

IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

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Moldova's quest for stability and security

by

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INTRODUCTION

Up until about a year ago, Moldova, a country situated to the north-west of the Black Sea sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania, did not attract much attention. On the rare occasions when it made the global headlines it was either because of the massive banking fraud of 2014 dubbed 'the theft of the century' or because of the separatist region Transnistria, known as one of the 'dark tourism' destinations in eastern Europe. However, this state of affairs changed in 2022 in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its status as a frontline state endowed Moldova with a new geopolitical significance in the regional and wider European security context.

The country's geographical proximity to the war zone raised the risk of a spillover of violence to Moldova, a scenario which would make Ukraine's position along its southern border more precarious. The re-escalation of the dormant conflict in Transnistria, which borders Ukraine, suddenly became a dangerous possibility. If Moldova were to be dragged into the vortex of war then security threats would proliferate across the EU's eastern flank. On the positive side, the country's role in accommodating a massive influx of refugees from Ukraine as well as

Summary

- › In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Moldova was confronted with security challenges on a scale that it had not experienced since the early 1990s.
- › In 2022 the chances of Russian using force against Moldova increased dramatically. However, as Ukraine managed to stabilise the frontline and began liberating its territory in the south, the threat subsided.
- › While Russia was unable to launch a direct military attack on Moldova (from Ukraine) in spring 2022, it intensified hybrid warfare operations against the country. In turn, the government in Chisinau began to address security vulnerabilities that Russia was exploiting.
- › Moldova would not have been able to weather the crisis of 2022 without the EU's comprehensive support. In the years to come the EU will need to keep Moldova in focus, helping to strengthen the country's resilience in both the security and economic domains.
- › The EU and the wider region has a stake in a secure Moldova providing much-needed stability along Ukraine's southern border and contributing to peace in south-eastern Europe.

in providing transport corridors to facilitate the transit of Ukrainian grain to global markets has also put Moldova in the international spotlight. Last but not least, its long border with Ukraine makes Moldova a prospective transport hub in post-war reconstruction efforts. Clearly, Europe has an important stake in a secure and stable Moldova.

This Brief explores Moldova's efforts to strengthen its security and resilience in the shadow of Russia's war on Ukraine. It begins with an overview of how the country's security landscape has changed over the last year. The Brief then looks at the Moldovan authorities' responses to both military and non-military threats. It follows with a future-oriented focus on Moldova's critical security vulnerabilities and how these could be addressed. Since the EU has played a powerful stabilising role in Moldova over the last year, the Brief concludes with recommendations on how it could support the country's resilience going forward.

LIVING DANGEROUSLY

In 2022 Moldova lived through one of the most dangerous moments in its recent history. The country was confronted with security challenges on a scale and of an intensity that it had not experienced in three decades.

The outbreak of the war meant that the risk of Russian military aggression against Moldova significantly increased. There were two potential vectors of attack on Moldova: ground and air. Russia's army rapidly advanced in the first weeks of the war across the south of Ukraine, while the Russian Black Sea fleet was poised to launch a naval assault on Odesa. Both developments raised the probability of a ground attack on Moldova at a later stage. The encirclement or fall of Odesa, located only 60 km away from Moldova's border, would allow the Russian army to move further west and link up with the military contingent stationed in the Transnistrian region. In April 2022 this strategic objective was publicly confirmed by Russia's top military commander⁽¹⁾. The goal was in line with Russian military doctrine according to which once a foothold has been secured, troops must press for advantage and thus gain more terrain. For example, the capture of Kherson in March 2022 was followed by an immediate push towards Mykolaiv. Thus, it was safe to assume that upon reaching Odesa Russian troops would make a thrust towards Tiraspol, the capital of the separatist region. From there, given Russia's significantly reinforced military presence, Kremlin would be in position to impose regime change in Chisinau followed by the progressive incorporation of the country into Russia's military, political and economic orbit.

Russia's aerial power projection to secure an air bridge in Chisinau or Tiraspol was another possible vector of military attack in the early days of the war. This would follow the example of Russia's attempt in February 2022 to secure an air bridge in Hostomel airport in order to fly in reinforcements to sustain the assault on Kyiv. It is noteworthy that until very recently Chisinau airport was controlled via a shell company by Ilan Shor, a fugitive oligarch closely associated with Russia who played a key role in the 'theft of the century'. The fact that a proxy of the Kremlin exerted control over one of the major international gateways to Moldova constituted a major national security vulnerability which could have facilitated military intervention. Russian planes landing in Tiraspol was another plausible scenario. In 2021, Moscow asked the Moldovan authorities if it could fly in via Tiraspol equipment necessary for the disposal of old munitions stored at the Cobasna ammunition depot in Transnistria. Back then, Chisinau refused, suspecting that Moscow might use this opportunity to bring in more troops⁽²⁾. But in 2022 Russia could have tried to force its way in without asking for permission.

In mid-March 2022 Russia began to highlight the issue of alleged discrimination against Russian speakers in Moldova⁽³⁾. It looked as if Moscow was building the case for eventual military intervention. However, Russia's failure to launch an assault on Odesa as well as Ukraine's success in halting and later repelling the Russian offensive in the south (around Mykolaiv) meant that by summer risks of a ground invasion of Moldova were significantly reduced. The attack on Hostomel turned into a major debacle for the Russian military. Most importantly, despite Russia's massive opening salvo of missile strikes in February, Ukraine's air defences remained effective. Thus, attempts to set up an airbridge to Chisinau or Tiraspol would be a very risky and costly exercise for Russia whose planes would first have to cross Ukrainian airspace.

While the threat of a direct assault on Moldova receded, the risk of missile attacks has increased since last autumn as Russia launched its air campaign to annihilate Ukraine's energy system. On several occasions Russian missiles targeting Ukrainian infrastructure in the south and west of the country violated Moldova's airspace, an unprecedented occurrence⁽⁴⁾. Russia used Moldova's airspace knowing that the country does not have the capabilities to shoot down such missiles and that the chosen trajectory would increase the missile penetration rate. However Ukraine has been able to counter these threats by downing the few missiles which crossed Moldova's airspace.⁽⁵⁾ Unable to achieve its aim by early spring 2023, Russia scaled down its missile attacks against Ukraine's energy system, which in turn gave Moldova a brief respite.

Although in the end the most pessimistic military scenarios did not materialise in Moldova in 2022, the

whole spectrum of non-military threats against the country originating from Russia has dramatically increased. The impact of these has been amplified by Russian local proxies: political forces, oligarchs and criminal elements. At the same time, these hostile operations landed on fertile soil as Moldova's economy and society have been hit hard by the war. In 2022 Moldova's GDP contracted by 6 %, while inflation soared to over 30 %, among the highest rates in Europe. In such adverse socio-economic conditions, Russia saw opportunities to undermine Moldova's statehood from within.

Moldova has been the target of Russia's hybrid warfare for three decades. But in 2022 Russia stepped up its hybrid tactics in Moldova, expanding both the scope and the frequency of such attacks. Although Moldova was used to Russia funneling cash to political parties, restricting Moldovan agricultural producers' access to its domestic market, or cutting energy supplies, there were areas where Chisinau was caught completely offguard. For instance, Russia tested hack-and-leak operations by first hacking Telegram channels and later releasing edited versions of the chat correspondence of politicians from Moldova's ruling party⁽⁶⁾. Russia's experimented with new hybrid tactics in the Transnistria region too. A series of explosions rocked the separatist entity, likely organised by Russian intelligence services, whose stronghold Transnistria was for decades⁽⁷⁾. The attacks were apparently designed to harm no one directly, but rather to spread panic among the population on both banks of the Nistru river. Moreover the attacks were attributed by Russian proxies in Tiraspol to Ukraine in what looked like an effort to drive a wedge between Kyiv and Chisinau⁽⁸⁾. Russia's propaganda efforts have been attuned to regional developments: Moldova was targeted by disinformation campaigns against Ukrainian refugees, while fake military conscription notices were circulated on social media.

The incidence of cyberattacks and false bomb alerts reached unprecedented levels. The Ministry of Interior confirmed a sharp increase in false bomb alerts across Moldova from 25 in 2021 to 148 in the first 8 months of 2022⁽⁹⁾. The government also reported in January 2023 that more than 1 300 public officials were targets of scam and phishing attacks⁽¹⁰⁾. Russian proxies organised protests in Chisinau throughout autumn and early spring aimed to provoke chaos and fuel wider public discontent. Unable to launch a direct military assault on Moldova, Moscow decided to put the country under hybrid siege.

For Moldova accession to the EU has a strong security imperative.

LEARNING THE HARD WAY

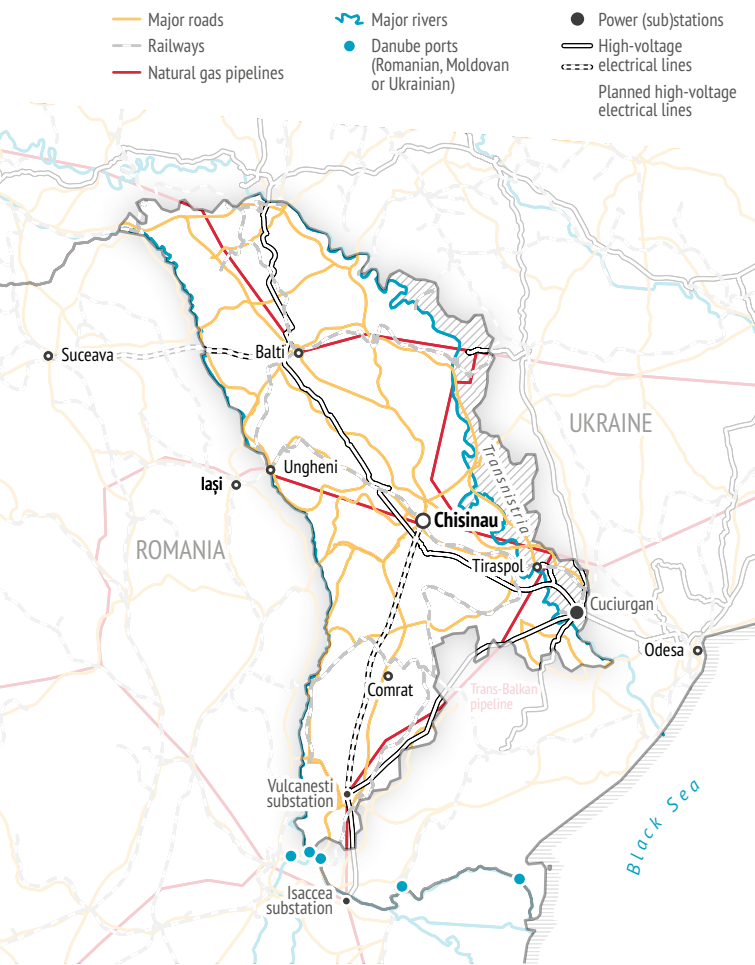
If Moldova had taken its security more seriously over the last three decades, 2022 might perhaps have been less challenging. The lack of a coherent, well-resourced long-term security policy made the task of survival last year more demanding and perilous. In the security realm, Moldova had to learn the hard way and fast. It was fortunate to have Ukraine as a bulwark against a direct attack from Russia. But Moldova left plenty of internal vulnerabilities unaddressed which Russia did not hesitate to exploit. Security measures taken by Chisinau over the last year show that the government has begun to correct the mistakes of the past.

Firstly, since Ukraine plays such a crucial role for Moldova's security, Chisinau tried to support the country, welcoming refugees, providing humanitarian assistance and offering transit corridors as part of a collective European effort to offset the impact of the war on Ukrainian society and the country's economy. While helping Ukraine, Moldova sought an additional layer of protection. Its application for EU membership in March 2022 was not only dictated by democratic aspirations, it was also an effort to gain an extra security insurance against a resurgent and aggressive Russia. Unlike candidates who joined the EU in the 2000s (and who were already members of NATO), for Moldova accession to the EU has a strong security imperative.

Secondly, while the threat of a direct Russian attack has subsided for now, it has not disappeared. The thinking in Chisinau is that regardless of the protective bulwark provided by Ukraine in the east, the country needs to be prepared to resist militarily in the event of Russian aggression at least until partners come to the rescue. And for this Moldova needs hard power. Russia's military intervention in Ukraine exposed significant gaps in Moldova's air defence systems, but also the deficit of non-lethal defence capabilities. To start addressing these problems and deficiencies, the government raised defence spending twice in 2022 and topped this with a 68 % increase in the defence budget in 2023⁽¹¹⁾. But this remains a drop in the ocean (the budget of €85 million amounts to 0.55 % of GDP) after decades of underinvestment in the national army. The Ministry of Defence has estimated that Moldova would need to allocate €250 million annually until 2030 in order to modernise its armed forces⁽¹²⁾. Struggling economically at home, Chisinau has sought international financial assistance from the EU, United States, United Kingdom and NATO to fill the capabilities gaps. In addition to modernising hardware, Moldova has made efforts to improve the combat-readiness of the armed forces

Moldova's connectivity

Selection of cross-border infrastructure links with immediate neighbours



Data: Moldelectrica, 2023; Global Energy Monitor, 2023; European Commission, GISCO, 2023; OSM, 2023; Natural Earth, 2023

through more frequent military exercises, including with international partners.

In the wake of Russia's military onslaught against Ukraine, Chisinau began to pay more attention to a host of non-military threats. Although initiated before the war, the process of bringing Chisinau airport back under state control was accelerated and finalised in early 2023. The Ministry of Interior beefed up the police presence on the border with Ukraine and sought international partners' assistance to boost its border surveillance capabilities. It also introduced anti-corruption measures at border checkpoints to curb illegal trafficking of people and goods across the border⁽⁴³⁾. In an unprecedented move, the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's office jointly with the National Anti-Corruption Centre and the Security and Intelligence Service seized more than €400 000 in illegal funding from the Sor Party, funds which were earmarked for disbursement to protesters⁽⁴⁴⁾. Chisinau airport was the hardest hit by false bomb alerts; each incident paralysed traffic for 2–3 hours. In July 2022 alone there were 17 false bomb alerts⁽⁴⁵⁾. Authorities amended security procedures to prevent

severe disruption to air traffic. Since then, the number of false bomb alerts at the airport has dropped substantially.

With Moldova having been extensively targeted by cyberattacks in 2022, the parliament passed the country's first law on cybersecurity. The authorities also took steps to address massive disinformation emanating from Russia. The Committee for Exceptional Situations (CES) temporarily suspended the broadcasting licences of six channels in an effort to curb the spread of disinformation via Russian TV and radio stations in Moldova. Subsequently parliament adopted legislation which defined the term 'disinformation' and made the suspension decreed by the CES permanent. Later that year, the government took measures against Moldovan TV channels retransmitting Russian programmes.

Thirdly, under duress, Moldova made some progress in building resilience against economic coercion. Russia's energy blackmail compelled Chisinau to address long-standing vulnerabilities in the energy sector. While in 2021 Moldova learned how to make gas acquisitions on the European spot market, in 2022 this practice became a 'new normal'. When in October Gazprom reduced gas supplies by 49 %, within the space of two months Moldova was able to shift to alternative suppliers⁽⁴⁶⁾. While sending the remaining 51 % of Russian gas to Transnistria, Moldova stopped importing gas from Gazprom in December 2022. For the first time in its history Moldova (excluding its separatist region) survived the winter season without Russian gas. This was possible due to enhanced access to the European market via transit agreements with Bulgaria and Greece, a gas interconnector with Romania as well as measures taken by Ukraine and Moldova to transport flows via the Trans-Balkan pipeline (previously used to supply Russian gas to Balkans) in reverse mode.

Chisinau made progress in improving the situation with regard to electricity supplies. In March 2022 Moldova and Ukraine synchronised their power systems with the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E), opening opportunities to import electricity from the European market. This proved critical in several instances in 2022, when Moldova relied on electricity from Romania to offset the deficit in the system created by Russian missile strikes on Ukraine, previously a source of electricity imports to Moldova. As Russia imposed a fruit and vegetable embargo in August 2022, the government in Chisinau made efforts to wean the country off its dependence on the Russian market by diversifying towards markets in the EU, Middle East and Asia. In 2023 Moldovan farmers exported a first consignment of apples to India. Moreover, efforts of economic diplomacy began to pay off: the share of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) market (where Russia is the biggest customer) in Moldova's

exports of apples declined from 92 % to 84 % in the first three months of this year⁽⁴⁷⁾. Still much more needs to be done to reduce this and many other vulnerabilities *vis-à-vis* Russia.

STAYING THE COURSE

Ukraine's robust defence against Russia's full-scale aggression has bought Moldova valuable time to conduct critical reforms and modernise its security sector. Despite several important initiatives in the security domain, many measures taken last year are just the beginning, not the end of the road.

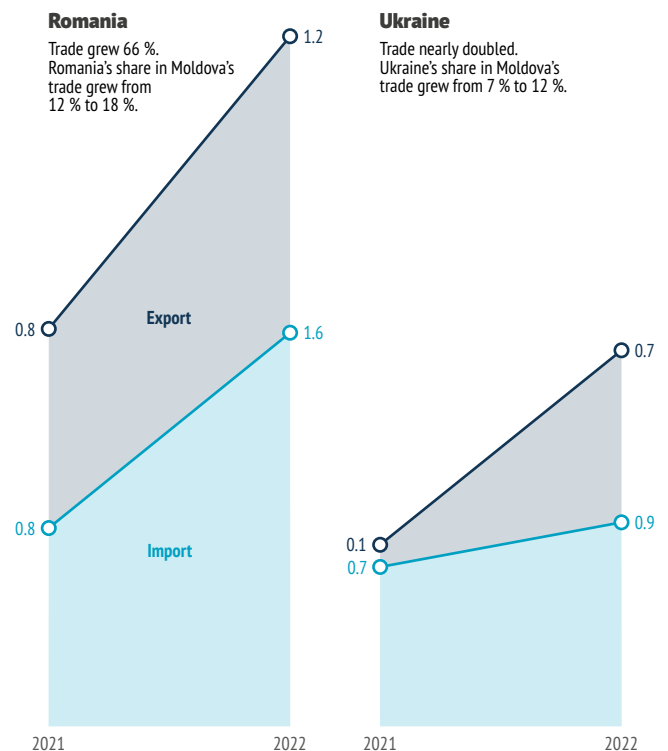
As the Moldovan army progressively modernises its capabilities, it will be necessary to provide military personnel with training on how to use new equipment, especially as some hardware will be significantly different from Soviet analogues. Training in tactics and strategy will also need to absorb the lessons of the war in Ukraine where applicable to Moldova's context. The military infrastructure of the national armed forces also needs to be modernised. The announced plan to build a new base near Chisinau signals the beginning of this process⁽⁴⁸⁾. As Moldova will invest in rebuilding its stock of ammunition, security measures at military storage depots across the country will have to be strengthened. Last but not least, Moldova has to consider developing its territorial defence force and increasing the frequency of exercises for reservists. Bolstering the country's national defence will need to be conceived as a whole-of-society endeavour.

Action also needs to be taken on the internal security front. The high-intensity hybrid warfare waged by Russia denotes a 'new normal' with which Moldova will have to learn to live. Many elements of hybrid warfare are conducted in the shadows, especially in the preparatory stages. To identify these and swiftly direct resources to counter the threat, Moldova will have to strengthen counterintelligence and early warning capacities within national security bodies. Infiltration by police agents of a group which planned violent acts during protests that took place in Chisinau in March 2023 has helped obtain information about a hostile network and subsequently derail its plans⁽⁴⁹⁾. Such an anticipatory approach has to be integrated across the entire national security system. As investigations have revealed, the coordinator of the group residing in Russia sought to recruit men with criminal records to conduct subversive activities during protests in Chisinau. This points towards the need to pay more systematic attention to criminal elements in Moldova as a source of emerging national security threats.

One particular field which requires additional focus is financial intelligence. Hybrid warfare often requires financial means. Since Russian or Moldovan oligarchs associated with the Kremlin have a track record of illegally providing funds to political parties or individuals to engage in hostile activities against Moldova, financial intelligence capacities need to be boosted. Efforts by the Central Election Commission to enhance capacities to monitor party finances are very important in the context of hybrid threats. This should go hand-in-hand with strengthening of the banking sector and its ability to effectively conduct due diligence on clients. Disrupting businesses which finance illegal activities is essential in averting or minimising the scale of hybrid attacks. Strengthening financial intelligence across the board will help not only to curb illegal money flows but also to better enforce the sanctions that the EU and US have applied against Russia.

Moldova expands trade with Romania and Ukraine

Moldova's imports and exports with Romania and Ukraine, 2021-22, \$ billion



Data: UN, COMTRADE, 2023

To ensure internal security Moldova has to pay much more attention than before to its administrative boundary line with Transnistria. The Russian contingent there is unlikely to risk a major operation against Moldova proper: its access to resupplies from Russia is cut off, its equipment is ageing and the troops constituted mainly from local Russian passport-holders who may not be eager to fight. Still, Russian intelligence and elite units stationed in Transnistria may be involved in sabotage or other types of low-key operations aimed at fuelling insecurity and destabilisation. According to the Ministry of Interior, between 2010

and 2020 there were 81 cases of illegal detention or other hostile actions against Moldovan citizens committed by the self-proclaimed Transnistrian separatist authorities in the Security Zone (a demilitarised area established in 1992 which covers parts of Transnistria and Moldova proper)⁽²⁰⁾. Chisinau has to strengthen monitoring of the administrative boundary line in order to prevent any incursions or attempts at infiltration.

As Moldova's government moves to expand digital public services, the surface of cyberattacks is increasing exponentially. The adopted law on cybersecurity provides a useful framework and set of measures to be implemented. One urgent task is to establish a cybersecurity agency with wider powers in the digital domain. The government also needs to do much more to secure its own digital networks by improving the quality of installed software on PCs and scaling up cyber hygiene training for public officials. In view of Ukraine's experience it also has to develop contingency plans for attacks (whether kinetic or cyber) aimed at destroying governmental data and servers.

Counter-disinformation remains a battle to be fought. An opinion poll conducted in April 2023 reveals that more than one year into the war Russian narratives remain deeply entrenched in Moldovan society. Although 43 % of respondents describe the events in Ukraine as unjustified and the Russian invasion as unprovoked, 22 % are of the view that Russia is 'defending the Donbas people's republics from Ukraine', 11.4 % believe that Russia is 'liberating Ukraine from Nazi elements' and 3.3 % think that Russia is fighting against NATO to defend its borders⁽²¹⁾. Moldova has taken measures to curb disinformation on TV and radio, but the online domain is still poorly regulated. The government needs to set up an authority to monitor and regulate online media, which is the main source of news for 18.7 % of respondents. But it is not enough to monitor and interdict, the government has to become more proactive. One way to go about this would be to set up a strategic communications centre, modelled on similar initiatives in EU Member States, which not only will debunk the most blatant disinformation imperilling the work of state structures but will help to coordinate inter-agency communication and make it more appealing to the public.

There is still plenty to be done on the economic front in terms of enhancing resilience. Moldova has improved the situation by securing alternative gas supplies. But more can be done to reduce gas consumption through better thermal insulation of buildings as well as by shifting to cheaper alternative fuels (e.g., biomass, biogas) to generate thermal power. The situation with regard to electricity supplies remains precarious. Moldova is heavily dependent on energy

supplied from the Transnistrian region (around 80 %) which is generated from Russian gas. Thus, in reality Moldova's decoupling from Russian gas is only partial. And things might get worse in the future should Moscow opt for a total chaos scenario and suspend gas deliveries earmarked for Transnistria. Although unthinkable a few years ago, in the current security context such a scenario cannot be ruled out. In this case, Moldova would be deprived of one of its main (albeit replaceable) sources of electricity, while Transnistria, which has not paid Gazprom for delivered gas for years, would lose its main source of budgetary revenue, leading to the collapse of its economic system.

To avert such doomsday scenarios, Chisinau has to address the problem of domestic power generation and connectivity with the European market as well as develop market-based contingency plans for the Transnistrian region. One way to deal with insufficient power generation capacities is to speed up the transition to green energy. At the level of individual consumers this is already happening: because of high gas prices Moldova has witnessed a spectacular increase in photovoltaic panel installations in the private sector. While in 2021 there were 472 users, by February this year the number of users had increased to 2606⁽²²⁾. As a result, last year renewable energy generation capacities increased by 300 % and in the first two months of 2023 by another 50 %⁽²³⁾. The growth looks impressive because of the low base; the share of renewables in Moldova's energy mix remains meagre, amounting to just 6 % in 2022⁽²⁴⁾. To accelerate the trend Moldova will have to attract investments in solar parks and wind farms.

In addition to domestic power generation capacities, Moldova needs a better interconnection with the EU electricity market. This implies building high-voltage electricity interconnectors with Romania. Last year during Russian missile attacks on Ukraine, Moldova experienced two major power outages. The reason for this is that while Moldova can import electricity from Romania, the supply of large volumes is possible for now only via the energy system of Ukraine and the Transnistrian region. This is due to the problem of Soviet legacy infrastructure which has remained unaddressed for three decades. Moldova needs direct high-voltage interconnections with Romania in order to ensure security of supply and prevent power outages in future. The extension of one voltage line which will circumvent Transnistria is under construction and due to be finalised in 2025; the second one is still in the early planning stages. In both cases the projects are backed financially by the EU, which proved in 2022 to be indispensable for Moldova's security and resilience.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE EU IN MOLDOVA

Moldova would not have been able to go through the most difficult year in its recent history without the EU's comprehensive support. The country was able to buy gas on Europe's spot market because of the loan provided by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Moldova managed to preserve social stability also thanks to the EU's financial assistance which helped to offset increasing gas and electricity tariffs for the most vulnerable categories of citizens. Moldova managed to secure its borders with important assistance from Frontex and the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM). It was able to counter hybrid threats with the support of the EU's Security Hub⁽²⁵⁾. The EU was and will remain critical for Moldova's stability and security.

Moldova's push to modernise its armed forces' capabilities in the years leading up to 2030 would greatly benefit from annual allocations of funds from the European Peace Facility (EPF). In 2022 the EU increased its contribution for Moldova via the EPF (in total €47 million). It is scheduled to disburse another €40 million in 2023. The EPF should become an instrument of long-term support for the modernisation of Moldova's armed forces. The EU could play a critical role in training the Moldovan army too. This can be done on a bilateral basis via partnerships with the EU Member States or through a separate CSDP mission modelled on a similar one set up for Ukraine. The EU may also consider including Moldova in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects which would enhance its knowledge and capabilities in areas critical for its security.

Helping Moldova to fend off hybrid attacks is urgent and requires more support. As the EU has recently approved an advisory CSDP mission to deal with non-military threats (the EU Partnership Mission to Moldova – EUPM), it is crucial that the mission is rapidly deployed. And as previous cases demonstrate, the success of the mission will depend not only on the demand side (the receiving party's ability to absorb advice) but also on the supply side (providing a fully-staffed mission with advisors deployed for long-term engagement). Its success will also depend on financial support for Moldova's civilian security sector. Moldovan police will need more modern equipment to step up monitoring of the border with Ukraine as well as of the administrative boundary line with Transnistria.

In the coming months Moldova will require capacity-building assistance to set up a cybersecurity

agency, improve strategic communications and reform its intelligence service. The EU could share knowledge and know-how on how to do this and thus help Moldova to avoid making frequently committed mistakes in the process. These needs can be addressed in part via the upcoming CSDP mission, and partially via bilateral tracks with the EU Member States. To help Moldova build resilience against hybrid attacks the EU could also curb the inflow of dirty money into the political system. The EU's decision to establish a sanctions regime against those who try to destabilise Moldova needs to be followed by listings of individuals and strict enforcement of sanctions as sophisticated evasion tactics are to be expected on the part of targeted individuals.

The separatist region of Transnistria, which is of relevance not only for Moldova's but also Ukraine's security, requires special focus in the new regional context. While assisting Moldova in ensuring more effective monitoring of the administrative boundary line, the EU has to elevate its diplomatic profile on the Transnistria issue. The EU should consider appointing a Special Representative for the Transnistria conflict, whose main goal as long as the war drags on would be to ensure calm and stability in the region. The EU Special Representative could play an active role in facilitating talks in a 1+1 format between Chisinau and Tiraspol. On the one hand, more frequent talks in this format would ensure uninterrupted communication between the two sides towards solving day-to-day problems. On the other hand, the talks could also contribute to Transnistria's gradual reintegration into Moldova's legal and economic space. The Special Representative would also have the task of coordinating positions between two key regional stakeholders, Romania and Ukraine.

The EU should consider appointing a Special Representative for the Transnistria conflict.

The EU could help address Moldova's economic vulnerabilities by for example allocating more financial assistance to improve Moldova's road, railway and waterway connections with Ukraine and Romania. Moldova's trade with Ukraine and Romania significantly expanded in 2022 and is set to grow. At the same time the country's infrastructure is

not designed for such intensive trade. In the context of the future reconstruction of Ukraine, infrastructure will need to be significantly upgraded. In parallel with facilitating connectivity, the EU could further open up its market by lifting tariffs on all imports from Moldova. The EU Commission proposal tabled in early May to suspend remaining tariffs is unlikely to have an impact on EU producers (given the modest size of Moldova's economy), but would in turn yield significant benefits for Moldova, which struggles with Russia's economic coercion. Last but not least, the EU has a role to play in powering Moldova's green transition. The shift to solar energy has helped

Moldovans to reduce energy bills but also to reduce fossil fuel consumption. The EU should consider scaling up its support for green energy projects in Moldova. By doing so, the EU will not only foster Moldova's energy resilience but will help to put the country's economic development on a more sustainable footing.

Moldova's stability and resilience in 2022 was to no small degree the result of the EU's multifaceted support. It is important for the EU to persist in this vein. A secure Moldova will ensure much-needed peace along Ukraine's southern border, in a context when that country's northern and eastern frontiers are and perhaps will remain sources of grave security threats. An effective Moldovan air defence system would to an extent help to minimise security threats to Ukraine too. Ukraine's second-longest border, after its border with Russia, is with Moldova. A secure Moldova has the potential to play the role of a key transport hub in Europe's efforts to reconstruct the war-torn Mykolaiv, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts of Ukraine. And finally, viewed in the perspective of the larger regional context, a secure and resilient Moldova is a factor of stability in south-eastern Europe.

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