

## MEDIA LITERACY AND THE CHALLENGE OF FAKE NEWS

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Moldova, a country with a Soviet past and hopes of a European future, has by no means avoided the problem of fake news and disinformation. Given its geopolitical position, in the past few years Moldova has been a target of hostile activity, short of conventional military measures, after domestic and foreign policy developments had redirected Russian attention to the country. The protracted transition to market economy and the legacy of a tightly controlled society during communism have so far hindered in-depth, society-wide discussions about democracy and its fundamental tenets, such as freedom of speech and freedom of media.

Moldova's information space, since its independence, has been exposed to foreign influences. This has not necessarily been detrimental to Moldova's development. However, the country's vulnerability became clear when foreign actors started to aggressively exploit this openness to influence public opinion. By creating parallel realities and employing deceiving narratives—whether situational (related to one particular event) or strategic (related to ones' traditions, beliefs, customs)—external actors have sought to control, manipulate, and increasingly, disrupt the existing order in Moldova.

### The elements of hybrid warfare in Moldova

#### Exploiting strategic narratives

The term "hybrid warfare," incorporating such elements as propaganda, fake news, and manipulation, is a global phenomenon. Yet, its prevalence has increased significantly on the European continent in the past few years as an "East-West" confrontation has made a comeback. The main thrust of the propaganda has targeted, among other, the sovereign choice of the Eastern Partnership countries<sup>1</sup> to engage in closer political and economic cooperation with the European Union (EU) and to conclude trade and association agreements. Already lacking proper communication with the

EU and a common understanding in several strategic areas, Russia has interpreted the new partnerships as a threat to its security and as a foray in its historical sphere of influence.

For the public, it became clear how destructive hybrid warfare could be in 2014, when it was complemented by conventional military measures and led to territorial revisions in Eastern Europe. The annexation of Crimea, as well as the war in Donbas, proved that governments can no longer ignore threats posed by disinformation and fake news given their power to influence citizens and trigger the replacement of sovereign governments and the creation of power vacuums or grey zones.

<sup>1</sup> Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia

Moldova, situated right next to Ukraine, has been facing a massive propaganda attack and avalanche of fake news in the past few years. These attacks attempt to exploit institutional, societal and emotional vulnerabilities, including the lack of consolidated institutions and up-to-date legal framework; a weak educational system; an ethnically and linguistically divided society that is highly susceptible to geopolitical messages; and a significant nostalgia for the past Soviet times.

Two competing patterns of integration, the European Union and what is today called the Eurasian Union, clashed in the early 2000s as Moldovan foreign policy priorities shifted with the Communists in government. In 2009, mass protests following allegedly fraudulent elections highlighted the popular need for a genuinely democratic Moldova and laid the foundations for a Europe-oriented foreign and domestic policy. Moldova’s institutions, including civil society, the media, NGOs, the church, and political parties, played an important role later in either amplifying and promoting propaganda narratives or, on the contrary, in demystifying them. But the country lacked a narrative and a well-defined strategy that would strengthen its resolve to follow a European path and pro-Europe messages were either weak or came up late in the reform process.

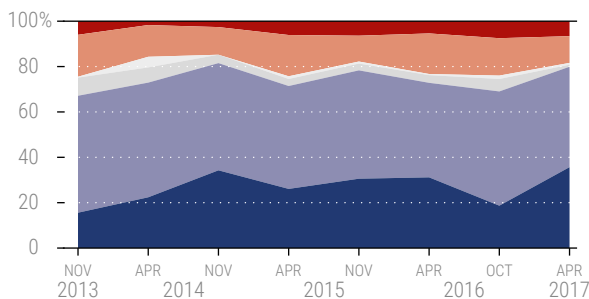
### The power of language...

Given its Soviet heritage, Moldova’s small and poorly developed media market was easy to exploit, and it became one of Russia’s first targets in the ongoing hybrid warfare. Pro-Russian sentiment in the country’s ethnically diverse population—combined with a nostalgia for the past usually strongest in the older generation—simplified the spread of false information throughout the country. The uniqueness of Russian media lies in its vast area of coverage and in its entertainment value. Its quality is above that of local channels, facilitating the consumption of fake news together with Saturday night shows. Thus, Russian TV channels in Moldova have become a means of delivery for fake narratives and propaganda, a highly controlled and centralized “golden pipeline.”

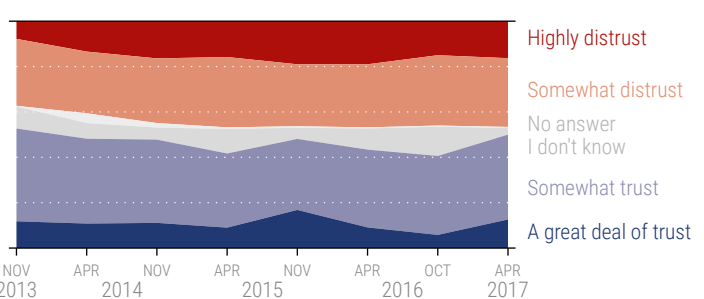
Moldovan viewers, for reasons such as nostalgia, better quality, habit, or even a genuine lack of interest for other channels stay faithful to Russian television; in fact, their trust in the information that they receive from these outlets has been growing. According to the Barometer of Public Opinion (April 2017), 71.6 percent of respondents predominantly receive information from Moldovan media (TV and radio), 43 percent from Russian media, and 21.8 percent from Romanian (European) media. The credibility of Russian

#### How much do you trust the media (TV, radio, newspapers, internet) in Russia?

Responses by Russians, Ukrainians and others

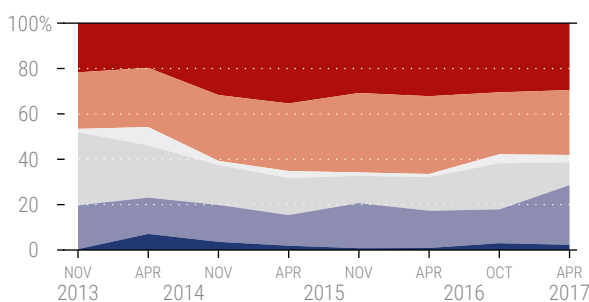


Responses by Moldovans, Romanians

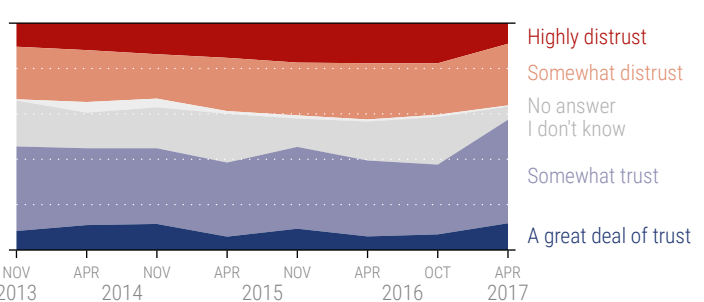


#### How much do you trust the media (TV, radio, newspapers, internet) in the European Union?

Responses by Russians, Ukrainians and others



Responses by Moldovans, Romanians



Data by Public Opinion Barometer, Institute of Public Policies; <http://bop.ipp.md>

media is grounded in first and foremost two major elements of statehood: ethnicity<sup>2</sup> and language. According to the 2014 census, 75.1 percent of the population self-identifies as Moldovans, 7 percent as Romanians, 6.6 percent as Ukrainians, 4.6 percent as Gagauz, 4.1 percent as Russians, 1.9 percent as Bulgarians, and 0.3 percent as Roma.<sup>3</sup>

While the Russian community is quite small, Russian is the second most spoken language in the country.<sup>4</sup> The lack of a real language barrier facilitates the promotion of messages in Russian but also the consumption of false information. News is communicated in a language that people understand—a fact that already increases its authenticity and credibility.

An analysis of data provided by the Barometer of Public Opinion for the period 2013–2017 (see charts) shows that Russian, Ukrainian, and other minorities started to trust Russian-language media more after the March 2014 annexation of Crimea. The peak was reached in November 2014 when Russia was perceived as a strong regional actor capable of undertaking military actions. Alignment with a powerful nation has been a strategy employed by weak countries or heterogeneous societies for decades. In April 2015, however, the level of trust decreased rapidly, presumably because of the continuous fighting in Donbas and the emerging economic crisis in Russia generated by Western sanctions. Russia’s economic standstill temporarily affected Moldova’s seasonal labor migrants. By late 2016, the consistency and sustainability of Russia’s propaganda efforts and a number of domestic developments—including the “one-billion-dollar theft” and a significant disillusionment with the European path—had contributed to an increase in trust.

Compared to the minorities, the ethnically Moldovan / Romanian population seem to be slightly more careful with Russian media, although they still rate outlets’ credibility high.

At the same time, the percentage of those trusting Europe-based outlets has increased significantly, acknowledging efforts by these countries to present their own narratives in Moldova’s information space.

Nevertheless, convincing the country’s Russian-speaking population—which, building on its experience in the Cold War, has a tendency to distrust information coming from the “other side”—remains a challenge.

### ...and the power of the church

The 2016 presidential elections have emphasized the role of the church in shaping the public discourse and delivering messages of clear political nature. The Orthodox church plays a major role in social life in Moldova; the majority of citizens identify as Christian-Orthodox. Weaponizing religion in a country where the church is the most trusted institution could be considered a “jackpot,” and not only for domestic actors. The Moldovan Metropolitan is subordinate to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, a crucial figure in the “Russkiy Mir” (Russian world).<sup>5</sup>

The overlap between politics and religion has worked in favor of current president Igor Dodon, who has been featured together not only with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who enjoys great popularity among Moldovans, but Patriarch Kirill of Moscow as well. It could be argued that the current Russian rhetoric of traditional values and acting as Christianity “saviors”

2 Identification and feeling of belonging to a specific territory, state or even region.

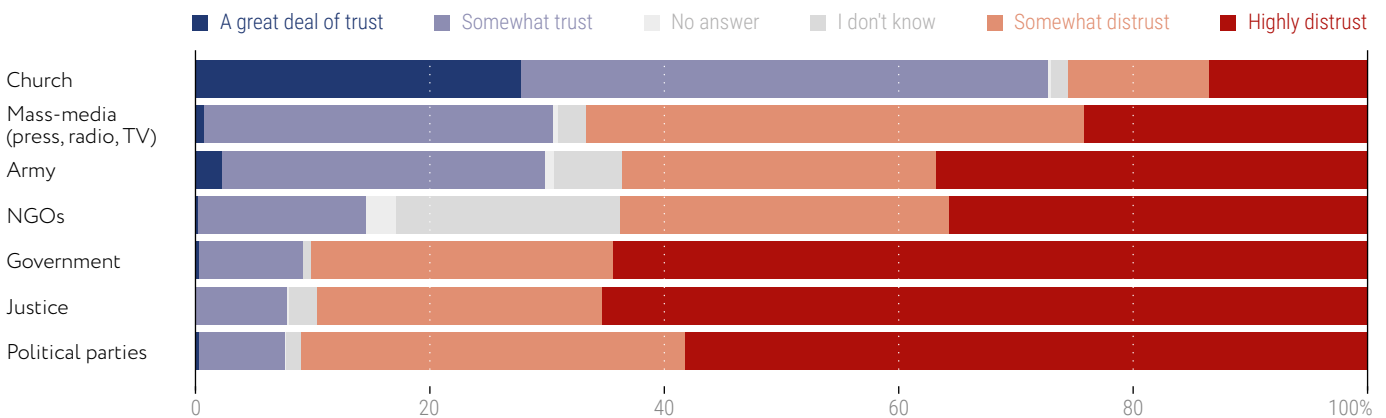
3 Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Moldova, May 12-25, 2014 <http://www.statistica.md/pageview.php?l=en&idc=479>

4 According to the 2014 census Russian is the main language spoken by 14.5 percent. However, a considerable part of the Romanian-speaking population also use or understand Russian.

5 Russian World represents the overall communities of Russians leaving in the near abroad. This concept defines Russia’s policies toward countries with Russian-speaking communities.

### How much do you trust the following institutions?

Period: October 2016



Data by Public Opinion Barometer, Institute of Public Policies; <http://bop.ipp.md>

has been piloted in Moldova, using instruments such as hate speech and xenophobia. In the 2016 election campaign, fake news proliferated with the help of the church and priests against Dodon's electoral rival Maia Sandu. Although the church has always played a role in the electoral campaign in Moldova, never before did religious representatives use media as an additional channel for massive disinformation.

The strategic narrative centered on religion and the so-called traditional values not only represents a threat, it also influences Moldova's geopolitical orientation. The Moldovan Orthodox Church's opposition to Law 121 on ensuring equality—a 2012 law aimed at tackling discrimination on several criteria but known mostly as the "law on sexual minorities"—jeopardized the implementation of the action plan on visa liberalization and the ongoing negotiations over the Association Agreement, two major steps in EU-Moldova relations. In these cases, it was clear that the church is using its institutional and political leverage in order to hamper Moldova's European integration. Compared to a political party, the Orthodox church reaches many more people due to the presence of at least one parish per community.

Both in 2012, when Law 121 was adopted, and during the 2016 electoral campaign, the representatives of the Orthodox church exploited societal fears around same-sex couples and the possibility of same-sex marriages and adoption. They painted apocalyptic scenarios, which worked well with the wider public due to the absence of alternative narratives and a lack of understanding when it comes to the concept of discrimination.

### Building fake news on situational narratives

Strategic narratives are often seen as providing a fertile ground for the emergence of situational narratives, messages that appear in certain circumstances, coincide with particular events, or derive from concrete actions. Moldova has faced the challenge of fake news and propaganda in crucial moments for the country's future and its regional relations. Fake narratives have disrupted the EU-Moldova partnership, the country's regional security, and last but not least, its internal affairs.

In addition to the weak media regulatory framework, the lack of a strategic approach by the government provides fertile ground for exploiting societal, economic,

and political vulnerabilities. Situational narratives are successful in cases where strategic narratives are well-rooted, and media literacy, critical thinking, or pluralism do not help tackle fake information. Below are a few examples of situational narratives.

**European Union:** During the negotiation of the Association Agreement—including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and the action plan on visa liberalization—the Moldovan authorities, concerned primarily with their external communication, ignored several ongoing domestic processes that had been infused with propaganda. Thus, a series of myths spread all over the country related to the Moldovan society's traditions, beliefs, and values. The European Union was portrayed as an institution that deprives countries of their sovereignty and territorial integrity, and claims proliferated that "enhanced cooperation" will require abandoning a country's own culture, religion, and traditions.<sup>6</sup> In order to make these messages more appealing to ordinary citizens, outlets distorted real facts and mixed them with half-truths. For example, the propaganda presented the accession criteria of having a unitary state with no territorial claims as something that will lead to Moldova's dissolution and to giving up Transnistria; it claimed that new requirements under the DCFTA were endangering local producers and exports to Russia;<sup>7</sup> argued that the signing the Association Agreement implied joining NATO and withdrawing from the Commonwealth of Independent States;<sup>8</sup> and that the visa liberalization with the EU will cause massive migration flows resulting in depopulation.<sup>9</sup> Xenophobic, unrealistic, and apocalyptic scenarios of Moldova being invaded by LGBT individuals and representatives of various religious groups, mainly Muslims, represented a key component in the propaganda campaign.

**NATO:** Describing potential NATO accession as a grave danger—although deployed recently as situational narrative—most certainly reinforces a strategic narrative inherited from the Cold War. Through well-aimed messages it has been portrayed as a threat to Moldova's neutrality on the one hand, and on the other, it has been argued that closer cooperation will set off direct confrontation with Russia. According to the Barometer of Public Opinion for the 2006-2007 period, 30 percent of respondents do not know what NATO's mission and goals are,<sup>10</sup> demonstrating a significant lack of information.

6 Mîțuri și realități despre integrarea europeană a Republicii Moldova, [https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova\\_1968321.html](https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova_1968321.html)

7 Cinci mituri despre Acordul de Asociere cu Uniunea Europeană, <https://expert-grup.org/ro/activitate/item/881-cinci-mituri-despre-acordul-de-asociere-cu-uniunea-european%C4%83>

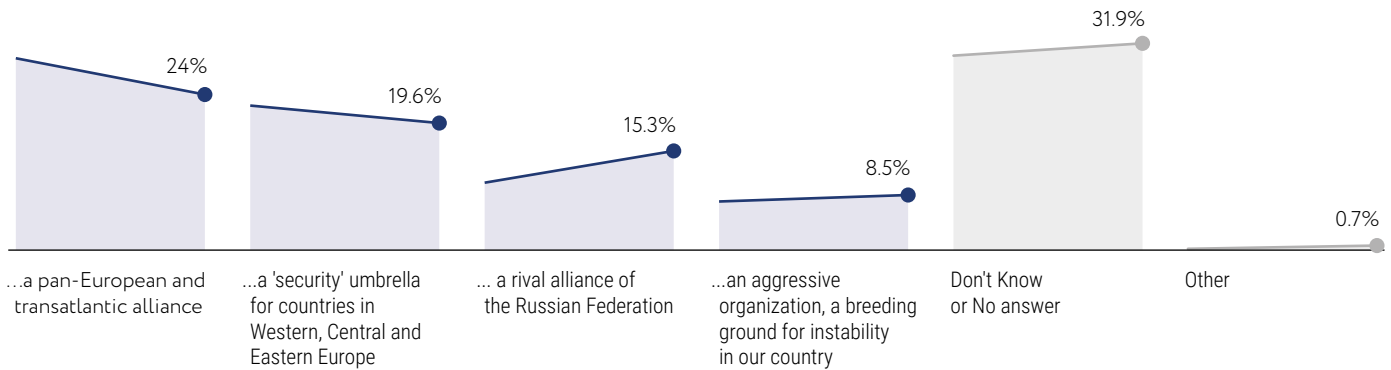
8 Ibid.

9 Mîțuri și realități despre integrarea europeană a Republicii Moldova, [https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova\\_1968321.html](https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova_1968321.html)

10 Republic of Moldova, Public Opinion Barometer, <http://bop.ipp.md>

Which of the following statements is closest to your opinion? NATO is...

Period: April 2006, November 2007



Data by Public Opinion Barometer, Institute of Public Policies; <http://bop.ipp.md>

**Ukraine:** The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have increased the amount of fake news and propaganda penetrating Moldova’s information space. Despite the immediate proximity of the country as well as the presence of a Ukrainian community, Moldovan citizens have been confused about what is happening on the ground. According to the April 2014 Public Opinion

Barometer, 34.9 percent of ethnic Ukrainians considered Russia’s annexation of Crimea justified, while 27.8 percent argued that there was no intervention at all.<sup>11</sup> In comparison, among ethnic Moldovans/Romanians—who watch more Romanian and EU-based media outlets—43.7 percent considered the intervention not justified.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Not a member of EU or NATO but still at their frontier, Moldova remains ever vulnerable to foreign influence. Russia will continue to target the country and attempt to deepen societal divisions by, among other means, undermining institutional trust. For Russia, this approach highlights both frustration over its lost sphere of influence and intentions to be seen as a strong actor in the regional and international arena.

With the support of its partners, Moldova’s government has embarked on significant reforms under the Association Agreement. Its progress has been insufficient so far, making little headway on one of the most important criteria for financial assistance, the independence of the media and plurality of opinion. While in an encouraging first step, Moldova’s parliament has passed recently an amendment to the audiovisual code, which includes the term “information security” and addresses the issue of foreign propaganda, the provisions fall short of providing genuine protection for the country’s information space.<sup>12</sup>

Fighting fake news and propaganda is not only time consuming and sometimes meaningless, but also irrelevant when it comes to fostering critical thinking and a plurality of opinions. Elaborating on messages based on Moldovan citizens’ perceptions, fears, and needs while anticipating a

societal shift could serve as first steps in reducing foreign influence and creating own narratives.

Fake news and propaganda, together with populism, have challenged governments around the world and have revived the need for increased civic awareness and quality journalism, whether in foreign or domestic media. The critical assessment of information and its sources has become an indispensable tool in fighting fake news; while increasing media literacy and assisting in understanding complex messages will help to build solid democracies in the future.

### Recommendation 1: Identify media education as a strategic pillar for preserving democracy.

1. Develop effective media literacy training programs for high-school teachers and encourage young people to prepare projects that approach media critically at a time when social media profiles, vlogs or blogs are important parts of their social identity;<sup>13</sup>
2. Publicly address topics such as critical media consumption, fake news, propaganda and disinformation through examples that relate to daily life and take into account professional, religious, ethnic, and linguistic background;

11 Republic of Moldova, Public Opinion Barometer, April 2014, <http://bop.ipp.md>

12 Proiectul legii cu privire la modificarea și completarea Codului audiovizualului al Republicii Moldova nr.260/2006 (art.2, 7, 9, ș.a.), <http://www.parlament.md/ProcesulLegislativ/Proiectedeactelegislative/tabid/61/LegislativId/3792/language/ro-RO/Default.aspx>

13 The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, Annual report 2016, <https://baltic.media/about>

3. Introduce media literacy at the university level to develop skills related to source analysis, fact verification, and data literacy.

### **Recommendation 2: Adopt a strategic approach in communicating and conveying national interest.**

1. Design a national communication strategy highlighting the national interest of the Republic of Moldova, both in terms of foreign and domestic policy;
2. Cultivate and offer national narratives based on societal, cultural, and emotional elements characteristic to Moldovan society and addressing existing gaps and controversies related to history, religion, language, ethnicity or social, economic, and political contexts;
3. Encourage the setup of civil consortiums promoting media literacy and civic awareness regionally (including in Gagauzia and Transnistria to an extent possible) and locally (cities, villages);
4. Design special media literacy courses and platforms for public opinion leaders, such as mayors, teachers, medical staff, social servants, church representatives, etc.

### **Recommendation 3: Increase awareness of fake news, propaganda, and misinformation through national and local strategic plans.**

1. Revise key strategic plans and identify hybrid threats at local and central levels;
2. Amend the current audiovisual regulatory framework to tackle fake news, propaganda, and misinformation after a thorough analysis of the threats and societal perception;
3. Develop genuine opportunities for the diversification of media, the professionalization of journalism, and access to information.
4. Set up institutional partnerships that engage with the strategic communication centers of the EU<sup>14</sup> and NATO,<sup>15</sup> and thus interact in platforms that address information war on a multinational level.

14 The Strategic Communications Division ("StratComms")

15 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence based in Riga



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Victoria Bucataru is the Executive Director of the Foreign Policy Association of Moldova. She is the author of several publications on foreign and security policies and Moldova's relations with the European Union, and has provided expertise to national and international organizations, including Freedom House, the Austrian Ministry of Defense, Latvian Institute of International Affairs, Leipzig University, and others. Ms. Bucataru is a 2017 Alumna of the Marshall Memorial Fellowship of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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