HYBRID ACTIONS AGAINST EU MEMBER STATES BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

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In this tense geopolitical context, the Russian Federation is acting in a hybrid manner against EU member states and European institutions with the aim of destabilising the security situation on the European continent. In addition to its kinetic military actions in Ukraine, the Russian Federation is using a highly sophisticated hybrid arsenal that includes disinformation campaigns, the instrumentalization of migration as a weapon against the EU, support for extremist political parties in EU member states, the fuelling of frozen conflicts in areas of strategic interest, and large-scale cyber-attacks against European institutions.

Through these hybrid means, the Russian Federation is maintaining a tense climate at European level, with the authorities in Moscow willing to prolong the military conflict in Ukraine indefinitely, their strategic objective being to gain control not only over the entire Ukrainian territory, but also to take possible action against states they consider to be within their sphere of influence. In this context, proactive measures must be taken at EU level to strengthen mechanisms to counter hybrid threats from the Russian Federation.

Keywords: hybrid; migrants; aggression; cybernetic; informational;

INTRODUCTION

Recent military and diplomatic actions reveal that the Russian Federation has no intention to end the war it started illegally against Ukraine. It is postponing peace negotiations indefinitely by imposing unacceptable conditions and continuing to carry out sustained military attacks, including against Ukraine's civilian population. The Russian armed forces' primary objective is to conquer Ukraine and subsequently gain control of states considered to be within Russia's sphere of influence: the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia), the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. If the Russian Federation conquers a significant part of Ukraine, achieves military success in Odessa and gains access to the Danube Delta, it will have a common border with both the Republic of Moldova and Romania. This threatens the security of these states. The Russian Federation's interest in occupying the Danube Delta has also been voiced by presidential adviser Cristian Diaconescu, who has warned that the Russians have expressed their interest in the area directly and that the fall of Ukraine would pose a threat to the Republic of Moldova and Romania. (Coman, 2025).

Moreover, in support of this hypothesis, Colonel Pavlo Palissa, deputy head of the Ukrainian Presidential Administration, presented the recent conclusions of the Ukrainian military services to a Ukrainian delegation visiting the USA. According to these conclusions, the Russian Federation intends to occupy the entire Donetsk and Luhansk regions by September 2025. However, according to the Ukrainian official, the Russian Federation's plans do not stop there: *"They even have plans for 2026. Next year, they plan to occupy the entire area of Ukraine on the left bank of the Dnieper River".* (Euronews, 2025). He also stated that Russia intends to militarily occupy the southern regions of Odessa and Mykolaiv in order to *"cut off Ukraine's access to the Black Sea".* (Ib.)

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The Russian Federation's stated strategy is to act militarily and, above all, through hybrid means to achieve its strategic objective of regaining the sphere of influence it had during the Soviet era and establishing territorial control in the vicinity of the eastern flank of the EU and NATO. Another of the Russian Federation's strategic objectives is to gain control of the Black Sea and establish new trade rules that favour the authoritarian regime in Moscow.

In fact, General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, introduced the concept of *"hybrid warfare"* at an international level for the first time in 2013 with his *"Gerasimov Doctrine"*, which involves conducting asymmetric actions using military and non-military methods to destabilise the adversary. In March 2019, General Gerasimov changed the tone of his public discourse radically, using Cold War-era terminology. According to this rhetoric, the USA and its allies are perceived as *"aggressors"* who are ready to attack at any moment using *"colour revolutions"* or military force (Ivan, 2019).

In 2024, the Russian Federation engaged in highly aggressive hybrid actions against EU member states that supported the Ukrainian government's position. The aim was to undermine EU cohesion and influence the populations of member states to oppose the democratic governments' measures to support Ukraine.

As the Russian Federation is set to face economic sanctions from the European Union for its ongoing military conflict with Ukraine, it is anticipated that its hybrid actions will escalate in the coming period. These actions will involve a diversification of asymmetric methods, including disinformation campaigns, the instrumentalization of migrants, cyberattacks, and interference in electoral processes within EU member states. Additionally, the Russian Federation will provide ideological, financial, and logistical support to far-right and far-left parties within these states.

Although EU-level mechanisms have been established to counter hybrid threats from the Russian Federation, further measures will be required to strengthen these mechanisms and identify hybrid campaigns carried out directly or with the financial and logistical support of Moscow authorities at an early stage. For these measures to be successful, a united front against these asymmetric threats must be formed at the EU level, involving the Euro-Atlantic states. The United States of America is the main partner capable of providing effective support to counter these persistent threats.

This paper aims to analyse the qualitative extent of hybrid threats to EU member states, including the conduct of information operations to influence strategic decisions at the EU level, the instrumentalization of migrants by the Russian Federation and its allies, support for extremist political parties and candidates in EU member states, and cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure in EU member states and European institutions. This analysis is based exclusively on data and information available in open sources (OSINT).

CONDUCTING INFORMATION OPERATIONS TO INFLUENCE STRATEGIC DECISIONS AT THE EU LEVEL

The information operations carried out by the Russian Federation follow a model involving the fabrication and validation of fake news through multimedia content and extensive false details. Similar methods are used to popularise and spread content, such as the same initial source, accounts involved in popularising the fake message and target audience, as well as the erroneous linking of events with Ukrainian vectors, such as refugees or the resistance movement.

These information operations, carried out by professionals in the fields of collective psychology and communication, lend credibility to subsequent news reports about real or fake sabotage incidents. They aim to generate panic and distrust in the authorities and manipulate the collective mindset, particularly among those with low media literacy, to place responsibility on the Ukrainian vector from the outset.

The Moscow authorities generally use photo and video material whose authenticity is difficult to prove. It includes recordings of alleged incidents without visible identifying features, where the original source or location of the footage cannot be identified. These are accompanied by exaggerations about their scale, as well as the use of photos taken from the press and manipulated to influence public opinion. Another modus operandi involves cross-posting on multiple social networks (e.g. X, Telegram, Facebook and Instagram) using

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ROMANIAN MILITARY THINKING

ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

approximately the same accounts. In this context, Russian propaganda vectors targeting the Russian public have been involved, including political scientists, accounts associated with the Russian Orthodox Church and pro-Russian accounts dedicated to covering the military conflict in Ukraine. These accounts have a high visibility among European audiences (e.g. English, French, German and Spanish speakers), as well as Arab and Chinese audiences.

At the same time, the Russian Federation relies on opinion leaders, particularly in the media of EU member states, who either have a material interest in or share the same ideological values as the Kremlin regime, and who promote its ideas. These individuals, recruited by the Moscow authorities, promote messages favourable to the Russian Federation or ideas that discredit national and European institutions. These messages, which are usually promoted through traditional media such as radio and television or social networks, are intended to destabilise societies in EU member states by promoting hatred and causing social unrest. These individuals seek to undermine public order and security by taking advantage of press freedom and freedom of speech. They claim that the messages they promote are in the interests of the populations of EU member states, and that these states' governments are seeking to impose censorship and autocratic practices. To counteract these extremist messages, EU member states must amend legislation to punish such media abuses and put an end to the dissemination of false or hateful news and incitement to public disorder.

Furthermore, Russia has long sought to exert influence over Romania's online environment through campaigns involving well-known news websites, controversial influencers and advertisements for alternative medicine. These methods are supplemented by well-coordinated disinformation campaigns that draw the public into conspiracy theories. At the same time, the Russian Federation uses publications such as Sputnik, Russia Today and RIA Novosti to disseminate Russian propaganda narratives. Between 2016 and 2024, AdNow – a digital advertising company with strong links to the Moscow authorities – directed at least €2 million to Romanian television station websites, conspiracy theorists,

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and far-right publications. AdNow also spread fake news about vaccines during the pandemic through hundreds of Facebook and Instagram pages. AdNow was established at the same London address as a Russian GRU hacker firm and a company owned by a relative of Vladimir Putin. Other companies with proven links to the Moscow authorities are also based at this address, including Bunelu Ltd. (Ilie, 2024).

The Russian Federation's influence campaign in Ukraine was initiated via channels primarily on the Telegram social media platform. These channels were managed by an anonymous administrator who requested the creation of content promoting ethnic group cohesion based on specific guidelines. At the same time, the coordinators sent a set of minimum conditions that content creators had to comply with, including the number of views required, the time at which the content had to be posted, the sound and emoticons to be used, and the narrative text. The coordinators of these disinformation campaigns successfully recruited well-known online influencers to create and disseminate content according to the established guidelines, unaware of the true beneficiary of the campaign. In Ukraine, each piece of content was paid for at a rate of 17 USD, whereas in Romania, each influencer received 390 lei (approximately 78 EUR) for every 20,000 followers. Additionally, content creators involved in the disinformation campaign in Ukraine were encouraged to distribute content via other individuals, akin to the promotional campaign in Romania (SIE, 2024).

Disinformation campaigns on illegal migration aim to influence public opinion in EU member states regarding the effectiveness with which EU institutions and member states manage this phenomenon, and to promote the idea that supporting migrants will lead to an economic, social and political deterioration in these countries. The Russian Federation's coordinated disinformation actions are primarily carried out by co-opting opinion leaders in EU member states and using them as mouthpieces for the Kremlin's strategic interests. One of the Russian Federation's main objectives is to discredit the European institutions responsible for managing migration by promoting the idea that these institutions spend large amounts of money helping migrants instead of supporting disadvantaged

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populations in EU member states. Through these well-coordinated disinformation campaigns, the idea is promoted that migrants and refugees are favoured by policies adopted in Brussels and that they are a priority for EU institutions at the expense of citizens in EU member states. These narratives are also adopted by certain far-right or far-left groups, who aim to gain electoral support from those dissatisfied with their living conditions.

Disinformation campaigns coordinated directly or through proxies by the Moscow authorities will continue and intensify as EU sanctions against Russia take effect in the economic and social spheres. In this context, it is necessary for EU institutions to take measures to strengthen strategic communication (STRATCOM) and proactive measures to counter these messages, in particular those disseminated online, by disabling websites and social media pages used to misinform the population of EU member states. In order to effectively combat the effects that these disinformation campaigns may have, it is also necessary for the national authorities responsible in all EU member states to carry out genuine awareness-raising campaigns on the risks posed by the narratives put forward by Moscow's agents of influence.

THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF MIGRANTS TOWARDS THE EUROPEAN UNION BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The Russian Federation, either directly or with the support of Belarusian authorities loyal to the Kremlin regime, poses a persistent risk to the EU's borders by attempting to destabilise EU member states that share a border with Russia and Belarus. The Baltic States, Poland and Finland are the most targeted by these hybrid actions. Following these hybrid actions by Belarus and the Russian Federation to exploit migrants, Poland has decided to invest over €2 billion to secure and strengthen its eastern border, which is also the border of the European Union, against potential enemies. These funds will be used to build fortifications on the eastern border, given the hybrid war on illegal migration launched by Belarus, an ally of the Russian Federation (Ion, 2024).

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This extremely dangerous phenomenon was recorded in 2023 on the border between Finland and the Russian Federation, when there was an exponential increase in the number of illegal asylum seekers from Russia to Finland. The hybrid actions against Finland came in response to its strong support for Ukraine in the military conflict with the Russian Federation, its decision to join NATO in April 2023 and its decision to deepen its defence partnership with the USA. Finland is vulnerable to the instrumentalization of migrants given that it shares a 1,340 km border with the Russian Federation. In this context, since August 2023, Finland has seen an influx of visa-free migrants from the Middle East and Africa, particularly Iraq, Somalia and Yemen. (Dumitru, 2023). According to statements by Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, the Russian Federation has changed its tactics, allowing people to enter the border without the necessary travel documents. In this context, the senior Finnish official noted that *"it is clear that these people are being helped and are also being escorted or transported to the border-by-border police"* (Cristescu, 2023).

Map 1: Instrumentalization of migrants by the Russian Federation at the border with Finland (www.infomigrants.net)

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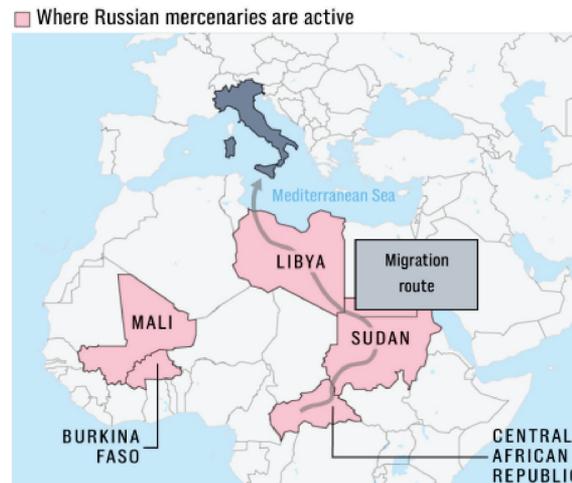
ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

At the same time, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia faced an unprecedented influx of illegal migrants in 2021. The aim of these actions was to test the EU's defence capabilities and destabilise the bloc. The hybrid attacks carried out by the Russian Federation against these three EU and NATO member states are motivated by the fact that they are among Ukraine's most important supporters, following the Russian invasion (Păcurar, 2024).

Against this backdrop, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni observed that *"Russia poses a significant threat to the security of the European Union, with the capacity to exploit illegal immigration and other issues to undermine the bloc".* The senior Italian official also stated that the threat to EU security from Russia or other sources will not end with the conflict in Ukraine and that the EU must prepare accordingly. At the same time, the Italian Prime Minister called on the EU to strengthen border security and prevent the Russian Federation or criminal organisations from manipulating the flow of illegal migrants (Bancăs, 2024).

The Russian Federation has been managing illegal migration networks from Africa to Europe in order to destabilise the European Union politically and socially. To this end, the Moscow authorities conspired to enlist the services of Jan Marsalek, an Austrian citizen and former director of the German electronic payments company Wirecard, who turned out to be a Russian military intelligence (GRU) agent. Marsalek led private paramilitary groups *("mercenary militias")* whose main objective was to facilitate transit routes for migrants from Africa to European Union member states via Libya. After his illegal activities were exposed, Marsalek disappeared and is now wanted by Interpol. It is believed that he is receiving support from the Moscow authorities to avoid arrest by European authorities.

According to Western intelligence services, Austrian citizen Jan Marsalek was responsible for forming an armed force of 15,000 mercenaries whose objective was *"to harmonise the flow of migrants"*, a key objective of Vladimir Putin. The issue of migration has been a major factor in European elections (Spiegel International, 2024). The use of mercenaries in Africa is common practice; the Wagner paramilitary group is the best-known force affiliated with the Moscow

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Map 2: Migration routes used by pro-Russian groups to exploit illegal migrants from Africa in Europe (https://ukrainetoday.org)

authorities and has been involved in the military conflict in Ukraine on Russia's behalf. Further analysis revealed that the narrative of illegal immigration promoted by the Russian authorities through intermediaries had a decisive influence on certain EU member state elections. Consequently, since 2020, extremist ideological groups in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom have exploited the issue of illegal migration to gain popularity and secure more seats in the European Parliament. The aim of obtaining as many seats as possible is to influence EU decisions and block certain initiatives against the Russian Federation with narratives promoted by the Moscow authorities. In fact, careful analysis of the speeches of MEPs from extremist parties in the European Parliament reveals ideas that are fervently supported by Moscow's allies. Hate messages against migrants are widely used in ideas promoted by the Russian Federation.

At the same time, the violent actions of mercenaries belonging to the Wagner group against the populations of the African states

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they control have led to the physical displacement of migrants towards the EU's borders, facilitating their arrival in Europe. This support has included logistical and financial assistance. Data analysis shows that Austrian citizen Jan Marsalek was involved in reorganising the Wagner paramilitary group following the death of its leader, Evgheni Prigojin, in 2023. Analysis of this data reveals that Marsalek holds an important position within these forces, which are active in African states. However, they are commanded from Moscow, where there is active encouragement of these forces' actions against the strategic interests of the European Union (Ib.).

To carry out this plan to exploit African migrants for the benefit of EU member states, Marsalek held repeated meetings with Killian Kleinschmidt, a former UN employee, and an Austrian Ministry of Defence official in 2017-18. It demonstrates the Moscow authorities' interest in recruiting personnel in key positions in international organisations and EU member states for their hybrid operations. In this context, an Austrian Ministry of Defence official signed a declaration of intent promising €20,000 for a plan to *"stabilise and manage migration in Libya"*, while Killian Kleinschmidt was promised €100,000 for a *"partnership project"* with the Libyan government. However, these payments were not made. The Austrian official subsequently denied having had a close relationship with Jan Marsalek. He stated that the meetings had been authorised by his superiors and were intended to explore the project. He also claimed to have had no knowledge of Jan Marsalek's connection with the Russian Federation. The project payments were to be made by Jan Marsalek via the Russian-Libyan Cultural Institute, a non-governmental organisation based in Moscow (Dixon, 2025). This example demonstrates that actions planned by the Russian Federation are carried out through individuals loyal to the Kiev regime and organisations that are directly or indirectly funded by Moscow. The main method used by these individuals is to bribe EU officials, who, even if unaware of their connection to the Russian Federation, act to achieve Russian strategic objectives.

The Moscow authorities' persistent exploitation of illegal migration to destabilise the political and social situation in EU member states is likely to continue in the coming period against the backdrop of tougher

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economic sanctions imposed by the EU on the Russian Federation. The border areas with Russia or its ally Belarus are the most likely locations for this exploitation, but we cannot ignore other scenarios involving the facilitation of illegal migration from Africa or other regions through proxies who are financially and logistically supported by the Moscow authorities.

These asymmetric and hybrid threats must be countered effectively at the EU level by using predictive analytical methods to anticipate risks so that effective measures can be taken to counter the instrumentalization of migrants.

IDEOLOGICAL, FINANCIAL AND LOGISTICAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES OF THE FAR RIGHT AND FAR LEFT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Russian Federation provides ideological, financial and logistical support for radical measures to combat illegal migration, including isolationist measures that contradict the policies of free movement of goods and persons within the Community. These actions will be reinforced by supporting extremist and sovereignist ideological groups in electoral processes, which constitutes direct interference in the sovereignty of these states. The Russian Federation will also pay particular attention to certain states that have expressed their desire to join the European Union, such as the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, which are considered by the Moscow authorities to be part of Russia's sphere of influence.

According to a report by the US Intelligence Community, between 2014 and 2022, the Russian Federation secretly directed over $300 million to political parties with the aim of influencing the politics of states in Europe, Africa and other areas of interest to the Kremlin authorities (Nova News, 2022). The Moscow authorities intended to spend hundreds of millions of dollars more as part of its secret campaign to undermine democratic systems and promote political forces considered aligned with the Kremlin's interests. The subversive actions of the Russian Federation constitute serious interference in the democratic interests of the states attacked, in the sense

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ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

that the political parties *"sponsored"* by Moscow promoted the autocratic objectives dictated by the Kremlin. In most cases, the funding was not provided directly through accounts, but through intermediaries close to the Moscow authorities. Among the states where Russian influence has manifested itself in support for ideological groups and candidates promoting pro-Russian policies are Albania, Montenegro, Madagascar and, possibly, Ecuador. There were also suspicions that Russia supported Donald Trump in the 2016 elections. At the same time, in an Asian country, the Russian ambassador provided millions of dollars to a presidential candidate (Iacob, 2022).

Another method used by forces loyal to the Kremlin regime is to use shell companies to conceal sums of money provided to loyal individuals supported by the Russian Federation, think tanks and other hybrid means to influence political events, sometimes to the benefit of far-right groups. A favourite theme used by the Moscow authorities is that of migrants and refugees, who are portrayed as untrustworthy individuals seeking to undermine political and economic stability in the countries where they live. For example, in Romania, the narrative was used that Ukrainian children who fled the military conflict triggered by the Russian Federation in Ukraine receive much higher allowances than Romanian children. Also in Romania, there were local image vectors who argued that it was necessary to refuse further economic and military support to Ukraine, promoting pacifist and non-combat ideas.

For example, officers of the National Investigation Inspectorate, under the coordination of the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Moldova, carried out 30 house searches and searches of currency exchange offices, seizing various amounts of foreign currency totalling 3,000,000 lei (Poliția Republicii Moldova, 2024). These actions were carried out following the uncovering of several illegal channels of financing from illegal sources of political parties affiliated with Moldovan citizen Ilan Shor, who was convicted in the Republic of Moldova and granted protection in the Russian Federation. Ilan Șor has created a powerful network of influence in the Republic of Moldova, acting on orders from Moscow to destabilise the country politically and prevent Moldova from moving towards European integration in any way (Ib.).

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During the investigation, it was established that, in 2024, Ilan Shor regularly organised various meetings in Moscow, Russian Federation, with representatives of political parties affiliated with him, which allegedly led to the creation of a political bloc called *"Victory"*, involving several individuals affiliated with political parties and the criminal group led by Ilan Shor. Similarly, alleged political forums/meetings were regularly organised with representatives of political parties affiliated with Ilan Shor in Moscow, who are in fact used as couriers. Those responsible within the organised criminal group identified individuals who were usually members of the primary territorial organisations of political parties in the country and offered them to travel to Moscow for USD 150-200, after which they centrally purchased plane tickets for them (Ib.).

In Moscow, they were accommodated in various hotels and then attended a meeting chaired by Ilan Shor, after which individuals unknown to the couriers distributed envelopes containing sums of money ranging from 2,000 to 12,000 dollars. Upon their return to the Republic of Moldova, part of the money was distributed to subordinate activists, and part was transferred to representatives of political formations affiliated with Ilan Shor. The cost of a courier's trip (airfare, accommodation, gifts) amounted to 1,000–1,500 euros (Ib.). The political bloc *"Victory"* promotes pro-Russian and anti-European Union narratives.

According to information obtained by the Moldovan authorities, political forces supported by Ilan Shor offered Moldovan voters the equivalent of 100 euros for each fraudulent vote. The funds were transferred through accounts opened at the Russian bank *Promsveazbank*. Between April and October 2024, approximately 140,000 Moldovan citizens opened accounts at this bank. The aim of this illegal action was to vote against the pro-European candidate Maia Sandu and against Moldova's accession to the European Union (Călugăreanu, 2024).

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operandi suggests that the Russian authorities will stop at nothing to gain influence over states that Moscow considers to be within its sphere of influence.

There are reasonable suspicions that the aim of this political bloc, financed and supported by the Moscow authorities, was to win the elections in the Republic of Moldova in order to prevent, by any means, this state from pursuing its European path. This modus operandi is typical of the autocratic policy promoted by the Russian Federation to support political parties that promote Moscow's policy and oppose the accession of states to the values of the European Union.

In this context, the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, Kristina Gherasimov, stated that *"Russia has spent approximately €100 million on disinformation campaigns and destabilisation operations in an attempt to disrupt the presidential elections in Moldova and the referendum on the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, which will take place on the same day – 20 October 2024".* The Moldovan official stated that the Russian Federation is trying by all means to prevent the Republic of Moldova from joining the European Union, in particular by spreading false news that EU accession will lead to the outbreak of a large-scale military conflict (Andrei, 2024).

Although these efforts in the Republic of Moldova have not been successful, anti-European and anti-Atlantic actions are still planned to consolidate the totalitarian efforts of the Russian Federation. These efforts will not be limited to the former Soviet states, but will also be directed at EU member states.

CYBER ATTACKS ON THE CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE EU MEMBER STATES

Cyber attacks carried out by state and non-state actors coordinated by the Russian Federation will intensify as EU sanctions take effect on the Russian economy. EU analyses highlight that cyber attacks and cybercrime are increasing and becoming more technically sophisticated. This upward trend will intensify in the future, given that the number of devices connected to the Internet worldwide is expected to almost double by 2030, from 15.9 billion in 2023

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to 32.1 billion in 2030 (Statista). Thus, during the 2024 elections in Romania, a state cyber actor attacked the IT&C infrastructure supporting the electoral process, hosted by the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) and the Special Telecommunications Service (STS) (Financial Intelligence, 2024). Some access credentials associated with *"bec.ro", "roaep.ro"* and *"registrulelectoral.ro"* were published on Russian cybercrime platforms, with similar data also identified on a private Telegram channel known for disseminating data exfiltrated from many countries, including the Russian Federation. The exfiltration was carried out either by targeting legitimate users to whom user credentials and passwords were distributed, or by exploiting the legitimate training server provided by the STS at https://operatorsectie.roaep.ro (Ib.).

Thus, a cyber incident targeted and affected the IT&C infrastructure of the AEP, as a result of which cyber attackers compromised a map server (gis.registrulelectoral.ro), connected both externally to the Internet and to the internal network of the AEP.

In this context, over 85,000 cyber attacks of the SQL Injection (SQLi) and Cross Site Scripting (XXS) type were identified, which targeted the exploitation of existing vulnerabilities in the IT support systems. SQL Injection (SQLi) and Cross Site Scripting (XXS) cyber attacks were identified, which targeted the exploitation of vulnerabilities in the IT systems supporting the electoral process in order to gain access to data in the IT systems, alter their integrity, change the content presented to the general public and render the infrastructure unavailable (Ib.).

These attacks continued in a sustained manner, including on election day and the night after the elections (25 November 2024). IT systems in more than 33 countries were used to launch the attacks, using advanced anonymisation methods to make attribution difficult (SRI, 2024).

Following these cyber attacks coordinated by the Russian Federation, as well as the favouring of a candidate through the manipulation of the TiK ToK social network algorithms, the Constitutional Court of Romania ordered the cancellation of the 2024 presidential election and the rescheduling of the elections for 2025. Although legitimate, this decision by the Constitutional

Court has damaged Romania's image and caused financial losses, which has implications for national security. The cyber attacks against state institutions were intended to discredit them and damage Romania's image as a democratic state capable of conducting legitimate elections.

The cyber attacks and methods used by the Russian Federation against Romania could be replicated against other EU member states, and it is therefore necessary for the lessons learned by Romania to be disseminated at the level of the European Union institutions so that they are not repeated in other electoral processes in other democratic European states.

Among the authorities targeted by cyber attacks are those responsible for managing the EU's borders. In this context, measures need to be taken to increase the resilience of cyber infrastructure at the level of member states and European institutions responsible for managing illegal migration.

In this context, in December 2020, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) presented a new EU Cybersecurity Strategy, aimed at strengthening Europe's resilience to cyber threats. At the same time, on 22 March 2021, the Council adopted conclusions on the Cybersecurity Strategy, emphasising that cybersecurity is essential for building a resilient, green and digital Europe. On 2 December 2024, the Council adopted the Regulation on cyber solidarity, which regulates the EU's capabilities to make Europe more resilient and responsive to cyber threats, including by strengthening cooperation mechanisms. The new EU Cybersecurity Agency has also been established at EU level, building on the structure of its predecessor, the European Union Agency for Network and Information Security, with a strengthened role and a permanent mandate, but retaining the same acronym (ENISA). This agency is responsible for helping member states, EU institutions and other stakeholders to manage cyber attacks.

FROZEN CONFLICTS IN THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

In order to maintain control in the Wider Black Sea Region, the Russian Federation is perpetuating certain frozen conflicts that allow it to act in areas of strategic interest by maintaining a tense situation in these regions and keeping them dependent on Moscow's influence.

In December 2020, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) presented a new EU Cybersecurity Strategy, aimed at strengthening Europe's resilience to cyber threats. At the same time, on 22 March 2021, the Council adopted conclusions on the Cybersecurity Strategy, emphasising that cybersecurity is essential for building a resilient, green and digital Europe.

The frozen conflicts in the Wider Black Sea Region are a permanent source of instability and insecurity. According to the agreed definition, frozen conflicts are *"those conflicts that have reached a fragile state of equilibrium, neither peace nor war, following the military victory of minority communities. However, their independence is not recognised internationally and remains a subject of violation of international law"* (Tocci, 2007, pp. 2-3).

The security situation in the Wider Black Sea Region is very complex due to the war launched by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, as well as the involvement of the Moscow authorities in maintaining frozen conflicts in the states of this region and the excessive militarisation of the Crimean Peninsula. Through these methods, some of which are hybrid in nature, Russia seeks to maintain a buffer zone in the Wider Black Sea Region, thus using the concept of *"frozen conflicts"*.

One of the frozen conflicts is that in Transnistria, a separatist region not recognised by the UN, which emerged at the end of the Moldovan-Transnistrian conflict in 1992. Some researchers believe that Transnistria *"could become the new Crimea for Russia if it recognises the independence of the separatist territory"* (Poghosoyan, 2017). In Transnistria, the Russian Federation has its own troops, including those assigned to guard the ammunition depot in Cobasna. These stocks date back to the Soviet era, have expired, and pose a danger in the event of an accident at the depot, with disastrous effects on the environment.

The Transnistrian area is a region of strategic interest to the Russian Federation, whose aim in maintaining influence in Transnistria is to retain a certain degree of control over the Republic of Moldova. Recently, Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean stated that *"Russia wants to deploy 10,000 soldiers in the separatist region of Transnistria, close to Romania, which is a NATO member state"* and aims to install a pro-Kremlin government in the Republic of Moldova in order to achieve its strategic objectives (Jucan, 2025).

Another area of interest for the Russian Federation is the South Caucasus, with Moscow keen to maintain control over Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as this region is strategically located *"on the main East-West and North-South transit routes"* (Poghosoyan).

ROMANIAN MILITARY THINKING

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ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

After the dissolution of the USSR, this region was claimed by Turkey, Russia and Iran, with the USA, EU and NATO also having interests in the South Caucasus region. In Georgia, independence was followed by numerous political crises and armed conflicts over control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, regions that were part of Georgia during the Soviet era. Following these conflicts, the conflicts between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia are currently frozen. After 2014, the Russian Federation consolidated its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, increasing its military presence in these regions and establishing strategic partnerships with both Abkhazia (November 2014) and South Ossetia (2015).

The conflict in the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh region between Armenia and Azerbaijan has the potential to escalate, as it is in the Russian Federation's interest to maintain control over the two states. Armenia is supported by the Russian Federation, while Azerbaijan is supported by Turkey, with the interests of the two states being antagonistic.

In conclusion, the Russian Federation will continue to maintain these frozen conflicts both to retain control over these areas of strategic interest to the Moscow authorities and to preserve certain *"bridgeheads"* in order to be able to take military action in certain situations that it may consider favourable from a geostrategic point of view.

CONCLUSIONS

The Russian Federation will continue to use hybrid actions to destabilise EU member states by any means possible, with the aim of gaining control over decisions taken at EU level. Thus, disinformation campaigns will continue, and the narratives promoted by the Moscow authorities will promote negative messages about decisions taken at the level of European institutions and those taken at the level of EU and NATO member states.

Another means by which the Russian Federation is trying to influence public opinion in EU member states is the instrumentalization of migration, particularly from the Middle East and Africa to the EU, by attempting to create a negative mood among the public in EU

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member states. Russia will also focus its efforts on providing logistical, financial and ideological support to extremist parties in EU member states in order to create tensions within EU institutions and undermine decision-making cohesion at EU level.

The Russian Federation is also fuelling frozen conflict zones in the Wider Black Sea Region to maintain a tense situation in these regions, which could degenerate into open conflict if it is in the interests of the authorities in Moscow. At the same time, as a hybrid means, the Russian Federation will continue to attack, through proxies, both essential institutions and critical infrastructure in EU member states, as well as the decision-making bodies of the European Union.

In this tense geopolitical context at European level, the EU institutions must strengthen existing mechanisms to counter the risks posed by hybrid threats from the Russian Federation and act more *"aggressively"*, in the sense that greater firmness is needed to effectively manage the difficult situations that the Moscow authorities may create.

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ROMANIAN
MILITARY
THINKING

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