

Offsetting hybrid threats in Associated Trio: Georgia, Moldova & Ukraine



EaP Security Forum



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The analytical synthesis is part of the project „Eastern Partnership Security Forum”, that aims to launch the “EaP Security Forum” that will engage nongovernmental and governmental experts from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine in a joint effort to strengthen security resilience of their countries in the areas of cybersecurity, intelligence reform, offsetting hybrid threats, and strengthening the national defense.

The project is funded by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) and implemented by the Foreign Policy Association of Moldova in partnership with the Georgian Center for Strategy and Development and the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”.

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OFFSETTING HYBRID THREATS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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SUMMARY

The challenges posed by hybrid threats are becoming more complex as the concept is continuously expanding along with the specific features of information technologies. This well-known phenomenon became popular in Eastern Europe since - Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, triggering a chain of targeted actions in the region of hybrid nature. Countering these particular security threats is becoming a serious struggle for the less resilient countries, as in Moldova's case but also Georgia and Ukraine.

Most of Moldova's security vulnerabilities have an internal origin that is being constantly fueled by foreign malign factors. The most common threats such as the Transnistrian conflict, external energy dependency, Russia's meddling in Moldova's election campaigns along with the backing of high officials and political parties, biased media outlets, and the recently widespread of infodemia during the current pandemic, etc., pose a serious threat to Moldova's national security.

The Moldovan leadership invested some effort in improving the information security landscape by working on the legal frameworks in the field. Despite that, an accurate and proper mechanism of early prevention and countering of hybrid threats has not been developed yet.

Due to the constant and dynamic change of the security environment, regional cooperation in this field is essential for states like Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. The EaP framework should be mostly explored by the Association Trio in terms of defense and security, lobbying further for an active engagement of the EU in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of hybrid threat is at the top of the agenda of many governments. While definitions vary, it is considered that this phenomenon has only recently evolved. The novelty is the combination of intense disinformation campaigns and a well-known mixture of coercive and subversive activities, conventional and unconventional methods employed by a state or non-state actor following specific objectives. The efforts to destabilize countries as Moldova by undermining the public trust in government institutions, and by challenging the core values of society become more common in Eastern Europe. Apart from that, the pandemic crisis has reshaped the notion of safety and security.

This study aims to analyze Moldova's main risks and challenges in offsetting hybrid threats, government policy achievements and failures. It also evaluates Moldova's cooperation initiatives with its main strategic partners, including within the Association Trio and the EU to strengthen state resilience through rapid and accurate responses for preventing and countering hybrid threats. Consequently, a series of recommendations have been elaborated in this regard.

ASSESSING THE MAIN HYBRID WARFARE TOOLS IN MOLDOVA

The Transnistrian conflict

In recent years, the Eastern Europe region has been increasingly exposed to hybrid threats that involve hostile actions designed to destabilize the area. The Republic of Moldova is no exception. The concept of hybrid warfare, however,

is not new. It became popular following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing military confrontations in South-Eastern Ukraine. Subsequently, the term of hybrid threat was linked to Russia in EU and NATO's main security strategies and policies, as well in public discourses across Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, the Republic of Moldova has become Russia's target of influence since the 1991 proclamation of independence, causing an artificial military conflict in March 1992. Moldova's underdeveloped management and capabilities of countering hybrid threats and other security issues make the country more vulnerable. In turn, Moscow has managed to use a series of hybrid warfare tools against Chisinau. This occurred in conjunction with the use of conventional military and political methods, increased disinformation campaigns and propaganda spreading xenophobic messages about Romania, or alleged nationalist sentiments of Moldovan officials, aimed to threaten the national identity of the population in the region¹. It is considered that Russia exploited the financial backing tools too, rather than military aid, as being a more suitable method to legitimize the Tiraspol regime, thereby gaining local population support instead of having to confront potential uprisings.²

As a result, Moldova is confronting on its territory a breakaway region where Russian military forces are present. This served as a pressure button to blackmail the Chisinau leadership whenever Moldova's decisions on domestic and foreign development directions did not match Russia's plans and goals. For instance, the signing of the Association Agreement between Moldova and the EU triggered a hostile response from Russia, such as the politically-motivated embargos on the Moldovan wine, meat, vegetables and fruits. Moldova decided to re-orient and form more ties with the EU, rather than remain economically and politically dependent on Russia.

Moldova's energy vulnerability

The energy issue is among the important political and economic tools that Moscow uses to keep Moldova under its influence. The fact that RM is totally dependent on the Russian gas supplies and the imports made by the MoldovaGaz company – in majority-owned by the Russian company Gazprom, gives Russia the opportunity to manipulate the Moldovan leadership whenever the time comes to reach a new deal. During the election campaigns, the topic surrounding gas supplies became a common point and argument in the public discourses of the pro-Russian politicians in Moldova.

For instance, this happened in November 2019 during the ex-prime minister Ion Chicu visit to Moscow and discussions about a possible discount for gas prices.³ This was done in the context of the 2020 Moldovan Presidential elections, a common Russian practice aimed at backing its allies, as in the case of the former head of state, Igor Dodon, and the financial support offered to his political party.⁴ In addition, Moscow makes use of Gazprom to blackmail the Moldovan authorities for the country's alleged debt for unpaid gas, which reached around \$ 7 bn. In effect, the unpaid gas is delivered to the breakaway region as a form of Russian aid for the Tiraspol regime.

Russia's meddling in Moldova's election campaigns

The multiple political crises and economic unfavorable circumstances within the country are generating vulnerabilities, which are exploited through malign actions. This was the case for the majority of the Moldovan elections, specifically after 2010, when the pro-European political parties took the lead. Since then, this was an open invitation to Russian meddling in all election campaigns of the RM. The process comprises various intrusive

¹ Hybrid threats in EaP countries: building a common response, Tbilisi, Chisinau, Kyiv, Erevan, Brussels, 2019

² D. Minzarari, Victoria Bucataru, Transnistrian conflict resolution at 25th year of impasse: causes, obstacles and possible solutions, February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2VeNkMj>

³ A visit and "key" agreements: Moscow offers a discount for gas prices and the prospect of a substantial credit, RFL Moldova, 21 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/3lbC5gT>

⁴ The Socialists Party is suing BILD for writing that Russia would have spent more than 11 million euros to make Dodon president, adevarul.ro, 25 June 2021, <https://bit.ly/3n4DJdy>

measures and tools, e.g. affiliated media, fake news and propaganda, shadow financing, political consultants, social media, the Russian Orthodox Church, targeted mobilization of diaspora and ethnic minorities, involvement of the unconstitutional authorities from Tiraspol, etc.⁵

These well-integrated elements were particularly effective, for instance, during the 2014 parliamentary elections, when the recently created pro-Russia Party of Socialists led by Igor Dodon got into the Parliament and took the most mandates, unlike other political candidates.⁶ With every new election, Russia's techniques improved due to learning from past mistakes. This was the case of the 2016 presidential elections, won by Igor Dodon, who defeated the current head of state, Maia Sandu.⁷ This electoral scrutiny encompassed an increasingly polarized media coverage, abuse of administrative resources, lack of transparency in campaign financing⁸, organization of free transportation for voters from the Transnistrian region, the wide use of black PR and practices of appealing to stereotypes and fake news, such as the alleged promise of Maia Sandu to EU that Moldova will accept 30,000 Syrian refugees in return for gaining the European support, which went viral both in online and offline spaces.⁹

One must acknowledge the elevated role given to **the Orthodox Church** in Russia's hybrid warfare efforts, adjusted to the circumstances of the specific countries. The fact that the majority of Moldovan citizens identify themselves as Christian Orthodox and somewhat trust churches (39,3%¹⁰), with the Moldovan Metropolitan being a branch of the Russian Patriarchate, "weaponizing religion"¹¹ in a country where the narrative is focused on religion and so-called traditional values is an important aspect. The Moldovan church ensures, therefore, a form of right to interfere in politics and manipulate the public opinion in favor of particular officials, and serves as a tool for massive disinformation. For instance, in the 2016 election campaign, churches proliferated fake news about Maia Sandu, mobilizing the pro-Russia electorate to vote for Dodon's candidacy.¹² Igor Dodon also used to leverage the church throughout his presidential mandate, aiming to gain constant electorate sympathy and support, by participating in religious ceremonies, taking pictures with religious figures, such as the Russian Patriarch, who enjoys great popularity among the Moldovan citizen/parishioners, etc. Additionally, this was also used to legitimize Kremlin's interests and worldviews in the Republic of Moldova.

Media influence and persuasive propaganda

There are no national borders in the communication and information spaces, which makes it possible to reach foreign media consumers at an unimaginable scale. Powerful political actors used this privilege by deploying effectively fake news and disinformation campaigns in targeted countries, where at least a part of the population is receptive to such messages. According to experts, this strategy is particularly efficient if the targeted population, including ethnic minorities, already uses the language of the hybrid warfare-implementing country as their mother tongue¹³. The Russian language is widely spoken in the former soviet countries, and Moldova being a multi-ethnic country is no exception. Due to the vast area coverage, quality infotainment and talk shows, Russian TV programs enjoy high popularity among the Moldovans media consumers 42,9%, with a small difference of 50,3% in favor of local media content¹⁴. It explains why Russian broadcasting is predominant in the Moldovan media landscape, thus facilitating Russia's influence in the region.

⁵ Pasa Valeriu, "Ask Dodon" – why Russia is meddling in Moldova's 2019 elections? Chisinau 2019, <https://bit.ly/38HFFJz>

⁶ 2014 Parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova, alegeri.md, <https://bit.ly/3jRQqzD>

⁷ 2016 Presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, alegeri.md, <https://bit.ly/3jKf6K0>

⁸ Russian-linked offshore helps fund socialist campaigns, rise.md, 28 September 2016, <https://bit.ly/3n1JstH>

⁹ How the lie with the Syrians evolved: from a pamphlet site to the most watched television in the country, zdg.md, 6 November 2016, <https://bit.ly/3n1PCKp>

¹⁰ Barometer of Public Opinion, February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3h5uizN>

¹¹ Victoria Bucataru, Media literacy and the challenge of fake news, January 2018, Freedom House, <https://bit.ly/38FW7u3>

¹² Vitalie Calugareanu, Moscow attacks Maia Sandu through the mouths of misogynistic priests in Moldova, DW-Chisinau, 5 November 2016, <https://bit.ly/3yNoEIG>

¹³ Pál Dunay, Ralf Roloff, Hybrid Threats and Strengthening Resilience on Europe's Eastern Flank, March 2017, <https://bit.ly/3n0qqUy>

¹⁴ Barometer of Public Opinion, February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3h5uizN>

In fact, Moldova's mass media is facing many challenges related to political influence, lack of ownership transparency and pluralism, low-quality journalism and media content, financial sustainability, intimidation, as well as hindering the work of investigative journalists, etc. Nevertheless, mass media still plays an important role in Moldovan citizens' life. The 2021 Barometer of Public Opinion reveals that 74,2% of respondents are using TV as the main source of information, followed by the internet with 58,6%.¹⁵ Despite the diversity of media outlets, they still play a dual role of misinforming and manipulating the public opinion, due to the excessive concentration of media ownership in the hands of a group with narrow interests linked to Russia¹⁶. Regarding the county's media, in particular the Gagauzian region, experts mentioned that "local media publishes only pieces of information that favor local authorities"¹⁷, unlike in the Transnistrian breakaway region, where there are no quality and independent media outlets, the mass-media sector being under strict control of the Tiraspol regime.

Social media is a noteworthy hybrid tool, widely used by Russian trolls and pro-Russia groups. They are very active with an especially strong presence on the Russian social networks Odnoklassniki and VKontakte, the most accessed platforms by Moldovans. They disseminate mostly pro-Russian narratives about glorifying the Soviet past, the promotion of the "Russian world" concept and compatriot policy, as well as anti-Western messages and false news.

The obvious purpose of that is to exploit a weak media market, along with corrupted Moldovan officials and a low media literacy in the ongoing hybrid warfare, in order to destabilize the political processes inside the country. For instance, Russia's proxy group promoted narratives about the alleged disadvantages of deepening the cooperation between RM and EU, including about possible economic and political threats posed to the Gagauzian autonomy and Transnistrian region, following the AA/DCFTA implementation, etc.¹⁸ Despite the authorities' attempts to debunk all these myths related to Moldova's partnership with the EU¹⁹, with the upgrade of its soft power strategies, Russia's targeted hybrid efforts have particularly improved during this time.

Disinformation during the pandemic crisis

The pandemic crisis revealed the power of information and mass communication means at all levels. The outbreak of Covid-19 triggered a threatening infodemia within the Republic of Moldova and abroad. The authorities' reluctance to provide prompt information of public interest concerning the evolution of the pandemic created a vacuum that was rapidly filled with fake news of internal and external origin. Among the main sources of disinformation in Moldova were the obscure websites that aimed to spread false information²⁰, including about treatment methods, conspiracy theories about the virus or vaccine. Also, several news agency portals and media outlets close to the Socialist Party and its leader, Igor Dodon, highly politicized the pandemic topics, presenting them from the perspective of political preferences.²¹ Some Moldovan religious figures also played a crucial role in disseminating dangerous fake news about the nano-chipping of the population through vaccination that was meant to get full control over people, or about the existence of a global conspiracy under the Microsoft corporation.²²

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For instance, during the Democratic Party leadership four out of five national broadcasters (*Prime, Canal 2, Canal 3, Publika*) along with several radio stations and web portals had been controlled by the runaway oligarch and ex-leader of the Party Vladimir Plahotniuc. The paradox is that V.Plahotniuc played the role of pro-West supporter, while his TV channels broadcast Kremlin-controlled programs. At least three television stations (*Accent TV, NTV Moldova and Exclusive TV*) and news agency (*Argumenti i Fakti*) are linked to the ex-Moldovan President, Igor Dodon and his Socialist Party. As well, the controversial fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor has control over few television stations (*Alt TV, Televiziunea Centrala*, previously Euro TV) and news agency (*Novosti – Moldova and Sputnik.md*) through people close to him.

¹⁷ Moldova vibrant information barometer 2021, USAID, IREX, <https://bit.ly/3DSYYhz>

¹⁸ Irina Vlah, Bashkan of Gagauzia: „The situation has worsened due to the Association Agreement with the EU, an enslaving agreement imposed from outside which cut the vital economic ties with Russia, both in the case of our autonomy and of Moldova in general”, Rise.md investigation, Kremlinovici: instructions for favorites, 5 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/2WYvzRR>

¹⁹ Myths about the EU-Moldova AA and DCFTA. Setting the facts straight, mei.gov.md, <https://bit.ly/3BKVRX1>

²⁰ Fake news sites, stopfals.md, <https://stopfals.md/ro/category/21>

²¹ Covid-19 disinformation index, Moldova, Natalia Stercul, Kyiv, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3z0aV1b>

²² Moldova's Metropolitan Church Spreads Fake News About COVID-19 Vaccine, ZdG, 27 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3BPJd90>

On the other side, Moldovan high officials misinformed the citizens regarding the virus gravity and its severe consequences²³, as well as had a biased approach related to the foreign aid offered to Moldova at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, the Moldovan ex-president Igor Dodon did not miss any chance to claim personal credits for the Russian, Chinese and Turkish medical toolkits that Moldova received. Notwithstanding, the Russian and Chinese support was lesser than what Dodon had publicly presented and highly promoted those countries as Moldova's main providers of support in combating the coronavirus through the party's affiliated media outlets. By intentionally disregarding other strategic partners, especially Romania and the European Union, the socialist leader followed, in fact, Russia and China's strategy of manipulating the public opinion, aimed to downplay the solidarity showcased by the EU and its member states and the substantial support they in these difficult times for the entire world. Consequently, Moldovan citizens were severely affected by the persuasive pandemic propaganda, along with the dissatisfaction with the country's government, doubts about the disseminated information, distrust and corruption in the state institutions.²⁴

MAIN REFORMS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES IN OFFSETTING HYBRID THREATS

The Moldovan authorities and relevant stakeholders have done little so far to properly understand, prevent, diminish and combat hybrid threats. Some important steps towards improving the legal framework have been made with the adoption of the Concept²⁵, Strategy and Action Plan on Information Security (2019-2024)²⁶, and the assignment of the Information and Security Service as the state institution that would lead the implementation of this policy is. Unlike other national strategic documents, these policy documents define concepts related to hybrid threats, information warfare, informational weapons, as well as outlines a series of linked activities. However, these policies need adjustments in explaining better the main indicators correlated to hybrid threats, fake news, propaganda, to set up proper mechanisms of early detection, prevention and rapid response to such crises.

For instance, during the pandemic outbreak the ISS blocked access to 52 websites for allegedly promoting fake news about the evolution of Covid-19. These unilateral and untransparent measures triggered some concerns and critiques among the public opinion. In particular, those revolved around the extent that those actions aimed to specifically combat disinformation, or to infringe the standard judiciary and human rights procedures.²⁷ Based on this logic, state officials can easily decide on their own which type of news represents or not disinformation, and whether or not it would be the subject of penalties.

A novelty for Moldova's intelligence service included among the Strategy priorities was the proposal to create a civic control mechanism, which implies a cooperation between public authorities and civil society organizations. There were several attempts in 2019 on behalf of the ISS to discuss with CSOs and set up a Coordination Council to monitor the policy implementation. With that being said, a few questions arose regarding the sustainability and transparency of the Council, as well possible threats that might endanger the involved civic representatives, given the volatile political environment in Moldova at that time.

In addition to the above-mentioned policies, the Moldovan authorities endorsed several important strategic documents linked to the media environment: the new Audiovisual Media Services Code (2018)²⁸, or the so-called

²³Igor Dodon, about coronavirus: "It's as if you had a problem with your nose, a cold passed through you, you passed the coronavirus, and you didn't even know about it," Pro TV Chisinau, 20 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/3twvEsf>

²⁴A survey conducted in 2020 by Watchdog.md think-tank together with CBS Research company revealed for example, 50,4% of respondents believe that virus is no more danger than a flu, and it was on purpose created to destroy the economies, or 33,4% participants consider garlic a remedy against Coronavirus etc. On the other side, only 16,3% of respondents said it is rather hard or very hard for them to understand what news are accurate or information presented is true or not.

²⁵Law no. 299 of 21.12.2017 on Information Security Concept approval, Official Monitor, 2018, <https://cutt.ly/QWAh3u7>

²⁶Law no. 257 of 22.11.2018 on Information Security Strategy and Action Plan for 2019-2024, Official Monitor, 2019, <https://cutt.ly/6WPOO8o>

²⁷Veaceslav Balan, Vladislav Stegnyi, Covid-19 pandemic: lessons for media freedom in Moldova, June 2020, <https://cutt.ly/LWAAHeH>

²⁸Law no. 174 of 8.11.2018 on Audiovisual Media Services Code of the Republic of Moldova, Official Monitor, 2018, <https://cutt.ly/1WAM2hh>

anti-propaganda law (2017)²⁹ that forbids news, information, analytical, and military broadcasts from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. This is the case of Russian Federation, therefore, three Russian television stations³⁰ and TV programs were prohibited from broadcasting in the RM. However, in 2020, during Igor Dodon's presidency two amendments were passed, with the aid of the unofficial majority between socialists and defectors democrats: first, cancelling the prohibition of rebroadcasting propagandistic audiovisual programs and the second one, excluding the mandatory quota for European programming in audiovisual media services of Moldova.³¹ Therefore, state officials excluded all measures meant to halt foreign propaganda since they were using media tools themselves for their narrow interests.

On the other side, the Moldovan civil society organizations along with independent media institutions acknowledged that disinformation, fake news, propaganda pose serious security threats to the Republic of Moldova. Various efforts to debunk fake news and increase media and information literacy have been undertaken by some CSOs through trainings, programs, information campaigns and projects, the majority of which were financially supported by foreign donors. For instance, the StopFals platform³², Center for the Prevention and Combating of Hybrid Threats³³, Independent Journalism Center³⁴, or media investigations like Ziarul de Garda³⁵ and Rise Moldova³⁶ revealed numerous shady activities of high Moldovan officials and their affiliation to obscure and criminal group. In turn, their work was hindered and they were intimidated by the subjects of their investigative materials. Nevertheless, the resources and capacities of involved stakeholders in countering the elements of hybrid threats are limited as it is already being observed, unlike the back-up officials, who are promoters of foreign propaganda, or even worse, have legal instruments to act contrarily.

COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR ASSOCIATION TRIO AND THE EU SUPPORT TO OFFSET HYBRID THREATS IN THE REGION

Given the current security state in the region and beyond, which has worsened since 2014 and has shown no signs of rapid improvements, high interest of particular actors arose over the years in this area. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, sharing common European objectives while struggling with common security issues, decided to undertake additional measures in terms of security cooperation in the region.

Therefore, a joint declaration was signed in 2018 at the level of parliament speakers of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine,³⁷ which expressed their commitment to identifying proper solutions aimed to combat hybrid threats. Among the priorities were to create anti-hybrid cells and National Contact Points that will receive, analyze and share specific information related to hybrid threat indicators and warnings. Also, the three countries expressed willingness to join as participants or observers to the Hybrid CoE and other European initiatives on countering hybrid threats, aiming to improve their institutional capacities and enhance state resilience to address common security issues.

Despite the lack of substantial results in this regard, there are many opportunities to exploit due to the favorable political landscape within the associated partners³⁸ and openness from the EU side. From this perspective, several strategic initiatives were made by the Trio group, confirming their steadiness to deepen and advance the cooperation

²⁹Law no. 257 of 22.12.2017 on completing the Audiovisual Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 260/2006, Official Monitor 2018, <https://cutt.ly/eWANAQK>

³⁰ Pervyi canal, NTV, Rossia-RTR

³¹The rebroadcasting of military and information-analytical programs from Russia and other countries can be resumed. The new provisions of the Audiovisual Media Services Code have entered into force, media-azi.md, 22 December 2020, <https://cutt.ly/SWA4keM>

³² StopFals is an online platform created by the Association of the Independent Press, <https://stopfals.md/>

³³ Center for the Prevention and Combating of Hybrid Threats, <https://h1.md/en/>

³⁴ Independent Journalism Center, <https://bit.ly/3zZCbhK>

³⁵ Ziarul de Garda, <https://www.zdg.md/>

³⁶ Rise Moldova, <https://www.rise.md/>

³⁷ Joint Declaration of the Speaker of the Parliaments of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, 27.12.2018, <https://bit.ly/38NHV27>

³⁸ Associated Partners, as well Trio refers to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as three out of six countries within the Eastern Partnership (+ Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus), are part of the DCFTA and have Association Agreement with the EU, as well expressed their willingness to join the bloc.

within the EaP. Considering the upcoming 2021 EaP Summit, a joint letter has been addressed to the EU in February 2021³⁹, highlighting the need to set up an ambitious EaP agenda for the next decade, by expanding the sectoral cooperation with a special focus on countering hybrid threats, strengthening cyber resilience, as well developing cooperation with specific platforms, such as the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell and the EU Cyber Security Agency. These particular issues became relevant since some political actors have been taken action to gain monopoly influence in the region and beyond, making use of the pandemic crisis through various hybrid activities and IT tools.

Aside from the challenges met by each of the associated countries on their political and economic integration with the EU, including domestic struggles, the Trio group seems to be more eager to galvanize the momentum of their European future, which comes with difficult and costly reforms. Therefore, a Memorandum of understanding was signed by the foreign ministers of the respective countries, aiming to establish a legal framework of the associated partners in the field of European integration cooperation.⁴⁰ Thereby, their cooperation ramped up within the Batumi summit, where the heads of the Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine issued a joint declaration to strengthen their trilateral cooperation on European integration.⁴¹ Among the commitments listed within the declaration is fostering security and stability in the region including in the Black Sea area, through an active engagement from both sides, the associated partners and the European Union.

An increased cooperation on countering hybrid threats could take place and be ensured through additional EU engagement on security-related issues within the EaP. The EU's precautionous approach in terms of security towards Eastern Europe is obvious due to the profound security challenges stemming from the protracted conflicts, ongoing military confrontations, along with hybrid threats that undermine the national security of those EaP countries. Notwithstanding, the EU and its member states are aware of the need to increase capabilities to enable a safe and secure neighborhood, by involving their partners, especially the associated Trio, in joint efforts to prevent and combat hybrid threats.

Both parties can, therefore, benefit from this sort of partnership. The EU and its members can learn from the experiences of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine that have been in the front line of hybrid threats. In turn, the Trio can make use of the EU expertise and good practices to detect, prevent and respond to those threats in areas such as cyber, strategic communication and counter-intelligence, as well as improve the situational awareness and build resilience, with a better capacity to respond. Also, from a practical point of view, the active involvement within the created EU structures in this field, e.g. the Hybrid Fusion Cell that receives and analyses classified and open source information from different stakeholders concerning hybrid threats, or the Hybrid CoE that carries out research and analysis on hybrid threats etc. is important.⁴² Therefore, by being part of the EU strategies and frameworks in this field, the Trio countries would enhance their response measures and state resilience.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Moldova is continuously at risk of national security threats, coming both from inside and outside sources, due to the narrow interests of some officials and obscure groups close to them, as well due to Russia's aim to keep and expand its power of influence in the Eastern Europe region. As it has been already noticed, the preparation for offsetting hybrid threats cannot be left only to state institutions, without actively involving other relevant stakeholders, and by

³⁹ Joint letter of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on enhanced cooperation with the Associated Partners within the Eastern Partnership, Tbilisi, Chisina, Kyiv, 1st February 2021

⁴⁰ Press statement of the Foreign minister Aureliu Ciocoi after the signing the Memorandum of understanding between the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine on cooperation in the field of European integration, MFA RM, 17 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/2YDZccf>

⁴¹ Batumi Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State of Association Trio - Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, 19 July 2021, Presidency.md, <https://bit.ly/3yV9bX4>

⁴² Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on Increasing resilience and bolstering capabilities to address hybrid threats, Brussels, 13.6.2018

working with countries that share common security issues. Building state resilience requires difficult and costly measures, but most importantly, the acknowledgement at the national level of the gravity of such threats aiming to destabilize the independence, sovereignty and integrity of the country. In order to diminish the impact of hybrid threats, the following **recommendations** could be considered:

- Conduct at the national level a mapping of security threats according to new realities, to have a common understanding at the government level of concepts and terms related to hybrid threats. Therefore, the appropriate legal framework must be revised and explicitly define those concepts based on internationally recognized and respected definitions, as well as clearly outline the countering measures, criminal and administrative punishments for hybrid actions of external and internal origin without leaving gaps.
- There is a need to designate at the national level a leading institution, either to create a center within ISS, all equipped and capacitated with essential resources and tools, and constantly trained to manage efforts and tasks to detect and combat hybrid threats.
- It is important to establish a solid inter-institutional channel of communication and rapid response to hybrid actions. Also, it is crucial to engage related stakeholders, such as the independent media outlets, civic society, private and IT sectors, to raise awareness and respond swiftly to any disinformation actions.
- Develop special training programs for education and public institutions aimed to enhance information/media literacy, especially related to digital space/social networks. Also, to elaborate special guidelines for online news agencies and portals following the journalistic and deontological norms.
- Based on the European Council of Foreign Relations’ proposal to sign an “EU security compact” with the associated Trio, it is important to establish pragmatic measures to address hard security vulnerabilities, for instance step up cyber dialogues and the inclusion of military and intelligence officers from the Trio group in related training programs, participation in multilateral initiatives, exchanges of sensitive intelligence, preparation of joint reports and the organization of joint EU–Trio exercises covering hybrid-threat scenarios.
- To ensure closer cooperation between the EU and associated Trio, to accept Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine as participants within the EU’s Hybrid Fusion Cell, EU Cyber Security Agency and other EU specific structures dealing with security issues.
- It is important to enhance the cooperation with appropriate institutions beyond the EU, such as the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, to carry out specific programs and trainings for cross-sector stakeholders, aimed to improve strategic communication capabilities while dealing with hybrid actions.

ABBREVIATIONS:

AA – Association Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Moldova
CSOs – Civil Society Organizations
DCFTA - Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EaP – Eastern Partnership initiative
EU – European Union
Hybrid CoE - European Center of Excellence for Combating Hybrid Threats
ISS – Information and Security Service
RM – Republic of Moldova

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OFFSETTING HYBRID THREATS IN GEORGIA

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SUMMARY

For Georgia as well as several western states, “hybrid warfare” is an increasing threat that hampers the sustainable development of the countries. Georgia faces a broad variety of hybrid threats that are among the main challenges in terms of the country’s security and western integration.

Since 2008 and after the Russo-Georgian war, Russia has been constantly leveraging hybrid warfare tools against Georgia in order to achieve political, military, social and economic, ideological and other types of influence. Considering the complexity of the Russian “hybrid warfare” and the threats stemming from it, resilience-building is of crucial importance for Georgia to effectively respond to the above-mentioned challenges.

Georgia has made considerable progress in enhancing the institutional framework and building the capacity of the relevant state institutions to counter hybrid threats; however, much remains to be done to ensure that relevant policies and practices are accordingly established and implemented. Also, because of the shapeshifting nature of hybrid threats and rapid changeability of the security environment, Georgia needs further pro-active cooperation with the EU, the “Association Trio” group and its international partners to enhance the security conditions and safeguard its western integration.

INTRODUCTION

The following policy paper analyses the major hybrid threats that Georgia is facing from hostile foreign actors. Specifically, it describes and evaluates the country’s current context and risks in terms of hybrid threats, as well as state policy outcomes and achievements in countering the above-mentioned challenges. Additionally, the policy paper reviews the cooperation opportunities among the Association Trio countries, and between the Association Trio and the EU. Additionally, it includes tailor-made recommendations on strengthening resilience in the policy area.

The analysis is based on open-source information, including reports from different state and public institutions, and quantitative and qualitative research conducted by trusted local and international organizations.

According to the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, the term “hybrid threat” refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by combining overt and covert military and non-military means⁴³.

Since 2008, Georgia has been at the frontline of the fight against the Russian hybrid threats, including information operations. As reported⁴⁴ by Georgia’s State Security Service in 2020, together with the Russian occupation and increasing militarization of the occupied territories, the Russian hybrid threats and attempted covert operations, and the application of cyber capabilities remain to be key challenges for the country.

With the ongoing technological progress, cyber security, the protection of information space and critical infrastructure against hostile cyberattacks all gain a particular significance for Georgia’s national security, as the

⁴³ Hybrid CoE – The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Hybrid Threats as a concept, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>

⁴⁴State Security Service of Georgia, The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3b9b5Kh>

country has been already exposed to well-coordinated, massive cyber-attacks on state and private institutions, orchestrated by Russia's special services. According to the National Cyber Security Index 2021, which includes cyber security data on 160 countries, Georgia ranks on the 46th position, indicating that there is an urgent need to take more active steps and consider EU best practices to safeguard the cyber security of the country.⁴⁵

Additionally, Russia makes every effort to restrict Georgia's foreign agenda, its aspirations and the choice of the Georgian people to join NATO and the EU. To achieve this objective, Russia exploits an impressive wide range of available methods, including the hybrid ones, having the aim to undermine democratic values, and discredit the credibility of Georgia's state institutions, and its western integration. Russia's hostile endeavors also attempt to restrict the interests and power projection capabilities of the West in the wider Black Sea region.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF GEORGIA IN COUNTERING HYBRID THREATS

Notwithstanding the long experience that Georgia already has in dealing with hybrid threats, the country has not yet incorporated the afore-mentioned risks in its conceptual documents; moreover, the research demonstrated that the comprehensive policy planning and implementation in this regard is also lacking.

The National Security Concept of Georgia is the basic document that details key threats, risks, and challenges, and establishes the major directions for the national security policy. It should be noted that the document does not explicitly mention "hybrid threats". The last version of the Concept dates back to 2011, and despite the major challenges in the security environment of the Black Sea region, as well as the Euro-Atlantic area, it did not see any updates. It was only as late as 2021 that the National Security Council (NSC) included the issue on the agenda and began working on the relevant amendments to the document, which should be ratified by the parliament by the end of this year.

The Threat Assessment Document of Georgia is another fundamental conceptual document that identifies threats the country is facing. This is a classified document, yet its open sections clearly identify and regard hybrid threats as significant challenges to national security. Unfortunately, the document was last updated in 2015, covering the period of 2015-2018. Currently, the process of updating the Threat Assessment Document is underway, being coordinated by the NSC. It should be mentioned that after the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2019, this has been the major coordinating institution in the field of national security policy planning. Next year, in 2022, the council is planning to develop a comprehensive strategy on countering hybrid threats, which will be an important step to further enhance the country's resilience against such threats.

The review of the key conceptual documents clearly demonstrates that the country needs to take more proactive steps and ensure the development of a more coherent policy on countering hybrid threats. Additionally, the interviews and the analysis of the legal basis showcase the lack of a legislative framework and institutional setup that could effectively counter the hybrid threats and build society's resilience long-term. Those factors add to the vulnerability of the country in terms of preventing or responding to hybrid threats in an effective manner.

Despite these challenges, Georgia has shown considerable progress in enhancing the country's capacity to counter its hybrid challenges, and reducing the damage they inflict. When it comes to curbing the Russian-generated hybrid threats, one of the earliest and most important steps was Georgia's effort to decrease the energy and economic dependence on the Russian Federation.⁴⁶ In 2006, the Russo-Georgian energy crisis has pushed Georgia to diversify its portfolio and start replacing Russian gas with the Azerbaijan-imported gas. Moreover, after the 2008 Russo-

⁴⁵ National Cyber Security Index, 2021. <https://ncsi.ega.ge/country/ge/>

⁴⁶ N,d, Georgia Natural Gas: Imports 2005-2021, CEIC DATA. <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/georgia/natural-gas-imports>

Georgian war, Georgia began to put more effort into exporting its goods to the European market but economic vulnerabilities have been a persisting problem for the country.

In 2008, for the first time in Georgia's history, a cyberattack accompanied the outbreak of the armed conflict. As a result, the Georgian official websites were massively blocked due to well-coordinated cyberattacks. Since then, Georgia has repeatedly been the target of Russia's cyberattacks (large-scale attack of October 2019, the cyberattack on the databases of Richard Lugar Public Health Research Center in September 2020, etc.). The war experience has once again demonstrated that cyber security and crucial infrastructural projects are in dire need of systematic upgrade and enhancement.⁴⁷ Since then, Georgia has taken significant steps in enhancing its cyber security sector and the capabilities to fight against cyber threats. In addition to the significant investments in the field and trainings held to improve the qualification of the frontline staff working with critical infrastructures, Georgia has adopted its National Cyber Security Strategy in 2021, which is being systematically reviewed and updated. It helps Georgia to keep up with the ever-developing nature of cyber threats and defend itself better.

Georgia's efforts to reduce the information-related hybrid threats should also be mentioned. As described in the Report of the State Security Service of Georgia (2020), Russian disinformation and propaganda against Georgia were actively spread using new information technologies, including various online applications. Despite the challenging information environment, the capacity of relevant state institutions to monitor, analyze and appropriately react to disinformation campaigns has significantly improved. Additionally, the support offered by Georgia's international partners enhanced the country's strategic communications capacity and developed the strategic communications departments in various ministries. Moreover, the country has started working on developing the Communications Strategy of the Government of Georgia, which will further contribute to the elaboration of a more coordinated and coherent communication policy that could effectively counter disinformation and hostile narratives.

Alongside with state institutions, the Georgian civil society has a crucial role in countering the Russian propaganda and misinformation. With the active support of the EU, U.S., and other partners, the civil society's capacity has significantly increased, as they are actively engaged in a fight against disinformation, fake news, internet trolls, and Kremlin propaganda. Nongovernmental organizations also conduct regular trainings for ordinary civilians to raise awareness on hybrid threats and counter the Kremlin propaganda.

There are many different threats that are also related to the Russian hybrid threats in Georgia, such as the strengthening of the anti-liberal and far-right groups, which promote polarisation and radicalization, the continued occupation and "borderization" process, as well as the constant danger associated with provocations, which may escalate to renewed military aggression in Georgia, etc. This confirms and illustrates the direness and diversity of hybrid challenges that the country is facing, and as they encompass all aspects of state authority or social life, it is extremely difficult to predict what threats these challenges may generate in the future.

THE MORPHING NATURE OF KREMLIN HYBRID THREATS AGAINST GEORGIA

One of the "charms" of an authoritarian regime is its capacity to orchestrate and use different foreign policy tools in its interest.⁴⁸ The Kremlin-orchestrated hybrid threats that have occurred in Georgia include all classic categories synchronized together, to serve the Kremlin interests. Among many others, the main threats that are dictated from/generated by Russia can be considered as following:

- **History Falsification** – the Russian Federation uses this particular category of hybrid threats to falsify facts and history. Russia does not shy away from using different instruments, including the academia to justify its

⁴⁷ John Markoff, Before the Gunfire, Cyberattacks, The New York Times. August 12, 2008. <https://nyti.ms/3jPmNOV>

⁴⁸ Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence, Foreign Affairs. November 16, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

aggressive actions against Georgia during different times in its history. For instance: the Russian Federation has intensively funded research projects claiming that Georgia started the war in 2008.⁴⁹

- **Religion-related** – Russia does not only leverage the narrative about sharing the same religion with Georgia, but it also uses the Moscow Patriarchate to boost this narrative by disguising the decision to free the kidnapped Georgian citizens as an act of good and Christian will. Such actions are often accompanied by religious messages that cloak the old Russian "One religion, one-way" tale.
- **Informational** – the Russian Federation uses different instruments of information warfare against Georgia, such as Russia-based TV and Radio stations, printed media, trolls and bots on the internet, local (based in Georgia) and international experts, and the Russian-funded research institutes. Overall, Russia's well-coordinated disinformation and propaganda aim to divide and polarize the society and clip its wings in search of Euro-Atlantic integration.
- **Political** - the Russian Federation supports political parties and various non-state actors to advocate the country's policy agenda in Georgia and to advance the idea that having close cooperation with Russia serves to Georgia's best interests.⁵⁰
- **Military-related** – apart from the crippling occupation and borderization process, the Russian Federation uses different entities, such as private military companies, special forces, local rebels, and armed forces for reconnaissance and provocation of Georgian state agencies. Furthermore, the occupation and kidnapping of Georgian citizens smears the image of the Georgian government and leaves Georgians with a feeling that the state cannot ensure their protection.
- **Economy-related** – Russia often uses its economic position and economic connections to exert influence on the country's political decisions and decision-making process. Georgia has already experienced economic embargoes, which aimed to force certain political positions and choices.
- **Cyber Security-related** – before the military intervention and the occupation of Georgian territories in 2008, the Russian Federation orchestrated cyberattacks against critical Georgian infrastructure and successfully shut down state websites and systems. These cyberattacks served their prime purpose and caused public panic and disorientation.

COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ASSOCIATION TRIO IN STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE AGAINST HYBRID THREATS

On 17 May 2021, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine formed a trilateral alliance called the 'Association Trio', whose primary goal is to orchestrate the countries' joint efforts towards the European integration.⁵¹ Similar to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have also been exposed to hybrid threats posed by Russian Federation.

Cooperation amongst the Association Trio member states is of critical importance, as not only do these countries face similar hybrid threats, but these threats also serve the same purpose - undermine the Association Trios' aspiration towards integration with the European institutions. In order to take effective steps in this direction, it would be important to expand the collaboration and partnership within the framework of the "Association Trio", to improve the countries' common response and joint effort against threats like cyberattacks, disinformation, psychological warfare, etc.

⁴⁹N.d., What's Behind Russia's Disinformation Campaign in Georgia, Deutsche Welle. November 24, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/whats-behind-russias-disinformation-campaign-in-georgia/a-55708502>

⁵⁰ Kanashvili George, Russian Soft Power in Georgia: Exploits, Limitations and Future Threats, Heinrich Boll Stiftung. October 16, 2017. <https://ge.boell.org/en/2017/10/16/russian-soft-power-georgia-exploits-limitations-and-future-threats>

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have signed the Memorandum founding the Associated Trio, May 17, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3pFvj6S>

The fact that the member states have different institutional and legislative frameworks, and none of them have a comprehensive national strategy on hybrid threats, it creates an additional barrier for effective cooperation. However, such a partnership remains to be of vital importance. Sharing experiences and best practices in the field will further contribute to building the resilience of their communities. Inter-agency cooperation on cyber security is another possible area of collaboration, where joint trainings and trilateral agreements would be extremely useful in this regard and serve a great purpose.

The enhancement of the strategic communications capacities and joint efforts to monitor the information environment and conduct tailored information campaigns can create new opportunities for the Association Trio member states, generate added value for their security and lead to more pro-active and well-coordinated communications. This can have a substantial impact on countering hybrid threats in all three countries.

Overall, the association agreements between the EU and Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are important tools that could move the countries towards the European Union together, as a new Eastern Partnership alliance, whose experiences with hybrid threats put the European security in danger.

COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ASSOCIATION TRIO AND EU IN CYBERSECURITY SPACE

The European Union first mentioned hybrid threats in its 2003 security strategy. The document stated that new threats are not related to just territorial issues.⁵² However, the European Union did not take into consideration that a country could pose hybrid threats until 2014. The analytical document prepared in 2015 suggests that the EU member states have an action plan to minimize the dangers of hybrid threats.⁵³

The whole idea behind the Eastern Partnership, including its primary goals to build a stronger economy, governance, society, and connectivity for partnership member states, will inevitably boost the Association Trio member states' resilience against hybrid threats. As members of the Eastern Partnership, the Association Trio is allowed to closely observe and learn from institutions like the EEAS, which recommends and helps countries conduct analytical studies in various state assets to identify their specific weaknesses and vulnerabilities in relation to hybrid threats. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are also able to closely work with the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, which helps interested parties to learn more about the nature of hybrid threats.

Regarding cyber security and disinformation, the Association Trio could learn from the ENISA and CERT-EU, which can strengthen the members' resilience against cyber and information-related threats. Additionally, the involvement of civil society in countering hybrid threats has significant importance in ensuring the building of more resilient societies. Without taking into consideration the society, having an inclusive approach and engagement of all key stakeholders, it would be extremely challenging to effectively address hybrid threats and vulnerabilities. To successfully achieve medium and long-term perspectives and results, the cooperation and active engagement of state and governmental institutions with the EU institutions can have a crucial importance.

The European Union has demonstrated on many occasions that it stands with the Association members in times of various crises. In terms of political hybrid threats, the trio could seek the assistance of the IPCR and learn from it, as IPCR's primary purpose is to provide integrated responses to a political crisis.

⁵² N.d. A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy. ECLAN. December 12, 2003. <https://eclan.eu/en/eu-legislatory/a-secure-europe-in-a-better-world-european-security-strategy>

⁵³ The European Agenda on Security. April 28, 2015. Pg. 4.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia's meddling with Georgia's policy-making and decisions, and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war represent a pivotal point for Georgia in its fight against hybrid threats. Over the past 13 years, hybrid threats posed by the Russian Federation have involved almost every category of tools and means known to the academic world.

Russia is constantly using hybrid warfare tools against the Association Trio countries to undermine democratic values, erode trust in state institutions, and undercut their ambitions of Euro-Atlantic integration. Taking into consideration the complexity of the Russian "hybrid warfare" and the threats stemming from it, resilience-building of the Association Trio countries can have significant importance in ensuring effective responses to the above-mentioned challenges.

Georgia has made considerable progress in enhancing the institutional framework and building the capacity of the relevant state institutions to counter hybrid threats. With that being said, much remains to be done to ensure that relevant policies and practices are elaborated and implemented accordingly. Because of the shapeshifting nature of hybrid threats and rapid mutability of the security environment, Georgia also needs further cooperation with the EU, the Association Trio countries and other international partners to enhance the national security and safeguard its western integration.

Recommendations:

- Develop a joint framework with a particular focus on a comprehensive approach to improving the common response to the challenges posed by hybrid threats against all three States, citizens, and the collective security of the Black Sea region. This should unite all relevant actors, policies, and instruments to both counter and mitigate the impact of hybrid threats;
- Enhance strategic communications capacities and support more coordinated joint efforts to counter hybrid threats; Conduct joint trainings to improve the qualifications, skills and knowledge of different state officials and non-governmental organizations in the field; The EU Twinning facility could also be used to support experience sharing between the EU and the Association Trio countries.
- Enhance the links between the government, civil society, media and the IT sector to fight hybrid threats within each state;
- Enhance and strengthen the abilities of civil society organizations and non-state actors to fight Russian disinformation and raise awareness of the public through tailored information campaigns;
- Support more evidence-based policy-making in countering hybrid threats, including launching a hybrid risk survey to identify key vulnerabilities;
- Support improving the awareness of hybrid threats in different sectors, including the energy security and supply, space infrastructure, maritime security, public health, cyber security, communications, and financial systems;
- Develop standard operating procedures and clear protocols on the hybrid threat response mechanisms, in close cooperation with the EU;
- Address and cooperate with the European institutions like Europol, EEAS, IPCR, CERT-EU, EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, and others to learn from their experience and increase cooperation with them on an operational level;
- The EU should aid more the independent social resilience initiatives and national governments in the implementation of coordinated responses in the Association Trio countries.

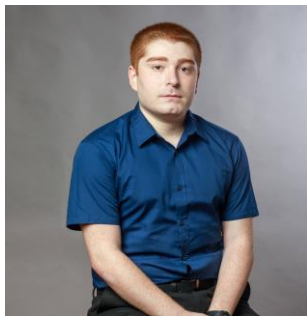
ABBREVIATIONS:

CERT-EU - Computer Emergency Response Team
EaP – Eastern Partnership
EEAS - European External Action Service
ENISA - The European Union Agency for Cybersecurity
EU - European Union
Europol - The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
IPCR - Integrated Political Crisis Response
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSC - National Security Council (Georgia)
U.S. - The United States of America

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OFFSETTING HYBRID THREATS IN UKRAINE

by Hennadiy Maksak & Mykhailo Drapak
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SUMMARY

Ukraine has been the subject of Russia’s hybrid aggression for the past eight years. It is embodied in the traditional war that the Kremlin is waging through the alleged annexation of Crimea, the active war in Eastern Ukraine and the concentration of its armed forces along the Russian-Ukrainian border. At the same time, all this time Russia has been attacking Ukraine by fakes, broadcasting toxic narratives, undermining social cohesion, imprisoning Ukrainian citizens and forcing them to obtain Russian passports, including through economic pressure, and energy projects. The main purpose of these actions pursued by Kremlin is to undermine the statehood of Ukraine and return the country to its sphere of influence, as is happening today with Belarus.

Despite these efforts of official Moscow, Ukraine continues to exist as a sovereign state, does not renounce the prospect of integration into the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance, and is reforming its public administration system. This means that the country is able to effectively resist the aggressor in a hybrid war. However, the pressure from Russia, which is not weakening, and the objective and subjective gaps in the state's resilience to hybrid threats remain a challenge to Ukraine's national security, including the information space and Ukrainian media landscape. Kyiv managed to form a system to counteract the Russian disinformation and achieved some progress in this regard. At the same time, the current system still lacks a comprehensive institutional and legal basis for tackling the Russian offensive on many theaters of the information war.

This study tracks key achievements, mistakes and current challenges to strengthening Ukraine's resilience in fighting disinformation. It concerns the actions of the state in the legal, political, and security dimensions, and the steps made by the Ukrainian civil society since 2014. For this purpose, we present key events in the main areas of hybrid threats and Ukraine's response to them. We also pay attention to the factors that helped increase the stability of the state in this area, in particular the support of external actors.

Thus, study shows the crucial role the EU has played in the development of Ukraine’s resilience and countering the Russian disinformation. It is important to extend the current bilateral level of cooperation between Ukraine and EU on two other partners inform the Association Trio, as well as take into consideration the Ukrainian lessons learned in the resilience-building process.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of hybrid war / hybrid threats can have a wide range of definitions, as it can be understood as a significant number of measures undertaken to influence the opponent and weaken or even eliminate him from a certain sector of international relations⁵⁴. This concept can also encompass the measures of pressure from one subject to another, which could not be imagined as a means of confrontation. Thus, anything can become an instrument of hybrid wars⁵⁵. For the purpose of this study and in the context of the challenges Ukraine faces, hybrid threats are understood as means of influence that weaken a country's defense capabilities through

⁵⁴ Dr. Damien Van Puyvelde. Hybrid war – does it even exist? NATO Review. 7.05.2015. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2015/05/07/hybrid-war-does-it-even-exist/index.html>

⁵⁵ Mark Galeotti. Thinking about Hybrid War and the ‘Imagination Race’ GLOBSEC. 29.09.2021. <https://www.globsec.org/publications/thinking-about-hybrid-war-and-the-imagination-race3/>

informational, economic, social and political influence in the context of a parallel traditional warfare and armed aggression.

Within this study, we will predominately focus on the informational dimension. Although it is a part and parcel of the hybrid aggression, it deserves a particular attention for several important reasons. Firstly, design formation and propaganda from Kremlin has accompanied all other stages of aggression. Secondly, Ukraine has to foster and strengthen its resilience and develop a comprehensive information security foundation on three core directions. Official Kyiv is to fight against the Russian disinformation both on its sovereign territory, and on occupied territories.

Two tasks differ in terms of narratives and toolkits, and the Ukrainian authorities operate to debunk the Russian malign influence. Moreover, Ukraine has to be active in the media space of Western partner states, where Kremlin employs huge resources to depict Ukraine as failed state, led by war-mongering extreme right nationalists. All three priority directions influence the way the Ukrainian information security is formed.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT - RISKS, THREATS, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES

Russia started the undeclared hybrid war against Ukraine in 2014. This aggression continues to this day. It includes the annexation of territories, support for militants in the temporarily occupied territories, the involvement and employment of regular Russian troops, information attacks targeting the state and social cohesion, the illegal detention and torture of Ukrainian citizens, as well as economic and energy pressures.

If prior to 2014, Russia used various means of pressure on Ukraine, after 2014 events, Kremlin resorted to a concentrated hybrid war against its neighbor. All aggressive actions over the past eight years have been accompanied by information attacks on Ukraine, including the spread of disinformation to discredit the Ukrainian state, its political course, defense bodies, and so on. Fake stories were created in Russia throughout 2014-2018 about murders, the looting and rape of civilians in Donbas by the Ukrainian defense forces, about the creation of NATO units in Ukraine, the futility of European integration, Ukraine as a failed state, Crimea's belonging to Russia, the involvement of the Ukrainian authorities in the downing of the MH-17 plane, including about the connection of the terrorist group "Islamic State" to Ukrainian structures and many others.⁵⁶

Besides the direct media influence in the distribution of Russian propaganda a significant source of false narrative we have to mention is the pro-Russian political parties in Ukraine. In 2021, the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group of the Ukrainian Crisis Media Center's research stated that Russia relied heavily on local agents of influence – pro-Russian oligarchs and politicians. The Kremlin has the most obvious connection with the Opposition Platform For Life. Former Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev had repeatedly met with the party's leaders, Viktor Medvedchuk, Yuri Boyko and Vadim Rabinovich⁵⁷. These people act through political instruments, being MPs of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. In particular, they advocate the idea of negotiations and concessions to Russia in order to resolve the conflict and avoid the topic of the return of the temporarily occupied territories.

They also operate through their business influence in certain sectors of the Ukrainian economy, including fuel industry. The information dimension of the activity of these agents was manifested in the broadcasting of the channels affiliated with them – 112, NewsOne, ZIK. Experts noted that these media distributed toxic narratives among the most vulnerable groups of the Ukrainian population. In particular, there were reports of Ukraine as

⁵⁶ Dmytro Zolotukhin (ed.), "White book of special information operations against Ukraine in 2014–2018" [in Ukrainian], Kyiv, February 2018, https://mip.gov.ua/files/pdf/white_book_2018_mip.pdf

⁵⁷ Бойко і Медведчук знову в Москві: зустрілися з Медведєвим і керівництвом «Газпрому». Радіо Свобода. 11.07.2019. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-boyko-medved%D1%81huk-medvediev/30048820.html>

a Failed state or a "puppet of the West", of the alleged civil war in the country and the growth of Russophobia there⁵⁸.

During the years of Russian aggression, Ukraine has developed a legal and institutional framework to counter hybrid and direct threats to national security. In 2015, the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine was established. Its main tasks were the development of Ukraine's information space, public strategic communications, information reintegration of the temporarily occupied territories, and the promotion of Ukraine in the world⁵⁹. In 2017, the Doctrine of Information Security was adopted, according to which various state bodies in Ukraine should coordinate their actions in combating disinformation⁶⁰. After that, the Information Security Service was established at the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine.

Also, during those years, government agencies had taken significant steps to increase and strengthen their ability to withstand the Russian influence in the domestic media space. The Law on Transparency of Media Ownership was adopted on September 3, 2015, establishing one of the best legal frameworks in Europe⁶¹. The State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine has been assigned to lead the work on developing the Strategy for the Development of the Information Space and the Information Security Doctrine.

The first stage in securing Ukraine's media space was of a restrictive nature. Since 2017, the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine has restricted the broadcast of 77 Russian TV Channels on cable networks in Ukraine⁶². It is important to bear in mind that, as of 2014, there were 82 Russian cable TV channels in Ukraine. The Ukrainian State Film Agency, in accordance with the norms of the Law of Ukraine on Cinematography, cancelled the state registration of films produced in Russia and released after January 1, 2014.

MAIN POLICY ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES IN COUNTERING HYBRID THREATS

The next significant changes in the legal and institutional field meant to combat hybrid threats occurred after the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections. The new Cabinet of Ministers abolished the Ministry of Information Policy, transferring its competencies to the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. In 2020, the National Security Strategy of Ukraine was adopted⁶³. In particular, the document focuses on the possibility of Russia's confrontation in a hybrid war, where the opponent uses political, economic, informational, psychological, cyber and military means.

The Strategy also aims to build a comprehensive information policy and strategic communications of the state. Later, the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security under the Ministry of Culture and the Center for Countering Disinformation under the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine were established. Both bodies somewhat repeat each other's goals. However, the organization that is part of the Ministry of Culture focuses on the general fight against disinformation and the development of the Ukrainian society's resilience to it⁶⁴. The Center within the National Security and Defense Council focuses on information

⁵⁸ "Evolution of Russian narratives about Ukraine and their export to Ukrainian media space," Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, May 2021, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x5y7qQjIFW0sCHwjzJoDU_5LL29WZZZd/view

⁵⁹ "Міністерство інформаційної політики України: план на 2016 рік." http://mip.gov.ua/files/Presentation/MIP_activity_2016.pdf

⁶⁰ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №47/2017 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 29 грудня 2016 року «Про Доктрину інформаційної безпеки України». <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/472017-21374>

⁶¹ "Freedom of Media in Ukraine." Council of Europe Office in Ukraine. 2018. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/freedom-of-media-in-ukraine>

⁶² "Нацрада заборонила 'Дождь' в Україні." 2017. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/2155072-nacrada-zaboronila-dozd-v-ukraini.html>.

⁶³ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №392/2020 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 14 вересня 2020 року «Про Стратегію національної безпеки України». <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/3922020-35037>

⁶⁴ Центр стратегічних комунікацій та інформаційної безпеки. <https://spravdi.gov.ua/pro-nas/>

activities in the military sphere, the fight against crime and corruption, foreign and domestic policy, economics, infrastructure, health, ecology, science and technology⁶⁵.

Also in 2021, the National Security and Defense Council approved the Information Security Strategy until 2025⁶⁶. The document defines the main goals of the state in the domain, such as the countering of disinformation, the comprehensive development of Ukrainian culture, the raising of media literacy of citizens, protection of journalists, information reintegration of residents of the temporarily occupied territories, creation and development of strategic communications, promotion of Ukraine's positive image abroad and information society development. In addition, in 2021 the Strategy of Ukraine's Foreign Policy was adopted⁶⁷. Among other things, it mentions the need to counter hybrid operations of influence on the state, especially those undertaken by Russia.

To counter these threats, the Ukrainian authorities would work in particular on consolidating the international community, raising the awareness of foreign partners on hybrid risks, countering disinformation and using public diplomacy. Thus, Ukraine has created a framework for combating hybrid threats in various areas. However, the state now faces the challenge of having to effectively coordinate the activities between different state bodies within the framework of those approved documents and mechanisms.

It is worth noting that in recent years the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine has become a key body for combating hybrid threats. In 2021, this organization began to apply sanctions against Ukrainian citizens whose activities can pose a threat to state security. In the context of our study, the most important decisions include the blocking of the assets of the MPs from OPZZh Taras Kozak⁶⁸ and sanctions against Viktor Medvedchuk⁶⁹. The first decision led to the termination of broadcasting of 112, NewsOne and ZIK outlets, being that Taras Kozak is their owner. The second decree restricted the political and economic activities of one of Russia's main lobbyists in Ukraine. Both defendants are accused of financing terrorism. Their cases are currently pending in court.

In the context of Ukraine's information security, the great role of civil society and media initiatives, known as debunking teams, should be noted. Many of these groups appeared spontaneously as a reaction to the Kremlin-backed disinformation campaign surrounding the annexation of Crimea in February and March 2014. Among the most active initiatives are StopFake, InformNapalm, UCMC, Euromaidan Press, UkraineWorld, Information Forces of Ukraine, Behind The News and VoxCheck.

At the same time, the Texty.org.ua media is actively involved in detecting and counteracting disinformation. In March 2021, five initiatives – UCMC, Euromaidan Press, StopFake, Internews Ukraine and Texty.org.ua – launched the Ukraine Explained project to combat disinformation and negative narratives. In addition, we should mention the Western Ukrainian Network for Counteracting Disinformation created by the Lviv Media Forum, which, in particular, drew attention to the activities of blogger Ostap Stakhiv, who countered the

⁶⁵ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №187/2021 Питання Центру протидії дезінформації. <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1872021-38841>

⁶⁶ Проект Стратегії інформаційної безпеки України до 2025 року. Міністерство культури України. <https://mkp.gov.ua/files/pdf/45698712365.pdf>

⁶⁷ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №448/2021 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 30 липня 2021 року "Про Стратегію зовнішньополітичної діяльності України". <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4482021-40017>

⁶⁸ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №43/2021 Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 2 лютого 2021 року «Про застосування персональних спеціальних економічних та інших обмежувальних заходів (санкцій)» <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/432021-36441>

⁶⁹ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №64/2021. Про рішення Ради національної безпеки і оборони України від 19 лютого 2021 року "Про застосування та внесення змін до персональних спеціальних економічних та інших обмежувальних заходів (санкцій)". <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/642021-36753>

quarantine measures and vaccination against COVID-19. He was later detained by the Security Service of Ukraine⁷⁰.

COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES IN THE POLICY FIELD FOR ASSOCIATION TRIO AND EU

To map the opportunities for cooperation, one has to mention that the European Union itself has undergone several phases of developing mechanics for detecting and fighting disinformation. Against the backdrop of active Russian military aggression in Ukraine, the European Union has become a target of disinformation attacks from Kremlin. The European institutions have been under the shelling of Russian propaganda machine. In 2015, these issues prompted the European Council to task the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy F. Mogherini to elaborate possible ways and strategies of countering online disinformation campaigns. As a result, this led to the creation of the East Strategic Communication Task Force.

Additionally, the institutional structure has been enforced and strengthened by the launching of the Hybrid Fusion Cell within the European External Action Service. Furthermore, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, a joint initiative with NATO was set up in Finland. These agencies focus on several tasks provide analysis on hybrid threats, pool and share best practices, as well as establish fact-checking, debunking mechanisms. The basic approach of the European Union in tackling disinformation was presented in the Joint Communication on Countering Hybrid Threats in 2016. Along with a proposed definition of hybrid threats that the EU and its neighbors were facing, the document revealed a toolkit for countering threats, including in the media environment.

Given the level of scarce resources and staffing of these bodies, the EU remained extremely vulnerable to external information operations. But at the same time, through various programs and instruments, Brussels offered assistance to public and non-governmental institutions from the Eastern Partnership states to develop their resilience to disinformation, as well as promote media literacy and critical thinking.

The next important phase began in 2018, when several strategies and roadmaps were adopted. Thorough attention was given to this process, against fears of external involvement in the European Parliament elections in 2019 and more than 50 various elections in Member States that took place by 2020. In April 2018, the European Commission adopted the Communication on “Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach”, which depicts the challenges and possible clusters for public-private cooperation to tackle those. In May, under the initiative of the European Commission, the Multistakeholder Forum on Disinformation was convened to prepare the draft Code of Practice on Disinformation. The Code was published in September 2018.

Additionally, in September 2018, the Communication on Securing free and fair European elections was adopted. It is important to mention that the use of sanctions, where appropriate, was envisaged among policy recommendations. In December 2018, the Joint Communication “Action Plan against Disinformation” was presented by the Commission⁷¹. All these efforts constitute a more comprehensive approach undertaken to combat disinformation sponsored by third states and reveals political will to build up resilience not only in the EU but in partner-states, like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Ukraine maintains a proactive approach when it comes to advocacy of joint Ukraine-EU efforts. Strengthening cooperation in countering hybrid threats and tackling disinformation is always on the agenda of the Ukraine-

⁷⁰ Якщо дезінформація захоплює світ, то час об'єднуватись і боротись з нею. Lviv Media Forum. <https://lvivmediaforum.com/news/analitychnyi-zvit-zapidsumkamy-doslidnyckoyi-chastyny-proyektu-zahidnoukrayinska-mediamerazha-z-protydiyi-dezinformacziyi/>

⁷¹ JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Action Plan against Disinformation, JOIN(2018) 36, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018_en.pdf

EU Summit. It is worth to notice that the EU plays a significant role in supporting the independent media in Ukraine. The European assistance is important for fostering media literacy, as well as for sharing best practices on strategic communications.

There is a common interest in such kind of activity coming from both Ukraine and the EU. By buttressing up the Ukrainian resilience, Brussels simultaneously undertakes the endeavor to descale the level of anti-EU narratives, propelled by Russia's propaganda-machine. The Batumi Summit Declaration, issued by the Heads of State of Association Trio - Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine on 19 July 2021, demonstrates the common interest of the Trio in aligning with the European mechanisms and norms in this field. For instance, the heads of the three states declared their will to increase the Trio's resilience and «cooperate with the European Union on common security and defence policy (CSDP), including on countering hybrid threats, strengthening cyber resilience, fighting disinformation, developing cooperation platforms with the EU's relevant agencies and services»⁷².

Ukraine, as a primary target of Russia's information aggression, has accumulated vast experience in detecting and countering external propaganda and disinformation. Some trends may be of interest for the Trio partners as well. The best practices can also be transferred at the bilateral level of cooperation. In this regard, one has to mention the 2021 launch of the Crimea Platform, an international initiative aiming to join efforts in the de-occupation of the Crimea Peninsula. 46 foreign and international delegations took part in the inaugural summit of the Crimea Platform in August 2021. This may serve as an important forum for drawing attention to the Russia-sponsored territorial conflicts in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. If successful, the platform may be thematically extended to other issues related to the occupied territories.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In countering hybrid threats, namely the information warfare waged by Kremlin, as well as the disinformation campaigns from other third state-sponsored actors, we need sustainable cooperation between the Association Trio partner-states and the EU. To deliver that, all sides have to be engaged in consistent joint activities on many layers.

First, all three partner-states have to adopt a viable base at the state institution level for detecting and countering threats in the information sphere. These institutions' activity needs to be covered and supported by sufficient public resources, of an amount not less than what the international partners contribute with in terms of support for non-governmental teams and organizations focused on fact-checking information, debunking narratives and media literacy.

Under the Eastern Partnership policy, all available resources and programs should be explored to draw attention to the hybrid threats and ways to deter and prevent them. A proposal that is currently pending, which is supported by a number of partner-states and the civil society in the EaP region, is the launch of a specific intergovernmental platform for security issues. It will extend the current multilateral institutional architecture of the Eastern Partnership and adjust it to the needs of the partners.

On the level of the Trio states, some coordinated efforts might be taken to enhance the cooperation with relevant institutions, working groups and task forces. The scope of the joint activity may potentially envision any type of affiliated membership and the secondment of personnel to the East StratCom Task Force (ESTF), Hybrid CoE, intelligence cells and European agencies.

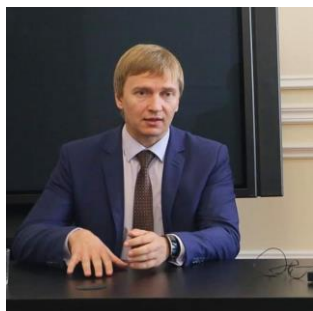
⁷² Декларация Батумського саміту, схвалена главами держав Асоційованого тріо – Грузії, Республіки Молдова та України, 19 липня 2021 року, <https://www.president.gov.ua/news/deklaraciya-batumskogo-samitu-shvalena-glavami-derzhav-asoci-69609>

Special attention should be placed on developing strategic communications infrastructure in all three countries and taking advantage from the assistance that the EU and some member-states can offer. It will help withstand disinformation campaigns and build up state and societal resilience.

The European institutions may also consider the creation of the Center for Countering Hybrid Threats in the EaP, and more narrowly, on the level of the Association Trio, as a positive perspective. Sharing the experience and best practices in debunking disinformation may prove to be an effective tool.

Of course, as in Ukraine's case, an already established civic-public synergy in fighting the Russian disinformation and other aggressive steps in the informational domain is essential for preserving sovereignty and standing up to the external influence. In this regard, it is of great importance to establish and support international non-governmental coalitions, including from Trio countries, which monitor the vulnerability of states and societies to disinformation and share best practices to dismantle lies and myths coming from Kremlin. Such initiatives should be widely supported by international partners, including the EaP Civil Society Forum.

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ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION



Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (APE) is one of the leading foreign policy think-tanks in Moldova. The Association is committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country's Europeanization. APE was established in 2003 by a prominent group of local experts, public figures, former government officials and high-ranking diplomats, who decided to contribute through their experience and expertise to the development of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova.

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ABOUT THE PARTNERS ORGANIZATIONS



Georgian Center for Strategy and Development (GCSD) is a non-partisan, non-governmental organization. Since its establishment, GCSD has directed efforts towards supporting Georgia's and regional sustainable, democratic development by embedding values of respect, impartiality, accountability, fairness and transparency in all interventions and undertakings. Over years GCSD has distinguished itself as an outstanding local think-tank. The organization has carried out number of research activities and issued remarkable publications, covering variety of topics. GCSD is the first Georgian organisation to establish a unit within its structure fully dedicated to research of topics related to terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation. The Terrorism Research Center (TRC) of GCSD aims to increase the knowledge and awareness of the Georgian society regarding the above stated phenomena and to design and implement projects that help minimise the threat thereof.

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Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" is a network-based non-governmental analytical center, the goal of which is to participate in providing democratic ground for developing and implementation of foreign and security policies by government authorities of Ukraine, implementation of international and nation-wide projects and programs, directed at improvement of foreign policy analysis and expertise, enhancement of expert community participation in a decision-making process in the spheres of foreign policy, international relations, public diplomacy. The Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" is officially registered as a non-governmental organization in 2015, while analytical work and research had been carried out within the network of foreign policy experts "Ukrainian Prism" since 2012. At present, the organization united more than 15 experts in the sphere of foreign policy, international relations, international security from different analytical and academic institutions in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Chernivtsi.

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