# THE SOCIETY-WIDE BATTLE AGAINST DISINFORMATION IN MOLDOVA

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## Introduction

Publishing and promoting false information in the media are not a new phenomenon. Often, false information is intentionally spread to mislead the public and support special interests; other times, it is disseminated unintentionally as the result of a technical/human error. A 2017 Council of Europe report[1] describing disinformation as an "information disorder" asserts that the concept of "false news" can present itself in three distinct forms: **misinformation**, **disinformation** and **malinformation**. Each carries different connotations, and it is important to clearly differentiate each term.

| Misinformation | Disinformation | Malinformation |
|---|---|---|
| The unintentional sharing of inaccurate and/or misleading information. | The deliberate dissemination of false or inaccurate information; e.g., to deliberately discredit a person or organization using false information. | Using information that is based on reality to inflict harm on a person, organization, or country; e.g., the use of a photograph of a dead child refugee with no context in an effort to ignite hatred against a particular ethnic group. |

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks the Republic of Moldova 40th in its 2022 Press Freedom Index, a significant improvement of 49 places compared to two years prior. RSF describes the Moldovan media landscape as divided into pro-Russian and pro-Western camps, with oligarchs and political leaders strongly influencing outlets' editorial positions. Media with pro-Russian editorial policies that regularly cite pro-Kremlin sources are particularly identified as common sources of disinformation, but not exclusively.

Moldova has faced the challenge of external and internal disinformation for several years. The dangers of this phenomenon are particularly evident in election campaigns and during periods of national crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, geopolitical events, and the war in Ukraine. This brief reviews prevalent disinformation narratives in Moldova from recent years and the corresponding measures taken by Moldovan authorities to combat this phenomenon. It concludes with proposals to further improve the legislative framework on disinformation and increase the capacity of Moldovan media outlets and the public to recognize false information.

## Disinformation on COVID-19

Throughout the last three years, disinformation campaigns about COVID-19 in Moldova have circulated across various communication channels, reaching a wide target audience. Disinformation notably reached the Moldovan public through religious websites and church leaders,[2] current and former politicians,[3] comments on articles,[4] posts on social media networks, and fake influencer profiles, among other sources.

An important step taken by Moldovan authorities in the fight against COVID-related disinformation was to block numerous online sources of communication they determined had spread false news. In accordance with the March 23, 2020 Decision of the Extraordinary National Commission, providers of publicly-available electronic communications services were obligated to block websites that spread false information about the pandemic and vaccination based on a list of online sources published by the Security and Information Service of Moldova.[5] However, not all internet providers complied, and some websites were still accessible days after the decision was adopted to blacklist them.

## Disinformation on the War in Ukraine

The media in Moldova is currently facing two major problems – internal and external disinformation – which can both be linked to the concentration of media ownership. The relationship between the concentration of media ownership and disinformation is relevant because the public is manipulated and misinformed according to the interests of those in control of the media. Under these conditions, disinformation has the power to influence the decisions of its audience and can change a citizen's view on a given topic.

In Moldova, it is important to distinguish between external and internal sources of propaganda and disinformation. **External disinformation** generally focuses on anti-Western messages targeting entities such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the United States. Commonly in the leadup to elections in Moldova, a common disinformation narrative claims that the West is involved in and has influence over Moldovan elections. The spread of externally-sourced propaganda significantly increased with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. After the Russian army further invaded Ukraine in February 2022, disinformation about Ukrainian refugees spread rapidly; disinformation took the form of false messages[6] and inciting inter-ethnic hatred.[7]

A particular message that incited hatred posited that Ukrainian refugees in Moldova are criminals and/or members of extremist groups. Several politicians and public figures contributed to the spread of this false narrative, including Mayor of Chisinau Ion Ceban. Without any evidence, Ceban claimed that refugees from Ukraine were a "risk" to public security and implied that they would commit crimes. "We estimate that in the next period, because of our hospitality, we could end up with pretty bad things, starting with theft, robberies, abuse, and vandalism, which are already taking place," declared Ceban at a meeting on March 3.[8] The Mayor's unfounded accusations were denied[9] by Alexandru Oprea, head of the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. At a press briefing, Oprea stated that after the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Moldova, there was no increase in the incidence of crime compared to the same period in the previous year.

A wedding organizer from Chisinau, Viorel Grigoraș, shared[10] a similar message. He posted on social networks that Ukrainian refugees had allegedly threatened several people at gunpoint at a gas station in Cimişlia while demanding food and fuel. This statement was shown to be false by the local authorities in Cimişlia. Other disinformation narratives suggested that all Ukrainian refugees would be violent and aggressive. Vladimir Odnostalco, Deputy of the Electoral Bloc of Communists and Socialists (BECS), bemoaned[11] that refugee children enrolled in Moldovan educational institutions "are aggressive."[12] This claim was subsequently denied[13] by the Ministry of Education and Research.

During this difficult period, the level of **internal disinformation** also increased in intensity. Internal propaganda is disseminated by various actors, including politicians, politically-affiliated media sources, outlets with pro-Kremlin editorial policies, and/or Eurosceptic individuals. This year, the primary tool for spreading disinformation was the messaging app Telegram, which connects Moldovans with other internet users in the region and the world.  On this platform and on others, politically-affiliated media, politicians and/or their supporters frequently take over chats and propagate misleading rumors. Disinformation on these platforms often echoes the Kremlin's favored propaganda narratives, namely that NATO and the U.S. are to blame for the war in Ukraine, that the Americans would fund biological weapons laboratories[14] in neighboring countries, and refuting documented cases where pregnant women were hospitalized at facilities bombed by Russian troops in Mariupol.

Waves of disinformation in 2022 have greatly impacted the Moldovan population.  For two months following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Promo-LEX Association monitored and analyzed online media, TV, social networks, and public statements of political actors and opinion leaders. Their findings are worrying. According to their report,[15] "Hate Speech and Incitement to Discrimination," the most common theme found in hate speech rhetoric was related to nationality. "In the context of the war in Ukraine and the wave of refugees, hate speech and incitement to discrimination or other forms of intolerance were directed against the group represented by Ukrainians, including Ukrainian politicians, Ukrainian military, refugees

of various ethnicities—and through association—against the citizens of the United States of America and Romania," the report states. During the monitored period, Telegram was the main platform for spreading hate speech, and disinformation directed against Ukrainian refugees was also disseminated through TikTok.

## Measures Taken to Combat Disinformation

To counteract this phenomenon, well-planned actions are needed both from the Moldovan state authorities and from the media and civil society. Information security is a key element of state security, and it is imperative that Moldovan authorities develop a well-informed information security strategy that serves the interests of the country. Although the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted[16] such a strategy in 2019, it is not adequate to counter or prevent disinformation.

At the same time, it is also vital that state institutions respond quickly to requests for information to discredit falsehoods. Most of the time, these replies come from the authorities within a maximum of fifteen working days; this delay is problematic, as it means that the false information would have already been spread widely in society and the counterarguments would have had minimal impact in combating false narratives. It should be noted that the Moldovan authorities have taken steps to improve communication between the media and public institutions. On the very first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Moldovan government announced the creation of the new "First Source"[17] Telegram channel, an official government channel for verifying information that is administered by officials from the Offices of the Presidency, Parliament, and Government. The channel includes information on important decisions of the Moldovan Government and responds to false rumors in the media space, including regarding the security situation in Ukraine.

Another important step taken by the Moldovan authorities to combat disinformation was the Parliament's adoption of the Law on Information Security,[18] which provided state institutions with tools to protect its citizens. This legislative instrument established a ban on news and analytical broadcasts from countries that have not ratified the Convention on Transfrontier Television, including Russia. The new law also creates a distinction for disinformation, which involves much harsher sanctions. Moreover, a new threshold of sanctions was established for those who do not produce local content. Importantly, the law endowed the Audiovisual Council (AC) with the authority to suspend the right to advertise; in cases of disinformation, the AC may suspend the license of a media outlet for up to seven days. These efforts to restrict advertising are a useful tool in combatting disinformation.

Some media sources with a pro-Kremlin editorial policy have speculated about broader change[19] surrounding the new amendments to the Audiovisual Media Services Code (known as the "Information Security Law"). Several Moldovan websites published news quoting Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, who declared that Moldova is attempting to cancel everything Russian. Both Lavrov and pro-Kremlin media disseminate the myth that Russophobia is widespread. In actuality, the law seeks to combat disinformation, regardless of the country of origin. To protect Moldova's national audiovisual space and ensure the informational security of citizens, it takes strict measures against aggressive militaristic propaganda. Specifically, it bans the broadcast of any audiovisual programs that justify wars of aggression, deny war crimes and crimes against humanity, or incite hatred.

The distribution of inappropriate, offensive, hateful, and divisive content can have dire consequences, including the increase of societal tensions that induce fear, insecurity, panic, and mass disorder. At the beginning of July 2022, the Criminal Code was supplemented with a new article (Article 70¹),[20] which imposes sanctions for any actions that incite discrimination. The new legal amendments impose a fine for committing any deliberate actions aimed at inciting discrimination, including through the media and public dissemination of information media (in written, graphic or digital forms). The fine ranges from 1,000 to 4,000 lei (approx. $200 to $800 USD) for natural persons and from 6,000 to 10,500 lei ($1,200 to $2,100 USD) for persons in a position of authority. Moreover, propaganda which could incite genocide and/or crimes against humanity will be sanctioned with a fine of up to 50 thousand lei ($10,100 USD) for individuals and up to 250 thousand lei ($50,800 USD) for legal entities. As of November 2022, no instances of the article's use have been made public.

An area that requires improvement is the teaching of media education in Moldovan schools. The 2021-2022 academic year marks the fifth year in which the subject of media education has been taught in Moldovan schools as an optional subject. According to the Center for Independent Journalism, in 2021-2022,[21] 128 instructors, trained in media skills, taught a media education course to 4,180 students from 103 schools across the country. To raise a generation with well-developed critical thinking and media literacy skills, it is necessary for more educational institutions to introduce this discipline into the school curriculum.

## Recommendations:

Despite recent efforts by Moldovan authorities to combat disinformation, additional measures must be taken. To make needed progress in securing the country's information space and to continue to equip citizens with stronger media literacy skills, the following recommendations should be considered by the Moldovan parliament and government, civil society, and media outlets, respectively

1. **Legislation should be adopted that requires all media outlets, including online platforms, to publicly disclose ownership information.** This has been a significant problem in Moldova as many websites are currently registered abroad, which makes it difficult to identify the owner/editor of platforms that disseminate disinformation. The Public Services Agency would be the appropriate entity to make a list of all the media platforms registered in the country to ensure greater transparency, as a similar list[22] already exists in the audiovisual field. It is necessary that these rules be applied to online platforms that claim to be informative (sites and portals), but not to blogs or vlogs, in order not to limit the freedom of expression of people in online spaces.

2. **Government and civil society, including both media and human rights organizations, should carry out activities to develop media literacy skills among the Moldovan public.** This could include discussions with people from various localities, socio-economic statuses, and professional backgrounds. This needs to be institutionalized through public education. Teachers of all school subjects should be trained to analyze and combat all forms of disinformation. The Association of Independent Press' ongoing STOP FALS[23] campaign against false and biased information has devoted special attention to the rural population and organizes activities to develop critical thinking and increase popular awareness of disinformation. The campaign's activities educate media consumers to be aware of the effects of manipulation and propaganda, to adopt a critical stance towards media, and to make informed decisions about the media products they consume.

3. **Media outlets must strengthen their editorial capabilities by devoting more resources to fact verification.** In Moldova, both the Association of Independent Press and the School of Journalism carry out activities to train journalists to identify and combat disinformation.

## Endnotes

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Lilia began working at API in 2011 and joined the editorial board of API's "Moldova Curată.md" portal, which reports on the integrity of public officials. She also published on the Report.md site. The Center for Independent Journalism in Moldova recognized her as one of the top ten journalists of the year in 2013. Lilia is the author of most articles published on Stop Fals!, a portal dedicated to fact-checking and related investigations. Throughout her career, she has worked both as a fact-checker and an educator in the field of fact-checking and media literacy.