

## **THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

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***Abstract:*** In order to correctly perceive the causes and determinations of the Russian-Ukrainian war, we will make a brief presentation of the current geopolitical phenomenon. This will help us understand how the Russian Federation, as an actor in the system of international relations, has imposed its interests in its geographical area of interest. The place of an actor such as Russia in the power equation and especially its position in relations with other actors such as Ukraine, the USA, NATO, the EU, China, Iran, North Korea, etc. defines its geopolitical place and role. In the international security environment, there have been transformations in various political, economic and diplomatic fields, in political-military systems and in the very nature of wars that also require a change in the content of the object of geopolitical studies. However, the object of geopolitics' study is understood as that area of international relations established between actors (state and non-state) of the international environment characterized by the competition of power and dispute of interests. The Russian Federation is trying to establish itself as a regional or even global power towards its neighbors and towards the EU, the USA, China, etc.

***Keywords:*** war; geopolitical phenomenon; Russian Federation; Ukraine; international relations; international environment.

### **Introduction**

Geopolitics helps us decipher the trends of evolution and the state that the system of international relations will have in the future. In this regard, the main purpose of geopolitical theory is to highlight some of the ways used by the international actors to impose their interests in a geographical area, as the Russian Federation does.

Russia is trying to manifest itself as a regional and even global power towards its neighbors and especially with the EU, the USA, China, India, Iran, etc. Thus, the geopolitical situation of Russia can be defined by the power rivalry between it and the actors who dispute their interests in the area of interest of the Russian Federation. Therefore, for a good understanding of the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it is beneficial to study the contemporary geopolitical phenomenon, in order to find solutions that help us understand the events and transformations taking place in the international security environment.

### **1. Russia's Preparation for War**

In the Report of International Experts: “16 Myths and Prejudices about Russia”, from issue number 124 of the Policy Brief Magazine, published in August 2021, several renowned historians and political analysts assessed the Western prejudices regarding the Russian acts of aggression. This

analysis exposes Russian policy in Europe and around the world towards Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Poland, Romania and the Baltic States. The 16 myths/prejudices are debunked, and it is explained how the West should critically analyze its position in order to react more rationally and effectively against Russian intentions.

Vladimir Putin has a hidden agenda of aggressive military, economic, financial, etc. policies and actions against his neighbors and member states of NATO and the European Union. The geopolitical objectives of the Russian Federation have been and continue to be directed against NATO and the EU. The Report “16 Myths and Prejudices about Russia” shows that the policy of EU states towards the Russian Federation has failed to build a functional relationship with the Russian state because it was unrealistic. Misconceptions and visions about Russia have spread rapidly among Western leaders. All erroneous myths about Russia reflect a lack of knowledge of the geopolitical intentions of the Russian Federation. For example, the belief that what will come after Vladimir Putin will definitely be better than his governance demonstrates ignorance of the realities and history of Russia. Next, we briefly present the 16 erroneous myths:

1. Russia and the West are equally bad;
2. Russia and the West are pursuing the same thing;
3. Russia was promised that the North Atlantic Alliance would not expand;
4. Russia is not in conflict with the West;
5. A new pan-European security architecture is needed that includes the Russian Federation;
6. It is necessary to improve the relationship with the Russian Federation, although it does not make any concessions because it is very important;
7. The Russian Federation is entitled to have a defensive perimeter and privileged interests that include the territory of other states;
8. It is necessary to create a fault line between the Russian Federation and China to prevent a joint action against the interests of the EU and NATO;
9. The EU's relationship with the Russian Federation must be normalized in order to combat China's rise;
10. The Eurasian Economic Union is the equivalent of the European Union;
11. The peoples of Belarus, Ukraine and the Russian Federation form one nation;
12. Crimea has always been Russian;
13. All reforms aimed at liberalizing the Russian Federation's market since 1990 have been a failure;
14. Sanctions against Russia are the wrong approach;
15. It all comes down to Putin: The Russian Federation is a strong-handed autocracy;
16. Something better will come after Putin.

All these myths/preconceptions are debunked in the aforementioned Report so that EU and NATO political leaders can reassess their opinions/beliefs towards the Russian Federation and the wrong decisions that have resulted from those erroneous opinions. All 16 myths have been preserved in the political rhetoric of EU and NATO leaders and as a result of Moscow's disinformation. Some of them contain older aspirations of the Russian Federation such as the establishment of a pan-European security system centered on a Russian project from the 1950s, or the idea that the Russian Federation could legitimately claim a sphere/area of interest; or, the idea that Belarusians and Ukrainians together with Russians constitute a single Slavic people without their own identities and separate states.

All 16 erroneous myths have had a negative influence on the decisions of the EU and NATO leaders, which have been distorted in the sense of decisions that are desirable/convenient for the Russian Federation and undesirable for the West. The conclusion of the aforementioned Report explains quite clearly that the Russian Federation continues to disregard international principles of conduct and to commit acts of aggression in the future using the 16 myths as justification. American and allied leaders should have separated myths from the harsh reality as early as 2021 (a year before

the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war) and taken measures against Russia's intentions to attack Ukraine. It follows that Vladimir Putin and his clique have pursued and continue to pursue the old principles of Russian policy, and their aggressive behavior should never be considered a "historical anomaly" (Mincu 2021, 22).

Putin prepared the aggression in 2000, immediately after he was elected president of Russia. Despite clear signals that the Russian Federation was preparing "for the restoration of the Russian Empire in the form of USSR 2.0, Western decision-makers treated superficially, even with indifference, the analyses of political-military analysts from several countries of the world. There are hundreds of materials published on various news sites, books and reports which, with solid arguments, demonstrated that we are approaching a major aggression against Ukraine and then, against other states located, by historical-geographical misfortune, in the so-called close neighborhood of the Russian Federation" (Mincu 2023, 6). The Romanian people have a saying: "Russia neighbors whoever it wants". Russia has pursued and continues to pursue the policy of "spheres of influence anywhere on the globe where possible, of political, economic and military subordination of the so-called near abroad, which Russian leaders see, in a first phase, as far as Berlin..." (Mincu 2024, 38) .

In order to achieve geopolitical goals, Russia led by Putin uses various means and procedures (political, military, diplomatic, economic, financial, etc.), the same as USSR took over from the experience of the Tsarist Empire and developed concepts and actions in order to destabilize each country considered an enemy. Thus, our country suffered greatly due to the actions of the USSR and then of Russia - a country with an iron dictatorship that seeks to gradually restore the USSR 2.0.

The Russian Federation has always wanted to have the status of a great power, but it understood that it "alone cannot cope with this status and only the Russian World as a formula for restoring the post-Soviet Empire can help it reach the imperial heights it desires, for this it must conquer Ukraine" (Udrescu and Siteanu 2024, 38). In 2008, at the summit of the leaders of the member countries of the North Atlantic Alliance, the possibility of Ukraine's accession to NATO was discussed. The Russian Federation opposed and declared that it would act against this decision of NATO. After this, a fierce and continuous confrontation began between the Russian Federation and the other side: the USA, NATO and the EU. The United States influenced the elections in Ukraine and helped pro-Western forces take political power. Then the Russians, through a hybrid war, conquered Crimea, which they incorporated into Russia. The Kremlin also declared the separation of several regions with a predominantly Russian (Russophile) population from Ukraine. Ukrainian military forces attacked these regions with artillery against pro-Russian separatist forces.

On March 24, 2021, Zelensky ordered the re-occupation of Crimea. During this time, NATO exercises with reconnaissance flights were conducted in Ukraine along the border with the Russian Federation. In response, Russian troops conducted some applications along its border with Ukraine. In November 2021, Vladimir Putin requested to the United States that: Ukraine be a neutral country; nuclear missiles not be deployed in Ukraine; and Ukraine not be a member of NATO. The United States did not respond to Russian requests. In this tense situation, the Russian Federation launched military maneuvers with tens of thousands of soldiers on the border with Ukraine, while the EU media sounded the alarm about a possible invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops. On February 17, 2022, Ukrainian troops bombed the Donbas daily, non-stop (Udrescu and Siteanu 2024).

## **2. Russian Federation's War of Aggression against Ukraine**

Shortly before the launch of the "special military operation" against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin declared that he had the following political objectives in mind: "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine and protection of the ethnic Russian population of Ukraine" (Treisman 2022). He later added as objectives: neutrality of Ukraine and independence of Crimea, as well as recognition of the annexation of this peninsula. In addition, Putin also stated that he was aiming to liberate four regions

of Ukraine: Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhia. In return, Ukraine is fighting to defend its independence and sovereignty and to join the EU and NATO.

According to the Resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations No. 3314/1974, the “special military operation” of Russia is considered armed aggression (as in the provisions of International Humanitarian Law).

Unlike the numerically superior Russian forces, the Ukrainian ones are fewer, but better trained, motivated and equipped. At the beginning of the war, the Russians went on the offensive with 200,000 soldiers: in the north and north-east of Ukraine to conquer Kiev and in the south and east of Ukraine to link up with the forces in the north. The Ukrainians divided their forces and means in order to be able to defend themselves in the four zones of operations. Therefore, the offensive of the Russian troops was carried out simultaneously in four main directions, targeting the four aforementioned regions. The Russians planned the offensive as something similar to a blitzkrieg, that is, at a fast pace, but they failed due to the tenacity of the Ukrainian defenders, strongly supported by advanced military equipment and intelligence provided by Western states, especially the USA. As a result, the Russian offensive in the north and northeast was thwarted by Ukrainian troops who managed to prevent the encirclement of Kiev. Therefore, in early April 2022, the Russians withdrew their troops from the northern operations area and part of the forces that operated in the northeastern operations area, concentrating their efforts in the other operations areas: southern and eastern.

Due to the failure in the northern operations area, the Russians changed their strategic and political objectives in the sense that they decided to completely conquer the four regions: Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporozhe in order to incorporate them into Russian territory. This was the Russian objective for the second phase that began on April 15, 2022 and in which the actions of the Russian troops were concentrated in the two areas of operations, southern and eastern, in which the Russians continued offensive actions, and the Ukrainians carried out numerous counterattacks using the few Western HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems). Afterwards, by joining forces (southern and eastern) at the end of May 2022, the Russians created a corridor between Donbass and the Crimean Peninsula, and also managed to capture the ports on the Sea of Azov. Moreover, the Russians also managed to capture the Donbass region.

In September, the Ukrainians launched a counteroffensive in the northeastern area of operations, liberating the Kharkov region. In the south, they liberated the cities of Kherson and Nikolayev. But Russia carried out partial mobilization in September 2022 and annexed the four regions (Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhia). In the following months, the front line in the southern and eastern areas of operations was maintained, just like in World War I.

The Russians used outdated military equipment, while the Ukrainians benefited from high-quality Western equipment. Many countries around the world supported the Ukrainian war effort, considering the Russian aggression illegal and unjustified, despite the increase in the price of hydrocarbons worldwide. The Russians have failed to weaken and isolate Ukraine, which is a failure for Moscow.

In the second year of the war, Russia aimed to conquer the position of regional hegemon, in the ex-Soviet area, and perhaps global hegemon in the conditions of maintaining the war on the borders of the EU and NATO and of Russian diplomatic efforts, having dramatic effects in the economic sphere. Here we mention the use of Russian energy resources as a weapon of pressure against the European Union states and initiating propaganda campaigns including cyber aggressions to destabilize the targeted states. Also, by developing relations with important states such as China, India, Iran and North Korea, and by taking over the presidency of BRICS+, Russia gains possibilities to support the war effort and fuel a perspective of a bipolar world. At the same time, Russia aims to maintain pressure on Western states that are forced to seek other energy resources (hydrocarbons) in order to maintain the development of their economies that are seriously affected by the crisis. Consequently, Western states are making great efforts to provide aid to Ukraine and develop their defense capabilities, as well as to support the sanctions imposed on Russia.

Of great geostrategic importance for Russia is maintaining control over the annexed Ukrainian regions, including Crimea. In the second year of war, the fighting alternated between the stationary front lines, in a war of attrition, as it did in World War I. In addition to its army troops, Russia also used mercenaries (Wagner, Chechen fighters, the Hispaniola group, etc.), some from the Cuba, Nepal, Syria, Serbia, Afghanistan, Somalia and Malaysia (Bartosiewicz and Żochowski 2024). As a result, the Russians had a mix of mercenaries, paramilitary forces, and the Russian army. This resulted in the Wagner Group uprising of June 2023, action which was suppressed by the Kremlin.

In June-November 2023, the Ukrainian counteroffensive took place, which did not achieve its objectives. Later, in October, the Battle of Avdiivka began, when Russian troops went on the offensive. Ukrainian troops left the city on February 16, 2024 with heavy losses on both sides. After this episode, Russian troops took the initiative and conducted a slow-paced offensive in the southern and eastern areas of operations.

A new stage in this war began in August 2024, when Ukrainian forces launched an offensive on Russian territory in the Kursk region. This is a classic offensive with units and brigades, unlike some raids carried out by the Free Russian Legion and the Russian Volunteer Corps with semi-regular subunits (they have Russian citizens who fought on the Ukrainian side). The first days and weeks of the Ukrainian offensive in Kursk were a resounding success as the Ukrainians occupied about one thousand square kilometers of Russian territory and the city of Sudzha – a logistics center of the Russian army, which is the administrative center of the Sudzha district and has a Gazprom metering station intended for the distribution and transportation of Russian natural gas to the European Union<sup>1</sup>.

The Ukrainian invasion of the Kursk region meant the fastest and most significant change of the front in favor of Ukraine. With this Ukrainian incursion into Russian territory, the war became one of movement and not attrition that week. If the war was fought only on Ukrainian territory, now it is being waged on the territories of both states, which has become a shame for Moscow, especially if this episode will not be just a short episode but will become a prolonged action. Unfortunately, the Russians went on the counteroffensive and asked North Korea, based on the Treaty concluded with this country, to send about 10,000 soldiers who are now fighting in Kursk (U.S. Department of Defense 2024) against the retreating Ukrainians who have already lost half of the 1,200 square kilometers (BEL SAT 2025).

The new military strategy of Ukraine modifies the plan for waging war by Russia against Ukraine, due to the Ukrainian offensive that began on August 6, 2024. Thus, the Russian Federation was forced to bring more forces to its territory. Repelling the Kursk counterattack, as well as other probable Ukrainian counterattacks, is an important strategic problem for the Russian army. Until August 6, 2024, Russian forces fought battles and wars only on foreign territories, such as in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine and other states. But after August, the Russian Federation is forced, in addition to aggressive actions carried out in various countries, to also conduct defensive operations on Russian territory. Through the Kursk offensive, Ukraine managed to block Russian troops in that region so that they could no longer attack and terrorize the Ukrainian population. Thus, Ukraine influenced not only the internal affairs but also the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, undermining Moscow's propaganda and information policy not only among the mass of Russians but also in the international community.

The Ukrainian incursion into Russian territory created an image of Russia as a loser towards Ukraine and a cognitive dissonance among the Russian population and the international community. This unexpected attack by Kiev demonstrated the strategic incapacity and technical-material weakness of the Russian Federation that had been evident since 2022, during the failure of the offensive on Kiev and the Ukrainian counterattack in Kharkov and Kherson. The Ukrainian counterattack in Kursk strongly undermines the propaganda of the invincibility and superiority of the Russian Federation. If Serbia's irredentism was defeated by the actions of NATO and especially those

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<sup>1</sup> The gas from Sudzha is pumped to Slovakia and further to Central Europe. Both Russia and Ukraine have an interest in maintaining gas transportation to the EU.

of the USA, Western support for Ukraine has been weak and sporadic over the past ten years. However, some EU economic and financial sanctions against the Russian Federation and support for Ukrainian military actions have been increasing since 2022, but they are insufficient for Ukraine's defense. At the same time, some states in the Global South are helping Russia economically. On the other hand, support for Ukraine by the West is slow, hesitant and insufficient. And with all these shortcomings, Ukraine continues to show the world that both the evolution and the end of the war are unpredictable and that Russia does not have an undeniable superiority.

### **3. Geopolitical Future of Russian-Ukrainian War**

The broader geopolitical context of the Ukrainian strategy is closely connected with the likely negotiations with the Russian Federation on territorial issues, which could constitute a preparation for multilateral discussions such as, for example, another international conference on the war after the Peace Summit held in Switzerland in July 2024. If Ukraine were to manage to keep the territories near Kursk, it could hold transactional talks for the exchange of Russian lands, which it captured, for Ukrainian territories annexed by Russia.

Regarding the future of the war, we predict that it will continue for an unknown amount of time. The two belligerent parties do not want to negotiate, and the subject of peace negotiations has a low level of acceptability on both sides. Ukraine cannot accept an unconditional surrender, a change of political leadership, demilitarization and annexation by Russia of all the territories it has conquered. The Ukrainian side demands that Russia return the territories it has illegally occupied, but the Russian Federation rejects this demand. Russia's conditions determine the possibility of continuing the war in 2025, when Donald Trump proposes a peace plan through which Ukraine would give up the territories occupied by the Russian Federation and join NATO.

Russia is aware that Ukraine can resist as long as the West supports it. If this support diminishes, the defence capacity of Ukrainian troops will decrease. The decrease in Western support could be due to the political, social, economic-financial fatigue of EU states, etc. If the Russians manage to continue the offensive in Ukraine to the north and northeast and restore the front line from the first phase of the war and open the way to Kiev again, this would produce dramatic consequences for Ukrainians and would mean the defeat of Ukraine. At the same time, the conquest of Odessa would represent great losses for Ukraine on several levels (economic, military, social, moral, etc.).

After the installation of Donald Trump in the new mandate of President of the USA, according to Euronews, Vladimir Putin declared that he would be willing to sit down at the negotiating table with the American President, regarding the war in Ukraine but also the current interests of the USA and the Russian Federation (Bellamy 2025). Putin also stated that if Trump had been re-elected in 2020, the crisis in Ukraine could have been avoided.

In November 2024, close associates of the new US President Donald Trump said that Trump would work to conclude peace between Russia and Ukraine and would not help Ukraine regain the territories occupied by Russia. Trump administration will ask Zelensky for a realistic vision for peace. If President Zelensky claims that he will conclude peace only if he gets Crimea back, it means that he is not realistic, since Crimea was taken by Russia.

Democrats accused Trump of getting closer to President Putin and claimed that President Trump's approach to the Russian-Ukrainian war would amount to a real capitulation for Ukraine, which would endanger Europe. Also, the Prime Minister of Estonia told the BBC that if Ukraine backed out of the war, Russia's appetite would increase.

The truth is that Western countries and US President Biden have not given Ukraine enough weapons and ammunition for Ukraine to win the war. In early 2024, the US House of Representatives approved providing \$61 billion in military aid to Ukraine (The Kyiv Independent 2025). In fact, the United States has provided the most weapons to Ukraine; from February 2022 to the end of June 2024, it has delivered weapons and ammunition worth about \$55 billion (Le Monde 2024).

Vice-presidential candidate J.D. Vance said in August 2024 that Ukraine needs more military equipment than the US can deliver (Politico 2024). Half of Republican voters, and 27% of Americans believe that the United States is providing too much aid to Ukraine (Pew Research Center 2024). Without the help of the United States of America, Ukraine would no longer be able to resist and would be forced to make peace. Moreover, the new US President declared in late November 2024 that he wants to stop the war and stop the flow of US resources to Ukraine as war aid. Trump also said that regaining Crimea by Ukraine is not realistic and is not a US goal. Trump added that the United States did not send American soldiers to fight in Ukraine, and that Ukraine did not ask for American troops to fight for Ukraine, but only asked for American help to arm Ukrainian soldiers.

Beside the US involvement, there is the need to assess the international factors that threaten the security of the European Union, such as, for example, the wars in the Middle East and Africa that can influence the aid given to Ukraine. For example, the greatest danger was the war between Israel and Hamas, but now the ceasefire has ended and the release of hostages has begun.

In addition, there are a number of world crises that were triggered or amplified by the Russian-Ukrainian war (of migrants, food and energy) and affect the entire world (especially the Middle East and Africa, but also Western actors). For example, the energy crisis led to the energy destabilization of Western states and the explosion of hydrocarbon prices. Added to this is the fierce competition between the USA and China prompted even by the possibility that in the future the USA will lose world hegemony to China. Therefore, China, Russia, Iran and North Korea threaten world peace.

A Romanian researcher presents three possible scenarios of the Russian-Ukrainian war: 1) Russian troops can conduct the offensive in directions in order to extend control over the entire territory of the Donbass, Kherson and Zaporozhe regions and include them in their entirety in the Russian Federation; 2) the Russians will change the offensive in the Donbass region with a strategic operation in the Hortitia direction to recapture the Kharkov region, threatening to conquer Kiev, continuing to strengthen the defensive positions; 3) the Russians will abandon the offensive in the Zaporozhe and Kherson regions and attack from the Odessa strategic direction to recapture the Odessa region and then to make the junction with the forces in Transnistria, continuing to maintain the current defensive positions. Then they could attack the Republic of Moldova (Ioniță 2024, 17).

No matter the possible scenarios, the Russian Federation has the possibility to sustain the offensive campaign because it has mobilized several hundred thousand people to reinforce forces in Ukraine and replaced tank losses, while also securing sufficient missiles and drones from Iran and North Korea. Meanwhile, Ukraine strongly depends on aid from the European Union and the USA. Of course, an important aspect of geopolitical future of the Russian-Ukraine war in the event of a ceasefire agreement and/or an armistice is given by the possible election scenarios this year. Thus, if Zelensky remains in power or another pro-Western president is elected, Ukraine continues on its current path. But, the election of a pro-Russian president, or of an ultranationalist president are wildcards that can lead Ukraine to new political direction, and concomitantly change the whole course of the war.

It gets common sense that “the continuation of the Russian Federations war against ... Ukraine remains a major threat not only to Eastern Europe, but also of the entire diplomatic effort made worldwide to build a global peace by implementing the rule of law” (C.-C. Ioniță 2024a). As for Romania, a reliable partner for Ukraine since the beginning the war, all along, it had to face “complex challenges ranging from geopolitical tensions to economic concerns and issues of national sovereignty” (Plate and Marc 2023). All of these challenges were fueled by the intensification of Russian hybrid actions aimed to weaken Romanian support for our illegitimate attacked neighbor. Moreover, once the Agreement on security cooperation between Romania and Ukraine was signed in 2024, and Romanian engagement to “facilitate full-fledged integration of Ukraine into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)” (President of Romania 2024), Russian actions amplified and this was proved by the interference in the Romanian elections in

December 2024. Thus, as long as the Romanian support for Ukraine will continue, the Russian Federation will strive to weaken the Romanian state by all means.

### Conclusions

The evolution of the Russian-Ukrainian war is difficult to predict for the year 2025 because the events are particularly complex, changing and fluid and include the actions of the belligerents, as well as the interests and involvement of the other parties – state and non-state actors.

Many military analysts believe that it is difficult to predict how the Russian-Ukrainian war will evolve on the short or long run. Shortages in weapons and ammunition and the delay in US aid to Ukraine raise numerous signs of concern and doubt about Ukraine's defence capacity against the Russian offensive.

Russia can continue to maintain pressure on Ukrainian air defences and strike Ukrainian defence industry targets, as well as undermine the morale of Ukrainian civilians and military personnel. Given that Russia is substantially increasing its defence budget, it will be able to continue the war for several more years, but Ukraine is dependent on Western foreign support.

The Russian-Ukrainian war future development, when it comes to Western support, must not only be analyzed in terms of political will, but also in terms of available resources to put at disposal to support the Ukrainians. Also, it should be analyzed from a geopolitical perspective, taking into account other aspects as the conflictual situation in the Middle East, Russian-Ukrainian war effects, the new American presidency and the tensions in the Sino-American relationship that also preoccupy and modify the Europeans and the American security agendas. Moreover, the prolongation of the war and its escalation create the danger of the outbreak of World War III because this period is similar to the one that preceded World War II.

The results of election in Ukraine plays significant role in the course of war, as a pro-European president means the continuation in the same direction, but a pro-Russian or ultranationalist President could challenge more the geopolitical trends.

As long as Romania will support Ukraine, Russia will intensify its hybrid actions (particularly, by using cyber and informational instruments, as was the case with the presidential elections) to weaken the Romanian state.

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