

A Lesson in Resilience: Moldova's Resistance to Election Interference

By Matthew Schaaf and Andrew Rogan

*"Our vulnerabilities are being weaponized by foreign powers — amplified by technology and artificial intelligence, financed through cryptocurrency, disguised in democratic language. These are no longer attacks on institutions — they are assaults on our very sovereignty."*¹

This was the message that Moldova's President, Maia Sandu, delivered on the 35th anniversary of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

Her message reflects the embattled state of her country, emerging from two back-to-back election cycles beset by cyberattacks, illicit financing schemes, prolific information manipulation campaigns, and political rhetoric espoused by Kremlin-linked actors.² Her words carry weight for democracies across the continent, and indeed the world, as they contend with the growing threat of geopolitical tensions spilling into direct foreign interference in electoral processes.

The threat of foreign interference in elections

Efforts around the world to address malign foreign interference are struggling to keep pace with influence tactics, even as [government and citizens are stepping up to fight back](#). In IFES's experience, there are three primary channels for foreign interference in elections: cyberspace and digital systems; the information environment; and financial flows in politics. Domestic vulnerabilities to corruption further enable foreign actors to engage in strategic corruption, or the "weaponisation of corruption in pursuit of foreign policy goals."³

Malign foreign actors leveraged all possible channels of interference in Moldova's elections – across presidential, parliamentary, and referendum elections held in the span of 18 months. While new tactics and tools of foreign interference proliferated in Moldova's elections, the country's effective response strategy proves instructive in what may be key to building resilience.

Russia's "hybrid war" on Moldova

Moldova's presidential elections on October 20, 2024, and parliamentary elections on September 28, 2025, took place in the context of intense public debates over the role of the European Union (EU) and Russia in the country's political life, society, and future. Since 2021, Moldova has elected leaders who champion closer ties with the EU, with Moldova opening EU accession negotiations in mid-2024. In late 2024, the goal of EU membership was enshrined in the country's constitution with the passage of a hotly contested constitutional referendum, itself a target of foreign interference. The EU's latest [progress report](#) on Moldova reflects this commitment, with EU leaders estimating the completion of accession before the end of the decade.

Moldova's EU aspirations come with unwelcome Russian attention. As it has with Ukraine and other countries it seeks to manipulate, Russia targeted Moldova with hybrid attacks during its elections. The

¹ Press Release: "Maia Sandu at the Venice Commission anniversary: "We must redefine transparency, accountability and political freedom in a world where money, technology and disinformation move faster than the law," *Presidency of the Republic of Moldova*, October 11, 2025.

² Odarchenko, Kateryna, "Putin's Moldova election failure highlights Russia's declining influence," *Atlantic Council*, October 4, 2025 and Jensen, Donald, Testimony before the Staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission), U.S. House of Representatives: Russian Interference in the 2024 Moldovan Presidential Election and Constitutional Referendum, *United States Institute of Peace*, November 12, 2024.

³ Kerusauskaitė, Ingrida, and Caryn Peiffer, "Practical Challenges Mitigating Strategic Corruption," *Public Integrity*, June, 1–15, 2025.

pace and scale of cyber incidents, widescale vote-buying and illegal campaign donations, misinformation campaigns, and other interference threats have proliferated since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The impact in Moldova is significant, causing social and economic harm to the country. In one notable example, Russia [manufactured a gas crisis in Moldova's separatist region of Transnistria](#), sacrificing the region's wellbeing to undermine national level authorities.

Much of this influence has been coordinated by fugitive Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor, a key figure in the 2014 Moldovan bank fraud scandal, when Moldova lost the equivalent of 12% of its GDP to corruption. Shor fled Moldova in 2019 after being convicted and sentenced to prison and has since coordinated a range of domestic political proxies to corrupt the electoral process and undermine its integrity. In 2023, Shor's eponymous political party was [banned by the Constitutional Court](#) after evidence exposed its illicit activities and connections to Russian intelligence.

Russia expanded its hybrid tactics throughout the 2024 and 2025 elections and referendum; there is a comprehensive body of evidence that exposes its attempts to influence election conduct and results, especially via the unprecedented volume of illicit funds flowing into the country.⁴ In the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election and constitutional referendum, [authorities confiscated more than 20 million lei](#) (approximately USD 1.2 million) from organized groups of passengers traveling from Moscow to Moldova, allegedly for use in vote-buying and election manipulation by Shor-affiliated actors. An undercover investigation by journalists from the Moldovan investigative media outlet Ziarul de Gardă (ZdG) in October 2024 [revealed a vast Russian scheme](#) to bribe and manipulate voters, offering citizens payments via [accounts opened in Russia's Promsvyazbank](#). All told, roughly 10 percent of voters were influenced through vote-buying and an estimated [\\$39 million dollars](#) was spent to bribe voters, not accounting for funds used in online advertising, information manipulation campaigns, or coordinating community influencers.

Attempts to interfere continued in the 2025 parliamentary election process and featured new channels and tactics. In a similar fashion to the Shor Party's efforts in 2023, a range of proxy political entities with illicit ties to Russia sought to contest the elections, leading to the decision of Moldova's Central Electoral Commission (CEC) to [reject their registration](#), upheld by the Supreme Court of Justice. During the campaign period, ZdG once more [revealed a network of Moldovan influencers and trolls paid with Russian funds](#) to spread propaganda on TikTok and Facebook, apparently linked to the Victory bloc, one of the competitors in the elections aligned with Russia. Another [investigation by BBC](#) also revealed an extensive paid network of pro-Russian propagandists operating with direct instruction from Russian-affiliated coordinators. [Russia also allegedly trained upwards of 150 Moldovans in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to serve as would-be provocateurs](#) around and after the election, arming them with combat knowledge and destabilization tactics. By the time citizens went to the polls, the entire campaign period was shrouded in case after case of documented interference attempts and illicit schemes.

Resilience: from theory to practice

In the period between November 2024 and the start of the election period in mid-2025, citizens across Moldova mobilized to translate lessons learned into action—both to ensure accountability for wrongdoing in the 2024 election period, and to insulate the 2025 elections from malign influence.

In the months following the 2024 elections, Moldova's governing institutions carried out enforcement actions against election violations, applying new measures adopted in recent years as part of

⁴ Doroftei, Alina, "Lessons in Resilience: Moldova's Response to Russia's Hybrid Interference," Policy Brief for the *German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Foundation*, October 2025.

anti-corruption reforms. In April 2025, state police [began fining voters](#) who took bribes; the fines were waived if the voters cooperated with investigators to expose higher-level organizers. In August 2025, Eugenia Gutsul, a leader from Moldova's autonomous Russian-speaking majority region Gagauzia, was convicted of funneling illicit Russian funds into the Moldovan electoral process and was [sentenced to seven years in prison](#).

Moldova also focused on preventative actions ahead of the 2025 vote. In particular, the CEC enhanced its campaign finance oversight and electoral cyber defense capabilities. This included [monitoring financial flows in elections](#) and [revamping the security infrastructure](#) for the "Elections" platform housed on the State Automated Information System. The newly established Center for Strategic Communication and Counteracting Disinformation (STRATCOM) [was empowered in September 2025](#) to take steps to counter Russian disinformation and build citizen resilience. Coordination between law enforcement and anti-corruption investigators worked to [dismantle offshore vote-buying networks](#). Meanwhile, [civil society and the media](#) raised awareness, publicized Russia's hybrid-war tactics, and directly challenged Kremlin narratives.

At the same time, flexible and swift assistance from the EU and the broader international community strengthened responses to complex threats to election integrity, offering Moldova's institutions, civil society, and media reliable partnerships for action. Among this assistance, IFES's support was focused on proactive measures to build resilience against hybrid threats, especially with the CEC, as the country's national-level election management body charged with administering the electoral process, registering and validating contestants, and conducting oversight of political and campaign finance. Ahead of the parliamentary elections, IFES worked with the CEC to strengthen the institution's resilience and coordination with other key stakeholders. With support of the United Kingdom (UK), IFES [trained](#) CEC and district election council political finance staff, law enforcement personnel, civil society, and media on political finance oversight and enforcement, focusing on abuse of state resources and risks of foreign interference through illicit finance, such as cryptocurrency and hidden donations. To explore potential regulatory responses to third-party campaigning—a common method facilitating foreign financial flows—IFES [brought together](#) CEC officials with experts from the UK to examine case studies and approaches to monitoring third-party activities in election campaigns. Alongside the CEC, IFES also strengthened public engagement and voter education initiatives to build trust in the electoral process and establish resilience against information manipulation efforts perpetrated by foreign malign actors and their proxies in Moldova.

[While international observers noted](#) the 2025 election campaign was "marred by serious cases of foreign interference, illegal funding, cyberattacks and widespread disinformation, these efforts yielded results. The head of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) delegation commended "electoral authorities for a well-run process and the people of Moldova for their calm, civic-minded participation." Other members of the international observation mission noted that proactive measures by institutions and citizens were key to preserving election integrity. Indeed, the government also spoke widely about its actions to insulate the parliamentary elections from malign influence. When asked what the difference in 2025 was compared to 2024, President Sandu explained,

"This year, the Prosecutor's Office did its job according to the law and there were results. These schemes stopped. The people who organized, or tried to organize vote-buying schemes, made a lot of people miserable who ended up paying large fines for selling their votes. But those who lured these people into traps must answer, first of all...We have now seen that the state can be efficient when institutions respect the law and fulfill their obligations."

Lessons for Europe and beyond

Looking ahead, Moldova has much to do to cement its EU accession path and fulfill outstanding recommendations to improve democratic governance, rule of law, anti-corruption, and electoral processes, which are integral elements of the EU's Fundamentals accession cluster and are essential to secure future elections and mitigate foreign interference.

The EU also has much to learn from the experience in Moldova, both for its Member States and other aspiring candidate countries. While the scope and scale of Russia's interference in Moldova is an example of the growing threat in Europe, the tactics and methods are not unique and are used throughout the region. Drawing on Moldova's last two election cycles, the *Transparency International* chapter in the EU [recommends a series of actions](#) for the EU to consider. The *European Council on Foreign Relations* also [suggests three overarching themes](#) to turn lessons learned from Moldova into a broader democratic resilience strategy. These recommendations closely align with IFES's [Democratic Resilience Framework](#), adapted below to reflect a counter-interference approach applicable well beyond Moldova:

- *Preparation:* To “pre-empt election fraud and foreign interference,”⁵ national governments should adopt measures that enhance inter-institutional coordination with financial intelligence units, cybersecurity experts, law enforcement, and oversight bodies, opening fora to share information, cooperate on detecting threats, and carrying out enforcement actions. These measures should also advance international cooperation on cyber defense, illicit finance investigations, and intelligence sharing, tapping into regional networks to identify and respond to active interference threats.
- *Response:* When threat becomes reality, responses should both reinforce democratic culture and pursue accountability. First, pro-democracy actors can deploy strategic communication campaigns that highlight benefits of democratic values and pushback against exploitative narratives. These campaigns should engage community and popular voices ranging from celebrities, influencers, civic advocacy groups, volunteers, religious leaders, and youth networks to amplify messages. Second, authorities must step up accountability measures that punish violations through credible and legitimate judicial processes, ranging from administrative fines through criminal convictions.
- *Recovery and Transformation:* To recover resilience in society, democratic champions must reflect on the vulnerabilities exposed by interference and transform these failure points toward structural improvements. New norms, rules, and practices that reflect lessons learned should take priority, and ensure that tangible outcomes are felt by citizens. National governments, civil society, and responsible institutions should work in hand to resist future threats and deliver new investments and concrete opportunities to secure citizen trust.

In the near term, the lessons drawn from Moldova will prove valuable for other countries in the region holding elections amidst threats of foreign interference, including [Armenia in mid-2026](#), Montenegro in early 2027, and Ukraine, once it is in a position to hold post-war elections. In Armenia in particular, [efforts are already underway](#) to apply strategies from Moldova. Outside of Europe, other vulnerable countries will look to the experience of Moldova and the EU for inspiration in their own counter-interference approaches, whether from internal or external malign forces working to distort democracy and diminish trust in elections.

While there is much to learn from Moldova as a global community of democratic champions, those who aim to destabilize democracy will similarly learn from the experience in Moldova, innovating new methods

⁵ Litra, Leo and Gabriele Valodskaitė, “From success to strategy: Three lessons from Moldova’s election,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 7, 2025.

for interference. IFES's research on [authoritarian collaboration](#) reveals that malign actors around the globe are rapidly developing new influence techniques to stay ahead of law enforcement, intelligence bodies, and democratic political forces. And the uptake of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems offers substantial opportunities for malign foreign actors to scale-up their interference campaigns. To address this latter challenge, IFES' [AI Advisory Group on Elections \(AI AGE\)](#) is bringing together stakeholders from the election community, private sector, and beyond to design and deploy safeguards as an initial step in bolstering democracy protections.

As malign foreign actors rapidly proliferate their tools and strategies to destabilize democratic processes and undermine elections, the global community of democracies must keep pace with the ever-evolving threat landscape. The EU has just launched its [European Democracy Shield \(EDS\)](#), seeking to forge stronger and more resilient democracies in Europe. Announced on November 11, 2025, the EDS will create a new European Centre for Democratic Resilience to collectively “anticipate, detect and respond to threats and build democratic resilience.”⁶ Its planned initiatives include establishing a network of fact-checkers, a cooperation mechanism for exchange on election integrity topics, developing new guidelines on the use of AI in elections, and fostering media and digital literacy.

While initiatives such as the EDS offer new resources against external threats, they must be coupled with robust *internal* protections. Ultimately, resilience requires a national commitment to democratic principles: accountability, transparency, and civic trust. The experience of Moldova shows that even a fragile democracy can go to bat against a major authoritarian spoiler, so long as there is strong collaboration between citizens, institutions, government, and the international democracy community to stand against interference.

⁶ Press Release, European Democracy Shield and EU Strategy for Civil Society pave the way for stronger and more resilient democracies, *European Commission*, November 11, 2025.