

DGAP REPORT



Countering Hybrid Threats

Lessons from Eastern Europe



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Russia's ongoing interference in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood threatens the stability of societies and institutions. It aims to prevent reform processes and hinder EU enlargement. States in this region were forced to adapt to constant pressure and have learned valuable lessons about resilience. As Russia expands its influence operations to the rest of Europe, the EU and its member states would benefit from integrating these learnings into a proactive approach against hybrid threats.

Societies across Europe have been experiencing foreign interference and increasingly aggressive hybrid warfare for several years now. Through hybrid threats, actors such as Russia aim to undermine and weaken democratic institutions. Especially in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, Russia has exploited the legacy of weak governance and low trust in elected officials for decades. It weaponizes infrastructure and energy dependencies. Yet, countries in this region are fighting hybrid threats and defending their institutions – by attributing and responding to them more quickly, raising the costs for Russia, and bringing civil society on board. Featuring examples from the region, this report helps ensure that their best practices can be transferred and EU countries can learn from their experiences.

RUSSIA'S HYBRID THREATS TOOLKIT

Russia's war against Ukraine and the fundamental shift of US foreign policy under President Donald Trump have changed the security reality in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood. While Russia has lost much of its direct political influence and hegemony in the region, it remains present by increasingly meddling in the domestic politics of Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia with hybrid instruments. In Ukraine, Russia asserts its presence through military and non-military tools that go hand in hand. For Russia, using a hybrid toolkit to achieve its goals is cheaper and easier to deny than military aggression. Hybrid measures take longer to attribute and keep targeted states under constant pressure, weakening their institutions.

Hybrid attacks are waged across different domains, taking the form of disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and acts of sabotage. All are intended to serve the same purpose: weakening governmental institutions in the countries they target and preventing reforms. To this end, Russia aims to keep countries in the EU's Eastern

Neighborhood in the so-called gray zone – a state of conflict or competition that exists between conventional peace and open war – with funding that is mostly channeled through illicit financial flows.

LEARNINGS FROM THREE TYPES OF HYBRID INTERFERENCE IN EASTERN EUROPE

There is constant innovation of hybrid tools. While EU member states are slow to adapt, countries in Eastern Europe – which have more experience dealing with Russia – are more agile. They are learning to be a step ahead in, for example, identifying loopholes against cyberattacks or how cryptocurrency is used to circumvent financial regulations and sanctions.

Below, we examine three types of hybrid interference used by Russia and the lessons we can learn from responses by Eastern European countries to them.

1. Exploiting Emotions and Insecurities to Stoke Fear and Nostalgia

Narratives spread by Russia-linked proxies cover a wide range of issues that are sensitive for societies in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood. In particular, these narratives target vulnerable groups by appealing to their fears and insecurities. One of the most common of them focuses on perceived lack of sovereignty and overreliance on the EU. Others that resonate strongly include fears about the spread of war (in Moldova and Georgia), as well as general concerns about security and territorial integrity (in Armenia) and corruption and the untrustworthiness of government (in Ukraine and Moldova).

The increased use of social media as a news source allows such narratives to spread widely. The use of AI-generated messages and videos multiplies posts on social media exponentially, making content seem personalized and original.

The bot networks that operate to spread these messages are often the same for different countries in the region. The majority of Russian bot networks that operated in Moldova during its elections also operated in Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels, including in occupied Ukrainian territories.¹ While disinformation is easily amplified through social media, hybrid interference also relies on controlling traditional media and recruiting local or religious actors to act as proxies.

¹ OpenMinds, "How Russia Uses AI-Driven Bots on Telegram to Meddle in Moldova's Elections," accessed January 30, 2026: <https://www.openminds.ltd/reports/how-russia-uses-ai-driven-bots-on-telegram-to-meddle-in-moldovas-elections>.

Armenia's upcoming parliamentary elections – expected to be held in early June – are the next target for Russia to exploit Armenian grievances. Russian-launched narratives will portray the EU and the West as colonial powers with decaying values, especially targeting the country's pro-EU prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan. Also, Russia often weaponizes the economy and energy. Because Armenia is economically dependent on Russia, it is particularly vulnerable to its influence there. Another Russian tool that could be used is investing in different political parties with different ideologies, swaying votes from the reform-oriented parties.

In Georgia, the Georgian Dream (GD) party has relied on a campaign that sows fear of war among the population. It has erected billboards portraying bombed Mariupol that allude that this can happen in Georgia if another government is elected.² As the Georgian campaign is similar to one used in Russia, it shows how authoritarian actors learn from each other. Georgian Dream also relies on social media. Bots operating on Telegram and V Kontakte, the largest social media network in Russia and several other countries in the region, were especially active in the run-up to Georgia's parliamentary elections in October 2024. At that time, 70 percent of bot comments referred to the Russian war in Ukraine as a warning; they also highlighted the risks of the West meddling in Georgian politics.³ Narrative-wise, the opposition failed to address the population's war fears. Their campaigns did not resonate with the whole of society.

Lessons to Learn from Moldova

Measures taken in Moldova around the parliamentary elections in September 2025 prove that such negative narratives can be countered successfully. The Moldovan government and civil society shifted toward spreading positive narratives, communicating what the country stands for and not only what it

rejects. They also shifted their focus to pre-bunking, which has proven to be more effective than pure debunking. Building a positive narrative and focusing on the achievements of Moldova-EU relations helped to build hope. EU support emphasized that Moldova will not be left alone.

Moldova's strength has been its ability to involve society in the process of countering electoral interference. Moldova addressed Russian interference in multiple sectors through cooperation among different actors, including law enforcement, the justice system, civil society, and independent media. Investigative journalists infiltrated the networks financed by the sanctioned Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor, who resides in Russia, and publicly disclosed the schemes.

One message that the Moldovan authorities communicated consistently centered around the concept of a militant democracy, which is defined by “the use of legal restrictions on political expression and participation to curb extremist actors in democratic regimes.”⁴ While there is debate about how democratic this concept truly is,⁵ it – coupled with the fear of Kremlin interference – was a strong mobilizing factor for the September 2025 elections. It led to a strong victory of the governing party, PAS, despite the resources invested by Russia.

2. Exploiting Loopholes for Illicit Financial Flows

Russian hybrid operations are mostly funded through illicit money. In Moldova, significant funding was channeled through the sanctioned Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor. In 2024, Moldovan authorities seized the equivalent of \$1 million in cash – approximately €843,000 – from individuals returning from meetings with Shor in Moscow. Overall, it is estimated that Russia invested €200 million to influence the 2024 elections.⁶ For the 2025 parliamentary elections, Russia invested approximately €350 million, around 2 percent

2 Shota Kincha, “Georgian Dream Launches Campaign Ads Using Images of War-Torn Ukraine,” OC Media, September 26, 2024: <https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-launches-campaign-ads-using-images-of-war-torn-ukraine/including-the-aftermath-of-the-deadly-mariupol-drama-theatre-bombing>. Banners were first spotted in Tbilisi on Thursday with images of destroyed buildings and infrastructure in Ukraine alongside the electoral numbers of opposition groups and the caption ‘no to war’, next to pictures of intact Georgian buildings marked with the ruling party’s own elect.” container-title: “OC Media”, language: “en”, title: “Georgian Dream launches campaign ads using images of war-torn Ukraine”, URL: “https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-launches-campaign-ads-using-images-of-war-torn-ukraine/”, accessed: {“date-parts”: [“2026”, 2, 6]}], issued: {“date-parts”: [“2024”, 9, 26]}}], schema: “https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”

3 OpenMinds, “Russian Electoral Interference in Moldova and Georgia 2024: Mapping Telegram Disinformation Networks,” accessed January 30, 2026: <https://www.openminds.ltd/reports/russian-electoral-interference-in-moldova-and-georgia-2024-mapping-telegram-disinformation-networks#kremlin-dream-pro-russian-telegram-channels-in-georgia>.

4 Giovanni Capocchia, “Militant Democracy: The Institutional Bases of Democratic Self-Preservation,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (2013): 207–26: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-102612-134020>.

5 Bojan Bugarić, “Defending Democracy Against Itself,” *Verfassungsblog*, ahead of print, January 6, 2026: <https://doi.org/10.17176/20260106-172156-0>.

6 “Republica Moldova acuză Rusia că a cheltuit 200 de milioane de euro pentru a „cumpăra” voturi la alegerile prezidențiale de anul trecut,” Digi24, April 2, 2025: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/moldova/republica-moldova-acuza-rusia-ca-a-cheltuit-200-de-milioane-de-euro-pentru-a-cumpara-voturi-la-alegerile-prezidentiale-de-anul-trecut-3183071>.

of Moldova's GDP.⁷ This increase highlights the rising costs for Russia to exert its influence. As Russia's messaging resonates less with the Moldovan population and the costs of interference increase, it must invest more to participate in electoral corruption.

During the 2025 parliamentary elections, illicit money transfers were mainly done using cryptocurrency. However, the digital footprints left by cryptocurrency helped trained investigators to trace and unravel criminal networks – one confiscated wallet alone contained more than €1 million.⁸ After the elections, Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) recommended introducing additional legal regulations around cryptocurrencies, which are currently being drafted and discussed in parliament. Recently, it was revealed that Shor's cryptocurrency company is associated with a business in Budapest, highlighting potential implications for Hungarian elections.⁹

The breakaway region of Transnistria remains a major blind spot for Moldovan authorities. Banks operating there are tied to Russia and non-sanctioned. The territory and its electricity supply are used for crypto mining centers, resulting in complete opacity of the financial flows inside that region.

In terms of the use of illicit funds to pay for acts of sabotage,¹⁰ it should be noted that there is a trend away from using trained Russian operatives for such activities to a "gig-economy" sabotage model. This is especially true in EU member states. Ordinary citizens, often Ukrainian or Belarusian nationals, are recruited through online job platforms to serve Russian security interests and undermine support for Ukraine. Sometimes, even those carrying out larger acts of sabotage are not aware of who they work for. Other times, targeted people are tasked with smaller assignments such as photographing critical infrastructure or monitoring security. They are mostly driven by personal economic need rather than ideological ambition.

Lessons to Learn, Especially from Moldova and Ukraine

Across the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, but

particularly in Moldova and Ukraine, law enforcement, investigative journalists, and international partners have adopted the "follow the money" principle, which helps attribute hybrid activities to Russia.

A key lever for success lies in taking concrete steps to stop the money flows that enable malign actors to pose threats against public institutions and civil liberties. This entails investing in up-to-date monitoring and investigative capabilities, as well as the political commitment to continuously update legal frameworks at the national and international level that allow law enforcement bodies to operate as fast and as stringently as necessary. Understanding the use of cryptocurrency and cooperating with private actors in this field can also be beneficial. Proactive legal action and assertive attribution would help countries across Europe to not be trapped in the ambiguous gray zone that characterizes hybrid warfare. In the run-up to elections, when foreign interference can be expected, coordination and engagement with social media and blockchain companies is key.

While it is impossible to stop all illicit financial flows, raising the costs and risks of interference can significantly hamper an adversary's success rate. Crucially, any legal and institutional loopholes that malign actors continue to exploit should be closed. Available tools include fines for passive corruption and stricter laws related to campaign funding, as well as exposing and investigating those involved in electoral corruption. Curtailing illicit financial flows is a powerful way for governments to demonstrate that the rule of law is functioning.

3. Targeting Cyber and Infrastructure Domains

Cyberattacks often precede or accompany other hybrid attacks to exploit known and unknown vulnerabilities. In the cyber field, Ukraine is at the forefront of Russian attacks – in 2025, 25 percent of Russia's cyber operations targeted the country.¹⁰ However, despite the increased number of attacks, the number of critical incidents has decreased.¹¹ Ukraine has significantly improved its defense capabilities, including through the IT Army of Ukraine and public-private partnerships. Ukraine's bill to create a dedicated military

7 "Maia Sandu La Varșovia: Rusia a Cheltuit Aproape 2% Din PIB-UI R. Moldova Pentru a Vicia Alegerile Parlamentare Din Septembrie 2025," January 26, 2026: <https://moldova1.md/p/67353>.

8 "Maia Sandu avertizează despre intențiile Rusiei: 'Alegerile au devenit noua linie de front,'" October 11, 2025: <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/maia-sandu-avertizeaza-despre-intențiile-rusiei-2478531.html>.

9 "EXCLUSIVE: Kremlin's Sanctioned Crypto Payment Network Has Budapest Link," Reporter, December 4, 2025: <https://reporter.london/?p=1579>.

10 Jana Cvetko, "Microsoft Digital Defense Report 2025 Shows Ransomware Drives 52% of Attacks. Ukraine Ranks 5th Globally, Highlighting Urgent Need for Cybersecurity Modernization," Source EMEA, n.d., accessed January 22, 2026: <https://news.microsoft.com/source/emea/features/microsoft-digital-defense-report-2025-extortion-and-ransomware-drive-over-half-of-cyberattacks-2/>.

11 State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine, "Russian Cyber Operations: Attack Automation, Espionage Against Defense Sector, and New Tactics. Analysis for the Second Half of 2024," accessed January 22, 2026: <https://cip.gov.ua/en/news/russian-cyber-operations-attack-automation-espionage-against-defense-sector-and-new-tactics-analysis-for-the-second-half-of-2024>.

cyber branch further emphasizes the importance of tackling ongoing cyber threats.¹²

In Moldova, cyberattacks have become a major challenge since 2022, particularly around elections. The number of cyber incidents rose from 173 in 2018 to more than 1,340 in 2024.¹³ On the day of parliamentary elections in 2024 alone, the Moldovan Central Election Commission (CEC) experienced a series of concentrated, high-volume (DDoS) attacks with more than 898 million malicious requests directed at the CEC.¹⁴ Yet, the CEC website could withstand the attacks due to earlier risk assessments and swift reactions.

Lessons to Learn from Moldova

Resilient digital infrastructure and sufficient resources for cybersecurity are important, but the “human factor” is similarly, if not more, relevant. Best practice standards need to be understood and implemented by state employees at all levels; therefore, they require well-designed training. The demand for training provided by international partners should be beneficiary-driven and address long-term structural questions. It must offer sustainable opportunities to improve the resilience of institutions instead of providing easily implementable and measurable exercises from the perspective of donor organizations – as was previously too often the case in Moldova.

Another crucial factor is ensuring cooperation among different actors, including state-run and private companies, with support from the international community and cyber experts. Moldova’s response increasingly relies on a multisectoral model: legislative measures, education, technical capacity, staff retention, and coordination with local authorities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At a time when Europe finds itself threatened by increasing hybrid warfare, the development of both expertise and capabilities to defend its democracies is lagging. Countries like Ukraine and Moldova, which

have long experience dealing with Russian tools and adapting to them, can provide lessons on how to identify and respond to Russian interference. The aim should not be to replicate the same responses, but rather to work together to recognize vulnerabilities that can be exploited and close existing loopholes.

An Initiative like the European Democracy Shield is useful.¹⁵ Yet, it needs to better integrate lessons learned from Eastern Europe and provide a more robust enforcement mechanism to avoid becoming a merely consultative body. Moreover, the EU must deliver on its enlargement promise to remain a credible actor in its Eastern Neighborhood.

In particular, national governments have the opportunity to push for joint European initiatives to improve and harmonize regulations about foreign interference while they simultaneously coordinate (and finance) subnational and private actors to focus on the practical elements of resilience, e.g., infrastructure protection or support for disenfranchised groups of the population. A strong EU framework – as well as further development of central coordinating hubs such as the European Centre for Democratic Resilience¹⁶ – will be key to countering transnational networks responsible for foreign interference.

Moving forward, it will be crucial to overcome feelings of helplessness and instead mobilize decision-makers for the joint effort of preserving liberal democracy. The success of democratic, pro-European forces in the two recent Moldovan elections should serve as positive examples of what is possible when the relevant international and local actors come together with a common goal and clear political priorities. Improving resilience against hybrid threats is achievable if the effort is supported by sufficient resources and sustained attention.

12 Daryna Antoniuk, “Ukraine Takes Steps to Launch Dedicated Cyber Force for Offensive Strikes,” *The Record*, October 13, 2025: <https://therecord.media/ukraine-takes-steps-dedicated-cyber-force>.

13 PROGRAM NAȚIONAL de securitate cibernetică pentru anii 2026–2030: <https://gov.md/sites/default/files/media/documents/sedinte-de-guvern/2025-12/NU-905-MDED-2025.pdf>.

14 Jocelyn Woolbright, “Helping Protect the 2025 Moldova Elections,” *The Cloudflare Blog*, October 29, 2025: <https://blog.cloudflare.com/helping-protect-the-2025-moldova-elections/blocking> over 898 million malicious requests that peaked at 324,333 requests per second. This defense kept critical election infrastructure online and accessible for citizens during a critical parliamentary vote. “Helping Protect the 2025 Moldova Elections,” *The Cloudflare Blog*, October 29, 2025, <https://blog.cloudflare.com/helping-protect-the-2025-moldova-elections/>.

15 European Commission, *European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies*, November 2025: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/2539eb53-9485-4199-bfdc-97166893ff45_en.

16 European Commission: *European Centre for Democratic Resilience*: https://commission.europa.eu/european-centre-democratic-resilience_en.

THE INPUT PAPERS

From November 5 to 7, 2025, the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE) held a colloquium on hybrid threats in Chisinau, Moldova. The event brought together experts working on different aspects of hybrid threats and democratic resilience in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood and the EU itself. This report consists of five input papers prepared for the colloquium and a framing paper based on the discussions held there. Each contribution examines specific dimensions of hybrid interference and how authoritarian actors, particularly Russia, utilize financial, political, informational, and societal tools to undermine democratic systems and destabilize the countries.

Two papers focus on Moldova. The first paper compares the role and impact of illicit external financing and Russian hybrid operations in the 2024 and 2025 elections: 2024's presidential elections and the EU accession referendum and 2025's parliamentary elections. It highlights Moldova's response to the former and the lessons learned from closing financial loopholes, showing that it raised the costs of intervention in the latter.

The second paper places Moldova in a comparative perspective with Bulgaria. Despite Bulgaria's membership in the EU and NATO, entrenched channels of influence and governance deficits persist there and influence domestic politics. The comparison highlights both the limits and potential benefits of EU accession as a tool for strengthening resilience. It also discusses how EU support to Moldova can be tailored to strengthen institutional structures.

The third paper focuses on Georgia and examines how the governing Georgian Dream party has adopted methods like those used by Russia – despite Moscow's low popularity among Georgians. It analyses narratives and actions applied to gradually weaken democratic institutions from within. Georgian

Dream's combination of anti-democratic reforms, anti-Western rhetoric, and pragmatic engagement with Russia has enabled Moscow to expand its leverage without direct intervention and has also led to a divide between Georgia and the West that is beneficial for Russia.

The fourth paper examines state-sponsored gendered disinformation as a growing element of Russia's hybrid toolkit. It is being used a time when women are taking an active role in resisting and opposing autocratic tendencies. Consequently, Russia instrumentalizes narratives around "traditional values" to polarize societies, discredit pro-democratic actors, and weaken trust in the EU and state institutions. Focusing on Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus, the paper also highlights how Russia benefits from these narratives.

The fifth paper analyses the role of fictional political narratives in electoral contexts. Drawing on cases from Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova, it shows how entertainment formats can shape voter perceptions long before formal campaigns begin. By creating emotional familiarity and archetypal images of leadership, such narratives can later be used during elections. The paper argues that this indirect form of persuasion should also be seen as part of a broader hybrid environment, particularly in contexts marked by weak party institutionalization, low trust in mainstream politicians, and political cynicism.

Taken together, the five input papers and the framing paper show that hybrid threats manifest themselves in different areas and are constantly evolving and adapting. They also make clear that resisting hybrid threats takes a whole-of-society approach. Addressing financial transparency, political accountability, media ecosystems, and societal narratives simultaneously is essential if democratic systems are to withstand sustained external and internal pressure. Raising the costs of interference and pre-bunking narratives – as well as communicating proactively and coming up with positive narratives – is essential.

Hybrid Threats to Democratic Processes in the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood, Moldova’s 2025 Elections

Why the Upgraded Illicit Funding Playbook Failed to Replicate 2024’s Electoral Impact

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Hybrid threats increasingly exploit financial channels to influence political competition without overt military or diplomatic coercion. Foreign funding in elections is not a new phenomenon, yet in hybrid threat environments, it becomes a central instrument of influence. The literature often regards such funding as an external supplement to domestic political resources. However, Moldova’s 2024 and 2025 elections suggest a shift: external money can replace domestic financing altogether, reshaping incentives, allegiances, and the structure of competition. Illicit financial flows are used to buy influence, mobilize voters, and manipulate narratives, turning elections into instruments of geopolitical leverage.

In 2024, external actors exerted disproportionate influence over Moldova’s presidential election and EU-referendum cycle through a combination of off-shore companies, cash distributions, proxy organizations, and media capture. These tactics pushed results to razor-thin margins and created a widespread perception that the electoral process lacked full legitimacy. By 2025, these networks sought to upgrade

their approach. According to President Maia Sandu and Moldovan authorities, plans existed to inject as much as €100 million¹⁷ into the electoral environment through deepfakes, paid protests, and Kremlin-affiliated clergy to manipulate public opinion. This funding included cryptocurrencies, public campaigns, paid protests, and other destabilizing activities. As confirmed by the OSCE mission in its post-elections statement: “These elections took place against the backdrop of unprecedented hybrid attacks, including illegal funding and disinformation and cyberattacks amid deep political polarization over the country’s geopolitical orientation.”¹⁸

The mechanics of these operations combined both visible and shadow elements. Large sums were transformed into public campaigning with banners, concerts, and organized events, but a more dangerous fraction circulated below regulatory oversight. Suitcases of cash moved across borders, app-based payments were used to bypass reporting thresholds, and cryptocurrency transactions routed through foreign platforms allowed funds to flow with minimal traceability. Investigators and international observers documented complex mixes of cash distributions and electronic transfers that compensated local operatives and purchased loyalty at the local level. Expert

17 Politico, “Moldova warns of Russian election interference, Maia Sandu cites cyberattack, disinformation,” July 30, 2025: <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-warns-russian-election-interference-mai-sandu-cyberattack-disinformation/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

18 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), “Moldova’s parliamentary elections were competitive but campaign marred by cyberattacks, illegal funding and disinformation, international observers say,” September 29, 2025: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/598219> (accessed November 24, 2025).

assessments¹⁹ identified illicit financing, cyber-attacks, and disinformation as central challenges to electoral integrity.

At the center of several public allegations is the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor. Convicted in connection with the 2014 banking fraud²⁰ and sentenced in absentia, Shor has been repeatedly identified in investigative reporting as a key organizer of parallel funding networks associated with pro-Russian political projects. From abroad, networks linked to him coordinate proxies, local organizers, and logistical chains that translate central financing into local mobilization and vote-buying tactics. Reports²¹ have described these operations as functioning with the organizational rigor of a corporate structure, with trusted political operatives, coordinators in Moscow managing call centers, and local activists implementing precise mobilization strategies.

2024: ILLICIT FINANCING AS A VECTOR OF HYBRID INTERFERENCE

In 2024, Moldova experienced a dramatic convergence of a presidential election and a referendum on EU accession. Observers and prosecutors reported²² large-scale vote-buying, opaque transfers from off-shore entities, and a surge in pro-Kremlin disinformation. Investigations linked²³ substantial transfers and operational support to networks connected to fugitive oligarchs (e.g., Ilan Shor and Veaceslav Platon), whose resources were funneled into local brokers, prepaid cards, and sympathetic media platforms. These interventions had three strategic effects. First, they directly affected voter incentives via cash and in-kind payments in targeted localities, widening the short-term constituency for pro-Russian political forces. Second, they subsidized media outlets and online channels that amplified polarizing narratives

and undermined trust in institutions. Third, the presence of large external resources altered the balance of political competition by reducing parties' reliance on domestic fundraising and voter-based accountability.

The 2024 model relied heavily on opacity: shell companies, middlemen, and informal cash networks created deniability and friction for investigators. In a small political market, these methods were efficient: relatively small sums could have disproportionate effects at the local level, as seen also in the Moldova local elections in 2023²⁴ (Balti, Orhei) and 2023 Bashkan (governor) elections in Găgăuzia. The narrow outcome of the EU referendum (passed with 50.35%)²⁵ and the widespread reports of illicit flows made 2024 a warning case for the region: when financial instruments are weaponized, elections can be converted into instruments of geopolitical leverage rather than mechanisms of domestic representation.

2025: AN UPGRADED PLAYBOOK

Ahead of the 2025 parliamentary election, interference networks sought to replicate and scale the 2024 model while reducing exposure. The upgrades included:

- Diversification of financial channels through the encrypted TAITO app,²⁶ used to mobilize Shor-affiliated activists. Tens of thousands reportedly installed the app, which hides user identities and transactions. Activists were paid via a layered process: funds sent in rubles through Promsvyazbank were converted into crypto A7A5²⁷ (used for Russian sanctions evasion), then foreign currency, and finally Moldovan lei.

19 Alina Doroftei, Risk Assessment: Electoral Integrity in Moldova, German Marshall Fund of the United States, August 1, 2025: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/risk-assessment-electoral-integrity-moldova> (accessed November 24, 2025).

20 Reuters, "Who Is Ilan Shor, the Fugitive Tycoon at Centre of Moldova's Meddling Allegations," October 21, 2024: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/who-is-ilan-shor-fugitive-tycoon-centre-moldovas-meddling-allegations-2024-10-21/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

21 V-Square, "Intelligence Report: Russian Meddling in Moldova, EU Referendum, SIS, Ilan Șor," January 17, 2025: <https://vsquare.org/intelligence-report-russian-meddling-in-moldova-eu-referendum-sis-ilian-sor/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

22 Euronews, "Moldova's President Alleges Vote Buying Tainted EU Referendum Results," October 21, 2024: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/10/21/moldovas-president-alleges-vote-buying-tainted-eu-referendum-results> (accessed November 24, 2025).

23 Euractiv, "Moldova's Fugitive Oligarchs Keep Spending Money on Social Media Platforms Despite Sanctions," July 9, 2024: <https://www.euractiv.com/news/moldovas-fugitive-oligarchs-keep-spending-money-on-social-media-platforms-despite-sanctions/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

24 OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), "Moldova's 2023 local elections: ODIHR election observation mission final report," March 19, 2024: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/moldova/564934> (accessed November 24, 2025).

25 BBC, "Moldova says 'Yes' to pro-EU constitutional changes by tiny margin," October 21, 2024: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1wnr5qdx7e0> (accessed November 24, 2025).

26 Kateryna Odarchenko, "Moldova's Voters and the Russian Bear Paw," CEPA, September 19, 2025: <https://cepa.org/article/moldovas-voters-and-the-russian-bear-paw/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

27 Elliptic, "The A7 Leaks: The Role of Crypto in Russian Sanctions Evasion and Election Interference," September 26, 2025: <https://www.elliptic.co/blog/the-a7-leaks-the-role-of-crypto-in-russian-sanctions-evasion-and-election-interference> (accessed November 24, 2025).

- Construction of bespoke mobilization bots and coordinated messaging²⁸ on platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp.
- Expanded cyber operations through website disruptions, DDoS attacks, and targeted leaks,²⁹ seeding doubts about the electoral process, and hackers hijacking Wi-Fi routers to attempt to overload the servers of Moldova’s Central Electoral Commission.
- Renewed efforts to manipulate diaspora voting included spreading confusion, paying unauthorized election observers,³⁰ and issuing bomb threats³¹ at polling stations in Western Europe to cause disruption.
- Covert operations³² led by the Moscow-based organization ANO Evrazia, which transferred funds to Moldova under the guise of “humanitarian assistance,” financed propaganda and fake opinion polls, and organized training trips for Moldovan clerics aimed at amplifying pro-Russian narratives.
- Preparations for violent street protests by pro-Russian groups contesting the results of the elections were preempted and thwarted by the security services, and three people from Transnistria were arrested.³³

Technically, crypto promised faster, cross-border transfers, and app-based infrastructures offered a way to automate and coordinate payments to local activists. These tools were complemented by traditional methods to create redundancy and make interdiction harder. However, the shift also introduced

new dependencies: digital infrastructure leaves forensic traces, and scaling operations required more intermediaries, each a potential point of failure.

WHY THE 2025 PLAYBOOK FAILED TO REPLICATE 2024’S IMPACT

Although the 2025 toolkit appeared stronger, a combination of legal, operational, technical, diplomatic, and civic factors undermined its effectiveness. Four interacting mechanisms explain the failure to reproduce 2024’s disruptive impact:

1. Legal tightening and institutional readiness. After the 2024 cycle, Moldova enacted and operationalized stronger campaign-finance safeguards and clarified rules around foreign-linked donations. Following vulnerabilities exposed in 2024, Laws No. 130/2025³⁴ and No. 100/2025³⁵ strengthened political and campaign finance rules by expanding eligible donors, tightening contribution limits, and increasing transparency. The amendments also prohibited³⁶ pre-campaigning, paid participation, unauthorized transport to rallies, illegal signature collection, and the political use of charity organizations. The Central Electoral Commission and courts were more willing to act on suspicious registrations and to disqualify entities that failed to meet new transparency thresholds. International investment in critical state institutions, such as the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation and the National Agency for Cybersecurity, has borne fruit.³⁷

2. Proactive enforcement. Authorities significantly strengthened pre-emptive measures to counter illicit electoral financing. Fines for vote-buying

28 Victoria Olari, “Telegram Network Seeks to Manipulate Moldova’s Local Political Discourse,” DFRLab, March 6, 2025: <https://dfrlab.org/2025/03/06/telegram-network-moldova/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

29 Doina Nistor, “Moldova Electoral Commission Hit by Cyberattack Days Ahead of Vote,” Politico Europe, September 26, 2025: <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-electoral-commission-cyberattack-days-ahead-vote-russia-democracy-doina-nistor/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

30 Cotidianul.md, “Unauthorized Observer in Athens Watched the Voting Process and Took Notes,” September 28, 2025: <https://cotidianul.md/en/15068/Unauthorized-observer-in-Athens-watched-the-voting-process-and-took-notes> (accessed November 24, 2025).

31 Politico, “Moldova Embassy in Brussels Evacuated After Election Day Bomb Threat,” September 28, 2025: <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-embassy-in-brussels-evacuated-after-election-day-bomb-threat> (accessed November 24, 2025).

32 NordNews.md, “Cinci Luni Sub Acoperire: Rețeaua Moscovei – Acțiuni Conspirative, Bani, Propagandă și Manipulare Electorală,” September 22, 2025: <https://nordnews.md/investigatii/cinci-luni-sub-acoperire-reteaua-moscovei-actiuni-conspirative-bani-propaganda-si-manipulare-electoralala/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

33 RBC Ukraine, “Moldova Arrests Three in Connection with Transnistrian Unrest,” September 29, 2025: <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/moldova-arrests-three-transnistrian-unrest-1759094747.html> (accessed November 24, 2025).

34 Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, “Legea organică LP 130/2025 – modificări la Codul Electoral nr. 325/2022,” Legis.md, June 3, 2025: https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=148761&lang=ro (accessed November 24, 2025).

35 Parlamentul Republicii Moldova, “Legea organică LP 100/2025 – sancționarea infracțiunilor electorale,” Legis.md, June 14, 2025: https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=148941&lang=ro (accessed November 24, 2025).

36 OSCE/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), “Republic of Moldova, Parliamentary Elections, 28 September 2025: Interim Report,” September 10, 2025: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/6/597315_0.pdf (accessed November 24, 2025).

37 Laurențiu Pleșca, Will Kingston-Cox, “Russia Has Lost Moldova,” German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS), September 29, 2025: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russia-has-lost-moldova> (accessed November 24, 2025).

(reaching €1,900) applied to more than 30,000 citizens,³⁸ which is substantial compared to the median wage of €650. At the same time, exposure and dismantling of clandestine networks limited the effectiveness of these operations. Law enforcement moved from post-factum investigations to pre-emptive disruption. High-profile raids on cash distribution networks, targeted arrests, and the freezing of suspect accounts signaled that intermediaries would face immediate consequences. The publicity around enforcement deterred some would-be facilitators and made long-term operational planning more brittle. Because the Russia-backed individuals and entities were placed under international and EU sanctions for undermining Moldova's democracy, the authorities were able to freeze their bank accounts and launch criminal investigations (e.g., Irina Vlah and Victoria Furtună).³⁹

Law enforcement also demonstrated increased vigilance. For example, in the final week of the electoral campaign alone, the National Anticorruption Center conducted 150 searches and seized over 20 million lei⁴⁰ (€1 million) in electoral corruption cases, while the police carried out 250 searches⁴¹ in a criminal investigation concerning the preparation of unrest and destabilization efforts supported by Russia.

3. Civic mobilization and reputational backlash. Exposure campaigns by independent media, NGOs, and fact-checkers reframed attempted manipulation as a threat to national sovereignty. Where vote-buying had previously been effective because of transactional voter expectations, in 2025, offers of cash were often rejected, reported, or met with public outrage, particularly among diaspora and urban voters. Ziarul de Gardă revealed⁴² that hundreds of accounts with fake identities, operated by real activists of the "Victorie" Bloc, controlled by Ilan Shor from Moscow, were created to spread Russian propaganda on TikTok and Facebook.

4. Diminishing marginal returns and operational friction. Scaling the 2024 model required more transactions, more intermediaries, and more digital infrastructure, all of which increased traceability and cost. The marginal political gain from additional spending decreased notably as voters became more suspicious and as the network's capacity to deliver reliably was degraded by enforcement and exposure. In parallel, the authorities launched a nationwide awareness campaign⁴³ *Nu te juca cu votul că vei pierde totul* ("Don't play with your vote, or you'll lose everything"), which was highly visible on television and aimed at discouraging electoral bribery and manipulation, reinforcing citizens' trust in the integrity of the electoral process.

In short, the synergy of legal reform, enforcement, and civic resistance raised the cost and risk of interference above its expected benefit. This dynamic transformed interference from a low-risk, high-return tactic in 2024 into a high-risk, low-return proposition in 2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE

Moldova's experience offers transferable lessons for other countries facing similar hybrid threats. First, transparency is both a preventive and punitive tool: real-time reporting, beneficial-ownership registries, and transparent campaign finance reduce the operating space for covert external financing. Second, the value of an integrated, multi-agency approach cannot be overstated: when prosecutors, financial crime units, and election administrators share intelligence and act together, they create institutional memory and rapid-response capability. Third, civil society and media are force multipliers: investigative journalism and public awareness campaigns convert covert manipulation into observable, politically costly behavior for perpetrators. These lessons inform the following set of recommendations:

38 [Realitatea.md](https://www.facebook.com/realitatea.md/videos/1181543957342017). Declarații de presă ale premierului Dorin Recean privind ingerințele străine și riscurile electorale. Video publicat pe October 18, 2024: <https://www.facebook.com/realitatea.md/videos/1181543957342017> (accessed November 24, 2025).

39 IPN News Agency, "Moldova applies sanctions to Canada Vlah's funds – will be blocked, Premier Recean announces," September 5, 2025: <https://ipn.md/en/moldova-applies-sanctions-to-canada-vlahs-funds-will-be-blocked-premier-recean-announces/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

40 Centrul Național Anticorupție (CNA). CNA: peste 60 de percheziții în dosare privind finanțarea ilegală a campaniilor electorale, September 22, 2025: <https://cna.md/en/node/1213> (accessed November 24, 2025).

41 Europa Liberă Moldova. Poliția a făcut sute de percheziții, bănuind că sunt pregătite dezordini coordonate de Rusia. Dodon: "Vor să anuleze alegerile," September 22, 2025: <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/politia-a-facut-sute-de-perchezitii-banuind-ca-sunt-pregatite-dezordini-coordonate-de-rusia-dodon-vor-sa-anuleze-alegerile/33536819.html> (accessed November 24, 2025).

42 Ziarul de Gardă. Kremlin's Digital Army: An Undercover Investigation. "It's paid, let me tell you, it's paid directly from Moscow," September 4, 2025: <https://www.zgd.md/en/kremlins-digital-army-an-undercover-investigation-its-paid-let-me-tell-you-its-paid-directly-from-moscow/> (accessed November 24, 2025).

43 Inspectoratul General al Poliției al Republicii Moldova. IGP lansează campania națională "Nu te juca cu votul, că vei pierde totul," September 3, 2025: <https://politia.md/ro/noutati/inspectoratul-general-al-politiei-lanseaza-campania-nationala-nu-te-juca-cu-votul-ca-vei- pierde-totul> (accessed November 24, 2025).

1. Enhance interagency coordination through Stratcom. Moldova’s 2025 experience underscores the need to consolidate and better resource existing coordination mechanisms rather than create new ones. The Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (Stratcom), in cooperation with the Crisis Management Center, should be further empowered to act as the hub for hybrid threat response. Strengthening Stratcom’s mandate, staffing, and analytical capacities, including in areas such as financial interference tracking, election-related information operations, and rapid interagency communication, would ensure more effective and sustainable coordination across law enforcement, regulatory, and electoral institutions beyond electoral cycles.

2. Expand societal trust-building and digital literacy initiatives. Resilience against hybrid threats depends not only on state institutions but also on citizens’ capacity to detect manipulation. Expanding nationwide programs on media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible online engagement can reduce the impact of disinformation.

3. Secure sustainable, multi-year donor support for civil society and media. Short-term project funding limits the ability of watchdog organizations to build expertise and respond consistently to evolving threats. International donors and EU instruments should prioritize multi-year financing frameworks for investigative journalism, civic monitoring, and cybersecurity. This stability would allow independent actors to maintain vigilance during non-electoral periods and to innovate in data analysis and outreach.

4. Strengthen cooperation with social media platforms to counter online manipulation. Given the growing influence of platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Telegram, authorities should establish structured partnerships for rapid reporting of election-related disinformation and greater transparency in political advertising. TikTok’s removal of hundreds of thousands of fake accounts and millions of artificial likes during Moldova’s elections was a start, but ongoing cooperation is essential.

5. Ensure continued oversight of diaspora engagement and financial flows. Given the growing role of the Moldovan diaspora in both legitimate political participation and as a target for illicit mobilization, oversight mechanisms should be strengthened.

6. Mainstream hybrid threat resilience into EU-Moldova cooperation frameworks. This would allow for joint training, technology transfers, and shared analytical capacity between Moldovan and EU institutions. Establishing a regional center of excellence in Chişinău could also serve as a platform for knowledge transfer to other EU countries.

CONCLUSION

The contrast between Moldova’s 2024 and 2025 elections demonstrates that while illicit external financing is a potent tool of hybrid interference, it is not invulnerable. Legal reforms, proactive enforcement, and civic mobilization collectively shifted the risk calculus for would-be perpetrators. Moldova’s experience demonstrates that democracies can adapt to the financial dimension of hybrid threats, provided that adaptation is sustained and coordinated. The policy package outlined above provides a roadmap for turning tactical successes into enduring institutional resilience across the EU and its Eastern Neighborhood.

By 2025, Moldova’s security and governance institutions had absorbed key lessons. Enforcement bodies collaborated with financial intelligence units to trace and freeze illicit funds, while electoral authorities deployed advanced digital tools for transparency. Civil society built partnerships with international fact-checking networks, which swiftly countered disinformation. Importantly, the political culture began to change: public rejection of cash-based vote-buying signaled a maturation of civic consciousness. Consequently, Russia’s strategy shifted from financial infiltration to narrative control, but even here, effectiveness waned as citizens developed stronger resistance to propaganda narratives.

Moldova’s experience demonstrates that resilience against hybrid threats requires an integrated strategy combining legal, institutional, technological, and societal dimensions. Strengthened oversight mechanisms can deter illicit financing, but sustainability depends on civic engagement and international solidarity. For the EU and its partners, Moldova’s trajectory provides a replicable model for building hybrid resilience in other Eastern Partnership states.

Resisting Russian Hybrid Interference: Lessons from Bulgaria for Moldova and the EU

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Hybrid threats have become one of the most long-term challenges to democratic life in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood. They rarely rely on a single tool, but instead on a framework to undermine trust in elections. As research shows,⁴⁴ hybrid war functions less as a single campaign and more as a system of overlapping mechanisms designed to shape perceptions, behaviors, and ultimately political outcomes.

Moldova is among the most exposed states when it comes to hybrid interference. This vulnerability is not abstract; it has been visible in recent electoral cycles. The 2023 local elections revealed weak oversight of campaign finance and misuse of administrative resources, while Russian-linked networks continued to channel money into sympathetic political forces. These vulnerabilities continued to surface in subsequent elections in 2024 and 2025, coupled with Russian narratives adapted to local identities and historical sensitivities, making inclusive political strategies as important as regulatory ones.

Bulgaria provides a telling comparison. Comparing the two cases helps clarify where resilience can and cannot be built. Despite being a member of the EU and NATO, it still struggles with entrenched channels of influence and governance deficits.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what Moldova can learn from Bulgaria's mix of partial resilience and persistent weakness. By comparing the two cases, the

analysis seeks to identify which defenses are transferable, where vulnerabilities are likely to persist, and how the EU might refine its support so that Moldova avoids repeating Bulgaria's mistakes. The aim is modest but practical: not to suggest immunity, but to outline realistic options that can make Moldova less vulnerable to hybrid interference.

INTERFERENCE MECHANISMS

Hybrid interference and warfare in elections does not rely on one tactic. It works through overlapping channels and tools that exploit weak institutions and social divisions. In both Moldova and Bulgaria, four mechanisms stand out: illicit financing, institutional manipulation, media capture, and identity politics. Research has found⁴⁵ that hybrid war targets populations and political leadership by shaping perceptions and behavior, effectively allowing foreign actors to become "domestic" players without open aggression. This systemic view helps explain why illicit financing, media capture, and institutional manipulation are so effective in Moldova and Bulgaria – they blur the line between external and internal influence.

BULGARIA'S EXPERIENCE: PARTIAL RESILIENCE AND PERSISTENT GAPS

Bulgaria is a paradox: it enjoys the protection of EU and NATO membership yet remains vulnerable to external influence. Integration created frameworks for transparency and accountability, but a complex mixture of entrenched governance deficits still gives

⁴⁴ Dumitru Mînzărari, "Understanding Hybrid War: A Mechanism Design Approach," Policy Paper, Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE) (December 4, 2020): <https://ipre.md/2020/12/04/policy-paper-understanding-hybrid-war-a-mechanism-design-approach/?lang=en> (accessed November 17, 2025).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Russia room to maneuver, as highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Some resilience has come from outside pressure and domestic watchdogs. EU conditionality during accession pushed through rules on financial disclosure and procurement. Investigative journalists and NGOs helped expose covert financing and lobbying networks, which in turn drew international attention. The Magnitsky sanctions⁴⁶ against Bulgarian officials in 2021 showed how external actors can spotlight vulnerabilities when domestic institutions fail to act. Yet, the reemergence of sanctioned figures shows how limited these defenses remain.

Delyan Peevski, sanctioned by both the US and the UK under the Global Magnitsky Act for corruption and media manipulation, has become one of the most influential actors⁴⁷ in Bulgarian politics without holding a formal executive office. His party now holds a decisive share of parliamentary seats. After the fragile October 2024 elections, this placed him in a kingmaker role. This comeback underscores how entrenched networks adapt to external pressure and thrive amid institutional weakness.

Concerns about judicial independence deepened in 2025 when Teodora Georgieva, Bulgaria's representative to the European Public Prosecutor's Office, alleged pressure linked to Peevski⁴⁸ and recused herself from a major EU-funded investigation. The episode reinforced public fears that informal networks continue to compromise prosecutorial independence. It is important to highlight that even mainstream parties contribute to structural vulnerabilities. Despite its pro-European rhetoric, the party GERB under Boyko Borisov has long maintained energy and business ties with Russia, most notably through the Turk-Stream pipeline.

In summary, vulnerabilities run deep. Russian-linked networks in energy, finance, and politics – mapped years ago in the *Kremlin Playbook*⁴⁹ – remain resilient. Judicial independence is weak, corruption cases

rarely advance, and media concentration curtails pluralism. These structural weaknesses limit the impact of formal safeguards. The political arena also remains open to direct alignment with Moscow. In 2025, the Revival party signed⁵⁰ a cooperation agreement with United Russia, a move that was telling. Combined with Bulgaria's oligarchic ties, such alignments demonstrate that EU membership alone does not guarantee protection from hybrid interference. Bulgaria thus illustrates how partial resilience coexists with persistent vulnerabilities – a mix Moldova now confronts in even sharper form.

MOLDOVA'S CURRENT VULNERABILITIES

Illicit financing remains the most visible distortion. Russian-linked networks have repeatedly funneled money into Moldovan politics, financing parties and even protests. The 2023 local elections again exposed the problem, with allegations of undeclared funds on a large scale. The Chance Party, associated with oligarch Ilan Șor, was barred⁵¹ only days before the vote, after evidence of covert Russian funding. These measures may seem controversial, but they underline how deeply financial manipulation threatens electoral integrity.

Russia's tactics have also shifted in recent years. Before 2020, the primary focus was on building and consolidating pro-Russian parties and media outlets. During the 2024–2025 electoral cycle, the emphasis had shifted to direct voter manipulation and the use of cryptocurrencies – distributing cash and instructing people on whom to vote for just days before elections. The aim is not to secure a majority for one party, but to fragment the political field by boosting multiple Kremlin-aligned actors.

Institutional fragility makes matters worse. Moldova has passed reforms inspired by EU standards, yet enforcement is inconsistent. The electoral commission has little investigative capacity, and the judiciary

46 US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Influential Bulgarian Individuals and Their Expansive Networks for Engaging in Corruption," Press Release JY0208 (June 2, 2021): <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0208> (accessed November 17, 2025).

47 Dimitar Keranov, "Democracy Captured: Bulgaria's Peevski Predicament," German Marshall Fund of the United States (April 30, 2025): <https://www.gmfus.org/news/democracy-captured-bulgarias-peevski-predicament> (accessed November 17, 2025).

48 Ibid.

49 Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies and Center for the Study of Democracy, October 2016): https://cis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161017_Conley_KremlinPlaybook_Bulgaria.pdf (accessed November 17, 2025).

50 Dimitar Keranov, "Bulgaria's Revival–United Russia Links," AUTHLIB – Neo-Authoritarianisms in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Response (October 15, 2025): <https://www.authlib.eu/bulgaria-revival-united-russia-links/> (accessed November 17, 2025).

51 Euractiv.com with Reuters, "Moldova Bars Pro-Russian Party From Taking Part in Local Elections," Euractiv (November 2023): <https://www.euractiv.com/news/moldova-bars-pro-russian-party-from-taking-part-in-local-elections/> (accessed November 17, 2025).

is widely seen as politicized or vulnerable to outside pressure. Complaints and appeals procedures during elections often fail to deliver transparency or accountability.

Media and information capture is another critical weakness. Independent journalism exists, but pro-Russian outlets and online platforms remain influential. Bans on certain channels have done little, as they reappear under new names.⁵² Russian-language media and social networks continue to question Moldova's European trajectory, especially during campaign periods.

According⁵³ to Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), external interference intensified between 2022 and 2024 and was centrally coordinated from Moscow to undermine the 2024 referendum and presidential election. SIS reports the creation of a nationwide cell structure with thousands of activists, coordinated from Moscow. Financing allegedly relied on covert cash couriers, Promsvyazbank accounts, and crypto rails. Overall, SIS concludes that Russian efforts span financial, media, religious, cyber, and "hard" mobilization vectors aimed at fragmenting Moldova's politics and discrediting EU integration. In this sense, Moldova is a contributor to European security: its early warning, case work, and lessons now inform wider EU responses. Moldova's services have mapped financing channels, since documenting, publishing, and acting on indicators raises the cost for repeat Russian campaigns.

In that context, outside of the digital world, Russia increasingly relies on direct voter manipulation through cash payments or pressure just days before elections; another tactic is preparing people for mass unrest. In one case, several men were⁵⁴ arrested – they had been trained in paramilitary camps in Republika Srpska by individuals tied to Russia's Wagner Group. Republika Srpska and Serbia are pro-Russian in their

orientation. This illustrates how interference is no longer limited to covert financing of parties but can also involve attempts at orchestrated destabilization during electoral periods.

Identity exploitation completes the picture. In Gagauzia, Moscow cultivates its role as protector of autonomy, encouraging pro-Russian political alignments. Broader identity narratives are also at play: appeals to history, language, and fears of closer association with Romania are used to cast doubt on Moldova's sovereignty and its path to the EU.

Cross-border cases highlight how identity politics and Russian influence interact. Victor Petrov,⁵⁵ a businessman from Gagauzia, has been sanctioned by the EU for spreading pro-Russian disinformation and "inciting fear among the Gagauz people." He is associated with the media outlet Gagauznews,⁵⁶ which has been blocked by authorities and accused of amplifying Kremlin narratives, and served as deputy governor under the administration of former Gagauzian Governor Evghenia Guțul. Guțul was sentenced to seven years for channeling Russian funds.⁵⁷ These ties show how pro-Russia actors operate across formal institutions and local media ecosystems in Moldova's minority regions. While some allegations circulate about Petrov's use of Bulgarian documents for travel, these remain unverified and highlight the need for further investigation by the Bulgarian authorities. Such cases illustrate how diaspora connections can be either a resilience channel or a vulnerability, depending on how effectively they are monitored and regulated.

Taken together, these vulnerabilities go beyond technical election flaws. They strike at the legitimacy of Moldova's democratic governance itself. Reforms have started, but without stronger institutions and consistent enforcement, elections will remain a central point of pressure in the country's political trajectory.

52 Victoria Olari, "Unveiling the Russian Infrastructure Supporting the Moldova24 TV Channel," Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (May 29, 2025): <https://dfirlab.org/2025/06/03/unveiling-the-russian-infrastructure-supporting-the-moldova24-tv-channel/> (accessed November 17, 2025).

53 Serviciul de Informații și Securitate (SIS), "Fraudele electorale: acțiuni de corupere a alegătorilor, imixtiunea externă în procesul electoral și integrarea platformelor de media și online în campaniile de influență" ["Electoral Fraud: Voter-Bribery Actions, External Interference in the Electoral Process, and the Integration of Media and Online Platforms into Influence Campaigns"] (2024): https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport_SIS_Public_Interferenta_in_procesul_electoral.pdf (accessed November 17, 2025).

54 CU SENS, "Investigație: Instruiți să facă haos. Partea III," YouTube (video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOreEbUMILEk> (accessed November 17, 2025).

55 Mădălin Necșuțu, "EU Sanctions Pro-Russia Individuals for Attempts to Destabilise Moldova," *Balkan Insight* (February 23, 2024): <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/23/eu-sanctions-pro-russia-individuals-for-attempts-to-destabilise-moldova/> (accessed November 17, 2025).

56 Saman Nazari, "Shor's Echo: Influence Operations Targeting Moldovan Gagauzia," *Alliance4Europe* (December 28, 2024): <https://alliance4europe.eu/shors-echo-influence-operations-targeting-moldovan-gagauzia> (accessed November 17, 2025).

57 "Moldova Sentences Pro-Russian Politician Evghenia Guțul to 7 Years in Prison," *Politico Europe* (2025): <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-sentence-pro-russian-politician-evghenia-gutul-7-years-prison/> (accessed November 17, 2025).

COMPARATIVE LESSONS FOR MOLDOVA AND THE EU

Looking at Bulgaria and Moldova side by side shows both parallels and differences in how Russian hybrid interference works. Three main lessons emerge:

First, EU membership brings only partial resilience.

Bulgaria's accession pushed through transparency reforms and created external oversight. But persistent weaknesses in the judiciary and media have kept the door open to influence. Moldova should not assume that future membership will solve these problems. Strengthening enforcement capacity in electoral bodies and courts must come first, before relying on EU monitoring. Bulgaria can also draw from Moldova's posture: elite-level buy-in that treats hybrid threats as strategic – not episodic – and tasks services to anticipate, not just react. That means top Bulgarian political leadership publicly naming Russian hybrid interference as a strategic threat, tasking services to anticipate – not just react – and resourcing cross-ministry teams with clear mandates.

Second, watchdogs and external pressure are necessary but not sufficient.

In Bulgaria, investigative journalists, NGOs, and international sanctions exposed corrupt networks and Russian ties. Yet, captured institutions meant that many of these revelations did not lead to accountability. Moldova has its own active watchdogs, but they need institutional protections and secure funding to ensure their work results in consequences, not just headlines. A practical enabler is formalized cooperation between authorities and civil society, including joint tracking of covert cash and crypto-based political financing. In other words, funding for watchdogs is of the utmost priority so that they can, in terms, track and uncover illicit financing.

Third, identity exploitation is context-specific but always dangerous.

In Bulgaria, Russia appeals to historical and cultural narratives around orthodoxy and Slavic identity. In Moldova, it leans on the autonomy of Gagauzia and fears of closer ties with Romania, or what Moscow frames as “Romanization.” In both cases, exclusionary politics increase vulnerability, and resilience requires not only regulation but also inclusive political strategies.

Beyond Gagauzia, Moldova's Bulgarian minority in Taraclia illustrates how ethnic communities are both vulnerable to Russian narratives and potential bridges⁵⁸ for EU engagement. While the Russian language remains dominant in public life among the Bulgarian minority, and exposure to Kremlin media is high, Sofia's cultural and educational programs – from scholarships and university branches to citizenship pathways – link Taraclia to the EU.⁵⁹ This shows that minority regions, often seen only as risks, can also serve as resilience channels if engaged inclusively. For Moldova, supporting such communities with development aid, education, and media pluralism is crucial; for the EU, leveraging Bulgaria's ties can help counterbalance Moscow's influence.

For the EU, the comparative picture points to one clear adjustment: conditionality cannot remain a one-time tool. Bulgaria shows how reforms can stall once the pressure of accession fades. Moldova will need resilience-building mechanisms built into its path to integration from the start, with continuous monitoring to keep reforms on track.

The EU should also encourage Bulgaria to close loopholes in citizenship and border enforcement, so that Moldovans sanctioned for undermining democratic processes cannot exploit Bulgarian EU citizenship to evade accountability.

Resilience depends not only on reforms but on systematic and continuous monitoring of hybrid indicators. For Moldova, this means⁶⁰ investing in trained personnel, data collection, and legal frameworks that allow hybrid threats to be tracked proactively rather than addressed reactively. This logic mirrors the lesson from Bulgaria: one-off reforms during accession fade unless supported by ongoing institutional capacity.

58 Dimitar Keranov, “Bulgaria's Ties to Moldova's Ethnic Minorities Can Channel Pro-EU Engagement,” German Marshall Fund of the United States (2024): <https://www.gmfus.org/news/bulgarias-ties-moldovas-ethnic-minorities-channel-pro-eu-engagement> (accessed November 17, 2025).

59 Dimitar Keranov, “Why Taraclia's Vote Matters: Moldova's Bulgarian Minority and the EU Path,” Bulgarian Institute for International Politics (BIIP) (October 2024): <https://biip-varna.github.io/articles/taraclia-vote-en.html> (accessed November 17, 2025).

60 Dumitru Mînzărari, “A Hybrid War Early Warning Model: Toward an Early Warning Mechanism for the Republic of Moldova,” Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE) (March 30, 2021): <https://ipre.md/2021/03/30/a-hybrid-war-early-warning-model-towards-an-early-warning-mechanism-for-the-republic-of-moldova/?lang=en> (accessed November 17, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The cases of Bulgaria and Moldova show that hybrid threats to elections are systemic and persistent. Russian-backed actors exploit weak points across finance, institutions, media, and identity politics.

Bulgaria's experience underscores the limits of external frameworks. EU and NATO membership helped raise transparency standards and added some resilience, but structural deficits in judicial independence and media pluralism still provide entry points for interference. Moldova, which faces even greater vulnerabilities, cannot expect accession alone to protect it. Instead, it must learn selectively from Bulgaria's partial resilience while confronting its own specific risks, including Gagauzia, and illicit party financing.

For the EU, the lesson is equally important: conditionality works best when applied early and maintained over time. Moldova's integration process should embed resilience-building from the outset, ensuring reforms are not only passed but enforced.

The broader implication is straightforward: defense against hybrid interference is not a one-off task but a continuous effort to close systemic gaps. Moldova's challenge is to build credible defenses before vulnerabilities harden; the EU's is to learn from its past shortcomings and provide steadier, more consistent support. However, the lessons do not flow in only one direction: Moldova's experience of confronting hybrid tactics head-on may also help Bulgaria and the EU recognize Russian interference earlier – and treat it with the seriousness it deserves.

Anti-Democratic, Anti-Western, and Russia-Friendly Governing Elites as Enablers of Russian Influence in Georgia

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GROUP (PMCG), GEORGIA

Georgia offers an interesting case study of how Russia seeks to interfere and gain influence in circumstances where the ruling party's interests align with Russia's, even though Moscow's popularity among the general public is low.

Given the geopolitical changes with Russia's war in Ukraine and the political developments within Georgia, Russia has sought to consolidate its influence in the country, especially given its declining sway over the rest of the South Caucasus. There are debates on the nature of the relationship between Georgia's governing party and Russia. Some analyses see Georgian Dream leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, as neither pro-Western nor pro-Russian but rather pro-Ivanishvili.¹ Meanwhile, others argue that, as Georgian Dream's regime survival agenda increasingly aligned with Russia's interests, being "pro-Ivanishvili" became indistinguishable from being "pro-Russian."²

This paper examines the Russian side of the equation. It attempts to understand through which narratives and actions Russia seeks to increase its influence in Georgia, given the persistent societal constraints. It finds that amid enduring societal opposition, the blend of Georgia's governing elite's anti-democratic actions, anti-Western stance, and pragmatic engagement with Russia facilitates Moscow's ability to strengthen its leverage in Georgia without resorting to overt interference. Georgian Dream's transformation into

an anti-democratic and anti-Western political project, along with its positive engagement with Russia, has created fertile ground for Moscow to strengthen its influence in the country. Seizing on the favorable political environment, Russia has sought to further cultivate ties with the ruling Georgian Dream party, discredit its domestic opponents, and drive a further wedge between Georgia and the West.

I start by discussing the factors that constrain Russia's influence in Georgia. The next section turns to unpacking the motivation and calculus of Georgia's ruling party, followed by a discussion of Russia's interests and strategies toward Tbilisi. The paper concludes by suggesting the normative and geopolitical implications of the current state of Georgian-Russian relations.

FACTORS CONSTRAINING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN GEORGIA

Across the former Soviet Union, Russia has sought to exercise dominance, as well as contest and prevent the consolidation of Western influence, and undermine democracy's normative appeal. Achieving these goals requires country-specific approaches, as the nature of Russia's relations with its neighbors differs. In Georgia, Russia is constrained by the interplay between four factors: its negative public image, Georgians' embrace of democracy as the best form of government, their aspirations to join transatlantic institutions, and the identity of the ruling elite.

1 Neil Macfarlane quoted in Natalie Sabanadze, "Is Russia Behind Georgia's Geopolitical Realignment?", *GEOPOLITICS* (January 8, 2025): <https://politicsgeo.com/is-russia-behind-georgias-geopolitical-realignment/> (accessed: November 27, 2025).

2 Natalie Sabanadze, "Is Russia Behind Georgia's Geopolitical Realignment?", *GEOPOLITICS* (January 8, 2025): <https://politicsgeo.com/is-russia-behind-georgias-geopolitical-realignment/> (accessed November 27, 2025).

Historically, Russia has had a negative public image in Georgia, yet Georgians support pragmatic engagement with the country. Moscow's negative image stems from its support for secessionist movements in Georgia during the 1990s and its continued attenuation of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, most recently through the War of Aggression in 2008 and through the recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia as independent states. Various public opinion polls have shown that, over the past years, Georgians see Russia as a main enemy (CRRC, 2020),³ a political threat (IRI, 2023),⁴ and a military threat (NDI, 2022).⁵ That said, the public recognizes the need for pragmatism toward Russia, likely because of fears of another war and the perceived benefits of economic ties. Most Georgians have supported a pro-West foreign policy while also maintaining relations with Russia.⁶

Amid the war in Ukraine, the majority of Georgians support their government's careful approach to the war. According to a National Democratic Institute (NDI) February to March 2022 poll, early in the war, a plurality of Georgians were satisfied with their leaders' response, and half approved the government's decision not to impose economic sanctions on Russia (NDI, 2022).⁷ A June 2025 poll by the Institute of Social Studies and Analysis shows that 47 percent of Georgians agree that Georgian Dream has kept the country out of a war with Russia, while 45 percent disagree.⁸ However, the public's choice of pragmatism toward Russia does not mean that Georgians support it at the expense of ties with the West or endorse formal relations with Moscow.⁹

The identity of the ruling elites can be either an asset for Russia or a hindrance. Georgian political elites fall into two camps when it comes to their policy toward Russia. One camp – which includes Georgian Dream,

its offspring Gakharia For Georgia party, and other conservative forces – supports policies that are more cooperative and tension-avoiding. The other camp – including United National Movement, its offspring Coalition for Change, Federalists, and independent actors such as Lelo and Freedom Square – is less cooperative toward Russia, advocates for anti-Russia policies, and for close ties with the West. Currently, the governing Georgian Dream party pursues an extremely overcautious approach toward Russia, yet avoids any formalization of the ties. If the opposition parties form the government, they are likely to pursue anti-Russian and vehemently pro-Western policies. This is likely to significantly weaken Russia's influence and leverage on Georgia's ruling elites.

Georgians' embrace of democracy as the best form of government further hinders Russia from consolidating its influence in the country. Although a dominant party system impeded the consolidation of liberal democracy in Georgia, Georgians have challenged autocratization through peaceful revolution in 2003 and through a parliamentary vote in 2012. The ongoing episode of autocratization is also met with widespread protests. Civil society and a pluralistic media environment have been an important source of Georgia's democratic resilience. According to the Caucasus Barometer's time-series poll, a confident majority of Georgians prefer democracy to any other form of government¹⁰ and think that people should participate in protests.¹¹ However, Georgians' trust in political parties has been on the decline since 2012,¹² making the political parties and state institutions the weakest point in Georgia's democratic resilience. Still, for Georgians, democracy is a normatively appealing concept and practice, and the successful cases of democratic comeback in Georgia pose challenges to Russia's influence in the country.

- 3 [Civil.ge, New Survey Results Sum Up Decade of Change in Georgian Society](https://civil.ge/archives/337512) (February 7, 2020): <https://civil.ge/archives/337512> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 4 [International Republican Institute, Georgian Survey of Public Opinion: September – October 2023](https://www.iri.org/resources/georgian-survey-of-public-opinion-september-october-2023/) (November 15, 2023): <https://www.iri.org/resources/georgian-survey-of-public-opinion-september-october-2023/> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 5 [National Democratic Institute, Taking Georgians' pulse: Findings from August 2022 face to face survey](https://ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-eu-remains-destination-choice-vast-majority-georgians-disenchantment) (September 2022): <https://ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-eu-remains-destination-choice-vast-majority-georgians-disenchantment> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 [National Democratic Institute, Taking Georgians' pulse: Findings from February and March 2022 Surveys, and March 2022 Focus Groups](https://ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgians-expect-economic-decline-and-challenges-ahead-remain-steadfast-their) (April 2022): <https://ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgians-expect-economic-decline-and-challenges-ahead-remain-steadfast-their> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 8 [Civil Society Foundation, \(sakartvelos mosakhleobis gantsqobebis kleva sakartveloshi mimdinare protsesebtan dakavshirebit\) \[Studying Attitudes of Georgian Population towards the Ongoing Processes in Georgia\]](https://csf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ISSA-06-25-1.pdf) (June 2025): <https://csf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ISSA-06-25-1.pdf> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 9 [CRRC Georgia, Perception of Foreign Threats in Georgia](https://crrc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/eng_perception-of-foreign-threats-in-georgia-2023.pdf) (2023): https://crrc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/eng_perception-of-foreign-threats-in-georgia-2023.pdf (accessed October 31, 2025); [CRRC Georgia, Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia](https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/EEUSUPNA/) <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/EEUSUPNA/> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 10 [CRRC Georgia, Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia](https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/ATTEM/): <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/ATTEM/> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 11 *Ibid.* <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/PROTEST/> (accessed October 31, 2025).
- 12 *Ibid.* <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/TRUPPS/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

Georgians are also highly supportive of ties with the West. Georgia has historically seen itself as part of the European continent, with its political leaders embracing Georgia's European aspirations. A confident majority of Georgians supported Georgia's EU membership.¹³ In 2025, an EU-commissioned study showed that 74 percent of Georgians would support EU membership if a referendum were held.¹⁴ The majority of Georgians also support the country's membership in NATO¹⁵ and view the relationship with the United States positively.¹⁶ The consistently high support for EU and NATO integration demonstrates the limits of Russia's ability to sway Georgians against the West.

UNDERSTANDING GEORGIAN DREAM'S CALCULUS

Following the onset of war in Ukraine, Georgian Dream attacked democracy at home and took an increasingly anti-Western stance, showing a stark contrast to the pre-war Georgian Dream, which balanced relations between Russia and the West, adhered to the standards of electoral democracy, and welcomed cooperation with the West.

The sources of such transformation lie primarily in the regime survival concerns of Georgia's governing party and its leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili. Regime survival required eliminating political pluralism and democracy in Georgia, undermining ties with the West, and pursuing pragmatism toward Russia.

Over the past years, and particularly since 2024, Georgian Dream has challenged the fundamentals of Georgia's fragile democracy. Throughout 2024 and 2025, after being granted EU candidate status in 2023, Georgian Dream adopted repressive laws targeting civil society organizations, individual protesters, independent media, and rival political parties. Pro-democracy actors, including major opposition leaders

and individual protesters, have been imprisoned and/or targeted by repressive state machinery. Elections in Georgia are no longer free and fair, and major political parties face the threat of being banned. Georgia's fast-tracked autocratization has undermined political pluralism in the country, while state institutions are increasingly subjected to a partisan agenda. In 2024, the reputable V-Dem Institute characterized Georgia as an electoral autocracy,¹⁷ while the EU's enlargement report for 2025 dubbed Georgia "a candidate country in name only."¹⁸

Regime survival also necessitated taking an anti-West stance to eschew democratic conditionality and creating an enemy image of the West. On the one hand, the EU's democratic conditionality required an independent judiciary, tackling corruption, ensuring political pluralism, and upholding the rule of law – the very reforms that threatened Georgian Dream's hold on power. On the other hand, criticizing the West offered Georgia's ruling party an opportunity to mobilize its supporters against external enemies. A 2025 public opinion poll showed that more Georgians (31 percent) see the US and EU responsible for Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in Georgia than those (24 percent) who blame Russia, "correlating with the government's shifting rhetoric toward the West."¹⁹ By transforming itself into a populist-nationalist political force, Georgian Dream has securitized the EU as a threat to Georgia's traditional values, religion, security, and sovereignty. The EU and its member states, and the UK, have been constantly accused by the ruling party members and Georgian Dream-affiliated media broadcasters of interfering in Georgia's internal affairs, of pushing Georgia into the war with Russia,²⁰ and of supporting and funding "radicals," "extremists," and "domestic terrorists."²¹

Georgian Dream further expanded its ties with Russia to maintain power, although it abstains from formalized relations with Moscow. Amid the war in Ukraine,

13 Ibid. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/EUSUPP/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

14 EU Neighbors East, *Annual Survey 2025: Georgia* (August 25, 2025): <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2025-georgia/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

15 CRRC Georgia, *Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia*: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/NATOSUPP/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

16 Ibid. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/MAINFRN/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

17 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (March 2025): https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf (accessed November 20, 2025).

18 European Commission, *2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (November 4, 2025): https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2025-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en (accessed November 20, 2025).

19 Media Development Foundation, *Survey on Media Consumption and Disinformation in Georgia* (2025): https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//CRRC-MDF-Report_ENG_28.07.2025.pdf (accessed November 20, 2025).

20 *Civil.ge*, *Kobakhidze Says 'Global War Party' Uses EU Visa Threat to Open Second Front in Georgia* (July 18, 2025): <https://civil.ge/archives/693168> (accessed November 20, 2025).

21 *Imedi.ge*, *Georgian Parliament Speaker: EU must stop downplaying threat of domestic terrorism and funding propaganda of violence* (October 25, 2025): <https://info.imeri.ge/en/politics/7377/georgian-parliament-speaker-eu-must-stop-downplaying-threat-of-domestic-terrorism-and-funding-propaganda-of-violence> (accessed October 31, 2025).

economic ties with Russia are ever-expanding. Furthermore, Georgian Dream has adopted repressive laws modeled on Russian legislation to target domestic opponents, and there is a discursive alignment between the two countries in promoting anti-Western narratives.²² Despite these, Georgian Dream still abstains from initiating formal ties with Russia. The two countries do not have diplomatic relations; Georgia is not a member of any Russian-led regional organizations, and Georgian Dream refuses to participate in the 3+3 regional cooperation format that includes Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the three South Caucasian states. The refusal to formalize ties with Russia may stem from public opposition, as doing so would carry dire political costs for Georgian Dream.

RUSSIA'S INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES REGARDING CONTEMPORARY GEORGIA

Given the existing irritants in Russian-Georgian relations, Russia has to design strategies tailored specifically to Georgia. Much like in the rest of the former Soviet Union, Russia's interests regarding Georgia include the following: to bolster its positive image among Georgians, to erode Georgians' trust in democracy, and to undermine Georgia's ties with the West. With the war in Ukraine, Georgia's geographic location has increased its value for Russia.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia had thought to achieve these objectives in Georgia. To bolster its positive image among Georgians, it has been using its soft power toolbox, including appeals to positive common history and religion, and shared traditional values,²³ and has waged disinformation campaigns to those ends.²⁴ To erode Georgia's trust in democracy, Russia has been promoting its own versions of "sovereign democracy" while lamenting the liberal model of democracy. Russia has dubbed the color revolutions as foreign to the post-Soviet political space and primarily orchestrated by Western intelligence agencies rather than being a genuine expression of

dissatisfaction by citizens. To undermine Georgia's ties with the West, Russia has traditionally used a mixture of hybrid measures, including war, economic sanctions, cyberattacks, and disinformation campaigns. As Georgia's ties with the EU have been expanding, particularly since 2014, Russia intensified its disinformation campaigns against the country.²⁵

With the war in Ukraine and political crisis in Georgia, Georgian Dream transformed into an anti-democratic and anti-Western political project while at the same time embracing deeper ties with Russia. Seizing on the favorable political momentum, Russia has sought to cultivate more ties with Georgian Dream, target Georgian Dream's domestic opponents, and erode Georgians' trust in the West.

As Georgian Dream refused to impose economic sanctions on Russia and sought to reap the economic benefits from the war in Ukraine, Russia has responded with more economic opening, resulting in Georgia's further dependence on Russia. In 2023, Russia suspended a ban on direct flights to Georgia, introduced visa-free travel for Georgians, and increased trade with the country. These measures facilitate people-to-people ties, including educational exchanges, as well as economic linkages between business leaders of the two countries. Georgia's economy is now even more linked to Russia's. As one analysis put it, Western sanctions "allowed Russia to develop deeper ties with the Georgian economy and its ruling elite, honing an exclusive relationship with systemic significance that reinforces the foundations of the captive state."²⁶ These developments increase Russia's sway over Georgia's economy and its ruling elites.

Russian authorities have praised Georgian Dream and targeted its opponents with disinformation campaigns, demonstrating that Georgian Dream remains Russia's most favorable political force in the country. In November 2024, Vladimir Putin personally praised the Georgian government for showing "courage" and "strength of character"²⁷ as they continued with the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign

22 EUvsDisinfo, *Russian scripts, Georgian voices: How disinformation targets the country's Western allies: the US, EU, and UK in Georgia* (August 29, 2025): <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/russian-scripts-georgian-voices-how-disinformation-targets-the-countrys-western-allies-the-us-eu-and-uk-in-georgia/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

23 Alexander Rondeli, "Moscow's Information Campaign and Georgia," *GFSIS* (2014): <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/opinion-papers/29-expert-opinion-eng.pdf> (accessed October 31, 2025).

24 Irakli Sirbiladze, "Russia's Disinformation Campaigns in Georgia: A Study of State and Civil Society Response," PMC Research Center (2019): https://www.pmcresearch.org/policypapers_file/f6ac5dfb34c12e31c.pdf (accessed October 31, 2025).

25 Ibid.

26 Ilya Roubanis and Anonymous Co-Author, "Dealing with the Sanctions Bubble in Georgia," *The Foreign Policy Centre* (October 2025): <https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Dealing-with-the-Sanctions-Bubble-in-Georgia-FPC-October-2025.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2025).

27 TASS, *Путин удивился мужеству властей Грузии, с которым они отстаивали свою позицию [Putin was surprised by the courage with which the Georgian authorities defended their position]* (November 28, 2024): <https://tass.ru/politika/22526189> (accessed November 27, 2025).

Influence. In February 2023, Foreign Minister Lavrov complimented Georgia for not being an irritant in the relationship, describing Georgian Dream's foreign policy as being "in line with the interests of the Georgian state and people."²⁸ By contrast, Russia targeted Georgian Dream opponents with disinformation campaigns, reinforcing the Georgian Dream's similar disinformation at home. For example, Russia branded the ongoing protests in Georgia as externally driven rather than a genuine expression of dissatisfaction by Georgian citizens. Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service "accused the EU Delegation in Tbilisi of paying protestors €120 per day to attend demonstrations."²⁹ As documented by EUvsDisinfo, pro-Kremlin outlets in Georgia have waged disinformation campaigns "to discredit pro-European protesters, downplay police violence, and portray Georgia's Western allies as instigators."³⁰

Russia has also sought to accuse the West of interfering in Georgia and of attempting to overthrow the government, complementing the narratives promoted by Georgian Dream. According to the Federal Security Service director Alexander Botkinov, "the subversive activities of Western secret services, diplomatic agencies, non-governmental organizations and media controlled by them are expanding as part of the implementation of the aggressive policy of the North Atlantic Alliance in the post-Soviet space,"³¹ citing Georgia's example where – in his opinion – "attempts were made to carry out another color revolution."³² As claimed by EUvsDisinfo, "these recurring accusations of Western interference are designed to erode public trust in Georgia's international partners, paint the West as a destabilising force, and ultimately undermine the country's European integration trajectory."³³

The change in the identity of the ruling party has become a key factor in enabling Russia's influence in Georgia, even though the majority of Georgians remain committed to democracy and seek integration into Western institutions. As Georgian Dream has eroded Georgia's democracy, drifted away from

the West through anti-Western disinformation campaigns and actions, and portrayed the West as an enemy while engaging positively with Russia, Moscow has little need to deploy the overt interference methods it used in Moldova. The advantages of incumbency, vast financial resources compared to rival opposition parties, control over repressive state apparatuses, dominance in the media and information space, adoption of a set of repressive laws to shrink civic space, and the absence of a visionary and united opposition have all allowed Georgian Dream to sideline public preferences for democracy and EU integration. As a result, Georgia has been turned into a consolidated authoritarian state where the ruling party's interests are treated as national interests, and vice versa. The existence of such a policy in Georgia aligns fully with Russia's objectives regarding the country.

CONCLUSION

In Georgia, Russia faces a hostile yet cautious public, but a loyal ruling elite bent on holding on to power at all costs. In pursuit of regime survival, Georgian Dream transformed itself into an anti-democratic and anti-Western political party – an outcome that facilitates Moscow's objectives of bringing Russia in, pushing the West out, and keeping democracy down in Georgia. Russia has rewarded Georgian Dream for its pragmatism and has provided it with discursive support against its domestic opponents and the West.

The current state of the Russian-Georgian relationship benefits the ruling elites in both Moscow and Tbilisi. For Russia, there is no strategic rationale for disrupting the current status quo, in which Georgia's ruling elite dismantles the country's democracy and weakens its ties with the West. For Georgian Dream, informal alignment with Russia offers both economic opportunities and political survival.

28 Shota Kincha, "Russia's top diplomat compliments Georgia for not 'irritating' them," (February 3, 2023): <https://oc.media.org/russias-top-diplomat-compliments-georgia-for-not-irritating-them/> (accessed November 27, 2025).

29 EUvsDisinfo, *Russian scripts, Georgian voices: How disinformation targets the country's Western allies: the US, EU, and UK in Georgia* (August 29, 2025): <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/russian-scripts-georgian-voices-how-disinformation-targets-the-countrys-western-allies-the-us-eu-and-uk-in-georgia/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

30 EUvsDisinfo, *The war on truth: Russian disinformation and Georgia's path to EU* (April 4, 2025): <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-war-on-truth-russian-disinformation-and-georgias-path-to-eu-discord/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

31 *Civil.ge*, Lavrov: Collective West Trying to Unleash a Color Revolution in Georgia (November 26, 2024): <https://civil.ge/archives/638070> (accessed October 31, 2025).

32 *Ibid.*

33 EUvsDisinfo, *Russian scripts, Georgian voices: How disinformation targets the country's Western allies: the US, EU, and UK in Georgia* (August 29, 2025): <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/russian-scripts-georgian-voices-how-disinformation-targets-the-countrys-western-allies-the-us-eu-and-uk-in-georgia/> (accessed October 31, 2025).

Such a state of affairs between Russia and Georgia has negative implications for Georgia's democracy at home and its bargaining power in foreign policy. As Georgia consolidates its autocracy, its EU accession prospects are falling short. Isolation from the West risks increasing Georgia's dependence on authoritarian powers such as Russia and China, thereby weakening its bargaining power. While chances of Georgia's democratic comeback are currently grim, authoritarian hubris and overreach could eventually lead to political change in Georgia.

A Blind Spot in Democratic Security?

How Russia’s Gendered Disinformation Undermines Democratic Processes in the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood and What We Should Do About It

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State-sponsored gendered disinformation is one of Russia’s fastest-growing yet underestimated hybrid threats in its playbook. For over a decade, the Kremlin has used it to consolidate domestic power and advance its agenda of “traditional values” across the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood and beyond. As women have become some of the most prominent figures of resistance to autocratic tendencies and advocates of liberal reforms that threaten Russian influence, they increasingly face targeted and disproportionate attacks.³⁴

This paper examines how Russia and its proxies instrumentalize debates on gender equality and diversity to weaken public trust in the EU and democratic institutions in Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus. It draws on desk research, including studies, reports, fact-checking databases, and journalistic investigations. While attribution is often difficult, these cases indicate clear benefits for Russian interests and links to pro-Russian actors and reflect Moscow’s interest in promoting its distinctive domestic anti-gender

agenda overseas. The lack of comparable regional data – one of the main obstacles in data collection – further underscores the need for conceptualization, systematic research, and monitoring.

THE BLIND SPOT OF HYBRID THREATS

Caroline Criado-Perez, in her book *Invisible Women*, observes that phenomena which remain unseen are often treated as non-existent.³⁵ This also applies to the limited research on Russia’s use of gendered disinformation. This deliberate spread of manipulated or false information and images about female public figures exploits social stereotypes about women’s roles to damage their reputations and to silence or deter them from public engagements.³⁶ It also extends to the LGBTQ+ community as a target. The victims often withdraw from public life without reporting the abuse due to limited awareness of coordinated attacks.³⁷ Attacks on traditionally marginalized groups in question pose a broader threat to democracy: when successful, they exclude these groups, weakening participation, representation, and institutional and societal resilience.³⁸

34 Lucina Di Meco. February 2023. Monetizing Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women’s Rights and Democracy Globally, *ShePersisted*, p. 4.

35 Criado-Perez, Caroline. 2019. *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. London: Chatto & Windus.

36 *ShePersistedMoldova*. May 2024. Big Tech and the Weaponization of Misogyny in Moldova’s Online Ecosystem: An Assessment of Digital Threats to Women in Public Life, p. 3.

37 Kuzmenko L. and L. Kompantseva. 2023. An Underestimated Threat: Gendered Disinformation about Ukrainian Women Journalists. (Zhinky v Media Report), p. 8: <https://wim.org.ua/en/materials/an-underestimated-threat-gendered-disinformation-about-ukrainian-women-journalists/>

38 Krizsán, Andrea, and Conny Roggeband. 2024. *Report on Violence and Pathways to Violence in the Context of Anti-Gender Politics (CCINDLE D2.4)*. Budapest: Central European University; Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, p. 53: https://ccindle.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/D2.4-Report-on-violence-and-pathways-to-violence-in-anti-gender-campaigns.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Russia is an insidious actor in this field for two reasons. First, Russian foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is widely recognized as a hybrid threat to the EU and its Eastern Neighborhood. Second, Russia actively promotes the narrative of the “Russian World” as the defender of “traditional values,” enshrined domestically in the so-called 2013 Russian anti-LBGTQ+ law. This strategy, deployed both domestically and abroad, uses anti-gender manipulation as a foreign policy tool to portray the West as an enemy.³⁹ The countries of the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood, especially those aspiring to join the EU or distance themselves from the Kremlin, have therefore become a battleground for ideological and political influence. Russia channels its narratives through traditional media, co-opted local political actors, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Over the past decade, however, digital platforms that amplify emotionally charged content have become a key tool, extending Russia’s reach far beyond traditional media. Collectively, these mechanisms of Russian gender-based disinformation create four major challenges.

CHALLENGE 1: “GAYROPE” AND UNDERMINING THE EU’S CREDIBILITY THROUGH LBGTQ+ RIGHTS

Support for EU membership remains high in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (Table 1). Yet, this contrasts sharply with the low social acceptance of homosexuality (Table 2), which is reflected in the weak implementation of legal and policy frameworks protecting LBGTQ+ rights (Table 3), which the EU actively promotes. Gender equality and the protection of minorities are embedded in the Copenhagen accession criteria that candidate countries must fulfill and are further reinforced through EU treaties, directives, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The situation is particularly acute in Georgia, where the so-called anti-LBGTQ+ propaganda law has been in force since 2024, despite former President Salome Zourabichvili’s refusal to sign it. This gap constitutes a soft underbelly that Russia and coopting local actors exploit to undermine pro-EU sentiment.

The EU is portrayed as morally decadent and dangerous through claims, for example, that compulsory

Table 1 – Support for EU Membership

| BELARUS | GEORGIA | MOLDOVA | UKRAINE |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| n/a | 78% | 69% | 84% |

Source: ShePersistedMoldova. May 2024. Big Tech and the Weaponization of Misogyny in Moldova’s Online Ecosystem: An Assessment of Digital Threats to Women in Public Life, p. 3.

Table 2 – Acceptance of Homosexuality

| BELARUS | GEORGIA | MOLDOVA | UKRAINE |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 6.85% | 0.99% | n/a | 3.1% |

Source: World Value Survey: <https://www.equaldex.com/surveys/justifiability-of-homosexuality>

Table 3 – Implementation of Legal & Policy Frameworks Protecting LBGTQ+ Rights

| BELARUS | GEORGIA | MOLDOVA | UKRAINE | EU |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| 10.16% | 11.88% | 38.41% | 18.76% | 51.13% |

Source: <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/>; The Rainbow Map ranks 49 European countries on their respective legal and policy practices for LGBTI people from 0 to 100%. The indicators include equality and non-discrimination, same-sex marriages, hate crime protections, legal gender recognition, intersex bodily integrity, civil society space for LGBTI+ (including the organization of Pride Parades), and protection of the rights of LGBTI asylum seekers.

sex education corrupts or “sexualizes” children and that gender identity can be changed without parental consent.⁴⁰ It is frequently referred to as “Gayrope,” a portmanteau of “gay” and “Europe.” This trope gained traction during Euromaidan and Ukraine’s 2012–2013 EU accession talks, when pro-Russian groups used EU-linked LBGTQI+ reforms to stoke fear and undermine pro-EU sentiment, and it has continued to

39 Kuzmenko L. and L. Kompantseva. An Underestimated Threat, p. 14.

40 Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Gendered Disinformation 2023* (Media Development Foundation): <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/241>, p. 12.

circulate ever since.⁴¹ Russia also frames changes in one country of the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood as threats to others. When Ukraine appointed a transgender spokesperson for its English channels, Russia condemned it as “a slap in the face of former Soviet republics,”⁴² portraying Ukraine as weak, feminized, and caught between a masculine, traditionalist Russia and a “degenerate” Europe.⁴³

Following the Russian example, Belarusian state propaganda targets LGBTQ+ people, portraying support for their rights as “foreign” and part of a Western “hybrid war.”⁴⁴ In 2024, 48 percent of LGBTQ+-related media content contained hate speech.⁴⁵ Although unlike Russia and Georgia, Belarus does not yet have a law specifically banning “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.” Existing laws on “extremism” and “morality” are used to intimidate activists, while practices like forced public confessions (so called repentance videos) use actual or alleged sexual orientation and gender identity to suppress dissent and divert attention from socio-economic issues.⁴⁶ After 2020, anti-LGBTQ+ narratives were increasingly applied to political opponents, linking pro-democracy activists to “foreign” agendas to justify repression.⁴⁷

CHALLENGE 2: SILENCING “PROBLEMATIC” WOMEN IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC SPHERES

Although the overall share of women in politics in the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood remains low (see Tables 4 and 5), with Moldova as a positive outlier, women have emerged as prominent advocates for democratic reforms and EU integration. Currently, Ukraine has a female prime minister and Moldova a female president. In some cases, Russian-linked politicians initially underestimated them as opposition leaders, as with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya in Belarus or Maia Sandu in Moldova.

Table 4 – Women Cabinet Ministers

| BELARUS | GEORGIA | MOLDOVA | UKRAINE |
|-------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| 4.3% (1/23) | 25% (3/12) | 35.7% (5/14) | 26.3% (5/19) |

Source: Inter-parliamentary Union: Women in politics 2025: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2025-03/women-in-politics-2025>.

Table 5 – Women in Lower Houses

| BELARUS | GEORGIA | MOLDOVA | UKRAINE |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 33.9% | 22% | 40% | 21.2% |

Source: Ibid.

Research in Moldova in 2024 shows that the main malign actors actively targeting women leaders in a coordinated and inauthentic manner were explicitly pro-Russian and/or had links to Russian networks.⁴⁸ Leading and influential women often become targets, with direct gendered tropes used to intimidate them, damage their reputations, and question their morality. Such attacks not only discredit women but also pressure them into a defensive stance, with far greater impact than on men.⁴⁹ Sexualization, increasingly aided by pornographic deepfakes, is a common form of gendered attack. For example, after a 2017 UN speech on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk became the target of viral content, including fabricated nude images and false claims that she would run naked through Kyiv.⁵⁰

Similar methods were used in Georgia before the 2016 parliamentary elections, with illicit videos and threats targeting female politicians critical of the pro-Russian ruling party, eventually forcing some

41 Shevtsova, Maryna. 2020. “Fighting ‘Gayropa’: Europeanization and Instrumentalization of LGBTI Rights in Ukrainian Public Debate.” *Problems of Post-Communism* 67 (6): 500–510. doi:10.1080/10758216.2020.1716807.

42 Kuzmenko L. and L. Kompantseva. An Underestimated Threat, p. 7.

43 Kratochvil, Petr, and Mila O’Sullivan. 2023. “A War like No Other: Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine as a War on Gender Order.” *European Security* 32 (3): 347–66. doi:10.1080/09662839.2023.2236951.

44 Orieshchenko, Vladislav. 2025, May 22. Под прицелом: Как белорусская пропаганда воюет с ЛГБТК+ и разрушает жизни. Белорусская ассоциация журналистаў. Retrieved from <https://baj.media/be/pod-pricelom-kak-belorusskaja-propaganda-vojuet-s-lgbtk-i-razrushaet-zhizni/>.

45 Orieshchenko, Vladislav. January 25, 2025. “Мониторинг языка вражды в отношении ЛГБТК+ в СМИ Беларуси в 2024 году.” Журналисты за толерантность: <https://i4t.info/2025/01/25/monitoring-yazyka-vrazhdyi-v-otnoshenii-lgbtk-v-smi-belarusi-v-2024-godu/>.

46 Ibid.

47 Kazharski, Aliaksei. January 16, 2025. “Phobias in place of ideologies: Why are politicians so preoccupied with ‘LGBT’ and migration issues?,” *The Insider*: <https://theins.ru/en/opinion/aliaksei-kazharski/277943>.

48 ShePersisted Moldova, p. 1.

49 Stephan, Adriana. “The Targeting of Female Public Officials.” *New America*, January 25, 2025: <https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/a-weapon-against-women-in-politics/the-targeting-of-female-public-officials/>.

50 Ibid.

to leave politics.^{51,52,53} Following her pardon of an opposition figure in a politically charged case, former Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili was targeted with doctored images depicting her scantily dressed, whereas fake images of Olena Zelenska circulated online to attack her husband.⁵⁴ A recent study on gendered disinformation in Ukraine shows how Russian narratives attack leading female journalists as advancing their careers through relationships with (wealthy) men or portraying female correspondents as SBU agents, feminists, prostitutes, lesbians, or escort workers.⁵⁵

Leading female politicians are often depicted as incompetent or puppets of foreign actors and/or sponsored by them, with their Western education or international experience used to discredit them. This tactic is frequently applied to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and Maia Sandu. Belarusian and Russian narratives have depicted Tsikhanouskaya as, for example, a “kitchen maid unable to put two words together,”⁵⁶ dismissing her higher education, professional background, and the reasons behind her withdrawal from work. Forensic analysis of Sandu’s case revealed a coordinated pro-Russian network spreading fake and manipulated content; during the analyzed period on Facebook, roughly 90 percent of posts containing gendered attacks targeted her specifically.⁵⁷ This undermines trust in both these women and the institutions or movements they represent. Narratives portraying women as foreign agents or national enemies can also escalate to calls for violence; in Ukraine, female journalists have faced “shooting lists” and slogans such as “kill feminists,” while a Russian pro-government outlet, *Life.ru*, surveyed how to punish a Ukrainian female TV host for “Russophobic statements.”⁵⁸

CHALLENGE 3: INCREASED SOCIETAL POLARIZATION

Over the past decade, polarization in the four analyzed countries has risen sharply⁵⁹ with gender emerging as a potent tool of contention. Russian-linked actors exploit these divisions, framing conflicts as progressive/pro-European versus traditional/pro-Russian. Local conservative elites often reinforce these narratives, either for political gain or to resist women’s empowerment and liberal reforms, which they perceive as threats to their interests and the established social order.

Recent studies from Moldova show that actors with Russian or pro-Russian ties have not only targeted women in leadership, but also that women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and politicians were the most frequent targets in the 2024 elections.⁶⁰ Moreover, between 2021 and 2025, the share of respondents viewing women primarily in domestic roles rose from 47.9 percent to 62.4 percent, while opposition to women in politics increased from 18.2 percent to 26.2 percent. Among young men aged 18 to 29, adherence to gender stereotypes grew sharply, from 27.6 percent to 37.6 percent.

Further investigation is needed, but Moldova’s heavy exposure to disinformation may partly explain this rapid change. In the electoral context, the cumulative effects of long-term disinformation can significantly influence outcomes.

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- 51 See: Nina Jankowicz, “How Disinformation Became a New Threat to Women,” Coda Story, December 11, 2017: <https://www.codastory.com/polarization/how-disinformation-became-a-new-threat-to-women/>.
- 52 See: Transparency International Georgia. 2019. “Government Should Exhibit Political Will and Clamp Down on Private Recording Blackmail.” January 29, 2019: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/government-should-exhibit-political-will-and-clamp-down-private-recording-blackmail>.
- 53 See Lomsadze, Giorgi. 2019. “Georgia’s SexTapes Politics Returns.” *EurasiaNet*, February 5, 2019: <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-sex-tapes-politics-returns>.
- 54 See Myth Detector. “Manipulated Photos Depicting Salome Zourabichvili Have Been Circulating on Facebook.” *Myth Detector*, June 27, 2023: <https://mythdetector.ge/en/manipulated-photos-depicting-salome-zourabichvili-have-been-circulating-on-facebook/>; and Myth Detector. “Photomanipulation as If Olena Zelenska Is Relaxing on a Nudist Beach in Israel.” *Myth Detector*, June 6, 2023: <https://mythdetector.com/en/photomanipulation-as-if-olena-zelenska-is-relaxing-on-a-nudist-beach-in-israel/>.
- 55 Kuzmenko L. and L. Kompantseva. *An Underestimated Threat*, pp. 24–26.
- 56 EUvsDisinfo. “Disinformation Cases Involving Svetlana Tikhanovskaya.” *EUvsDisinfo*: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=tikhanovskaya&date=&per_page=
- 57 ShePersistedMoldova, p.10.
- 58 Kuzmenko L. and L. Kompantseva. *An Underestimated Threat*, p. 40.
- 59 V-Dem, “Social polarization” for Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, 2005–2023: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/.
- 60 UNDP Moldova. “Tradition Overshadows Equality: Gender Stereotypes and Electoral Passivity Undermine Democratic Progress.” *United Nations Development Programme*, August 22, 2025: <https://www.undp.org/moldova/press-releases/tradition-overshadows-equality-gender-stereotypes-and-electoral-passivity-undermine-democratic-progress>, p. 4.

CHALLENGE 4: NATIONAL SECURITY

Russian gendered FIMI poses a multifaceted threat to national security. It advances influence operations and fosters distrust in democratic institutions under the guise of defending “traditional values,” a tactic particularly potent in electoral contexts.⁶¹ Research also links misogyny to extremism, showing that inciting anti-gender attitudes can create conditions for violence and long-term social destabilization.⁶² Following the full-scale invasion, Russian information campaigns aim to link feminism with terrorism by associating it with “sexual deviations,” connecting these to pro-Ukrainian views (framed as nationalism), and ultimately portraying them as tied to terrorism.⁶³

The most extreme manifestation of abusing the “traditional values” discourse is framing the invasion of Ukraine as, among other things, a defense of these values. This hypermasculine narrative, grounded in neo-traditionalist ideology and supported by the Orthodox Church, was also used to cultivate public support for the aggression against Ukraine and, by extension, the West (i.e., the EU), which represents liberal values.⁶⁴ This discourse is echoed strongly in statements by Patriarch Kirill, as well as Russian politicians, including Putin, who, in his 2022 Victory Day speech, accused the collective West of “canceling the millennia-old values,” becoming “morally degraded,” and embracing “Russophobia.”⁶⁵

The current environment further enables disinformation, as NGOs – which are critical in monitoring disinformation – face shrinking operational spaces, backlash, labeling as foreign agents in Belarus and Georgia, and reduced funding following the withdrawal of US support.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As this paper has demonstrated, although equality and gender-related values are often dismissed as “marginal” and “soft issues” and therefore invisible in security discussions, they can easily be weaponized. With gender now a central element of the EU-Russia identity conflict, it is far more than symbolic and

represents a pressing security concern. Can the countries of the EU's Eastern Neighborhood afford to ignore the gendered disinformation coming from Russia, whether directly propagated or co-opted by local actors? In the short term, it risks heightened tensions and polarization, the exclusion of marginalized voices from public life, and the brutalization of public discourse, all detrimental to a well-functioning democracy. In the long term – which appears to be the ultimate aim of this strategy – it seeks to undermine not only equality, but also broader liberal reforms and potential EU membership for Moldova and Ukraine. Russia perceives this as a threat to its interests and influence.

Given the current geopolitical realities, Russia cannot be easily deterred from such activities. Efforts to counter their detrimental impact must primarily be implemented within the affected countries themselves with the support of international partners.

Recommendations

Recognize, define, and codify gendered disinformation as a distinct external security threat coming from Russia and co-opted by local actors; establish dedicated expert teams in public institutions to provide rapid gender-sensitive legal and online responses that communicate their findings to a broader public.

Raise awareness among women and LGBTQ+ people in the public space of coordinated online attacks; train them on how they can protect themselves instead of quitting public spaces.

Ensure women and LGBTQ+ public figures can report gendered disinformation without fear and with structured support from the state, media, and NGOs.

Support fact-checking with a focus on gender-based disinformation to better monitor, map, and understand the scale of the challenge. Effective fact-checking with the use of available technologies can be costly; therefore, support of institutions and international donors is crucial.

Sustain and/or increase financing for NGOs, especially those in the field of disinformation, and support their operations in contexts of shrinking civic space.

61 Lucina di Meo, “Monetizing Misogyny,” p. 5.

62 See: Johnston M., Meger S. (2022), *The Linkages between Violent Misogyny and Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism Policy Brief*. Vienna: OSCE Secretariat: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/c/525297.pdf>

63 Kuzmenko L. and L. Kompantseva. *An Underestimated Threat*, p. 6.

64 Kratochvil, Petr and Mila O'Sullivan. “A War like No Other.”

65 Leandra Bias. February 24, 2023. *The International of Antifeminists*, Engenderings: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2023/02/24/4808/>.

Due to their flexibility, NGOs can often respond to and identify emerging threats more quickly as well as **mobilize citizens to act as voluntary fact-checkers.**

Challenge societal stereotypes by engaging influencers and public figures for public discussion about gender equality and diversity, and provide targeted support for women and LGBTQ+ individuals to remain active in public life.

Continue promoting women and LGBTQ+ participation in politics and public institutions through quotas, campaign financing, mentoring and mentorship programs, gender-sensitive candidate recruitment, public visibility campaigns, temporary reserved leadership positions, and other affirmative measures. Increasing women’s and LGBTQ+ people’s participation in politics can weaken gendered disinformation by normalizing their leadership. With more diverse voices, disinformation campaigns lose focus, making false narratives harder to sustain.

Cinematic Statecraft: Engineering Electoral Choice Through Strategic Storytelling in Eastern Europe

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On April 21, 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy won Ukraine’s presidential election with 73 percent of the vote. While Western analysts struggled to explain how a television entertainer could so thoroughly dominate Ukraine’s political establishment, Ukrainian voters were not surprised. Spanning three seasons, voters had watched Zelenskyy play President Vasyl Holoborodko in *Servant of the People*, experiencing his fictional presidency across dozens of episodes and multiple emotional arcs. When Zelenskyy announced his real candidacy in December 2018, voters confronted not the question “Can we imagine this comedian as president?” but rather “Should we elect the president we have already emotionally experienced?”

The Ukrainian case represents an extreme manifestation of a phenomenon increasingly visible across electoral democracies: the deployment of long-form fictional narratives as preconditioning that shapes the emotional and cognitive substrates upon which campaigns subsequently build. Unlike traditional campaign communications such as advertisements, debates, and rallies, which are recognized as persuasion attempts and thus trigger critical evaluation, political films operate through what scholars⁶⁶ theorize as narrative transportation: the psychological state in which audiences suspend critical faculties and process stories experientially rather than analytically.

This article examines three Eastern European cases in which fictional narratives appeared in proximity to electoral cycles: Ukraine’s *Servant of the People* (2015–2019), Romania’s *The Perfect Candidate* (2024), and Moldova’s *Plaha* (2025). While these cases differ dramatically in institutional settings, media environments, and political outcomes, they exhibit structural similarities in deploying narrative frames that align with campaign objectives.

We analyze them not as determinative of electoral outcomes but as components within broader persuasion ecosystems, where strategic storytelling functions as a soft preconditioning mechanism.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Existing research addresses components of this phenomenon but not their intersection. The strategic narratives literature⁶⁷ explains how political actors compete to impose meaning through system, identity, and issue narratives, but treats narratives primarily as elite communications rather than mass entertainment. Conversely, entertainment-education research^{68,69} documents how audiences internalize beliefs through fictional storytelling but rarely examine electoral politics.

We bridge this gap by theorizing political films as strategic narrative vectors leveraging entertainment-education mechanisms for electoral purposes. Our

66 Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock. 2000. “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (November): 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>.

67 Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. 2013. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge.

68 Bandura, Albert. 2004. “Social Cognitive Theory for Personal and Social Change by Enabling Media.” In *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice*, edited by Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, 75–96. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

69 Slater, Michael D., and Donna Rouner. 2002. “Entertainment-Education and Elaboration Likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion.” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 2 (May): 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00265.x>.

contribution identifies the use of emotionally absorptive long-form fiction to establish cognitive-affective templates that campaigns later activate through associative priming.

The technology operates through what we conceptualize as a five-stage pipeline:

1. Entertainment-framed entry lowers epistemic vigilance.
2. Narrative transportation produces experiential processing.
3. Archetypal encoding creates durable cognitive templates.
4. Emotional priming establishes latent affective associations.
5. Electoral activation triggers pre-positioned cognitive structures.

Each stage leverages well-documented psychological mechanisms, but their combination and deliberate deployment in electoral contexts represent an evolution in campaign strategy deserving systematic analysis.

The post-communist context provides particularly fertile ground for this phenomenon due to three converging factors: weak party institutionalization creating space for personality-based politics; widespread cynicism making traditional messaging less effective while increasing receptivity to anti-establishment narratives; and hybrid media ecosystems enabling rapid transmedia amplification through social platforms.⁷⁰

CASE I: UKRAINE 2019 – PROSPECTIVE MOBILIZATION

Servant of the People premiered in October 2015 on 1+1, Ukraine's most-watched TV channel. The series followed high school history teacher Vasyl Holoborodko (Zelenskyy), whose profanity-laden rant against corruption goes viral, propelling him to the presidency. Across 51 episodes, audiences watched

Holoborodko navigate political intrigue while maintaining authenticity and moral clarity.

The narrative established Zelenskyy-as-Holoborodko within powerful archetypal frames. The reluctant hero archetype – ordinary people thrust into extraordinary circumstances – provided aspirational identification while maintaining accessibility. Unlike traditional politicians, Holoborodko embodied the civic ideal: competent without being elite, principled without being inflexible, tough without being cruel.⁷¹

Crucially, the series generated hope – the rarest and most powerful political emotion. Audiences experienced simulated reform success, watching anti-corruption measures implemented, oligarchs prosecuted, and institutions rebuilt. This emotional priming established latent associations between outsider leadership and systemic change that Zelenskyy's campaign would later activate.

When Zelenskyy announced his candidacy on December 31, 2018, the critical moment had already passed. Voters had spent years in a parasocial relationship with President Holoborodko. The campaign merely activated pre-existing emotional bonds and archetypal templates.^{72,73} His victory speech was telling: "I'm not a politician. I'm just a simple person who came to break this system."⁷⁴ This was the verbatim articulation of the Holoborodko character voters had internalized. The Ukrainian case demonstrates prospective mobilization while creating enthusiasm for future change through aspirational outsider leadership, a narrative that became psychologically real before political reality emerged.

Table 1 illustrates a narrative pattern of the story built around **hope and trust**, following a **reluctant hero** arc across a long, multi-series storyline. Therefore, through extended exposure, the audience develops **parasocial trust** in an ordinary man unexpectedly elevated to power. His character is continuously tested, reinforcing moral consistency and building credibility. The emotional journey moves from frustration with the status quo to belief in change and,

70 Hutchings, Stephen, and Vera Tolz. 2015. *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*. London: Routledge.

71 Dal Cin, Sonya, Mark P. Zanna, and Geoffrey T. Fong. 2004. "Narrative Persuasion and Overcoming Resistance." In *Resistance and Persuasion*, edited by Eric S. Knowles and Jay A. Linn, 175–191. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

72 Brown, William J. 2015. "Examining Four Processes of Audience Involvement with Media Personae: Transportation, Parasocial Interaction, Identification, and Worship." *Communication Theory* 25, no. 3 (August): 259–283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comm.12053>.

73 Giles, David C. 2002. "Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research." *Media Psychology* 4, no. 3: 279–305. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532785XMEP0403_04.

74 Zelenskyy, Volodymyr. 2019. "Victory Speech [Speech]." Kyiv, Ukraine, April 21, 2019.

Table 1 – Narrative Arc Structure

Standardized narrative arc analysis: *Servant of the People* (Ukraine 2019). Table created with Claude, AI technology, on 25 October, 2025, with prompt to analyze the series plot from the perspective of the discussed theories.

| INDICATOR | DESCRIPTION |
|-------------------------|--|
| Dominant Emotion | Hope, trust, aspirational optimism |
| Archetypal Pattern | Reluctant hero (Campbell’s Monomyth) |
| Temporal Structure | Long preparation: 4 years (2015–2019), 51 episodes |
| Psychological Mechanism | Parasocial bonding through extended exposure → Trust accumulation |
| Entry Point | Ordinary man thrust into power (viral video) |
| Character Development | Integrity tested repeatedly → Moral consistency established |
| Emotional Trajectory | Frustration (status quo) → Hope (change possible) → Trust (character proven) |
| Climax/Resolution | Small victories demonstrate that change is difficult but achievable |
| Viewer Conditioning | “I know this person” → “I trust their character” → “They won’t betray us” |
| Electoral Translation | Parasocial trust → Political support (73 percent landslide victory) |
| Political Function | Aspirational mobilization → Creating hope for transformative outsider |

ultimately, trust in the protagonist. Small but symbolic victories signal that transformation is possible. This enables **aspirational mobilization in the electoral context** and provides a space for an outsider-driven catalyst of political change.

CASE II: ROMANIA 2024 – PROSPECTIVE DEMOBILIZATION

The Perfect Candidate premiered in September 2024, two months before Romania’s presidential and parliamentary elections. Unlike *Servant’s* episodic buildup, *Perfect Candidate* operated through concentrated satirical intensity, depicting the entire political system as a corrupt conspiracy.

The narrative centers on an ordinary, incompetent guy with a senseless life. Costică is recruited by the intelligence services to run as a presidential candidate because his incompetence guarantees controllability. The film systematically reveals democratic processes as theater: campaigns as manipulation, debates as scripted performance, elections as predetermined outcomes. Every institution – parties, media, and civil society – exists only to maintain the illusion of choice while elites extract rents.⁷⁵

The archetypal structure positions the anti-hero fool: a protagonist neither heroic nor villainous, but pathetic, revealing systemic absurdity through incompetent participation. This choice proves strategically crucial. Had *Perfect Candidate* featured a heroic

75 Converse, Philip E. 1964. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In *Ideology and Discontent*, edited by David E. Apter, 206–261. New York: Free Press.

Table 2 – Narrative Arc Structure

Standardized narrative arc analysis: *The Perfect Candidate* (Romania 2024). Table created with Claude, AI technology on October 25, 2025, with prompt to analyze the series plot from the perspective of the discussed theories.

| INDICATOR | DESCRIPTION |
|-------------------------|---|
| Dominant Emotion | Cynicism, despair, futility |
| Archetypal Pattern | Anti-hero fool (inverted hero journey) |
| Temporal Structure | Medium preparation: months before election, single 90-minute film |
| Psychological Mechanism | Dark comedy → Bitter recognition → Systemic conspiracy schema |
| Entry Point | Pathetic protagonist with absurd motivation (parking revenge) |
| Character Development | No transformation; remains ridiculous throughout (anti-catharsis) |
| Emotional Trajectory | Recognition (laugh) → Cynicism (worse than thought) → Despair (no escape) |
| Climax/Resolution | Either outcome confirms corruption; system always wins |
| Viewer Conditioning | “All politicians corrupt” → “System is conspiracy” → “Why bother voting?” |
| Electoral Translation | Mainstream demobilization → Space for anti-system candidates |
| Political Function | Cynical demobilization: reinforcing despair about endemic corruption |

Note. This narrative inverts traditional hero structures to create learned helplessness. By depicting all political actors as equally corrupt conspirators, it delegitimizes mainstream options, depresses turnout among pro-democratic voters, and potentially benefits radical alternatives who position themselves outside the system.

reformer exposing corruption, it would have generated mobilized anger. Instead, presenting corruption as so total that even protagonists are complicit generates demobilizing despair.

The film’s release coincided with Călin Georgescu’s emergence – an independent candidate promoting sovereigntist, anti-establishment, and orthodox-nationalist positions. Georgescu’s sudden first-round victory (22.9 percent) shocked analysts. Post-election analysis revealed massive TikTok amplification, suggesting coordinated external intervention.⁷⁶

Romania’s Constitutional Court annulled the elections on December 6, 2024, citing evidence of foreign interference and “massive manipulation of the democratic process.”⁷⁷ While establishing direct causation between *Perfect Candidate* and Georgescu’s rise proves impossible, the temporal correlation and functional alignment are striking.

Perfect Candidate created despair about present corruption that discouraged mainstream participation while potentially benefiting radical alternatives. The mechanism – narrative transportation, archetypal

76 DFRLab. 2024. “Romania’s Social Media Election Interference: Preliminary Analysis.” Atlantic Council (blog). Accessed [date]. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

77 CCR Decision 32/2024. 2024. “Curtea Constituțională a României.” <https://www.ccr.ro/>.

Table 3 – Narrative Arc Structure

Standardized narrative arc analysis: Plaha (Moldova 2025). Table created with Claude, AI technology on October 25, 2025, with prompt to analyze the series plot from the perspective of the discussed theories.

| INDICATOR | DESCRIPTION |
|-------------------------|--|
| Archetypal Pattern | Systemic villain (network corruptor) |
| Temporal Structure | Compressed: 2 weeks before election, multi-part serial (8+ hours) |
| Psychological Mechanism | Historical dramatization → Horror recognition → Justified compromises |
| Entry Point | 2025 frame asking “How did we get here?” → Flashback to 2016–2019 |
| Character Development | Not protagonist-centered; focus on systemic capture mechanisms |
| Emotional Trajectory | Stability (2025) → Horror (past revealed) → Relief (nightmare ended) |
| Climax/Resolution | Unlikely coalition removes villain through moral compromise |
| Viewer Conditioning | “Never again allow capture” → “Compromises were necessary” → “Current order justified” |
| Electoral Translation | Retrospective legitimization → Vote for continuity vs. risk of return |
| Political Function | Retrospective legitimization: justifying past political changes and compromises |
| Political Function | Cynical demobilization: reinforcing despair about endemic corruption |

Note. This narrative uses a circular temporal structure – past horrors justify present compromises. Unlike Ukraine’s prospective hope or Romania’s prospective despair, Moldova’s narrative is retrospective, teaching viewers that sometimes distasteful political deals are the price of preventing worse outcomes. The broadcast timing (two weeks prior to the election) maximizes recency effects while minimizing counter-narrative time.

encoding, and emotional priming – operated identically to *Servant of the People* but with opposite political valence.

Table 2 illustrates how the core narrative frame of **despair and futility** revolves around an **anti-hero, the fool**. This film, released before the election, uses dark comedy to guide viewers from amusement to bitter recognition and a **systemic-conspiracy mindset**. The protagonist enters as an absurd figure that never evolves and produces deliberate anti-catharsis. The emotional arc transitions from laughter to deep cynicism and a sense of hopeless entrapment. No matter the plot’s resolution, the system appears irrevocably

corrupt. This aims to encourage **political apathy** and the belief that all politicians are corrupt and that voting is pointless.

CASE III: MOLDOVA 2025 – RETROSPECTIVE CONSOLIDATION

Plaha is the multi-episode drama series broadcast in Moldova’s final two weeks before the 2025 parliamentary elections, depicting events from 2016 to 2019: the state capture network orchestrated by oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc and the unprecedented coalition that forced his removal.

Plahotniuc, despite never holding formal executive office, exercised near-total control over Moldova through systematic institutional capture.⁷⁸ His power rested on controlling parliament through purchased and compromised loyalty, controlling the judiciary through appointing dependent judges, and controlling the media through ownership and intimidation.⁷⁹

The archetypal structure positions Plaha–Plahotniuc as a systemic villain – not merely a corrupt individual, but a corruptor who built capture institutions persisting beyond his person. This framing proves politically critical: if portrayed as an individual bad actor, removal appears sufficient; as a systemic architect, continued vigilance seems necessary.

Plaha's 2025 broadcast, six years after the events, employed sophisticated dramatization, reconstructing them through investigative journalism, leaked documents, and insider testimony. The series depicted the mechanics of vote-buying, judicial corruption, media capture, and economic schemes with detail that made abstract concepts viscerally comprehensible.

From an emotional perspective, *Plaha* generates retrospective horror – audiences experience delayed recognition of thorough state capture – serving a justificatory function: making removal appear not merely desirable but morally imperative. The relief creates emotional anchoring: “we escaped something terrible” that makes the status quo feel valuable by comparison.⁸⁰

Plaha's electoral timing – two weeks before voting – suggests a clear political intention. Production by pro-authority media indicates coordination with governing circles, consolidating the post-Plahotniuc order through retrospective legitimation.

Table 3 illustrates the mechanics of narrative that elicits **retrospective horror**, followed by **relief** and **pragmatic acceptance**, built around an archetype of the **systemic villain**. Released shortly before the election as an extended serial, it reconstructs past events

through historical dramatization, directing viewers from stability in the present to shock about earlier systemic capture. The story plot shows how the villain's network of corruption operated, and ambiguous compromises were the only chance to escape. The emotional arc moves from horror to relief that the worst is over. This logic legitimizes political change and frames compromises as necessary, thereby encouraging voters **to oppose regression**.

SYNTHESIS: MECHANISM AND VARIATION

The core mechanism operates through five steps documented across all cases despite substantial differences:

First, narrative entry through entertainment framing lowers epistemic vigilance. Audiences approach political films seeking pleasure rather than belief formation, meaning critical defenses against persuasion remain deactivated. All cases were consumed as entertainment, even by viewers recognizing political content.

Second, narrative transportation produces experiential rather than analytical processing. Once engaged, viewers enter a state where attention narrows to the narrative world, imagery becomes vivid, emotions intensify, and critical evaluation decreases.⁸¹

Third, archetypal encoding creates durable cognitive templates that persist after conscious memory fades. Specific archetypes varied – reluctant hero versus anti-hero fool, versus systemic villain – but the encoding mechanism operated consistently.⁸²

Fourth, emotional priming establishes latent associations between political themes and affective states. Each narrative generated emotions encoded with political content. These associations persist in implicit memory, rapidly reactivating when campaigns activate thematic resonance.⁸³

78 Tudoroiu, Theodor. 2020. “Moldova’s ‘Twitter Revolution’ that Never Was: State Resilience and Electoral Manipulation.” *Democratization* 27, no. 8: 1367–1385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1793043>.

79 Freedom House. 2019. “Freedom in the World 2019: Moldova.” Accessed September 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2019>.

80 Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina, and Dacian Dumulescu. 2019. “The Costs of State Capture in Moldova.” Government Transparency Institute. Accessed [September, 2025]. <https://www.againstcorruption.eu/>.

81 Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock. 2000. “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (November): 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>.

82 Brewer, William F., and Glenn V. Nakamura. 1984. “The Nature and Functions of Schemas.” In *Handbook of Social Cognition*, edited by Robert S. Wyer Jr. and Thomas K. Srull, 1:119–160. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

83 Reber, Rolf, and Norbert Unkelbach. 2010. “The Epistemic Status of Processing Fluency as Source for Judgments of Truth.” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1, no. 4 (December): 563–581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-010-0039-7>.

Fifth, electoral activation occurs when campaign environments present stimuli matching film-established templates and emotional keys. Voters enter decision contexts with cognitive-affective structures pre-positioned by narrative consumption.

While this mechanism operated uniformly, political functions varied. *Servant of the People* performed prospective mobilization; *Perfect Candidate* performed prospective demobilization; *Plaha* performed retrospective consolidation, legitimizing past changes. This functional diversity confirms we are identifying general-purpose technology rather than a mechanism tied to specific ideological goals.

Ethical consideration: Tables are created with AI, and grammar clarity checked by AI in accordance with the Oxford University guidelines of safe and responsible use of AI.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This analysis reveals a sophisticated campaign technology exploiting fundamental features of narrative cognition that make it psychologically portable across diverse electoral contexts. While Eastern Europe's weak institutions and hybrid media environment may intensify operation, the underlying psychology transcends regional specifics.

For democratic theory, this poses challenges. Traditional models assume voters make reasoned choices based on policy comparison and candidate evaluation. Yet, our cases demonstrate how narrative preconditioning establishes emotional and cognitive structures, shaping "choice" before campaigns begin. This doesn't eliminate agency but constrains it in ways citizens don't consciously recognize.

For campaign regulation, current frameworks prove inadequate. Electoral laws govern spending limits, advertising disclosure, and debate formats, all of which are explicit attempts at persuasion. But entertainment products consumed months or years before elections fall outside regulatory purview, even when serving clearly political functions. The "bypass mechanism" isn't just psychological but legal.

For democratic resilience, implications prove mixed. The technology could enhance democratic participation by making politics emotionally accessible and civically engaging – *Servant of the People* arguably increased Ukrainian political interest. Yet, it could also manipulate through mechanisms citizens cannot consciously resist; *Perfect Candidate*'s demobilization potentially facilitated external interference.



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