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Moldova's Fast-Response Playbook Against Election Interference: Learnings for Europe

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Moldovans voted on 28 September 2025 under heavy Russian interference: deepfakes, proxy media, illicit money and planned street unrest. Even so, President Maia Sandu's pro-European camp won clearly and continue to have a parliamentary majority in their attempt to lead the Eastern European country into the EU. The surprise was not only the clear win of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), but Moldova's strong response to the threats of disinformation and vote-buying from the Kremlin.

Moldovan authorities moved fast, aligned various agencies and interrupted money flows before narratives spread more widely. In short, pro-EU forces held against well-resourced pro-Russian actors. EU countries can learn from this playbook before their next ballots and meet the broader challenge of Russian hybrid warfare at home.

Setting the stage: Moldova

Moldova is a small, former Soviet republic of 2.4 million residents, with Romanian and Russian-speaking communities and the breakaway Transnistria region. With about 40% living abroad (many with Romanian passports), its electorate extends to 3.3 million.

Economic conditions improved over the last decade, although progress in the rural areas has been slow. The 2014 Association Agreement with the EU started important reform processes and brought more investment. Importantly, Moldova was being rewarded the EU candidate status in 2022 together with Ukraine after Russia's war of aggression. President Sandu held a referendum on 20 October 2024, 50.4% of Moldovans voted in favour of EU accession. Chișinău sees itself on track to join the EU by 2028, yet the EU needs to overcome its own internal challenges of moving forward on enlargement in Eastern Europe.

Standing up against interference

EU accession hopes raised the stakes and drew hostile attention from the Kremlin aiming to bring Moldova back into its sphere of influence or to have it stalled in a state of paralysis. The Russian interference goes way beyond the elections, including energy blackmailing, trade barriers and a long game to slow accession to the EU by denying stable majorities in Chişinău and confusion with Transnistria. Elections, however, allow for a particularly vulnerable point in any democracy to interfere and Russia tried its best doing so.

Estimates suggest that Russia has spent more than €100 million ahead of the parliamentary elections to meddle in Moldova. The campaign period saw disinformation across platforms, AI-generated smear videos, cloned outlets and micro-targeting of the diaspora. The BBC exposed a fake news network on Telegram while GlobSec documented a broader Russia-linked operation using clusters of look-alike websites, including fake polling, to deceive voters. Google said it closed over 1,000 YouTube channels and TikTok removed 100,000 fake accounts tied to Moldova.

Cyberattacks hit the electoral systems on polling day. Hoax bomb threats disrupted expatriate voting sites in cities such as Rome and Brussels, with police detaining suspects preparing to incite post-vote chaos. This was the visible layer of a wider Kremlin-attributed hybrid push built on deny-and-deflect tactics.

The main threats Moldova faced

In summary, three main threats can be identified. First, the **war of disinformation**. Telegram dominated political communication and propaganda. One positive message on social media usually triggered a flood of hostile replies, often automated by bots and fake accounts, powered by AI. That environment amplified false claims about the elections and stoked distrust in the process. On clergy influence, Chișinău flagged systematic use of the Russian Orthodox Church through promoting Kremlin narratives. Religion is thus misused as part of the disinformation campaign.

Second, the **illicit finance for vote-buying**. Moldova faced a shift from cash payouts in previous elections to app-based vote buying and prepaid card top-ups. A rouble-pegged stablecoin, A7A5, tied to Promsvyazbank (PSB), a sanctioned state-owned Russian bank, emerged as a sanctions-evasion tool for the elections. Blockchain analysts tracked average daily transaction flows near US$1 billion, which created a path from PSB accounts to crypto and ultimately to local cash-out in Moldova. Ilan Șor, a fugitive oligarch in

Moscow, is accused of orchestrating these efforts. Sanctions hit back, but liquidity pushes continued.

Third, the **security risk of staging violence**. On 22 September, a joint operation of the Moldovan police raided some 250 locations and detained 74 people linked to training for violent disorder, including 150 individuals abroad in Serbia, allegedly by Russian intelligence and the Șor network. Pre-empting the physical stage mattered as was showcased with the protests of an opposition candidate, Igor Dodon of the Patriotic Bloc who didn't accept the results and bringing Moldovans on the streets of Chișinău, but in the end people got their cash for participating and returned peacefully to their homes.

Take-aways from Moldova's response

What can a small country like Moldova do about it? Moldova's response was operational: speed beats volume. As the OSCE Interim Report of 12 September 2025 noted, Moldova combined clear seizure powers, weekly party-finance transparency of the parties and a single cyber security lead. That mix addressed both the information layer and the logistics behind it. Moldova's approach was imperfect, but it worked well enough under stress.

That was no small feat. Moldova tightened electoral-corruption offences, empowered the CEC to sanction and suspend public funding, and required weekly reports from the political parties that were contesting, including online advertisement spending. When risk spiked, an inter-agency mechanism froze funds linked to sanctioned actors, whereby seizures happened within days and not months. Cyber oversight moved from the CEC to the Information Technology and Cyber Security Service, with the new Cybersecurity Agency handling risk; shared guidelines and training cut response times and inter-agency confusion.

A specific example are the coordinated raids on 22 September seized cash, prepaid cards and documents tied to paid protests and vote-buying. Authorities followed-up with public awareness messaging on the penalties for selling a vote. Targeting the money can work faster than fact-checks because it stops the operation itself, not only the narrative.

Why did this work for a small state like Moldova? The bureaucratic capacity is limited and salaries are low. Yet, quite simple legal triggers and a tight command chain have helped to turn the tide. Moldova still has a top-down bureaucracy as part of its post-Soviet legacy that needs clarity, not elegant guidelines. Moldova went for clear thresholds, a few

single points of contact and the political will as well as the political back-up to act quickly. That design matched state capacity to the tempo of interference.

There also needs to be a word of caution, as fast lanes can overreach. Observers flagged vague provisions on extremism, onerous observer accreditation and the need for due-process clarity around freezes. In addition, it also left not much time for implementation. The answer is post-election audits, judicial review windows for seizures and bans as well as published criteria for content referrals and takedowns.

Lesssons learned for the EU

While Moldova's context is specific, its strategy to counter Russian interference has relevance for all EU countries, as evidenced by similar threats in the UK (Brexit vote), Germany (far left and far right) and France (far right). There are multiple transferable lessons for EU member states:

1. **Coordinate fast**: Create permanent election and hybrid-threat coordination centers that bring together relevant actors from cybersecurity, law enforcement, intelligence, prosecutors and electoral authorities for joint planning, information fusion and crisis response. Moldova's rapid command chain was a decisive advantage, echoed in EU Hybrid Rapid Response initiatives.

2. **Freeze illicit financing fast**: Equip financial intelligence units and prosecutors with emergency, legally robust procedures to freeze suspicious political funds and assets. Weekly party-finance transparency, immediate action on transaction patterns and coordination with asset recovery units worked well in Moldova.

3. **Make social media platforms act**: Negotiate rapid-action arrangements with digital platforms for flagging and removing deepfakes, coordinated inauthentic behavior and disinformation within 24 hours during election periods.

4. **Pre-empt physical disruption**: Establish interagency protocols, police readiness, and legal criteria to identify, prohibit and quickly contain orchestrated public disorder and unrest with independent, rapid judicial review. The Moldovan approach to detain networks before protests take place limited potential destabilisation.

5. **Keep resilient through transparency**: Maintain systemic transparency (e.g., open audits), involve civil society in monitoring and use tailored international support (e.g., rapid cyber assistance teams) to reinforce defenses against cyber threats without overreach.

Moldova benefited from public communication and external expert missions to strengthen trust and maintain due process.

Conclusions

Moldova's parliamentary elections have been a stress test against Russian interference, offering learnings for the whole of Europe. While Moldova's playbook is not overly complex, its success relied on adapting basic countermeasures to local conditions and maintaining flexible, enforceable rules. The EU's support was vital, but Moldova's determination was equally important. At the end of the day, the oxygen for Russian interference was reduced and the rules were kept tight, yet reviewable.

As other European countries prepare for their own elections, they can benefit by closing the gaps that hybrid threats so often exploit and ensure they are better prepared than many have been to date of interference from abroad.

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