



## EU Starts New Partnership Mission and Continues Support for Moldova's Security

Aleksandra Koziół, Jakub Pieńkowski

The EU Partnership Mission in Moldova was launched in May 2023. Its aim is to protect the country from hybrid attacks by Russia conducted in parallel to its aggression against Ukraine. The mission provides strategic advice to Moldova's pro-European authorities—the government of Dorin Recean from President Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). This complements the efforts of the EU and Member States in supporting the capacities of the Moldovan civilian security structures and armed forces. Such broad engagement will increase Moldova's overall resilience to Russia's actions and contribute to stabilising the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

**EU Civilian Mission to Moldova.** Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine convinced previously sceptical Member States to agree on strengthening the security of the Union's eastern neighbourhood. Therefore in April 2023, less than three months after receiving a request from Moldovan authorities, the Council decided to launch the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM). Crucial to the speed of the procedure was [Russia's increased destabilisation activities](#), which Member States considered a direct threat to the Union's borders.

The main objective of the EUPM is to improve Moldova's resilience to hybrid threats, such as information manipulation and cyberattacks. The mission is also intended to help establish a crisis-management system. Its mandate is set initially for two years with a €13.4 million budget. Ultimately, the EU is deploying almost 40 people to Moldova, who will participate in, among others, the development of strategies and policies, significantly supporting the inefficient Moldovan administration. The appointment of Cosmin Dinescu—former Romanian ambassador to Lithuania and Latvia—as the Head of the EUPM confirms the EU's recognition of [Romania's special interest in Moldova policy](#).

**Other EU Civilian Instruments in Moldova.** The EU decided to comprehensively expand its previously limited assistance to Moldova's civilian security sector and initiated a High-Level Political and Security Dialogue as early as March 2022. At that

time, it also increased operational support for handling the influx of war refugees from Ukraine (according to UNHCR 842,000 people by June 2023). Frontex assisted the Moldovan Border Police with dozens of officers. In addition, the EU Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine (EUBAM), which has been operating since 2005, received a new mandate on June 2022. Its personnel were given operational powers to support Moldovan and Frontex forces at the busiest border crossings. The EU increased EUBAM's budget by €15 million for staff recruitment, equipment, and Border Police training, among others.

In May 2023 Moldova—as the first non-EU country—joined the Connecting Europe Facility. Under this instrument it can apply for funding to integrate its transport, digital, and energy infrastructure with the EU. This is expected to increase Moldova's resilience, including against cyberattacks. Development of the Trans-European Transport Network—despite its civilian nature—is also expected to allow for [faster movement of military personnel and equipment](#) in the event of a crisis.

**Moldova's Changing Threat Perception.** Moldova started to seek the EU's support as the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022 negated its previous security policy based on neutrality. This status was enshrined in the 1994 constitution, but Russia undermines it by treating Transnistria as own protectorate—in

addition to 500 peacekeeping troops, Russia also maintains a 1000-strong contingent there, which is an occupying force under international and Moldovan law. Despite this, successive Moldovan governments, including pro-Western ones, invoking neutrality led to degradation of the country's capacity for self-defence. This is because they believed that the situation did not pose a threat as it gave other states no reason for aggression.

The willingness of the Moldovan authorities to enlist Western military support evolved in tandem with the successes of Ukraine's defence. Due to a fear of Russian invasion, the Moldovans initially avoided accepting aid and responded evasively, for example, to the British offer of immediate supplies of equipment and armaments. When they agreed to equipment deliveries from the EU, they specified only non-lethal ones. This change was due to the collapse of Russia's military advance on Odesa, which isolated and deprived the potential of the Russian and 5,000-7,000 separatist forces in Transnistria. Moreover, Sandu asked Moldova's partners for an air defence system during the Davos Economic Forum in January 2023. It was prompted by Russia still trying to destabilise Moldova through [hybrid actions](#) and at the same time attacking Ukraine over its territory with missiles. These actions were ignored by the pro-Russian opposition—the Electoral Block of Communists and Socialists and the Șor Party (outlawed now)—which accused Sandu and PAS of violating constitutional neutrality and of militarism and an attempt to drag the country into a war with Russia.

**Support to the Moldovan Armed Forces.** The West has stepped up efforts to strengthen Moldova's small defence capability. Its armed forces number about 5,000 soldiers and 1,000 carabinieri, which in peacetime are subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). They have no combat helicopters, aircraft, or tanks and no modern anti-tank or anti-aircraft weapons. Only the 22<sup>nd</sup> Peacekeeping Battalion—equipped with 20-year-old HMMWVs and protective equipment for soldiers by the U.S. in 2014-2015—and the "Fulger" Special Police Brigade, subordinate to the MIA, display high combat value. Moldova's inability to defend itself was evidenced by the need for 200 troops from Romania, the UK, France and the U.S. to provide air cover for the [European Political Community Summit](#) in Bulboaca in June 2023.

Moldova is seeking EU assistance as it is unable to finance the modernisation of the armed forces on its own. Despite a 68% increase in the Ministry of Defence's budget in 2023, the €85 million it spends is only around 0.55% of GDP. Meanwhile, according to the government, modernisation would require €250 million per year for 10 years (excluding the purchase of an air defence system) because 90% of its military equipment is outdated or unfit for modernisation. Moldova received a total of €87 million from [the European Peace Facility \(EPF\)](#) between 2021 and 2023, which is used by the EU countries to buy

equipment and vehicles for the Moldovan Army, supporting medical security, demining, logistics, mobility, command and control, cyberdefence, monitoring, and tactical communications capabilities. Over the next three years, the EPF will also facilitate the purchase of a mobile radar at a cost of around €20 million, intended to initiate the construction of a modern air defence system. In addition, between 2022 and 2023, Moldova received, among other things, 19 used Piranha IIIH armoured personnel carriers without weapons from Germany, as well as weapons, ammunition, and equipment for the MIA forces from Poland.

**Conclusions.** The EUPM represents a qualitatively new EU mission providing operational support to improve crisis management and combat hybrid threats, on which the success of Moldova's ability to deter Russian destabilisation attempts will depend. In the short term, the mission can significantly strengthen the Moldovan administration's knowledge and instruments to combat disinformation. Effectively fighting against manipulation of information, to which the public remains susceptible, is crucial to maintaining support for European integration. In doing so, it will be important to secure the mission itself, as it is likely to be the target of Russian manipulation or cyberattacks, which, if successful, would lower the EU's credibility. Despite the reduction in the number of refugees at Moldova's borders, it will also be important to maintain the activities of the EUBAM and Frontex to accelerate the unification of Moldovan procedures with EU requirements.

The EU civilian missions and support from the EPF are a response to the breakdown of Moldova's previous security policy, which, under the pretext of neutrality, meant neglecting its own capabilities. The threat of Russian aggression demonstrated the country's structural inability to rebuild its potential. Nevertheless, the Moldovan authorities remain undecided on redefining the scope of the constitutional neutrality and it is uncertain whether they will ultimately decide to procure lethal weapons for the army. It is possible that if violations of Moldovan territory by Russian missiles end, Sandu and PAS will stop raising the issue of building an air defence system, content with the supply of equipment such as buses, trucks, ambulances, or computers to the army. The authorities may be prompted to do so by fear of opposition accusations targeted at financing armaments instead of social objectives.

It is in the interest of Poland, which is among the countries most actively supporting the democratisation and transformation in Moldova, to involve the EU as much as possible in strengthening Moldovan security and defence capabilities. Taking into account the priority of further support for Ukraine, Polish diplomacy may seek to extend EU and NATO financial and expert assistance to Moldova as well. Poland can also—citing its own example—encourage partners to make individual donations to the Moldovan army and MIA forces.