

FIMI RESPONSE TEAM REPORT

# Moldova: Country Election Risk Assessment (CERA)

In collaboration with Debunk.org, EU DisinfoLab,  
DFR Lab and Alliance4Europe.

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

## Authors & Contributors

Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), Alliance4Europe, Debunk.org and EU DisinfoLab (as a contributor).

## About the Project



This report evaluates Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) threats to the 2025 Czech presidential elections. It was developed through the project 'FIMI Defenders for Election Integrity'. The project consortium brings together 10 member organisations of the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Information Sharing and Analysis Centre (FIMI-ISAC), which offer unparalleled expertise in developing a multi-stakeholder FIMI framework before and during elections, thereby serves to also strengthen FIMI defender communities and democratic institutions.

To learn more about the FDEI project, please refer to the project's landing page via the following link: [FIMI Defenders for Election Integrity \(FDEI\) | Debunk.org](#).

## 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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# 1. Executive Summary

The 2025 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova will take place in a highly polarised and fragile political environment, marked by competing geopolitical visions and increasing systemic vulnerabilities. Since obtaining European Union (EU) candidate status in 2022 and launching accession talks in 2024, Moldova has faced growing pressure from external actors, primarily the Russian Federation, which continues to deploy hybrid tactics to destabilise the country's democratic processes and influence voter behaviour.

This Country Election Risk Assessment (CERA) evaluates Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and its impacts on electoral integrity. It **focuses on Moldova's pre-election period, examining influence operations, deceptive narratives, and societal vulnerabilities, while drawing lessons from prior elections.** The methodology 1) incorporates the DISARM taxonomy for threat analysis, alongside narrative categorisation, 2) adapts the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) framework to develop a likelihood-impact matrix, and 3) includes first-hand interviews to assess risks and countermeasures. This CERA leverages FDEI/FRT collaboration within the FIMI-ISAC, combining cross-border datasets and joint analytic review that no single member could perform alone.

**The assessment identifies persistent Russian-led hybrid threats, including information warfare, illicit financing, cyberattacks, and proxy mobilisation, aimed at undermining the Moldovan government's pro-EU agenda and boosting pro-Russian actors.** Significant vulnerabilities include Moldova's fragmented media landscape, where banned pro-Russian outlets evade restrictions via mirror websites, apps, and social media platforms such as Telegram and TikTok. Institutional limitations, such as the limited resources of regulatory bodies and the gaps in online political ad regulation, exacerbate exposure to threats.

Vote-buying schemes and paid attendance at protests, which are often funded through sanctioned Russian banks, cryptocurrencies, and external apps, distort voter agency and amplify anti-government narratives.

**The dominant FIMI narratives in Moldova follow a Promote, Excuse, Normalise, and Accuse (PENNA) model,** promoting pro-Russian actors while accusing the West and Moldovan government of interference. Key meta-narratives are Anti-EU (portraying integration as authoritarian and identity-eroding), Anti-West (framing Western values as corrupt and meddlesome), Anti-Establishment (depicting the government as weak and corrupt), and Pro-Russian (positioning Russia as Moldova's protector).

Sub-narratives are catalogued as Anti-Maia Sandu (labelling her a Western puppet) and Election Manipulation (claiming fraud to normalise vote-buying). The narratives build on 2024 trends, exploiting AI-generated deepfakes, forged documents, and cross-platform amplification.

**Foreign interference tactics targeting Moldova have evolved significantly, shifting from the paid mobilisation strategies observed during the 2023 electoral cycle to increasingly technology-driven operations in 2025.** External actors now employ sophisticated bot-enabled impersonation and encrypted mobile applications to organise covert protests, amplify propaganda, and mask financial flows. These hybrid tactics reduce attribution risks while expanding the scale and speed of influence operations, making detection and disruption more challenging for national authorities.

At the same time, Moldova’s internal political dynamics compound these vulnerabilities. Emerging opposition coalitions, especially ones of dubious origins, are positioned to fragment the pro-EU electorate and undermine the formation of a stable, reform-oriented government. In parallel, pro-Russian sentiment in regions such as Gagauzia is increasingly leveraged by Kremlin-aligned actors to deepen social divides, exploit identity politics, and fuel narratives portraying European integration as a threat to Moldova’s sovereignty and cultural values. **This intersection of external manipulation and internal fragmentation heightens political polarisation, risks disengaging the traditionally pro-European diaspora, and fosters growing public apathy and disillusionment, outcomes that directly threaten electoral integrity and democratic resilience.**

The qualitative ratings in the assessment table below for "likelihood" and "impact" are the result of a structured evaluation of the complex, interconnected factors influencing Moldova’s information environment. This approach allows a transparent and replicable analysis that accurately reflects the specific threat landscape in Moldova. By adopting this recognised framework, we ensure that our findings are part of a broader, expert-validated practice for assessing risks to democratic processes.

	FIMI Narratives	Cyber Threats	AI-Generated Disinformation	Physical Threats to Candidates	Institutional Trust Erosion	Unfair Conduct by Political Actors
<b>Likelihood</b>	High	High	High	Medium	High	High
<b>Impact</b>	High	High	Medium	Low	High	High
<b>Overall</b>	High	High	Medium	Low	High	High

The overall risk to electoral integrity is medium to high, driven by intensifying influence campaigns that spread divisive narratives across Moldova's information space, institutional capacity gaps that hinder effective detection and response, and persistent external destabilisation through covert financing, cyber operations, and proxy mobilisation. These dynamics are monitored through Priority Intelligence Requirements (PIRs) on narrative manipulation, institutional resilience, and foreign actor tactics.

While physical threats to electoral candidates are not high, physical threats to civil society actors, organisations, and journalists is very high. Pro-European civil society actors and journalists are the primary targets of these sorts of threats with the goal of silencing them.

## 2. Country and Election Overview

### 2.1 Political Context

The discourse surrounding the 2025 parliamentary elections is shaped by the profound division between pro-European and pro-Russian factions. The current government, led by the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) under President Maia Sandu, is committed to European Union (EU) integration, having secured EU candidate status in 2022 and initiated accession negotiations in 2024. Since taking power, PAS has prioritised a reform-oriented agenda focused on combating systemic corruption, advancing judicial independence, and stabilising the economy.

These efforts were pursued against a backdrop of significant challenges, including security and humanitarian crises stemming from Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, as well as a prolonged energy crisis. However, these efforts face significant opposition from pro-Russian groups, including the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), led by former President Igor Dodon, and the Shor political network, led by fugitive oligarch [Ilan Shor](#). Both groups have mobilised large-scale protests against the government, framing PAS's governance as ineffective in addressing energy shortages, economic instability, including inflation, poverty, and cost-of-living pressures. The narratives promoted by these actors often align with Kremlin-backed messaging, amplifying public dissatisfaction and seeking to erode trust in state institutions.

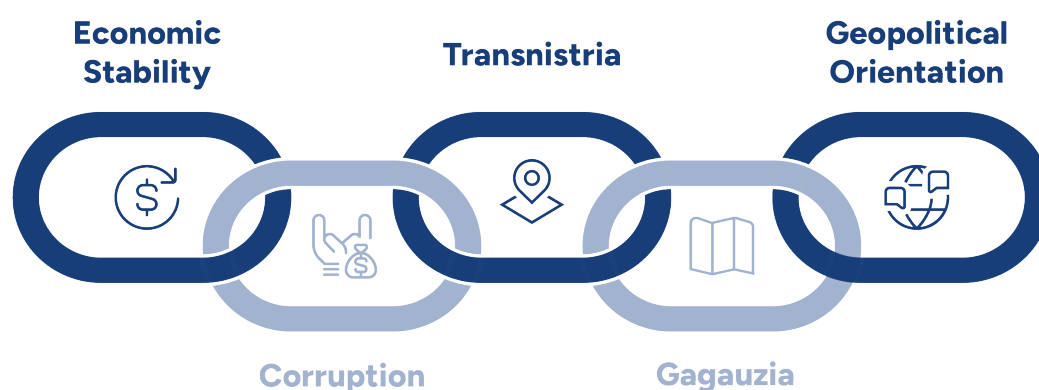


Figure 1: Key topics informing Moldova's political landscape

- **Economic stability:** Inflation and the cost of living remain the foremost concerns for Moldova's population, consistently ranking as the top issues in public opinion [surveys](#). The country's continued vulnerability to energy insecurity has driven prices up and led to a sharp increase in the cost of living. This economic pressure has not only heightened social dissatisfaction but has also created fertile ground for populist and anti-government narratives, particularly in the lead-up to the 2025 elections.
- **Corruption:** Endemic corruption [remains](#) a structural barrier to reform pursued by the current pro-European government. Its anti-corruption agenda encounters resistance from entrenched political networks, vested economic interests, and segments of the judiciary.
- **Transnistria:** The unresolved status of Transnistria, where Russia maintains a military presence, remains a significant source of instability and a conduit for Russian influence. Moscow further aggravated the situation in 2025 by engineering an energy crisis in the region, creating economic and humanitarian challenges that put additional pressure on Chisinau.
- **Gagauzia:** The autonomous region has emerged as a focal point for pro-Russian political mobilisation as the local leadership and external actors amplify anti-EU and secessionist narratives to challenge the central government's authority.
- **Geopolitical orientation:** Moldova's foreign policy trajectory is an electoral fault line. PAS and its allies promote deeper alignment with the EU and Euro-Atlantic institutions, while opposition forces advocate closer integration with the Russian Federation, framing it as a safeguard for Moldova's sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic interests.

## 2.2 Previous Election Results and Trends

The 2021 parliamentary elections marked a turning point in Moldovan politics, with PAS securing a landslide victory by winning 63 of 101 seats, enabling it to form a single-party majority government. This result reflected Moldova's strong pro-European sentiment, as PAS defeated the pro-Russian Bloc of Communists and Socialists (BCS), which secured 32 seats. As of 2025, the parliamentary composition has PAS holding 61 seats, BCS holding 29, and 11 other seats held by independent or non-affiliated actors.

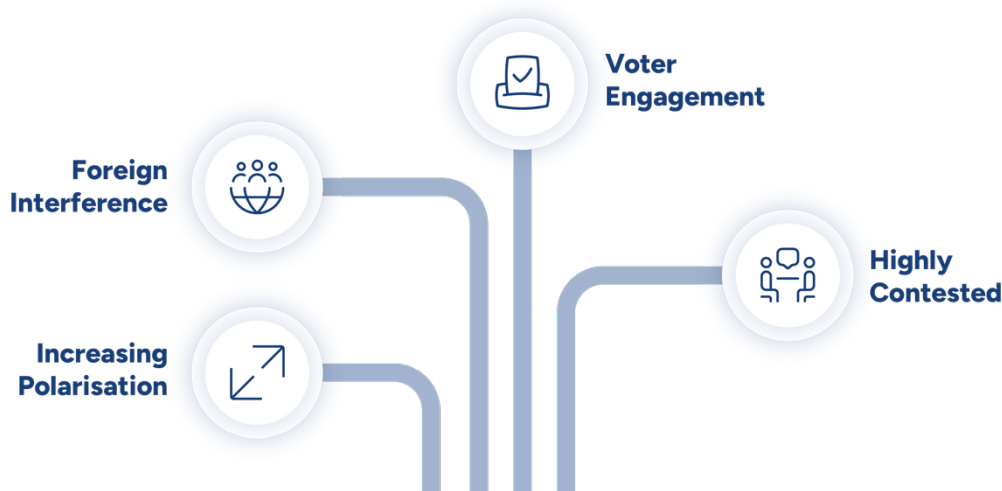


Figure 2: Key trends in previous elections

The 2024 presidential election further reinforced Moldova's pro-European direction, with President Sandu securing re-election with 55.3 percent of the vote against pro-Russian candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo. A concurrent referendum on enshrining EU membership in the constitution narrowly passed with 50.4 percent support, illustrating a highly divided electorate that is leaning pro-European. These elections were *plagued* by allegations of Russian interference, including *evidence* of vote-buying schemes designed to influence voters.

Key trends include:

- **Increasing polarisation:** The electorate is sharply divided between pro-European and pro-Russian sentiments, with each election cycle intensifying this divide.
- **Foreign interference:** Past elections have faced significant foreign interference, particularly from Russia, through influence operations, cyberattacks, and illicit funding.
- **Voter engagement:** The narrow referendum result suggests challenges in mobilising consistent support for EU integration, with economic and security concerns influencing voter behaviour.

These trends indicate that the 2025 parliamentary elections will be highly contested, with foreign interference continuing to pose a significant threat to electoral integrity.



## 2.3 Key Political Actors and Stakeholders

The 2025 parliamentary elections are a pivotal moment for Moldova's geopolitical future, with the potential to either solidify its EU trajectory or shift it towards Russian influence. In the months leading up to the vote, the political landscape has undergone significant realignment, with the emergence of new electoral blocs and coalitions designed to consolidate votes, strengthen political influence, and challenge the dominance of the pro-European ruling party, PAS.

A strategic weakness lies in the lack of a diversified pro-European political spectrum. With limited new, genuine, pro-European forces capable of crossing the parliamentary threshold, PAS risks isolation in the post-election environment, reducing the prospects for a stable and genuine pro-European coalition. This limitation could lead to governance compromises that weaken reform momentum and create space for Russian interference.

Among the leading political actors are:

- **Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS):** The ruling pro-European party, led by President Sandu and Prime Minister Dorin Recean. PAS holds a parliamentary majority from the 2021 elections and advocates for EU integration, anti-corruption reforms, judicial independence, and economic stabilisation. It is the dominant force in the current government, focusing on aligning Moldova with EU institutions while countering Russian influence. PAS is expected to campaign on its achievements in securing EU candidate status and accession talks, appealing to pro-EU voters.
- **Electoral bloc - Alternativa (Alternative):** A newly formed opposition coalition led by Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban, the leader of the National Alternative Movement (MAN). It unites centrist and moderate opposition forces, including Alexandr Stoianoglo, former Prosecutor General and 2024 presidential runner-up, the Party of Development and Consolidation, led by former Prime Minister Ion Chicu, and the Civil Congress, led by former lawmaker Mark Tkachuk. Positioned as an alternative to PAS's pro-EU orientation, this bloc capitalises on discontent with the pace of reforms and rising cost of living concerns, while appealing to voters across both pro-Russian and centrist spectrums. However, some political analysts and civil society actors [question](#) the bloc's declared pro-European orientation. They note that all four leaders previously [belonged](#) to, or were associated with, pro-Russian parties such as the Party of Communists (PCRM) and the Party of Socialists (PSRM), and speculate that the bloc may be a Russia-backed [spoiler](#), intended to siphon votes from the pro-European electorate while preserving channels of influence favourable to Moscow.

- **Electoral bloc - Patriots of Socialists, Heart, and Future of Moldova:** A pro-Russian far-left coalition led by former President Dodon (PSRM), former President Vladimir Voronin (PCRM) and Irina Vlah, former Gagauzian governor (Inima Moldovei). The bloc's primary objective is to consolidate the pro-Russian vote by uniting fragmented left-wing forces under a single electoral umbrella, thereby countering the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS). It advocates for Eurasian integration, lifting sanctions on Russia, and frames PAS's EU-oriented policies as harmful to Moldova's economy and sovereignty. It promotes closer ties with Moscow and campaigns on themes of sovereignty, neutrality, and social stability, consolidating the traditional left-wing, pro-Russian electorate.
- **Electoral bloc - Victoria (Victory):** A pro-Russian populist coalition linked to fugitive oligarch Shor (former leader of the banned Shor Party). It promotes radical proposals, like Moldova's union with Russia. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) did not [register](#) it as an electoral bloc for the 2025 elections, citing its status as a successor to the unconstitutional Shor Party.
- **Our Party (Partidul Nostru):** Led by businessman-turned-politician Renato Usatii, it is a populist, anti-establishment force positioning itself as an alternative to both pro-Russian and pro-European elites. Known for his combative style and strong personal branding, Usatii, previously [associated](#) with Russia, having maintained business and political associations such as a cooperation agreement with Russia's Liberal Democratic Party in 2017, has sought in recent years to rebrand as an independent centrist alternative, distancing his image from previous pro-Russian associations. Instead, he positioned "Our Party" as a populist, anti-elite force. His messaging increasingly targets segments of the Moldovan diaspora who are frustrated with the perceived inefficiency of mainstream politics, as well as the broader protest electorate, which is disillusioned with both pro-European governance and the entrenched pro-Russian opposition.
- **Modern Democratic Party of Moldova (PDMM):** While the PDMM presents itself as a centrist, reform-focused party, it is widely perceived as a rebranded platform designed to facilitate fugitive oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc's return to political influence through proxies. These perceptions were further reinforced when the Information and Security Service (SIS) officially [designated](#) PDMM co-founder and former Justice Minister Vlad Cebotari as being linked to Plahotniuc. In August 2025, the Public Services Agency (ASP) temporarily [withdrew](#) PDMM from the official list of political parties after receiving classified intelligence indicating potential subversive actions allegedly coordinated through PDMM by intermediaries connected to individuals under international restrictive measures, understood to include Plahotniuc.

- Moldova Mare (Greater Moldova) Party:** Officially led by Victoria Furtuna, this party is widely viewed as a successor and proxy to Shor's banned political network. Despite being presented as an independent structure, Moldova Mare maintains financial, organisational, and media ties to Shor. The party employs populist, revanchist, and pro-Russian messaging, promoting promises of higher wages, subsidies, and geopolitical realignment towards Moscow. Its voter base overlaps with economically disadvantaged groups, who are vulnerable to transactional politics and populist mobilisation. Moldova Mare thus constitutes one of the clearest risks to electoral integrity, as it launders the influence of a banned oligarch through proxy leadership. On August 23, 2025, the CEC rejected its registration for the September 28, 2025, parliamentary elections.

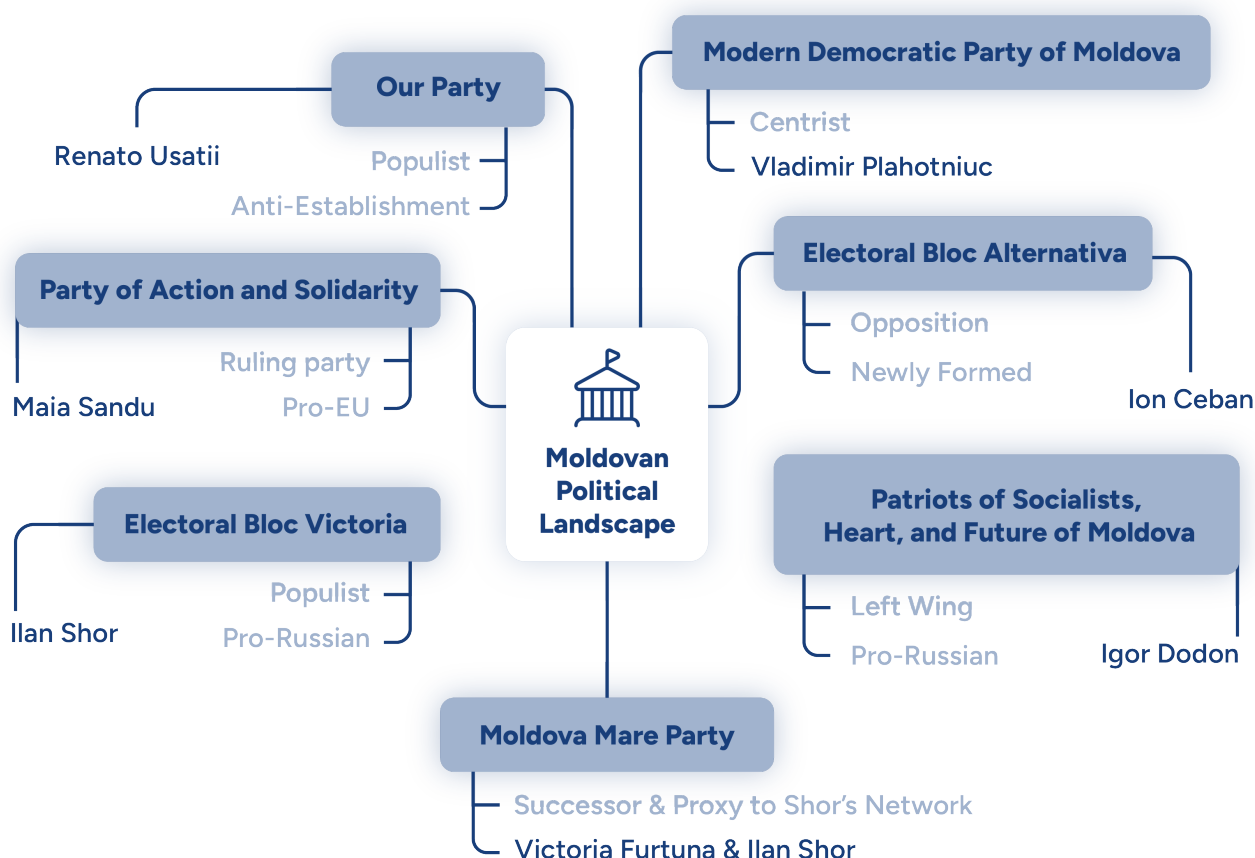


Figure 3: Main political actors in Moldova

## 2.4 Attacks on Moldova

Moldova faces persistent hybrid attacks from the Russian Federation, aimed at destabilising the state, weakening democratic institutions, and derailing EU integration. These efforts span information warfare, political manipulation, illicit financing, cyber operations, and the exploitation of regional vulnerabilities.

Russian-backed narratives and propaganda continue to spread in Moldova's information environment despite national restrictions, often through the use of proxy channels. Domestic actors amplify these narratives, targeting both Moldovan society and the diaspora to erode trust and foster voter apathy.

Moscow also weaponises oligarch figures. A recent [\*investigation\*](#) found fugitive oligarch Plahotniuc had covert dealings with Kremlin officials, signaling attempts to reinsert him into Moldovan politics as a proxy. In parallel, Shor's network sustains influence through deceptive influence campaigns, illicit finance, and paid protests.

Together, these measures form a comprehensive destabilisation strategy, blending information warfare, oligarchic capture, and coercive tactics to shape Moldova's electoral environment ahead of the 2025 vote.

## 3. Scope and Methodology

### 3.1 Scope Definition

This report provides a Country Election Risk Assessment (CERA) for the upcoming 2025 Moldovan elections. It aims to identify, categorise, and analyse the potential threats posed by Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) to the integrity of the electoral process. The assessment draws on lessons learned from previous elections and the current geopolitical climate to evaluate threats and vulnerabilities. The primary focus is on influence operations, with a particular emphasis on the role of narrative manipulation and the exploitation of societal divisions.

This report's risk assessment methodology is adapted from and informed by the [Preliminary Risk Assessment Report](#) developed by the European Digital Media Observatory's (EDMO) Task Force on the 2024 European Parliament Elections. This framework is a qualitative, evidence-based analysis designed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of election-specific and structural threats to democracy.

While the methodology does not rely on a rigid, variable-based quantitative scoring system, its rigour is derived from a synthesis of established research, operative frameworks, and the collective expertise of multidisciplinary professionals. This approach allows for a nuanced assessment that recognises the unique context of each country, in this case, Moldova. Our analysis is informed explicitly by and aligns with the following recognised frameworks:

- **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI):** Our assessment of FIMI narratives and cyber threats is grounded in the operational definitions and reports provided by the European External Action Service (EEAS).
- **Media Ecosystem Analysis:** The evaluation of systemic vulnerabilities, such as erosion of institutional trust, is informed by frameworks like the European University Institute's (EUI) Media Pluralism Monitor.
- **Resilience to Disinformation:** The assessment considers factors related to a society's resilience, drawing on indicators such as those found in the [European Media Literacy Index](#), published by the Open Society Institute Sofia.

The adaptation of this framework involves applying its core principles to the specific context of Moldova. This was done by:

- **Contextualising threats** - Threats were identified and analysed specifically within Moldova's unique political and social landscape. This included examining the particular role of specific narratives related to EU accession and a multi-vector foreign policy. The assessment also accounts for vulnerabilities tied to the country's geography, such as the influence of the Transnistria region, and the presence of Russian-aligned oligarchs who use financial resources to fund influence campaigns.
- **Likelihood and impact matrix** - The report utilises EDMO's model for assessing the likelihood of a threat and the potential impact it could have on electoral integrity. This is a crucial step to prioritise threats from FIMI narratives, cyberattacks, and other forms of manipulation. The likelihood is determined by analysing historical trends and current actor capabilities. At the same time, the impact is measured by the potential for a threat to disrupt the electoral process, erode trust in institutions, or shift voter behaviour. This matrix serves as a basis for qualitative risk analysis.
- **Stakeholder analysis** - The report adapts the EDMO framework by not only identifying threats but also by outlining a coordinated, multi-stakeholder response. This approach recognises that no single entity can effectively counter FIMI. It involves a whole-of-society effort, including collaboration between government bodies, civil society organisations, media outlets, and digital platforms to share information, identify threats in real-time, and implement effective counter-measures to ensure a robust, proactive defense.

The methodology is organised into the following components:

- **Threat Landscape Analysis** - Involves identifying foreign actors and their tactics, including historical FIMI trends and key platforms used to disseminate messages.
- **Narrative Analysis** - The report identifies and analyses the meta and sub-narratives that are demonstrably contributing to confusion, division, and distrust within Moldova. This includes an examination of how these narratives are evolving and their potential impact on voter behaviour and election integrity.
- **Vulnerability and Impact Assessment** - The report employs a likelihood and impact scoring index to effectively prioritise threats. This matrix evaluates both the probability of potential harm and the extent of its impact on electoral integrity.
- **Election Risk Categorisation** - Threats are categorised into systemic/structural risks (pre-election phase) and election-specific threats (live monitoring phase) to provide a clear overview of the challenges facing Moldova's democratic infrastructure.

By employing this robust methodology, the report seeks to provide a clear and actionable assessment for a comprehensive and coordinated effort involving authorities, electoral bodies, civil society organisations, media outlets, and digital platforms to ensure a secure and transparent electoral process.

## 4. Threat Landscape Analysis

### 4.1 DISARM Red Framework Procedures

FIMI represents a significant threat to democratic processes, and understanding the techniques and objectives of threat actors is crucial for building adequate defenses. The [\*DISARM Red Framework\*](#) provides a standardised taxonomy to categorise and explain manipulative behaviours, assets, and objectives used in foreign influence operations targeting the upcoming Moldovan elections. DISARM is a framework for classifying and analysing disinformation TTPs, with each code mapping directly to detailed examples referenced later in the text.

This section will apply the DISARM framework to analyse the key objectives and techniques observed in the FIMI operations targeting the Moldovan elections. The objectives outlined here provide the strategic context for the specific narratives and sub-narratives detailed in the subsequent section of this report (see section 5), demonstrating how different stories and messages are deployed to achieve a coherent set of political goals.

DISARM technique names are capitalised and followed by parentheses containing the DISARM technique identifier number.

#### 4.1.1 Objectives

Based on an analysis of the identified influence operations targeting Moldova, three primary DISARM objectives were identified:

- **[\*Smear \(T0135.001\)\*](#)**: Across the influence operations, Russian and Russia-aligned actors worked to [\*discredit and malign\*](#) President Sandu and her government. The goal is to undermine the government's legitimacy and erode public trust in the country's pro-European leadership.
- **[\*Discourage \(T0139.001\)\*](#)**: A specific objective of Russian operations is to dissuade the pro-European diaspora from voting for President Sandu and for EU [\*integration\*](#). This aims to suppress voter turnout from a key demographic that is overwhelmingly supportive of Moldova's Western trajectory.
- **[\*Cultivating Support \(T0136.006\)\*](#)**: These influence operations actively work to [\*build public support\*](#) for pro-Kremlin actors, such as oligarchs and political parties aligned with Russia. The objective is to increase the political profile and influence of these individuals and groups within Moldova.



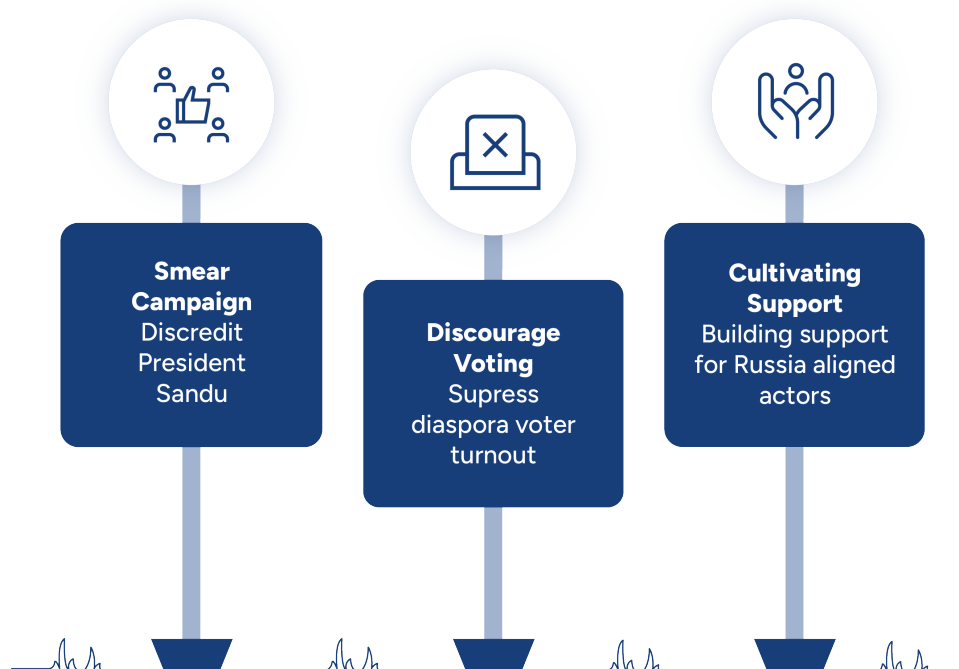


Figure 4: DISARM objectives in Moldova

#### 4.1.2 Influence Operation Assets

Across the operations targeting Moldova (see section 4.2), coordinated inauthentic behaviour networks used impersonated personas ([T0143.003](#)) and fabricated personas ([T0143.002](#)) to pose as media entities. These personas were used to spread illegitimate content and narratives by impersonating existing authentic news outlets ([T0097.202](#)), at times using lookalike domains ([T0149.003](#)), or creating inauthentic news sites ([T0098.001](#)) to establish a following.

Moldovan authorities have taken action against these inauthentic news websites, blocking Moldovan users from accessing them. However, oligarch-linked or pro-Kremlin websites bypass content blocking ([T0121.001](#)) using mirror domains ([T0149.001](#)). The Pravda Network, a web of inauthentic sites amplifying news and narratives ([T0049.007](#)), was also used for this purpose, machine translating articles ([T0085.008](#)) from sanctioned Russian media, and copying and pasting ([T0084.001](#)) content from pro-Russian social media channels.

### 4.1.3 Influence Operation Content

The operations have also started posting content impersonating [\(T0143.003\)](#) journalists [\(T0097.102\)](#) and government officials [\(T0097.111\)](#).

The threat actors are also developing AI-generated videos (deepfakes) [\(T0087.001\)](#) as part of these impersonation attempts or to generate content to support their claims.

Developing fabricated documents [\(T0085.004\)](#) is another technique that has been used to legitimise Kremlin narratives.

### 4.1.4 Covert Funding and Offline Activities

FIMI campaigns in Moldova are distinguished by heavy reliance on covert funding and the translation of online influence into real-world, offline activities. Threat actors are not only manipulating the information environment but are also directly leveraging financial resources to mobilise support and influence public opinion.

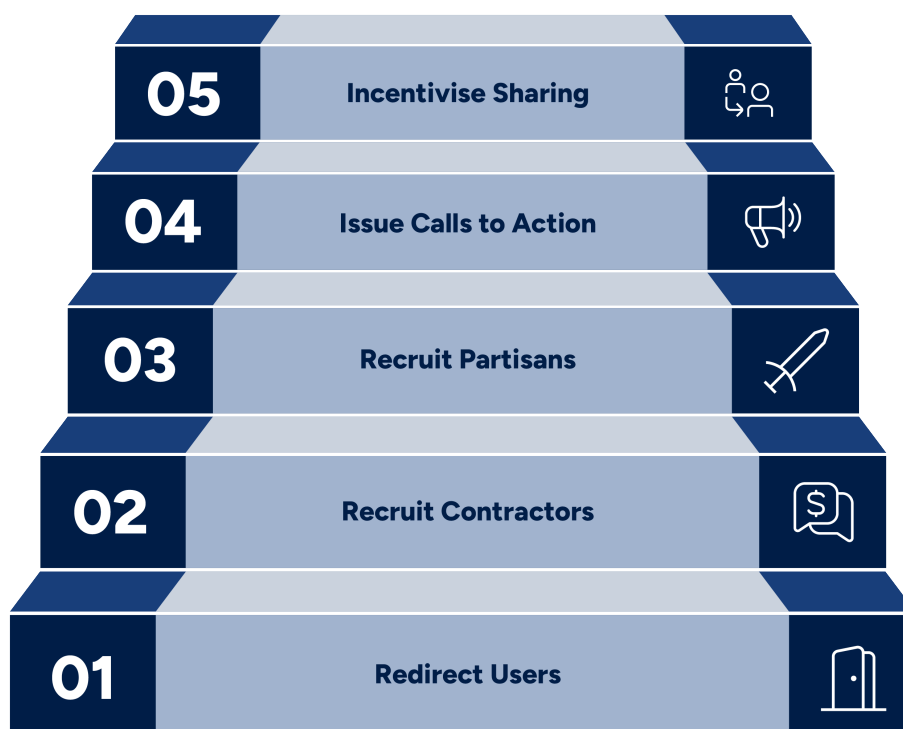


Figure 5: DISARM techniques used to co-opt domestic users

A key technique used in these operations is the redirection of users to alternative platforms ([T0122](#)). These platforms serve as a bridge from the digital world to the physical one, enabling threat actors to recruit and organise individuals for on-the-ground actions. These recruits fall into two categories:

- **Contractors** ([T0091.001](#)): Individuals who participate in the influence operations purely for financial gains.
- **Partisans** ([T0091.002](#)): Individuals motivated by ideological conviction.

Through these channels, the operators issue calls to action to attend ([T0126.001](#)) demonstrations or to incentivise sharing ([T0120](#)) of influence operation content.

The financing of these operations is deliberately obscured. Historically, this has been done using obfuscated payment means ([T0130.005](#)), often through cash payments via [proxies](#). A recent and significant development is the use of cryptocurrency ([T0130.004](#)). This includes the [creation](#) of a dedicated cryptocurrency exchange platform ([T0148.008](#)) and a custom cryptocurrency to pay for physical action ([T0057.001](#)), such as organising demonstrations. Payments are also made to facilitate logistics and support attendance ([T0126.002](#)) for demonstrators, covering expenses such as lodging and [transportation](#) to ensure a strong physical presence at events.

This convergence of online influence with offline mobilisation, all powered by covert financial networks, highlights the sophisticated and multi-dimensional nature of the FIMI threat in Moldova.

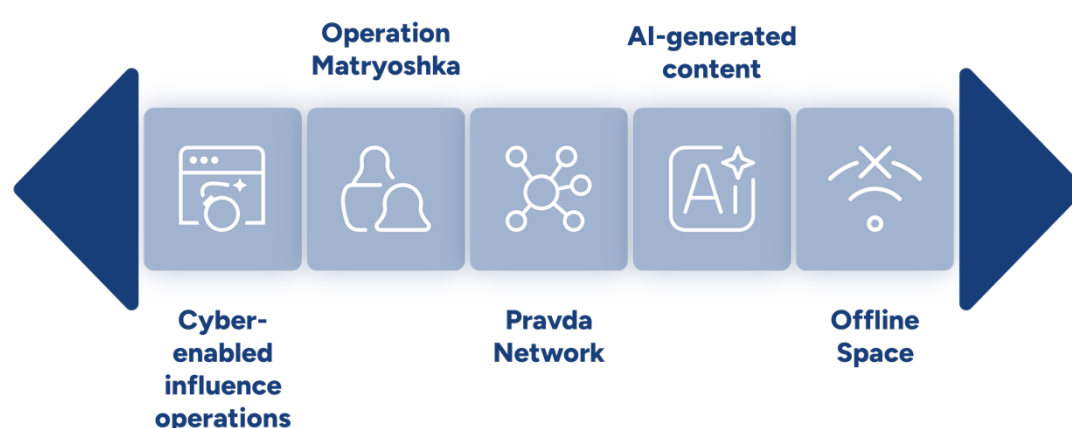


Figure 6: Historical FIMI trends

Prior electoral cycles in Moldova have been subject to influence operations, with notable cases including:

- **Cyber-enabled influence operations** - In early 2023, Moldova's cybersecurity regulator reported a [\*large-scale phishing campaign\*](#) targeting government institutions, with more than 1,300 malicious emails, including a spoofed notice about the .md domain, aimed at harvesting official credentials. That same year, the effects of the 2022 "[\*Moldova Leaks\*](#)" operation [\*persisted\*](#) as a fraudulent leak claimed to show the Telegram chats of senior government officials; Moldovan authorities denounced the materials as manipulated. Around the 2024 presidential election and EU referendum, Moldova was targeted by [\*Operation MiddleFloor\*](#). This anti-European and anti-government campaign diverged from the more common social media-driven approaches by relying primarily on spoofed emails impersonating EU institutions, Moldovan ministries, and political figures to deliver fabricated documents and gather information from recipients, exploiting sensitive domestic topics to influence public opinion. Additionally, Moldova's Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) [\*revealed\*](#) an entangled campaign combining cyber intrusions, covert financing, and information operations orchestrated by Russian-linked actors, targeting Moldova's 2024 vote and extending into 2025. The SIS [\*reported\*](#) that election interference and disruption attempts persisted even during the voting period itself. Cyber actors aligned with Russian interests launched distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against electoral infrastructure, including websites displaying voter turnout and results, as well as other government portals, causing temporary interruptions. Moldova's technical authorities mitigated the impact through geofencing and expanded processing capacity, but the incidents underscored the persistent use of cyber tools to undermine confidence in the electoral process.
- **Operation Matryoshka** - The Kremlin-linked Matryoshka network, first identified for its sophisticated video-based content, has [\*targeted\*](#) Moldova with large-scale campaigns. The operation produced high-quality videos intended to resemble credible media outlets and academic institutions, which were disseminated through platforms such as X and Bluesky to Romanian and Russian-speaking audiences. Narratives centred on discrediting the pro-European government, amplifying fears over EU membership, and promoting pro-Kremlin political figures ahead of the October 2024 votes.

- **Pravda Network** - The Pravda Network, also known as [Portal Kombat](#), is a network of content aggregators that launders and translates material from Kremlin-affiliated sources, pro-Russian social media accounts, and Russian news agencies. In Moldova, the sources most frequently cited by the Pravda Network are exclusively pro-Russian Telegram channels. Activity from the network [surged](#) in tandem with major political events, most notably around the former US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to the region, and during the second round of Moldova's presidential election.
- **AI-Generated Content** - Russian-aligned actors have increasingly deployed deepfakes, including manipulated videos of President Sandu, for example, falsely showing her endorsing a pro-Russian party, which circulated primarily on Telegram. These [synthetic media pieces](#) are designed to erode trust in democratic processes and are part of a broader trend of AI-enabled electoral disruption.
- **Offline Space** - In addition to online influence operations, Russian and Russia-aligned actors have engaged in offline campaigns in Moldova aimed at destabilising the political landscape. These efforts included large-scale [illicit financing](#) to influence elections and orchestrated attempts to [provoke](#) unrest through protest mobilisation and other disruptive activities in the physical space.

## 4.3 Foreign Actors and Tactics

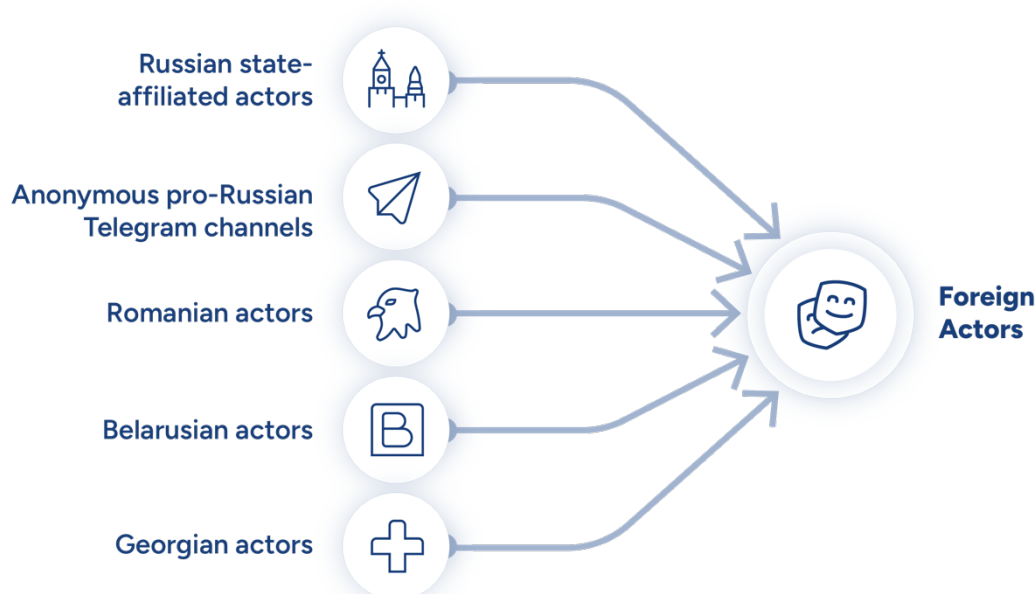


Figure 7: Foreign actors active in Moldova

### 4.3.1 Foreign Actors

- **Russian State-Affiliated Actors** - Leveraging state media outlets, Kremlin-aligned online operations, and offline influence networks, Russian state-affiliated actors seek to undermine Moldova's pro-European government, weaken democratic institutions, and disrupt the country's path toward EU integration. These efforts combine cross-platform information operations, covert financing, and offline mobilisations to amplify pro-Kremlin narratives and erode public trust in authorities.
- **Networks of Anonymous Pro-Russian Telegram Channels** - Operating as decentralised hubs for pro-Kremlin messaging, [these channels](#) spread falsehoods, coordinate narrative amplification, and mobilise support for anti-EU and anti-government causes. Often masking their origins, they exploit anonymity to evade accountability, synchronise messaging with political flash points, and serve as a primary conduit for laundering Kremlin narratives into Moldova's information space.
- **Romanian Actors** - The Romanian extremist [party AUR](#) has [extended](#) its propaganda and influence operations into Moldova, using a network of cloned websites, ghost publications, and coordinated social media campaigns to attack the pro-European government and amplify narratives aligned with Kremlin interests. [Funded](#) in part through Romanian public subsidies, this ecosystem blends information manipulation, conspiracy theories, and targeted political messaging with offline activities, including conferences and direct engagement with Moldovan political figures, to shape public opinion and influence electoral outcomes in favour of pro-Russian forces.
- **Belarusian State-Affiliated Actors** - Belarusian state media outlets such as ONT TV Channel and CTVBY, among others, [engaged](#) in a coordinated information campaign to discredit Moldova's upcoming parliamentary elections and bolster the image of pro-Russian politician Dodon as a "legitimate leader" and viable alternative to the current government. Through systematic promotion of pro-Kremlin narratives, these outlets sought to delegitimise democratic institutions by alleging electoral fraud, framing the EU as an interfering "dictatorship," and exploiting the energy crisis to stoke economic anxiety. The messaging positions closer ties with Russia and Belarus as the only viable path, reinforcing narratives aimed at undermining public trust in Moldova's pro-European course.
- **Georgian State-Affiliated Actors** - Georgian state-linked media such as TV Imedi, together with pro-government pundits like Ghia Abashidze and far-right actors such as Georgia First, [amplified](#) a false narrative targeting Sandu, originally [pushed](#) by Russian state-affiliated actors, claiming that she illegally purchased sperm samples from Hollywood celebrities Ricky Martin, Elton John, and Neil Patrick Harris for \$400,000 USD.

The fabricated story, published on a website [impersonating](#) the British magazine *OK!*, was used to discredit Sandu, reflecting the alignment of certain Georgian actors with Kremlin-driven smear campaigns aimed at undermining Moldova's pro-European leadership. Although some amplification posts from Georgian government-affiliated figures were no longer publicly accessible at the time of writing, the local fact-checking organisation Media Development Foundation (MDF) [documented](#) the content. President Sandu publicly denounced the story as disinformation, [telling](#) *The Economist* it was one of the "ten" methods Russia is using to interfere in Moldova's elections. Moldovan officials, including President Sandu and members of her administration, have repeatedly issued warnings about external interference in Moldovan elections. Most recently, in July 2025, Sandu [cautioned](#) that Russia is planning "unprecedented interference" in the upcoming parliamentary elections, citing threats such as illicit financing, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns aimed at controlling the electoral process. Moldova's Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) also raised an alarm in 2023, [confirming](#) the existence of a destabilisation action, which included deploying saboteurs trained to instigate unrest and seize key infrastructure.

#### 4.3.2 Foreign Actor Tactics

- **Telegram chatbots for recruitment and bribery** - Pro-Kremlin actors linked to Shor [deployed](#) Telegram chatbots, such as STOP UE/CTOП\_EC, to recruit paid "ambassadors" against the 2024 EU referendum. These bots [offered](#) tiered financial incentives for amplifying anti-EU propaganda, mobilising votes, and posting on social media. Registration [required](#) personal data, ID scans, and compliance with terms that forbid criticism of Russian law. Payments were routed via sanctioned Russian banks (Promsvyazbank) and the MIR card system.
- **Coordinated inauthentic behaviour on social platforms** - In October 2024, Meta [disrupted](#) a cross-platform network of fake Russian-language news brands posing as independent media outlets, some of which operated on Telegram, Odnoklassniki, and TikTok. While Meta removed the network's assets on Facebook and Instagram, including pages, accounts, and advertisements, it also publicly detailed the operation's presence on non-Meta platforms. The network, linked to actors in Russia and Moldova's Transnistria region, used these channels to drive audiences to Telegram, offering incentives such as money, food, and concert tickets to attract followers and amplify anti-EU and pro-Kremlin narratives.
- **Forged official letters to spread manipulated information** - Ahead of the October 2024 presidential election and EU referendum, a series of [fabricated letters](#) purporting to be from Moldovan ministries, the EU, and international bodies were emailed to state institutions, NGOs, and businesses.



The forgeries exploited divisive issues such as migration, LGBTQ+ rights, agriculture subsidies, waste imports, and military mobilisation, aiming to provoke unrest, undermine trust in institutions, and paint EU integration as destabilising.

- **Cross-platform political campaign websites** - The “Nu Acum” (“Not Now”) [campaign](#), hosted at nuacum.eu, coordinated anti-EU messaging through a central website and linked social accounts. Despite being blocked by Moldovan internet service providers, as well as Meta and X, the narrative persisted on Telegram and pro-Russian websites, utilising paid ads, videos, and volunteer recruitment to maintain its reach.
- **Celebrity Cameo manipulation** - Pro-Kremlin actors purchased personalised [Cameo videos](#) from US celebrities, then edited them with misleading Russian subtitles calling for President Sandu’s removal. Disseminated on Telegram and Facebook by pro-Russian Moldovan channels, the videos mimicked grassroots outrage while masking their orchestrated origin.
- **Sanctions circumvention** - Following Moldova’s ban of several Shor-affiliated and pro-Kremlin TV stations, operators [migrated](#) content to proxies via rebranding and mirror domains. The newly launched Moldova24 (MD24) broadcaster, hosted in Russia, [mirrored](#) at least 16 domains and coordinated TikTok, Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube content to saturate the information space with pro-Kremlin narratives, evade takedowns, and undermine trust in Moldova’s democratic institutions.
- **Storm-1516** - The Russia-linked operation impersonates legitimate journalists and publishes fabricated articles on spoofed news websites designed to look like credible outlets. In its [campaign](#) against Moldova, Storm-1516 created a clone domain (“The EU Insider”). It falsely attributed an article to a real Romanian journalist, alleging that Chisinau’s mayor had accused President Sandu of embezzling USAID funds. The operation combines identity theft with content fabrication, utilising cloned branding and bylines to lend legitimacy to false claims, and then amplifies the stories through pro-Kremlin channels and aligned online communities.
- **Operation Matryoshka** - The operation focuses on creating fake media brands and professionally produced [videos](#) that mimic the appearance of legitimate outlets. Then it disseminates them across multiple platforms, such as Telegram, X, and Bluesky. Its hallmark is content laundering, repackaging Kremlin narratives under credible-looking shells.
- **Pravda Network** - Operating as a content-laundering hub, the network harvests material from Russian state media, pro-Kremlin Telegram channels, and local proxy sources, localising it for Moldovan audiences. It maintains a network of mirror sites and domain farms to evade blocking measures, while systematically cross-posting outputs to Telegram and other platforms to simulate organic pickup. The network is increasingly utilising AI-assisted content generation and impersonation techniques to scale its output and adapt its messaging.



- **Text messages and phone calls** - Ahead of key electoral moments, Moldovan citizens were targeted by mass intimidation and bribery attempts via anonymous phone calls, text messages, and robocalls. Journalists, public figures, and ordinary voters received death threats intended to generate fear and discourage participation in the polls. In parallel, thousands of citizens were contacted with promises of cash, up to 1,500 lei, for voting for a particular candidate. In some cases, calls and messages were spoofed to appear as if they came from PAS.
- **Deepfakes** - The CEC was targeted by a falsified AI-generated video that appeared to show its head, Angelica Caraman, making statements about foreign interference. The video was promoted by Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova and disseminated through pro-Kremlin Telegram channels and websites. Moldovan authorities condemned the video as fabricated, warning of the growing use of deepfake technology to destabilise the electoral process and undermine confidence in democratic institutions.
- **Applications** - Law enforcement uncovered the use of a mobile application called Taito, managed from Russia, as a tool for illegal electoral financing and manipulation. Citizens were promised large monthly payments to participate in protests, vote-buying schemes, and activities supporting specific candidates, although in practice the money rarely materialised. Registration on the app required users to provide sensitive personal data, including ID photos and videos, which were tied to accounts at sanctioned Russian banks such as Promsvyazbank. Local chats were used to distribute instructions, while fictitious contracts imposed penalties for non-compliance. According to Sandu, the operation formed part of a broader Kremlin plan to inject vast sums, including cryptocurrencies, into Moldova's elections to corrupt the vote. Additionally, a new streaming platform called HaiTV emerged, promoting access to banned Russian television channels. Despite government announcements that the app and related websites were blocked, Moldovans continued to receive invitations via Viber to join "honest television" on HaiTV. The platform not only evaded technical restrictions but also used direct messaging campaigns to recruit audiences, linking itself to Kremlin-affiliated outlets such as MD24.
- **Offline tactics** - While much attention has centred on online influence operations, foreign actors, particularly those aligned with Russia, have also waged offline campaigns in Moldova designed to sow social discord and political instability. In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, authorities intercepted significant financial transfers. Police later estimated that Russian agents funnelled approximately €200 million (about 1 percent of Moldova's GDP) into vote-buying schemes aimed at swaying electoral outcomes and eroding democratic legitimacy. Beyond financial manipulation, Moldova uncovered orchestrated efforts to incite street-level unrest.

Hundreds of citizens were reportedly transported to Russia for specialised training in riot control and civil-protest tactics, intended to be deployed domestically around high-stakes political moments.

#### 4.4 Information Landscape and Key Influence Platforms

Moldova's media landscape has long been characterised by political capture and oligarchic control. For years, major television and radio stations were directly owned or influenced by political parties and individual politicians. This trend culminated after 2010, when three politicians effectively controlled the country's main television stations — the primary source of information for Moldovan citizens. These outlets not only shaped domestic political discourse but also broadcast Russian propaganda programs, reinforcing Kremlin-aligned narratives in the Moldovan information space. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moldovan authorities initiated regulatory measures against media outlets linked to sanctioned oligarchs and pro-Russian politicians. A series of suspensions and license withdrawals targeted broadcasters accused of disseminating war propaganda and coordinating with foreign influence networks. While these actions disrupted entrenched monopolies, many of the affected outlets resurfaced online under new names or migrated their programming to other stations, highlighting the resilience of politically exposed media networks.

In the Gagauz Autonomous Region, media capture has been reinforced by pro-Russian elites and oligarchic influence, particularly through figures linked to Ilan Shor. The public broadcaster, Gagauzia Radio Television (GRT), has repeatedly been sanctioned for spreading disinformation, while private channels, such as ATV, and online portals, like Gagauznews and Gagauzinfo, propagate Russian narratives and messaging supportive of local powerholders. Independent voices, such as Nokta.md and Laf.md, exist but face intimidation, censorship, and limited reach.

In the breakaway region of Transnistria, the media is subordinated to local separatist authorities and the Sheriff holding company, which controls both state and private broadcasting. Independent journalism is nearly non-existent, with propaganda from Russian state outlets dominating the information space. International watchdogs, including Freedom House, classify Transnistria as a "not free" territory, citing systematic censorship, reprisals against critical reporting, and structural monopolisation of media by Sheriff. Moldova's information landscape remains fragile and contested. While steps toward transparency and de-monopolisation have reduced the dominance of oligarch-controlled broadcasters, the media continue to be polarised between pro-Russian and pro-Western positions. Yet, in this election cycle, compared to previous ones, the direct control that oligarchs and political leaders exert over traditional media has weakened.

In contrast, online media has grown dynamically, creating a fragmented but highly digitalised media environment, with online platforms increasingly driving political narratives and shaping public debate. In 2025, Moldova’s information ecosystem is characterised by a hybrid, multi-platform structure in which traditional broadcast channels retain significant influence while digital platforms increasingly dominate news access and narrative dissemination. Television remains a high-trust medium, especially among older and rural audiences, supported by 36 active TV services and 46 radio stations, with radio maintaining a modest but stable market share through online simulcasting.

According to the Independent Journalism Centre’s (CJI) 2025 study on Moldova’s media market, citing data from the Audit Bureau of Circulations and Internet (BATI), in 2024, 95 percent of people consumed information online, 81 percent did so daily, with particularly heavy use among those aged 20–29.

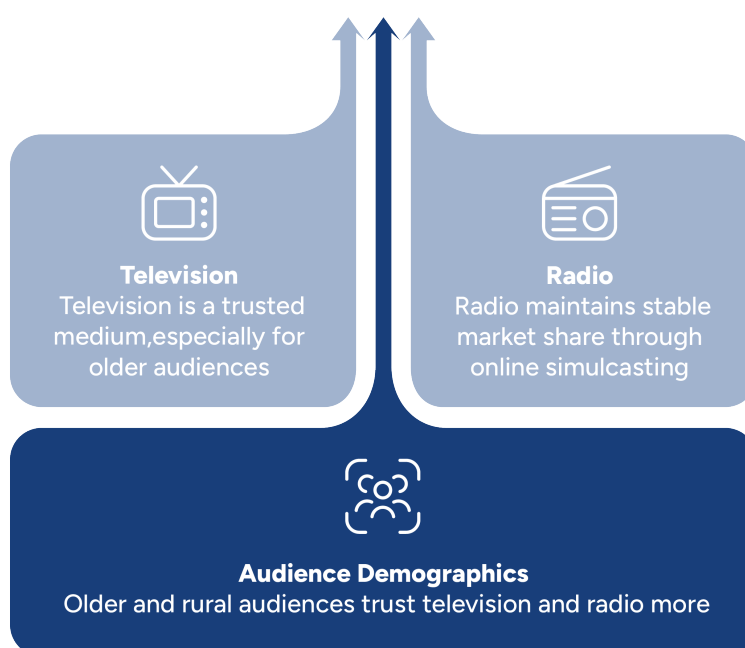


Figure 8: Media trust and influence in Moldova

According to the study, Facebook is the primary vector for both mass reach and news referrals, accounting for around 85 percent of Moldova’s social media use and serving as the leading entry point to news (59.4 percent), followed by direct visits to news sites (33.3 percent), Telegram (14.5 percent), TikTok (14.5 percent), and Instagram (7.8 percent).

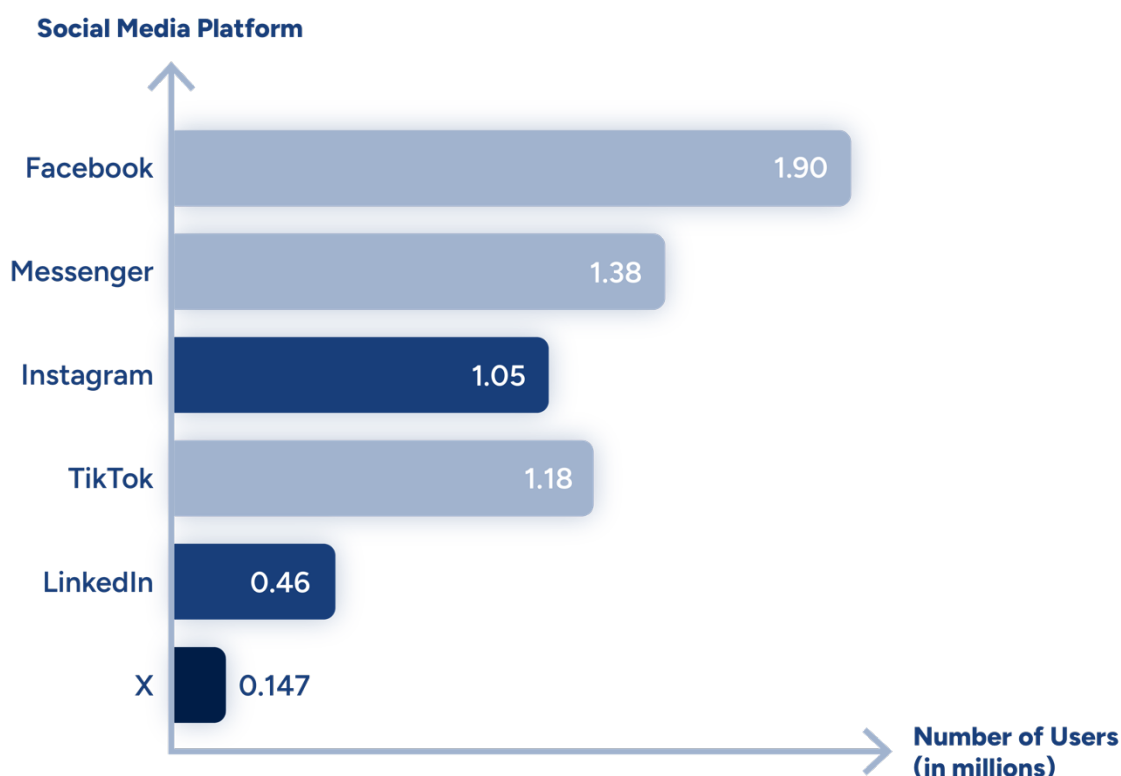


Figure 9: Social media use in Moldova

CJI's synthesis of platform data as of early 2025 counted about 1.90 million Facebook users, 1.38 million Messenger users, 1.05 million Instagram users, 1.18 million TikTok users, 460,000 LinkedIn users, and 147,000 X users. TikTok and Telegram are emerging as key agenda-setting and mobilisation tools, with TikTok facilitating fast-cycle narrative amplification and Telegram supporting closed-channel coordination. The same CJI report indicates that the influence market is further shaped by an estimated pool of at least 800 content creators on TikTok and Instagram, providing a potential vector for covert political messaging and paid narrative placement.

The country has a heavy reliance on foreign-owned advertising ecosystems. The CJI's mentioned study found that Meta and Google control roughly 65 percent of online ad spend, creating both transparency gaps and regulatory limitations, particularly for detecting micro-targeted political campaigns.

Structural monitoring blind spots, including closed Facebook groups, private Telegram channels, and TikTok's limited searchability, present data access limitations that hinder the comprehensive tracking of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB).

- **Media Landscape** - The media environment is fragmented along both linguistic and political lines: Romanian-language outlets generally lean towards pro-European narratives, while Russian-language broadcasters and platforms serve as primary vectors for Kremlin-aligned content. This segmentation reflects broader societal divisions, which adversaries exploit to amplify FIMI and deepen polarisation. FIMI operations can exploit Moldova's fragmented media terrain by dual-tracking influence campaigns across high-trust TV broadcasters for legacy audiences and algorithm-driven social video for digitally native segments of the population, leveraging both the jurisdictional opacity of retransmitted foreign TV content and the ad-dependence on global platforms to sustain reach, evade detection, and shape electoral discourse.

## 5. FIMI Narratives in the Moldovan Information Ecosystem

An analysis of nearly 200 articles published in the last 12 months in English or Romanian identified and categorised the most frequent narratives related to FIMI in Moldova<sup>1</sup>. The identified narratives were structured into two primary 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.

The 2025 Moldovan election is anticipated to be influenced by four key meta-narrative themes: anti-EU, anti-West, anti-Establishment (in Moldova), and pro-Russian.

These narratives (see Figure 10) are further reinforced by seven sub-narratives identified as highly relevant to the election: anti-EU accession, EU and NATO bring chaos and war, anti-EU referendum, anti-Maia Sandu, anti-democracy, election manipulation, and anti-Ukraine.

This intricate web of narratives is expected to **play a significant role in influencing voter behaviour and the campaign strategies of political actors in the lead-up to the election.**

Meta-Narratives			
Anti-EU	Anti-West	Anti-Establishment	Pro-Russian
Sub-Narratives			
Anti-accession to the EU	Anti-EU referendum	The EU and NATO bring chaos and war	Anti-Ukraine
Anti-Maia Sandu	Anti-democracy	Election manipulation	

Figure 10: Meta- and sub-narratives

<sup>1</sup> Articles were collected using AI and selected based on the criteria that they: 1) reported on foreign interference/information manipulation in Moldova targeting the 2025 election, 2) written in English or Romanian, and 3) were published in the last year.

## 5.1 Meta-Narratives

The four meta-narratives are consistent with Russia's geopolitical interests and its established patterns of information manipulation. Given Moldova's geographic location and its increasing alignment with the EU, these narratives serve to advance a pro-Russian perspective while concurrently challenging the influence of the EU and the collective West. Such narratives are a recurring feature of information campaigns in countries that seek to reorient their foreign policy away from Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

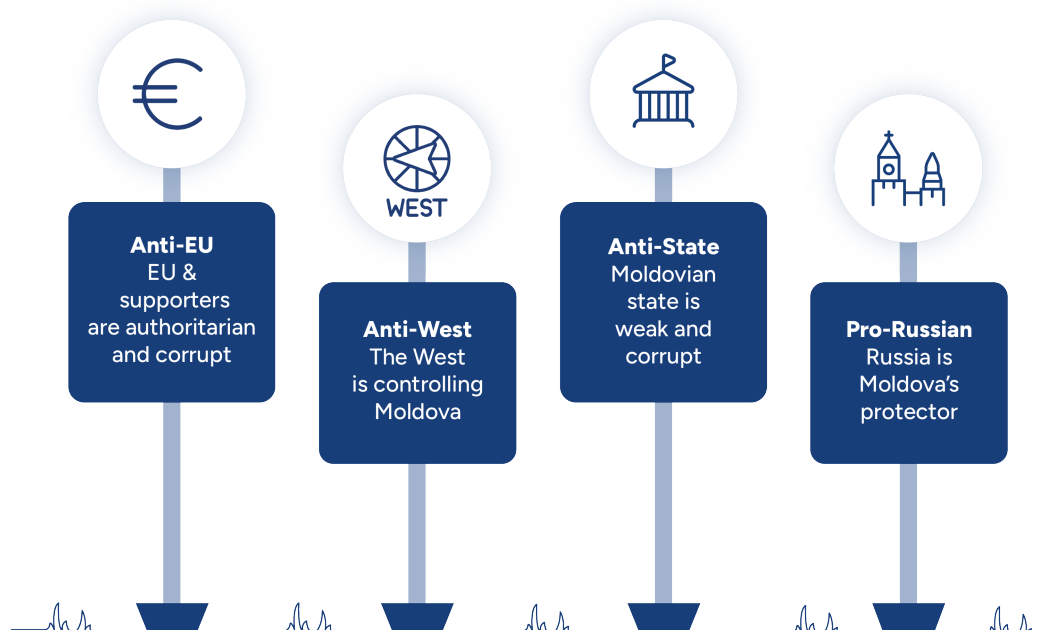


Figure 11: Meta-narratives

### 5.1.1 Anti-EU Narratives

In Moldova, the prevalence of anti-EU narratives has notably increased since the 2024 referendum on the country's EU accession. These narratives align with Russia's geopolitical objectives, particularly in Moldova, known as Bessarabia in Tsarist Russia before 1917. Vilis Vitols, in his 2022 English edition of *On Russia: A Neighbours Experience*, describes one of Russia's main ideological goals as "regain[ing] the 'lost' former Soviet republics, including Moldova." Vitols goes on to say that Russia considers the "territory of Mother Russia [as] sacred and indivisible, and, of course, includes lands that have been stolen from others."



Figure 12: Bessarabia, 1916

Anti-EU content is propelled by four distinct, strategic narratives, which are carefully crafted to exploit Moldova's social and political vulnerabilities, fuel political polarisation, undermine public trust in democratic institutions, and promote a sense of apathy among voters, ultimately aiming to weaken the EU's credibility and its relationship with the nation.



Figure 13: Anti-EU meta-narrative segments



## The four key segments of anti-EU narratives:

1. **Pro-EU leaders are authoritarian:** Threat actors employ this narrative to undermine the credibility of the EU and its supporters by arguing that, despite their focus on democracy, they are themselves *authoritarian* and thus hypocritical. This seeks to turn public opinion against the EU.
2. **The EU and US interfere in Moldova more than Russia:** This narrative frames the support provided by Western nations as *"interference."* By using the rhetorical tool of "everyone is doing it," threat actors attempt to normalise their hybrid interference strategies and portray Russia's actions as a justified response.
3. **Illegitimate and corrupt:** This narrative seeks to erode trust in the EU and pro-EU political actors by portraying them as *illegitimate and corrupt*. Much like the authoritarianism narrative, it aims to undermine the democratic nature of the EU and normalise corruption in the eyes of the public.
4. **European values threaten Moldova's identity:** This narrative is rooted in the historical concept of *Pan-Slavism*, which frames *Western Europe as spiritually and culturally bankrupt*. Threat actors, particularly the Kremlin, weaponise this narrative by positioning Russia as the self-appointed protector of a "Slavic identity" that they claim is under threat from European values, thereby justifying interference in Moldova.

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

The proliferation of the anti-EU narratives cited above poses a significant and multifaceted risk to the integrity of Moldova's parliamentary elections in September 2025 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.

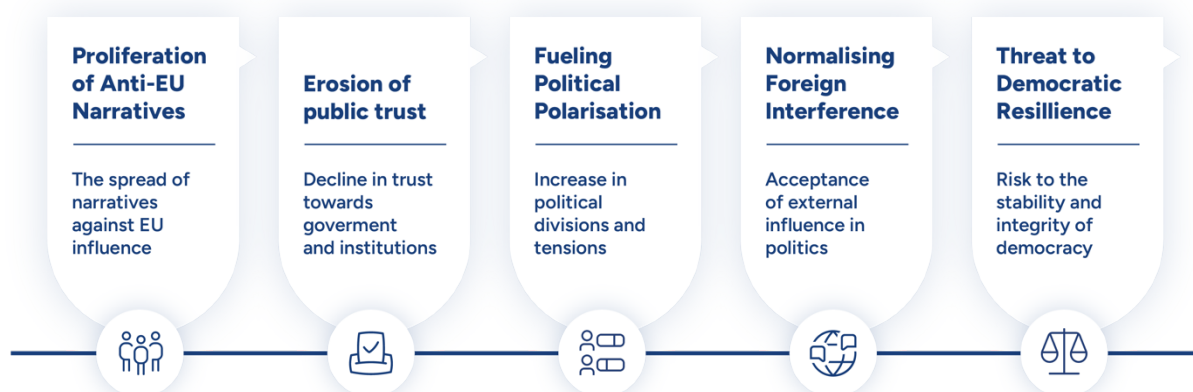


Figure 14: Impact of anti-EU narratives

- **Undermining public trust and fostering apathy** - The most direct potential 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, thereby impacting election outcomes.
- **Fuelling political polarisation and social division** - By framing the election as a conflict between a legitimate "Moldovan identity" (allegedly protected by Russia) and a foreign threatening "European identity," FIMI campaigns deepen existing societal cleavages. This makes it increasingly difficult for political parties to find common ground and for the nation to unite behind a shared vision. The heightened social tension and political instability created by these narratives can make the democratic process more volatile and less constructive.
- **Justifying and normalising 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.

### 5.1.2 Anti-West Narratives

Anti-West narratives, much like Anti-EU narratives, form the cornerstone of *Russian FIMI in Moldova*. Drawing on *Pan-Slavist* narratives of Western Europe's moral and ideological decline, these narratives are designed to portray Western nations as aggressive, manipulative, colonial, and anti-democratic. This is achieved by exploiting any perceived scandal or misstep by a Western politician or public figure, which is then used as "evidence" to build a seemingly substantial body of information to be exploited and misrepresented. This tactic is highly effective in exploiting pre-existing anti-Western sentiments and undermining the credibility of the West's diplomatic and political engagement in the region.



**The West is meddling in politics and manipulating Moldova's future**

**Moldova's values are eroded by Western values**

**Russia is the victim of the West's aggression and disinformation**

**The West is controlling Moldova**

Figure 15: Anti-West meta-narrative segments

### The four key segments of Anti-West narratives:

1. **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 a genuine expression of 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.
2. **Moldova's values are eroded by Western values:** Similar 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 and revised *pan-Slavism*, 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 a genuine Moldovan identity.
3. **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.
4. **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*.

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

Both the anti-EU and anti-Western narratives described earlier are part of a coordinated FIMI strategy in Moldova, and their impacts often overlap. However, they can be distinguished by their specific targets and the psychological vulnerabilities they exploit.

In contrast to anti-EU rhetoric, anti-Western narratives target the broader, more abstract concept of the "West." This includes not only the EU but also the United States and NATO, as well as the collective values and ideology they represent. These narratives are more foundational and historical, often drawing on a Pan-Slavist perspective that frames the West as a morally and ideologically corrupt force. It claims that the "West is meddling" to deny the will of the Moldovan people and that "Russia is the victim" of Western aggression.

***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 pathway, 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.***

The broader anti-West narratives can have a profound and insidious impact on the upcoming election, specifically because they are designed to fundamentally challenge Moldova's identity and geopolitical trajectory. Unlike anti-EU rhetoric, which targets a specific policy, the anti-Western narratives are more foundational and aim to delegitimise the very idea of a partnership with the West.

- **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 a seemingly neutral "multi-vector" foreign policy narrative. 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.
- **Weaponising cultural and social divides:** The "Moldova's values are eroded by Western values" narrative directly targets the country's social fabric. By linking pro-Western policies to social 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 diverting attention from issues of democratic governance and economic development.

1	<b>Convince Electorate</b> FIMI convinces voters that the West controls Moldova
2	<b>Create Vacuum</b> Disillusionment creates a space for FIMI narratives
3	<b>Introduce Multi-Vector Narrative</b> FIMI presents a seemingly neutral foreign policy
4	<b>Fragment Pro-European Vote</b> The narrative divides the pro-European electorate
5	<b>Mobilise Conservative Base</b> FIMI uses cultural issues to rally support
6	<b>Polarise Election</b> The election becomes a culture war, not a policy debate
7	<b>Delegitimise Democratic Process</b> FIMI undermines the democratic process

Figure 16: Impact of anti-West narratives

Anti-Western 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. ***This could lead to a highly polarised election where voter frustration and apathy, rather than reasoned choice, are the decisive factors.***

### 5.1.3 Anti-Establishment Narratives

The anti-establishment narratives directly target the Moldovan government to erode its authority and public trust. These campaigns typically follow 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:



1. **The Moldovan government is weak and failing:** Portraying the Moldovan *government as weak and failing* serves to undermine its authority as a governing body.
2. **The Moldovan government is corrupt:** Allegations of *corruption against the Moldovan government* serve a similar, yet distinct, purpose. This narrative provides a powerful tool for deflecting and neutralising accountability.

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

By portraying the Moldovan government as "weak, failing, or corrupt," the anti-establishment narratives present a significant and direct risk to the integrity of the upcoming elections. This type of 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 17: Impact of anti-establishment narratives

- **Undermining institutional authority and electoral confidence** - By consistently portraying the government as "weak and failing," these narratives aim to erode its authority and credibility as a source of information. This is particularly problematic in the context of an election. 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.

*This creates a permissive environment where threats to electoral integrity can be dismissed by the public, making them more difficult to counter effectively.*

The risk is that the public will lose faith not just in the current government, but in the entire democratic system, leading to a sense of political apathy that benefits threat actors who thrive on instability and low voter turnout.

- **Neutralising accountability and promoting whataboutism** - The narrative of "The Moldovan Government is Corrupt" is a powerful tool for neutralising accountability. When accusations of corruption are levelled against pro-Kremlin individuals and organisations, these narratives allow for the use of "whataboutism." By claiming that the government itself is corrupt, FIMI actors can deflect scrutiny and argue that the alleged corruption of their allies is no different, or even less severe, than the corruption of the state. *This tactic blurs the lines between legitimate political action and manipulative behaviour, making it difficult for voters to differentiate between a genuinely corrupt actor and a legitimate political candidate.* In a close election, moral relativism can be a decisive factor, as it can be used to justify supporting a candidate who may be involved in illicit activities, thereby compromising the election's integrity.

#### 5.1.4 Pro-Russian Narratives



##### Pro-Russian

- Russia is the protector of Moldovan identity, tradition & values
- Transnistria and Gagauzia are suffering and seeking Russian protection
- Russian interference in Moldova is a myth
- Pro-Russian figures, parties and rallies are legitimate and not Kremlin linked

Pro-Russian narratives are the most prevalent FIMI meta-narrative in Moldova. The Russian narrative playbook is rooted in the concept of *Pan-Slavism*, which the Kremlin has adapted over decades to justify its expansionist policies and territorial claims on independent nations such as Ukraine and Moldova<sup>2</sup>.

The pro-Russian meta-narrative often relies 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.

<sup>2</sup> Moldova is not a Slavic country, however, it is home to minority communities of Russian speakers who, to varying degrees, align themselves with Pan-Slavic ideas.



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

### The four key segments of pro-Russian narratives:

1. **Russia is the protector of Moldovan identity, tradition, and values** - A segment that repeats itself often in different forms throughout these meta-narratives. The Kremlin has long positioned itself as the protector of Slavic people, a cornerstone of a modernised Pan-Slavist ideology. This Kremlin narrative argues that *Moldovan identity, tradition, and values are under threat from the West and therefore require protection from Russia*. This is part of a broader "big brother" narrative that the Kremlin uses with bordering countries, with Ukraine serving as a prime example.
2. **Transnistria and Gagauzia are suffering under Moldovan rule and seek Russian protection** - This narrative capitalises on the pre-existing pro-Kremlin sentiment in Moldova's semi-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. Suppose the public is convinced that Russia is not interfering. In that case, 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 grassroots; they are 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 aims to establish a perception of legitimacy.

## Impact of Pro-Russian Narratives on Moldova's Election Integrity and Democracy

The pro-Russian meta-narrative represents the most pervasive and direct FIMI threat to the integrity of Moldova's electoral process. These narratives are not merely political arguments; they are a sophisticated and coordinated effort to manipulate public opinion, discredit democratic institutions, and ultimately shift the country's geopolitical trajectory. Their impact on the upcoming elections is likely to be significant and multifaceted.

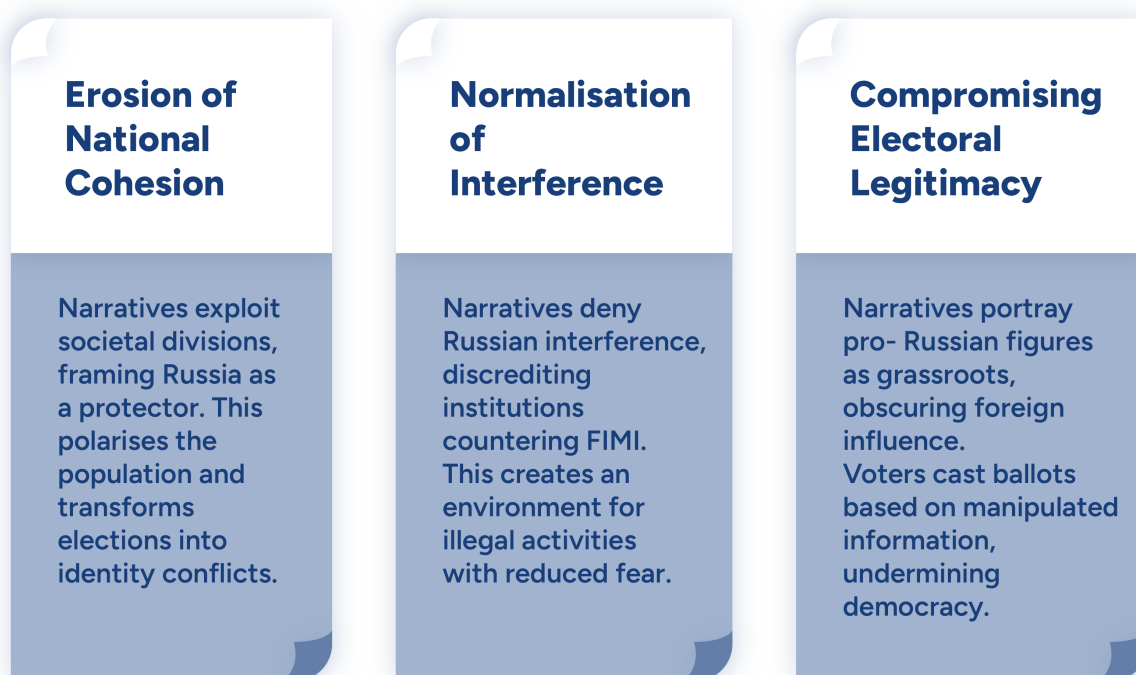


Figure 18: Impact of pro-Russian narratives

- Erosion of national cohesion and electoral polarisation** - The narratives asserting that "Russia is the protector of Moldovan identity" and that "Transnistria and Gagauzia are suffering under Moldova" exploit and exacerbate existing societal divisions. By framing Russia as the guardian of traditional values and the saviour of semi-autonomous regions, FIMI actors create a deep chasm between pro-Russian and pro-European segments of the population. This polarisation can potentially transform the election into a zero-sum conflict over national identity, rather than a debate on policy. ***This increases the risk of social instability and makes it difficult for a winning party to govern effectively, as a significant portion of the electorate will view them as a threat to their core identity.***

- **Normalisation of interference and subversion of accountability** - The narrative that "Russian interference in Moldova is a myth" is a critical component of this FIMI strategy. By actively denying any wrongdoing, these campaigns, as mentioned earlier, seek to discredit and neutralise the very institutions that are working to expose and counter FIMI. This creates a permissive environment where illegal activities, such as illicit campaign financing or vote buying, can be carried out with a reduced fear of public backlash. Furthermore, ***by creating a false narrative that a third party, such as the West, is the real manipulator, this tactic successfully deflects accountability and makes it harder for the public to recognise the true source of the threat.***
- **Compromising electoral legitimacy and voter agency** - The narrative that "Pro-Russian figures, parties, and rallies are legitimate and grassroots" is designed to create a false impression of widespread, authentic support for pro-Kremlin actors. This tactic is particularly dangerous because it seeks to obscure the role of foreign funding and coordination in local politics. By portraying foreign-backed political movements as organic, FIMI actors aim to legitimise their presence and influence. If successful, this can lead to an election where voters, unaware of the foreign influence, cast their ballots based on manipulated information. ***The ultimate impact is a compromised election where the outcome may not genuinely reflect the will of the people, thereby undermining the democratic process itself.*** This, in turn, can lead to post-election instability and a widespread belief that the entire system is rigged.

### 5.1.5 Conclusion: Assessing the Potential Cumulative Impact of FIMI Meta Narratives on Moldova's Upcoming 2025 Election

The four meta-narratives, anti-EU, anti-West, anti-Establishment, and pro-Russian, constitute a comprehensive and systemic threat to the integrity and democratic functioning of Moldova's upcoming elections. 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 can effectively:

- **Erode trust** - By portraying the government and its pro-Western allies as corrupt, weak, and illegitimate, FIMI campaigns foster widespread cynicism and apathy, leading to a disengaged electorate less likely to participate in the democratic process.

- **Deepen polarisation** - By weaponising cultural and social issues and framing the election as an existential conflict between national identity and foreign influence, these narratives deepen societal divisions and make constructive political discourse nearly impossible.
- **Normalise interference** - Through tactics like denial and "whataboutism," FIMI campaigns blur the lines between legitimate political activity and foreign meddling, creating a permissive environment where illicit activities can flourish with reduced fear of public backlash.
- **Compromise legitimacy** - The combined effect of these narratives is to delegitimise the electoral process itself, leading to the risk of an election outcome that does not reflect the genuine will of an informed electorate, thereby jeopardising post-election stability and democratic governance.

In summary, the meta-narratives identified pose a profound and ongoing risk that could subvert Moldova's democratic resilience and compromise the fairness and legitimacy of the 2025 elections.

Meta Narrative	Primary Impact on Election Integrity and Democracy
<b>Anti-EU</b>	Directly undermines the legitimacy of Moldova's EU accession process, fosters distrust in pro-European political parties, and can influence voter behaviour regarding a key policy direction.
<b>Anti-West</b>	Challenges the very concept of a Western partnership, delegitimises any pro-Western foreign policy, and deepens cultural divides by framing the West as a hostile, meddling force.
<b>Anti-Establishment</b>	Erodes public trust in government institutions, deflects accountability for threat actors through "whataboutism," and promotes voter apathy by portraying the government as weak and corrupt.
<b>Pro-Russian</b>	Actively shifts public opinion in favour of pro-Kremlin actors, leverages regional tensions (e.g., in Transnistria and Gagauzia) to create division, and works to normalise foreign influence in domestic politics by denying its existence.

Figure 19: Summary of risks by meta-narrative

## 5.2 Sub-Narratives

Eight sub-narratives were identified as most relevant to this election: anti-EU Accession, EU and NATO bring chaos and war, anti-EU Referendum, anti-Maia Sandu, anti-democracy, election manipulation, and anti-Ukraine narratives.

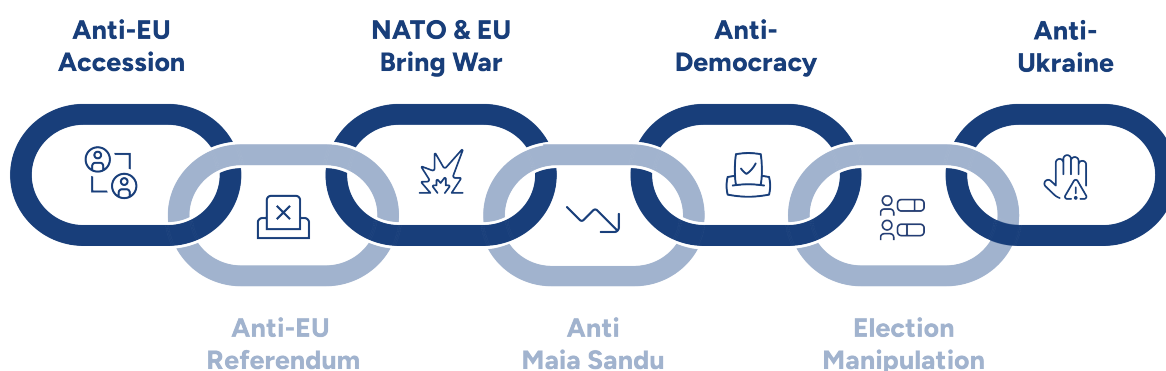


Figure 20: Sub-narratives

As illustrated in the visual below, each sub-narrative fits within a broader meta-narrative. The sub-narratives of Anti-EU Accession, EU, and NATO bring chaos and war, and the Anti-EU Referendum are all components of the Anti-EU meta-narratives. Similarly, the anti-Maia Sandu, anti-democracy, and Election Manipulation sub-narratives fall under the Anti-Establishment meta-narrative. Finally, the anti-Ukraine sub-narrative is a component of the pro-Russian meta-narrative.



Figure 21: Sub-narratives as they relate to meta-narratives

## 5.2.1 Anti-EU Sub-Narratives

These anti-EU sub-narratives, also deployed during the 2024 elections, are likely to be repurposed for the upcoming 2025 parliamentary election:

- **Anti-EU accession** - These narratives argue against Moldova's accession to the EU, highlighting the perceived negative consequences.
- **EU and NATO bring chaos and war** - This sub-narrative directly links Western integration to instability and conflict, playing on fears related to the ongoing war in Ukraine.
- **Anti-EU referendum** - This narrative specifically targets the legitimacy and outcome of the 2024 referendum, claiming it was fraudulent or not a true reflection of the public will.

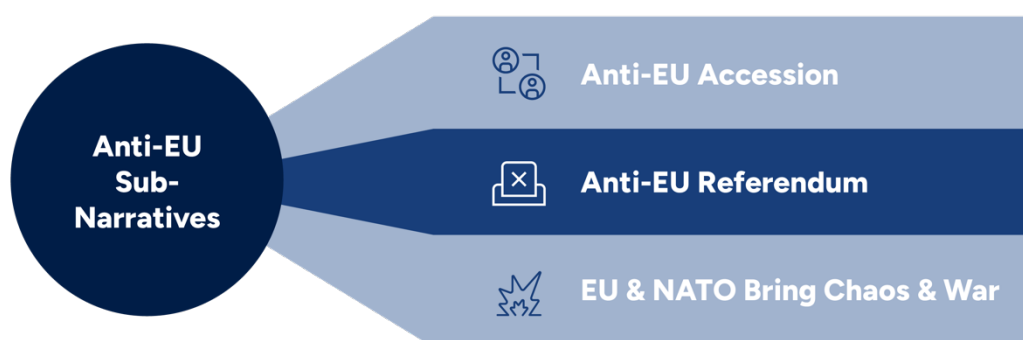


Figure 22: Sub-narratives to the anti-EU meta-narrative

### 5.2.1.1 Anti-EU Accession Sub-Narrative

The Anti-EU Accession sub-narrative targets several specific vulnerabilities to undermine public support for Moldova's European path. The upcoming 2025 parliamentary elections are likely to see these same themes amplified to influence voter behaviour.

1. **Alignment with the EU undermines Moldovan neutrality** - This narrative promotes Moldovan neutrality as the sole guarantor of the country's independence and sovereignty. It carries a clear threat: should Moldova abandon its neutrality by aligning with the EU, Russia will respond with actions that compromise Moldova's independence and sovereignty, as it has in Ukraine and Georgia.

2. **Joining the EU equals loss of sovereignty** - The Kremlin narrative portrays the EU as a colonial organisation that controls its members and *strips them of their capacity for self-governance*. It serves to defame the EU and frame Russia as the more suitable and respectful partner for Moldova.
3. **The EU will erase Moldovan identity and values** - Another standard Kremlin narrative, this trope portrays the EU as a *threat to Moldovan identity and values*. The underlying message is that European and Western identities are fundamentally at odds with traditional Moldovan culture, framing Russia as the protector of the nation's unique heritage.
4. **EU integration equals foreign occupation** - Similar to the loss of sovereignty narrative, this sub-narrative seeks to *equate joining the EU with occupation or colonialisation*. It implies that a pro-EU government would be a puppet regime and that the nation would lose control to the EU.



Figure 23: Anti-EU accession sub-narratives

### 5.2.1.2 Anti-EU Referendum Sub-Narrative

The anti-EU referendum sub-narrative, which was also a central feature of the 2024 elections, is likely to be a recurring theme in the lead-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections. While the referendum on EU accession was ultimately passed, its razor-thin margin amid widespread reports of foreign interference has provided FIMI actors with exploitable material to undermine its legitimacy. These narratives are designed not to debate the merits of EU membership but to outright deny that the outcome of the democratic process reflects the will of the Moldovan people.



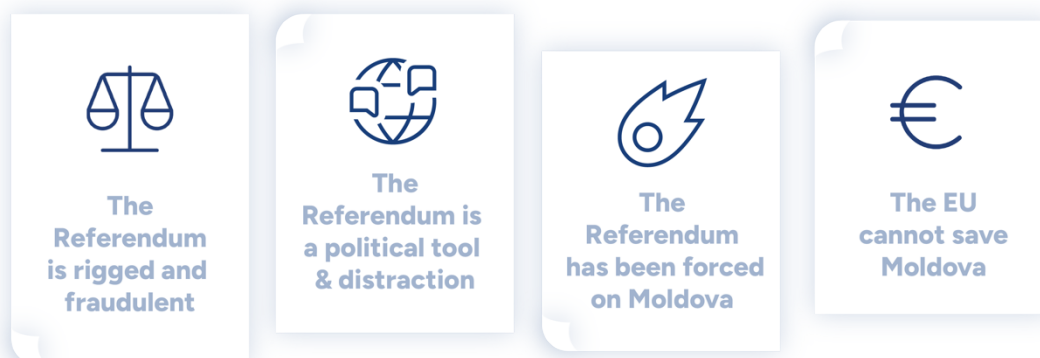


Figure 24: Anti-EU referendum sub-narratives

1. **The EU referendum is rigged and fraudulent** - This narrative aims to invalidate the referendum's results by alleging widespread manipulation. Its goal is not to discredit the EU but to sow doubt in the integrity of Moldova's democratic institutions and to deny the public's expressed will to accede to the EU.
2. **The EU referendum is a political tool and distraction** - This narrative frames the referendum as a cynical political manoeuvre. It argues that the vote was held not out of genuine public interest, but to distract the population from alleged corruption and illicit actions by the government. The subtext here is to portray the pro-EU government as corrupt and self-serving.
3. **The EU referendum was forced on Moldova** - This narrative takes the argument of illegitimacy a step further by claiming that the referendum was not the result of a popular movement but was imposed on the population by a government seeking to force its political agenda. This reinforces the perception of a corrupt and manipulative pro-EU government that disregards the will of its people.
4. **The EU cannot save Moldova** - This narrative shifts the focus from the referendum's legality to the EU's competence. It asserts that Moldova's problems are too severe for the EU to solve, implying that only a more "understanding" partner, namely Russia, can provide a viable solution. This narrative preys on public disillusionment with slow progress and seeks to reframe Russia as the country's only potential saviour.

### 5.2.1.3 The EU and NATO bring War and Chaos Sub-Narrative

The narratives linking the EU and NATO to war and chaos are a series of direct and indirect threats intended to intimidate Moldova's population and deter them from pursuing closer ties with the West. These sub-narratives are particularly potent due to the ongoing war in neighboring Ukraine, which provides a real-world backdrop for Russian FIMI to exploit public fears. These narratives, therefore, represent a form of coercive information warfare, aiming to frame EU and NATO integration not as a path to prosperity but as a direct route to conflict.

*"The latest and most aggressive narrative is that the EU means war. We counter this misinformation with a strong communication strategy that stresses the benefits of EU membership (...). Our message is that the EU brings lasting peace and prosperity."*

*Ana Revenco, Director,*

*Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation in the Republic of Moldova*

**This set of sub-narratives can broadly be categorised as a series of threats against Moldova should it continue to work with the EU and progress towards accession.**

1. **EU integration means war** - This is the most explicit sub-narrative, presenting a direct threat: should Moldova integrate with the EU, it will result in war. While the narrative does not explicitly name Russia as the aggressor, the implication is evident, especially in light of the invasion of Ukraine and threats made against Georgia.
2. **The EU brings chaos and instability** - This narrative takes a more indirect approach, accusing the EU of fostering chaos and instability. The subtext is that this chaos would be a retaliatory response from Russia, triggered by Moldova's collaboration with the EU. It shifts the blame for potential Russian-orchestrated instability onto the EU itself.
3. **EU and NATO expansion is an act of war** - This is a standard, recycled Kremlin narrative that blames NATO and EU expansion for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the Moldovan context, it serves two purposes: to threaten Moldova with war should it pursue integration and to defame the EU and NATO by portraying their defensive alliances as aggressive and expansionist.

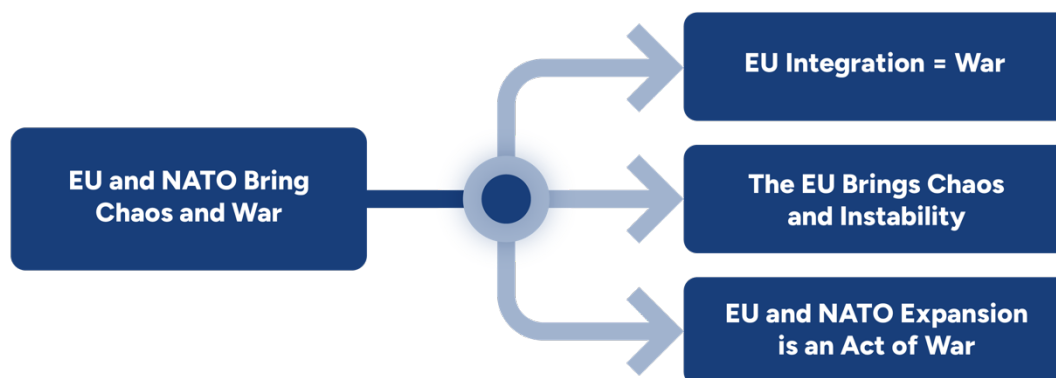


Figure 25: The EU and NATO bring war and chaos sub-narratives

## 5.2.2 Anti-Establishment Sub-Narratives

The **anti-establishment sub-narratives**, which consistently target the Moldovan government, can be categorised into three primary themes: **anti-Maia Sandu**, **anti-Democracy**, and **election manipulation**. These narratives were deployed on an ongoing basis to delegitimise the government and erode public trust in the country's leadership. They represent a significant component of longstanding FIMI campaigns that were particularly salient during the 2024 Moldovan elections, and are likely to intensify in the lead-up to the upcoming parliamentary elections.

### Anti-Maia Sandu

Defame and erode trust in President Maia Sandu.

### Anti-Democracy

Undermine the democratic process and diminish public participation in elections.

### Elections are Manipulated

Generate doubt in elections results and reduce public participation in elections.



Figure 26: Sub-narratives to the anti-establishment meta-narrative

### 5.2.2.1 Anti-Maia Sandu Sub-Narrative

*"These gendered attacks are often spread by pro-Kremlin actors. They argue that feminism oppresses men and destroys families. It is used to convince citizens to reject a Western European future, and to pull countries back into Russia's influence. This information against female politicians has become a weapon used to destroy the democratic process, and combating this is not just a women's issue, it is a fight for democracy itself."*

**Anna Strolenberg, European Parliament, Greens/European Free Alliance, Netherlands**

President Maia Sandu is a primary target of FIMI narratives in Moldova. Allegations against her leadership vary, but they consistently focus on discrediting her as an elected official. While most narratives are not explicitly gendered, they often use subtle cues to exploit her femininity, framing it as a political weakness. This aligns with a broader pattern of Russia spreading gendered disinformation, in which female candidates and elected officials are disproportionately singled out in disinformation campaigns. In Sandu's case, attacks have gone beyond her policies or performance to target her personal life: even during the 2016 and 2020 electoral cycles, she was repeatedly criticised for being unmarried and childfree. A striking example came during the 2020 presidential race, when opponents circulated false claims that her lack of a family made her "unable to understand the people's needs" and therefore unfit to govern. These narratives have at times taken an explicit turn, with Russian TV channels, fringe websites, and anonymous Telegram channels speculating on Sandu's allegedly non-traditional sexual orientation, framing her alleged sexuality as evidence of foreign influence and moral decay. Such narratives have also spread on Facebook through pages tied to opposition figures, where memes and commentary mocked her marital status and insinuated her sexual orientation. By weaponising gendered and homophobic tropes, these campaigns seek not only to discredit her personally but also to erode the legitimacy of Moldova's pro-European leadership.

**Based on analysis of FIMI campaigns, the three most common narratives targeting President Sandu are:**

1. Sandu is a Western puppet - This narrative alleges that Sandu's decisions are not made in the interest of the Moldovan people but are instead controlled by foreign powers. It seeks to delegitimise her by portraying her as an agent of Western nations rather than a leader representing the will of her electorate.
2. Sandu's leadership is illegitimate - This narrative works to discredit Sandu by challenging the integrity of her electoral victory. By claiming that she did not legitimately win the presidential election, FIMI actors not only undermine her

authority but also sow widespread distrust in Moldova's electoral system as a whole, alleging it is corrupt and produces illegitimate results.

3. Sandu is provoking civil conflict - This narrative attempts to transfer blame for ongoing *civic tensions between Chisinau and the semi-autonomous regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia* onto Sandu. It frames her as the aggressor, thereby deflecting responsibility for the situation from Russia's hostile actions and interference in those regions.

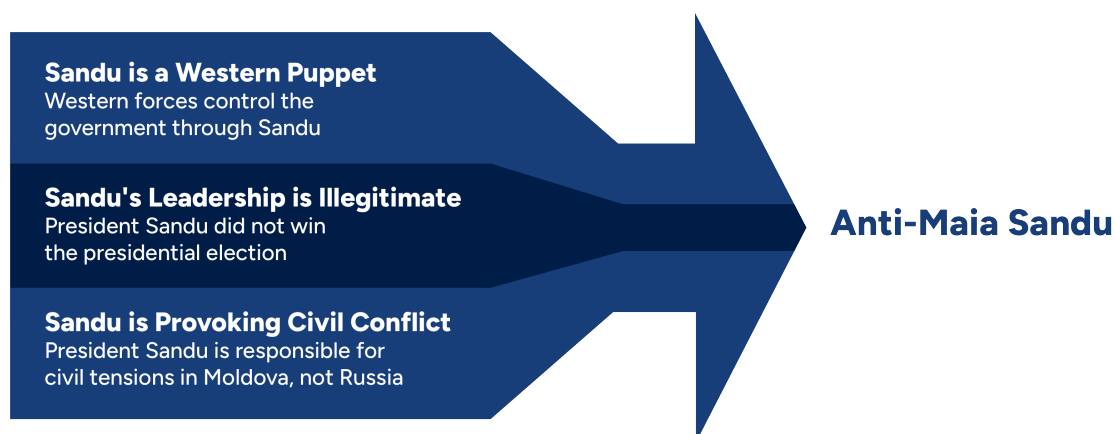


Figure 27: Anti-Maia Sandu sub-narratives

#### 5.2.2.2 Anti-Democracy Sub-Narrative

The narratives arguing that Moldova is not suited for democracy and is fundamentally divided are a core component of the Anti-Establishment meta-narrative. These tropes are designed to erode public confidence in Moldova's entire political system, rather than just a specific government administration. By drawing on historical colonial rhetoric, these FIMI campaigns aim to undermine the very legitimacy of Moldovan sovereignty and self-governance, suggesting that the country requires external control to function effectively.

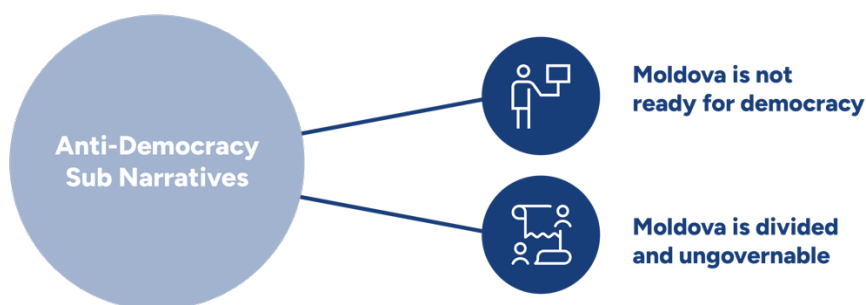


Figure 28: Anti-democracy sub-narratives

1. **Moldova is not ready for democracy** - This narrative serves to undermine Moldovan democracy by alleging that the *country is not sufficiently developed for a democratic system*, implying that a top-down approach would be most effective. This is an adaptation of traditional 20th-century narratives used in regard to European colonies to argue against their independence.
2. **Moldova is divided and ungovernable** - Another narrative derived from those used against European colonies to deny them their independence in the 20th century, this narrative argues that Moldova's internal division renders the country *ungovernable*, implying that a larger power with more direct control is needed. The irony of this narrative is, of course, that Russia's interference in Moldova is to blame for much of the country's ongoing and exacerbated divisions.

### 5.2.2.3 Election Manipulation Sub-Narrative

A central component of FIMI's strategy in Moldova is the *undermining of electoral integrity*. These narratives work in concert to erode public trust in the democratic process itself. By discrediting the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, framing legal actions as political persecution, and normalising illegal activities, these FIMI campaigns seek to convince the public that participating in elections is futile, thereby serving the Kremlin's geopolitical agenda.

1. **Election fraud is rampant** - Narratives of *election fraud* seek to dissuade the public from engaging in the democratic process and from having faith in the results it produces, convincing the population that there is no point in participating.
2. **Pro-Russian candidates are persecuted** - The narrative that *pro-Russian candidates are persecuted* is employed by the Kremlin as a counter to the legitimate removal of pro-Russian candidates from Moldovan elections based on illegal activities. Through this narrative, punishment for the illicit activities of pro-Russian candidates is turned into persecution rather than a consequence for their actions.
3. **The diaspora vote is illegitimate and manipulated** - As the *diaspora vote in Moldova has historically been pro-EU and anti-Kremlin*, Russian FIMI in Moldova works to delegitimise this vote and its impact on Moldovan electoral outcomes. By *turning the diaspora vote into an illegitimate vote*, it is implied that the legitimate vote runs contrary to the result.
4. **Vote buying is common, therefore meaningless** - This narrative is used to *justify electoral fraud* perpetrated in Moldovan elections by pro-Russian candidates, normalising their crimes to maintain electoral support for their initiative.

### 5.2.3 Pro-Russian Sub-Narrative - Anti-Ukraine

The Anti-Ukraine sub-narrative is a prominent component of Russia's FIMI in Moldova, designed to cast Ukraine as the primary cause of Moldova's most pressing issues. By shifting blame for domestic problems onto a neighbouring country, this narrative serves not only to sow discord between the two nations but also to diminish public support for Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression. This strategic blaming is a key tactic used to manipulate public opinion and advance the Kremlin's geopolitical agenda in the region.

1. **Ukraine is destabilising Moldova** - This narrative holds Ukraine responsible for the alleged destabilisation of Moldova by claiming it causes or aggravates internal division and foreign interference, both of which are primarily orchestrated by the Kremlin. A secondary objective of this narrative is to undermine Moldova's public support for Ukraine in its ongoing conflict with Russia.

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

The narratives highlighted in the sections above form a **four-pronged approach - promote, excuse, normalise, and accuse (PENA) - targeting Moldova and its government**. This approach is a helpful analytical 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.

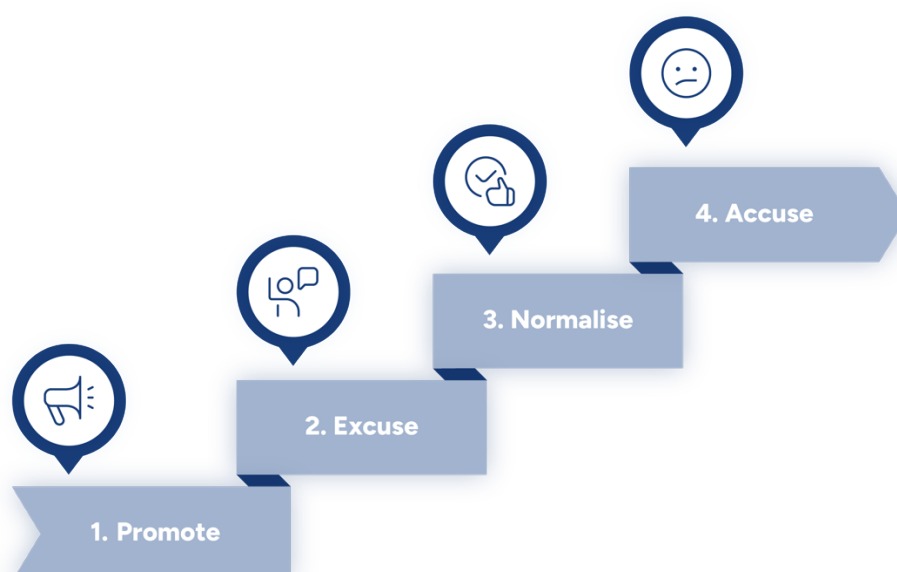


Figure 29: PENA model



### **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 Shor, who acts as the Kremlin's voice in Moldova despite having fled the country to avoid jail, are key vectors for this promotion.

### **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. This is often achieved by claiming that such behaviour is commonplace (*as in the case of vote buying*) or by using "whataboutism" to accuse the West of similar or worse actions (for example, *in anti-EU narratives*). The Kremlin has also created narratives portraying figures like Shor as "a man of the people," deflecting from their criminal activities.

### **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. Normalising illicit activities, such as vote-buying, diminishes public sensitivity to these issues and discourages reporting, thereby compromising the integrity of Moldova's democratic system.

### **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 true source of foreign interference. This tactic also serves as the basis for "whataboutism," allowing FIMI actors to deflect scrutiny by bringing up the alleged crimes of their opponents when confronted with their own.

## 5.4 Impact on Election Integrity

The four meta-narratives represent a sophisticated, systematic, and comprehensive threat to the integrity and democratic functioning of Moldova's upcoming 2025 elections. These FIMI campaigns are not merely isolated stories but a coordinated information ecosystem designed to achieve specific political outcomes. The primary risk they constitute is the subversion of a free and fair electoral process, jeopardising the country's democratic resilience and stability.

Meta Narrative	Sub-Narrative		Likelihood/ Impact
<b>Anti-Establishment</b>	Anti-Democracy	Undermines the foundational belief in Moldova's ability to govern itself, making the population receptive to authoritarian or foreign control.	<b>High/ Medium</b>
	Election Manipulation	Suppresses voter turnout by convincing the public that their participation is pointless, and provides a ready-made narrative to reject unfavourable results, which can lead to a post-election political crisis.	
	Pro-Russian Candidates are Persecuted	Reframes legal consequences for illicit activities as political persecution, making it difficult to hold pro-Kremlin actors accountable and undermining the rule of law.	
<b>Anti-EU and Anti-West</b>	The EU and the West are a Threat to Sovereignty	Discourages support for Moldova's European integration, which can lead to public opposition to key reforms and make the country more vulnerable to a return to Russia's sphere of influence.	<b>High/ Medium</b>
	The West is Morally Corrupt	Creates deep-seated distrust of Western values and institutions, leading voters to reject pro-European candidates based on cultural or moral arguments rather than policy	
<b>Pro-Russian</b>	Anti-Ukraine	Shifts blame for domestic instability onto a neighbouring country, damaging Moldova's support for a key partner in the fight against Russian aggression.	<b>High/ Medium</b>
		Actively shifts public opinion in favour of pro-Kremlin actors, leverages regional tensions to create division, and works to normalise foreign influence in domestic politics by denying its existence.	
		Directly undermines the legitimacy of Moldova's EU accession process, fosters distrust in pro-European political parties, and can sway voter behaviour on a key policy direction.	

Figure 30: Concluding risks to election integrity and democracy

### 5.4.1 Primary Risks of the FIMI Narratives

The combined effect of these narratives presents four core risks to the Moldovan electoral process.

Narrative	Risk to Election Integrity & Democracy	Likelihood	Impact
<b>Erosion of Public Trust</b>	The most fundamental risk is the deep erosion of trust in the electoral system, political institutions, and pro-democratic leaders. By consistently portraying the government as corrupt, pro-Western leaders as "puppets," and the judiciary as a tool for political persecution, these narratives foster cynicism and apathy. <b>This discourages public participation, which can lead to lower voter turnout, making the results less representative and potentially allowing a motivated minority to have a disproportionate impact on the outcome.</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b> Allegations of corruption, manipulation, and illicit behaviour are difficult to disprove
<b>Deepening Societal Polarisation</b>	The narratives actively exploit and exacerbate existing cultural, linguistic, and regional divisions. By framing the election not as a choice between policy platforms but as an existential struggle for national identity - between a pro-European and a pro-Russian path - they deepen societal rifts. <b>This makes constructive political dialogue nearly impossible and increases the risk of social instability, regardless of the election result.</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b> Likely to continue to take place along pro- and anti-Russian lines
<b>Normalisation of Illicit Activity</b>	Through the "normalisation" and "excusing" tactics, the narratives blur the lines between legitimate political competition and foreign-sponsored illicit activity. By arguing that vote-buying and other forms of fraud are common and therefore "meaningless," they desensitise the public to violations of electoral law. <b>This reduces public outcry and reporting of such crimes, creating a permissive environment for pro-Kremlin actors to continue their illegal operations with impunity, directly compromising the integrity of the vote.</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b> Illicit activity is difficult to normalise and requires political allegiance
<b>Deligitimisation of the Outcome</b>	By accusing the EU, the West, and the Moldovan state of the same crimes that pro-Kremlin actors are guilty of, the narratives create confusion and muddy the waters. This "whataboutism" strategy undermines the judicial system and casts doubt on the fairness of the entire process. <b>The ultimate risk is that, regardless of the election results, a significant portion of the population will perceive the outcome as illegitimate, thereby threatening post-election stability and potentially providing a pretext for further external interference.</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b> The impact of electoral delegitimisation varies depending on political affiliation and support, or lack thereof.

Figure 31: Primary risks of FIMI narratives

## 5.4.2 Specific Risks of the Sub-Narratives

### 1. Risks of Anti-Establishment Narratives

- Anti-Democracy Narrative - This sub-narrative undermines the foundational belief in Moldova's ability to govern itself, creating a public mindset that is receptive to authoritarian or foreign control.
- Election Manipulation Narrative - This sub-narrative is designed to convince voters that their participation is pointless. They not only suppress voter turnout but also provide a ready-made narrative to reject unfavourable results, potentially leading to post-election protests and a political crisis.
- Pro-Russian Candidates are Persecuted Narrative - This sub-narrative reframes legal consequences for illicit activities as political persecution. This makes it difficult to hold pro-Kremlin actors accountable for their crimes, undermining the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, which are critical for a functioning democracy.

### 2. Risks of Pro-Russian Narratives

- Anti-Ukraine Narrative - This narrative shifts blame for domestic instability onto a neighbouring country. The primary risk is that it undermines Moldova's support for Ukraine, a key partner in the fight against Russian aggression, while simultaneously sowing discord and suspicion between the two nations.

### 3. Risks of the Anti-EU and Anti-West Narratives

- The EU and the West are a Threat to the Sovereignty Narrative - These narratives discourage support for Moldova's stated goal of European integration. They can lead to public opposition to key reforms, weakening the country's alignment with democratic norms and making it more vulnerable to a return to Russia's sphere of influence.
- The West is Morally Corrupt Narrative - This narrative creates deep-seated distrust of Western values and institutions. It can lead voters to reject pro-European candidates based on cultural or moral arguments rather than political ones, weakening the pro-democracy movement's appeal.

In conclusion, ***the identified narratives pose a multifaceted and direct risk to the integrity of Moldova's 2025 elections.*** They are a coherent information campaign that seeks to delegitimise democratic processes, manipulate public perception, and create a political environment where foreign interference can succeed.

By eroding public trust, polarising society, normalising illicit behaviour, and ultimately preparing the ground to reject unfavourable results, these narratives represent a clear and present danger to Moldova's future democratic governance.

#### 5.4.3 The Cumulative Risk of Narrative Repetition (2024 to 2025)

The repetition of these narratives from the 2024 referendum through to the lead-up to 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, causing people to believe it is more truthful, 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 as "fake news," 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 the key mechanism through which FIMI campaigns can successfully manipulate the electorate and undermine the integrity of the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections.

## 6. Unfair Conduct by Political Actors



Figure 32: Forms of unfair conduct by identified political actors

### 6.1 Exploitation of FIMI Narratives by Domestic Actors

The actions, or inactions, of Moldovan politicians, media actors, and digital influencers play a decisive role in the circulation of FIMI narratives. While foreign actors are often the initiators and amplifiers of deceptive influence campaigns, their resonance in and penetration of Moldova's information space depend heavily on the degree of reception by domestic actors. Politicians and parties could be particularly susceptible to leveraging such narratives, whether due to ideological alignment, opportunism, or transactional benefit. This report is intended to assess indicators and risks, but it does not make determinations on legality.

#### 6.1.1 Forms of Exploitation

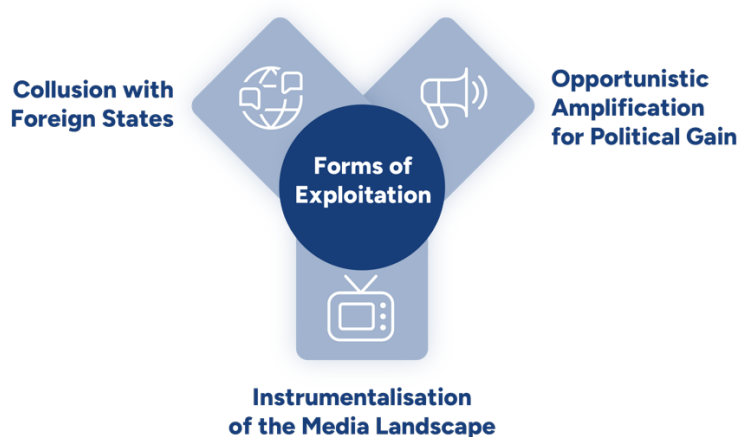


Figure 33: Forms of exploitation by political actors

- **Collusion with foreign states:** Some Moldovan political figures maintain direct or indirect ties with foreign governments, most notably Russia. In such cases, they may operate under a tacit or explicit arrangement to reproduce Kremlin-sponsored narratives, obstruct democratic reforms, or destabilise institutions. The incentive often involves access to illicit funding, material resources, or promises of political support. Investigations into pro-Russian parties and networks, including those associated with Dodon and Shor, provide evidence of such collusion, where local actors function as vectors for the cross-border laundering of influence.
- **Opportunistic amplification for political gain:** A wider pool of politicians and influencers adopt FIMI narratives opportunistically, even in the absence of direct coordination with external actors. By echoing anti-EU, anti-government, or conspiracy-laden rhetoric, they aim to reinforce their personal political brand, discredit opponents, or appeal to disillusioned segments of the electorate. This form of exploitation is more difficult to regulate, as it falls within the boundaries of protected political speech, but it nonetheless normalises narrative manipulation, disinformation, and blurs the line between legitimate political discourse and malign interference.
- **Instrumentalisation of the media landscape:** Moldova's fragmented media environment provides fertile ground for narrative laundering. Domestic broadcasters with opaque ownership structures, online portals with political affiliations, and bloggers with substantial followings often reproduce FIMI-aligned messaging. In many cases, editorial choices—such as the disproportionate coverage of “authoritarian EU” or “fraudulent diaspora vote” narratives—serve partisan political goals while simultaneously reinforcing foreign influence disinformation campaigns.

### 6.1.2 Implications for Electoral Integrity

The exploitation of FIMI narratives by domestic political actors constitutes a dual risk:

1. **Legitimisation of FIMI** – When narratives are endorsed or repeated by elected officials, they gain a veneer of credibility and penetrate more deeply into public discourse. Voters may interpret such statements as legitimate political positions rather than foreign-influenced propaganda, reducing their resilience to manipulation.
2. **Erosion of accountability mechanisms** – By adopting and amplifying falsehoods/disinformation, politicians can deflect scrutiny of their own illicit behaviour. For example, allegations of vote buying or illicit financing are reframed as “normal practice” or excused through whataboutism. This undermines the enforcement of electoral law and weakens public trust in democratic safeguards.
3. **Fragmentation of the electorate** – Domestic actors that weaponise FIMI narratives deepen polarisation along pro-European versus pro-Russian fault lines. This not only



exacerbates social divisions but also creates a volatile environment in which election outcomes, regardless of legitimacy, risk being contested by a significant portion of the population.

## 6.2 Vote Buying and Illicit Financing

One of the most entrenched forms of unfair conduct in Moldova's electoral landscape is the systematic use of [vote buying](#) and illicit financing. This practice not only distorts voter agency but also embeds foreign and oligarchic influence into the political process. Evidence from past cycles and early 2025 monitoring indicates that these mechanisms remain central to how certain political actors mobilise support.

### 6.2.1 Illicit Financing Channels

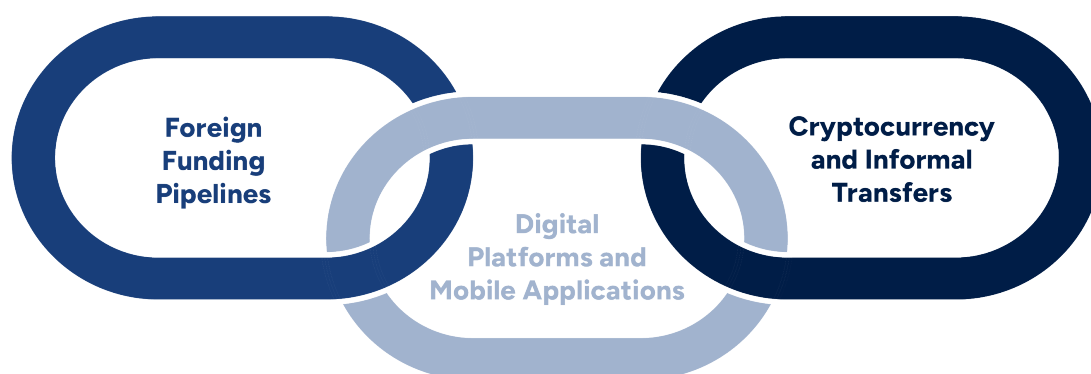


Figure 34: Illicit financial channels used by political actors

- **Foreign funding pipelines:** Russian state-linked financial systems remain key enablers of electoral corruption in Moldova. Promsvyazbank, a Russian bank under international sanctions, has repeatedly surfaced in investigations as a conduit for payments linked to electoral mobilisation in Moldova. Funds transferred through Promsvyazbank and the MIR card system were used to reward individuals, offering tiered payments for anti-EU propaganda and voter mobilisation.
- **Digital platforms and mobile applications:** In recent years, illicit electoral financing has been facilitated by the use of mobile applications designed to manage, recruit, and reward participants in influence operations. Apps such as Taito, reportedly used by Shor-affiliated networks in the 2025 parliamentary campaign, allow organisers to track attendance at protests, distribute payments, and coordinate logistics. These platforms blur the line between political activism and paid campaigning, creating a



semi-automated infrastructure for electoral corruption. By employing digital tools, actors reduce the visibility of cash handouts while enhancing scalability and control.

- **Cryptocurrency and informal transfers:** To bypass monitoring, actors increasingly rely on cryptocurrencies and informal money transfer systems. Reports from 2023–2025 highlight the use of newly created cryptocurrency exchanges linked to pro-Kremlin operators to obscure financial trails. These funds have been used to pay demonstrators, cover transport logistics, and support media operations.

## 6.2.2 Impact on Electoral Integrity

1. **Distortion of voter agency** – The use of direct payments, app-based micro-payments, and disguised social assistance reduces elections to transactional exchanges, eroding the principle of free choice.
2. **Entrenchment of foreign influence** – The involvement of sanctioned Russian banks and apps designed for covert political mobilisation indicates a high degree of coordination between domestic actors and foreign sponsors.
3. **Erosion of public trust** – Repeated exposure to allegations of vote buying and digital bribery reinforces the belief that elections are inherently corrupt, discouraging participation and creating a permissive environment for manipulation.

## 6.3 Paid Protest Mobilisation

Beyond direct vote buying, political actors have institutionalised the practice of paying citizens to participate in protests designed to destabilise the political environment. The most notable example is linked to fugitive oligarch Shor, who in 2025 [reportedly](#) promised each participant in his “tent protests” up to \$3,000 per month (approximately 2,570 euros). As of the third quarter of 2024, the average gross monthly wage in Moldova was [approximately](#) 14,117 Moldovan lei (MDL), which is equivalent to about €732 or \$752.

Such payments blur the line between legitimate political dissent and organised subversion.

These protests serve dual purposes:

1. **Electoral masquerade** – Creating the illusion of large-scale grassroots dissatisfaction with the government, designed to influence undecided voters and weaken the credibility of pro-European parties.
2. **Destabilisation tactic** – By sustaining long-term protest camps with paid demonstrators, Shor-affiliated networks aim to provoke institutional fatigue, strain security forces, and project an image of political crisis favourable to pro-Kremlin narratives.

## 7. Vulnerability and Impact Assessment

### 7.1 Institutional Resilience

#### 7.1.1 Resource and Staffing Constraints

Public trust in Moldova remains fragile amid political polarisation and debates on media independence. An institutional mechanism was adopted in 2023 to counter FIMI, the [\*National Strategy 2024–2028 on Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, Information Manipulation and Foreign Interference\*](#), but implementation capacity and inter-institutional coordination are still being developed.

The Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating/Countering Disinformation (CCSCD), [\*established\*](#) following parliamentary approval in July 2023, and formally created by the end of 2023, has its own legal standing and a coordination/oversight role in the FIMI field, including the right to propose legal amendments and to notify law enforcement bodies. However, its expanded mandate requires more resources and clear operational procedures.

The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) operates under the modernised [\*Electoral Code No. 325/2022\*](#); however, monitoring the online dimension of campaigns and data exchange with other authorities requires standardised procedures and robust coordination (e.g., coordination with the National Anti-Corruption Centre, ANRCETI, and the Audiovisual Council).

[\*The Audiovisual Media Services Code \(CSMA\) No. 174/2018\*](#) is a framework for media service providers. Its provisions prohibit broadcasts that include “disinformation, hate speech, propaganda of military aggression, extremist or terrorist content, or threats to national security”. Violations can result in fines or suspension of broadcast licenses.

In an August 2025 background interview with a Moldovan official, conducted by a report author, it was confirmed that although monitoring capabilities have improved, agencies still struggle with persistent financial and human resource challenges. It was also noted that pro-Russian actors are systematically using complaints and lawsuits to target the state agency. These Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are viewed as a tactic to drain institutional resources and intimidate staff, effectively using legal and bureaucratic systems to weaken the state's ability to counter foreign interference.

### 7.1.2 Inter-Agency Coordination Gaps

Despite the existence of coordination frameworks, operational cooperation between institutions remains inconsistent. The CCSCD's coordination role requires clearer protocols for information sharing, joint operations, and rapid response mechanisms.

## 7.2 Regulatory Strength and Gaps

### 7.2.1 Legal Framework Overview

Moldova has taken notable steps to institutionalise its defence against foreign influence and information manipulation through a series of preventive reforms and legal frameworks, anchored in the [National Strategy 2024–2028](#). These policies aim to fortify resilience across government and society. Moldova institutionalised a counter-FIMI strategy, defining roles, coordination mechanisms, strategic communication objectives, and resilience measures through 2028. It is a programmatic document, meaning success depends on translating it into action.

Moldova's [National Security Strategy](#) is another important framework that, for the first time in a domestic policy document, explicitly names Russia as a security risk and recognises disinformation as a core hybrid threat, reinforcing the prioritisation of counter-FIMI efforts.

The Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation ([CCSCD](#)), established in 2023, is legally empowered to coordinate state-wide efforts in pre-empting and responding to external manipulation and influence [operations](#). Law [No. 242/2023](#) on the CCSCD provides operational definitions for “information manipulation and foreign interference” and outlines the centre’s competences.

Moldovan regulations also provide legal tools to address FIMI operations on radio, TV, and websites, but these have not been fully adapted to cover social media threats.

The Audiovisual Council has increased authority over audiovisual content, but the migration of FIMI operations to online platforms and user-generated content (UGC) shifts the burden of responsibility towards new monitoring tools and cooperation with digital platforms. In July 2025, [amendments](#) to the Council’s code introduced a new chapter on “illegal audiovisual content.” It included updated definitions, including disinformation, which is defined as “the intentional dissemination, by any means, in the public space, of information whose false or misleading nature can be verified and which is of a nature to harm national security.”

During the electoral period, the Audiovisual Council is required to address cases involving false or misleading information, either through the examination of submitted complaints and petitions or by initiating its own investigations, within a maximum of five working days from the date of submission or initiation. This accelerated timeline, stipulated in Article 83, Paragraph 41, of the CSMA, aims to ensure timely intervention against harmful information that could compromise the integrity of the electoral process.

The CSMA also empowers its regulator to ban news bulletins or programs produced in countries that are not parties to the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. This measure targeted Russian state media and was part of the broader Information Security Law, which aimed to combat foreign propaganda and ensure national [resilience](#).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moldova [revoked](#) broadcasting licenses for several pro-Russian TV stations for spreading deceptive information and propaganda related to the war in Ukraine. The government also has the ability to geofence websites from the [country](#).

[Electoral Code](#) No. 325/2022 governs parliamentary, presidential, local, and referendum elections, including voter registration, campaigns and financing, voting, vote tallying, and complaints—the 2023 updates aimed to align with European standards. Gaps remain in the transparency and traceability of online political communication and micro-targeting used in advertising.

Initiatives to combat electoral corruption and strengthen political finance oversight exist, but harms in the online ecosystem (such as political ads, influencers, and cross-border sponsored content) can easily slip outside the bounds of legislation, requiring a comprehensive and vigilant approach.

### 7.2.2 Digital Governance Alignment

Moldova does not yet apply the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). But the July 2025 CSMA amendments incorporate several EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) concepts. These included updated definitions for video-sharing platform providers, user-generated content, and jurisdiction criteria, extending national regulations to cover a broader range of online services, such as YouTube, social networks, and European platforms like Dailymotion and Vimeo. The amendments also introduce the "trusted flagger" mechanism, enabling accredited individuals or organisations to report harmful content with priority handling by platforms.

Moldova is aligning its regulatory practices that focus on the curtailment of illegal content, as defined by national governments, with those of the EU. However, the primary challenge lies in supervisory capacity, ensuring the Audiovisual Council and other relevant bodies have the technical expertise, staffing, and resources to monitor compliance effectively. Another critical factor would be establishing functional frameworks with major international platforms, which currently vary in responsiveness to Moldovan regulatory requests. Without coordination mechanisms, the transposed EU concepts risk remaining largely declarative.

### 7.2.3 Electoral Integrity Provisions

In April 2025, Parliament adopted amendments significantly increasing penalties for electoral corruption and illegal financing of political parties, addressing a persistent vulnerability in Moldova's electoral integrity framework. The revised Criminal Code introduces harsher prison terms, substantial fines, and disqualification from public office for individuals and legal entities involved in vote-buying, illicit donations, or falsification of results, with elevated sanctions when offences are linked to organised crime, foreign states, or unconstitutional entities. The CEC is empowered to suspend public funding to repeat offenders for up to four years. These measures strengthen deterrence against corrupt practices that can facilitate foreign information manipulation and interference, but their effectiveness will depend on consistent enforcement and cross-agency cooperation.

### 7.2.4 Balancing Strengths and Gaps

#### Strengths:

- Updated electoral framework
- Existence of a national FIMI strategy
- CSMA modernization
- Institutionalisation of the CCSCD

#### Gaps:

- **Implementation gaps:** The country's legal framework for digital campaigns and online political advertising is still evolving, particularly in terms of detailed rules governing micro-targeting.
- **Inter-agency coordination:** There is a need for better cooperation between government agencies to monitor and respond to digital threats.
- **Limited capacity:** Electoral and media authorities lack the significant resources and expertise required to monitor digital campaigns effectively.

- **Slow platform response:** Major platforms like Google and Meta are often slow to act on Moldovan government concerns, with interventions frequently arriving too late to prevent damage<sup>3</sup>. This has led officials to question the platforms' commitment to meaningful action.

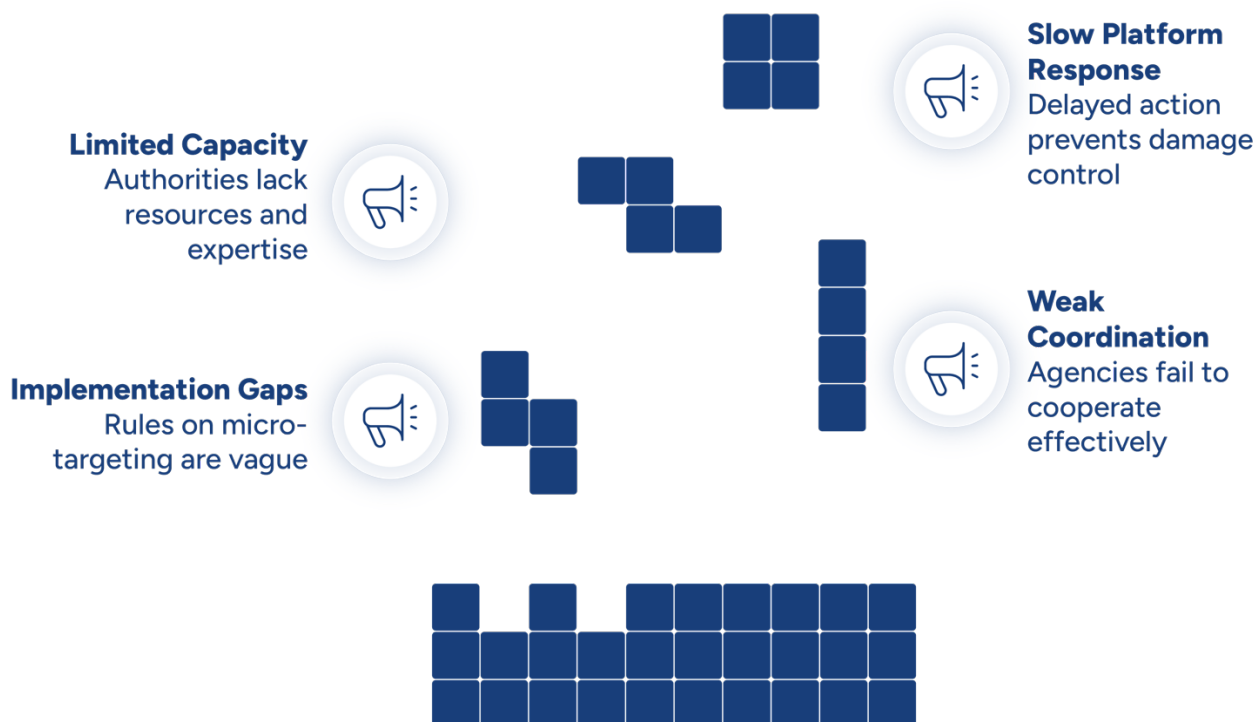


Figure 35: Gaps in countering foreign interference in Moldova

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Moldovan official, August 2025.

## 8. Key Developments (2023 to 2025)

Foreign interference in Moldova has gone through an evolution in recent years, shifting from traditional destabilisation tactics to increasingly sophisticated hybrid operations. What began as crude intimidation and street-level agitation has since transformed into a complex playbook that fuses financial corruption, digital forgeries, AI-generated content, and hard-to-trace cryptocurrency transactions.

In 2023, Moldova was targeted with a destabilisation playbook rooted in intimidation and physical pressure. Allegations of coup plots circulated after Ukrainian intelligence warned that saboteurs were being trained in Russia to spark unrest, while Moldovan authorities reported efforts to infiltrate and hijack protests. These operations leaned less on sophisticated digital manipulation than on classic tactics designed to rattle the country's fragile security environment and shake public trust in democratic institutions. Information manipulation at this stage was largely auxiliary, reinforcing narratives that accompanied street-level mobilisation and offline destabilisation.

### Key characteristics of 2023 threats:

- Direct intimidation and physical pressure tactics
- Crude street-level agitation and protest infiltration
- Basic information manipulation supporting offline activities
- Limited sophistication in digital operations

By 2024, interference campaigns became more sophisticated, blending information warfare with financial corruption. Operation MiddleFloor illustrated this shift: spoofed emails impersonating Moldovan and European institutions were used to spread forgeries and harvest targeting data, while coordinated inauthentic behaviour networks posed as local media outlets to seed anti-European narratives. At the same time, Moldovan authorities intercepted large inflows of Russian-linked funds intended for vote-buying and protest mobilisation. ***This hybrid model of information manipulation online and illicit financing offline marked a decisive evolution in the Kremlin's toolkit, transforming Moldova into a testing ground where old narratives were repackaged in sharper, more professionalised ways.***



### Key developments in 2024:

- Integration of cyber operations with financial corruption
- Sophisticated email spoofing and document forgery campaigns
- Coordinated inauthentic behaviour across multiple platforms
- Large-scale financial transfers for electoral manipulation
- Professional coordination between online and offline influence operations

By 2025, the interference landscape had entered a new phase defined by intimidation, technological innovation, and harder-to-trace funding streams. Anonymous phone calls and text messages delivered both threats and bribes directly to Moldovans' devices, weaponising mass communication channels at scale. Apps like Taito offered promises of thousands of euros for electoral corruption or participation in protests, backed by Russian banks and cryptocurrency transfers. Streaming platforms such as HaiTV, despite government bans, resurfaced through Viber campaigns that redirected users to pro-Russian broadcasts, underscoring how actors adapt to evade restrictions. Sandu [warned](#) in July 2025 that Russia planned to inject as much as €100 million in cryptocurrencies to rig the elections and finance protests. Officials have since [described](#) cryptocurrency as one of the greatest threats to Moldova's democratic process this year, as tracking these flows has proven increasingly difficult.

### Key innovations in 2025:

- Mass intimidation via anonymous phone calls and text messages
- Sophisticated mobile applications for financial corruption coordination
- Cryptocurrency-based funding mechanisms
- Enhanced circumvention of platform restrictions and government blocks
- AI-generated content and deepfake deployment
- Direct integration of financial apps with protest mobilization

## 8.1 Mitigation and Response Strategies

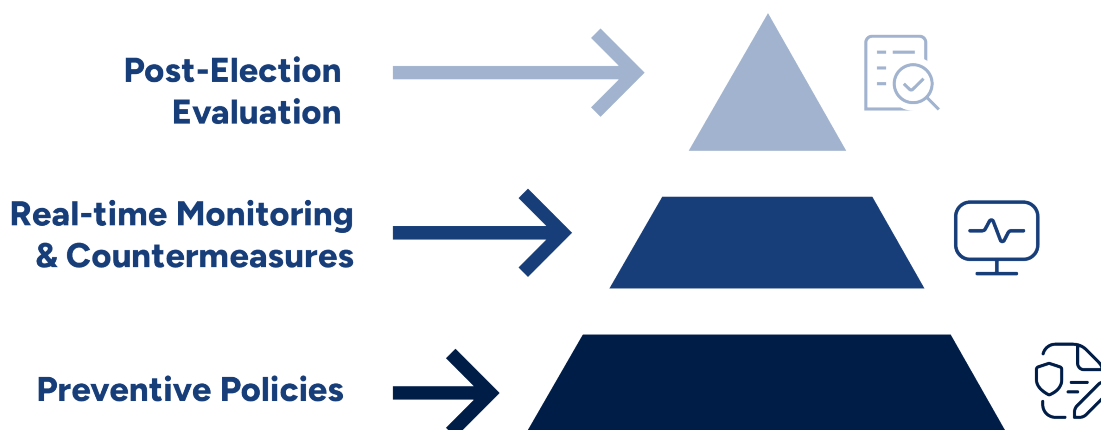


Figure 36: Mitigation and response strategies

### 8.1.1 Preventive Policies

#### Legal and Electoral Reforms

The Moldovan government has implemented several legal processes to strengthen electoral integrity and prevent corruption and interference:

- Enhanced integrity [requirements](#) for electoral actors ensure higher standards in the electoral process;
- New regulations to prevent the misuse of identity data in electoral activities;
- Shift in approach to [electoral corruption](#), treating it as a structural threat rather than a series of reactive measures, including classifying it beyond criminal offences;
- Increased transparency and oversight mechanisms for political parties to curb undue influence;
- Refusal by the CEC to register the pro-Russian Victory bloc due to [violations](#) of electoral financing laws linked to pro-Kremlin oligarch Shor.
- These steps aim to address vulnerabilities exposed in prior elections, such as the 2024 election.

#### Security and Counter-Interference Measures

To counter foreign interference, particularly from Russia, the government has focused on national security enhancements:

- Convening the [Supreme Security Council \(SSC\)](#) to assess threats, including electoral corruption, illicit financing, information manipulation, paid protests, cyberattacks, and involvement of organised crime.
- Enhanced collaboration among state institutions for data exchange and information-sharing to detect and prevent legal circumventions by foreign actors.
- Increased border controls and entry [bans](#) for individuals tied to pro-Russian agendas, such as organisers of the "Make Europe Great Again" conference linked to the Shor group, to prevent destabilisation.
- Identification and disruption of [vote-buying](#) networks through fines and investigations. At the time of writing, roughly 62 criminal cases had been [opened](#) in 2025 for electoral corruption.

### Capacity Building for Electoral Authorities

The Central Election Commission (CEC) and other Moldovan authorities have undertaken targeted training and collaborative initiatives to manage electoral risks, with a strong emphasis on international partnerships:

- A stress test on potential digital hybrid threats to election integrity ahead of Moldova's parliamentary elections was organised in June 2025, by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Moldova's Ministry for Economic Development and Digitalisation, the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova and the European Union Partnership Mission (EUPM) in Moldova. The simulation built on [the election readiness exercise](#) conducted in Chisinau in September 2024 and [the stress test](#) held with online platforms ahead of the 2024 European elections.
- [Workshops and simulations](#) on electoral risk management, focusing on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and Domestic Information Manipulation and Interference (DIMI), including scenario-based teamwork and tabletop exercises, intended to develop mitigation strategies, with an emphasis on risk tolerance, inter-institutional coordination, and transparent communication.

#### 8.1.2 Real-time Monitoring and Countermeasures

To complement legal safeguards, Moldova has engaged in proactive collaboration with CSOs and international partners to detect and counter FIMI in real time. Since 2022, International Media Support (IMS) has helped bolster independent media and CSO resilience. In 2024, IMS launched M-MIIND, a multi-organisational pilot [platform](#) that supports media and civic actors in testing prebunking strategies, monitoring information operations, and cultivating norm-resilient reporting methods across the electoral cycle.

These efforts are reinforced by capacity-building programs from entities like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and [EU member-state](#) donors, which include FIMI mapping, opinion research, and the integration of findings into strategic communication planning.

Moreover, civil society continues to safeguard democratic resilience through investigative monitoring and public awareness—organisations such as WatchDog.MD, Promo-LEX, and independent fact-checking networks play a crucial role in exposing information manipulation. In parallel, Moldova has received support from international cybersecurity teams, such as the EU Cyber Rapid Response Team, which was [deployed](#) during the 2024 elections to assist authorities in countering digital threats.

Still, these real-time defence tools face limitations. Civil society groups often operate without the full legal protection and funding they require. The lack of comprehensive, unified monitoring systems and fluctuating platform responsiveness to Moldova's requests makes it harder to act quickly on emerging threats. For real-time countermeasures to be truly effective, they must be backed by strong inter-agency protocols, sustained civil society capacity, and robust international cooperation.

### 8.1.3 Post-Election Evaluation

- International election observation missions: The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) deployed a mission including 15 core team members and 30 long-term observers from August 22, and approximately 200 short-term observers right before election [day](#). They will publish an interim report two weeks before the elections and a post-election report.
- Domestic election observation missions: On 22 July, the Moldovan Promo-LEX Association launched an election observation mission with 42 long-term observers (including two monitoring voting abroad) and nine monitors focusing on hate speech and incitement to discrimination. Furthermore, on election day, they have mobilised 400 short-term static observers and another 400 observers organised into 200 mobile teams. Their coverage includes all polling stations in Transnistria and approximately 100 diaspora polling stations, especially focused on postal [voting](#). They have already published an interim [report](#); three others will be published, and a final post-election report.

## 9. Election Risk Categorisation

### 9.1 Systemic/Structural Risks (Pre-Election Phase)

#### 9.1.1 Media and Information Landscape

Moldova's media environment remains deeply polarised, structurally limited, and highly exposed to manipulation. Following the 2022–2024 *bans* on multiple pro-Russian TV stations, operators quickly migrated online, using proxy ownership structures, mirror domains, streaming services, and social media platforms to maintain their influence. Platforms such as HaiTV and Moldova24 illustrate this adaptive strategy, continuing to provide access to prohibited Russian channels and laundering Kremlin-aligned narratives through digital ecosystems.

The Audiovisual Council retains authority over broadcast and some online audiovisual services, but not social media. Its technical and institutional capacity is limited. Enforcement is constrained by:

- Incomplete cooperation frameworks with global platforms (Meta, Google, TikTok) weaken oversight of algorithmic amplification, micro-targeted ads, and content moderation.
- Structural blind spots in monitoring closed Telegram groups, encrypted messaging channels, and emerging apps that serve as hubs for FIMI operations.
- A reliance on post-factum blocking measures, which adversaries circumvent through rapid rebranding and mirrored domain farms.

The result is an information ecosystem in which information manipulation campaigns can rapidly adapt, migrate, and persist, making regulatory action reactive rather than preventative. For the 2025 elections, this structural limitation leaves Moldova vulnerable to saturation campaigns that exploit both the credibility of television and the algorithmic virality of social media.

#### 9.1.2 Infrastructure and Policy Gaps

Moldova's democratic infrastructure has undergone notable reforms, including the updated Electoral Code (2022), strengthened anti-corruption laws (2025), and the creation of the CCSCD. These developments bring Moldova closer to EU standards and provide the country with legal tools to counter FIMI operations.

However, implementation gaps remain significant. Online political advertising and micro-targeting lack detailed regulatory guidance, leaving space for opaque funding and cross-border influence campaigns.

Political finance transparency is a persistent limitation. Illicit funding networks, often with foreign backing, exploit enforcement gaps to sustain influence operations.

Civil society plays a critical role in monitoring and countering information warfare, but it operates largely outside formal state structures through ad hoc cooperation.

### 9.1.3 Exogenous Threat Factors

Moldova's vulnerability is exacerbated by its volatile geopolitical environment and the persistent interest of hostile foreign actors.

Russia maintains a long-term interest in obstructing Moldova's EU integration trajectory. To achieve this, Moscow employs a hybrid toolkit combining illicit financing, narrative manipulation, cyberattacks, and proxy mobilisation. These tactics are amplified during electoral periods to destabilise the political system and undermine public trust in democratic institutions.

Cross-border influence networks (pro-Russian parties and extremist organisations in neighbouring countries) actively intervene in Moldova's information space. Romania's far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, for example, imports campaign models, cloned websites, and online mobilisation strategies tested in the Romanian political environment, tailoring them for Moldovan audiences. These actors provide not only narratives but also operational know-how to local proxies.

Moldova's eastern border and the unresolved Transnistrian conflict remain sources of leverage for adversaries. In the lead-up to parliamentary elections, a coordinated campaign has emerged aiming to pressure Moldovan authorities into opening additional polling stations for residents of the Transnistrian region, a territory outside Chisinau's effective control. Authorities flagged a series of nearly identical requests submitted to the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), seeking the establishment of extra polling stations in Transnistria. This pattern strongly suggests an orchestrated effort rather than an expression of organic voter demand.

At the same time, the Socialist Party (PSRM) has formally requested the CEC to authorise the opening of 40 polling stations in the Transnistrian region, despite current legal provisions allowing a maximum of only 10. This request mirrors similar demands made by the Transnistrian de facto authorities, indicating a possible coordinated strategy.

This push raises significant election security concerns as it highlights coordinated cross-river political activity between pro-Russian actors in Chisinau and Tiraspol authorities, consistent with broader Kremlin-linked destabilisation strategies. It also creates logistical vulnerabilities that could be exploited for vote manipulation and mass busing operations from the separatist region. These risks underscore the fragility of Moldova's electoral infrastructure, where legal thresholds risk being challenged through covert influence campaigns framed as legitimate civic participation.

## 9.2 Election-Specific Threats (Live Monitoring Phase)



Figure 37: Election-specific threats

### 9.2.1 Election-Specific Threats (Live Monitoring Phase)

Past Moldovan and European elections demonstrate a pattern of Russian interference. Notably, the Kremlin's ability to carry out cyber operations poses a serious threat to the 2025 election, with the number of cyberattacks on Moldovan institutions having tripled following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For instance, an attack on Moldovan parliamentary email servers compromised sensitive information ahead of the 2024 presidential elections. While no culprit was identified, this attack falls into a wider pattern of Russian hybrid warfare.

In 2025, Moldova's IT and Cybersecurity Service (ITCS) logged over 1,000 attacks on public-sector systems and critical infrastructure, and traced them to the Russia-affiliated groups NoName058 and CyberArmy.



Russia commonly shifts blame for such attacks onto independent hacker groups. On November 5, 2023, Moldova held local elections; at the time, [cyber-attacks](#) against the CEC website delayed the display of preliminary results and updates. Further, during the 2024 presidential election, the ITCS reported a large-scale [coordinated attack](#) targeting polling stations and their related IT infrastructure. The attack originated from multiple servers located worldwide, causing connection issues between polling stations and the electoral IT infrastructure. While the efficacy of this attack proved limited due to redundancy measures put in place by the ITCS, similar attacks should be anticipated ahead of future elections. During a meeting of the Supreme Security Council (SSC) convened by Sandu, the Director of ITCS detailed the [measures](#) taken to improve Moldova's cyber resilience for future elections. These include enhanced coordination with other state institutions responsible for security, enhanced training of electoral workers, regular testing of sensitive electoral digital assets and permanent monitoring of relevant cyber threats.

These improvements are clouded by the recent arrests of several ITCS employees for [attempted sabotage and attacks on government infrastructure](#). The suspects were caught trying to exfiltrate secrets to an agent working at the Russian embassy. These incidents demonstrate Russia's ability to both execute cyberattacks and also infiltrate the governmental structures responsible for Moldova's cybersecurity infrastructure.

Regional entities have also taken proactive measures to assist Moldova in countering such threats. For example, a [stress test on digital hybrid threats](#) was organised by Moldova and the EU ahead of the parliamentary elections. Moldova was also granted access to the [EU cybersecurity reserve](#), which will provide access to trusted providers in case of a large-scale cyberattack. Romania, a regional actor, has also offered technical expertise, notably in the field of cybersecurity, to assist Moldova in its upcoming elections. Such international cooperation is essential for Moldova to build resilient infrastructure ahead of the elections.

While Moldova is taking active steps to [reinforce](#) its electoral infrastructure for the next elections, its resources remain limited. Russia is equipped with an advanced cyber arsenal capable of harming Moldova's democratic election process. For these reasons, international cooperation is of utmost importance. Moldova's recent progress in the EU accession process presents a unique opportunity to deepen cooperation between the two parties by sharing resources, information, and technical expertise.

### 9.2.2 FIMI and Narrative Manipulation

FIMI operations targeting Moldova seek to disrupt voter decision-making, deepen societal polarisation, and delegitimise the electoral process. Pro-Kremlin messaging, channelled through Russian state officials, affiliated media, and proxy platforms, seeks to cast a shadow over Moldova's democratic processes by alleging electoral fraud in diaspora polling stations, suppression of opposition forces, and the emergence of an "authoritarian regime" in Chisinau. A central target of these efforts is the Moldovan diaspora in the EU. While voting history indicates this group leans strongly pro-European, it is increasingly exposed to narratives designed not to convert it into a pro-Russian constituency, but to demobilise it. Disinformation campaigns aim to sow doubt, fuel political cynicism, and spread the perception that voting is pointless.

The strategic risk is evident from Romania's recent electoral trajectory. Over the course of two election cycles, the Romanian diaspora shifted from a staunchly pro-European voting pattern to a more conservative bloc, with growing support for far-right candidates and anti-EU narratives. An assessment by the Foreign Policy Centre has [linked](#) this shift to sustained influence operations that combine micro-targeted online content, long-term audience profiling, and the exploitation of socio-cultural divisions. Without proactive countermeasures, such as targeted communication in diaspora communities, rapid rebuttals in diaspora media, and coordinated monitoring in key EU host states, there is a significant risk that turnout will be depressed, diaspora cohesion will erode, and the legitimacy of the electoral outcome will be undermined.

### 9.2.3 Physical and Digital Threats to Election Stakeholders

Election stakeholders, including candidates, journalists, election observers, and civil society activists, even representatives from the justice system, face both physical intimidation and online harassment. Threats documented in 2024–2025 include:

**Harassment:** Journalists investigating political financing or FIMI networks report coordinated online abuse, death threats, bot attacks and strategic lawsuits intended to exhaust resources. A 2024 [report](#) by the Association of Independent Press of Moldova identified and analysed 66 cases of attacks or threats against professional and citizen journalists. Most incidents [involved](#) non-physical or cyber-attacks.

- **The majority of incidents (56 cases, or 85 percent) were non-physical and/or cyberattacks**, a persistent pattern that has been observed since 2017. These have become the primary means of exerting pressure on media workers in Moldova.

- **One-third of the incidents occurred before or during the campaigns for the 2024 presidential elections** and the constitutional referendum on EU accession.
- **Of the total, 29 cases (44 percent) were attributed to individuals not connected to state authorities**, while 20 percent were carried out by unknown actors, some operating via fake accounts.
- **Notably, at least 18 attempts (29 percent) to intimidate journalists** originated from representatives of local or regional authorities, mainly from [Gagauzia](#).

For instance, Mihail Sirkeli, a prominent journalist and civic activist in Gagauzia (founder of the Nokta portal), has been a frequent target of coordinated [intimidation](#) spanning insults, smear campaigns, and digital [harassment](#) from actors associated with the Shor political network. In April 2025, Sirkeli was subject to a coordinated harassment campaign after publicly criticising former Gagauzia governor Irina Vlah for her treatment of a journalist. His Telegram account was flooded with threatening messages from anonymous, bot-like profiles, which quickly escalated to spam emails and unsolicited calls from foreign numbers. The multi-channel attack, widely interpreted as a retaliatory move, mirrored tactics previously employed by pro-Shor and pro-Russian networks in Moldova, illustrating the growing use of automated harassment to intimidate and silence independent media voices.

One high-profile [incident](#) illustrating the escalation of intimidation tactics occurred in August 2025, when the judge who sentenced Gutul received a series of explicit death threats. The threats included messages and images depicting decapitation, funeral wreaths, and morgue-related imagery, some of which were delivered directly to the judge's home address.

**Violent protest incitement** - Moldovan security services [uncovered](#) plots to infiltrate peaceful demonstrations with trained provocateurs (who were reportedly trained abroad in Russia and the Balkans) to trigger clashes and justify narratives of government repression. Some of these trainings were [reportedly](#) conducted under the guidance of individuals linked to the Russian Ferma and Wagner Group.

**Targeting of civil society** - NGOs engaged in election observation or counter-information manipulation work have been subjected to cyber intrusions, [phishing attempts](#), and smear campaigns questioning their neutrality and [funding](#).

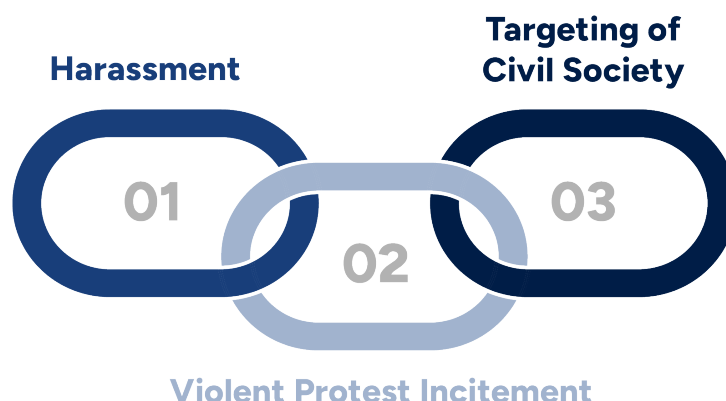


Figure 38: Physical and digital threats to election stakeholders

#### 9.2.4 Low Digital Literacy and Increased Vulnerability

- Even though there is an Interministerial Plan on Information and Media Literacy led by the Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Culture, **coordination and communication among government bodies, civil society, and donors remains limited.**
- **State institutions involved in implementing the plan face human resource shortages.** In some cases, this is compounded by a lack of expertise in media literacy within the existing staff.
- **Most media literacy efforts in Moldova are driven by civil society and donors,** with state institutions typically acting as partners rather than primary initiators, funders, or implementers.
- **No standardised methodology** exists for assessing information, media, and digital literacy levels in Moldova's population, particularly among its most vulnerable groups and regions.
- **Media education** is an optional subject in Moldova's schools, which means that not all students have the opportunity to develop media literacy skills. This risks widening the knowledge gap between students who can access the subject and those who cannot, including many in minority-language schools.

## 10. Priority Intelligence Requirements (PIRs)

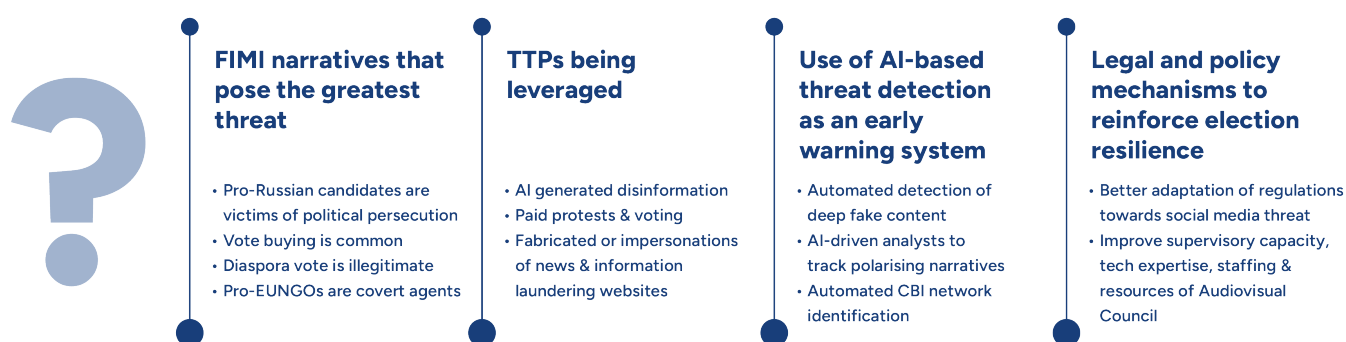


Figure 39: Priority intelligence requirements

Priority Intelligence Requirements are the most critical intelligence questions that decision-makers (governments, election authorities, civil society, or international observers) need answered in order to prepare, mitigate, and respond to threats. PIRs guide monitoring, analysis, and response efforts to ensure that limited resources are focused on the most relevant threats.

### PIR 1: Which FIMI narratives pose the greatest threat to electoral legitimacy?

- Pro-Russian candidates are victims of political persecution, and their electoral victories are repressed;
- Vote buying is common and therefore meaningless;
- The diaspora vote is illegitimate because the diaspora is not made up of real Moldovans;
- Pro-EU NGOs manipulate civil society and are covert agents manipulating elections.

### PIR 2: What TTPs are being leveraged in influence operations targeting elections?

- AI-generated disinformation (deepfakes, synthetic voices);
- Paid protests and voting;
- Fabricating or impersonating news and information laundering websites.

### **PIR 3: How can AI-based threat detection enhance early warning systems?**

- Automated detection of deepfake content in real time;
- AI-driven sentiment analysis to track polarising narratives;
- Automated coordinated inauthentic behaviour network identification.

### **PIR 4: What legal and policy mechanisms can reinforce election resilience?**

- Better adaptation of regulations towards addressing social media threats (political ads, influencers, cross-border sponsored content);
- Improve the supervisory capacity, technical expertise, staffing, and resources of the Audiovisual Council and other relevant bodies;
- Strengthen cross-border cooperation to help Moldova, through regional EDMO hubs (Romania/Bulgaria), flag threats and coordinate responses with VLOPs and EU stakeholders
- Operationalise CA and CCSCD mandates with sufficient funding, legal clarity, and coordination protocols to counter circumvention tactics

## 11. Policy Recommendations

Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections will be conducted in a digital landscape shaped by increasingly complex and intensifying foreign influence operations, political corruption, and systemic regulatory gaps. Despite notable reforms and alignment with EU standards, propaganda and influence operations continue to exploit Moldova's fragmented media landscape, limited enforcement capacity, and vulnerable digital infrastructure.

Moldova has made tangible progress in aligning with EU digital norms, notably by completing the bilateral screening process for Chapter 10 - Information Society and Media in March 2025. Chapter 10, one of the 35 thematic chapters that structure EU accession negotiations, specifically deals with aligning a candidate country's legal, institutional, and policy frameworks with the EU's digital and media-related acquis. This milestone reflects Moldova's commitment to the EU acquis, including the transposition of the European Electronic Communications Code and Roaming Regulation, and expanding oversight to video-sharing and social media platforms. However, implementation remains uneven, and Moldova's regulatory bodies still lack the resources, tools, and leverage to monitor and act on digital election threats meaningfully. The operationalisation of the CSMA amendments requires substantial investment in staff, technical capacity, and platform cooperation.

To that end, ***Moldova should work with global tech companies and Western cybersecurity agencies to enhance electoral protections***, particularly in relation to voting systems. In particular, it should partner with Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) to extend their DSA-mandated electoral integrity protocols to Moldova, as done during the recent EU and presidential elections.

Moldova exemplifies how electoral manipulation has become increasingly hybrid, as narratives portraying the pro-EU government as illegitimate, corrupt, and repressive have been associated with financial corruption and paid protests. Despite updated criminal provisions on vote buying and illicit funding, enforcement is hindered by capacity shortfalls, low inter-agency coordination, and the persistent use of cryptocurrencies and foreign banking systems to obscure financial transfers. Moreover, monitoring blind spots that exist across TikTok, closed groups, and encrypted platforms further complicate efforts to detect coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

Furthermore, efforts to regulate platform activity, including the blocking of pro-Kremlin broadcasters, have been repeatedly circumvented through the use of mirrored domains, proxy ownership, and rebranded media outlets, such as Moldova24. ***This cycle of takedown and evasion underscores the need for dynamic cooperation with internet***



**access providers and online platforms in order to ensure an adaptable and effective approach to measures taken to circumvent restrictions.**

Moldova should actively engage the CCSCD with the [DSA board's Working Group 4 - Integrity of the information space](#) through coordination with the European Commission and the Slovak Digital Services Coordinator (DSC), who currently serves as vice-chair. **This would provide Moldova with early-warning capabilities, enforcement templates, and access to dialogues on mitigating foreign influence.**

The institutionalisation of the CCSCD and the adoption of the Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation Strategy (2024-2028) mark an important shift toward a whole-of-society approach. However, their effectiveness depends on adequate resourcing, cross-agency operational planning, and political support. **It will be critical to ensure guarantees of independence and protection for the national authorities and local actors working on this topic.** In an environment where some malicious actors hold considerable financial and political power, there is a risk that fear of reprisal or future political shifts could lead to hesitation or self-censorship. **Safeguards must therefore be put in place to preserve operational autonomy and confidence in the integrity and independence of these institutions.**

Similarly, while Moldova's civil society has proven indispensable in tracking and responding to FIMI, through initiatives like WatchDog.MD, Promo-LEX, and M-MIIN, its contributions remain under-leveraged due to legal uncertainty, resource constraints, and inconsistent cooperation with state actors.

To enhance Moldova's integration with the European counter-disinformation community, **links should be strengthened between Moldovan civil society actors and the Romanian and Bulgarian regional hubs of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO).** The EDMO could serve as a bridge to VLOPs by flagging harmful content through trusted channels, particularly salient given the [cross-border nature](#) of Romanian-language FIMI campaigns.

Lastly, Moldova's media and digital literacy efforts remain limited. Despite the existence of an interministerial plan and initiatives funded by specific donors, media education is optional in schools, lacks a standard curriculum, and is inconsistently implemented across linguistic and regional divides. As a result, this gap leaves large segments of the population, especially younger and older individuals, exposed to narrative manipulation with limited tools for critical engagement.

**To effectively safeguard the 2025 elections and beyond, Moldova now requires multilayered defences spanning technology platforms, regulatory frameworks, and cross-border partnerships.** This includes cooperation frameworks with platforms aligned

with EU norms, building cross-sector monitoring and response systems, and addressing opaque political financing and investing in media literacy as a key component of democratic resilience. Without these efforts, the country remains vulnerable to rapidly evolving threats designed to exploit institutional gaps and erode public trust in Moldova's democratic trajectory.

## 12. Conclusion

This Country Election Risk Assessment (CERA) evaluates Moldova's vulnerabilities to hybrid threats and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in the context of the September 2025 parliamentary elections. The analysis finds that the overall pre-election risk level is high and rising, driven by intensifying influence campaigns, institutional capacity gaps, and persistent external destabilisation efforts.

The purpose of this assessment is to provide decision-makers, election authorities, civil society, and international partners with an evidence-based overview of systemic weaknesses and election-specific threats, enabling rapid and coordinated mitigation to safeguard electoral integrity. This report makes no determinations on legality.

Looking ahead, three scenarios are plausible. In the best case, disinformation and cyberattacks have a limited impact, diaspora turnout remains stable, and election results are broadly accepted. The base case anticipates heightened polarisation, moderate turnout suppression, and disputes over legitimacy that remain largely contained. The worst case envisions coordinated hybrid attacks triggering confusion, contested results, and prolonged post-election unrest.

Even with strong mitigation measures in place, the risks remain moderate to high due to Moldova's structural vulnerabilities and Russia's proven capabilities. Safeguarding Moldova's elections will require urgent inter-agency coordination, closer engagement with digital platforms, and strengthened civil society monitoring. Transparent communication, rapid response mechanisms, and proactive diaspora outreach will be critical to maintaining public trust and ensuring stability before, during, and after election day.

FIMI RESPONSE TEAM REPORT

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