

# Mapping Hybrid Interference

Lessons from Moldova's 2025 Parliamentary Elections

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS REPORT

JULY 2026



## A Vote at the Fault Line of Europe: Learnings from Moldova's 2025 Parliamentary Elections

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*Accompanying data analysis:* [A Data Driven Analysis: The Online Ecosystem ahead of the 2025 Moldovan Parliamentary Elections](#)

Moldova entered its September 2025 parliamentary elections at a moment of rare consequence, with rising geopolitical pressures magnifying what was already perceived as a pivotal vote. In a parliamentary republic, where control of the legislature determines both government formation and strategic direction, this vote assumed historic weight, a critical juncture over whether Moldova would consolidate its European path or succumb to Russian influence.

The patterns of interference preceding and accompanying Moldova's 2025 parliamentary election cannot be understood solely through the lens of online manipulation and propaganda. Digital operations do not occur in a vacuum – they thrive in conditions already embedded in political arenas, both domestic and regional. From the geopolitics of neutrality (long instrumentalised by Russia) to proxy candidates, (covert) financial streams, and the managed ambiguity of ideological positioning, these dynamics do not simply co-exist with disinformation; they enable and magnify it, providing influence operations with both entry points and receptive audiences.<sup>2</sup>

To situate the 2025 vote within the **broader history of subversion** is to understand Moldova's political contestation as more than a domestic struggle over governance. Positioned at Europe's eastern edge, this small, landlocked post-Soviet state serves as both a nodal point in Europe's security architecture and a historical laboratory for hybrid destabilisation.

This article is accompanied by a data-driven analysis, the forensic counterpart to the contextual argument advanced here. Together, they proceed from a shared premise: that contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Under Article 11 of its Constitution (1994), Moldova 'proclaims its permanent neutrality (...) and does not accept the presence of any foreign military on its soil'. Russia and local proxies have exploited this clause in its narrowest interpretation to preclude Moldova from engaging in any form of security cooperation with the West. Also refers to: Dumitru Minzarari, *Neutrality With No Guarantees: The Evolution of Moldova's Defense and Security Policies*, Black Sea Battleground Publication, Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, January 2022.

geopolitics is increasingly a competition for the governance of information environments, in which the capacity to structure visibility and circulation becomes a vector of power in its own right. Within this paradigm, the malign interference documented cross-platform (including Wikipedia) between June and September 2025 is not pre-eminently aimed at persuasion or ideological conversion, but at **participatory deterrence**. In other words, the depletion of civic agency through fatigue, cynicism, and the pre-emptive delegitimisation of electoral choice. Rather than advancing along conventional territorial boundaries, this is a geopolitical spatial strategy routed through digital infrastructures, and spans platform architectures, language corridors, and algorithmically mediated publics.

Any forensic mapping of cross-platform influence operations – their coordination patterns, actors, timelines, narratives, and circuits for amplification (encapsulated as Tactics, Techniques and Procedures - TTPs) – must therefore be **read against a contextual backdrop**. This is critical not only to grasp how disinformation circulates, but also why it resonates, where it embeds, and to what end it is deployed. The analysis is further informed by a leaked cache of primary source material documenting the operational infrastructure of the Victory/Pobeda Bloc, associated with Moldovan fugitive oligarch, Ilan Shor and his affiliated networks.<sup>3</sup> Verified and distilled for this report, the material traces regional disbursements of funds to contacts and political intermediaries, offering rare documentary evidence of how influence is bankrolled at the local level.

What the document cache renders visible is precisely the connective tissue of hybrid interference: the point at which illicit financial flows and coordinated information operations converge, and where the architecture of political capture, built through payments, proxies, and narrative seeding, becomes indistinguishable from the disinformation ecosystem mapped in the analysis that follows.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2023, Ilan Shor – a Moldovan oligarch and former mayor of Orhei - was convicted in absentia by the Chisinau Court of Appeal for his role in the ‘\$1 billion bank fraud’ (see: OCCRP, Moldova: US\$1 Billion Disappears From Banks, Thousands Protest in the Capital, May 2015, <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/moldova-us1-billion-disappears-from-banks-thousands-protest-in-the-capital>), receiving a 15-year prison sentence and the confiscation of assets (see: Reuters, Who is Ilan Shor, the fugitive tycoon at centre of Moldova’s meddling allegations?, October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/who-is-ilan-shor-fugitive-tycoon-centre-moldovas-meddling-allegations-2024-10-21/>). Shor had already fled Moldova in 2019 while under investigation and was believed to be residing in Israel at the time of the ruling. In the months following his conviction, he was sanctioned by both the EU and the US for acts of corruption and destabilisation of Moldova’s democratic institutions. Council of the European Union, Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/2408 of December 2022. Official Journal of the European Union, 2022, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022R2408>; U.S. Treasury Department (OFAC), Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Sanctions of Corrupt Oligarchs and Kremlin-Linked Actors, 26 October 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1054>

## Proxy Mobilisation in the Electoral Arena

The 2025 Moldovan parliamentary race unfolded against the backdrop of a fragmented political landscape with 15 political parties, four electoral blocs, and four independent candidates vying for control of the legislature (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. Registered Electoral Blocs, Parties, and Outcomes in Moldova's 2025 Parliamentary Elections<sup>5</sup>**

ELECTORAL BLOCS	INDIVIDUAL PARTIES	INDIVIDUAL PARTIES (CONT.)
<p><b>PAS</b> Party of Action and Solidarity Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate Igor Grosu · Maia Sandu Stood alone — not a formal multi-party bloc <b>55 seats · 50.16%</b></p>	<p><b>PPDA</b> Democracy at Home Democrația Acasă Vasile Costiuc Sovereignist/populist · TikTok-driven · AUR-backed · CEC sanctioned post-election <b>6 seats · 5.62%</b></p>	<p><b>AM</b> Moldovans Alliance Alianța Moldovenească Denis Rosca Conservative <b>&lt;1% · below threshold</b></p>
<p><b>BEP</b> Patriotic Electoral Bloc Blocul Electoral Patriotic Igor Dodon Member parties: <b>PSRM</b> Party of Socialists Igor Dodon <b>PCRM</b> Party of Communists Vladimir Voronin <b>PVM</b> Future of Moldova Vasile Tarlev · ex-PM 2001-08 <b>PRM</b> Heart of Moldova Irina Vlah · Banned 2 days before vote Four-party coalition <b>26 seats · 24.19%</b></p>	<p><b>PN</b> Our Party Partidul Nostru Renato Usatii Left-wing populist · ex-mayor of Bălți · nominally neutral <b>6 seats · 6.20%</b></p>	<p><b>NOI</b> New Historical Option Noua Opțiune Istorică Svetlana Chesari Centrist-conservative <b>&lt;1% · below threshold</b></p>
<p><b>BA</b> Alternative Electoral Bloc Blocul Electoral Alternativa Ion Ceban · Ion Chicu · Alexandr Stoianoglo Member parties: <b>MAN</b> National Alternative Movement Ion Ceban · ex-PSRM <b>PDCM</b> Party of Development &amp; Consolidation Ion Chicu · ex-PM 2019-20 <b>PCC</b> Common Action Party — Civic Congress Stoianoglo · Mark Tkaciuk Self-declared pro-EU; assessed as pro-Russian conduit <b>8 seats · 7.97%</b></p>	<p><b>MRR</b> Respect Moldova Movement Mișcarea Respect Moldova Marian Lupu Centre-left · ex-PDM leader <b>&lt;1% · below threshold</b></p>	<p><b>AUR</b> Alliance for the Union of Romanians Boris Volosatii Far-right nationalist <b>&lt;1% · below threshold</b></p>
<p><b>BEȚ</b> Together Bloc Blocul Electoral Împreună Tudor Ulianoschi Member parties: <b>PSDE</b> European Social Democratic Party Tudor Ulianoschi <b>CUB</b> Coalition for Unity &amp; Welfare Igor Munteanu <b>LOC</b> League of Cities &amp; Communes <b>PVE</b> Ecologist Green Party Anatolie Prohnițchi Failed to clear 7% threshold <b>0 seats · -1.5% · below threshold</b></p>	<p><b>ALDE</b> Alliance of Liberals &amp; Democrats for Europe Alina Spătaru Centre-right · liberal <b>&lt;1% · below threshold</b></p>	<p><b>PMM</b> Greater Moldova Party Moldova Mare Victoria Furtună Barred 26 Sept · illegal Russian financing · Furtună under EU sanctions <b>BANNED</b></p>
<p><b>POBEDA</b> Victory Bloc Blocul Electoral Pobeda / Victory Ilan Shor Rejected — affiliation with banned Shor Party · Ilan Shor: fugitive oligarch, resident Russia, EU &amp; US sanctioned <b>BARRED</b> at registration</p>	<p><b>PNM</b> Moldovan National Party Partidul Național Moldovenesc Dragos Galbur Centre-right · founded 2023 <b>&lt;1% · below threshold</b></p>	<p><b>PLDM</b> Liberal Democratic Party Vlad Filat Missed registration deadline by one day Did not register</p>
	<p><b>PL</b> Liberal Party Partidul Liberal Mihai Ghimpu Centre-right · pro-Romanian unionist <b>&lt;1% · below threshold</b></p>	<p><b>BUN</b> We Build Europe at Home — Withdrew 22 Sept · endorsed PAS Withdrew</p>
		<p><b>INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES</b></p> <p><b>Andrei Năstase</b> Ex-ACUM co-leader · ex-Interior Min. <b>-1.1% · did not win seat</b></p> <p><b>Olesea Stamate</b> Ex-PAS member <b>-0.3% · did not win seat</b></p> <p><b>Victoria Sanduța</b> <b>-0.1% · did not win seat</b></p> <p><b>Tatiana Crețu</b> <b>-0.1% · did not win seat</b></p>

Sources: Central Electoral Commission of Moldova · IRI Preliminary Statement 2025 · OSCE/ODHR · Wikipedia · Al Jazeera · IFES · D denotes banned, barred, or withdrawn contestants. Orientation assessments are analytical, not official.

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There were indeed some surprising turns of events. On the cusp of voting, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) barred the *Moldova Mare* (Greater Moldova) party, led by former prosecutor Victoria Furtuna, from participating in the election.<sup>6</sup> This was amid sweeping investigations into illegal financing and vote-buying schemes tied to Russia, the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, and proxy

<sup>4</sup> According to: Parliamentary Elections Portal, Alegerile parlamentare din 2025 in Republica Moldova, September 2025, [https://alegeri.md/w/Alegerile\\_parlamentare\\_din\\_2025\\_%C3%AEn\\_Republica\\_Moldova#Concuren.C8.9Bi\\_electorali](https://alegeri.md/w/Alegerile_parlamentare_din_2025_%C3%AEn_Republica_Moldova#Concuren.C8.9Bi_electorali)

<sup>5</sup> Overview of the principal electoral blocs, political parties, independent candidates, and parliamentary outcomes in Moldova's September 2025 elections, including parties barred from participation or failing to meet the electoral threshold.

<sup>6</sup> In July 2025, Victoria Furtuna was placed under EU sanctions (2025/1434 OJ L202501434). See: EU Sanctions Tracker, Victoria Furtuna, <https://data.europa.eu/apps/eusanctionstracker/subjects/177594>. Also: Thomas Rowley, Fugitive Moldovan tycoon recruits top Russian bankers to run sanctions-busting crypto firm: leak, Reporter London, September 2025, <https://reporter.london/?p=1484>

infrastructures such as the Evrazia foundation (most sanctioned entities).<sup>7</sup> Despite using ‘sovereignist’ and nationalist rhetoric, the party’s operations were found to be directly coordinated by Russian actors, including Anton Tregub and Alexandr Petrov, who channelled over €500,000 into digital campaign infrastructure, financing mass promotion across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Google Ads.<sup>8</sup>

In parallel, Irina Vlah’s party *Inima Moldovei* (Heart of Moldova), of the Patriotic Electoral Bloc (Blocul Patriotic – a coalition of pro-Russian, post-communist factions led by former president Igor Dodon), was also struck from the ballot, with the Court citing bribery and illegal financing.<sup>9</sup> Vlah was the former governor of autonomous Gagauzia, historically an ethnically layered Turkic enclave of Orthodox belief. In the aftermath of Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion into Ukraine, Gagauzia emerged as the preferred staging ground for Russian influence operations and a stronghold for Shor’s extremely well-funded destabilisation efforts. The importance of this economically deprived region in southern Moldova cannot be underestimated in Russia’s strategic calculus and, by extension, that of its proxies. Gagauzia’s territorial status has long been gamed to undercut Moldova’s fragile sovereignty, echoing the 1990s when its managed separatist mobilisation unfolded in tandem with Transnistria’s, albeit with different outcomes.

In August 2025, Evghenia Gutsul, Vlah’s successor and a close affiliate of Ilan Shor, was sentenced to seven years in prison for funnelling Russian funds into the Shor Party between 2019 and 2022, including illicit subsidies (i.e. cash-based payments) used to orchestrate protests and propaganda activities, at times opportunistically reviving the separatist rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> In 2023, Gutsul was elected *bashkan* (governor) of Gagauzia on the *Victory (Pobeda) Bloc*’s ticket, while serving as its executive secretary.<sup>11</sup> This political Bloc was founded by Shor (also its chairman) as a surrogate vehicle after the Constitutional Court officially banned his party in 2023; by then, he had already fled to Russia. The Bloc’s inaugural congress was ominously held in Moscow, and assembled Gagauz officials, remnants of the banned Shor Party and disparate pro-Russian factions, ‘supporting Moldova’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union [a Russian-led structure]’, closer ties with the Community of Independent States (CIS) and ‘(...) traditional partners and neighbours’, explicitly referencing Russia.<sup>12</sup> Marina Tauber, Shor’s former high school colleague and long-term associate, was elected secretary of the executive committee, the third in the formal leadership trinity alongside Shor and Gutsul.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Journalistic investigation conducted by Deschide.md (Moldovan News Outlet). Cristian Reznice, Victoria Furtuna, coordonata de Moscova si Ilan Sor: Cum Rusia a finantat activitatile partidului Moldova Mare, Nord News (MD), September 2025, <https://nordnews.md/stiri-nationale/social/finantare-ilegala-moldova-mare-rusia/>.

<sup>8</sup> Based on an investigation by reporters from Deschide.md, a Moldovan investigative outlet, Anton Tregub and Alexander Petrov have been identified as political operatives, coordinating on behalf Russia, operations and liaison with political candidates in Moldova. Monica Scutaru, DOC // Victoria Furtuna, coordonata de Moscova si Ilan Sor. Cum Rusia a finantat activitatile partidului, Moldova Mare, Deschide.md, September 2025, <https://deschide.md/articole/doc-victoria-furtuna-coordonata-de-moscova-si-ilan-sor-cum-rusia-a-finantat-activitatile-partidului-moldova-mare>. Anton Tregub was sanctioned by the Council of the European Union in 2026: Republic of Moldova: Council lists six individuals for actions destabilising the country (Press Release 486/26), June 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/06/15/republic-of-moldova-council-lists-six-individuals-for-actions-destabilising-the-country/pdf/>

<sup>9</sup> Stephen McGrath (Associated Press), Moldova bars two pro-Russian parties from high-stakes parliamentary election, PBS News, September 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/moldova-bars-two-pro-russian-parties-from-high-stakes-parliamentary-election>

<sup>10</sup> Saman Nazari, *Shor’s Echo: Influence Operations Targeting Moldovan Gagauzia*, Alliance4Europe Report, December 2024, <https://alliance4europe.eu/shors-echo-influence-operations-targeting-moldovan-gagauzia>

<sup>11</sup> Madalin Necsutu, Pro-Russian’s Governorship Win in Moldova’s Gagauzia Upheld, Balkan Insight, May 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/05/23/pro-russians-governorship-win-in-moldovas-gagauzia-upheld/>

<sup>12</sup> Shor’s opening remarks quoted by Infotag, a Moldovan news portal: <https://www.infotag.md/politics-en/315485/>

<sup>13</sup> For additional details on political operatives/figures, refer to: <https://profiles.rise.md/> [in Romanian]. Courtesy of RISE Moldova (an independent investigative outlet).

**In other words, the Bloc positioned itself to obstruct Moldova’s European trajectory by leveraging captive pro-Russian constituencies in Gagauzia and beyond, embedding itself in the country’s most vulnerable political and socio-economic fault lines to sustain Russian influence despite institutional bans.**

The infusion of illicit capital driving the 2023 gubernatorial elections across Moldova fringed on the surrealist. Beyond entrenched corruption, vote-buying schemes, and pyramid-like financial operations traced to sanctioned Russian banks (i.e. PSB), the campaign also witnessed the unveiling of an amusement park, GagauziyaLand.<sup>14</sup> This was spun as a philanthropic initiative of Shor’s, commanding a dilapidated rural landscape, – the soft facade of yet another Potemkin village camouflaging systemic capture, much like its other iteration in Orhei (OrheiLand).<sup>15</sup> Foreshadowing the elections that were to follow, Gagauzia served as a laboratory for tactics later scaled across Moldova, and beyond. This demonstrated the fusing of illicit financial pipelines, on-the-ground patronage networks, as well as digital mobilisation and coordinated disinformation campaigns with much wider implications and geographical reach.

Although Moldova’s CEC reiterated its 2024 decision to prohibit the *Victory Bloc* from participating in the 2025 parliamentary ballot, its presence still loomed large, resurfacing in online spaces and recalibrating its weight behind amenable politicians and parties, exposing how proxy infrastructures adapt and re-embed under new guises. Even from his safe haven, and despite the weight of Western sanctions, Shor, the convicted oligarch, ensconced in Russia, continues to cast a long shadow over Moldovan politics. Not as a mere appendage of Russian influence, but as **one of the Kremlin’s privileged conduits for interference.**

Similar to the constellation of sanctioned companies associated with A7 and Ilan Shor, the political parties founded in Moldova, appear modular, interchangeable shells, stood up and discarded as legal and institutional pressure demands. Nevertheless, the core group of trusted associates resurfaces more or less consistently.<sup>16</sup> A7 is the Russian cross-border payments and crypto-settlement network co-owned by Ilan Shor and Promsvyazbank (Russia’s defence bank), designated across multiple jurisdictions for sanctions evasion and influence operations.<sup>17</sup> It operates as the central financial node connecting Shor-linked entities, payment channels, criminal and politically sensitive funding operations.

## **Networks of influence, and what they cost**

A cache of internal logs, communications, monthly expenses, and budgets, leaked in 2025, offered a rare glimpse into the Shor networks, a web of political operatives, proxies and close associates bound together by an economy of inducements, as luxurious as their captive fiefdoms are deprived.<sup>18</sup> A

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Rainsford, Russian cash-for-votes flows into Moldova as nation heads to polls, BBC News, October 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c23kdjxxx1jo>.

<sup>15</sup> Evghenia Gutul, Telegram post, Telegram, September 2023, <https://t.me/evgheniagutul/1225>. In 2015, Ilan Shor served as mayor of Orhei, a municipality in northern Moldova, before being placed under house arrest for 30 days on suspicion of abuse of office.

<sup>16</sup> Please refer to the Annex section for a timeline of parties and political blocs founded/sponsored under Ilan Shor, juxtaposed with institutional bans & sanctions.

<sup>17</sup> A7 LLC (9710137165) has been sanctioned by Canada, the EU, the UK, Switzerland, the US, New Zealand, Belgium, and France, the last adopted by New Zealand in May 2026. OpenSanctions, A7 Limited Liability Company, <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-ZoBhzV7NdLLmjMYu9QXxg/adjacent/sanctions/>. Moldovan police said the Shor network used the PSB application, owned by Russia’s sanctioned Promsvyazbank to move funds into Moldova for voter bribery, including more than \$24 million in October 2024 alone. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Moldovan Service, Moldovan Police Accuse Pro-Russian Oligarch Of \$39M Vote-Buying Scheme, October 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-police-accuse-shor-russia-oligarch-39m-vote-buying/33172951.html>

<sup>18</sup> The leaks associated with Ilan Shor’s network of companies (listing personnel, transactions, locations, operations, etc.) were first revealed and validated by investigative journalists from: Ziarul de Garda, Canale de Telegram asociate gruparii Sor, sparte. Scurgere masiva de informatii si un mesaj pentru activistii Blocului Victorie: Acum sunteti pe cont propriu, August 2025,

sample of documents – partial, and subject to an in-depth investigation to follow – span March-May 2024, straddling the Victory Bloc’s founding congress in Moscow on the 21<sup>st</sup> April at the Carlton Hotel, within sight of the Kremlin walls. Tellingly, each of the Bloc’s congresses (from April 2024 to July 2025) was held on Russian soil, and each with greater (public) visibility of Russian state actors.<sup>19</sup> Moldovan political figures named in the ledgers, include: Evghenia Gutsul (sentenced in August 2025 to seven years for channelling Russian funds into the Shor Party), Vasile Bolia (the Victory Bloc’s presidential candidate in 2024, for whom Marina Tauber acted as campaign manager), Alexandr Suhodolski (former Gagauz representative), Alexandr Nesterovschi (formerly affiliated with the *Communist and Socialist Electoral Bloc*, in 2023 adhered to *The Movement for the People Platform*, founded by the Shor Party), Irina Lozovan (formerly of the *Socialist Party*, PSRM, and the fractured *Communist and Socialist Bloc*), Alexei Lungu (leader of the Shor-linked *Chance Party*, *Partidul Șansă*), Vadim Grozavu (leader of the Victorie Party, PPV, the fourth component of the Victory Bloc), among many others named and unnamed. The names matter beyond the constantly fluctuating political affiliations, as a political class in constant circulation, yet firmly placed within Russia’s orbit of influence.

An economy of inducements ran continuously with the influence operation itself. All associated Moldovan politicians were brought to Moscow, housed at luxurious hotels, and attended to with a consistency and granularity that suggests an established routine. Their flights are logged, their VIP terminal passages itemised, and restaurant dinners recorded by headcount. The Moldovan delegation hosted in late March (occupying four rooms at the Four Seasons and six at the WTC simultaneously, transported by dedicated minibuses across 11 separate daily bookings) represents the most concentrated hospitality cluster in the ledgers, costing in excess of €27,000 over six days.<sup>20</sup> This may be a fraction of the hundreds of millions reportedly channelled through Russian operatives into the political destabilisation of Moldova, yet it provides a rare and granular window into the mechanics of systemic political capture at its higher echelons.

Marina Tauber, elected secretary of the Victory Bloc’s executive committee, was one of the most extensively documented individuals. The records track her hotel stays (at least 11 bookings across March-April alone), beauty salon visits (12 in March-April, six in the first week of May), VIP terminal uses, spa treatments, personal shopping, and myriad gifts. On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024, a poster is ordered in her name reading ‘*Everyone to the elections*’, most likely in anticipation of the 2024 ballots (October-November), where local activist networks on the ground were already mobilised, and as we shall explore in the digital forensics section, coordinated to foment violent protests.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in Gagauzia, pensioners were reportedly offered between 20 and 30 euros per protest attendance, and a promised monthly stipend of 100 euros, in a region where the average pension stands at 220 dollars a month.<sup>22</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> April 2024, Gutsul, then still serving as *bashkan* (governor) travelled to Moscow and signed an agreement with sanctioned Russian bank Promsvyazbank (PSB) to distribute

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<https://www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/canale-de-telegram-asociate-gruparii-sor-sparte-scurgere-masiva-de-informatii-si-un-mesaj-pentru-activistii-blocului-victorie-acum-sunteti-pe-cont-propriu/>

<sup>19</sup> By the 2025 gathering, the guest list included Leonid Slutsky, chair of the State Duma’s Committee on International Affairs, Vyacheslav Nikonov (First Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma’s International Affairs Committee), Artem Turov (Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma’s Committee on Issues of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots).

<sup>20</sup> In the leaked documents, the expenses, carefully itemised and conflated with Shor family and personal budget lines, approach almost €4.7 million, over two months.

<sup>21</sup> Tauber was sentenced in absentia on 30th of September 2025 (two days after the parliamentary vote) to seven years and six months for controlling illegal cash flows from Russia into the Shor Party between 2022 and 2023. She has been sanctioned under multiple regimes, including EU, UK, Canada, US-OFAC. Available: OpenSanctions, A7 Limited Liability Company, Available online at: <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/Q97763578/adjacent/sanctions/>

<sup>22</sup> Maria Gerth-Niculescu, In Moldova’s Gagauzia, Pro-Russian Fugitive Seeks to Sway Pensioner Vote, Balkan Insight, August 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/07/in-moldovas-gagauzia-pro-russian-fugitive-seeks-to-sway-pensioner-vote/bi/>

these payments.<sup>23</sup> The leaked expense ledgers place her in Moscow hotels that same month (4-9<sup>th</sup> April), with a dedicated security guard, indulging in the same lavish lifestyle, cumulating thousands of euros in just a few days' stay, drawn from the same kleptocratic network that promised Gagauzia's deprived populations the modicum sums in a bid to sway the ballot.

Several insights into propaganda and mobilisation budgets also emerge. From the leaked accounting logs, an entry showed how the operation relied on a Production Centre, which paid over €46,000 to Ivan Aksyuta (former head of music at Channel One Russia), and €185,000 to Roman Emilyanov, a Russian media producer. In May 2024, ₺1,350,000 is allocated in the Skolkovo budget line for the purchase of 18 desktop computers explicitly labelled 'for political strategists.'<sup>24</sup> This shows a deliberate operation sustained through a dedicated and well-funded infrastructure, its tentacles extending to the highest levels of Russia's power vertical. The territorial reach of the operation is documented in a separate set of files, showing instances of political mobilisation (meetings, planned activists, etc) on the ground. A regional coordinator grid assigns named operatives (almost exclusively Russian-speaking) to every Moldovan district across six regional groups: North, Special Territories, Centre 1, Centre 2, Chişinău, and South-Gagauzia. Each district carries a coordinator, a Territorial Organiser (TO) appointed to specific electoral precincts, a monitoring supervisor, and a PTD overseer (Political Technology Directorate). The Chişinău group appears as the most operationally granular: 15 coordinators identified only by first name and Telegram handle, each assigned to a numbered precinct. In Gagauzia, 18 coordinators are listed by full name.

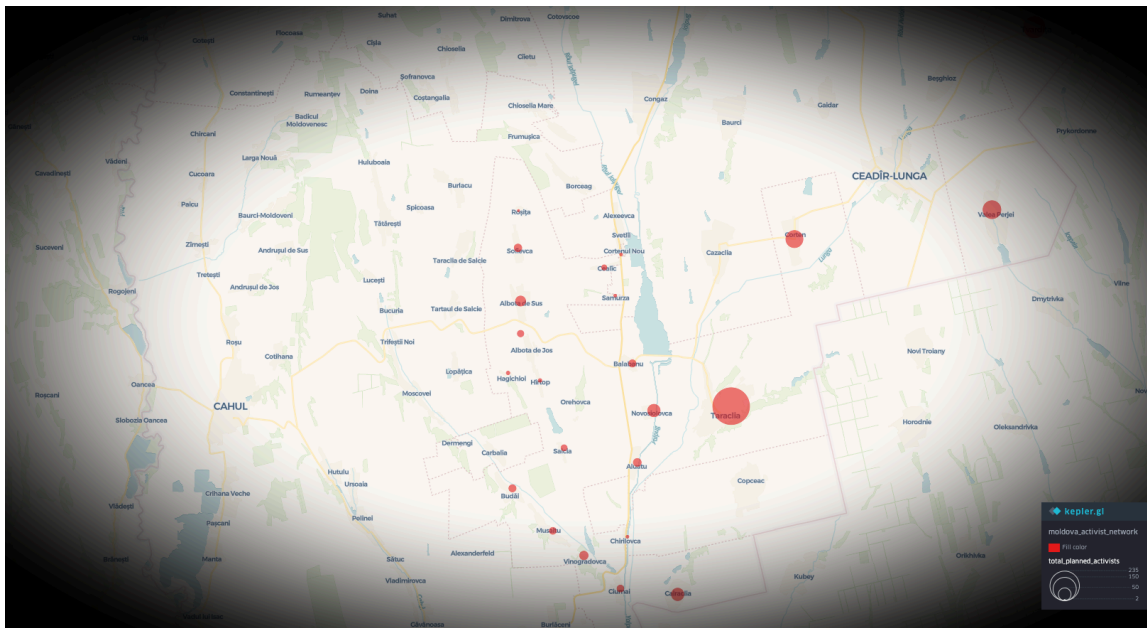
The political mobilisation documents from July-August 2024 evidence this infrastructure in operation at the ground level. Across 44 scheduled meetings in 26 settlements of the Taraclia district alone (one of the country's most economically deprived) named local organisers with mobile phone numbers, meeting times, and activist headcount targets were recorded village by village. Meetings ran across eight days between 27<sup>th</sup> July and 4<sup>th</sup> August 2024; in the second round, a fixed office at Strada Stefan cel mare 38A in Taraclia served as the coordination base. Moreover, planned mobilisation for this single district totalled approximately 600 activists. A third document plans the logistics of a VIP candidate event in Taraclia on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2024 (eight weeks before the October vote) with Vasile Bolia, the Victory Bloc's presidential candidate, as the named attendee. Bolia was another fixture in the documented Moscow delegations.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* The signing of the agreement with PSB's chairman Petr Fradkov was preceded by a March meeting with President Putin, for supposedly 'humanitarian cooperation and support for socially vulnerable categories of the population of Gagauzia', as reported by Sputnik News, Evgeniya Gutsul: Residents of Gagauzia will have access to the Mir payment system, April 2024, <https://md.sputniknews.ru/20240409/evgeniya-gutsul-u-zhiteley-gagauzii-poyavitsya-dostup-k-platezhnoy-sisteme-mir-60310981.html>

<sup>24</sup> The Skolkovo Innovation Centre features extensively in the leaked corpora, as one of several Moscow locations at the operational core of Shor's corporate and political infrastructure.

Figure 2. Geographic Distribution of Planned Political Mobilisation Activities in Taraclia District<sup>25</sup>



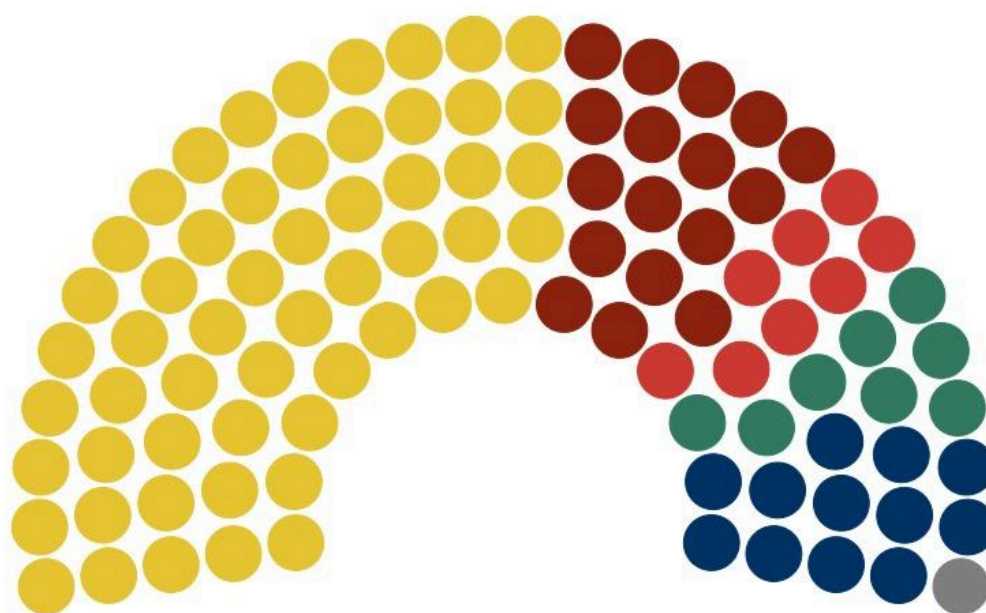
The October 2024 presidential election, the European Union (EU) constitutional referendum and the September 2025 parliamentary contest, were not separate operations but sequential phases of the same campaign of hybrid interference. By 2025, successive institutional responses (i.e. criminal convictions, EU and US sanctions, CEC registration rejections, or banning the Bloc's constituent parties) had degraded but not dismantled the network. Denied access to the ballot, it recalibrated into online ecosystems and proxy or alternative political structures, whose reach the data-driven analysis documents in detail.

### What the results tell us

The outcome of the September 2025 election delivered a measure of clarity. The pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) secured an outright majority with 55 of 101 seats, a mandate sufficient to govern without coalition partners and, for the short-to-medium term at least, to stabilise the political landscape. Alongside PAS, the new parliamentary configuration includes the *Patriotic Bloc* (*Blocul Patriotic*) with 26 seats, the *Alternative Bloc* (*Blocul Alternativa*) with eight seats, *Our Party* (*Partidul Nostru*) and the *Democracy at Home Party* (*Democratia Acasa - PPDA*) with six, reflecting a fragmented but contained opposition totalling 46 seats.

<sup>25</sup> Visualisation of planned activist mobilisation activity across settlements in Taraclia district between July and August 2024, based on leaked operational coordination documents. Circle size reflects projected activist participation. Source: Authors' analysis of leaked operational documents. Visualisation produced using Kepler.gl.

**Figure 3. Parliamentary Seat Allocation Following Moldova's 2025 Elections**



Party	Seats
● Partidul Actiune si Solidaritate (PAS)	55
● Partidul Socialistilor din Republica Moldova (PSRM)	17
● Partidul Comunistilor din Republica Moldova (PCRM)	8
● Blocul Alternativa (BA)	8
● Partidul Nostru (PN)	6
● Partidul Democratia Acasa (PPDA)	6
● Independenti	1

As the ballot was being tallied on election night, the pro-Russian Patriotic Bloc leadership, including Igor Dodon, former Moldovan President (2016-2020) and Vasile Tarlev, former Prime Minister (2001-2008), accompanied by a small group of supporters, staged a demonstration outside the Central Electoral Commission. They threatened to reject the outcome, after paradoxically claiming their own victory earlier that evening.<sup>26</sup> Such contradictions, which will be explored, were a mainstay on the campaign trail, instrumentalised to mobilise grievance, while preserving contestation as a political resource irrespective of the outcome. No incidents were reported, and the protest soon defused. Yet, no matter how anti-climactic or short-lived, this rally was the latest expression of a months-long hybrid destabilisation campaign characterised by an unprecedented degree of coordination and intensity. It may not be the last, so a cautious stance is warranted, with outcomes contingent on domestic receptivity and institutional resilience, already strained by mounting economic pressures – inflation hovering at 9%, surging energy prices, economic precarity coupled with persistently low salaries and pensions.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ziarul de Garda (ZdG), Protest nocturn la CEC al Blocului Patriotic, September 2025, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/protest-nocturn-la-cec-al-blocului-patriotic-daca-in-noaptea-asta-vor-fi-falsificari-noi-maine-nu-vom-rec-unoaste-alegerile/>

<sup>27</sup> The International Monetary Fund Report notes that ‘inflationary and energy-related pressures continue to strain institutional capacity. International Monetary Fund, Republic of Moldova – Fifth Review under the ECF/EFF, July 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2024/07/11/Republic-of-Moldova-Fifth-Reviews-Under-the-Extended-Credit-Facility-and-Extended-Fund-551687>. Average gross earnings in Moldova reached 15,470.6 MDL per month in Q2 2025 (≈ €794 at 19.5 MDL/EUR, or ≈€1,320 in PPP-adjusted terms), compared to an EU full-time adjusted average of ≈€3,158/month in 2023, underscoring persistent wage gaps despite nominal growth. See: Eurostat, Annual full-time adjusted salary in EU grew in 2023, November 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20241107-1?>

Moldova's greater institutional preparedness did not fully insulate it from regional contagion. The sovereignist and pro-Russian networks that encroached Romania's presidential elections in 2024 and 2025 operated through inter-woven digital amplification infrastructures, and cross-border party affiliations. One such manifestation was the unexpected ascendance of Vasile Costiuc's *Democratia Acasa* Party (PPDA) to pass the 5% threshold and win six parliamentary mandates, running on a 'sovereignist' platform reinforced by the support networks of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Costiuc has been tied to a number of Russian ventures and to dubious alliances with Vlad Plahotniuc, a former Moldovan politician and oligarch, who after fleeing the country in 2019, was extradited back from Greece in 2025 to face corruption charges in Chişinău.<sup>28</sup> Pre-electoral polls had failed to credit PPDA with any realistic chance of clearing the threshold, even as the party's messaging and visibility became increasingly evident across online ecosystems.<sup>29</sup> This echoed, in part, the sudden prominence of (fringe) radical currents during Romania's presidential race, where algorithmic amplification and digitally fuelled mobilisation shifted the political centre of gravity.

While polarisation is not new to Moldova's political landscape, PAS victories in traditionally pro-Russian constituencies may point to an attenuation of longstanding divisions – at least electorally.<sup>30</sup> However, the parallel to Romania does not imply identical political trajectories or outcomes, at least not in a conventional sense. Rather, it reveals the activation of shared informational templates and synchronised amplification networks across a common linguistic and digital space that transcends national borders. References to 'Romanian-style interference', accusations of foreign machinations eroding national sovereignty, or outright annexation proliferated throughout Moldova's parliamentary campaign; these narratives were then reinjected and reamplified in Romanian information ecosystems, where they fuelled isolationist tropes portraying Moldova as a liability and Western institutions and alliances as self-serving or predatory.<sup>31</sup> Beneath the surface of procedural normalcy, in both neighbouring countries, perceptions of disenfranchisement and otherwise legitimate socio-economic grievances remain ripe for instrumentalisation. As political fatigue and economic vulnerability persist, these undercurrents will be increasingly reframed and weaponised by populist and hybrid actors into a durable source of affective polarisation, orchestrated and sustained on a cross-border, regional scale.

In this evolving landscape, PPDA breaching the parliamentary threshold (after three previous failed attempts) may carry implications that exceed its modest seat share. Procedural legitimacy now affords the populist platform enough room to mainstream its populist and conspiratorial narratives, extending its reach beyond the platform-engineered activism that propelled it online; an operation that nevertheless reached a critical mass, both domestically and abroad.

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<sup>28</sup> Gabriel Mateescu, *Democratia Acasa, partidul sustinut de AUR la alegerile din Moldova, urca pe locul al patrulea*, Context.ro (an investigative journalism outlet), September 2025, <https://context.ro/democratia-acasa-partidul-sustinut-de-aur-la-alegerile-din-moldova-urca-pe-locul-al-patrulea-dupa-procesarea-a-aproape-jumatate-din-sectiile-de-vot/>. Subsequent investigations link Costiuc's PPDA with Shor networks. See, for instance, Ziarul de Garda (investigative outlet), *Investigatie CU SENS: Pionul lui Sor, in echipa lui Costiuc*, October 2025, <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/investigatie-cu-sens-pionul-lui-sor-in-echipa-lui-costiuc/>. The original reporting is available: CU SENS, *Investigatie: Instruiti sa faca haos. Partea I*, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_j9g2-oCTHY&t=633s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_j9g2-oCTHY&t=633s)

<sup>29</sup> The PROMPT consortium in collaboration with investigative journalists from Context.ro (also part of FACT hub) analysed the TikTok surge associated with PPDA and leader Vasile Costiuc, prior to the ballot. See: Context, *1000 de tehnici de manipulare pentru alegerile din Republica Moldova. Cazul Costiuc*, September 2025, <https://context.ro/1000-de-tehnici-de-manipulare-pentru-alegerile-din-republica-moldova-cazul-costiuc/>

<sup>30</sup> Comisia Electorala Centrala, *Map of voting results by territorial constituencies*, September 2025, <https://pv.cec.md/preliminare>.

<sup>31</sup> Similar frames were consistently deployed during Romania's presidential elections to cultivate distrust in the EU and NATO, aligning local grievances with a broader Eurosceptic and anti-Western repertoire. See, Andra Martinescu et alii, *Networks of influence: decoding foreign meddling in Romania's elections*, Foreign Policy Centre Report, December 2024, <https://fpc.org.uk/networks-of-influence-decoding-foreign-meddling-in-romania-s-elections-a-collaborative-investigation-into-disinformation-campaigns-and-influence-operation/>

A key takeaway from the outcome, was that the Moldovan diaspora, estimated at 1.2 million, emerged as a decisive political force. In recent electoral cycles, the state has expanded overseas voting, opening a record 301 polling stations across 41 to 45 countries for the parliamentary election, and offering postal voting in designated states.<sup>32</sup> Turnout abroad was relatively high, with over 275,000 casting a ballot by closing time. It was notable, however, how the Moldovan diaspora in the run up to the election was targeted by a vast information warfare campaign that involved Matryoshka networks (translated as 'nested doll') — layers upon layers of cloned media, proxy outlets, and visible or anonymous online personas mutually reinforcing each other.<sup>33</sup> The scope was to demobilise diaspora participation and to undermine trust in democratic processes by staging or urging protests both abroad and at home.

## The Road Not Taken – and Why It Matters

What would have happened if the September parliamentary vote had yielded a different result? Had no party secured an outright majority, coalition building would have become critical, but also the most volatile factor shaping the next government.

Previous attempts at power sharing had repeatedly collapsed under the weight of mistrust, corruption and competing geopolitical loyalties. Uneasy alliances oscillated at times between reformist, European-leaning platforms and opportunistic political arrangements of the old guard, newly emergent elites, or oligarchic clans, all variously bound by crippling corruption schemes and the long reach of Russia's patronage networks. For instance, in 2019, the short-lived PSRM-ACUM coalition formed to dismantle the oligarchic control of Plahotniuc, but collapsed five months later when PSRM joined the Democratic Party in a no-confidence vote that toppled then Prime Minister Maia Sandu's government.<sup>34</sup> The successor Ion Chicu cabinet (aligned with the then pro-Russian President Dodon) promptly soft-pedalled justice reforms, revived Moscow-centric initiatives (including a Russian state loan later struck down by the Constitutional Court), and reoriented energy and diplomatic channels eastward.<sup>35</sup> At their most malign, these coalitions periodically resuscitated bids for reintegration into Russian-led structures, triggering parliamentary dissolutions, sudden realignments, and prolonged episodes of institutional paralysis.

Such moments of fracture reliably yielded geopolitical dividends for Moscow, which treated political and domestic instability not necessarily as a by-product but as a strategic asset — a calibrated opportunity to stall, dilute, and reverse even the most incremental alignment with Europe or the West. Thus, every crisis became a reset point, one step forward towards integration, two steps back into the grey zone of neutrality, and externally managed stagnation. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, however, has added an extra layer of urgency for Russia. What may be considered isolated incursions can be better understood as **components of a broader hybrid coercion approach**, whereby political interference, electoral disruption and kinetic probing (including the recent drone incursions) are

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<sup>32</sup> Adept Association, Moldova Parliamentary Elections 2025: Polling Stations Abroad, UNDP Report, August 2025, [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-09/adept\\_note\\_on\\_polling\\_stations\\_abroad\\_2025.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-09/adept_note_on_polling_stations_abroad_2025.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Gabriel Gavin, Russia targeted voters across EU, Moldova warns, Politico, August 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-moldova-voting-elections-candidates-west-kremlin/>

<sup>34</sup> Vlad Plahotniuc, a Moldovan oligarch, was implicated in what was deemed 'the theft of the century' a bank fraud case (2014), and the embezzlement of an estimated \$1 billion (approx. 12% of Moldova's total GDP). He was extradited from Greece to face corruption charges in Moldova on 25 September 2025, days before the parliamentary vote. The US Treasury department also imposed financial sanctions on Plahotniuc (at the same time with Ilan Shor) in 2022 accused of 'capturing and corrupting Moldova's political and economic institutions and...acting as instruments of Russia's global influence campaign'. Eugen Urusciuc, Parlamentul R Moldova (...), Radio Free Europe Moldova, September 2025, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/parlamentul-r-moldova-de-la-agrarieni-si-comunisti-coalitie-monstruoase-aliante-beton-si-bin-oame-pana-la-majoritate-proeuropena/33539642.html>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

deployed in tandem, not only to test reaction but also to exhaust and overwhelm state and alliance-level responses.<sup>36</sup>

Under the incumbent administration, which has retained a governing majority since the July 2021 snap parliamentary elections, when the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) secured 63 out of 101 seats, the country experienced, for the first time since independence, **an uninterrupted pro-European parliamentary-executive alignment**. This was the first legislature to explicitly align its agenda with the European integration process. Roughly one in 11 laws passed over the four-year mandate carried the EU imprint, amounting to around 140 acts harmonising national legislation with European standards across multiple sectors.<sup>37</sup> Politically, it went even further by adopting the Parliamentary Declaration on Moldova's accession to the EU, reaffirming an irreversible commitment to European integration (since 2024 also enshrined it in the Constitution).<sup>38</sup>

In effect, Moldova moved tangibly westward, securing EU candidate status in 2022 and formally opening accession talks in June 2024. Brussels has since kept the enlargement track active. This geostrategic tilt was reinforced on the security and energy fronts. Moldova's grid was synchronised with continental Europe in March 2022, and gas interconnectivity with Romania (Iași-Ungheni-Chișinău) expanded alternatives to Russian supply. In parallel, Moldova served as a transit corridor in the EU's Solidarity Lanes, routing Ukrainian exports via Moldovan rail and the Giurgiulesti/Danube axis to Romanian ports.<sup>39</sup> Domestically, Chișinău demonstrated resolve in dismantling Russian-linked networks, including the 2023 ban of the Shor Party over its role in orchestrating destabilisation.<sup>40</sup>

## The Geopolitics of Neither East nor West – Europe as a Battleground

Moldova's trajectory toward European integration has been far from linear; often contested, unevenly embraced, and deeply mediated by economic hardship in marginalised constituencies. However, it is precisely this tension between strategic reorientation and structural vulnerability that renders Moldova's European turn susceptible to external sabotage and interference. Such efforts extend beyond the manipulation of electoral outcomes, seeking instead to erode public confidence in the very assumption that integration can generate tangible socio-economic or democratic dividends, thereby transforming latent discontent into a lever of geopolitical obstruction. The study's analysis of cross-platform (mostly Russian-affiliated) disinformation ecosystems substantiates this trend, showing how **the European Union has been actively targeted**, reframed as either predatory, ineffectual or outright destabilising.

In line with Russia's information warfare doctrine, rooted in the concept of *reflexive control* and the fusion of psychological, informational and political instruments, Moldova's policy achievements were deliberately recast as vulnerabilities in a bid to legitimise their reversal: with EU alignment depicted as a loss of sovereignty; security cooperation and the support afforded to Ukraine as provocation;

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<sup>36</sup> Dan Sabbagh and Jennifer Rankin, Russian drone incursions, The Guardian, October 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/15/russian-drone-incursion-tactically-stupid-and-counterproductive-says-polish-minister>

<sup>37</sup> Eugen Urusciuc, Parliament of the Republic of Moldova - From agrarians and communists, "monstrous coalitions", "concrete alliances" and "binomials", to a pro-European majority, RFE/RL, September 2025, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/parlamentul-r-moldova-de-la-agrarieni-si-comunisti-coalitii-monstruoase-aliante-beton-si-bin-oame-pana-la-majoritate-proeuropeana/33539642.html>

<sup>38</sup> During the campaign, Russian-aligned parties and leaders constantly threatened to back-track on this constitutional provision and organise a referendum that would herald a return to the status quo - disinformation outlets amplified this narrative across platforms and the web.

<sup>39</sup> European Commission, Solidarity Lanes: Moldova and Ukraine, European Commission, [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/solidarity-lanes-moldova-and-ukraine\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/solidarity-lanes-moldova-and-ukraine_en)

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Tanas, Moldova bans pro-Russian Shor party after months of protests, Reuters, June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-bans-pro-russian-shor-party-after-months-protests-2023-06-19/>

energy diversification as economic sabotage; NATO as a deliberate war proxy; and so forth.<sup>41</sup> The objective is not persuasion in any conventional sense, but rather the systematic erosion of societal resilience, aimed at fragmenting public support and fostering a climate of epistemic insecurity.

Nor were these distortions confined to policy. Narratives surrounding governance, social cohesion, and even the integrity of elections were relentlessly targeted, ensuring that democratic participation itself became a site of contestation, mistrust, and manipulation. In this sense, Moldova was not merely a receptacle of propaganda, but an operational theatre of Russia's hybrid strategy, where the information domain could be weaponised to shape choices before they were even made. The methods deployed drew on a repertoire that had been tested in Ukraine, Georgia, the Western Balkans, and, increasingly, Romania, amongst others.

Since the country's independence, geopolitics has played a disproportionate, albeit valid role in Moldova's politics, but not necessarily in a coherent manner or as an expression of geopolitical conviction. The language of East and West has long functioned as a revolving instrument of leverage, deployed for electoral gain, coalition bargaining, or legitimacy-seeking, often obscuring deeply entrenched transactional governance or clientelism beneath ideological posturing. From Russia's vantage point, fostering **controlled fragmentation into political blocs**, as seen in this parliamentary race, **was less about elevating a single ally than about sustaining volatility**. This opportunistic strategy targeted cohesion across the broader European integrationist camp, **deliberately diluting** and even confusing **the pro-European message**. By cultivating multiple political actors simultaneously, the approach ensured that parallel channels of influence remained active even if parties or leaders were discredited or excluded from the race. The accompanying data analysis of online disinformation and propaganda ecosystems across multiple platforms confirms this pattern.

## Nothing Is What It Seems – Incursions into Rhetorical Camouflage

An illustrative case is the *Alternative Electoral Bloc* (Blocul Electoral Alternativa - BA), ostensibly (self-declared) as pro-European, but in fact operating as a pro-Russian conduit, aligned with Moscow's strategic interests and official posturing. The Bloc's leadership includes a number of controversial figures, amongst them, Alexandr Stoianoglu (presidential contender in 2024), Ion Ceban (formerly a member of the pro-Russian Socialist Party, PSRM, who was denied entry in Romania and the Schengen area on grounds of national security risks), and Mark Tkaciuk (a communist ideologue who persistently advocated for Moldova's integration into the Eurasian Union and adherence to the Kozak Plan).<sup>42</sup>

Throughout its campaign trail, BA avoided a clear positioning on core geopolitical issues, including Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Moldova's relationship with NATO, and its EU accession path. Thus, the adoption of a pro-European rhetoric may be deemed as an electoral tactic designed to appeal to moderate voters without alienating a core pro-Russian base. Essentially, 'nothing is what it seems'. Ideological lines become deliberately blurred, with 'sovereignist' movements reframing Kremlin positions as nationalism or anti-establishment resistance, and self-declared pro-European blocs in fact treading a carefully **curated ambiguity that obscures external alignment**. In practice, such political formations employ **camouflage strategies**, rebranding hostile agendas in a pro-European vernacular to preserve influence under shifting electoral and geopolitical constraints.

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<sup>41</sup> Keir Giles, *The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare*, Riga: NATO StratCom COE, May 2016, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/the-next-phase-of-russian-information-warfare/176>

<sup>42</sup> Reuters, *Moldovan Mayor Barred From Romania Over Security Concerns*, July 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/romania-bans-moldovan-mayor-border-free-schengen-area-ministry-says-2025-07-09/>.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the data collected, a substantial share of the information manipulation arsenal was channelled into sustaining ‘sovereignist’ parties and blocs, amplifying their messaging and political foothold. The *Moldova Mare* (Greater Moldova) Party was ultimately banned from running on the ballot, but *Democrația Acasă* - PPDA (under the leadership of Vasile Costiuc) won six mandates/seats, following an aggressive TikTok campaign that propelled its transnational outreach.<sup>43</sup> PROMPT, in collaboration with the FACT EU Hub, conducted an analysis of PPDA’s online ecosystem and rhetoric prior to the elections, forestalling the party’s resurgence. At the same time, connections between populist and irredentist movements across the region have increasingly displayed converging agendas and thematic overlaps. Such cross-border spillovers were particularly forceful in the case of Moldova and Romania.

These political hybrids blend nationalist rhetoric with populist tropes, allowing them to exploit domestic grievances while opportunistically tapping into transnational ideological currents, including newly imported slogans and nominal affiliations to the MAGA (Make America Great Again) and its European offshoot, MEGA (Make Europe Great Again) movements.<sup>44</sup>

The circulation of such narratives has relied on an ecosystem of foreign influencers and political technologists, some visible, others concealed behind online avatars and proxy accounts, with many also operating from the United States (where the origin could be traced). In 2024, during Romania’s presidential elections, Jackson Hinkle, an American commentator, openly aligned with Russian state media, played an active role in amplifying polarising frames and has since directed similar messaging toward Moldova.<sup>45</sup> In both cases, unfounded accusations of election fraud and vote theft were intended to pre-emptively discredit the result and incite civil unrest. This is just one of numerous other examples that amassed substantial transnational engagement – a form of ideological franchising, repackaged for local consumption. Such strategies form part of a broader repertoire of political uncertainty, whereby parties or leaders disavow firm geopolitical allegiance while signalling *de facto* alignment through narrative cues and coalition patterns.

Another example is *Partidul Nostru* (Our Party), which secured six parliamentary seats under the leadership of Renato Usatîi (the pro-Russian former mayor of Bălți in northern Moldova). Despite publicly claiming neutrality—“neither with the Russians nor the Europeans” – Usatîi’s positioning echoed a familiar strategy: **adopting nominal equidistance while normalising pro-Russian preferences** beneath a veneer of pragmatism. This posture dovetails with a wider effort by Russian-aligned actors to re-legitimise neutrality as a structural constraint on Moldova’s foreign and security policy.

Moldova’s constitutional neutrality clause has long been a focal point in this struggle.<sup>46</sup> More recently, in April 2024, the Socialist and Communist parties tabled a draft law that would have redefined neutrality to explicitly prohibit all forms of military or security cooperation with

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<sup>43</sup> Context, 1000 manipulation techniques in Moldova’s elections. The Costiuc Case, September 2025, <https://context.ro/1000-de-tehnici-de-manipulare-pentru-alegerile-din-republica-moldova-cazul-costiuc/>

<sup>44</sup> Ziarul de Garda (ZdG), MEGA Scandal la Chisinau. Mai multi participant la o conferinta internationala – interzisi in R. Moldova, July 2025, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/mega-scandal-la-chisinau-mai-multi-participanti-la-o-conferinta-internationala-interzisi-in-r-moldova-sis-evenimentul-ar-avea-legaturi-dubioase-cu-gruparea-criminala-sor/>

<sup>45</sup> Jackson Hinkle with unfounded allegations of electoral fraud and the repression of opposition leaders, otherwise a common narrative thread amplified by Russian-affiliated disinformation networks. See: Jackson Hinkle, X Highlights, <https://x.com/jacksonhinkle/highlights>. Also see coverage of Hinkle’s participation at a forum held in Moscow: Aleandru Mihaescu, Romanian extremists Calin Georgescu and George Simion praised at pro-Russian Moscow forum, G4Media (Romanian news outlet, June 2025, <https://www.g4media.ro/romanian-extremists-calin-georgescu-and-george-simion-praised-at-pro-russian-moscow-forum.html>

<sup>46</sup> Vladimir Socor, Moldova’s Bizarre Neutrality: No Obstacle to Western Security Assistance (Part One), Eurasia Daily Monitor 19(123), Jamestown Foundation, August 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/moldovas-bizarre-neutrality-no-impediment-to-western-security-assistance-part-one/>

Euro-Atlantic structures. Such a move would not merely reaffirm Moldova's non-alignment but effectively institutionalise it as a buffer state – one in which Russia, already maintaining troops in separatist Transnistria, could exploit by freezing the country's strategic options and blocking deeper integration with the West, a limbo with profound regional reverberations.<sup>47</sup> From an operational standpoint, such a posture would also constrain Romania's role as NATO's principal staging and transit hub on the Black Sea-Danube axis, amplifying risk across a supply network that underpins both Ukraine's resilience and regional security.

This ambiguity was further instrumentalised in the information domain. A constellation of narratives was subsequently deployed to stoke public fears about Moldova's involvement in the war in Ukraine, with an imminent attack upon Transnistria, discursively framed as a NATO/Western proxy.

## Strategic Recalibration or a Genealogy of Subversion

In 2024, the Kremlin's coordinated attempts to influence the Moldovan presidential election and Constitutional referendum (enshrining EU accession as a strategic objective) were narrowly thwarted but only temporarily so. A fragmented electoral arena and the prospect of fractional negotiations tangibly expanded Russia's opportunities for interference, otherwise commensurate with its strategic bid to reestablish control over Chişinău. However, Russia's tactical approach has visibly adapted, and some lessons have been learnt.

This recalibration reflects a broader shift within *the Kremlin's power vertical*.<sup>48</sup> As the Deputy Kremlin Chief of Staff, Dmitry Kozak had significant contracting influence over the 'near abroad' portfolio. Meanwhile, the rise of Sergei Kiriyenko within the Russian Presidential Administration have signalled a decisive turn in Russia's management of the region, with **profound implications for Moldova** in the immediate lead-up to the vote. Amongst other functions, Kiriyenko is also the architect of Russia's ruthless and dehumanising occupation regime in Ukraine. While Kozak seemed to court a more transactional approach, akin to elite brokerage, energy and commercial inducements, or formal architectures such as the federalisation plan for Moldova, designed to play out over the long term.<sup>49</sup> Kiriyenko meanwhile has brought a hardened political technology edge practised both domestically and across the region. Undeniably, each aimed to exert control over this small Eastern European polity, likely even competing. What set these strategies apart was the tempo.

In effect, the hybrid pressure was visibly intensified, favouring deniable levers to sway votes, polarise public opinion, and destabilise Moldova's pro-Western orientation and incumbent majority. The modus operandi combined, amongst others, coordinated influence operations sustained through illicit funding infrastructures, proxy mobilisation (i.e. in Russian-speaking localities) and recruitment to stir public unrest both within Moldova and abroad. Mirroring Kiriyenko's interventions in Russia and Ukraine, constellations of covertly funded NGOs and Orthodox religious networks were deployed as levers, weaving narratives of religious persecution with material incentives to cultivate support and loyalty among transnational communities of faith. In parallel, clerical hierarchies and parish priests (primarily subservient to the Moscow Patriarchate) were mobilised to sermonise against

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<sup>47</sup> ISW Brief, Russia Continues Efforts to Regain Influence Over Moldova, September 2025,

<https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russia-continues-efforts-to-regain-influence-over-moldova/>

<sup>48</sup> Russia's centralised hierarchy of political control, by which authority flows downward from the presidency through state institutions, security apparatus, and loyalist networks.

<sup>49</sup> Anton Troianovski, The Quiet Technocrat Who Enacts Putin's Ruthless Agenda, The New York Times, August 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/10/world/europe/putin-russia-ukraine-war-sergei-kiriyenko.html>

European integration, framing it as a spiritual threat, and to seed narratives across coordinated Telegram channels and local media.<sup>50</sup>

Setting aside the almost instant capacity for proliferation of online ecosystems, the weaponisation of ecclesiastical networks echoes historically in the KGB's (well-documented) playbook, whereby Soviet front organisations such as the Christian Peace Conference (CPC) and the World Peace Council provided religious facades to conduct influence operations abroad. Through these platforms and numerous others, Moscow cultivated sympathetic clergy, legitimised Soviet foreign policy in ecumenical forums, and penetrated international institutions under the guise of interfaith dialogue and peace activism.<sup>51</sup> This is similar to how Russian-funded activist NGOs instrumentalised claims of religious persecution within UN fora (for instance, in the Committee for Human Rights).<sup>52</sup>

To complicate the fragile balance of prospective coalition negotiations or even contest an unfavourable outcome, Russian-affiliated networks and local proxies have incited public unrest and mobilisation in the vote's immediate aftermath. Prior orchestrations targeted the Moldovan diaspora, coordinated both offline and online. The manufacturing of public outrage in online spaces was correspondingly reinforced by the tactical training of saboteurs in various locations across the western Balkans – **coercive auxiliaries prepared to embed protest movements and foment violent escalation**.<sup>53</sup> Although at least one such network was dismantled prior to the vote, the scope of sabotage campaigns and the level of penetration cannot be fully gauged.

This continuity between past and present reminds us that much of what appears 'new' in Russia's hybrid arsenal is **deeply rooted in a historical modus operandi**. By failing to connect present-day influence operations with their historical precedents, much of the scholarship on information threats risks treating symptoms in isolation while missing the structural persistence of its insidious approach – **an omission that distorts both assessment and response**.

## Conclusion

While the September 2025 parliamentary outcome delivered a measure of clarity, it did so without resolving the underlying contest. PAS's outright majority may be a meaningful consolidation; it marks the second successive legislature in which Moldova's pro-European orientation has been institutionally anchored rather than merely rhetorically claimed. Yet the structural conditions that made the months preceding the vote so volatile have not been fully dismantled. The networks of proxies, financial pipelines, and ideological surrogates documented in the series of analyses, were not defeated. They were denied the ballot and will have recalibrated, under different guises, perhaps more insidious and covert. The modular architecture of Shor-linked parties (each banned and succeeded by another) is one of the clearest examples of hybrid adaptation, suggesting a capacity to absorb institutional pressure and redistribute across new vessels.

What the 2025 elections illuminate, above all, is the evolving grammar of hybrid interference in a small, structurally exposed democracy at Europe's eastern edge. The economy of inducements documented in the leaked financial records, the nationwide coordinator grid with Russia-based

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<sup>50</sup> Mihaela Tanase, Marionela Toma, Persecutia ortodocsilor: Operatiune ruseasca dedicate alegerilor parlamentare din Republica Moldova, *Context*, September 2025,

<https://context.ro/persecutia-ortodocsilor-operatiune-ruseasca-dedicata-alegerilor-parlamentare-din-republica-moldova/>

<sup>51</sup> A recommended read into the history of the KGB's modus operandi, Christopher Andrew, Vasili Mitrokhin (2000). *The Mitrokhin Archive. The KGB in Europe and the West* (Penguin: London). PP: 634-5.

<sup>52</sup> Mihaela Tanase, Marionela Toma, Persecutia ortodocsilor: Operatiune ruseasca dedicata alegerilor parlamentare din Republica Moldova, *Context*, September 2025,

<https://context.ro/persecutia-ortodocsilor-operatiune-ruseasca-dedicata-alegerilor-parlamentare-din-republica-moldova/>

<sup>53</sup> Vladislav Culiomza, Moldova arrests 74 over "Russian plan to incite mass riots", *The Times*, September 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/moldova-elections-2025-news-p97tw7wvl>

political technologists as overseers, the village-by-village activist schedules, and Moscow-hosted delegations are not exceptional instruments but routine ones, embedded across cycles and recalibrated between ballots. The October 2024 Presidential and September 2025 Parliamentary elections can and should be viewed as sequential phases of the same campaign, not separate episodes.

At least three dynamics warrant sustained attention moving forward:

- **Firstly, rhetorical camouflage is deepening.** This is happening through self-declared pro-European formations operating as pro-Russian conduits, the so-called sovereign platforms laundering Kremlin positions as anti-establishment nationalism, and the deliberate blurring of ideological lines to preserve influence under shifting electoral and legal constraints. Albeit not a novelty in political rhetoric, information spaces have the capacity to compound public confusion exponentially, particularly if governed by obscure algorithmic (recommender) systems.
- **Secondly, the regional dimension is structural, rather than incidental.** One example, the cross-border networks linking Moldova's information environment to Romania's contested electoral cycles (i.e. shared amplification infrastructures, converging populist/sovereignist platforms, common foreign actors, etc.) fuse countries across the region into a single operational theatre, albeit with local adaptations.
- **Thirdly, the role of the diaspora in elections is decisive.** Over 275,000 votes were cast abroad in both 2024 and 2025 (78.6% for PAS in the latter) rendering this extra-territorial constituency a permanent target. This fact was attested by the information warfare campaign directed at Moldovan communities across the EU in the months prior to the ballot.

Yet despite these analytical gains, there remains a widespread sense that defensive capacities continue to lag behind adversarial innovation. States, supranational structures, and alliances still operate in policy and decision-making silos, marked by the hard borders that continue to govern geo-strategic thinking. Uncomfortable truths are cushioned and curated to suit political sensibilities, while adversaries move fluidly across systems, exploiting precisely those gaps in vision and resolve. Platforms, too, play an increasingly destructive role. Those ostensibly designed to democratise speech, now systematically amplify what enrages, divides and confuses. **Algorithmic incentives and democratic interests are no longer aligned.**

It is worth reiterating that the corollary of hybrid influence operations is simple: **if citizens can be persuaded that democracy itself is dysfunctional or illegitimate, there is little need to persuade them whom to vote for.** Perhaps this is the most suitable adage for what was observed during Moldova's parliamentary elections. **In essence, the attacker need only sow doubt, while the defender must rebuild the public trust that makes democratic choice meaningful — a task far more fragile, and consequential than any specific electoral outcome.**

The global landscape is engaged in an asymmetric warfare, where grassroots counter-response remains dwarfed and powerless in comparison. And yet, it is within these grassroots citizen-led communities of practice that the first alarms are often sounded and where democratic values are lived rather than merely legislated. To withstand the pressures of this evolving assault on democracy, local defences must be elevated, given a resolute voice, and equipped with the capabilities to pre-emptively respond – not within insulated echo chambers, but on **the digital frontlines where democratic legitimacy is being contested.**

*Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual author and do not reflect the views of The Foreign Policy Centre.*

## Annex I. Timeline of the Shor/Victory Political Network (2015–2025)<sup>54</sup>



<sup>54</sup> Chronology tracing the evolution, reconstitution, sanctions, and electoral prohibitions associated with Ilan Shor-linked political parties, blocs, and affiliated structures between 2015 and 2025.