

CULTIVATING INFORMATION RESILIENCE IN MOLDOVA'S MEDIA SECTOR

Danu Marin

In democratic societies, media are considered the fourth branch of power because they provide free, objective information on important matters in politics, society, and local communities for the public. They are not only an instrument of communication and information distribution, but also a mechanism that steers public discourse and oversees public life by holding officials accountable. Countries with weak democratic institutions, such as Moldova, must establish a healthy and independent media environment to prevent abuse of power, safeguard democratic principles and values, and build trust between citizens and government.

Unfortunately, media outlets are often used for propaganda and disinformation. In the case of Moldova, this poses a problem at two levels. Domestically, a large portion of media outlets serve private interests. The concentration of ownership in the hands of a few political actors creates alternative media ecosystems that promote diverging political agendas. It also adds to sociopolitical polarization and mistrust between citizens and government, which undermines representative democracy.

At the international level, Moldova is subject to foreign propaganda and disinformation from both state and nonstate actors. Russia has disproportionate influence on its neighbors, as Russian news outlets and entertainment programs are often more popular than local channels. An especially disturbing development is the instrumentalization of media to support foreign interventions and meddle in the domestic affairs of other nations. Due to its strong information presence, Russia has routinely managed to manipulate public opinion and weaken social cohesion in Moldova.

This brief analyzes the vulnerabilities in Moldova's media sector from both a domestic and foreign perspective and provides recommendations to improve information resilience.

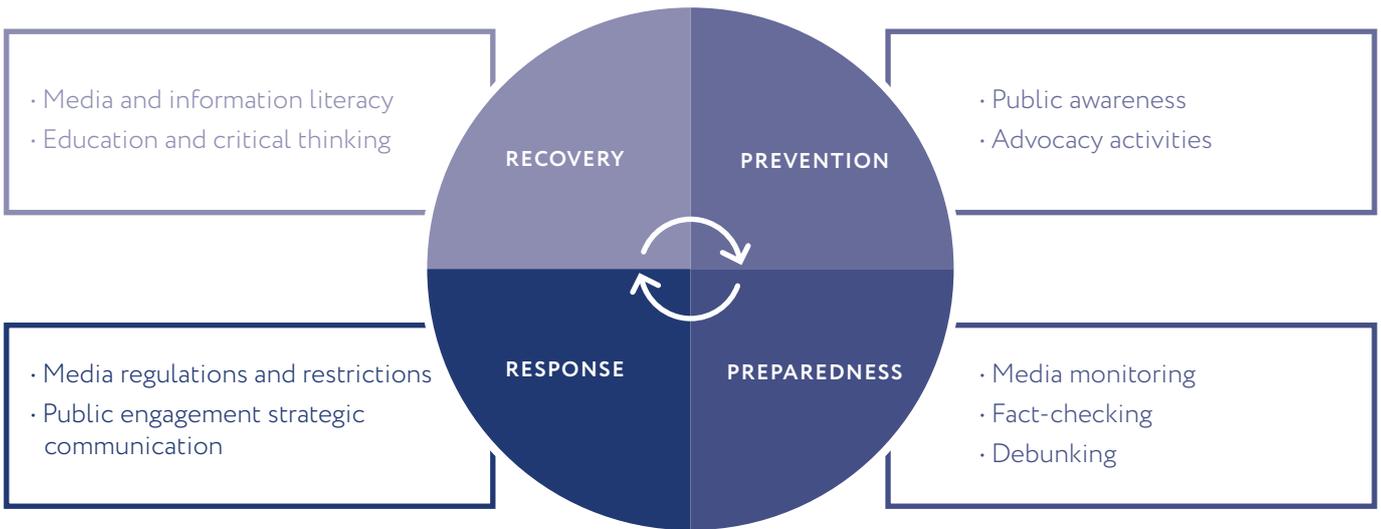
Information resilience through an emergency management framework

With a growing reliance on information technology and services, the potential risk of disinformation and propaganda has surged. This situation shares many features of an emergency but, instead of causing material damage, it weakens social cohesion and erodes trust in democratic institutions. Because media are integral to modern societies, a comprehensive approach to information security is needed.

First and foremost, societies must improve information resilience and treat information-related threats through the prism of emergency management. Emergency management consists of four separate phases: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Prevention can minimize the negative effects of a potential emergency. Preventive capabilities require public awareness about the dangers of disinformation and its negative impact on public discourse.

Preparedness works as an *early warning system* and encompasses media monitoring mechanisms and content



awareness. It requires human and technology-based instruments to detect and report *fake items* in traditional and social media.

Response mechanisms are countermeasures used to address disinformation and propaganda. They include adjusting the legislative framework and improving the effectiveness of the media regulator, along with enhancing public engagement and institutional capacity for strategic communications.

Finally, the recovery phase should yield an environment in which media faithfully serve the public and society stays vigilant towards manipulation. This requires long-term investment in educational programs that improve media literacy and critical thinking.

Prevention

There are many awareness-raising initiatives in Moldova, most of which are primarily led by volunteers and civil society. The “[StopFals](#)” platform, which aims to counter the effects of propaganda and help citizens critically analyze information, was launched in 2015 by a consortium of three media organizations.¹ However, awareness-raising efforts still fail to reach a critical mass of people, especially those communities which need it the most. Research has identified several *echo chambers* in Moldova due to the variability of media preferences spanning from foreign news to entertainment content.² Studies on public perception show that, while 50

percent of Moldovans are able to identify media manipulation, far fewer recognize externally produced content that aims to influence the consumer, especially from biased sources.³ This is especially true in ethnic and cultural communities, which often live in separate information ecosystems characterized by a preponderance of Russian outlets and few alternative information sources.⁴

Prevention: Best Practices

In Georgia and Ukraine, government and civil society have employed a more targeted approach to awareness-raising and used innovative solutions to reach intended audiences. Their experience also highlights how important civil society is in countering negative informational influence. The [StopFake](#) platform launched by Ukraine’s Mohyla School of Journalism in March 2014 became the gold standard for awareness-raising activities at the national and regional level in Ukraine, and the platform was modeled in other Central and Eastern European countries. In Georgia, a consortium of 20 organizations launched an information campaign entitled “[Support Georgia to Defend Liberty](#)” in 2015 to warn about foreign propaganda and encourage enhanced responsiveness by public authorities.⁵

1 Association for Independent Press (API), Independent Journalism Center (IJC), and Independent Journalists Association of Moldova (ATVJI).
 2 Ion Bunduchi, et al., “Securitatea informațională din perspectivă mediatică” (“Information Security from a Media Perspective”), Soros Foundation Moldova, 2016, https://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_Securitatea%20informatiionala%20din%20perspectiva%20mediatica_2016.pdf.
 3 “Public Perception of False and Distorted Information Covered by the Media,” Independent Journalism Center (IJC), January 2016, <http://media-azi.md/en/public-perception-false-and-distorted-information-covered-media-january-2016>.
 4 Oazu Nantoi, et al., “Moldova Between East and West: Views from Gagauzia and Taraclia,” Institute for Public Policy, 2016, http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Moldova-between-East-and-West-Views-from-Gagauzia-and-Taraclia_EN.pdf.
 5 Tabula, GISS, TDI, Baltic to Black Sea Alliance Georgia, GRASS, GFSIS, ALPE, EPRC, European Students for Liberty, CIPDD, Georgian Democracy Initiative, and others

MAIN INFORMATION SOURCES

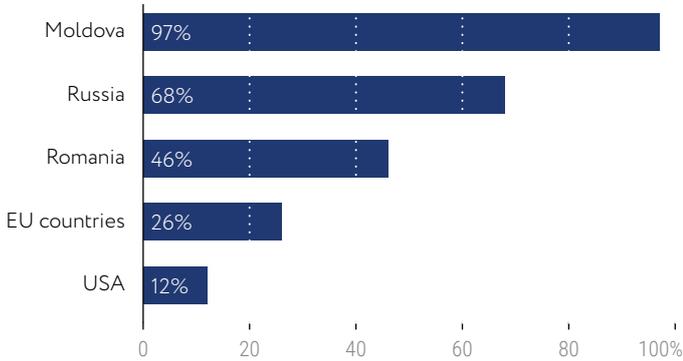


Figure 1: Usage of media sources by country of origin in Moldova
Source: January 2016 report, Independent Journalism Center

TRUST IN MEDIA SOURCES

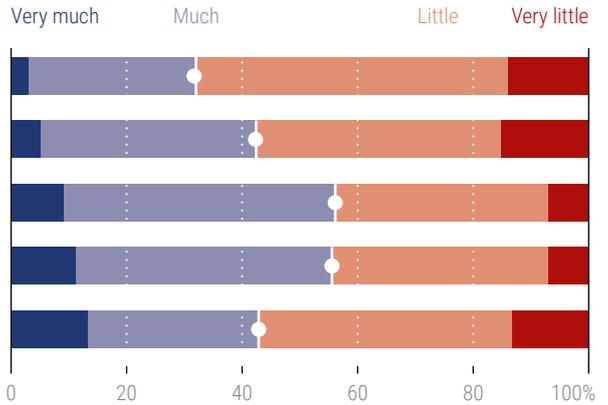


Figure 2: Level of trust in media sources by origin in Moldova
Source: January 2016 report, Independent Journalism Center

Preparedness

An *early warning system* against disinformation and propaganda is a combination of monitoring, fact-checking, and debunking tools. With the rise of internet technology, monitoring has become more complex. While there are well-established tools to monitor traditional media—usually in the form of an independent state regulator, such as the Audiovisual Coordination Council (CCA) — different capabilities are required to monitor online content. Eliminating negative influences requires both human and technological resources and better synergy between the public, authorities, civil society, and the private sector to design and implement efficient solutions.

Moldova lacks an efficient *early warning system* against information-related threats. First, there is a shortage of monitoring, fact-checking, and debunking capabilities; second, there is no genuine synergy between state and nonstate actors. The Audiovisual Coordination Council (CCA) lacks the capacity to efficiently monitor the environment and enforce compliance with national legislation. Furthermore, the Council is often subject to political pressure that raises doubts about its institutional independence and impartiality. While independent media organizations such as the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) and the Association for Independent Press (API) conduct additional monitoring, they have limited resources and public clout for influencing large organizations.

INFORMATION SOURCES

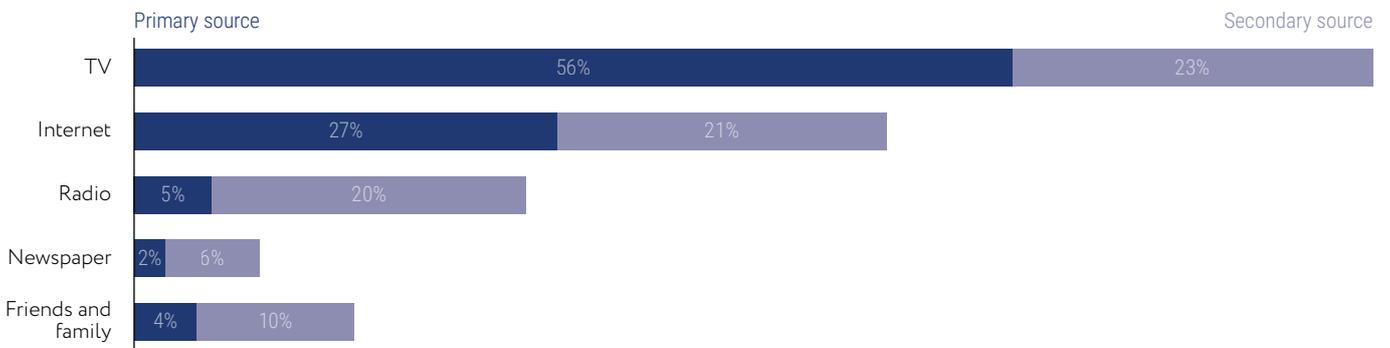


Figure 3: Relative usage of information sources in Moldova
Source: 2017 Barometer of Public Opinion report, Institute for Public Policy (in Romanian)

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN MOLDOVA

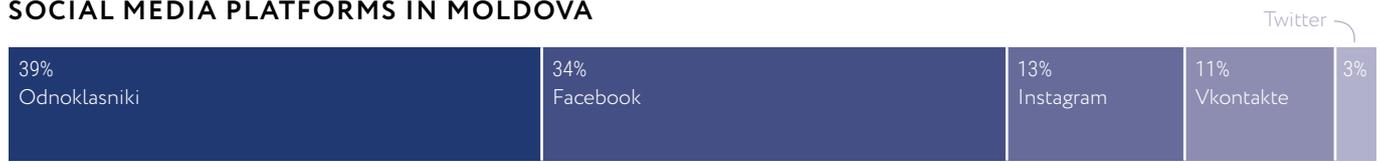


Figure 4: Usage of social media services in Moldova
 Source: *Public Opinion Survey 2017*, International Republican Institute

Civil society volunteers and activists monitor online content. Two of the most well-known platforms in Moldova are [MediaCritica](#) and [StopFals](#), which carry out fact-checking to monitor and track disinformation and propaganda. Additionally, there are smaller online communities engaging in monitoring and debunking, but they are inefficient due to the massive presence of internet trolls or hired opinion influencers.⁶ Furthermore, debunking materials have limited reach; they are being shared primarily on Facebook and are nearly absent on other platforms, such as Odnoklasniki and VKontakte. This gap is critical to address in order to break up echo chambers and deliver the message more widely.

Preparedness: Best Practices

Ukraine, which developed an efficient early warning system against propaganda and disinformation, offers a valuable model. The Ukrainian authorities enhanced media monitoring by improving the efficiency of the state regulator and forming partnerships with the private sector, which has facilitated professional analysis of media content and promotion.

Civil society actors contributed additional monitoring through initiatives such as [StopFake](#) and [MediaSapiens](#), which were especially active online. It is also important to mention certain controversial projects such as [Myrotvorets](#), which the NGO “Myrotvorets Center” launched in 2014 with the stated goal of monitoring illegal activities threatening Ukraine’s national security.⁷

Ukraine also produced well-known debunking platforms such as the aforementioned StopFake and [InformNapalm](#), which utilized digital forensic and open-source intelligence to disprove falsified information that flooded local and international media following the Ukrainian Revolution.

Response

The Moldovan authorities have been passive in addressing the problem of information security. The first official, public debate to raise awareness and formulate policy options in Moldova occurred in 2016.⁸ After the event, a joint government-civil society working group was formed and tasked with examining media legislation⁹ and developing an information security strategy.

This led to a controversial 2017 amendment sometimes referred to as the “*Anti-Propaganda Law*.”¹⁰ The goal in this legislation is to secure Moldova’s information space against foreign (particularly, Russian) interference by restricting the broadcast of Russian news and analytical programs. While it is important to restrict openly propagandistic content, the law does very little to address the complexity of the information environment. This is especially true with respect to the state of domestic media, which often acts as a proxy for domestic and foreign propaganda and disinformation activities.

Moldova’s authorities are also working to improve strategic communication in public institutions, but progress has been slow and halting. Communication strategies lack synergy, and the interministerial communication taskforce, charged with

6 Antti Sillanpää, et al., “The Moldovan Information Environment, Hostile Narratives, and Other Ramifications,” NATO Strategic Communication Center of Excellence, July 2017, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/moldovan-information-environment-hostile-narratives-and-other-ramifications>.

7 The website has been accused of overstepping its monitoring competencies when it created a database of “public enemies” in 2014 in violation of privacy laws and ethical standards. The website has a section entitled “Purgatory,” which allows users to post personal data (name, passport number, address, and telephone number) of everyone considered to have committed an offense against Ukrainian national security – from participation in military actions in the Donbass to public declarations in media. It effectively created a system of public shaming and allowed, and partly encouraged, extrajudicial persecution.

8 “Provocările din spațiul mediatic al Republicii Moldova – propaganda și produsul autohton” (“The Challenges of the Moldovan Media Environment – Propaganda and Domestic Product”), Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, July 26, 2016, <http://www.parlament.md/Actualitate/Noutati/tabid/89/NewsId/1584/language/en-US/Default.aspx>.

9 The legislation included the Audiovisual Code, the Law of the Press, and the Law on Access to Information. Objectives included creating a Mass Media Development Strategy (2018-2025) and Information Security Strategy.

10 “Lege privind modificarea și completarea Codului Audiovizual al Republicii Moldova nr. 260/2006” (“Law on the Modification and Amendments of the Audiovisual Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 260/2006”), Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, June 13, 2017, <http://parlament.md/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=tz6%2bH3AFTNA%3d&tabid=255&language=ro-RO>.

coordinating informational output and promoting a common narrative on policies and strategic goals, requires deeper cooperation.¹¹ Finally, there is a need for increased synergy between the public and private sectors to help cross-cutting initiatives and improve public engagement.

Response: Best Practices

In terms of implementing restrictive measures against propaganda and disinformation, Ukraine's experience is instrumental because it highlights the trade-off between freedom of speech and information security.¹² Since 2014, Ukrainian authorities have been introducing restrictions on Russian media—first, on television and radio broadcasting services and, later, on online outlets. These actions helped reduce Russian information influence and stimulated the development of local media that previously had difficulty competing. However, these restrictions curtailed access to information, undermined confidence-building initiatives and disregarded international norms and standards of freedom of expression.

It is equally important to develop proactive communication and public engagement. Georgia presents a good model in this regard. The department on strategic communication established in the framework of the State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic Integration helped improve institutional capacity and maintain public support for the country's Euro-Atlantic integration.¹³ A very innovative project, implemented in partnership with civil society, aims to familiarize representatives of the Orthodox Church¹⁴ with Western societies and institutions to change the inherently negative attitude towards EU and other development partners. Another positive practice comes from Ukraine, which highlights efficient cooperation between the government and civil society. The [Ukraine Crisis Media Center](#), following its creation in 2014, became an *information hub* that provides the global community with accurate and up-to-date information on the events in Ukraine.

Recovery

Moldova's media sector is far from the recovery stage, but there are positive developments that will improve media

literacy and critical thinking in the longer term. A notable example is the national program "[Novoteca](#)," funded by IREX, which aims to renovate and transform public libraries into community learning centers. A more targeted approach involves media training courses and workshops in the framework of regional programs. For example, the European Union's "[Open Media Hub](#)" and "[Creative Europe](#)" initiatives are designed to provide training and support to media professionals across the EU's Eastern neighborhood, while country-specific projects like Internews' "[Media-M](#)" aim to foster independent media at the local level. A noteworthy example is the Chisinau School of Advanced Journalism, which trains young professionals in skills conducive to investigative and watchdog journalism.

Another important aspect is the private sector's contribution to media literacy. A good example is the "[Digital Communication Network](#)," a regional platform that gathers professionals across the public and private sectors to improve knowledge-sharing and promote digital innovation. IT incubators and coworking spaces, which present networking opportunities and informal educational resources, further contribute to this goal.

Recovery: Best Practices

Ukraine provides a great example in promoting media literacy with a nationwide project that the government has developed. In the experimental stage (2010-2016), the Ministry of Education implemented a pilot project for media literacy in secondary education. In the second (current) stage of the project (2017-2020), the goal is to standardize media literacy courses and further broaden the project's coverage so that it includes more institutions on all three educational levels. The third stage (2021-2025) involves nationwide introduction of media literacy courses in the educational system.

Another success from Ukraine, which indirectly contributes to information resilience, is the IT boom the country has experienced.¹⁵ A developing IT sector is not only good for the economy and overall digital literacy of the population, but it is also a source of innovation and creativity that can provide new solutions to countering fake news and disinformation.

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- 11 Danu Marin, "Strategia de Informare și Comunicare în Domeniul Apărării și Securității Naționale: Analiză și Recomandări" ("Information and Communication Strategy in the Field of Defense and National Security for the Years 2012-2016: Analysis and Recommendations"), Foreign Policy Association, August 3, 2017, <http://www.ape.md/2017/08/danu-marin-strategia-de-informare-si-comunicare-domeniul-apararii-si-securitatii-nationale-analiza-si-recomandari-osife-ape/>.
- 12 Max Elgot, "Ukraine: Authorities Block Journalists as Threats to National Security," Index on Censorship, September 13, 2017, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2017/09/ukraine-journalists-threat-national-security/>.
- 13 "Communication Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Georgia's EU and NATO Membership for 2017-2020," EU-NATO.gov.ge, http://www.eu-nato.gov.ge/sites/default/files/EU-NATO%20Communication%20Strategy_ENG%20Final%20version.pdf.
- 14 The Orthodox Church is the most trusted institution in Georgia, as 88% of respondents indicated a favorable attitude according to: "Survey of Public Opinion in Georgia," International Republican Institute, March 2017, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation_georgia_2017.03-general.pdf.
- 15 Diane M. Francis, "Ukraine's Booming IT Sector is Good News Despite the War," Huffington Post, February 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/diane-m-francis/ukraines-booming-it-secto_b_9333070.html.

Recommendations

For the government of Moldova:

- **Play the role of “referee” for the media sector** and balance promoting national security and information policy. Engage more actively in improving public awareness about information and media-related threats.
- **Create an early warning system against propaganda and disinformation** that covers both traditional and online media. The system should include monitoring and reporting mechanisms that combine human and technological solutions.
- **Improve the capacity of the Audiovisual Coordination Council** to regulate audiovisual communication and exercise credible authority in monitoring content.
- **Adjust media legislation to address new security challenges and information-related risks.** Particular attention should be given to online media, which is often used as a gateway to promote propaganda and undermine trust in democratic institutions. A balanced approach is needed in applying restrictions since they have adverse effects, especially in highly polarized societies.
- **Finalize the mass media development strategy** and create a favorable environment for encouraging local news and content creation.
- **Increase the capacity for strategic communication** by improving interinstitutional cooperation and creating information-sharing platforms. A good example is the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, which provides information on events in Ukraine and threats to national security, particularly in the military, political, economic, energy, and humanitarian spheres.
- **Engage further in promoting media and information literacy.** Introduce media literacy courses into the educational system,

potentially in a gradual format similar to that in Ukraine's project for media literacy for the years 2010-2025.

- **Conduct nationwide media literacy evaluation and leverage international expertise to advise on implementation.** Create or adjust existing government grants to stimulate grassroots education projects for media and information literacy.

For civil society and development partners:

- **Continue advocacy activities** in the area of freedom of speech, journalistic ethics, and political accountability, as well as raising awareness about the risks of domestic and foreign propaganda. Create more **networking opportunities** and **promote collaborative partnership** among civil society actors to improve experience-sharing and avoid duplication of efforts and resources.
- **Shift away from** an institutional mindset to content creation and **embrace a story-telling approach** to be more engaging for the public.
- **Update monitoring and analytical toolkits** and develop more robust skills in digital forensics, open source intelligence, and big data.
- **Conduct more research on online Moldovan communities** and how they interact in the social media environment. A particularly interesting topic is the impact of RuNet, the online Russian-language community, on Moldova's internet culture.
- **Improve fact-checking and debunking platforms** to promote fact-based public debate and demand more accountability from public institutions, elected officials, media outlets, and independent opinion formers.
- **Work at the community level to improve media and digital literacy** in order to educate society and improve critical thinking.



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