Analysis of Disinformation Present in the Online Space of the Republic of Moldova Regarding the Activities of NATO and the European Union

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Social media networks influence individuals' cognitive characteristics and prompt them to select information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and to reject information that contradicts them. When associated with propaganda, the phenomenon of fake news becomes a propaganda instrument insofar as the source is unknown or malicious and aims to misinform and manipulate, to construct a one-dimensional monologue, and to polarize society. YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, and TikTok constitute fertile platforms for the global dissemination of fake news.

The information space of the Republic of Moldova is saturated with elements of anti-Western propaganda and manipulation (particularly targeting the European Union and NATO), and operating to the detriment of the national interests of the Republic of Moldova. The narratives circulating within the information space (especially online) are strongly influenced by geopolitics, the regional security environment, and the war in Ukraine, and have increased substantially in the context of this year's electoral campaign. Social media platforms unquestionably represent fertile ground for the spread of disinformation. False news disseminated through social media can generate a significant range of negative effects on national and human security, due to the degree of influence they can exert on public opinion.

Research and analyses conducted over the years by experts of the Platform for Security and Defence Initiatives [1] have demonstrated that disinformation has a negative impact on both national and human security as it polarizes Moldovan society along various lines; undermines and obstructs, at the political level, the implementation of security-related policies and the democratic process. It creates a "security trap" (characterized by a lack of clarity regarding the direction and means of ensuring security) and influences the agenda and decision-making processes (e.g., hindering participation in peacekeeping missions, cooperation with certain organizations or partners, the implementation of development projects, and the development of defence capabilities). It also erodes trust in state institutions and leads to non-compliance with the rules imposed by these institutions (e.g., during the pandemic period).

With the advent of the internet, especially social media, propaganda and disinformation have become less costly, unrestricted by traditional dissemination channels, accessible to all, and conducive to anonymity. An ordinary citizen can act as both a creator and distributor of information and, implicitly, of propaganda. The internet and social media have thus become the principal spearheads of this new form of propaganda, employed by both societal and governmental propagandists. Additionally, blogs and fake websites function as modern propagandistic tools. Propagandistic messages are repeatedly circulated online, exposing individuals over extended periods to constant trolling messages that can alter their behaviour.

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Throughout the 21st century, numerous examples have been recorded, including the conflict in Syria, ISIS propaganda, Brexit, the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, and, notably, the coronavirus infodemic, which confirms both the existence of a new form of propaganda and the need to intervene in this largely unregulated online environment.

[1] www.pisa.md/publicații

This entails identifying ways to coordinate the virtually unlimited power that various online actors exert over the public, or even to limit the impact of these transformations on state institutions, democracy, and related domains. Effective propagandistic action in the online environment requires a careful analysis of this environment itself, of the target individual, of groups within the virtual space, of the laws governing their formation and disintegration, of mass influences, and of the constraints imposed by the social framework.

A report published in 2020 by the Romanian Center for European Policies indicated that Moldova is among the European countries most affected by disinformation campaigns originating from the Russian Federation [2]. The content of these campaigns is taken up and promoted by certain Moldovan politicians, representatives of the Orthodox Church, as well as pro-Russian media outlets. In this context, Moldova serves as a testing ground for the projection of Russian influence in Eastern Europe and is one of the countries most exposed and vulnerable to the Kremlin's information warfare [3].

The society of the Republic of Moldova is heterogeneous and fragmented along linguistic and religious lines, and it displays differing modes of relating to major events that unfolded throughout the 20th century (such as the Second World War, the collapse of the USSR, and NATO's enlargement). A significant segment of the population remains nostalgic for the Soviet period. Moreover, there are contextual characteristics that facilitate the reception of fake news and other forms of disinformation originating from the Kremlin. One of the most significant factors, with a constant and considerable impact, is the presence of a Russian-speaking community, together with all the political consequences that derive from this reality: political organization, ethnic parties, Moscow's cultural advantage, and related dynamics. Combined with the widespread knowledge of the Russian language among the population, these factors contribute to the creation of an information space conducive to the direct consumption of Russian media products, without additional translation costs. In the context of the state of emergency, some television channels were closed; however, many of them continue to operate in the online environment, a space in which disinformation is facilitated by new technologies. Regardless of whether they take the form of news or entertainment programmes, such content presents a narrative exclusively from the Russian perspective on various global or regional issues and is heavily promoted.

The Republic of Moldova is among the countries where mobile internet and access via social media function well and are widely accessible; however, the information available in the online environment may be distorted and compromised by fake news, which has become increasingly prevalent despite measures adopted in the context of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, new technologies also make a significant contribution to efforts aimed at limiting the effects of Fake news, through the development of mechanisms for the automated verification of information credibility, including the assessment of sources along the information flow back to their origin.

Technologies for influencing public opinion, initially developed and tested in the Russian Federation, have been used in the Republic of Moldova for several years. However, they have intensified considerably since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and have experienced a marked increase during this year's electoral period. Manipulation and disinformation are closely interconnected with individuals' political preferences, perceptions, and the actions that stem from them. In turn, the political preferences of Moldovan citizens are largely shaped by the country's socio-economic development, and political actors who understand this logic exploit it for the purpose of influencing and manipulating the electorate.

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[2] Identificarea, expunerea și deconstruirea campaniilor de dezinformare și știri false promovate de Federația Rusa în Republica Moldova și regiunea extinsă a Mării Negre. https://www.crpe.ro/ro/identificarea-expunerea-si-deconstruirea-campaniilor-de-dezinformare-si-stiri-false-promovate-de-federatia-rusa-in-republica-moldova-si-regiunea-extinsa-a-marii-negre/

[3] Dezinformarea ca armă îndreptată împotriva securității naționale. https://api.md/ro/dezinformarea-ca-arma-indreptata-impotriva-securitatii-nationale/

The Public Opinion Barometer conducted in the autumn of 2022 provided striking data, according to which one-third of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova found justification for Russia's war against Ukraine, including justifying the killing of civilians by Russia. These findings demonstrate the evident impact of propaganda, which is disseminated not only through traditional mass media. The majority of citizens no longer rely primarily on traditional media sources for information, and social media undoubtedly represent the greatest risk for disinformation, particularly Telegram channels and other platforms through which such disinformation is disseminated [4].

In the document prepared by the Information and Security Service (SIS), titled "Assessment of the Russian Federation's Involvement in the Electoral Processes of the Republic of Moldova in 2024–2025" [5] , it is stated that the Russian Federation continues to pursue, as a strategic objective, the attraction of the Republic of Moldova into its sphere of influence. In this context, the tactical objectives to be pursued over the next two years are:

2024

Undermining the referendum on European integration, interference in the presidential elections, as well as the discrediting of political candidates associated with it.
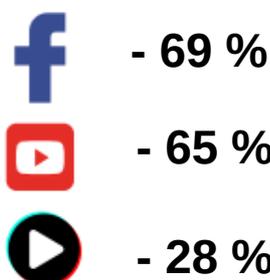
2025

The entry of political parties under the influence of the Russian Federation into the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova aims to create a pro-Russian majority or at least a moderate stance toward European integration

The SIS identifies three methods for achieving these objectives: supporting political actors under the direct or indirect control of the Russian Federation; creating multiple crises of varying magnitude across different areas of sociopolitical life. The third method is the object of our analysis, namely, large-scale informational attacks aimed at amplifying the psychological effect of these crises through extensive use of social networks, especially Telegram channels, attempts to restore or establish TV channels to propagate the desired messages, and the dissemination of false information in the public sphere with major media impact [6].

Throughout 2024, and continuing into the following year, the information space has been and will remain the primary instrument of influence, managed both at the level of Russian special services (their controlled propaganda centers) and by sociopolitical actors in the Republic of Moldova (independently), who are connected to the Russian factor. According to an opinion survey conducted in August, there has been an increase in the number of Moldovans

subscribing to Telegram and TikTok, where there is a growing number of propaganda-promoting channels. TikTok ranks third as a source of information for Moldovans (28 %), after Facebook (69 %) and YouTube (65 %) [7]. For comparison, in January 2022, according to the results of a survey conducted by the sociological company iData, the ranking of social networks was as follows: Facebook – 90.2 %; Instagram – 45.9 %; Odnoklassniki – 33.5 % [8] ; TikTok– 25.5 %; Telegram– 18,5 % [9].

- 69 %

- 65 %

- 28 %

[4] Rețelele sociale reprezintă cel mai mare pericol de dezinformare. https://stiri.md/article/social/opinii-retelele-sociale-reprezinta-cel-mai-mare-pericol-de-dezinformare

[5] Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse în procesele electorale din Republica Moldova în 2024-2025. https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Scenarii%20de%20influen%C8%9B%C4%83%202024-2025.pdf

[6] Ibide

[7] Sondaj IRI: De unde se informează moldovenii? Facebook, YouTube și TikTok, principalele aplicații media utilizate. https://agora.md/2024/07/17/sondaj-iri-de-unde-se-informeaza-moldovenii-facebook-youtube-si-tiktok-principalele-aplicatii-media-utilizate

[8] În conformitate cu sondajul din 2024, doar 7%

[9] Top 5 rețele sociale folosite de moldoveni în ultima lună. Facebook și Instagram stau ferm pe poziții. https://diez.md/2022/01/26/sondaj-top-5-retele-sociale-folosite-de-moldoveni-in-ultima-luna-facebook-si-instagram-stau-ferm-pe-pozitii/

False information that has emerged over the course of this year is increasingly aimed at undermining trust in state institutions and associating various illicit activities of the government with the process of European integration. In addition, numerous anonymous Facebook pages with a radical/extremist character have appeared, intended to incite, test reactions, and gauge the number of supporters. In both print and online media, so-called investigative reports or studies on issues of priority public interest for the Republic of Moldova are published, including in the Western information space. In the television sector, there has been the launch of new TV channels or the acquisition of existing ones, migration of propaganda content from one channel to another in cases of sanctions or licence revocation, and the transition of TV products to the virtual space [10] .

Among the Fake narratives concerning NATO activity, and especially the EU, the following have been observed: "European integration of the Republic of Moldova is equivalent to the loss of neutrality and the thawing of the Transnistrian military conflict.", "An order will be given for Moldovans to go to war in Ukraine." , "The aim is for the Republic of Moldova to join NATO and unite with Romania."

Some of the most prominent FIMI narratives spread by pro-Russian actors in Moldova, according to the Pre-Election Assessment Mission statement of the National Democratic Institute for the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum, include: "Moldova is being ruled by foreigners and Western powers", "The pro-European government is establishing a dictatorship", "Maia Sandu represents war", "The current government is not truly pro-European but uses the EU to cover its illegal activities"; "EU accession will cause Moldovans to lose their moral values and become homosexual"; "Moldova will lose its sovereignty if it joins the EU", "The upcoming constitutional referendum on EU accession is illegal"; and others [11].

Within the project *Countering Disinformation: Civil Society's Response to Fake Narratives about NATO and the European Union*, the experts involved have identified and explained **six false** narratives about these organizations that are present in the information space:

FAKE Moldova will face the same fate as Ukraine if it seeks to join NATO/EU.	FAKE Moldova does not need NATO support to develop its defence capabilities.	FAKE NATO brings war.
FAKE Accession to the EU means accession to NATO.	FAKE Moldova will lose its sovereignty if it joins the European Union.	FAKE EU accession will lead to the loss of Moldova's national identity.

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[10] Evaluarea implicării Federației Ruse în procesele electorale din Republica Moldova în 2024-2025, p. 1
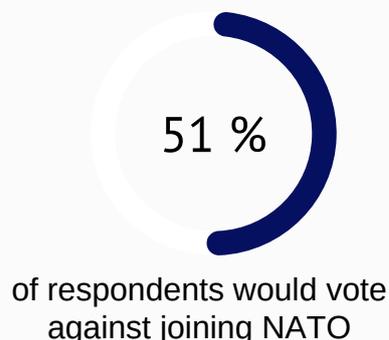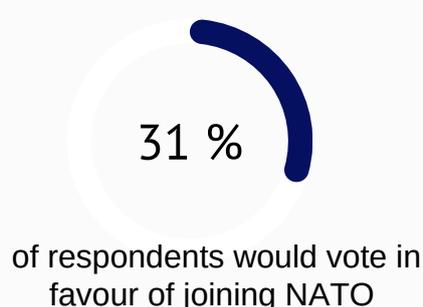[11] Declarația Misiunii de evaluare preelectorală a Inititutului Național Democratic pentru alegeri prezidențiale și referendumului constituțional. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/FINAL%20NDI%20Moldova%20PEAM%20Statement%202024%20RO.pdf

Moldova currently faces a negative public perception of NATO, shaped by historical experiences, geopolitical factors, and disinformation campaigns. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for strengthening bilateral relations and ensuring regional security.

The primary aim of this analysis is to identify and assess false narratives concerning NATO in Moldova and to propose strategies to enhance public support. Key objectives include debunking prevalent myths, raising public awareness, and highlighting the benefits of partnership with NATO.

Moldova established formal relations with NATO in the 1990s. However, these partnerships have been constrained by constitutional neutrality and ongoing Russian influence. Initiatives such as the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and various cooperative programs have contributed to engagement, albeit limited.

Recent public opinion surveys [12] indicate that **support for NATO membership in Moldova remains relatively low.** A survey conducted in July 2024 revealed that:

31 %
of respondents would vote in favour of joining NATO

51 %
of respondents would vote against joining NATO

This reluctance toward NATO is influenced by the regional geopolitical context and Moldova's history of constitutional neutrality. Nevertheless, relations with NATO are viewed positively by 51 % of respondents [13], and Moldova collaborates with the Alliance through various partnership programs, such as those focused on cybersecurity and countering disinformation.

There are several reasons [14] for some Moldovans to be sceptical of or not to trust NATO. These reasons include historical, political, cultural, and economic influences, as well as disinformation campaigns. Some main reasons are:

- Russia has made substantial investments in disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting NATO and promoting a negative image of the Alliance. A significant portion of the Moldovan population has access to Russian or pro-Russian media sources that consistently propagate anti-NATO narratives.
- There is widespread concern that NATO membership could provoke economic, political, or even military reactions from Russia, which perceives NATO expansion into the former Soviet sphere of influence as a threat. Regional precedents, such as the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, which experienced aggression from Russia after expressing interest in closer ties with NATO, reinforce these fears. Many Moldovans believe that both NATO membership and partnership could violate the principle of neutrality and conflict with this constitutional status. A large part of the population is insufficiently informed about the benefits and functioning of NATO, a situation exacerbated by the lack of effective informational campaigns by the government and civil society to educate citizens about the Alliance.

[12]Sondaj sociologic al Institutului Republican Internaţional (IRI) pentru iunie 2024, https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-moldova-may-june-2024/
[13] Barometrul opiniei publice. http://bop.ipp.md/
[14] Opinii și percepții privind ordinea public, securitatea statului și colaborarea Republicii Moldova cu Uniunea Europeană şi NATO. https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Opinii-si-perceptii-privind-ordinea-publica-securitatea-statului-si-colaborarea-cu-Republicii-Moldova-cu-Uniunea-Europeana-si-NATO.pdf

- Domestic political influence also plays a role. Certain political parties in Moldova (e.g., the Socialist Party, the Shor Party) promote a pro-Russian and anti-NATO agenda. Internal political polarization complicates the adoption of a consensual pro-NATO position.
- There is a lack of objective informational campaigns highlighting the benefits of partnership with NATO.

Public Perception of NATO in Moldova

Studies indicate that support for NATO in Moldova remains low, influenced by disinformation and historical ties with Russia. Factors such as fear of Russian reactions and insufficient public awareness contribute to this negative perception.

The low level of security culture within society and among the political class, combined with inadequate public communication in the fields of security and defence and the presence of strong propaganda, diminishes both public and political support for more decisive actions to strengthen security and defence, as well as cooperation with NATO and the European Union. Moreover, investments in strengthening the security and defence sector are often unpopular among the public, potentially creating reputational costs (due to disinformation and propaganda) for political actors, and thereby discouraging more decisive policies and actions.

Notably, there are persistent toxic propaganda and manipulation campaigns targeting security partnerships, the actions of Moldova's external allies, and even the actions or intentions to enhance resilience. The topic of constitutional neutrality is also frequently exploited in a manipulative way to discourage public support for defence capacity building or other measures aimed at fortifying Moldova's security.

The aggressive anti-NATO discourse of Russian media in the Republic of Moldova is intense. Every diplomatic or administrative detail regarding Chișinău's relations with international organizations has been turned into a propaganda tool. This persistent anti-NATO rhetoric, propagated across all available channels, is particularly reflected in public opinion surveys conducted in the Republic of Moldova, which have revealed widespread opposition among the population to a potential rapprochement with the North Atlantic Alliance.

Main Fake Narratives

Among the falsehoods or manipulations debunked by Stopfals.md are claims that NATO is gathering military equipment at Moldova's borders, planning to open a chemical laboratory at the Băcioi military base, deploying tens of thousands of NATO soldiers in Moldova, constructing a NATO military base, or moving hundreds of NATO tanks toward Transnistria and Gagauzia.

FAKE!

NATO Brings War: The disinformation suggests that joining NATO provokes conflicts, despite contrary evidence from member countries.

FAKE!

NATO Wants to Control Moldova: The myth that NATO seeks to impose control over Moldova is unfounded

FAKE!

NATO Imposes Enormous Costs: In reality, NATO supports the modernization of defence without imposing disproportionate costs.

[12]Sondaj sociologic al Institutului Republican Internaţional (IRI) pentru iunie 2024, https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-moldova-may-june-2024/
[13] Barometrul opiniei publice. http://bop.ipp.md/
[14] Opinii și percepții privind ordinea public, securitatea statului și colaborarea Republicii Moldova cu Uniunea Europeană și NATO. https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Opinii-si-perceptii-privind-ordinea-publica-securitatea-statului-si-colaborarea-cu-Republicii-Moldova-cu-Uniunea-Europeana-si-NATO.pdf

FAKE: Moldova will face the same fate as Ukraine if it seeks to join NATO/EU.

Grain of Truth: It is true that a country's aspirations for EU integration and an intensified partnership with NATO, particularly one located near Russia, can generate geopolitical tensions. Russia perceives NATO and EU expansion into the former Soviet republics as a threat to its regional influence. Russia reacted aggressively to Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations. Moreover, the region is characterized by intense competition for influence between Russia and the West, requiring countries in this area to carefully navigate between these powers.

Truth/Reality: The statement fails to account for historical and geopolitical differences. Ukraine is strategically more significant for Russia, whereas the Transnistrian conflict is frozen and diplomatically manageable, unlike the active war in eastern Ukraine. Moldova does not have the same internal divisions and vulnerabilities as Ukraine, and Russia's interests in Moldova are less significant. Moldova is not as strategically important economically or militarily for Russia, which exerts influence through economic or political pressure rather than direct military intervention. Through diplomacy, domestic reforms, international support for European integration, and a proactive foreign policy to ensure its security, the Republic of Moldova can manage the risks associated with its European aspirations and the strengthening of its partnership with NATO without facing the same fate as Ukraine.

Fake: Moldova does not need NATO support to develop its defence capabilities.

Grain of Truth: This false narrative contains an element of truth in recognizing that the Republic of Moldova can seek other sources of support for developing its defence capabilities, including through bilateral partnerships, international and regional organizations, and its own resources.

Truth/Reality: The Republic of Moldova is located in a region of significant geopolitical tension, where Russia has intervened militarily in former Soviet republics (e.g., Ukraine, Georgia). Moreover, the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria remains a constant source of instability and a threat to Moldova's security. To address threats and risks to national security, Moldova requires international support and assistance.

NATO is one of the partners that provides Moldova with military support, technological assistance, and programs for modernizing the armed forces, support that would be difficult to obtain outside the framework of NATO's partnership platform. Moldova is already a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), benefiting from cooperation and assistance without being a full member. NATO allocates funds for specific security projects and cooperation programs aimed at strengthening defence capabilities. Additionally, NATO facilitates regional collaboration between Moldova and other partner countries, which can enhance regional security. Collaboration with NATO reinforces strategic partnerships and integrates Moldova into an effective collective security system, while also supporting political, economic, and military reforms necessary for European integration. NATO support provides unique advantages, such as advanced technological assistance and training programs, which would be difficult to replicate through other means.

The Republic of Moldova is a sovereign and independent state and independently decides the scope of multilateral and bilateral cooperation in line with its national security interests.

Moldova's defence capabilities are limited, with a modest defence budget and inadequately equipped armed forces, insufficient to address regional threats. Without the support of a strong military alliance such as NATO and its member states, Moldova's capacity to defend itself against external aggression would be significantly reduced.

FAKE: NATO Brings War

Grain of Truth: This false narrative is based on NATO's actions, and expansion can provoke perceptions of threat and negative reactions from other international actors, particularly Russia. Additionally, NATO military interventions, while aimed at defensive and humanitarian objectives, may be perceived by some parties as acts of aggression, thereby fuelling critical narratives. Some NATO interventions have faced international criticism, including regarding their methods and impact on civilian populations. However, these aspects do not diminish NATO's primary role in protecting its members and maintaining international stability.

Truth/Reality: The false narrative ignores the defensive and stabilizing role of the Alliance. NATO has been essential in preventing and resolving conflicts, promoting stability, and supporting its partners. Through its commitment to collective defence, diplomacy, and reforms, NATO contributes to global peace and security rather than initiating wars.

NATO is a defensive alliance established to protect its members against external aggression. Article 5 of the NATO Treaty states that an attack against one member is considered an attack against all, thereby deterring potential aggressors and contributing to peace and stability. Historically, NATO has intervened to stop genocide and stabilize the Balkans during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and it conducted operations in Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001, attacks to eliminate terrorist threats under a UN mandate. Through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, NATO collaborates with partner countries to develop defence capabilities and promote democratic reforms and the rule of law, thereby contributing to regional stability. In addition, NATO has provided humanitarian assistance and logistical support during international crises. In response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, NATO's presence in Eastern Europe has been strengthened to protect member and partner states. NATO is also active in counter-terrorism efforts, cooperating to prevent and respond to terrorist threats. NATO has sought to maintain dialogue and cooperation with Russia through the NATO-Russia Council, even during periods of heightened tension, promoting diplomatic solutions to security issues. Furthermore, NATO collaborates with numerous partner countries and international organizations to address global challenges and prevent conflicts.

Sources of False Narratives
Russia plays a major role in spreading these narratives through controlled media and disinformation campaigns. Russian media sources serve as the primary channels for distributing these myths in Moldova.

Impact of False Narratives

False narratives about NATO have had a profound impact on the Republic of Moldova, contributing to public misinformation and influencing national political decisions. They have increased fears and insecurity among the population, resulting in over 60 % of Moldovan citizens opposing NATO membership and cooperation with the Alliance. In the medium and long term, the impact is also evident in the reform of the security and defence sector, where NATO remains one of the key partners for development in the field of security and defence.

Solutions

- *Education and Awareness: Launch informational campaigns to educate the public about NATO and the benefits of partnership. Involve civil society and NGOs in these efforts.*
- *Collaboration with NATO: Seek support in countering disinformation and developing a culture of security. Establish regional partnerships to share best practices and resources.*
- *Development of an Effective Government Communication Strategy: Promote transparency and open dialogue with citizens to debunk myths about NATO.*

Recommendations:

▶▶ Implementing short-term informational campaigns and organizing dialogues with local communities to clarify the benefits of a partnership with NATO.

▶▶ Launching public education campaigns about NATO and the advantages of partnership, involving civil society and NGOs in these efforts.

▶▶ Introducing educational modules about NATO in schools and establishing a system to monitor public perception to adjust communication strategies accordingly.

▶▶ Promoting education and public awareness.

▶▶ Ensure that information about security and defence is presented in an accessible and easily understandable manner. Interactive training modules can help improve communication and understanding.

▶▶ Overall, security, and defence education should be adaptable, up-to-date, and responsive to the continuously evolving needs of society and the global environment.

▶▶ Collaborating with NATO to receive support in countering disinformation and establish regional partnerships to share best practices and resources.

Conclusion: The analysis demonstrates that false narratives about NATO have a significant negative impact on public perceptions and Moldova's national security. It is crucial to act promptly to correct these perceptions and strengthen relations with NATO. Mobilization of the government, civil society, and international partners is essential.

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has become fertile ground for disinformation campaigns focused on the European Union, a phenomenon that significantly influences public perceptions and the country's political orientation. At a critical moment when Moldova has consolidated its pro-European aspirations, such disinformation campaigns seek to undermine citizens' trust in the European path, intensify fears of a loss of sovereignty, and fuel economic uncertainty. These false narratives are disseminated through a wide range of media channels, from television to social networks, reinforcing a discourse that reflects fears deeply rooted in Moldovan society.

Recent surveys have shown that the majority of Moldovan citizens support EU accession [15]; however, a substantial segment of the population remains influenced by misleading ideas, often propagated by internal and external actors whose interests run counter to the process of European integration. Disinformation exploits a range of social and economic vulnerabilities, from historical Russian influence to fears of cultural change and geopolitical pressures. Through well-orchestrated manipulation techniques, such as message repetition, the exploitation of "grains of truth," and societal polarization, disinformation campaigns achieve their objectives of creating confusion, fragmenting public opinion, and undermining the democratic process.
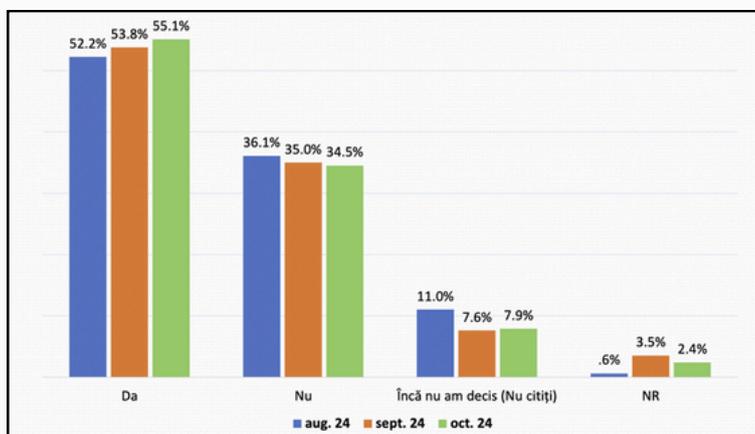
The following analysis examines the impact of these disinformation campaigns on public perceptions of the European Union in Moldova, exploring both the mechanisms used to disseminate Fake messages and their social and political consequences.

In a context in which Moldova is facing significant hybrid attacks, it is essential to understand how disinformation shapes public trust and influences the country's European future.

How did narratives affect the EU referendum?

The constitutional referendum of 20 October on the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union marked a decisive moment in the country's political and social orientation. Although the majority of citizens who participated in the referendum voted "Yes" [16], as indicated by preliminary surveys, disinformation campaigns significantly influenced both voting intentions and overall turnout.

The question included on the ballot for the 20 October referendum was formulated as follows: "Do you support the amendment of the Constitution with a view to the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union? How would you vote?"

Source: CBS Axa and WatchDog Survey

The question that will be on the ballot for the October 20 referendum will read as follows: "Do you support amending the Constitution with a view to Moldova's accession to the European Union?" How will you vote? [17].

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[15] https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Raport_PISA_DCAF_SE_2024_ro-1.pdf
[16] Sondaj: Opțiune certă pro-UE a moldovenilor.
https://www.dw.com/ro/sondaj-op%C8%9Biune-cert%C4%83-pro-ue-a-moldovenilor/a-70302780
[17] https://watchdog.md/polls/208333/sondaj-socio-politic-octombrie-2024/

Surveys conducted before the referendum by CBS Axa and iData indicated majority support for European integration: 55.1% of CBS Research respondents and 47.9% of iData respondents opted for "Yes" to the constitutional amendment aimed at EU accession. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the population remained undecided or chose not to participate, reflecting the profound impact of false narratives. The CBS Research survey reported that 7.9% of respondents were undecided and 2.4% did not provide an answer. Similarly, iData found that 12% were undecided, while 13.5% stated that they would not go to vote. Disinformation capitalized on deeply rooted fears and insecurities within Moldovan society, such as the perceived loss of sovereignty, fears of reprisals from Russia, and the economic risks associated with EU accession. These themes were intensified through techniques such as the constant repetition of messages in the media space and the exploitation of a "grain of truth," thereby amplifying distrust toward European integration.

The impact of disinformation was reflected in a high proportion of voters who cast a "No" vote in the referendum, as well as in the fragmentation of public opinion. Consequently, false narratives succeeded in discouraging part of the pro-accession electorate and in sowing distrust among undecided voters. Although the outcome was a narrow "Yes" vote in favour of accession, the effects of disinformation on the democratic process underscore the need for accurate and accessible public information campaigns capable of countering disinformation and supporting a healthy and transparent public discourse on Moldova's European future.

Below, we present a set of false narratives concerning the European Union:

FALSE NARRATIVES ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION

FAKE 1: "The EU can no longer afford enlargement because it lacks the necessary resources."

Grain of truth: EU finances are indeed allocated carefully, and the enlargement process requires substantial resources to integrate new member states.

Reality: The EU continues to allocate funds for enlargement, particularly for candidate countries in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Enlargement remains a strategic priority, and the EU budget provides grants and pre-accession funds to support the necessary reforms. Claims of resource scarcity are only partially true, as most costs are offset by access to larger markets and enhanced regional stability.

FAKE 2: "Accession to the EU means accession to NATO."

Grain of truth: Many EU countries are also NATO members, and the EU and NATO cooperate on security and defence matters.

Reality: EU accession and NATO accession are distinct processes with no mutual conditionality. Countries such as Austria, Ireland, and Sweden have maintained neutrality without being NATO members while remaining part of the EU. This narrative overlooks the fact that the EU's defence policy is autonomous, and that member states may opt for neutrality, particularly in contexts of geopolitical pressure, as is the case for Moldova.

FAKE 3: "The EU no longer provides grants to the Republic of Moldova, offering only loans with exorbitant interest rates."

Grain of truth: Some programmes include loans with very low interest rates; however, grants and funds remain the primary instruments of support for countries such as Moldova.

Reality: The EU continues to provide grants and non-repayable funds to support reforms and development projects. Loans are usually offered as part of macro-financial assistance packages, under conditions far more favourable than those available on international markets, and they contribute to the financial stability of partner countries.

FAKE 4: "Moldova will lose control over its own resources."

Grain of truth: EU membership entails common standards and participation in a single market that includes economic regulations.

Reality: National resources remain under the control of the authorities of the member state. EU accession brings trade benefits and access to development funds, not the transfer of strategic resources. Moldova would retain control over its natural resources while benefiting from access to an expanded market.

FAKE 5: "The EU is pushing Moldova into conflict with Russia."

Grain of truth: Moldova's rapprochement with the EU and its integration aspirations may affect relations with Russia, which opposes EU and NATO enlargement.

Reality: The EU does not pursue a policy of conflict with Russia but supports dialogue and cooperation, including in its eastern neighbourhood. The EU promotes stability and democracy, and Moldova has the sovereign right to determine its geopolitical future. EU accession does not constitute a military alliance; therefore, the premise of conflict is false and does not reflect EU intentions or policies.

Fears Exploited by False Narratives

A segment of the Moldovan population fears that accession to the European Union would lead to a loss of control over national resources and decision-making. False narratives amplify this concern by promoting the idea that the EU would impose measures reducing governmental authority and undermining national sovereignty.

Moldova's geographical proximity to Russia and its economic dependence on Russian resources, particularly natural gas, generate fears of economic or political reprisals from Russia. Narratives suggesting that EU accession would place Moldova in conflict with Russia and provoke reactions similar to those observed in Ukraine exploit these fears.

False narratives regarding EU grants and loans capitalize on economic anxiety in Moldova by claiming that the EU provides only high-interest loans. This fuel concerns that the country would incur excessive debt and become vulnerable to external economic control.

There is also apprehension that EU integration would bring cultural and social changes perceived as incompatible with local traditions. This concern is frequently exploited through false narratives about the "loss of national values" following accession.

Techniques Used	Description of the Techniques
Emotionalization of messages	Simplified and emotionally charged messages are used to amplify fears
Exploitation of a "grain of truth".	Inclusion of a distorted element of truth to enhance credibility
Use of social media and fake accounts	Deployment of fake accounts and bot networks to disseminate content
Message repetition across multiple channels	Repetition through various channels to create an appearance of consensus
Polarization of society	Creation of oppositional narratives that divide and polarize public opinion

Sources of False Narratives

- Russian media outlets and pro-Russian channels are the primary sources consistently disseminating messages against European integration. They use television, social media, and online news platforms to promote anti-EU narratives, portraying the EU as a foreign force seeking to control Moldova's resources or undermine the national economy [18].
- Political parties and public figures promoting a pro-Russian agenda are frequently associated with the spread of these narratives. Through public speeches and statements, they advance ideas of distancing from the EU, framing European integration as a loss of sovereignty and national decision-making authority.
- Social media campaigns, often coordinated through fake accounts or bot networks, further amplify these messages. Simplified and emotionally charged rhetoric is used to reach a broad audience, particularly young people and rural populations.
- False narratives due to the absence of verified sources or sustained government information campaigns sometimes fill the lack with objective and balanced information. This environment allows disinformation to gain traction.
- The European Union risks being perceived negatively. The EU may become associated with a threat to national sovereignty and resources, which could adversely affect diplomatic relations and European support for Moldova.

Impact of False Narratives

- False narratives can influence public opinion, diminishing popular support for EU accession. In the long term, this may impact political stability and the pro-European orientation of the Moldovan government, reducing its capacity to implement the reforms necessary for integration.

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[18] TOP 22 de falsuri ale anului 2022. https://stopfals.md/ro/article/top-22-de-falsuri-ale-anului-2022-180733

- These narratives create divisions between pro-European and pro-Russian segments of society, increasing social tensions and polarization. Interest groups to manipulate and control public opinion may exploit such divisions [19].
- A population influenced by disinformation tends to have lower trust in public authorities and international commitments. Consequently, false narratives can undermine Moldova's efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law.
- If false narratives continue to spread unchecked, the EU risks being perceived negatively. The EU's image could become associated with a threat to the country's sovereignty and resources, which would impact diplomatic relations and European support for Moldova.

Solutions

1. Launching public information campaigns focused on debunking myths and promoting the benefits of EU accession. This may include collaboration with fact-checking organizations and the dissemination of verified information, both online and offline.
2. Involving non-governmental organizations and European partners in awareness and information campaigns. Such partnerships can support journalist training, public education about the EU, and the strengthening of resilience against disinformation.
3. Developing a clear strategy for communicating the advantages of European integration and cooperation in economic, political, and security matters with the EU. Messages should be accessible, targeted to both urban and rural populations, and directly address public concerns.
4. Using technology and experts to monitor and counter disinformation campaigns. The rapid identification of accounts and pages spreading false narratives can help mitigate their impact.

Recommendations:

Introducing an educational module on the European Union in schools to ensure an accurate understanding of the functioning and benefits of European integration.

Implementing long-term information campaigns to ensure the continuity of pro-European messages and effectively counter disinformation. It is important that these campaigns are accessible to all social groups and adapted to the specific characteristics of each audience segment.

Organizing events, debates, and public dialogues, including participation from EU representatives, to engage directly with citizens and address their questions. Such initiatives can reduce suspicions and enhance understanding.

Encouraging and funding investigative journalism and independent information sources. High-quality journalism can help debunk false narratives and provide a reliable and balanced alternative for public information.

[19] Chifu Iulian. Război informațional: tipizarea agresiunii informaționale a Federației Ruse. București: ISPRI, 2016

▶▶ Launching public initiatives explaining the differences between the EU and NATO, the benefits of integration, and the maintenance of national sovereignty.

▶▶ Collaborating with local fact-checkers and online platforms to counter disinformation and clarify the benefits of European integration.

▶▶ Moldovan authorities and civil society organizations could develop a transparent strategy for dialogue and information on the advantages and realities of relations with the EU, as well as on national sovereignty and economic resources.

▶▶ Cooperating with social media platforms to raise awareness about the characteristics of online disinformation and establish partnerships based on information sharing and expertise distribution.

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