



Research Article

## Information Warfare Laboratories: Comparing Russian Disinformation Operations in Romania and Potential Expansion to Moldova and Georgia

*Khyati Singh*

*Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, India,*

<https://www.idsa.in/page/11?center=strategic-technologies>

**Abstract:** This article examines the information warfare efforts of the Russians in Romania as a model for understanding how these operations can be configured to suit Moldova and Georgia. Relying on theoretical constructs from strategic communication, information warfare doctrine, and hybrid warfare theory, the analysis explores specific historical, cultural, and political vulnerabilities exposed by Russian disinformation actors in Romania. The analysis also notes the involvement of Brazil-linked social-media networks that amplified Russian narratives during key geopolitical moments, a feature that becomes relevant for understanding the broader architecture of cross-border disinformation flows. It then proposes predictive models for three possible directions of Russian political developments after 2022, and what differences in methodology, targeting, and effect are likely to arise. This review of evidence finds that Romania has been used as a research and development lab to perfect the methods of disinformation that are then retuned to neighboring contexts in accordance with local vulnerabilities. The article contributes to the academic discourse on information warfare by providing a comparative framework that can predict the development of Russian information campaigns across the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe.

**Keywords:** information warfare, disinformation operations, hybrid warfare, strategic communication, Romania, Moldova, Georgia, Russia, propaganda, media manipulation.

## Introduction

The information domain remains an active and evolving sphere of international competition as states increasingly employ advanced information applications in pursuit of strategic advantage. Joseph Nye's theory of soft power warns us not to forget that one of the most important spheres of modern geopolitical rivalry is the ability to influence the information environment. In this paradigm, all Russian information warfare operations, inside and outside Ukraine, are examples of weaponized information.<sup>1</sup> This article explores Russian information warfare activity in Romania through the lenses of strategic communication, information warfare doctrine, and hybrid warfare theory to explain how it can be implemented and further expanded to Moldova and Georgia.

Although there is a wide body of scholarly research on Russian information operations in Ukraine, the Baltic countries, and major Western societies,<sup>2</sup> research on Romania is comparatively underdeveloped. However, Romania represents an essential experimental laboratory for Russian information operations. As a member of NATO and the European Union, and as a state situated within Russia's historical, cultural, and geographic sphere of influence, Romania presents a unique vantage point from which to examine Moscow's information strategies as they apply to states in this contested geopolitical landscape.

This article focuses on three main research questions: (1) What is the pattern of Russian disinformation operations in Romania? (2) What vulnerabilities of Romania's information ecosystem have been exploited? And (3) What could happen to these operations, and how might they even be extended to Moldova and Georgia under different possible future Russian political outcomes? Through these questions, the study develops predictive models to forecast the evolutionary patterns of Russian information operations across the broader post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe.

## Information Warfare as Strategic Communication

Modern practices of Russian disinformation have been examined through the lenses of strategic communication theory and information warfare. This article relies on Hallahan's definition of strategic communication, namely that strategic communication is the purposive use of communication by an organization to meet its mission.<sup>3</sup> In exploring the interpretation of this concept for state and state-affiliated agents in Moscow, this article seeks to identify how Moscow

<sup>1</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Ivo Juurvee, Māris Cepurītis, Ieva Bērziņa, and Diana Kaljula, *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2016/2017* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/russias-footprint-in-the-nordic-baltic-information-environment-20162017/138>.

<sup>3</sup> Kirk Hallahan, Derina Holtzhausen, Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Verčič, and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, "Defining Strategic Communication," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 3-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244>.

might purposefully use communicative means to further a foreign policy objective. The study finds that, under the information warfare paradigm, strategic communication extends beyond traditional public diplomacy to encompass not only psychological operations but also deception and propaganda. Lucas and Pomerantsev<sup>4</sup> theorize that current Russian information warfare is an advanced hybrid of active measures unveiled during the Soviet era and modern digital media and platforms, which they refer to as the new information warfare. This phenomenon is characterized by multi-platform, multi-dimensional, multi-pronged campaigns designed to exploit weaknesses in target societies while allowing the Russian state to deny involvement. The theoretical overview provides context for this discussion of Russian activities in Romania and shows that Moscow's actions are neither ad hoc nor one-off events, but part of Russia's overall information warfare strategy.

### ***Hybrid Warfare and the Information Domain***

Recent academic literature on contemporary Russian military strategy finds that hybrid warfare provides a framework to understand Moscow's information operations as an integral component of warfare and as equal to other instruments of power. Hybrid warfare, as proposed by Hoffman,<sup>5</sup> refers to the calibrated application of the different instruments of power, such as conventional, irregular, political, economic, and informational, to achieve strategic objectives. In this comprehensive framework, information operations play a central role: they act independently as well as in tandem with the other tools of statecraft.

How information operations have intersected with Russia more broadly is informed further by how Galeotti conceived what became known as the Gerasimov Doctrine, albeit later prefixed with qualifiers. Galeotti's early interpretation of Russian strategic writings—later labelled the "Gerasimov Doctrine"—is useful in understanding how information operations fit within Russia's broader approach to conflict.<sup>6</sup> Although Galeotti subsequently clarified that no such formal doctrine exists and the term itself has become controversial, the debate highlights an important analytical point: contemporary Russian strategy deliberately integrates military and non-military tools, blurring the boundaries between war and peace. Within this framework, information operations are not peripheral but a central component of Russia's overall method of strategic competition.

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, "Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter-Strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe," Center for European Policy Analysis, 2016, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/winning-the-information-war/>.

<sup>5</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), [https://potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac\\_hybridwar\\_0108.pdf](https://potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Mark Galeotti, "The Mythical 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and the Language of Threat," *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no. 2 (2019): 157-161, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2018.1441623>.

### **Reflexive Control Theory**

In addition to strategic communication and hybrid warfare theory, a third conceptual theme in contemporary information warfare studies is reflexive control theory, which is a uniquely Russian contribution and needs to be examined in detail. Reflexive control refers to the sending of suitably prepared information to a partner or an opponent in order to persuade that actor to voluntarily adopt the pre-judged choice sought by the initiator of the action.<sup>7</sup> Forged in the context of Soviet military science and later elaborated in modern Russian discourse on strategy, this framework provides a specific perspective on the psychological and cognitive aspects of Russian information operations. The application of reflexive control theory in the Russian campaign in Romania would elucidate why disinformation campaigns can be constructed not only to spread falsehoods but also to influence the decision-making mechanisms of targeted audiences in ways that serve Russian strategic interests. This lens is particularly crucial for understanding operations that would otherwise seem counterintuitive or paradoxical when viewed through Western strategic thinking.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on publicly available evidence—including social media posts, news stories, and governmental and NGO investigative reports—and reveals the dynamics of disinformation in Romania. The results indicate that Brazilian and Russian actors stepped up the sharing of manipulative content in parallel with key geopolitical events, in particular the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the issuance of international sanctions against it. These campaigns featured repetitive stories that focused on anti-EU sentiment, ethnic tensions, and public distrust in institutional competence. Interpreting these dynamics within the broader geopolitical context highlights a coordinated interaction between Kremlin-directed messaging and local sympathetic actors. This pattern demonstrates that Russian information warfare seeks both to influence specific policy debates when advantageous and, more broadly, to erode societal cohesion and weaken democratic institutions. In many cases, the latter—long-term destabilization—constitutes the more consistent strategic objective.

### **Data Collection**

The study used primary source texts, including Russian-produced content intended to reach Romanian audiences—namely reporting by outlets such as RT and Sputnik—and social media accounts identified by the Romanian security ser-

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Thomas, "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, no. 2 (2004): 237-256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040490450529>; John Merriam, "Diagnosing and Countering Russian Reflexive Control," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 36, no. 1 (2023): 1-27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2023.2201113>; Larissa Doroshenko and Josephine Lukito, "Trollfare: Russia's Disinformation Campaign During Military Conflict in Ukraine," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 4662-4689, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16895>.

vices as being implicated in Russian information operations targeting Romania. The study also engaged secondary sources, including reports released by Romanian security agencies, non-governmental analytical centres, and academic organizations, with each report covering different elements of disinformation campaigns conducted by Russia. Finally, the study conducted computational analysis of social-networking practices, tracing how certain disinformation narratives spread throughout Romanian online media.

### **Analytical Framework**

The examination of the dataset was performed in three echelons. These included: a narrative analysis that identified key narratives used in Russian disinformation campaigns against Romania; vulnerability mapping that identified past cultural and political vulnerabilities, as well as media-ecosystem weaknesses exploited by these operations; and, finally, a comparative analysis that juxtaposed Romania's vulnerabilities with those of Moldova and Georgia in a systematic effort to develop predictive models.

### **Predictive Modelling**

Upon analysis of recent developments in Russian activities on the territory of Romania, along with a comparable vulnerability analysis specific to Moldova and Georgia, several noticeable tendencies can be extrapolated to forecast the future of information operations facilitated by the Kremlin. To facilitate clear analysis, three scenarios are postulated:

1. *The Continuity Scenario* – Russia remains under the control of its existing political leadership and moves forward with its strategic priorities, but without significant changes in its information-warfare practices.
2. *The Escalation Scenario* – Russia becomes more aggressive in its foreign policy and commits additional resources to its information-warfare mechanisms. Additionally, Moscow could undertake more aggressive actions directed against Moldova and Georgia.
3. *De-escalation Scenario* – Political change in Russia leads to a diminished focus on confrontational forms of information warfare, reducing pressure on Moldova and Georgia.

In combination, these scenarios provide a conceptual framework against which the hypothetical evolution of Russian information operations in Moldova and Georgia can be projected, with Romania's experience serving as the test case.

## **Russian Disinformation Operations in Romania: Patterns and Vulnerabilities**

Several geostrategic reasons make Romania a visible target of Russian information activities. Geographically, Romania occupies a strategically significant position on the Black Sea, sharing this maritime space with both NATO allies and

Russia. Its proximity to Moldova—an area Moscow views as central to its near-abroad strategy—further heightens Romania’s relevance in the regional security environment. This geographic configuration complicates Moscow’s efforts to assert influence across the broader Black Sea region. Additionally, Romania’s geographic proximity to Russia encourages Moscow’s ambition to influence the policies of Western institutions.

From a historical perspective, Romania is an example of a communist country that experienced the rule of Ceaușescu, yet retained some autonomy vis-à-vis Moscow. This legacy of independent thinking still largely shapes Romanian politics and society, complicating contemporary Russian plans.

Since 2014, Romania’s relevance to NATO’s eastern frontier and the Black Sea energy landscape has increased, and this should be noted in the broader NATO context. Although antecedents explain observable trends, 2014 saw an apparent shift in the course of the information warfare Moscow wages against Bucharest.

After a careful analysis of disinformation campaigns, several narrative areas and functional patterns prevail, namely family narratives, military discourses, and civilizational discourses. Family narratives invoke kinship bonds, for example, by celebrating shared cultural efforts or by alleging that Romanians betray their Slavic “brothers.” Military discourses portray Russia as the natural security partner of Romania, based on presumed common Slavic roots, while depicting NATO as a destabilizing pan-European project. Civilizational discourses allege that Romania is culturally and historically a Slavic nation, and that its European orientation began only with Ceaușescu. The recurrence of these patterns across themes demonstrates both the stability and flexibility of Moscow’s information warfare doctrine in Romania.

### ***Anti-NATO and Sovereignty Erosion Narratives***

Within the larger academic context of current Romanian politics, there is a pervasive narrative that depicts NATO membership as fundamentally hostile to Romanian sovereignty and national interests. Important aspects of this theme cluster noticeably in both social and mainstream media, which contain claims that, by building a defence site at Deveselu, NATO inadvertently transformed Romania into a target of Russian retaliatory activities.<sup>8</sup> Narratives in these media consistently refer to NATO’s permanent military presence in Romania as an occupation

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<sup>8</sup> James Thomas, “Romania, NATO and Sham Accounts: Fake Euronews Content Persists Online,” *Euronews*, August 19, 2025, [www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/08/19/romania-nato-and-sham-accounts-fake-euronews-content-persists-online](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/08/19/romania-nato-and-sham-accounts-fake-euronews-content-persists-online); Cristina M. Arribas et al., “Information Manipulation and Historical Revisionism: Russian Disinformation and Foreign Interference Through Manipulated History-Based Narratives,” *Open Research Europe* (2023), 3:121, <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16087.1>; Christina Harward, “Likely Kremlin-Backed Election Interference Against Romania Threatens Bucharest’s Continued Support for Ukraine and NATO,” Institute for the Study of War, December 6, 2024, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/likely-kremlin-backed-election-interference-against-romania-threatens-bucharests-continued-support-for-ukraine-and-nato/>.

rather than collective defence, and allege the existence of secret NATO protocols that influenced policy choices and led Romania to agree to this deployment.

These accounts attempt to deploy strategic discourse on history by making purposeful reference to earlier Romanian insecurities about great-power interference and perceived loss of sovereignty. Similarly, such messaging is keenly tailored to nationalist and internationalist audiences in a way that aligns with the approach of Bjola and Pamment<sup>9</sup> – namely, narrative customization for the audience.

### ***Historical Revisionism and Identity Manipulation***

The second set of narratives concerns historical revisionism, which strives to sharpen controversies between Romania and its neighboring states, on the one hand, and to promote a more flattering account of Russian/Soviet historical outcomes, on the other. These narratives pursue various complementary projects, including the Soviet annexation of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, bringing Romanian fascism and antisemitism to the fore, fueling animosities with Hungary over Transylvania, and perpetuating a divisive outlook on ethnicity in Romania.

The strategies deployed here draw on what Applebaum<sup>10</sup> terms “memory gaps” within post-Communist societies, capitalizing on unresolved historical traumas and questions of identity to deepen social cleavages and erode cohesive national narratives that might otherwise advance Euro-Atlantic integration.

### ***Energy Dependency and Economic Vulnerabilities***

The third narrative triad targets Romania’s energy policy and economic vulnerabilities, including resistance to developing Black Sea natural gas reserves. These narratives emphasise alleged unavoidable dependence on Russian gas, exaggerate the economic costs of aligning with Western institutions and distancing itself from Russia, and portray corruption as inherent to Western-style democracy. As Renz and Smith observe, Russian information operations frequently seek to shape strategic thinking by manipulating perceptions of critical infrastructure and energy security through precisely such narratives.<sup>11</sup>

## **Operational Vectors and Technological Applications**

Russian disinformation operations in Romania operate through multiple vectors, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the Romanian media ecosystem.

*Direct Russian State Media Operations.* Sputnik Romania launched in 2016 and is perhaps the most relevant actor in direct Russian information influence in

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<sup>9</sup> Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment, eds., *Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism: The Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith, “Russia and Hybrid Warfare – Going Beyond the Label,” *Aleksanteri Papers* No. 1/2016 (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, University of Helsinki, 2016), <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/175291>.

the Romanian and Moldovan public spaces. A close examination of its output reveals tightly woven narratives that are highly cautious about assuming an overtly pro-Russian stance and instead favor an anti-Western, sovereignty-driven vocabulary that appears more closely aligned with Romanian national sensibilities.

*Proxy Media and Amplification Networks.* Moscow's direct media activities in Romania are complemented by its strategic investments in proxy media purporting to be independent but spreading Russia's narrative goals. The spectrum ranges from nationalist-oriented websites whose funding provenance remains opaque to "alternative news" platforms whose core content gravitates toward conspiracy theories. A recent surge of computational studies now confirms that such phenomena fall within the domain of social media networks that disseminate premeditated inauthentic conduct.<sup>12</sup>

In essence, we are observing a practical implementation of the model labelled the "information laundry," whereby narratives originating in Russian sources pass through ostensibly independent third-party conduits, thereby acquiring an aura of collective legitimacy and greater resonance among the desired target populations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See reviews of Russian state media operations in Romania (e.g., Sputnik Romania) and their narratives in country reports and investigations. For specific mappings of Romanian-language proxy media, named amplifiers and operators, see Context.ro's "Rețeaua minciunilor" (investigation), the Firehose of Falsehood cross-border mapping, and investigative reporting on AdNow/Matryoshka operations; election-period case studies are in Reuters and FPC/analytical reports; <https://context.ro/reteaua-minciunilor-cine-raspandeste-propaganda-pro-kremlin-conspiratiile-si-dezinformatiile-in-romania>; Nicolas Quénel, "AdNow Exposed: How Romania Became a Test Lab for Russian Interference in the West," *Intelligence Online*, December 3, 2025, [www.intelligenceonline.com/europe-russia/2024/12/03/adnow-exposed-how-romania-became-a-test-lab-for-russian-interference-in-the-west%2C110347109-evl](http://www.intelligenceonline.com/europe-russia/2024/12/03/adnow-exposed-how-romania-became-a-test-lab-for-russian-interference-in-the-west%2C110347109-evl). See also the computational literature on coordinated inauthentic behavior and false amplifiers. These studies formalize and empirically detect the kinds of coordinated amplification observed in national disinformation ecosystems. See Giuseppe Fenza et al., "Investigating Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior on Alternative Platforms During the 2024 U.S. Election," in *Workshop Proceedings of the 19th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, June 5, 2025, [https://workshop-proceedings.icwsm.org/pdf/2025\\_19.pdf](https://workshop-proceedings.icwsm.org/pdf/2025_19.pdf); Monica Murero, "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior: An Innovative Manipulation Tactic to Amplify COVID-19 Anti-vaccine Communication Outreach via Social Media," *Frontiers in Sociology* 8 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1141416>; and Matteo Cinelli et al. "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior and Information Spreading on Twitter," *Decision Support Systems* 160 (2022): 113819, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2022.113819>.

<sup>13</sup> "How the Kremlin Launders Disinformation around the Globe," Centre for Information Resilience, May 15, 2024, <https://www.info-res.org/cir/articles/how-the-kremlin-launders-disinformation-around-the-globe/>; Belén Carrasco Rodríguez, *Information Laundering in the Nordic-Baltic Region* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, November 2020), <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/information-laundering-in-the-nordic-baltic-region/26>.

*Exploitation of Orthodox Church Connections.* Russian influence in Romania always highlights Orthodox Church affiliations despite the long-standing autocephalous state of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Three key trends can be observed: the rise of conservative religious leaders who publicly resist Western cultural codes; the promulgation of discourses highlighting Orthodox traditions as a common civilizational fabric; and the use of ecclesiastical networks to disseminate politically aligned content. Overall, these methods represent what Leustean<sup>14</sup> identifies as the so-called religious soft power of Russian influence operations, an approach that proves quite successful in situations and environments where church-based institutions continue to enjoy a high credibility.

## Vulnerabilities Exploited in the Romanian Information Ecosystem

The effectiveness of Russian disinformation operations in Romania stems from their sophisticated exploitation of specific vulnerabilities in the Romanian information ecosystem.

*Media Market Fragility.* After the fall of Communism, the Romanian media system experienced a liberalization period that created a situation of ownership concentration among politically connected actors, financial insecurity of independent outlets, a restriction of finances for investigative journalism, and an observable drop in the quality of public service broadcasting.<sup>15</sup> In this setting, Bajomi-Lázár<sup>16</sup> draws on the idea of media capture, in which an economically dependent structure causes news organizations to be open to outsider control and the selective broadcasting of favorable content in exchange for financial backing.

*Digital Literacy Gaps.* In Romanian society, sharp disparities in digital literacy are the result of multiple factors, including geographies of urban-rural environments, age groups, educational levels, and economic status. These disparities precondition diverse risks to disinformation, as people in different social positions show different levels of critical thinking and scrutiny of information sources.<sup>17</sup>

*Institutional Trust Deficits.* The post-communist transition in Romania has created a long-lived institutional deficit of trust. According to 2023 Transparency International data, the average rate of confidence in government institutions was only 28 percent, trust in traditional media fell by 16 percent between 2021

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<sup>14</sup> Lucian N. Leustean, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Irina Marica, “Romania Drops to 55th in 2025 World Press Freedom Index, US Also Falls to 57th,” *Romania Insider*, May 2, 2025, <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-press-freedom-index-2025>.

<sup>16</sup> Péter Bajomi-Lázár, *Party Colonisation of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe* (Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES), “Digital Literacy in Romania: National Study, 2020.” – in Romanian

and 2023,<sup>18</sup> and Romanians held a consistently high level of perceived corruption. These conditions increase receptivity to disinformation,<sup>19</sup> leading audiences to exhibit a readiness to consider alternative accounts that challenge dominant institutional narratives and actions.

## Comparative Analysis: Moldova and Georgia

Moldova and Georgia share certain vulnerability factors with Romania while exhibiting distinctive characteristics that could influence the application of Russian disinformation techniques developed in the Romanian “laboratory.”

### *Moldova: Enhanced Vulnerabilities*

The Republic of Moldova represents an intensified version of the vulnerabilities observed in Romania, mostly due to more direct media penetration by a Russian-speaking demographic, as well as stronger historical and linguistic links with the Russian Federation, the ongoing territorial conflict in Transnistria, a more draconian set of economic limitations, greater reliance on energy, and greater political polarity, represented by the opposition of pro-Western and pro-Russian factions.<sup>20</sup> The wider Russian-speaking media sphere in Moldova also provides Moscow with an immediate and translation-free medium with which to influence narratives. Moreover, Russian-influenced media often exhibit high operational capacity. Memories of the Tsarist and Soviet eras provide cultural signifiers that might be leveraged easily by Russian information campaigns, whereas the long presence of Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria, occupying the region since 1992, lends Moscow both physical and psychological power.

In addition, the almost complete dependence<sup>21</sup> of Moldova on Russian gas deprives the country of alternatives and consequently heightens susceptibility to

<sup>18</sup> Reuters Institute, “Digital News Report 2023,” <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>.

<sup>19</sup> W Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, “The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions,” *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 2 (2018): 122-139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>.

<sup>20</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), “Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries: Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience” (Sofia, Bulgaria: CSD, 2018), [https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications\\_library/files/2018\\_09/Russian\\_Influence\\_in\\_the\\_Media\\_Sector\\_en.pdf](https://csd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2018_09/Russian_Influence_in_the_Media_Sector_en.pdf); Interview with Iulian Groza, Executive Director of the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, “How Moldova Mobilises to Fight Russian Interference and Propaganda,” Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, September 22, 2025, <https://eap-csf.eu/articles/how-moldova-mobilises-to-fight-russian-interference-and-propaganda>; “Russia’s Disinformation Targets Moldova’s Ties with Europe” (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2024), [www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/russias-disinformation-targets-moldovas-ties-europe](http://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/russias-disinformation-targets-moldovas-ties-europe); International Crisis Group, “Moldova Divided: Easing Tensions as Russia Meddles and Elections Approach,” Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°97, August 21, 2024, <https://crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/b097-moldova-divided.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> International Energy Agency (IEA), “Moldova: Energy System of Moldova,” 2023, [www.iea.org/countries/moldova](http://www.iea.org/countries/moldova); “European Commission and Moldova Agree on a 2-

energy-related messages (whereas Romania is less vulnerable to this due to its partial reliance on Russian energy). Another exacerbating element is the polarized nature of pro-EU and pro-Russian parties, which show a sharp contrast between them, seen most vividly in recent presidential and parliamentary elections.<sup>22</sup> This fuels textbook-style polarization, thus stretching the range of targeting openings. Collectively, these overlapping factors may be described as a multidimensional susceptibility landscape, in which disinformation discourses will be far more likely to find greater resonance and functional effectiveness than in Romania.

Thus, Moldova represents the so-called compounded vulnerability stipulated by a set of multi-layered factors forming heightened sensitivity to external influence.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Georgia: Distinctive Vulnerability Profile***

Georgia is a portrait of disparate weaknesses. These include the 2008 Russian military intrusion; an amplified population predisposition to Kremlin-instigated information threats; a comparatively strong civil society structure devoted to counter-disinformation; a media environment characterized by normative independence; unique religious articulations related to the Georgian Orthodox Church; and unresolved territorial wrangles in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After the 2008 Russo-Georgian War—a decisive turning point—Georgian society began to see Russia as a security threat and, accordingly, steered national information practices toward a new landscape. Researchers such as Kandelaki<sup>24</sup> refer to this period (2008 to 2012) as one of high threat awareness, evident across essentially all demographic groups. This kind of awareness resulted in the emergence of advanced organizations, of which the Media Development Foundation and Georgia Reforms Associates (GRASS) are the most well-known, that aim to monitor and counter Russian propaganda.<sup>25</sup> These organizations are char-

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year Comprehensive Strategy for Energy Independence and Resilience and Immediate Support with the Energy Bills,” European Commission, February 4, 2025, [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-commission-and-moldova-agree-2-year-comprehensive-strategy-energy-independence-and-2025-02-04\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-commission-and-moldova-agree-2-year-comprehensive-strategy-energy-independence-and-2025-02-04_en); “Annual Implementation Report 2023 – Moldova Chapter,” Energy Community Secretariat, November 1, 2023, 70-81, [https://www.energy-community.org/dam/jcr:3da7c4f8-ea23-4169-b1e9-66b0ed05fcb7/EnC\\_IR2023.pdf](https://www.energy-community.org/dam/jcr:3da7c4f8-ea23-4169-b1e9-66b0ed05fcb7/EnC_IR2023.pdf); World Bank, “Moldova – Country Economic Memorandum: Achieving the European Union’s Standard of Living within a Generation” (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2023), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099112024082570311>.

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, “Moldova Divided: Easing Tensions.”

<sup>23</sup> Matthew Crandall, “Soft Security Threats and Small States: The Case of Estonia,” *Defence Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 30-55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2014.890334>.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgi Kandelaki, “Georgia’s Experience in Countering Russian Disinformation,” East StratCom Task Force, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> “FactCheck Annual Report 2020,” Georgia’s Reforms Associates, <https://grass.org.ge/en/projects/factcheck-georgia>.

acterized by the use of modern methodologies and wide-ranging education campaigns aimed at the population, as well as a high rate of citizen and expert involvement.

Thus Georgia has made genuine progress in establishing editorial independence in its media system, notably in television, where diverse, competing voices routinely appear, even over matters of political importance in the geopolitical arena.<sup>26</sup> While sharing theology with its Russian counterpart, the Georgian Orthodox Church makes separate historical claims of autocephaly stretching back to the fifth century and has demonstrated periodic autonomy in religious diplomacy vis-à-vis Moscow.<sup>27</sup> This complicates Russia's attempts to use Orthodox identity as a lever of influence. However, the presence of unresolved territorial issues in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—regions under de facto Russian control—remains an ongoing source of weakness, particularly in sovereignty-related discourses and potential integration into the Euro-Atlantic space.

Therefore, Georgia exhibits a paradoxical reality born of experience: it possesses a toughened defense against Russia's information operations, yet remains hampered by the acute vulnerabilities of its unfinished territorial standing and deep-rooted religious connections.

## Scenario-Based Predictions for Operational Evolution

Situated within the framework of disinformation vulnerability, the Romanian case study is complemented by a comparative analysis of Moldova and Georgia. These nations illustrate distinct trajectories of disinformation, shaped by the shifting priorities of Russian statecraft. In a projection of continuity—presuming the preservation of the existing Russian political leadership and strategic focus—separate but overlapping trajectories can be imagined in the Kremlin's information campaigns in the two countries.

<sup>26</sup> Georgian National Communications Commission Annual Reports, [www.coe.int/en/web/cybercrime/gncc-ge](http://www.coe.int/en/web/cybercrime/gncc-ge); Freedom House (Freedom on the Net / Freedom in the World 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>; European Parliament & Commission Reports (Pre-2023), [www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/mission-reports/product-details/20240625CPU45442](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/mission-reports/product-details/20240625CPU45442); Media sustainability Index worsened in Georgia – IREX Survey; “Georgia: Vibrant Information Barometer,” [www.irex.org/sites/default/files/VIBE\\_2024\\_Georgia.pdf](http://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/VIBE_2024_Georgia.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Isabella Wilkinson and Tamar Dekanosidze, “Georgia Must Bolster Resilience to Information Warfare,” Chatham House, March 14, 2022, [www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/georgia-must-bolster-resilience-information-warfare](http://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/georgia-must-bolster-resilience-information-warfare); Lasha Tughushi, Ana Meskhi, and Guram Ananeishvili, “Georgia: Disinformation Resilience Index,” Media Development Foundation Prism UA, July 31, 2018, <https://prismua.org/en/english-georgia-disinformation-resilience-index/>; Vasil Sikharulidze, “Russian Influence Operations in Georgia: A Threat to Democracy and Regional Stability,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 13, 2025, [www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russian-influence-operations-in-georgia-a-threat-to-democracy-and-regional-stability/](http://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russian-influence-operations-in-georgia-a-threat-to-democracy-and-regional-stability/).

### *Moldova*

In Moldova's case, Romanian-tested discourses portraying NATO/EU integration as a threat to sovereignty will be deepened, making European integration appear as an assault on Moldovan cultural autonomy and traditional values. The calibration of such messaging will specifically seek to exploit the neutrality enshrined in Article 11 of the Moldovan constitution,<sup>28</sup> positioning any form of defense cooperation with Western institutions as a violation of that principle. Moldova's energy dependence on Russia will be a pressure point that can be exploited; campaigns will likely attack any attempts by Moldova to increase its gas supply beyond Gazprom, with the most complex challenges potentially being addressed in disinformation that questions the effectiveness or reliability of alternative routes through Romania.

To supplement the blatantly pro-Russian Russian-language media, Moscow will be ready to increase its investment in seemingly independent proxy media. It will likely develop or reinforce Moldovan-language digital media outlets that mimic independent journalism but, on issues of relevance, subtly promote pro-Russian narratives. This dual media ecology, described by Nimmo,<sup>29</sup> ought to provide reinforcing messages through various platforms.

Potent rhetoric of divisiveness and identity politics will also feature prominently. The ambiguity of political discourse has created an opening to incite hostility between Romanian-identified and Moldovan-identified populations. This polarization is exacerbated by a complex linguistic context, where the political relationship between Romania and Moldova remains a contentious topic. The unresolved debate over national identity has created a vulnerability that hostile actors use to incite conflict between those who identify as Romanian and those who identify as Moldovan. This polarization is fueled by the ongoing controversy regarding the official language and the country's sensitive political relationship with Romania. In addition, it is likely that targeted actions exploiting the conflict over Transnistria will continue to play a central role, including proposals such as federalization—beneficial to Russian interests—as the only possible way to reintegration, whilst stoking separatist tensions when that suits Russia's political interests.

### *Georgia*

In Georgia, the Romanian anti-NATO program could be adapted to local conditions. Messaging to this end may center on assertions that the 2008 war is evidence that the West will never defend Georgia against Russian interests, thereby undermining the country's aspirations for NATO membership. Indeed, Russian

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<sup>28</sup> "Constitution of the Republic of Moldova," Article 11, <https://codices.coe.int/codices/documents/constitution/4e21beda-fd19-4f64-b947-a9810b85f657>.

<sup>29</sup> Ben Nimmo, "Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It," *Stopfake*, May 19, 2015, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/anatomy-of-an-info-war-how-russia-s-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-to-counter-it/>.

disinformation narratives have strategic portability, specifically the “abandonment” trope, which has already been successfully tested in Romania and is currently being tailored to Georgian anxieties. The reference to the “Romanian anti-NATO program” likely corresponds to the “Sitting Duck” narrative – a proven psychological operation aimed at demoralizing NATO aspirants.

In Romania, Russian influence operations have cultivated a specific narrative known as the “Sitting Duck” theory.

- *The Narrative*: This narrative argues that hosting Western military assets (like the missile shield components in Deveselu) does not make Romania safer; instead, it paints a target on the country’s back while the West has no intention of actually defending it.
- *The Goal*: It aims to decouple the population from NATO by framing the alliance not as a shield, but as a liability that invites Russian aggression without guaranteeing protection.

The prediction asserts that this same psychological mechanism will be “ported” to Georgia, but with a different proof point.

- *The Proof Point (2008 War)*: Instead of hypothetical fears (as in Romania), propagandists in Georgia use the 2008 Russo-Georgian War as historical “evidence” of Western betrayal. The narrative asserts that the West encouraged Georgia to stand up to Russia but failed to intervene militarily when the tanks rolled in.
- *Current Iteration*: This has recently evolved into the “Second Front” conspiracy, claiming the West wants to open a second front in Georgia to distract Russia from Ukraine, sacrificing Georgia in the process.

The basis for this prediction is a standard Russian military doctrine called Reflexive Control – using a target’s own history and trauma to manipulate their decisions.

- *Why It Works*: By linking the fresh trauma of Ukraine (narratives that “the West abandoned Ukraine”) with the historical trauma of 2008, the messaging creates a pattern that looks like a “law of nature”: the West uses small nations as proxies and then discards them.
- *The Intended Outcome*: Just as the Romanian narrative seeks to neutralize Romania’s NATO contributions, the Georgian adaptation seeks to undermine the aspiration for membership by making it seem like a suicidal endeavor.

The campaign’s primary strategy centers on Georgia’s theological affinities with the Orthodox Church by advancing messages that highlight shared conservative religious beliefs in contrast to Western liberal ones. Strategic messaging will also include historical accounts that emphasize the period when Russia exerted protective influence on Georgia and downplay the elements of imperial dominance – especially in the complex history of the nineteenth century, which involved both protection against Ottoman encroachment and state suppression

of Georgian sovereignty. This is intended to convince Georgians that Russian dominance was not conquest but rather the necessary price of survival.

Liabilities to the Georgian economy include access to Russian markets, especially wine exports and money transfers from Georgian laborers in Russia.<sup>30</sup> The messaging increases uncertainty regarding the potential closure of such markets if Georgia continues to pursue alignment with the West. Russian messaging about Abkhazia and South Ossetia will also persist, reinforcing storylines that present Russian occupation as the sole guarantee against renewed conflict, and warning that Western integration would permanently foreclose any reintegration. Combined, these attributes of calibrated confrontation within a broader framework of continuity enable Russia to retain consistent pressure without triggering imminent retaliatory action by the West. Moreover, this strategic messaging enables the development of narratives over extended periods without prompting societal or governance responses that would strengthen institutional resilience in target states.

### ***Escalation Scenario: Aggressive Intensification***

In an escalation scenario, with an increasingly aggressive Russian foreign policy accompanied by additional funding for information warfare, research indicates a rise in the frequency of confrontational information campaigns in Moldova and Georgia.

#### ***Moldova***

In Moldova, this would take the form of an overt threat to the legitimacy of the state and would include an extensive disinformation campaign directly challenging the constitutional basis of pro-Western governments by accusing them of electoral fraud, corruption, or foreign influence. This goes beyond standard political critique; it constitutes a direct assault on the state's institutional legitimacy. Such a disinformation campaign may include provocations aimed at pushing the boundaries of Western support: selective leaks or even fabricated documents could create diplomatic incidents that would push Moldovan authorities

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<sup>30</sup> Wine Exports to Russia (Valuation & Market Share) – Facts: (1) Russia takes 65% of Georgia's wine exports (highest since 2005), valued at \$168 million in 2023. (2) In 2024, this dependence continued, with wine supplies to Russia increasing by 8.5% to \$182.6 million. Source: "TI Report on Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia in 2023," Civil Georgia, February 16, 2024; <https://civil.ge/archives/582712>; "Georgian Exports to Russia Up 3.7% in 2024, Wine Supplies Increase 8.5%," *Interfax*, January 20, 2025, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/109257/>. Money Transfers (Remittances) from Russia – Facts: (1) In 2023, money transfers from Russia to Georgia totaled \$1.5 billion, making it a dominant source of foreign income. (2) While this dropped to \$541 million in 2024 (falling to 3rd place behind the US and Italy), it remains a critical economic lever. Sources: Natiko Taktakishvili, "Statistics of Remittance System for 2024," *Business Media*, January 16, 2025, <https://bm.ge/en/news/statistics-of-remittance-system-for-2024>; "NBG: Money transfers from Russia decreased by 64.6% in 2024," *1TV* (Georgian Public Broadcaster), January 15, 2025, <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/nbg-money-transfers-from-russia-decreased-by-64-6-in-2024/>.

and Western partners into reactive stances, thereby demonstrating the limits of foreign commitments to Moldovan sovereignty.

The study also predicts that Russia will engineer information crises that require outside intervention. Manipulative disinformation could cause the population—and thus the government—to panic about energy security or bank stability, leading to emergency pleas for foreign aid and emphasizing Moldova's dependence. Additionally, "sovereignty referendum" plots in territories such as Gagauzia and Taraclia, similar to those conducted in Crimea, would resuscitate separatist leanings among the population and create *de facto* situations that international observers would struggle to contain. These autonomy referenda could be supported by synchronized campaigns of informational and economic pressure, in which disinformation efforts combine with real economic actions—such as selective import restrictions, control of energy prices, or interference in remittances—to apply cumulative pressure on decisionmakers.

### *Georgia*

In the case of Georgia, the escalation scenario would lead to increased delegitimization of democratic institutions, as well as advances in disinformation and misinformation targeting the integrity of electoral processes, the judicial system, and civil society organizations, in order to diminish both domestic and international confidence in Georgia's democratic progress. At the same time, Russia's actions would likely involve information operations in the separatist territories, such as falsified border incidents, alleged cases of human-rights abuses against Russian citizens, or claims that Georgia is preparing for war, leading to crises necessitating Russian "protective" measures. Amplified anti-Western discourse directly tying Georgia's security issues to NATO expansion—portraying Georgia's territorial losses as the logical result of Western security policy and presenting Russia as the sole security provider—could accompany such operations. In addition, Moscow may launch synchronized cyber-information campaigns targeting critical infrastructure, coupling disinformation with disruption to energy, transport, or communications infrastructure and thereby causing multiple security crises that erode trust in state capabilities.

Lastly, Russian disinformation operations will probably take advantage of any hesitation or inconsistency in Western support by operating in real time to spread and expose any contradictory policies or conditions for support mandated by NATO or the European Union, with the intent to illustrate that the West's commitment to Georgia cannot be relied upon. Such a situation reflects what Snegovaya<sup>31</sup> attributes to the so-called "escalatory information confrontation" phenomenon in the pre-conflict phase of Russia's activity in Ukraine: an

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<sup>31</sup> Maria Snegovaya, "Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare," Institute for the Study of War, 2015, <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/putins-information-warfare-in-ukraine-soviet-origins-of-russias-hybrid-warfare-2/>.

intensified information war prepares the public mind and manufactures an excuse for a military invasion. At the same time, it frames Western support as purely symbolic and ineffective.

### ***De-escalation Scenario: Tactical Adaptation***

If Russia were to lose interest in confrontational information warfare, research on Romania suggests Moscow would significantly adjust its information efforts in Moldova and Georgia.

#### ***Moldova***

The Romanian study indicates that a shift in authoritarian discourse toward approaches focused on economic and cultural influence would occur. Kremlin messaging would emphasize historical economic interdependence and cultural closeness, rather than portray Russia as an epicentre of threats to Moldovan sovereignty. Rather than top-level institution-building exercises, information operations would strongly emphasize practical forms of cooperation and “common interests,” promoting bilateral solutions to various regional problems—such as migration, environmental protection, and transnational crime—that position Russia as a partner in need rather than a foe.

However, as more conciliatory notes become audible, identity vulnerabilities would likely be further exploited. Messaging that accounts for Moldova’s desire to join the European Union would now focus on aspects of Moldovan identity aligned with Russian proximity rather than on Romanian integration discourses. Moscow’s strategy pairs anti-Western rhetoric with economic seduction. While downplaying overt hostility, it will contrast the “financial burden” of Western regulations with the tangible benefits of Russian partnership, such as preferential trade deals, investment projects, and access to migrant labor markets.

#### ***Georgia***

If Russia de-escalates its current activities, the direction of reconciliation narratives will likely shift. The Kremlin would likely redefine past antagonisms through dialogue and practical engagement, without setting preconditions on sovereignty or territorial issues. Russia’s messaging would focus on economic opportunity, highlighting the tangible benefits of renewed trade, tourism, and investments that prioritize economic payoffs over geopolitical affinity. The promotion of common Orthodox culture and heritage—through religious tourism, films, and exhibitions—would contrast with a reduced focus on territorial conflicts and security issues. Additionally, Moscow could advance a form of middle ground, socializing the notion that Russia does not exclude Europe but instead promotes a special model of Eurasian development that preserves more of Georgia’s sovereignty and traditions than full Western integration would allow.

When it comes to regional security issues, Russia would encourage selective cooperation. Moscow would attempt to bolster its credentials as a responsible actor in security matters, spreading propaganda focused on joint work on terror-

ism and drug trafficking, responses to natural disasters, and information campaigns, even without resolving these problems in the disputed territories. Tsygankov<sup>32</sup> sees this shift by Russia as an example of strategic flexibility, whereby the Kremlin rebalances its influence strategies to meet strategic goals by employing less confrontational options without compromising core strategic interests. Russia anticipates that such a stance would be more effective in influencing state action and less likely to attract Western countermeasures or inspire further external assistance.

## Conclusion

This article considers Russian disinformation campaigns in Romania as test cases for the Kremlin's potential disinformation strategies in Moldova and Georgia. Romania has been an experimental ground for Russian information warfare campaigns, and these activities have been carefully tailored to target particular weaknesses in the Romanian information landscape.

A comparative analysis of modern information operations in two adjacent post-Soviet countries—Moldova and Georgia—displays vivid but differing levels of receptivity to Moscow-sponsored discourses, the effectiveness of which is filtered through contextual predispositions. Considering the Romanian testbed model in each of these environments, it is apparent that, in the case of Moldova, the known playbook poses urgent risks. In contrast, Georgia requires a more nuanced analysis that accounts for its specific context. The article analyzes potential paths of escalatory and de-escalatory Russian disinformation campaigns in both nations, projecting probable lines of action.

This discussion bridges theory and practice, demonstrating that effective countermeasures should include not only restorative responses to content but also responses that address underlying structural flaws that make societies vulnerable to established strategies for perpetuating information warfare. To that end, future research should be dedicated to empirical testing of the predictive models proposed herein, longitudinal monitoring of tactical shifts between the laboratory and the target state, and a comparative evaluation of the efficacy of diverse countermeasures across different vulnerability settings. These activities promise to increase both academic understanding of information warfare processes and the ability of democratic governments and the global community to curb their negative consequences.

## Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy

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<sup>32</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 101-111, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.04.002>.

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### **About the Author**

**Khyati Singh** is a Research Analyst at the Center for North America and Strategic Technologies, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, India. She is also a doctoral candidate at the Center for the Study of the Americas, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9784-2727>

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