Zentrum Liberale Moderne

The Russian FIMI Playbook in Moldova

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Executive Summary

Moldova underwent the most intensive FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference) Europe has ever seen, and its defences held. The core lesson: FIMI is a governance challenge, not a media challenge; Russian operations amplify governance deficits that already exist. Five priorities follow, for Chișinău and Brussels alike: treat FIMI as a good-governance problem; prioritize resilience over censorship; follow the money — banks, cards, crypto; learn faster than the adversary; and treat democratic oversight as an asset, not an obstacle. Ultimately, Russia is competing less for control over information than for control over citizens' trust.

I. Country context and strategic relevance

Why Moldova matters to Russia. Moldova's importance is defined less by what it is than by where it stands: an EU candidate country negotiating accession on the immediate flank of the war against Ukraine. Whether a post-Soviet state can complete a democratic, European trajectory in the face of sustained Russian resistance is a question now being tested on Moldovan soil. For Moscow, "losing" Moldova would puncture its claim to a privileged sphere of influence; by keeping Moldova unstable, Russia retains its leverage over the wider Black Sea region and complicates the provision of support to Ukraine. Moldova is also a low-cost, high-yield target, one with limited administrative resources, no collective-defence guarantees, and permanent neutrality enshrined in the Constitution.[1] That neutrality is treated by Moscow not as a constraint to be respected but as a grey zone to be exploited — interference escalates while remaining below any threshold that would trigger an allied response. The Transnistrian region adds a structural vulnerability: an unrecognized administration, a residual Russian troop presence, and an information and financial space serving as a platform for influence operations against the rest of the country.

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1 Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, Preamble (European Integration), Art. 11 (permanent neutrality). Official texts of Moldovan legislation: https://www.legis.md. Source: Constitution

State of relations with Russia. Since February 2022 the relationship has been de facto adversarial: Moldova has aligned with EU sanctions, drastically reduced its energy dependence on Russia, and expelled intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover. In response, coercive diplomacy has given way to a sustained hybrid campaign in which the information domain is the main focus of activities and elections themselves the main objective.

Exploited vulnerabilities. Russian FIMI rarely creates vulnerabilities; rather, it succeeds by identifying, exploiting, and amplifying governance deficits that already exist. Corruption, weak institutions, gaps in public services, and low institutional trust are the true fertile ground and the principal focus of Russia's information manipulation. Russia also exploits information vulnerabilities, the most consequential of which is a fragmented information space that functions as parallel ecosystems: Romanian-language media broadly support the European course, while a large Russian-language segment remains permeable to Kremlin narratives; the media environments in Gagauzia and Transnistria are almost entirely dependent on Russian content and infrastructure. Different communities thus inhabit different perceived realities. This fragmentation intersects with chronic distrust of central institutions — a legacy of corruption and instability — while trust remains concentrated in local figures, such as priests, mayors, and teachers, who become preferred vectors of influence. The pattern extends to the very top of the state: even under the current pro-European government, trust is attached to the President as a person rather than to the ruling party, Parliament, the Government, or even the presidency as an institution.[2] Socio-economic grievances (energy prices, inflation, emigration), linguistic and identity divisions, and instrumentalized historical memory (the Soviet victory cult, nostalgia narratives) complete the attack surface.

FIMI within the broader toolkit. In Moldova, FIMI is not a standalone media problem but the connective tissue of a coordinated hybrid strategy. Information manipulation amplifies electoral corruption networks, mobilizes paid protests, magnifies the effects of cyberattacks and energy pressure, and disguises covertly financed political activity as spontaneous civic sentiment — a snowball effect in which each instrument raises the yield of the others. Any analysis or response that isolates "disinformation" from this system will underestimate it. This paper argues that Moldova offers an important lesson for Europe: FIMI is primarily a governance challenge rather than a media challenge.

II. The Russian FIMI playbook

Strategic objectives. The purpose of Russian information activity in Moldova is destabilization rather than persuasion. Campaigns aim to generate confusion, corrode trust in institutions, polarize society, and paralyze democratic decision-making — the logic of reflexive control. The operational goals are concrete: derail EU accession, delegitimize the pro-European government and electoral outcomes, and hold Moldova in strategic limbo.

Dominant narratives. The narrative set is stable and locally tailored: EU integration means war, loss of sovereignty, and loss of traditional values; the West is dragging Moldova into the Ukraine conflict; the government is a Western puppet and elections are rigged; Moldova is a failed state that cannot survive without Russia; Russia is the protector of peace, faith, and affordable energy. Distinct narrative packages target Russian speakers (sovereignty, NATO aggression, "gender ideology"), rural

[2] Public Opinion Barometer (BOP) surveys; CBS-Research / Institute for Public Policy; see, for example, the September 2025 edition. Source: Barometer survey

communities (messages carried by trusted local figures), and the autonomous and separatist regions (loss of autonomy, "Central power is controlled by the West").

Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). The TTP repertoire has industrialized and increasingly relies on AI:

- Coordinated inauthentic behaviour at scale: troll farms, bot networks, and auto-generated pages — civil-society monitoring (WatchDog.MD) identified a network of over 2,000 auto-generated Facebook pages, including 146 pages tied to Șor structures promoting political advertising.[3]
- Impersonation and information laundering: Operation Overload/ "Matryoshka" (Storm-1679), alongside Storm-1516 and Operation Undercut, produced fabricated videos impersonating credible Western media and officials; AI-generated deepfakes targeted President Sandu and Western leaders.[4]
- Platform migration as an adaptive response: after licenses for propaganda-linked television broadcasters were suspended,[5] activity shifted to Telegram, TikTok, and YouTube; campaigns demonstrably learn from regulatory and platform countermeasures.
- Monetized influence: payments to "activists," bloggers, and protesters via MIR cards issued by the sanctioned Promsvyazbank and, increasingly, via crypto infrastructure (the A7/A7A5 sanctions-evasion ecosystem).[6]

Actors and channels. State actors — intelligence services and the Russian state media ecosystem with its proxy portals — operate through a dense layer of local intermediaries: the networks of fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor (the Evrazia organization, the "Victory" bloc, the Moldova24 channel)[7], pro-Russian parties and regional elites (the Gagauz executive under Evghenia Guțul signed cooperation agreements with Evrazia and Promsvyazbank)[8], and societal vectors including segments of the Moldovan Orthodox Church. A case in point: in 2024, dozens of priests joined Moscow "pilgrimages" financed through Evrazia.[9] Primary audiences are Russian-speaking communities, older rural TV audiences, Gagauzia, Transnistria and Bălți, the diaspora in Russia, and youth reached through TikTok.

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[3] WatchDog.MD, report of May 2025: 146 anonymous Facebook pages affiliated with fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor for political advertising, plus 315 pages held "stand-by", forming part of a network of at least 2,167 auto-generated pages. Source: Watchdog Analysis

[4] Attribution per Recorded Future, "Russian Influence Assets Converge on Moldovan Elections", 3 September 2025, and the G7 RRM report on the 2025 elections. Operation Overload is also known as Matryoshka / Storm-1679; see also Storm-1516 and Operation Undercut. Source: Recorded Future Report.

[5] The suspensions rested on state-of-emergency powers: Disposition No. 1 of 24 February 2022 of the Commission for Exceptional Situations (suspension of certain media broadcasts) and the Order of the SIS Director of October 2023 blocking online sources, issued under Parliament Decision No. 41/2022. Source: SIS Order

[6] OCCRP / CU SENS / RISE Moldova, 15 October 2024. A7 is a payments/crypto firm jointly owned by Șor and the sanctioned Promsvyazbank, which is used to evade Western sanctions; the associated A7A5 rouble-backed stablecoin has since been reported to be used to finance influence operations (EDMO, September 2025). Sources: OCCRP Report; EDMO Report.

[7] See the SIS report of November 2023 on the criminal group led by Ilan Șor; and Recorded Future (2025) on the Evrazia organisation and the Moldova24 television network. Source: Recorded Future Report.

[8] Balkan Insight, 10 April 2024; OSW, 26 April 2024; OCCRP, 15 October 2024. Governor Evghenia Guțul signed cooperation agreements with both Evrazia and Promsvyazbank on monthly "humanitarian" payments channelled via MIR cards. Sources: Balkan Insight Analysis; OSW Analysis; OCCRP Report.

[9] Investigations by deschide.md and Ziarul de Gardă (2024); C. Lowe, P. Nikolskaya, A. Zverev, "Holy war: How Russia recruited Orthodox priests to sway Moldova's voters", Reuters, 26 September 2025. Clergy received MIR cards from the sanctioned Promsvyazbank and were promised roughly €1,000/month for "church repairs". Sources: ZdG Investigation; Reuters Special Report.

Landmark operations, 2022–2026. During the 2022–2023 energy crisis, panic campaigns and waves of paid protests organized by Şor-linked structures sought to convert economic anxiety into pressure for regime change. The October–November 2024 EU referendum and presidential election saw interference of unprecedented scale: Moldovan police documented the transfer of roughly USD 39 million through Promsvyazbank to some 138,000 citizens in a vote-buying scheme,[10] which was accompanied by mass disinformation and bomb threats against diaspora polling stations. The referendum passed by the narrowest of margins – 749,719 "yes" votes vs. 739,155 "no" votes, a margin of some 10,500 out of almost 1.49 million validly cast.[11] The September 2025 parliamentary elections drew the most intensive FIMI effort ever recorded in the country: G7 Rapid Response Mechanism joint monitoring documented over 450 pieces of FIMI content;[12] Matryoshka alone generated several times the output observed around recent US elections;[13] authorities reported the removal of roughly 100,000 fake TikTok accounts and over 1,000 cyberattacks on state systems.[14] The governing pro-European party nevertheless retained its majority, and post-election protest mobilization failed. Since late 2025, the financing of influence networks has visibly migrated toward crypto rails, and narrative seeding for the next electoral cycles is already underway. Much of this is a preview for the rest of Europe: the crypto-based financing, AI-generated content, and platform migration observed in Moldova are likely to surface elsewhere on the continent next.

III. Resilience and countermeasures

What has worked. Moldova's response has evolved from improvised emergency measures toward an institutionalized, whole-of-society – indeed whole-of-democracy – model, engaging parliament, the courts, electoral authorities, media, and civil society alongside the executive. The Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (established by law in 2023, operational since 2024 and strengthened in 2025)[15] monitors the information space, publishes exposure reports, and coordinates pre-bunking. The 2023 National Security Strategy, the 2024–2034 National Defence Strategy, and the 2025 National Security Law[16] explicitly securitize hybrid threats and information manipulation, creating a lasting legal basis for the response. During the 2024–2025 electoral cycles, it was the combination of responses that was decisive: law-enforcement disruption of vote-buying networks, tenacity on the part of the electoral authority and courts, investigative journalism (Ziarul

[10] General Police Inspectorate (chief Viorel Cernăuțeanu), press conference of 24–25 October 2024, cited by RFE/RL and bne IntelliNews: about USD 39 million (USD 15 million in September, USD 24 million in October) transferred via Promsvyazbank to some 138,000 documented transfer recipients; the authorities assessed the actual number of beneficiaries to be higher, though undetermined. Sources: Radio Free Europe; Intelli News.

[11] Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova, Judgment No. 24 of 31 October 2024 confirming the results of the constitutional referendum of 20 October 2024 (case No. 212d/2024): 1,488,874 valid votes, of which 749,719 were in favour and 739,155 were against; turnout was 50.72% of registered voters. Neither the CEC nor the Court cites results in percentage terms; the widely cited c. 50.35% "in favour is derived from these figures. Source: Briefing by the President of the Constitutional Court.

[12] G7 Rapid Response Mechanism, "Joint Monitoring of the 2025 Moldovan Parliamentary Elections", Global Affairs Canada, April 2026. Russian state-aligned operations accounted for about 91% of FIMI content aimed at Moldova. Source: G7 Rapid Response.

[13] Valeriu Pașa (WatchDog.MD): the output of Operation Matryoshka was roughly five times the volume of content targeting Moldova's elections seen during the last two US elections (New Eastern Europe, 10 October 2025). Source: New Eastern Europe.

[14] Prime Minister Dorin Recean: more than 1,000 cyberattacks on state systems since the start of the year and 100,000 fake TikTok accounts removed (New Eastern Europe, 10 October 2025). TikTok reported blocking over 100,000 fake accounts between 1 July and 9 September 2025 (IWPR). Source: IWPR Report.

[15] Law No. 242/2023 of 31 July 2023 on the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (Official Gazette No. 318–321/2023, art. 566), amended by Law No. 247 of 10 July 2025. Official text: StratCom Law.

[16] National Security Strategy, approved by Parliament Decision No. 391 of 15 December 2023 (Official Gazette No. 17–19/2024, art. 28); National Defence Strategy 2024–2034, approved by Parliament Decision No. 319 of 26 December 2024 (Official Gazette No. 1–4/2025, art. 15); Law No. 249/2025 on the national security of the Republic of Moldova. Official texts: National Security Strategy; National Defence Strategy; National Security Law.

de Gardă's exposure of the Evrazia scheme)[17], NGO monitoring and fact-checking (WatchDog.MD, Promo-LEX), and pre-electoral joint monitoring with international partners (G7 RRM, EEAS StratCom Task Force East, the EU Partnership Mission).[18] Election integrity was preserved despite record-scale interference — a test of institutional resilience passed under fire — and Moldova is currently less a victim case study than a resilience laboratory: the site of the most intensive testing in Europe, from vote-buying and illicit financing to AI-generated FIMI, and a source of lessons for the wider continent.

The democratic dilemma. Restrictive measures — license suspensions, website blocking — were largely grounded in state-of-emergency powers, and the limited transparency and judicial review of these measures hand the adversary its most effective counter-narrative — the "censoring regime": provoking democratic overreach is part of the design, and the ultimate objective of the Moldovan government is not only to counter Russian manipulation but to preserve democratic legitimacy while doing so — a particular challenge as a permanent, court-tested legal basis for FIMI response is still under construction. Success in countering FIMI must therefore be measured not only by how much manipulative content is removed, but by how much institutional trust is preserved.

Remaining vulnerabilities and gaps. Three gaps stand out. The first is the democratic dilemma described above — striking a balanced response without damaging the democratic legitimacy it is meant to protect. Second, institutional sustainability: the counter-FIMI architecture is young, concentrated in a small pool of specialists, and exposed to political and funding cycles — resilience built over five years could be unbuilt in one. Third, the audiences that matter most remain the hardest to reach: Russian-speaking communities, Gagauzia, and Transnistria still lack credible public-interest media in their own languages, so debunking and quality journalism rarely penetrate the ecosystems where FIMI is most effective.

Transferable lessons. Moldova's experience suggests five lessons. Treat FIMI as a national-security and good-governance problem, not a media problem, and institutionalize the response before the crisis, not during it. Prioritize resilience over censorship: in the long term, the battle is one over trust in democratic institutions, and the weapons are media literacy, independent journalism, and government communication that answers citizens' practical questions rather than restating policy abstractions. Follow the money: FIMI is inseparable from illicit financing, and disrupting its payment infrastructure — banks, payment cards, crypto — measurably degrades operations. Institutions must also learn faster than the adversary: FIMI adapts between electoral cycles, and standing lessons-learned mechanisms matter more than one-off fixes. Finally, democratic oversight of countermeasures is itself a resilience asset: proportionate, transparent, and accountable responses deny the adversary its most effective counter-narrative; parliamentary and judicial scrutiny are not obstacles to countering FIMI but the competitive advantage of democracies.

Policy recommendations. At the national level: replace emergency-based instruments with a permanent legal framework for FIMI response that is subject to judicial review and parliamentary oversight; strengthen the basis for the analytical independence of the strategic communication function, and secure its resourcing; invest in Russian-language public-interest media and in media literacy across the education system; and make the disruption of illicit financing — banks, payment

[17] Investigations by Ziarul de Gardă into the Evrazia network and the financing of pro-Russian influencers and trolls (2024–2025); see also Kyiv Independent, 25 October 2024, and IFES, "A Lesson in Resilience". Sources: Kyiv Independent; IFES Study.

[18] Pre-electoral joint monitoring: G7 RRM (April 2026 report); East StratCom Task Force / EEAS (2025 EEAS Report on Countering FIMI); EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (since 2023). Sources: G7 RRM Report; EEAS Report.

cards, crypto — a standing pillar of FIMI response rather than an electoral emergency measure. Democratic resilience depends not only on a pro-European political orientation but equally on the continued strengthening of checks and balances, judicial independence, parliamentary oversight, and institutional accountability – in short, on good governance. At the European level: treat Moldova as a front-line source of FIMI lessons and systematize their transfer across the enlargement space; make joint monitoring of the G7 RRM type permanent rather than election-bound and extend it to other exposed partners, backed by common analytical cells and a shared TTP database; take action at the EU level on platform accountability — above all Telegram and TikTok — and on crypto-based FIMI financing; and integrate FIMI-resilience and governance-quality benchmarks into the enlargement methodology itself. Rather than treating FIMI as one instrument among many, European policy should understand it as the connective tissue that links and amplifies all other hybrid instruments. Russia seeks to weaken democracy not only through disinformation, but also by eroding the institutions that generate public trust; the most sustainable response is therefore not stronger censorship, but stronger democratic governance. Ultimately, Russia competes less for control over information than for control over citizens' trust.