out military invasion, Russia's available toolbox in Moldova includes the following options.

- **A limited military invasion**. Russia launches this from within Moldova's territory – from the region of Transnistria, which it controls – potentially with some long-range military support from Crimea or its Black Sea fleet. It follows this up by installing a de facto military administration in Chisinau and eventually conducts fake elections to claim popular legitimacy for a regime in Moldova loyal to Russia.

- **Hybrid action 1: An elite-focused rebellion**. Moscow inserts agents to stoke local unrest either in support of Russia-loyal local authorities in a region such as Gagauzia (which already shows signs of rejecting the authority of Chisinau) or to support local pro-Russian elites (such as political figures that may not currently be in charge locally) to replace regional leaders loyal to Chisinau. Meanwhile, Russia organises violent groups to pose as local militia and take control of regional administrative functions, including forcing out Moldova's law enforcement agencies, with the subsequent formation of an armed local 'popular guard' to protect the new status quo.

- **Hybrid action 2: Popular unrest**. An issue such as an election or gas prices generates protests in Chisinau or in towns close to Transnistria and Gagauzia. Small groups of Russian operatives mix with the demonstrators, attacking both sides and provoking clashes between the protesters and Moldova's law enforcement agencies, resulting in casualties. A possible end point for this hybrid action is when a local Russian political proxy – such as the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova – requests the armed 'protection' of the Russian government.

Each scenario contains a target vulnerable to Russian aggression in Moldova: territory, political elites, and the population. These together also represent three key pillars of national sovereignty. By this logic, hybrid aggression that attempts to undermine one or more of these pillars is an attempt to destroy or undermine a target country's sovereignty. This makes these aggression scenarios comparable in effect to open military aggression. Policymakers concerned with deterring Russian aggression in Moldova should consider these scenarios and how best to respond to them – indeed, how to ward them off in the first place.

Russian aggression scenarios in Moldova

A limited military invasion
Territorial invasion

Stages:
• Russian and Russian-backed forces in Transnistria create strike groups
• Strike groups either: seize locations near Transnistria; seize Gagauzia; or march on the capital
• The invading force installs a military administration, replacing the government
• New authorities conduct fake elections to claim popular legitimacy for a regime loyal to Russia
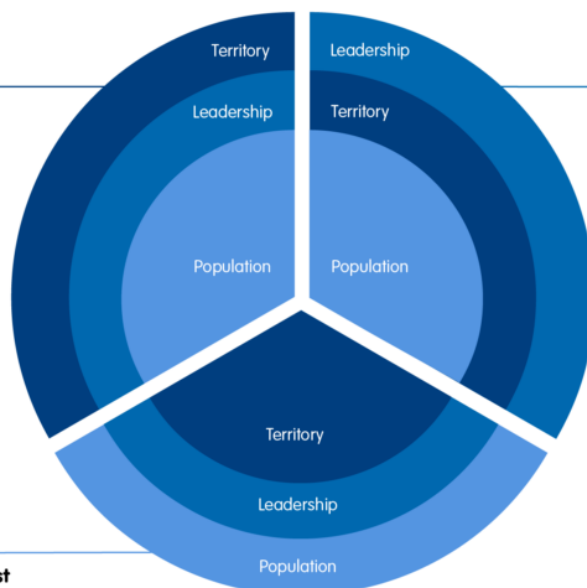
Hybrid action 1:
An elite-focused rebellion
Leadership capture

Stages:
• Local elites reject the authority of Chisinau
• Russia inserts agents to support the local Russian proxy and stoke local unrest
• Violent groups (possibly armed) pose as local militia and take control of regional administrative functions, including forcing out Moldovan law enforcement
• A local 'popular guard' forms, providing the Russian armed groups (special forces) with cover.
This now-overt armed force aims to deter counterattacks and defend the new status quo

(Concentric circle diagram showing three segments, each with bands labelled: Territory, Leadership, Population)

Hybrid action 2: Popular unrest
Using the population as a tool

Stages:
• A Russian proxy in Moldova organises small protests in the capital, whether on elections, economic conditions, or another matter
• The protests grow due to mobilisation by the proxy and Russian-backed groups, and by people being brought in from Transnistria or other pro-Russian regions
• Small groups of operatives mix with the protesters, attacking both sides and provoking clashes between the protesters and law enforcement
• These operatives damage property, attack government buildings, and/or create casualties
• The local Russian proxy requests the "protection" of the Russian government

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A limited military invasion

Given that Russia would not necessarily need to mount a large-scale invasion to meet its goals in Moldova, it could pursue a military attack that is narrower in scope and use troops based in the country. The Kremlin may commence such a scenario with a limited aim of taking territory close to Transnistria, seizing the Gagauzia region, or even marching on the capital. At this point, options for Russia could include replacing the civilian government with a local Russian proxy backed by the Russian military, followed by conducting falsified elections that provide a veneer of legitimacy to the new authorities.

It is not too hard to picture how such a scenario may begin. In fact, it already made the press this year – albeit in a "newspaper from the future", as local Moldovan media came to dub it.

On 2 May 2022, the *Pridnestrovie* newspaper, published by the Transnistrian 'authorities', reported on "bloody terrorist attacks against the region during the May holidays" that claimed "dozens of dead and hundreds wounded". The edition also included "the Transnistrian people's" appeal to President Vladimir Putin to employ the "Transnistrian armed forces in

assisting the response of the Russia's Army to eliminate the Nazi threat". The newspaper assigned the blame for the "attacks" to the Ukrainian armed forces, which "had NATO support". It also alleged that the Moldovan authorities had provided the coordinates of targets, including of civilian infrastructure.

Yet that story appeared online on 30 April. The newspaper's editor denied involvement and said it was a fake. On top of this, a few days earlier the Transnistrian 'authorities' had cancelled the annual 9 May Victory Day military parade, citing security reasons – an unprecedented move for a symbolically important event. All this was preceded by: an attack using portable rocket-propelled grenade launchers on the KGB office in Tiraspol, Transnistria's main city; and by an explosion next to two major Soviet-era Russian radio towers. These incidents caused minimal casualties and looked suspiciously like false-flag operations.

There are two likely explanations for the fake-news invasion and the real (if limited) attacks. The first is that Moscow intended to implement the scenario as described by the newspaper story during the 9 May parade in Tiraspol, using the attacks to justify a military invasion of Moldova. The obstacles to this option were likely the earlier failure of the Russian amphibious operation in the Odesa region (which, if successful, could have facilitated the land-bridge option), and perhaps also opposition from local elites in Transnistria. If the latter was the case, local elites may have pre-emptively leaked the story in an attempt to avoid war and preserve their economic interests. The fact that the Tiraspol 'authorities' cancelled the parade suggests a wish to avoid the fabrication of a pretext for intervention. That being said, in reality, if Russia were serious about implementing this scenario, local elites would be unable to block it.

The second possibility is that Russia deliberately allowed the story to be published, using it to pressure the Moldovan government. The Russian military presence in Transnistria makes the Ukrainian authorities uneasy, and around that time had led them to suggest that Chisinau could accept Kyiv's military assistance to recover its administrative control over the region and push the Russians out. On this reading, Russia's goal was to intimidate the Moldovan authorities into rejecting Ukraine's proposals.

Nevertheless, the story's mere appearance suggests that – as in Ukraine – Russia has no need for any genuine, or even genuine-looking, *casus belli*. A targeted action using Russian troops, Transnistrian troops, or in all likelihood both together is fully within the bounds of possibility for the Kremlin. And, given the parlous state of the Moldovan armed forces, Moscow could easily achieve its key objectives. As in Ukraine, NATO troops are unlikely to enter Moldova to support Chisinau. It is also impossible to discount the use of long-range missile strikes from

Russia, occupied Crimea, or Belarusian territory in support of such an operation, whether to attack military units and destroy military installations or merely to cow the Moldovan authorities.

Any future "appeal from the Transnistrian people" (or from Gagauzia) could therefore mark the start of a potentially limited but rapid Russian military intervention launched from within Moldova and threatening the integrity of the state.

Hybrid action 1: An elite-focused rebellion

No "newspapers from the future" are needed to understand the hybrid options Russia may pursue in Moldova. When armed fighters took over Crimea and Donbas, observers in Ukraine and abroad looked on in astonishment as these groups seized government buildings and replaced the local Ukrainian authorities. But these observers had failed to understand the logic that guided Moscow's choices, including its use of tools of aggression.

A more detailed look at the Russian action in Donbas offers a good illustration of how Moscow may pursue a hybrid aggression strategy. Before Russia sent its own armed forces into Ukraine to stop Kyiv's military attempt to recover its control of Donbas in the second half of 2014, its operation comprised three stages, which can serve as a guide.

The initial stage is to use local agents, or to place groups on the ground, to trigger civil unrest against the central government. In some parts of Donbas this operational element was implemented with the support of local authorities or political forces loyal to Russia. The apparently internal nature of the conflict is a critical element for operating below the threshold of war; following Ukraine's April 2014 presidential election, the new authorities in Kyiv were unsure how to respond. Deploying armed forces may not necessarily quell a genuine regional rebellion, but only armed forces can be effective against a foreign aggression camouflaged as internal, civil conflict. (The geography factor also matters – the smaller the target territory, the fewer troops or armed groups an aggressor needs to establish effective administrative control.)

The second stage is to put pressure on and intimidate any recalcitrant local authorities and law enforcement agencies to either leave the contested territory or switch sides. This is the stage when the aggressor takes control of government buildings and installs its own 'authorities', removing incumbent elites and office-holders, and building local legitimacy for the transfer of power to the local proxies.

The final stage is to make observable the armed groups that played a critical role in forcing law enforcement agencies out of the contested territory. The aggressor may ensure these

groups are, for example, seen on camera so that central authorities know they are facing an armed resistance. This last stage plays a strong deterrent role, since it consolidates the new status quo, which is then difficult and costly to reverse. The Transnistrian conflict in the late 1980s and early 1990s roughly followed a conceptually similar version of this model.

Such hybrid operations permit Russia to undermine one of the three elements of the target state's national sovereignty: political control exercised via local governing elites. The armed component secures the gains of the new status quo. Indeed, this plays a critical role in separating success from failure: Russia's 2014 attempts to repeat its Luhansk- and Donetsk-style successes in Kharkiv and Odesa failed because it had not ensured the deployment of an armed component. Therefore, while it is true that Moldova is likely to experience a form of Russian aggression that is below the threshold of conventional war, it is also highly probable that Russia will combine this with an armed component to protect the new facts on the ground.

In Moldova, Russia could repeat variations of its Crimea or Donbas operations, centring on the Gagauzia region in particular, but also other Russian-speaking areas of the country. (Such a scenario would not apply to Transnistria, since Russia already effectively controls that region.)

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia lies in the south of Moldova. It is largely inhabited by ethnic Gagauz, who make up 82 per cent of the region's 150,000 people and represent over 4 per cent of the total population of Moldova. Gagauzia is preponderantly pro-Russian, which election results demonstrate. As an illustration, in Moldova's 2020 presidential election, more than 94 per cent of the region's electorate voted for the Russian-backed Igor Dodon, while only slightly more than 5 per cent supported Sandu.

Gagauzia's regional parliament (the People's Assembly) has repeatedly contested the authority of the central government in Chisinau. Among the most serious recent challenges were repeated votes by the assembly to cancel the effects of a bill passed by the Moldovan parliament in April 2022. That law banned the use of symbols of Russian aggression, including the black-and-orange ribbon and the "Z" and "V" symbols. Nevertheless, the Gagauzia assembly voted to permit the use of the ribbon for the 9 May celebrations, referring to it as a "symbol of victory". In this way it intentionally broke Moldovan law. Following the suspension of this decision by a local court of appeal, the Gagauz legislators met in an "urgent session" on the night of 8 May and voted again to approve the use of the ribbon on the region's territory. In addition, following Moldova's success in obtaining EU candidate status, the Gagauzia assembly issued a declaration that implied the candidacy was against the interest of the region's inhabitants. This made reference to a bogus referendum held in Gagauzia in 2014,

in which a majority voted for Moldova to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union rather than the EU.

These examples show that the Gagauz local authorities are willing to ignore Moldovan law, and that they have done so with impunity; the central government has mounted little response to this act of defiance. Given this backdrop, it appears that Russia could deploy hybrid aggression to contest Moldova's control over Gagauzia. It could pursue this via a "separatist" disguise to generate political pressure for Chisinau to renounce its European integration aspirations and return to the Russian fold. It is not hard to imagine a situation in which the People's Assembly votes to secede from Moldova – and does so after having already welcomed several hundred armed troops from Transnistria onto the region's territory. These troops would take control of police stations and other central government agencies across Gagauzia. If it felt this was an insufficient deterrent, the assembly could then additionally issue a request for Russian "military protection". Only armed action ordered by Chisinau could reverse this new status quo, which would be inherently costly.

In a more escalatory scenario, Russia could attempt to consolidate its territorial control over the main pro-Russian regions in Moldova by implementing an informal annexation of Gagauzia, perhaps connecting it to Transnistria. The conditions to facilitate this are already in place and are comparable to those surrounding Crimea prior to its invasion – these include both the proximity of a sufficient military force and the political loyalty (or at least neutrality) of the population in the targeted territory. The only way the Moldovan government could resist such a course would be to drive out armed groups or Russian troops almost immediately after they first arrive, or even prevent them reaching Gagauzia or other key locations. However, the signs are that the Moldovan authorities would be highly likely to fail in resisting the imposition of a new status quo in the region. They have not devoted sufficient time and funding to improving defence capabilities or even to effective monitoring and early warning.

Hybrid action 2: Popular unrest

Moldova is also vulnerable to an externally instigated popular revolt scenario. Into such a mix, Russia could insert violent elements during popular protests that challenge public order, by launching attacks against both protesters and law enforcement agencies, thus pitting them against each other. This opportunity exists in Moldova with the presence of the erstwhile governing Party of Socialists, which is a Russian proxy. Russia could then engineer or construct a number of events, creating opportunities to work through its proxy to place pressure on the population and the government. Alongside or subsequently to this, it may also send in operatives to cause violence and exacerbate brewing unrest.

The most effective context would be around an election, in which a Russian proxy could contest the results of the vote, organise protests, and instigate violent actions during the demonstrations. These could include attacking the police, government buildings, and protesters themselves. This type of crisis is not unknown in Moldova: in April 2009, following a parliamentary election, violent protests erupted that led to the ransacking and burning of the buildings of the presidency and the parliament. The images from the protests indicated that the crowd was infiltrated by an organised group that successfully instigated protesters to attack government buildings and provoke them into clashes with the police. Later investigations declined to suggest who was behind these violent provocations. (Elements of this model were on display in the 2021 attack on the US Capitol. The model's power was also evident during the 2014 Maidan protests in Kyiv, when protesters were killed by sniper fire in what looks like a covert operation.)

A second opportunity exists with gas supplies. Indeed, Russia already appears to have begun to create the conditions for stoking popular unhappiness with the Moldovan government around this. Since the end of 2021, Moscow has sought to create a social and economic crisis by abruptly raising the price that Moldova pays for imported natural gas. The target of the pressure was the newly appointed government and the parliamentary majority of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) backing it. PAS won the 2021 election, ending the absolute political control of the Party of Socialists. Russia's goal was to either coerce PAS into submission or to generate enough popular pressure to challenge its hold on power.

To achieve this, Russia deliberately dragged its feet over extending the contract for the export of natural gas, waiting until the very last moment and the approaching winter to raise the price. Ordinary Moldovans' expenditure on gas heating and electricity in autumn 2021 more than doubled. During negotiations, Russian officials requested that Moldova give up its pursuit of stronger ties with the EU and make federalisation-related concessions in negotiations over Transnistria in exchange for lower prices. The Russian position eventually softened, but only as part of two wider considerations for Moscow. In October 2021, Russia still wanted to maintain a benign image in negotiations with the West over Ukraine; but it also did not want to undermine its credibility as energy provider, given the pressure that the United States was placing at that time on Germany over the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project. The Russian efforts also fell short in part thanks to a financial package worth €60m issued by the EU, which allowed the Moldovan government to make direct support available to private consumers. As a result, despite regular Russian pressure since October 2021 – applied via the local Moldovagaz company, which Gazprom controls – the potential for popular unrest that Russia wanted to exploit was mitigated. Still, recent polls show that more than 65 per cent of the Moldovan population say they are under heavy financial pressure due

to increases in gas and electricity prices.

Popular anger at election results and gas price rises represent only a couple of ways that Russia could seek to influence ordinary Moldovans. But there is no doubt that Russia has the proxies on the ground as well as the means and the influence to stir discontent, including by bringing about drastic changes to Moldovans' economic or social conditions. To meet its goals Russia does not necessarily need the resultant protests to be particularly large. It can deploy a mix of approaches, combining smaller demonstrations with violence that exacerbates the public's unhappiness. Ultimately, if this scenario panned out successfully from Moscow's point of view, its proxy could request Russian "protection against NATO." Or a situation could emerge that resembles the second scenario, with 'local' groups taking advantage of the chaos to seize control of either local or national government and state institutions.

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Recent and current Russian actions could enable the activation of any of the three scenarios outlined here. If Russia decides to raise the stakes in Moldova, it has some chance of success. How, therefore, could Moldova resist the successful Russian application of these scenarios or their variants? And what support can its Western partners provide? It is impossible for Moldova to create effective countermeasures to such threats unless one understands the logic that the implementer of hybrid aggression is pursuing. Russia could select the destabilisation of Moldova as its goal and experiment with different options to achieve this.

Russia will also be fully aware that the EU's framework for supporting countries at risk of such threats aims to bolster a state's "resilience." But this approach is highly unlikely to be up to the challenge of dealing with the sorts of scenario Russia could launch. Instead, the EU and other powers friendly to Moldova should move quickly to elevate their support to an "active resilience" offer. This upgraded approach would enable Moldova to more forcefully deal with the significant threats that each of these scenarios represents.

Active resilience

The EU has placed "resilience" at the core of its approach to hybrid aggression and hybrid threats. In what was arguably its first such comprehensive thematic policy document – "Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response" – in 2016 the EU defined resilience as "the capacity to withstand stress and recover, strengthened from challenges". The EU 2020 Strategic Foresight Report extended the description of resilience to: "the ability to withstand and cope with challenges but also undergo transitions, in a

sustainable, fair, and democratic manner."

At first glance, "resilience" looks like a logical response to the threats and manifestations of hybrid aggression, given the potentially expansive nature of hybrid war. However, it suggests that the EU has only a partial understanding of hybrid threat mechanisms. The bloc's strategy is heavy on recommendations such as "information exchange and best practices"; its existing policy responses lack measures to actively weaken the intensity of Russian hybrid aggression. This may be because the EU and Moldova do not yet fully understand the different pathways that Russia's hybrid aggression could follow.

The weakness rests with the resilience approach's reliance on passive means. For example, one of the most effective ways to counter Russian disinformation would be to block all the sources and channels the Kremlin uses to conduct influence operations. Yet those EU countries that have applied this in practice have done so only unwillingly and very slowly, with opponents usually invoking the freedom of press and of information – protecting democratic values from an opponent that has no interest in such niceties. As a result, Russia has had the freedom to make a politically relevant impact on public opinion in major EU states.

In addition, the resilience approach alone is unlikely to work in the face of some of the aggressive active tactics outlined in the scenarios available to Russia. For example, the first stage of the elite-focused rebellion scenario can be triggered by the participation of a small minority of a particular population, used as a smokescreen. But most of the heavy lifting is done by the main aggressor – who is beyond the reach of enacted resilience efforts. One might have strengthened citizens to be able to resist such ploys, but a sizeable and geographically concentrated minority could still be attracted by the aggressor and run through the stages of this scenario up to the full takeover of local institutions with armed support. At this point, a belief in democratic values will fare poorly as a tool of resistance.

A more effective response in the face of such a scenario would involve the defending state being able to identify the true nature of the threat and then move quickly to block the violent second stage of the aggression. In this regard, a more valuable and more comprehensive resilience strategy should focus both on passive defence and on taking the initiative to weaken the opponent's offence prior to and during an attack. This component may be termed "active resilience", to emphasise its offensive, combative element.

To fill this gap in their defences, the EU and Moldova can create active resilience tools for use in different domains, over different timescales.

Application of short-term active resilience measures

The following section sketches out ideas that Moldova or other targeted states could initiate – even if in the form of partial but workable models – to increase their active resilience to the three types of scenario. Pursuing these will require significant investment and planning, which should start immediately, with support from the EU and other partners.

A limited military invasion

An essential part of preparing for this scenario should include reducing Russia's capacity to transport additional troops and logistics to Moldova from Crimea or the Black Sea. Russia could attempt to move these by using low-altitude helicopters, land transport, or sea transport, including through the port of Giurgiulesti, disguised as legitimate cargo. It could also infiltrate a special forces unit up to the size of a battalion into the Transnistria region over the course of several months, using civilian air and ground transport and presenting individuals as legitimate travellers using foreign (likely not Russian) passports. Given the size of the Moldovan armed forces and the country's small territory, this unit size could have a significant operational impact.

To address this, Moldova in conjunction with its Western partners could establish an early warning and early response system. This would include monitoring political developments in Transnistria, military-related developments and movements, and training activities and exercises. Given the importance of territorial control, the Moldovan authorities should place potential areas of access from Transnistria under artillery targeting. This would allow them to strike moving forces and access zones such as bridges or amphibious operations areas. The Moldovan armed forces should also introduce operational protocols for mobile units with high firepower to intercept enemy troops. They should prepare the coordinates of military installations in Transnistria to be destroyed immediately at the start of an invasion. Moldova should also make sure it can protect its own military installations and resources from long-range strikes, which Russia would likely target early in an invasion.

Hybrid option 1: An elite-focused rebellion

During this scenario, active resilience measures are feasible even for smaller, more vulnerable states such as Moldova. This is because at the beginning of Russia launching this scenario, the local armed element aims to stay inconspicuous and unobservable. It is lightly armed and has no official backing. This not only makes it easier to destroy but is also less costly in terms of damaging the image of the more powerful aggressor. The most effective

approach to counter scenarios similar to that in Crimea (and that observed at the initial stage of the war in Donbas) is to strike and destroy the low-profile armed element before it can trigger stage two of the hybrid aggression mechanism. Ideally, national special forces and operatives would do this so that the public is not even aware these countermeasures are under way.

Alongside this, and depending on the stage an aggression scenario has reached, the defending state should be ready and able to enact measures such as: closing its borders to prevent influxes of armed groups; identifying the networks and leaders of the hybrid aggression; intercepting and blocking foreign funding; preventing transfers of arms or access to arms; tracking armed groups' locations; arresting or attacking combatants; and publicly exposing the aggressor.

Hybrid option 2: Popular unrest

In the event of popular unrest, the aggressor requires the presence of a local political force on the ground to exploit protests or other social discontent. The defending state would pursue its active resilience approach by drawing up a set of tailored strategies to limit that proxy in its actions and then develop the capabilities to deliver them. This could include gathering effective intelligence to enable the state to identify and monitor the connections of the local political proxy with its foreign patron, including financial links. Among other things, active resilience in this scenario also requires effective law enforcement agencies, whose members are trained in crowd control and can quickly identify and separate the violent element and the leaders from the genuine protesters, who are being exploited and whose safety and security is paramount.

Medium- and longer-term active resilience measures

The information domain

In the medium and longer term, implementing active resilience means that Moldova, or any other targeted state, needs to increase its regulation and control of the national information space. Modern technological developments make the information space a borderless operational domain of war, in which it is difficult to counter foreign activity. Without regulation, an aggressor can acquire information access to a target country's population.

The Moldovan authorities have recently made attempts to prevent Russian-funded audiovisual media from conducting influence operations. Parliament recently passed a law on countering disinformation, which restricts the broadcast of news, analysis, military, and

political content not produced in the EU, the US, and Canada or states that have ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television.

However, while this is a step forward, the law is unlikely to fully address the problem or improve Moldova's resistance to Russia's influence operations. This is because the law is not built on a clear understanding of the logical mechanism of Russian influence operations. To illustrate, Russia could easily create media companies in Turkey, Cyprus, Malta, or Austria, for instance, and avoid the restrictions of the new legislation.

The law's provisions also ignore social media, which account for a significant source of information for Moldovan citizens. A pre-emptive response to Russian actions in this domain would be, for instance, to map the channels through which Russia conducts influence operations in Moldova, and (depending on resources and capabilities) target their most critical elements. The "active" part of this strategy would include not simply blocking channels of Russian disinformation and manipulation as and when they appear; it would also involve aggressive engagement with the public, providing narrative alternatives to the Russian story. If the Moldovan authorities cannot inform the population and choose to leave that job to the "invisible hand" of the information market, then Russia will succeed in winning over a critical segment of Moldova's population.

Defence

Ukraine's successes on the battlefield in 2022 can be attributed to improved strike capabilities, comparatively better intelligence than it previously had, and higher mobility. It began developing these in earnest after Russia's invasion of Crimea and its activities in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Despite this progress, Ukraine has lost a significant amount of territory, trading space for time. As a small country, Moldova will be unable to use a "space for time" strategy.

Effective Moldovan resistance to military aggression would instead inflict rapid and sizeable losses on the enemy, whether the latter is advancing overtly or disguised as military proxies. Its success would hinge on the advantage of defence compared to the exposure of offence in modern warfare, but crucially also because of Moldova's physical distance from Russia and location beyond Ukraine. While it is no panacea, this insulation limits the number of troops Russia can send to Moldova and the logistical supplies it can provide to maintain combat activities.

Resisting a full-scale military invasion or the armed elements of a hybrid aggression is feasible for Moldova if it makes the right preparations and puts in place effective strategies.

To achieve this, the country would need to completely reformat its current model of armed forces modernisation and training, which currently focuses on maintaining a light infantry force as well as being able to carry out peacekeeping and humanitarian operations.

The EU and the US should provide aid to advance such reforms – but current assistance fails in this regard. For instance, the EU has committed some €47m to Moldova via its European Peace Facility instrument. This aims to strengthen the Moldovan armed forces' capacities in logistics, mobility, command and control, cyber-defence, tactical communication, unmanned aerial reconnaissance, military engineering, and medicine. But the EU's support package stresses the non-lethal character of the assistance. Given the logic of the mechanisms exploited by Russia to mount aggression, this kind of help is almost inconsequential because it does not develop Moldova's active military resistance capabilities.

Conclusion and recommendations

Arguments made in the West to avoid "provoking" Russia are misguided and put countries such as Moldova (as well as Western countries) at risk. Indeed, this paper has shared evidence that suggests Russia has the intention to target Moldova, and that it has the capabilities to successfully pursue a number of scenarios that meet this goal. Episodes such as the "newspaper from the future" and the plethora of Russian official opinions on Moldova signal the choices the Kremlin could make. Russia is an aggressive and revanchist power, and policymakers should approach it as such. While policies such as confidence building, arms control, and geopolitical concessions that create "buffer zones" may have their place with a country that is facing genuine insecurity, applied to Russia they do nothing more than encourage further aggression. Strategically, the only effective policy is to apply military and political counter-pressure that blocks and weakens Russia's attempts to control other countries.

Having identified Russian threat scenarios in Moldova, Western and Moldovan policymakers need to map the – numerous – important gaps that exist in the current resilience policies adopted to deal with hybrid actions. With the assistance of specialised EU agencies and partner nations, the Moldovan government should urgently scrutinise such threat scenarios and identify potential solutions. The key challenge to this is the Moldovan authorities' lack of technical and logistical capabilities to conduct thorough assessment exercises. They also lack capabilities to plan, implement, and monitor related solutions.

To address this, the EU should set up a long-term, on-site assistance force. This force's value would lie in the creation of an effective feedback loop with relevant EU agencies, which should improve the quality of European assistance, increasing its funding impact.

Incidentally, it would also allow the EU to use the lessons learned in Moldova to strengthen its understanding of how modern hybrid threats work under conditions different to those in most EU countries, even those member states subject to Russian hybrid aggression.

This force would operate under the EU's CSDP, and would contain civilian and military components, focusing on the hybrid aggression elements to which Moldova is most vulnerable. They would provide training, expertise, and technical support to assist the country to counter Russian influence operations that target its population. The force would help build and maintain an effective hybrid aggression early warning system, by strengthening the capabilities of the military and civilian elements of Moldova's security sector and improving their coordination and interoperability.

This EU mission would also draw on the experience of Ukraine to optimise Moldova's responses to foreign aggression, and build a robust military capacity appropriate for the magnitude of the military and hybrid threats Moldova is facing. It would work to understand the mistakes of Ukraine, the EU, and others that failed to deter Russia or defend Ukraine, and would apply this new knowledge in Moldova. Specifically, this mission should strengthen the capabilities, training, and planning related to responding to a live act of hybrid aggression, which in Moldova is highly likely to contain an armed component. It would identify the intelligence, special forces capacity, mobility, striking power, and effective force employment Moldova could use in the early stages of a Russian action.

No resilience strategy for Moldova can be effective if it omits key elements to diminish and erode the ability of an aggressor to pressure the country into submission. Only by building active resilience capabilities and strategies can Moldova improve its ability to deter or defeat hybrid acts of foreign aggression.

About the author

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