

# DIVISION, DELEGITIMISATION, DISCREDITATION

Tactical analysis of pro-Russian influence operations in  
the Republic of Moldova

September 2024 - January 2025

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study provides a tactical analysis of **pro-Russian influence operations** in the Republic of Moldova, conducted between September 2024 and January 2025.

Influence operations are part of a broader strategy of hybrid warfare, through which pro-Russian actors seek to achieve certain **strategic objectives**:

- Restoring pro-Russian political control in the Republic of Moldova;
- Obstructing the integration of the Republic of Moldova into Western structures.

The study proposes an analytical framework based on four **pro-Russian influence objectives** — key messaging strategies used to steer public opinion **against the West and in favour of the Russian Federation**:

- Division of society;
- Delegitimisation of democratic institutions;
- Discreditation of pro-Western actors;
- Promotion of Russian influence.

The analysis focuses on how these influence objectives were integrated into pro-Russian communication regarding three critical events in the Republic of Moldova:

- **Constitutional referendum** on integration into the European Union (EU) of October 20;
- Both rounds of the **presidential elections** (October 20; November 3);
- **Energy price crisis** of December 2024 - January 2025.

The main conclusions derived from the analysis of the three events highlight how pro-Russian actors tried to achieve each influence objective:

Division	Delegitimisation	Discreditation	Promotion
Presenting European integration as a threat to traditional values and neutrality, mobilising Russian speakers through narratives of state oppression.	Undermining democratic institutions of the Republic of Moldova through accusations that they have been captured by the Governing Party.	Portraying PAS and President Maia Sandu as fascist oppressors, driven by non-transparent personal interests, which allow the exploitation of the Republic of Moldova by the EU.	Projecting Russian Federation as a benevolent partner, whose offers of support during the energy crisis were blocked by the Governing Party. The deliberate omission of details related to the real life of the RF population and its distorted presentation.



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The document is based on primary monitoring reports developed during this period by state and non-state organisations. Its structure is organised around the four identified pro-Russian influence objectives. This structuring manner reflects the nature of influence operations, where objectives may be clearly defined, but tactics, techniques, procedures, and narratives are fluid and frequently overlap.

The analytical framework of this study, based on the four influence objectives, provides relevant insights for understanding both recent and future pro-Russian influence operations – especially in the context of the 2025 parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova.



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# STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK – INFLUENCE OBJECTIVES

This report analyses pro-Russian influence activities in the Republic of Moldova between September 2024 - January 2025, focusing on the period surrounding the constitutional referendum, presidential elections, and the 2024-2025 energy supply crisis. During this period, the Russian Federation and other pro-Russian actors intensified their efforts to influence the political trajectory of the Republic of Moldova.

These activities reflect broader patterns of Russian-aligned influence operations aimed at maximising influence in the former Soviet states and beyond.

**The strategic objectives** are the following:

- A** The restoration of a pro-Russian government in the Republic of Moldova.
- B** Obstructing the integration of the Republic of Moldova into Western institutions, including the European Union.

To achieve these strategic objectives, pro-Russian actors use a wide range of **hybrid warfare tactics** which include:

- economic constraints including in the energy sector;
- instrumentalisation of the military presence in the Transnistrian region;
- direct and indirect support for separatists in the Transnistrian region and leaders of the Gagauzia Autonomous Territorial Unit;
- exploitation of corruption networks linking business, politics and cross-border organised crime;
- targeted cyberattacks;
- direct interference in elections through voter bribery and intimidation;
- hybrid warfare tactics also include influence operations and information manipulation—the use of communication to shape public perceptions, decision-making, and behaviours of the target population.

Actors conducting pro-Russian influence operations pursue **four fundamental objectives**:

- **Division of Moldovan society** by exploiting the ethnic, linguistic, political and social divisions existing in the Republic of Moldova, aiming to fragment the pro-European camp and consolidate the pro-Russian one.
- **Delegitimisation of the institutions of the Republic of Moldova** to reduce their communicational authority, weaken their ability to counter pro-Russian hybrid warfare tactics, and undermine the population's trust in democratic processes.
- **Discreditation of pro-Western actors, both domestic and foreign** to direct public opinion against pro-Western politicians in the Republic of Moldova and Western institutions, such as the European Union and NATO.



- **Promoting Russian political, economic and cultural influence** and positioning the Russian Federation as the only viable partner for the Republic of Moldova.

The influence operations targeting the Republic of Moldova are well-coordinated campaigns that denote a good knowledge of the vulnerable points in society, the involvement of efficient multipliers (the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor but also other pro-Russian networks with an audience) and a strategy in disseminating messages. Depending on these benchmarks, the four identified influence objectives represent natural tactical choices of any adversary who intends to manipulate public perceptions against the West and in favour of Russia. The sequence of objectives / Division of society / Delegitimisation of institutions / Discreditation of pro-Western forces favours the creation of an environment in which Russian influence can be more easily planted and then consolidated, thus preparing the ground for the fourth objective / Promotion of Russian influence. The achievement of the first three influence objectives gradually narrows the political horizons until the Russian Federation appears as the only option for Moldova. The coherence of this strategy in addressing multiple vectors of influence - whether they are coordinated or not - leads to the efficiency with which public attitudes are modified and an increase in the degree of pro-Russian influence acceptance.

The strategic value of these influence efforts is amplified by the approaching parliamentary elections in 2025, which offer a clear opportunity to achieve their strategic objectives both for pro-Russian actors (by restoring a pro-Russian government) and for Russia (distancing Moldova from the West). If pro-Russian forces manage to gain parliamentary control, through the levers of power to which they have access, Russia could use them to halt and possibly reverse Moldova's Western integration trajectory. The successful achievement of the four influence objectives—dividing society, delegitimising institutions, discrediting pro-Western actors, and promoting Russian influence—could create the conditions required for a pro-Russian electoral victory.

Between September 2024-January 2025, pro-Russian actors conducted operations focused on three critical events: the constitutional referendum, the presidential elections, and the 2024-2025 energy supply crisis. In the case of both elections, the main objective of pro-Russian actors was to achieve an outright victory ("No" in the referendum and the election of a pro-Russian president), but also to undermine the legitimacy of any outcome favourable to European integration. Regarding the energy crisis, the main objective of pro-Russian actors was to obtain the attribution of economic difficulties to pro-Western politicians in the Republic of Moldova, reinforcing the narrative that the Republic of Moldova should naturally align with the Russian Federation, instead of continuing to integrate into the West.



# OPERATIONS TO INFLUENCE THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

(September 2024 – January 2025)

## I. Division of society

Why "The Division"



Pro-Russian actors face a demographic challenge in the Republic of Moldova, where polls typically indicate a pro-European majority. Several sociopolitical surveys conducted throughout 2024 and in January 2025 showed that the European Union enjoys a higher level of public trust (about 65% expressing "a lot" or "some" trust) compared to the Russian Federation (about 40% expressing "a lot" or "some" trust). Also, the level of distrust towards the EU is significantly lower (about 17% expressing "very little" trust) compared to Russia (about 40%). In connection with the upcoming 2025 parliamentary elections, pro-Russian actors must reduce this disadvantage by fragmenting the pro-European majority using divisive themes, while consolidating their pro-Russian base.

This strategy is achieved by exploiting fault lines in society. Divergences over traditional versus liberal values (e.g. LGBTQ rights) separate conservative Europeanists from progressive ones, while also bridging the gap between conservative Europeanists and pro-Russians with similar views. Similarly, the issue of neutrality divides pro-Europeans in the Republic of Moldova between those who consider it essential for national security and those who perceive it as a vulnerability, as well as between those who support Western security assistance and those who consider it provocative. By amplifying these divisions, pro-Russian actors seek to fragment the pro-European majority and prevent its electoral mobilisation against Moscow's interests.

Even a fragmented pro-European majority could still outnumber the pro-Russian minority if the latter is not effectively consolidated and mobilised in support of pro-Russian parties and causes. **Therefore, promoting unifying narratives for the pro-Russian electorate becomes essential.** The perception of an external threat is an effective cohesive factor - minorities tend to fear oppression by the majority, and one of the most common tactics used to unite this segment is the accusation of current or imminent state oppression.



## How was the "Division" targeted during the monitored period: September 2024 - January 2025?



This period provided unusual opportunities for pro-Russian actors to divide Moldovan society. It included a referendum on amending the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova to enshrine European integration as a national goal—a binary choice on a divisive issue. It also witnessed two rounds of presidential elections, decisive for Moldova's strategic trajectory.

Maia Sandu's presence as a candidate and the fact that she is the political figure most often associated with the pro-European/pro-democratic path was instrumentalised to create division in society.

These electoral exercises posed a challenge for pro-Russian actors, as a "Yes" vote for European integration and a second term for the pro-European and pro-democratic president (significant setbacks for Russia) postponed the achievement of their strategic objectives. Although these electoral exercises did not facilitate the achievement of their objectives, they nevertheless offered them the opportunity to deepen social cleavages on essential issues: the EU, the West, neutrality, President Sandu, PAS, progressive versus traditional values, economic partnerships with Europe or Russia, the relationship between Chisinau and Russian-speaking minorities (especially in Gagauzia and the Transnistrian region), diaspora versus Moldovans in the country, etc.

The final part of the monitored period offered pro-Russians other opportunities: the increase in energy costs in Moldova on the right and left banks of the Dniester was used to consolidate a sense of siege among the pro-Russian population. The disruptions in energy supplies were presented as part of an aggressive pro-European policy aimed at repressing the rights and freedoms of pro-Russians. The fundamental logic applied was fragmenting pro-Europeans through controversial issues and consolidating pro-Russians through creating a sense of threat. By disseminating divisive messages on these topics, pro-Russian actors have tried to ensure that the Republic of Moldova reaches the end of this period with less consensus in favour of a European path rather than with more.

### Division of pro-Europeans

Pro-Russian actors relied on two interconnected narratives to fragment the pro-European consensus in Moldova during the electoral campaigns and in the post-electoral period. On October 12, eight days before the referendum, Shor's "Victory" bloc exemplified both tactics in a post on Telegram:

***"The dictatorship of the pro-Western puppet regime, wars, gay parades – all this will come to our country with the European Union. All this has already been brought to us by Sandu. That is why, on October 20, we will vote against the EU!"***

This statement summarises well the narrative tactics used to divide pro-Europeans in the Republic of Moldova: the EU threatens traditional values and will bring war, putting the Republic of Moldova in danger.



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The first narrative exploited fears about progressive values to create anxiety regarding European integration. By associating the fear of external control with cultural change, this message sought to fracture the pro-European coalition along social fault lines.

This narrative evolved from discouraging “Yes” votes before the referendum to undermining its legitimacy after it took place. On November 13, political actors from the pro-Russian bloc attempted to publicly justify this strategy:

***"The European Commission recommends that the legalisation of LGBT marriages and medical procedures for sex change be a priority in Moldova. The EC is also outraged that there are no sex education courses... It recommends introducing LGBT education programs in schools. Well, what is to be done? The referendum is over; it's time to pass the bills. I warned you; you laughed..."***

This narrative was reinforced by framing European integration as a form of colonial domination. The Telegram channel “Moldova adevărată” did so explicitly on November 16:

***"Colonial intervention mechanisms... are starting to function at full capacity in Moldova. So, did you vote for "European values" in the so-called referendum? No? But anyway - take it! ... The "Agenda" is an instrument of colonial policy, which we are experiencing right now."***

This framing served to create common ground between pro-Russian and pro-European social conservatives.

The second narrative focused on Moldova's neutrality, claiming that European integration and Maia Sandu's leadership would drag the country into war. This theme proved particularly effective, as neutrality has different meanings for different segments of the population: while pro-Russians interpret it as a detachment from the West, some pro-Europeans may perceive it as a prudent security policy.

The legitimate fear of war and the distorted interpretations given to neutrality were manipulatively exploited during the election period. One of the pro-Russian candidates claimed on October 5 that he had documents showing that...

***"If Maia Sandu wins the presidential elections, Moldova will soon be drawn into war! A Second Front will open in Transnistria! This is their plan for the future! ... Therefore, I call on all our citizens to preserve Moldova's neutrality and avoid any interference in the military conflict, at any cost!"***

After the referendum, the Telegram channel “WTF Moldova!?” warned on November 7 that now that “they” have changed the Constitution “by deception,” “they” will use it to “destroy Article 11 of the Constitution, which guarantees neutrality. And then they will vote for Moldova to join NATO.” “WTF Moldova!?” continued this narrative on December 9:

***"The boots of NATO troops have long been trampling Moldovan soil... Experts had previously warned that Sandu's referendum would lead to the complete loss of neutrality, which would drag the country into a war. Unfortunately, we are heading exactly in this direction."***



The effectiveness of these narratives lay in their ability to exploit existing tensions among the pro-European electorate. By presenting European integration as a simultaneous threat to traditional values, national sovereignty, and neutrality/peace, pro-Russian actors sought to undermine confidence in Moldova's European path, even after the "Yes" camp's victory in the referendum.

## Strengthening the pro-Russian electorate

Even a divided pro-European bloc can be numerically superior to the pro-Russian electorate in the Republic of Moldova, if the latter is not effectively mobilised. Creating a sense of threat and fear of oppression are effective strategies to motivate and activate a minority. During the monitored period, narratives to this end have escalated to extreme levels: from simple claims of discrimination to predictions of forced suppression, and finally to accusations of "energetic genocide" against the population of the Transnistrian region.

On October 20, the (de facto) former deputy foreign affairs minister of the self-proclaimed Transnistrian region, Igor Shornikov, told RIA Novosti that...

***"Once the 'Romanians' came to power in Moldova, the Gagauz found themselves under pressure. The current government is almost openly developing plans to suppress the Gagauz and abolish their autonomy."***

This discrimination narrative intensified between the first and second rounds of the presidential election. On October 23, the Cartea lui Nosovici Telegram channel claimed that "Maia Sandu's core electorate" was demanding the withdrawal of citizenship from Moldovans who voted "No" and the deportation to Siberia of Moldovans *"who live in EU countries but voted against European integration."*

On October 25, Ilan Shor added a recurring reason: "Moldova's preparation for war":

***"The Sandu regime does not want negotiations [with Transnistria], but it really wants Western weapons. What are you preparing for, Maia? War?"***

Transnistrian politician Andrei Safonov wrote on Facebook on November 11:

***"Transnistria and Gagauzia expect increased pressure from the dictatorship in Chisinau... A forced suppression of the pro-Russian population in Gagauzia is possible... An attempt to completely abolish Gagauz autonomy in the near future cannot be ruled out."***

The December energy crisis has become a focal point for reinforcing the narrative of Chisinau's oppression of Russian speakers. On December 16, Insider Moldova reported claims that...

***"Amid the energy crisis, hot-headed people in Ukraine and idiots in Moldova are considering conducting a military operation in Transnistria."***



The rhetoric escalated to accusations of “energy genocide” against the Transnistrian region. On January 2, the Transnistreanul Telegram channel declared:

*"If the Moldovan authorities continue the genocide of the Transnistrian people, Russia's special operation in Ukraine will smoothly turn into Russia's special operation in Moldova. And Moldova is not Ukraine, it will be conquered literally in an hour, and this Romanian scum will flee to Romania in a desperate race."*

These accusations continued in January. On January 16, political pundit Igor Shornikov, close to the Tiraspol regime, stated that...

*"If the Moldovan authorities do not allow the passage of humanitarian gas into Transnistria, this will be an open genocide of the population."*

Until January 24, well-known pro-Russian activist Diana Karpinschi from Fântâna Speranței organisation claimed that the Chisinau regime could “solve the humanitarian crisis in Transnistria in 20 minutes” but nevertheless it “maintains the course of dividing people.” She went further, calling it “genocide against the Moldovan people.”

During the monitored period, influence efforts meant to divide pro-Europeans were supplemented by extreme rhetoric and alarmist propaganda directed at Russian speakers, aiming to mobilise a compact core within a fractured electorate. Pro-Russian actors used escalating accusations of imminent oppression of Gagauzia and Transnistria to amplify the sense of threat in these regions and among Russian speakers of the Republic of Moldova.

These influence efforts transformed Moldova’s pro-European majority into a fragmented electorate, in which a united pro-Russian minority could exert disproportionate influence – creating more favourable conditions for blocking European integration and restoring a pro-Russian government in the 2025 parliamentary elections.

## II. Delegitimation of institutions



### Why delegitimation?

Pro-Russian actors are using influence operations to undermine public trust in Moldovan institutions, amplifying perceptions of **corruption, incompetence, and political bias**. This delegitimation serves three main tactical purposes:

#### 1 RU COMMUNICATION

Since 2019, pro-Russian communication has been at a growing institutional disadvantage in the Republic of Moldova. Maia Sandu’s election as president marked the beginning of efforts to reduce Russian influence on state structures, a process that accelerated after PAS obtained a parliamentary majority in 2021. With an alignment between the Parliament, the Presidency, and the ministries, institutions such as law enforcement, the judiciary, and the Central Electoral Commission have become closer to the Moldovan national interests and less favourable to Russia. From 2023,



Pro-Russian television channels, such as RT, NTV and Ren TV, were restricted because of violations of the laws in force regarding the spread of false, manipulative information likely to endanger the security of the state and the lives of citizens.

2

If state institutions, such as the judiciary and law enforcement, are effective, they become an obstacle for pro-Russian actors who intend to use hybrid warfare tactics, including illicit financing, voter bribery, external interference, and corruption. Therefore, these actors either try to capture these institutions or, if this is not possible, seek to reduce their effectiveness.

RULE OF LAW

While delegitimisation alone cannot completely disable state institutions, it does make them more difficult to operate. In a climate of public distrust, investigations are viewed with more scepticism, decisions are more easily labelled as corrupt or politicised, and interference is easier to conceal. Moreover, cynicism toward state institutions reduces public support for reforms that could make them more independent and effective, thus limiting Moldova's ability to counter Russia's hybrid warfare tactics.

3

Discreditation of elections integrity and promotion of disinformation narratives regarding the independence of institutions ensuring the smooth running of democratic processes increase public acceptance of messages contesting the election results which are promoted by pro-Russian actors. Thus, the delegitimisation of institutions serves three main purposes: it reduces the difference in authority between official and pro-Russian messages, facilitates the undermining of the rule of law, and supports the rejection of democratic results unfavourable to Russia/pro-Russian actors.

DEMOCRACY

With the 2025 parliamentary elections approaching, these delegitimisation tactics aim either to facilitate a pro-Russian victory or, failing that, to increase the chances that a new pro-European outcome will be viewed with scepticism or even rejected by population.



## How was "Delegitimisation" targeted during the monitored period, September 2024-January 2025?

The presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova and the constitutional referendum on EU accession represented both a challenge and an opportunity for pro-Russian actors. While victory in either contest was preferred, delegitimisation efforts offered a way to manage potential defeats by constructing overarching narratives of institutional capture and electoral fraud. These narratives were vigorously promoted by Russian media and officials, including the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), representatives of the State Duma, and the Kremlin spokesman, who worked in concert with a practically united Moldovan opposition.

Unfounded statements, which were not followed by any legal initiatives from the initiators, were made in a post-electoral context by one of the former candidates:



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***"The contradictory, specifically created legislation, the CEC and all state structures, including the media, served the authorities and an already prepared scenario... We have concluded, and we have hundreds of proofs that the elections were falsified, and the electoral process was falsified, especially by the CEC structures and some entities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. Local mayors were also involved in this case, which led to the division of the state. The administrative resource was used very actively... We are waiting for the resignation of the Central Election Commission and the recount of votes."***

Although the defeat of President Sandu and her replacement with a pro-Russian candidate was the preferred outcome, her status as Moldova's leading pro-European figure made it urgent to prepare the ground for the delegitimation of a possible re-election. While this could not prevent a second term, a fraudulent victory narrative could have undermined President Sandu's effectiveness in office.

Similarly, pro-Russian actors had to prepare for a possible "Yes" vote in the referendum on EU accession. A democratically won and consolidated mandate for European integration would strengthen Moldova's pro-Western consensus, making it tactically essential to build an electoral fraud narrative.

Attacks on democratic institutions reached high levels, with the Central Election Commission and its handling of the presidential elections and referendum being the most affected. The diaspora (its pro-European option and even its legitimate right to vote) was also a constant target of pro-Russian information operations.

***"The Central Electoral Commission and other state institutions are being captured by PAS."***

During the 2024 election period, pro-Russian actors portrayed Moldova's democratic institutions as being captured by PAS, with a particular focus on the Central Electoral Commission (CEC). The day after the 2024 referendum, a deputy from the State Duma's International Affairs Committee declared that these "elections cannot be called elections," stating that "what the official Central Electoral Commission is now presenting is a lie and a falsification." He highlighted regional voting patterns, noting that in Gagauzia, "where it is more difficult to put pressure on the Central Electoral Commission, at the polling stations," voting was "100%... against", also giving the example of "how Transnistria voted".

Pro-Russian blogger Vitalie Florea extended this criticism to several institutions on October 27, arguing that "the CEC, the Audiovisual Council, and the Police have effectively lost their sight and hearing." He maintained that this was obvious according to ...

***"...their lack of reaction to all these slanders, manipulations, forgeries, lies spread openly and without hindrance by the pro-government press, who jumped "to the defence" of Maia Sandu's opponent..."***

On October 31, in an official statement, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) escalated the accusations of institutional capture and fraud. According to the SVR, the Moldovan government "demanded that local administrations ensure the results" that "central authorities needed," threatening to cut funding. They claimed that the CEC "instructed



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district electoral commissions to ensure the “correctness” of vote counting, including by adjusting the protocols of the polling station commissions.” The SVR added that, at diaspora polling stations in European countries, there was “no independent control over the voting process and no reliable data on the number of voters.”

Pro-Russian parties publicly justified their defeat in the presidential elections by statements accusing the current ruling party of seizing democratic processes and institutions. According to them, without “observing the most elementary rules of electoral campaigns”, there could not be “free and fair elections” in the Republic of Moldova. Without providing supporting arguments, the main pro-Russian opposition party demanded “the depoliticisation of the Central Electoral Commission, the Constitutional Court, the Audiovisual Council, public television, the Court of Accounts and other state institutions”, announcing that they will “negotiate with other political forces and civil society to develop a common strategy” in this regard.

On the pro-Russian blog “Traditia”, opinion leaders focused their accusations of institutional capture on the diaspora vote. They described the diaspora vote as “not just opaque, but completely uncontrolled” by society and the opposition, while it was “very well” controlled by the government, emphasising that these elections were managed by...

***“The Central Electoral Commission, which is completely subordinate to PAS, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by the PAS vice-president, along with the consular service, which—it’s no secret—is closely linked to the Intelligence and Security Service, also controlled by the president and the parliamentary majority.”***

Thus, pro-Russian actors presented Moldova’s democratic institutions as completely captured by PAS, with the CEC as the main but not isolated example. Their accusations created a narrative of institutional conspiracy, linking election administration, law enforcement, media regulators, and diaspora voting fraud – all serving the ruling party.

***“The referendum and presidential elections were rigged.”***

Pro-Russian actors waged a comprehensive campaign to deny the legitimacy of both Moldova’s constitutional referendum and presidential elections, combining accusations of institutional capture by PAS with specific claims about the voting processes and their results.

On October 21, Igor Shornikov told RIA that “the referendum on constitutional amendments was falsified.” He particularly questioned the diaspora vote, where “Sandu’s team had a free hand”, claiming that it was “impossible to verify the authenticity of the diaspora vote” and that the number of votes was “extremely exaggerated”.

On October 21, Tatarstan-based journalist close to the Kremlin, Albert Bikbov, pointed out that “in Russia, where the largest Moldovan diaspora lives, only two polling stations were opened, but in the US and the EU, attempts were made to reach every potential voter.” He argued that for “the 500,000 Moldovans living in Russia,” the authorities had



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printed only "10 thousand ballots". In conclusion, "the current government, with the support of Western elites, has turned these important civic election procedures into a mockery".

The Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee, Konstantin Zatulin, pre-emptively rejected the possibility of a legitimate victory for Maia Sandu in the presidential elections, stating on October 21 that:

***"Now we are going to see the Western "democracy" in all its glory. But even if, in the remaining hours, we manage to force 50% + one vote for "Europe", and Maia Sandu can finally appear before journalists in broad daylight, she is in a difficult situation. She cannot win the second round properly. This is clear to everyone."***

Attacks on the diaspora and the alleged corruption of the out-of-country voting process resumed just before the second round on October 29:

***"Maia Sandu loses the domestic elections. She has no chance of winning in Moldova. Therefore, she will try to falsify the elections in the diaspora."***

This set the stage for the anticipated results to be discredited, offering the easy (but false) explanation of interference in the diaspora elections. After the second-round results, the losing candidate was declared the "people's president" and the "real winner" by the pro-Russian bloc on November 4, with direct reference to the alleged illegitimacy of the Western diaspora vote. The party specifically rejected the legitimacy of the vote from the Transnistrian region and abroad, citing...

***"...unjustified reduction of polling stations, blocking of voters' access, electioneering on the day of silence and on election day, other irregularities in several countries, including hundreds of cases of intentional falsification and the disappearance of ballot boxes."***

Accusations regarding the legitimacy of the results (statements such as "...obtained through abuses, violations, threats, intimidation and dictatorial use of state resources and institutions.") and the legitimacy of the incumbent president's newly-obtained mandate ("...she is in office without having been elected by the inhabitants of the Republic of Moldova...") were resumed after the elections by pro-Russian political leaders.

***"Maia Sandu achieved a victory only in numbers and only with support from outside the country. She is the chosen one of the Diaspora, being rejected by the citizens who lived directly under her government for four years, who suffered under her government."***

Evidence of message alignment and coordination between local pro-Russian political actors and the Kremlin administration appeared very soon after the second round of the presidential elections when Dmitry Peskov, the spokesman for the Russian administration, shared the same narrative of rejecting President Sandu's legitimacy.

***"...[President Sandu] is not, as far as we understand, the president of her country, because in the country itself, the majority of the population did not vote for her... we are talking about a very, very divided society."***



Peskov invoked the voting restrictions imposed on Moldovan citizens in Russia, arguing that because they "did not have the opportunity to exercise their vote," the election results "cannot be considered clean" and that these "elections were neither democratic nor fair."

On November 11, Shor has characterised both elections in harsh terms as a theft, claiming that President Sandu is "a simple European subject, with imperial ambitions" who "stole the elections of every Moldovan."

He accused "manipulation, deception, bribery, threats—it's all documented, we've all seen it" and declared that "the number of violations is unprecedented. The regime used the Constitution as toilet paper." He announced that...

***"...we, the 'Victoria' bloc, together with all Moldovan patriots, do not recognise the result of these elections. And we will never recognise it."***

These pro-Russian messages mixed accusations of alleged systematic institutional partisanship, manipulation of the diaspora vote, and discrimination against voters in the Russian Federation to deny the legitimacy of both the referendum and the presidential elections. By emphasising the alleged illegitimacy of diaspora votes and depicting the results as externally imposed, not democratically achieved, pro-Russian actors sought both to undermine Moldova's democratic institutions and to establish a narrative distinction between the "real" voters in the country and an allegedly manipulated diaspora. The ultimate goal was either to achieve victory in the 2025 parliamentary elections or, in the event of a new pro-European victory, to generate ground for contesting it.

### III. Discreditation of pro-Western actors



#### Why discreditation?

Pro-Russian actors in the Republic of Moldova operate in an environment where pro-European sentiment typically outweighs pro-Russian sentiment in polls. Although the pro-European orientation of many Moldovans remains fluid and not always firm, this persistent majority provides an advantage to pro-European political forces. To achieve their strategic goals—re-establishing a pro-Russian government and blocking Western integration—pro-Russian actors must systematically discredit both domestic pro-European political actors (PAS, President Sandu) and their international partners (EU, US, NATO).

This discrediting campaign benefits from an information environment in which pro-Russian actors face few constraints on the intensity of the accusations they launch. While formal media channels are restricted, informal platforms, such as Telegram and other social networks, allow for the unlimited amplification of extreme accusations about alleged acts of corruption, incompetence, and hostile intentions. The more exaggerated these accusations are, the greater their potential for viral spread and emotional impact, including on audiences that are not naturally hostile to pro-European messages.

Crucially, the discreditation strategy seeks to alter the competitive landscape. If pro-European actors maintain a positive public image, managing the democratic governance agenda makes it difficult for pro-Russian forces to win elections. By eroding public trust



in the current pro-European leadership, pro-Russian actors can compete more effectively for the votes of undecided voters, who remain ambivalent about the country's geopolitical orientation.

### **Discrediting during the monitored period (September 2024 – January 2025)**

During this period, pro-Russian communication promoted two complementary narratives, building a powerful story about the victimisation of the Republic of Moldova, caught between internal and external oppressors. Predictably, these efforts focused on President Maia Sandu, PAS, and the European Union—the central actors of the referendum and presidential elections. The simultaneous votes provided fertile ground for discreditation campaigns, which besides attempting to achieve immediate political victory, tried to systematically erode public confidence in pro-Western options, both domestically and internationally.

The promoted narrative presented the local pro-European forces (President Sandu and PAS) as authoritarian puppets in the service of their EU “masters”, while the European Union was portrayed as a predatory external force. These two narrative threads reinforced each other: the government in Chisinau was depicted as both a domestic oppressor and an accomplice, betraying national interests to facilitate European colonisation. The European Union was presented as a cultural and economic aggressor, threatening the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova, its traditional values and the material well-being of the population.

This woven narrative was captured with particular clarity in a series of articles published on the Traditia pro-Russian blog, ahead of the referendum and the first round of the presidential elections, which highlighted the extremism of the rhetoric used against pro-European actors. In an article dated October 5, 2024, Traditia portrayed the PAS government as responsible for the demographic replacement of the Moldovan people, while ceding sovereignty to the evil forces of the European Union...

*"The new 'European population' of Moldova, which will biologically and demographically replace the historical people of Moldova... will have to blindly and completely submit to the decisions of an anonymous and occult bureaucracy in Brussels."*

Another article from October 9 equated supporting PAS with supporting Nazism, stating...

*"...by participating in this referendum, the voters in question resemble those voters in Germany in 1933 who voted for Hitler's Nazi party... Back then, German fascism came to power through parliamentary elections, and now, individuals with the same ideology, somewhat modernised, will seize control of the country through this criminal referendum."*

The use of strong emotional appeals as a manipulation tactic reached its peak with dedicated posts around October 10, which combined accusations of alleged fascism by domestic actors with claims of Satanism and genocide by the European Union. PAS was described as implementing '**liberal fascism**' with "the same contempt for the law, the same disregard for moral and legal norms, as Hitler's regime", following a "diabolical plan" with an '**anti-national, fascist, anti-human essence**'. The European Union was characterised as the '**Fourth Reich**', and the blog claimed that "numerous scientific studies" had noticed the '**satanic symbolism**' of all the EU official symbols, starting with the architecture of the EU headquarters



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in Brussels, which would deliberately reproduce *"the image of the Tower of Babel... the symbol of the rejection of God, of rebellion against Him, following Satan's revolt against God"*. The article ended by presenting the European integration as "cultural erasure", warning that "entering Europe means leaving Orthodoxy", and characterising this process as 'ethnocide', which aims to destroy and eliminate a people from history... the result of ethnocide being the same as that of genocide.

This basic narrative - about supporters of fascism from within carrying out the orders of a predatory EU - resonated in pro-Russian media, although not always in such categorical terms as in the case of the *Traditia* blog. After the pro-European victory in the referendum and presidential elections, the tone of commentary shifted from warnings of impending catastrophes to resigned declarations that the foreseen disasters were already unfolding. When high energy prices were implemented with the arrival of the cold season, pro-Russian commentators quickly integrated this development into their established narrative, presenting it as an inevitable result of the PAS government's submissive pro-European policies.

### ***"PAS and Maia Sandu are internal supporters of fascism."***

It should be emphasised that fascism is a favourite topic of the Kremlin in discrediting political opponents. It has even used it in connection with Zelenskyi and Soros, who are Jews, it uses it in connection with European political elites. This angle provides a connection with the symbolism of the Great War and intends to speculate on some common attributes of the populations of the ex-Soviet space, who learned a certain type of history, mystified by the communists.

Pro-Russian messages have consistently characterised PAS and President Maia Sandu as authoritarian forces implementing a fascist regime. On October 12, Shor set the tone, denouncing "the dictatorship of the pro-Western puppet regime." On October 18, he warned of the authoritarian violence to come, stating...

***"God forbid, if Maia gets what she wants from this Referendum, then, in the name of the EU, she will shoot people, throw people in prison, take away their pensions and make Moldovans pay 50 lei per cubic meter of gas!"***

Again, without any incriminating evidence, on October 22, Maia Sandu was accused by a counter-candidate with pro-Russian views of creating an ethnic and political division...

***"Maia Sandu is personally responsible for this campaign of hatred, xenophobia and discrimination on ethnic and political grounds against her opponent, Alexandru Stoianolgo, as well as against any other citizen of the country who expressed a different position during the referendum."***



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This counter-candidate continued with historical parallels to fascism, warning...

*"We are rapidly moving towards a society that has been completely 'cleansed' of all inconvenient elements... Mrs. Sandu, read the history books about how Nazism or fascism emerged. You are following the same path. Exactly the same."*

Former Moldovan dignitaries, known for their connections with fugitive oligarchs convicted in Moldova for corruption and for their constant support of anti-Western and pro-Russian views, have been actively involved in supporting the narrative of the alleged Nazi views of the Chisinau's ruling political class. One such example was recorded on October 24, when it was stated that *"lately, Nazism has been imposed in Moldova, unfortunately not only by the authorities, not only from inside, but also from outside."* The statements also claimed that:

*"...stigmatisation in society, which is practically one of the main tools of the so-called PAS government in these years, is the first sign of Nazism and the first red alert of the degradation not only of society, but also of any government!"*

*"PAS facilitates the destruction of Moldovan society, identity and values by the European Union."*

As previously mentioned, the Traditia blog presented an extreme version of this narrative, portraying PAS as supporters of an EU "ethnocide" that would eliminate Moldovan Orthodox identity, while the European Union was characterised as a "Fourth Reich" that PAS was consciously bringing to the country.

On October 12, Shor described PAS as responsible for actively surrendering the Republic of Moldova into European hands, warning that...

*"The dictatorship of the pro-Western puppet regime, wars, gay parades—all this will come to our country with the European Union. All this has already been brought to us by Sandu. That is why, on October 20, we will vote against the EU! Moldova must be happy, independent, peaceful and with an identity. And we will create such a country together!"*

The theme of PAS opening the Republic of Moldova to European "predation" emerged in more specific forms. On November 14, Shor claimed that the PAS leadership was preparing legislation to allow European exploitation of Moldovan bodies, stating:

*"This is how I imagine the 'European grand masters' talking to Recean and Nemerenco (in the spirit of 'tolerant Europe'). The "Cut off" gentlemen are ready to turn Moldova into a cheap organ market for the EU... Legislative amendments are now being prepared to simplify the exchange of human organs — the export, import of human tissues and cells... The EU will start buying organs*



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*from our country at ridiculous prices. Recean, are you ready to sell a kidney? Maia, a liver?"*

On November 16, the Moldova Adevărată Telegram channel portrayed the PAS referendum as a mechanism allowing for the colonisation by the EU:

*"In Moldova, the mechanisms of colonial intervention in business are starting to work. Well, did you vote in the so-called referendum for 'European values'? No? And yet—receive them!... Everything, as it is written... is an instrument of colonial policy, which we feel right now upon ourselves."*

On November 26, the Moldova Politics channel claimed to identify specific ways in which PAS was opening Moldova to European social engineering—including the organ transfer narrative—stating that:

*"After the 'euro referendum', the European Commission recommended Moldova 'in priority order' to legalise LGBT and sex change procedures in the country. Analogues of European legislation allowing the export and import of human tissues and organs are also urgently accepted. Moldovan authorities are actively adapting legislation to European standards. By 2025, it is planned to launch an electronic register of citizens who do not want to be organ donors after death. If the refusal is not filed, the person is automatically included. The draft law was adopted in the first reading, simplifying the donation procedure and the transportation of biological materials abroad."*

The discrediting narratives used familiar themes related to the neutrality and security of the Republic of Moldova, with Shor claiming on November 29...

*"Ursula von der Leyen is preparing the EU for a protracted war. Moldova is a buffer between the West and the East. Those who yesterday talked about green energy today spend billions on inciting hatred."*

On December 11, Gagauznews claimed that PAS was allowing the NATO invasion:

*"This foreign policy activity of Sandu is an open settlement of accounts with the European masters. Under the guise of imaginary protection against external threats, NATO is filling Moldova with weapons to make the country a buffer—a military outpost between Russia and Europe. Neutrality and the real needs of the people have been thrown overboard from the EU's 'peace ship.'"*

These narratives portrayed PAS as an active facilitator of various forms of European predation on the Republic of Moldova, from cultural erasure to organ trafficking and military exploitation, depicting the PAS leadership and President Sandu as supporters of EU colonisation.



## ***"The energy crisis is the fault of PAS and its pro-Western choices"***

In December and January, pro-Russian voices characterised the emerging energy supply disruptions as a conscious—or even deliberate—choice on the part of the PAS leadership, designed to harm the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. The narrative presented PAS as actively obstructing potential solutions to the energy dysfunctions, while simultaneously describing the Russian Federation as a partner willing to offer a solution although rejected for pro-Western ideological reasons.

On November 16, the Moldovan authorities deliberate blocking narrative was obvious on **Telegram channel The Big Game of Little Moldova**. The channel suggested that "Chisinau has not yet taken the necessary steps to reach agreements with Russia and Ukraine...it can be assumed that someone in Chisinau wants to provoke a gas crisis."

The post emphasised that "negotiations with Russia have been interrupted, Moscow is under daily attack" while noting that "at the same time, on December 10-11, President Sandu was in Brussels, where she met with the leadership of the European Union and NATO... Although panic was spreading in the country, Maia Sandu did not personally speak about the gas issue." The channel presented the Russian Federation as a willing partner who was blocked from helping, stating that "Russia itself proposed to Moldova to solve the gas supplies issue for the right bank. All that is needed for this is desire."

On the same day, the Moldavsky Wagon Telegram channel reported comments by Iurii Ceban, president of the Union of Industrialists, Agrarians and Entrepreneurs of (de facto) Transnistria, who stated that:

***"Neither Russia nor Ukraine is preventing gas transit to Transnistria. The reason for the impending energy crisis is the refusal of the Moldovan authorities to pay Gazprom's debts for Russian gas already consumed."***

A former high-ranking Moldovan official and presidential candidate in the 2024 election offered a clear formulation of this narrative on December 18. Speaking to the Kremlin-controlled news outlet Izvestia, he stated:

***"According to our estimates, Sandu and her government, unfortunately, are preparing Moldova for a humanitarian catastrophe from January 1, 2025. The gist is simple. Stopping Russian gas supplies to the Transnistrian region of Moldova will not allow the State Electric Power Plant of Moldova to generate the necessary electricity. This attitude of the Moldovan leadership towards its own citizens means that the people and the national economy as a whole have become hostages of the anti-Russian course of the European Union, although more European countries support both a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Ukraine and the continuation of the Russian gas transit to European countries. It is clear that such a genocide policy ... towards its own citizens cannot have support in Moldova."***

On December 18, a deputy from the "Victoria" bloc, who later ended up on the international sanctions list because of pro-Russian actions undertaken to undermine the electoral processes, blamed the European Commission for stopping gas transit through Ukraine:



*"The transit of Russian gas through the territory of Ukraine will be stopped. This is what the European Commission decided, reasoning that it is "not in its interest"... We will be left without gas and electricity at affordable prices (both financially and physically). In other words, we are about to face a real humanitarian catastrophe!"*

On January 24, WTF Moldova!? reported on the statements of a pro-Russian influencer in the Republic of Moldova...

**"The Moldovan regime can "solve the humanitarian crisis in Transnistria in 20 minutes". To do this, it is necessary to turn on the gas pipeline tap. In Transnistria, they mentioned that they would pay for the blue fuel. Therefore, the Moldovan authorities will not lose anything... However, the president continues the course of dividing the people. The activist said that this represented a genocide of the Moldovan people. Shame on those who voted for Sandu in the second round of the presidential elections."**

The energy supply disruptions during the cold season provided pro-Russian actors with a new opportunity to develop their already established discreditation narrative - the ruling party as a domestic oppressor and facilitator of Western predation on the Republic of Moldova - now manifested in accusations of deliberately causing material hardship for Moldovan citizens. This rhetoric substantiated accusations of fascism and betrayal, linking them to daily concerns about heating and electricity prices.

## IV. Promotion of Russia



Why is Russia being promoted?

While discrediting pro-European actors is essential, it alone cannot secure pro-Russian strategic objectives in the Republic of Moldova. The 2025 parliamentary elections represent a crucial opportunity to achieve their main strategic objective: to re-establish pro-Russian political control in the Republic of Moldova in order to restore the Russian sphere of influence over the state. To succeed, pro-Russian forces must not only discourage support for pro-European options but also generate substantial electoral support for pro-Russian parties and politicians - whether openly aligned with Russia or not.

However, promoting Russian influence involves tactical trade-offs. Too visible Russian involvement could unite pro-Europeans in the Republic of Moldova, countering efforts to divide them. Pro-Russian messages must therefore balance the positive promotion of the Russian Federation with the risk of triggering defensive cohesion among pro-Europeans.

This tactical challenge makes pro-Russian actors prioritise the fragmentation of pro-Europeans over the active promotion of Russian influence. Given the demographic advantage of pro-Europeans in the Republic of Moldova, the fragmentation of this plurality is usually more urgent than building explicit support for Russia.



When promoting Russian influence, the emphasis is often laid on practical benefits rather than overt geopolitical or civilizational messages. Pro-Russian actors present the Russian Federation as an indispensable economic partner for the Republic of Moldova, a defender of traditional values, and a protector of minority rights. This focus on concrete advantages, rather than abstract geopolitical alignment, helps to avoid triggering defensive cohesion among pro-Europeans.

Messages promoting the Russian Federation often emphasise the stability and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova. By presenting Russia as a guarantor of the Republic of Moldova's regional position and showing respect to its constitutional neutrality, pro-Russian messages strive to attract Moldovans fearful of geopolitical implications. This positioning of the Russian Federation as a stabilising force directly counters pro-European narratives that portray Russia as a threat to the independence of the Republic of Moldova.

The promotion of Russian influence aims to provide a concrete alternative for voters who have been disillusioned by anti-Western discrediting narratives. It is not enough to make citizens cynical about the pro-European leadership: they need to see pro-Russian parties as credible vehicles for positive change. This explains why the promotion of Russian influence often focuses on concrete benefits, such as lower gas prices or access to markets, instead of abstract geopolitical arguments, appealing to pragmatic concerns that can resonate with the pragmatic Moldovan electorate.

## Monitored period, September 2024 – January 2025

The referendum and presidential elections amplified the tactical trade-offs involved in promoting Russian influence. With immediate priorities of preventing both a “Yes” vote in the referendum and the re-election of President Sandu, pro-Russian actors faced significant risks in openly promoting Russia: such a message could have united the very pro-European societal groups they were trying to divide. Thus, pro-Russian actors continued to focus their attention on division, delegitimisation, and discreditation rather than promotion: weakening support for EU integration, eroding President Sandu's electoral support, and exploiting energy supply dysfunctions to discredit pro-Western actors.

However, pro-Russian voices continued to carefully promote Russian influence by emphasising philanthropic benefits and humanitarian support, especially in regions such as Gagauzia and the Transnistrian region. This message positioned the Russian Federation and pro-Russian actors as benevolent partners, blocked by hostile PAS authorities from delivering aid to Moldovan citizens.

### *"Russia is the natural protector and benefactor of Moldova"*

On October 30, Ilan Shor contrasted his team's offering of aid with President Sandu's lack of humanity:

*"This goes beyond any limits of humanity. Sandu, you are soulless. Explain why your police confiscated the refrigerator of an unemployed woman, a mother of several children? Yes, the refrigerator was provided by our team. This family asked for our help because they are barely surviving."*



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*"For years we have been selflessly helping large families, people with disabilities, pensioners—people who have nothing to put on the table. They turn to us because you, those in power, are denying them the right to a decent living."*

On November 16, the Russian ambassador-designate in Chisinau, Oleg Ozerov, stated that Moldova was economically dependent on the Russian Federation: "Moldova's economic well-being largely depends on economic relations with Russia. Without cheap Russian gas, without a large market in Russia that would accept Moldovan products, it is difficult to talk about the prospects for the republic's prosperity."

On November 23, a Telegram message from Media Killer PMR reinforced a narrative about Russia's essential and benevolent support for Moldovans:

*"Everything is clear about gas. Moldova does not want to be left without gas in the winter, and the alleged concern for the PMR citizens is just a fiction and a pathetic manipulation attempt—Russia will not leave the citizens of Transnistria without gas."*

On November 25, Moldavian Wagon reported that the Bashkan of Gagauzia, Evgenia Guțul, praised the philanthropic activities of the Eurasia organisation, an entity supported by Shor whose board includes members of the State Duma of the Russian Federation who are on the international sanctions list, claiming that the authorities of the Republic of Moldova are blocking humanitarian assistance from the Russian Federation:

*"Thanks to the "Eurasia" projects, teachers and young people from Gagauzia and other regions of Moldova had the unique opportunity to conduct training courses and exchange experiences with their colleagues from Russia... Although the Russian side was ready to provide Gagauz farmers with 12 thousand tons of humanitarian aid as early as October, the Moldovan parliament has not even begun to analyse our legislative initiative."*

On December 10, Radio 1 reported statements by the de facto Foreign Minister of Transnistria, Vitaly Ignatyev, which amplified the narrative about Russia's goodwill being blocked by the Moldovan authorities:

*"Relations between Russia and Transnistria will reach a new level in the future... He has stressed the strategic partnerships and allied relations, noting that the Russian Federation carries out a peacekeeping mission, participates in negotiations and provides humanitarian support, including pension payments for Russian citizens. "We cannot ignore the fact that Moldova is trying to destabilise these important ties for Transnistria," Ignatyev said."*

While the promotion of Russian influence was less visible compared to other influence objectives during the referendum, presidential elections, and energy disruptions, it could gain more importance in 2025, as pro-Russian actors will try to build electoral support for pro-Russian parties and politicians ahead of parliamentary elections. However, during the monitored period, pro-Russian actors promoted the so-called philanthropic and humanitarian offers of the Russian Federation and pro-Russian actors, which were allegedly blocked by the Chisinau government.



# Conclusions

Between September 2024-January 2025, pro-Russian influence operations focused on the constitutional referendum in Moldova, the presidential elections, and energy sector situations between December 2024-January 2025.

## Pro-Russian narratives have been used to:

### Division

- ...exploit the binary option of the referendum to deepen national divisions over European alignment.
- ...fragment supporters of the European Union using inflammatory messages about traditional values and neutrality.
- ...strengthen the pro-Russian minority through accusations of oppression of Russian-speaking regions, such as Gagauzia and the Transnistrian region.

### Delegitimisation

- ...present Moldova's democratic institutions, especially the Central Electoral Commission, as captured tools of PAS control.
- ...reject the legitimacy of the conduct and results of the constitutional referendum and presidential elections.
- ...create a false distinction between "real votes" within the country and the "manipulated" ones of the diaspora to weaken confidence in any pro-European democratic outcomes.

### Discreditation

- ...present PAS and President Sandu as fascist oppressors of Russian speakers.
- ...portray the European Union as a colonial force that threatens to destroy Moldova's sovereignty, values, and security.
- ...blame the situation in the energy sector on the pro-Western stance of PAS, portraying it as a self-sufficient and/or evil choice of the ruling party.

### Promotion

- ...communicate the tangible benefits of the Russian Federation and its support points, including cheaper gas, charitable and humanitarian aid.
- ...position the Russian Federation as a guarantor of the security and neutrality of the Republic of Moldova.
- ...claim that PAS authorities intentionally blocked Russian humanitarian aid during the energy crisis.



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### These influence objectives have been mutually reinforcing. Thus:

- **The division** of the society has reduced public consensus, making institutions more vulnerable to delegitimising narratives...
- ...**The delegitimation** of institutions has facilitated even more extreme attacks to discredit pro-Western actors...
- ...**The discreditation** of pro-Western actors created room for the promotion of Russian alternatives.

### Looking towards the 2025 parliamentary elections:

- The current pro-Russian focus on division, delegitimation, and discreditation could adjust to include a more active and aggressive promotion of Russian influence as the urgency to build electoral momentum for pro-Russian candidates increases.
- The “four influence objectives” framework provides valuable information for anticipating future pro-Russian influence operations and can guide the development of countermeasures, such as strategic communication campaigns to be applied by all democratic actors.
- Addressing the fundamental vulnerabilities exploited by pro-Russian influence operations is essential: strengthening national cohesion and trust in democratic institutions is crucial for the long-term security of the Republic of Moldova.

