

The Intelligence System of the Republic of Moldova amid the Transformation of the Regional Security Environment after 2022

Розвідувальна система Республіки Молдова в умовах трансформації регіонального безпекового середовища після 2022 року

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Purpose. To provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and prospects for the development of the intelligence system of the Republic of Moldova in the context of regional instability following the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and the intensification of hybrid threats. Particular attention is paid to intelligence as a key instrument for the identification and early detection of threats to national security.

Method. The research employs a combination of systemic, structural-functional, formal-legal, comparative-legal, logical-analytical, and prognostic methods. The empirical basis includes strategic and regulatory legal acts of the Republic of Moldova, official materials of the Intelligence and Security Service, as well as documents of the European Union, the OSCE, and the Danube Commission.

Results. The findings indicate that, within the contemporary security environment, intelligence performs a system-forming role in ensuring early warning, prevention, and neutralisation of threats. The main risk factors for Moldovan statehood include the unlawful Russian military presence in the Transnistrian region, hybrid interference in domestic political and electoral processes, the destabilising impact of informational, political, and financial influence, and the vulnerability of the Danube logistical corridor.

Theoretical value. The theoretical contribution lies in advancing scholarly understanding of the role of human intelligence within national security systems of small states under sustained hybrid pressure, as well as in clarifying the interrelation between threat detection, counterintelligence support, strategic warning, and institutional resilience.

Practical value. The practical significance of the study consists in developing recommendations for improving threat identification mechanisms, particularly in the context of Ukraine, and in offering a comparative perspective on intelligence models under external pressure.

Article type. Research and analytical.

Мета роботи. Комплексний аналіз викликів і перспектив розвитку розвідувальної системи Республіки Молдова в умовах регіональної нестабільності після повномасштабної агресії російської федерації проти України та посилення гібридних загроз. Особлива увага приділяється розвідці як ключовому інструменту ідентифікації та раннього виявлення загроз національній безпеці.

Метод дослідження. У дослідженні використано системний, структурно-функціональний, формально-юридичний, порівняльно-правовий, логіко-аналітичний і прогностичний методи. Емпіричну основу становлять стратегічні та нормативно-правові акти Республіки Молдова, офіційні матеріали Служби інформації та безпеки, а також документи Європейського Союзу, ОБСЄ та Дунайської комісії.

Результати. Результати дослідження свідчать, що в сучасному безпековому середовищі розвідка виконує системоутворюючу роль у забезпеченні раннього попередження, запобігання та нейтралізації загроз. Основними факторами ризику для молдовської державності визначено незаконну російську військову присутність у Придністровському регіоні, гібридне втручання у внутрішньополітичні та виборчі процеси, дестабілізаційний вплив інформаційних, політичних і фінансових чинників, а також вразливість дунайського логістичного коридору.

Теоретична цінність дослідження. Поглиблення наукового розуміння ролі агентурної розвідки в системі забезпечення національної безпеки малих держав, що перебувають під тривалим гібридним тиском, а також в уточненні взаємозв'язку між категоріями виявлення загроз, контррозвідального забезпечення, стратегічного попередження та інституційної стійкості.

Практична цінність дослідження. Практичне значення дослідження полягає у розробленні рекомендацій щодо вдосконалення механізмів виявлення загроз, зокрема в контексті України, а також у формуванні порівняльного бачення моделей функціонування розвідки в умовах зовнішнього тиску.

Тип статті. Науково-аналітична.

Key words: Republic of Moldova, National Security, Intelligence, HUMINT, Counter-Intelligence, the Transnistrian Region, the Danube, Hybrid Threats, Russian Aggression, Threat Detection.

Ключові слова: Республіка Молдова, національна безпека, розвідка, HUMINT, контррозвідка, Придністровський регіон, Дунай, гібридні загрози, російська агресія, виявлення загроз.

Introduction

Under the contemporary conditions of the transformation of the security environment in Eastern Europe, the Republic of Moldova finds itself in a zone of heightened geopolitical risk. This is due to

a combination of several factors: the unresolved nature of the Transnistrian conflict, the continued unlawful foreign military presence on the territory of the state, systematic external political and informational influence, energy vulnerability, as well as its immediate proximity to the theatre of hostilities resulting from the Russian Federation's full-scale aggression against Ukraine (Parlamentul a adoptat; National Security Strategy; Decision No. 1504.).

In such circumstances, particular importance attaches to the effective functioning of the intelligence system as an instrument of strategic warning, early threat detection, and the provision of information and analytical support for state decision-making in the sphere of national security. The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, approved by Parliament in December 2023, directly links the security of the state to the consequences of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine and identifies the Russian Federation and the proxy structures associated with it as the most dangerous and persistent source of threats (Parlamentul a adoptat; National Security Strategy).

The relevance of this study is further reinforced by the fact that the Moldovan example is illustrative for analysing the functioning of the intelligence system of a small state compelled to adapt to prolonged hybrid confrontation without possessing excessive resource capacity yet operating under intense external pressure. It is precisely in this context that intelligence assumes particular significance as an institution capable of obtaining information on intentions, concealed links, structures of influence, channels of financing, and the preparatory stages of destabilisation operations conducted by the Russian Federation and other threatening actors (Lege privind activitatea; Intelligence analysis; Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Raport SIS public).

Theoretical foundations of the study

The theoretical foundation of the article is an approach according to which intelligence activity is regarded as an integral component of the mechanism for identifying threats to national security. Within this sequence, intelligence performs not only an information-gathering function, but also analytical and prognostic, preventive, and counter-threat functions. This is directly reflected both in the strategic documents of the Republic of Moldova and in the updated legislation, which defines counter-intelligence activity as a set of measures, actions, operations, and procedures aimed at identifying, preventing, and countering vulnerabilities, risk factors, and threats (National Security Strategy; Lege privind activitatea).

Within the framework of contemporary scholarly approaches, intelligence, and HUMINT in particular, occupies a special place, as it provides access to those segments of threats within the security environment that cannot be fully covered by technical means or open sources of information. This refers primarily to concealed intentions, informal arrangements, latent channels of coordination, personalised networks of influence, corrupt and politico-financial connections, as well as the preparatory stages of destructive actions. At the official level, the ISS defines information and analytical activity as the transformation of primary data obtained through secret sources, including HUMINT, SIGINT, IMINT, MASINT, as well as OSINT, into an analytical product relevant to the institutions responsible for ensuring national security (Intelligence analysis).

For small states situated in borderland zones of geopolitical rivalry, the role of intelligence becomes even more significant. The limited nature of military and material-technical resources objectively necessitates reliance on preventive security mechanisms, among which the state's capacity for the early identification of concealed risks occupies a central place. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, this issue is directly linked to the existence of the unrecognised Transnistrian enclave, the prolonged influence of the Russian Federation on domestic political processes, the use of energy, informational, and social levers of pressure, as well as the strategic vulnerability of transport and logistical routes (National Security Strategy; Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Raport SIS public; Decision No. 1504.).

Methodology

The methodological framework of the study is constructed as a multi-level integrated system combining general scientific and special legal approaches to analysing the functioning of intelligence systems within a transformed security environment. The systemic approach serves as the core, enabling intelligence to be examined as an element of a comprehensive national security mechanism operating in interaction with political, legal, and institutional components of the state.

The application of the structural-functional method ensured the identification of the roles of individual components of the intelligence system (in particular HUMINT, counter-intelligence, and analytical units) in the processes of early detection and neutralisation of threats. At the same time, the formal-legal method made it possible to analyse the regulatory framework governing the activities of the Intelligence and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova, including the most recent legislative acts adopted in 2023.

The comparative-legal approach was employed to compare the Moldovan intelligence model with the practices of the European Union and international organisations (OSCE, Danube Commission), which enabled the identification of trends in harmonisation and institutional adaptation.

The logical-analytical method facilitated the generalisation of empirical data and the establishment of causal relationships between the nature of hybrid threats and the transformation of intelligence functions. Finally, the prognostic method allowed for the formulation of scenarios for the further development of the intelligence system under conditions of sustained external pressure.

The empirical basis of the study consists of strategic documents of the Republic of Moldova, official materials of the Intelligence and Security Service, as well as documents of the EU and international organisations, ensuring a sufficient level of validity and representativeness of the conclusions.

Results

The present stage in the development of Moldova's intelligence system is characterised by a gradual transition from a predominantly reactive security model to one oriented towards strategic warning and the anticipatory detection of threats. Such a reappraisal is driven by the changing nature of the risks faced by the state, as well as by the need to adapt to the new regional reality that has emerged since the outbreak of the Russian Federation's full-scale war against Ukraine. In this sense, the development of Moldova's intelligence system forms part of a broader process of national security transformation under conditions of the hybridisation of conflicts and the growing role of covert forms of external interference (Parlamentul a adoptat Strategia; National Security Strategy).

Of decisive importance in this process is the 2023 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova, which has substantially altered the official approach to the identification of sources of threat. Of fundamental importance is the fact that the Russian Federation and the proxy structures associated with it are expressly identified therein as the most dangerous and persistent source of threats to the state's national security. In this way, a transition has been effected from general political formulations to a clearer strategic identification of the source of destabilising influence, thereby creating the normative and conceptual basis for the concentration of intelligence resources on specific areas of the security environment (Parlamentul a adoptat Strategia; National Security Strategy).

The institutional and legal foundation of the transformation of Moldovan intelligence has been reinforced by new legislative regulation governing the activities of the Intelligence and Security Service, as well as counter-intelligence and foreign intelligence activity. Law No. 136/2023 established the updated legal basis for the functioning of the ISS, whilst Law No. 179/2023 regulated counter-intelligence and foreign intelligence activity, including judicial mechanisms for authorising certain measures, a special procedural regime, and the principles of oversight. This creates better

conditions for combining operational effectiveness with legality, which is critically important for a state subjected to intense external pressure whilst simultaneously declaring its commitment to European standards of public administration and the rule of law (Lege privind Serviciul; Lege privind activitatea).

A particularly important place within this system is occupied by intelligence itself. Its significance for Moldova is determined by the fact that the principal threats to state security are of a covert, latently networked character. This concerns the financing and coordination of political actors, the instigation of protest activity, the creation of information platforms of influence, the use of corrupt connections, the involvement of intermediary structures, penetration into state bodies, the establishment of channels for the leakage of information, and the preparation of actions aimed at destabilising the constitutional order. Most such processes cannot be properly identified by technical means or open-source intelligence alone; accordingly, intelligence, and at times HUMINT in particular, performs the role of the primary mechanism for gaining access to concealed plans and intentions, as well as to the internal motivations of the actors concerned (Lege privind activitatea; Intelligence analysis; Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Raport SIS public).

The practical significance of the agent component is confirmed by official ISS cases. In particular, in July 2023 the Service reported the exposure of an agent network involved in activities classified as treason and espionage. The official position of the ISS in this case indicates that the Moldovan state is confronted not merely with informational or political pressure, but also with attempts at agent penetration, the formation of networks providing access to internal information, and the use of Moldovan citizens in the interests of foreign intelligence services (Briefingul de presă).

Also, of fundamental importance for assessing the current threat landscape is the official ISS report on Russian interference in Moldova's electoral processes during 2024–2025. It states that the Service identified an unprecedented intensity of actions by the Russian Federation aimed at keeping Moldova within its own sphere of influence. The document refers to a mechanism of hybrid influence encompassing attacks on democratic processes, interference in elections, support for political actors, information campaigns, the mobilisation of influence networks, as well as the potential use of the Transnistrian region in anti-government hybrid actions (Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Raport SIS public).

The Transnistrian region continues to remain the central security nexus for the Republic of Moldova. In its documents, the OSCE continues to emphasise the need to resolve the Transnistrian issue with due respect for Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity, whilst also recalling the context of Russia's obligations regarding the withdrawal of troops and ammunition. In practical terms, Transnistria constitutes a problem not only as an unresolved conflict, but also as a space of strategic uncertainty (National Security Strategy; Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Decision No. 1504).

Under current conditions, Transnistria should be regarded not so much as a self-sufficient bridgehead for a large-scale conventional operation, but rather as a base for hybrid influence, sabotage and agent support, information provocations, illicit logistical schemes, and political pressure on Chișinău and, indirectly, on Ukraine and Romania. It is precisely for this reason that particular importance attaches, for Moldovan intelligence, to penetration into the political, administrative, border, logistical, and communications environments associated with the region (Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Raport SIS public; Decision No. 1504).

A significant element of the study is the issue of security provision in the Danube area. The legal regime of the Danube is determined by the 1948 Convention regarding the Regime of Navigation on the Danube, which applies the regime established therein to the navigable section of the Danube and provides for freedom of navigation within the limits of the established rules. At the same time, this international legal regime forms a framework within which the interests of

navigation, the sovereign rights of states, and matters of border, customs, and police regulation are combined (Convention regarding the Regime).

For Moldova, this dimension assumes particular importance because of the Giurgiulești port complex. The Danube Commission identifies Giurgiulești as a Moldovan port at 133.8 km of the Danube, suitable for handling general, bulk, and liquid cargoes. In 2026, the Government of Moldova designated the Giurgiulești International Free Port as the state's principal point of access to international maritime and river transport and emphasised the need for its modernisation and more transparent management as a strategic infrastructure facility (Republic of Moldova; Giurgiulești International Free Port).

In this connection, the Danube direction should be regarded not merely as an economic or transport corridor, but also as an area of intelligence significance. In conditions of regional instability and war in the neighbouring region, the risks associated with the use of logistical infrastructure for smuggling, sanctions evasion, the covert movement of dual-use resources, the penetration of affiliated structures into strategically important sectors, and the use of economic space as cover for hybrid activity are increasing. Accordingly, the effective identification of threats in this area requires not only border and customs control, but also a fully-fledged intelligence and analytical support framework (Convention regarding the Regime; Republic of Moldova; Giurgiulești International Free Port).

Another important area is external interference in Moldova's domestic political and electoral processes. Recent years have shown that attempts to destabilise the state are carried out not in the form of direct coercive pressure, but through a combination of political financing, information campaigns, the manipulation of protest activity, the use of digital platforms for psychological influence, and the involvement of affiliated political and social actors. In this environment, intelligence and counter-intelligence must ensure the identification both influence networks themselves and of the mechanisms of their functioning, their links with external centres, and their impact on key decision-making processes (Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Raport SIS public).

At the same time, the development of Moldovan intelligence is accompanied by a number of objective constraints. First and foremost, this concerns the resource insufficiency characteristic of small states. Moldova's intelligence system is compelled simultaneously to respond to military-political risks, information operations, cyber threats, border and logistical vulnerabilities, and domestic political destabilisation processes. In such circumstances, the prioritisation of resources, institutional specialisation, and the analytical integration of different information flows become critically important (Intelligence analysis; Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse; Moldova Report 2024; Moldova Report 2025).

Despite these problems, the prospects for the development of Moldovan intelligence are quite real. First, a new strategic framework has already been formed, within which threats are no longer masked by general formulas but are clearly identified. Secondly, the legal foundations of the activities of the special services have been updated. Thirdly, Moldova is deepening its security cooperation with the European Union: in May 2024, the European Union and the Republic of Moldova signed a Security and Defence Partnership, which creates a political basis for cooperation in the fields of hybrid threats, cyber security, countering foreign manipulation and interference, the protection of critical infrastructure, border management, and defence resilience (Security and Defence Partnership).

It is also important that, in its reports for 2024 and 2025, the European Commission links the further development of Moldova's security sector with stronger civilian oversight, the functional modernisation of institutions, and an improvement in the quality of parliamentary control. This means that the prospective model for the development of Moldova's intelligence system must rest on several interrelated foundations: strengthening the agent component as a key instrument for penetrating closed environments; improving the counter-intelligence regime in relation to state

institutions, electoral processes, and logistical infrastructure; increasing analytical capacity for the fusion of heterogeneous data; deepening international cooperation; and reinforcing democratic oversight of the special services (Security and Defence Partnership; Moldova Report 2024; Moldova Report 2025).

Discussion

The obtained results confirm the thesis regarding the transformation of intelligence from an auxiliary instrument into a system-forming element of national security in small states under conditions of hybrid conflict. However, this thesis requires critical refinement.

First, the assumption of the determining role of intelligence may involve the risk of analytical reductionism: complex security processes are partially reduced to the informational component, while institutional resilience, political will, and economic factors remain insufficiently operationalised. This creates a potential risk of overestimating the capabilities of intelligence structures.

Second, the emphasis on HUMINT as a key instrument is justified, yet it does not fully account for the growing role of technologically integrated analytics (data fusion). Under contemporary conditions, the effectiveness of intelligence is determined not only by access to classified sources but also by the ability to integrate heterogeneous data into coherent analytical products.

Third, the interpretation of threats related to Transnistria and the Danube direction is conceptually sound; however, it relies predominantly on official sources. This generates a risk of institutional bias, as alternative expert or non-governmental assessments are only partially incorporated.

At the same time, the study demonstrates a strong aspect—namely, the integration of “whole-of-government” approaches and counter-FIMI practices, which are consistent with contemporary European standards. Nevertheless, the assertion regarding the effectiveness of centralised coordination requires further empirical verification, as crisis conditions often generate tension between centralisation and the operational autonomy of security actors.

Thus, the findings are generally consistent with contemporary theoretical approaches to the analysis of hybrid threats; however, they require further empirical validation, expansion of the source base, and consideration of interdisciplinary factors. This opens prospects for further research in modelling the effectiveness of intelligence systems and their adaptability to highly dynamic security environments.

Conclusions

The study conducted provides grounds for asserting that the development of the intelligence system of the Republic of Moldova in the contemporary security environment should be regarded as a component of the overall mechanism for identifying threats to national security. The Russian Federation’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the explicit identification of Russia and its proxies as the principal source of threats in the 2023 National Security Strategy, the persistence of the Transnistrian centre of instability, attempts at external interference in domestic political processes, as well as the vulnerability of the Danube direction, all give rise to the need for a qualitatively new level of functioning of the intelligence system.

It has been established that, under such conditions, intelligence assumes not an auxiliary but a system-defining significance. It is precisely intelligence that provides access to concealed processes, informal connections, and hidden intentions which constitute the basis of contemporary hybrid threats. In Moldova’s case, this is particularly relevant with regard to the Transnistrian region, the domestic political environment, electoral processes, logistical and border hubs, and infrastructure sectors vulnerable to external influence.

It is substantiated that the effective development of Moldovan intelligence is possible only based on a comprehensive combination of several components: normatively regulated intelligence

and counter-intelligence activity, the analytical integration of heterogeneous sources of information, inter-agency coordination, international cooperation, and proper democratic oversight. The viability of such a model is determined by its correspondence to the contemporary character of threats, which requires not a reaction to isolated incidents, but an integral system of strategic threat warning.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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