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The EU as a Security Actor in the Eastern Neighbourhood

Securitised Resilience-Building Against Russian Hybrid Threats Since 2022: Case Studies of Moldova and Georgia

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Abstract

This thesis provides an in-depth exploration of how the EU's resilience-building initiatives for the Eastern Neighbourhood have evolved against Russian hybrid threats since 2022. Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly altered the security order on the continent, reshaping the EU's perception of its own security. In response to increased hybrid threats, the EU has employed extraordinary regulatory and responsive measures to ensure the safety of its own territory as well as its neighbours. This research tests the hypothesis that the war in Ukraine has elevated disinformation in the Eastern Neighbourhood to a core security issue for the Union. Relying on the tenets of Securitisation Theory, this hypothesis is examined on two levels: official narratives and policy implementation. First, a content analysis of strategic and policy documents from the last decade showcases a linguistic shift. Second, interviews with local stakeholders reveal main practices and tools of EU support measures in Moldova and Georgia. The findings demonstrate that on both dimensions, the EU has employed a securitised approach to the neighbours. However, several challenges emerge both in the local political context and in the EU's policy design, undermining the EU's impact as a security actor in the region.

Key words: Hybrid threats, disinformation, FIMI, Eastern Neighbourhood, resilience-building

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AI Use Declaration
The author used AI tools, ChatGPT and Gemini, for background research, brainstorming, and grammar/style refinement, and relied on Otter for interview transcription. The core analysis and final text remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

Abbreviations

AA – Association Agreement

CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy

CS – Copenhagen School

DSA – Digital Services Act

EaP – Eastern Partnership

EC – European Commission

EEAS – European External Action Service

ESTF – East Stratcom Task Force

EU – European Union

EUGS – European Union Global Strategy

EUPM – European Union Partnership Mission

FIMI – Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

HR – High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

MDF – Media Development Foundation

MS – Member State (MSs - Member States)

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NDICI – Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument

PS – Paris School

PT – Process Tracing

SAFIMI –"Georgian Society Against FIMI, Disinformation and Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour"

SC – EU Strategic Compass

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1. Introduction

The EU policy on countering hybrid threats is a relatively new concept that has been gradually developing over the past decade. However, in recent years, foreign information manipulation has become an even more relevant and pressing issue amid Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine since 2022. In response, the EU has implemented unprecedented measures, including the ban of Russian media channels, the regulation of online platforms through the Digital Services Act (DSA), and, most recently, the introduction of the European Democracy Shield (Vériter, 2025). All these measures were aimed at ensuring security within the EU's borders. At the same time, the EU has accelerated its assistance in combatting information manipulation attempts beyond its borders, particularly in the eastern neighbouring countries. The deployment of the European Partnership Mission to Moldova (EUPM), with a special competence in countering hybrid threats, serves as one of the clearest examples of this shift (Kovalčíková et al., 2024). Furthermore, the EU has supported a large number of projects aimed at building the capacities of local civil societies, state institutions, and society as a whole in Moldova and Georgia. More broadly, the EU itself has become directly contested by Russian disinformation campaigns during the 2024 and 2025 election cycles in Georgia and Moldova, which have become battlegrounds between pro-European and pro-Russian future trajectories. Hence, the EU's involvement in supporting the Eastern Neighbourhood against Russian hybrid threats represents a highly relevant topic for research.

Academic literature has actively analysed the EU's counter-disinformation measures, particularly the evolution of legislative and executive initiatives and the gradual elevation of disinformation high on the EU's security agenda (Vériter, 2024; Hedling, 2021). However, there is almost no comprehensive study on the EU's support for countering hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood. In turn, academics have explored the EU as a security provider in the neighbourhood and the increasingly securitised approach to the region since 2022 (Pozˇarlik, 2025; Kaunert & Pereira, 2023). Yet none of these studies specifically address the EU's cooperation with Eastern Partners in the area of hybrid threats. Therefore, this thesis aims to fill this gap by connecting the EU's policy on countering hybrid threats with its growing security actorness in the neighbourhood. Hence, the thesis will explore how the Russian hybrid threats facing the Eastern Neighbourhood became a security issue for the EU and the securitised measures implemented to support resilience-building in partner countries.

The full-scale war at the EU's borders has profoundly transformed the security order of the European continent. In response, the Union has significantly intensified its support for the Eastern Neighbourhood in countering Russian disinformation and other hybrid threats, which destabilise these states while simultaneously undermining the EU's own security and strategic positioning in the region. This thesis presumes that the upscaled support provided by the EU constitutes an outcome of the growing securitisation of hybrid threats within the Eastern Neighbourhood. While the accelerated support to the neighbouring partners may appear to be a natural and straightforward response to the changing security environment, two puzzling aspects emerge from this development. First, the acceleration of support activities does not automatically constitute the securitisation of hybrid threats unless such securitisation is specifically demonstrated, which represents the core objectives of this research. Second, this case represents a rather unique example of the EU securitising a security policy dimension within third states through the externalisation of tools and measures originally developed as part of its internal policy on hybrid threats. This is particularly striking given that the cooperation concerns practical security issues, an area in which the EU itself possesses limited competences compared to the Member States (MSs). Hence, this development represents an important illustration of the EU's expanding role as a security actor.

1.1 Research question and aims

This thesis seeks to address the following research question:
How has the EU's resilience-building assistance in the Eastern Neighbourhood evolved since 2022 in response to Russian hybrid threats, and how does this reflect the EU's growing securitisation of the region?

As can be seen from the research question, this thesis aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the new EU initiatives in the Eastern Neighbourhood implemented since 2022 to assist in countering hybrid threats. Hence, the thesis contributes to the existing literature empirically by offering a comprehensive and detailed overview of these support measures. In particular, the thesis explores actions launched in Moldova and Georgia as representative cases of the Eastern Neighbourhood (see Methodology for the detailed logic behind the case selection).

The second objective is to confirm the hypothesis, already reflected in the research question itself - the evolution of the EU's resilience-building initiatives constitutes an outcome of the securitisation process triggered by the altered security perceptions following the war in Ukraine. In order to demonstrate this securitisation, the thesis first explores strategic and policy documents for official securitised narratives. It then examines on-the-ground activities in the neighbourhood to assess whether such official securitisation is reflected in concrete actions.

Lastly, as an added value, the thesis discusses whether the EU's official narratives and the practical implementation of its counter-disinformation policy align with one another. This enables a more comprehensive assessment of the EU's security actorness in the neighbourhood.

The research is based on the integrated understanding of the securitisation theory, particularly considering securitisation through language and practices as complementary and not competing frameworks. This thesis does not argue for the dominance of one form of securitisation over another, nor does it attempt to establish a strict causal hierarchy between rhetorical and practical securitisation. Instead, the securitisation of hybrid threats in official EU narratives is treated as evidence that the newly introduced resilience-building measures should likewise be understood as securitised. Furthermore, the thesis does not seek to determine whether the securitisation process originates primarily from central EU institutions such as the European Commission (EC) or from local interacting actors in the neighbouring states. Rather, it focuses on examining how securitisation is reflected both in the EU narratives and in the practical implementation.

1.2 Operationalisation of terms

1.2.1 Resilience-building by whom?

Countering hybrid threats primarily represents a competence of the MSs, similarly to other security-related issues. Moreover, most EU members that are also part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) have traditionally relied on NATO frameworks for countering hybrid threats, as it developed this policy dimension much earlier than the EU (Giumelli et al., 2017). However, the increasing number of destabilising attempts by external actors poses threats simultaneously to multiple MSs as well as to cross-border networks (European

Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy [EC & HR], 2016). At the same time, non-NATO member states also require support in countering foreign interference (Giumelli et al., 2017). Therefore, it became imperative for the EU to respond through a common approach. Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union and Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union provide mutual solidarity and assistance provisions covering a broad range of threats. The broad conceptualisation of these provisions enabled the EU to adopt a more unified framework for countering hybrid threats, which over time has become increasingly comprehensive and overarching (Giumelli et al., 2017).

Despite limited competence, the EU is more than mere reflection of its MSs' preferences. Rather, it possesses the legal and political authority to define threats and formulate common policies. Within this framework, EU actorness emerges from a generative process in which institutions such as the EC can function as autonomous agents, provided they have been endowed with the necessary authority by the MSs (Sperling & Webber, 2019) . Based on this understanding, the thesis treats the EU as a unified actor in the policy area of countering hybrid threats.

The primary focus is placed on the EC as the EU's executive organ. In order to maintain analytical consistency, the thesis explores strategic documents issued by the EC and selected policy documents produced by the European External Action Service (EEAS) as the EU's main diplomatic body. Regarding resilience-building measures in Moldova and Georgia, the analysis mainly encompasses centrally deployed EU missions and projects, as well as selected initiatives implemented through consortiums involving multiple MSs.

1.2.2 Resilience-building of whom?

Eastern Neighbourhood is a geographical region encompassing six countries: Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Since 2009 the EU has upscaled its cooperation with the region through establishing a political and cooperative framework named Eastern Partnership (EaP). The initiative contributed to the Europeanisation of the region, deepening ties and generally having a positive impact on the peoples of Eastern Europe through

strengthening local political, economic and security stability (European Commission, n.d.). The ultimate goal for the EU through the policy was to acquire strategic partnerships.

The EaP policy followed two tracks: bilateral cooperation with partner states and a multilateral regional framework. Over time, geopolitical and domestic political developments created substantial differences among the partner countries. For example, in 2014 Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine signed Association Agreements (AAs) and established Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, which granted them privileged trade opportunities with the EU while also requiring the harmonisation of legislation (Emerson, 2015). Hence, these three states formed what became known as the Association Trio and maintained significantly closer relations with the EU than the other EaP countries. In 2022 and 2023, all three attained candidate status. Eventually, Moldova and Ukraine entered an active accession process, while Georgia's process became effectively stalled due to severe democratic backsliding and a shift towards a more pro-Russian political path (Kintsurashvili & Pleșca, 2026).

Belarus took a different path and significantly downgraded relations with the EU. Minsk had always viewed the EaP as an apolitical and purely economic structure for cooperation. After years of worsening relations with Brussels and the regime's democratic backsliding Belarus decided to leave the initiative in 2021 (Chanadiri, 2021). Moreover, Azerbaijan has maintained limited cooperation with the EU mainly due to diverging priorities, where the EU promotes normative governance reforms while Azerbaijan largely views the relationship as a transactional framework centred on economic and energy cooperation (Ahmadzada, 2026). Lastly, Armenia remained dependent on Russia in security matters for years, which constrained relations with Brussels. However, in recent years Armenia has distanced itself from Russian influence and pursued more active cooperation, including discussions surrounding potential accession (Lannoo, 2026).

This overview provides a general understanding of the Eastern Neighbourhood as the region of focus. Throughout the paper, the region is at times referred to as the EaP, eastern neighbours, or partner states. In the context of the thesis, these terms primarily refer to those countries where the EU has held leverage in policies related to countering hybrid threats since 2022. These include Moldova and Georgia (although significantly decreased in recent years), as the principal case studies of the thesis, as well as Ukraine and Armenia.

1.2.3 Hybrid threats?

Hybrid threats constitute a broad concept encompassing various tactics aimed at destabilising another state and undermining democratic processes. Examples of hybrid threats include attacks on critical infrastructure, cyberattacks, weaponisation of migrants, disinformation, and etc.

This thesis particularly focuses on the information security dimension of hybrid threats, specifically disinformation and the broader concept of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), established by the EU. Such a narrow conceptualisation of hybrid threats allows for a more comprehensive and analytically valuable research focus. Throughout the thesis, the term "hybrid threats" primarily refers to information manipulation activities. Moreover, the differences between the concepts of disinformation and FIMI will be acknowledged and analysed in the Literature Review. However, in this paper, these two concepts will be treated more broadly as threats to the information domain.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualising hybrid threats

Hybrid threats are a dynamic concept that not only vary in definition across authors and actors but also can evolve and expand over time in response to emerging challenges.

Hoffman (2010), one of the first to systematically conceptualize and popularize the term in academia, associates hybrid threats with "any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives" (p. 443). Current understanding of hybrid threats encompasses more "irregular" forms of action following new technological developments. Moreover, understanding what constitutes a threat requires the context of a specific actor. Hence, it is necessary to examine the definition adopted by the EU itself.

Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats, the first ever official EU policy document on hybrid threats defines them as: "...mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare" (EC & HR, 2016, p. 2). The emphasis on the "interconnected nature of challenges; the multiplicity of actors involved; and the diversity of conventional and unconventional means used" (European Parliament, 2017, p. 2) has transformed the term into an umbrella concept encompassing an exceptionally broad spectrum of threats.

2.1.1 Hybrid threats facing the EU

Beyond conceptual discussions, a range of academic research has positioned hybrid threats at the centre of EU security debates, providing insights into the Union as a security actor. Arkan (2025) provides a deep critical analysis of the official narratives on hybrid threats through the EU's and NATO's strategic policy documents to better understand how security is conceptualized in modern Europe. The research is based on the acknowledgement of the salience of "discursive constructs" used to shape security perceptions and policy responses.

The author argues that hybrid threats serve as a "symbolic and unifying thread" across the EU's security and defence policy (p. 29). The broad conceptualization of hybrid threats allows the EU a larger scope to "adapt the leitmotif to different contexts, whether addressing cyber warfare, electoral interference, or energy dependency" (p. 30). However, from a more skeptical perspective, the open-ended nature of hybrid threats might be a sign of "the EU's fragile, complex, and contested security environment," contributing to a persistent state of insecurity (p. 55). Despite this, the EU's framing of hybrid threats grants it the position of a "multidimensional actor" that can employ a variety of actions in response to vulnerabilities, including regulatory, economic, and technological tools (p. 68).

The EU's perception and counteractions to hybrid threats have significantly evolved in reaction to the Russian malign activities. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 transformed hybrid warfare from a concept primarily associated with non-state actors into a state-centred strategic instrument (Vračar & Ćurčić, 2018, p. 16). Through its deliberately ambiguous actions, Russia maintained plausible deniability, which made it difficult for the EU to formulate effective responses, as the line between taking countermeasures and engaging in a conflict remained unclear (Vračar & Ćurčić, 2018). Events such as 2014 Ukraine crisis, Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections and the Brexit referendum, exposed Russian financing of far-right parties across several EU MSs and active disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscored the need for a dedicated policy to combat (Kalniete & Pildegovičs, 2021, pp. 23-24). In response, the 2016 *Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats* and the 2018 *Joint Communication on Increasing Resilience and Bolstering Capabilities to Address Hybrid Threats* established the foundational institutional framework for the EU's policy on hybrid threats (Kalniete & Pildegovičs, 2021, p. 26). As regards the external dimension of resilience, *A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action* from 2017 served as the first guiding document providing recommendations in this area. Furthermore, the *European Council Conclusions of 2019 on complementary efforts to enhance resilience and counter hybrid threats* emphasised extra support for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, focusing on security sector reform and measures to address hybrid threats and disinformation stemming from Russian malign activities (Bajarūnas, 2020, p. 65).

2.2 Conceptualising disinformation and FIMI

The distortion of the information space, among other hybrid measures, represents one of the most common forms of destabilising tools that can serve wider hostile strategic objectives. Information disorders vary in both actor intent and consequential impact. Disinformation, as defined by the EC, "includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, 2018). In contrast, misinformation is the accidental result of sharing incorrect, outdated, or misapplied information (Stahl, 2006, p. 86). The EU, in turn, has advanced from a narrow understanding of disinformation and fake news to employing a special holistic concept, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. FIMI encompasses all information manipulation activities with a "non-illegal pattern of behavior" that have a potential to undermine values and democratic processes (EEAS, 2025b, p. 4). The primary focus of countering FIMI lies in identifying manipulative practices rather than merely addressing the dissemination of misleading content. These activities extend beyond disinformation and propaganda and include the deployment of bots and inauthentic accounts, the impersonation of legitimate entities, and cross-platform campaigns designed to artificially promote specific narratives (Ramunno, 2025).

Although disinformation spreads easily and embeds itself within a target state with relatively little effort in the digital era, it is the deliberate and strategic nature of these actions, as reflected in the definition, that classifies it as a hybrid threat (Van Raemdonck & Meyer, 2024, p. 3). By systematically generating confusion within society, disinformation campaigns weaken individuals' capacity to critically evaluate information, ultimately fostering political disillusionment and eroding trust in state institutions (Van Raemdonck & Meyer, 2024, p. 11). At its core, the ultimate objective of disinformation is to disrupt the functioning of "a political system that places its trust in essential custodians of factual authority" (Rid, 2020, p. 186). Democracies are particularly susceptible to such tactics because disinformation exploits foundational democratic principles, such as the free flow of information and pluralistic debate (Van Raemdonck & Meyer, 2024, p. 13). At the same time, forceful responses to disinformation may pose additional risks, as measures such as censorship can undermine the very liberal values they seek to protect (Van Raemdonck & Meyer, 2024, p. 14).

In the context of EU policy, FIMI is often closely considered in regard to cybersecurity and cyber diplomacy (Pup, 2026). Notably, scholarly research reinforces this link by arguing that disinformation shares key characteristics with traditional cyber threats, including identifiable targets, defensive measures, and the capacity to exploit individuals' cognitive vulnerabilities. Disinformation often accompanies cyber operations and prepares cyber operational environments (Caramancion et al., 2022). Given the interconnected nature of information manipulation tactics with other forms of foreign interference, such as cybersecurity, it is necessary to consider all related concepts to fully understand the EU resilience-building in neighboring countries.

2.2.1 Disinformation as a hybrid threat: The evolution and securitisation of the EU's disinformation policy

The literature on the EU's policy on disinformation encompasses a wide range of sources that empirically trace the gradual evolution of the measures leading to the establishment of the policy. The policy for the information domain progressed incrementally, initially triggered by the 2014 Ukraine crisis and culminating in the EU's extraordinary measures after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Initially the issue lacked significant salience among MSs, resulting in limited institutional focus and funding. Over time, however, disinformation began to be recognized as a domestic challenge. The EU's eastern flank and the EC played a central role in the development of the policy. Within just six months of holding the Council Presidency, Latvia, a Baltic country with a fraught history with Russia, successfully managed to introduce a policy initiative in an entirely new domain in which the EU had previously not legislated. It built a coalition of supportive MSs, persuaded larger states of the initiative's necessity, and simultaneously maintained its image as an honest broker (Vériter, 2024). Moreover, tracing the process from 2015 reveals a clear continuity in institutional choices, demonstrating that the policy development was not random but rather a sequential process, where each new policy step was built fundamentally on the foundations of previous ones. The EC was not merely reacting to security threats; instead, it actively created opportunities to establish rules and norms. In doing so, the EC assumed the role of a proactive policy entrepreneur, deliberately constructing a pathway to address salient security issues (Datzer and Lonardo, 2023).

Russia's vast disinformation campaign in 2014 served as a wake up call for the EU and necessitated the evolution of the EU's toolkit against pro-Russian propaganda. The first step in this policy expansion was the establishment of the East Stratcom Task Force (ESTF), a strategic communication point in the neighbourhood, which served to debunk Russian narratives and enhance strategic communication on the EU's policies beyond the Union's borders (Hedling, 2021, pp. 841-844). The ESTF has significantly transformed the EU's institutional landscape by reshaping the nature of its diplomacy. Public diplomacy became a central instrument in the containment of disinformation, with the aim of fostering societal resilience. It brought together communication specialists from diverse non-diplomatic backgrounds, each contributing unique expertise. The ESTF also introduced tactical changes by engaging more directly with disinformation through a myth-busting approach and positive narrative projection, focusing on communicating successful and constructive developments as a new way of sharing information (Hedling, 2021, pp. 852-856).

The EU's disinformation policy accelerated immediately after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. The measures of banning Russian media outlets, Russia Today and Sputnik, and regulating the digital space through the DSA, constituted an unprecedented step in the name of safeguarding the Union's security (Vériter, 2025). These actions sparked debate on whether the EU was limiting media freedoms and fundamental rights through increased control over the media and digital sphere. From a security perspective, the EU prioritized efficiency and coherence in protecting the information domain, framing information as a "battlespace". This security-centric approach can consequently lead to the adoption of tools that may be scrutinised for potentially undermining substantive democratic principles. By introducing measures that affected principles of freedom of press and freedom of information - and by elevating regulations to the supranational level, the EU signaled a significant geopolitical turn in its approach to the informational domain (Vériter, 2025).

On the external front of its disinformation policy, the EU has also employed unprecedented measures against FIMI in the Eastern Neighbourhood since 2022. For instance, the Union has resorted to imposing sanctions on individuals and entities engaged in Russian information manipulation (Council of the European Union, 2025). Furthermore, the establishment of EUPM Moldova, the first civilian mission designed to strengthen Moldova's crisis management structures and enhance resilience against hybrid threats, further illustrates this dynamic (Kovalčíková et al., 2024). However, scholarship has not yet theorised the EU's

disinformation policy in its external actions, particularly in its relations with the Eastern Neighbourhood. Hence, this thesis aims to address this gap.

2.3 The EU as a security actor in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The immediate neighbourhood has become a crucial focus of the EU's security policy since the inception of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), as officially outlined in the 2003 European Security Strategy. This development serves as an unprecedented example of the blurring lines between external and internal security (Delcour, 2010; Bigo, 2002). As EU enlargement shifted the Union's external borders and generated a new periphery, the stability of these newly adjacent states became of increased importance to the EU's internal security due to the fear of instability spilling over into EU territory (Delcour, 2010, p. 536). In response, the EU positioned itself as a "motor for ensuring regional security" (Delcour, 2010, p. 536). Eventually, normative presence in the region gave way to the geopolitical turn of the EU's engagement. "Geopolitical security turn marked the advent of an increasing existentialisation of the ENP" (Poz˙arlik, 2025, p.203).

The EU has received significant criticism as a security provider in the neighbourhood, as the implementation of its initiatives do not always fully meet the prescribed objectives. The EU policies in the neighbourhood have been characterised by a lack of coherence in the application of values across different partner countries (Delcour, 2010). On the other hand, some scholars argue it is crucial for the EU to adopt pragmatic and differentiated policies, tailored to local needs and political dynamics in order to achieve effective change (Christou, 2010). Moreover, a contradiction can be observed between the EU's projection of long-term goals of peace and shared values and its security-building practices in reality, which prioritise short-term self-interests. Furthermore, a lack of inter- and intra-institutional cohesion has adversely impacted the effectiveness of the ENP and EaP (Christou, 2010).

These challenges were broadly theorised in Christopher Hill's seminal work, which identified a profound mismatch between the EU's performance in the international system and the perceptions of it both internally and externally. Due to a deficit of conventional instruments,

such as diplomacy and common military resources, alongside a lack of coherence within its multilevel governance system, the EU failed to fulfill the expansive external roles and to take up the space previously occupied by the Soviet Union (Hill, 1993). More recent academic contributions attributed the flaws of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) to the genuinely low expectations set by national governments. Despite ambitious public rhetoric, national executives made no serious structural effort to actually bridge the capability-expectations gap. By consistently basing consensus on the lowest common denominator among MSs, the CFSP was relegated to a limited and largely symbolic function (Bendiek, et al., 2020).

However, Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine "resulted in the EU pushing for a more comprehensive attitude towards dramatic worsening of the security environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood" (Poz˙arlik, 2025, p. 209). The Russian invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally shaken the European security architecture. Particularly, the "Great Russian" ontological project triggered an acute state of ontological insecurity within the EU. Consequently, this shift profoundly impacted the EU's self-identity as a geopolitical actor and elevated the importance of Eastern Neighbourhood to a central pillar of the EU's foreign policy (Kaunert & Pereira, 2023).

The war in Ukraine forced the EU to abandon its idealistic view of its external role in favour of a more realistic paradigm. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion, the EU maintained unprecedented unity, providing €50 billion in financial support for Ukraine (Hill, 2025). Furthermore, the EU placed greater emphasis on militarisation and on strengthening security and defence investments in its relations with Eastern Partners (Poz˙arlik, 2025). For the first time in its history, the EU delivered arms to a country at war and deployed the EU Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine (Hill, 2025; Crombois, 2023). The Union has also heavily utilised its primary instrument of economic statecraft by imposing 20 packages of sanctions against Russian individuals, organisations, and commercial sectors (European Commission, 2026). Furthermore, this crisis has driven MSs to strengthen their own military capabilities while prompting the EU as a whole to realise the importance of NATO for Europe's security (Crombois, 2023).

The geopolitical turn and securitisation of the ENP, in practical terms, was translated into the emergence of resilience-building as the primary course of action to address the more immediate, short-term risks in the partner states (Poz˙arlik, 2025; Nitoiu & Simionov, 2023).

After 2022, resilience-building became the "existential imperative" for the protection of the EU's security structure (Poz˙arlik, 2025, p. 211). Hence, the next chapter will explore resilience in greater depth, with close attention to debates surrounding this concept, as well as measures and means of its implementation.

2.4 The EU's resilience-building in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) elevated the concept of resilience to a central objective of EU foreign policy and defined it as a comprehensive and multidimensional approach (Tocci, 2020, p. 177). Resilience aligned closely with the evolving EU strategy, both in responding to a changing geopolitical environment and in facilitating the integration of diverse policy areas. Its adoption reflected the EU's broader process of transforming its foreign policy outreach in response to crises in its neighbourhood (Nitoiu & Simionov, 2023, p. 1073), which began with the 2008 Russia-Georgian war and reached a critical juncture with the 2014 annexation of Crimea. As a result of reflection, resilience brought greater sobriety to the EU's approach to its neighbourhood, highlighting both the limits of the EU's ability to transform the complex region and the urgency and responsibility to provide support (Tocci, 2020, p. 186). Moreover, its multifaceted understanding - "the capacity to adapt, respond, and recover in the aftermath of shocks and crises" - enabled its application across multiple domains and supported efforts to bridge policy silos and link traditional foreign policy with the external dimensions of internal policies (Tocci, 2020, p. 178).

Resilience is also associated with pragmatic stability-oriented support in the neighbourhood, rather than outward-oriented democracy promotion (Nitoiu & Simionov, 2023, pp. 1074–1075). Hence, growing security concerns prompted a shift in the EU's identity - from a predominantly normative actor toward the "principled pragmatist" (Juncos, 2017). The EU established a strategic "middle ground between over-ambitious liberal peace-building and under-ambitious stability" (Wagner and Anholt, 2016, p. 415). The Union sought to align its value promotion with strategic interests (Juncos, 2017). However, some scholars approach the concept of "principled pragmatism" critically, questioning whether resilience is genuinely reflected in the EU's practical engagement with its neighbourhood (Nitoiu and Simionov, 2023,

p.1079). Furthermore, some argue that the EU cannot simultaneously pursue both objectives, as the pursuit of strategic interests may compromise its core values, or because resilience may be interpreted merely as a means to advance value promotion (Juncos, 2017, p. 14-15).

Earlier conceptualizations of resilience placed primary responsibility on national governments. State resilience-building primarily focuses on strengthening state institutions, an area in which EU civilian missions have played a significant role. For example, the EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) in Ukraine has contributed to advancing security sector reform (SSR) through strategic advice, training, and legislative support aimed at enhancing institutions such as the police and anti-corruption bodies. However, its functioning has been criticized for its limited scope and overly technocratic approach (Mészáros & Toca, 2020). Corman and Schumacher (2023) have also argued that the EU's approach in Moldova was at times narrowly state-centric, focusing on anti-corruption measures and the responsibilisation of local elites. This, in turn, marginalized local NGOs and ultimately left the country in a more vulnerable position. Moreover, the EU has faced the dilemma of how to simultaneously strengthen state resilience while promoting civil engagement and empowerment in the fragile democracies of its Eastern Neighbourhood (Poz˙arlik, 2025, p. 211). The invocation of state resilience discourse in relation to authoritarian neighbours such as Belarus was highly problematic, as it risked reinforcing regime structures while further constraining an already fragile civil society (Bosse & Vieira, 2023).

Nonetheless, the EU has gradually shifted away from a purely state-centric approach, placing greater emphasis on fostering societal resilience in its eastern neighboring countries. As the EUGS argues, "states are resilient when societies feel they are becoming better off" (EEAS, 2016, p. 26). The EU has nonetheless pursued substantial efforts to strengthen the political landscape in its neighbouring countries through various instruments. In particular, it has successfully enhanced public trust in state institutions. Moreover, the EU supported efforts to strengthen the legitimacy and oversight capacities of civil society organisations, which served as key actors in democratic reform (Kakachia, et al., 2021, p. 1345-1348). As the war in Ukraine continues, the need to strengthen societal resilience becomes more obvious. Scholarship has increasingly recommended that the EU should strengthen societal resilience in the Eastern Neighbourhood closely considering local political developments, with civil society naturally playing a central role (Mussnig, 2023).

Last but not least, another key shift in the EU's external resilience agenda since 2022 is the introduction of "democratic resilience." Unlike traditional democratization, democratic resilience refers to a system's capacity to resist autocratization, uphold democratic values, and recover from crises. Building on this definition, democratic resilience is closely linked to hybrid threats, which seek to target these core aspects of democratic system. Consequently, the EU has increasingly approached democratic and security resilience as interconnected dimensions of its external policy (Tyushka, 2026). Nonetheless, this approach can be questioned, particularly in the case of Ukraine, where resisting Russian conventional and hybrid attacks takes precedence over strengthening democratic institutions during the ongoing war (Kudelia, 2022).

Resilience-building is characterised by certain principles of action. Some of the key changes in the EU's engagement under the resilience framework include a greater emphasis on local ownership, alongside the more differentiated approaches to individual partner states, and flexibility in policy implementation. Local ownership places responsibility on local communities and individuals, who are expected to develop the capacity to cope with risks (Juncos, 2017). Indeed, resilience in regards with the neighbourhood has been framed as "a domestic process with external actors supporting or spoiling the process of resilience-building" (Kakachia, et al., 2021). Local ownership was perceived as an attempt to abandon top-down imposition and instead foster broad acceptance through the engagement of diverse societal actors in their co-creation (Petrova & Delcour, 2020, pp. 343-344) However, the shift also received criticism and the title of "governance through failure" (Joseph, 2016). The "local ownership turn" has been interpreted as a mechanism for outsourcing the responsibility for the shortcomings of the EU's normative agenda and democratic state-building efforts to the neighbouring states (Nitoiu and Simionov, 2023, p. 1078). Another criticism is about local ownership not fully being translated into policy practices. The EU policies remain largely top-down, particularly in rule-of-law and trade areas where strict compliance with EU standards is required. Security concerns also limit the scope for bottom-up approaches, sometimes clashing with local interests (Nitoiu and Simionov, 2023).

The EU's bottom-up approach centres on capacity-building measures. The EU accomplishes this through the knowledge (training, advising, mentoring) and financial transfers aimed at strengthening local institutions and actors (Juncos, 2017, p. 9). Capacity-building aims to empower local actors by strengthening skills and institutional capacities, with the long-term

objective of ensuring that external support is both sustainable and effective (Venner, 2015). In this context, EUAM primarily employs practices such as the provision of hands-on advisory support and targeted training for local stakeholders to facilitate security sector reform (Jayasundara-Smits, 2018, p. 463).

As such, resilience became a framework for more tailored, comprehensive and pragmatic engagement, aimed at strengthening state institutions, promoting good governance, and enhancing societal capacities. These efforts are intended to improve partners' ability to withstand external security threats stemming from Russia. Practices such as information and expertise sharing, as well as capacity-building, emerge as central instruments of EU engagement. Building on this, the thesis examines what practices the EU's resilience-building efforts have been using since 2022.

2.5 Filling the gap

Observing the existing literature as well as the theoretical framework of securitisation applied to the EU, we can construct the analytical foundation upon which this thesis is based. The EU's perception and approach to hybrid threats on one side, and the Eastern Neighbourhood on the other, have been gradually evolving for past decades. Since 2014, the EU has gradually developed its disinformation policy through various frameworks, institutions and tools. Eventually, disinformation became framed as a security issue. Similarly, the literature shows that the EU's approach to cooperation with its eastern neighbours has shifted over the years, and eventually adopted a more geopolitical and pragmatic orientation, moving away from a predominantly value-based approach.

However, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 changed the overall perception of both the Eastern Neighbourhood and Russian hybrid attacks. The EU started to perceive these threats as significantly more dangerous for its internal security. As a result, it employed extraordinary legislative measures, including the banning of Russian media outlets and increased regulatory control over the digital information space.

What is missing in the academic literature is the intersection between these two strands - the EU's disinformation policy and its policy towards the Eastern Neighbourhood. Particularly, there is no comprehensive academic work analysing the EU's activities supporting its eastern neighbours against Russian hybrid threats. Since 2022, several unprecedented developments have taken place, such as the establishment of the EUPM Moldova, the first-ever mission specifically aimed at strengthening the resilience against hybrid threats of a partner state. Moreover, the EU has launched numerous overarching projects in Moldova and Georgia assisting local civil society capacities to monitor and counter foreign information manipulation. This thesis aims to examine these developments, based on the presumption that neighbouring states facing hybrid threats also constitute a security and geopolitical concern for the EU in the context of the war in the region.

3. Theoretical framework

Securitisation theory has made a significant contribution to security studies by examining how "the process of presenting an issue in security terms" unfolds (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 214). The theory is divided between two contrasting schools of thought. The Copenhagen School (CS) posits that an issue is securitised primarily through language by political elites. The Paris School (PS) emerged as a critique of this approach. It argues that, alongside narratives, practitioners securitise certain issues through their everyday practices and interactions. This thesis draws on the integrated approach and specifically on scholars who emphasise the equal relevance of both discursive and practical dimensions of securitisation.

3.1 Conflicting perspectives: Securitisation in discourse versus practice

The CS conceptualizes securitisation through the lens of speech act, emphasizing that the very act of articulating a security concern constitutes a form of security practice (Eroukhmanoff, 2018). The process of securitisation begins with a non-politicized issue that the state does not actively address. The issue then becomes politicized, entering the realm of public policy, and if it is subsequently framed as an existentially salient threat, it is securitised (Emmers, 2010).

Although, according to the CS, the securitising actor is typically a central institution or a political leader, this process is not straightforward. Rather, it is an intersubjective process that encompasses interactions between different actors and operates at multiple levels. The securitisation process itself comprises two components: a security act, which involves the use of specific language and the adoption of extraordinary measures to address the threat, and a political act, which entails the actor's effort to convince the audience of the necessity of these measures (Emmers, 2010). Following this logic, the speech act not only produces security but can also be considered "one component of the inter-subjective construction of security" (McDonald, 2008, p. 566). Hence, security issues do not exist independently; rather, they emerge through rhetorical interactions between a securitising actor and an audience and

through the endorsement of proposed extraordinary measures (Eroukhmanoff, 2018). Another core element for securitisation to occur is a referent object - an entity such as the state, society, or a set of values that is portrayed as facing an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998). Lastly, there must be a securitising actor who articulates the existence of that threat and seeks to persuade the audience of its urgency.

In contrast to the CS, the PS emerged as a critical alternative, shifting the analytical focus from the discursive speech acts of political elites to the everyday practices. The school claims that local practitioners are more influential in shaping security reality than the exceptional rhetoric of politicians. Balzacq (2011), one of the prominent representatives of the PS, advocates understanding security formation through a "sociological" lens. He portrays securitisation as a pragmatic process that accounts for practices, context, and the power relations between actors. According to the PS, securitisation is driven by a professional field of "managers of unease", including police, intelligence agencies, and border guards, who use bureaucratic technologies and surveillance to categorize certain groups or issues as risks (Langwald, 2021). These professionals sometimes even compete within a specific "field" to define what constitutes a threat, creating a "governmentality of unease" that justifies their own expertise and institutional roles (Bigo, 2002). Moreover, policy instruments and technical bureaucratic decisions can over time reshape political reality and contribute to the increasingly securitised handling of an issue (Balzacq, 2011).

The PS shares its conceptual ground with the theory of ontological security, particularly in how both perspectives understand the social construction of insecurity and the role of routines and practices in producing security. Ontological security theory similarly stresses that states seek a stable identity, which depends on routine social relations and established systems of trust. Disruptions to ontological security generate anxiety, which can in turn lead to securitisation (Langwald, 2021). Securitisation itself is pursued through changes in the routines and practices of local actors.

3.2 Application of theory: Securitisation in discourse and practice

This study explores the EU's securitisation of Russian hybrid threats in the eastern neighbouring countries both in official narratives and in on-the-ground initiatives (see more in Methodology). This thesis rejects competing perspectives and applies a framework that incorporates both rhetorical and practical dimensions of securitisation. This thesis shares the ideas of scholars who develop integrated approaches and assign equal weight to both aspects of securitisation.

Holger Stritzel (2007) is one of the most prominent critics of the way securitisation theory split into two separate camps. He argues that securitisation cannot be understood as either an isolated linguistic or a purely material process; rather, these are co-constitutive processes. As he notes, "...speech act cannot have an impact on social relations without a situation that constitutes them as significant" (Stritzel, 2007, p. 367). The influence of text can only have a meaningful impact if an appropriate political context and collective historical memory allow for it. Everyday institutional routines and physical actions do not merely follow speech acts. Rather, changes implemented by local actors constitute "the process through which meanings of security are communicated and security itself constructed" (McDonald, 2008, p. 10). On the other hand, institutional routines require an overarching narrative to legitimise and direct them (Stritzel, 2007; McDonald, 2008). Securitisation is therefore a continuous process in which text generation and institutionalised practices occur simultaneously over time.

Reflecting the abovementioned ideas, this thesis does not establish a hierarchy between different pathways of securitisation. On the one hand, it could be the EC acting as a securitising actor, with its narratives later translating into locally implemented support initiatives. On the other hand, securitisation may emerge through the interaction of actors from both the EU and partner states at the national level. In fact, the analysis of the data indicates that both dynamics are present. Hence, the thesis examines both processes without attributing primacy to either.

4. Methodology

This thesis seeks to investigate the European Union's support in countering Russian hybrid threats directed at its eastern neighbours since Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Achieving this requires a comprehensive qualitative analysis of EU policy over time to identify key trends and developments. To this end, the study employs a process-tracing (PT) methodology, which allows the "systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses" (Collier, 2011, p. 823). From a philosophical perspective, drawing causal inferences by examining historical developments can be seen as a natural and intuitive approach, rooted in the human tendency to understand events through purposeful reasoning and action (Beach & Pedersen, 2012). However, from a scientific perspective, ensuring the validity of this approach requires a more systematic and clearly defined methodology, including a precise explanation of its aims and procedures.

PT constitutes a particularly suitable method for small-N analysis, with a strong focus on within-case dynamics. Unlike quantitative approaches, the examination of one or a limited number of cases allows for a deeper, context-sensitive analysis. This enhances the precision and internal validity of the findings. This approach avoids the risk, often associated with large-N studies, of aggregating diverse cases in ways that may overlook important contextual differences (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 26). In particular, employing PT within a case study allows for the examination of how different conditions affect the causal chain and enables the exploration of alternative pathways through which outcomes may be produced (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 28).

"The process-tracing method attempts to identify the intervening causal process - the causal chain and causal mechanism - between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 141). George and Bennett (2005) illustrate the causal process through the metaphor of a sequence of falling dominoes, where each step leads from the initial cause to the outcome. However, more recent scholarship suggests that this linear understanding is overly simplistic. Intervening variables should not be seen merely as elements directly caused by the independent variable that pass on causal force in a straightforward manner. Rather, the causal process is more complex. First, intervening variables can shape and redefine the context in which causation unfolds, thereby amplifying or

weakening the causal force rather than simply transmitting it. Second, and particularly relevant to this research, some intervening variables function as diagnostic evidence. Instead of actively transmitting causal force, they serve as indicators that a particular causal chain is present (Bennett & Checkel, 2012, pp. 8-10).

Another reason why PT serves a great fit to this thesis is its capacity to both generate rich descriptive insights into a political phenomenon and establish causal relationships (Collier, 2011, p. 823). This dual capability makes the method particularly well suited to this research. The research question - examining how the EU's resilience-building measures in its Eastern Partners have evolved since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine - naturally calls for a descriptive analysis. Simultaneously, the second element of the research question, which points to securitisation, gives rise to a hypothesis. The hypothesis posits a causal relationship between the EU's perceptions of its security and the neighbourhood after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the development of securitised resilience-building against Russian hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

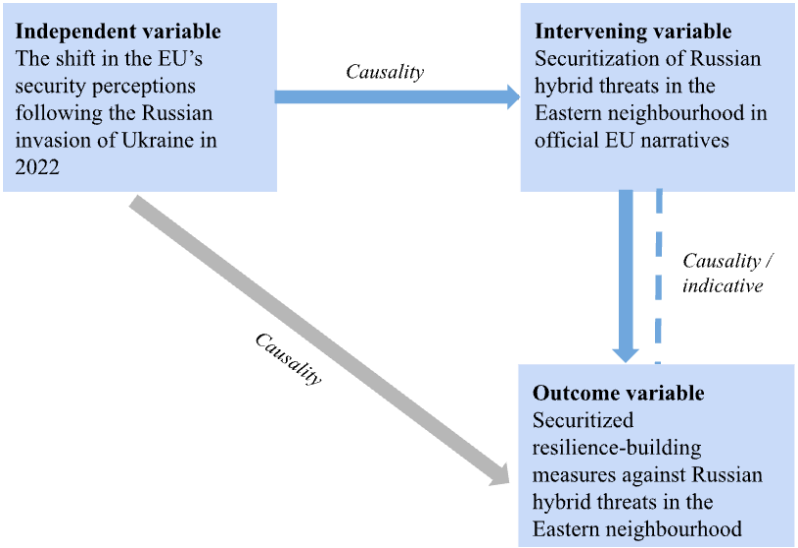
Therefore, the study aims to assess whether the EU's policy on countering hybrid threats aligns with the theory established at the intersection of the reviewed literature. More specifically, the thesis evaluates the proposition that *the security crisis in the EU's near neighbourhood constituting a critical juncture, can trigger the emergence of securitised resilience-building practices*. To do so, the research analyses EU policy both at a broader level and through in-depth case studies of Moldova and Georgia.

Figure 1- Research question, hypothesis, testing the theory

As reflected in the research question and hypothesis, the independent variable is conceptualized as *the shift in the EU's security perceptions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022*. The dependent variable is the development of *securitised resilience-building measures against Russian hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood*. The intervening variable is selected to be *the securitisation of Russian hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood in official EU narratives*.

As noted above, an intervening variable does not always function as a direct transmitter of a causal link, it can instead serve as diagnostic evidence. In this thesis, the intervening variable is treated as an "indicative variable". In practice, this means that the securitisation of official narratives in a given policy area does not necessarily cause the resilience-building actions implemented on the ground. Demonstrating securitisation in official narratives simply provides evidence that the 2022 invasion represented a critical moment for framing hybrid threats in the neighbourhood as a security concern. This thereby supports the assumption that the subsequent resilience-building measures were shaped by the securitising logic. Moreover, there is a possibility that the securitisation occurred directly among locally interacting actors, such as local governments and EU-deployed diplomatic missions. While considering both pathways, it should be noted that this research does not seek to determine whether securitisation originates from central authorities or emerges at the local level.

Figure 2 - Causal mechanism

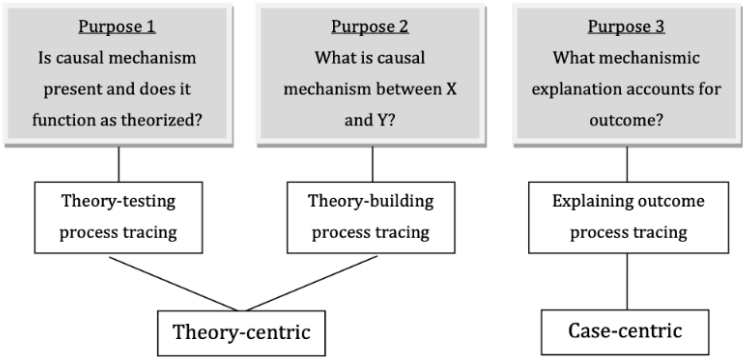


This causal process was studied in three main steps:

1. Demonstrating the causal connection between the shift in EU security perceptions (independent variable) and the securitisation of official narratives (intervening variable);
2. Examining whether official EU documents announce more active and securitised resilience-building measures;
3. Conducting a detailed analysis of the resilience-building measures against Russian hybrid threats in eastern neighbouring countries, with a specific focus on Moldova and Georgia.

Therefore, the thesis primarily employs a variant of PT called theory-testing. The theory-testing component draws on existing evidence and assumptions from the literature to construct a theoretical framework and evaluate whether it is reflected in the EU's specific policy area. This part of the thesis aims to establish causal inference (Beach & Pedersen, 2012). However, due to the limited literature on the EU's resilience-building measures against Russian hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the research also requires an in-depth analysis of these measures. This implies first demonstrating the existence of such measures with extensive empirical evidence, and then systematically describing how they are implemented and identifying their common characteristics. Thus, the descriptive component of the thesis will take a "snapshot" of the EU's resilience-building mechanisms from 2022. An in-depth, descriptive analysis of key steps along the causal pathway constitutes a central aspect of PT, as it enables a close examination of the process and strengthens the argument for causality (Mahoney, 2010, as cited in Collier, 2011).

Figure 3 - Different types of process tracing method



Note. Adapted from *Case selection techniques in process-tracing and the implications of taking the study of causal mechanisms seriously* by D. Beach and R. B. Pedersen, 2012, SSRN Electronic Journal.

4.1 Case selection

A case study refers to a well-defined aspect of a broader historical episode selected by the researcher for detailed analysis. A case itself can be understood as an instance of a particular "class of events," such as types of governments, revolutions, or other political phenomena (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 24). The appropriate selection of cases is therefore essential for effectively addressing the research question.

The Bayesian logic underpinning PT enables the method to draw causal inferences through within-case analysis, rather than relying on cross-case comparison. Accordingly, PT focuses on identifying empirical evidence that corresponds to theoretically derived predictions about the presence of a causal mechanism. For such inferences to be robust, the evidence must satisfy specific criteria. In particular, it should be sufficiently strong to support the existence of a given mechanism (certainty), while also being difficult to explain through alternative accounts (uniqueness) (Beach & Pedersen, 2012, p. 4). Together, these criteria strengthen the credibility of causal claims derived through PT.

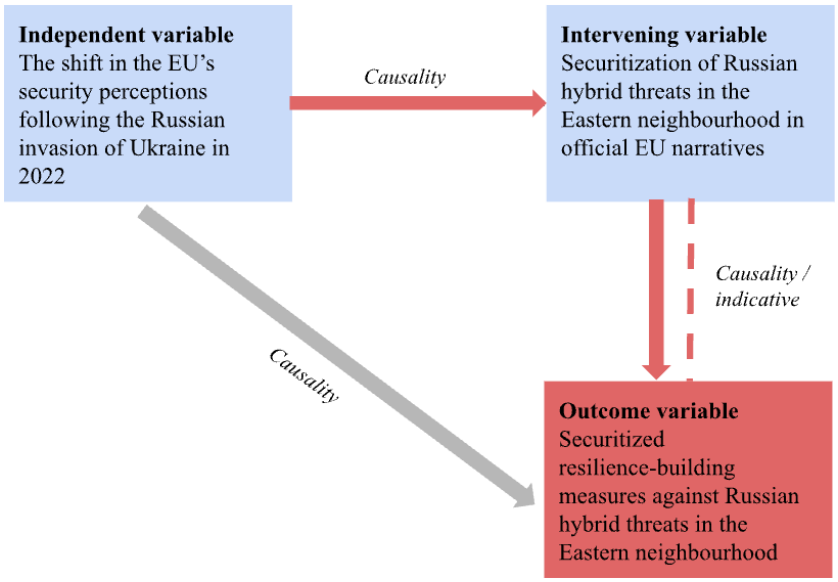
In theory-testing PT, only typical cases should be selected to assess whether theorized causal mechanisms operate. More specifically, these are cases in which both the causal condition (X) and the outcome (Y) are present (Beach & Pedersen, 2012). Moldova and Georgia can both be considered typical cases for the purposes of this thesis. As ex-Soviet member states with territorial disputes with Russia, the outbreak of war in Ukraine has direct implications for both security and domestic politics. Therefore, Georgia and Moldova, as states directly in the Russian sphere of interest, are long-term targets of Russian hybrid threats. Moreover, both, located within the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, have maintained long-term cooperative relationships with the EU, and the EU's securitisation of hybrid threats is expected to be associated with shifts in resilience-building practices. At the same time, important differences in scope conditions - particularly the level of governmental cooperation with the EU - distinguish the two cases. Moldova, under a pro-European government, has demonstrated increasingly close cooperation with the EU in recent years, with some resilience-building initiatives even originating domestically. In contrast, Georgia's recent political trajectory away from its European aspirations, has constrained the EU's ability to influence state-level policies. Consequently, Moldova can be considered a most-likely case, where the causal mechanism is expected to be clearly observable. Georgia, by contrast, represents a less-likely case, where the

mechanism may be weaker, though it may still operate through alternative channels, such as civil society actors. Taken together, these two case studies complement each other and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the EU's capacity to adopt differentiated approaches to support its neighbours in countering foreign interference.

4.2 Data collection

Referring back to the causal mechanism developed earlier in this chapter, the analysis the analysis proceeds in three main steps: first, the causal link between the independent and intervening variables; second, the relationship between the intervening and outcome variables; and finally, an in-depth descriptive analysis of the outcome variable.

Figure 4 - Three stages of research



The research process drew on a diverse range of empirical data sources to address these questions. The thesis employed both primary data, such as EU strategic and policy documents and interview findings, and secondary sources, including policy analyses and news reports. The following subchapters outline the methods of data collection, explain how the collected data will be utilized, and justify the suitability of these approaches for the research objectives.

4.2.1 Content analysis

Content analysis is a research method used to systematically examine and interpret the content of texts, communication, or media. It focuses on identifying patterns, themes, meanings or specific elements (such as words) within different types of material (Pierce, 2008). This method was used for two stages of the research process: first, to prove the causal relationship between the independent and intervening variables, and second, to draw the link between the intervening and dependent variables.

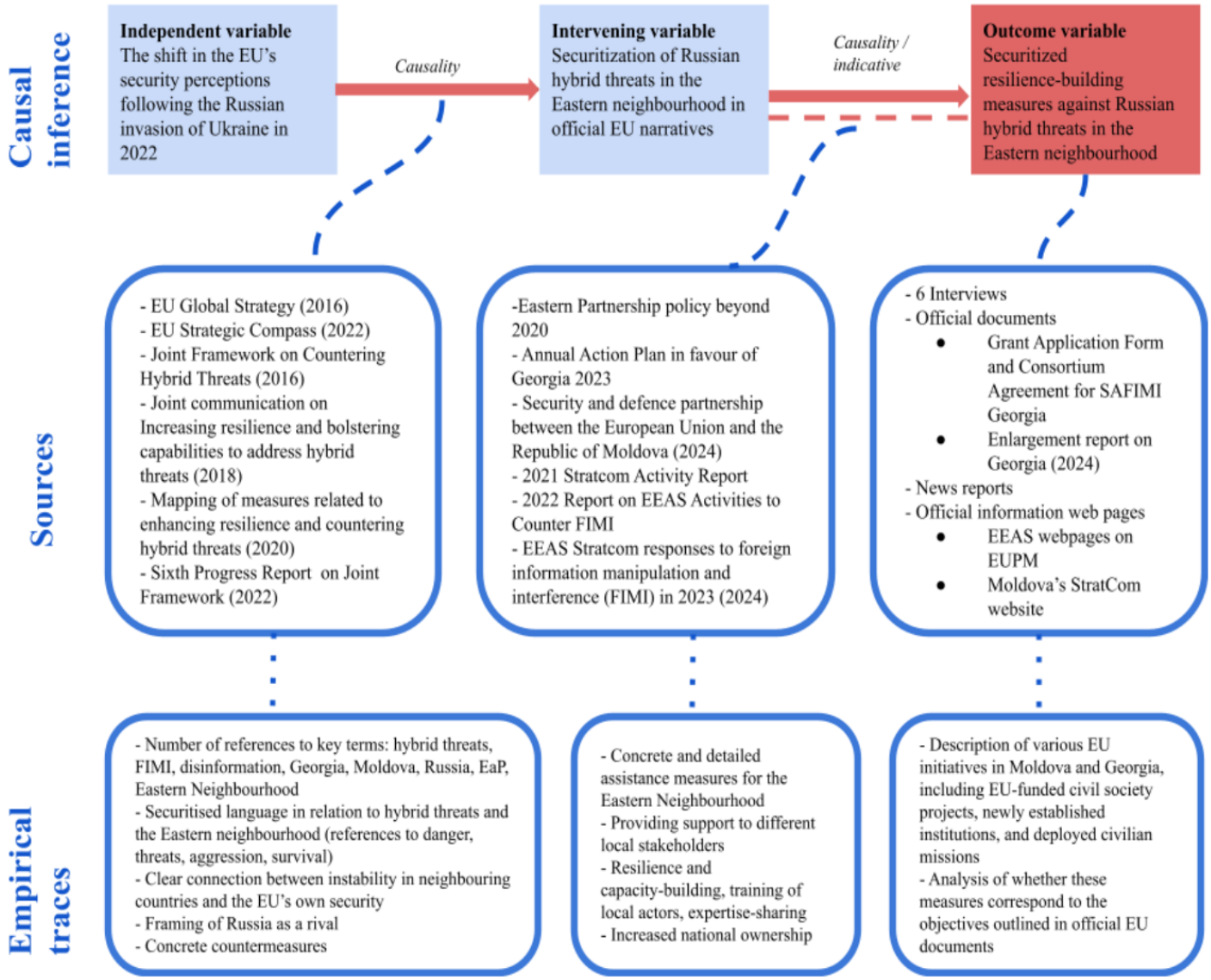
The first phase of the research aimed to confirm that shifting security perception of the EU after the war in Ukraine led to the securitisation of the official narratives. Initially, a comparative examination of two key strategic documents: the European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) and the EU Strategic Compass (SC) was conducted. The goal was to identify shifts in the EU's foreign and security policy priorities, comparing the security concerns of 2016 with those arising from the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. However, a direct comparison between these two documents alone was insufficient to establish a causal link between the security crisis in the region and the securitisation of EU narratives. To address this, the thesis also examined the development of EU policy on hybrid threats in the period between 2016 and 2022. By tracking the evolution of linguistic choices over time, it was possible to determine whether the securitisation of hybrid threats occurred gradually or emerged specifically in response to the 2022 crisis. If the intermediate policy documents had shown no significant increase in securitised language prior to 2022, this would indicate that the Russian invasion acted as a critical juncture, triggering the EU's securitisation of hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Since other factors, alongside the Russian war in Ukraine, may have influenced the securitisation process, the documents were searched for references to this specific conflict. Passing this test would provide strong confirmation for the hypothesis, making it a logical presumption that recent developments in the EU's engagement with neighbours against Russian interference are aligned with a securitisation logic. Consequently, the content analysis served as a "smoking gun" piece of evidence, enabling further investigation into the underlying causal mechanism (Collier, 2011).

The second step of the content analysis identified the EU's resilience-building measures in the Eastern Neighbourhood as articulated in official documents. For this purpose, four different sets of documents were scrutinised: the EEAS policy papers on FIMI, the EU Action Plan for

Georgia, the Security and Defence Partnership with Moldova, and a policy document concerning the EaP. These files were selected after reviewing a broader range of similar materials, as they most clearly articulate the assistance tools announced by the EU.

The texts were examined for references to specific resilience-building mechanisms, particularly those related to capacity-building for local actors, including state institutions and civil society organisations, as well as expertise and information-sharing, training opportunities, increased funding, strengthened national ownership, and broader societal awareness-raising initiatives. This coding approach provided a comprehensive overview of the EU's pragmatic resilience-building plans, upon which the actual practices in Moldova and Georgia were assessed. The detailed guide for data collection and analysis can be found on figure 5.

Figure 5 - Data collection and analysis



4.2.2 Interviews

The final step of the study was dedicated to a comprehensive investigation of the EU's resilience-building practices in Georgia and Moldova against Russian malign interference. Along with online resources, news reports and official documents, a significant share of data for this descriptive analysis was drawn from semi-structured interviews. The respondents can be categorised into three groups: practitioners working in local NGOs that are beneficiaries of the EU's support mechanisms, representatives of the EU Delegation to Moldova and Georgia, and academics specialising in Russian hybrid threats in the region.

Interviews lasted on average 30-60 minutes, were conducted online and transcribed using AI-assisted tools (with the exception of two interviews with the EU Delegation representatives, for which permission to record was not granted). Insights from these interviews were particularly valuable for understanding the outcome variable in depth. Direct engagement with practitioners involved in resilience-building projects provided a unique, on-the-ground perspective on EU initiatives, while discussions with policy experts enhanced the analytical understanding of EU motivations.

Table 1 - Respondents and semi-structured interview questions

	Practitioners from local civil society	**Academics**	**EU Delegations**
Respondents	Executive director of Media Development Fund (MDF), Georgia (Interview I) Editor-in-chief at Independent Journalism Centre (IJC), Moldova (Interview IV)	Senior Fellow at Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) (Interview II) Programme Officer at German Marshall Fund (Interview III)	Two representatives of EU Delegation to Georgia (Interview V) Representative of EU Delegation to Moldova (Interview VI)
Semi-structured interview questions	- What are the main Russian disinformation narratives currently circulating in Georgia/Moldova? - Who are the main actors and what are the main tools used for disseminating Russian disinformation? - Have there been any noticeable changes in Russian interference tactics since 2022? - How does Russian disinformation affect the work of your organisation? - What actions does your organisation undertake to counter Russian disinformation? - How does the EU support these activities, and what does this cooperation look like in practice? - What are the main weaknesses and challenges your organisation faces in countering disinformation? What additional support measures could strengthen civil society and media resilience? - Has the EU's engagement in countering hybrid threats changed since 2022? If yes, how?	- What are the main Russian disinformation narratives currently circulating in Georgia/Moldova? - Who are the main actors and what are the main tools used for disseminating Russian disinformation? - Have there been any noticeable changes in Russian interference tactics since 2022? - How would you assess the EU's support to Moldova in building resilience against foreign interference? - What have been the main EU projects and frameworks implemented in Moldova in the area of countering hybrid threats? - What are the main challenges in Moldova's accession process to the EU, and how does the EU's assistance against hybrid threats fit within this process? - Do you consider the EU's increased engagement in supporting Moldova's resilience to be linked to the growing securitisation of the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood?	- What are the EU's overall strategy and key objectives in supporting Moldova's efforts to counter hybrid threats? - How do Russian FIMI activities challenge EU-Moldova/Georgia relations and the country's integration process into the EU? - Has the outbreak of the war in Ukraine influenced the EU's approach to increasing hybrid threats? If so, how? - What are the key EU programmes or initiatives in Moldova/Georgia focused on countering hybrid threats and FIMI? - How does the EU engage with local stakeholders, such as state institutions, civil society, and journalists, in strengthening their resilience? What concrete steps are taken in areas such as capacity-building and expertise-sharing?

4.3 Limitations

The research plan faces several potential limitations that must be acknowledged to avoid overestimating what the PT method can achieve. First, implementing a within-case research design means that the findings are specific to the cases under study and cannot be generalized (Kay & Baker, 2015). The purpose of this research is to assess whether the theorized propositions hold in these cases, specifically, whether hybrid threats in eastern neighboring countries were securitised following security crises in the EU's neighbourhood, using Moldova and Georgia as examples. While the findings may contribute to the broader literature and provide evidence to guide future studies in other policy areas, it is not possible to conclude definitively that securitisation occurred in other countries or policy domains. Contextual factors unique to each country play a significant role in shaping the outcomes, and these must be considered when interpreting the results.

Another potential limitation arises from the impossibility of asserting with complete certainty that the selected variables are the sole causes of the observed outcome. Numerous other factors may have also influenced the outcome, but due to constraints of time and scope, these could not all be fully explored. However, the primary goal of this thesis is to assess the causal chain as proposed; this limitation does not undermine the purpose or value of the research.

Lastly, the thesis incorporates interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders in order to ensure a broad perspective. However, the absence of interviews with certain actors, particularly representatives of the EUPM mission and state institutions, constitutes a limitation of the research, as such insights could have contributed to a more holistic understanding of the examined practices.

5. Political context in Moldova and Georgia

This chapter seeks to provide a brief overview of the political context in Moldova and Georgia, including the most common Russian narratives spread in these countries and the most recent developments in their relations with the EU. This serves an important background for understanding the analysis section. As countries that fall within Russia's traditional sphere of interest and are involved in frozen conflicts, Moldova and Georgia have always been targets of Russian manipulation. However, the granting of EU candidate status to Moldova and Georgia in 2022 and 2023, respectively, made both countries more susceptible to such attacks. Ultimately, Russia aims to undermine their pro-Western path as well as democratic processes.

The overall tactic of Russia when it comes to conducting disinformation campaigns is "quantity over quality", meaning that the goal is to flood the information space with content that creates confusion among the public (Interview II). "Russians are trying to put out as much as they can to flood the enemy with narratives of different quality, of different kinds, from different sources. They don't really need to be very well prepared. They don't need to be well thought out. They just need to be overwhelming" (Interview II). Within this vast information space, three different strands of disinformation messages can be distinguished: exposing the weaknesses and negative aspects of the EU, manipulating narratives related to the war in the region, and presenting Russia as an alternative to the West.

Russia is actively trying to exploit the emotional sentiments of comparatively more conservative nations by presenting an image of the EU as an enemy of traditions and religious values (Interview I; II). This rhetoric claims that integration into the European Union will destroy the cultural and religious identities of Moldova and Georgia. It frames the EU as an entity that imposes unwanted conditions in order to force societal and cultural change on the population (Interview III). Moreover, overemphasised references to the weaknesses and limitations of Western democracies aim to generally undermine trust in the liberal democratic system and encourage a shift towards an opposing trajectory at the national level (Interview I). Furthermore, one of the most impactful propaganda lines among populations living in frozen territorial conflicts is the prospect of war with Russia. Both countries have experienced long-

lasting territorial disputes involving Russia and de facto breakaway regions over which they do not exercise control - Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in Georgia. Due to relatively recent experiences of armed conflict, the exploitation of fear of renewed war constitutes a particularly powerful political tool (Interview I). Russian narratives point at the West, an ambiguous actor, which seeks to open the "second front" against Russia in Moldova and Georgia. The same narratives also blame the West, particularly NATO, for the war in Ukraine (Kintsurashvili, 2025). In Moldova's case, internal messages often emphasise the possibility that the government could initiate military action in Transnistria, which would eventually escalate into a broader conflict (Interview II; III). Moreover, Russia does not portray itself as a peaceful neighbour but instead presents Georgia and Moldova as instruments used by Western actors to advance geopolitical proximity to Russia.

Lastly, Russia presents itself as an alternative partner to small neighbouring states. In the case of Georgia, the emphasis is placed on shared religious values (Interview I). In Moldova, Russia maintains a stronger economic leverage. Specifically, Moldova receives significant remittances from Russia, which are used as a point of pressure by framing the potential loss of access to the Russian labour market as a risk (Interview II). Moreover, Moldova remains highly dependent on Russian energy, which facilitates manipulation through the exploitation of this vulnerability and the restriction of supply (Całuś, 2023). Although Russian narratives promote the idea of the cheapest energy supply, Russia has politicised and weaponised energy by adjusting volumes and pricing conditions, contributing to rising gas and electricity prices (Interview II; Całuś, 2023).

Interestingly, in both Moldova and Georgia, the most prominent actors in the dissemination of disinformation are local political actors. In the case of Georgia, prior to 2022 Russian narratives were more fragmented; however, since 2022, following a clearer pro-Russian shift within the government, the ruling party has become the main conduit of disinformation (Interview I). Moldovan government cooperates closely with the EU, while most opposition parties openly or covertly support the country's closer ties with Russia. Hence, it is primarily political actors who take the lead in disinformation campaigns (Interview II; III).

Both Moldova and Georgia received the opportunity to apply for EU candidate status following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. However, the paths of the two countries took completely different political turns. Instead of meeting the recommendations given to Georgia by the

European Council as part of its candidacy conditionality, the country took a drastic shift in its relations with the EU. Along with the adoption of a package of legislative measures that significantly undermined democratic governance, the government officially suspended its accession process (Lavrelashvili & Hefele, 2025; van Dreven, 2024). On the other hand, Moldova has maintained close cooperation with the EU, opening official accession negotiations just two years after obtaining candidacy (Meister, 2024). EU-Moldova cooperation was especially significant prior to the 2025 elections, where both partners successfully identified and quickly reacted to illicit activities, ultimately safeguarding the electoral process. Therefore, despite facing similar external threats, Georgia's halted relations with the EU left it in a significantly more vulnerable position (Pup, 2026).

6. Data analysis

6.1 Securitisation in narratives

The following chapter aims to explore the evolution of the EU's narrative on hybrid threats before and after 2022. The objective is to determine whether hybrid threat-related issues in the Eastern Neighbourhood have become securitised within the EU's foreign and security policy as a result of the changing security environment in the region. The analysis encompasses a comparative content assessment of two strategic documents, as well as an in-depth examination of policy papers issued in the period between the two strategic documents. The findings focus on three main aspects: the level of attention devoted to hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the securitised language used in relation to these issues, and the concrete countermeasures outlined.

6.1.1 Comparative content analysis of the EU Global Strategy and the Strategic Compass

The EU Global Strategy and the Strategic Compass serve as key strategic frameworks for the EU's foreign and security policy. Issued by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in 2016 and 2022 respectively, these documents outline the EU's global action plan for the years ahead. Both strategic documents were developed in response to heightened security threats in the EU's neighbourhood. The EUGS was shaped by Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, as well as by the migration crisis and the Brexit referendum. The SC, on the other hand, although initiated earlier, reflects the EU's increased sense of urgency regarding its security and defence capabilities in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. An analysis of the texts reveals notable modifications in the EU's self-perception and priorities as a global security actor, including in its approach to hybrid threats over a relatively short six-year period.

Before turning to the analysis of hybrid threats policy, it is important to note that both documents share two overarching themes. First, both strategies demonstrate an increasing blurring of the dividing line between internal and external security. As stated in the EUGS, "my neighbour's and my partner's weaknesses are my own weaknesses" (EEAS, 2016, p. 4).

Similarly, the SC calls for the integration of the internal and external dimensions of EU policy through the mobilisation of all available capabilities (EEAS, 2022a, p. 34). Moreover, the coding analysis indicates a growing emphasis on the EU's development as a hard-power actor. The existence of seventeen civilian and military CFSP missions across the globe illustrates the EU's commitment to promoting global peace and security (EEAS, 2016, p. 4). Furthermore, the SC affirms that in order for diplomatic measures to prove successful, they need to be backed up by power behind it (EEAS, 2022a, p. 6).

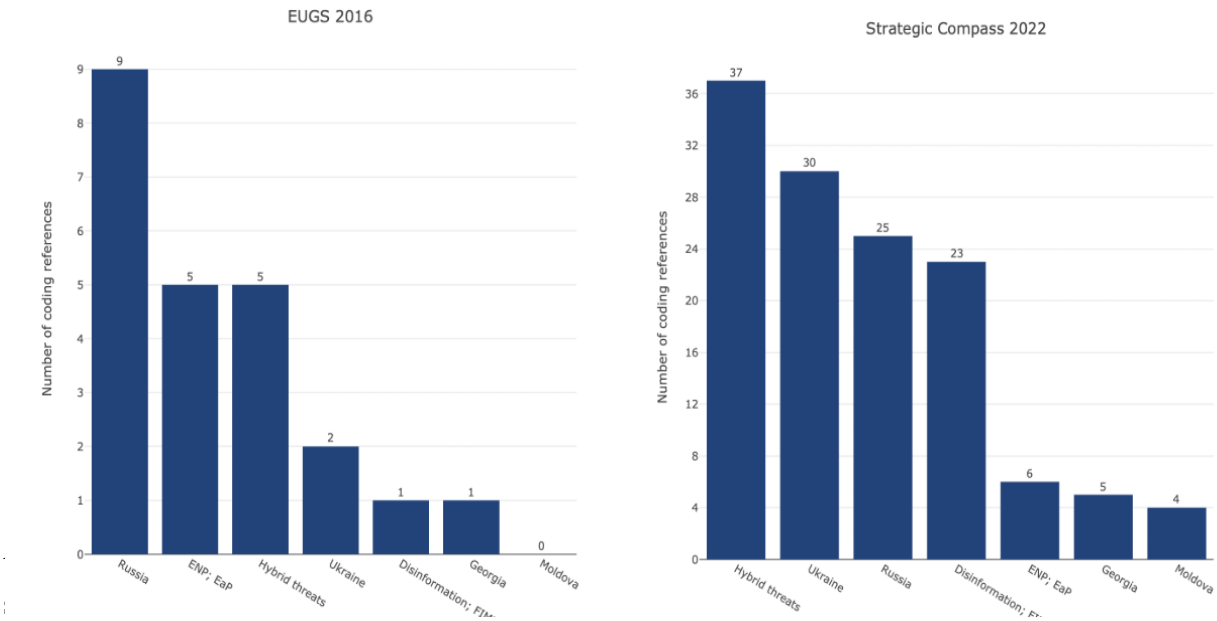
Beyond similarities, the EUGS and the SC adopt different conceptualisations of external security threats. The EUGS emphasises building resilience in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods, based on the premise that stability in surrounding regions guarantees European security. It also focuses on international governance and cooperation with regional orders. Contrary, the SC prioritises strengthening internal resilience of EU MSs against external threats. This reflects a highly securitised perception and an increased sense of vulnerability (Bargués, 2022). However, when examining the implementation aspect of both strategies in the policy field of hybrid threats, a paradox emerges. A close analysis reveals that the SC sets out significantly more concrete steps for strengthening the eastern neighbours in addressing security challenges. Meanwhile, the EUGS devotes limited attention to measures for countering hybrid threats in its neighbourhood.

The EUGS provides only limited and less detailed engagement with hybrid threats and concrete resilience-building measures and lacks securitised language regarding the threats in the neighbourhood. Although the EUGS acknowledges hybrid threats as an emerging security challenge, it addresses them within a broad spectrum of other risks, while the later SC devotes a dedicated section to hybrid threats and foreign information manipulation and interference. The EUGS, nevertheless, frames hybrid threats as harmful to the security of EU territories and citizens, generating fear that undermines the European way of life (EEAS, 2016, pp. 18-19). Despite the implicit sense of urgency, hybrid threats are primarily discussed alongside terrorism, cross-border crime, and other policy areas characterised by both internal and external components, rather than an autonomous security category (EEAS, 2016, p. 20). This broader framing can be explained by the prominence of large-scale migration flows for the EU security agenda at the time. Furthermore, the EUGS avoids clearly attributing hybrid activities to Russian interference, while references to the specific Eastern Partners and European Neighbourhood Policy remain more general as well. As a result, the document does not propose

concrete countermeasures aimed at building neighbouring states' resilience against hybrid threats. Generally, the strategy acknowledges the salience of enhanced EU-NATO cooperation as well as closer intra-institutional coordination for countering hybrid threats (EEAS, 2016, pp. 37; 50). The strategy also calls for several frameworks for cooperation with neighbours, including state and societal resilience-building, supporting the implementation of AAs, and developing more tailored partnerships with these countries (EEAS, 2016, p. 9, 25). Yet, it fails to specify concrete policy areas or operational mechanisms through which these resilience-building objectives would be implemented.

The first and most immediately noticeable difference between the two strategies is the significantly increased attention devoted to hybrid threats in the SC. As illustrated by Figure 6, a comparative textual analysis of the EUGS and the SC revealed a substantial rise in the frequency of selected keywords, which suggests that the salience of specific security-related topics has grown between 2016 and 2022. In particular, references to the concept of "hybrid threats", including its variations such as "hybrid attacks", "tactics", "conflicts", "strategies", "campaigns", and "activities", appear significantly more frequently in the SC. Moreover, the SC explicitly discusses the impact of hybrid threats particularly in the EaP. Lastly, SC frames Russia as the primary source of hybrid threats, which destabilise the EU's security architecture and constitute a key target of the EU's countermeasures.

Figure 6 - Comparative analysis of the EUGS and EU Strategic Compass



Frequent references to danger, threats, aggression, coercion, destabilisation and similar terms serve as evidence of this tendency. According to the SC, the EU perceives itself as operating in an intensely competitive geopolitical environment, where even technology and information are weaponised (EEAS, 2022a, p. 14). The document frames the exposure to foreign disinformation tactics as being in "a fierce battle of narratives" (EEAS, 2022, p. 4). Different forms of hybrid attacks facing the EU, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, direct interference in elections, economic coercive measures and instrumentalisation of migrants at the EU's external borders, are regarded as direct attacks on democratic sovereignty (EEAS, 2022a, p. 22). Moreover, the strategy states "the security of our citizens and our Union is at stake" (EEAS, 2022a, p. 14). Elevating the survival and security of citizens, beyond merely the stability of the political system, constitutes a classical securitising language. Lastly, these challenges are envisioned as not only threatening to domestic stability, but also to the EU's geopolitical position and its ability to enforce its interests globally (EEAS, 2022a, p. 10).

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that, beyond conventional military tools, threats stemming from "disinformation and foreign interference operations" have become increasingly destabilising for EU security (EEAS, 2022a, p. 5). However, the EU's focus extends beyond Ukraine, as the priorities also encompass Moldova, Georgia, and the South Caucasus, which face "strategic intimidation" from Russia (EEAS, 2022a, p. 19). Consequently, the strategic text signals a shift towards more systematic engagement with Eastern Partners on security and defence issues (EEAS, 2022a, p. 55). Even more, the Compass, under the subsection named as "tailored bilateral partnerships", directly refers to the Russian hostile interference in its Eastern partner states as a threat to the EU's internal security.

> *"The challenges faced by Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, including hostile interference by Russia and the extensive use of military instruments and hybrid tactics, compromise their stability and their democratic processes and have direct implications for our own security" (EEAS, 2022a, p.56).*

Part of the securitisation process can be observed in the strategy's geopolitical mapping of the region, in which Russia is constructed as the adversarial actor, while the EU assumes the role of a protector of its neighbourhood. The EU's foreign and security policy is underpinned by an implicit logic of "othering" Russia, with the Eastern Neighbourhood constituting one of the main contested spaces between them (Korosteleva, 2019). Moreover, geopolitical narratives

and the rising focus on Russia can be considered as an attempt of establishing ontological security by attributing the otherwise vague concept of hybrid threats to one adversary (Eberle & Daniel, 2022). In light of this, the strategic documents indicate the shift towards more assertive language to Russia, reflecting a broader process of securitisation. The EUGS adopts a comparatively softer approach, condemning the breach of international law through the annexation of Crimea and destabilization of the whole Black Sea region, while still leaving room for negotiations in spheres of common interests between the EU and Russia.

> *"Substantial changes in relations between the EU and Russia are premised upon full respect for international law. At the same time, we will engage Russia to discuss disagreements and cooperate if and when our interests overlap" (EEAS, 2016, p. 33).*

In contrast, the SC explicitly characterizes Russia as a direct threat to the European security order. Russian actions violate international law and the UN Charter, which are the very foundations for the European security structure. "These aggressive and revisionist actions for which the Russian government, together with its accomplice Belarus, is entirely responsible, severely and directly threaten the European security order and the security of European citizens" (EEAS, 2022a, p. 17). Furthermore, the text highlights specific violations across the Eastern Neighbourhood, mentioning the 2008 war against Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the growing control over Belarus, the prolongation of territorial conflicts in Moldova, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. (EEAS, 2022a, p. 17). Through this framing, the EU constructs a clear adversarial distinction vis-à-vis Russia, which strengthens the justification for enhanced security and defence measures. At the same time, the increased emphasis on individual Eastern partner states reinforces the EU's ambition for a strong geostrategic position in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

Lastly, the SC showcases a clear enhancement of policymaking in the field of hybrid threats compared to the previous strategy. The document itself calls for a "quantum leap forward on security and defence" (EEAS, 2022a, p. 7). Furthermore, "to tackle cyber threats, disinformation and foreign interference" is identified as one of the EU's primary objectives within the strategy (EEAS, 2022a, p. 7). The SC adopts a comparatively more comprehensive approach to hybrid threats and foreign information manipulation and interference, particularly

by identifying exact targets of such interventions, emphasising the cooperation with partner states and outlining concrete steps towards building a toolbox to counter the risks. The EU refers to its coordinated and firm response to Russian disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine and expresses its intention to continue such decisive measures in strengthening its response capabilities (EEAS, 2022a, p. 34). Moreover, the Compass, directly asserts that cooperation with partners on hybrid threats, disinformation and cybersecurity will be intensified.

> *"As close partners to the EU, specific dialogues and cooperation with Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova will be strengthened, in particular in areas such as countering hybrid threats, disinformation and cybersecurity" (EEAS, 2022a, p.56).*

As mentioned previously, the EU has not only acknowledged the threats deriving from Russian interference but has also proposed concrete countermeasures. The SC explicitly introduces the EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams under the EU Hybrid Toolbox, described as "adaptable to the threat and drawing on relevant sectoral national and EU civilian and military expertise to support MSs, CSDP missions and operations and partner countries in countering hybrid threats" (EEAS, 2022a, p. 34). Furthermore, CSDP civilian missions are viewed as key contributors to strengthening the EU's capacity to combat hybrid threats, particularly in the external dimension of its policy through cooperation with partner states (EEAS, 2022a, p. 27). The EU has also announced ad hoc missions funded through the European Peace Facility, which will be linked through operational cooperation and information sharing and promote the EU's interests on the global stage (EEAS, 2022a, p. 26). Last but not least, the strategy foresees the deployment of EU and national experts to support partner states in cyber crisis management (EEAS, 2022a, p. 35). Overall, the EU aims to ensure "more rapidity, robustness and flexibility" in response to critical situations (EEAS, 2022a, p. 25).

The SC constructs a plan of pragmatic EU action in support of its partners. Instead of abstract conceptual discussions, the document calls for clear steps in the geopolitically competitive environment (EEAS, 2022a, p. 6). Two key aspects of the EU's pragmatic strategy combine the identification of limitations in existing hybrid threat policy and implementing a tailored approach (EEAS, 2022a, p. 39). "A more tailored and integrated approach to capacity building of partners will be pursued", including training and advisory support during the

emergency situations. The European Peace Facility will serve as an additional funding instrument. Additionally, the coordination of military assistance with civilian resilience-building, national security sector reform and other forms of support is presented as a vital measure to bolster partners' capacities against hybrid threats (EEAS, 2022a, pp. 57-58).

To summarise, the side-by-side analysis of the EU Global Strategy and the Strategic Compass illustrated a significant alteration in the EU's policy on hybrid threats and the neighbourhood. Attention to these specific issues in the latter strategy has risen significantly, as hybrid threats and the security assistance to eastern neigbhours in this field have moved higher on EU security policy agenda. Moreover, the strategy uses securitised framings on these topics, representing them as existential to the EU's survival. Lastly, the Compass outlines more concrete measures to be implemented in the EU's assistance to its neighbours, which reflects more comprehensive policymaking in this field. Overall, the 2022 strategic paper adopts a securitised approach towards hybrid threats stemming from the neighbouring region. In fact, this alteration is clearly underscored by a security crisis of an unprecedented scale, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

6.1.2 Content analysis of policy papers on hybrid threats (2016-2022)

A comparison of the EUGS and the SC reveal a significant shift in the EU's positioning as a security actor, as well as an increased securitisation of hybrid threats in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. However, this evidence alone is insufficient to conclude that this shift was caused by altered perceptions of the security environment because of the war in Ukraine alone. Instead, a closer analysis of specific policy documents over this six-year period can help determine whether the securitisation of EU policy reflects a gradual evolution or an immediate response to the regional crisis.

The first dedicated EU policy document on hybrid threats, the Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats from 2016, and the Sixth Progress Report issued in 2022, are similar in acknowledging the impact of a challenging security environment in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood on the Union's stability, as well as the need to enhance tools to counter hybrid threats. However, the difference is that the earlier policy papers include more limited reference to concrete actions in support of neighbours' resilience against hybrid threats. This can suggest

either that the EU has created new tools in later years, or that there was less political attention to this issue on the policy agenda at the time.

According to the Joint Framework, strategic communication is the central point of cooperation with neighbouring countries, notably via East StratCom, which aims at monitoring and countering disinformation (EC & HR, 2016, p.5). In addition, the security aspect in the ENP is addressed at the juxtaposition of security and development policies, particularly by supporting security sector reform and institutional capacity-building. The document also presents terrorism, organised crime and illegal migration as key priorities in bilateral relations with partners (EC & HR, 2016, p. 14). These themes remain consistent in subsequent policy documents. The policy paper from 2018 and the mapping of measures from 2020 continue to offer limited detail regarding the concrete measures to build partners' resilience against Russian meddling.

The Sixth Report on the Joint Framework, issued in 2022, represents a visible step forward in the EU's policy on countering hybrid threats. In particular, the report identifies a comparative rise in the prioritisation of disinformation on the policy agenda and introduces the concept of FIMI as part of a broader framework of hybrid threats for the first time. The document outlines the EU's "commitment to building local and regional partnerships with civil society activists, fact-checkers, opinion leaders, governments and journalists to counter FIMI" (EC & HR, 2022, p. 6). Through coordination with local stakeholders, as well as proactive fact-based communication strategies, the EU aims to raise awareness of ongoing Kremlin propaganda and equip partners with the necessary tools to counter it. Furthermore, the report introduces the CyberEast Programme, which provides technical assistance to eastern neighbours, and delineates financial support under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) to strengthen Ukraine's cyber resilience (EC & HR, 2022, pp. 28-29). It also highlights strict monitoring of the implementation of the ban on Russian media channels within the EU under the Code of Practice of Disinformation (EC & HR, 2022, p. 7).

According to the 2022 report, COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for the EU to strengthen its response to information manipulation from other countries, especially the EC's role in helping MSs' strategic communication on public health issues (EC & HR, 2022, p. 5). However, at the same time "mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the progress in supporting the EU's neighbours has been slower than anticipated" (EC & HR, 2022, p. 31). On the other

hand, the war in Ukraine is consistently cited as the "unprecedented crisis" that necessitated an urgent expansion of the EU's hybrid tools and neighbourhood outreach (EC & HR, 2022, p. 28). The Russian aggression in Ukraine served as a wake-up call for the EU, which "demonstrates the need to constantly adapt … tools and measures to respond to common threats" and to protect the EU and its partners (EC & HR, 2022, p. 32).

Taken together, the analysis of four policy documents reveals that in earlier years the EU's cooperation with neighbours regarding hybrid threats was primarily centred on analytical and communicative measures, with an emphasis on broad, region-wide approaches. In 2022, however, the focus shifted towards more operational and reactive instruments. There was also a clearer move towards more tailored, context-specific measures. Despite different crisis situations acting as a barrier to stronger engagement with neighbours regarding information manipulation, Russian aggression compelled the EU to upscale its assistance to neighbours against Russian malign tactics. It was only after 2022 that the regional security crisis significantly accelerated the EU's attention to hybrid threats beyond its borders and in its neighbourhood.

6.2 The discursive construction of resilience-building in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood

The second step in the causal chain aimed at identifying the EU's resilience-building mechanisms that were formally presented in the documents. As a result of exploring the EU Action Plans towards Georgia and Moldova, bilateral security agreements, the EaP, and FIMI policy papers, this chapter constructs a holistic image of the EU's tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) for resilience-building, particularly in the context of hybrid threats and FIMI. The analysis demonstrated that the EU employs a comprehensive and all-inclusive approach to resilience-building, which spans the whole cycle - from the identification of threats and the analysis of strategies to providing support at three levels: state institutions, civil society, and citizens.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly impacted the EU's actions regarding hybrid threats, and FIMI in particular. Alongside conventional tools of warfare, disinformation served as a key driving instrument of Russia's actions. Through information manipulation, Russia

long before the invasion tried to set the stage and justify its decision to invade and afterwards attempted to undermine the West's resolve to provide unequivocal support for Ukraine (EEAS, 2023, pp. 3-4). Hence, action reports from EEAS present FIMI as a dual-imaged issue with internal and external dimensions, which requires "working with like-minded partner countries to either support them in their work against FIMI or in working together to address an issue that goes beyond national borders" (EEAS, 2022b, p. 2).

Situational awareness and risk assessment hold a primary position in the EU hybrid toolbox. On the regional level, the EUvsDisinfo flagship project plays a pivotal role in identifying and exposing Kremlin propaganda in neighbouring countries and is accessible in local languages (EEAS, 2024). Furthermore, the EU has conducted several Hybrid Risk Surveys in Georgia and Moldova over the past years. As an outcome, the surveys identified key vulnerabilities in these countries, as well as potential areas for future assistance. Consequently, the EU provided recommendations for priority domains requiring improvement (European Commission, 2023, p. 11; Council of the European Union, 2024). The most recent Security and Defence Partnership with Moldova further reaffirms the importance of joint risk analysis with local academia and centres of excellence (Council of the European Union, 2024).

The EU aims to actively coordinate with local governments of partner states with the objective of jointly countering FIMI. The EU's collaboration with neighbouring countries has long relied on the logic of stronger shared ownership of different policies, especially in the security sector (European Commission et al., 2020, p. 17). Concretely, the experience in Georgia has outlined a crucial need for an increased sense of national ownership in the security field, including in tackling hybrid threats. The existing national security strategy is considered outdated and inefficient in the altered regional security environment (European Commission, 2023, p. 11). However, beyond the mere documentation of a security strategy, there is also a need for increased capacity, accountability, and transparency within national security institutions. For this reason, the EU aims to assist in enhancing national public policies and government structures for addressing hybrid threats (European Commission, 2023, p. 6). In Moldova, for instance, the EU has supported the enhancement of the country's strategic communication institutional capacities and helped strengthen the capacity of the Audiovisual Council, which oversees the information and media domain (EEAS, 2022b).

Moreover, the EU actively empowers local civil society who play a significant role in building countries' resilience against hybrid threats. Policy development processes in neighbouring

states require strong oversight mechanisms which civil society delivers. In this matter, the EU plans to support communication between the state and civil society for an enhanced security partnership (European Commission, 2023, p.15). Different civil society actors also play a significant role in practically countering disinformation, raising awareness and so on. The EU provides valuable training opportunities for civil society representatives as well as financial support to media and NGOs who are engaged in countering FIMI in Eastern Neighbourhood countries (EEAS, 2023b, p.14).

Last but not least, the documents call for a whole-of-society approach and announce engagement with diverse initiatives. This implies, first of all, raising citizens' awareness about disinformation, which requires nationwide caution (European Commission, 2023, p. 6). The EU Action Plan for Georgia, for example, applies a human rights prism to security issues; hence, building resilience against disinformation is viewed as a way of ensuring the enjoyment of human rights (European Commission, 2023, p. 5). Secondly, the whole-of-society approach to FIMI implies strengthening various actors, including creating more agile fact-checkers, academic researchers, journalists, media monitors, and others (European Commission, 2023, p. 17; EEAS, 2024, p. 4).

Overall, the EU's approach to countering FIMI in neighbouring countries follows the logic of tailored and integrated cooperation with partners, as set out in the SC. The Hybrid Risk Surveys conducted in Moldova and Georgia represent attempts to analyse local needs and vulnerabilities. Moreover, resilience-building against hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood mainly implies the capacity-building of local state and non-state actors, thereby fostering a stronger sense of national ownership. Such capacity-building is implemented through increased engagement in expertise-sharing and financial support.

6.3 Resilience-building measures in the Eastern Neighbourhood

6.3.1 Georgia

Since 2022, the EU's cooperation with the Georgian government has gradually become largely nominal due to the ruling party's anti-Western shift. Currently, the EU maintains very limited engagement with the government (Interview V). At the same time, despite deteriorating relations with the state, the EU has continued to actively engage with Georgian civil society in order to support resilience-building efforts, including against Russian disinformation campaigns following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. This chapter briefly explores significant failures in the Georgian government's policy on hybrid threats, demonstrating why the EU can no longer exercise meaningful leverage in supporting Georgian state institutions in this area. Furthermore, the main focus of the chapter is the EU-funded SAFIMI project, implemented in cooperation with two major NGOs in Georgia, which aimed to enhance cross-sectoral cooperation and foster a more active and informed community of actors engaged in countering information manipulation.

The Georgian state maintained a rather vague policy on hybrid threats for a considerable period of time. More specifically, the official narratives presented in government communication documents significantly differed from the actual policies implemented by the StratCom units (Interview I). The communication strategy documents on Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as broader governmental strategic communication documents, clearly framed Russian hybrid threats as one of the main national security challenges. At the same time, however, the Government's Strategic Communication Service utilised its capacities primarily to focus on the internal control and discrediting of critical media outlets. There were even fake online accounts uncovered on social media platforms that carried out disinformation campaigns against Ukraine (Kintsurashvili, 2025). Moreover, Western funding aimed at strengthening the Georgian government's strategic communication capacities eventually backfired, as these structures increasingly became associated with anti-Western rhetoric (Neal, 2024). The EU's 2024 Enlargement Communication explicitly stated that Georgia failed to implement the recommendation related to measures against disinformation, which had been included among the conditions for granting the country candidate status (Kintsurashvili, 2025). The ruling party's active anti-Western rhetoric, together with the rapid adoption of several pieces of legislation directly contradicting democratic values and human rights standards, as well as

other developments, ultimately led to the official suspension of EU-Georgia cooperation on FIMI and related issues (European Commission, 2024b, p. 94). Indeed, the lack of political will to restore relations makes meaningful EU support in this area nearly impossible, as such cooperation requires initiative and commitment from both parties (Interview V).

Amid declining relations with the government, the EU strengthened its support to civil society in countering Russian FIMI. In 2025, the EU launched a broad two-year initiative under the NDICI funding instrument aimed at strengthening societal resilience against FIMI in Georgia. The project, titled "SAFIMI: Georgian Society Against FIMI, Disinformation and Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour," brought together two civil society organisations from the EU and two major Georgian NGOs - Media Development Foundation (MDF) and Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia) (Media Development Foundation, n.d). Several EU-funded projects have been implemented in Georgia since 2022 to support local civil society, most of them focusing on more specific aspects of countering hybrid threats, such as strengthening human rights standards in the security sector, mapping terrorist group disinformation in the EU's neighbourhood, or promoting media literacy and critical media consumption through public workshops (Richter, 2025, pp. 15–17). However, SAFIMI stood out as the first project of its kind implemented in Georgia due to its comprehensive and multidimensional approach. It simultaneously incorporated a research dimension aimed at exploring and identifying the main disinformation narratives in the country, while also providing the necessary tools to build societal resilience at multiple levels, including the media, civil society, and governmental sectors (European Commission, 2024a).

This particular project encompassed all the aspects of the EU's securitised resilience-building, as conceptualised in the previous chapter. First of all, by utilising the expertise of Georgian and European NGOs, the project began with a "comprehensive baseline study". The research identified main gaps in the state's protection from foreign interference, as well as the main tactics and narratives through which Russian disinformation is spread in Georgia (European Commission, 2024a, p. 8). Beyond sharing the study results with various stakeholders and raising situational awareness, the findings of this study were also used as a basis for the next phase of the project, namely the development of a "multi-stakeholder FIMI toolkit" (European Commission, 2024a, p. 9). Hence, the first stage of the project functioned both as an outcome in itself and as a foundational step for the subsequent activities, enabling a tailored, country-

specific engagement grounded in both the political context within Georgia and the needs of different stakeholder actors in the FIMI domain.

Secondly, the initiative aspired to enhance the capacity of national actors to identify and counter information threats. Through tailored training tracks, the European counterparts in collaboration with Georgian NGOs, provided expertise to different media practitioners, fact-checkers, journalists, local NGOs, and government representatives in various regions. Through these trainings, local actors were introduced to FIMI tools such as European standards of fact-checking, the DISARM framework (a systematised language for documenting foreign information manipulation operations), pre-bunking, public policy development, among others (European Commission, 2024a, p. 9). Beyond strengthening each category of actors, the SAFIMI project also aimed at the creation of a "multistakeholder community against FIMI and other information threats" which would bring together representatives from civil society, the media, and local authorities (European Commission, 2024a, p. 9). Considering the highly polarised political environment in Georgia, the creation of a platform for collaboration between the government and civil society, knowledge-sharing, and the development of tools against foreign information manipulation was an ambitious but very necessary objective. Additionally, the initiative also aimed to have a society-wide impact by establishing the MDF's Telegram chatbot, which would provide accessible real-time monitoring of disinformation, including in languages of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, as a flagship initiative of the project, dozens of media literacy public trainings and forums were planned in municipalities, particularly targeting youth (European Commission, 2024a, pp. 9-10). In this way, these flagship programmes, together with the other forms of intervention outlined above, sought to ensure a long-term resilience-building impact.

The EU initiative faced significant and realistic threats already at the stage of its proposal and early implementation. The Transparency of Foreign Influence bill adopted by the Georgian parliament in 2024 constituted a direct instrument for pressuring civil society organisations receiving EU funding for their operations (Goedemans, 2024). Taking this into consideration, the consortium agreement of the SAFIMI project clearly reflected the anticipated risks, including the potential freezing of accounts and its possible impact on the functioning of the project (SAFIMI Georgia Consortium Agreement, 2025). Indeed, after the completion of the first phase of the project, which implied the publication of the MDF report on FIMI in Georgia, the subsequent stages were not implemented, and the project was ultimately shut down.

According to the executive director of MDF, the cancellation, alongside financial difficulties, was caused by the need to protect potential participants of the project from governmental scrutiny (Interview I). The shutdown of the project directly reflects a broader trend in which many other EU-funded projects, as well as local NGOs themselves, have been forced to suspend their activities due to the increasing pressure created over the past two years.

Overall, in Georgia, the EU very actively initiated support to build the resilience of a diverse range of stakeholders against Russian disinformation. The SAFIMI project adopted an overarching approach, with ambitious and broad impact through enhanced cross-sectoral cooperation and capacity building of diverse actors tailored to their needs. This clearly corresponds with the idea that the EU has treated disinformation in neighbouring Georgia as a security issue since the war in Ukraine. However, the anti-Western shift in the country's foreign policy trajectory created a domestic political constraint that the EU could not overcome. This has significantly limited the EU's role as a security actor in the country.

6.3.2 Moldova

The Russian war of aggression has acted as a major incentive for strengthening regional resilience and advancing new security-related activities in Moldova (Interview IV; VI). Since 2022, the EU's support to Moldova in countering Russian hybrid threats has resulted in several unprecedented initiatives, demonstrating the EU's growing capacity as a security provider in the region. European initiatives have encompassed all main FIMI actors in the country, as well as various frameworks and mechanisms of cooperation. Unlike in Georgia, the EU has established a closely integrated cooperation with the Moldovan government, including the deployment of a CFSP mission and the creation of state bodies specialising in strategic communication, FIMI and crisis management. At the same time, the EU has actively supported local media and civil society, alongside broader society-wide awareness-building efforts

.The most significant development in EU cooperation with Moldovan state is the new CFSP mission launched with the aim of providing tailored security sector support. The European Union Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova) was deployed in 2023 in response to increased Russian attempts to destabilise Moldova through hybrid attacks amid the war in Ukraine. The mission represents a unique civilian mission of the EU with a particular mandate

of assisting state resilience-building against hybrid threats, FIMI, and cyberattacks (Benkler, 2023). As outlined in the official objectives of the initiative, the mission aims to enhance crisis management capabilities, support resilience against foreign hybrid and information interference, and provide targeted support to Moldovan authorities (EEAS, 2023a). The mission's main point of cooperation is with state authorities and intelligence services (Interview IV). As for the concrete mechanisms and techniques, EUPM has adopted a "train, advise, equip" approach (Van der Togt, 2025). In particular, experts from 12 EU MSs first investigate and define the main vulnerabilities and provide advice on best practices to enhance policy, including legislative updates (EEAS, 2023a; Interview VI; Van der Togt, 2025). Furthermore, the professionals share their experience and expertise in order to train Moldovan officials for critical situations. Lastly, they provide institutions with technical equipment and know-how to strengthen capacities (Van der Togt, 2025). Interestingly, the former head of EUPM has clarified that "EUPM is a non-executive mission; this means that while … supporting the Moldovan authorities with advice, training and equipment, it is the Moldovan authorities themselves that have the role and capacity to respond to attacks and threats" (Van der Togt, 2025). Hence, with its operational nature, including its tailored capacity-building through expertise-sharing and the attribution of local responsibility for countering actual threats, the EUPM aligns with the overall EU's resilience-building strategy in partner states, as outlined multiple times in this thesis.

The EUPM itself became instrumental in supporting the establishment of several crucial institutions in the field. "These institutions were created ad hoc … as disinformation campaigns intensified specifically after 2022" (Interview III). Moreover, Moldova's alignment with the EU and the opening of the accession process necessitated the creation of new institutions (Interview III). One of the flagship projects, the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (StratCom Centre), emerged as a central agency tasked with "detect[ing], analys[ing] and respond[ing] to disinformation campaigns" (EEAS, 2025a). The StratCom Centre became the first Moldovan body to engage in the regular development of strategic communication against FIMI (Interview VI). A central element of the institution involves moving beyond passive and reactive engagement with FIMI towards strengthening societal resilience through the creation of solid counter-narratives supporting Moldova's pro-European path. At the same time, the Centre facilitates cross-institutional and cross-sectoral cooperation with actors such as the media, civil society, and academia (Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, n.d). Moreover, the EUPM played a crucial

role in the establishment of the Cybersecurity Agency, which promotes interinstitutional cooperation across the government in responding to cyber threats (EEAS, 2025a). Lastly, the most recent addition, the National Crisis Management Centre, has served as a navigator during crisis situations such as the energy crisis caused by Russian attacks on power plants in Ukraine that supply Moldova (Interview III). All of the flagship initiatives were supported by the EU through specialised trainings, the involvement of EU MSs' expertise in cooperation with Moldova, the sharing of EU standards, and support for the harmonisation of relevant legislation (EEAS, 2025a).

Lastly, it is important to separately highlight the EU's significant role during Moldova's highly contested 2025 parliamentary elections, supporting the state through various mechanisms both before and on election day. "Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections marked a turning point in the EU's approach to defending democratic processes beyond its borders" (Pup, 2026). The EU showcased the significant potential of its cyber diplomacy as, for the first time, it deployed the European Cybersecurity Reserve under the EU Cyber Solidarity Act ahead of Moldova's elections. Democratic processes in the state were under immense threat, with Russian networks also targeting the Central Election Commission (Interview III). The deployed team of experts supported the Moldovan government's readiness against critical infrastructure attacks as well as FIMI operations conducted through cyber spheres (Pup, 2026). As one interviewee noted, "without the proper observation of elections… the outcome of the elections would be different, and Moldova would now be in a different situation when it comes to democracy, institutions, civil society, and political actors" (Interview III).

The EU has also been highly active in strengthening Moldova's civil society and media resilience against FIMI. Local NGOs, independent media, watchdogs, and fact-checkers play an equally significant role alongside the government in countering Russian disinformation (Interview III). Russian information manipulation campaigns actively seek to undermine public trust in the media. In particular, disinformation affects the effective functioning of the media sector by forcing journalists to constantly debunk propaganda narratives instead of focusing on reporting itself (Interview IV). Consequently, "the trust in media is at its lowest point in Moldova" (Interview IV). In response to these challenges, the Independent Journalism Centre (IJC), one of the major civil society actors in the media sphere, implements projects across multiple dimensions. The organisation closely cooperates with the government and acts as both an expert and a scrutiniser in the transposition of European legislation in Moldova, particularly

on issues such as audiovisual regulation, media transparency, and media freedom. At the same time, it implements projects aimed at raising societal awareness of disinformation, especially among schoolteachers. NGOs of this type also remain directly engaged in debunking and countering FIMI narratives in the media space (Interview IV). The EU actively supports local media and civil society through different consortium agreements and funding mechanisms (Interview VI). Financial assistance remains one of the EU's main tools in this regard, as a large share of Moldovan media outlets rely heavily on grants for functioning. Particularly after the closure of USAID (The United States Agency for International Development) programmes, the EU has increasingly become the main donor providing financial support for projects aimed at sustaining independent media and countering disinformation (Interview IV).

"Moldova's authorities want to present the country as a hub for countering hybrid threats," given its unique position at the forefront of Russian aggression and its first-hand experience with the multifaceted nature of hybrid threats (Interview III). Engagement with Moldova against Russian disinformation has also proven beneficial for the EU's expanding expertise in this specific area of security policy. In particular, the experience of safeguarding Moldova's elections against Russian interference has enabled the EU to build significant practical expertise in providing such assistance. "The Moldovan counterparts are invited to different seminars and conferences, both in Brussels or in MSs, to share their experience, the expertise that they gained during two electoral cycles" (Interview VI). In fact, the EU now draws on this experience in supporting other upcoming contested elections in the region, such as in Armenia (Interview III).

In sum, the EU's engagement with Moldova against Russian disinformation demonstrates the securitisation of this policy issue in the neighbourhood. This conclusion can be drawn from two main arguments. First, the EU has launched a wide variety of activities encompassing all local stakeholders and aimed at building resilience. Second, it has relied on concrete mechanisms of the EU's securitised resilience-building practice - ranging from large financial assistance to expertise-sharing and capacity-building measures, while still granting national ownership a central role in combating disinformation. Despite these positive developments, there are various factors that could undermine the EU's security actorness in the region, which will be discussed in the following subchapter.

6.4 Discussion: narratives vs implementation

The data analysis demonstrated that both the EU's policy and strategic papers, as well as the actual resilience-building measures implemented in Georgia and Moldova, reflect the EU's increasingly securitised approach to Russian hybrid threats in its relations with Eastern Partners. The assistance initiatives directed towards these two countries correspond with the EU's strategic objectives for providing such support, as outlined in official narratives. Hence, the EU's policy practice remains consistent with its narratives. However, a deeper exploration also makes it possible to identify several important points that may undermine the EU's security actorness in the region or constitute important points of discussion. This chapter focuses on four main issues emerging from the collected data. First, it explores the limitations of the EU's capacity-building assistance, focusing on both the shortcomings of EU actions, and the broader domestic political contexts in partner countries that constrain the EU's leverage. Second, the chapter examines how assistance aimed at strengthening resilience against disinformation relates to the ongoing accession process in Moldova. Lastly, it raises the question of the alignment between "national" or "shared ownership" as a central principle of the EU's resilience-building approach and its actual implementation.

Limitations of the EU's resilience-building assistance

The media in Moldova is facing serious challenges, especially regarding basic needs such as funding and human resources, which makes the EU's current support somewhat ineffective. Most media actors in the country depend on donors to function, which makes them highly vulnerable. Particularly, in a difficult economic environment they struggle to survive. Hence, beyond just providing funding through different member state- or EU-led projects, the EU should step up its assistance of overall economic development, which would naturally improve the media environment (Interview VI). Moreover, the lack of staff, as well as their lack of professional preparation, is a substantial issue. The EU is becoming increasingly active right now in providing training to Moldova's journalists on European standards. However, "when you work under a constant pressure to find money, to find people, to give salaries, the DSA is somewhere there as an abstract concept" (Interview IV).

Moreover, the EU needs to enhance the consistency of its institutional support to Moldova. The EU's activity in Moldova peaked around the election period but subsequently declined, although hybrid threats are continuous. "After the pro-EU party won, … after the 2025 elections, the EU changed its focus and shifted to … safeguarding of elections in Armenia… But Kremlin tactics are focused … throughout the year; these networks are operating constantly" (Interview III). Fluctuations in the intensity of EU support creates a risk of unsustainable resilience and could leave a security vacuum.

Beyond specific policy areas, the broader political dynamics in Moldova and Georgia limit the EU's effectiveness and strategic leverage as a security partner. Moldova is in need of urgent reform in its justice system, which would enable the prosecution of those involved in illegal actions like illicit money flows during elections or vote buying. Moreover, it is important that the government achieves maximum consolidation of public opinion regarding European integration. Building this popular support for the EU and its supporting activities in Moldova is beyond the EU's strength. It is mostly the government's responsibility to provide quality communication with the general public, which is an ongoing challenge for the Moldovan authorities (Interview II). In Georgia, the EU has actively attempted to support anti-disinformation capacity through various projects and by promoting this as a prerequisite recommendation for the enlargement process. However, the lack of cooperation and a drastic change in the country's foreign policy trajectory have completely left no room for EU action.

Cooperation on hybrid threats - enlargement process

Moreover, the EU's activities against hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood lack a coherent strategic connection between these policies and the EU accession process. EU initiatives tend to be event-driven and insufficiently integrated into a long-term enlargement framework (Devuyst, 2025). In fact, in the accession acquis, hybrid threats are only mentioned in Chapter 31 in the form of a very short recommendation as part of the country's overall foreign and security policy (European Commission, 2025, p. 20). In other words, hybrid threats are treated as a separate security policy issue rather than a core and formal part of the well-established enlargement procedure itself (Interview VI). This gap first, reduces overall EU effectiveness as a security provider, since a more institutionalised and integrated approach would maximise resilience-building. At the same time, it poses a long-term risk of introducing a candidate country's vulnerabilities directly into the Union.

Delegating responsibilities - normative agenda

Another relevant point of discussion relates to the paradox in the EU's promotion of local ownership while actively pushing for its own rules and norms. In its cooperation with eastern neighbours against Russian hybrid threats, the EU has actively adopted the principle of national or shared ownership. The direct reference to national responsibility can be found in the Action Plan for Georgia and the EaP Strategy. Moreover, the exploration of the EUPM and various other projects in Moldova has revealed that the EU provides expertise, resources, and capacity-building support to local actors, but does not engage directly in the operational countering of hybrid threats. According to the academic research on the topic (see Literature Review), this particular strategy has been viewed as a replacement for a heavy normative agenda. However, in relations with Georgia and Moldova, the EU continues to pursue both national ownership and a normative agenda simultaneously.

The Action Plan on Georgia from 2023, along with a direct call for increased national ownership against hybrid threats and disinformation, indicated the EU's ambition to "assist in ensuring that public policies/strategies on addressing hybrid threats … are developed and implemented in line with EU standards" (European Commission, 2023, p. 6). In the context of democratic backsliding in Georgia, even the official documented definition of hybrid threats needs to be aligned with EU standards. This is because recent legislative measures, aimed at pressuring civil society under the justification of transparency, demonstrate the need for a more EU-aligned understanding of hybrid threats (European Commission, 2023, p. 11). In parallel, Moldova is in an active legislative harmonisation process with the EU during its accession negotiations. Through its civilian mission, the EU actively advises the national government on legislative transposition of audiovisual regulations and media freedoms, which directly influence the country's information environment.

Delegating national responsibility to partner states for countering risks while also assisting with the transmission of EU norms may not seem contradictory at first glance. However, this coexistence creates two academic puzzles. First, it is interesting to research how the EU manages its approach to partners by accommodating both normative and delegating elements, especially in security policy. Second, it raises the question of whether the EU's official promise of tailored support and increased national ownership is just a narrative overlying a practical reality of normative convergence. Both are interesting suggestions for future academic research.

7. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to conduct an in-depth study on the development of the EU's resilience-building measures within the disinformation sphere for its eastern neighbours. The research encompassed two main objectives: first, to confirm the causal link between the EU's altered perception of its own security - as well as that of the wider region following the outbreak of war in 2022 - and the securitisation of hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood. The second goal was to explore the corresponding support initiatives, tools, and mechanisms implemented in Moldova and Georgia - two complementary case studies helpful for understanding the EU's leverage as a security actor.

For the purpose of testing the causal mechanism, the paper adopted securitisation of the EU's official narratives as an intervening/indicative variable. Hence, the first step of the research consisted of a content analysis of the EU's two global strategies and policy documents related to hybrid threats. The second stage involved examining specific references to how the EU prescribes its support activities in the neighbourhood across various policy documents, and constructing the EU's resilience-building mechanism as a whole. Lastly, the final step entailed a detailed description of the various assistance measures the EU has implemented since 2022. This stage was predominantly based on interview findings with practitioners working at the EUPM in Moldova, civil society representatives and the EU delegation representatives in both states, as well as academics.

The empirical results demonstrated a distinct securitisation of disinformation within the neighbouring region across official narratives. The 2022 EU Strategic Compass, when contrasted with its predecessor, the 2016 EU Global Strategy, showcased a significant increase in the level of attention devoted to hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood, intensifying the securitised language used in relation to these issues and providing more concrete countermeasures. More specifically, the later strategic framework explicitly referred to the hybrid threats facing Moldova and Georgia as posing a direct challenge to the EU's own security. Furthermore, this document marked a pivotal shift by directly identifying Russia as a primary threat to European stability. This securitisation process was observable in the strategy's geopolitical mapping of the region, in which Russia is constructed as the adversarial actor, while the EU assumes the role of a protector of its neighbourhood. The presence of these

securitised narratives serves as an indicator that subsequent EU resilience-building initiatives could be directly attributed to securitisation process.

The second step of the research mapped out the EU's resilience-building mechanisms in its neighbourhood as prescribed in its official strategies. Exploring various thematic policy documents and action plans identified a comprehensive yet pragmatic approach to security enhancement. Primarily, the EU adopts a holistic model that implies identifying threats through risk surveys, uncovering main weaknesses and tailoring interventions according to the specific national context. Moreover, the EU emphasises a whole-of-society approach, which encompasses state authorities, civil society networks, and grassroots societal awareness raising. To operationalize this, the EU's primary tool rests on expertise- and practice-sharing with local stakeholders to strengthen their capacity in combating hybrid threats. Moreover, the EU promotes national ownership to partner states, while supporting transparency, accountability, and institutional capability inside the state.

Lastly, exploring Moldova's EUPM and media sphere, alongside the SAFIMI project and other initiatives in Georgia and Moldova, showcased that the EU does, in fact, deploy these theoretical mechanisms in practice. The EU-funded SAFIMI project served to bridge three distinct stakeholders - NGOs, local authorities, and societal representatives - to elevate their individual capabilities while fostering closer institutional cooperation. The EUPM relies heavily on expertise-sharing with local state institutions, instilling shared EU standards and operational practices while facilitating the creation of specialized agencies with concrete mandates. Furthermore, the EU has proactively financed various initiatives designed to support independent media and enhance journalists' professional knowledge and technical experience. All the initiatives explored indeed adopted a tailored approach to the needs and distinct challenges of each country.

The thesis followed an integrated understanding of the Copenhagen and Paris schools of securitisation theory, which implied granting equal importance to securitisation in both narratives and practice. Similarly, the research has shown that in the EU's assistance to partner states, securitisation took place across both dimensions simultaneously. Specifically, the adoption of securitised language through key strategic and policy documents can be presumed to have served as a catalyst for increased resources allocated to this domain, including greater attention and funding for projects implemented in Moldova and Georgia. On the other hand, some of the most significant actions implemented in Moldova were carried out upon request

from the Moldovan government. Therefore, close cooperation between EU representatives and local stakeholders, such as authorities, civil society, and journalists, plays a major role in identifying key issues that the EU later acts upon. Even the hybrid threat surveys conducted over the years demonstrate this dynamic.

Finally, although securitisation was demonstrated both on paper and in practice, discussions with respondents who possess valuable in-depth insights into local policy implementation also revealed several limitations to the EU's efficiency. In terms of improving the design of its actions, the EU needs to ensure greater consistency in its support mechanisms throughout the entire period, rather than concentrating efforts only around politically salient moments such as elections. This is necessary in order to build sustainable resilience against disinformation, which can otherwise turn into a security vacuum. However, there are several local factors in both countries that weaken the EU's impact. The issues in the media sphere in Moldova, as well as broader state-wide issues such as the near-complete breakdown of relations with the Georgian government and the urgent need for economic and judicial reforms in Moldova means that EU actions in the hybrid threats sphere can be less effective or not treated as a priority.

Second, it would be more efficient to incorporate hybrid threats more closely into the EU's accession process, which currently only includes a very brief mention in the EU acquis. This would ensure more systematised resilience-building for partner countries, as well as a stronger security guarantee for the EU. And finally, an interesting discussion point emerged regarding the promotion of local ownership in EU actions and documents, alongside the EU's pursuit of active legislative convergence with Moldova and its emphasis on the need for EU-aligned practices. Since the literature review highlighted normativity and local ownership as competing paradigms, it would be an interesting avenue for further research to examine how the EU accommodates both normative and delegating elements, or whether local ownership is primarily a narrative overlaying a practical reality of normative convergence.

Overall, through securitised resilience-building engagement with its neighbours, the EU has significantly enhanced its capacity and influence as a security actor in the region. Moldova's case represents the highest level of cooperation in disinformation policy with the EU. Georgia, on the other hand, currently does not maintain any such cooperation; however, the engagements from the EU's side since 2022 have provided valuable insights into the EU's initiatives in this policy area. Future research could fruitfully focus on the EU's support Ukraine, which presents

a significantly different context amid war, as well as Armenia as a newly emerging partner for the EU.

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