CHAPTER 5.

AMENINȚĂRI ȘI PERSPECTIVE PENTRU REZILIENȚA DEMOCRAȚIEI LA FRONTIERA UCRAINEANO-ROMÂNO-MOLDAVĂ: ALEGERI ÎN VREMURI DE RĂZBOI

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Rezumat: *În timpul războiului, democrația se află sub amenințare, deoarece crizele necesită decizii rapide și uneori radicale. Războiul Rusiei împotriva Ucrainei, început în 2014 într-un format hibrid și continuat în 2022 într-un format tradițional, convențional, a devenit, de asemenea, un război împotriva democrației. Moscova și-a lansat ofensiva pe mai multe direcții — vizibile și invizibile publicului larg: militare, informaționale, economice, diplomatice etc., pentru a influența democrațiile europene și a-și impune propria hegemonie. Kremlinul acordă o atenție deosebită Europei Centrale și de Est, în special Republicii Moldova și României. Alegerile prezidențiale și parlamentare din aceste țări au devenit un adevărat câmp de luptă între forțele democratice și populiștii, și radicalii pro-ruși. Forțele pe care Moscova le-a mobilizat pentru instaurarea unui regim loial în România și Republica Moldova au fost fără precedent. Totuși, în ambele cazuri, Moscova a pierdut. Instituțiile democratice și-au demonstrat reziliența și flexibilitatea în perioade de criză. Evoluția situației electorale din Republica Moldova și România a arătat că, în pofida narațiunilor ruse despre slăbiciunea democrației, aceasta rămâne singurul instrument eficient de depășire a autoritarismului în forma sa imperială. În același timp, războiul total al Rusiei rămâne cea mai importantă provocare și amenințare la adresa democrației.*
Cuvinte-cheie: *democrație, războiul ruso-ucrainean, Europa Centrală și de Est, Moldova, România, alegeri, război informațional, securitate.*

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THREATS AND PROSPECTS FOR PRESERVING DEMOCRACY ON THE UKRAINIAN – ROMANIAN – MOLDOVAN BORDER: ELECTIONS IN WARTIME

Abstract: *In wartime, democracy is under threat, as crises require quick and sometimes radical decisions. Russia's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 in a hybrid format and in 2022 in a traditional, conventional format, has also become a war against democracy. Moscow has launched its offensive in several directions —visible and invisible to the general public—military, informational, economic, diplomatic, etc.—to influence European democracies and establish its own hegemony. The Kremlin is paying particular attention to Central and Eastern Europe, in particular the Republic of Moldova and Romania. The presidential and parliamentary elections in these countries have become a real battleground between democratic forces and pro-Russian populists and radicals. The forces that Moscow has thrown into establishing a regime loyal to itself in Romania and the Republic of Moldova have been unprecedented. However, in both cases, Moscow has lost. Democratic institutions proved their resilience and flexibility in times of crisis. The development of the electoral situation in the Republic of Moldova and Romania showed that, despite Russia's narratives about the weakness of democracy, democracy remains the only effective tool for overcoming authoritarianism in its imperial form. At the same time, Russia's war on all fronts remains the most significant challenge and threat to democracy.*

Keywords: democracy, Russian-Ukrainian war, Central-Eastern Europe, Moldova, Romania, elections, information warfare, security.

Introduction

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has become the most significant geopolitical challenge of the 21st century. Its significance for the collective security system, formed after two world wars, lies in its forcing every country in the world to choose sides. Moreover, even if some try to balance, their actions testify to a choice that is existential not only for them, but also for the fate of democracy.

The Ukrainian-Romanian-Moldovan border region is a special political and spiritual space, united by a common history and challenges

of the present. Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova have all gone through a difficult transition from authoritarianism to democracy, building it through the thorns of historical and political stereotypes and fears. The recent elections in Romania and Moldova have become a battleground for democracy in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. It has become clear that Moscow is waging its war not only against Kyiv, but also against Bucharest and Chisinau. Understanding the essence of contemporary Russian policy in Central and Eastern Europe, which includes all three states, requires reference to its historical preconditions and peculiarities.

During the two world wars of the last century, Central and Eastern Europe were one of the main theatres of war. Wars swept through these lands several times, bringing enormous losses and destruction. As a result of the world wars, practically everything changed for the population living in the region, in some cases even their nationality, as the architecture of the world order underwent significant changes after both the First and Second World Wars.

The year 1918 saw the fall of empires, one of which, the Russian Empire, formally disappeared from the political map of the world and transformed into the Soviet Union. The imperial nature of this "union" was evident from the moment of its creation: the annexation of new territories took place according to the usual pattern for Moscow – through the creation of puppet governments that expressed a "voluntary" desire to "join" Soviet Russia, their financial, military, organisational, and other support, followed by the unfolding of "civil confrontation" and, accordingly, Moscow's open military intervention in the internal affairs of already independent states to restore its dominance. Thus, the era of the people's republics proclaimed in 1917-1920 by the former colonies of Russia ended with the return of Russia to these lands in a Soviet format, the creation of the so-called Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

This algorithm, successfully tested at the beginning of the 20th century – in 1917-1922, was repeated by Moscow in the mid-1940s, when it formed a socialist camp of Central and Eastern European states. After victory in World War II, the Kremlin prioritised strengthening control over Eastern European countries. Joseph Stalin, generalissimo and leader of the Soviet state, "considered the Soviet sphere

of influence to be the most important outcome of the war and was not going to make any concessions to the West in this part of Europe" [40]. Therefore, the pressure on the countries of the region regarding their potential cooperation with Western democracies was unprecedented. It was precisely because of the USSR's position that the countries of the region were forced to refuse to participate in the Marshall Plan and accept aid from the American government to rebuild their economies after World War II [41].

Cominform, and later, from 1955, the Warsaw Pact Organization (WPO), created as a counterweight to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), became additional instruments of control over the states of the region. Unlike NATO, the organisational structure of the WSO was built in accordance with Moscow's imperial ambitions: 1) only Soviet generals held leadership positions in the organisation; 2) the organisation's headquarters were in Moscow; 3) the armies of the member states, which, in addition to the USSR, included East Germany (GDR), Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Albania, were fully integrated into the WSO structure. The working language was Russian [38].

All this allowed the Kremlin not only to strengthen its presence in the region but also to maintain Moscow's status as an imperial centre: the independence of the member states of these associations was, to a certain extent, formal, since only Moscow made strategic decisions on development and international cooperation. This is evidenced by the aforementioned refusal of Eastern European states to participate in the Marshall Plan at Moscow's request and their subsequent participation in all associations initiated by the latter, primarily the Warsaw Pact. Attempts to defend their right to sovereignty were perceived as a direct threat to the existing legal order and were suppressed by force, as in 1956 in Hungary or 1968 in Czechoslovakia. In fact, the military operation in Budapest in October 1956 was the Warsaw Pact's first [38].

The "velvet revolutions" in the region in the late 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the reunification of Germany led to the understanding that maintaining the Warsaw Pact as a military-political alliance was impossible and pointless. In February 1991, a decision was made to liquidate the military structures, and on July 1, 1991, the

Warsaw Pact ceased to exist. Literally a month and a half later, a coup began in Moscow with an attempt to return the USSR to the Stalin era, which effectively put an end to the existence of the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the USSR, the situation was changing radically, and it seemed that Russian imperialism would finally be destroyed. At least, that was the hope of all opponents of the Soviet regime. The mobilisation of national elites and the unfolding of anti-colonial national movements led to the collapse of the socialist system, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and, ultimately, the Soviet Union itself. The independence of the former republics of the USSR and their desire to build their own sovereignty proved the success of the second stage of the collapse of the Russian Soviet Empire. It should be noted that the change in political elites, primarily the rise to power of Boris Yeltsin in Russia, was perceived primarily as an opportunity to establish and develop Russia as a democracy. His active role during the attempted coup in August 1991 triggered a domino effect – a parade of sovereignties by the republics of the former "union."

Radical changes in the former Soviet space marked the period from 1991 to 2000. The development of independence in each newborn state had its own character and peculiarities. As for Russia, Boris Yeltsin's liberal statements were seen mainly as a basis for future democratisation. An additional argument in favour of the latter was the return to history, the appeal to the works of oppositionists repressed by the Soviet authorities – Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, and others, drawing attention primarily to the anti-Soviet nature of their works and statements.

However, no miracle happened. Russia did not become a liberal democracy, or even a democracy at all. Moreover, it quickly became clear that the newly formed Russian Federation was a colossus with feet of clay, unable to survive as an independent geopolitical actor without Western support. Furthermore, the West did everything possible to preserve and strengthen the Russian Federation, because after the collapse of the USSR, it seemed impossible to survive the collapse of yet another state and another redistribution of control over nuclear weapons. Here, one could recall the technical and other support programs (TACIS, for example) that were provided to the Russian Federation in the early 1990s to prevent its further collapse. We could also men-

tion the Kremlin's convulsive attempts to preserve at least the formal framework of the union by creating the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which never became a real geopolitical player. Looking back at the 1990s today, the author is convinced that without Western aid, the Russian Federation would not have survived as a single state, as centrifugal tendencies were quite noticeable, and the social tensions and economic situation were complex. Humanitarian aid from the West and the so-called "Bush legs" saved not only Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also the entire current Russian Federation from starvation [25] and, in the author's opinion, geopolitical collapse.

Politically, the loss of Ukraine and other republics (which, despite their formal sovereignty, were in fact colonies of Moscow) became a litmus test for Moscow's imperial ambitions. Unprepared to develop its own national project, the latter convulsively tried to maintain its influence over the states that emerged from the ruins of the USSR, while at the same time preserving itself as a single state, giving no chance to national republics such as Ichkeria or Tatarstan for genuine autonomy, let alone independence.

Despite liberal statements, the imperial nature of the new president's policy – jBoris Yeltsin – manifested itself almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian-Chechen wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2007 (the latter ended by the next president, Vladimir Putin) against the backdrop of the current Russian-Ukrainian war and the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 allow us to highlight the peculiarities of Russian imperial policy at the turn of the second and third millennia. In all cases, we are talking about the active use of hybrid warfare tools in interaction with states that Moscow traditionally considers to be its sphere of influence and which have shown a persistent desire for independence. Thus, the term "war" was not used by Moscow in any of these cases: in Ichkeria, it was a "counterterrorism operation" [47], in Georgia, a "peace enforcement operation" [16], and in Ukraine, a "special military operation" [48]. The military attack began without a declaration of war, with an active disinformation prelude aimed at discrediting the victim of Russian aggression. Unable to defeat any of the above-mentioned parties by military means, Moscow focuses on information warfare, undermining the stability and cohe-

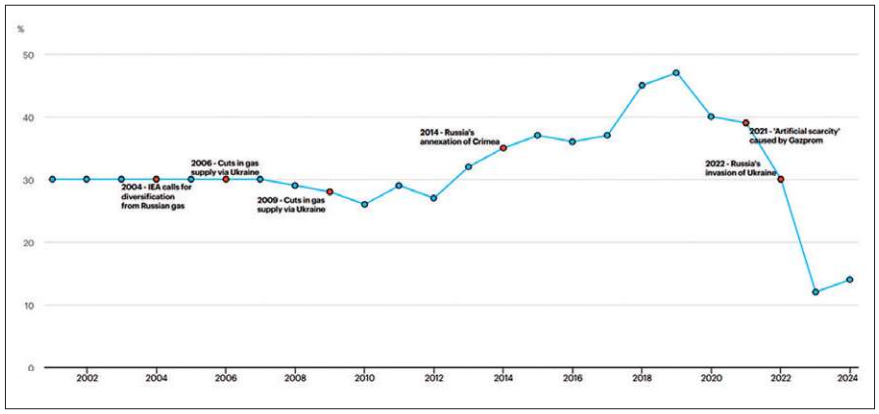
sion of societies through manipulative technologies, propaganda, and disinformation.

Looking back on the last decade of the previous millennium, we realise it was a turning point for Russia. The inability of the new political elite to form its own national project, the lack of understanding of what Russian national identity is and what the Russian national idea consists of, inevitably kept Moscow in the practices of imperialism that had been formed and successfully implemented over the centuries. The Soviet man – Homo Sovieticus – was transformed into the Russian man – Homo Russicus. The path from Yeltsin's "dear Russian citizens" ("dorogiie rossiiane") to Putin's "Russians" (russkiie) was extremely short, and it took only one New Year's Eve to consolidate it legally. Thus, in literally ten years, the Soviet Union was transformed into Russia, where Soviet is equated with Russian and where there is no place for the national self-expression in any of its manifestations.

Over the past ten years, Eastern Europe has come a long way from Moscow, overcoming the challenges of Euro-Atlantic integration. Moscow has been unable to do anything about it. However, it could not allow Ukraine and other former Soviet republics to turn toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Preserving the Russian state meant preserving the empire, the essence of which is expansion in all its manifestations, primarily territorial. Ukraine, like the Republic of Moldova, was seen as an integral part of this empire, with the prospect of restoring influence over the rest of Central and Eastern Europe. To implement its plans, Moscow needed additional tools, which could only be obtained in exchange for energy resources. This required a change in the political course of the Russian Federation itself.

New Year's Eve 1999–2000 brought an unexpected "gift" not only to Russians, but also to the entire world community – the appointment of Vladimir Putin as acting president of the country. Almost immediately, in the same year 2000, the European Union began an active energy dialogue with the Russian Federation. Both sides were highly interested in developing cooperation. Each had its own goals, with the EU hoping that Putin would "continue the course of the previous president" and viewing Russia "as a reliable partner" [53, p. 40]. The cheap energy resources offered by the Russian Federation were extremely beneficial for the European Union. In a short period, a number

of Western European countries fell into Russia's trap of cheap energy. At the same time, it should be noted that, practically from the very beginning of the Energy Dialogue, it had a strong political dimension, and gas supplies to the EU were used to achieve political goals, in particular to discredit Ukraine as a reliable partner in the eyes of the EU. The following infographic allows us to trace the main features of gas cooperation between Brussels and Moscow through the prism of the Ukrainian factor:



Джерело: https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/charts/share-of-european-union-gas-demand-met-by-russian-supply-2001-2024

The opportunities opened up by the Energy Dialogue not only provided Moscow with financial gains, but also strengthened its military and political potential, not to mention its ability to influence decision-making processes within the EU through reflexive management tools, in particular pressure on the authorities, providing disinformation about a particular situation, influencing the enemy's decision-making algorithm, and changing the timing of decisions, etc. [50]. Systematic information pressure on European states became apparent after the outbreak of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine in 2014. Since then, the situation has only worsened: new technological capabilities allow Moscow to actively use all innovative information tools to influence the general public, destabilising the situation, introducing elements of uncertainty and creating an atmosphere of chaos, which ultimately leads to an increase in negative trends, distrust in demo-

cratic institutions, internal resistance to the actions of the authorities, and the spread of radical ideas, whether right-wing or left-wing, depending on the political culture and traditions of a given society.

Between 2014 and 2022, Russia's interference in the internal affairs of European states was repeatedly documented. The most significant examples were the referendums in Spain and Scotland, Brexit, the elections in France, etc. On the eve of and after the outbreak of a large-scale war against Ukraine, the information front expanded and became particularly relevant. Today, Russia is trying to bring political forces dependent on itself to power in European states, not only to deprive Ukraine of support, but also to establish its hegemony on the European continent. Given the experience of the hybrid war of 2014-2022, as well as the military challenges of today, pressure on EU states is intensifying, which is particularly acute during election campaigns, particularly in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, which are Ukraine's neighbours and on whose political stability and European orientation it depends.

The Russian-Ukrainian war and its impact on electoral processes in neighbouring countries

As the successor state to the USSR, Russia has been unable to accept the loss of "its" territories since its inception. Its attempt to transform the USSR into the so-called CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) is a vivid example of this. The next step on the path to restoring Russian imperialism in its full force was the aforementioned appointment of Vladimir Putin as acting president of the country, followed by his election to this post. The latter immediately declared Russia's geopolitical ambitions and outlined inviolable "red lines" in relations with Moscow:

"For centuries, Russia has been and remains a great world power. It has always had and will always have areas of legitimate interest [...]. We must not relax our vigilance, we must not allow our opinion to be ignored" [18].

Since then, Russia has been systematically moving towards restoring the Soviet-era format of the Russian Empire, expanding its sphere of influence not only into the countries of the former socialist camp, but also into Western Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa.

The large-scale war against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since February 24, 2022, had every chance of starting earlier. The Russian Federation made its first attempt to enter Ukraine by military means back in 1992, when the Black Sea Fleet was divided [17]. At that time, Russia lacked both the political audacity and the military and economic potential to start a war. Therefore, information and energy became the main instruments of influence on Ukraine and Ukrainians.

The next step is to resolve the hybrid war in 2014 and the large-scale war in 2022. Russia's current war against Ukraine has been and remains aimed at destroying Ukrainian statehood. This can only be achieved by undermining democratic institutions not only in Ukraine but, above all, in the EU, which has become a beacon of freedom and democratic choice for states that were Soviet republics in the recent past.

Since 2014, and especially since 2022, Russia has been paying particular attention to Ukraine's neighbouring states. By discrediting democracy and promoting its own narratives there, Russia is effectively surrounding Ukraine with a belt of unfriendly states, which in turn should lead to Ukraine's isolation in both political and logistical terms. The latter, in turn, will make it impossible for the European states to assist Ukraine in its confrontation with the Russian aggressor. The expected result for Russia is further defeat and the subsequent occupation of Ukraine. Another consequence of this policy will be the expansion of Russian influence in Europe, at least in the territory of the former socialist camp. Among the states under Moscow's particularly close attention are Romania and Moldova, Ukraine's neighbours, whose citizens' political choices will largely determine the future course of events in Ukraine.

Defeat in Moldovan style: European course instead of "Russian world"

The Republic of Moldova is one of the countries that gained independence following the collapse of the USSR. On August 27, 1991, Moldova declared independence and began to forge its own geopolitical path. However, all this time, the Republic of Moldova has been living in a state of hybrid war, which has created conditions for the preservation and, at a particular stage, even strengthening of Russian influence

on political processes within the state and on the vector of its foreign policy development.

Accepting the Republic of Moldova's independence as a fait accompli and subsequently respecting its sovereignty became an impossible task for the Russian political elite, especially the state leadership. Moscow continued its policy of "divide and rule" in Moldova, seeking to play a key role in the region while simultaneously creating additional challenges and threats through its presence.

The presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova in September 2024, as well as the parliamentary elections in 2025, demonstrated the readiness of the Moldovan political elite to defend democratic values and the opportunity to choose their own geopolitical destiny independently. The conditions in which these elections took place were formed even before the declaration of independence, and the pain points Russia pressed on have their roots in the 1980s and early 1990s at least. These include Chisinau's constitutional obligations regarding neutral status, Transnistria, Gagauzia, national identity in the context of geopolitical choice, and so on. The change in the geopolitical situation forces us to return to Moldova's recent history through the prism of military challenges and threats to Moldovan statehood.

The history of the formation of the modern territory of the Republic of Moldova is complex and full of contradictions. The Soviet authorities created the preconditions for subsequent conflicts while implementing their national policy. The inclusion of the Transnistria region into the Moldavian SSR (as the Republic of Moldova was then called) and its subsequent subordination to Moscow led to predictable consequences: the formation of a separate, Russian-speaking, conservative nomenclature, which became the new political elite of the region. Frightened by the ethno-political renaissance in Moldova, the spread of unionist ideas, in particular the potential prospect of unification with Romania, which was then actively discussed, as well as the need to study the Moldovan language, which on August 31, 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR declared official, it opposed Chisinau. While the Chisinau elite could not believe in the possibility of separatism in Transnistria, the Russian-speaking population of Transnistria categorically rejected the process of ethnopoliticalization

of Moldovan society. It began to view it as a threat to the existence of their established way of life [36].

As a result, Transnistria declared independence from Moldova on August 25, 1991, while retaining Soviet laws on its territory [39]. Tiraspol's radical position was due to several factors, among them confidence in Moscow's support. The subsequent outbreak of military conflict was inevitable. Moreover, while official Chisinau received "moral support" from Bucharest, Tiraspol received real military support from the Russian Federation. Since then, the 14th Russian Army (part of the All-Russian Army under the agreement of April 1, 1992), located on the left bank of the Dniester, has sided with Tiraspol. Thanks to this, Transnistria was able to deploy heavy weapons, including tanks, in the battle for Bendery, which forced Chisinau to make concessions and begin negotiations [36]. The course of the conflict, the negotiations, and their results are described in the works of scholars from Moldova and other countries. However, in the author's opinion, one fundamental fact remains unnoticed: the resolution of Russia's hybrid war against Moldova.

The fundamental difference between hybrid warfare and information warfare is the potential use of military force. By combining traditional military actions with non-traditional methods such as propaganda, disinformation, cyberattacks, economic, political, and other levers of influence, hybrid warfare allows for the establishment of reflexive control over enemy territories and the realisation of interests there. In this case, the proclamation of an independent, democratic Moldova ran counter to Moscow's interests, which are desperately trying to preserve Russian imperialism in any form. For the Kremlin, a democratic Moldova, like a democratic Ukraine, Georgia, etc., is an enemy that must be destroyed at any cost.

With the collapse of the USSR, Moscow has been systematically undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova, with a separatist enclave in the form of Transnistria and loyal Gagauzia. The presence of Russian troops on Moldovan territory in Transnistria, combined with Moscow's information dominance, has enabled it to significantly influence the sovereign state's internal political life over the following decades. It has also influenced its foreign policy priorities, because the author never tyres of repeating that democratic choices cannot be

made under threat and that the potential to use force is sometimes a more powerful weapon than its overt use. The latter is clearly evident in Russian policy in Moldova, where the potential use of armed forces is a constant backdrop to political decision-making not only by the ruling elite, but also by the electorate, which is simultaneously under significant informational pressure from the Kremlin.

For Moscow, Moldova has been and remains a strategically important foreign policy objective. It provides access to the EU via Romania, which, for a long time, remained the only Central and Eastern European country independent of Russian energy resources. In the context of a large-scale war against Ukraine, this opportunity takes on particular significance, as the situation on the Russian-Ukrainian front and socio-political stability in the region, which is also the eastern border of the European Union, directly depend on the security of logistical links.

In the case of Moldova, Russia achieved its desired outcome for a while: the country's neutral status is enshrined in its constitution, which is the subject of constant political manipulation and geopolitical pressure from Moscow. In addition to Transnistria, Moscow's proxy in Moldova is the Gagauz autonomy. Like Tiraspol, Comrat declared independence in 1991, only on August 19. However, due to its geography and inability to ensure its independence, it returned to the Republic of Moldova in December 1994 as an autonomous region. According to the Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Eri), "in the event of a change in the status of the Republic of Moldova as an independent state, the people of Gagauzia have the right to external self-determination" [27].

Thus, sovereign Moldova has been living in a state of hybrid war for over 30 years, where political decisions, like elections, take place under systematic and powerful pressure from Moscow. At the same time, a generation of young people has grown up during independence, for whom European values and prospects are much closer than Russian ones, or, more precisely, reincarnated Soviet ones.

Every election in the Republic of Moldova since 1991 has been a test of readiness to break away from Moscow. As mentioned above, in 2020, Maia Sandu, leader of the pro-European Action and Solidarity Party, won the presidential election. Her opponent was Igor Dodon, the then-incumbent president and leader of the Socialist Party.

His statements about Crimea belonging to Russia sparked widespread discussion in the Ukrainian public sphere and raised the question of a possible ban on his entry into Ukraine. A number of activists and MPs called on the Security Service of Ukraine to ban Igor Dodon from entering Ukraine. However, under international norms, it is not possible to ban diplomats from entering the country, as they have special status when crossing the border [46]. Therefore, it was not possible to ban him from entering Ukraine during his presidency. Relations between the two countries during this period can hardly be called constructive, let alone friendly.

The election of Maia Sandu as president changed the nature of Moldovan-Ukrainian relations and Moldova's interactions with the European Union and Russia. From her first days in office, Sandu faced active opposition to her initiatives and Moldova's shift towards European integration from pro-Russian forces. This did not prevent her from actively working to reduce the influence of pro-Russian political forces in the country, carry out reforms, and implement a European integration course.

The outbreak of Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine has brought the issue of security to the forefront for Moldova. This is particularly true in the military sphere: Russia's 14th Army continues to be stationed in the unrecognised region of Transnistria, and Moscow is actively using this potential for military force to maintain its influence in the republic. This concentration of Russian forces between Moldova and Ukraine creates additional tension in the region and requires a new approach to neutralise it.

In addition to military and political tensions, the Russian-Ukrainian war has created several new challenges for Moldova. First and foremost, increased information pressure: Russia intensified its disinformation and propaganda activities, discrediting the EU, Ukraine, Moldovan President Maia Sandu, and her policies. In addition, the socio-economic situation has worsened: in 2024, the country's economy entered a recession, with GDP growing by only 0.1%. As noted by economic expert V. Ionite, "Economic stagnation in 2024 with insignificant growth of 0.1% is only a symptom of a much more serious problem: over the past five years, the cumulative growth of the economy was only 0.4%, which is an alarmingly low level, comparable only

to the period immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union" [52]. According to the expert, this is a sign of a systemic economic crisis.

The socio-economic crisis that Moldova is experiencing is being exacerbated by active Russian interference in the country's internal affairs. Unable to do so directly, Moscow is using proxies in the region and expanding its network of agents of influence and lobbyists to keep Moldova within the "Russian world". In its disinformation and propaganda activities, the Kremlin substitutes concepts, shifts emphasis, and manipulates citizens' consciousness. In the context of the presidential and then parliamentary elections, the situation has become threatening.

One area where Russian cynicism takes on particularly grotesque forms is Ukrainian refugees. From the very first hours of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moldova opened its borders to people who were forced to leave their homes because of the war. As of the end of 2024, 123,000 Ukrainian refugees were living in the Republic of Moldova [28]. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova has taken in more than 1.4 million Ukrainians [49]. A significant number of them have moved to other countries or returned to Ukraine. Among those who remained in Moldova, according to a study by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), about 60% found work, with 44% finding permanent employment. Some work remotely or in temporary or informal jobs [10]. In its attempt to discredit Ukraine and Ukrainians, Russia has launched a widespread disinformation campaign. In July 2022, Russians launched a series of posts on social media about "ungrateful Ukrainians". As noted by Dmitry Lekartsev, director of assistance to Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, Moldovan society has shown unity in its desire to help Ukrainians affected by the war:

"*To be honest, I have never seen such unity in Moldovan society. People gave everything they had. Once, a little boy came to us with his piggy bank, broke it open, and gave us all his savings. People were sincere and open. Then another story began: there was a wave of posts and various videos on TikTok saying that Ukrainian refugees were bad and ungrateful, etc. In response, we launched the Moldova Pentru pace ("Moldova for Peace") campaign"* [33].

Moscow's defamation campaign against Ukrainian refugees in Moldova is part of a broader effort. It began immediately after the full-

scale invasion and aims to cause social division, polarisation, and a rejection of support for Ukraine at all levels. In Moldova, this theme was actively used to discredit Maia Sandu's European course and her PAS during the elections. To maintain its influence and pursue its own interests, Moscow has intensified the *Matryoshka* and *Overload* campaigns. These social media disinformation networks are directly targeted at Moldova. Their messages constantly contain elements of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, including accusations of "terrorist attacks" and "mass riots" linked to Ukrainian refugees. Among the main target audiences of these campaigns is the Moldovan diaspora, which has demonstrated its commitment to Moldova's European course [43].

A systematic approach to discrediting everything European is a characteristic feature of Russian policy in Moldova. Since 1991, Russia has been actively working to create a negative image of the EU and the European integration process in Moldova. The Russian-Ukrainian war has become an additional tool for political manipulation in the country. Moscow has introduced the term "Ukrainization" with a negative connotation as a synonym for "war", thereby intimidating broad segments of the population with the negative consequences of choosing Europe. In fact, Russia has proposed the following propaganda chain, which, incidentally, it also uses in Georgia: the choice of European integration, the division of society, and war with all its consequences. This chain is schematic, but it fully reflects the Russian approach, where formally Moscow plays no role, but the second and third links in the chain are precisely its activities and the desired outcome. After all, it allows it to continue controlling the situation and opens the door to the restoration of Moscow's imperial power in certain territories.

The information vise with which Moscow has attempted to squeeze Moldova in recent years is unprecedented even for the Kremlin. In 2023, the latter spent $55 million to destroy democratic Moldova. In 2024, this amount reached €200 million [8]. One of the reasons for the increased pressure was Moldova's acquisition of EU candidate status in June 2022. This forced Russia to expand its arsenal of tools to influence the situation in the republic, including controlled protests, energy blackmail via Transnistria, and the creation of vote-buying networks during local elections. The latter were fronted by Shor and cost $55 million on the campaign [2].

During all election campaigns – local, presidential and parliamentary elections – Moldovan pro-European political forces were under constant pressure from Moscow, including through fugitive Moldovan oligarchs from the old regime. According to Prime Minister Dorin Recean, Russian agents bought votes and oligarchs organised anti-Western protests [2]. In fact, Moldova has become the second front in Russia's war against democracy. While Ukraine is holding back the Russian military offensive and defending the front, Moldova has become a testing ground for new influence tactics aimed at accelerating the establishment of Russian myths in Moldovan society.

A specific feature of the geopolitical battle for Moldova has been the de facto division of Moldovan society into Russian- and Romanian-speaking communities. This division is conditional in the context of each citizen's command of languages. According to the author's observations, the number of citizens who are fluent in both languages is growing in the country, as is the number of young people who prefer English to Russian. This refers to preferences in information consumption and trust in sources, as well as the orientation towards the relevant audience of the subject of information influence, in this case, Russia. The latter is oriented towards Russian-speaking consumers for whom Russian is their native language (11.1% according to 2024 data) or the language of everyday communication (15.3%) [3]. The largest Russian-speaking population is concentrated in cities and northern regions, particularly in Bălți, where this figure reaches 45% [22]. Accordingly, the Kremlin's propaganda machine is operating at full capacity there, as pro-European forces have been unable to provide a strong, consolidated response in the Russian-speaking media space.

Until 2022, Russian media occupied key positions in the Moldovan information space, including print publications such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Trud*, and *Argumenty i Fakty*. Russian media influence began to weaken in 2022. At that time, Maia Sandu signed a law banning the broadcast of Russian news and analytical programs, as well as military films from the Russian Federation and other countries that had not ratified the convention on cross-border television [45]. The closure of *Sputnik's* local bureau by the Moldovan Information and Security Service for inciting hatred during the Russian invasion

of Ukraine was an additional argument for changing the situation in favour of national audiovisual and print media, and strategically national political discourse. In 2023, for the first time in history, the Romanian-language newspaper Ziarul de Gardă had a larger circulation than the Russian-language Komsomolskaya Pravda. As for trust in Russian-language sources, a study by the Institute for Public Policy found that only 27.5% of respondents continued to trust them in 2023 [44].

Without legal access to traditional media, Russia has increased its presence in cyberspace, as mentioned above, especially on social networks such as TikTok and Telegram, as well as on anonymous Facebook pages. Various memes have become a popular tool of influence, allowing the aggressor to impose the desired image through visual perception. In general, the content disseminated by the Russian side in the Republic of Moldova before and during the presidential and parliamentary elections can be divided into three thematic clusters [8]:

1. Identity-based narratives frame: Europe as a threat to Orthodoxy, the national language, the "traditional" family, and values;
2. Economic, including social fears about living standards, the cost of utilities, lost markets, and the EU's colonialist policy, while Russia offers significant economic opportunities for development;
3. Security, based on the manipulation of neutral status, issues of peace and war, threats from NATO and the EU, which are contrasted with Russia's desire to protect Moldova and guarantee its peace and stability, in particular through the presence of military forces in Transnistria.

The Russian-Ukrainian war runs through all these clusters, and, under the Russian approach, responsibility for resolving and conducting it lies with Ukraine, the North Atlantic Alliance, and the EU, but not with Russia. Accordingly, all the negative consequences of the war are incorporated into messages useful to Russia and disseminated to the population in formats familiar and understandable to everyone, regardless of age, gender, or nationality.

A clear pro-European position, swiftness in making decisions that are inconvenient and unexpected for the Russian side, such as the ban on Russian media in 2022, the obligation of national Internet provid-

ers to block seven Russian Internet resources (including *RIA Novosti* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*), blocking Telegram channels associated with the pro-Russian I. Shor [54] and refusing to depend on Russian energy sources have strengthened trust in Maia Sandu as a president capable of achieving her goals. Therefore, despite the active information campaign launched by the Kremlin through agents of influence and proxies, the level of trust in Maia Sandu among Moldovan society remained at the highest level throughout the presidential election campaign, as did the level of trust in her political party, PAS. Similarly, the majority of Moldovans leaned toward the European course of the state [15], which was key during both the presidential and parliamentary elections.

An important decision to mobilise the pro-European electorate was to hold a referendum on enshrining EU membership as a strategic goal of the state in the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova on the same day as the presidential elections. On the one hand, this opened a window of opportunity for Maia Sandu in her electoral campaign, but on the other hand, it intensified anti-European rhetoric from pro-Russian forces.

The presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova were held on October 20, 2024, alongside a referendum on European integration. Voter turnout was relatively high at 51.68%, well above the electoral minimum of 33.33%. Maia Sandu won in the first round with 42.45% of the vote and in the second round with over 55%. The candidate from the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, Alexander Stoianoglo, won over 48% of the vote. The country's European course was supported by 50.38% of voters [54], with the Moldovan diaspora playing a significant role in the victory of pro-European forces. It demonstrated a high level of political awareness and confirmed its desire to build a democratic Moldova.

The presidential elections in Moldova demonstrated the stable position of the "Russian world", so the parliamentary elections became a continuation of the struggle between two forces – European democracy and imperial Russia. The difference lay in the increased attention paid to Moldova by the entire democratic community, the intensified mobilisation of democratic forces, and the formation of informal networks of informational resistance to the Russian propaganda ma-

chine. The latter also began their work in the traditional Russian-language field of Russian propaganda, thereby undermining Russian attempts to encroach on Moldovan sovereignty. The main activities include monitoring information, identifying key Russian disinformation narratives, developing counter-narratives, and then launching them into the country's information space. At the same time, various media and information literacy projects were implemented for the Russian-speaking population, primarily young people, explaining the essence and forms of information warfare, propaganda, and political manipulation, round tables and discussions, television programs, and podcasts, some of which with the participation of the author of this study.

The parliamentary elections took place amid heightened tensions, with every vote crucial to the future development of the state. Voter turnout was 52.21%. PAS M. Sandu received 50.2% of the vote, becoming the only pro-European force in parliament. The rest have various ties to Russia or Russian forces and demonstrate either strongly pro-Russian or moderate pro-Russian positions. It is noteworthy that the Democracy at Home party, led by V. Kostyuk and partnering the Alliance for the Unification of Romanians (AUR), led by G. Simion in Romania, also entered parliament, albeit with the least support (5.6%) [29].

Having confirmed its European choice in general, Moldovan society remains fragmented and manipulated by the Russian side. With the end of the 2023-2025 electoral cycle (from local to parliamentary elections), Russia's hybrid war against Moldova is not over. Moscow will continue to discredit the pro-European M. Sandu and her policies, especially domestic ones, as there are more than enough challenges here.

At the same time, Moldova managed to achieve the most important thing – to demonstrate to Moscow and the whole world that Russia is a losing state. And not only on the military front in Ukraine, but also on the hybrid front in the Republic of Moldova. This victory was one of the most painful defeats for the Russian Federation, which is now trying to compensate for its losses through instruments of reflexive governance in the Caucasus and Asia.

Defeat in Romanian style: experience of countering Russian aggressor in the Romanian electoral arena

Romania has never shown any particular fondness for the Kremlin or its policies, primarily because of its historical experience of interaction with Moscow. Over the past decades, the dynamics of Romanian citizens' trust in the Russian Federation have shown a negative balance. In 2023, the share of those in Romania who have a positive attitude towards Russia decreased from 36.8% (2023) to 18.3% [51]. At the same time, this is the country where Russia is currently trying to lay the groundwork for the next wave of populists, of various stripes, to come to power, who will be more than critical of the EU and its policies.

The recent parliamentary and presidential elections in Romania, which had been presented as a "light" Russian intervention, turned into an instrument of hybrid warfare that Russia is waging against Ukraine and the entire democratic world. The issue of Ukraine shifted from foreign policy to domestic policy: it was constantly raised in the programs of election campaign participants and in public discussions. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian war took centre stage in electoral discourse. As did the related social and economic challenges for Romania, as well as the imaginary political dividends that populists promised their electorate in exchange for support.

According to Moscow's plan, the war in Ukraine was supposed to divide Romanian society and lead to the establishment of Moscow's reflexive control over the state. The disinformation narratives that the Russian side is actively spreading in Romania are aimed at changing the public consciousness and worldview of the country's citizens. The main goal is to discredit the European Union and NATO in the eyes of the Romanian electorate and to foster hostility towards the West and its policies in the region, Ukraine, and Ukrainians. Among the main messages are: an attack on Christian / family values by the EU and, accordingly, the EU as a "gay dictatorship" [20], large social payments to Ukrainian refugees, emphasis on the socio-economic gap between Ukrainian refugees and Romanian citizens (the former being "wealthy idlers" who parasitise on social assistance from the Romanian state), etc.

It should be emphasised here that in its propaganda policy of "divide and rule", the Russian side took into account only the negative ex-

perience of Romanian-Ukrainian cooperation, without considering the significant positive contribution of the EU to the development of the modern Romanian state, primarily in its socio-economic dimension, and the importance of security on Romania's eastern border, which is also the eastern border of the EU and NATO. It is worth briefly recalling Romania's path to the EU, which it clearly outlined immediately after the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime in 1990. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 marked a point of no return for Romania's socialist past. Just two years later (1993), Romania signed an Association Agreement with the European Economic Community, consisting of 126 articles and covering various areas of cooperation between the two states [5]. Over the next decade, steps were taken to become a full member of the EU: from applying to developing a strategic "Partnership for Accession", which clearly outlined the forms of assistance to be provided to the candidate country along the way [13]. Romania became an EU member state on January 1, 2007. At the same time, the country joined the Schengen area on March 31, 2024.

Despite positive developments in the socio-economic sphere, Romania remains one of the poorest countries in the European Union, which in turn has a significant impact on public sentiment and political processes in the country. Russia actively uses the latter to promote disinformation narratives and establish reflexive control over the Romanian state by supporting various political forces, primarily populists. Historical and political stereotypes and disputes between Romania and its neighbours, including Ukraine, occupy a special place in this information war.

Although Romania recognised Ukraine's independence in January 1992, relations between the two neighbouring states have not been easy to build. The Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Ukraine and Romania, which became the first basic document defining the foundation for further cooperation, was signed only in 1997. It left unresolved issues regarding the delimitation of the continental shelf and exclusive economic zones, which ultimately led to a protracted legal process at the UN International Court of Justice [37].

Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 set new priorities in domestic and foreign policy. It should be noted that in the period after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and until 2008 (the period of

active preparation and the first year after Romania acceded to the EU), a number of bilateral legal documents and agreements were signed between the two countries aimed at regulating various areas of intergovernmental cooperation [37]. The then presidents V. Yushchenko (Ukraine) and T. Basescu (Romania) demonstrated their willingness to resolve contentious issues between the two countries and significantly intensified intergovernmental cooperation.

The Revolution of Dignity and the overthrow of the regime of V. Yanukovych in Ukraine were, to a certain extent, similar to the overthrow of the regime of N. Ceaușescu. Although this comparison is not entirely accurate from the perspectives of history and political science, the aspirations of both societies for freedom and democracy in 1989 in Romania and in 2013-2014 in Ukraine have more in common than they differ. The author is convinced that the Revolution of Dignity was an event that demonstrated the necessity and irreversibility of active inter-state cooperation based on shared democratic values. Romania condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine, did not recognise the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and called on the international community to respond adequately to new challenges and threats [19].

Romania responded to the start of the large-scale military invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops on February 24, 2022, as a partner of Ukraine. From the very first hours, Ukrainian refugees were met at the Ukrainian-Romanian border by volunteers and representatives of humanitarian organisations, who provided all the necessary assistance – from hot tea to finding temporary shelter and psychological and medical support. Refugee reception centres were set up in Suceava, Bucharest, Constanta, and other Romanian cities bordering the Chernivtsi region. As of October 31, 2025, 195,258 Ukrainians had requested temporary protection in Romania [14]. The largest number of refugees was recorded in Bucharest, Constanța, Maramureș, Galați, Suceava, and other cities. Most of them were women and children.

Together with EU member states, Romania supported international sanctions against Russia, condemned the aggression, and became a logistical hub for providing various types of assistance to Ukraine, which cannot but worry Moscow, which today is more interested than ever in destroying any form of partnership between Ukraine and Ro-

mania. Therefore, the Romanian presidential elections became an opportunity for Russia to exert influence that it could not fail to take advantage of.

The presidential elections in Romania were scheduled for November 2024. The first round took place on November 24. Fourteen candidates competed for the post of head of state, one of whom, Diana Shoshoake, was removed from the race by a decision of the Romanian Supreme Court. Most of the judges stated that the politician's statements were "sufficient grounds to indicate that Diana Shoshoake [26] as a presidential candidate questions and disregards the obligation to respect the Constitution through public statements calling for the abolition of fundamental state values and choices, namely membership in the EU and NATO" [23].

Independent candidate Călin Georgescu, who was not the favorite in the race, won the majority of votes. Elena-Valerica Lasconi, representative of the Union for the Salvation of Romania, came in second. The difference in votes between them was minimal—just over three percent. Călin Georgescu received 22.94% of the vote, while Elena-Valerica Lasconi received 19.17%. Ion-Marcel Ciolacu, whose victory was predicted by many political experts from various countries and think tanks, came in third, losing to Elena-Valerica Lasconi by a mere 0.03%. George Simion, leader of the well-known far-right AUR, later became one of the favourites in the presidential race, receiving 13.86% [11]. Of the four politicians who received the most support from the Romanian electorate, two, Călin Georgescu and George Simion, are representatives of far-right (nationalist) views.

Călin Georgescu's victory came as a surprise: preliminary polls showed that Ion-Marcel Ciolacu (PSD leader) and George Simion (AUR leader) were most likely to advance to the second round of elections. Călin Georgescu's main messages, which resonated with the AUR, actually echoed the Kremlin's propaganda narratives: anti-EU, anti-globalism, anti-Ukraine. The candidate repeatedly expressed his approval of Vladimir Putin and Ion Antonescu, demonstrating his patriotism through visual images close to the electorate, such as "wearing a traditional Romanian shirt and riding a cantering white horse" [6]. Călin Georgescu emphasised that after his election, he would stop all military and political support for Ukraine:

"Zero. Everything stops. I have to take care of just about my people. We have many problems ourselves" [9].

It is no coincidence that the candidate's vision of the future resonated with the Romanian electorate. Despite the success of the reforms, Romania remains one of the poorest countries in the EU. In 2024, it ranked third among European countries for poverty, with a rate of 27.9%. This means that the average salary in the country is lower, the social protection system is weaker, and income inequality is higher compared to the core EU countries [42]. Among the main challenges are labour market participation, a rapidly shrinking working-age population, significant regional disparities, employment of disadvantaged groups, and, what is most remarkable from our point of view, a very high number of young people not in employment, education, or training. Common to a declining and ageing population, this creates additional challenges for domestic political stability in the country, which Călin Georgescu took advantage of in his election campaign. By emphasising the need to stop aid to Ukraine, he effectively refocused voters' attention on an "external enemy" that was "taking away" resources from the Romanian people. His totally populist proposal to solve socio-economic problems by stopping aid to Ukraine in its war against the Russian aggressor, presented in short videos for TikTok and other social networks, was aimed at those dissatisfied with the current state of affairs in the country. These are primarily those who feel economic instability, live mainly in rural areas with low access to services, are socially vulnerable, or work in the so-called "grey" economy. His electorate, like that of George Simion, consists of those who have not benefited from European integration, who feel left out of the modernisation process, on the sidelines of socio-economic and political processes.

Călin Georgescu's TikTok campaign was both an unprecedented success and failure. In a short time, he achieved the desired result – leadership in the electoral race. Messages about a "strong leader" who is a "true Romanian" and has a 'plan' and "solutions" for all problems found their audience. At the same time, such an unprecedented victory for the "dark horse" of the election – a rapid increase in support from 5% to 22.9% – prompted a response from the Romanian authorities. The Central Election Bureau of Romania began recounting the votes

on November 30. Moreover, although on December 2, the Constitutional Court of Romania recognised the first round as valid, the situation changed radically in just a few days [35].

On December 5, President Klaus Iohannis released intelligence documents that proved interference in the presidential election in support of Călin Georgescu through the TikTok platform and cyber-attacks, including Russian ones [35]. These documents confirmed the promotion of commissioned content in support of the far-right Călin Georgescu. The Constitutional Court initiated a full recount of the votes [7]. The Romanian national media regulator accused TikTok of "amplifying" Călin Georgescu's content to the detriment of other candidates "through the automation of video promotion" [31]. The deputy head of ANCOM (the media regulator) even demanded that the social network be temporarily blocked until the investigation was completed [7]. Here, it is worth referring to the platform's own report, which emphasises its active work to prevent the creation and operation of covert influence networks. According to information released by the platform itself, TikTok blocked three covert influence networks in Romania during several months of the election campaign, in particular, "a network of 78 accounts operating from Romania, with 1,781 followers, that attempted to promote candidate Călin Georgescu on TikTok — which to date is the only network we have identified that focused on promoting Călin Georgescu as a prominent topic". In addition, appropriate steps were taken against a network linked to Sputnik Media, which targeted Romanian and Moldovan audiences [4].

The logical consequence of the disclosure of information about violations of electoral law was the annulment on December 6, 2024, two days before the second round, by the Constitutional Court of Romania of the results of the first round, in which Călin Georgescu had won. However, despite the annulment of the results of the first round of the presidential election, Călin Georgescu attempted to continue his electoral battle and, on March 7, 2025, became the official candidate for president for the second time in the elections scheduled for May 4. However, on Sunday, March 9, Romania's Central Election Authority blocked C. Georgescu's candidacy, stating that "it is unacceptable after the Constitutional Court annulled the December vote" [21]. After C. Georgescu was banned from participating in the election race, the

leader of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, George Simion, announced his candidacy instead.

The Romanian presidential elections became a striking example of democracy's institutional capacity to combat populism and political manipulation amid Russia's information warfare. The situation that developed in the Romanian electoral field became a truly unprecedented case in global electoral practice. The presidential elections in the country were marked by the removal of two controversial candidates (D. Shoshoake and C. Georgescu) and the cancellation of the first-round results, followed by the start of a new electoral cycle. The candidates removed from the race were ideologically linked to each other and to G. Simion, the leader of the AUR. The ultra-right populism of both D. Shoshoake and C. Georgescu was represented in the second round of the presidential election by G. Simion. He, however, tried to sit on three chairs: to maintain relations with the EU, Russia, and the US, seeking the maximum benefits in each case. His criticism of the EU was not as radical as that of C. Georgescu. However, it was clear that, if elected, G. Simion would complicate procedures and delay decision-making as much as possible regarding aid to Ukraine. As for his position on the Russian-Ukrainian war, Simion stated the need to restore relations with Russia and sign a peace agreement:

"We must stop this war. We must stop any civilian casualties. Moreover, that is why we must achieve a ceasefire. We hope that Donald Trump's peace initiatives will bear fruit" [32].

In light of Trump's November initiatives (2025) to establish peace in Ukraine, this approach fully explains the more than loyal attitude of both the US and Russia towards this candidate. Both Washington and Moscow have demonstrated their support for G. Simion with all available informational and political tools. Here, as in the case of the current "peace plan", D. Trump and V. Putin have presented a united front.

For Moscow, Simion's victory was critical. It would have allowed Moscow to establish its direct influence in the region and given it an additional tool to exert pressure on Brussels (alongside its puppet Viktor Orbán), would have made Ukraine's European integration impossible (or at least more difficult), and would have given it additional opportunities to keep Moldova within the embrace of the "Russian world". However, the latter is still debatable, given Romania's national

interests in the region. In any case, the conflict potential of the Romanian-Moldovan-Ukrainian border region would increase, which Moscow would use to achieve its own interests.

The first round of the spring presidential elections in Romania ended with a clear victory for G. Simion. He won the support of 40.5% of voters and said that if he wins, he might bring C. Georgescu, the de facto twice-deposed pro-Russian far-right candidate, onto his team. Nicuşor Dan, the mayor of Bucharest, a centrist independent candidate, received 20.99% of the vote [24]. Unlike Simion, Nicuşor Dan has a pro-Western stance, is a staunch supporter of Romania's European course, and supports Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

G. Simion's victory, against the backdrop of his statements regarding the potential implementation of C. Georgescu's program (this is the only way to interpret his statements about the possibility of Georgescu bringing his team on board), alarmed not only the pro-European electorate within Romania, but also the entire democratic world.

The following two weeks were decisive for mobilising the country's pro-European electorate. Analysing the course of events in Romania at that time, it should be emphasised that Nicuşor Dan's electorate, which consists mainly of residents of large cities, voters with higher education, and medium and high incomes, demonstrated a high level of civic awareness. The election results confirmed Romania's European course: Nicuşor Dan won 53.6% of the vote, while G. Simion won 46.4%. Voter turnout exceeded forecasts, reaching 64.7% [1].

Immediately after the election, George Simion announced his victory:

"We are the clear winners of this election. We declare victory on behalf of the Romanian people. However, this is not my victory. It is Călin Georgescu's victory. He is the true president of Romania" [30].

However, the very next day, he had to admit defeat publicly.

"We were alone against everyone. I am proud of you and congratulate my opponent on his victory. It was the will of the Romanian people... We will go to the end, even if it is difficult to endure the bitter taste of defeat right now" [34].

Romania has successfully passed the test of the 2024–2025 presidential elections. It has managed to defeat a powerful and largely invisible enemy—the Russian Federation, which uses all possible tools

and formats in its information war against democracy. The importance of this victory lies in the fact that the attempt to establish reflexive control over the country by bringing its candidates to power in Russia has failed. The latter failed to destroy the partnership between Ukraine and Romania, to nullify the achievements made during the country's EU membership, and to push the country toward a populist abyss. And although the positions of the AUR and other radicals remain quite strong in Romania, institutionally, the country remains a stable democracy, which is a key factor in preserving its potential for development and growth.

Conclusions

Russia's military offensive against Ukraine has revealed that the process of the collapse of the global colonial system is not yet complete. The last global empire, Russia, continues to exist, aggressively attempting to subordinate global political processes to its own authoritarian practices. Moreover, while in the early 1990s this took place in a somewhat covert manner, under the guise of "peacemaking", today Russia openly declares its imperial intentions and ambitions, backing them up with daily terrorist attacks on Ukrainian cities and villages, killing thousands of civilians every day and night.

Unable to implement its military plans within the deadlines it had set for itself, Moscow expanded the geography of its information and hybrid warfare, primarily to Ukraine's neighbouring states. Among them are the Republic of Moldova and Romania. Moldova, which has been under Russian hybrid attack since the early days of independence, found itself in the grip of a Russian hybrid offensive. With a separatist enclave in the form of the unrecognised Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic and the Russian army on its territory, it continues to fight for its sovereignty and the right to make independent political choices. The complex socio-economic situation in the republic has increased the operational capabilities of Russian influence. Moscow spared no expense in Moldova's election campaigns to promote its own candidates. For the 2025 elections alone, it allocated €100 million to undermine trust in democratic institutions, disrupt electoral processes, and so on [12]. However, despite Russia's active efforts, Moldova made its historic choice in favour of European integration in the 2024 presi-

dential elections and confirmed it in the 2025 parliamentary elections. This was one of Moscow's most significant defeats on the hybrid front and demonstrated the irreversibility of the empire's decline in regional influence.

Romania has never been a country where Russian influence has been as strong as in neighbouring Moldova or Ukraine. Even during the socialist era, the potential for conflict between the two countries was rather high. In its quest to surround Ukraine with a belt of unfriendly states and to establish (or restore) its dominance in the region, Moscow has thrown its weight behind efforts to reshape Romania's political landscape. Its open support for far-right populists did not produce the desired result: the Romanian deep state demonstrated institutional resilience and preserved democratic procedures in the face of blatant political manipulation by Moscow. The latter, even with the help of the US, failed to push through its candidate for the presidency.

In its desire to maintain control over Moldova and strengthen its influence in Romania, Moscow sought to preserve its role as the region's leading power. The implementation of plans for reflexive control over Moldova and Romania could have created a danger zone for the entire European continent. However, in this electoral struggle, democracy demonstrated not only its resilience but also its competitiveness with autocracy, even in times of crisis. Despite Moscow's narrative about the effectiveness of authoritarianism in times of crisis, it turned out that it is democratic institutions and procedures that are most effective in protecting citizens from unauthorised attacks on their security. However, Russia's war on the European continent is the greatest challenge, threat, and litmus test of democracy's resilience in times of crisis.

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