

# Ballots as Weapons: Moldova Leaps Over Moscow's Hurdle

On 28 September 2025, Russia launched its most ambitious attempt to influence Moldova's political trajectory, seeking to install a satellite government in Chişinău. After testing similar hybrid strategies in Romania and Georgia, the Kremlin targeted this small state of 2.6 million people at a decisive moment in its European integration process. The so-called "Kiriienko Plan," named after Sergey Kiriienko, Moscow's chief strategist for hybrid operations, [mobilized](#) EUR 350 million and combined multiple tools of interference: vote-buying, disinformation campaigns, religious propaganda, cyberattacks, and the transportation of voters from Transnistria, the eastern region of the Dniester controlled by a pro-Russian separatist administration.

Why target Moldova and why now? Vladimir Putin finds himself in a precarious position, both domestically and on the Ukrainian battlefield. The sovereign fund that once fueled his 'special military operation' is depleted, while Ukrainian strikes have successfully targeted Russia's refin-

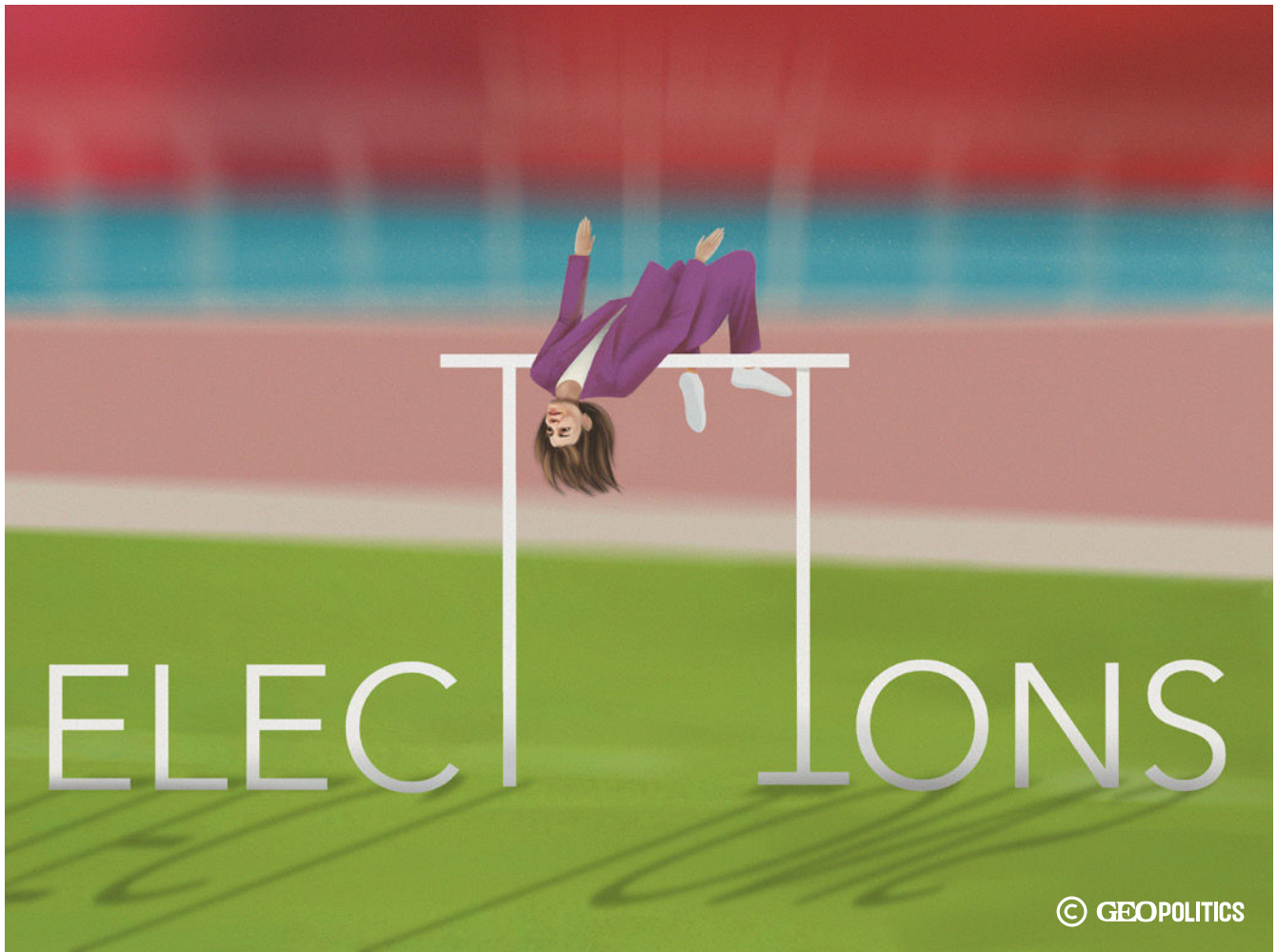
ing capacities. On the ground, the Russian army is unable to advance further. Against this backdrop, Moldova emerges as a strategic locus: wedged between Ukraine and Romania, it plays a crucial role in the security architecture of the EU and NATO's eastern flank. Russian planners reportedly view the establishment of a satellite government in Chişinău as a stepping stone, from where they could potentially pave the way, within 18 months, for operations against Ukraine's Odessa region. At the same time, Moldova's internal vulnerabilities, such as economic hardship, energy dependence, and social as well as linguistic divides, make it an appealing target for Kremlin manipulation.

Despite the massive pressure, the Kremlin's "electoral invasion" ultimately failed. The parliamentary elections delivered a narrow but decisive victory for President Maia Sandu's *Party of Action and Solidarity* (PAS), which secured an absolute majority. This outcome gave the government a renewed mandate to continue reforms aligned with the EU acquis and to accelerate Moldova's integration into the European Union.



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What happened in Moldova highlights the growing use by Russia of hybrid strategies during the electoral processes as instruments of geopolitical confrontation. It raises two central questions: what explains Moldova's resilience in the face of Moscow's most extensive interference campaign to date, and what does this outcome reveal about the EU's capacity to support its most exposed and vulnerable neighbors?

I argue that Moldovan authorities have developed an effective strategy, combining determination with transparency in exposing Russia's massive

interference tactics. The parliamentary majority obtained by PAS provides a rare political window of three years to anchor the deep reforms required for EU accession. The European Union carries a major responsibility as the path towards membership requires the EU to deliver concrete support and rapid results. Without visible progress, public frustration could fuel disillusionment and open the way for a resurgence of pro-Kremlin forces, which remain a significant and organized presence in Moldova.

## **The Kremlin's Massive Hybrid Warfare Campaign**

Russia has openly thrown its weight behind political factions aligned with its interests in Moldova. A new coalition, called the *Patriotic Electoral Bloc*, brought together openly pro-Russian parties in a rare display of unity, despite longstanding rivalries,

particularly between the Socialist and Communist leaders. Irina Vlah provided the Gagauz endorsement—a rural, Turkish Orthodox electorate overwhelmingly pro-Russian, while Vasile Tarlev added technocratic credibility to the bloc. It campaigned under the slogan ‘We Believe in Moldova,’ positioning itself as the guardian of Moldovan identity and values against what it portrays as the decline of Western values, especially the so-called ‘Gayropa.’ The bloc’s discourse exalted national sovereignty as a tool of internal mobilization, masking an economic, strategic, and ideological dependence on the Kremlin. Indeed, it firmly rejected NATO membership, advocating for the federalization of the country—a move PAS leader Igor Grosu [qualified](#) as “handing Moldova on a silver platter to the Kremlin.”

The Kremlin’s endorsement has been anything but subtle. On July 11, 2025, Socialist leader Igor Dodon, accompanied by Irina Vlah and Vasile Tarlev, [met](#) in Moscow with senior Russian officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak. The delegation openly discussed the restoration of Russian gas supplies and the revival of trade relations, sending clear signals that Moscow is once again using energy as a lever of influence over Moldova. Russian officials hinted that, under a satellite government in Chișinău, gas deliveries would resume at favorable prices.

The rhetoric of pro-Russian actors has increasingly adopted a populist style reminiscent of MAGA, framing citizens against “corrupt elites” and the “pro-European establishment.” This discourse was further reinforced by events such as the fourth edition of the *Make Europe Great Again* Congress, [recently held](#) in Chișinău.

What was new in Moldova was the parallel emergence of a seemingly pro-European alternative: the *Alternative Bloc*, launched in early 2025 under the slogan “Europe at Home.” Its program emphasized infrastructure development, judicial reform,

and social welfare, appealing to urban and moderate voters disillusioned with Maia Sandu’s government. Yet most of its leaders have long-standing ties to pro-Russian parties. Journalist Paula Erișanu [describes](#) the bloc as part of a pro-Russian “fifth column.”

The bloc’s figurehead is Chișinău’s mayor, Ion Ceban, a political shapeshifter who now portrays himself as a pragmatic centrist reformer. Although he promotes European integration and has launched a “Chișinău Pact,” his record includes backing federalization and membership in the Eurasian Customs Union. The strategy of Moscow, therefore, was on the surface – to divide the pro-European electorate, siphon off centrist voters, and slow Moldova’s European path from within. Meanwhile, the *Patriotic Bloc* targeted rural areas, the Gagauz minority, and voters in Transnistria.

In the context of the “Kiriienko plan,” oligarch Ilan Șor [played](#) a significant and multifaceted role. Șor is best known for his involvement in the 2014 “theft of the century” scandal. Self-exiled in Moscow to avoid prosecution, he continues to exert massive influence over Moldovan politics, particularly in rural areas and among the Gagauz community, where he is viewed as a defender of traditional values against Western influence. Șor attempted to launch his own political bloc, *Victory*, in Moscow, led by his Gagauz ally, but the Central Electoral Commission barred its participation. Public policy expert Andrei Curăraru [compared](#) Șor to a chess queen, highlighting his mobility and disruptive power, which allow Moscow to engage in media manipulation, election interference, and the creation of political proxies.

## The Strategic Role of Disinformation

Russia’s sustained disinformation efforts in Moldova aimed to influence voter behavior by creating

fear and polarization, destabilizing the democratic process, and weakening Maia Sandu's party. The Kremlin's strategy was to saturate the information space and reach diverse audiences simultaneously through multiple mass media channels.

Social media manipulation played a central role. Well-known propaganda networks like *Matryoshka* and *Pravda* have been active on Telegram, TikTok, and Facebook, spreading viral content targeting President Maia Sandu and the PAS government. Coordinated inauthentic networks have amplified anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-Sandu narratives, sometimes using mirror or duplicate content across platforms. Among false allegations were claims that Sandu [embezzled](#) USD 24 million and was dependent on "psychotropic drugs." While *Sputnik Moldova* has been officially banned, related websites and Telegram channels maintained influence in the information sphere.

Artificial intelligence was a cornerstone of these operations. Deepfake videos and manipulated images [portrayed](#) PAS leaders in false or compromising situations, including fabricated claims of election rigging and child trafficking. Cloned websites were also used to give disinformation a veneer of credibility.

Local actors amplified these disinformation efforts. Fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor and his NGO Evrazia financed and coordinated disinformation networks, blending propaganda with vote buying, rallies, and political proxies. He publicly offered EUR 3,000 per month to citizens willing to take part in anti-government protests. Domestic media tied to pro-Russian elites rebroadcast content from Moscow-based channels, especially targeting Gagauzia and Transnistria.

The Moldovan Orthodox Church, aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate, has been mobilized to support pro-Russian narratives, particularly in rural areas where the Church retains strong social au-

thority. Initiatives have included pilgrimages to Moscow, pre-paid bank cards, and the creation of pro-Kremlin Telegram channels to shape public opinion. These activities aimed to mobilize rural voters by reinforcing traditionalist messaging.

Beyond local actors, well-known figures seeking to influence European elections were also active on voting day. Among them was Telegram founder Pavel Durov, a Russian-born French national residing in Dubai, but currently stranded in France, who claimed, without evidence, that French and Moldovan intelligence services had pressured him to shut down pro-Kremlin Telegram channels that did not violate the platform's rules. His post was amplified by Elon Musk with a laconic "wow," signaling the alignment between pro-Kremlin networks and the MAGA movement, an alliance also observed during Romania's presidential election. Although French authorities [denied](#) Durov's allegations, their rebuttal had negligible reach compared to the viral impact of Durov's and Musk's interventions. For comparison, Durov's tweet garnered 17 million views, amplified by Elon Musk to 13 million more, while the French Foreign Ministry's official response reached only 15,000.

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The disinformation narratives deliberately sought to sow fear, portraying PAS's victory as a path to war, NATO intervention, or the suppression of protests. The war narrative was particularly powerful in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Russia was portrayed as seeking peace, while the European Union was depicted as pursuing war. Like in Romania, this narrative exploited the population's fear of conflict, fostering the belief that aligning with the Kremlin could spare them from the atrocities and destruction of war. Yet, as French jour-



nalist and Russia expert Paul Gogo believes, Moscow would not hesitate to resort to killing, even ethnic Russians in Moldova, if it served its strategic objectives.

Finally, cyberattacks and psychological operations complemented disinformation. Nearly 4,000 websites were disabled before the vote, while hoax bomb threats at diaspora polling stations sought to discourage participation.

The OSCE, which monitored Moldova's elections, [referred](#) to Russian hybrid interference ahead of the vote as "unprecedented." In response, Moscow rejected claims of meddling, framing them as an anti-Russian narrative.

## Determined Response from the Government

Faced with such an unprecedented information war, the Moldovan government chose a strategy of transparency and assertive action.

First of all, this concerned the transparency about the extent of the Russian information war, its networks, and techniques. President Maia Sandu [delivered](#) martial speeches, warning as of July 2025 that Moscow aims to "control" Moldova, using vote-buying, online disinformation campaigns, organization of paid violent protests, cyberattacks, and manipulation of traditional religious institutions, with EUR 100 million allocated for this purpose. She also underlined the Kremlin's strategy of undermining the pro-European moderate electorate by flooding the campaign with 'neutral' candidates.

Days to elections, Moldovan authorities conducted 250 raids, [targeting](#) over 100 individuals, with 74 detained for up to 72 hours. Suspects, aged 19 to 45, reportedly received training in Serbia, according to Victor Furtuna, Chief Prosecutor of the

Office for Combating Organized Crime and Special Cases. Serbian networks have also been implicated in hybrid attacks observed in France.

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Transparency efforts also extended to the vote-buying system. Sandu reported that over 300,000 votes were purchased, with 150,000 documented by state institutions. Such techniques exposed the vulnerability of Moldova's democratic system to both foreign influence and internal criminal networks. Vote-buying was particularly effective in rural and impoverished regions, such as Gagauzia, where cultural proximity, nostalgia for the USSR, and low living standards facilitated manipulation.

The Central Electoral Commission also intervened to prevent certain parties from participating. Days before the election, the Gagauz component of the Patriotic Bloc [was disqualified](#), for illegal campaign financing. Its leader Irina Vlah, is [sanctioned](#) by several EU states for assisting Russian interference. Similarly, the Great Moldova Party, led by Victoria Furtună, [was barred](#) days before the elections. Ilan Șor's bloc had been barred from the outset due to legal and organizational irregularities, a decision upheld by the Supreme Court.

While these measures aimed to safeguard the electoral process, they have simultaneously fueled narratives of political persecution, exploited by disinformation campaigns [to portray](#) the PAS as authoritarian. Pro-Kremlin leaders who have been sanctioned or detained often presented themselves as political prisoners, and part of the population believed this to be true, as journalist Paul Gogo verified on the ground. This strategy of narrative manipulation mirrored tactics observed in Romania, where it has also been used to divide the population.

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The determined fight against Russian hybrid threats was complemented by reinforcing the pro-European narrative. High-level European visits underscored this message: French President Macron, German Chancellor Merz, and Polish Prime Minister Tusk [attended](#) Moldova's Independence Day celebrations, delivering speeches in Romanian to signal support. A few days later, the Romanian President [visited](#) Chişinău on Romanian Language Day, further demonstrating solidarity. These coordinated actions sent a clear signal to Moldova's pro-European electorate that Europe stands firmly by Moldova's side.

Three days before decisive elections, former oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, Moldova's former power broker, [was extradited](#) from Greece, where he was detained. Images of arrested Plahotniuc, formerly involved in the "theft of the century," along with the popular media series "Plaha," were also instrumental in mobilizing the pro-European electorate.

## **Electoral Results and Geographic Patterns**

The electoral process occurred under a tense climate, marked by cyberattacks and hoax bomb threats against polling stations in the EU states. The government closed several bridges to Transnistria, citing bomb alerts and a reported mine, prompting a diplomatic protest from Transnistria over restricted voter access. The Central Election Committee approved only two voting points for citizens residing in Russia, [highlighting](#) security concerns.

Voter turnout was approximately 52%, remaining moderate given the importance of the election

but higher than in previous parliamentary votes. Participation varied across regions, with urban centers such as Chişinău and Bălţi recording the highest rates, while rural areas exhibited lower turnout.

The *Party of Action and Solidarity* achieved a decisive victory, securing 55 of 101 parliamentary seats, obtaining an absolute majority without the need for coalition partners. This marks the second time the party has won an absolute majority, though with fewer seats than previously. PAS's support was concentrated in urban centers, particularly Chişinău, and among the EU diaspora, whose role remains crucial. As seen in Romania, diaspora mobilization continued to play a decisive role in sustaining Moldova's pro-European trajectory.

Election results showed that attempts to fragment the pro-European vote were unsuccessful. The *Alternative Bloc* obtained only 8%. PAS maintained its lead, including in Chişinău, despite the bloc's leader being the city mayor.

The main opposition, the pro-Russian *Patriotic Bloc*, garnered roughly 24% of the vote, concentrated in the country's second city, Bălţi, rural areas, Gagauzia, and Transnistria. Despite substantial funding and sophisticated electoral manipulation techniques, the final tally showcased the bloc's inability to present a credible alternative. The bloc won 51% in Transnistria, though PAS increasing its vote share. In Gagauzia, the bloc remained strong due to extreme poverty and the lingering influence of Russia; journalist Paul Gogo, who recently visited the region, likened the electorate's profile to that of populations in Donbass in 2014.

While weakened, the bloc maintains a significant base capable of bringing political instability through street demonstrations. Igor Dodon [vigorously contested](#) the election outcome, labeling the

government a “criminal regime” and calling on his supporters to demonstrate in the streets against what he described as electoral fraud. This narrative was reinforced by the Kremlin, with spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [stating](#) that it was “too early” to recognize the results, citing disagreements from “some political forces.”

Among pro-Russian forces, Moldovan allies of pro-Kremlin Romanian sovereigntists made a breakthrough, entering parliament for the first time, after an active campaign on TikTok, supported by their Romanian counterparts. The party [is suspected](#) of illicit TikTok promotion and coordination with foreign actors. The Central Electoral Commission sanctioned the *Democracy at Home* party for repeated electoral code violations, issuing a formal warning while forwarding the validation of the seats obtained to the Constitutional Court.

The election results were [promptly welcomed](#) by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who reassured Moldovan citizens that the European Union remains open to their integration, signaling continued EU support.

## A Race Against Time

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Concrete and timely EU support is therefore essential to maintain public confidence and sustain Moldova’s trajectory toward European integration. Just days before the elections, Moldova [completed](#) the screening process, an essential milestone in its EU accession path. The next critical step is the opening of negotiations on Chapter 1 of the acquis, the most significant chapter. However, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a Kremlin ally in Europe, has blocked this stage, as Moldova’s candidacy is linked with Ukraine’s, and Orbán opposes it on grounds of what he presents as ‘national interest.’ To circumvent the Hungarian veto, technical discussions on so-called “clusters” – subsections of accession chapters – [may begin](#) at the technical level while awaiting the outcome of the 2026 Hungarian elections. The requirement for unanimity in EU accession negotiations remains a critical constraint, as Russian influence in several EU capitals has the potential to slow Moldova’s accession process. Further political uncertainty could arise if the *National Rally* achieves electoral success in France in 2027, potentially complicating the EU consensus on enlargement.

One concrete deliverable from the EU is to address Moldova’s energy security, a critical factor affecting purchasing power and historically exploited by Moscow to manipulate prices. Following *Gazprom’s* [gas supply cuts](#) in early 2025, the EU has provided substantial financial assistance to enable Moldova to purchase gas from Romania and Ukraine. While this support is crucial in the short term for diversifying energy sources, the next priority is financing the development of internal infrastructure and integration with the European energy grid, the very projects that have been delayed under pro-Kremlin governments. These infrastructure investments are [essential](#) for building energy autonomy based on renewable sources and reducing demand, particularly in Soviet-era buildings.

Another way the EU can continue supporting Moldova is by extending the scope of its Europe-

an Democracy Shield initiative to include candidate countries. The European Democracy Shield, currently [in development](#) by the European Commission, is envisioned as a coordinated European response to the growing threat of foreign interference in democratic processes. It aims to enhance information integrity, strengthen fact-checking networks, counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), bolster civic resilience, and defend electoral systems from hybrid attacks, particularly those originating from Russia.

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For Moldova, such an extension would offer a medium-term strategic defense against the Kremlin's destabilization tactics, which include disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, energy blackmail, and electoral interference. By integrating Moldova into the EU's democratic defense architecture, Brussels would send a powerful signal: that Moldova's security is treated as a part of a shared European democratic space. The European Democracy Shield would not only help Moldovan authorities anticipate, detect, and respond to hybrid threats more effectively; it would also raise the reputational and operational costs for Moscow ■