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Russia's Fingerprints Seen in Elections Across Eastern Europe

By Felix Cunningham

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People stage a protest outside the Parliament Building in Tbilisi. **Mikhail Tereshchenko / TASS**

From 100 days of continuous protests in Georgia over contested election results to Romania barring frontrunner Calin Georgescu from May's re-run presidential election: the shadow of Russian influence looms large over Eastern Europe.

Experts say these incidents are part of the Kremlin's broader strategy to sow distrust and sway elections in what it considers to be its sphere of influence as these countries seek to deepen cooperation with the West.

The election interference patterns seen in Georgia, Romania and Moldova highlight a troubling reality for Europe: Moscow's hybrid warfare strategies are becoming increasingly sophisticated and pervasive.

Over three years of war in Ukraine and the failure to prevent the ousting of ally Bashar al-

Assad in Syria have exposed the weaknesses of Russia's military, once thought to be one of the strongest in the world.

In a joint article for the Financial Times, the heads of MI6 and the CIA warned Russia is intensifying its hybrid warfare approach, shifting focus from conventional military dominance to destabilizing democracies from within — "spreading lies and disinformation designed to drive wedges between us."

According to the Kremlin's playbook, "state capture involves installing Russian-aligned oligarchs and puppet governments to control nations through corruption while suppressing civil society, independent media and political opposition," said Batu Kutelia, a former Georgian ambassador to the U.S. and former head of Georgia's Foreign Intelligence Service.

Russia consistently denies interfering in other countries' elections.

In Georgia, the ruling, populist Georgian Dream party's victory in November's parliamentary elections sparked outrage from citizens, triggering 100 consecutive days of ongoing protests.

Controlled by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the country's wealthiest man who made his fortune in Russia, Georgian Dream started as a pro-EU and Western liberal party but has in recent years pursued more illiberal policies and aligned itself more closely with Russia — even as a majority of the population favors closer EU integration.

Election observers and the OSCE acknowledged that while the Georgian elections were marred by an uneven playing field, the legal framework was deemed sufficient to uphold the credibility of the results.

In Romania, Georgescu, a previously little-known ultra-nationalist, managed to win the first round of the presidential election with 23% despite earlier polls projecting him to receive single digits.

Declassified Romanian intelligence documents said that Russia launched a "hybrid" action against Romania through cyberattacks, dissemination of disinformation and targeting vulnerabilities in information systems. Meanwhile, Georgescu's media campaign was reportedly coordinated by a "state actor" who paid over 100 influencers on TikTok to boost his campaign in the two weeks before the election.

After Romania's constitutional court annulled the results of the first round of the presidential elections held in December, Romania's electoral bureau announced Sunday it had invalidated Georgescu's presidential candidacy due to allegations that he violated laws against extremism. The rerun of the presidential election is set for May.

Amid the fallout, the government has decided to expel two Russian diplomats in connection to the widespread interference efforts.

And in Moldova, incumbent president Maia Sandu won re-election by almost 20%, while an EU referendum passed by a tiny margin of around 1%.

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Widespread Russian Interference

Moldovan officials estimate that Moscow poured $100 million into its efforts to influence the election and referendum outcomes in 2024. Ilan Shor, a fugitive Moldovan oligarch now living in Moscow, funded operations with the support of the Kremlin by funneling money directly into bank accounts of Moldovans disguised as "bonus pensions" to secure their "no" vote.

Officials have also described a widespread disinformation campaign, stoking fears of war if the referendum passes and falsely claiming that Brussels aims to brainwash children into becoming gay or transgender.

Russia appears to have increasingly adopted this form of hybrid warfare ever since widespread reports of Moscow's efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Now, the timing is especially advantageous for Moscow. The rise of right-wing populists who are generally more sympathetic towards Russia, combined with U.S. President Donald Trump's isolationist stance, has created conditions that allow external interference to deepen divisions.

While Russia's goals of exploiting societal ruptures and sowing distrust in institutions apply to both EU countries and post-Soviet states, "there is a difference in the types of narratives used," says Laura Jasper, Strategic Analyst at The Hague Center for Strategic Studies.

"In the EU, they don't create storylines but rather amplify divisions that already exist, such as migration — and in Germany, particularly, the greening of the economy," Jasper said.

Related article: Russia Denies Interfering in Romanian Elections

This subtly aligns public opinion with Kremlin-backed ideologies, a more effective technique than outright disinformation.

While in post-Soviet states heading towards EU integration, the focus lies on "sowing distrust in democratic institutions and aggressively attacking that type of governance," she said.

In the EU, governments and media frequently highlight the threats of disinformation and election interference.

However, "it doesn't start two weeks before an election," says Jasper, emphasizing the need for structural measures rather than reactive ones.

While authorities continue to introduce new initiatives, "giving new names to the same underlying issues," says Jasper, such as the latest framework, FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference), many of these efforts lack the transparency and recognition that disinformation exists and is often difficult to identify.

The ongoing "revival" of free speech on social media platforms like X and Facebook has only accelerated and complicated efforts to form a united front against disinformation and foreign influence campaigns. Jasper calls it "a double-edged sword."

“Free speech needs to be protected as a fundamental right, but on the other hand, it is used for the wrong ends so many times and makes legislation and countermeasures for the government very tricky,” she said. “To build a more resilient society, people need to be critical of where their information comes from and think about what they see and share.”

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