

Threats to the security of the Republic of Moldova in the short and medium term



Authors: Valeriu PAȘA, Natalia ALBU, Iurie GOTIȘAN, Elena MÂRZAC, Alexandru FLENCHEA, Victor PARLICOV, Sanda SANDU

Contents

Introduction	3
Threats to Moldova's security in the new context of regional and international insecurity	4
Risks and vulnerabilities	6
Recommendations.....	13
The Transnistrian dimension.....	14
National defence and shock resilience dimension.....	15
Security policy and strategic communication dimension.....	16
Specific recommendations to mitigate and eliminate risk-generating vulnerabilities	17

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to define short-term threats and risks to the security of the Republic of Moldova. The threats, their sources and potential character will be defined. At the same time, the current study is presenting an analysis of the risks that may facilitate the realization of negative scenarios, exploring existing or emerging vulnerabilities. The paper contains policy recommendations and actions that will mitigate risks and increase the resilience of the Republic of Moldova to existing threats. The views expressed in the study reflect the authors' consolidated position and do not necessarily represent the views of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

In this study, we will work with several terms and it is important to define them at the outset:

***A security threat** is an action or sequence of events that seriously threatens to cause degradation in the quality of life of the citizens of a state within a relatively short period of time or represents a significant threat to the freedom of policy choice of a government or private, or non-governmental entity within a state (Ullman R. Redefining Security. In International Security, vol. 8, no. 1, 1983, p. 153).*

***Risks** refer to possible but uncertain events that may cause harm. The impact of risk depends on evolving threats, plus the level of vulnerability to those threats, plus the capacity available to deal with those threats. In addition, risks affecting national security will be assessed according to areas of activity and their level of severity and likelihood will be taken into account.*

***Vulnerabilities** are analysed from a classical point of view. Vulnerability depends on the nature of the situation in which the state finds itself: either the state of war/conflict, the state of "apparent" peace or depends on the objectives/interests pursued by an actor/disruptor in the region. In general, vulnerabilities are processes or phenomena in the internal life of a state (weaknesses), which reduce its capacity to respond to existing or potential risks or facilitate their emergence and development. Specifically for the Republic of Moldova, vulnerabilities can be assessed from both internal and external perspectives (depending on where they are generated). For example, Moldova's unilateral dependence on foreign energy systems is a major vulnerability that, in the current security environment, becomes a threat to national security. There may also be vulnerabilities characteristic of weak countries, such as the emigration of highly qualified specialists and the weakening of the country's development potential.*

Threats to Moldova's security in the new context of regional and international insecurity

With the unleashing of full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation has moved to a new stage of its foreign policy in Eastern Europe. Beyond the numerous and sometimes contradictory propaganda motivations aimed at convincing the domestic and international public of the legitimacy of its aggressive actions, the Kremlin is continuing a consistent line of behaviour for more than 20 years. This policy is among the key priorities under the Primakov Doctrine, which is based on several priorities:

- Creation of a multipolar world, with Russia as one of the major centres of power;
- Russia has primacy and control over integrationist processes in the former Soviet space;
- Russia opposes NATO enlargement.

Given its modest economic capabilities after the collapse of the USSR, Russia has focused on accumulating resources, including the modernisation of its military. Only after regaining economic and military power would a process of re-subordination of former Soviet territories take place. In the meantime, the priority in regional policy was to avoid losing influence in the former Soviet states. This objective was achieved through the creation of economic dependencies, interference in domestic political processes, the projection of soft power, including the spread of propaganda, but also through conventional or hybrid warfare (maintaining pro-Russian separatist regions in Moldova and Georgia, perpetuating the unresolved conflict in Karabakh, Georgia's aggression in 2008, the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the proxy war in southeastern Ukraine in 2014). In his speech on the eve of the armed aggression against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin used the same set of arguments that denote the legitimisation of Russian hegemony over former Soviet territories. Just as the Primakov Doctrine stipulates, Vladimir Putin practically refuses to recognise the right of countries that gained their freedom with the break-up of the USSR to be sovereign and independent. Russian geopolitical thinking operates with the term 'limited sovereignty, i.e. legalising the dependence of the former Soviet states on the Kremlin in matters of security and foreign policy, regardless of the will of the peoples of those countries. In 2020, Russia practically succeeded in imposing such a model on Belarus. The same visions have repeatedly been proposed to the Republic of Moldova in exchange for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict, and also to Ukraine, through negotiation processes within the framework established by the Minsk agreements.

By launching the conventional war against Ukraine, the Kremlin has moved on to the second stage of imposing its hegemony in the post-Soviet space - imposing the ceding of

territories and/or the de facto subordination of Ukraine by military means. In these new realities, we can see the following: **the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation represents a direct threat to the security of the Republic of Moldova, directly threatening the sovereignty and independence of our country, in addition to the threat to its territorial integrity which has persisted since 1992.**

There are too many variables to make predictions about time perspectives, but we can say that the Republic of Moldova is one of the targets of the Kremlin's aggressive revisionist policy. Military actions against Ukraine increase Moscow's interest in Moldova. Perceiving the Republic of Moldova as an unstable, politically and militarily weak state, the Russian leadership may see Moldova as an easy target to conquer to weaken Ukraine's strategic position. A possible military control over the territory of the Republic of Moldova would allow the isolation of Odesa, facilitate the offensive in the western districts of the Odesa region, but also over western and central Ukraine. These calculations could stimulate an offensive in the direction of the Republic of Moldova (towards the Transnistrian region), plans that have been repeatedly announced by the Moscow powers. The interest in controlling Moldova is also reinforced by economic aspects, as transit through our country is crucial for the survival and functioning of the Ukrainian economy. In particular, we are referring to the blockade of agricultural exports, which Moscow is using to hijack international stability and erode the collective will of the West to resist Russian aggression. Since military advance in the western direction (along the Mykolaiv-Tiraspol/Odesa line) is currently difficult to achieve because of the stalemate in the fighting in eastern Ukraine, although it is not impossible in a future that is still difficult to predict, the Russian Federation will concentrate its efforts on obtaining or, at least, preparing a change of political regime in Moldova to a docile or allied one. The Russian armed forces may not even succeed in resuming their offensive westwards along the Black Sea coast. In general, the situation on the battlefield is very volatile and makes forecasting difficult. On the other hand, the objective of making Ukraine vulnerable by seizing political control of Moldova will not disappear even if the conflict intensity decreases or a ceasefire is concluded.

But the situation could change dramatically if the Russian Federation suffers a military defeat and withdraws from the Dnieper River basin. Aware of the multitude of possible factors and developments, we will build our analysis starting from the status quo existing in the conflict in mid-July 2022. In the perspective of the next 5-6 months, we will consider unlikely the scenario of a successful offensive of the Russian army toward the borders of the Republic of Moldova. **Therefore, the main direct threat from the Russian Federation will be to exploit and feed internal vulnerabilities to impose a docile regime at the helm of Moldova.** Even if there is no military threat in the short term, the war in Ukraine itself is a vulnerability, which influences many aspects of the internal situation in Moldovan society, increases anxiety and tension, and produces numerous constraints in various areas. The threat from the Russian Federation is conditioned by Moscow's visions and not by the actions or inactions of the Republic of

Moldova. Moscow's strategic vision is dominated by conspiratorial strategic thinking, which treats as basic scenarios those that are perceived as most negative to the Kremlin's interests.

Risks and vulnerabilities

There is a wide range of outcomes that the Russian Federation's efforts in Moldova can achieve:

1. The most effective scenario for Russian interests would be for Kremlin-affiliated forces to take full control of the country, provided that this new regime is stable and has the support of the population and state institutions, especially those of force.

2. The change to a Moscow-controlled but unstable government, capable of maintaining itself only in the event of a junction with Russian military forces advancing westwards.

3. Destabilise and weaken the Republic of Moldova, blocking its ability to build societal, military, economic and institutional resilience, as well as the process of integrating into the European Union and building security partnerships with Western states and Ukraine. In this scenario, any military aggression would meet with much weaker resistance.

4. Failure to achieve most objectives, including hijacking European integration and establishing security partnerships, but the use of significant resources, which will reduce the ability to build sufficient resilience to threats (including military).

5. Failure to achieve all objectives and build military, economic, and societal resilience to a sufficient level where Moldova could, in partnership with Western countries and Ukraine, face even military aggression.

There are also many intermediate scenarios which may contain various elements of the above.

To achieve its maximum objectives in its effort to extend its level of influence over the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, using the means and instruments available, may attempt to carry on events that pose imminent risks to the Republic of Moldova:

- ***Disloyalty of the broad masses of the population and state institutions towards the Government, with the provocation of a political crisis;***
- ***The organisation of early parliamentary and presidential elections under conditions maximally favourable to political forces controlled by or allied with the Kremlin;***
- ***The production of mass unrest culminating in a coup d'état or a deep political and social-economic crisis, which would lead Moldova either to early elections or plunge the country into chaos and a humanitarian crisis;***

- *A deepening economic crisis and social tensions that will erode the capacity to increase resilience in the face of threats and consume resources needed to deepen European integration and security partnerships;*
- *Blackmail and propaganda pressure could discourage and reduce the willingness of Moldova's leadership to strengthen the security sector, effectively increase resilience to threats, including through partnerships with Western countries and Ukraine;*
- *Produce paramilitary provocations (along the lines of Donbas in 2014) that would cause panic, amplify multiple crises and plunge Moldova into internal conflict or chaos.*

At present, the Republic of Moldova is facing numerous vulnerabilities that will certainly be exploited by both the Kremlin and its allies and agents of influence inside the country. Below we list and describe these **vulnerabilities** and how they can influence the emergence of certain risks and contribute to the achievement of the Kremlin's objectives in Moldova.

1. **Various political and civic forces are controlled, financed and supported by the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova.** Although they behave as legitimate political actors, several political parties and civic movements in the Republic of Moldova act under the direction of special services and political (and economic) circles in the Russian Federation. They will certainly be instrumental in achieving the objectives of destabilising the Republic of Moldova. It is important to understand the nature of the subordinate relationship of these forces to Moscow, especially the fact that they are not informed about the complex plans of the metropolis, not even the non-military executors coordinating from Russia the activity of various political actors in Moldova necessarily have access to detailed plans on all areas of subversive actions in our country. It is not even necessary to have concrete and detailed plans, very often subversive actions repeat certain patterns with the general aim of eroding the target, not allowing it to strengthen. In turn, the absolute majority of proxy political actors are not devoted to the Kremlin, most of them parasitic on financial and political (including media) support of Russia in their interests, especially pecuniary. As a result, Kremlin exponents in Moldovan politics and society often carry out their plans superficially, avoiding taking too great personal risks.
2. **Local enablers: local oligarchic, kleptocratic forces with a shared interest in changing the governing regime in Moldova,** either through early elections or a coup d'état. These are the fugitive oligarchs - forces such as the 'Shor' party, Veaceslav Platon, Vladimir Andronachi, and possibly Vlad Plahotniuc. There are also less "notorious" interest groups that have grown up around the PSRM,

former PDM leaders, former and current high-ranking dignitaries or exponents of the justice system from the period of the captured state. The degree of coordination of efforts between these local malign forces and the Russian Federation is unknown, but they are certainly pursuing a common goal. This coordination will be intensified in the coming period. Major dangers are posed by the Sor group, figures such as Veaceslav Platon and Vladimir Andronachi, who have maintained a strong influence within the country and are still actively involved in political and economic processes, corruption, dark sponsorship of the media, opinion formers and political forces. Even without directly coordinating their actions with the Russian Federation, these actors are determined to achieve a regime hijacking in the Republic of Moldova, thus achieving the Kremlin's objectives in Moldova by all means.

- 3. Economic crisis.** The worsening of the social and economic situation of the population will decrease the trust and support for the Government and automatically lead to the strengthening of the pro-Russian or pro-Russian opposition. It will also increase the protest mood in the society, and erode the state budget capacities, thus the possibilities of financing the increase of defence and security capacities. Here we are talking about a very high inflation rate, an increase in the poverty rate, and the same scenario the problem of energy prices, which is increasing the impoverishment of the population and where the Russian Federation has room for manoeuvre to create additional problems. Here we refer, first and foremost, to the prices of natural gas and electricity (supplied by the Russian Government-controlled Cuciurgan power plant). It is important to mention that, after the recent synchronisation with the European electricity market and the experience of purchasing natural gas on the spot market, the Republic of Moldova is not affected by possible supply disruptions. The prices of alternative energy sources are extremely high and may cause further sharp price increases. However, Moscow is very likely to raise the issue of terminating the gas supply contract in the autumn, thus imposing very high additional economic costs on Moldova and additional social tension within the country, plus a new domino effect of price increases.
- 4. Under-the-table financing** of the activities of political parties, opinion formers, and any protest actions and media that serve these interests. This factor is directly linked to the activity of the kleptocratic groups described above. They can make it easier for the Kremlin to bring money into the country and to take over some of this expenditure in exchange for rents from the Kremlin in the future or the present.
- 5. Disinformation and manipulation of public opinion** are tools widely, constantly and intensively used by the Kremlin in Moldova. They are carried out both through penetration of the national information space by Kremlin-coordinated

Russian media outlets, as well as through Kremlin-sponsored media and opinion-makers (including politicians) inside the Republic of Moldova. Through these instruments, feelings of dissatisfaction with the Moldovan government, the EU and the USA are constantly fuelled, protest movements are amplified, and political and civic forces and state institutions, including security institutions, are denigrated. In particular, we should note the toxic propaganda and manipulation campaigns targeting security partnerships, the actions of Moldova's external allies, and the actions, even intentions, to strengthen resilience. Even the subject of constitutional neutrality is exploited in a manipulative manner to discourage public support for strengthening defence capabilities or other actions to fortify Moldovan security. This universal tool is and will be used to facilitate absolutely all risks and amplify all other vulnerabilities. In particular, it aims to alienate important parts of society from the Moldovan state. Joint efforts with kleptocratic groups within the country to produce, sponsor and distribute disinformation and harmful propaganda are visible. After the bloody aggression against Ukraine, Russian and local pro-Russian propaganda has lost credibility and influence in the Republic of Moldova, which is looking for an opportune moment for an information counter-offensive. This opportunity is provided by the deep economic crisis in the country.

- 6. Lack of security culture in society and the political class, and poor public communication in the field of security and defence** diminishes public and political support for more determined actions to strengthen security and defence. The level of expertise and general culture on security and defence issues is very low in society and among the political class. The same problem is present in the media and a large part of civil society. This state of affairs diminishes the attention of political decision-makers, as major emergencies in this field do not require sufficient effort on the part of the state administration. Moreover, investment in strengthening the security and defence sector is unpopular in society, can create image costs (due to misinformation and propaganda) for political actors and thus discourages more decisive policy and action. There is a lack of basic knowledge in society on how to behave in war situations, civil security infrastructure is in a poor state, and general knowledge of mobilisation and other military issues is lacking. The latter amplifies panic and can be particularly damaging in the event of possible military provocation or aggression. In particular, the lack of expertise on military and security issues in the media should be mentioned.
- 7. Corruption and the weakness of the rule of law** facilitate impunity for Russian facilitators and agents of influence, including the illegal financing of these actions. But the negative impact of corruption and impunity is far greater because they are not prosecuted and punished, including for acts of state treason. Because of corruption, state institutions, including security institutions, remain permeable to

the recruitment of agents by foreign special services. Political stability is also threatened by corruption, as attempts to break up the parliamentary majority by bribing members of parliament cannot be ruled out. Possible acts of corruption involving government officials could be used to erode popular support for the government, facilitating the risk of political instability and blocking reforms etc.

- 8. Insufficient administrative capacity at the level of state institutions, including analytical and development capacity in the area of security and risk management** - ministries, state agencies and other central government bodies suffer from a chronic shortage of qualified and motivated staff. The speed of drafting and quality of policy acts undermine the implementation of reform plans, crisis response and cooperation with external partners. The security and defence area is particularly affected. The Supreme Security Council is understaffed to consolidate all information and has sufficiently developed crisis response plans, the capacity to monitor and analyse developments rapidly and adjust response plans in all areas concerned. This problem also affects the capacity to access and rapidly absorb external assistance in all areas, including security and defence. The decision-making framework for the security sector is also uncertain and insufficiently institutionalised. At the very least, it is unclear to the general public.
- 9. The lack of cohesion in society** is manifested by the existence of significant parts of society (no less than 30%) that see the right way forward for Moldova's development differently from the majority and the political leadership. In essence, it will not be an exaggeration to say that a significant part of the citizens is loyal to the Russian Federation rather than the Republic of Moldova. It is among these sections of society that supporters of subversive actions or mass protest actions can easily be recruited. At the same time, the presence of such a large part of society, which regards Russian subversive actions as legitimate, greatly reduces the room for manoeuvre for a more determined counteraction. Simply put - banning pro-Russian parties or the entire Russian state media is very problematic in Moldova compared to Ukraine or the Baltic States. Such actions can be interpreted as non-democratic limitations because they target such a large number of citizens. It may seem paradoxical, but multi-year realities have turned the option of subordinating Moldovan sovereignty to the Kremlin into a legitimate political option in our country.
- 10. The non-integration of ethnic minorities** is closely linked to the vulnerability described above. In densely populated regions (Gagauzia, Taraclia, localities in the north of the country, etc.) the problem is even more acute. Lack of knowledge of the state language, insufficient perception of belonging to the state,

much greater exposure to disinformation and toxic propaganda, and dissent at the level of local and national political elites increase the risks of exploitation of ethnic minorities for subversive actions. One of the Kremlin's actively fuelled propaganda and disinformation topics is the fuelling of conflict along ethnic and linguistic lines. The lack of perception of belonging to the state is also because in school history courses there is no mention of the common history of Gagauz, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Roma or Jews and Moldovans/Romanians in the country where they live. Therefore, national minorities know their history either from collective memory or family legends, have no way to develop a sense of belonging to the state of the Republic of Moldova and associate themselves with the "country of origin".

- 11. The Transnistrian region** is a constant vulnerability. To the "established" set of problems are added new challenges arising from the large-scale war in Ukraine. These are the so-called armed attacks (explosions), the introduction of additional limitations on freedoms and human rights, energy blackmail for benefits in the currency and banking sphere, aggressive statements and media provocations - all of which will consume important resources of state institutions, add tensions in Moldovan society and fuel the harmful propaganda agenda. At the same time, we affirm that the unleashing of military aggression by separatist and Russian forces in the region is practically impossible without a possible junction with the Russian ground army in southern Ukraine. It is important to remember that not all actions coming from the Transnistrian region are dictated by Moscow, the separatist regime can also pursue its interests, primarily economic - concessions for the operation of the Sheriff Group business, facilitation of imports on preferential terms, etc.
- 12. The fragility of the financial-banking system** - even if the banking system of the Republic of Moldova has overcome the many problems of the previous period, bank capital is still low and citizens' confidence in it is not at a sufficiently high level. In this situation, a possible panic, which can also be generated by provocations and misinformation, not just real dangers, can cause massive withdrawals. Even if the National Bank has proven prompt interventions to maintain the supply of foreign currency, potential shortages of funds in banks may cause a chain reaction that will have negative effects on the already complicated economic situation.
- 13. The refugee crisis** generated by the war in Ukraine is already putting pressure on the state system and the economy, but it is also being exploited for media provocations, and attempts to provoke inter-ethnic tensions. Possible new waves of refugees in the event of a Russian offensive toward Odessa will put even more pressure on the Moldovan public system and consume virtually all the administrative resources needed for interventions in other areas, including

increased attention to security and defence. The international support deployed in the Republic of Moldova will make it much easier to manage potential refugee flows comparable to the one in February-March, but they are insufficient for the eventuality of several hundred thousand more refugees entering shortly (up to 2 weeks). And the previous wave of refugees has not yet been sufficiently "absorbed". This concerns, in particular, effective employment policies (in the context of the labour shortage in the country), but also the schooling of children, who make up a large proportion of refugees.

14. Border security - the closure of several crossing points on the Transnistrian side, as well as the blockade of Ukrainian seaports, have strongly increased pressure on functional crossing points. At the same time, there has been an increase in attempts to cross illegally (due to bans imposed by the Ukrainian authorities) and the use of Moldovan territory to redirect illegal flows. The strengthening of smuggling routes may facilitate the introduction into our country of weapons and other materials that can be used for provocations and insurgency. Border congestion can also be exploited to fuel public discontent and panic caused by media provocations.

15. Inadequate consistency in foreign and security policy is manifested, in particular, by contradictory public statements that discourage awareness of threats and risks by citizens, the media and the political class. In particular, cooperation with external partners in the field of defence is weakened. Unpermitted ambiguity is allowed in the determination to defend the country's independence in the event of aggression. The importance of strengthening military forces is downplayed, and not presented as a major government priority. Messages of reassurance about the absence of immediate military dangers are not complemented by messages of warning about the real existence of such threats in the event of major changes on the battlefields of Ukraine. The somewhat natural desire to avoid over-irritating Russia leads to the sabotage of efforts to combat Russian propaganda and to blame Russia's aggressive policy, to the conviction of Moldovan society of the Kremlin's major threat to Moldova. Moreover, this position is perceived very negatively in Ukraine, discourages and makes vulnerable the crucial security cooperation with the neighbouring country.

16. Organised crime is routinely used by Russian special services to achieve their objectives. In the Republic of Moldova, we refer primarily to the Karamalak/Bulgaru group. Its exponents were actively involved in the 2021 election campaign. Persons affiliated with it are active in local politics in the Gagauz Autonomy, are involved in financing media institutions, and cooperate with political forces at the national level.

This and other organised crime groups may be involved in preparing and financing destabilising actions, provocations and mass disorder.

Recommendations

Based on the multilateral and interdependent nature of the vulnerabilities, risks and threats to national security identified in the study, the recommendations are structured according to the perspective or scope of the actions or solutions. Beyond the specific recommendations per area of activity, we propose a general approach to strengthen Moldova's resilience to security threats and risks:

The absolute priority must be to strengthen the defence capabilities of the national army. The other interventions must complement this effort and contribute to the elimination of constraints and vulnerabilities that can render defence vulnerable. Without strengthening the defence sector all other efforts are not capable of combating the threat from the Russian Federation. At the same time, it is important to realise that the role of strengthening in the face of the threat cannot be left to state institutions alone; the private sector, the media and civil society play a decisive role in complementing the national effort. Without the voluntary and full involvement of these actors, it is not possible to avoid negative scenarios.

The societal dimension

- In the short term, there is a need to establish and/or intensify dialogue between central and local authorities in the most vulnerable areas. (Self-)isolation of the regions and, above all, of the leaders in the regions leads to alienation and, respectively, to seeking support (political and economic) outside the country. In particular, Russia uses this support to undermine Moldova.
- In the long term, concerning the problem of non-integration of ethnic minorities, there is a need to review the pre-university education system in general and the curriculum for ethnic schools in particular, which, apart from the intellectual and administrative effort, will also require additional investment in university education to train specialists. On the one hand, there is a need for secondary school and high school graduates to be able to speak Romanian fluently. On the other hand, the insufficient perception of belonging to the state is also because the school history course does not talk about the common history of Gagauz, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Roma or Jews and Moldovans/Romanians in the country where they live. Respectively, national minorities know their history either from collective memory or family legends, have no way to develop a sense of belonging to the state of the Republic of Moldova and associate themselves with the "country of origin". It is recommended to develop reforms for the political inclusion of ethnic minorities in line with

the best European practices and to strengthen their cultural identity, in contrast to the mechanical categorisation as "Russian speakers".

- In the short term, there is a need to strengthen information security by blocking and eliminating all forms of obscure funding of media sources and opinion formers. It is also necessary to strengthen strategic communication capabilities by forming specialised institutions and strengthening press services in state institutions. Another intervention should be aimed at eliminating harmful practices that undermine the economic sustainability of independent media. In partnership with external donors, it is recommended that programmes be set up to strengthen the training of Moldovan journalists in areas such as economic news, foreign affairs, security and combating disinformation.

The Transnistrian dimension

Concentrate resources and channel efforts primarily to prevent possible destabilisation and provocations in/out of the area and only as Plan B to counteract them. To this end it is recommended:

- Formation of a compact working group (Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Secretary of the Supreme Security Council, Interior Ministry, SIS, Ministry of Defence) to monitor developments in the Transnistrian area and develop a flexible crisis prevention/management plan, which can be adjusted weekly according to developments;

- Develop a plan of economic measures applying regulatory, customs and fiscal instruments to maintain and strengthen the Transnistrian region's economic dependence on Chisinau. This plan of measures must be integrated into a broader strategy for managing/ overcoming the economic and energy crisis, so as not to undermine the country's economic and energy security;

- Establish an operational communication channel with decision-makers in Tiraspol for de-conflicting and preventing escalation in crises. Existing security communication formats should be avoided (e.g. Unified Control Commission, which is politicised and in which the Russian Federation is also present), but the formalisation/officialisation of this new communication channel should not be allowed either.

- Development of a strategy for crises through the use by the Russian Federation of energy instruments to implement political plans at the regional level: the suspension of natural gas supplies to the Republic of Moldova by Gazprom, or only to the right bank of the Dniester. Scenarios for the future of the Republic of Moldova or just the Transnistrian region should be considered, the likelihood of which depends on the course of the war in Ukraine or global developments. At the local level, the following scenarios should be considered and anticipated: the scenario of small armed provocations in the Security Zone; the scenario of targeted pressure on vulnerable groups or entities in the region - farmers in the Dubasari district, Romanian-language schools, public institutions in Bender, Tiraspol

or Râbnița, or the scenario of the extension of Tiraspol's control by force over "disputed" localities (the villages of the Cotsnita plateau, the Cokyeri plateau, Varnița, Hagimus, Copanca).

National defence and shock resilience dimension

- Although in the short term, there is a low probability of escalation of direct aggression against the Republic of Moldova, there is nevertheless a pressing need to make effective use of time, which is not enough to recover the thirty years of destruction of the national defence potential, to make the maximum possible efforts to prepare the country for defence and to face possible military actions, internal and external.
- War is a complicated social phenomenon that puts a strain on any nation. Therefore, preparing the state for defence should be a daily and basic activity of the political-military leadership of the country. Activities to prepare the country for defence are multiple, complex and long-term, and their execution should be planned and carried out systematically and in time.
- Leverage strategic partnerships at the bilateral and multilateral levels, in particular with the North Atlantic Alliance. The support of these partners is vital for the functioning of a modern defence system fit for the times. Maintaining these strategic directions is likely to provide the country with the necessary conditions to enhance its capacity for conflict resolution, crisis management and increased responsiveness to threats, including military threats.
- In the context of the status of neutrality declared in the country's Constitution, it is necessary, in the current security environment, to promote the message to the population that "developing the National Army and ensuring defence does not mean preparing for a war of defence". Moreover, there is a need to promote the perspective of "civil defence" which has been neglected for a long time and has diminished the individual's ability to understand the actions of the state in any crisis. Respectively, this will also contribute to raising civic awareness in society. At the same time, to avoid panic, by promoting the need to ensure a civil defence system, the perspective of 'civil protection' could be emphasised, which is a system of preparatory measures for the protection of the population, material and cultural values on the territory of the country from dangers arising not only from military conflicts or as a result of such conflicts, but also as a result of natural and ecological disasters, damage, catastrophes and fires.
- Beyond the enhancement of military defence capabilities, the creation of an analysis and forecasting centre is required which will provide relevant studies capable of providing multidimensional analysis of short, medium and long-term security risks and threats, as well as the military perspective that will underpin the planning and execution of defence preparedness activities. Such a Centre could be set up alongside the Supreme Security

Council, and its independent and apolitical nature will have an impact on the accuracy of the assessments to be prepared.

- Strengthening and reinforcing the operational capabilities of the Border Police, both technical (means and equipment for rapid reaction, control and surveillance, etc.) and human resources. Adequate absorption of constant support (financial, technical, human etc.) from external partners, in particular FRONTEX.
- Reviewing, reforming, refreshing and implementing new internal operational PROCEDURES of the Border Police, its organisational charts, structural units and sub-units, to be of maximum utility and capable of quick and intelligent reactions.
- The combined application of the C4ISR classic operational standard or its general principles would provide advanced capabilities through awareness of the border situational picture, knowledge of criminal and environmental potential and, respectively, shortening the time between criminal detection and response.
- It should therefore be a priority for Border Police, including through investment and use of innovative technologies and smart solutions, especially in the current regional security environment.

Security policy and strategic communication dimension

- In the medium-long term, there is a need to address the country's defence and foreign policy in the broader context of the development of national security policy, in this regard and in the context of current trends to develop and adopt a new National Security Strategy. It must establish, without philosophical baggage, both in terms of security objectives and strategic priorities, the actors and structures that will contribute to the development and security of the country, as well as the factors and states that in the current security environment pose a threat and risk to national security.
- Develop in the short term (3-6 months) a vision of the security option of the Republic of Moldova within the limits of constitutional neutrality, but also in the context of the war in Ukraine and the hybrid war in Europe. Drawing up such a document on the future of the country would be an exercise that should involve not only decision-makers in Chisinau but also other relevant actors from political parties and civil society.
- The elaboration of the communication strategy internally and externally, based on the elaborated vision, will eliminate current inconsistencies. In this regard, sustained efforts are needed from the Government of Moldova to synchronise words and deeds, and to clarify how they will be perceived by all stakeholders acting in the national security and defence sector. In this context, we consider it necessary to review the concept of information security and the sectoral strategy. It is also mandatory to build institutional capacities in the field of information security.
- Establishment of a national working group for the coordination of strategic communication activities under the leadership of the coordinating institution at the

national level and an inter-institutional technical working group at the expert and policymaker, external relations and public relations levels. In all cases, staff in the institutions involved must be trained on StratCom issues and mechanisms. And in the medium term, there is a need to initiate a process of institutionalisation of StratCom.

- Collaboration and take-up of good practices of institutionalisation and practical application of strategic communication elements from specialised organisations (NATO Centre of Excellence for StratCom, EU East StratCom, similar structures in Ukraine), international organisations, as well as partner states.
- In the long term, strategic communication should become a constant component of Moldova's national security, which will develop resilience and ensure the protection and presentation of national interests, strengthening the social cohesion of the state both among the population and external partners. At the same time, state and non-state actors should adopt and fully implement long-term national strategies aimed at combating disinformation campaigns and producing coherent narratives toward vulnerable groups of the population.
- Establish and strengthen partnerships between state institutions and civil society, including non-governmental organisations and the media, and identify joint programmes in the field of communication and promotion of security issues. Monitor citizens' perceptions and concrete results, the information environment and opinion leaders.

Specific recommendations to mitigate and eliminate risk-generating vulnerabilities

- 1.** The new drafting of the National Security Strategy must recognise the dangers and anti-democratic nature of interference by foreign states and criminal groups in the political life of the country. State institutions must be empowered and obliged to detect and counteract, by transparently informing society about the dark financing of political parties and the media. The legal and institutional strengthening of the financial transparency of political parties and the fight against tax evasion is necessary. Criminal legislation must contain clear procedures for punishing political and electoral corruption.
- 2.** Because of the particularly serious threats to security, democracy and sovereignty, and the state of the judiciary in the Republic of Moldova, our country should consider developing a legal mechanism to limit the interference of kleptocratic oligarchic groups in political life. In this regard, the experience of Ukraine can be examined with the utmost care and restraint.
- 3.** In order to strengthen the integrity of the information space, special measures should be taken to prevent tax evasion and illegal financing of media institutions and opinion makers in the Republic of Moldova. These measures must be proportionate, preserve the limits of non-interference in the freedom of the press, and be universally applied to all institutions and persons concerned. The application of these mechanisms must be a partnership

between the Audiovisual Council and the Tax Service, based on a clear and transparent risk assessment methodology.

4. Legally strengthen the transparency of advertising and efforts to prevent and combat misinformation on social networks. Very often, positive practices self-assumed by social platforms are not respected by social networks themselves. Enforcement is required by law. It is important to preserve the autonomy and non-interference of the state in decisions to restrict harmful content on social platforms. At the same time, there must be enforcement mechanisms, such as the obligation to have dedicated persons employed by the platforms to enforce these rules for the national cyberspace.

5. The social impact of the economic crisis must be mitigated as much as possible by running targeted support programmes for the most vulnerable groups of citizens. At the same time, open and honest communication with society as a whole is needed, so that every citizen can be sure that the crisis is being borne in solidarity and fairness. The government must show much more leadership and encourage businesses to behave much more responsibly, to curb their desire for profiteering in times of crisis. At the same time, a tough policy is needed to prevent and punish speculative price rises. Economic communication must be much more elaborate and planned and exclude unpredictable interventions.

6. On the energy dimension, it is necessary to speed up the preparation of a stronger negotiating position with the Russian Federation on the gas supply contract. In this respect, it is very important to coordinate positions with Ukraine to avoid critical interpretations in case of the contract extension. At the same time, it is necessary to form a working group with experts from the government, civil society and development partners, who will develop scenarios and prepare operational analyses for the conduct of negotiations with Gazprom, including scenarios related to the Transnistrian region, assessment of Gazprom's export interests in the context of gradually reducing Russian gas procurement in Europe, close monitoring of the development of Russian-European gas relations.

7. Rapid, massive and systemic intervention is needed to modernise the heating supply systems for residential blocks in Chisinau and Balti by changing the horizontal distribution systems and installing individual heating points. Another programme should stimulate widely used credit instruments for thermal insulation of blocks. Consideration should be given to the compulsory connection of public institutions to central heating and a major programme to modernise Termoelectrica.

8. The government must work to strengthen the revenue base of the public budget, including through measures that resonate with expectations of fairness in society, such as additional taxation of luxury properties, prevention of illicit enrichment and tax evasion.

9. Building on the new National Security Strategy, the SIS must make it a priority to detect and report publicly on organised disinformation activity. A digital counterintelligence department must be created within the SIS to publicise cases of external (excluding external) public influence operations.

10. The National Army, the Ministry of Defence and the SIS must benefit from a substantial strengthening of public communication capabilities. These institutions must become more transparent and proactive in communicating with the media, informing society about their work and popularising defence and security issues. In cooperation with civil society, a positive image of these institutions must be built up and prejudices and myths about them countered. The same applies to communicating risks and threats to the country. The danger of conventional and hybrid aggression must not be dosed, but made public in all its complexity. At the same time, society needs to understand that the Republic of Moldova is not powerless in the face of threats. That it is necessary to invest in and strengthen the army and other areas so that we can be protected even in the face of a threat as great as the Russian Federation. Both the political class and society must be well informed about the course of the war in Ukraine and the limitations of the aggressor country so that it is understood that neither possible air attacks nor even potential ground aggression will inevitably and immediately mean loss of sovereignty, that the Russian Federation is not in a position to deploy major ground forces on our country's border, given Ukraine's continued resistance, and that the national army can cope with aggression, generate unacceptable costs for the potential aggressors if it receives rapid reinforcement and support from society. These messages must also be taken on board by civil society and the media.

11. The government must embark on a qualitative reform of the central public administration, starting with the security and defence sector. To attract and retain highly qualified and motivated human resources, a targeted review of pay policy in the military, the civil service (especially key and expert positions in ministries and agencies) and state officials is needed. It is not a popular measure, but a strictly necessary one to rapidly increase the pace of reforms, speed and quality of crisis responses.

12. The Supreme Security Council Service must become the institution that coordinates and consolidates all state policies in the field of security and defence. It must be strengthened by the creation of a robust analytical department (minimum of 15 highly qualified staff with high salaries).

13. The public and private media, civil society and as many political forces as possible must mutually share a single position on the European and democratic direction of Moldova's development. Any drift towards integration under the leadership of the Russian Federation - an aggressor state and a threat to the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova - must be declared anti-national and unconstitutional. The dangers and war crimes committed by the Russian Federation must be blamed, publicised intensively and permanently, and the option of European integration must be assumed as the only correct path. At the same time, this civilizational choice must not be identified with the unconditional support of the ruling party. Support for democratic pluralism must remain unequivocal. The economic and social problems faced by the Republic of Moldova must not affect citizens' support for EU membership. Intensive work is needed to combat

perceptions among ethnic minorities that their rights will somehow be affected by the country's Western orientation.

14. Intensive reflection of Ukraine's resilience to war shock must build shock-resistance skills among the population, including preventing the "devouring" of the banking system by depositors in the event of conventional provocation or aggression. Commercial banks should partner with the media to educate and inform about major crises, drawing on the Ukrainian experience.

15. The Republic of Moldova should continue to prepare for potential refugee waves at least similar to, if not larger than, the first. In particular, it may happen in the event of a Russian military offensive on the Mykolaiv-Odesa line. Schooling of children, employment, and legal assistance are some of the areas that need more attention. The media must continue to pay attention to the subject, including preventing stigmatisation and campaigns of hate speech and misinformation against refugees.

16. The activity of international organised criminal groups on the territory of the Republic of Moldova must be recognised as a national security risk. Thus, additional tools for monitoring and blocking their activity must be provided.

17. Contradictory and sometimes evasive public communication by the authorities has contributed to a much lower perception of the real threat to Moldova. Moreover, the authorities are self-limiting in taking measures and in international defence and security cooperation to "avoid panic" and "not to irritate the Kremlin". Both approaches are counterproductive, even toxic, to strengthening the country's resilience. We recall here the principle stated above, according to which possible hostile actions by the Russian Federation are in no way influenced by possible actions or inactions by the Republic of Moldova. Instead, the inevitability of major costs (military, economic and political) is the only preventive tool that discourages aggressive decisions. This principle has been demonstrated in the Kremlin's war in Ukraine - the renunciation of the multi-pronged offensive, the withdrawal of the military fleet and the liberation of the Snake Island, the renunciation of air raids over the territory controlled by the Ukrainian army - all this shows that Vladimir Putin is self-limiting in taking major risks, acting for gains with as few losses as possible. The Republic of Moldova must firmly declare that it is preparing for war not because it is inevitable, but to deter aggression against it. Our country must demonstrate resilience both for its society and for the potential aggressor. But also for external partners who will greatly increase their support if they see a determination to defend themselves. The Republic of Moldova will be much more likely to avoid aggression if it demonstrates the capacity and determination to defend itself throughout society. This preparedness must also be reflected in educating the population on wartime behaviour, by strengthening the civil defence system, including public communication about such actions.