

Policy Brief: Moldova in Focus

Country Office Republic of Moldova



How to win this war? Hybrid Threats and Democratic Resilience in the Republic of Moldova

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Republic of Moldova is currently contending with a multidimensional onslaught of hybrid threats, most of which are traceable to coordinated efforts by the Russian Federation. The escalation of these tactics, especially in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election and the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 28, 2025, reflects a broader Kremlin strategy of strategic disruption across Eastern Europe. The hybrid warfare spectrum now includes algorithmically tailored disinformation, foreign information manipulations and interference, electoral corruption, institutional infiltration, cyber sabotage, and energy coercion. Far from seeking electoral influence alone, these actions are aimed at structurally weakening Moldova's democratic institutions, polarizing its electorate, and arresting its EU integration trajectory.

Key Findings

- Moldova has become a laboratory for next-generation hybrid operations, featuring artificial intelligence-powered disinformation, staged civil unrest, weaponised media influencers, and state-directed economic leverage.
- According to findings by investigative journalists and confirmed through law enforcement investigations, an estimated 5-10% of the electorate during the 2024 presidential elections and concurrent referendum were likely mobilized through vote buying mechanisms sponsored by Russian-aligned proxies.
- The Moldovan state suffers from acute deficits in institutional preparedness, particularly within its cybersecurity apparatus, judicial structures, and oversight mechanisms.
- Social media ecosystems, particularly TikTok, Facebook and Telegram, have been instrumentalised for mass psychological manipulation, circumventing conventional regulatory frameworks and disproportionately targeting across different demographics.

Strategic Recommendations

- Facilitate coalitional alignment among centrist pro-European parties and equip civil society with advanced tools to detect and counteract malign influence operations.
- Augment digital and electoral regulatory frameworks with advanced monitoring capabilities and inter-agency task forces.
- Establish institutionalized cooperation platforms with EU and NATO stakeholders to coordinate real-time threat detection and response.
- Strengthen prosecutorial independence and investigative capabilities to dismantle illicit financing networks underpinning vote buying.

INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical salience of Moldova has intensified markedly in light of the ongoing Russian War against Ukraine and changes in the environment of the European security architecture. Moldova has emerged as a focal point for hybrid interference orchestrated by the Russian state and affiliated non-state actors. The 2024 electoral cycle offered critical insights into the evolving nature of this interference, which extends into strategic corruption, cyber sabotage, and electoral manipulation. Given the deteriorating security environment on Ukraine's eastern front and the Kremlin's renewed assertiveness in the Black Sea region

Moldova constitutes a vulnerable node within the Euro-Atlantic periphery. A successful hybrid campaign in Moldova could catalyse a cascade of destabilising effects across the region.

The objective of the Policy Brief is:

- To systematically map the typologies, tools, and actors behind hybrid threats targeting Moldova.
- To evaluate structural weaknesses across Moldova's institutional landscape.
- To delineate actionable and evidence-based interventions for both domestic and international actors invested in Moldova's democratic consolidation.

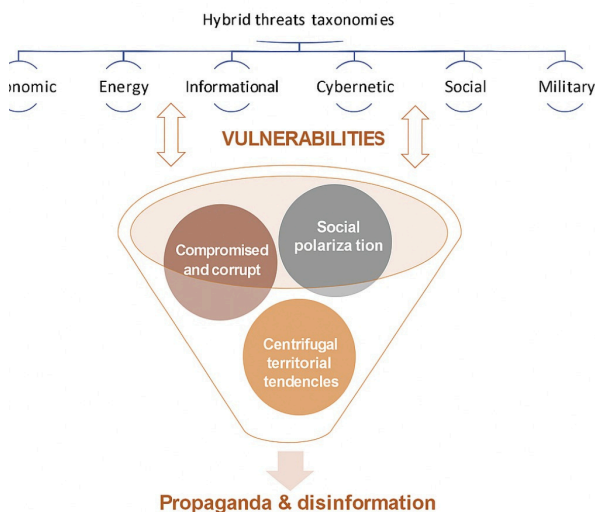
ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW

Typologies of Hybrid Threats and Their Operational Vectors

Hybrid threats, by their nature, defy simple categorisation, they blend conventional and unconventional tactics, exploit systemic vulnerabilities, and operate across multiple domains simultaneously (Regan and Sari 2024). Hybrid tactics do not operate in silos, they are interwoven into a strategic choreography aimed at undermining public trust, delegitimising democratic institutions, and fracturing political consensus.

In Moldova, these threats are not abstract risks but lived realities, manifesting through daily episodes of informational manipulation, cyber sabotage, political subversion, and economic coercion. What makes Moldova particularly susceptible is not merely its geopolitical location but the confluence of fragile institutions, polarized society, and unresolved territorial disputes.

This section presents six principal typologies of hybrid threats currently deployed in Moldova. These are not speculative or emerging dangers, they are operational, empirically observed, and increasingly embedded in the country's electoral and governance ecosystems.



The classification provided here reflects both their functional roles in the hybrid warfare spectrum and their contextual expression in the Moldovan case.

Disinformation and Influence Operations.

Moldova has seen an intensification of digital propaganda, particularly on TikTok and Telegram, which are used to disseminate content framed to incite distrust in democratic processes. These campaigns frequently utilize AI-generated deepfakes, pseudo-news anchors, and misleading political commentary to distort public perception. For instance, in 2024, coordinated TikTok accounts promoted narratives that the EU accession process would force conscription of Moldovan youth, a claim without basis but one that resonated with young voters (PISA 2025).

Electoral Engineering due to the fact that vote buying has transformed into a systemic and internationalised instrument of electoral interference (Volontiru 2024). Shor-affiliated proxies and agents with connections to Russian business networks facilitated the distribution of cash, consumer goods, and transport vouchers to economically vulnerable populations, particularly in rural areas and the diaspora. Evidence from Promo-LEX and civil society observers indicates that in some districts, over 10% of votes may have been directly incentivized, significantly distorting the democratic outcome (Promo-LEX 2024).

Sociopolitical Provocation, Moldova has experienced staged protest mobilisations aimed at projecting an image of political crisis. In May 2024, protests ostensibly organised by grassroots movements against energy price hikes were later revealed to have been funded through opaque NGO fronts linked to Kremlin intermediaries. Simultaneously, social media manipulation weaponized polarizing issues, such as minority rights and religious freedom, to inflame existing divisions.

Cyber Hostilities. Moldova has endured a surge of cyber incursions, ranging from ransomware attacks on media outlets to coordinated bomb threat hoaxes at educational institutions. These attacks serve dual purposes: undermining trust in public safety systems and distracting institutional attention away from longer-term policy goals. Cybersecurity analysis from regional partners indicates a signature consistent with the GRU-affiliated APT28 group.

Political Fragmentation Tactics. Russia's strategy includes artificially inflating electoral pluralism through the creation or co-option of political movements that siphon votes from the pro-European center. Political parties with minimal public presence before 2024, surged in visibility through disproportionate access to advertising and social media amplification.

Energy Coercion. The energy dependency on Transnistrian sources is being tactically manipulated to generate instability. In winter 2024, Gazprom-imposed restrictions and Transnistrian sabotage of energy delivery systems were timed to coincide with peak electoral campaigning, inducing rolling blackouts in several pro-government constituencies and amplifying public frustration.

Vote Buying as an Instrument of Strategic Subversion

Vote buying in Moldova has evolved from episodic electoral corruption into a vector of strategic foreign interference. It is not merely a transactional form of voter influence but a political technology employed to undermine institutional legitimacy and skew electoral mandates in favor of actors aligned with Moscow's objectives.

Illegal financing and financial resources from obscure sources, including from abroad. The numerous cases of transporting money from Russia by citizens as couriers, the use of cards and accounts in Russian banks in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova, the illegal and non-transparent involvement in the electoral campaign of groups not registered in the law,

non-transparent activity of some media sources, are the indications that reflect to a very large extent. the electoral campaign with money from obscure sources, including from countries. The presence and operation of a parallel banking system, outside any control of the constitutional authorities, favors the circulation of money from obscure sources and does not allow for a record or accounting of the real amounts spent for electoral purposes of an illegal nature and in a non-transparent manner. In 2024, by the General Inspectorate of Police, it was reported and documented a possible corruption of about 138,000 voters, corresponding to 8.8% of the total number of voting participants (1,564,495). Also, amounts of over 200 million euros were estimated, coming illegally and non-transparently from foreign sources (Russian Federation), and spent for electoral purposes, i.e. approx. 7 euros for each voter in the Republic of Moldova who participated in the vote. General Police Inspectorate announced that there are over 6 thousand misdemeanor sanctions related to electoral fraud and passive corruption charges (Europa Liberă, 2025).

According to the Intelligence and Security Service, external influence in 2024 was achieved using platforms, influence agents and tools typical of hybrid interference (SIS 2024). The main platforms used were the EVRAZIA entity and the so-called "victory" bloc; the influence agents were and remain the "Sor" organised criminal group, its affiliates and other individuals under international sanctions, as well as those wanted nationally and internationally; the tools used include clandestine financing by external subversive centers, disinformation, corruption, illegal financing of electoral campaigns, attempts at destabilisation, sabotage actions and others. Russian interference was exercised on multiple vectors, including:

- amplification of radical tendencies of a separatist-autonomist nature;
- RF interference in the electoral process in the Republic of Moldova;
- subversive operations carried out by Russian special services;
- exploitation of elements of organised crime.

Vote buying is also psychologically effective, it reinforces political apathy and fatalism, especially among low-income citizens who perceive elections as a spectacle of transactional loyalty rather than democratic choice. This erodes the democratic ethos and creates a feedback loop of vulnerability.

Institutional Capacities and Gaps

While Moldova has embraced democratic reform, institutional limitations continue to undermine its capacity to resist hybrid threats. These vulnerabilities are systemic and often exploited in real-time by hostile actors.

Cybersecurity Fragmentation: Moldova's cybersecurity infrastructure is decentralised, and there is little operational coordination between the Ministry of Internal Affairs, SIS, and private telecom entities. For example, in March 2024, during a simulated NATO cyber exercise, Moldova's institutional response failed to meet threshold coordination benchmarks.

Prosecutorial Passivity: The judiciary remains largely reactive. Investigations into illicit campaign financing have either stalled or failed to result in meaningful sanctions. WatchDog.md highlighted that in over 80% of documented financial irregularity cases, no charges were brought forward.

Instrumentalisation of corruption, considering that Russia has used corruption in Moldova to undermine the country's pro-Western political forces, to hinder its integration and cooperation in European and Euro-Atlantic structures, and to maintain its sphere of influence in the region. Corruption, as an instrument of Russia's hybrid warfare in Moldova, includes the following tactics: Bribing politicians and officials to influence political decisions in Russia's favor; Coopting Moldovan businesses through corrupt practices to exert economic influence; Financing political parties that support Russian interests; Engaging in money laundering and other financial crimes to undermine Moldova's economy; Bribing voters and creating a pyramid scheme to rig elections and referendums;

Influencing key legal cases and ensuring that corrupt actors or those aligned with foreign agendas avoid accountability.

The SIS report reveals that the Russian Federation clandestinely finances parties and campaigns, using methods such as transfers through offshore accounts and use of the MIR payment system.

These institutional gaps are not merely administrative inefficiencies, they are exploited deliberately as part of a strategy of attrition that renders the state structurally incapable of defending its democratic processes.

Key Lessons from the 2024 Electoral Cycle

The 2024 electoral cycle underscored both the resilience of Moldovan civil society and the limitations of its institutional response to hybrid interference. While diaspora networks and independent watchdogs played a critical role in detecting and publicizing irregularities, the state remained largely on the defensive.

One of the key takeaways is the instrumental use of emotional narratives on TikTok to sway the youth vote. Analysts identified over 500 coordinated short videos between August and October 2024 targeting female and first-time voters with disinformation about EU integration, suggesting the imposition of gender ideology or cultural dilution.

Telegram groups posing as community networks also circulated pre-election day instructions suggesting "ballot protection" from EU-aligned NGOs, falsely warning voters of rigged machines. These messages reached over 200,000 users within 48 hours.

Ultimately, Moldova's experience demonstrates that civil society alone cannot sustain the burden of defending democracy. Anticipatory institutional design, legal adaptation, and international technological cooperation are critical prerequisites for resilience against such evolving hybrid tactics.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These policy recommendations are targeted for Government and state actors that implement policies related to security and resilience. In addition, it is aimed at international partners and civil society organisations.

1. Political Cohesion and Narrative Framing

- Facilitate inter-party dialogues aimed at consolidating a democratic, pro-European electoral front.
- Develop locally resonant counter-narratives to neutralise identity-based disinformation.

2. Empowering Independent Media and Civil Society

- Provide structural funding for watchdog NGOs specializing in disinformation mapping.
- Mainstream media literacy within national curricula, prioritise digital discernment skills for youth demographics.

3. Enhancing Digital Resilience

- Institutionalise a Hybrid Threats Inter-Agency Response Cell linking SIS, CEC, and

the Ministry of Digitalisation.

- Expand algorithm auditing capacity in partnership with global technology platforms to detect coordinated inauthentic behavior.

4. Electoral Infrastructure Modernization

- Enact legislation criminalising coordinated vote buying with clearly defined prosecutorial pathways.
- Mandate campaign finance disclosures for foreign-origin contributions and enforce transparency via independent audits.

5. Multilateral Security and Intelligence Cooperation

- Operationalise a hybrid threat early-warning system in conjunction with Romanian and Ukrainian counterparts.
- Integrate Moldova into NATO's Center of Excellence for Strategic Communication and EU StratCom initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2025 parliamentary elections represent not only a national democratic exercise but a regional stress test for national resilience. The constellation of hybrid tactics deployed against Moldova demands an equally sophisticated, coordinated, and preemptive response. At stake is more than electoral integrity; it is the viability of Moldova's European future. The Kremlin's strategy is not to persuade Moldovan citizens but to delegitimize their institutions, incapacitate their governance, and weaponize their divisions.

Historical precedent demonstrates Moldova's capacity for resistance. However, this iteration of interference, armed with algorithmic precision and multi-vector infiltration, poses an existential challenge. The international community and domestic actors must act with urgency and strategic clarity.

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