

# Targeted Disruption: Russian Interference in the 2024 Elections of Moldova, Romania and Georgia

**R**ussia interfered in the 2024 elections in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia. In each case, the Kremlin deployed a mix of disinformation, covert financing, cyber operations, and exploitation of societal divisions to skew democratic outcomes and undermine trust in electoral institutions. These were not isolated incidents; they were part of a coordinated campaign targeting vulnerable democracies along Russia's periphery.

In Moldova, despite a technically well-managed presidential runoff, evidence [surfaced](#) of Russian networks funding proxy media, mobilizing diaspora votes through manipulated narratives, and attempting to engineer street-level unrest. In Romania, security services [uncovered](#) an extensive Russian influence operation aimed at shaping the presidential vote, involving front organizations, illicit money flows, and propaganda channels. In

Georgia, observers [reported](#) systematic voter intimidation, misuse of administrative resources, and [alignment](#) of local actors with Kremlin narratives, suggesting domestic-authoritarian complicity in amplifying foreign influence.

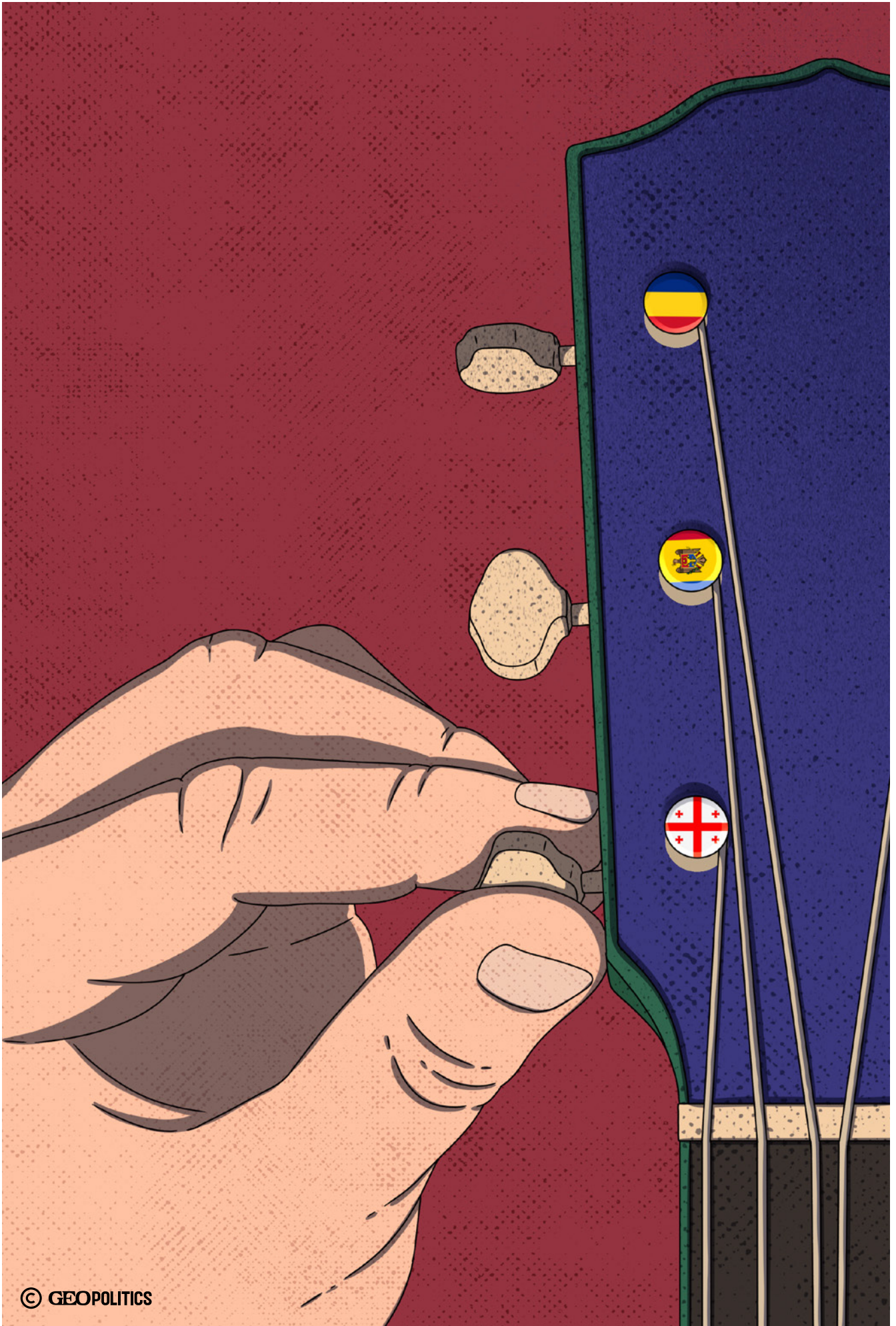
**Moscow's electoral interference machine is not only active—it is adapting.**

These cases confirm that Moscow's electoral interference machine is not only active—it is adapting. Following its military setbacks in Ukraine, Russia is reverting to and refining the hybrid warfare [pattern](#) it used extensively in the 2010s: information manipulation, covert interference, and strategic disruption of democratic cohesion. The goal is not just to support pro-Russian candidates but to weaken institutional trust, divide societies, and erode the West's democratic model from within.



**SHOTA GVINERIA**  
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010–14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



© GEOPOLITICS

By examining these three concurrent operations, we gain insight into how Russian interference is evolving, shifting from blunt-force propaganda to more tailored, data-driven, and context-specific approaches. The shared experience of Moldova, Romania, and Georgia underscores the urgency of developing anticipatory defenses, greater societal resilience, and closer regional cooperation in the face of persistent hybrid threats.

## Russia's Playbook: Tools, Tactics, and Strategy

Russia's foreign interference strategy has become increasingly exposed in recent years. At its core, it operates on three well-established objectives: to undermine public trust in democratic institutions, to discredit pro-European political actors, and to promote pro-Russian or radical alternatives. These efforts are carried out by exploiting societal divisions and using a broad spectrum of communication platforms, particularly Telegram, TikTok, and VKontakte. In the 2024 elections in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia, these goals were pursued through carefully adapted methods aligned to each country's vulnerabilities and political environment.

Across the three countries, Russia deployed an expansive toolkit involving digital and offline channels. These included state-controlled media outlets, troll farms, bot networks, politically affiliated NGOs, clerical figures, and a growing reliance on micro- and macro-influencers to seed and normalize Kremlin-aligned narratives. The Romanian [declassified](#) intelligence reports uncovered the systematic use of AI-generated content, fake news, and deep fakes to pollute the digital space with rapid-response propaganda. The reports also revealed sociological profiling and micro-targeting to segment audiences and adapt messages for maximal resonance. These tactics were not limited to Romania. Similar methods were identified in

Moldova and Georgia, reinforcing that the same tools were repurposed across borders with local variations.

***Pro-Russian narratives emphasized Moscow's solid standing as a geopolitical partner and positioned NATO as an aggressor. Techniques included disinformation, polarization, content flooding, election noise, and co-optation of public discourse.***

The most prominent narrative across all three elections portrayed the European Union as threatening national sovereignty, economic stability, and traditional values. Disinformation campaigns framed the EU as a foreign project undermining national identity and family structures. In Moldova and Georgia, the legacy of unresolved conflicts was [exploited](#) to revive fear and instability. Pro-Russian narratives emphasized Moscow's solid standing as a geopolitical partner and positioned NATO as an aggressor. Techniques included disinformation, polarization, content flooding, election noise, and co-optation of public discourse.

While nuanced in each case, the strategic goal underpinning these operations remains consistent: to erode confidence in democratic institutions, obstruct integration with NATO and the European Union, and empower political proxies or friendly actors aligned with Russian interests. These influence efforts are designed to weaken pro-Western coalitions, destabilize internal politics, and ultimately foster dependency on or alignment with Moscow.

In all three cases Russia's overarching goals were similar, however, the tools and tactics were contextually adapted. In Romania, the interference focused on a highly coordinated TikTok campaign to elevate a fringe candidate. Moldova's operations concentrated on vote buying and corruption, ex-

exploiting economic precarity and weakened electoral oversight. In Georgia, interference took a more [systemic](#) form, with the ruling party openly cooperating with Russian-linked actors and adopting elements of authoritarian governance promoted by the Kremlin.

In Moldova and Romania, influence operations were resisted by pro-European governments and security institutions. This limited the effectiveness of the campaigns. In contrast, Georgian authorities have acted in concert with Russian objectives, allowing the three pillars of interference—corruption, disinformation, and intra-societal confrontation—to unfold with less resistance. The result has been a tangible success for pro-Russian forces in Georgia, while similar actors continue to be challenged in Moldova and Romania.

Russian electoral interference in 2024 was not static but reactive to key electoral moments. [Vote buying schemes](#) involving large-scale cash transfers to voters were [reported](#) in all three [countries](#). Evidence points to sedition, fraud, and money laundering operations that funneled illicit funds to pro-Russian parties and groups. Local media outlets, public figures, and influencers were financially [incentivized](#) to amplify Kremlin narratives, often funded by oligarchs closely tied to Moscow, such as Ilan Shor in Moldova, Gabriel Prodanescu in Romania, and Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia. These strategies were not new, but failing to internalize lessons from previous election cycles has left observers and institutions vulnerable to persistent disruption.

## Moldova

Russia's strategic objectives in Moldova's 2024 presidential election were clear: reverse the country's pro-European momentum and destabilize reform efforts, particularly in the lead-up to a constitutional referendum that aimed to enshrine EU integration as a foreign policy priority. To this end,

Russia weaponized local pro-Russian elites and Russian-speaking populations, leveraging widespread poverty and information vulnerabilities.

The centerpiece of the interference was a vast vote buying operation. According to Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service (SIS), Ilan Shor, head of the pro-Russian Victory bloc, acted as a key implementer of this strategy. Utilizing Russian-sanctioned banks, notably *Promsvyazbank*, more than USD 39 million was [funneled](#) to over 138,000 Moldovan citizens, primarily through virtual accounts. The campaign targeted vulnerable communities with direct financial incentives.

Supporting [tactics](#) included coordinated cyberattacks, fake bomb threats at diaspora polling stations in Germany and the UK, and illegal voter transportation from Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Transnistria. Identity-based disinformation also played a role. In the days before the second round, journalists received threats in broken Romanian, falsely attributed to President Maia Sandu's team.

Russian efforts extended to psychological operations, including a fabricated video in which Sandu was [portrayed](#) banning the harvest of rosehips, a culturally significant plant. The footage provoked emotional backlash by evoking Soviet-era limits on national characteristics and traditions. Another viral piece falsely [claimed](#) Romania was massing troops near the Moldovan border, while the promoted footage was from an earlier military parade.

**Russia's long-practiced use of cyberattacks reached a new level of coordination. Hack-and-leak operations, fake bomb threats, and DDoS attacks targeted the electoral infrastructure. Disinformation, political corruption, and staged unrest were used in tandem, mainly to discourage diaspora voting and reduce trust in the electoral process.**

Russia's long-practiced use of cyberattacks reached a new level of coordination. Hack-and-leak operations, fake bomb threats, and DDoS attacks targeted the electoral infrastructure. Disinformation, political corruption, and staged unrest were used in tandem, mainly to [discourage](#) diaspora voting and reduce trust in the electoral process. In the final days of the campaign, TikTok was [flooded](#) with anti-European content designed to sway the outcome of both the election and the EU referendum.

## Romania

In Romania, the 2024 presidential elections were targeted by a sophisticated influence campaign to undermine trust in EU institutions and fracture the country's pro-Western consensus. The strategic objective was to cultivate internal dissent and install a disruptive political figure who could serve as a Trojan horse within NATO and the EU.

The primary tool was social media. Over 25,000 TikTok accounts were [allegedly](#) used to boost the candidacy of fringe politician Calin Georgescu artificially. Coordinated via Russian-linked Telegram channels, these accounts exploited platform algorithms to drive rapid surges in online engagement. Georgescu's support leapt from 1 to 35 percent in just two weeks.

Cyberattacks against the Central Electoral Bureau and the Permanent Electoral Authority were [recorded](#) on election day, originating from more than 30 countries. Romanian intelligence services (SRI) reported that TikTok had flagged manipulative activity linked to Sputnik-affiliated accounts. Financial traces [pointed](#) to payments totaling USD 381,000 coordinated by Bogdan Peschir, a tech entrepreneur with suspected Russian ties.

Tactics included stoking anti-EU sentiment, amplifying nationalist rhetoric, and targeting diaspora voters with fear-based messaging. Disinformation

campaigns [framed](#) the EU as hostile to Romanian traditions and sovereignty. Telegram groups supporting Georgescu had been created years in advance, suggesting a long-term strategic build-up.

***Tactics included stoking anti-EU sentiment, amplifying nationalist rhetoric, and targeting diaspora voters with fear-based messaging. Disinformation campaigns framed the EU as hostile to Romanian traditions and sovereignty.***

Though the Romanian government remained pro-European, its response was limited by the plausible deniability built into Russia's hybrid tactics. No overt evidence was sufficient to prompt immediate international repercussions. In the aftermath, Moscow leveraged this ambiguity to question Romania's narrative and sow division. The campaign did not succeed in electing a pro-Russian candidate in the first round of elections, but it succeeded in polarizing public discourse, eroding trust, and weakening institutional legitimacy.

## Georgia

Georgia's 2024 elections presented a different interference model, shaped by the ruling Georgian Dream party's direct [alignment](#) with Russian interests. Unlike Moldova and Romania, where pro-European governments attempted to counter interference, in Georgia, the authorities themselves became enablers.

Russia's strategic goal was to block Georgia's path to EU and NATO membership. To achieve this, it offered Georgian Dream the political support necessary to remain in power in exchange for abandoning integration efforts. This alliance enabled Russia to deploy a layered disinformation strategy through pro-government propaganda channels, orthodox clergy, and pseudo-civil society organizations.

Narratives were tailored to promote a false choice between peace and war. Pro-Western opposition figures were portrayed as warmongers, while Georgian Dream presented itself as a guarantor of stability and traditional values. Russian state media and senior officials echoed and directly endorsed these messages. The ruling party further reinforced them with the ruthless pre-election propaganda campaign, including the billboards and videos [contrasting](#) destroyed Ukrainian cities with peaceful Georgian landscapes.

***A central tactic was transposing the Kremlin's domestic propaganda model into Georgian politics. Civil society actors and independent journalists were labeled as foreign agents. Online disinformation campaigns alleged the presence of Ukrainian snipers and U.S.-sponsored coup attempts.***

A central tactic was transposing the Kremlin's domestic propaganda model into Georgian politics. Civil society actors and independent journalists were [labeled](#) as foreign agents. Online disinformation campaigns [alleged](#) the presence of Ukrainian snipers and U.S.-sponsored coup attempts. Conspiracy theories and cultural nationalism were mobilized to shift public discourse away from democratic reforms and toward sovereignty and survival.

This environment, [saturated](#) with fear and manipulated messaging, allowed Georgian Dream to maintain control. The October 2024 election was widely seen by opposition and civil society leaders as manipulated. 5th President Salome Zourabichvili explicitly [accused](#) Russian intelligence of shaping the outcome, citing propaganda tactics identical to those used in Putin's reelection campaign.

## Comparative Insights

Across Moldova, Romania, and Georgia, the 2024 elections reveal a complex picture of shared vulnerabilities and varied responses to Russian interference. A comparative lens shows both common tactics used by Russia and significant differences in how governments and societies responded to the challenge.

One clear pattern is Russia's continued use of electoral disruption to achieve strategic geopolitical objectives. In all three countries, the Kremlin deployed disinformation, cyberattacks, financial operations, and influence campaigns to destabilize the democratic process. Yet, the methods were tailored to local conditions. In Moldova, economic hardship made vote buying a particularly effective tactic. In Romania, the information space was the primary battleground, while in Georgia, the ruling party became a central vector of Russian influence.

A notable shared feature was the targeting of diaspora voters. In Moldova, as in 2016, efforts were made to suppress the diaspora vote. In the earlier election, shortages of ballot papers and administrative obstacles prevented many Moldovans abroad from voting. In 2024, this was compounded by bomb threats and transportation blockages. Similarly, Georgian authorities restricted access for diaspora communities, understanding that these voters, many of whom left the country in search of better opportunities, were unlikely to support the ruling party. In both cases, diaspora suppression was calculated to remove a pro-reform voting bloc from the electoral equation.

Responses to interference varied widely. Romania's authorities initially underestimated the scale and speed of Russian influence operations. However, once identified, national institutions—ranging from intelligence services to the presidency and judiciary—reacted with a united, resilience-based

strategy. This included exposing manipulation attempts and engaging in strategic communication to rebuild public trust.

Moldova, too, demonstrated moments of institutional strength. The public campaign “They cannot steal as much as we can vote” reminded citizens that selling their votes was not a victimless act but a criminal offense. This message helped shift perceptions and mobilize voters to resist manipulation. Still, Moldova’s capacity to block foreign funding and illegal logistics remains limited, especially given the sophisticated laundering methods used by actors like Ilan Shor.

Georgia stands in contrast. There, state institutions did not attempt to counter the interference. Instead, they were complicit in facilitating it. The ruling Georgian Dream party used the tools of Russian hybrid warfare—including disinformation, fear-based messaging, and vote buying—as part of its official campaign strategy. While civil society in Georgia showed remarkable resilience by organizing large-scale protests and documenting abuses, institutional checks were absent or actively working against democratic integrity.

***Societal resistance is essential, institutional leadership and coordination are equally critical. Where institutions stood firm, interference was mitigated; where institutions aligned with the malign actor, democratic integrity was deeply compromised despite strong societal resistance.***

This comparison underscores a fundamental lesson: democracy under pressure requires both a vigilant, well-informed public and independent, capable state institutions. While societal resistance is essential, institutional leadership and coordination are equally critical. Where institutions

stood firm, interference was mitigated; where institutions aligned with the malign actor, democratic integrity was deeply compromised despite strong societal resistance.

## Policy Reflections

Russia’s electoral interference is not a new phenomenon. What makes it effective is not innovation, but adaptation. Its strength lies in its ability to be localized, context-specific, and constantly evolving. The 2024 elections in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia illustrate this with alarming clarity. The most sobering lesson may be that we still have not fully learned the lessons from previous interference campaigns. While Romania and Moldova may have escaped the worst outcomes this time, the underlying trend continues to shift in Russia’s favor. Russia learns and constantly improves its influence operations.

The patterns observed in 2024 are not likely to diminish. Instead, they are becoming more precise, covert, and embedded. This year, Moldova faces parliamentary elections, and the Georgian Dream regime will conduct scheduled local elections or will have to rerun parliamentary elections because of internal and external pressure on its lame legitimacy. While the regime in Georgia doubles down on its authoritarian Russian style rule, Moldova’s political landscape remains a high-stakes battleground, with each election a narrow contest between Russian-backed forces and pro-European actors. All signs point to a repeat of the same tactics: hybrid messaging campaigns, diaspora vote disruption, disinformation via social media platforms, and illicit financial flows supporting extremist or proxy candidates.

These operations become more effective with each cycle, producing cumulative effects. As former KGB defector Yuri Bezmenov famously [explained](#), once the first phase of psychological warfare called demoralization is complete, affected people lose the

capacity to process factual information. Instead, they cling to the narratives pushed by propaganda, even when faced with clear evidence to the contrary. Romania's second round of elections illustrates this vividly. Although Calin Georgescu was banned from running due to proven Russian influence operations on his behalf, the impact of those operations intensified like a snowball gaining momentum. As a result, in the first round of the rerun elections on May 4, 2025, another far-right candidate, George Simion, who built on Georgescu's support and capitalized on his earlier campaign, secured 40% of the vote.

The interference model seen there is already being replicated, at different scales, in Western democracies where populist and extremist parties on both the left and right are gaining traction. They are learning from past mistakes, testing new methods, and taking full advantage of the openness of democratic systems. The asymmetry is stark. Authoritarian actors do not follow rules. Electoral ethics or transparency norms do not constrain them. They possess immense financial resources, criminal infrastructure, propaganda ecosystems, and offensive cyber capabilities. And once they help bring a regime to power, they support its transformation into a political system designed not to lose elections.

The case of Georgia is a warning. Once Russian-aligned forces consolidate power, democratic reversal becomes deeply entrenched. Georgia shows what happens when authoritarian influence is normalized and institutionalized. The exported model—one where elections are held but never truly competitive—now mirrors systems in Russia, Belarus, and increasingly, Hungary. It is a system that cannot be voted out once it is fully embedded.

***This must be a wake-up call. If democratic actors continue to approach electoral security reactively, they risk permanent losses.***

This must be a wake-up call. If democratic actors continue to approach electoral security reactively, they risk permanent losses. It is no longer sufficient to monitor ballots. Investing in independent media, digital literacy, and civic trust-building is essential for strengthening democratic resilience, but these efforts must be complemented by effective accountability measures against malign actors to be truly effective. Election integrity must now include protection of the broader information ecosystem, cyberspace, and financial transparency of political campaigns. European countries must urgently prioritize coordinated cross-border efforts in law enforcement and counterintelligence to clearly distinguish between legitimate domestic grievances and malign foreign influence operations. Key priorities should include:

- Developing tailored countermeasures based on integrated defense and security frameworks, moving beyond generic, one-size-fits-all bureaucratic responses;
- Establishing a commonly acknowledged enforcement mechanism for transparently and effectively sanctioning and reprimanding malign actors involved in anti-democratic activities;
- Expanding election monitoring to cover not only traditional voting processes but also information operations, social media manipulation, and suspicious financial flows linked to influence campaigns.

The longer democracies wait to seriously study and counter these influence networks, the more likely they are to succeed. The goal must be to prevent malign actors from ever capturing institutions, because once they do, the game changes, and the costs of reclaiming democracy become far greater ■