



Election Investigations



**New Challenges,
Emerging Issues, and
Potential Solutions**

MARCH 2026

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About this Report

In December 2020, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) released an elections investigation guidebook – Standards, Techniques and Resources for Investigating Disputes in Elections (STRIDE). In the five years since STRIDE was published, electoral dispute resolution (EDR) practitioners have had to confront an increasingly complex landscape.

In this paper, we seek to tackle these emerging issues related to elections investigations, highlighting cases where new technologies facilitate electoral violations that were not yet prevalent when STRIDE was published. This includes election integrity and foreign interference threats related to the misuse of state resources, widespread disinformation campaigns on social media, illicit political finance, and cyber tactics for electoral manipulation.

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**International Foundation
for Electoral Systems**

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
CEC	Central Election Commission (in Albania and Moldova)
BKH	National Bureau of Investigation (acronym comes from the Albanian spelling)
EDR	Electoral dispute resolution
EMB	Election management body
EU	European Union
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
KNAB	Corruption Prevention and Combatting Bureau (acronym comes from the Latvian spelling)
MOU	Memorandum of understanding
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SPAK	Special Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office (in Albania)
STRIDE	Standards, Techniques and Resources for Investigating Disputes in Elections
TSE	Superior Electoral Court (acronym comes from the Brazilian Portuguese spelling)

Introduction

In December 2020, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) released an elections investigation guidebook – *Standards, Techniques and Resources for Investigating Disputes in Elections (STRIDE)*.¹ STRIDE was designed to address the unique challenges inherent in election investigations and fact-finding processes, including the expedited timelines associated with election cases that may span both administrative, civil, and criminal violations. STRIDE outlines standards for election investigations and presents concrete recommendations to implement these standards in practice. As such, it serves as a comprehensive tool for practitioners—including law enforcement, prosecutors, members of the judiciary system, and officials of electoral authorities—who are responsible for carrying out these time-bound, sensitive, and complex investigations.

In the five years since STRIDE was published, electoral dispute resolution (EDR) practitioners have had to confront an increasingly complex landscape, in particular due to rising hybrid threats in the digital space. Elections are more litigious than ever, with contestants, parties, and even voters lodging complaints and legal challenges in courts. Election management bodies (EMBs), investigative authorities, and judges in election cases face high caseloads, tight deadlines, polarized political environments, and increasing suspicion regarding the integrity of the electoral process itself. These stressors are exacerbated by online mis- and disinformation targeting both members of electoral institutions and the electoral process itself, cyber-attacks, and interference from malign actors including of a foreign nature. Despite these challenges, carrying out robust, timely, and efficient investigations remains essential to ensure accountability, maintain election integrity, and uphold the rule of law.

In this paper, we seek to tackle these emerging issues related to elections investigations, highlighting cases where new technologies facilitate electoral violations that were not yet prevalent when STRIDE was published. This includes election integrity and foreign interference threats related to the misuse of state resources, widespread disinformation campaigns on social media, illicit political finance, and cyber tactics for electoral manipulation. This report is meant to complement STRIDE, leveraging the standards and best practice highlighted in the guidebook, to assess recent developments in electoral crimes and corruption, the new challenges faced by investigative and enforcement bodies, and the innovative practices they use to address these challenges.

¹ Vickery, C., Ellena, K., Szilagyi, H., Shein, E., Brown, A., Dekanic, E., & Lippolis, E. (2020). *Election Investigations Guidebook*. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. <https://www.ifes.org/publications/election-investigations-guidebook>

We begin with a brief overview of the standards and best practices for election investigations highlighted in STRIDE. The paper then discusses the emergence of new challenges in electoral investigations, including the increased presence of complex schemes like covert vote-buying networks, fraudulent online campaign financing, and digital disinformation campaigns designed to undermine electoral integrity, spotlighting incidents in recent elections in Albania, Moldova, and Romania. We proceed to an analysis of these trends and then outline promising practices to strengthen enforcement mechanisms, including leveraging cross-sector data and enhancing inter-institutional cooperation to more effectively detect and prosecute electoral crimes and violations.

A Quick Primer: Guidelines for Elections Investigations

In the [Standards, Techniques and Resources for Investigating Disputes in Elections \(STRIDE\) Guidebook](#),

IFES outlines how investigating election offenses and crimes raise unique issues and challenges with respect to dispute resolution which, if not handled properly, “can destabilize governments, undermine public trust, and lead to violence.”² Depending on the nature of the violation, a case may, for example, implicate election law or

regulations, broader administrative or civil law and the criminal code – complicating matters of jurisdiction, raising questions about who is responsible for conducting the investigation and which standards of evidence apply, and increasing resources and time needed to complete these investigations. In addition, a tendency to default to criminal proceedings, rather than administrative or civil sanctions, can lead to high thresholds to pursue criminal cases, lengthy trials, and impunity for minor violations.³

Examples of elections investigators

- Electoral management body staff
- Law enforcement
- Public prosecutors
- Courts
- Supreme audit institutions
- Anticorruption prevention authority
- Political finance authority

Those investigating election cases may not be familiar with the intricacies of the electoral process or election law, or they may be experts in the electoral process but not experienced investigators. Further, when electoral management bodies are charged with investigating, they may have limited resources or be required to investigate allegations related to their own personnel, resulting in actual or perceived conflicts of interest. Depending on the election violation or offense in question, an investigator or investigative body may need to seek or request additional evidence related to the irregularity and then determine the author of the violation, whether the act was committed intentionally and/or whether the act or irregularity had an outcome-determinative impact on the election result. Finally, tight deadlines associated with the electoral process may require that elections cases proceed on accelerated timelines, expediting the investigative or fact-finding process and forcing those resolving disputes to make decisions with incomplete information. This is especially important to consider in contexts where election materials might not be easily accessible but require a high level of scrutiny to substantiate the violation.

² Ibid.

³ Stefan, L. & Roblot, T. (September 2023). *Effective Investigations and Sanctions of Integrity Breaches (Unpublished)*. International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Notwithstanding the complex environment, an elections investigation must adhere to international standards, as articulated in General Comment 31 to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: “Administrative mechanisms are particularly required to give effect to the general obligation to investigate allegations of violations promptly, thoroughly and effectively through independent and impartial bodies.”⁴ STRIDE lays out four stages of the investigation process to give life to these four principles: prompt investigation, thorough investigation, effective investigation and independent and impartial investigators. In the following sections, we first consider the stages of the investigative process – itself just one part of the broader electoral dispute resolution process – and then provide a brief discussion of the four principles.

Four Principles of an Election Investigation

Prompt

Thorough

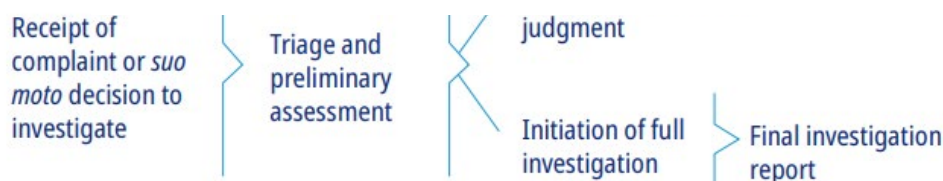
Effective

Independent and Impartial

The Stages of the Investigative Process

In the framework introduced in STRIDE, the investigative process consists of the following stages: (1) receipt of complaint; (2) preliminary assessment; (3) dismissal or referral of the complaint; and, if applicable, (4) formal investigation/full fact-finding.⁵

Stages of the Investigative Process (excerpt from STRIDE)



In the first stage, an investigation may be triggered by the receipt of a complaint from a stakeholder with legal standing; a competent institution may refer a complaint to the investigative body; or the investigative body/investigator may make a *suo motu*⁶ decision to investigate, once aware of a potential violation. A written complaint may be filed through the submission of a standardized form – now more commonly done through online portals – or with a phone call, email, social media message, or other less formal mechanism. In some jurisdictions, complaints may be filed anonymously,

⁴ General comment no. 31 [80], *The nature of the general legal obligation imposed on States Parties to the Covenant*. (2004). Refworld. Retrieved January 5, 2026, from <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/hrc/2004/en/52451>

⁵ For a more fulsome discussion of each stage, see STRIDE.

⁶ Taking action on its own accord or own motion.

although doing so necessarily limits investigators' ability to follow up on a complaint. A standardized form can provide complainants with necessary guidance to ensure complaints are complete and facilitate triage by the competent authority/investigative body. Per good practice, whatever the mechanism, election dispute resolution bodies should develop uniform standards for the submission of complaints, give complainants an opportunity to correct any deficiencies in their submissions, and track and record all complaints received in a consistent manner.

During the second stage, the investigative body should conduct a preliminary assessment and triage the complaint accordingly. First, the appropriate jurisdiction for the claim must be established to determine which entity (or entities) will be responsible for the investigation. Some complaints may require referrals to law enforcement and assessment by the electoral authorities to determine whether to award a more time-bound electoral remedy for any potential administrative violation. An assessment must also be made to determine whether there is a legitimate basis for a full investigation, considering a complaint's "credibility, materiality, and verifiability."⁷ Given the high volume of election complaints in some countries and the compressed timelines associated with electoral processes, this preliminary assessment and triage phase is essential to avoid disrupting the electoral calendar and to weed out frivolous claims.⁸

Why triage?

*Romania's Permanent Elections Authority received **more than 50,000 complaints** during the May 2025 election.*

Following the preliminary assessment, an investigative or adjudicative body may decide to dismiss the complaint and close the case or, if appropriate, refer the case to another entity. This could occur if, for example, the complaint does not appear to have a sufficient impact on stakeholder rights or on electoral processes and outcomes to warrant investigation, the allegations do not fall within the investigative body's jurisdiction, or the statute of limitations has expired. In making this determination, investigators must presume that the evidence presented in a claim is true and accurate, determine whether the claim contains sufficient evidence to support a judgment until contradictory evidence is presented and, if proven true, determine whether the complaint could influence election outcomes. An increasingly important consideration is the need to balance accountability with citizens' trust. In politically sensitive events such as elections, investigative bodies must weigh accountability against

⁷ United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services. (2009). Conference of International Investigators (CII 2009): Uniform Principles and Guidelines for Investigations, Second Edition. United Nations. https://oios.un.org/sites/oios.un.org/files/Reports/investigations_uniform_guidelines.pdf

⁸ Protocol 14 of the European Convention proposes to further improve the efficiency of adjudicators by dividing complaints into two categories. The first category concerns cases that are unlikely to succeed due to lack of substance or failure to state a claim. The second category captures cases that are similar to cases brought previously against the same member state. Furthermore, the protocol proposes that cases that are "manifestly ill-founded" or in which an applicant has not suffered a "significant disadvantage" should not be admitted (see STRIDE).

damage to public perception of, and trust in, the electoral process. Some electoral violations result in negligible or fairly inconsequential effects on the results of an election and pursuing punitive actions could quickly escalate into larger questions about the legitimacy or credibility of the electoral process. In any case, if a complaint is ultimately dismissed, the reasons for doing so should be thoroughly and transparently documented and communicated to the parties.

Canadian Investigators' Manual: Criteria for Recommending a Full Investigation

- 1) Reasonable cause is shown for the commission of violations that have (or could have) influenced election processes and/or outcomes.
- 2) Reasonable grounds exist to show facts that can be verified or corroborated through further investigation efforts, particularly evidence collection.
- 3) A complaint appears to present a *prima facie* claim and does not warrant additional investigation.
- 4) The factual circumstances and current environment justify further action.
- 5) Further action is in the public interest.
- 6) The statute of limitations for filing complaints has not expired.

The final stage is the decision to engage in a full fact-finding process or investigation.⁹ Once that determination is made, the investigative bodies should establish their own investigation plan, ideally based on existing laws and regulations and informed by established institutional investigative procedures.¹⁰ Once a full investigation is initiated, it must follow the four principles: prompt, thorough, effective, and conducted by independent and impartial investigators, as discussed in the next section.¹¹

The Four Principles

From a human rights perspective, **prompt** investigations are critical in elections cases, especially in light of the number of complaints institutions must address in a compressed time frame. In election cases, evidence may be time sensitive, difficult to access, or subject to post-election destruction.

⁹ Prosecutors and other investigators are also aware of timing, confidentiality and their potential to influence the outcome of an election or be perceived as politically motivated if news of an investigation into potential wrongdoing is made public. As the U.S. Department of Justice investigations manual notes, for example, “any criminal investigation by the Department must be conducted in a way that minimizes the likelihood that the investigation itself may become a factor in the election. The mere fact that a criminal investigation is being conducted may impact upon the adjudication of election litigation and contests in state courts. Moreover, the seizure by federal authorities of documentation generated by the election process may deprive state election and judicial authorities of critical materials needed to resolve election disputes, conduct recounts, and certify the ultimate winners. Accordingly, it is the general policy of the Department not to conduct overt investigations, including interviews with individual voters, until after the outcome of the election allegedly affected by the fraud is certified.”

¹⁰ As STRIDE notes, “the decision of the investigative body must be reviewable by a court, as needed, although the investigators should be given authority to determine the standards and manner by which they prioritize and conduct investigations.”

¹¹ In practice, it is a challenge for electoral dispute resolution bodies to conduct a full fact-finding/investigation in many places, given short deadlines for the adjudication of election disputes – sometimes 48 or 72 hours. As a result, some electoral dispute resolution bodies limit their adjudication to an administrative review process.

Additionally, impunity for election offenses may linger from one electoral cycle to the next. A triage system – wherein cases are prioritized in terms of the severity of the alleged violation (especially the likelihood that the result would have a determinative effect on the election results) – is essential for managing the investigation process. Any such system must strike a balance between efficiency and due process, both of which implicate fundamental rights. An election case that is not resolved before the electoral process concludes could nullify voters’ freedom to select their leaders, while a case that is rushed – including with respect to the investigation – could deny the accused of their fundamental right to due process of law.

“Investigative bodies necessarily have an interest in ensuring the conclusion of an investigation before the possible infringement of an electoral right becomes irreparable and in preventing a lingering dispute that may bring the democratic process to a standstill ...”¹²

That said, while many election laws and regulations provide tight deadlines for adjudicating electoral disputes, it is less common for specific timelines to be provided to govern the investigative process. An investigation plan can help ensure the investigative phase proceeds efficiently and may require bifurcation of the investigation to address time-sensitive electoral remedies (recount, audit, or annulment) separately from disciplinary sanctions against officials or criminal convictions that can proceed after the election concludes and require a higher standard of evidence.

While ensuring an investigation moves forward as efficiently as possible, investigative bodies are also responsible for ensuring investigations are **thorough** and produce sound evidence. Investigators must collect evidence, substantiate and corroborate that evidence, analyze and present the evidence, and ensure evidence is documented and protected. Ideally, electoral law, regulations, or rules provide for a wide range of types of evidence that are admissible in an elections case. Common types of evidence in election cases include, for example, documents, video or audio recordings, photographs, electronic evidence, interviews or testimony, official election observation reports, expert testimony, and physical evidence. The procedures used to obtain evidence – including rules related to the search and seizure of property or possessions believed to suggest the commission of a crime or electoral misconduct – must also be established in law or regulation and adhered to by investigators.

Any evidence collected by investigators or submitted by complainants must be substantiated and corroborated. Investigators must consider all the evidence available, including inculpatory and exculpatory evidence, and present their findings and recommendations based on that evidence,

¹² Ibid.

including their reasons for the conclusions they reach.¹³ An investigator's findings and recommendations should be presented in a formal report and any substantiated complaints should be referred to appropriate authorities. Documentation and evidence gathered throughout all stages of the investigation should be retained, recorded, and preserved pursuant to an established information and records management policy.¹⁴

Next, an **effective** investigation is essential to ensure individuals have accessible and effective remedies in place to protect their rights to vote and stand for election. An effective investigation is necessary to determine whether an alleged violation took place and thus whether a remedy is appropriate. An effective investigation regime is characterized by a clear delineation of the specific subject-matter jurisdiction of each electoral institution and the appropriate scope of investigation; which bodies have original and/or

exclusive jurisdiction over electoral matters; and how matters of concurrent jurisdiction should be handled to deter forum shopping. Investigative bodies must have the capacity and authority to conduct election investigations that comport with domestic and international standards and develop communication mechanisms with other relevant entities – including EMBs, law enforcement agents, prosecutors, and courts – to support timely referrals and effective communication among institutions. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between institutions can be an effective mechanism to set out clearly defined roles and responsibilities and avoid overlap in investigations, or to ensure quick referral.

States should provide investigators with regular training and establish and implement normative and procedural safeguards to promote accountability in the investigative process, with the twin goals of preventing investigators from misusing their powers and addressing such conduct when necessary. Training and standard operating procedures should ensure that investigators are prepared to maintain a proper chain of custody in handling the evidence related to election disputes.¹⁵ This

Promising practice: cooperation in Kenya

The Kenyan judiciary – in cooperation with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission and the Office of Department of Public Prosecution – designed a curriculum that included a module on election offenses. Magistrates were trained on the topic months before the elections. To enhance cooperation on election offenses, the Commission and the Office also signed a memorandum of understanding regarding evidence and information sharing to counter impunity ahead of the elections.

¹³ Inculpatory evidence is indicative of guilt, liability, or wrongdoing, while exculpatory evidence is indicative of innocence.

¹⁴ See STRIDE for a robust set of examples and standards related to document retention and preservation.

¹⁵ The “chain of custody” refers to the chronological and careful documentation of evidence to establish its connection to the offense.

includes maintaining a thorough inventory of physical evidence to ensure all items are secured and preserved for subsequent adjudication.

Finally, investigations must be undertaken by **independent and impartial** bodies. This requires investigators to “maintain objectivity, impartiality, and fairness throughout the investigative process and conduct activities competently and with the highest levels of integrity.”¹⁶ Investigative bodies should be institutionally independent, in action and in structure, from other branches of government to avoid real or perceived bias towards government entities or representatives that may be involved in electoral disputes. Investigative bodies must ensure confidentiality during an electoral investigation, while taking steps to inform the public about the investigative process and making investigative records publicly available after the matter is resolved. Individual investigators must act without bias or prejudice in carrying out their duties and must not allow their opinions or political views to influence their actions in conducting an investigation. This includes that investigators be free of conflicts of interest that could affect their ability to be (or be seen to be) impartial.

¹⁶ Conference of International Investigators, Uniform Guidelines for Investigations ¶ 3 (2d ed. 2009), http://www.un.org/Depts/oios/investigation_manual/ugi.pdf; cf. UNDP, Legal Framework for Addressing Non-Compliance with UN Standards of Conduct ¶ 74 (2010), http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/documents/about/transparencydocs/UNDP_Legal_Framework_for_Addressig_Non_compliance_with_UN_Standards_of_Conduct.pdf (“All investigators ... shall be independent. They have a duty of objectivity, thoroughness, ethical behavior, and observance of legal and professional standards.”).

Emerging Challenges in Election Investigations: Snapshots from Europe

In the last several years, a growing set of emerging issues in election-related cases has tested the four principles guiding election investigations. With complex challenges such as regulating and enforcing restrictions on social media campaigning, tracking illicit financial flows in elections, more aggressive cyberattacks, and increasing attempts at foreign interference in elections – investigators’ ability to uphold these principles is essential for delivering accountability. Case studies from recent elections in Romania, Moldova, and Albania illustrate the emerging challenges and demonstrate promising good practices.

Snapshot: Interference in Romania’s 2024 Presidential Election

The first round of Romania’s presidential elections in November of 2024 – the result of which the Constitutional Court ultimately annulled – is an unprecedented example of emerging challenges in investigating and adjudicating outcome-determinative electoral violations. On November 24, 2024, Romanians went to the polls for the first round of the presidential election. At the end of election day, independent candidate Călin Georgescu emerged, surprisingly, as the leading candidate, having secured 23 percent of the vote.¹⁷ Georgescu had been largely invisible in the mainstream media during the campaign, did not participate in any televised debates, and received negligible positive recognition in opinion polls conducted during the campaign. However, he was heavily promoted on social media in the final days of the campaign, particularly in TikTok videos, despite the absence of corresponding online advertising in campaign finance reports.

A recount was ordered, and on December 2, 2024, the Constitutional Court certified the election result, citing a lack of evidence to support an annulment. Georgescu and the second-place finisher, Elena-Valerica Lasconi, were set to move forward to the second round. Two days later, on December 4, the sitting president declassified documents from the Romanian intelligence services that raised concerns about cyber activities by state and non-state actors, the use of digital technologies, illegal financing of online campaign ads, and information campaigns that may have undermined the

¹⁷ See, e.g., reporting from the Guardian that noted, “An ultranationalist, Moscow-friendly Nato critic is set to face a centre-right candidate in the runoff of Romania’s presidential elections after a shock first-round result that has upended the country’s politics and could jeopardise its support for Ukraine.” From Henley, J. (2024, November 25). *Shock as pro-Russia independent wins first round of Romanian election*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/25/calain-georgescu-romania-election-hard-right-candidate>

election's integrity.¹⁸ Specifically, intelligence reports found that "foreign actors had manipulated social-media platforms, especially TikTok, to benefit Georgescu ... [R]eports indicated that the campaign was likely orchestrated by Russia, though Moscow denied any involvement."¹⁹

With this new information, the Constitutional Court took the decision *ex officio*²⁰ to reopen the matter. In Decision No. 32, the Court annulled the outcome of the first-round election, citing

"manipulation of the electors' vote and the distortion of the equality of opportunity for the electoral competitors, through the non-transparent use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in the electoral campaign in violation of the electoral legislation, and through the funding from unreported sources of the electoral campaign, including the online one."²¹

Specifically, the Court found that:

"... the free expression of the vote was violated by the fact that the voters were misinformed through an electoral campaign in which one of the candidates was aggressively promoted, carried out by circumventing national electoral legislation and by abusing the algorithms of social media platforms. The manipulation of the vote was all the more evident as the electoral materials intended to promote a candidate did not bear the specific symbols of electoral advertising in accordance with Law No 370/2004. Moreover, the candidate also received preferential treatment on social media platforms, which led to a distortion of the voters' expression of will."²²

The electoral process was annulled entirely, even though the second round of the campaign was underway and election day was only a few days away. Shortly after this decision, the Venice Commission issued an urgent report²³ on **conditions and legal standards whereby a constitutional court could invalidate elections**. Although the report did not examine the decision of Romania's Constitutional Court, it reiterated important criteria such as the exceptional nature of

¹⁸ For an in-depth analysis of this case, see International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). (2024, December 20). *The Romanian 2024 Election Annulment: Addressing Emerging Threats*. <https://www.ifes.org/publications/romanian-2024-election-annulment-addressing-emerging-threats-electoral-integrity>

¹⁹ Allnutt, L. (2024, March 10). *With Calin Georgescu's Electoral Disqualification, Romania Could Be in for a Rocky Ride*. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/calin-georgescu-romanian-disqualified/33343037.html>

²⁰ Acting independently, absent an external request.

²¹ Constitutional Court of Romania. Dec. 6, 2024, Ruling No. 32/2024 on the annulment of the electoral process for the election of the President of Romania. <https://www.ccr.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/RULING-No-32-2024.pdf>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Council of Europe, Venice Commission. (2025, January 27). *Conditions and legal standards that could permit a constitutional court to invalidate elections: Urgent Venice Commission report*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/conditions-and-legal-standards-that-could-permit-a-constitutional-court-to-invalidate-elections-urgent-venice-commission-report>

annulment due to the impact on the election outcome, the importance of legal reasoning, broad legal standing and corroborated evidence.²⁴ A new presidential election was set for May 2025. Romania's Permanent Electoral Authority rejected Georgescu's candidacy for the new election on the grounds that he had misreported campaign finances, made illegal use of digital technology, and promoted fascist groups – a decision that the Constitutional Court upheld. In September 2025, Romanian prosecutors charged Georgescu with trying to stage a coup.²⁵

“Proving violations of the law by online campaigning and via social media is challenging. Well-reasoned, transparent decisions are crucial and such decisions should precisely indicate the violations and the evidence, and they must not be based solely on classified intelligence (which may only be used as contextual information), as this would not guarantee the necessary transparency and verifiability.”

Venice Commission, Urgent Report on Cancellation, Ref. DC 013 (2025)

Several elements of the Romanian case have implications for election investigations. First, in initially validating the results of the election, the Constitutional Court dismissed candidate Cristian-Vasile Terheș' allegations of irregularities related to illegal online campaigning during voting, the use of automated bots in campaigns and many invalid votes due to fraud. Instead, the Court concluded that inconsistencies identified in the vote count were minor administrative errors and that the litigant had brought insufficient evidence to show the violations had affected the overall outcome. In so doing, the Court highlighted the evidentiary standard required to annul an election – namely, clear evidence of fraud or irregularities capable of altering the assignment of mandates or candidate rankings. The Court concluded that the threshold had not been met.²⁶

When the Court reconsidered the matter in light of the updated evidence received from the intelligence services, however, it came to a different conclusion, highlighting the impact of the extensive deployment of artificial intelligence (AI), automated systems, and coordinated disinformation campaigns on the integrity of the election. The Court also noted that one candidate (not named, but clearly Georgescu) had a huge online presence even though he had reported no campaign expenditures in his filings. The scale of such an online presence implies significant spending and undeclared sources of funding, potentially linked to external entities operating in violation of national laws. The declassified document also presented cyberattacks, leaks, and

²⁴ Council of Europe, Venice Commission. (2025, March 18). Urgent Report on the cancellation of election results by Constitutional Courts. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/urgent-report-on-the-cancellation-of-election-results-by-constitutional-courts>

²⁵ Financial Times. (2025). *Romania charges Russia-linked far-right candidate with plotting 'coup'*. <https://www.ft.com/content/5248339f-3dcc-4ee3-b2b3-7b54e4ecf0bc>

²⁶ See Article 52(1) of Law No. 370/2004; <https://www.roaep.ro/legislatie/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/LAW-no-370-2004.pdf>

sabotage against Romanian institutions. The Court determined that these actions had skewed voter perceptions, deprived candidates of equitable opportunities, and violated voters' rights to make informed choices.

“While nullifying an election addresses immediate procedural violations that affected the outcome of the election, it cannot fully repair the harm. Misleading narratives and non-transparent campaigns can leave a lasting imprint on voter trust in democratic processes.”

IFES, The Romanian 2024 Election Annulment: Addressing Emerging Threats to Electoral Integrity (2024)

The Constitutional Court's decisions implicate important questions related to the investigative process and the standards detailed in STRIDE and summarized above. With respect to prompt investigation, when the first-round election results were originally challenged, the evidence available to the complainant (and therefore the Court) was determined to be insufficient to justify annulment. By the time the evidence provided by the intelligence services was made available to “the competent authorities in areas of national security, criminal investigation and supervision of the electoral process,”²⁷ the deadline for election dispute resolution had already lapsed. Additionally, when the Constitutional Court reconsidered the question of annulment and issued its decision, the second round of voting was already in process. Nullification did provide an immediate remedy with respect to the violations affecting the election results. Yet, the lack of timeliness in reaching this decision, the nature of the evidence the court relied on and the Court's reversal on the impact of the violation on the outcome of the elections resulted in “[d]oubt, anger, and disillusionment ... rippling through Romanian society, chipping away at trust in the system.”²⁸ Georgescu and Lasconi both protested the decision.

Further, because the intelligence community led the investigation and produced the evidence that the Court ultimately relied upon to annul the election, there was limited ability to verify the investigation's thoroughness and efficacy, as the supporting evidence related to the sources and methods by which it was gathered likely remains classified.²⁹ The Court's decision provides limited detail about the specific evidence relied upon, making it difficult to scrutinize the evidence or contest the decision.

²⁷ Calin Georgescu v. Romania, European Court of Human Rights, Fourth Section Decision, February 11, 2025.

<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-242417%22%7D>

²⁸ Anghel, V. (December 2024). *Why Romania Just Canceled Its Presidential Election*. Journal of Democracy.

<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-romania-just-canceled-its-presidential-election/>

²⁹ Reports indicate that “the Supreme Council for Defense of the Country (CSAT) met on 29 November to discuss possible foreign interference in the election process and its potential threat to national security. Those findings were not made public.” Selejan-Gutan, B. (2024, December 7). *The Second Round that Wasn't: Why The Romanian Constitutional Court Annulled the Presidential Elections*. Verfblog. <https://verfassungsblog.de/the-second-round-that-wasnt/>, DOI: [10.59704/60b2d4d62859cfe1](https://doi.org/10.59704/60b2d4d62859cfe1)

Electoral disputes require public confidence in both the process and the outcome. The use of intelligence findings – particularly when they cannot be fully disclosed and the full investigative record is not available for public scrutiny – creates a transparency deficit, undermining trust in judicial decisions.

The use of intelligence agencies to conduct investigations related to electoral matters, while unavoidable in some cases, does have implications for investigative independence and impartiality. That is, selective or biased intelligence could be weaponized for political ends.³⁰ While their mandate is to safeguard national security, intelligence agencies are not automatically immune to political pressures. The inability of Courts and the public to fully scrutinize the evidence underlying the conclusions drawn by intelligence services contributes to this concern.³¹ If their findings are perceived as serving partisan interests, this can further erode trust in both the judiciary when using evidence from intelligence sources and the electoral process.

That said, as election offenses are increasingly perpetrated or supported by foreign actors, intelligence and national security agencies are likely to become increasingly necessary to support election investigations. This is especially true in cases when election investigators cannot identify the tactics and channels of foreign interference on their own. Evidence in election cases may necessarily include national security and intelligence reports, and election investigators should collaborate with the entities that produce that evidence. Ultimately, the information that intelligence and national security actors provide can support investigation of foreign interference but should be corroborated by other evidence to avoid potential influence, abuses, or government overreach.

Finally, this case shows the need to pressure significant online platforms to abide by the European Union's Digital Services Act and quickly provide relevant courts or electoral bodies with evidence during election investigations.³² Although TikTok played a central role in online electoral manipulation

³⁰ Indeed, in his case before the European Court for Human Rights, Georgescu alleged that the Constitutional Court's decision "was the result of political interference by 'the ruling party' in charge of the electoral process and that it undermined the freedom to participate in democratic process ..." See, *Calin Georgescu v. Romania*, European Court of Human Rights, Section 4.

³¹ The Venice Commission has noted that decisions to annul elections "should precisely indicate the violations and the evidence, and they must not be based solely on classified intelligence (which may only be used as contextual information), as this would not guarantee the necessary transparency and verifiability." From Council of Europe, Venice Commission. (2025 March 18). Urgent Report on the Cancellation of Election Results by Constitutional Courts. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2025\)003-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2025)003-e)

³² Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act).

in Romania, the Court did not have any evidence from TikTok on illegal political ads at the time of its ruling.³³ The company only released evidence months after the annulment was before the court.

The Romanian presidential elections saga brings into stark relief important challenges in electoral investigations that are likely become more prominent over time:

- the likely weaponization of social media by external actors – including foreign governments – to distort the information space and manipulate the outcome of a democratic election
- the challenges with identifying the true source of these attempts to engage in electioneering – whether domestic, foreign, or both
- the need to enhance access and collection of evidence in a timely manner from social media platforms
- accurately assessing the impact of these covert actions on elections, including whether their influence would rise to the level of justifying the nullification of an election result
- how to identify and track the funding for these efforts, which could indicate the violation of campaign finance laws and sometimes require cross-border investigation cooperation on illicit financial flows

Election oversight bodies, academics, journalists, and civil society organizations have made strides in addressing these gaps, including through the development and testing of social media monitoring methodologies. In the case of Romania’s presidential election, the electoral authority revised its rules relating to online campaign advertisement and financing and provided a clear mechanism to report alleged online violations. Civil society analysts at Expert Forum were able to review and analyze political promotion activities on TikTok during the presidential elections – including coordinated promotion of Georgescu.³⁴ Additionally, the European Commission launched an investigation to determine whether TikTok had breached its obligations under the Digital Service Act, as it had failed to mitigate the risks of foreign interference in the election.

³³ “[T]he European Commission released [preliminary findings](#) confirming that TikTok had violated the Digital Services Act (DSA) in a separate investigation—this time for its ad repository. The platform failed to disclose who sponsored political ads, how audiences were targeted, and where funding originated.” From Radu, R. (2025, May 22). *Expert Comment: Which urgent tech lessons must the EU take from Romania’s election?*. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2025-05-22-expert-comment-which-urgent-tech-lessons-must-eu-take-romania-s-election>

³⁴ Expert Forum. (November 2024). Cum a crescut Călin Georgescu în sondaje? Politica pe TikTok-ul românesc. <https://expertforum.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Policy-Brief-190-Cum-a-crescut-Calin-Georgescu-in-sondaje-2.pdf>

Many institutions and organizations have also made headway in monitoring political advertisements on Meta platforms, drawing on its ad library and conducting manual monitoring of party and candidate feeds – a time-consuming and laborious process. Social media monitoring methodologies must be

Key questions in regulating social media platforms

Are political ads allowed to be posted on the platform at all?

If ads are allowed, what kind of disclaimer is required?

How are ads to be identified and documented?

Who has authority to purchase ads?

What disclaimers must influencers post or share if receiving payment for political statements?

tailored to each platform, as the companies that own them have disparate policies with respect to political advertising. Transparency levels and privacy settings also differ significantly across platforms (e.g., monitoring Telegram communications or WhatsApp group messages presents unique challenges). Nevertheless, civic stakeholders are rapidly building and testing new online monitoring strategies and must continue innovating to keep up with emerging threats.

Snapshot: Illicit Political Finance and Vote-Buying in Moldova

Campaign finance violations, including an influx of foreign funding for vote-buying, have been key features of elections in Moldova for several cycles, resulting in the disqualification and sanctioning of leading political figures and their associated political parties. Responses to illicit financing by Moldova’s electoral and oversight authorities highlight promising practices and evolving investigative techniques that have been adopted in the face of an increasingly sophisticated adversary.

The orchestration of illicit financing in Moldova’s elections – which has resulted in decisions from the Moldovan Central Election Commission (CEC) and Moldovan courts, as well as warnings and sanctions from other governments (including the European Union, the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada) – begins with Ilan Shor, an oligarch and politician who was found guilty of fraud and money laundering by the Chisinau Court of Appeals in April 2023.³⁵ Specifically, Shor was convicted of playing a key role in a bank fraud scandal by which \$1 billion went missing from Moldovan banks in 2014. Shor fled Moldova in 2019 and was sentenced *in absentia* to 15 years imprisonment plus the confiscation of \$290 million in assets.³⁶ In May 2023, the European Union placed Shor and four associates on a list of people facing financial and travel restrictions “for actions which undermine

³⁶ Moldova’s Supreme Court of Justice upheld his conviction in a decision in December 2024. From SCJ, *final decision on Ilan Șor’s case*. (2024, December 13). M1 Moldova. Retrieved 8 January 2026 from <https://moldova1.md/p/40761/scj-final-decision-on-ilan-sor-s-case>

and threaten the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova, and the democracy, the rule of law, stability and security in the Republic of Moldova.”³⁷ Among other charges, Shor and his associates were accused of funneling the stolen funds to paid protestors and other pro-Russian agitators in Moldova.

Although Shor has not lived in Moldova since 2019 – having moved between his native Israel and Russia, both of which have repeatedly refused to extradite him – he has continued to play a key role in Moldovan politics through his Shor Political Party. In advance of the September 2025 parliamentary elections, there were five deputies from the Shor Party in parliament, notwithstanding a decision by the Constitutional Court in June 2023 that the party is unconstitutional.³⁸ The court found that “the party and its leaders, consciously, persistently, methodically and non-transparently had been using financial means of illegal origin in their activity to distort democratic processes and undermine the existing constitutional order.”³⁹ This ruling followed a number of other measures against the party taken by the CEC, including the cancelation of candidates’ registration and fines for underreporting election expenses and obfuscating campaign funding amounts and sources.⁴⁰

Shor’s efforts have continued from outside Moldova as part of a broader “unofficial campaign from non-registered and illicit actors ... including offering illicit monetary incentives to influence voters, according to a report by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The report continued, “[a]ccording to Moldovan authorities and others, this foreign interference predominantly came from the Russian Federation and pro-Russian political forces.”⁴¹ These efforts came to a head in advance of the 2024 presidential race, which took place in two rounds in October and November, accompanied by a constitutional referendum meant to affirm Moldova’s efforts to seek EU membership.

³⁷ European Union. (2023, May 30). *Official Journal of the European Union, L 140 I: Council Implementing Regulations and Decisions*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2023:140I:FULL>

³⁸ “Five Șor Party members of parliament (MPs) retained their mandates and sit as independent MPs. The sixth seat remains vacant after party leader Ilan Șor was stripped of his mandate, following a sentence issued in absentia in April 2023 to 15 years’ imprisonment for fraud and money laundering.” From Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE). (2024). *Republic of Moldova Presidential Election and Constitutional Referendum ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE). https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/9/587451_0.pdf

³⁹ Curtea Constituțională a Republicii Moldova. (2023, June 19). *Hotărârea nr. 10 din 19 iunie 2023 privind controlul constituționalității Partidului Politic „Șor”*. <https://www.constcourt.md/ccdocview.php?tip=hotariri&docid=828&l=ro>.

⁴⁰ Necsutu, M. (2023, January 18). *Moldova Fines Party of Fugitive Oligarch Ilan Shor*. BalkanInsight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/01/18/moldova-fines-party-of-fugitive-oligarch-ilan-shor/>

⁴¹ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE). (2024). *Republic of Moldova Presidential Election and Constitutional Referendum ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE). https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/9/587451_0.pdf

An evolving adversary

In advance of the 2023 local elections, Russia reportedly spent €4 million to buy the votes of approximately 27,000 people in the autonomous region of Gagauzia, resulting in the election of Shor-affiliated politician Evghenia Gutsul as regional governor. In advance of the October 2024 elections, [“pro-Russian proxies have provided 40,000 people across the region with Russian ‘Mir’ cards – loaded with \\$100 ... In exchange, recipients are required to send proof they will cast their vote for a pro-Russian presidential candidate.”](#)

In June 2024, the governments of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement asserting that Russia was “seeking to undermine Moldovan democratic institutions” in the lead-up to the election through disinformation campaigns and other interference tactics.⁴² The statement also noted that the three countries had previously sanctioned Shor “for his destabilizing activities” and accused Russia of “supporting candidates for Moldova’s presidency and ... exacerbating societal tensions.”⁴³ In the months

preceding the election, relying on intelligence reports, Moldovan enforcement authorities seized millions of dollars from Moldovans flying into the country from Moscow with suspiciously large (but within the legal threshold) amounts of cash. Although more than \$1 million was seized in a single day, none of the people who had money confiscated asked for it to be returned to them.⁴⁴

These “cash mules” were part of a much larger vote-buying scheme overseen by Shor and his allies. Once the couriers were discovered, the operation shifted to direct electronic bank transfers: “Moldovan authorities reported that \$39 million was funneled into Moldova in September and October alone, via Russian bank Promsvyazbank, which is under U.S. sanctions.”⁴⁵ It is estimated that as many as 130,000 voters received payments, amounting to 10 percent of the electorate.⁴⁶ While this scheme was ultimately unsuccessful at preventing Maia Sandu’s re-election or the passing of the pro-EU referendum, it did represent an escalation in both foreign interference in Moldova’s electoral process and an increasingly sophisticated vote-buying and illicit financing scheme. All told, Moldovan authorities estimated that “Russian agents spent around 200 million euros ... on efforts to buy votes” for the presidential election and the EU referendum in 2024.⁴⁷ Additional efforts to undermine the electoral process included cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns.

⁴² United States Department of State. (2024, June 13). *Joint Statement Exposing Russia’s Subversive Activity and Electoral Interference Targeting Moldova*. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/joint-statement-exposing-russias-subversive-activity-and-electoral-interference-targeting-moldova/>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Rainsford, S. (2024, October 20). *Russian cash-for-votes flows into Ukraine’s neighbour as nation heads to polls*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c23kdjxxx1jo>

⁴⁵ United States Mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. (2024, November 7). *On the November 3 Run-off Round in Moldova’s Presidential Election*. <https://osce.usmission.gov/on-the-november-3-run-off-round-in-moldovas-presidential-election/>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Reuters. (2025, April 2). *Moldova says Russian agents spent 200 mln euro to rig votes last year*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldova-says-russian-agents-spent-200-mln-euro-rig-votes-last-year-2025-04-02/>

Illicit financial flows remained a concern throughout the 2025 parliamentary election cycle, although there were signs that tactics for moving funds had evolved. In addition to using cash and bank transfers, cryptocurrency was reportedly used to obfuscate the source of funds used in vote-buying schemes. According to the General Inspectorate of Police, instead of loading Promsvyazbank funds directly to citizens accounts, rubles were converted to cryptocurrency before eventually being converted to Moldovan leu and deposited.⁴⁸ The National Anticorruption Centre coordinated more than 30 raids in the lead-up to the election, targeting one political party's alleged operation to move foreign funds into the country via cryptocurrency accounts for conversion into local currency and use in elections.⁴⁹

Moldova's experiences combating Russian interference through vote-buying and illicit political financing mechanisms have implications for the investigative process. The country's response illustrates several promising practices. Notably, Moldova had to adopt increasingly sophisticated investigative strategies implicating electoral, administrative, and criminal offenses to protect its elections. Doing so also required increased coordination among public sector agencies, intelligence services, enforcement bodies, the courts, journalists, and civil society, and an evolving legal and regulatory framework to address the offenses.

For example, although the cash amounts coming in with individuals through several high-risk routes on flights from Moscow were below the legal thresholds, customs officers soon realized that the pattern of this behavior was unusual and began systematically searching for passengers on certain routes. When Russia adapted its strategy after officials intercepted the cash, Moldovan officials adapted their efforts, using wiretaps, undercover police, and cooperating witnesses to understand the breadth of the efforts. Once the scheme moved to banking, Moldovan officials were able to track recipients through the personal data they used to open bank accounts. Further, while vote-buying has been an issue over several elections and is a crime that can result in five years in prison, in 2024 a new law made it an administrative offense to accept money in exchange for one's vote and to photograph one's ballot as evidence of having voted in a particular way.⁵⁰ Before the 2024 elections,

⁴⁸ Moldpres. (2025, September 8). *Interviu MOLDPRES // Șeful IGP, Viorel Cernăuțeanu, despre tentativele de corupere a alegătorilor, schemele deconspirate și finanțările din exterior: „100 de milioane de dolari este doar a treia parte din suma investită de Rusia în procesul electoral din R. Moldova”*. <https://www.moldpres.md/rom/interviuri/interviu-moldpres-seful-igp-viorel-cernauteanu-federatia-rusa-fie-prin-interpusul-ilan-sor-fie-prin-alte-elemente-va-incerca-continuu-sa-gaseasca-anumiti-algoritmi-prin-care-sa-ajunga-la-dezordini-si-destabilizari>

⁴⁹ McGrath, Stephen. (September 23, 2025). *Moldovan officials carry out raids and detain 1 over alleged Russian financing of a party*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/moldova-election-russia-raids-europe-8f32d48131335f44be2bb5f5d55f934d>

⁵⁰ Sperfeld, R. & Gröger, J. (2025). *Moldova ahead of the parliamentary elections*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung. <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/03/04/moldova-ahead-parliamentary-elections>

relevant institutions also bolstered their cooperation to use the wide array of civil, administrative, and criminal sanctions available. For instance, the CEC, the anticorruption body, and the police set up cooperation mechanisms with designated focal points that enabled timely sharing of information and evidence, supporting successful investigation of the vote-buying scheme. Investigative journalists also played a critical role in infiltrating and revealing the financial networks behind the vote-buying effort, enabling the government of Moldova and external actors to pursue criminal charges and sanctions.

Finally, as part of the wider hybrid campaign, Moldovan institutions faced mounting cyberattacks against the CEC in the lead-up to the 2025 elections. Under the European Union’s new Cyber Solidarity Act, the European Commission deployed a “cyber reserve” – a team of private-sector cybersecurity experts – and the government of Moldova received bilateral support from other countries.⁵¹ This international initiative helped Moldovan authorities prevent, detect, and investigate attempts to influence the elections. Collective action across stakeholders, and information and resource exchange between them, was a foundational aspect of Moldova’s counter-interference strategies that ultimately strengthened accountability for violations.

Snapshot: Enhancing Investigation and Prosecution of Electoral Corruption in Albania

Many of the emerging challenges discussed so far – proliferating social media advertising, illicit political finance, cyber threats, and information manipulation campaigns – are prevalent in Albania. Consistent deficiencies in Albania’s election integrity infrastructure have undermined trust in the electoral process and remain a thorn in the side of the country’s efforts to join the European Union. In particular, the European Union notes outstanding recommendations for Albania to address pervasive vote-buying, abuse of state resources at the national and local levels, personal data protection, and political finance oversight and control.⁵² In 2025, ahead of the May parliamentary elections, Albania’s electoral and anticorruption authorities mobilized a new strategy to enhance investigative practices in light of these issues, marking the country’s first ever inter-institutional initiative.

⁵¹ Industrial Cyber. (2025, July 16). *EU and Moldova expand digital pact to counter cyber and hybrid threats*. <https://industrialcyber.co/news/eu-and-moldova-expand-digital-pact-to-counter-cyber-and-hybrid-threats/>

⁵² EU Commission Report, Albania, November 2024.

The strategy, led by the Special Anticorruption Prosecutor’s Office (SPAK)⁵³ – itself a newer institution charged with addressing high-level organized crime and corruption – encompassed a comprehensive plan to investigate and prevent electoral crimes.⁵⁴ This included the establishment of a dedicated task force, on-site monitoring, and the creation of a specialized platform for citizens and institutions to report potential electoral offenses. Dedicated resources included SPAK prosecutors, investigators from the National Bureau of Investigation (Albanian acronym is BKH), financial investigators, experts, and support staff. Additionally, dedicated investigative teams were established across Albania’s 12 electoral regions, with a thirteenth in the capital, focusing on preventing and investigating offenses related to the abuse of state resources, vote-buying, and the influence of organized crime in elections.

Foundational Pillars of the SPAK Strategy for Investigation and Prevention of Electoral Crimes



A formal cooperation agreement was established between the Head of the Prosecution, the Prosecutor General, the Director of the State Police and the State Election Commissioner. A dedicated BKH investigator from the National Bureau of Investigation was appointed as the CEC point of contact to facilitate real-time information exchange. Additionally, field investigation groups were expected to coordinate and cooperate with prosecutors, law enforcement, other public institutions, local government, the media, and civil society in their areas of responsibility. The field teams were expected to “focus on preventing and investigating criminal offenses related to the use of public administration, state infrastructure, and the involvement of criminal groups in the electoral process.”⁵⁵ A working group composed of financial investigators and other experts from the Special Prosecution Office was established to monitor the use of campaign budgets and any public investments prohibited from taking place during the electoral period.

⁵³ “The Special Courts against Corruption (SPAK – from its Albanian acronym) were established as part of a separate structure for the investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of corruption and organised crime cases, created by a constitutional reform package in 2016. The courts began operations in 2019 Albania was granted EU candidate status in June 2014, but the start of accession negotiations was made conditional on sustained progress on justice reforms and actions to counter organised crime and corruption.” The parliament extended SPAK’s jurisdiction to cases of electoral corruption in December 2020. From U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. (2022). Albania’s Special Courts against Corruption and Organised Crime. Chr. Michelsen Institute. <https://www.u4.no/publications/albanias-special-courts-against-corruption-and-organised-crime.pdf>

⁵⁴ Special Prosecution Office Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK). (2025). Strategy for the investigation and prevention of electoral crime: 2025 parliamentary elections. <https://spak.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/STRATEGY-FOR-THE-INVESTIGATION-AND-PREVENTION-OF-ELECTORAL-CRIMESTRATEG.pdf>

⁵⁵ CNA. (2025, April 29). *Exclusive/ SPAK prosecutors and BKH investigators arrive in the districts.*

<https://www.cna.al/english/aktualitet/ekskluzive-prokuroret-e-spak-ut-dhe-agjentet-e-bkh-se-zbarkojne-ne-rr-i428596>.

Members of the public were encouraged to submit complaints or concerns through a platform that included an emergency number, e-mail reporting, and online reporting, and SPAK developed a communications strategy to increase “transparency, information and public trust in the judicial system.”⁵⁶ Criminal cases had to be submitted in writing to the prosecutor’s office. A special working group monitored data and information publicly reported through the media and social networks and forwarded relevant information to the central investigative structure and groups in the field.

In advance of the 2025 elections, the General Prosecutor’s Office, SPAK, and international experts met to evaluate existing investigative protocols, develop procedures for interagency information sharing, and establish guidelines for how to collect and manage evidence. Reports from the 2025 elections indicate that this effort paid off, but that work remains. OSCE observers noted that the “new coordination mechanisms between SPAK, the CEC, and the General Prosecutor’s Office enabled better information sharing on electoral crimes and was seen as having a possible deterrent effect.”⁵⁷ Some stakeholders did question “the effectiveness of police in handling electoral offenses and the effectiveness of efforts against politically connected organized crime.”⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the latest report available from the General Prosecutor’s Office⁵⁹ states that 107 criminal complaints were registered related to electoral offenses (including vote-buying, voter intimidation and abuse of state resources), resulting in the initiation of 47 criminal proceedings. By way of comparison, in the period between 2021 and 2024, a total of 110 criminal cases were registered.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, SPAK initiated 40 criminal proceedings based on 189 received reports and opened nine proceedings *ex officio*, applying the strategy framework for further investigation.⁶¹

While this strategy focused on improving investigative practices for criminal violations, it is worth noting that administrative investigations did not receive the same level of attention. The CEC retained the ability to investigate election-related administrative offenses *ex officio* or in response to complaints

⁵⁶ Special Prosecution Office Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK). (2025, January 30). Communication strategy 2025–2028 / Strategjia e komunikimit. <https://spak.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Communication-Strategy-2025-2028-Strategjia-e-Komunikimit-Ang-1.pdf>

⁵⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2025, September 28). *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions: Republic of Moldova — Parliamentary Elections, 28 September 2025*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/moldova/596261>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Released May 26, 2025, capturing data through May 22, 2025. From Republic of Albania General Prosecution Office. (2025). *Updated information on criminal complaints, proceedings, and arrests concerning election-related offenses*. https://www.pp.gov.al/Media_en/Press_Release/Updated_information_on_criminal_complaints_proceedings_and_arrests_concerning_election-related_offenses.html

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2025 October). *Final Observation Report, Albania, May 11 2025 Parliamentary Elections, October 2025*.

filed online by any interested party. Per the OSCE, many of the 166 complaints the CEC received in the pre-election period were about the use of public resources, road paving, prohibited public-private partnerships, and the initiation of social assistance, subsidies, and public procurement tenders, made in connection with heads of public institutions, mayors, and ministers. However, the CEC reached a decision in only 118 of the complaints by election day, raising concerns that the lack of an expedited procedure for investigating and ruling on administrative offenses could result in diminished accountability. Furthermore, the CEC established a special unit to monitor social network sites of more than 150 public institutions but flagged only 10 posts for further administrative investigation and chose not to flag any posts made in support of the ruling party.⁶² The OSCE assessed that the administrative investigation of social media advertising was insufficient to deter future violations.

SPAK's creation and its dedicated strategy to investigate and prevent electoral crimes illustrate promising practices to strengthen election investigations. The SPAK strategy explicitly includes two of the four STRIDE principles – effective investigation and independence – as foundational, while focusing on delivering prompt and thorough investigation through other provisions. Further, the existence of SPAK and its prioritization of fighting corruption and organized crime in elections indicates the presence of a professional investigative workforce with resources and authority to pursue proper investigations, a key standard emphasized in STRIDE. As SPAK enjoys a high level of citizen confidence – among the highest of all institutions in Albania – implementation of the strategy represents a clear good practice in upholding trust through demonstrated independence and impartiality.

The Albania experience emphasizes the necessity of intentional collaboration between multiple competent institutions that have a role to play in election investigations. At the same time, coordination alone is insufficient to adequately address investigations. For example, sufficient training and capacity of all investigative stakeholders and interoperability of the data and evidence shared is necessary to fully capitalize on coordination. The OSCE, in its final observation report, recommends increased “efforts to identify and investigate all allegations of electoral violations, in a thorough, timely and transparent manner,” going on to call for improved outreach to voters on reporting violations and protecting would-be whistleblowers from repercussions.⁶³

Albania's experience in 2025 also indicates that police investigators need more training to properly investigate election cases and that CEC personnel need increased capacity to effectively investigate

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

and process the volume of reported administrative election violations that emerge in advance of election day. SPAK personnel should also be trained to inform or refer cases back to the CEC or other relevant bodies if it is determined that the violation does not meet the higher threshold for a criminal charge, as administrative sanctions may still apply.

The Big Picture: Emerging Challenges and Issues in Election Investigations

Taking stock of the trends and lessons learned from Romania, Moldova, and Albania, we now turn to a more in-depth discussion of the challenges and promising practices illustrated by the three snapshots and highlight cross-cutting issues that implicate the election investigation standards outlined in STRIDE. The emerging challenges speak to a broader toolkit that malign actors use to destabilize democratic processes and undermine elections. Addressing these threats can help close loopholes that can be exploited by malign actors, while ensuring investigations deliver accountability in the face of wrongdoing.

Online Political Advertising

Online political advertising occupies an increasing share of the election campaign landscape. More advertising now occurs through social media platforms than through traditional media, and because the internet is not confined to national borders, it can be challenging for governments to regulate this space domestically.⁶⁴ Governments also must strike a balance between protecting the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association and their responsibility to protect electoral integrity. Restrictions must be legitimate, reasonable, and proportionate. In most cases, electoral codes and political finance laws were developed in a pre-digital environment, before social media advertising emerged, and have not been updated sufficiently to account for this new reality. For example, according to Transparency International, 7 in 10 countries do not have any spending limits or regulations with respect to online political advertising.⁶⁵

Social media platforms and campaign regulation

There is significant evidence to suggest that governments cannot rely on social media platforms to regulate themselves and prevent distortions in the information environment. As Transparency International notes, for example, “platforms’ weak political advertising safeguards have facilitated hidden groups and networks of ‘profiles’ to create almost invisible ecosystems with the ability to advance political messages and influence public opinion without transparency and accountability.”

Therefore, governments must establish and enforce legal standards for tech companies operating in their countries, including with respect to preserving evidence for electoral investigations, consistent with human rights protections.

⁶⁴ Dunčikaitė, I., Žemgulytė, D., Valladares, J., Martini, M., & Hinks, J. (2021). *Paying for Views: Solving Transparency and Accountability Risks in Online Political Advertising*.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Even where laws are in place, several factors complicate their enforcement. First, it can be difficult to even identify political ads, particularly those that appear on non-party or non-candidate accounts, in a language that the investigative or oversight body is not monitoring or are embedded in messages from influencers who fail to disclose that they are being paid for sharing political content. It can also be difficult to determine who placed the ad, who paid for the ad, whether they were operating at the direction of or in cooperation with a political campaign or candidate, and whether a single post or advertisement was part of a broader coordinated effort to sway public opinion. Identifying these elements is even more challenging when foreign actors become involved, given the added complexity of identifying where funds originate and how they end up supporting an advertising campaign. Evaluating whether advertising is consistent with existing regulations is even more difficult when platform companies do not have an ad library in place to consolidate all political advertisements, or when they maintain that their platforms do not host political ads at all. When considering cases challenging election results, investigative bodies must also contend with whether these efforts were sufficient to change the outcome of the election, a standard that can be particularly difficult to meet when attempting to measure the reach and impact of online advertising.

As illustrated in the country snapshots, the online space can be exploited by malign actors seeking to disrupt the electoral environment, including by spreading mis- and disinformation and leveraging technology to artificially inflate the reach of certain voices or accounts. Information supporting a particular candidate or party – or information that is negative toward another contestant – can be posted online by accounts that may not have any official link to a candidate, campaign, or political party. During the 2024 Romanian elections, researchers from Expert Forum reported that TikTok, while ostensibly prohibiting political advertising, was used very successfully as a tool for advancing particular candidates, given that the only advertising done for Georgescu (the top vote-getter) was done through TikTok.⁶⁶ The fact that political content is not labeled as such – and may not be advanced by an official campaign source – makes it especially hard for monitors or investigators to uncover using traditional models. Taking Romania as a case in point, Expert Forum noted that “[m]onitoring the official account of figures like Călin Georgescu is futile if the true amplification occurs through hundreds of other accounts that claim to be apolitical but are entirely political in nature.”⁶⁷ This effective free advertising occurred while Georgescu reported zero campaign expenditures, itself raising a red flag for investigators, and led the court to confirm the impact of such violations on the results.

⁶⁶ Expert Forum. (2024). *Policy Brief No. 194: TikTok in times of crisis — Episode II: What can we observe in the case of Romania?* Expert Forum. https://expertforum.ro/en/files/2024/12/ENG-Policy-Brief-194-2024_compressed.pdf

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Ahead of the 2025 elections in Romania, TikTok announced the “Romanian Election Center,” which it claimed was designed to provide election-related “key information, such as important dates, and [guide] people to the Permanent Election Authority’s website.”⁶⁸ The same announcement touts TikTok’s efforts to promote media literacy and commitment “to diligently protect our community to help ensure people can safely express themselves on topics that matter to them.”⁶⁹ In Moldova, TikTok also advertised its efforts to protect voters in advance of the parliamentary elections, stating that it had dismantled networks of accounts that were “promoting pro-Russian politicians and trying to discredit the current government.”⁷⁰ This resulted, according to TikTok, in the removal of 9,300 pieces of content, as well as the prevention of 2.9 million fake likes and 1.8 million fake follow requests (determined by TikTok to originate from inauthentic accounts), and TikTok blocking the creation of 268,000 spam accounts in Moldova. TikTok also reported removing over 134,000 fake accounts, including 1,173 accounts impersonating Moldovan officials.⁷¹ Emphasizing the magnitude of the problem, all of this took place within a three-month period. Research by Global Witness in Romania found that the TikTok algorithm served “nearly three times as much far-right content to new, politically balanced users as all other political content,” indicating that additional work remains.⁷²

Illicit Financial Flows

“Follow the money” remains a relevant catchphrase for election investigators, but this project has become increasingly complicated in the context of modern campaigns and illicit, cross-border financial flows. As we have seen throughout this report, money comes into campaigns in a variety of ways, some of which may be difficult to track, originate from illicit sources, and/or represent attempts by malign foreign actors to influence the outcome of an election. Campaign funds may also be contributed in ways that are deliberately designed to mask their origin, evade donor disclosure requirements, or exceed legal funding limits. This includes donations through third-party campaigns, businesses, and nongovernmental organizations where “oversight bodies can face challenging webs of ownership and business interests that mask foreign malign connections. Lack of ultimate beneficial

⁶⁸ TikTok. (2025, April 24). *Protecting the integrity of TikTok during the Romanian elections*. <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/protecting-the-integrity-of-tiktok-during-the-romanian-elections?lang=en-150>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ TikTok. (2025, October 21). *Cum am protejat utilizatorii noștri în timpul alegerilor parlamentare din Republica Moldova*. (2025). https://newsroom.tiktok.com/safety-during-elections-ro?lang=ro-MD&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Global Witness. (2025, May 15). *Romanian elections: Far-right posts still pushed on TikTok*. <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/tiktok-algorithm-continues-to-push-multiple-times-more-far-right-content-to-users-ahead-of-romanian-election/>

ownership data, and secrecy provided by offshore jurisdictions, complicate the investigation of illicit foreign financing in elections.”⁷³

In Romania, for example, in addition to efforts to manipulate the information environment, we see illegal campaign contributions in the form of undeclared political advertising paid for by independent sources. In Moldova, millions of dollars came into the country through a variety of means and sources – from attempts to smuggle cash across the border with individuals to unregulated transfers from a foreign bank to individual bank accounts – all with an eye to purchasing votes. In Albania, continued vote-buying, driven by proceeds from organized crime and corruption, demonstrate the cycle of illicit finance in distorting the playing field and undermining meaningful citizen choice at the polls.

The growing use of cryptocurrencies to move and mask the source of funds used for political donations and vote-buying schemes poses new challenges for oversight and investigative bodies, particularly in countries that lack robust cryptocurrency laws and regulations, let alone rules for the use of cryptocurrency in elections. Even where legal frameworks exist, oversight bodies are at the early stages of understanding how to identify signs that donations may have been backed by crypto transfers and how to deploy tailored investigative tools for cryptocurrency analysis. Indeed, so long as donors stay in the bounds of the law regarding the amount they contribute, there is little chance that their donations will be investigated further unless the oversight body receives credible, external intelligence that a donor might have been embroiled in a “crypto operation.”

In the 2024 U.S. elections, for example, watchdog organization Public Citizen found that crypto corporations accounted for 44 percent of all corporate money contributed during the election cycle.⁷⁴ While this has significant implications for these companies’ ability to influence U.S. policy with respect to the use and regulation of cryptocurrency, there are much broader challenges in the use of cryptocurrency for political finance. Namely, the built-in anonymity of cryptocurrencies – and their use across national borders – creates significant barriers to tracking campaign contributions, including those that might come from foreign governments or other illegal sources.⁷⁵ Such complex financial

⁷³ Rogan, A. (2024, June 12). *Illicit Foreign Finance and Election Integrity*. <https://www.ifes.org/news/illicit-foreign-finance-and-election-integrity>

⁷⁴ Claypool, R. (2024, August 21). *Big Crypto, Big Spending: Crypto Corporations Spend an Unprecedented \$119 Million Influencing Elections*. Public Citizen. <https://www.citizen.org/article/big-crypto-big-spending-2024/>

⁷⁵ “Cryptocurrencies and cashless payment cards offer donors anonymity, while autocrats toy with the idea of funneling covert support through small donors whose identities go undisclosed.”, from Rudolph, J. & Morley, T. (2020). *Covert foreign money: Financial loopholes exploited by authoritarians to fund political interference in democracies*. Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ASD-Covert-Foreign-Money.pdf>

schemes require a specific technical skill set from investigators, in addition to resources and time, which may not always be available in sufficient supply to electoral investigators and adjudicators.

Information Manipulation Campaigns

The cases of Moldova and Romania show the range of information manipulation tactics that malign actors are deploying to influence the outcomes of elections from both within and outside each country. As is well-documented by civil society, the media, and law enforcement and intelligence agencies, the Russian government has been actively working to influence the electoral information environment on both sides of the Atlantic. This includes attempts to manipulate the information space through coordinated campaigns, paid “opinion” pieces disguised as real analysis and amplifying damaging rhetoric across borders. While these actions may not always result in the selection of an external actor’s preferred candidate, the chaos and doubt sown among the public disrupts the democratic process and diminishes trust in the elections – these outcomes often being a goal of such external campaigns.⁷⁶

Of course, not all attempts to distort the information environment come from external sources. In the 2022 presidential elections in Brazil, for example, significant efforts to discredit the country’s well-established electronic voting machines and cast doubt on the integrity of the vote were primarily led by incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro and his re-election campaign and perpetuated by his supporters.⁷⁷ Although this attempt to undermine the election was firmly countered by Brazil’s election management body and judiciary, almost in real time, an online disinformation campaign ultimately fueled protests by thousands of Bolsonaro supporters following the release of the results. Protestors “demanded a military intervention to prevent the election winner, President Lula da Silva, from taking office, which was followed by an attack on the Supreme Federal Court building, the National Congress building, and the Planalto Presidential Palace.”⁷⁸ The Brazil experience highlights the dangers of

⁷⁶ European Union External Action. (January 2024). *2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats*. European Union External Action.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EEAS-2nd-Report%20on%20FIMI%20Threats-January-2024_0.pdf

⁷⁷ As noted by researchers from the Mozilla Foundation, “Not only were they a technological marvel, ensuring quick and transparent election results, but they also eliminated past fraudulent practices, like multiple registrations and inactive deceased voters. Furthermore, these machines were equipped with a myriad of security mechanisms, from ensuring voter anonymity to being immune from online hacking attempts, thanks to their offline nature.” from Regattieri, L. & Salles, D. (February 2024). *Election Manipulation in Brazil’s 2022 General Elections: The Role of WhatsApp and Telegram on the Attacks Against Electoral Integrity and the Threats to Democracy*. Mozilla Foundation.

<https://www.mozillafoundation.org/en/research/library/global-elections-casebook/brazil-case-study/>

⁷⁸ Rossini, P., Mont’Alverne, C., & Kalogeropoulos, A. (2023, May 16). Explaining beliefs in electoral misinformation in the 2022 Brazilian election: The role of ideology, political trust, social media, and messaging apps. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. <https://misinfreview.hks.harvard.edu/article/explaining-beliefs-in-electoral-misinformation-in-the-2022-brazilian-election-the-role-of-ideology-political-trust-social-media-and-messaging-apps/>

disinformation perpetuated directly by a presidential candidate, particularly disinformation that targets the integrity of the electoral system and undermines trust in the judiciary, and the potential for online turmoil to transition to offline violence.

AI is only making these attempts to disrupt the information environment less expensive and more impactful. The algorithms that drive social media platforms often result in the amplification of content that is more provocative or “controversial,” ensuring that more extreme political messages reach more eyes. Microtargeting serves to ensure that users are presented with increasingly “personalized” content, with data collected constantly as users engage with posts. Generative AI makes it easier for politicians and their supporters to create messages in multiple languages and even seem to personally direct messages to individuals. Convincing deepfake videos can be used to “spread false information about a politician’s platform or doctor their speeches on a certain topic” using the politician’s own voice and image – making it increasingly difficult for voters to identify manipulated content.⁷⁹

For investigators of election violations and crimes, understanding the diverse roles that malign actors and information manipulation may play in the electoral process – including those described in this report – is crucial. The fact that malign actors, including foreign governments, are spreading disinformation and sowing distrust in elections through coordinated online campaigns, distorting the playing field by making illegal campaign donations, or coordinating the purchase of votes and ultimately candidates and elected officials, has severe consequences for election integrity and requires updated tactics and strategies to bring these actors to justice. Recent elections have also shown that judges are not immune to disinformation campaigns. Elections in Nigeria, Indonesia, Kenya, and the United States featured a growing trend of disinformation attacks targeting judges and magistrates involved in resolving election cases. This phenomenon calls for investigators, prosecutors, and judges to demonstrate integrity and transparency in their work to avoid any perception of bias in their investigations and maintain citizens’ trust.

In the next section, we turn to promising practices and recommendations to investigate these increasingly complex election violations and crimes.

⁷⁹ Folts, E. (n.d.). *Voters: Here’s how to spot AI “deepfakes” that spread election-related misinformation*. Carnegie Mellon University’s Heinz College. <https://www.heinz.cmu.edu/media/2024/October/voters-heres-how-to-spot-ai-deepfakes-that-spread-election-related-misinformation1>

Recommendations and Promising Practices

Election investigators, like all actors in the electoral dispute resolution process, have difficult and important jobs to do. They must work in highly contentious and politically fraught environments; engage in complex data gathering, often across multiple agencies; and do so under significant time pressures. This section presents recommendations to address the emerging challenges identified throughout this report and promising practices from different jurisdictions to ensure election investigations are prompt, thorough, effective, independent, and impartial.

Strengthen the Legal Framework

Although it is not the remit of investigators, the legal and regulatory framework will necessarily inform the scope and scale of investigators' work, including their ability to adequately address modern election crimes and violations. To that end, election and political finance laws and regulations must be updated to tackle emerging challenges, especially the use of digital technologies, AI, and online political advertising. The legal framework should also establish clear lines of responsibility and jurisdiction with respect to administrative, civil, and criminal offenses, all of which play a role in handling election violations. Electoral regulations should be updated regularly to keep pace with trends in violations and emerging threats to election integrity, including those detailed throughout this report. As regional bodies attempt to create new norms and standards to tackle the threats, legislators and oversight bodies should regularly engage with their peers to share their experiences and contribute to building a stronger legal framework.

To date, courts have been fairly adept at contending with disinformation related to campaigns or candidates that have spread through social media, often because “limited evidence is presented to a court to support the allegations...or the claims are so egregious that they are clearly defamatory or otherwise addressed by legislation that deals with elections and rules of evidence.”⁸⁰ IFES' study of case law on the use of social media

Electoral Rules

Electoral rules should provide clear parameters for candidates, political parties, tech companies, and voters to know how AI and other technologies can manifest in elections; which systems are prohibited or limited in the electoral context; and how stakeholders will be held accountable if rules are violated.

⁸⁰ Brown, A., Reppell, L., Quimby, P., & Roblot, T. (2021). *Lessons for regulating campaigning on social media (Election Case Law Analysis Series, Part II)*. International Foundation for Electoral Systems. <https://electionjudgments.org/en/entity/mt5cpnj0nsf>

in elections also found that intent is a key element of disinformation cases; that is, actors must create or spread the information with knowledge of what they are doing, in a deliberate manner, and to cause harm.⁸¹ Therefore, investigators must be prepared to gather evidence demonstrating not only that an incident of online disinformation occurred, but also that it was known to be false and published with the intent to deceive. However, many laws, regulations, and rules of procedure that govern election offenses were adopted before generative AI and other tools that support disinformation were publicly available and widely used. As a result, they are often too broad to address the unique risks that these technologies pose, and lack precise definitions of critical terms of art. At the other end of the spectrum, some governments have taken threats related to online disinformation or cybersecurity as an opportunity to impose unreasonable restrictions on freedom of speech or to restrict civic space.

Brazil's electoral justice system has been proactive in adapting to address ongoing technological developments. The Superior Electoral Court (*Tribunal Superior Eleitoral, TSE*) is entrusted to regulate elections "in accordance with the scenario and technological tools existing at each electoral moment" to develop "rules of good practice relating to electoral campaigns on the internet."⁸² As one example, the resolutions issued by the TSE include details on which entities should have the police power to investigate questions of "electoral propaganda," including the authenticity of images, audio, and video; whether the material was appropriately released during the campaign period; and the sanctions applicable for non-compliance.

In Latvia, the political finance regulatory framework has continued to evolve to anticipate emerging issues and challenges, including with respect to political advertising on social media and third-party campaigning. Latvia maintains a specific entity tasked with addressing corruption, the Corruption Prevention and Combatting Bureau (*Korupcijas Novēršanas un Apkarošanas Biroja, KNAB*), which is also charged with campaign finance oversight.⁸³ Through ongoing collaboration among the KNAB, lawmakers, civil society, and the media, Latvia began regulating online campaigning early in its use and has created specific rules to regulate online campaign finance – including requirements for political parties to report all online campaign spending through itemized political party finance reports. Third-party campaign expenditures are subject to a spending ceiling and required to include a disclaimer. Monitoring and oversight responsibilities and sanctions are detailed in the regulations, and an online platform allows citizens to report potential violations.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Zingales, N., Lucena, M., Calderon, A., Milanese, G., Bazan, H., Barbosa, L., & Rebelo, L. (2024). *TSE and disinformation: Relevant concepts and commentary on the TSE resolutions*. Fundação Getulio Vargas, Escola de Direito do Rio de Janeiro (FGV Direito Rio). <https://diretorio.fgv.br/sites/default/files/arquivos/preliminary-guide-tse-and-disinformation-volumes-1-2.pdf>.

⁸³ Cigane, L. (2022). *Regulating Online Campaign Finance: Case Study on Latvia*.

In developing its campaign finance regulation and monitoring system, Latvia took advantage of windows of opportunity to make the system more robust over time.⁸⁴ That is, engaging on these issues – and issues of broader electoral reform – in the immediate post-election period allows electoral stakeholders to (1) reflect on the election while the experience is still fresh, (2) note areas of electoral irregularities that went unaddressed, (3) identify gaps in the legal framework that need to be closed to address such violations in the future, (4) make changes to laws and regulations to address those gaps, and (5) provide ample time for coordination among implicated entities, development of investigation guidelines, and training and capacity strengthening for investigative personnel well in advance of the next election.⁸⁵

Enhance Institutional Cooperation

Investigatory responsibilities for the types of electoral crimes and violations discussed in this report may lie with multiple institutions, including EMBs, prosecutors, court personnel, law enforcement agencies, or specialized anticorruption bodies. Therefore, it is essential that efforts are made in advance of the election period to align resources and responsibility for investigations, deconflict overlapping jurisdictions, identify points of contact in relevant agencies and with clear roles and responsibilities, provide joint training and capacity strengthening, and build a coordinated plan for how investigations will proceed through each phase of the electoral cycle – including for how cases will move through the courts. The example from Albania provides insight into how this cooperation can be facilitated and the value that a joint strategy can bring to establishing collaborative investigations.

In the Albania example, however, several important elements are missing: policies for inter-institutional cooperation and guidelines and joint training to effectively prepare all investigators to properly investigate election cases. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Electoral Commission has a dedicated department for election crimes that provides training and guidance on election offenses, including a pocket guide, for police officers. If the Commission serves notice to a party for records related to election offenses and the party fails to comply, then that failure becomes a criminal

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ These types of gaps are often noted in election observation reports, as in the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' report on Moldova's Presidential election: "To ensure instances of illicit financing are promptly and effectively addressed, the authorities should conduct a review of the relevant legislation and procedures to ensure any gaps that inhibited the handling of cases from the 2024 election and referendum are addressed and the legal framework is enhanced to fully address the sources and means of illicit financing.", from Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE). (2024). Republic of Moldova Presidential Election and Constitutional Referendum ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report. Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE).

https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/9/587451_0.pdf

offense, at which point law enforcement gets involved. Although the Electoral Commission can only issue administrative sanctions, it can refer criminal matters to the police and share records of any interviews it conducted to assist in investigations. This allows investigators to quickly obtain evidence, ensure the preservation of integrity and chain of custody, and avoid tampering.

Beyond the investigative process itself, there is a need to build bridges between investigators and adjudicators. While some countries have dedicated election courts and judges, in many countries, election cases are decided by non-specialized judges. EMBs and courts should coordinate in advance of elections to ensure judges and magistrates are familiar with the operational and technical challenges of investigating election irregularities during an ongoing election process.

The establishment of a special prosecutions' unit or entity, such as the KNAB in Latvia or SPAK in Albania, can provide an essential coordination mechanism for elections. Other potential members include law enforcement, dedicated magistrates or judicial actors, the election commission, and those responsible for monitoring political finance. These entities can designate specific points of contact to facilitate communication, referrals, and information sharing; agree on common reporting forms and databases; and participate in joint training activities. In Kosovo, the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption conducts preliminary investigations into suspected political finance violations. Based on reports received from other institutions, complaints filed, or acting *ex officio*, the Agency first assesses whether the facts allege a violation of the law, whether the alleged violation falls under the agency's jurisdiction or whether it contains classified information. The Agency conducts administrative (preliminary) investigations in cases of suspected violation of relevant laws. If it finds elements of violations, the agency prepares reports – forwarding the cases to the prosecution, police, or the Tax Administration – or requests disciplinary proceedings against public officials. Under the laws in Kosovo, the prosecution office must inform the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption about the outcome of criminal reports. Efficient delegation of responsibilities and communication between actors can help ensure that administrative offenses are processed separately (and more expeditiously) than more time-intensive criminal investigations.

Collaborate with Media, Civil Society, and Citizens

Coordination and collaboration to address election violations need not be limited to public entities. In many cases, investigations by journalists and civil society organizations and reports by ordinary citizens have been essential in identifying and bringing to justice those who commit election offenses. In the recent illicit foreign financing trial against the former president of France, a media organization

uncovered the financing scheme and anticorruption civil society organizations joined the proceedings.⁸⁶ With respect to malign interference and information manipulation in elections, a recent study commissioned by the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations emphasized the role of information from public open-source research, noting that “[i]n almost all major reported cases in Europe, the information first came from investigative NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], journalists or academics, only then leading to enquiries by national governments.”⁸⁷ The authors conclude, “[as] malign foreign actors continue to target the electoral behaviours of European civil societies, fostering an ecosystem of civil society watchdogs is crucial.”⁸⁸

Indeed, as an official from Moldova’s Ministry for Internal Affairs noted with respect to uncovering the vote-buying scheme in 2024, “the police [are] not alone in investigating the fraud and in identifying those who are actually systematically organizing the criminal network behind all those fraud cases. We had investigative journalists from Moldovan media inside those networks, and it became very obvious how the network functioned.”⁸⁹ Groups of “elves” in the Baltic states and across Europe have taken up cyber arms to combat Russian disinformation campaigns that attack democratic institutions,⁹⁰ and a number of countries have empowered the public to report violations of campaign finance rules and other issues through publicly available reporting forms, hotlines, and online portals.⁹¹ These efforts help expand the reach of investigative bodies and maximize limited resources.

Leverage Cross-sectoral Data

The primary challenges associated with monitoring illicit financial flows, investigating financial crimes, and enforcing campaign finance laws in the modern era relate to how money can move across borders and through cyberspace and how easily the true origin of funds being contributed to a campaign can be disguised. Often, one entity – such as the election commission, a financial body, or an anticorruption agency – is responsible for monitoring campaign and political party funding, but

⁸⁶ Sherpa. (2025). Libyan campaign financing case: A historic and unprecedented conviction for Nicolas Sarkozy. <https://www.asso-sherpa.org/libyan-campaign-financing-case-a-historic-and-unprecedented-conviction-for-nicolas-sarkozy>

⁸⁷ Karásková, I., Bērziņa-Čerenkova, U. A., & Nēmečková, K. (2023). *Foreign electoral interference affecting EU democratic processes*. Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations. <https://www.appf.europa.eu/cmsdata/277388/Foreign%20electoral%20interference%20affecting%20EU%20democratic%20processes.pdf>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Sperfeld, R. & Gröger, J. (2025). *Moldova ahead of the parliamentary elections*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung. <https://www.boell.de/en/2025/03/04/moldova-ahead-parliamentary-elections>

⁹⁰ Abend, L. (2022, March 5). *Meet the Lithuanian ‘Elves’ Fighting Russian Disinformation*. TIME. <https://time.com/6155060/lithuania-russia-fighting-disinformation-ukraine/>

⁹¹ See, e.g., KNAB, which developed a downloadable “Report to KNAB” application allowing citizens to report potential violations of campaign finance rules. In 2018, the KNAB received 1,179 reports of potential campaign violations through this application.

relevant information to complete the full funding picture, including related to corporate donations, for example, may sit with other agencies.

Timing can be another challenge. The law may require regular financial reports, with varying levels of specificity, but the timelines associated with election processes versus political finance reporting often have an impact on investigators' ability to collect and act on relevant evidence. For example, many political finance violations are not discovered until reports are filed, and that information may require further cross-checking against institutional databases or registries or against reports from civil society watchdogs or election observation missions, all of which can take several months. Thus, campaign finance violations may not be uncovered until well after the election is over and the results are certified. In some cases, it may not be possible to cross-reference data between sectors because of incompatibility with how information is collected and stored.

More regular updating and reporting of campaign finance records is one way to address this issue, as is developing online databases where multiple agencies can access and verify political finance data. In Lithuania, for example, election contestants must report their income (including donations), expenditures, and campaign contracts within 10 working days through the EMB's Political Parties and Political Campaign Financing Control Subsystem. Importantly, Lithuania's system is interconnected with that of other institutions

– including banks, the tax inspector and the registrar of legal entities – to facilitate verification of the information reported and create “red flags” when donations violate laws and regulations. Other law enforcement bodies can use the system, making it easier to support cross-sector investigations into political finance crimes and electoral violations.

Increasing data interoperability – which requires consistent data collection, labeling, and storage across multiple systems – is essential in making it easier and more efficient for multiple agencies to review and cross-check political finance data during election campaigns. In Croatia, the Commission for the Prevention of Conflicts of Interest deployed software that automatically compared data

Data Interoperability

A new report by IFES highlights how strengthening the interoperability of political finance data can greatly reduce the burden on electoral management bodies, anticorruption agencies, audit institutions, courts and other investigative entities, allowing them to quickly and confidently assess the legality of donations and the accuracy of contestants' spending declarations.

This resource will help institutions (1) determine which data to prioritize and (2) develop strategies for establishing safe and effective data sharing and connecting relevant data between systems.

contained in public officials' declarations of assets to other public databases. The program flagged apparent discrepancies, allowing investigators to assess whether apparent mismatches provided grounds for violation of the provisions of the Act on the Prevention of Conflict of Interest.⁹² With the expansion of AI, investigators are exploring the development of new tools to automate data analysis or enhance evidence processing. If adequately designed with appropriate human verification, these new tools can help investigators save time in their investigations.

⁹² Network for Integrity. (December 2020). Developing digital tools to promote transparency in public life. Network for Integrity. https://www.hatvp.fr/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Networkforintegrity_Developing-Digital-Tools-and-Open-Data-dec-20.pdf

Conclusion

Election investigations have become increasingly complicated in the five years since STRIDE was published, and actors seeking to manipulate election processes have more opportunities for impunity than ever before. Further, election investigators face an increasingly complex and interconnected set of challenges. Citizens are ever more distrustful of government institutions, even historically independent institutions such as courts and election management bodies. This distrust both causes and is caused by deepening political polarization and attempts to politicize efforts that promote accountability, increasing the pressure on election officials and the judiciary. At the same time, malign actors are increasingly sophisticated, leveraging new technologies and operating across borders to undermine elections.

In response, EMBs, courts, law enforcement, prosecutors, journalists, and civil society watchdogs have come together in novel ways to identify and investigate election violations and offenses. This includes new efforts to gather and share information to support investigations within the tight timelines of electoral justice processes. Such practices are important and will be increasingly necessary in the future – including efforts to leverage existing tools and relationships, strengthen legal frameworks and close the implementation gap between law and practice. Election officials, investigators, and judges must take particular care to ensure consistency and impartiality in their investigations, increase transparency in their reasoning and decisions and communicate clearly and proactively in the face of disinformation campaigns.

The emerging challenges and promising practices identified in this report will undoubtedly be joined by others with each passing election cycle. Although tactics and strategies have evolved on both sides of the investigative process, the fundamental principles laid out in STRIDE remain: elections investigations must be prompt, thorough, effective, and independent. Practitioners have a responsibility to take the standards and apply them in their own contexts without losing sight of those principles.



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