

The Final Target Is Trust

by Daniel Vodă



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ABSTRACT

Moldova's recent electoral cycles provide one of Europe's clearest stress tests of democratic resilience. The [2024 presidential election](#) and [constitutional referendum](#), followed by the [2025 parliamentary election](#), were conducted under sustained pressure from illicit financing, political proxies, cyberattacks, disinformation and organised vote buying. Yet citizens voted, institutions adapted and the constitutional order held. Moldova should therefore be treated not only as a recipient of democratic solidarity, but also as a source of operational knowledge useful for the upcoming elections cycles around Europe. This paper distills seven lessons. Interference usually begins with a real weakness

rather than a fabricated story; the visible message is only the surface of a wider infrastructure; elections are the harvest, not the beginning, of an influence operation; and the strategic objective is to erode trust. Russia remains the immediate and best-documented aggressor, while China's different, longer-term methods require a distinct risk lens. The policy answer is permanent preparedness: faster intelligence sharing, action against illicit finance, enforceable platform protocols, support for local media and investigative journalism, joint attribution and sanctions, and long-term investment in governance and civic resilience.

ARGUMENTATION

Moldova is a democratic stress test, not a cautionary footnote. The country did not choose to become a frontline case study in cognitive warfare. Geography and Russia's war against Ukraine made that choice for it. Nevertheless, Moldova's experience now offers unusually practical evidence about how an open society can be pressured without a formal declaration of war. The [OSCE/ODIHR final report on the 2025 parliamentary election](#) found that the contest was competitive and election day was orderly and transparent, while the process was marred by serious foreign interference, illicit financing, cyberattacks and widespread disinformation. This dual finding matters. Democratic resilience is not the absence of attack; it is the capacity to preserve meaningful choice, institutional legality and public confidence while an attack is under way. Moldova's value to its partners lies precisely in this combination of vulnerability, adaptation and democratic persistence.

1. Moldova has hard-earned democratic instincts.

For more than two centuries, Moldovans have lived under, beside or in the shadow of Russian power. This history creates vulnerabilities, but it also produces political intuition. Many citizens recognise familiar patterns early: pressure through identity and language; the instrumentalisation of energy and Orthodox networks; nostalgia for an imagined past; fear of war; and corruption presented as ordinary politics. These instincts do not make Moldova immune. Familiarity can also normalise manipulation, and social divisions remain exploitable. But they provide early warning knowledge that cannot be obtained from monitoring dashboards alone. Moldova has not learnt Russian interference from reports; it has learnt it from geography, history and daily

politics. European partners should therefore treat Chişinău as a contributor to doctrine, training and scenario design, not merely as a beneficiary of assistance. The EU Council made this logic explicit in March 2026 when it invited the Union to draw lessons from the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova for other theatres. Moldova's experience is exportable operational knowledge.

2. Interference rarely starts with a lie; it starts with a weakness.

The first target is often a genuine frustration, that was our case too: low incomes, unequal opportunity, a court case that never ends, a village that feels abandoned, a reform whose costs arrive before its benefits, or fear that the war next door may cross the border. Hostile actors do not need to invent every grievance. They identify one, strip it of context, attach an enemy to it and distribute it through networks that make anger look larger and more unanimous than it is. A lie travels faster when it finds a real wound in society, that is the lesson I have learned on day 1 of the Spokesperson job at the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs during COVID-2019 crisis. This is why resilience cannot be reduced to fact-checking or correcting false posts. It also requires better public services, credible justice, visible consequences for corruption and faster answers to citizens' concerns. Communication cannot compensate indefinitely for weak governance. Equally, authorities should not label every criticism as manipulation: doing so confuses democratic dissent with hostile interference and gives hostile actors a new grievance to exploit. The strongest counter-narrative is often a solved problem, explained honestly.

3. The visible message is only the surface. A fabricated video or viral post is rarely the whole

operation. Behind it may sit financiers, political proxies, opaque media ownership, criminal intermediaries, data brokers, bot networks, paid protests, cyber pressure and diplomatic intimidation. [Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service](#) reported that a Moscow-based command structure supported the 2024 interference effort with financial, media, human, logistical and technical resources. The [EU's June 2026 sanctions listings](#) illustrate the same ecosystem: successor political entities, Russian coordinators, a Russia-based organisation, vote-buying schemes, disinformation and the penetration of church structures. By that point, EU measures applied to 29 individuals and five entities under the Moldova regime. The lesson is operational: do not chase content while leaving the machinery intact. Connect strategic communication with electoral oversight, financial intelligence, anti-corruption bodies, law enforcement, cybersecurity, independent regulators and sanctions authorities. Please mind that a post is visible on Social Media; the infrastructure behind it is the real problem. Moldova's example shows the importance of mapping it, exposing it and dismantling it, with judicial oversight and due process.

4. Elections are not the beginning of the attack; they are the harvest. By the time a campaign officially opens, hostile networks may already have cultivated narratives, recruited influencers, tested emotional triggers, prepared local intermediaries and moved money. Election season is when this accumulated capacity is activated and measured. In 2025, ODIHR documented inauthentic networks using AI-generated videos, troll farms and automated bots, while platform responses to notifications from authorities and civil society were judged inadequate. Cyberattacks targeted public infrastructure and the credibility of the Central Electoral Commission. Preparing only during the campaign therefore guarantees a structural disadvantage. Monitoring, public communication, civic education, media support, financial tracing and institutional exercises must be permanent. Electoral bodies need standing crisis protocols and trusted channels with banks, platforms, cybersecurity teams and prosecutors long before the first campaign poster appears. If we start defending democracy only during elections, we are defending it too late.

5. Look beyond the bear: the dragon uses different methods. Russia remains the most aggressive and best-documented foreign actor in Moldova. Its toolkit is disruptive and coercive: political proxies, illicit money, information flooding, energy pressure, cyber operations and the amplification of social conflict. China presents a different strategic challenge. Publicly available evidence of direct Chinese electoral interference in Moldova is far more limited, and the two actors should not be treated as interchangeable. Yet democratic risk mapping must look beyond the immediate attacker. [NATO's assessment of China's hybrid methods](#) highlights economic leverage, strategic dependencies, critical infrastructure, technology, cyber operations and disinformation. These are slower instruments, often

embedded in otherwise legitimate commercial or institutional relationships. Artificial intelligence is also lowering the cost of translation, synthetic media, persona creation and micro-targeting for every authoritarian actor and its proxies. Behind the bear, there is often a dragon - different methods, but the same opportunity to test democratic weakness. Moldova and its partners should therefore monitor procurement, telecoms and cloud dependencies, data access, opaque investment, research links and elite networks through evidence-based screening. The response should be transparency and reciprocity, not indiscriminate suspicion.

6. An assertive coalition of democracies must act at operational speed. Solidarity is important, but speed is decisive. A country under cognitive pressure needs support while hostile networks can still be disrupted, not after the public agenda has already been shaped. That means faster intelligence and threat sharing, rapid action against illicit political finance, platform protocols that work in the languages citizens actually use, joint attribution, coordinated sanctions and durable support for local media and civil society. The [EU Council's March 2026 conclusions](#) provide a strong basis: they call for continuous vigilance, rapid response, stronger intelligence, action on online platforms and lessons drawn from Moldova. The next step is to make those commitments operational before the next crisis. In this field, slow support is often symbolic support; fast support can be deterrence.

7. The real battlefield is trust. The strategic goal of hostile interference is rarely to make every citizen believe one lie. It is to convince enough people that nobody is honest, nothing is knowable and democratic institutions cannot protect them. Once that cynicism takes hold, contradictory narratives can coexist; their shared purpose is paralysis. The answer must protect trust in elections, public institutions, journalism, local communities and the European path. Trust is built when institutions are competent, rules are applied fairly, leaders admit uncertainty, public money is traceable and abuse has consequences. Democratic defence can itself damage trust if it relies on opaque takedowns, last-minute legal changes, selective enforcement or partisan state communication. ODIHR's 2026 report rightly paired stronger protection against interference with legal certainty, effective remedy and transparent counter-disinformation measures. For Moldova, this is also the heart of European integration. The EU is not only a geopolitical destination; it is the promise that rules can be fair, institutions can serve people and small states do not have to live under imperial pressure. Every credible reform in justice, public administration, energy security, competition or media freedom therefore reduces the attack surface. Security policy must remain visibly democratic, or it will reproduce the distrust it seeks to defeat.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Operationalise the coalition through practical commitments. Moldova, the EU, G7 partners and other like-minded democracies should build on the professional network of practitioners, public institutions, media and the existing bilateral channels through the following measures.

1. On a pan-European level, it is advisable to create a permanent democratic-resilience mechanism.

Establish a small, secure coordination cell linking Moldova's electoral, intelligence, financial, cyber, law-enforcement and communication authorities with designated EU and partner-country counterparts. It should exchange indicators throughout the political cycle, run quarterly exercises and activate a joint protocol when agreed thresholds are crossed. This should reinforce, not duplicate, existing bodies.

2. Treat illicit political finance as a security threat and a criminal economy.

Create joint financial-investigation teams able to trace cross-border transfers, cash couriers, prepaid cards, crypto-assets, sham organisations and beneficial owners. Partners should provide rapid access to financial intelligence, help prepare court-ready and sanctions-ready evidence, and coordinate asset freezes. Investigations and penalties must remain subject to clear law, independent courts and appeal.

3. Negotiate enforceable crisis protocols with online platforms.

Platforms should maintain properly staffed Romanian- and Russian-language teams; 24/7 points of contact; response-time commitments for coordinated inauthentic behaviour; searchable political-ad libraries; and transparent rules for AI-generated content. Authorities should publish aggregate data on notices, platform decisions and appeals, protecting both electoral integrity and freedom of expression.

4. Fund trusted information where vulnerability is greatest.

Shift from short project grants to multi-year, arms-length support for independent local media outside Chişinău, including Russian- and Gagauz-language journalism, community reporting, audience research, digital security and sustainable advertising capacity. Expand funding for cross-border investigative journalism and civil-society research that

can expose networks before election day, without giving donors editorial control.

5. Attribute hostile operations jointly and impose costs quickly.

Agree in advance how evidence will be assessed and which actors can speak for the coalition. When the threshold is met, issue coordinated attribution, diplomatic action and targeted sanctions within days, not months. Align EU measures with the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and other partners, and share relevant indicators with banks and platforms. Attribution delayed until the operation is over has little deterrent value.

6. Invest in civic resilience as enduring public infrastructure.

Fund media and election literacy in schools, local dialogue, community organisations, diaspora outreach and practical crisis education over three- to five-year cycles. Pair this with faster grievance handling, clear reform communication and visible improvements in services. Measure whether citizens can recognise manipulation, find reliable information and obtain an answer from institutions - not merely how many workshops were held.

7. Make democratic safeguards part of the security architecture.

Publish regular threat assessments, the legal basis for interventions and aggregate takedown data; ensure independent oversight, judicial review and meaningful appeal; and consult parties, media and civil society on durable rules well before elections. Counter-interference powers should be tested for necessity, proportionality and political neutrality. A democracy cannot defend trust through measures that citizens are asked to accept blindly.

8. Measure response time and real-world outcomes.

Partners should track the time from detection to intelligence sharing, investigation, platform action, public attribution, asset freezing and assistance disbursement. They should also monitor local-media reach, case outcomes, institutional trust and the recurrence of known networks. Funding decisions should reward durable capacity and learning. In this field, slow support is often symbolic support. Fast support can be deterrence.

CONCLUSIONS

Moldova's record is neither a story of helplessness nor a declaration of victory. It is the record of a democracy with hard-earned instincts that has preserved competitive elections and continued its European course while confronting sustained pressure. Its institutions made mistakes, learnt and adapted; its citizens retained meaningful political choice.

The country's experience requires three analytical shifts. Democracies must move from correcting lies to repairing the weaknesses that give them traction; from monitoring messages to dismantling the infrastructure that finances and distributes them; and from campaign-season defence to permanent preparedness.

Russia is the acute threat, while China's distinct methods require a longer-range, evidence-based lens.

The policy implication is straightforward. Moldova needs partners that are faster, more practical and more political, while its own institutions must be more transparent, fair and responsive. External deterrence and internal democratic reform are not competing agendas. Together they protect the public's confidence that rules matter and democratic choices will be respected.

The final target is not information. The final target is trust - and trust is the infrastructure of democracy.

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