



Russian Interference Nearly Overwhelmed Moldovan Presidential Election-Referendum Vote

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Russia and its local proxies attempted to influence the outcome of the recent presidential election and referendum in Moldova through vote-buying, disinformation activities, and cyberattacks. Although they failed to achieve their objectives, they will next seek to undermine the legitimacy of both votes and deepen social polarisation. The same hybrid methods, but on a larger scale, are likely to be used in Moldova during the parliamentary elections to be held in the summer of 2025. Therefore, the EU should start providing more support now to Moldova to counter foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

Despite interfering [in the presidential election and referendum in Moldova](#), Russia did not succeed in preventing Maia Sandu's re-election or in blocking the inclusion of European Union integration as a strategic goal in the constitution. However, the fact that the referendum was decided by a small percentage of the vote (just 0.7%, or 10,564 votes) shows that Russia was close to achieving at least one goal. Sandu's victory in the presidential election was determined by the votes of the Moldovan diaspora, which cast one in five votes and 83% for Sandu. These results testify to the deep socio-political divisions among Moldovans on the issue of European integration, which makes it easier for Russia to [conduct FIMI influence operations](#).

Russia would most likely have achieved its objectives were it not for the support of the EU and NATO countries to Moldova. Thanks to the [EU's EUPM Moldova mission](#), the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, the Cyber Security Agency, and others were launched. Cooperation with the Moldovan intelligence services has been strengthened and a number of local initiatives to counter disinformation have been reinforced, providing training and funding, among other things. Prior to the elections, the EU deployed the Lithuanian-led Cyber Rapid Response Team to Moldova. Indeed, Moldovan state

institutions still lack the capacity to respond independently to Russian hybrid interference.

Methods and Scale of the Interference. The main tool for influencing the outcome of the elections and referendum in Moldova was vote-buying. Pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Șor played a key role in this procedure. He is accused of illegally obtaining \$1 billion in total (about 10% of the country's GDP) from three Moldovan banks and, in order to avoid criminal responsibility for it, now resides permanently in Moscow, from where he supported the candidacy of former Prosecutor General Alexander Stoianoglo, formally independent but supported by the pro-Russian Socialist Party. Șor pursued these activities despite being banned from political campaigning (his party was banned in 2023), through the Victory Bloc grouping and the Evrazia Foundation, which promotes the Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin's idea of Eurasianism and Moldova's integration into the Eurasian Union, seen as an alternative to the EU.

Despite the sanctions imposed by the EU and the U.S. on Șor and Evrazia before the first round of the presidential election (which was combined with the referendum), his network bribed at least 138,000 voters through coordinators (mainly at voting sites), spending \$39 million on it. The funds for the bribes were raised through the Russian state bank

Promvyazbank (PSB), which is headed by Petr Fradkov, son of the former director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Prior to the second round, the Moldovan security services tried to counter vote-selling by introducing a €1,900 fine on takers. According to estimates by the Moldovan authorities, a total of around 300,000 votes were bought. Russia also helped to artificially mobilise the electorate voting for Stoianoglo by organising transport to polling stations for Moldovan citizens living in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russia, Turkey, and the separatist Transnistria, and distributing restaurant vouchers to them.

On election day, a series of coordinated denial of service-type cyberattacks were carried out on the ICT infrastructure of the Central Election Commission. These were intended to disrupt connectivity between polling stations in the country and abroad. False bomb alerts were called in to a number of Moldovan diplomatic missions in Europe to discourage the pro-European diaspora from voting for Sandu. In Moldova, in turn, there was a telephone campaign in which unidentified callers directed threats to voters in order to influence the outcome of the vote.

Moldovans' electoral attitudes were also influenced by disinformation operations that undermined the sense of EU integration and attacked the image of Sandu, who was portrayed as an "agent of the West". Before the elections, officials and businesses received fake correspondence allegedly sent by EU institutions or national ministries containing false information about supposed EU plans to bring in migrants from the Middle East to fill gaps in the Moldovan labour market, overly enforce the rights of the LGBT+ community, deny EU support for the agricultural sector, and mobilise Moldovans to fight in Ukraine. These manipulations were intended to create public confusion, discourage citizens from voting for EU integration, and undermine their trust in state institutions.

Șor's network spread disinformation through more than 40 websites and social media advertisements funded by him. Although these were reported by the fact-checking community and blocked by Meta (Facebook), more kept appearing, forcing the re-implementation of a procedure to block them. However, these measures did not extend to the Russia-based service Telegram, where a special chatbot STOP EU/СТОП ЕС operated, through which Evrazia recruited 20,000 "ambassadors" to vote against European integration. For publishing anti-EU posts and comments, these users were paid from \$50 (for supporters) to \$2,500 (for leaders) per month, which went into individual accounts at the PSB bank. According to President Sandu, tens of millions of dollars were spent by Russia and its local allies, and the scale of information manipulation was unprecedented.

Threat of Further Interference. The disinformation activities are continuing, with the aim to delegitimise both the electoral process, which, according to the pro-Russian opposition, was controlled by EU bureaucrats, and Sandu herself, which they call an illegitimate president. Despite the results giving Sandu the victory and maintenance of a European foreign policy direction for Moldova, Russia will not give up interfering in the former's internal situation and will try to prevent its integration into the EU. During the parliamentary elections to be held in the summer of 2025, Russia, through Șor, will attempt to bring about a victory for pro-Russian political parties favouring the country's Eurasian integration, which in practice means with Russia. They will again try to achieve this goal with methods tested during the presidential election and referendum. Russia may also seek to provoke violent protests, as evidenced by the training of Moldovan activists to incite riots. There are camps for such agitators in Russia, Serbia, and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), funded by Șor, and the instructors have included mercenaries from the former Wagner Group. Around Moscow, about 300 activists were trained in the tactics of mass demonstrations and clashes with law enforcement. In paramilitary camps in the Balkans, groups of several people have been trained in the use of weapons and incendiary and explosive devices (including dropping them by drone), indicating preparations for situations that include destabilisation using violent subversive methods.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Due to Moldova's parliamentary-cabinet political system, next year's elections will be crucial for the future course of its foreign policy. For Russia, the strategic goal is to block Moldova's integration into the EU and incorporate it into Eurasian structures. In order to prevent Russia interference from being effective, the EU should increase its strategic communication activities and extend and strengthen the mandate of the EUPM Moldova mission, which formally ends in May 2025, and equipping it with instruments to respond immediately to disinformation and cyberattacks, thus strengthening national capabilities in this area. It is in Poland's interest to have Polish diplomats and experts associated with the mission, as currently there is not a single one. Polish public diplomacy in cooperation with local NGOs should also focus on popularising knowledge of the EU among Moldovans, highlighting the socio-economic benefits of membership.

During the upcoming EU Council presidency, Poland should request the deployment of [EU Rapid Hybrid Response Teams](#) (EURHRTs) to Moldova, which would be tasked with supporting the state in combating disinformation and ensuring cybersecurity during the parliamentary elections, and other activities. This would be the first opportunity to test in practice the capabilities of this instrument, which should reach operational readiness at the end of 2024.