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NATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: RISKS AND THREATS

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Abstract

This article analyzes the complex process of genesis and evolution of the Republic of Moldova's law enforcement and security structures (Ministry of Internal Affairs, National Army, Intelligence and Security Service, and the State Protection and Guard Service) during the 1990-2026 period. The study highlights how the national security architecture was shaped not merely through administrative reforms, but primarily as a critical response to the secessionist conflicts in Transnistria and political tensions in TAU Gagauzia. The paper traces the transition from the reactive legislation of the 1990s toward a modern normative framework, culminating in the 2023 National Security Strategy, which introduces the concept of hybrid resilience. Particular attention is paid to the taxonomy of contemporary threats, demonstrating how factors such as systemic corruption, energy blackmail, and external electoral interference undermine territorial integrity and internal systemic stability.

In conclusion, the article argues that the security of the Republic of Moldova has evolved from a military-centric paradigm toward an integrated security model, where the success of security institutions increasingly depends on their capacity to protect democratic processes against asymmetric and transborder challenges within a volatile geopolitical context.

Keywords: National Security, Law Enforcement Structures, Hybrid Warfare, Territorial Integrity, Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI), National Army, Security Strategies.

MEDIUL DE SECURITATE NAȚIONALĂ A REPUBLICII MOLDOVA: RISCURI ȘI AMENINȚĂRI

Abstract

Articolul analizează procesul complex de constituire și evoluție a structurilor de ordine publică și securitate ale Republicii Moldova (Ministerul Afacerilor Interne, Armata Națională, Serviciul de Informații și Securitate și Serviciul de Protecție și Pază de Stat) în perioada 1990–2026. Studiul evidențiază faptul că arhitectura securității naționale s-a configurat nu doar prin reforme administrative, ci, în principal, ca răspuns la conflictele secesioniste din Transnistria și la tensiunile politice din UTA Găgăuzia. Lucrarea urmărește tranziția de la legislația reactivă a anilor 1990 către un cadru normativ modern, culminând cu Strategia Securității Naționale din 2023, care introduce conceptul de reziliență hibridă. O atenție deosebită este acordată taxonomiei amenințărilor contemporane, demonstrând modul în care factori precum corupția sistemică, șantajul energetic și interferențele externe în procesele electorale afectează integritatea teritorială și stabilitatea internă a sistemului statal.

În concluzie, articolul susține că securitatea Republicii Moldova a evoluat de la o paradigmă centrată pe dimensiunea militară către un model integrat de securitate, în cadrul căruia succesul instituțiilor de securitate depinde tot mai mult de capacitatea acestora de a proteja procesele democratice împotriva provocărilor asimetrice și transfrontaliere, într-un context geopolitic volatil.

Cuvinte-cheie: securitate națională, structuri de ordine publică, război hibrid, integritate teritorială, Serviciul de Informații și Securitate (SIS), Ministerul Afacerilor Interne (MAI), Armata Națională, strategii de securitate.

Introduction. The Republic of Moldova is going through a period with multiple risks and threats, both older and newer, of both internal and external nature, such as the existence of an unresolved conflict or the risk of aggression manifesting in the region, or the presence of elements specific to hybrid warfare [1]. Among these are the unresolved Transnistrian conflict, the risk of escalation or manifestation of aggressive actions in the region, as well as the intensification of hybrid warfare elements, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressures, and attempts to influence democratic processes. These challenges, directly or indirectly, affect the national security, political stability, and socio-economic development of the state, necessitating the strengthening of public institutions, increasing societal resilience, and deepening cooperation with international partners.

Traditionally, when we thought about a state's security, the reference image was that of an army defending its borders. Today, however, the configuration of the security environment has radically transformed, shifting from clear and predictable threats to a complex ecosystem of interconnected global, regional, and internal challenges. The main characteristic of this new context is accelerated dynamism; the world is changing so rapidly under the influence of technology and tensions between major powers that the reaction capacity of state institutions is often severely tested. This "speed of dangers" currently represents the greatest vulnerability for any sovereign state.

Thus, the concept of security has expanded beyond the protection of constitutional order and the military sphere, now including vital elements such as digital stability, the protection of energy resources, and the ability to resist disinformation or economic blackmail.

A state that does not constantly analyze its risk environment becomes extremely fragile in the face of strategic surprises. For the Republic of Moldova, situated at the intersection of major geopolitical interests, the continuous adaptation of its security structures and legislation is not merely an option for modernization, but a fundamental necessity. This adaptation process, documented in national security strategies over recent decades, represents the foundation upon which the resilience of our society is built in the face of increasingly invisible and constant threats.

The construction of our state began with the Declaration of Sovereignty (1990) and was finalized with the Declaration of Independence (1991). In those critical moments, Moldova had an urgent mission: to create its own security system to replace the old mechanisms controlled from Moscow. In a period marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and internal tensions that led to the tragic war on the Dniester, the new security institutions (the Police, the National Army, the Intelligence and Security Services) were not just structures of law and order; they represented the very guarantee that the Republic of Moldova would survive as a state on a world map that was changing radically before our eyes.

The transition from the militarized and politically controlled system of the Soviet era to a democratic one was not easy. The state had to confront three major challenges:

- Gradually removing the military footprint from internal affairs;
- Transforming soldiers into professionals who respect the country's neutrality;
- Reforming the Intelligence Services so that they operate strictly within the limits of the law.

Today, as we move ever closer to the European Union, we are witnessing a shift in vision: the Republic of Moldova no longer wants to be just a country that “asks for” help and security, also the protagonist of a new European policy – and of the “new neighborhood” [19]. Reducing the chances of the European path for the Republic of Moldova facilitates the accentuation of certain risks [8]. Our objectives go beyond simple border guarding; we wish to actively participate in European defense platforms and international crisis management missions. This evolution is essential, because without a modern and robust security system, we cannot speak of a stable economy or the success of EU accession negotiations [12].

The increasingly close collaboration with Europe, from visa-free travel to trade agreements, has been supported by the political will to bring European standards to all state institutions. Only thus, by participating in various international missions, will it be shown that the Republic of Moldova shares the same security values as the entire European community.

Therefore, this article analyzes how the institutions of the Republic of Moldova emerged and developed. We will see how the journey from independence to the present day now allows us to occupy a respected place in the European security system, and how we have managed to build our resistance (resilience) in the face of modern dangers, from hybrid attacks to the major current geopolitical tensions.

Methods and materials applied. The rigorous foundation of this study required the adoption of a multidisciplinary methodological approach, capable of integrating the historical, legal, and political science dimensions of the national security system. The research design was based on a broad spectrum of documentary materials, segmented between the normative-legislative framework of the Republic of Moldova and the relevant specialized literature for the European space.

The empirical basis of the work includes the founding acts of the state, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, complemented by a meticulous analysis of the organic laws regulating the functioning of various structures and the national security strategies adopted over the three decades of statehood.

To process this volume of information, priority was given to the historical method, essential for reconstructing the process of institutional genesis from the period 1990-1992 and for understanding how the Soviet administrative legacy conditioned the early stages of democratic reform.

The analytical dimension of the study was strengthened by applying the comparative method, used to measure the degree of alignment of national institutions with the standards of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy. At the same time, the adoption of a systemic approach allowed for the examination of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Economy and Digitalization, the Intelligence and Security Service, and others, not as isolated entities, but as interdependent elements of a unitary mechanism, in constant interaction with the regional security environment.

Finally, through the use of logical and deductive analysis, it was possible to outline the correlations between internal vulnerabilities, such as corruption or energy insecurity, and the major risks to territorial integrity, thus offering a prospective view of the state's

response capacity in the face of contemporary geopolitical challenges.

Discussions and results obtained. The current security environment is characterized by increased unpredictability in the global system of international relations and the difficulty of delineating classic risks and threats from asymmetric ones [21].

The genesis of the security system in the Republic of Moldova can be divided into three fundamental stages: 1) the transition period (1990-1991); 2) the stage of consolidation through fire (1992); and 3) the phase of modernization reforms (after 1999).

Unlike other structures, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was the “promoter of institutional reform”. On December 18, 1990, with the adoption of the Law on Police, the Republic of Moldova became one of the first states in the post-Soviet space to abandon the terminology of “militia”. This change was not merely semantic; it aimed at transitioning from a body of repression to one focused on the protection of citizens’ rights [14].

Subsequently, on December 12, 1991, the Carabinieri Troops were established, a hybrid structure intended to ensure public order in crisis situations, adopting the model of traditional European states (Italy, France) [16].

While the police inherited and reformed, the National Army had to be created almost from scratch. The turning point was September 3, 1991, when Decree No.193 laid the foundations of the Armed Forces. The war for the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova forced an acceleration in the equipping and organization of the Ministry of Defense (officially established in February 1992) [10]. The absence of a pre-existing military infrastructure (most Soviet units being directly subordinate to Moscow) turned this process into an act of national volunteerism and resilience.

In the security architecture of the Republic of Moldova, the segment dedicated to state protection has undoubtedly undergone the most complex and sensitive institutional transformation, having the delicate task of managing the succession and, subsequently, the detachment from the central structures of the Soviet KGB. This process of identity and functional rupture formally began in September 1991, with the transformation of the former State Security Committee into the Ministry of National Security (MNS) [15]. This first stage represented an attempt to provide the new sovereign state with its own protection instrument; however, the structure initially retained a classic ministerial configuration with extensive executive functions, specific to the transition period. The evolution towards a democratic security model reached a turning point with the reform of 1999. This stage was marked by the crystallization of the understanding that a rule-of-law state does not require an “institution” with discretionary executive powers in the field of security, but rather a specialized, lean, and efficient body.

The result of this strategic reevaluation was the creation of the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), an institution redefined as a specialized structure strictly focused on intelligence and counterintelligence activities. Beyond the name change, the reform aimed to streamline the service’s mission and, crucially, to place it under rigorous parliamentary control, thereby ensuring the necessary balance between the imperative of operational secrecy and respect for citizens’ rights in a democratic society.

At the same time, the relevant legislation defining national security treatment must be sufficiently flexible to allow a security intelligence service to scan the horizon and prepare for emerging threats [18].

Unlike structures with a general mission, the State Protection and Guard Service (SPPS) crystallized as a niche necessity, being designed to ensure the continuity of governance through the protection of state representatives. The institution was founded on January 27, 1992 (Decree No.11) under the name of the Presidential Protection Service,

initially functioning as a subdivision with strictly limited duties confined to the bodyguard of the head of state [9].

A decisive stage of maturation occurred in 1998, when the structure was reorganized into the State Protection and Guard Service. This reform significantly expanded the institution's competencies and reconfigured its political oversight, marking the transition from the exclusive tutelage of the Presidency to a variable subordination regime (Government, Parliament, or Presidency), depending on the evolution of the legislative framework [13].

Currently, the SPPS is an institution specialized in the national security architecture, with the complex mission of ensuring the protection of domestic dignitaries, foreign guests, and the working premises of the main state institutions. Thus, the service has evolved from a tactical escort unit to a strategic pillar guaranteeing the functional stability of the Republic of Moldova's authorities.

The outbreak of the Dniester conflict in the early 1990s came as a surprise to the international community, which, at the time, did not know how to react.

At the same time, the young state, still burdened by the Soviet legacy and lacking the necessary diplomatic experience, was drawn into several settlement schemes that most often proved unsuccessful. The Russian Federation, as the "first violin" in the negotiation process, dictated the signing of agreements by the Republic of Moldova that further bogged down the negotiation process and made Tiraspol increasingly less "dependent" on Chișinău. The European Union's enlargement process in the mid-2000s, and the concomitant entry of the Republic of Moldova into the EU's "sphere of attraction," rekindled certain hopes that this conflict would be resolved in a manner that would preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova.

During the critical early period of the 1990s, the authorities in Chișinău found themselves facing a major strategic dilemma: how to maintain order in the south of the country without provoking an open conflict, similar to the one on the Dniester. Tensions with leaders in Comrat and the emergence of local paramilitary formations created the imminent risk of a "second front" [6], which would have exhausted the already limited resources of the young state. In this context, the establishment of the Carabinieri Troops on December 12, 1991, was not merely a routine administrative decision but a tactical move of vital importance.

Unlike the army, which is trained to destroy the enemy, the Carabinieri Troops (currently the General Inspectorate of Carabinieri) were formed as a force with a dual status (military and public order), capable of intervening with proportional force. This "adaptability" allowed the state to deploy units to areas of ethnic instability that could restore peace without being perceived as an occupation army. Their presence provided Chișinău with "precious time" for negotiations, acting as a security filter that prevented direct clashes between radicalized civilians and government forces [11].

Moreover, the choice of the European gendarmerie model sent a clear message to international partners: the Republic of Moldova was choosing the path of democratization and civilized management of internal crises, even under conditions of extreme pressure. This strategy of "moderate force" was decisive in preventing a humanitarian catastrophe in the south, demonstrating that stability can be maintained through institutions that prioritize de-escalation and dialogue over armed confrontation. Thus, the carabinieri became the backbone of a new security doctrine, one in which maintaining public order is seen as an essential step towards lasting political peace.

The security architecture of the Republic of Moldova has traversed a complex evolu-

tionary trajectory, marking the transition from a normative framework based on sectoral functioning laws towards an integrated and multidimensional public policy structure. The genesis point of this strategic configuration lies in the adoption of the 1994 Constitution, where Article 11 established the status of permanent neutrality [5]. This provision did not merely represent a foreign policy option but functioned as a limiting strategic framework that directly determined the volume of investment in the defense sector and outlined the limits of international cooperation, forcing the state to define its security within a paradigm of military self-restraint.

This traditional vision began to be nuanced with the adoption of the 2011 National Security Strategy, a document that laid the foundations for a multidimensional approach to state security [7]. If at that stage the emphasis was on creating structures capable of ensuring internal stability and public order in relation to classic risks, the New National Security Strategy of 2023 marks a fundamental qualitative leap in Chișinău's strategic thinking.

The current public policy document operates a paradigm shift, abandoning the restrictive vision of "border defense" in favor of the modern concept of "national resilience". This change reflects a deep understanding of the contemporary geopolitical context, recognizing that modern threats are often invisible, constant, and hybrid.

Thus, security is no longer perceived as a simple reaction to external aggression, but as a systemic capacity of the state and society to absorb shocks and maintain functionality in the face of multi-directional challenges. Through this fine-tuning of the legal and political framework, the Republic of Moldova moves from a reactive to a proactive security model, focused on strengthening internal resistance as the main guarantor of state integrity.

The European Union has made important decisions and given new impetus to its efforts to strengthen security and the defense dimension. The development of a common foreign security policy includes the progressive definition of a common defense policy, as well as the definition of its security interests, particularly in its immediate neighborhood [3].

In the current geopolitical context, some of the most important the national security of the Republic of Moldova transcends the paradigm of classical military confrontations, being targeted by a complex ecosystem of hybrid threats designed to erode the foundations of the state from within. A critical dimension of this new security landscape is systemic corruption, treated in recent strategic documents not merely as a common crime, but as a major factor of national insecurity.

Currently, the most significant threats to the security of the Republic of Moldova are the Transnistrian conflict, external hybrid influences, cyberattacks, energy vulnerabilities, and the effects of the war in Ukraine. These risks require a combination of military, economic, informational, and institutional measures to protect the state's stability and sovereignty.

Simultaneously, democratic processes have become prime targets of hybrid warfare, where interference in electoral processes through illicit financial flows and concerted disinformation campaigns has imposed a redefinition of missions for security institutions.

These actions are not always evident or declared, but act subtly in the gray zones of security, combining non-military methods with psychological, economic, and informational influence tools [2]. These entities have evolved towards the role of guarantors of the integrity of the electoral process, extending their area of competence from the physical protection of dignitaries to securing digital infrastructure and the legitimacy of citizens' votes.

At the same time, internal pressure is compounded by energy vulnerability, frequently used as an instrument of political blackmail, a fact that has shifted the security “front” into the area of critical infrastructure management.

Therefore, diversifying supply routes and ensuring energy security have become national security priorities, under the direct monitoring of the Supreme Security Council.

Thus, by integrating responses to corruption, hybrid attacks, and energy blackmail into a unitary strategy, the Republic of Moldova is recalibrating its force structures to face a security environment where the border between internal and external threats becomes increasingly fluid.

Alignment with European standards involves implementing modern policies and regulations in the energy field, in accordance with European Union practices. This process favors market transparency, attracting investments, and consumer protection. Aligned with the country’s international commitments, the National Integrated Energy and Climate Change Plan (PNIEC) will play a vital role in ensuring a fair and sustainable energy transition, thus contributing to environmental protection and improving the quality of life for all citizens [17].

At the national level, cybersecurity is a shared responsibility that requires coordinated actions for prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery from incidents by government authorities, the private sector, and civil society. For this to work smoothly and to ensure a secure and resilient digital sphere, a comprehensive framework or strategy needs to be developed, implemented, and executed in a multi-stakeholder approach [4].

The security of the Republic of Moldova is governed by a fragile balance between proclaimed sovereignty and the complex administrative realities on the ground, being exposed to a category of interdependent risks targeting both territorial integrity and the stability of the internal system. The most visible security vulnerability of the Republic of Moldova remains the unconstitutional foreign military presence in the Transnistrian region, where the existence of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) contingent and Transnistrian paramilitary structures constitutes a permanent asymmetric threat. The major strategic risk lies in the potential activation of these forces in the event of a change in the dynamics of the regional front, turning the separatist region into a bridgehead for offensive operations that could irremediably compromise state security.

Complementary to territorial risks, the integrity of the state border is subjected to enormous pressures generated by massive migration flows and the risk of illicit trafficking in weapons or prohibited substances, requiring multidimensional coordination between the Border Police and the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS).

However, state stability is conditioned not only by geographical demarcation lines but also by the cohesion of the internal system. The political instrumentalization of ethnic and linguistic diversity represents a risk of radicalization of certain social groups, which can challenge central authority through mechanisms similar to the crises of the 1990s. This polarization is often amplified by what experts define as “strategic corruption”, a process by which foreign actors undermine the loyalty of public officials, causing institutional paralysis that prevents the state from exercising its monopoly on legitimate violence at critical moments.

In conclusion, the security of a state is a central element for every community and constitutes a fundamental condition for the life of a democracy [20].

Conclusions and recommendations. If we look back at the path taken by the Republic of Moldova’s security institutions from the moment of independence to the present day, we see a continuous adaptation to a turbulent and often unfriendly regional reality.

The building of these institutions was not merely a routine bureaucratic procedure, but a real struggle for the survival of the state. The transition from the old Soviet model to a modern, democratic security system has shown that our society possesses an astonishing capacity for resilience. Even with limited resources and a frozen conflict on its territory, we have managed to professionalize and modernize our security institutions.

A key conclusion of this study is that today, a country's security is no longer just about guarding its borders. In the century we live in, a state's independence depends just as much on how we defend ourselves against "invisible" threats: cyberattacks, blackmail involving gas and energy, or the various forms of corruption through which foreign actors try to control institutions from within. The changes within the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) and the State Protection and Guard Service (SPPS), the modernization of the police and gendarmerie according to European models, the new 2023 Security Strategy, and other essential changes show that Moldova has learned to stop being merely reactive (waiting for something bad to happen before acting) and has become proactive, building a well-structured national resilience.

In the digital age, modern societies are globally interconnected and increasingly dependent on ICT and digital infrastructure. However, in the Republic of Moldova, this interconnectivity also creates interdependencies and vulnerabilities to emerging threats that must be managed at the national level. Improving cybersecurity and protecting critical information infrastructures are essential for the nation's security and economic well-being – especially during the global transition to the digital economy and the information society.

At the same time, harmonizing legislation facilitates integration into the European energy system and access to funding programs and international cooperation. In this regard, our state has made progress in aligning its legislation with European standards in the fields of environment and energy. Among these achievements is the development of a Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) system for greenhouse gas emissions, which represents an important step in achieving the country's climate goals.

On our path towards the European Union, we are witnessing a very important shift in mentality: Moldova no longer wants to be just a country that receives aid, but a state that actively contributes to the region's stability. Our participation in international peace missions and alignment with European standards are the only ways to achieve a stable economy and a protected democracy.

Therefore, we must recognize that strengthening the defense system is a process that never stops. We are constantly challenged to find a balance between the neutrality enshrined in the Constitution and the need to have modern, effective defense. Our success will depend on how well the security institutions collaborate with each other. Only by working hand in hand can these institutions ensure that the Republic of Moldova remains a point of stability on the edge of Europe, capable of defending its sovereignty against any type of attack, whether with conventional weapons or through hidden (hybrid) methods.

The analysis of the historical journey and current risks highlights the need for profound reform, oriented towards resilience and technological modernization.

An absolute priority is the strengthening of the digital capabilities of the security structures, particularly through the modernization of the technical units within the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI). The creation of an integrated national cyber incident response center would ensure the protection of state databases and the banking system, thus preventing the risk of an internal shutdown caused by hybrid attacks on democratic processes.

In parallel, the Republic of Moldova must fully assume its role as a reliable partner in the region, transforming from a consumer of assistance into a state that actively contributes to European security. This objective requires more intense participation in European Union peace missions, which necessitates aligning the equipment and training of security institutions with international interoperability standards.

All these efforts will only be truly effective if bureaucratic barriers between institutions are eliminated through the creation of a National Rapid Reaction Protocol. Genuine collaboration, based on real-time information sharing between the SIS, the MAI, and the National Army, will allow the state to function as a unitary mechanism, capable of facing the hybrid and geopolitical challenges of the present.

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