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POLITICAL SECURITY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: BETWEEN EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AND INTERNAL COHESION

Vladimir BORȘ[38]

Diana HÎRBU[39]

Abstract. ***This article examines the political security of the Republic of Moldova through the analytical lens of the interaction between external influences and internal societal cohesion. It argues that Moldova's political vulnerability does not stem solely from external hybrid pressures, but from their interaction with internal structural weaknesses such as institutional fragility, political polarization, and limited social trust. The study highlights how external actors exploit internal divisions, undermining democratic legitimacy and strategic autonomy. By combining conceptual analysis with the Moldovan case, the article demonstrates that political security increasingly depends on strengthening internal cohesion, institutional resilience, and participatory governance alongside international cooperation.***

Keywords: *political security; Republic of Moldova; external influence; internal cohesion; resilience; governance; democratic stability.*

Political security is a crucial dimension of national security because it helps maintain the stability of government institutions, uphold constitutional order, and ensure that political processes function democratically. In the Republic of Moldova, this aspect is heavily influenced by how external pressures interact with the internal unity of society and its institutions. The challenges of transitioning from a Soviet past, ongoing political divides, and a lack of strategic consensus have created a situation where external geopolitical forces can easily take hold, threatening both decision-making independence and the legitimacy of governance.

In this scenario, these external influences don't just act on their own; they tend to magnify their effects by taking advantage of internal weaknesses like fragile institutions, declining public trust, and a lack of social cohesion. Hybrid threats—showing up in forms like information warfare, economic pressure, political manipulation, and cyberattacks—are not only sources of external strain but also tools that deepen internal rifts, ultimately impacting political stability and the democratic processes of the state.

The goal of the article is to pinpoint the key political and institutional risks while also outlining the strategic steps needed to bolster political resilience. This can be achieved by enhancing social cohesion, ensuring institutional legitimacy, and improving the state's ability to handle external influences within a democratic and sustainable framework.

[38] associate professor, Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova, E-mail: vladimir.bors@usm.md

[39] associate professor, Moldova State University, Republic of Moldova, E-mail: diana.hirbu@usm.md

Conceptual Framework: Political Security between External Influence and Internal Cohesion

Political security is all about safeguarding our democratic institutions, upholding the rule of law, and ensuring that electoral processes remain free from disruptive influences (Bencheci, 2024:54). It plays a crucial role in maintaining stable governance and the credibility of public authorities. On the flip side, hybrid threats bring a level of strategic ambiguity, blending both traditional and non-traditional tactics. This can involve everything from manipulating information and launching cyberattacks to applying energy pressure, corrupting political elites, and running disinformation campaigns (Sandu, 2024:25). The players in this game—whether they're state actors or non-state groups—aim to undermine social unity and chip away at the public's trust in government institutions.

In today's complex geopolitical landscape, characterized by fragmentation, strategic rivalry, and swift technological changes, political security has emerged as a crucial element for maintaining the stability of democratic systems. It's no longer just about safeguarding national sovereignty; it's about ensuring the resilience of our institutions, fostering public trust, and protecting decision-making processes from outside interference. Therefore, when we analyze political security in the context of hybrid threats, we need to grasp the dynamics of institutional resilience, the influence of non-state actors, and how the informational, infrastructural, and societal realms are interconnected (Bachmann, Sascha, and Håkan Gunneriusson, 2015:8).

The idea of political security has really evolved since the Cold War wrapped up. Back then, it was all about keeping the political system stable and ensuring the state's survival (Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, 1998). Nowadays, though, the focus has shifted to how well institutions can maintain democratic legitimacy, foster social cohesion, and make independent decisions, even when faced with pressures from both inside and outside.

Establishing political security within institutions is vital for bolstering democratic stability and safeguarding the state's ability to make its own choices. This process goes beyond just administrative changes; it requires a deep transformation in how public institutions handle transparency, legitimacy, and the trust of citizens.

A key element of this process is decisional transparency, which ensures that the public has access to information about how institutions operate, allowing for effective democratic oversight of government actions. By fostering open discussions and maintaining ongoing communication with civil society, institutions can bolster their legitimacy and minimize the chances of manipulation or corruption.

Another vital aspect is electoral resilience, which aims to safeguard democratic processes from outside interference and attempts to sway public opinion through misinformation or technological means (Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, 1998: 69). In today's digital landscape, electoral campaigns and voting systems are increasingly vulnerable to cyberattacks, disinformation efforts, and foreign meddling. Therefore, enhancing electoral security measures is essential to uphold the credibility of our democratic institutions.

These days, information governance has become an essential tool for ensuring political security. It helps combat narrative manipulation, disinformation, and media polar-

ization (Nye, 2021:92). In a world where the public sphere is flooded with fast-paced and often misleading information, the ability of institutions to react quickly, transparently, and in a coordinated way to information attacks is a true sign of political maturity and democratic strength.

As a result, establishing political security goes beyond just bolstering administrative systems; it also involves building a robust democratic ecosystem rooted in transparency, protecting electoral processes, and creating an information governance framework that can maintain the integrity of the public sphere. So, political security isn't just about military concerns anymore; it's a complex governance challenge that unites state institutions, the private sector, and civil society (NATO, 2021).

One of the most prevalent ways that manifestation occurs is through disinformation campaigns and social polarization, which take advantage of the cultural, economic, or political divides within society. By twisting public conversations and heightening social tensions, these campaigns chip away at national unity and erode trust in public institutions. Another tactic involves economic and energy-related maneuvers, which serve as tools of strategic pressure. By manipulating trade routes or energy dependencies, adversarial forces can sway a nation's political choices, impacting its economic independence and ability to react.

Moreover, political meddling in elections or decision-making—like secret funding, propaganda efforts, or media infiltration—aims to weaken the credibility of democratic institutions and foster a widespread sense of distrust (Mälksoo, 2021:11). Collectively, these strategies highlight the intricate and interconnected nature of hybrid threats, which don't necessarily aim for the outright destruction of a state but instead focus on its internal decay by undermining democratic principles and social unity.

Hybrid threats are tricky because they blur the lines between peace and conflict, which means we need flexible governance strategies and policies that help society bounce back. Political security and hybrid threats are closely linked; these threats take advantage of political, social, and informational weaknesses in states to chip away at their decision-making legitimacy and political independence (Wither, 2020:370). As a result, managing political security should include proactive and responsive strategies that focus on resilience, such as anticipating challenges, coordinating between institutions, and being adaptable. In this light, the EU and NATO have pushed for a unified approach that emphasizes "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" resilience. They understand that ensuring political security isn't just the job of state institutions; it also requires the active participation of citizens, businesses, and local communities (NATO, 2021).

Political resilience is essentially a structured way for democratic societies to defend their core values, infrastructure, and information systems from manipulation and coercion without resorting to military means. When faced with hybrid threats, the modern approach to political security relies on a sophisticated institutional framework that weaves together policies, structures, and operational tools to ensure a unified strategic response at both the European and Euro-Atlantic levels.

In a world where interdependence and cross-border vulnerabilities are the norm, these mechanisms go beyond just addressing immediate risks. They also focus on fostering systemic resilience through coordination and collaboration between various institu-

tions and the public and private sectors. A crucial part of this framework is the European Union's Strategic Compass, which outlines resilience as a key goal of collective security and provides guidance on bolstering European defense against hybrid threats (European Union, 2022). This document advocates for a whole-of-society approach to resilience, encouraging citizens, institutions, and private entities to actively participate in safeguarding common security.

Another vital component is the Hybrid CoE (Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats) located in Helsinki. This collaborative platform, formed by the EU and NATO, is dedicated to research, training, and policy development aimed at countering hybrid threats. The center offers strategic expertise in areas like disinformation, cybersecurity, information manipulation, and societal resilience, while also promoting the sharing of best practices among member states.

The NIS2 and CER Directives (Directive on the Resilience of Critical Entities (CER) and Directive NIS2, 2023) are essential for safeguarding critical infrastructures and information networks. They set out clear responsibilities for Member States regarding risk assessment, incident reporting, and enhancing collaboration between the public and private sectors (European Commission, 2023). These directives make digital security a fundamental part of political security, ensuring that services vital to governance and the economy continue to operate smoothly.

In addition, strategic communication methods and media literacy programs support this institutional framework. They aim to combat disinformation and narrative manipulation by promoting civic education and critical thinking among citizens. The European Commission (European Commission, 2023) highlights that fostering a culture of informational vigilance is just as important as protecting infrastructures, especially since hybrid threats often target public perceptions and social cohesion.

Navigating the governance of political security in the face of hybrid threats involves a blend of institutional and societal integration, where legal, technological, and educational tools work together seamlessly. This approach marks a shift from merely reacting to security issues to embracing a proactive and participatory stance, rooted in cooperation, transparency, and collective resilience. Through these policies, we see political resilience taking shape as an institutional process that weaves together normative, educational, and technological aspects. Meanwhile, establishing political resilience—through international collaboration, education, and innovation—becomes essential for achieving sustainable non-military security.

In this light, political security is no longer just about national defense; it's a collective societal endeavor where governments, institutions, and citizens join forces to foster a culture of resilience that can effectively tackle the long-term impacts of hybrid threats.

Context of the Republic of Moldova: Political and Institutional Vulnerabilities

For over thirty years, the Republic of Moldova has been navigating a tricky transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system, all while dealing with geopolitical tensions and a shaky economy. Its location between the European Union and the Russian Federation has created a delicate balance, swinging between pro-European sen-

timents and Eastern influences, which has made its political institutions and governance quite vulnerable (Cenușă, 2020:51).

The security framework in Moldova is under pressure from political divides, fragmented parties, and outside influences. Given these hurdles, it's important to see Moldova's political and institutional weaknesses not just as internal issues, but as part of a larger geopolitical picture where hybrid threats, corruption, and economic dependencies play significant roles in political instability (Olaru, 2021). The Moldovan political system is marked by ongoing party fragmentation, stark geopolitical divides, and a heavy dependence on charismatic leaders, all of which have stifled the growth of a robust democracy.

This instability is made even worse by outside forces in the realms of information and politics. The Republic of Moldova often finds itself battling disinformation campaigns and influence tactics from the Russian Federation, which aim to split public opinion and weaken support for European integration (Rusu, 2022:61). These tactics are a textbook example of hybrid warfare, taking advantage of internal political vulnerabilities to further external geopolitical goals (Mälksoo, 2021:12).

One of the biggest challenges facing the Republic of Moldova is its institutional fragility. Public administration struggles with a lack of professionalism, rampant politicization, and the sway of private interests over public decision-making. Additionally, the judicial system is still somewhat compromised, and anti-corruption reforms face significant pushback (Transparency International, 2023).

High-level corruption has significantly affected political stability, culminating in the notorious 2014 "theft of the billion" scandal—an iconic example of state capture that shattered citizens' trust in institutions and revealed the weaknesses in our financial and judicial systems (Rusu, Burduja, 2021:241). This situation led the European Union to tie financial aid to essential reforms, particularly focusing on judicial independence and enhancing institutional oversight.

Additionally, the absence of a strong administrative culture and political accountability hampers the effective execution of public policies. While there are strategies for public administration reform, their implementation often feels superficial and swayed by electoral cycles, which only serves to maintain institutional instability and vulnerability.

The Republic of Moldova stands out as a clear example of how hybrid threats can impact nations with fragile institutions. Tactics like disinformation campaigns, economic infiltration, and energy dependencies are used to sway political decisions and shape the state's strategic direction (Rettman, 2022). These hybrid tactics particularly target electoral processes, independent media, and security agencies, taking advantage of internal weaknesses to deepen social and political rifts. Meanwhile, the lack of a culture of institutional resilience diminishes Moldova's ability to effectively tackle these challenges. Collaboration between the state and civil society is still underdeveloped, and participatory governance remains more of an exception than a standard practice (Benea, 2023:109).

Our state faces significant political and institutional challenges, deeply rooted in a history of dependence, corruption, and fragmentation. These issues continue to obstruct the country's journey toward democratization and European integration. To truly strengthen the state and ensure national security, Moldova needs to focus on building po-

litical resilience through meaningful reforms and international collaboration. In a region where information warfare and geopolitical pressures are prevalent, the political security of Moldova hinges on its capacity to create independent, accountable, and transparent institutions that are firmly anchored in a strong democratic culture.

Hybrid Threats Specific to the Republic of Moldova

The specialized literature that delves into the political and institutional vulnerabilities of the Republic of Moldova paints a nuanced picture of state fragility, geopolitical dependencies, and the hurdles faced in the democratization journey. Recent studies provide a thorough insight into how the post-Soviet transition has been characterized by systemic dysfunctions, external hybrid influences, and an institutional resilience that is still a work in progress.

Andrei Benea (Benea, 2023) emphasizes that to bolster democratic resilience in Eastern Europe, including the Republic of Moldova, we need governance that is participatory and transparent, actively engaging civil society in decision-making. He points out that institutional weaknesses and a lack of trust in public authorities continue to pose significant challenges to political stability and the consolidation of democracy.

In a similar vein, Dionis Cenușă (Cenușă, 2020:52) takes a closer look at how the Moldovan political system is evolving. He points out that the hurdles of democratization, along with the shifting geopolitical landscape between East and West, have resulted in a governance model that's quite unstable. Often, the structural reforms we see are just surface-level changes, heavily swayed by the electoral climate. Cenuşă also notes that the journey toward European integration is often viewed more as political talk than a genuine long-term strategy.

On the other hand, Lilia Ciobanu (Ciobanu, 2022:220) sheds light on the issues of institutional weakness and political division. She argues that the internal rifts, influenced by various geopolitical dynamics, have made it tough to establish a stable administrative elite. This ongoing conflict has created a culture of perpetual political strife, which ultimately impacts how democracy functions in the country.

European institutions have confirmed these observations. In the Report on the implementation of the EU–Moldova Association Agreement (European Commission, 2023), it's pointed out that while there has been some progress in judicial reform and the fight against corruption, issues surrounding the independence of the judiciary and the consistent application of the law still linger. The European Council's conclusions regarding Moldova's candidate country status recognize the nation's potential but stress the importance of bolstering public institutions and curbing the influence of oligarchs in politics (European Council, 2022).

On the security front, Maria Mälksoo (Mälksoo, 2021) presents a fresh take on resilience as a security practice, showing that the Republic of Moldova faces threats from information warfare and hybrid tactics. Her research underscores the need for cohesive policies that blend information governance, civic education, and international collaboration. Similarly, Iulian Olaru (Olaru, 2021) examines the delicate balance between Western and Eastern influences, concluding that Moldova remains susceptible to various geopolitical pressures and unconventional methods of influence.

Nicu Popescu (Popescu, 2021) underscores the significance of adopting a European perspective, arguing that true integration into the European Union's norms and security frameworks is crucial for driving institutional reform and minimizing political vulnerabilities. He also cautions that if reforms don't lead to real improvements in justice and the rule of law, the pro-European rhetoric could end up feeling empty.

On the other hand, Valeriu Prohnitchi (Prohnitchi, 2020:31) points out the deep-rooted governance issues in Moldova, which range from the over-politicization of public positions to a lack of professional skills and accountability in administration. These problems not only sustain institutional dependency but also obstruct the growth of a merit-based bureaucracy, which is vital for successfully implementing European reforms.

Andrew Rettman (Rettman, 2022), in a piece for EUobserver, sheds light on the hybrid warfare tactics that Russia is using against the Republic of Moldova. He points out how propaganda, energy manipulation, and disinformation are all part of a strategy to keep the country unstable and dependent. This viewpoint is further supported by Vasile Rotaru and Andrei Rusu (Rotaru, Rusu, 2023), who describe Moldova as "a state of political fragility," caught in a tug-of-war between internal corruption and external geopolitical pressures on its democratic institutions. In another study, Andrei Rusu (Rusu, 2022) delves into the impact of information warfare on nations within the Eastern Partnership. He highlights how, in Moldova, media manipulation and attacks on the information landscape have become key strategies for eroding trust in European institutions. Additionally, Rusu and Burduja (Rusu and Burduja, 2021) examine the issue of state capture, detailing how oligarchic networks have seized control of public institutions for their own gain, fostering an environment rife with systemic corruption and institutional weakness. Transparency International (Transparency International, 2023) backs up this analysis, ranking Moldova among the countries perceived to have high levels of corruption and noting that, despite some legislative advancement, the enforcement of anti-corruption laws is still lacking. In summary, the literature paints a picture of a society caught between its European aspirations and the hurdles of fragile governance. The Republic of Moldova grapples with structural issues, external meddling, and weak institutions. However, recent developments hint at a positive shift towards bolstering democratic resilience, thanks to international support, legal reforms, and a more engaged civil society.

The political and institutional security of the Republic of Moldova hinges on turning resilience from just a theoretical idea into a practical, everyday reality. This means we need to weave together the state, institutions, and society into a unified approach to democratic defense and sustainable growth. Right now, Moldova is working on adapting and strengthening its responses to political and informational challenges, aiming to blend internal reforms with help from external partners. This effort shows the government's dedication to creating a robust system that can tackle hybrid threats and the risks of destabilization.

The role of civil society and independent media

In the framework of national resilience, civil society and independent media play a crucial role. Non-governmental organizations have emerged as vital players in ensuring government transparency and fighting against disinformation, which helps foster a civic culture rooted in accountability and critical thinking (API, 2024).

Through initiatives like media education campaigns, fact-checking platforms, and digital literacy programs, NGOs and independent journalists work to strengthen the public's ability to discern information and build trust in reliable sources. In a landscape where information warfare poses a subtle yet significant threat to democratic nations, these efforts serve as a form of civic defense that complements government policies.

By actively involving civil society, the process of building resilience becomes more legitimate and sustainable, as it embraces the participatory aspect of security—turning citizens from mere recipients into active contributors to political stability. As a result, the Republic of Moldova is steadily moving towards a model of collaborative security governance, characterized by strategic partnerships, transparency, and civic involvement. This approach signifies a shift from merely reacting to challenges to anticipating and cooperating, marking the dawn of a new phase in the development of national and regional resilience.

While the Republic of Moldova has certainly made strides in political and institutional reforms, a closer look at the current landscape uncovers several ongoing structural issues that hinder the state-building process. Key challenges include a shortage of financial and human resources, sluggish progress in implementing national strategies, and tensions among state institutions, all of which undermine decision-making and the ability to respond to crises effectively. Moreover, the fragmentation within the political class poses a significant barrier to government stability and the continuity of reforms. Disagreements among political parties, coupled with geopolitical divides, often result in institutional gridlock and a decline in public trust.

Adding to the complexity of governance is the ever-changing nature of hybrid threats, which turns the security landscape into a challenging environment to manage and control. These threats—ranging from cyberattacks and information manipulation to economic pressure—are not always easy to pinpoint or trace back to a single source, making legal responses and institutional coordination more difficult (Bencheci, 2024). The lack of a clear legal framework for addressing these situations hampers the state's ability to respond swiftly and leaves institutions vulnerable to recurring challenges.

The Republic of Moldova is on a constant journey to adapt to a challenging security landscape. Yet, hurdles like incomplete institutional reforms, limited administrative capabilities, and ongoing external pressures keep hindering its efforts to build political and strategic resilience. To tackle these issues effectively, it's crucial to adopt an integrated governance approach—one that blends administrative efficiency, international collaboration, and a robust culture of public accountability. These components are key to turning resilience from just a lofty ideal into a practical, sustainable institutional reality.

Conclusions. The political security landscape of the Republic of Moldova is at a pivotal moment, caught between its own internal weaknesses and the external pressures of hybrid threats. Today's challenges go beyond just controlling territory; they also aim to influence the minds of citizens, undermine institutional stability, and sway the country's geopolitical direction. To build political resilience, the Republic of Moldova needs a comprehensive strategy that weaves together state mechanisms, international alliances, and public education. By embracing a hybrid model of democratic defense, Moldova can turn its vulnerabilities into strategic advantages and pave the way for lasting stability.

To tackle the structural weaknesses and hybrid threats it faces, the Republic of Moldova must implement a cohesive strategy focused on institutional reforms, fostering international collaboration, and enhancing societal resilience. The key actions outlined in official documents and recent analyses demonstrate a united effort to modernize and fortify the state.

One of the main goals here is to strengthen the legislative and institutional framework by quickly putting the National Security Strategy into action and setting up an interinstitutional center dedicated to analyzing hybrid threats. This center would be key in coordinating efforts to monitor, anticipate, and respond to emerging risks. Think of it as a collaborative hub where government institutions, intelligence services, and external partners can come together to share insights and conduct strategic analysis.

At the same time, we need to ramp up our fight against corruption and push for greater transparency in politics. We can achieve this by bolstering the independence of the judiciary and improving parliamentary oversight of intelligence services. This way, we can maintain a healthy democratic balance and ensure effective supervision of executive power. Any judicial reforms should go hand in hand with solid mechanisms to evaluate the integrity of public officials, ensuring that our state institutions remain coherent and credible.

Another key area to focus on is media and digital education, which is becoming more and more essential in a world overflowing with disinformation and manipulated information. By developing information literacy programs in schools and universities, we can help shape a generation that knows how to spot false sources and actively engage in strengthening democracy. This educational aspect is vital for boosting society's cognitive resilience and minimizing the vulnerabilities that external propaganda tends to exploit.

At the same time, the Republic of Moldova should keep building and expanding its international partnerships with the European Union, NATO, and the OSCE. The emphasis should be on sharing expertise, technological collaboration, and joint training in cybersecurity and information defense. Being actively involved in these partnerships not only bolsters the country's standing within collective security networks but also opens doors to valuable resources, knowledge, and strategic support.

A crucial factor for national stability is reducing energy dependence by diversifying energy sources and enhancing local production capabilities. Achieving energy independence is not just an economic matter; it's also a security issue, as relying on external suppliers can leave the state vulnerable.

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