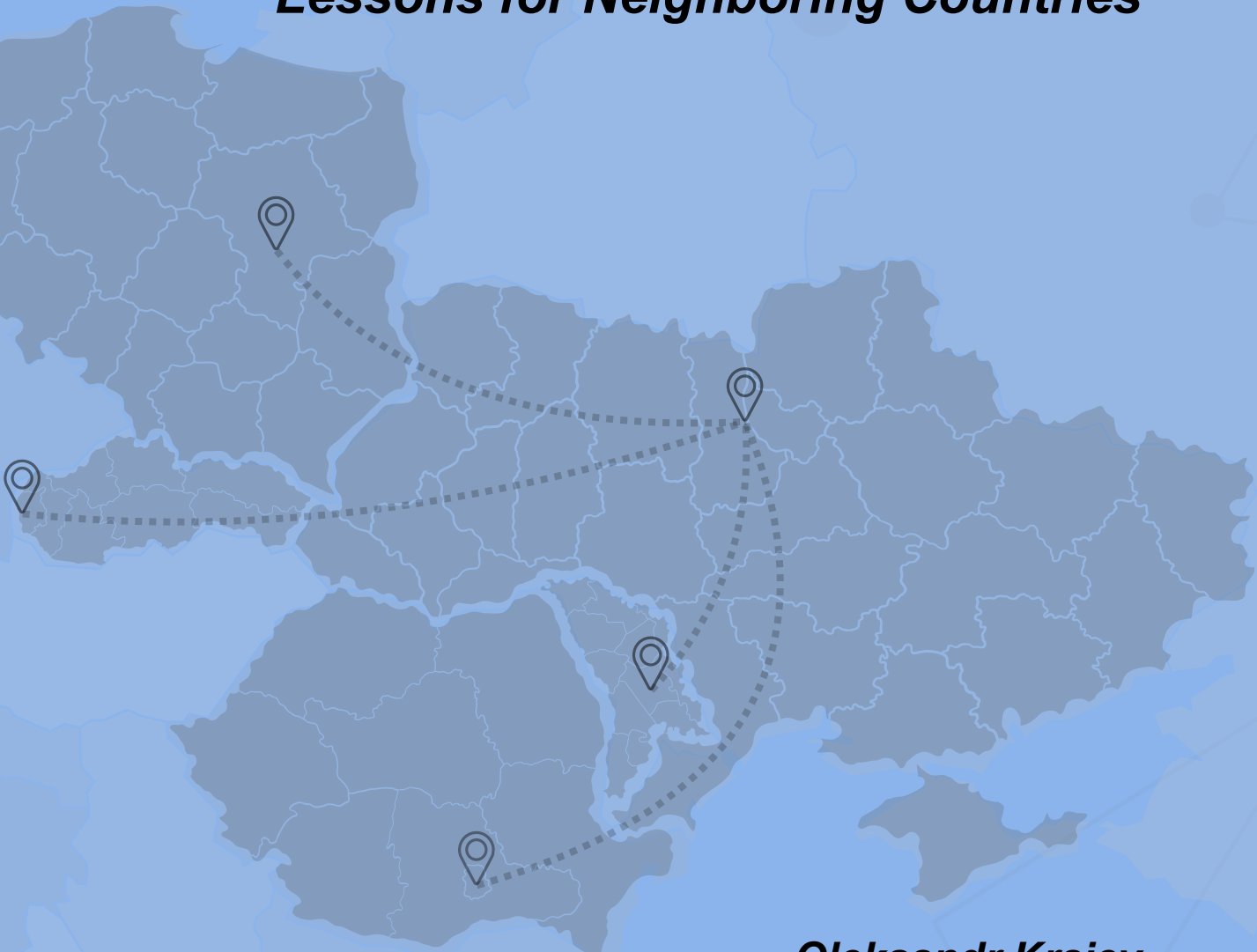


CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN VULNERABILITIES ALERT TRACKER

Deterring Russian Non-Linear Warfare in Ukraine: Lessons for Neighboring Countries



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TRACKER. DETERRING RUSSIAN NON-LINEAR WARFARE IN UKRAINE:
LESSONS FOR NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

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This study was conducted with the support of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Kyiv Office, Ukraine.

The opinions, conclusions and recommendations are those of the authors of this study and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Kyiv Office, Ukraine, and the German Government.

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CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN VULNERABILITIES ALERT TRACKER

Intro

Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” conducted an analytical research titled “Central and Eastern European Vulnerabilities Alert Tracker” with the support of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Ukraine.

The project baseline is that despite its full-scale aggression against Ukraine, Russia does not reduce but strengthens its hybrid warfare against both Ukraine and Europe, primarily Ukraine's neighbouring EU states and the Republic of Moldova (which has been especially relevant before and after the European Parliament elections, the full cycle of elections in Romania, presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova and Slovakia, and local elections in Poland). These political events present critical junctures where the vulnerabilities of these states are most exposed, making them more susceptible to Russian disinformation, manipulation of public opinion, and other tactics typical for hybrid and non-linear warfare.

The paper researches the vulnerabilities of the mentioned states to Russian hybrid and non-linear aggression. Additionally, the project focuses on analysing the strategies and tactics that Ukraine has effectively deployed in countering similar threats and evaluating how these countermeasures can serve as adaptable models for bolstering defense of Ukraine's neighbouring states. This aspect is particularly significant, given Ukraine's frontline experience with Russian aggression, which is providing a unique and tested set of countermeasures.

The framework of the project envisions a series of semi-structured interviews with experts from each of the target countries for verification and approbation of the gathered data and highlighting the priority areas of the research.

The list of experts for the interviews was formed from among the analysts as well as current and former practitioners in the field of foreign policy and national security in respective countries. All of them represent different organizations and institutions and possess a unique set of skills and experiences valuable in the context of the implementation of the project.

Overall, 12 interviews have been held, with three interviews per each of the target countries. The interviews were conducted over the period from the 4th of July to the 15th of September 2024.

The interviews were focused on unveiling the threats and vulnerabilities faced by the target countries, the ways in which Russia utilizes or might utilize them in hybrid and non-linear aggression tactics, and how Ukrainian experience in opposing such tactics could be applied for its Central and Eastern European neighbours.

During this research, the main attention was paid to the correlation between Ukraine's existing experience in the field of resistance to potential threatening actions of the Russian Federation and the existing framework—actual and legally established—for resistance to Russian disinformation and illegal influences in the countries that became the subject of this study. Thus, it is planned to highlight what experience within the last 10 years of active Ukrainian resistance to the negative informational and hybrid actions of the Russian Federation can be applied in the context of each individual case of a Central and Eastern European country.

It is also important to note that the involvement of people with a military background in this project and an understanding of the intricacies of the specifically military application of informational and hybrid components of the aggressive foreign policy of the Russian Federation made it possible to significantly strengthen the expert and analytical component of this work. In fact, this concerns not just the expansion of the subject horizon, but a deeper understanding of the real state of affairs and possible forecasting of their further development.

Separately, we should note that in due to security restrictions and national security issues that inevitably arise when working with information and expertise of this nature, within the scope of this study, only the conclusions, which publication and dissemination will not pose additional threats to the national security of Ukraine and the countries considered within the scope of this work, are presented. Additionally, these circumstances forced us to quote the interviewed experts under anonymously.

The following country cases are presented in alphabetical order, so this particular composition of the text does not represent a part of the findings and/or any specific significance attributed to a particular country.

Case of Moldova

Key challenges for Moldova

1. The illegal presence of the Russian contingent in Transnistria;
2. Difficulties with modernization of the armed forces of Moldova;
3. The influx of refugees and asylum seekers caused by Russian aggression;
4. Dependence on Russian energy resources and electricity;
5. The influence of pro-Russian elements on politics and electoral cycles.

Moldova, being the first country in our research, also holds a unique position in the context of vulnerability to Russian military and non-military methods of influence. Moldova is the only country within the scope of this study (except Ukraine), part of whose territory is controlled by pro-Russian proxies, the stability and functionality of which is ensured by the presence of the Russian military contingent and Russian economic support. The illegal presence of Russian troops on the sovereign territory of Moldova, on the left bank of the Dniester River, creates a constant security threat and tension both for the political elite and for society. Nevertheless there have been no progress in the settlement of this conflict seen in recent years.

“The illegal presence of Russian troops on the territory of the Transnistrian region has always been and remains a potential threat, and we do not see any progress, unfortunately, on this issue”.

Despite the stationing of **Russian forces in Transnistria**, experts underscore that the immediate threat posed by these troops remains comparatively limited. This military presence exerts a continuous pressure on Moldova, acting as a strategic leverage for Russia to maintain influence without necessarily engaging in overt military action. The situation is further complicated by the unique composition of the Russian contingent stationed in Transnistria, which includes both regular troops and locally recruited personnel with varying levels of training and equipment.

While the symbolic power of these forces is undeniable, their operational readiness and effectiveness are viewed as limited, partly due to logistical constraints and the geographical isolation of Transnistria. Experts note that the contingent’s ability to operate autonomously is restricted by its dependence on resupply lines and support infrastructure that could be easily disrupted, thereby diminishing its capacity to launch a sustained offensive. Furthermore, the willingness of these forces to engage in a direct conflict appears muted, constrained by broader geopolitical calculations and a perceived reluctance to escalate tensions and break status-quo.

This restrained posture also does not eliminate the long-term strategic risk posed by the Russian presence, as it serves as a constant reminder of Moldova's vulnerability and complicates its defense. Still, the immediate threat level remains low, as Russia's calculus in the region appears focused on maintaining a steady influence rather than provoking a direct confrontation. Consequently, while the

presence of the Russian troops in Transnistria continues to represent a latent risk to Moldova, their current operational limitations and lack of strategic support mitigate the immediate danger they pose, allowing Moldova some room for manoeuvre to strengthen its own security measures and regional partnerships.

“Russia made its impact, but to a lesser extent with its army. [...] They're kind of willing to sit on the sidelines and do nothing”.

However, experts warn that under certain conditions these risks may increase. The proximity of the conflict in Ukraine, especially if Russia's military advance to Odesa, could turn the Transnistrian region into a more active political and security player, increasing security risks for Moldova.

The long-term presence of Russian troops also plays a psychological and political role, especially among certain segments of the Moldovan population. The existence of Russian armed forces on the territory of Moldova is often used by political actors opposed to European integration, contributing to the creation of a narrative of neutrality and friendship with Russia. The persistence of pro-Russian elements in the political landscape of Moldova emphasizes the difficulty of completely neutralizing the influence of external forces, especially those related to Russia.

In addition to the electoral dimension, Moldova's **military modernization efforts** are seen as a potential counterbalance to the influence of Russian troops in Transnistria. However, the scale of Moldova's military potential remains limited, and the broader question of how to effectively neutralize Russia's military presence remains unresolved.

“There is one force, so to speak, that is afraid of [the military modernisation processes in Moldova], and that is Transnistria. All those contingents that are moving around there, with those Russian troops that are guarding Cobasna, but it's still very little. So, it could theoretically be some kind of problem for them”.

The answer to the potential increase in security threats from the illegal Russian contingent can be the strengthening of the process of modernization of the Moldovan armed forces, supported by the NATO member-states and the expansion of potential capabilities in the field of hard security. Moldova's military modernization efforts have gained notable momentum in recent years, though experts acknowledge that this progress, while significant for a country that has long seen stagnation in this sphere, is still in its early stages. This perspective is reinforced by the acknowledgment of Moldova's inherent limitations in maintaining a large military force.

“Moldova does not have a large military force, and it could not have one. And there are many factors related to this”.

“Taking into account the fact that almost nothing has been done in the last 20-30 years, this is practically drops in the sand compared to what needs to be done in order to actually have some kind of force that can resist aggression even for a week or several days”.

The country's constitutionally confirmed neutrality has traditionally constrained its defense expenditures, mirroring a broader societal hesitance to endorse military development despite evolving security challenges. Recently, however, Moldova has begun revising its strategic approach, evidenced by the adoption of a new national security strategy that explicitly identifies Russia as a main threat. Within this context, pro-European factions advocate for stronger ties with NATO, aiming to capitalize on the current political environment to drive forward modernization efforts and enhance Moldova's defense capabilities.

"The current government is guided by this principle: we need to modernize, this is a window of opportunity, a fairly serious window of opportunity, and we need to use everything to modernize the army".

The lack of self-sufficiency in critical defense areas underscores the necessity of close relationships and cooperation, primarily with NATO.

"If we apply elementary logic, it is obvious that Moldova can really ensure its security only within the framework of a collective defense system. And there is only one such organization on the continent, it is called the North Atlantic Bloc, NATO".

However, pro-Russian voices remain critical, cautioning against the militarization of the country, arguing that such moves could provoke Moscow. These divergent views have slowed the process and complicated efforts to establish a coherent, unified strategy on national defense.

Despite recent increases in military spending, the resources allocated remain insufficient to address Moldova's long-term security challenges.

"Even if some steps have been made, if you look in open sources on the budget in the army, it is many times higher than what it was in the last 20-30 years, but it is still a drop in the ocean".

With regard to the **issue of refugees**, Moldova, along with the entire region, felt the significant social and economic impact of Russian aggression against Ukraine—while many refugees move on to other destinations in Europe, over 100 000 remain in Moldova.

"There are about 114 000 refugees in Moldova right now. You understand that there is no language barrier. There are positive examples of integration into Moldovan society. People are opening businesses, people are looking for jobs".

Moldova's **dependence on Russian gas** has historically posed a substantial vulnerability within its energy security framework. This reliance, often intensified by Russia's strategic manipulation of gas prices—especially in regions like Transnistria and Gagauzia—has necessitated a critical reassessment of Moldova's energy strategy. Over the past two years, Moldova has taken considerable steps to diversify its energy sources, substantially decreasing its reliance on Russian gas. These efforts have bolstered Moldova's energy resilience, diminishing its exposure to Russian

energy leverage and enhancing its capacity to pursue a more autonomous and secure energy policy.

“The energy crisis has made us take very serious steps. [...] What was not done in 20 years has been done in two years. Now, even if gas does flow through Druzhba [pipeline], we have an alternative from Romania and other countries”

The situation with Russia's energy supply to Transnistria remains an unresolved issue for Moldova's security and sovereignty. While the right bank of Moldova has successfully reduced its dependence on Gazprom, the future of energy supply and policy in Transnistria remains uncertain. Despite significant progress by Moldova's central government toward energy independence, Transnistria's reliance on Russian energy supplies presents both a political and economic challenge, enabling Russia to retain considerable leverage over the region.

Experts interviewed highlighted that **Russian proxies** and supporters within Moldova's political elite continue to exert influence, primarily through shaping public opinion, though their direct impact on national policy is relatively constrained. A primary area of concern remains the ongoing “information war”, in which parts of Moldova's population are susceptible to pro-Russian narratives. This struggle over public opinion is critical, especially as Moldova pursues closer alignment with the European Union. Russian-aligned actors actively seek to erode support for Moldova's pro-European orientation by appealing to undecided or apathetic demographics. Additionally, the ambivalence of certain Moldovan political figures on Russia underscores the broader geopolitical tensions that Moldova must navigate as it seeks to solidify its European path.

“The position [of certain political figures in Moldova] toward Russia raises many questions”

The pro-Russian and often secessionist leanings of the Gagauzian population present a unique challenge to Moldova's internal unity and foreign policy. This sentiment is deeply rooted in Soviet-era policies, which created divisions in Moldovan society. This historical division has left a lasting impact, resulting in a society that remains fractured along ethnic and political lines, complicating both internal governance and external diplomacy. This trend is growing, as the last elections demonstrated.

Ukrainian experience for Moldova

- Ukraine's recent experiences in key sectors—such as information warfare, emergency services, and military organization—provide essential insights for Moldova's own efforts to fortify its resilience amidst ongoing regional conflict. Moldova's collaboration with both Ukraine and Romania has yielded promising advancements; a notable instance being the recent trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania in Chisinau in July 2024. During this summit, a trilateral agreement focused on countering information warfare was signed, representing a pivotal acknowledgment of shared security

vulnerabilities and a commitment to address them jointly. While this agreement is a significant milestone, the translation of this commitment into concrete actions will likely require a sustained, phased approach.

- In countering disinformation specifically, Ukraine's proactive and strategic efforts offer a valuable framework for Moldova. By adopting similar proactive measures, Moldova could significantly strengthen its resilience to disinformation campaigns that target public opinion and governmental stability.
- Ukraine's initiatives in economic development and the production of media content underscore the role of economic and informational resilience in national security. For Moldova, these approaches suggest pathways to fortify its media landscape and economic structures, establishing systems that are better equipped to resist external pressures. Together, these lessons highlight the potential for Moldova to enhance its national resilience by leveraging shared strategies and deepening cooperative efforts with regional partners.
- Moldova can also benefit from Ukraine's experiences in organizing emergency services and military organization in times of crisis, which was mentioned several times by the interviewed experts.
- Ukrainian experience with foreign (Russian) forces stationing distabilisational effect is an additional argument for Moldova to continue pushing an issue of changing military peacekeeping mission to a police one aimed at mitigating a perception of threats in the Transnistrian region, and insisting on a Russian military forces withdrawal according to their OSCE obligations. Ukrainian experience also provides lessons learnt for the necessity to improve counter-intelligence capabilities and the work of the security services to prevent political destabilization and Russian-proxies work.

Case of Poland

Key challenges for Poland:

1. The need for rapid modernization of the armed forces and strengthening of the existing infrastructure of NATO;
2. The influx of refugees and asylum seekers against the background of Russian aggression;
3. Threats due to the border provocations—Belarus and Kaliningrad;
4. Political post-election instability.

Among all the interviewed experts, it was the Polish colleagues who seriously emphasised that in the context of resistance to hybrid aggression, their key focus should be on strengthening the hard power component in the first place. Their position is that only in the presence of really strong arguments of a **classical military nature** and the potential to respond to the possible expansion of Russian aggression in the region, Poland should be ready to resist conventional aggression from Russia—and only with such confidence in its own security capabilities and in the support of allies the Poles can more effectively plan their own resistance in the hybrid and information sphere:

“Those facilities are seen by the Polish society as a way of, you know, strengthening our stability and peace and in a way to avoid Russian aggression towards Poland”.

However, there are differing views on whether the existing infrastructure is sufficient to counter current threats. Experts emphasized that while progress is visible, the pace of development may not meet the immediate security needs posed by the unpredictable Russian threat.

“Given the geopolitical situation and the threat from the Russian Federation, it is not enough. However, the good sign is that it is still developing. This NATO infrastructure and of course the presence of NATO troops on the Polish ground is also growing. And this is good news”.

Poland’s strategic geographic position significantly raises the stakes of its security policies. As both a critical supporter of Ukraine and a frontline state in relation to Russia, Poland faces unique complexities, particularly in managing public perceptions of its security environment. At the same time, concerns have emerged regarding the long-term commitment of key NATO allies—especially the United States—to maintaining a robust military presence in Poland. Any reduction in the US involvement could profoundly impact Poland’s defense posture, exposing a critical vulnerability within NATO’s collective defense framework.

In this context, there is broad consensus that Poland should actively advocate for an enhanced NATO presence to reinforce its security. Although ongoing efforts aim to increase NATO forces and bolster infrastructure within Poland, experts agree

that further enhancements are essential. Ensuring Poland's sustained security in an increasingly unstable geopolitical landscape will require continuous adaptation and proactive engagement within NATO to secure a resilient and enduring defense strategy. There is also strong societal support for increased defense spending, which limits any significant pushback against the budget allocations. This public demand provides political cover for the government to continue its extensive military spending without facing major resistance.

“There is a huge demand from the society to strengthen our military capabilities. [...] So, if there are any doubts about the budget, the less of it is around the military position and strand”.

Poland's response to **Ukrainian refugees** has illuminated distinctive aspects of its approach to migrants. The cultural affinities between Poles and Ukrainians—including shared language roots, religious traditions, and historical ties—have contributed to a relatively positive reception of Ukrainian refugees compared to those from more culturally distant regions. This influx, however, contrasts with Poland's historically restrictive policies on immigration from outside the EU, marking a shift shaped as much by economic need as by cultural proximity.

Nonetheless, despite this generally welcoming stance, lingering historical tensions between Poland and Ukraine persist, posing a ever-existing challenge. External actors, particularly Russia, have sought to exploit these tensions, aiming to amplify anti-Ukrainian sentiments within Poland. This underscores the dual influence of historical sensitivities and geopolitical pressures on Poland's evolving immigration policies and public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees.

“One side of this problem is that the Polish economy needs migrants, needs people to work, needs labor force. We need people from the outside. And actually, Ukrainian refugees are very useful for the Polish economy for many reasons. One of them is that we are culturally similar, similar language, similar culture, more or less the same religion. So, they adopt quite easily in Poland”.

The significant presence of Ukrainian asylum seekers in Poland has yielded both social and economic effects. On the economic front, the influx of Ukrainian labor has provided a critical boost to the Polish economy, facilitating workforce growth and supporting sectors facing labor shortages. Socially, however, challenges remain, particularly in the realm of public perception. Russian disinformation campaigns have actively sought to exploit these dynamics, amplifying anti-refugee sentiment by drawing on historical grievances and attempting to sow discord within Polish society. This underscores the dual impact of the refugee influx, highlighting both the economic benefits and the vulnerabilities to external influence on public opinion.

“It is being exploited by the Russians so as to create reality and make Ukrainians look bad in the eyes of the Polish public opinion, to shape Polish attitude towards Ukrainians and Ukraine at the same time”

The Russian **military presence in the Baltic Sea region**, particularly in the heavily militarized and nuclear-capable exclave of Kaliningrad bordering Poland, remains a critical concern for Polish security. As a strategically positioned Russian stronghold, Kaliningrad serves as a constant, if hypothetical, flashpoint that exacerbates Polish security anxieties.

In response, Poland has adopted a comprehensive approach to counter Russian influence in the Baltic region, with a central focus on deepening regional cooperation with neighbouring states. Strengthening ties with Eastern European countries is regarded as essential for building a collective security buffer, reinforcing Poland's defense posture, and enhancing resilience against potential Russian aggression in the region.

“If people in Poland are afraid of any aggression from Russia, they think about Belarus and about the Kaliningrad region”.

The Polish-Belarus border constitutes a critical security concern for Poland, particularly in light of ongoing hybrid threats orchestrated by both Russia and Belarus. This border has emerged as a focal point for hybrid tactics designed to destabilize Poland, including the manipulation of refugee flows. The refugee crisis—stemming from conflict zones in the Middle East and Ukraine—is strategically exploited to exacerbate internal social tensions and propagate anti-migrant narratives, thereby adding a complex layer of insecurity for Poland.

In response to the threats emanating from the Polish-Belarus border, Poland has implemented a range of measures aimed at enhancing border security. These efforts, which enjoy broad political support across party lines, underscore a national consensus on the importance of safeguarding Poland's borders. However, critics argue that the implementation of these security measures is both time-consuming and costly, raising questions about their efficacy and whether they serve a more symbolic purpose rather than delivering substantial security outcomes.

“Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared that there will be like the Maginot line built along the Polish-Russian and Polish-Belarusian border with some anti-tank obstacles, equipment, and weapons and so on. But it's a lot of money, it takes a lot of time to do it. So, it's more like a political declaration to show the citizens, we are protecting them”.

Ukrainian experience for Poland

- Ukraine's early recognition of Russian disinformation tactics has been pivotal in developing a comprehensive response to hybrid warfare. The ability to identify and counter disinformation campaigns is essential for maintaining societal cohesion and political stability. Poland should invest in media literacy programs and public awareness campaigns that educate citizens about the nature of disinformation and its potential impact. Establishing dedicated task forces or

units to monitor, analyse, and counter disinformation in real-time can also help to mitigate the effects of hostile narratives.

- Ukrainian society has demonstrated remarkable resilience against psychological warfare and propaganda. This societal fortitude has proven vital in maintaining national unity during conflict. Poland should focus on fostering national solidarity through community engagement initiatives and public dialogue about security threats. Encouraging citizen participation in defense preparedness and civic resilience training can empower communities and strengthen the societal fabric against disinformation and external pressures.
- Ukraine's experience in safeguarding critical infrastructure from sabotage and cyberattacks has highlighted the vulnerabilities that such systems face in times of conflict. Poland should prioritize the enhancement of its cybersecurity protocols and physical protection measures for energy systems and other essential services. Regular risk assessments, combined with the development of robust contingency plans, will enable Poland to better withstand potential disruptions.
- Ukrainian military has successfully integrated modern technologies, such as drones and electronic warfare systems, alongside traditional warfare tactics. This balance has proven essential in effectively countering a multifaceted military threat. Poland should invest in the modernization of its military capabilities, emphasizing the acquisition of advanced technologies while also ensuring readiness for conventional warfare. Continuous training and exercises that incorporate both modern and traditional military tactics will enhance operational effectiveness.

Case of Romania

Key challenges for Romania:

1. The need for rapid modernization of the armed forces and strengthening of the existing infrastructure of NATO;
2. AUR party and pro-Russian media and their political influences;
3. Energy sustainability.

The interviews offered a detailed assessment of Romania's NATO infrastructure in light of developments following the Madrid and Vilnius NATO summits. While substantial progress has been achieved since 2022, several critical gaps persist in **Romania's capabilities and infrastructure**. One prominent issue highlighted is a command-and-control framework, which, despite recent enhancements, requires further development to support an effective and responsive security posture. Moreover, the infrastructure supporting rapid deployment and interoperability with NATO forces remains an area where additional investment and coordination are necessary to strengthen Romania's role within the alliance's Eastern Flank.

“There are several layers of debate. One is about the command centre in Germany dedicated to the infrastructure, because with some exercises we've realized the shortcomings of the infrastructure that will help us in moving capabilities from Central Europe, from Western Europe, and from the ports around Europe to the Eastern flank”.

Considerable attention has also been directed toward the capacity of the military-industrial sector to meet NATO's operational requirements. Integrating European military industry initiatives was emphasized as a vital measure to strengthen both Romania's and NATO's defense capabilities, enhancing overall interoperability and reducing dependency on non-European suppliers. This approach underscores the importance of collaborative development within the European defense sector to support sustainable, long-term operational readiness for NATO forces in the region.

“You need to build capabilities to arm those formations. On the other hand, you need to have the ammunition to face such a war. So, everything came, and we had that, an agreement related to the military industry in Europe. In some places, things begin to work”.

Romania's NATO infrastructure and deterrence mechanisms have notably advanced following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, experts have indicated that pre-2022 deterrence measures were generally insufficient to address emerging security threats, and despite recent enhancements, current capabilities are still considered inadequate. This assessment stresses the need for sustained investment and strategic refinement to ensure Romania's deterrence posture aligns effectively with NATO's broader security objectives on the Eastern Flank. Romania's military modernization efforts have advanced considerably, particularly in response to the escalating threat from Russia. Romania's defense spending and equipment acquisition initiatives position it favourably in comparison to other regional actors,

reflecting a substantial commitment to enhancing national security. Nonetheless, critical capability gaps persist, and while Romania has made significant progress relative to previous years, there remains scope for further advancement. These modernization efforts, however, continue to face challenges, including bureaucratic constraints and entrenched institutional mindsets that slow the pace of reform and adaptation.

“In comparison to other countries in the region, Romania is doing really well. [...] Poland is leading all the way, but after Poland, there's a very big gap in the region and then comes Romania. So, Romania does do a lot better than the majority of countries and it wouldn't be fair for me not to acknowledge that”.

While overt pro-Russian narratives are not widespread in Romania, a notable segment of the population holds **“less pro-Western” views**. Romania's historical distrust of Russia remains deeply embedded, with over 60% of Romanians expressing negative perceptions of the country. However, despite limited pro-Russian sentiment overall, even the most extreme narratives find a receptive audience among certain groups. This suggests that, while Romania's alignment remains predominantly pro-Western, vulnerabilities that could be exploited by targeted efforts exist.

“In Romania we don't have pro-Russian. [...] [Lack of love for Russia] is deeply rooted in the feelings of the population. And that helps a lot in informational warfare. [It] doesn't mean that informational war doesn't have its reach. Even the worst of the lie has a public”.

The influence of pro-Russian narratives, particularly through the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), has yet to meaningfully impact Romanian policymaking. These narratives are largely perceived as fringe and lack credibility within the mainstream political landscape. Although AUR and other parties, such as SOS, have experienced some growth in public support, their influence remains insufficient to alter Romania's core policy commitments to NATO and the European Union.

However, experts agree that Romania's current approach to countering pro-Russian narratives has been inadequate. Criticism has emerged regarding the government's relatively “quiet” strategy, which has allowed such narratives to persist unchecked. This approach has limited Romania's effectiveness in debunking these narratives and mitigating their spread among susceptible audiences.

“They will poison political debates in the Romanian activity of the parliament. But the government will be formed by the same main parties and I'm pretty sure that the new president, the new government, the new prime minister, the new majority will be the same”.

Romania occupies a relatively favourable position in terms of **energy security** compared to other states in the region. Experts highlight that Romania is “virtually energy independent”, having largely avoided the dependence on Russian energy imports that characterizes many of its neighbours. Nevertheless, the expansion of Romania's offshore energy sector, particularly in the Black Sea, presents strategic

challenges. While recent discoveries, such as the gas fields in Neptune Deep, signal strong potential for domestic gas production, experts point to Russian aggression in the Black Sea as a significant threat to the security and continuity of these operations. This geopolitical risk complicates Romania's efforts to fully exploit its offshore energy resources, posing a threat to the stability of future gas supplies.

Although Romania's domestic production meets approximately 85% of its energy consumption, reducing its immediate vulnerability, this self-sufficiency has led to a certain degree of complacency regarding the diversification of energy partnerships. Romania's limited efforts to diversify energy sources constrain its capacity to contribute more fully to regional energy security, particularly in assisting neighboring countries, such as Hungary and Austria, in reducing their reliance on Russian energy supplies.

"In this instance, they've been managing well with the help of the EU and the United States. And the United States has played a big role here throughout, including through the Alexandropolis LNG, going to Bulgaria, and then being able to be transported further north".

Romania's international partnerships, particularly with the European Union and the United States, have been instrumental in strengthening its energy security framework. These alliances have supported Romania's broader ambitions for energy independence and bolstered its position as a potential regional energy leader. However, delays in advancing nuclear energy development remain a key concern. While Romania has made strategic commitments toward diversifying its energy sources, the protracted pace of nuclear expansion may limit its ability to fully achieve energy independence in the foreseeable future. As one expert noted, *"Not everything is perfect"*, underscoring that while progress has been made, critical gaps persist. These delays could ultimately constrain Romania's capacity to meet long-term energy goals and reduce its reliance on more vulnerable energy sources.

There are other significant threats that have not been widely discussed. One of the major concerns is **Romania's proximity to Moldova** and issues relevant to its political, social, and security situation.

"One of the major concerns that Romania again, has not been addressing properly has been through Moldova. [...] If the situation should get, God forbid, really bad in the south of Ukraine, Romania will have a problem that I don't think it has the means to manage".

"Romania has given a lot of citizenship to Moldova, and that means Romania has now a lot of citizens that speak Russian – it's a vulnerability if you're Romanian – that have been heavily exposed to Russian propaganda their entire life. And many of them have worked in Russia with labor arrangements. And these people have now EU and NATO, and Romanian citizenship".

Besides a primary focus on the other issues discussed during the interview, Romania and the EU remain vulnerable to other hybrid tactics employed by Russia.

Ukrainian experience for Romania

- Ukraine's emphasis on bilateral cooperation around shared security concerns, particularly regarding Moldova and the Danube Delta, underscores the value of coordinated responses to Russian influence in the region. Romania could benefit from Ukrainian insights on countering Russian influence in Moldova, including intelligence-sharing and tactical strategies to respond to destabilizing forces in Gagauzia and Transnistria. Enhanced communication channels between Ukraine and Romania could create a platform for real-time information sharing on Russian tactics, further protecting both countries from destabilization efforts.
- Ukraine's hard-earned expertise in identifying and countering Russian influence operations and hybrid threats, such as disinformation and cyberattacks, could provide Romania with a more nuanced understanding of Russian methods. Romania might consider deeper collaboration with Ukraine on recognizing and pre-empting Russian hybrid tactics. Developing joint training programs and workshops focused on Russia's information and influence operations, with an emphasis on societal resilience, would allow Romania to better prepare its population and institutions to resist Russian narratives.
- Ukraine's adaptive strategies in hard security, including the use of advanced technologies and the private sector's role in defense, present Romania with key areas to modernize its own defense capabilities. Ukraine's expertise in electronic warfare, subversive tactics, and continuous adaptation to battlefield realities offers practical insights for Romania to enhance its land and air defense, as well as to strengthen joint operational capabilities within NATO. By studying Ukrainian battlefield experience, Romania could also accelerate the integration of advanced technologies and tactics to counter Russian manoeuvres in the Black Sea region.
- Given Ukraine's naval experiences in the Black Sea, Romania stands to gain from Ukraine's insights into maritime hybrid warfare, but also regarding naval drones and coastal defense strategies. Ukraine's resilience against Russian navy forces provides Romania with lessons on reshaping its own maritime strategy, both in terms of acquisitions and tactical doctrine. Establishing formalized knowledge exchanges focusing on Ukraine's drone-based and electronic warfare capabilities in maritime domain would help Romania redefine its naval capabilities to counter potential threats in the Black Sea.
- Ukraine's rapid adaptation of defense technologies, incl. through partnerships with private tech companies, has allowed it to modernize its

response to Russian aggression. Romania could benefit from adopting similar innovations in its defense industry, leveraging private sector collaboration and integrating new technologies such as drones, cybersecurity, and electronic warfare tools. As part of its modernization efforts, Romania might also explore partnerships with Ukrainian miltech providers and NATO's Centres of Excellence to incorporate advanced battlefield solutions.

- Looking to the future, a Ukrainian-led Centre of Excellence for maritime drones in Odesa could become an essential asset for NATO's regional knowledge-sharing. Romania should consider establishing close ties with this centre to gain access to cutting-edge knowledge in maritime drone warfare, which would reinforce its coastal defense and align its capabilities with NATO's maritime strategies in the Black Sea.

Case of Slovakia

Key challenges for Slovakia:

1. Economic and energy dependence on Russia
2. Pro-Russian politicians and parties as an element of social polarization and instability
3. The presence of Russian media in the information sphere of Slovakia

While Slovakia has a history of **economic ties with Russia**, the trade imbalance with the country does not significantly impact Slovakia's economic stability or political decision-making. As one expert remarked, "*Luckily, not that much*", indicating that, although Russia was once a crucial trading partner, Slovakia has successfully diminished its dependency over time, thereby reducing Russia's leverage over its policy direction.

However, Slovakia's energy security has historically been a domain where Russian influence has been pronounced. The country has relied heavily on Russian energy supplies, particularly in the form of gas, oil, and nuclear fuel. This dependency became a focal point of Russian propaganda, particularly during the early stages of the ongoing aggression against Ukraine. Such narratives surrounding energy dependence were employed strategically to instil fears of economic collapse, underscoring the intersection of energy security and national sovereignty in the context of geopolitical tensions.

"If you are following Russian propaganda in Slovakia, they spoke a lot, especially in 2022, how we will fail because of the Russian oil and gas, and nuclear fuel. But actually, nothing happened and prices are even lower".

Concerns regarding natural gas supplies were initially prominent, particularly given Slovakia's historical reliance on Russian imports. However, this dependency has been addressed progressively, resulting in minimal adverse effects on the Slovak economy. At one point, Slovakia sourced 100% of its natural gas from Russia, but this figure has dramatically decreased to just 8% in the current winter, according to the interviewed experts.

Significant advancements have also been made in securing alternative energy sources. Slovakia is now able to import oil through various routes, including tankers to Slovenia and Croatia, facilitating access to the oil pipeline leading to Bratislava. These arrangements are set to be fully operational by January of the following year, when Slovakia will cease purchasing Russian oil altogether.

This transition is anticipated to stabilize Slovakia's energy requirements without jeopardizing national security; however, the Slovak oil refining company Slovnaft may encounter economic challenges due to the loss of access to cheaper Russian oil.

The ambiguous stance of Slovakia's **political leadership**, particularly its President and Prime Minister, on Russia's aggression against Ukraine illustrates a delicate balancing act between international commitments and domestic political

survival. This duplicity manifests in the manner Slovak leaders tailor their messages to different audiences, promoting narratives aligned with their international partners while simultaneously catering to domestic voter sentiments. For example, statements made at NATO summits often highlight Slovakia's military support for Ukraine, whereas back home, political figures may attempt to discredit previous administrations for similar actions.

This dichotomy between rhetoric and action presents a significant challenge for Slovakia, as it reflects a broader issue of insufficient long-term strategic planning within the political sphere. The leadership appears primarily focused on managing short-term domestic pressures, which can lead to a lack of coherent policies that genuinely align with international obligations.

The prevailing political ambiguity poses risks, particularly in light of the increasing polarization within Slovak society. The **rise of right-wing radicalism**, with radical nationalists comprising approximately 20% of the government, complicates the political landscape. This division is further exacerbated by a considerable portion of the population lacking a clear vision for the future, with decisions often driven by emotions rather than rational discourse. Consequently, external actors may exploit these vulnerabilities, as evidenced by the influence of Russian propaganda in shaping public opinion.

“The problem is that we have this radical nationalism, right-wing radicals. They are growing. They are now about 20% of the government. [...] On the other hand, there are 46-47%, who understand who the aggressor in this war is, who the victim is. And [...] we need to help the victim. This is a moral instinct that we have. [...] This is less than half of it. The problem with Slovak politics is that there are about 30% of people who have no vision, no rational understanding of what kind of Slovakia they want to live in. These people make decisions based on emotions, and they can change their minds in just a few days, if not from day to day. There is always a struggle for these 30% who have no opinion. Fico successfully mobilised this 30% to his position in the last election by using the war issue”.

Although certain political parties, such as the Slovak National Party (SNS), espouse anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments, their impact on foreign policy remains limited. Key decisions continue to rest with Robert Fico and his SMER party, which adopts a pragmatic approach despite engaging in campaign rhetoric designed to resonate with protest voters. This means that while Fico may vocalize opposition to the war to maintain voter support, his actual foreign policy actions tend to be more cautious.

“These matters remain in the hands of Fico. [...] He is a ‘political animal’. He had to mobilise the emotions of protest voters, so he had to be against the war, he had to show that he would do a different policy altogether, but he doesn't. He says so. This is necessary to keep these voters”.

Despite the SNS's nationalist platform, its influence appears to be waning, as public support for the party diminishes. While a small percentage of the population aligns with pro-Russian views, there exists a significant portion that advocates for a neutral geopolitical stance. This sentiment complicates Slovakia's alignment with Western institutions, as it fosters scepticism about the country's role within NATO and the EU.

The ongoing **availability of Russian media channels**, such as Pervyy Kanal and NTV MIR, has significantly influenced the Slovak media landscape, particularly in light of the Russian-Ukrainian war. While explicit pro-Russian outlets exist, their overall impact appears limited compared to the broader media ecosystem. More concerning is how access to Russian media facilitates the dissemination of propaganda that shapes Slovak public opinion, especially through various "alternative media" platforms. These platforms, while not overtly pro-Russian, often espouse anti-Western and nationalist narratives that resonate more profoundly with audiences.

The proliferation of quasi-media outlets has created a complex information environment. Although a small number of media sources explicitly support Russian narratives, the most widely consumed outlets promote anti-American and pro-nationalist positions, often with authoritarian undertones. This dynamic allows these alternative media channels to effectively utilize Russian content to amplify their messaging and spread propaganda.

“Social networks are playing an important role in this case. I could easily add hundreds of news pages, which are, let’s call them, alternative media, and people start to believe them without any obstacles. This is creating a critical situation in Slovakia, and as we can see during parliamentary elections or presidential elections in Slovakia, this is creating a lot of trouble for our democracy. [...] They were gradually working hard on propaganda and hoaxes bringing to Slovakia. And if they are doing that for ten years already very actively and some politicians and well-known people are helping them, then it’s much easier for part of the society to start to believe it”.

Efforts to combat these developments peaked during the tenure of the previous government but have largely diminished following the 2023 elections. The Heger and Oder administrations initiated strategic communication measures, establishing dedicated departments within various ministries to address disinformation across multiple sectors, including agriculture and national security. However, the current Fico government has dismantled these initiatives and made significant changes to national broadcasting policies, effectively deprioritizing the fight against disinformation.

As a result, civil society has taken the lead in responding to the rise of pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments, filling the void left by insufficient governmental action. Many experts have criticized the current administration for its lack of initiative in countering propaganda and addressing the pro-Russian narratives that permeate the Slovak media landscape. The ongoing success of online disinformation campaigns

underscores the need for a more coordinated and proactive approach to safeguarding the integrity of Slovak democracy.

Ukrainian experience for Slovakia

- Ukraine's success in addressing Russian disinformation offers a practical model for Slovakia, which faces similar risks. Engaging with Ukraine's insights on strategic communication, especially techniques for debunking Russian narratives, could benefit Slovakia's own media and public discourse. Ukraine has developed targeted responses to disinformation on multiple platforms, allowing for a nuanced approach in countering propaganda while maintaining public confidence in official narratives.
- Ukraine's strategies in working with its Russian-speaking populations in the east and south provide a valuable framework for Slovakia, which also has segments of its society susceptible to Russian influence. Ukraine's focus on inclusive messaging and fostering local resilience within communities facing heightened vulnerability to Russian narratives can offer Slovakia a way to preemptively reduce susceptibility within its own society.
- Ukraine's innovations in IT and communication tactics for countering Russian influence highlight the importance of adaptive technology in hybrid warfare. Slovakia could benefit from adopting these technologies, including information-tracking systems and data analytics tools, to detect and respond more effectively to disinformation campaigns. Sharing specific technologies or methodologies Ukraine has successfully deployed would support Slovakia's objectives in real-time threat detection and response.
- A sustained dialogue between Slovakia and Ukraine on security and hybrid warfare challenges could facilitate a robust exchange of knowledge on current disinformation strategies and tactics. Increased cooperation on intelligence-sharing mechanisms, especially regarding evolving Russian hybrid warfare tactics, could help Slovakia strengthen its resilience and response strategies by anticipating and countering threats before they take root.

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