

# STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE IN THE EAST

BRIEF / 15  
Sept 2024

## How the EU can empower countries against foreign interference

 The EUISS is an agency  
of the European Union



by

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Hybrid threats in the Eastern Neighbourhood have contributed to the EU adopting a coordinated approach to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) with its strategic partners. This has led to two key developments.

First, the FIMI concept has facilitated the creation and development of partnerships and the initiation of multilateral dialogues to mitigate the adverse effects of foreign interference. The United States Department of State has embraced the concept which was initially spearheaded by the EU<sup>(1)</sup>. It has been discussed at various international forums, for example at last year's European Political Community (EPC) meeting in Granada and the 2024 G7 Foreign Ministers' meetings in Capri. The Capri Communiqué underscores the urgency of addressing FIMI not just due to its potential to undermine democratic processes but also to 'negatively affect [states'] ability to conduct foreign and security policy'. FIMI has emerged as a pivotal

### Summary

- > Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) challenges EU strategic interests in the Eastern Neighbourhood, impacting not just communication and democratic processes but also partner countries' security.
- > In the 'Eastern trio' of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, FIMI risks have escalated, threatening both candidate countries and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).
- > The EU should consider adapting its CSDP to address these rising threats, as highlighted in the new Civilian Compact, and prioritise integrating FIMI countermeasures into the core of its CSDP efforts, especially in regions of strategic interest.
- > EUPM Moldova demonstrates how CSDP can strengthen resilience across multiple domains. The mission could serve as a blueprint for designing more flexible CSDP missions to respond to this challenge.

issue in fostering partnerships, with the EU at the forefront of shaping effective responses.

Secondly, the European External Action Service (EEAS) has played a significant role in enhancing understanding of the threats posed by FIMI in the information domain. International strategic documents have recognised the evolution of FIMI from a mere communication challenge to a security threat requiring comprehensive security and political countermeasures and ‘prebunking’. But intensified deterrence and resilience may be pursued also through revamping the CSDP. For instance, a survey conducted at the European Security and Defence College’s Annual Training Conference 2023 revealed that most attendees, predominantly CSDP experts from headquarters and the field, considered the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood as the primary target of FIMI activities: 82 % of participants identified this as a security threat. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have been particularly vulnerable to Russia’s targeted use of interference tools, including FIMI, in the region.

## HIGH STAKES FOR THE EU

The Council’s adoption of the 2023 EU Enlargement Package<sup>(2)</sup> has added a new dimension to the FIMI threat on the Eastern front. Responding to ‘the call of history’, the decision reshaped the power dynamics in the region. Following applications in 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and accession negotiations opened in June 2024. Meanwhile, progress for Georgia hit a roadblock as Tbilisi’s authorities proposed and the Parliament passed the ‘Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence’, the so-called ‘foreign agent law’, deemed ‘incompatible with EU values and standards’<sup>(3)</sup>.

The geopolitical shift has two implications for how the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries are dealing with the FIMI challenge. First, competing actors are likely to intensify FIMI campaigns to disrupt the accession negotiations. Since the Commission’s Enlargement Package was published on 8 November 2023, the EEAS flagship disinformation database *EUvsDisinfo* has increasingly identified targeted FIMI campaigns originating from pro-Russian outlets and centred around the EU accession process. These propagate the narrative that EU enlargement serves ulterior motives, for example portraying Ukraine’s accession as an American ploy<sup>(4)</sup>. While such narratives are well-established tactics in Russia’s playbook, these cases illustrate how FIMI efforts instrumentalise the prospect of enlargement to undermine the EU’s external action.

Second, enlargement emphasises the values shared by the EU and candidate countries, creating opportunities for cooperation. These campaigns threaten not only to sway public opinion against EU enlargement but also to undermine the freedom and agency of local populations, erode trust in democratic processes and reduce citizens’ ability to make informed decisions about their future. In April 2023, Georgia boasted an unprecedented level of public support for EU membership (89 %)<sup>(5)</sup>, but since then FIMI campaigns have saturated its information space, implying that the West is opening a ‘second front’ in the country<sup>(6)</sup>. The EU has a clear interest in pursuing strategies to support Georgia’s European aspirations, ensuring that the local population retain the agency to shape their own political future. With the EU planning to mobilise up to €17 billion by 2027 in the framework of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Eastern Partnership, the stakes are high.

## Harnessing efforts in the region

In recent decades the EU has established an extensive presence, moulded by the work of EU institutions, delegations and CSDP missions. EU policy initiatives mainly rest on three pillars.

First, resilience-building initiatives have been facilitated through Eastern Partnership funds. By investing in inclusive, gender-equal and diverse societies, the EU has supported approximately 2 500 local civil society organisations, 120 independent media outlets and 2 000 journalists across the region<sup>(7)</sup>. There remains a need for a more integrated approach to leverage these assets effectively against FIMI, for example through domestic actors with social media influence. Second, EU delegations have spearheaded strategic communication efforts that provide accurate information on, for example, the EU’s respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, the EU is absent from TikTok and Telegram, where Russia manages to reach sizeable segments of society. Third, CSDP missions have been key components of the EU’s contribution to partners’ security. Each country hosts CSDP missions, with mandates varying

from monitoring that there is no return to hostilities, especially across administrative boundary lines with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, to consulting on security sector reform in Ukraine and Moldova. This makes missions well-placed to play a valuable role in analysing threats, thus strengthening the EU’s awareness of hybrid and FIMI challenges.

Although Russia is attempting to disrupt the enlargement progress through FIMI, the EU has the capacities to confront these challenges head-on in a sustained manner, provided it demonstrates readiness

to continuously reimagine and redefine its approach. This includes enhancing the integration and coordination of existing assets into a more cohesive response. This would further allow the CSDP to expand its role in addressing FIMI threats, potentially inspired by the case of EUPM Moldova, and to increasingly invest in engaging local journalists and civil society actors on combating disinformation.

## EVOLVING MANDATES

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has transformed Moldova into a frontline state, and not only because of Moscow’s foothold in Transnistria. Russian-affiliated entities increasingly target Chisinau with hybrid attacks<sup>(9)</sup>. This includes pressure on the country’s economy, threats to its energy security, political meddling, electoral interference and exploitation of Ukrainian refugee flows<sup>(9)</sup>. FIMI is increasingly a hallmark of these hybrid threats.

Pro-Russian narratives have primarily attacked the government for its pro-European posture while blaming it for deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Such narratives have claimed that Moldova is losing its sovereignty and that the West has been inflating energy prices<sup>(10)</sup>.

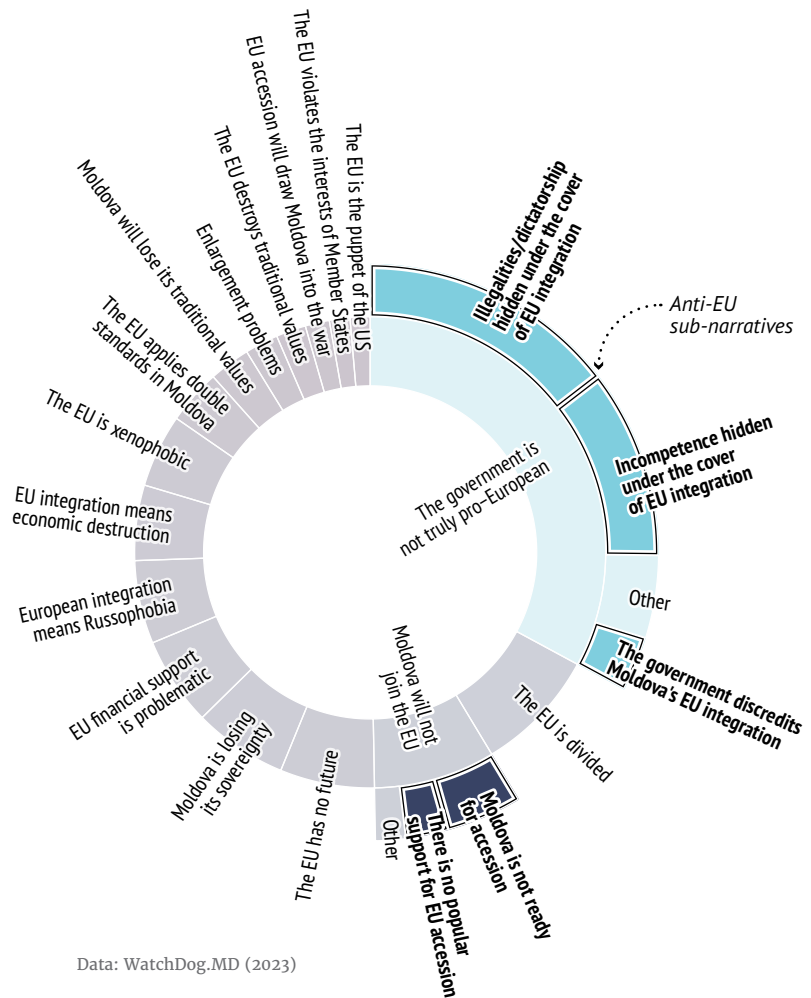
A disinformation campaign about an imminent Ukrainian military operation against the 1500 Russian troops in Transnistria is a case in point. This psychological operation started with a communiqué by the Russian Ministry of Defence claiming that the Ukrainian Armed Forces were preparing for a ground attack on Tiraspol, the message later being ‘massively disseminated by Russian state and pro-Kremlin outlets’<sup>(11)</sup>. The latter included Moldovan Russian-leaning broadcasters and politicians, who spread the campaign both domestically and internationally.

Given local vulnerabilities, including domestic political tensions and energy insecurity, and the Council’s December 2023 decision to open accession negotiations with Chisinau, the EU needs to continue monitoring the situation closely. Considering the potential spillover effects often associated with FIMI, some may claim that ‘Russian tactics tend to emerge in Chisinau and then move west’<sup>(12)</sup>.

The EU should swiftly enhance its security posture and strengthen its long-term strategic interests in the Eastern Neighbourhood. The CSDP could be a starting point for this endeavour.

## Anti-EU integration narratives gaining ground in Moldova

1 852 posts analysed across 17 Telegram channels and one Facebook page, categorised into 16 general narratives containing 86 sub-narratives



Data: WatchDog.MD (2023)

## EUPM Moldova

In April 2023, upon Chisinau’s request for assistance, the EU Council established EUPM Moldova, a new civilian partnership mission to ‘contribute to the strengthening of Moldova’s crisis management structures and to enhance its resilience to hybrid threats, including cybersecurity, and countering FIMI’<sup>(13)</sup>.

The evolution of CSDP deployments and mandates has been subject to two forces: the changing security landscape and lessons learned from previous deployments. EUPM Moldova’s two-year *non-executive* mandate, based on the principles of scalability and adaptability, is the first of its kind<sup>(14)</sup>. The mission, initially 40 personnel strong, is the first specifically tasked with building capabilities to counter hybrid threats and FIMI.

EUPM Moldova offers strategic advice and contributes to identifying areas where local authorities need capacity building. This includes early warning systems, detection methods, and response capabilities. EUPM Moldova’s innovative project cell<sup>(15)</sup> allows for a dynamic and flexible approach, ensuring that the

mission can swiftly respond to Chisinau's needs. This unit within the EUPM provides targeted support to local authorities and acts as a hub for EU Member States to coordinate and contribute additional resources.

For example, currently EUPM assists the government with strategic advice on crisis management and the Security and Intelligence Service in strengthening its analytical capacities. One year after its deployment, EUPM supported the creation and operationalisation of the 'Centre for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation', a new authority tasked with enhancing collaboration between agencies and institutions. The mission also played an advisory role during the development of Chisinau's National Security Strategy and the setup of the new Agency for Cyber Security.

EUPM Moldova will be instrumental in evaluating how the EU's CSDP could be adapted to respond to an increasingly hybrid threat landscape, especially considering the lessons learned process and the assessment of capabilities within the new Civilian Compact.

Should EUPM Moldova successfully enable Chisinau to counter Russia's increasingly sophisticated hybrid tactics, starting from the upcoming presidential elections in October and EU membership referendum, it could represent a new path for civilian CSDP deployments in the region. The new threat landscape calls for more proactive resilience-building that can contribute to rapid, flexible CSDP deployments to support partners in need.

## CONCLUSION

FIMI has emerged as a growing threat affecting EU security interests. EU policymakers should recognise that adversaries often employ FIMI in combination with other hybrid tactics<sup>(46)</sup> and continue to engage with like-minded partners to counter it. CSDP missions, as in the case of EUPM Moldova, offer a valuable tool for monitoring and assessing hybrid threats, including FIMI and subversive political activities, thereby improving the EU's situational awareness and its neighbours' preparedness.

Furthermore, the EU could take a more flexible approach in supporting partners' resilience, for example by expanding the mandate of existing or future missions in partner countries facing similar threats. This would enable the EU to demonstrate its agility and adaptability and reinforce its reputation as a strong and reliable partner in helping to counter a

fast-growing threat. Ultimately, strengthening the resilience of partner states and neighbours contributes to the EU's own security.

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