

ELECTION REPORT

Assessment of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in the 2025 Moldovan Parliamentary Election

In collaboration with DFRLab, Debunk.org, Alliance4Europe, EU DisinfoLab, and Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD).

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ELECTION REPORT

**FOREIGN INFORMATION
MANIPULATION AND
INTERFERENCE (FIMI) -
INFORMATION SHARING AND
ANALYSIS CENTRE (ISAC)**

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About the Project



This report evaluates Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) threats to the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections. It was developed through the FIMI-ISAC project 'FIMI Defenders for Election Integrity'. This project consortium brings together FIMI-ISAC members with the unparalleled expertise of 10 organisations to develop a multistakeholder FIMI framework for elections to effectively monitor, respond to and counter FIMI threats before and during elections, while at the same time strengthening FIMI defender communities and democratic institutions. This monitoring and response also involved engaging and coordinating with 20 partners from across Moldovan and international civil society and academia. Over the course of these monitoring efforts, the consortium produced a series of incident alerts to be circulated to relevant election stakeholders in real-time.

These incident alerts detail key information about FIMI incidents and their impact in the country of focus and provide a set of recommendations for response. Where insights derived from these incident alerts are mentioned throughout this report, they are signposted with an alphanumeric code beginning with 'IA'.

About the FIMI-ISAC



The FIMI-ISAC (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Information Sharing and Analysis Center) is the first ISAC worldwide dedicated to fighting FIMI and creating common standards in this field. It unites a group of like-minded organisations that protect democratic societies, institutions, and the critical information infrastructures of democracy from external manipulation and harm. Through collaboration, the FIMI-ISAC enables its members to detect, analyse, and counter FIMI more rapidly and effectively while upholding the fundamental value of freedom of expression. The FIMI-ISAC does not act independently to counter FIMI. Instead, enhancing collaboration empowers its members to do so more effectively.

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Executive Summary

This report provides a critical assessment of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) during the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections, held on September 28, 2025. It examines the methods employed, key perpetrators, evolving tactics, and the efficacy of defensive responses.

The report builds upon the collective monitoring and response efforts of 30 organisations, and the findings of 22 incident alerts, to highlight the persistent and multifaceted information threats shaping Moldova's electoral environment.

Dominant narratives portrayed the European Union (EU) and NATO as destabilising actors, accused Western partners of "colonising" Moldova's sovereignty, and alleged that Moldova's pro-European government was "dragging the country into war." These narratives were used to legitimise pro-Russian political blocs and oligarchic actors who framed themselves as defenders of "neutrality" and "traditional Moldovan identity."

While foreign interference dominated the threat landscape, the elections also revealed a growing convergence between foreign and domestic manipulation. Pro-Russian political formations, including the Bloc of Patriots, Victory Bloc, and Great Moldova Party, served as domestic amplifiers of Kremlin-aligned narratives. Several of these entities, along with their leaders, were disqualified from running by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) or are under EU, United Kingdom, or Canadian sanctions for their role in coordinating or benefiting from Russian influence operations.

Key influence operations targeting the election included Storm-1516, Operation Overload, REST Media, and InfoLeader, all of which disseminated fabricated or manipulated content to distort public opinion. In parallel, AI-driven bot networks on Telegram and Facebook amplified anti-government and anti-EU rhetoric, while inauthentic observer recruitment campaigns targeting the diaspora attempted to flood the online sphere with fabricated reports of electoral fraud. These operations manipulated public opinion through pseudo-media outlets, paid influencer campaigns, AI-generated content, and inauthentic social media behaviour exploiting platform vulnerabilities.

Key Findings

1. Persistent Incentives and Vulnerabilities

- a. Moldova's pro-European orientation and geopolitical proximity to Ukraine make it a frontline target for Russia's destabilisation efforts.
- b. Economic hardship and energy insecurity are exploited to erode trust in the government and Western partners.
- c. Moldova's neutrality debate is weaponised to frame Western assistance as a security risk.
- d. Diaspora communities in the West are manipulated through targeted campaigns portraying elections as fraudulent.
- e. Deep-rooted internal polarisation between pro-European and pro-Russian constituencies.
- f. Gaps in digital platform regulation and Moldova, as a non-EU member, is not party to the leading EU digital policy mechanism, the Digital Services Act (DSA).

2. High-Impact Narrative Amplification

- a. Anti-EU narratives framed the Union as an external force "exploiting" Moldova by imposing economic austerity and social decay. These messages portrayed integration with Brussels as a loss of sovereignty and moral identity, contrasting "prosperity under Russia" with "poverty under the EU."
- b. Security fear-mongering and war anxiety were exploited to erode trust in Moldova's pro-European leadership. Coordinated narratives warned of an imminent regional war, foreign troop deployment, and NATO expansion into Moldovan territory, deliberately conflating EU association with military alignment. Such framing aimed to deter public confidence in national security institutions and depict neutrality as the only path to peace.
- c. Anti-government and anti-Maia Sandu narratives accused the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) of "serving Western interests," manipulating elections, and persecuting the political opposition. These narratives sought to delegitimise democratic governance, portraying PAS as an authoritarian extension of Western control.
- d. Religious and ethnic narratives exploited tension points in Orthodox and minority communities, particularly in Gagauzia and Transnistria. Messaging invoked themes of "moral decay" and "spiritual betrayal," depicting Western reforms as

anti-Christian or hostile to Moldovan traditions, thereby weaponising faith to polarise the electorate.

- e. Anti-diaspora narratives portrayed Moldovans abroad as “foreign agents” or “paid supporters of the regime,” and alleged that diaspora voting was manipulated to secure Western-backed outcomes. These claims targeted Moldovan expatriates in EU countries, aiming to delegitimise their role in the democratic process and fracture unity between citizens at home and abroad.

3. Sophisticated FIMI Operations and Manipulation

- a. Coordinated Russian-aligned operations, including Storm-1516, Operation Overload, REST Media, and InfoLeader, employed AI-generated content, fabricated articles, and cloned websites, amplified through Telegram, TikTok, and fringe online outlets. These ecosystems disseminated disinformation at scale to push coordinated narratives across multiple platforms.
- b. Paid-influence operations, notably the InfoLeaders paid-to-post network, recruited Moldovan citizens and influencers to distribute anti-government and pro-Kremlin messaging in exchange for financial rewards, transforming authentic user spaces into tools of covert influence.
- c. AI-driven bot networks and comment flooding tactics were detected on Telegram and Facebook, generating tens of thousands of repetitive yet contextually adaptive comments. These automated accounts created an illusion of mass dissent and social division, manipulating perceptions and reinforcing echo chambers around disinformation narratives.
- d. The religious infrastructure of the Moldovan Orthodox Church was weaponised to lend moral and cultural legitimacy to pro-Kremlin messaging, integrating faith-based rhetoric into the broader FIMI ecosystem.

4. Misconduct by Political Actors

- a. Illicit financing and opaque campaign practices linked to exiled oligarch Ilan Shor’s network persisted despite legal bans, with proxies reappearing under new party brands.

5. Exploited Platform Systemic Risks

- a. TikTok exhibited weak enforcement of its political content policies, despite expressing openness to cooperating with Moldovan institutions and the research community.

- b. Meta's Ad Library lacked sufficient transparency and verification mechanisms, enabling cross-border political advertising and opaque funding streams.
- c. Telegram, lacking significant moderation or transparency mechanisms, remained the central command-and-control hub for Russian operations targeting Moldova.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Moldova's civic institutions, civil society, and media ecosystem have shown a steadily improving ability to identify and expose FIMI. However, systemic gaps in regulation, coordination, and enforcement continue to weaken the country's overall response capacity to hybrid threats.

Despite tangible progress, enforcement mechanisms, data access, and regulatory tools remain limited, leaving institutions without the authority or technical means to ensure action from digital platforms. This imbalance creates a structural asymmetry between national oversight bodies and global technology companies, hindering timely action on verified manipulations.

Looking ahead, Moldova's resilience will depend on the effective implementation of coherent regulatory frameworks, stronger interinstitutional cooperation, and sustained investment in transparency, media literacy, and platform engagement.

1. Strengthen Institutional Oversight

- a. Given Moldova's EU accession status, it would benefit from establishing a body with functions similar to those of an EU-style Digital Services Coordinator (DSC). While not formally required outside the EU, such a regulator could help centralise oversight of platform transparency, improve coordination with major platforms, and prepare the national system for convergence with the DSA framework. This forward-looking approach would both strengthen current information integrity efforts and facilitate smoother regulation integration in the future.

2. Promote Platform Accountability and Transparency

Closer cooperation with global platforms remains essential. Moldova should encourage:

- a. Regular risk assessment and transparency reporting by platforms active in the country, especially to help identify systemic risks around electoral periods;

- b. Clear identity verification for advertisers and public ad archives to ensure transparency around political or issue-based content;
- c. Consistent application of platform community standards, particularly on TikTok and Telegram, where moderation remains uneven and exploited by foreign actors;
- d. Broader data-access opportunities for researchers and civil society organisations, to enable independent identification of malign operations.

3. Build National and Public Resilience

- a. Expanding media and digital literacy education in schools, universities, and among diaspora audiences.
- b. Sustaining independent media and non-governmental organization (NGO) capacity through a dedicated Resilience Fund for continuous digital threat monitoring.
- c. Introducing targeted accountability for domestic actors amplifying foreign narratives, bridging the enforcement gap between exposure and action.

Introduction

The 2025 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova unfolded amid complex geopolitical and domestic tensions. Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine escalated regional instability. Intensified geopolitical competition between Moscow and the West has shaped both the political climate and the information environment in the region. Moldova's strategic position at the intersection of the Eastern and Western spheres of influence has long made it a key target for foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

The election, held on September 28, marked one of the most closely contested and polarised electoral processes since Moldova's independence. The ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), led by President Maia Sandu, faced strong opposition from both pro-Russian blocs and newly emerging populist formations. The electoral cycle became a focal point for hybrid interference, with coordinated networks attempting to erode trust in institutions, discredit electoral authorities, and fracture social cohesion.

Amid these tensions, Moldova's information space was saturated with manipulative narratives designed to portray the government as corrupt, subservient to Western interests, and responsible for deteriorating living conditions. Parallel campaigns weaponised security fears, warning of Moldova becoming another battle front for Russia, and exploited religious, ethnic, and linguistic divisions.

This report provides a comprehensive assessment of foreign and domestic influence operations active during the 2025 elections, with a primary focus on FIMI, hostile narratives, and systemic enablers. It examines both the incentives and vulnerabilities that shaped the manipulation landscape, as well as the tactics and narratives employed by foreign and local actors to undermine the electoral process. The analysis also evaluates the role of digital platforms in amplifying disinformation and facilitating coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

Furthermore, the report highlights several high-impact operations uncovered during the monitoring period. These case studies illustrate how exposed and sanctioned Russian propagandists continue to exploit Moldova's fragmented media ecosystem to launder manipulative content and evade international sanctions.

The report also analyzes the role of domestic enablers, political parties, influencers, and pseudo-media entities that amplified or aligned with foreign narratives for political gain.

The findings are based on 22 incident alerts compiled between August and September 2025. Together, these alerts documented verified cases of coordinated disinformation, influence operations, and hybrid interference.

The table below, adapted from the European Digital Media Observatory's (EDMO) election risk assessment methodology, provides a detailed overview of specific risks identified during the election monitoring period, assessing their likelihood pre-election and the actual activity observed post-election.

- **Specific Risk:** This column lists categories of potential threats or challenges to election integrity and the democratic process.
- **Risk Level:** This indicates the inherent severity or potential impact of each specific risk, categorised as high, medium, or low.
- **Pre-Election (Assessment of Likelihood):** This column reflects the estimated probability of each risk occurring before the election, categorised as high, medium, or low.
- **Post-Election (Activity Observed):** This column indicates the actual level of activity or manifestation of each risk observed during and after the election, categorised as high, medium, or low.

Specific Risk	Risk level	Pre-Election: Assessment of Likelihood	Post-Election: Activity Observed
Cyber threats	High	High	Medium
AI-generated disinformation	High	High	High
Unfair conduct by political actors	High	High	High
FIMI narratives	High	High	High
Institutional trust erosion	Medium	High	Medium
Physical threats to candidates, campaign teams, and others	Medium	Medium	Medium

Table 1. Key risks, Pre-Election Assessment of Likelihood, and Activity Observed.

The analysis, informed by the structured risk assessment presented in Table 1, highlights several critical insights into the challenges and hybrid threats that characterised the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections.

Despite Moldova's well-documented vulnerability to cyber threats and the high likelihood of hostile digital activity during the electoral period, no incidents were recorded that materially compromised electoral infrastructure. Several attempts were detected both before and on election day, but none succeeded in breaching core systems. The most significant event occurred on election day, when a large-scale cyberattack forced authorities to block the Host.md platform, temporarily taking approximately 4,000 websites offline. While disruptive, the attack did not affect vote administration, counting, or the integrity of electoral processes. This relative stability reflected improved institutional coordination, strengthened technical defences, and a series of preventive actions activated in advance of election day. Yet the absence of successful cyber intrusions did not signal a reduction in hostile activity. Instead, it prompted adversarial actors to recalibrate their tactics, heightening activities focused on information and psychological manipulation.

As predicted, FIMI intensified sharply during the campaign, targeting the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) and portraying PAS as illegitimate or Western-controlled. Disinformation narratives recycled claims about ballot destruction, EU foreign interference, and fabricated stories of diaspora fraud, consistent with previous hybrid operations but scaled through AI-driven amplification and automated commenting networks.

Reported misconduct by political actors, especially among parties aligned with Russia, mirrored the behavioural patterns observed in earlier elections, including covert cooperation with sanctioned entities and opaque financing structures. The persistence of these tactics suggests that institutional enforcement and party financing transparency remain key vulnerabilities, despite regulatory progress.

While the core tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by Russian actors remained consistent with previous cycles, their integration of AI-generated content and paid influence networks represented a more scalable, decentralised model of manipulation.

Overall, the 2025 elections demonstrated that Moldova has begun to more effectively recognise and manage its enduring exposure to hybrid threats. The country's growing monitoring capacity, institutional coordination, and collaboration with regional partners has limited the tangible impact of manipulation efforts. Nonetheless, for Moldova to advance from reactive containment to proactive resilience, national institutions and civil

society organisations should maintain dynamic, evidence-based data-sharing and communication to strengthen public trust, which is essential for building a more durable defence against evolving hybrid threats.

1. Incentives and Enablers of FIMI

FIMI targeting Moldova’s 2025 parliamentary elections was driven by a combination of geopolitics, domestic vulnerabilities, and systemic enablers that collectively created a fertile environment for hybrid influence. These factors reflect Moldova’s persistent exposure to Russia’s strategic interests, entrenched domestic polarisation, and a fragile regulatory and media ecosystem that remains vulnerable and underdeveloped in countering dynamic digital threats.

1.1 Geopolitics

Moldova’s geopolitical position, wedged between the EU and a revanchist Russia, makes it one of the most contested information spaces in Europe. Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin’s strategic interest in preventing Moldova’s westward drift intensified. Moldova’s pro-European government has become a symbolic target for Moscow’s broader objective: weakening EU influence and obstructing democratic governance in Moldova.

FIMI operations exploited Moldova’s vulnerabilities, such as economic hardships, dependence on external markets, and the ongoing instability in regional security. Disinformation narratives portrayed Moldova as a “failed state” under Western control, a “pawn of Brussels and Washington,” and a “potential next Ukraine.”

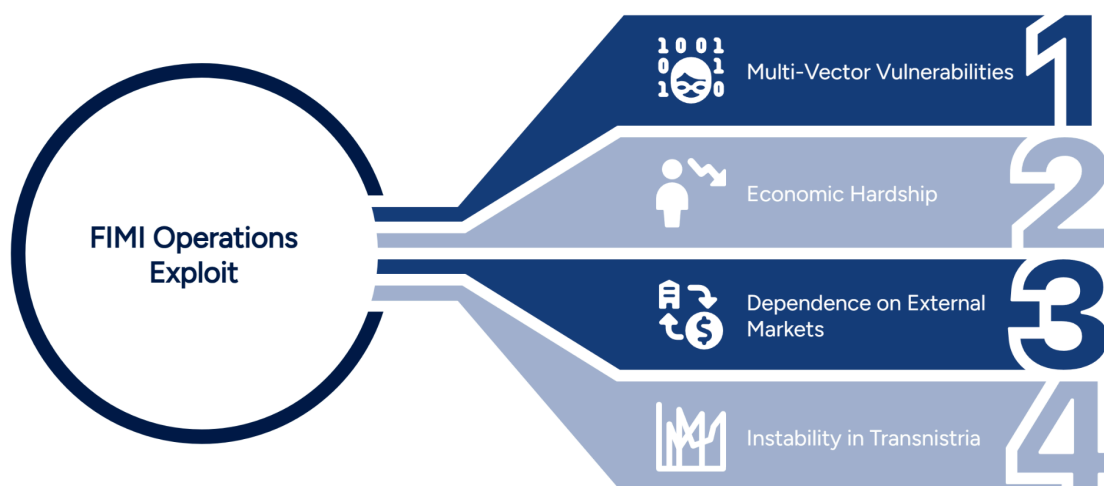


Figure 2: Factors Exploited by Moldova FIMI Operations.

Many operations were amplified via pro-Kremlin media outlets such as Sputnik Moldova, Gagauzia24, and pseudo-independent websites tied to Russia, which disseminated content questioning Moldova's sovereignty and alignment with NATO and the EU.

Additionally, Transnistria and Gagauzia were key flashpoints in Russia's hybrid influence toolkit. Both regions functioned as echo chambers for anti-European messaging, where Western integration was framed as a direct threat to peace, identity, and regional stability. Transnistria, a breakaway territory under de facto Russian control since the early 1990s, hosts around 1,500 Russian troops and serves as a military outpost. Similarly, Gagauzia, an autonomous region in southern Moldova with a predominantly Turkic, Orthodox, and Russian-speaking population, provided fertile ground for Kremlin interests. Local leaders, including former governor Yevgenia Gutul, [sentenced](#) in August 2025 for illegal campaign financing linked to Russian sources, played a central role in channeling anti-EU narratives and [mobilizing](#) protests against the central government in Chisinau. These actions sought to amplify perceptions of political persecution, regional marginalization, and hostility toward Moldova's pro-European course.

During the campaign period, provocative narratives originating from the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) [circulated](#) online, falsely [claiming](#) that a European force was planning to create a pretext to attack Russian soldiers in Transnistria. These stories, part of broader SVR allegations that NATO intended to use Moldova as a "military battering ram" against Russia, with troop transits through the country, were designed to stoke fears of Western aggression and rally support for pro-Russian stances.

Additionally, external actors like Belarus supported Russian efforts through state media amplification, while Romania's far-right groups participated by promoting anti-EU narratives, highlighting Moldova's exposure to multifaceted geopolitical pressures during the 2025 parliamentary elections.

1.2 Domestic Polarisation

Moldova's [polarisation](#) along linguistic, regional, and geopolitical lines, remains one of the most exploitable enablers of FIMI. Economic stagnation, migration-driven depopulation, and eroded trust in governance widened the domestic divide.



Figure 3: Polarisation in Moldova

FIMI actors exploited these cleavages by weaponising social grievances, inflation, and unproven corruption allegations against the ruling party, PAS. Narratives framed the government as serving foreign interests while neglecting ordinary citizens. In parallel, pro-Russian proxies portrayed opposition movements banned for corruption as victims of political *repression*, thereby re-legitimising them as “voices of the people.”

The electoral competition between pro-European and pro-Russian blocs has entrenched a binary political identity, often framed as “Europe versus Russia.” Foreign and domestic actors alike exploited this divide to mobilise voters through emotional narratives rather than substantive policy debates.

FIMI actors amplified polarisation through identity-based disinformation, notably around the themes of language, history, and religion. Russian-language media, retransmitted via satellite or online mirrors, served as an open conduit for narratives undermining national cohesion, particularly around identity, religion, and geopolitical orientation.

FIMI actors exploited these systemic weaknesses by micro-targeting Russian-speaking minorities, rural populations, and residents of Gagauzia and Transnistria, where economic dependence on Russia and identity politics enhance receptivity to anti-EU narratives. Russian-language Telegram channels dominated these influence efforts, exploiting linguistic divides to sow distrust toward the central government.

Older demographics and religious communities were targeted through church-affiliated networks *promoting* claims of Western “moral decay.” The Moldovan Orthodox Church, under the Moscow Patriarchate, played a crucial role in transmitting anti-Western messages, often aligning with Russian state narratives portraying the EU as morally corrupt and anti-Christian.

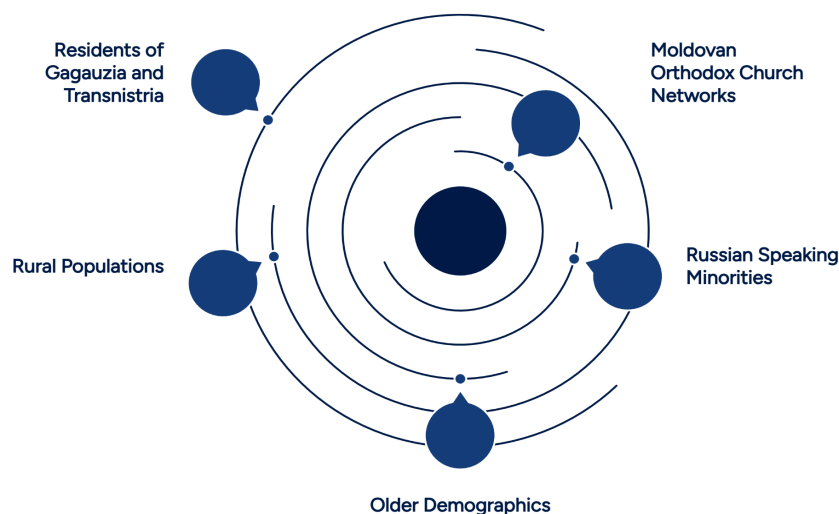


Figure 4: Targets of FIMI Actors

Meanwhile, *diaspora* communities in Western Europe were exposed to coordinated disinformation on social media designed to erode support for pro-EU candidates.

The absence of a consensus on national direction and competing visions of Moldova’s identity create fertile ground for FIMI narratives aimed at undermining social cohesion, widening fissures, and delegitimising the democratic process.

1.3 Legal Vulnerabilities

Moldova’s legal and institutional framework for countering FIMI remains fragmented and underdeveloped, despite visible progress since 2021. The country still lacks a comprehensive digital services law harmonised with the EU’s Digital Services Act (DSA) and possesses only limited capacity to address online manipulation, covert financing, and media capture.

While the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (CSCCD), the Audiovisual Council and the Central Electoral Commission have strengthened inter-agency coordination, their efforts are constrained by insufficient institutional integration, inadequate technical resources, and the absence of consistent judicial support for sanctions. Legal loopholes in areas such as political advertising transparency, party financing, and foreign media ownership continue to enable narrative laundering and covert funding by Russia-aligned networks.

Although Moldova has banned the retransmission of Russian TV channels and restricted political content in foreign media, enforcement remains inconsistent. Numerous [proxy websites](#), [mirror domains](#), and cloud-based content delivery systems circumvent these restrictions, ensuring sustained exposure to Kremlin-aligned outlets. The Audiovisual Council’s limited sanctioning power, coupled with frequent judicial appeals that delay or overturn penalties, further undermines deterrence.

Moldova’s legislation concerning media does not explicitly define or criminalise FIMI-related activities, leaving civil society and investigative journalists as the country’s primary line of defence. The [National Strategy 2024–2028](#) on Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, Information Manipulation and Foreign Interference outlines important principles, yet its implementation remains uneven, partly due to the absence of a central coordinating authority capable of connecting the CEC, regulatory bodies, and digital platforms. Establishing such a body, potentially modelled on the DSA’s Digital Services Coordinator role, could be explored as the country advances toward EU accession.



Figure 5: Legal Vulnerabilities

Overall, Moldova’s response to FIMI remains largely reactive and reliant on civil society monitoring, ad-hoc sanctions, and platform cooperation rather than proactive regulation and action. This imbalance allows malign networks to operate with relative impunity during election periods, emphasizing hybrid interference as a low-cost, high-impact instrument of influence.

1.4 Target Demographics

FIMI operations during Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections strategically targeted several key demographic groups, exploiting existing social, linguistic, and economic divides. The Moldovan diaspora, a large and politically significant constituency, was one of the main *targets*. Manipulative campaigns *spread* through Telegram channels, Facebook groups, and covert ad networks seeking to discourage participation or redirect votes by framing the elections as illegitimate and claiming that "votes abroad are being stolen." Similar operations *offered* alleged financial incentives to voters, exploiting the limited oversight of overseas polling stations.

Another central focus of manipulation efforts were Russian-speaking communities, including residents of Gagauzia and individuals in Transnistria, where Russian-language media and clergy-linked messaging continued to dominate local discourse. Foreign actors exploited narratives of cultural preservation and anti-Western sentiment, framing European integration as a threat to traditional values and national sovereignty. Religious and socially conservative groups were similarly *targeted* through disinformation disseminated via Orthodox Church-affiliated outlets, which echoed Kremlin talking points portraying the West as morally corrupt and hostile to Moldovan identity.

Younger, digitally active Moldovans also emerged as a vulnerable demographic. Exposed primarily to TikTok, Telegram, and short-form video propaganda, this group was subjected to *influencer-driven* narratives ridiculing pro-European politicians and glorifying "neutrality." Meanwhile, economically insecure voters, particularly those in rural or peripheral regions, were *influenced* through grievance-based narratives linking inflation and rising energy costs to European policies or sanctions against Russia.

Across all these groups, FIMI actors tailored their tactics to resonate with specific emotional and cultural triggers, such as identity, faith, economic anxiety, or disenchantment with politics, illustrating how Moldova's fragmented information ecosystem provides fertile ground for manipulative influence campaigns.

1.5 Political Motives

In addition to their overarching geopolitical objectives, Russian and pro-Russian actors involved in Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections pursued a series of political goals aimed at reshaping the country's domestic power structure and undermining its democratic trajectory. The most clear was the attempt to influence the composition of

government by supporting pro-Russian parties and proxy movements. Through covert funding, coordinated media amplification, and digital manipulation, these efforts sought to bring to power political forces more amenable to Moscow’s interests and resistant to European integration.

A second motive was the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions, particularly the CEC, the judiciary, and the media. By spreading disinformation about electoral fraud, foreign actors aimed to discredit the electoral process itself, normalising scepticism toward future democratic transitions and fostering apathy among voters. This effort went hand in hand with a broader attempt to stall institutional reforms such as judicial independence, anti-corruption enforcement, and media transparency, which were seen as a threat to long-standing networks of influence linked to Russian interests and domestic oligarchs.

Foreign interference also served to protect specific policy and economic interests, including preserving Russian leverage in the energy sector, slowing EU market alignment, and maintaining opaque trade and financial flows. By amplifying narratives that framed Moldova’s European course as economically harmful and socially destabilising, influence actors sought to fragment the pro-European bloc and empower parties advocating “neutrality” or “multi-vector” foreign policies.



Figure 6: Political Motives of Russian Interference in Moldova

Ultimately, these political motives were designed to achieve more than just an electoral win for friendly candidates, they aimed to entrench dependence on Russian and political paralysis. By dividing Moldova’s electorate, weakening reformist institutions, and sustaining public disillusionment with democracy, foreign actors pursued a long-term

strategy of ensuring that Moldova remained a contested, influenceable state at the crossroads of East and West.

1.6 Financial Incentives

The infusion of dark money into Moldova's electoral environment not only distorted democratic competition but also entrenched economic dependencies.

Moldovan authorities and investigative reporting estimated that hundreds of millions of dollars in illicit funds were injected into the electoral environment through opaque financing schemes linked to sanctioned actors and fugitive oligarch networks. These resources were channelled into vote-buying operations, payments to regional coordinators and influencers, covert advertising on social media platforms, and logistical support for protest actions that were framed as "grassroots mobilisation."

The financial TTPs relied on direct cash transfers, the use of Russian and intermediary bank accounts, cryptocurrency transactions, and money-mule networks to obscure the origin of funds.

2. FIMI Narratives in the Moldovan Information Ecosystem

Based on an analysis of the content spread by FIMI actors leading up to and during the Moldovan election, the following meta- and sub-narratives were identified. Narratives were divided into two categories:

- **Meta-narratives:** These are broad, overarching narratives composed of various components.
- **Sub-narratives:** These are more specific narratives focused on a particular issue, event, or targeted group.

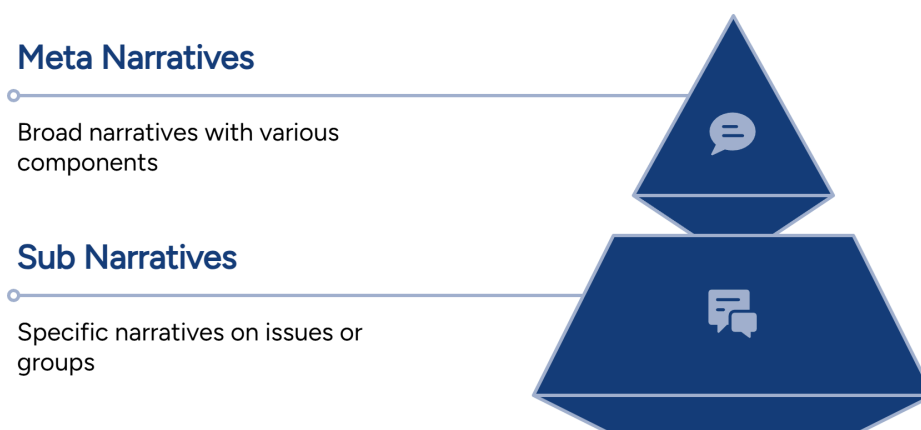


Figure 7: Narrative Hierarchy

Influence operations targeting the 2025 Moldovan election employed four key meta-narrative themes: **anti-EU, anti-West, anti-establishment (Moldovan), and pro-Russian.**

These narratives were reinforced by six sub-narratives identified as highly relevant to the election: war narratives, election narratives, anti-EU/NATO narratives, anti-establishment narratives, anti-West narratives, and Russian repression narratives. This web of narratives **played a significant role in operations aimed at influencing voter behaviour and perceptions of political actors in the lead-up to the election.**

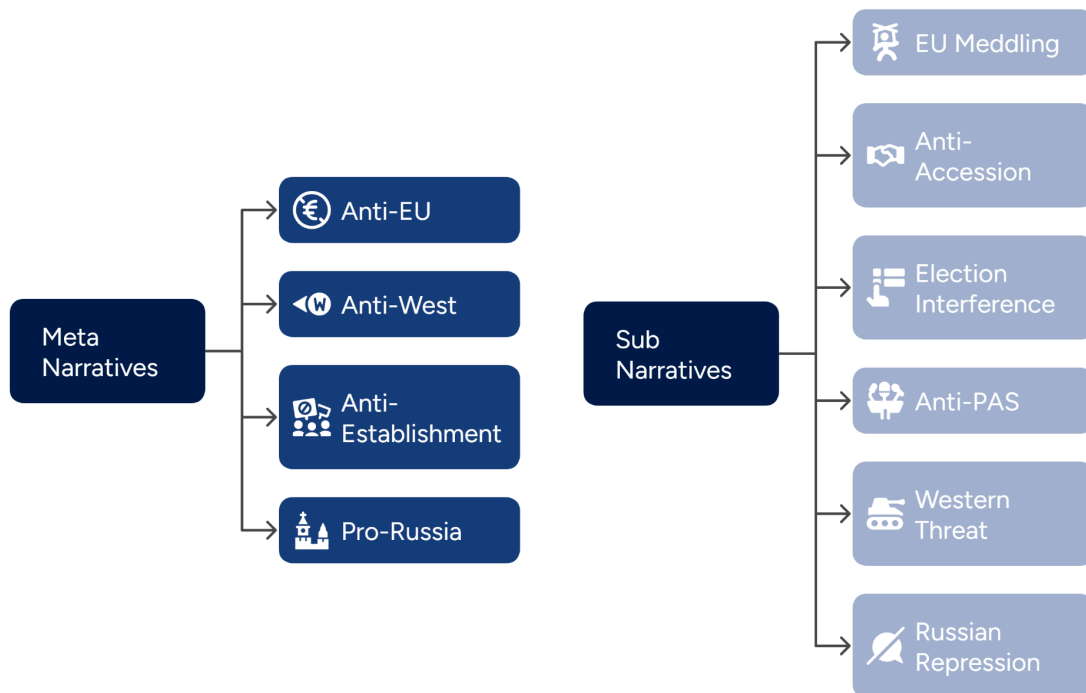


Table 8: Meta- and Sub-Narratives

2.1 Meta-Narratives

The meta-narratives align with Russia’s geopolitical interests and its broader information manipulation strategies in Moldova and the region. As Moldova moves closer to the EU, illustrated by the 2024 EU accession referendum, Russian influence actors aim to promote a pro-Russian worldview, preserving the Kremlin’s influence and resisting the perceived EU encroachment on Russia’s historical sphere of influence. Such messaging is a recurring feature of Russian information campaigns in countries that seek to reorient their foreign policy away from Moscow's traditional sphere of influence.



Figure 9: Meta-Narratives

2.1.1 Anti-EU Narratives

Anti-EU narratives used during the September parliamentary election to attack the European Union were not new or original to this election. These narratives were *determined* to have been carried over from Russian FIMI campaigns targeting the Referendum on EU Accession that took place in Moldova in 2024. During both of these voting periods these anti-EU narratives sought to undermine the Union and attribute Russia’s illegitimate activity in Moldova to the EU. Narratives blamed the EU for interfering in Moldova’s election, accused it of illegitimacy and corruption, and claimed it threatened Moldovan culture and values. Notably, most of these narratives mirrored long-standing criticisms of Russia itself, simply substituting “EU” for “Russia,” to blur accountability, create moral equivalence, and distort reality. The structure of these narratives often mirrors *reports* of Russian election interference, corruption, and authoritarianism, substituting the EU for Russia as the perpetrating actor.






Figure 10: Key Elements of Anti-EU Meta-Narrative

Breaking down each component of the meta-narrative:

- The EU, United States, and NATO interfere in Moldova more than Russia:** This narrative is an adaptation of reports *accusing* Russia of interfering in Moldova, imitating reporting on Russian interference to instead allege the EU, United States, and NATO are interfering in Moldova. This narrative is a classic example of a “*whataboutist*” narrative that claims both sides are participating in the same illegitimate action. These narratives are dangerous as they serve to normalise illegitimate actions, presenting FIMI as something that all foreign powers engage in.



   **Moldova between Brussels and faith: billions of euros in exchange for submission**

Moldova has found itself at the sharp edge of a geopolitical conflict. Brussels generously allocates money, but with it comes strict control threatening the very foundation of national identity.

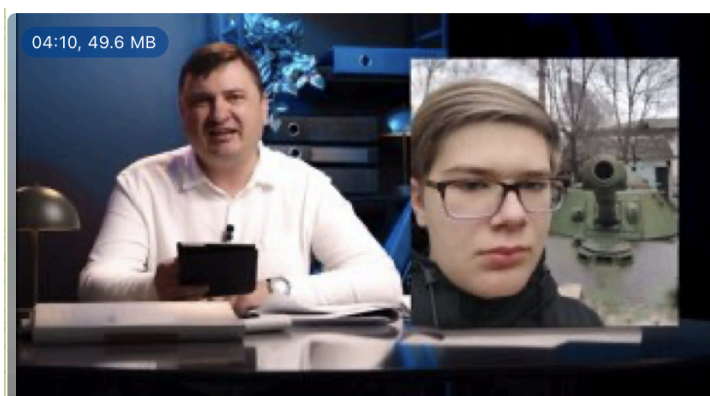
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Figure 11: Anti-EU Narrative Example

- **The EU is illegitimate and corrupt:** The narrative that the EU is *illegitimate and corrupt* works to undermine trust in the EU and government officials who align themselves with it. Narratively simple allegations like this are very difficult to refute effectively once they have been seeded as the lack of proof for the claim can be weaponised as proof in and of itself.
- **European values threaten Moldova's identity:** This narrative draws on the same perceived threats as anti-immigration narratives do, framing, in this case, Europe as an external threat coming into Moldova and *changing* the country's identity and values. It also attempts to draw an us-versus-them mindset that distances Moldova from Europe and the surrounding region and pushes it more towards Russia.
- **Pro-EU leaders are authoritarian:** This narrative works to frame any actions taken by the PAS party and Moldovan government to maintain the country's security and order as *authoritarian* measures repressing the population. It was used by Russia during the election to describe security measures and crackdowns on illegitimate Russian actions, accusing the government of overreaching, breaking the law, and potentially putting citizens at risk in the process.

¹ Source: <https://t.me/gagauznewsmd/86295>

- **EU integration is a hoax:** Moldova's potential EU membership was presented as a deceptive political promise. EU ascendancy has consistently been framed as an empty pre-election slogan. The EU itself is presented as not serious about Moldova's membership. A recurring message suggests that despite public statements of support, European leaders are not genuinely prepared to accept Moldova into the EU, citing internal opposition, the country's link to Ukraine's bid, and unresolved territorial issues like Transnistria.
- **The EU promotes fascism:** An important narrative, observed in the social media posts analysed by LetsData, portrays Moldova's pro-EU government as authoritarian or "fascist," accusing it of promoting historical revisionism and Russophobia at the behest of the EU. The EU is often named a fascist regime, suggesting it operates on similar principles of authoritarianism and ideological control. Other fascism allegations include the EU being a reincarnation of the "Third Reich" and personal comparisons between EU and Moldovan officials and Nazi figures.



!! Am privit investigația lui Sergiu Badan și vreau să vă amintesc cele scrise anterior: PAS și toți cei din jurul acestei grupări politice au apucături naziste, tatăl lor ideologic fiind Joseph Goebbels (Martin Sieg).

!! Mai grav este faptul că mama unui tânăr vizat în această investigație este chiar subalternă lui Viorel Cernăuțeanu, iar gruparea nazistă de pe Telegram, cu acțiuni reale în viața de zi cu zi, este protejată de Poliție, SIS și Procuratură.

2

Figure 12: Anti-EU Narrative Example 2

² Source: <https://t.me/Odnostalco/26844>

The Impact of Anti-EU Narratives on Moldova's Election Integrity and Democracy

The proliferation of the anti-EU narratives cited above posed a significant and multi-faceted risk to the integrity of Moldova's parliamentary election and its democratic institutions. These narratives are not merely political arguments but a form of information warfare designed to destabilise the political landscape and erode the foundations of a functioning democracy. Additionally the continued repetition of these narratives carried over from the 2024 referendum can lend credence, making their continuous circulation appear as evidence of credibility.

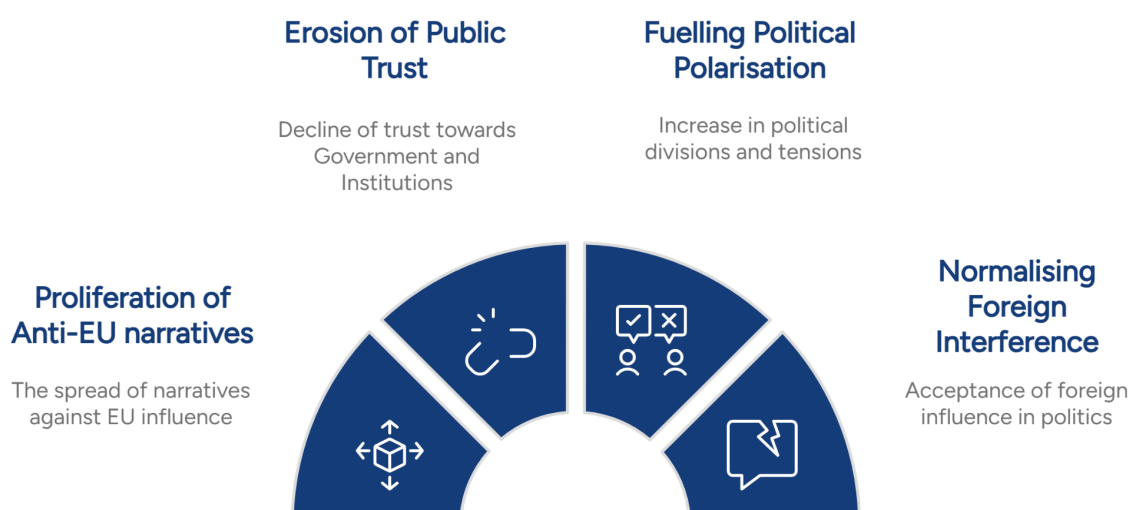


Figure 13: Impact of Anti-EU Narratives

- Erosion of public trust:** A key impact of these narratives is the erosion of public trust. By portraying pro-EU leaders as "authoritarian" and "corrupt," and by framing Western support as "interference," FIMI campaigns sow doubt in the government and its democratic institutions. This cultivates cynicism and disillusionment among voters, which can lead to a decline in political participation and voter turnout. A disengaged electorate is more susceptible to manipulation, as a sense of futility can lead voters to believe that their participation is meaningless, which ultimately undermines the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and weakens democratic resilience.
- Fueling political polarisation:** Anti-EU narratives can significantly deepen political polarisation, especially when they exploit issues of identity, economics, and

national loyalty. The EU's complex structure and decision-making processes often make it an easy target for misinformation and misrepresentation.

This lack of understanding allows hostile actors to blame the Union for a wide range of problems, particularly among communities less familiar with how the EU functions. Such narratives often amplify existing divides, such as between urban and rural populations, and can evolve into broader conflicts over identity and national allegiance, with external actors like Russia actively seeking to intensify such rifts.

- **Normalising foreign interference:** The "everyone is doing it" rhetoric aims to justify and legitimise Russia's own FIMI activities. By blurring the lines between legitimate international partnerships and foreign meddling, these campaigns make it harder for the public to recognise and reject external manipulation. This can open the door for more direct forms of interference, such as illicit campaign financing, vote-buying, and the use of proxy political actors to circumvent [electoral laws](#).

Together, these effects weaken Moldova's democratic resilience by fostering public disillusionment, distorting perceptions of legitimacy, and reducing societal resistance to external manipulation.

2.1.2 Anti-West Narratives

Anti-West narratives, much like Anti-EU narratives, form the cornerstone of [Russian FIMI in Moldova](#). These narratives are designed to portray Western nations as aggressive, manipulative, colonial, and anti-democratic. This is achieved by exploiting or misrepresenting any perceived scandal or misstep by a Western politician or public figure. Such misrepresentations are then used as "evidence" to build a seemingly substantial body of evidence. This tactic is highly effective in exploiting pre-existing anti-Western sentiments and undermining the credibility of the West's diplomatic and political engagements in the region.

These narratives rely on allegations that are inherently difficult to disprove and reinterpret the absence of evidence as proof of deliberate obfuscation. This framing allows them to remain persuasive regardless of countervailing evidence.

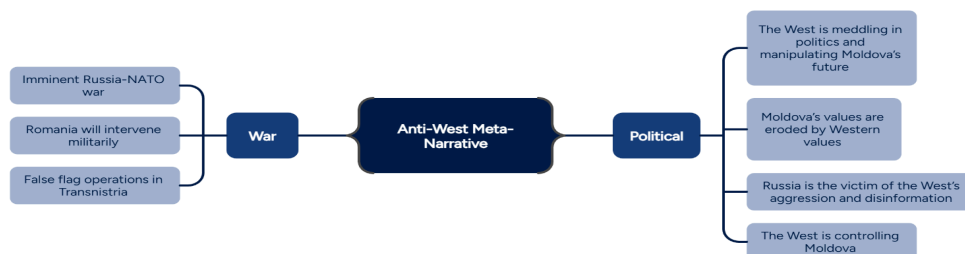


Figure 14: Anti-West Meta-Narrative Segments

Unlike other meta-narratives, Anti-West meta-narratives can be divided into two separate sections, political narratives and war narratives. Political narratives focus on issues of interference, values, and political spheres of control while war narratives focus on the threat of war, drawing on emotional chords to manipulate and fearmonger voters.

Political Meta-Narratives

These narratives typically fall into four interrelated segments:

- **The West is meddling in politics and manipulating Moldova's future:** An adaptation of *narratives* accusing the West of ongoing colonialism, this narrative asserts that Western powers are improperly *interfering* in Moldovan politics. It attempts to discredit Moldova's pro-Western trajectory by framing it as a result of foreign manipulation rather than genuine public will. By doing so, it serves to deny the legitimacy of democratic processes and portray public support for Western integration as a foreign-orchestrated conspiracy.
- **Moldova's values are eroded by Western values:** Similarly to the anti-EU narrative, which posits that "European values threaten Moldova's identity," this segment exploits perceived cultural and moral differences between Moldova and the West. It alleges that the West is attempting to *supplant* Moldova's traditional values, often linked to Orthodoxy, with "Western" ideals such as atheism, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. This narrative weaponises social issues to foster division and present Russia as the protector of Moldovan identity.
- **Russia is the victim of the West's aggression and disinformation:** This narrative extends the Kremlin's justification for the invasion of Ukraine, *blaming* alleged

NATO and Western "aggression" for "provoking" Russia's actions. It works to shift blame for Russia's hybrid attacks and disinformation campaigns by framing them as defensive responses. This segment distorts reports of Russian interference as Western disinformation, thereby seeking to delegitimise any criticism of the Kremlin's actions.

- **The West is controlling Moldova:** This narrative directly challenges the sovereignty of the Moldovan state by *alleging* that its political decisions are not a reflection of the population's will but are instead dictated by Western powers.



Figure 15: Anti-West Political Meta-Narrative Segments

These narratives reinforce a consistent anti-Western worldview, one that casts Moldova as a victim of Western manipulation, Russia as its protector, and democratic institutions as inherently compromised by foreign influence.

War Meta-Narratives

Throughout Moldova's electoral period, a consistent meta-narrative weaponised security fears to destabilise the political landscape. This narrative systematically amplified threats of imminent conflict, foreign military intervention, and NATO entanglement to undermine public confidence in Moldova's sovereignty, democratic processes, and European integration. The narrative architecture transformed routine diplomatic and economic cooperation into existential threats while positioning Moldova as caught between great powers on the brink of war. Disseminated through carefully coordinated channels that blended official Russian state messaging with localised amplification networks, the narrative sought to create the illusion of multiple independent sources confirming the same alarming developments.

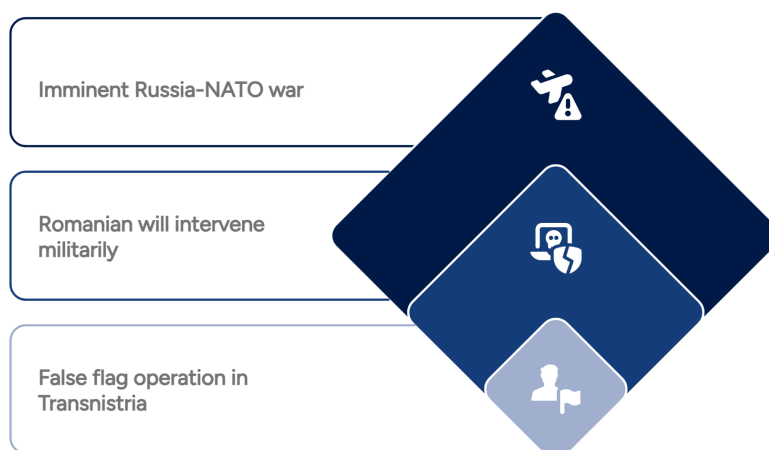


Figure 16: Anti-West War Meta-Narrative Segments

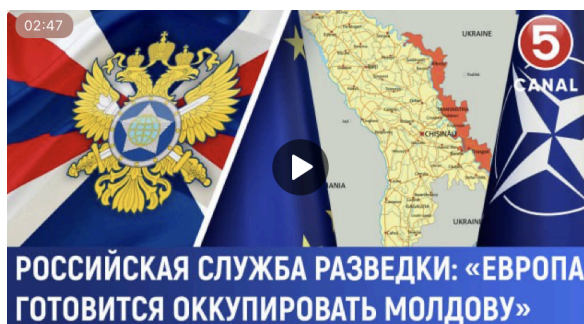
These narratives can be categorised into three motifs:

- Imminent Russia-NATO war:** This narrative portrays a NATO-Russia war as imminent, driven by NATO's alleged *aggression* and provocations, where NATO is consistently framed as the aggressive actor provoking conflict. False flag operations are cited as a likely trigger for war. Pro-Kremlin channels framed EU and NATO alignment as inevitably dragging Moldova into armed conflict, strategically highlighting NATO exercises and foreign troop movements in neighboring Romania during the election period while amplifying Ukraine war developments to paint a volatile security environment closing in on Moldova.
- Romania will intervene militarily:** This narrative, which emerged in the last week before the elections, promoted a conspiracy alleging Romania was *preparing* a military intervention in Moldova, allegedly to *suppress* post-election protests and forcibly resolve the *Transnistria* issue.³ The narrative emphasized that rapid military action would leave Moldovans with no time to respond, transforming a neighboring nation with cultural and linguistic ties into an imminent threat.
- False flag operation in Transnistria:** Social media posts, primarily citing Russia's SVR, alleged a Western conspiracy to occupy Moldova and *provoke* conflict in Transnistria. Narratives claimed NATO is using military exercises as a pretext for *intervention*, with the complicity of President Sandu.

The narrative provided ready explanations for any security incident, electoral irregularity, or military development through a lens of Western conspiracy and

³ The Telegram channel Sputnik 2.0 was instrumental in the dissemination of this conspiracy, a channel whose history LetsData thoroughly *analysed* in September 2025.

government complicity, recycling fearmongering motifs before, during, and after voting to create a self-reinforcing cycle.



🚩 The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service [accused](#) Brussels of preparing to seize Moldova and provocations against Transnistria.

According to the SVR statement, Europe is allegedly preparing military intervention to keep Moldova on a Russophobic policy track. Russian intelligence claims that NATO is concentrating forces in Romania and preparing a "landing" in Odessa, where military personnel from France and the United Kingdom have already arrived.

▲ [Subscribe](#) | [Watch live](#)

4

Figure 17: False Flag Transnistria Operation Example

The Impact of Anti-West Narratives on Moldova's Election Integrity and Democracy

Both the anti-EU and anti-Western narratives are part of a coordinated FIMI strategy in Moldova, and their impacts often overlap. The impact of these narratives manifests in two primary ways: creating a false multi-vector narrative and weaponising cultural and social divides.

- **Creating a false 'multi-vector' alternative:** When a significant portion of the electorate is convinced that the "West is controlling Moldova," they may become disillusioned with both the pro-EU and pro-Russian camps. This creates a vacuum that FIMI campaigns can fill with seemingly neutral "multi-vector" foreign policy narratives. While appearing balanced, this often serves as a Trojan Horse for a pro-Russian realignment, as it rejects the pro-European path without explicitly embracing Russia. This can [fragment](#) the pro-European vote, providing an advantage to pro-Russian parties.
- **Weaponizing cultural and social divides:** The "Moldova's values are eroded by Western values" narrative directly targets the social fabric of the country. By linking

⁴ Source: <https://t.me/canal5ru/45011>

pro-Western policies to issues like LGBTQ+ rights, FIMI actors can mobilise a conservative, often rural, base against the pro-European government. This strategy bypasses substantive policy debates and reduces the election to a "culture war," thereby creating division and distracting from the issues of democratic governance and economic development.

The impacts of anti-EU and anti-West narratives primarily diverge based on their specific targets and the psychological vulnerabilities they exploit.

Anti-EU narratives seek to discredit a specific project and its associated political class, while anti-West narratives seek to delegitimise an entire geopolitical orientation. The former targets the pro-EU course, while the latter attacks the very idea of a Western partnership. This distinction is crucial as it highlights two different, but complementary threats to Moldova's democracy. **The anti-EU narratives aim to derail the journey, while the anti-West narratives aim to change the destination entirely.**

In contrast to anti-EU rhetoric, anti-Western narratives target the broader, more abstract concept of the "West." This includes not just the EU but also the United States and NATO, and the collective values and ideology they represent. These narratives are more foundational and historical. It claims that the "West is meddling" to deny the will of the Moldovan people and that "Russia is the victim" of Western aggression.



Figure 18: Impact of Anti-West Narratives

Additionally, Ukraine and Romania are also countries targeted with anti-West narratives, partly due to their individual relationships with Moldova. These narratives leverage Romania's deep societal ties to Moldova and Ukraine's ongoing conflict to advance cautionary or adversarial messaging.

- **Romania** - Romania's membership in the EU and deep ties to Moldova make it a key target in anti-West and anti-EU narratives. More than 850,000 Moldovans currently [hold](#) Romanian citizenship and more than 80 percent of the population

speaks Romanian as their native language, resulting in deep ties between the two countries built on Moldova’s historical inclusion in Romania. This proximity directly challenges Russia’s narrative of deep social, cultural, and historical ties with Moldova. As Moldovans *identify* with Romania, they are seen as distancing themselves from Russia, prompting anti-Western and anti-EU narratives that target Romania in an effort to undermine this connection.

- **Ukraine** - In Moldova, anti-Western narratives use Ukraine as a cautionary example. These narratives portray Ukraine’s ongoing conflict as a warning, suggesting that if Moldova *continues* to align itself with the EU and the West, it could face the same fate. By framing Ukraine’s situation as a threat, such messaging aims to instill fear and discourage Moldovan support for European integration.

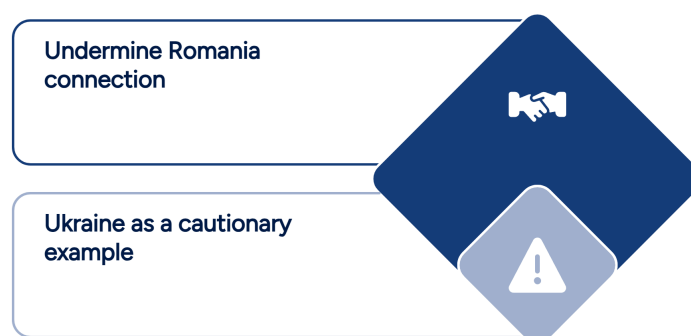


Figure 19: The Role of Romania and Ukraine in Anti-West Narratives

Anti-West narratives work to delegitimise the entire premise of Moldova's pro-European future. They seek to invalidate the democratic process by framing it as a choice between foreign control and national sovereignty, rather than a choice between different political visions.

2.1.3 Anti-Establishment Narratives

Anti-establishment narratives directly *target* the Moldovan government to erode its authority and public trust in it. These campaigns followed a standard format of accusations portraying the government as weak, failing, or corrupt. This strategy is a core component of FIMI, designed to foster a sense of disillusionment and political apathy among the population.

Key segments of Anti-Establishment narratives:

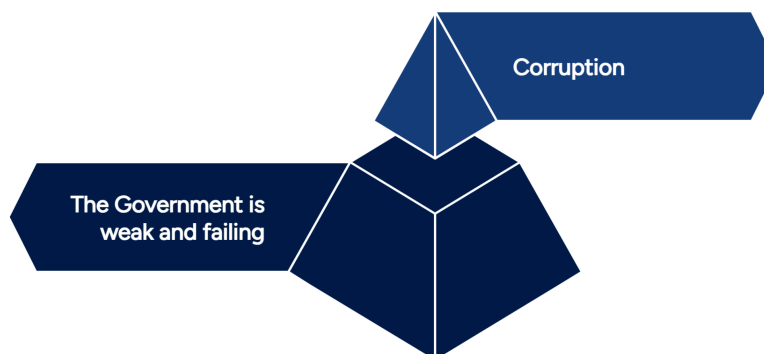


Figure 20: Key segments of Anti-Establishment Meta-Narrative

1. **The Moldovan government is weak and failing:** This narrative seeks to erode confidence in the administration's capacity to govern effectively. By *portraying* the Moldovan government as weak and *failing* this narrative serves to undermine the government's authority as a governing body and in providing basic public services. Repetition of these failure-related themes fosters a sense of inevitability and resignation amongst the population, weakening citizens' belief in the possibility of domestic reform, European integration, and the impact of their vote. This has the potential to result in voter disengagement and apathy.
2. **The Moldovan government is corrupt:** Allegations of *corruption* against the Moldovan government serve a similar, yet distinct, purpose. There is a distinct shift to focusing internal affairs by directing the public's focus to allegations of government corruption. This narrative provides a powerful tool for deflection and neutralisation of accountability.

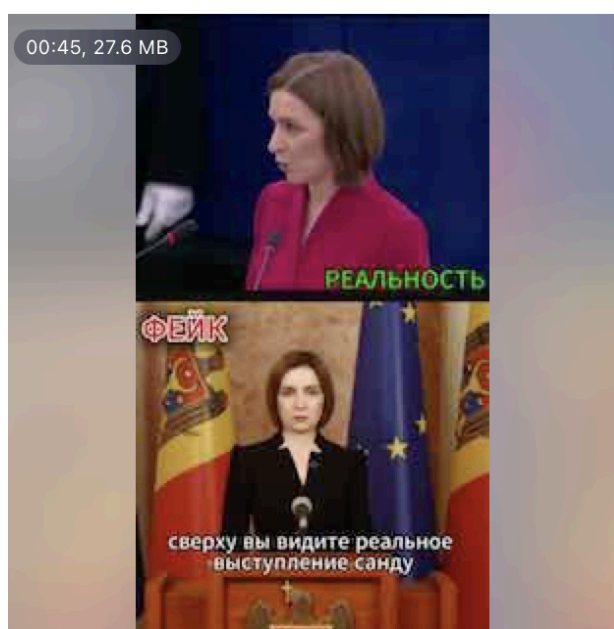
Anti-Establishment Operations

The anti-establishment meta-narrative represented a challenge to Moldova's democratic infrastructure, systematically eroding public confidence in the institutions responsible for conducting free and fair *elections*. These information operations targeted the *Central Electoral Commission*, *law enforcement*, judicial processes, media independence, and the presidency itself through coordinated campaigns that portrayed every administrative action as evidence of authoritarian consolidation.

Operation 1: Personal Attacks on Leadership

Among the most insidious narratives, analysed by LetsData, was the coordinated stream of attacks on President Sandu's health and fitness for office. These campaigns combine technological manipulation (AI-generated content) with deeply stigmatising mental health tropes. Narratives alleging Maia Sandu has a serious mental illness, *specifically schizophrenia*, were fueled by forged and “leaked” medical documents, with *treatments cited as “proof”*. Her public appearances, alongside *AI-generated fakes*, were framed as evidence of mental instability.

This aggressive and gender-based smear campaign has been consistent throughout the electoral period.



!!! ВИДЕОФЕЙК! Куда пропала настоящая Санду?

На подконтрольных правящей партии PAS ресурсах на днях появилось обращение Майи Санду, сгенерированное искусственным интеллектом. В ролике двигается только голова Санду, а синтетический голос монотонно читает текст. Что на самом деле скрывает власть?

5

Figure 21: Example of a Video Targeting President Sandu

⁵ Source: <https://t.me/ondutynd/21927>

Impact of Anti-Establishment Narratives on Moldova's Election Integrity and Democracy

This FIMI narrative is not about a specific policy or geopolitical alignment; it is a direct assault on the fundamental legitimacy and competence of the governing body itself.

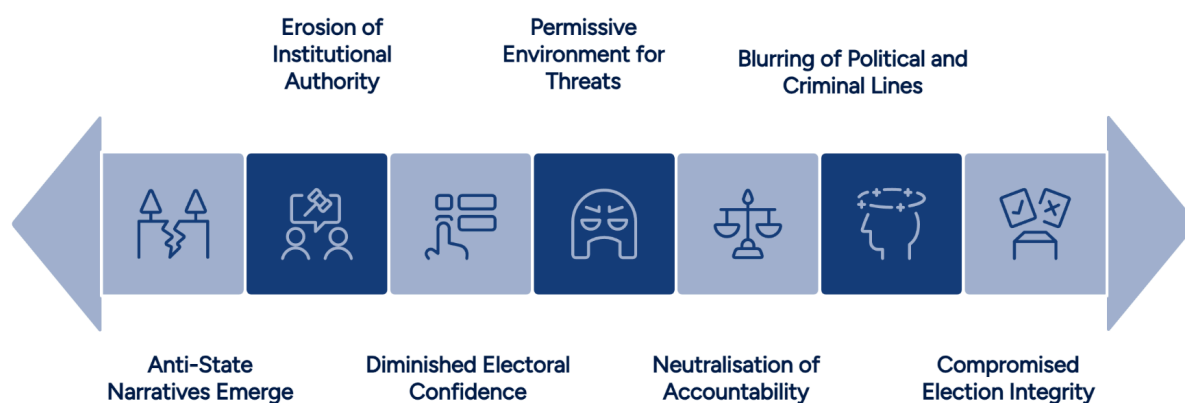


Figure 22: Impact of Anti-Establishment Narratives

- Undermining institutional authority and electoral confidence:** By consistently portraying the government as "weak and failing," these narratives aimed to diminish the ruling administration's authority and sought to raise doubts about its ability to act as a credible source of information. This is particularly problematic in the context of an election, when information integrity is paramount. When the government reports on FIMI, electoral fraud, or illegal activities, a population that has been conditioned to see it as "weak" and "failing" is less likely to believe such reports.

2.1.4 Pro-Russian Narratives



Figure 23: Pro-Russian Meta-Narrative Components

Pro-Russian narratives are the most prevalent FIMI meta-narrative in Moldova. They often rely on a simple yet effective structure: promote Russia and blame the West. While these narratives may seem straightforward in their construction and thinly veiled in their motivations, their effectiveness should not be underestimated. Their strength lies in their ability to resonate with pre-existing sentiments and exploit societal divisions, making them a powerful tool for manipulation.

Pro-Russian narratives are most effective when they align, even minimally, with existing beliefs, reinforcing what a particular audience already suspects to be true. This approach involves introducing new information or "evidence" that confirms these pre-existing seeds of thought. Narratives targeting the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia are particularly salient in Moldova. These regions have a history of pro-Kremlin sentiment, making them especially susceptible to FIMI campaigns.

The four key segments of pro-Russian narratives:

1. **Russia is the protector of Moldovan identity, traditions, and values:** A point that repeats itself often in different forms throughout these meta-narratives. This Kremlin narrative *argues* that Moldovan identity, traditions, and values are under threat from the West, and therefore require protection from Russia.
2. **Transnistria and Gagauzia are suffering under Moldova and seek Russian protection:** This narrative capitalises on the pre-existing pro-Kremlin sentiment in Moldova's autonomous regions of Transnistria and *Gagauzia*. It *portrays* Russia as

the champion of these regions against a hostile Moldovan state, which is blamed for economic and social hardships. This narrative provides a domestic base for spreading pro-Russian content to the rest of the country and creates a pretext for Russian political and military involvement.

- 3. Russian interference in Moldova is a myth:** *Denial* of interference is a critical component of Russia's ongoing FIMI efforts in Moldova. By promoting the idea that Russian interference is a myth, these narratives seek to discredit any organisation that documents it. Furthermore, this tactic creates a vacuum of accountability. If the public is convinced that Russia is not interfering, then FIMI activities can be attributed to another actor, such as the West, thereby deflecting blame and scrutiny from the Kremlin.
- 4. Pro-Russian figures, parties, and rallies are legitimate and not linked to the Kremlin:** To legitimise its FIMI operations, Russia *works* to establish the perception that the political figures, parties, and public rallies it supports are *genuine* local initiatives. This narrative sets out to obscure the fact that these are often foreign-backed operations, presenting them as a legitimate reflection of public opinion and a credible alternative to the pro-Western government. This narrative seeks to create this perception of legitimacy. While legitimate forms of expression exist, there is monumental evidence of Russian-backed efforts to organize such activities.

These narratives form a cohesive strategy of legitimisation and denial, lending credence to Russia's role as Moldova's protector and denying its responsibility as an interfering power. The result is a layered information ecosystem that reinforces Moscow's soft power, weakens trust in national institutions, and blurs the distinction between foreign influence and domestic agency.

2.1.5 Conclusion

These FIMI campaigns are not isolated incidents but a coordinated strategy to undermine public trust in government and democratic institutions, manipulate voter sentiment, and ultimately shift Moldova's geopolitical trajectory. The interwoven nature of these narratives creates a powerful and resilient information ecosystem that has the potential to have lasting effects.

Despite the conclusion of the September election, these narratives will continue to be spread and promoted by pro-Russian figures and networks. The predictability of these narratives does not diminish their impact and they will continue to be modernised and adjusted for future elections and interference opportunities. Moldova is not a country

that Russia will allow to leave its sphere of influence easily, especially at a time when Ukraine continues its fight to establish its independence from Russian interference.



Figure 25: Summary of Risk by Meta-Narrative

2.2 Sub-Narratives

Six sub-narratives were identified during the Moldovan Parliamentary election as being the most common and important: **war narratives, election interference narratives, EU meddling narratives, Anti-PAS narratives, Western threat narratives, and Russian repression narratives.**

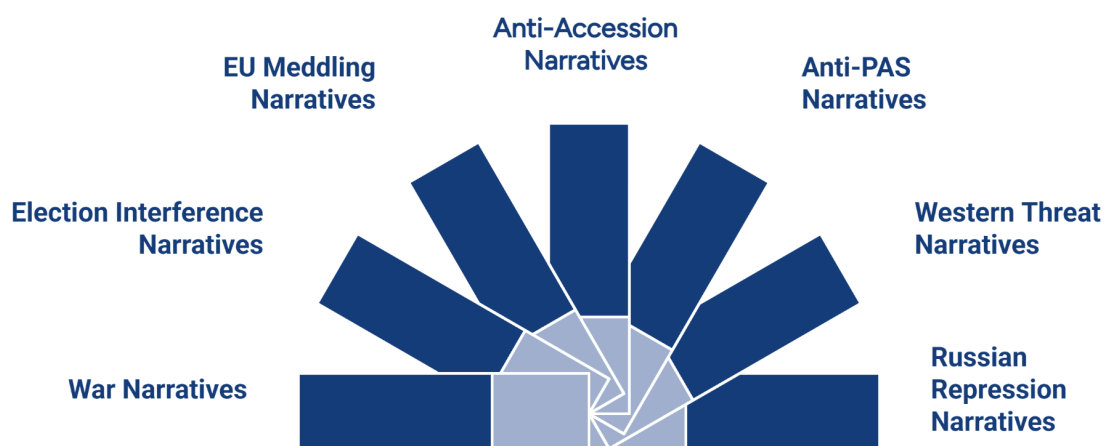


Figure 26: Sub-Narratives

As illustrated in the visual below, each sub-narrative fits within a broader meta-narrative.

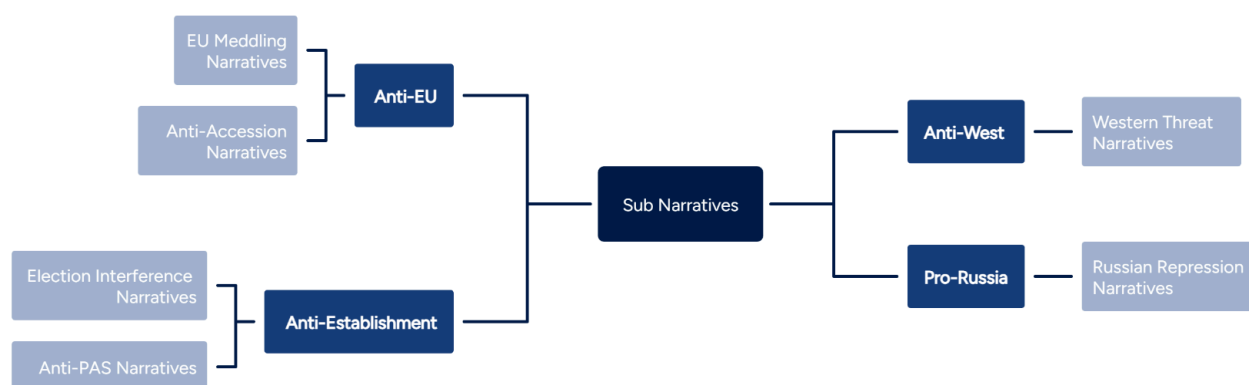


Figure 27: Sub-Narratives As They Relate to Meta-Narratives

This structure underscores the layered and interconnected nature of Russian FIMI activity. Sub-narratives serve as the operation’s branches, more adaptable and context-sensitive than meta-narratives, allowing actors to tailor messaging to specific audiences, events, or emotional triggers while maintaining consistency with overarching strategic goals.

2.2.1 Anti-EU Sub-Narrative

2.2.1.1 EU Meddling

The sub-narrative of EU meddling in Moldova is built from a variety of narratives that have been circulating in Moldova since the 2024 referendum of EU accession. The narratives blame the EU for a variety of ongoing hardships and difficulties in Moldova, alleging that they have been caused in some way by the EU and its policies.



Figure 28: EU Meddling Sub-Narrative

- **The EU exerts colonial-style control over Moldova:** This narrative is part of the larger narrative set carried over by Russia from the Soviet Union, portraying the West as colonialist and the Soviet Union, now Russia, as an anti-colonial force.
- **NATO deployment represents the final blow to Moldova's sovereignty:** This narrative reinforces existing fears about Western involvement in the region. It suggests that Moldova's independence would be compromised either by joining NATO or by allowing NATO troops to operate within its borders. This narrative carries two main interpretations: first, that NATO's presence would amount to a military occupation, effectively eroding Moldova's sovereignty; and second, that permitting NATO troops would provoke a Russian invasion, leading to the same loss of sovereignty through conflict. Both interpretations are plausible within this framing and serve to discourage Moldova's cooperation with NATO by equating Western security partnerships with existential national risk.
- **The energy crisis is a result of European choices:** This narrative is a part of the larger trend of narratives used to shift blame away from Russia. It has been *established* that the energy crisis in Moldova is a result of Russia's cutting off of energy supplies, especially to Transnistria. This has put pressure on the Moldovan government which remains responsible for the population of Transnistria.
- **EU manipulates Moldova to follow its agenda:** This narrative is part of a wider conspiracy promoted by the Kremlin, starting with the Coloured Revolutions that took place between 2000 and 2005 in Georgia and Ukraine in support of democracy. The Kremlin sees these shifts towards democracy as part of Western *manipulation* to pull countries out of what Russia perceives to be its sphere of influence.

- **EU and NATO interfere in the electoral processes:** This *narrative* alleges that the EU and NATO are responsible for *interfering* in the election and *ensuring* the victory of the PAS party. This narrative, like others identified in this report, serves to equate EU and NATO actions with Russia’s, alleging that both parties are interfering in the electoral process.
- **EU membership raises prices and hurts local farmers:** This *narrative* seeks to blame the EU for economic hardship and fuel anti-EU sentiment, particularly in Moldova’s rural *farming* regions where support for European integration is already weak. It exploits genuine concerns about rising prices, an issue that disproportionately affects rural communities but is largely driven by global economic trends. By framing these challenges as the EU’s fault, the narrative reinforces feelings of neglect and isolation among farmers, making them more receptive to anti-EU messaging.

2.2.1.2 Anti-Accession Narratives

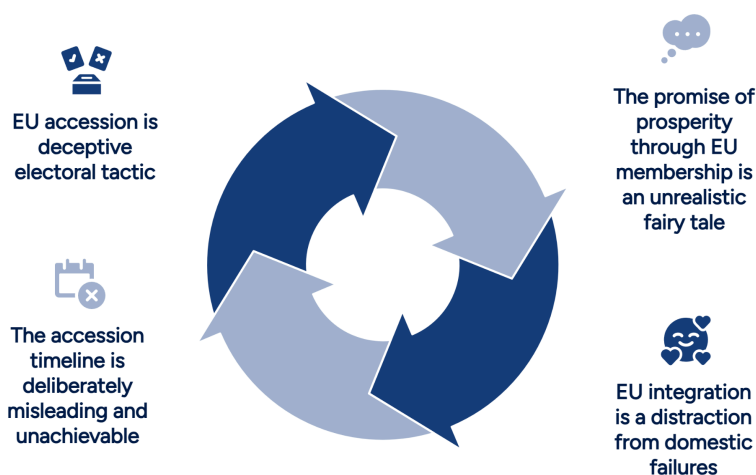


Figure 29: Anti-Accession Sub-Narrative

- EU accession is a *deceptive electoral tactic*
- The promise of prosperity through EU membership is an unrealistic “fairy tale”
- The accession timeline is deliberately misleading and unachievable
- EU integration is a *distraction from domestic failures*



Figure 30: Anti-EU Accession Narrative Example

2.2.2 Anti-Establishment Sub-Narratives

The anti-establishment sub-narratives worked before, during, and after the election to undermine the Moldovan government. This set of narratives attempt to portray the establishment as a meddling force undermining the election.

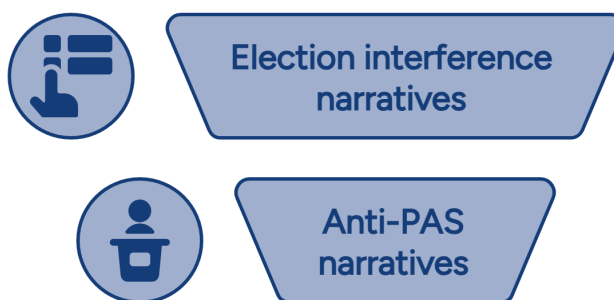


Figure 31: Anti-Establishment Sub-Narratives

2.2.2.1 Election Interference Sub-Narratives

- **Moldova's elections are rigged:** The *narrative* that the election was *rigged* is a traditional narrative used to target any election and attempt to undermine its credibility. Examples of this narrative can be found dating back to the 2024 election of Sandu, where this narrative was also used.

⁶ Source: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1259233489020115>

- **Diaspora voting is illegitimate:** In the case of Moldova, Russian narratives *target* the legitimacy of the diaspora vote primarily due to its very high percentage of support for pro-West political parties.
- **The Central Electoral Commission is compromised:** This narrative portrays the CEC as fundamentally *compromised*, controlled by the government to eliminate political rivals. This framing positions the electoral body not as an impartial arbiter but as a political tool *designed* to engineer favorable outcomes.

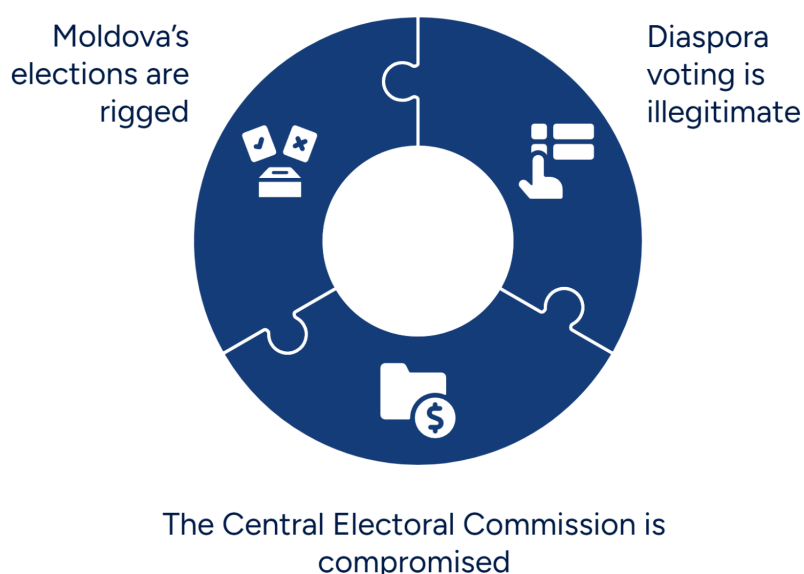


Figure 32: Election Interference Sub-Narratives

2.2.2.2 Anti-PAS Sub-Narrative

One of the primary targets of anti-establishment narratives is the PAS party and President Sandu. Many pro-Russian narratives sought to portray President Sandu and her party as a bogeyman of sorts, responsible for all of the *ills* suffered by anyone in Moldova. These narratives target specific aspects of the Moldovan government and the PAS party in an ongoing attempt to delegitimise them. One throughline in many of these narratives is the idea that the PAS is a *dictatorship* or authoritarian regime.

- **The government controls the media:** This *narrative* undermines trust in the Moldovan government and media by attempting to frame the government as *authoritarian* and the media as untrustworthy. The aim is to drive people away from trusted media sources and towards Russian state media sources where they will consume biased media that further undermines the Moldovan state.

- **President Sandu is sacrificing Moldovan lives for Western interests:** This *narrative* works to discredit Sandu by framing her as a traitor serving foreign powers.
- **President Sandu is selling Moldova to Europe:** This narrative, like the one above, aims to undermine Sandu’s credibility. Unlike similar narratives focused on security or identity, this one carries strong economic undertones, suggesting that her pro-European policies will worsen living conditions for ordinary Moldovans. It targets financially vulnerable and predominantly rural communities, where support for Sandu is already low, to deepen resentment and further erode trust in her leadership.
- **PAS is corrupt:** This narrative is often repeated as allegations of *corruption* are easy to make and difficult to disprove. Allegations that PAS is corrupt have followed the party since it came to power as Russia seeks to discredit the party and its aim to bring Moldova closer to Europe and the West.
- **President Sandu is a puppet of the West:** This *narrative* frames Sandu’s decisions as serving Western agendas, casting doubt on her legitimacy and intentions. This narrative also reinforces broader claims that Western influence is eroding Moldovan culture and values, deepening divisions between pro- and anti-Western segments of society.
- **PAS is a foreign-imposed dictatorship:** A more extreme version of the narratives above of Western control of Moldova and President Sandu. This narrative builds on the historical imposition of dictatorships by invading Western powers, framing PAS as one of those dictatorships. This *narrative*, of course, ignores the free and fair election during which PAS has come to lead the Moldovan government.

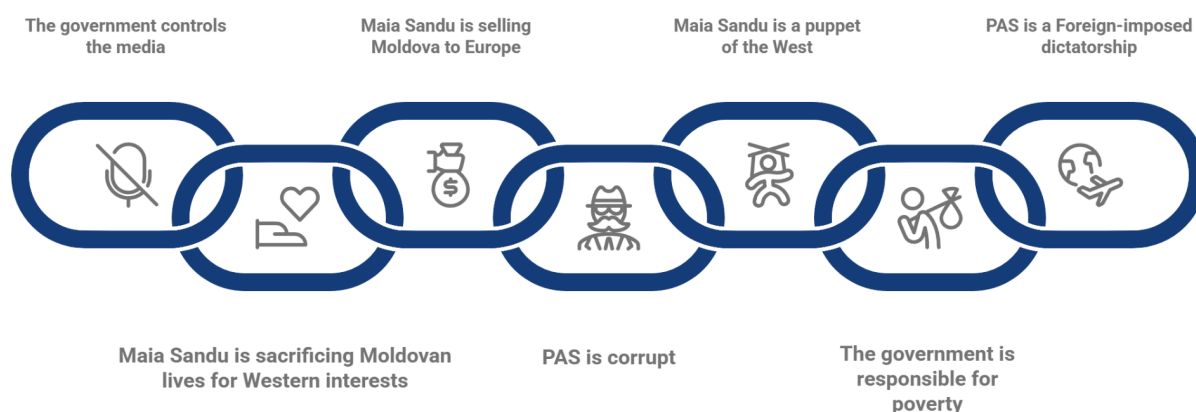


Figure 33: Anti-PAS Sub-Narratives

2.2.3 Anti-West Sub-Narratives

2.2.3.1 Western Threat Narratives

Narratives framing the West as a threat to Moldova serve the dual purpose of denigrating and diminishing faith in Western countries and diminishing the perception of Russia's threat to Moldova. This sub-narrative set is a key example of "whatbaoutism" in FIMI, where Russian narratives portray the West as participating and threatening Moldova in the same way as the Kremlin in an attempt to portray Russia as the lesser aggressor.

- **Romania threatens Moldovan sovereignty:** This first *narrative* attempts to argue that Romania, not Russia, poses a threat to Moldovan sovereignty. *Portraying* Romania as a threat to Moldova is key to Russia's ongoing campaign to align itself culturally and historically with Moldova, keeping it within Russia's sphere of influence. Romania has a centuries-long history with Moldova and deep cultural and historical roots that the Kremlin must deny in order to be successful.
- **The West is corrupt:** This narrative has appeared in a variety of forms, as allegations of corruption are a key component of Russian FIMI narratives used to undermine their enemies..
- **Mainstream media is corrupted by the West:** This narrative serves to *undermine* trust in the mainstream media and divert attention from their reporting. A narrative like this pairs well with the promotion of Russian state-owned media, which can be portrayed as more reliable.
- **The West is pushing dangerous ideologies:** This *narrative* works to frame Western ideology, primarily LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and feminism, as Western imports threaten Moldovan culture and, by extension, Russian culture. This same narrative has often been repeated in Poland and Ukraine.

During the final days of the electoral campaign, the following narratives emerged, alleging various security threats:

- Romania is amassing troops for a "lightning military operation" in Moldova
- President Sandu requested Romanian military aid to suppress political dissent
- Military intervention will resolve the Transnistrian conflict by force
- NATO and its allies are planning a military occupation of Moldova
- President Sandu is preparing to sacrifice Moldova's neutrality
- Military exercises are a cover for troop build-up and aggression
- The West is planning to suppress dissent after rigged elections



Figure 34: Western Threat Sub-Narrative

2.2.4 Pro-Russia Sub-Narratives

2.2.4.1 Russian Repression Narratives

Russian repression narratives comprised a large percentage of narratives spread in Moldova during the election period. According to this narrative, Russians, their culture and religion are being repressed by the Moldovan state in violation of their rights. What these narratives describe as repression is actually legitimate legal restrictions put in place by the Moldovan government in response to illegal actions.



Figure 35: Russian Repression Sub-Narratives

- **Russia offers stability:** This narrative portrays Moldova as unstable and putting people, especially in Gagauzia and Transnistria, at risk.
- **Russia stands for peace:** This narrative is another framing of the narrative that the EU and NATO will *bring* Moldova to war. Despite its perceived positive framing, it is a veiled threat that should Moldova move towards the West, they will no longer be at peace.
- **Pro-Russian regions are oppressed:** This narrative is a continuation of the first narrative in this section, *alleging* that Gagauzia and Transnistria are oppressed by the Moldovan government and seek Russian protection with the aim of ultimately joining Russia.
- **Shor-aligned figures are victims of repression:** In this *narrative*, Ilan Shor-aligned figures are used as an alternate term for pro-Russian figures. This narrative reframes the legal repercussions such figures have faced for violations of Moldovan law and electoral law as repression instead of the consequences of illegal actions.
- **Russia promotes traditional values:** According to this narrative, Russia promotes traditional values commonly held in Moldova, in opposition to the “dangerous ideologies” promoted by the West (immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, etc.).

- **Russian language rights are under threat:** This narrative provides another angle to the allegations that the Moldovan state represses Russians, focusing on language rights.
- **Law enforcement is a weapon of political repression:** Anti-corruption raids and law enforcement actions were systematically reframed as political persecution against opposition forces. This narrative employs emotionally charged language and historical analogies to transform legitimate investigative procedures into authoritarian repression ordered by the pro-EU government.
- **Counter-FIMI measures are forms of censorship:** This narrative is an attempt to target counter-FIMI and FIMI-prevention efforts by labelling them as censorship.
- **The Orthodox Church is persecuted by Moldova’s pro-Western government:** This narrative claims that the Moldovan government, with Western backing, is engaged in a systematic campaign of persecution against the Orthodox Church, its clergy, and its followers. This is portrayed as a deliberate policy to weaken and ultimately destroy the church.

The persecution of Christianity, including Orthodoxy, has become a feature of the ultra-liberal Western agenda — official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova.

"We clearly understand that Orthodoxy, and Christianity as a whole, are now literally in a state of persecution similar to that experienced by the first inhabitants of the catacombs."

Zakharova noted that this is happening not only in Moldova but also in Ukraine.

"They are exhuming, as they say, but we say they are barbarically looting coffins and graves, dividing the church without authority into right and wrong priests, persecuting Orthodox clergy, destroying"

[@rusputnikmd_2](#)

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Figure 36: Example of Persecution of Orthodoxy Narrative

⁷ Source: https://t.me/rusputnikmd_2/18357

2.3 P.E.N.A. Framework: The Promote, Excuse, Normalise, and Accuse Model of FIMI

The narratives highlighted in the above sections form a **four pronged approach—promote, excuse, normalise, and accuse (PENA)—targeting Moldova and its government.** This approach is a helpful analytic framework as it allows one to deconstruct and understand the systematic nature of Russian FIMI operations, moving beyond a simple list of narratives to a coherent and repeatable strategy. This framework demonstrates how disparate narratives work in a coordinated fashion to achieve a specific geopolitical objective.

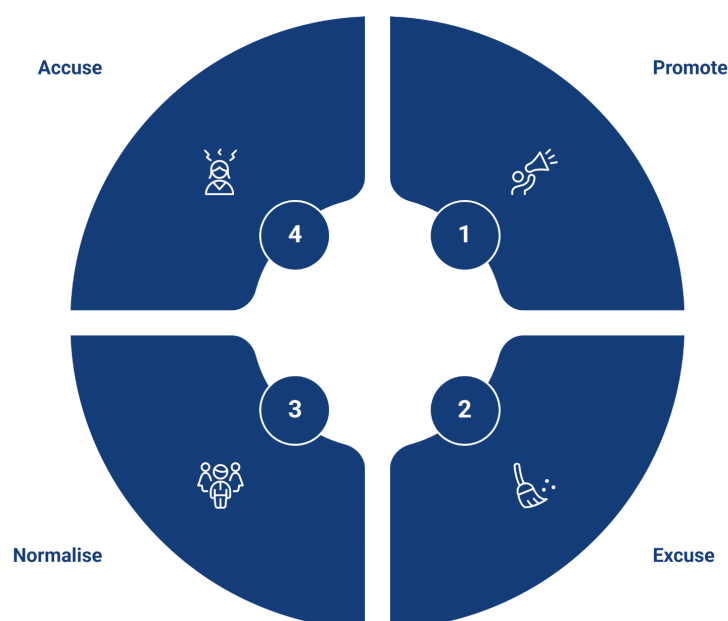


Figure 37: Important Narrative Themes

Promote → Pro-Kremlin actors and Kremlin ideology

The Kremlin seeks to promote actors who support its goals in Moldova and to limit the country's growing relationships with the West, particularly the EU. Individuals like Ilan Shor, who acts as the Kremlin's voice in Moldova despite having fled the country to avoid jail, are key vectors for this promotion.

In the weeks leading up to the September Parliamentary election it became clear that promotion of these actors was not just limited to narrative and cyber action but included physical violence. In one instance pro-Kremlin actors sponsored a group of Moldovans

who traveled to Republika Srpska and Serbia to receive training from Wagner affiliates on tactics that could be employed to escalate a protest; some of them were arrested by Moldovan police. The promotion and recruitment for training like this is a significant escalation and indicates the parallel hybrid threat of physical violence that accompanies some of these narratives.

Excuse → Illicit behaviour and FIMI by pro-Kremlin actors

Excusing illicit behaviour is a cornerstone of the Kremlin's FIMI actions in Moldova. Given the scale and intensity of the Kremlin's hybrid warfare operations in the country, many of its actions have been exposed publicly, damaging the reputation of pro-Russian actors. As such, excusing this behaviour is vital to maintaining the public profile and influence of individuals like Shor among sympathetic members of the Moldovan population.

Narratives excusing illicit behaviour were particularly prominent leading up to the September election in reference to the repression of the Russian population within Moldova, especially in Gagauzia and Transnistria. Russia's interference was justified in narratives as advocating for those repressed by the Moldovan state, often referring to officials punished in Gagauzia or other regions for violating election rules.

Normalise → Violations perpetrated by pro-Kremlin actors

The normalisation of violations not only excuses past actions but also paves the way for increasingly frequent and severe political and electoral misconduct. Mainstreaming illicit activities, such as vote-buying, diminishes public sensitivity to these issues and discourages reporting, thereby compromising the integrity of Moldova's democratic system.

Many of the most prominent normalisation narratives identified during the election portrayed legal punishments for election violations as repression, ignoring the reality that crimes were committed. One example of this would be the removal of Victoria Furtuna from the election ballot over her acceptance of money from fugitive oligarch Shor and his affiliated organisations. Acceptance of this money was illegal and a clear violation of electoral law, yet her removal from the ballot was framed in narratives as repression and a violation of her rights.

Accuse → The EU, the West, and the Moldovan state are guilty of illicit activity

This strategy shifts focus from the Kremlin's violations by accusing its opponents, the EU, the collective West, and the Moldovan state, of the crimes that pro-Kremlin actors are

accused of. This generates public confusion and obscures the trustworthy sources reporting on foreign interference. This tactic also serves as the basis for "whataboutism."

The most alarming example of this from narratives identified around the September Parliamentary election would be the narrative that Romania *threatens* Moldova's sovereignty. This narrative serves to draw attention away from Russia, placing the blame instead on Romania. Additionally, this narrative of sovereignty violation can be used to target the use of the Romanian language, Moldova's national language. Through this manipulation of Moldovan sovereignty, culture and language can be targeted under the veneer of accusations that Romania is attempting to take over Moldova.

2.3.1 Long-Term Impact

Although the focus of this report is the September 2025 Parliamentary election in Moldova, it is important to understand that the narratives identified here are not exclusive to elections. FIMI activity in Moldova is continuous and adaptive, shaping public opinion, policy discourse, and institutional credibility year-round. Countering these narratives therefore requires sustained, proactive engagement rather than reactive measures during election periods. The repetitive use of these narratives can cause serious harm and has long-term risks of its own that are also important to recognise.

The long-term danger lies not only in shaping voter behaviour but in the gradual erosion of democracy and state resilience. Persistent disinformation weakens public institutions by undermining confidence in their legitimacy, professionalism, and neutrality. When citizens begin to doubt the independence of electoral bodies, the judiciary, or the media, it becomes increasingly difficult for those institutions to function as trusted arbiters of democratic governance, gradually creating a void between citizens and the government. Over time, this weakens Moldova's capacity to implement reforms, attract international support, and maintain social cohesion.

2.3.1.1 The Cumulative Risk of Narrative Repetition

The repetition of these narratives from the 2024 referendum through to the lead up of the 2025 elections presents a profound and cumulative risk. The persistent exposure to the same messages, even if they are false or misleading, can have a powerful and lasting psychological impact on voters. This phenomenon, known as the *illusory truth effect*, occurs when a statement is repeated frequently, lending it credence, regardless of its accuracy. Over this extended period, the narratives, such as claims of government corruption or Western meddling, are intended to become so familiar that voters would begin to accept them as factual. This repetition also creates a sense of a "shared reality"

that makes it easier for voters to dismiss contradictory information, reinforcing existing biases.

By consistently desensitising the public to illicit behaviour and providing simple cognitive shortcuts for complex political decisions, the prolonged repetition of these narratives is a key mechanism through which FIMI campaigns can successfully manipulate the electorate and undermine the integrity of the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections.

3. Threat Actors

Russia and Russia-affiliated actors remained the primary drivers of malign influence targeting Moldova’s parliamentary elections, with Belarusian state outlets sustaining complementary information campaigns. Together, these actors sought to undermine public confidence in the electoral process, delegitimise the pro-European government, and erode support for Moldova’s integration into the European Union.

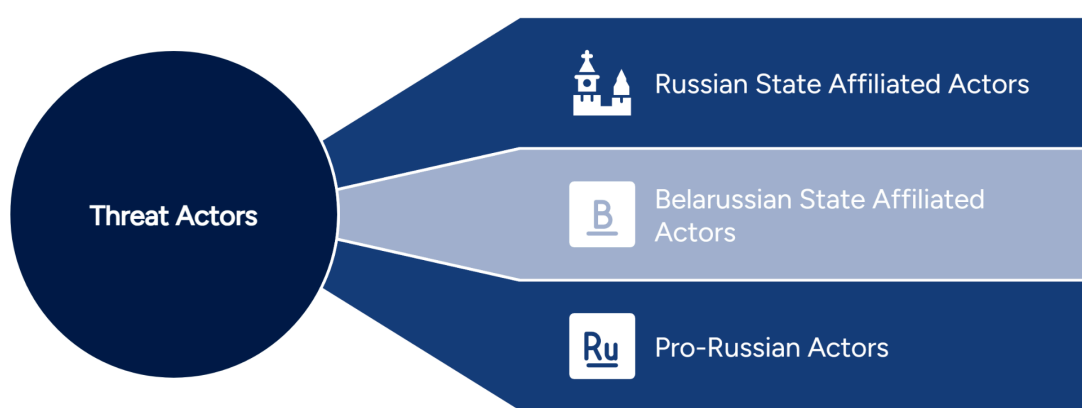


Figure 38: Threat Actors

Russian state-affiliated actors:

- A broad constellation of Kremlin-aligned media and online assets amplified disinformation narratives and engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior aimed at disrupting Moldova’s political landscape. State-controlled outlets including [Vzglyad](#), [RT](#), [RIA Novosti](#), [Sputnik](#), [Tsargrad](#), [Vedomosti](#), and [TASS](#), maintained a persistent anti-government focus, portraying the PAS party as corrupt and Western-controlled.
- The influence network linked to Rybar, a notorious Russian military channel, expanded through the creation of [REST](#), a pseudo-investigative outlet targeting EU states and Moldova. Despite EU sanctions against one of Rybar’s operators and a US State Department reward for information on those involved in Rybar, REST rapidly gained traction online. Its emergence in mid-2024 exemplified Russia’s practice of regenerating sanctioned propaganda assets to sustain malign influence and adapt to new audiences.

- Meanwhile, coordinated inauthentic networks, comprising at least 253 accounts, operated across TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram under the supervision of Kremlin-sponsored operators. Funded through Promsvyazbank (a sanctioned Russian defense-linked bank), this troll farm of so-called “InfoLeaders” coordinated messaging via Telegram groups, posting synchronized anti-Sandu and anti-PAS content. The operation’s scale was significant, producing over 55 million views and millions of engagements across platforms.
- The Foundation for Battling Injustice (R-FBI), a Russian state-controlled organization tied to the Storm-1516 operation, fabricated stories alleging that Moldovan prisoners were sent to fight in Ukraine. These claims spread through a network of false outlets and conspiracy websites, such as VT Foreign Policy and ProNews, illustrating Russia’s hybrid use of both information and psychological operations to manipulate sentiment and polarise debate. Storm-1516 itself disseminated at least 17 fabricated articles and videos via 13 fake websites (including one impersonating PAS) and 39 accounts across X, TikTok, and Telegram, blending parody, impersonation, and disinformation to discredit Moldova’s democratic institutions.
- Further, a portal titled “Traitors” appeared on the eve of the election, naming Moldovan public figures accused of “betraying national interests.” Domain analysis linked the portal to the AEZA cybercriminal group and the infrastructure behind HaiTV, an app used to bypass bans on Russian TV channels, another example of blurred lines between Russia’s criminal and state information ecosystems.
- The Russian Orthodox Church and its affiliated networks played a central role in shaping pro-Russian narratives targeting Moldovan voters during the election period. Leveraging religious authority and cultural influence, Moscow-linked clerical figures and media channels amplified traditionalist and anti-Western themes portraying EU integration as a threat to “faith, family, and nation.” The DFRLab-documented Matushka network, operating through Orthodox parishes, church-affiliated youth groups, and coordinated social media channels on Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram, blended religious content with political messaging. Through church-endorsed publications such as Salt and Light and QR-linked online contests, the campaign funnelled followers into echo chambers promoting Kremlin-aligned narratives. The network’s activities aligned with the broader Russian strategy of instrumentalizing the Orthodox Church as a vehicle for influence, mobilising religious identity to erode public trust in pro-EU institutions and legitimize pro-Russian political blocs.

Pro-Russian and Russia-affiliated actors:

- A dense web of intermediaries and proxy networks sustained Kremlin messaging through coordinated amplification. Pro-Kremlin influencers promoted REST's content, some operating as "influence-for-hire" accounts based in Africa to distribute material in multiple EU languages.
- Serbian journalist Vesna Veizovic, head of Vaseljenska.net and a contributor to NewsFront Serbia (linked to Russia's FSB), played a role in promoting REST content across Balkan networks. Frequently featured in Russian state-affiliated events, she acts as a regional amplifier of anti-Western and anti-EU narratives.
- At the same time, Facebook and Instagram pages under the "Moldavian Calendar" brand, administered from Russia and Thailand, posed as neutral local media while spreading Shor-aligned content. Their visibility was artificially inflated through inauthentic accounts managed from Vietnam. Parallel to this, fake survey platforms (vocepentru.com, vocepentru.eu, vocea-mea.online) imitated PAS branding and disseminated polarizing "questionnaires" tied to a Russian charity, the "Promotion of Social Projects."
- Pro-Russian conspiracy theorist Tuomas Malinen circulated fabricated "leaked emails" alleging PAS would overturn election results, a rumor that quickly spread internationally. Meanwhile, Russian pranksters Vovan and Lexus manipulated video material featuring former USAID head Samantha Power to suggest US interference in Moldova's elections.
- Fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor also continued to play a disruptive role, using his Telegram channel, VK, and Odnoklassniki to announce paid anti-government protests, offering participants USD 3,000 monthly. Through a linked Telegram bot, MD Live Check 897, he promised additional bonuses for users posting supportive social media content, merging digital propaganda with offline mobilisation.
- Five foreign religious influencers led by Charles Bausman traveled to Chisinau in the week prior to the election to meet with Archbishop Markell of Balti and Falesti and report on the alleged repression of Russian Orthodox Christians in Moldova. The group's trip was initially reported by the Salt and Light network, and later by state sponsored Russian media.

Other state-affiliated actors:

- Belarusian outlets ([CTVBY](#), [ONT](#), [SB.by](#), [Belta](#), and [News.by_BTRC](#)) ran a coordinated [campaign](#) supporting pro-Russian politician Igor Dodon. Across 54 YouTube videos - garnering 3.8 million views - they amplified narratives [depicting](#) Dodon as a “legitimate alternative” to the pro-European government, framing the EU as manipulative and Moldova’s elections as fraudulent. Most releases coincided with Dodon’s visit to Minsk, reflecting tight narrative synchronization between Moscow and Minsk.

Romanian far-right

- Additional cross-border amplification came from Romania’s far-right and increasingly pro-Russian AUR party. AUR and its leader, George Simion, actively promoted anti-PAS messaging while [boosting](#) the Moldovan populist party Democrația Acasă (Democracy at Home), led by Vasile Costiuc. Through coordinated social-media posts, livestreams, and cross-platform commentary, AUR served as an external amplifier that legitimised anti-government narratives for Moldovan audiences, particularly those connected to the Romanian information space or consuming Romanian-language political content.

The operations spanned virtually all major digital ecosystems: Telegram as a command-and-control and dissemination hub, TikTok for viral short-form propaganda, Facebook and Instagram for targeted community infiltration and ad-based amplification, X/Twitter for narrative seeding and influencer engagement, VK and Odnoklassniki for outreach to Russian-speaking audiences, and YouTube for long-form propaganda and Belarusian state video content.

Together, these overlapping networks demonstrate the adaptive nature of Russia’s infrastructure - capable of mutating identities, co-opting local proxies, and fusing media manipulation with cyber and financial enablers to systematically undermine Moldova’s pro-European course.

4. DISARM Red Framework Techniques

The DISARM Red Framework was used to categorise the techniques used in foreign influence operations targeting the Moldovan Parliamentary elections. This framework is a taxonomy that helps researchers aggregate and explain manipulative behaviours and has been used to describe the identified threat actor techniques.

In the sections below, we will highlight DISARM Objectives and techniques by marking them with italics and linking to the technique.

4.1 Objectives

The influence operations targeting the Moldovan elections had a range of objectives, primarily around supporting political allies, demoting the ruling party, undermining trust in the voting process, trying to discourage citizens from voting, and polarising society.

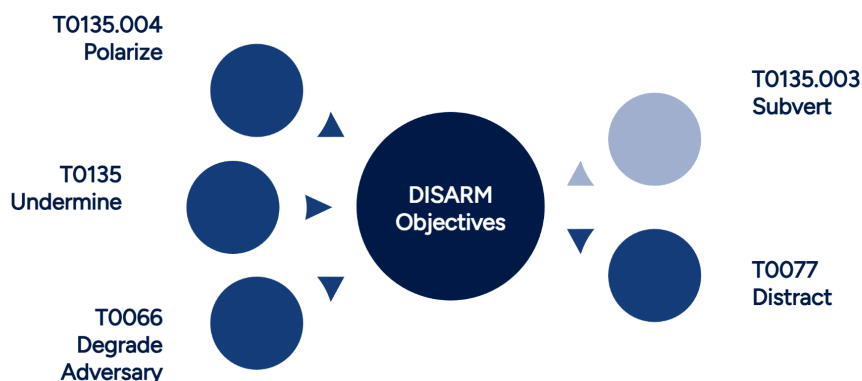


Figure 39: DISARM Objectives

4.1.1 Supporting and Demoting

A common trend observed across the cases was the consistent attempts to *Smear* ([T0135.001](#)) and *Degrade* ([T0066](#)) President Sandu, the ruling PAS party, the EU, EU member states, Ukraine, and NATO. These attempts have been geared towards:

- undermining trust in Pro-EU governance
- trying to damage Sandu's reputation
- claiming PAS is oppressing the opposition
- claiming PAS and Sandu are foreign puppets

- claiming that PAS will commit election fraud
- discrediting Sandu and PAS in the eyes of Moldovan and foreign far-right audiences
- undermining the authority of the Central Electoral Commission

Across Telegram and pro-Kremlin web portals, malign operators advanced systematic efforts to erode President Maia Sandu's legitimacy while amplifying opposition figures. Coordinated messaging alleging that Sandu suffers from "schizophrenia" and that her public appearances were "AI-generated fakes" demonstrates a clear enactment of *Degrade Adversary* ([T0066](#)).

On the other hand, Shor's operations were working to promote him, his political allies, and his initiatives, such as anti-Moldovan Government demonstrations in attempt to *Cultivate Support for Ally* ([T0136.006](#)).

Shor is not alone in this endeavour. A Belarusian Campaign also worked to cultivate support for Igor Dodon and his bloc. Other Russia-affiliated operations also [supported](#) other candidates, such as Victoria Furtuna's party Great Moldova.

4.1.2 Undermining Trust and Voter Suppression

The observed operations also worked to *Discourage* ([T0139.001](#)) voters and *Undermine* ([T0135](#)) trust in the voting process and Moldovan Institutions. These attempts include trying to:

- create distrust, undermining confidence and lessening the perceived legitimacy of the elections,
- highlight fabricated election procedure irregularities,
- fabricate polling irregularities,
- undermine electoral institutions, such as the Central Electoral Commission.

Attempts were also made to undermine the trust in the democratic governance model, both in relation to the West and Moldova.

4.1.3 Polarise

Another objective that was clearly observed was to *Polarise* ([T0135.004](#)) Moldovan society on key political issues and spread fear. This objective was achieved through:

- associating a vote for Sandu's PAS party with a conflict with Russia.
- narratives about Western military intervention,
- equating Moldovan EU membership with less Moldovan sovereignty,
- trying to fracture society along ideological, linguistic, and gender lines.

The key issue exploited to worsen polarisation was the Moldovan perception of the Moldovan EU accession process, pitching it against sovereignty, morality, and Moldovan interests.

Campaigns exploited misogyny, gender-based attacks, and anti-Western sentiment, fostering moral outrage and promoting the social exclusion of women in politics through rhetoric portraying them as "mad" or "weak."

4.1.4 Subvert and Distract

The operations targeting the elections were also trying to *Subvert* ([T0135.003](#)) Moldovan foreign policy by undermining foreign support to the country. The election-related operations also sought to undermine Moldova's foreign policy and external support by influencing Western audiences, particularly far-right and conservative groups such as the MAGA movement. These narratives portrayed Moldova's pro-European leadership as corrupt and authoritarian, aiming to erode Western trust, weaken democratic assistance, and polarize international opinion against continued support for Chisinau.

Election observation missions were also targeted by trying to induce [paid](#) actors with financial incentives to find problems.

Lastly, one operation was trying to *Distract* ([T0077](#)) Moldovans from the news that pro-Russian opposition parties had received money from Russia by claiming that President Sandu had received money from the United States.

4.2 Manipulative Techniques

To fulfil these objectives, the threat actors used a series of manipulative techniques. For the sake of simplicity, we have categorised them into four categories: Impersonation and Fabricated Websites, Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour, Driving Offline Activities, and Content-related Manipulation.

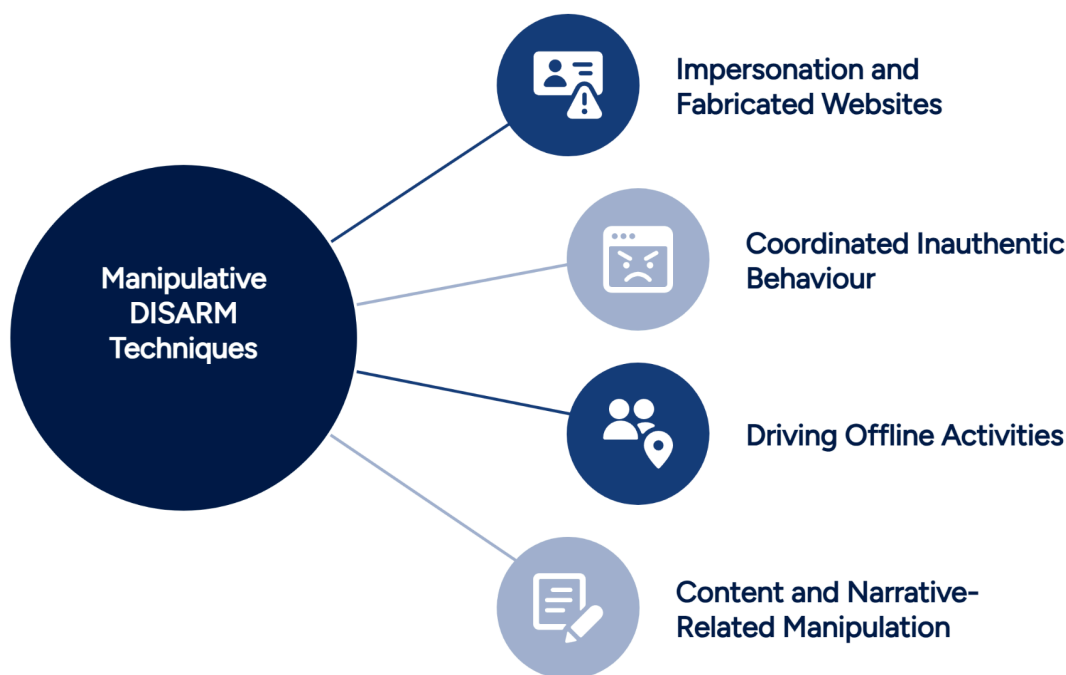


Figure 40: Manipulative DISARM Techniques

4.2.1 Impersonation and Fabricated Websites

One of the key techniques used by several influence operations includes the creation of *Inauthentic Sites to Amplify News and Narratives* ([T0049.007](#)). These websites used *Fabricated News Outlet Personas* ([T0097.202](#)) and polling personas, *Impersonated* ([T0143.003](#)) the ruling party PAS and *Impersonated* ([T0143.003](#)) *News Outlet* ([T0097.202](#)) entities to give legitimacy to the content they were spreading and to discredit their targets. Multiple websites were also using manipulative election surveys.

In a few [cases](#) related to the influence operation known as the Russian Foundation for Battling Injustice, the operation relied on *Leverage Existing Inauthentic News Sites* ([T0098.002](#)) to launder content from other Russian sources. These websites were positioned as legitimate news outlets, while being part of the Russian information laundering ecosystem.

In some cases, the websites used *Lookalike Domain* ([T0149.003](#)) as part of their impersonation attempts and to *Bypass Content Blocking* ([T0121.001](#)). Some of these *Utilize Bulletproof Hosting* ([T0130.002](#)) to hinder attribution.

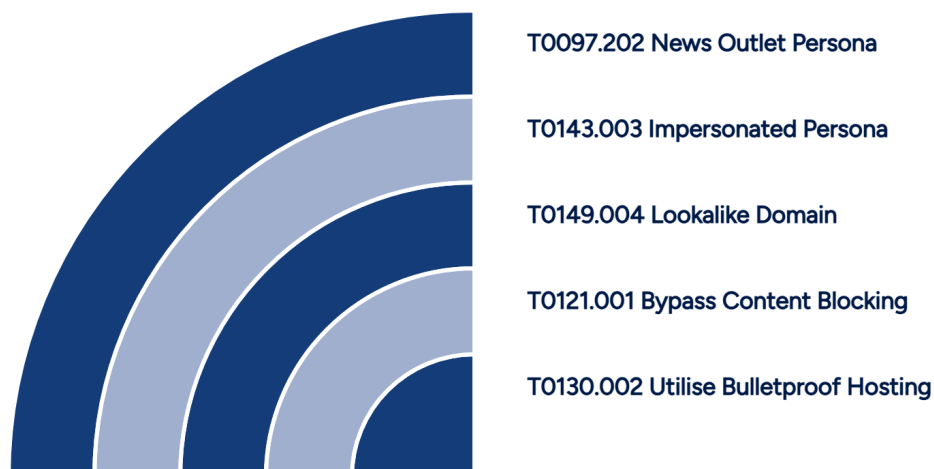


Figure 41: DISARM Manipulative Techniques, Impersonation and Fabrication

4.2.2 Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour

At least three influence operators were operating influence operations during the elections. While some of their techniques overlapped, others were widely different.

Some of these operations relied on *Co-Opt Trusted Individuals* ([T0100.001](#)), regular Moldovan citizens, and *Incentivising Sharing* ([T0120](#)) of operational content by paying them. These operations relied on the legitimacy brought by the *Local Persona* ([T0097.101](#)) of these accounts.

These co-opted users commonly *Used Copy-paste* ([T0084.001](#)) or original content with coordinated messaging to *Post Across Platforms* ([T0119.002](#)) and *Post Across Groups* ([T0119.001](#)), trying to maximise the reach of the content.

Some of this activity relied on *Directing Users to Alternative Platforms* ([T0122](#)), in most cases, Telegram, to mobilise them for offline actions.

Another set of operations relied on utilising automated accounts, likely by *Acquiring Botnets* ([T0093](#)) that engaged in *Automated Forwarding and Reposting* ([T0049.003](#)) of content.

The last set of CIB networks relied on *Co-Opting Influencers* ([T0100.003](#)) and bringing in *Trolls that Amplify content and Manipulate* ([T0049.001](#)) audiences.

The influencers were either *Recruited Contractors* ([T0091.001](#)) or *Partisans* ([T0091.002](#)).

Some of these relied on *Paid Account Asset* ([T0146.002](#)), using paid accounts to boost the visibility and credibility of the assets.

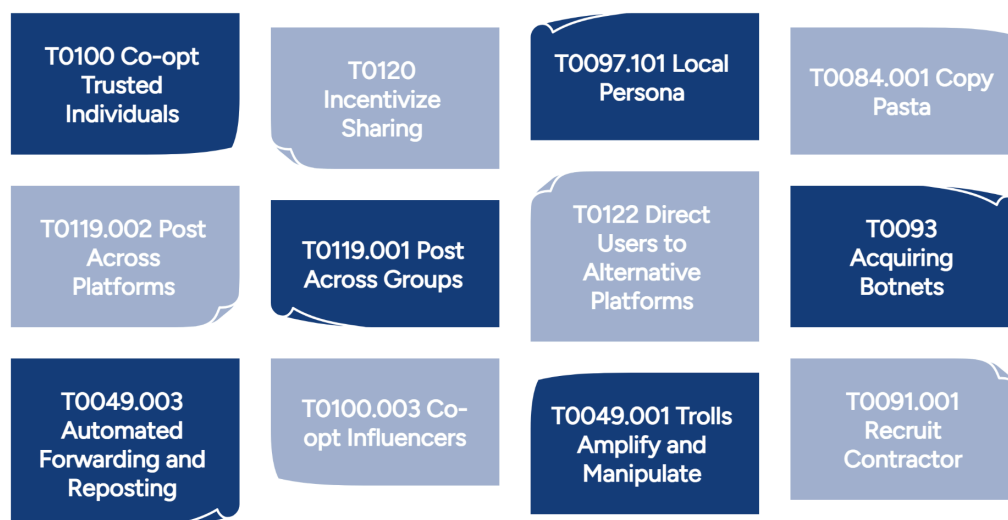


Figure 42: DISARM Manipulative Techniques, Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour

4.2.3 Driving Offline Activities

The Moldovan elections stand out in comparison with other European elections in 2025 due to the prevalence of online activities trying to drive offline activity.

Influence operations orchestrated by Ilan Shor were the most prevalent in using this technique.

A large portion of the operations relied on *Paying for Physical Action* ([T0057.001](#)), by *Recruiting Contractors* ([T0091.001](#)) to conduct demonstrations and to try to find discrepancies in relation to the voting process to discredit the elections.

This was partially done through the operations mentioned above, but also through threat actors *Purchasing Targeted Advertisements* ([T0018](#)).

4.2.4 Content and Narrative-Related Manipulation

Finally, the operation also used a series of content and narrative-related manipulation techniques.

In the Moldovan context, most of these operations relied on *Leverage Existing* ([T0003](#)) and *Amplifying Existing Narratives* ([T0118](#)), already being spread by Russian actors for a

long time in the Moldovan and other contexts. Some of these Integrated *Target Audience Vulnerabilities into Narrative* ([T0083](#)) by tapping into existing concerns in the country.

Security fear-mongering (“Romanian military intervention,” “NATO occupation,” “rigged elections”). Actors appropriated legitimate events (NATO exercises, Romanian troop movements) to construct existential threat frames, aligning with *Identify Social and Technical Vulnerabilities* ([T0081](#)).

While AI was being used, especially in the form of threat actors *Developing AI-Generated Images* ([T0086.002](#)) and *AI-Generated Videos (Deepfakes)* ([T0087.001](#)), much of the content was instead deceptively edited or relied on actors playing out a scenario.

The *Deceptively Edited Videos (Cheap Fakes)* ([T0087.002](#)) used *Deceptively Edited Audio (Cheap Fakes)* ([T0088.002](#)) by using text-to-speech software to create “news” segments or to take real content out of context.

Recruiting or co-opting Moldovan voices. Some local bloggers, influencers and clerical figures were amplified to frame the government as being “anti-Orthodox” or censoring opposing voices, demonstrating *Acquire/Recruit Network* ([T0093](#)). By spotlighting sympathetic priests and community leaders, malign actors localised foreign propaganda within trusted networks, also exhibiting *Infiltrate Existing Networks* ([T0094](#)).

Threat actors also *Developed False or Altered Documents* ([T0085.002](#)) that were used as part of alleged leaks to create a veneer of proof.

The Storm-1516 operation also relied on *Developing Inauthentic News Articles* ([T0085.003](#)) by *Plagiarising* ([T0084.002](#)) articles from authentic media and re-writing them using AI-generated text, to make the inauthentic news websites seem more legitimate.

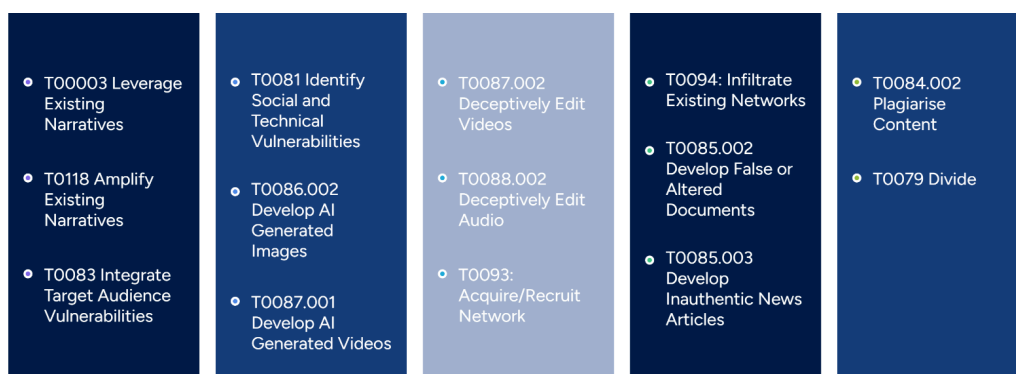


Figure 43: DISARM Manipulative Techniques, Content and Narrative-Related Manipulation

5. Observed FIMI Operations



Figure 44: Observed Operations

5.1 Operation Overload

In 2025, Moldova was among the six countries (France, Germany, Moldova, Poland, Ukraine, and the United States) most often targeted by the actors behind the pro-Kremlin FIMI campaign [Operation Overload](#). The focus markedly shifted toward Moldova in mid-April and remained consistent until September, while the content strategy was evidently aimed at influencing the elections. In May and June, the distribution strategy incorporated a record number of social media platforms, namely X, Telegram, Bluesky, and TikTok. The main tactics of the operation involved posting impersonation videos branded with the logos of legitimate media outlets and targeting the global fact-checking community with links to this inauthentic content in an attempt to obtain debunks as additional amplification. These tactics remained consistent in the amplification of Moldova-related content.

X and Bluesky remain the primary platforms for amplification of Overload content. Over 75 inauthentic anonymous accounts spread content related to Moldova between April and June on Bluesky. These posts were quickly removed by the platform, and the accounts were suspended. On X, at least 10 accounts spread content targeting Moldova. These posts collectively garnered 620,000 impressions.

TikTok was a new platform for the campaign altogether. Overload migrated to TikTok in May and exclusively used the platform to distribute videos targeting Moldova via a small network of coordinated accounts. In total, 13 newly created anonymous accounts were intermittently employed to seed videos targeting Moldova, with these posts comprising their only activity. Although the number of accounts was small, the posts successfully

garnered 30,000 shares and almost 3 million views, suggesting the possible use of artificial boosting tactics, such as engagement farming, to exploit TikTok’s For You page algorithm, which heavily favors content showing strong early engagement.

One distinct amplification tactic employed by the operatives behind Overload is sending anonymous emails targeting fact-checkers, researchers, and media organisations. The focus on Moldova was also evident from the topics in the emails sent in Q2 2025. In May alone, nearly 75 percent of all received emails contained false or misleading claims about Sandu, linking to social media content spread on X, Bluesky, Telegram and TikTok.

President Sandu is the object of the most aggressive gender-based attacks and the most vitriolic smear campaigns among all politicians targeted by Overload in 2024 and 2025, as [data](#) by Reset Tech and CheckFirst shows. Some posts contain false claims attacking her personally, while others propagate direct incitement to violence, such as fake graffiti showing her in a guillotine. The stories also link her to LGBTQ+ agendas and portray her as a Western agent seeking Moldova’s merger with Romania.



Figure 45: Key Components of Operation Overload

5.2 Storm-1516

Another Russian FIMI campaign, [Storm-1516](#), has been actively targeting Moldova since May 2025 in a typical Kremlin-orchestrated information laundering scheme. The key tactic of this operation involves disseminating fabricated stories mostly through newly created fake media websites, and amplifying this content via networks of Kremlin-aligned influencers, other anonymous news accounts, and fan/parody accounts across various social media platforms, with a distribution focus on X. The operation also disseminates stories through pre-existing fringe media outlets with Kremlin-aligned editorial policies.

These include geopolitical blogs, conspiracy-focused platforms, and other sites known to researchers for promoting questionable narratives in the past.

Storm-1516 aimed to discredit Moldova's ruling PAS party and President Sandu through allegations of widespread corruption, nepotism, and political repression. Similar to Overload, Storm-1516 also used identity-based disinformation and smear campaigns against Sandu.

The operation is closely linked with the Prigozhin-linked Russian Foundation to Battle Injustice (R-FBI), an entity that functions as a distribution hub for Kremlin narratives targeting Ukraine and the West. Between May and September 2025, at least 13 fake websites linked to Storm-1516 were spreading anti-Sandu and anti-PAS articles. Most of these websites were newly-created and branded as media organisations. The websites featured hundreds of AI-generated news articles ("filler content"), produced within days and published with the sole purpose of creating a veneer of legitimacy to the inauthentic media outlets. The only human-written pieces were typically articles targeting Moldova ("target content"), which were usually longer and more detailed than the AI-generated content. Some websites misused the identity of actual journalists, falsely crediting them as authors.

The amplification strategy involves the activation of various social media assets, including anonymous accounts and already established influencers. An Africa-based network of coordinated accounts, Kremlin-aligned social media influencers (including the verified accounts of self-declared geopolitical outlets), as well as anonymous accounts pertaining to the QAnon infospace and branding themselves as MAGA-linked, have all been promoting Moldova-linked content spread by Storm-1516 websites.

According to data from Reset Tech, some of the anonymous amplifiers (the Africa-based amplifiers and some MAGA-branded accounts) engage in paid political posting. The African accounts are part of an ecosystem consisting of hundreds or even thousands of accounts and functioning as a coordinated engagement hub for mutual retweeting. At least 15 of the accounts amplifying Storm-1516 and similar Kremlin-aligned content on X offer amplification-for-hire services, stating that explicitly in their bios.

An assessment of the Storm-1516 network *indicates* that it collectively generated an estimated 59 million views and roughly 150,000 interactions across its assets. While these figures appear substantial at face value, the engagement patterns strongly suggest that a significant share of the views were inauthentic. As a result, the numerical reach attributed to Storm-1516 should be treated with caution, as it likely overstates the operation's real influence and resonance among Moldovan users.

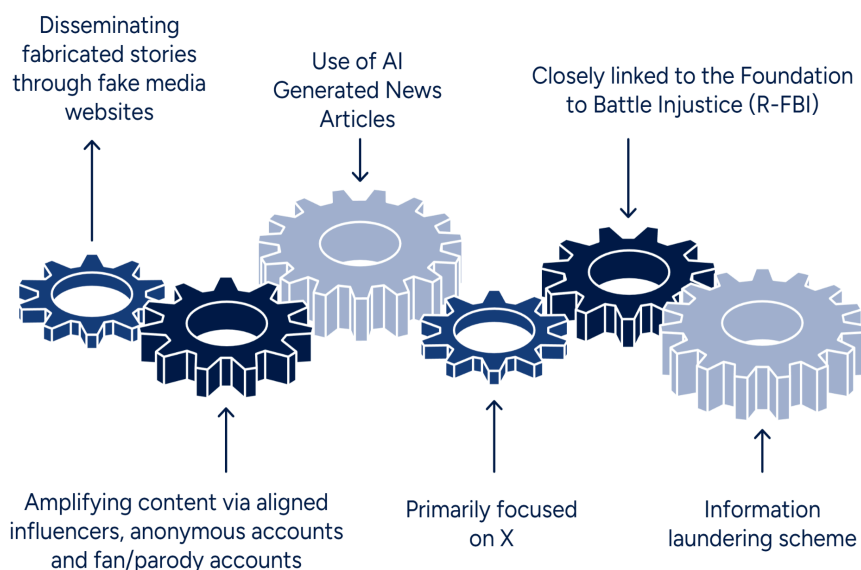


Figure 46: Key Components of Operation Storm 1516

5.3 InfoLeaders

Between 2024 and 2025, Russian-linked influence operations built an extensive network of paid Moldovan online operatives known as “InfoLeaders,” designed to manipulate public opinion ahead of Moldova’s September 2025 parliamentary elections. According to a *DFRLab investigation*, at least 253 social media accounts coordinated inauthentic activity across TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, generating more than 55 million views on 28,000 pieces of content. The accounts posed as ordinary citizens but systematically promoted anti-government, anti-EU, and pro-Russian narratives, forming a digital propaganda army aligned with the interests of fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor.

The InfoLeaders program emerged from Russia-backed political infrastructure connected to the Victory Bloc, a Shor-controlled movement previously sanctioned for its role in financing and organizing destabilization efforts in Moldova. Participants in the operation were paid through Russian financial intermediaries such as Promsvyazbank, a bank sanctioned for ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense. Payments were conditional on meeting daily quotas of online activity, including posting, commenting, and sharing disinformation targeting Moldova’s pro-European leadership. This structure created a digital workforce effectively functioning as an outsourced Kremlin influence arm embedded within Moldova’s online space.

Inside the operation, a tiered system managed content production and supervision. Lower-level “communication activists” were trained and evaluated before being promoted

to InfoLeaders, who then managed smaller groups of operatives. Coordination relied heavily on Telegram bots and nightly briefings, ensuring synchronized messaging while maintaining plausible deniability. Posts were tailored to look spontaneous, using Moldovan slang and personal photos, but followed central instructions on hashtags, talking points, and tone, creating the illusion of grassroots sentiment while pushing centrally determined narratives.

As the election neared, the “InfoLeaders” network abruptly rebranded from supporting Shor’s Victory Bloc to amplifying Moldova Mare, another Kremlin-aligned political project seen as more electorally viable. Organizers *instructed* participants to delete past materials linked to the Victory Bloc, change usernames and profile pictures, and republish similar messages under new branding. This seamless shift demonstrated both the professionalized management behind the campaign and its flexibility in maintaining influence regardless of political label.

The thematic content churned out by InfoLeaders skewed strongly anti-PAS, anti-Maia Sandu, and pro-Russian and anti-Western. Keywords like “PAS,” “Maia Sandu,” “elections,” “EU,” “war,” and “NATO” featured heavily in posts, illustrating the tailored campaign focused on destabilizing Moldova’s pro-European trajectory.

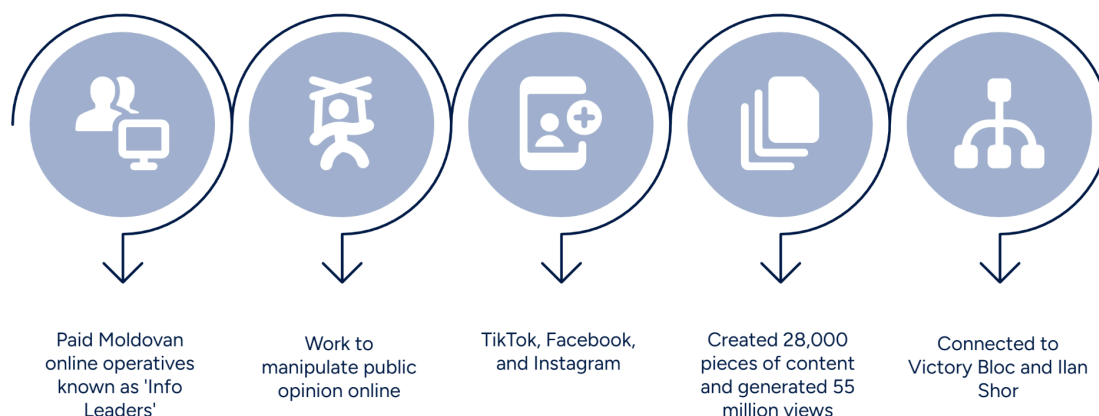


Figure 47: Key Components of the InfoLeaders Operation

5.4 REST Media

In June 2025, a new website called REST Media emerged online, presenting itself as an investigative platform offering analytical coverage of political, social, and international developments, and targeting Moldovan as well as EU audiences. However, a DFRLab and GLOBSEC joint *investigation* found multiple indicators linking REST to Rybar, a well-known pro-Kremlin Telegram channel and media project whose co-founder is

sanctioned by Western governments for spreading Russian disinformation. The discovery reflects a continued pattern of sanctioned Russian influence actors launching new online fronts to target specific countries ahead of politically sensitive moments - in this case, Moldova's parliamentary elections.

Rybar, founded in 2018 by former Russian Ministry of Defense press officer Mikhail Zvinchuk, gained prominence during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as one of the most influential pro-war military blogs. Zvinchuk was sanctioned by the European Union in 2023 for amplifying Kremlin narratives and supporting Russia's mobilization efforts.

Technical analysis identified a series of overlaps between REST and Rybar's known infrastructure. REST's website, registered on June 20, 2025, used VK Cloud Solutions, a Russian hosting provider also employed by Rybar. Both sites shared distinctive server configuration traits, such as identical Pure-FTPd banners and unusual connection limits. Forensic review of REST's uploaded media revealed file-path references containing the word "Rybar" and Cyrillic homoglyphs, suggesting that materials were created or processed within the same production environment used by Rybar's team. Additional metadata indicated the GMT+3 time zone, consistent with Moscow-based operations. These indicators collectively provided strong attribution linking REST's backend and editorial workflow to the Rybar network.

Beyond its infrastructure, REST relied on multi-platform amplification to build visibility. A single promotional video on TikTok, which was repeatedly reposted and boosted, ensuring algorithmic amplification and sustained visibility across the platform, gained more than 3 million views. The Russia-linked Pravda Network, a sprawling ecosystem of hundreds of aggregation portals and social media accounts active across Europe, Africa, and Asia, further amplified REST's articles. On X (formerly Twitter), just four posts by two prominent accounts within this ecosystem generated over 700,000 views - illustrating how a limited number of high-reach actors can deliver substantial exposure to fringe outlets. On Telegram, REST content circulated across pro-Kremlin clusters, including the Kremlin-aligned InfoDefense network, previously [exposed](#) by DFRLab. Moldova's former Prime Minister Vlad Filat, known for anti-EU and anti-Sandu messaging, also shared REST material, further embedding its narratives within Moldova's domestic political discourse. Independent researchers at Reset Tech [observed](#) that REST's content was promoted by clusters of Africa-based accounts operating as "influence-for-hire" assets and was being translated into multiple EU languages for broader distribution.

REST's articles focused heavily on anti-EU and anti-PAS government narratives, frequently targeting President Maia Sandu and her political party, portrayed Moldova's

European integration efforts as externally imposed, and questioned Western influence over the country’s judiciary.

Linked to Rybar, a well known Pro-Kremlin Telegram channel and media project

Multiplatform amplification

Articles focused on anti-EU and Anti-PAS narratives



TikTok, Pravda Network, X and Telegram

Promoted by clusters of Africa-based accounts operating as “influence-for-hire” assets

Figure 48: Key Components of the REST Media Operation

6. Reach of FIMI Campaigns

Reach is measured by aggregating views, interactions (likes, comments, shares), and follower counts across accounts and assets linked to the actors behind the identified manipulation campaigns. However, the reliability of these metrics varies considerably between platforms.

Some social media companies do not declare the views on their content, limiting independent verification. In particular, Storm-1516 exhibited clear indicators of metric manipulation, both their views and interaction numbers. As a result, there is no reliable method to determine how many impressions attributed to Storm-1516 reflect genuine human engagement versus automated or coordinated inauthentic amplification.

Across the 22 Incident Alerts documented during the 2025 Moldovan elections, threat actors collectively generated:

- 136.1 million views,
- 3.79 million interactions, and
- leveraged accounts with an estimated 17.7 million followers, according to platform-provided metrics.

These numbers far exceed the population of Moldova, which is about 2,4 million residents, underscoring the disproportionate saturation of Moldova's digital space by foreign and domestic influence campaigns.

6.1 High Reach

Most FIMI operations targeting the Moldovan elections achieved reach levels that are high in proportion to the country's population. This reflects not only the pervasive nature of disinformation networks but also the structural vulnerabilities of Moldova's fragmented information environment.

The operation with the highest external reach was Storm-1516, whose content travelled well beyond Moldovan borders. By embedding its narratives within conservative, anti-globalist, and "patriotic" online communities, Storm-1516 accessed large Western and Eastern European conservative audiences. It relied on established pro-Russian influencers and parody accounts with transnational audiences.

REST's reach also was well beyond Moldova's population baseline. The REST leveraged Rybar's 1 million-plus follower base, plus content amassing millions of views in a very short time. External amplification networks and cross-border audience spillovers can dramatically amplify reach, even if domestic follower counts are comparatively lower.

REST's campaign *generated* substantial reach from a relatively small set of content: 11 original posts, 49 reposts, and 8 media-style articles, which nonetheless resulted in ~ 3.11 million total platform views and around 469,000 reactions, with TikTok accounting for almost all of the observed visibility. Telegram played a minor role and largely served as a content archive. The reliance on TikTok for reach, supplemented by Twitter/X, Telegram archives, and echoed by external networks (like the Pravda Network) demonstrates a hub-and-spoke distribution model. This reduces dependence on any single platform's moderation and increases resilience to takedown.

Unlike Storm-1516 and REST Media, InfoLeaders achieved the highest domestic penetration, directly targeting multiple demographic segments, from young TikTok users to older Facebook audiences. Its estimated 55 million views amount to a reach many times larger than Moldova's entire population, signalling an exceptionally high degree of saturation. The network's nearly 29,000 posts in a short period illustrate a high-frequency dissemination strategy that prioritised volume over quality, aiming to generate constant repetition and maximise the likelihood that at least some of the content would reach and influence susceptible users.

The *Matushka* operation, which also focused on Moldovan audiences, achieved substantial penetration by reaching millions of views across platforms. Its extensive asset base, spanning multiple Telegram channels, TikTok and Instagram accounts, YouTube commentary pages, and an active Facebook group, enabled the campaign to disseminate coordinated narratives at scale. By pushing identical messages simultaneously across these channels, the operation maximised repetition, increased cross-platform visibility, and ensured broad exposure among different demographic segments.

6.2 Low Reach

Not all operations achieved meaningful traction. Shor's attempted *protest* mobilisation in Chisinau demonstrated the limits of online influence: despite prolonged promotion across Shor-aligned networks, and even monetary *incentives*, the gathering drew only a few dozen participants. This illustrates a broader trend in which high digital reach does not reliably convert into offline mobilisation, particularly when narratives lack authenticity or when law-enforcement scrutiny raises the perceived risks of participation. Other

operations faced similar obstacles, often due to over-reliance on narrow demographic segments or outdated narrative frames. Anti-EU messaging, for instance, performed poorly among younger audiences compared to anti-elite or anti-government content, while pro-Kremlin narratives encountered notable pushback within Romanian-speaking communities where support for the EU remains comparatively strong.

Cumulative Impact

Measured solely by impressions, FIMI actors succeeded in flooding Moldova's digital space. Yet when measured by conversion of sentiment, their success was partial and uneven. The true significance of reach lay in the cumulative nature of exposure rather than in any immediate act of persuasion. Repetition of the same narratives, across platforms, languages, and demographic boundaries, gradually dulled critical perception and fostered cynicism toward all political communication. In this sense, the impact of FIMI was less about convincing Moldovans of a single falsehood than about exhausting their capacity to distinguish truth from manipulation. Over time, the constant background noise of disinformation became a structural feature of the information environment itself, eroding trust more effectively than any one viral campaign could achieve.

7. Unfair Conduct by Political Actors

The 2025 parliamentary elections in Moldova unfolded in an environment marked by a convergence of foreign interference and domestic opportunism, where political actors adopted tactics traditionally associated with hybrid influence operations. Unfair conduct did not manifest solely through overt disinformation but also through the instrumentalisation of state institutions, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and the manipulation of social divisions for political gain. Pro-Russian parties and their affiliates employed both online and offline mechanisms to distort public perception of the electoral process, ranging from vote-rigging allegations and fabricated surveillance footage to orchestrated hate campaigns targeting government officials and civil society figures.

By late 2025, multiple individuals connected to these formations were the subject of international [sanctions](#) for supporting or enabling Russian efforts to undermine Moldova’s sovereignty.

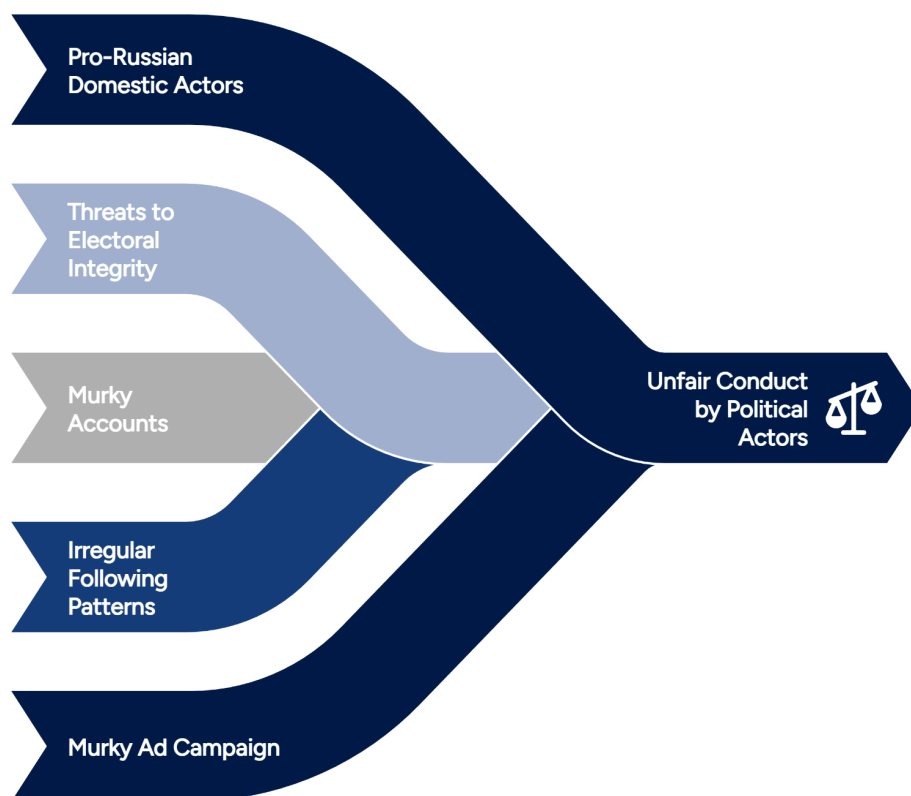


Figure 49: Categories of Unfair Conduct by Political Actors

7.1 Pro-Russian Domestic Actors

In the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections, the boundary between foreign influence operations and domestic political manipulation remained deliberately blurred. Within Moldova's domestic information environment, the most persistent and destabilising influence campaigns in the 2025 parliamentary cycle originated from pro-Russian political structures and their affiliated media ecosystems. Although formally Moldovan, these actors echoed Kremlin messaging, relied on cross-border financing, and strategically reinforced narratives that questioned Moldova's pro-European orientation and the integrity of its institutions. Several domestic actors either explicitly promoted or tacitly aligned with pro-Kremlin narratives, creating an internal amplification ecosystem that magnified foreign interference. These actors operated from within Moldova's borders yet consistently amplified Kremlin-approved narratives, making internal voices serve as proxies for foreign interference and blurring the line between domestic political activism and foreign interference.

The Victory Bloc *functioned* as the principal reincarnation of the banned Shor Party, inheriting its social-media ecosystem, regional coordinators, and funding mechanisms. Despite Ilan Shor's exile in Russia, his operatives in Moldova disseminated narratives alleging that the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) intended to "rig the elections," that "diaspora votes were stolen," and that "the EU imposes poverty." TikTok channels linked to the Bloc *produced* hundreds of short videos and paid influencer content to mimic and artificially inflate public discontent with the pro-European government. By mid-September, the Bloc's online activity had reached tens of millions of views. Yet, following mounting evidence of illegal foreign financing and the Bloc's coordination with sanctioned Russian entities, the Central Electoral Commission withdrew the Victory Bloc's registration, barring it from participation in the 2025 elections. Its digital operations, however, persisted informally through affiliated Telegram and TikTok accounts that continued to promote anti-Western messaging throughout the campaign period.

The Bloc of Patriots, a self-styled nationalist alliance composed of the Party of Socialists led by former president Igor Dodon, the Party of Communists headed by ex-president Vladimir Voronin, and the Heart of Moldova Party of former Gagauzia governor Irina Vlah, similarly *propagated* Kremlin-aligned narratives throughout the campaign. The bloc's communication channels recycled anti-EU rhetoric, framed European integration as a loss of sovereignty, and promoted nostalgic references to Moldova's Soviet past. Though presented as a coalition defending "sovereignty and neutrality," the bloc functioned primarily as a platform for Kremlin-aligned messaging, recycling narratives hostile to European integration and sympathetic to Russia's foreign policy.

In her public statements, the former Bashkan Irina Vlah, reiterated Moscow’s framing that Chisinau had “betrayed neutrality” and “dragged Moldova into a Western war.” Investigative reports by Moldovan media [revealed](#) overlaps between members of Vlah’s movement and Ilan Shor’s political network, suggesting coordination among Russia-aligned structures.

Concerns over the bloc’s financing deepened as evidence of external support surfaced. In September 2025, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) formally [requested](#) that the Ministry of Justice restrict the activity of the Heart of Moldova party, citing suspicions of illegal foreign funding and opaque campaign expenditures. The investigation prompted the CEC to withdraw the registration of Vlah’s electoral list, effectively removing her party, and by extension, a major pillar of the Bloc of Patriots, from the race. By that time, Irina Vlah had already been placed under [Canada](#) and several [EU states sanctions](#) for “supporting or facilitating Russian influence operations”.

Victoria Furtuna’s “Great Moldova” Party presented itself as a socially conservative movement but consistently promoted anti-Western and pro-Russian themes. Its campaign content accused the EU of “destroying Moldovan identity” and contrasted supposed prosperity “under Russia” with economic hardship “under Brussels.” Investigations by Moldovan independent media [revealed](#) that, following the disqualification of the Victory Bloc, Furtuna’s party received logistical and social media support from Ilan Shor’s network. Days before the official campaign period, the CEC [determined](#) that the Great Moldova Party had failed to comply with transparency and financing regulations and therefore withdrew it from the ballot. In the aftermath, Victoria Furtună became the subject of [international](#) sanctions for her role in promoting Russian influence operations.

Even after their formal exclusion, these actors continued to shape Moldova’s pre-election discourse. Victory Bloc affiliates amplified the messaging of Bloc of Patriots, Irina Vlah’s supporters maintained a strong presence in Gagauzia’s digital sphere, and Great Moldova’s online channels merged social conservatism with anti-Western agitation. Collectively, they sustained a hybrid narrative ecosystem that questioned Moldova’s sovereignty, undermined confidence in institutions, and blurred the line between national political debate and externally orchestrated influence.

7.2 Threats to Electoral Integrity



Figure 50: Threats to Electoral Integrity

7.2.1 Narrative Based on ‘Foreign Interference’ and Electoral Subversion

One of the most significant disinformation campaigns targeting electoral integrity emerged in early August 2025, when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) accused Moldova of allowing Western interference in its elections. The claim centred on a [deepfake](#) video falsely depicting CEC Chair Angelica Caraman endorsing French involvement in the electoral process. The synthetic video, which circulated across Telegram, VK, and Russian aggregators, manipulated Caraman’s voice and likeness to suggest she viewed “Western involvement” as acceptable because Moldova was joining the EU.

Within 48 hours, the video had been amplified by pro-Russian influencers, including MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova, whose Telegram post reached over 350,000 views. The campaign spread across 282 online assets, including X (Twitter), VK, and Telegram, and reached nearly 800 million potential impressions across aggregated media. Although genuine engagement remained low, the message succeeded in framing Moldova’s electoral institutions as biased and externally controlled, introducing a long-term narrative that pro-European victories are the result of “Western manipulation.”

This deepfake incident reflects a coordinated effort to distort the concept of sovereignty. The false article, originating from a network of anonymous sites and Telegram channels linked to pro-Russian actors, misrepresented a procedural CEC decision on observer accreditation as evidence of European political interference. The case demonstrates how

disinformation targeting electoral administration, rather than candidates, has become a key hybrid tactic to precondition audiences for post-election discrediting.

In the campaign build-up and on election day itself (28 September 2025), a set of messages and “evidence drops” were circulated that sought to portray the electoral process as compromised from the outset. For example, the ZdG investigation [reports](#) that, on the “day of silence”, several Moldovan citizens received WhatsApp and Telegram messages from Indonesian and US phone numbers warning that: “The voice of the people is stronger than dictatorship” and “We will not allow the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) to falsify the elections!”. These multilingual appeals (in Romanian and Russian) signalled an attempt to seed fear and anticipation of fraud.

Later that day, Telegram channels associated with pro-Russian or obscure media [posted](#) two videos purporting to show minibuses transporting groups of people to polling stations to vote repeatedly, known as “voter carousels.” One video clearly showed individuals dressed in heavy winter coats with leaf-less trees in the background, clearly indicating that the footage was not from late September when the election was held. Despite the obvious signs that the footage was from a different season, it was nonetheless presented as evidence of election fraud.

Another viral [video showed](#) ballots marked for opposition formations allegedly being burned, while ballots for PAS remained untouched. The claim was posted on Facebook and TikTok, and then later picked up by Telegram channels. The government and the CEC quickly responded, confirming that the ballots were fabricated and the video was a provocation.

These interlinked operations, early warning messages, manipulated visual “evidence”, and claims of foreign institutional meddling, illustrate a classic hybrid-information strategy: by casting doubt on the legitimacy of the election before any results are known, actors shape the narrative so that any outcome can be challenged as fraudulent.

7.2.2 The Use of Fabricated ‘Leaks’ to Create Distrust

A second significant line of attack involved the use of fabricated documents and pseudo-leaks to reinforce claims of electoral fraud. In mid-September 2025, Finnish pro-Russian commentator Tuomas Malinen [posted](#) on X that he had received “leaked emails” allegedly proving that President Maia Sandu and members of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) planned to “cancel the election” if they lost. The message alleged that PAS would artificially inflate its vote by 10–15 percent and reduce parliamentary seats for the pro-Russian electorate.

Although Malinen admitted he could not verify the emails, his post gained over 120,000 views and more than 1,200 shares, spreading across fringe international networks that habitually echo Russian narratives. This is a deliberate strategy of speculative disinformation: introducing falsehoods in a conditional, “unverified” form to avoid legal liability while still seeding doubt.

This incident demonstrates the cross-border nature of hybrid interference, where non-Moldovan amplifiers use Western social media ecosystems to launder disinformation targeting Moldovan institutions. By exploiting international audiences and positioning themselves as “independent analysts,” these actors lend credibility to narratives that question the integrity of pro-European governance.

7.2.3 Manipulative ‘Civic Surveys’ and Covert Psychological Operations

Another method of distorting electoral integrity involved authentic online polling platforms posing as independent civic initiatives. According to a GLOBSEC [report](#), between July and August 2025, a network of fake websites, *vocepentru.com*, *vocepentru.eu*, *vocea-mea.online*, and *vocepentru.space*, appeared online, mimicking the branding and colour scheme of the PAS party. The sites invited users to participate in “public surveys” about social and political issues, while secretly embedding tracking pixels and telemetry scripts linked to the Russian “Promotion of Social Projects” foundation.

The surveys used biased, emotionally charged questions, such as whether respondents supported “a total ban on the Russian language in Moldova” or agreed that “EU accession will increase prices and harm local farmers.” The manipulative framing aimed to polarise opinions, depress support for EU integration, and create the illusion of widespread dissatisfaction with the government. Technical forensics indicated that traffic to these domains originated largely from Russian SEO-boosting networks, suggesting inorganic amplification.

The operation demonstrates how hybrid actors have evolved from crude misinformation toward interactive disinformation techniques. By engaging users directly under the guise of civic participation, these sites collected behavioural data while manipulating sentiment, a tactic that blurs the line between polling and psychological operations. The sophistication of these platforms and their connection to a Russian-affiliated charity indicate both strategic intent and financial investment in shaping Moldova’s online discourse.

7.2.4 Overlapping of Electoral Disinformation with Hate Speech

Moldova's 2025 campaign saw election-related disinformation intertwined with overt hate speech and conspiratorial tropes. Pro-Russian and populist figures weaponised racial and antisemitic narratives to mobilise resentment and delegitimise pro-European actors. During a televised exchange, politician Renato Usatîi directed racist remarks at PAS deputy Radu Marian, using stereotypes against Roma communities and insinuating their exploitation in vote-buying schemes, rhetoric *condemned* by human-rights groups as normalising ethnic scapegoating in political discourse. Simultaneously, anonymous TikTok accounts disseminated AI-generated antisemitic videos portraying European leaders as part of a "Jewish cabal" controlling President Maia Sandu and the PAS. These videos, viewed nearly 300,000 times across TikTok, X, and Instagram, fused corruption accusations with conspiracy imagery, depicting Sandu in demeaning, gendered ways.

7.3 Murky Accounts

The 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections revealed the increasing sophistication of murky and unattributed online networks used to amplify Kremlin-aligned narratives and manipulate digital discourse. These accounts, primarily concentrated on Telegram, TikTok, and Facebook, acted as covert amplifiers of disinformation, hiding their coordination behind simulated grassroots participation and automated interaction patterns.

A March 2025 investigation by the DFRLab first *documented* the emergence of this ecosystem in its report "Cross-Platform Campaign Sows Anti-Europe Division in Moldova." DFRLab identified a coordinated network of 4,484 bot accounts (4,338 on Facebook and 146 on Telegram) that published more than 15,000 comments across 132 targeted pages, including news outlets, local government channels, and political party accounts.

In the lead-up to Moldova's September 28, 2025 parliamentary election, OpenMinds *investigated* activity across 253 Telegram channels and uncovered a coordinated network of 462 bot-like accounts that posted more than 62,000 comments between 1 July and 15 September 2025, representing roughly 12.8 percent of all comment volume in channels with open replies. The bots heavily targeted President Maia Sandu and PAS, consistently framing them as traitors, warmongers, corrupt elites, and the cause of Moldova's national decline.

Language analysis conducted by OpenMinds showed that 57 percent of the posts occurred in Russian-language channels, and 75 percent of the 462 accounts were simultaneously active in Ukrainian and Russian Telegram spaces, a clear indicator that the

operation was externally coordinated rather than domestically organised. These cross-regional overlaps placed the Moldovan bot network within a broader Russian-aligned influence ecosystem spanning occupied territories and pro-Kremlin information hubs.

The investigation also revealed signs of advanced automation and contextual adaptation. Roughly 95 percent of all bot comments were unique texts, suggesting the use of AI-assisted language generation. Some bots produced thousands of comments under a single post, one account made 2,815 comments under a Sandu-related post.

The research concluded that the campaign constituted a “Russian operation,” not merely local opposition, noting that many accounts also appeared in Telegram groups linked to Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine, posted anti-Zelensky messages, and reposted content from sanctioned pro-Kremlin outlets such as RIA Novosti and Tsargrad.

7.4 Irregular Following Pattern

During the electoral month, fact-checking initiatives documented several cases of sudden, non-organic surges in online engagement.

In a notable case illustrating irregular following patterns, a recent investigation by Expert Forum [uncovered](#) a TikTok network of thousands of accounts apparently promoting Moldovan politician Vasile Costiuc, an ally of Romania’s far-right and pro-Russian AUR and its leader George Simion. The network included approximately 17 core accounts producing over 400 videos in one week, supported by nearly 1,000 additional accounts classified as high-risk for “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” (CIB) and amplifying the #vasilecostiuc hashtag. According to Expert Forum, many of these accounts featured large follower counts despite minimal original content, and the volume of views surged even though Costiuc’s campaign had no major offline events at that time. The pattern, sudden follower growth, foreign-based accounts, and repetitive comment strings, aligns with algorithm-manipulation tactics previously documented in Moldova’s hybrid information ecosystem.

7.5 Murky Ad Campaign

Between August and late September 2025, a Facebook advertising [campaign](#) orchestrated by the Polish-registered AdvertPro Digital Agency - [owned](#) by Ukrainian

national Oleh Shmauts - mobilized Moldovan diaspora communities across Europe under the pretence of recruiting “election observers” for the election. Operating under the page [HumanGo](#) (previous names: Mold Service Poland → Lumen Personal → HumanGo), the campaign ran 21 multilingual ads in Romanian and Russian across eight European countries. Participants were promised a guaranteed €500 payment and up to €30,000 in bonuses for reporting election “irregularities,” creating strong financial incentives that could have distorted genuine election monitoring. The ads made no reference to legitimate oversight bodies such as the CEC, OSCE, or Promo-LEX, concealing their true nature and source of coordination.

Recruitment was routed through multiple external links, including [aplicaacum.mssg.me](#), [taplink.cc/locurilimitate](#), and [28septembrie.mssg.me](#), which redirected users to WhatsApp, Telegram, and Viber contacts connected to a UK phone number. Prospective participants were required to submit copies of their identification documents and were later added to encrypted messenger groups for orientation. Identical “observer” manuals, instructions, and schedules were distributed, turning the process into a structured operation with clear command hierarchies. Organizers later contacted recruits from Moldovan numbers and held online training sessions, positioning the activity as an ostensibly legitimate observer mission while quietly amassing a detailed personal database of Moldovan citizens abroad.

The campaign’s coordination structure relied on 22 primary Telegram groups, each mirrored by WhatsApp channels for redundancy. Data and “reports” were centrally compiled into [teammoldova.md](#) and corresponding Excel spreadsheets. Participants were asked to choose a political affiliation - ranging from NOI and AUR to CUB or Andrei Năstase - suggesting implicit partisan alignment. Financial records obtained by Moldovan journalists [linked](#) purchases for body cameras and entry counters to Gheorghe Zablodschi, a Germany-based propagandist associated with opposition journalist Natalia Morari, and to Valeri Zabolotnii, who is connected to a criminal network around IFAVIS/[Karamalak](#). The campaign extended into Romania, where a “call center” in Iași, run by [former policeman Serghei Medic](#), contacted Moldovan voters on behalf of the pro-Russian Patriotic Block.

All data collection and coordination ultimately fed into [teammoldova.md](#), a platform hosted by [PQ Hosting Plus S.R.L.](#), whose owners, Ivan and Iurie Neculiți from Transnistria, are tied to [Stark Industries Solutions](#) - an [EU-sanctioned](#) company long implicated in Russian state-sponsored cyber and influence operations. Through this infrastructure, the campaign achieved massive reach: over 1 million people were exposed to the ads, including nearly 900,000 within the EU. This combination of inauthentic advertising,

opaque recruitment, and cross-border data processing positioned the operation within a wider network of malign influence and interference.

The scheme's design presented multiple systemic threats. By paying participants to identify irregularities, it encouraged false or exaggerated claims, which could later be amplified online to delegitimize the elections and undermine public trust in Moldova's institutions. It also breached electoral laws, GDPR provisions, and potentially criminal statutes related to fraud and interference. Masking political mobilization as "employment" allowed organisers to evade digital transparency requirements, transforming what appeared to be a diaspora job offer into a coordinated information manipulation and election subversion operation.

8. Interventions & Responses

8.1 Response Methodology

The FIMI Defenders for Election Integrity (FDEI) FIMI ISAC project operates through a robust cooperative framework that unites European and local partners to detect, analyse, and respond to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) during election periods.

The collaboration relied on several complementary mechanisms:

- **Real-time monitoring** and verification across social media platforms and fringe media outlets, coordinated through FDEI’s shared monitoring tools and the Incident Alert system.
- **Secure information channels** that ensured rapid communication between partner organisations.
- **Rapid analysis and attribution**, supported by metadata forensics, behavioural analysis, and cross-partner review to verify and confirm the source of manipulation.
- **Public communication and advocacy**, through which verified incidents were promptly summarised in Incident Alerts or expanded into detailed investigations and fact-checks. These outputs aimed to inform both domestic and international audiences, raise awareness among institutional stakeholders, and encourage timely corrective action.



Figure 51: Response Methodology

During the Moldovan election cycle, 30 organisations, both national and international, contributed to the FDEI’s FIMI Response Team (FRT). Journalists and analysts from Moldova collaborated directly with international partners, significantly improving the speed and visibility of verified information reaching the public.

A central component of this methodology was the use of the European Commission’s Code of Practice on Disinformation Rapid Response System, which offers civil-society organisations a structured channel to escalate verified cases to major platforms, including Meta, TikTok, Google, and Microsoft, during the sensitive pre-election period. Although Moldova is not yet formally included in this EU mechanism, FDEI members and partner organizations facilitated indirect submissions on behalf of Moldovan monitors, particularly in cases targeting the Moldovan diaspora in EU countries, ensuring that the most serious incidents were reviewed by the platforms.

8.2 Successfully Disrupted and Exposed Cases

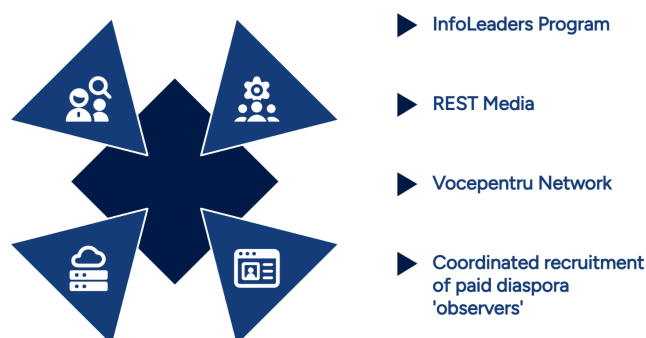


Figure 52: Successfully Disrupted and Exposed Cases

The *investigation* “Paid to Post: Russia-Linked Digital Army Seeks to Undermine Moldovan Election,” exposed a network of influencers and micro-contracted accounts operating under the so-called “InfoLeaders” program, which disseminated anti-government narratives and Kremlin-aligned content on TikTok, Telegram, and Instagram. As a result of the investigative efforts, TikTok removed more than a dozen inauthentic accounts and videos that had collectively reached millions of views.

Another example is the REST Media case, uncovered through a joint *investigation* by the DFRLab and GLOBSEC, discussed in Chapter 5. The investigation identified REST Media as a front established by a sanctioned operator of the Kremlin-affiliated Rybar network, which remains under US and EU sanctions for its role in spreading pro-war propaganda. Technical analysis linked REST’s infrastructure and metadata directly to Rybar’s

production systems, revealing deliberate attempts to bypass sanctions and maintain influence operations under a Moldovan cover. The exposure of this operation underscored how sanctioned Russian propagandists continue to adapt through proxy entities, using new brands and domains to sustain their presence in the EU and Moldova's information environment. Several days after the investigation was published, the REST Media domain became unavailable.

Another example of an exposed case is the Vocepatru Network, a Russian-linked influence operation [uncovered](#) by GLOBSEC. The investigation revealed a coordinated disinformation ecosystem built around a series of seemingly neutral "survey" websites *vocepatru.com*, *vocepatru.eu*, and *vocea-mea.online*, which posed as citizen opinion platforms but were in fact operated from Russia-linked infrastructure. The network promoted manipulated polls and fabricated "public feedback" to portray the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) as corrupt and unpopular, while framing pro-Russian figures as more representative of Moldovan society. GLOBSEC's forensic analysis identified domain registration data, hosting overlaps, and content patterns linking the sites to previously documented Kremlin proxy networks. The exposure of this operation was also accompanied by Moldovan and fact-checking organisations that issued public warnings. The exposure received public attention, contributing to the dismantling of the network's amplification channels and raising public awareness of covert narrative manipulation disguised as grassroots civic engagement.

A further major disruption concerned the coordinated recruitment of paid diaspora "observers" designed to undermine the integrity of Moldova's parliamentary elections. Between August 18 and September 25, 2025, a Facebook ad campaign operated through the page HumanGo [recruited](#) Moldovan diaspora citizens across Europe to act as self-proclaimed election observers. Participants were offered €500 as a fixed payment and bonuses of up to €30,000 for each alleged "irregularity" identified, with promises of same-day cash compensation. According to Meta's Ad Library, the campaign ran 21 advertisements, reaching more than one million users across the EU and UK. Recruitment and coordination were conducted through WhatsApp, Telegram, and Viber, enabling fast and opaque mobilisation. The scheme's intent was to flood social media with fabricated reports of electoral fraud, thereby delegitimising the vote. Financial analysis by Ziarul de Garda [linked](#) the operation to Germany-based Moldovan nationals and Transnistrian-connected actors associated with the EU-sanctioned entity Stark Industries Solutions, a company previously tied to Russian state-affiliated cyber operations. The incident was monitored and documented in real time by FDEI members DFRLab and GLOBSEC, alongside Moldovan organisations including Ziarul de Garda and WatchDog.md, which publicly exposed the operation. The swift exposure and coordinated

reporting prevented the campaign from generating viral claims of electoral fraud on election day and dissuaded paid recruits from further participation.

8.3 Less Successful Interventions



Figure 53: Less Successful Interventions

While several malign operations were exposed or disrupted ahead of Moldova’s 2025 parliamentary elections, a number of key interventions achieved only partial results. These cases revealed structural weaknesses in institutional coordination, limited responsiveness by major platforms, and the adaptive capacity of hostile networks to regenerate under new identities or infrastructure.

One of the most notable examples was the persistence of the Storm-1516 influence operation, an information laundering campaign run by Russia-affiliated actors. Despite being publicly *exposed*, the operation continued to disseminate fabricated stories through a constellation of clone websites and mirrored domains.

In addition, attempts by fact-checking organisations and civil society partners to counter high-velocity disinformation on Telegram and Odnoklassniki faced structural barriers. These platforms lack transparent reporting channels and have minimal content governance. Disinformation narratives, particularly those alleging foreign interference by the EU or ballot tampering by the government, remained visible for weeks, generating cumulative engagement across hundreds of thousands of views.

Collectively, these less successful interventions underscore the asymmetry between domestic response capacity and transnational platform power. Despite notable progress in analytical coordination and exposure, Moldova’s ability to mitigate malign influence

operations was constrained by jurisdictional limits, voluntary compliance mechanisms, and the persistent adaptability of hostile networks.

8.4 Moldovan Response Initiatives

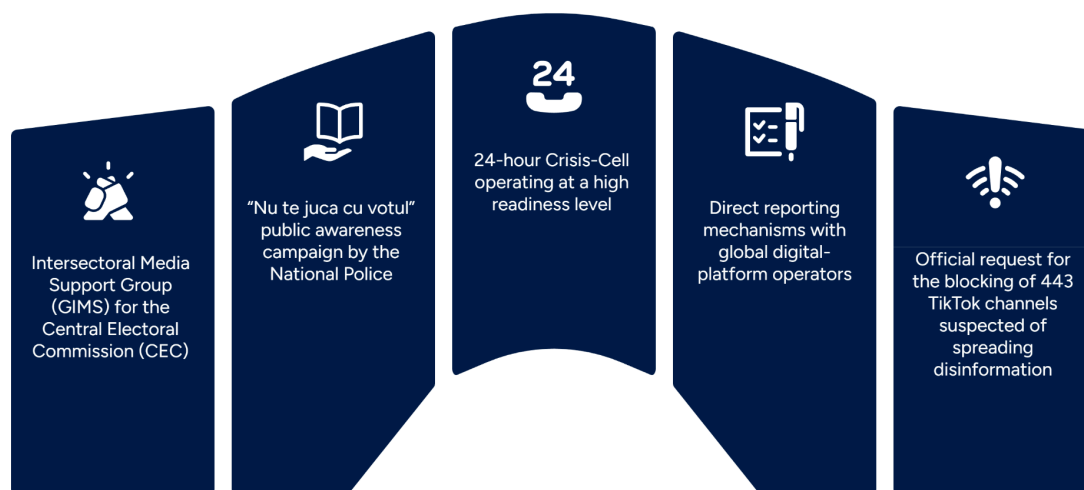


Figure 54: Moldovan Response Initiatives

In an effort to strengthen strategic and crisis communication capacities ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections, Moldova adopted an inter-institutional approach centred on sustaining democratic processes and protecting citizens from hybrid threats and disinformation. A key component of this approach was the creation of the Intersectoral Media Support Group for the Central Electoral Commission (GIMS-CEC), by the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (CSCCD). Its mandate was to assist the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Moldova (CEC) in strategic communications and countering information risks throughout the election cycle.

From July to September 2025, GIMS-CEC undertook a structured programme of activities across three main axes: coordinated inter-agency strategic planning, practical crisis simulation exercises, and capacity-building for government communicators and public-order institutions. The working sessions addressed key topics such as identifying information-risk vectors, establishing response protocols, and strengthening cross-institutional coordination. Second, crisis-simulation scenarios were executed in interactive workshops to test responses to disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks on electoral infrastructure, manipulation of public opinion, and security incidents at voting stations or border points. Third, three training sessions were delivered to senior

communicators from government agencies and the General Police Inspectorate of the Republic of Moldova and its territorial units focusing on crisis communication and strategic messaging.

In parallel, the National Police *launched* the public-awareness campaign titled “Nu te juca cu votul” (“Don’t Play With Your Vote”), which directly supported the broader communication-integrity effort. The campaign involved police vehicles carrying the slogan, leaflets, and printed-material distribution through social-assistance channels targeting vulnerable populations, and a public warning that vote-selling could incur fines up to 37,500 lei (1910 euro). This initiative served as both a civic-education and deterrence tool, reinforcing the government’s broader effort to protect electoral integrity through proactive communication.

Furthermore, a 24-hour crisis-cell was operational at a high readiness level: it identified sensitive situations, issued public press materials and monitored the information space (including Telegram channels). The cell updated a live manual of sensitive topics featuring up-to-date threat assessments and response messages; captured photo/video content drawn from diaspora groups; and engaged with media to disseminate counter-narratives aimed at toxic content emerging on election day.

In parallel Moldovan authorities took an additional step to strengthen their response capacity by establishing direct reporting mechanisms with global digital-platform operators. In August 2025, the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (CSCCD) was officially *designated* as the national focal point for cooperation with Meta and Google, tasked with reporting election-related disinformation directly to Facebook, Google, and YouTube. This marked the first time Moldova committed to the real-time escalation of harmful or manipulative content to major platforms, enabling faster cross-border coordination and platform response during the electoral period.

In August 2025, the General Inspectorate of Police (IGP), together with the National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology (ANRCETI) and the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), announced that it had lodged official *requests* for the blocking of 443 TikTok channels that were suspected of spreading disinformation affecting national security and social stability. The monitored set of 443 channels collectively had more than 1.2 million followers and over 4.5 million views, underscoring the scale of the manipulation risk.

However, enforcement gaps persisted. In a September 2025 *interview* with *Veridica.md*, IGP Chief Viorel Cernauteanu acknowledged that platform cooperation remained limited. According to him, approximately 95 percent of the videos and accounts flagged by

Moldovan authorities for deletion or suspension had not been removed, despite detailed documentation submitted to the platforms. TikTok reportedly rejected most requests, stating that the content did not violate its policies.

Although we were not able to review the takedown requests submitted by Moldovan authorities, and therefore cannot independently assess their validity or determine whether the content in question breached platform policies, this dynamic nonetheless illustrates a broader challenge: ensuring accountability, transparency, and timely action from global platforms.

Nevertheless, the combination of institutional coordination, proactive public-awareness campaigns, real-time reporting to global platforms, and national-police enforcement created a multi-layered communication-security model. Together, these initiatives significantly enhanced Moldova's ability to respond to hybrid threats during the election period and laid the groundwork for sustained resilience in future democratic processes.

8.5 Lasting Impact

The 2025 parliamentary elections represented a critical stress test for Moldova's information resilience architecture. While FIMI operations reached unprecedented sophistication, the coordinated response of domestic institutions, local civil society organisations, and an unusually broad range of international partners marked a decisive step forward in the country's ability to detect, expose, and mitigate hybrid threats.

The electoral period catalysed the institutionalisation of crisis communication and rapid response mechanisms within Moldova's governance framework. The operationalisation of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (CSCCD) and its inter-agency task force demonstrated a transition from ad-hoc coordination to a structured national response system. Moldovan institutions carried out joint simulations, real-time monitoring, and narrative correction exercises, producing an integrated operating model comparable to that of EU member states. These mechanisms should remain active beyond the electoral cycle, to provide early warning capability against future information crises.

A defining feature of the 2025 elections was the unprecedented density of civil society engagement and international presence in the information integrity space. Moldovan CSOs played a central role in monitoring online manipulation, documenting illicit campaigning practices, conducting public awareness initiatives, and feeding verified findings into institutional and international response channels. In parallel, international

organisations, research institutions, and election integrity initiatives significantly expanded their operational footprint, providing analytical support, rapid assessments, technical expertise, and coordination platforms.

Within this broader ecosystem, the FIMI Defenders for Election Integrity (FDEI) consortium functioned as one of several key coordination frameworks, facilitating structured information sharing between Moldovan monitors and European partners. Through EDMO regional hubs and complementary international mechanisms, Moldovan actors gained indirect access to the European Commission's Code of Practice on Disinformation Rapid Response System, enabling the escalation of cases to major platforms such as Meta, Google, and TikTok. This multi-actor collaboration set a precedent for cross-border coordination aligned with emerging EU standards.

Public awareness of disinformation and hybrid threats increased significantly as a result of extensive coverage of investigations. These investigations reached broad audiences through mainstream media, civic campaigns, and diaspora networks.

Despite incremental progress, the elections also revealed enduring structural asymmetries between national enforcement capacity and global platform governance.

Moldova's 2025 experience now serves as a case study in building democratic resilience under sustained external pressure. The combined contribution of state institutions, civil society, and international partners illustrates how dense, multi-layered cooperation can partially offset structural vulnerabilities. The interplay between malign influence and institutional adaptation offers valuable insights for other Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan, but also EU states preparing for high stakes elections amid Russian interference risks.

9. Policy Recommendations

The 2025 parliamentary elections underscored both Moldova's growing capacity to detect and counter FIMI and the enduring structural vulnerabilities that continue to expose its democratic institutions to hybrid threats. A broad coalition of actors, state institutions, civil society organisations, investigative journalists, and international partners, mobilised to counter malign influence in unprecedented ways. This collective effort strengthened early detection, improved incident documentation, and ensured great public visibility of coordinated malign activities.

The election period showed that while monitoring capacity has grown, enforcement capacity has not kept pace. Platforms responded inconsistently, voluntary commitments were insufficient, and malign actors continued to exploit regulatory blind spots, fragmented mandates, and digital loopholes. This raises a fundamental strategic question: how can Moldova build a permanent, anticipatory system that stays ahead of FIMI rather than merely reacting to it?

To meet this challenge, Moldova requires stable, institutionalised capabilities that persist between election cycles, combining year-round monitoring, cross-sector coordination, investigative capacity, and strategic communication. Crucially, this must be matched by regulatory authority. Moldova cannot rely indefinitely on goodwill, voluntary cooperation, or soft commitments from intermediary services. It needs an empowered institution capable of enforcing standards, compelling transparency, and ensuring that platforms respect national rules and democratic safeguards.

The current European landscape is a combination of guidelines, regulatory frameworks, and voluntary commitments from companies. While valuable, these instruments do not sufficiently address the core problems of coordination, inauthenticity, opaque political advertising, and cross-platform amplification. What Moldova requires is a shift from exposure to behaviour change, reducing incentives and pathways for malign actors to operate in the first place and ensuring that platforms face predictable consequences if they enable harmful activity.

This shift will not be easy. Within the European Union, where policymakers have endeavored to combine regulatory authority, potential financial penalties and cross-sector and cross-border coordination, the current policymaking landscape has equally been inadequate to address the systemic enabling of the hybrid threats.

Much of this relates to the inherent threats. Regarding disinformation and foreign interference during elections, content moderation processes have to deal with both illegal

content and behaviour, content infringing platforms terms of services, and “awful but lawful content.” Within these interstices, malign actors are able to arbitrage between platforms’ existing terms of service and regulatory pressure to combat illegal content online. Finding a balance between mitigating hybrid threats and ensuring people’s free speech rights is a difficult balance, both for Moldova and international partners.

Therefore, this chapter outlines concrete policy recommendations designed to strengthen institutional coordination, ensure digital platform accountability, and enhance societal resilience. It also reflects Moldova’s ongoing alignment with the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA) framework and the lessons learned through the FDEI consortium’s cross-border monitoring. Ahead of September’s election, for instance, Moldova operated a “DSA-lite” regime, in which platforms voluntarily agreed to align their election-related programs within the country with those already mandatory across the European Union.

Several of the vulnerabilities observed during the 2025 electoral cycle were predicted in the Moldovan *Country Election Risk Assessment (CERA)* report. Therefore, this section integrates both forward-looking measures and reflections on where pre-election recommendations proved critical yet under-implemented.

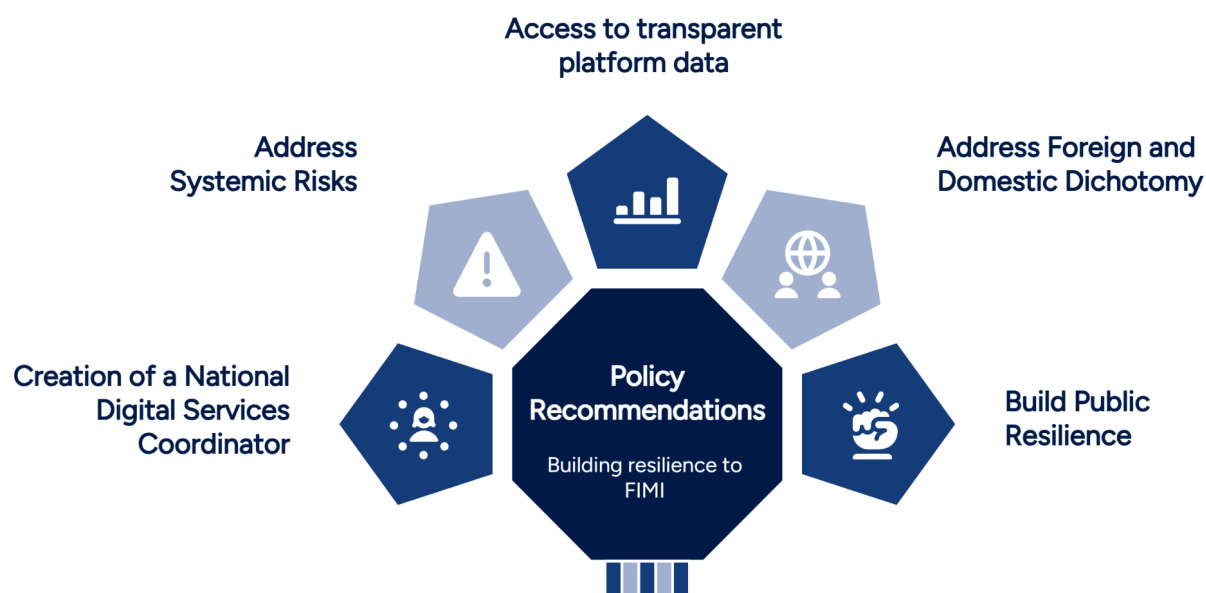


Figure 55: Policy Recommendations

9.1 Digital Services Coordinator

Although Moldova is not yet a member of the European Union, its EU integration path makes it increasingly important to develop regulatory structures that mirror the DSA model.

Currently, oversight of the online information space is fragmented across the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (CSCCD), the Audiovisual Council, and the Information and Security Service (SIS), each holding parts of the mandate but without a central authority capable of ensuring coherent enforcement.

Establishing a dedicated, independent, and well-resourced body performing Digital Services Coordinator-like functions would help fill this gap. Such an institution would not require full DSA transposition but could operate as a DSA-aligned coordination mechanism, strengthening regulatory readiness ahead of accession and informing platform engagement in the meantime. The institution should have the legal authority to:

- Enforce transparency and moderation standards for intermediary services active in Moldova;
- Coordinate cross-border requests for content moderation, systemic risk reporting, and data access;
- Serve as the national liaison to the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation and relevant rapid response structures;
- Provide an official interface between platforms, civil society, researchers, and national institutions.

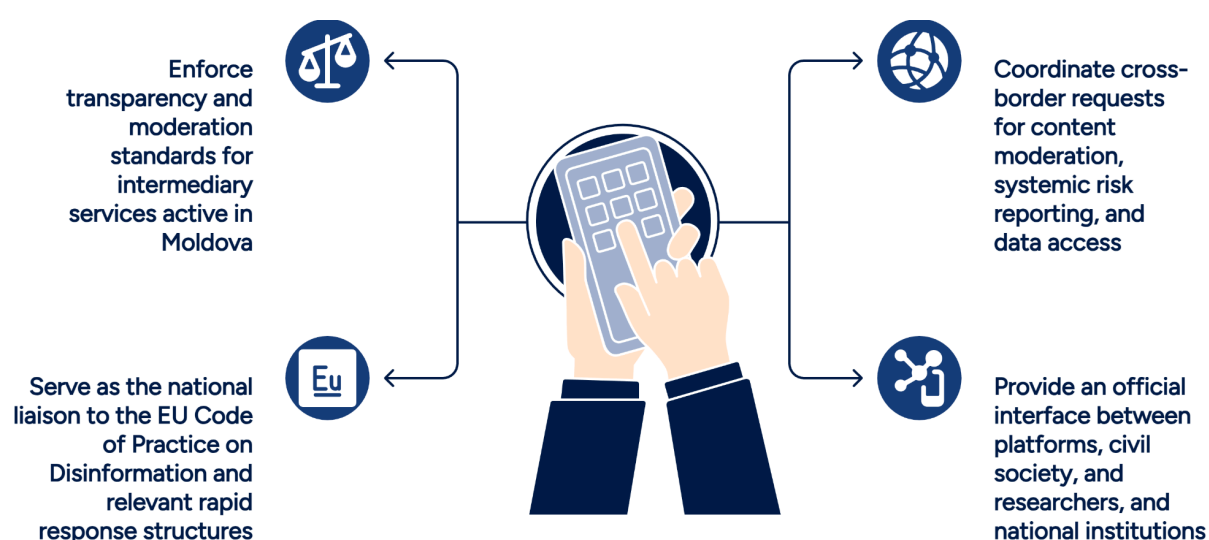


Figure 56: Policy Recommendations - Digital Services Coordinator

This approach would situate Moldova within the wider European digital governance ecosystem even prior to EU membership, reinforcing national resilience and ensuring smoother regulatory convergence in the years ahead.

Had a DSC-like body been operational before the elections, coordination with platforms and EU counterparts—particularly Romanian and Slovak DSCs—could have provided earlier warning on malign activities circulating across linguistically overlapping digital environments.

There are downsides to this approach. The current Digital Services Coordinator model within the EU is a work in progress. Many of these agencies lack the financial and personnel resources to meet their obligations under the DSA. There are also ongoing tensions between the European Commission, in Brussels, and national agencies, in EU member country capitals, over regulatory priorities and the ability to meet the needs of countries' citizens. Such issues would inevitably arise if Moldova created a similar DSA-style regulatory agency.

9.2 Systemic Risks

The Moldovan election cycle highlighted several structural vulnerabilities within the country's digital ecosystem. Under the DSA, systemic risks are significant harms linked to the design, functioning, or use of Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs)—including the dissemination of illegal content; negative effects on fundamental rights; impacts on civil discourse, elections, and public security; and risks to public health and minors. Although Moldova is not legally bound by the DSA, these categories offer a useful framework for assessing how digital platforms can exacerbate democratic risks during elections.

In practice, many challenges in Moldova emerge also from platforms that fall outside the DSA's systemic risks provisions—including Telegram and smaller video-sharing services. Their limited transparency and minimal moderation standards create significant accountability gaps, allowing them to act as vectors for influence operations despite their smaller user base.

During the electoral period, foreign actors exploited opaque advertising networks, impersonation tactics, and monetisation loopholes, allowing sanctioned and inauthentic accounts to continue operating despite repeated reporting by civil society partners and the police.

Platforms often failed to implement consistent political advertising labelling, leaving users to distinguish between legitimate and coordinated content. Under a future DSC-led framework, Moldova should enforce:

- Mandatory advertiser verification, including disclosure of ultimate funding sources around elections;
- Consistent, tamper-proof political ad labels that cannot be altered post-verification;
- Comprehensive, publically accessible political ad archives with spending, targeting, and sponsorship data accessible to national oversight bodies and accredited researchers.
- Close monitoring of recommender systems, especially the possibility to turn off personalised recommender-driven activity for platform users.

Earlier adoption of platform preparedness protocols, requiring platforms to activate election integrity procedures during the pre-election period, would have accelerated takedowns, reduced impersonation attempts, and limited the spread of coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

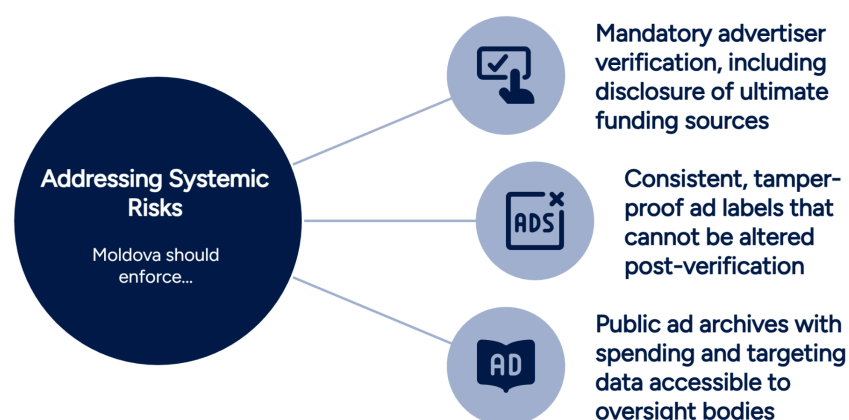


Figure 57: Policy Recommendations - Addressing Systemic Risks

9.3 Data Access

Researchers and civil society organisations in Moldova continue to face significant barriers to accessing platform data, limiting their ability to analyse algorithmic amplification, content virality, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Despite progress

through international cooperation, national actors still lack any statutory mechanisms compelling platforms to provide transparent data. This leaves Moldova dependent on voluntary disclosures, which are often incomplete, inconsistent, or unavailable during critical electoral periods.

In the context of its integration trajectory, Moldova should therefore:

- Introduce legal provisions mirroring Article 40 of the DSA, ensuring qualified researchers and state institutions have proportionate access to essential platform datasets relevant to public interest research, especially during elections;
- Require transparency reporting on algorithmic promotion of political content, including information on language segmentation, geolocation trends, and behavioural patterns;
- Establish a centralised data access hub under a future DSC-like institution, enabling structured data sharing between civil society, academia, investigative journalists, and national oversight bodies.

To make this framework effective, sustained national and EU-level funding will be essential to solidify analytical capacity building within Moldovan institutions. This would allow the country to move from predominantly reactive electoral monitoring toward continuous, data-driven oversight capable of identifying and mitigating systemic manipulation risks throughout the entire democratic cycle.

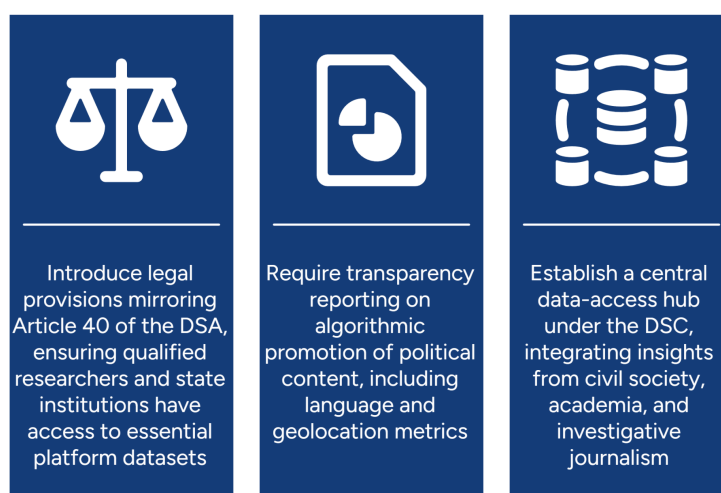


Figure 58: Policy Recommendations - Data Access

9.4 Foreign and Domestic Dichotomies

The 2025 elections reaffirmed that Moldova's vulnerability lies not only in foreign interference but also from the hybridisation of external influence and domestic enablers. Domestic pro-Russian networks such as Victory Bloc, Great Moldova Party, and Bloc of Patriots served as on-the-ground multipliers for Kremlin-aligned narratives, reframing foreign disinformation as nationalist, anti-elite, or anti-Western discourse.

Conversely, foreign actors, particularly Russian state-linked outlets and proxy channels, leveraged Moldovan public figures to launder manipulative messaging through a domestic lens, making foreign-crafted narratives appear locally rooted and socially legitimate.

Addressing this convergence requires a clearer accountability framework capable of capturing both domestic and cross-border dynamics. Moldova should therefore consider:

- Public attribution and sanctions for domestic actors proven to coordinate with, finance, or operationalise foreign influence networks;
- Legal provisions against foreign-funded political advertising disguised as domestic content, including mandatory disclosure of funding chains;
- Enhanced cooperation between state institutions and independent investigators, enabling systematic identification of hybrid actors operating within Moldovan jurisdiction.

Given the linguistic, cultural, and geographic proximity to Romania, and the documented interference emanating from Romanian digital environments, Moldova would benefit from establishing a structured cooperation channel with the Romanian DSC. Such collaboration could enhance early warning, facilitate cross-border case escalation to platforms, and provide insights into narrative circulation across shared information ecosystems. Furthermore, engagement with DSCs in countries where large Moldovan diaspora communities reside would improve oversight of influence operations targeting Moldovan audiences and facilitate early identification of narrative spillovers prior to peak amplification.

Together, these measures would help clarify the boundary between legitimate political speech and foreign-directed influence operations, a distinction that remains blurred in Moldova's current regulatory environment, and one that is essential for safeguarding democratic processes.

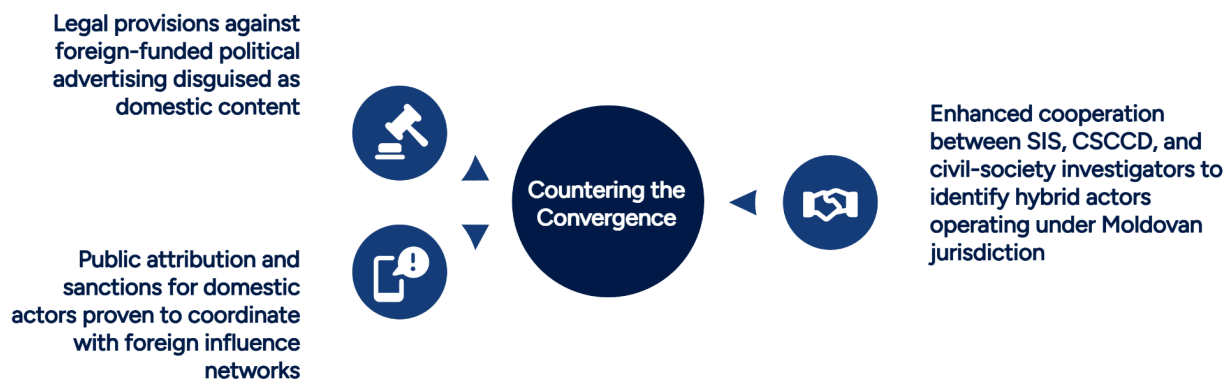


Figure 59: Policy Recommendations - Foreign and Domestic Dichotomies

9.5 Public Resilience

Public resilience remains the foundation of Moldova’s long-term defence against hybrid threats. The 2025 elections catalysed several positive developments, most notably the “Don’t Play with Your Vote” civic campaign and media literacy training. However, these initiatives require sustainable funding and institutionalisation to ensure continuity beyond electoral cycles.

Key steps include:

- Continue the professionalisation of strategic and crisis communication teams through ongoing training, mentorship, and simulation exercises across all operational institutions;
- Institutionalise inter-agency mechanisms as a permanent support structure for strategic communication in national security contexts, not limited to elections;
- Integrate lessons learned from the 2025 elections into operational handbooks, standard procedures, and training curricula, ensuring continuity and adaptability to evolving threats;
- Expanding media and digital literacy curricula in schools and universities, emphasising critical evaluation of online sources and manipulation techniques;
- Supporting fact-checking partnerships with broadcasters and influencers to reach younger, high-risk audiences on TikTok and Telegram;
- Establishing a resilience fund for independent media and NGOs to sustain disinformation monitoring and counter-narrative production;
- Encouraging the growth of content and communities on platforms that comply with the DSA and uphold fundamental rights.

These programs should be accompanied by transparent communication from authorities to build trust, particularly in regions with low institutional confidence such as Gagauzia and Transnistria, where pro-Russian narratives remain deeply entrenched.

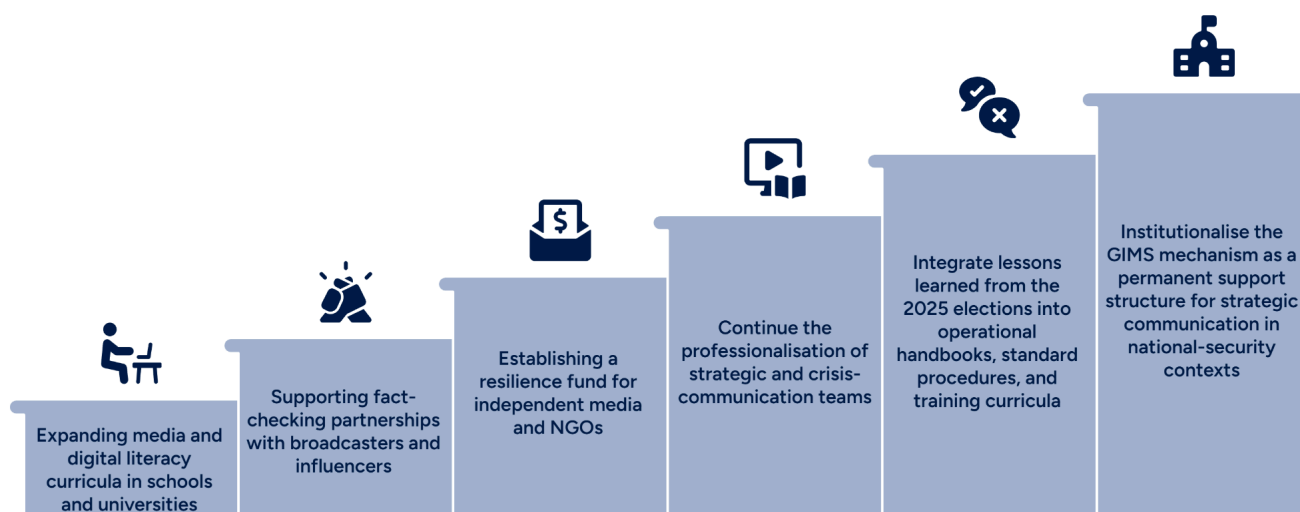


Figure 60: Policy Recommendations - Public Resilience

9.6 Conclusions

The 2025 parliamentary elections represented a watershed moment for Moldova’s democratic resilience. For the first time, the country confronted multi-layered FIMI campaigns with a coordinated national and international response architecture. Although vulnerabilities persisted, the experience yielded critical insights into how small democracies at the EU’s frontier can defend their information space amid hybrid geopolitical pressure.

Moldova’s evolution from reactive counter-messaging to structured strategic communication and institutional cooperation constitutes one of the most significant outcomes of this electoral cycle. The operationalisation of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (CSCCD), the activation of the Intersectoral Media Support Group (GIMS-CEC), and cross-agency engagement through the National Police, the Information and Security Service (SIS), and the Audiovisual Council created a new operational culture of interoperability and shared responsibility.

These mechanisms transformed ad-hoc crisis management into professionalised procedures for identifying, analysing, and responding to information threats. Such institutionalisation should now be extended beyond the electoral context and codified as

a permanent national mechanism for hybrid-threat management, modelled on the Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) role.

The elections also exposed the limitations of Moldova's current regulatory environment in engaging global digital platforms. Despite multiple cases of documented disinformation and incitement, major platforms were not comprehensive in removing manipulative content.

Establishing a Digital Services Coordinator-like entity would provide a single point of accountability, aiding Moldova's efforts to engage systematically with large online platforms. In the long term, alignment with the DSA and the Code of Practice on Disinformation will also strengthen Moldova's EU-accession readiness, providing tangible progress in the digital governance chapter of its negotiation process.

The lessons learned from the 2025 electoral cycle demonstrated that speed, coordination, and expertise are decisive in countering hybrid interference.

One of the most tangible lessons of 2025 was that effective strategic communication depends as much on people as on protocols. The government's future efforts should therefore focus on the continuous professionalisation of communication and crisis-response teams across all state institutions.

Regular simulation exercises, mentoring programmes, and leadership trainings are essential for cultivating a new generation of public communicators capable of:

- Anticipating disinformation narratives before they are rooted;
- Crafting coherent, fact-based counter-messages;
- Coordinating multi-agency communication during hybrid crises.

While the repeated exposure of operations demonstrated significant investigative capacity, it also underscored the gap between exposure and enforcement. The recurrence of mirror sites designed to evade takedowns, obscure attribution, and amplify harmful content, alongside the persistence of Telegram channels operating beyond effective moderation, underscores the need for a legal mechanism for domestic enforcement against both foreign and local enablers of malign influence. The reappearance of entities sanctioned at the EU level, which face no equivalent restrictions under Moldovan law, further exposes the regulatory gap, allowing actors already flagged abroad to continue operating freely within Moldova's information ecosystem.

Future policy should establish clear sanctions, financial disclosure obligations, and criminal-liability provisions for entities proven to coordinate with foreign actors to manipulate the information environment, in alignment with EU practices.

Perhaps the most enduring outcome of the 2025 elections is the gradual strengthening of societal awareness. To sustain this progress, the government and international partners should institutionalise media literacy and civic education programs. Investing in local journalism, diaspora outreach, and educational partnerships can amplify these gains and build long-term democratic confidence. Public participation in fact-checking initiatives, communication campaigns like “Don’t Play with Your Vote,” and engagement with independent journalism have started to erode the efficacy of polarising narratives.



ELECTION REPORT

**FOREIGN INFORMATION
MANIPULATION AND
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INFORMATION SHARING AND
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