



Research Article

Increasing Moldova's Deterrence Potential: Integrating National and Societal Resilience in Combating Russian Disinformation and Manipulation

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Abstract: This article provides an analysis of Russia's disinformation activities, strategies, tactics, techniques, and procedures, including Kremlin propaganda narratives and the role of Russian mass media in Moldova. Russian propaganda operations create profound risks to Moldova's social, economic, and information security. Key elements of the Kremlin's disinformation operations—specifically, how they are conducted and which methods are used—provide insights into the reasons behind Russia's disinformation campaign against Moldova. Examples, including Ilan Shor's role in Russian disinformation activities in Moldova, as well as the Portal Kombat and Matryoshka operations, highlight the varied methods used as part of the broader campaign. A deeper understanding of these activities allows policymakers to develop countermeasures and post-incident responses to Russian disinformation activities in Moldova.

Keywords: Moldova, deterrence, resilience, Russia, disinformation, propaganda, manipulation, Portal Kombat, Matryoshka, Ilan Shor, Eurasia.

Introduction

In the thirty years following Moldova's declaration of independence, until the election of the current government in 2021, Moldova existed within Russia's economic, energy, religious, and media spheres of influence. Prior to Maia Sandu's presidency, no Moldovan government dared to take measures to consolidate Moldova's de facto sovereignty by diversifying imports and exports, which were

exclusively oriented toward Russia. These previous administrations also failed to break free from total dependence on Russian energy resources, and none took measures to protect the national media space (TV/radio/internet) from the malignant propaganda and disinformation spread by the Russian regime.

In 2022, the Republic of Moldova applied for the status of candidate country for European Union membership. This was possible thanks to the EU's unprecedented support for Moldova, especially following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In June 2022, the European Union granted Moldova the status of a candidate country for EU membership.¹ At the same time, this historic decision was met with enormous resistance both internally and externally, the latter mainly represented by Russia's efforts to destabilize the social and political situation in the country.² Considerable economic pressure has been exerted by the dramatic increase in the prices of energy resources imported exclusively from Russia.³ But the disinformation campaign launched by Russia against Moldova has had an even greater impact on the country.⁴ Every day, Russian propaganda has sought to persuade Moldovans to adopt pro-Russian perspectives through Russian-language TV channels, internet resources, and interpersonal communication channels, fuelled by criminal entities and political parties funded by Russia, as well as by non-governmental organizations financed from the same source. Ultimately, these activities aimed, and continue to aim, to destabilize the internal situation in Moldova, overthrow the pro-European government, and install a puppet government directed by the Kremlin.⁵

The Kremlin 5D Strategy

Russia, as the threat actor, is identifiable by the 5D classification⁶—dismiss, distort, distract, dismay, divide—based on an analysis of the observables, the tac-

¹ "EU Leaders Grant Ukraine and Moldova Candidate Status," *Politico*, June 23, 2022, www.politico.eu/article/eu-leaders-grant-ukraine-and-moldova-candidate-status.

² "Statements by President Maia Sandu Following the Meeting of the Supreme Security Council on July 30, 2025," Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, July 30, 2025, <https://presedinte.md/eng/presa/declaratiile-presedintei-maia-sandu-in-urma-sedintei-consiliului-suprem-de-securitate-din-30-iulie-2025>.

³ "Gas Prices in the last 12 Years: The Path of Growth from Just Over 3.5 Lei to 15.18 Lei per Cubic Meter," *Agora*, May 27, 2022, <https://agora.md/stiri/102931/tarifele-la-gaz-din-ultimii-12-ani-drumul-cresterii-de-la-putin-pest-35-lei-la-1518-lei-pentru-un-metru-cub>. – in Romanian

⁴ Mădălin Necșuțu, "French Expert: Russia Has Intensified Its Efforts to Destabilize Moldova," *Veridica*, June 4, 2024, <https://www.veridica.ro/interviuri/expert-francez-rusia-si-a-intensificat-eforturile-de-destabilizare-a-moldovei>. – in Romanian

⁵ Christina Harward, "Russia Poses Long-Term Threats to Moldova's European Integration Beyond the October Elections," Institute for the Study of War, October 15, 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russia-poses-long-term-threats-moldova-s-european-integration-beyond-october-elections>.

⁶ The 4D classification was introduced by Ben Nimmo, Director of Investigations at the

tics, techniques, and procedures used, as well as the content promoted. According to the 3rd EEAS Report on FIMI Threats,⁷ Russian propaganda and disinformation *dismiss* all criticism and reject accusations of their own disinformation and, consequently, denigrate sources that provide factual information. For example, from January to March 2025, Gazprom failed to deliver natural gas to the Transnistrian region. Moscow rejected Chisinau's accusations that Russia had refused to deliver gas via alternative routes, claiming a historical debt of \$ 700 million that Chisinau does not recognize. Russia has blamed Chisinau and Kyiv for the energy crisis in the Transnistrian region.⁸

Moscow also *distorts* information about events, reframing them in a way that suits Russian narratives, resulting in propaganda. Thus, Putin, in his annual state-of-the-nation address on February 21, 2023, said: "We had no doubt that by February 2022, everything was prepared for a punitive action in Donbas; they attempted again to directly attack Donbas, they continued shelling, terror ... they started the war, and we used force in order to stop it."⁹

Russian disinformation *distracts* public attention, when necessary, away from its own aggressive actions toward other events or places the blame elsewhere. Russian authorities strongly condemned Israeli attacks on Gaza, emphasizing civilian casualties and the destruction of vital infrastructure.¹⁰ At the same time, there was no mention of their similarly destructive and deadly attacks on Ukraine, which claim thousands of lives every day.

The Kremlin *dismays*, threatens, and scares off its opponents. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that Moldova is the West's new anti-Russian project and that Moldova could meet the same fate as Ukraine.¹¹ Finally, Russian

network analysis firm Graphika, who outlined his 4D model for predicting disinformation: Dismiss: if you do not like what your critics say, insult them; Distort: if you do not like the facts, twist them; Distract: if you are accused of something, accuse someone else of the same thing; Dismay: if you do not like what someone else is planning, try to scare them off. The additional "Divide" element appears to be an extension added by experts from the European External Action Service (EEAS).

⁷ Strategic Communications, Task Forces and Information Analysis (STRAT.2), "1-st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence," European Union External Action, February 2023, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>.

⁸ "Chisinau Accuses Russian Embassy of Disinformation Regarding Energy Crisis," *Radio Free Europe Moldova*, January 7, 2025, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/33265917.html>. – in Romanian

⁹ Jenni Reid, "'They Started the War': Russia's Putin Blames West and Ukraine for Provoking Conflict," *CNBC*, February 21, 2023, www.cnbc.com/2023/02/21/russias-putin-blames-west-and-ukraine-for-provoking-conflict.html.

¹⁰ Elena Teslova, "Russia Strongly Condemns Israeli Attacks on Gaza," *Anadolu Agency*, March 18, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/russia-strongly-condemns-israeli-attacks-on-gaza/3513262>.

¹¹ Vitalie Calugareanu and Robert Schwartz, "Russia Steps Up Threats against Republic of Moldova," *Deutsche Welle*, April 2, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-steps-up->

propaganda *divides* the society of the targeted country, creating social, economic, and ethnic conflicts and deepening existing divisions within targeted communities and groups. Kremlin propaganda in the autonomous region of Gagauzia spreads falsehoods claiming that the central government is controlled by the West and acts against its own people. Russia is taking action to radicalize the Chisinau-Gagauzia relationship by organizing protests, corrupting voters, and spreading false narratives about risks to autonomy.¹²

Television-Centered Information Operations

The Impact of Television

In Moldova, television is one of the most important sources of information. According to researchers, television has a significant influence on everyday life, forming the beliefs and perceptions of the population.¹³ While the government changed after 2021, the media landscape remained significantly dominated by Russian-language media, news and TV shows from Russia, as well as by rebroadcasts of Russian programs by local television stations. As a result, most Moldovans saw the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its atrocities as they were presented by the Russian side.¹⁴ Because of this dominance, in 2021, approximately 42.9 % of Moldovan citizens trusted Russian or Russian-language information sources and therefore supported Russian policy.¹⁵

In 2021, television was the primary source of information about the country and abroad for 55.8 % of respondents, compared with websites (35 %) and social networks (39.7 %). Russian-language television and radio represented the primary source of information for about 19.9 % of the population, while Romanian-language television and radio were watched by about 16.1 %. The monitoring report of the national think tank Watchdog.md shows that most falsehoods launched by Russia and in its favor in 2022 concerned the war, the energy crisis, and attempts to discredit the Moldovan authorities. The most common false narratives broadcast by the Russian-language media present Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a necessity to defend Russian-speaking people in the Donbas

threats-against-republic-of-moldova/a-64612019.

¹² Piotr Garciu, "Russian Propaganda Dominates Moldova's Gagauzia. Pro-Kremlin Narratives Rule the Information Space in an Autonomous Region with Deeply Rooted Ties to Moscow," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, October 3, 2022, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/russian-propaganda-dominates-moldovas-gagauzia>.

¹³ "Information Policy of Television Stations in the Republic of Moldova, Monitoring Report (monitoring period May 1 – July 31, 2023)," Viitorul, December 15, 2023, http://viitorul.org/files/Studiu_Politica%20informațională%20a%20televiziunilor.pdf. – in Romanian

¹⁴ "Public Opinion Barometer, Republica Moldova, November 2022," Institute of Public Policy, CBS AXA, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, November 2022, <https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Sondajul-BOP-noiembrie-2022.pdf>. – in Romanian

¹⁵ Media Guard, "Russian Influence in Moldovan Media," Media Ownership Monitor Moldova 2024, <https://moldova.mom-gmr.org/en/findings/russian-influence>.

area from discrimination, to “denazify” and “demilitarize” Ukraine, and to fight NATO, against whose alleged aggression Russia is supposedly defending itself.¹⁶

Four key elements define Russia’s television information operations in Moldova:

1. Russia simultaneously uses covert and overt channels. Disinformation is distributed by all Russian governmental entities, including intelligence agencies (SVR and FSB). At the same time, fakes are spread through obscure channels created by the Russian secret services.
2. Russian official channels (the presidential administration, parliament, foreign ministry, and special services) and state-controlled media (TV: Russia 1, Channel One, NTV; radio: Radio Rossii, Vesti FM; and news agencies such as TASS and RIA Novosti) have increased their presence and are pushing more aggressive narratives targeting Moldova.
3. Russian infrastructure previously used to spread disinformation against Ukraine has been redirected against Moldova, with networks and narratives adapted for a new front of interference.
4. New local channels have been created to distribute content, ensuring its credibility among the Moldovan population with the aim of penetrating traditional media spaces. Importantly, Kremlin propaganda is pervasive: official channels prepare the ground for disinformation messages and underpin disinformation operations, while state-controlled and state-linked outlets (TASS, Ukraina.ru, EADaily, and Sputnik) serve as content generators, amplified by state-aligned channels such as Portal Kombat and Telegram channels.¹⁷

Social Media and Web Domains

The recent study *Youth Mil 2025 Index*,¹⁸ made public at the end of May 2025, shows that young people choose to obtain information primarily from social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. The study found that the preferred source of information was TikTok (26 %), Instagram (14 %), news sites (13 %), Telegram (7 %), discussions with parents and family (7 %), discussions with friends (7 %), colleagues (6 %), Facebook (5 %), TV (5 %, including online), and school (4%). The study highlights that although TikTok is apparently the leading preferred source of information, when young people were asked to select the most

¹⁶ “Top 22 Fakes of 2022,” *Stopfals.md*, February 9, 2023, <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/top-22-de-falsuri-ale-anului-2022-180733>. – in Romanian

¹⁷ Strategic Communication and Foresight (SG.STRAT), “3-rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Exposing the Architecture of FIMI Operations,” European Union External Action, March 2025, www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2025/EEAS-3rd-ThreatReport-March-2025-05-Digital-HD.pdf.

¹⁸ “Study to Assess Information and Media Literacy of Young People in Moldova,” Centrul Media pentru Tineret, May 30, 2025, <https://tineri.md/cat-de-alfabetizati-media-si-informatiionali-sunt-tinerii-din-republica-moldova>. – in Romanian

trusted source, TikTok ranked only seventh, being selected by only 6 % of respondents. Young people primarily trust information from news sites (22 %), followed by discussions with parents and family (18 %), TV (10 %), Instagram (9 %), Telegram (8 %), and school (7%). Young people's trust thus remains oriented toward traditional sources, such as news websites, family, and television.¹⁹

Incidentally, Moldovan authorities are concerned about possible interference in the electoral process through TikTok, as happened in the December 2024 elections in Romania.²⁰ In this regard, President Maia Sandu expressed hope that the government's discussions with TikTok, Telegram, and other social networks would be positive and cooperative.²¹

Following the closure in October 2023 of several TV stations that retransmitted Russian propaganda in Moldova, Russia shifted its focus to new media channels, with a significant share devoted to Telegram, Tiktok, Youtube, Facebook, and VKontakte. This effort involves hundreds of channels that focus exclusively on the sociopolitical situation in Moldova and are managed either by anonymous actors or by pro-Kremlin bloggers and influencers. The basic narratives promoted by these channels include Western interference in electoral processes, anti-government attitudes, civil disobedience, anti-Western and anti-EU messages, favorable portrayals of Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union, fears of war, the "militarization" of the country, socio-economic degradation, and the denigration of state institutions and the legally elected government of Moldova.²²

Another tactical approach used by cyber actors affiliated with Russian interests was the creation of web domains that largely mimic governmental and non-governmental web resources, which are then used to distribute disinformation, such as narratives denigrating European values and inducing panic in society through mass transmission via e-mail. Moldovan intelligence (SIS) discovered that all domain registrations were linked to IP addresses in Russia, and that payments were made through payment systems in Russia using the compromised credentials of Russian residents.

In addition to using social media and web domains, Russian actors distributed fake letters and posters that looked as if they were from the European Union.

¹⁹ Elena Robu, "How Young People in the Republic of Moldova Are Informed in 2025: Between TikTok, News Sites and ChatGPT," *Mediacritica*, June 4, 2025, <https://mediacritica.md/cum-se-informeaza-tinerii-din-republica-moldova-in-2025-intre-tiktok-site-uri-de-stiri-si-chatgpt>. – in Romanian

²⁰ "Declassified SRI Report, Part I," Presidency of Romania Official Site, December 4, 2024, www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente%20CSAT/Document%20CSAT%20SRI%20I.pdf.

²¹ "Explainer: Pro-Russia TikTok Influencers Create 'Toxic Media Climate' in Moldova," *BBC Monitoring*, Insight, July 31, 2025.

²² "Report on Electoral Frauds Detected in the Presidential Elections and the Referendum on Accession to the European Union: Foreign Interference in the Electoral Processes in the Republic of Moldova," Intelligence and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova, December 13, 2024, https://www.sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/Raport_SIS_Public_Interferenta_in_procesul_electoral_0.pdf.

Some of them contained disinformation claiming that the government was helping the West steal land from Moldovans, or that the European Union would ban the words “father” and “mother” and replace them with “parent number one” and “parent number two.”²³

Pro-Russian Actors: The Role of Ilan Shor

In April 2024, Russian special services established an operational command center in Moscow, led by Ilan Shor, to organize unrest, overthrow the existing Moldovan government, and establish a power in Chisinau favorable to the Kremlin's interests.²⁴ The Russian secret services provided him with the full spectrum of necessary tools: financial, media, human, logistical, and technical resources, as well as counter-intelligence support, according to the Moldovan intelligence agency (SIS). The same SIS report states that parties controlled by Shor, established in Moldova, were coordinated by political technologists from the Russian ruling party, Edinaya Rossiya. The so-called Victory bloc, a pro-Russian political bloc founded by Shor in Moscow in April 2024, has three call centers in Moscow responsible for indoctrination and relations with the party's activists and sympathizers. Members of Victory were trained to install a Telegram chatbot,

²³ Peter Pomerantsev, “Can Moldova – Population 2.4m – Show the World How to Stand up to Putin?” *The Guardian*, February 23, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/23/moldova-former-soviet-republic-kremlin-putin>.

²⁴ Ilan Shor is a Moldovan-Israeli citizen (since 2024, he also holds Russian citizenship), sentenced to 15 years in prison for his role in the “theft of 1 billion dollars” from the Moldovan banking system in 2014, which at the time amounted to around 12 % of the annual gross domestic product. See Tim Whewell, “The Great Moldovan Bank Robbery,” *BBC News*, June 18, 2015, accessed May 3, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33166383>. Shor fled Moldova to Israel in June 2019, after Maia Sandu's pro-European party won the elections, while his case was still in the appeal process. Israel did not extradite Shor to Moldova, despite multiple requests from Moldovan prosecutors; see Marc Champion, “Why Is Israel Helping This Putin Ally Evade the Law?” *Bloomberg*, November 7, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-11-07/why-is-israel-helping-this-putin-ally-evade-the-law>.

In January 2025, a *Bloomberg* investigation established that Shor appears to be helping Russian lenders and businesses continue conducting foreign trade amid payment problems caused by sanctions. The investigation also found that, according to publicly available regulatory documents, Shor had set up intermediary companies to help Russian businesses execute international transactions otherwise disrupted by US restrictions. In June 2025, the *Financial Times* wrote about the unprecedented rise of the A7A5 cryptocurrency, launched by Shor, which processed \$9.3 billion in transactions in just the first four months of the year. The currency is registered in Kyrgyzstan and is backed by ruble deposits held at Promsvyazbank, which is under US, EU, and UK sanctions. A7A5 is used in particular by large Russian importers affected by the sanctions imposed on Russia. *FT* investigators traced technical connections between the A7A5 platform and sites involved in political interference operations in Moldova, all sharing common IP addresses; see Polina Ivanova, Oliver Hawkins, and Eade Hemingway, “Crypto Coin for Russian Shadow Payments Moves \$9bn,” *Financial Times*, June 25, 2025, www.ft.com/content/1c71cac0-b86b-4361-8f54-ee5d3bb5a489.

@KYCMD_bot, through which activists were registered and electoral and propaganda measures were coordinated.

Pro-Russian Organizations: Eurasia

Eurasia is a Russian nonprofit organization. The founder and director of Eurasia is a former accountant of the Shor party and a member of the coordinating council of the Russian ruling party Edinaya Rossiya. The main objective of Eurasia is to project soft power by promoting the concept of “Russkiy Mir” (“Russian world”). Eurasia identifies and attracts young Moldovans prone to destabilizing actions and organizes their participation in various programs in Russia. Thus, in June 2024, 115 young people from Moldova, under the cover of Eurasia projects, were indoctrinated at a camp near Moscow and trained in tactics for provoking the police. Eurasia also exploits the religious factor (the Moldovan Orthodox Church is formally subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate). The SIS report stated that Eurasia organized pilgrimages to Russia for approximately 500 priests and parishioners of the Orthodox Church of Moldova. These pilgrimages were aimed at convincing the clergy to get involved in influencing the presidential elections and referenda. Upon arrival in Moscow, the clergy were ideologically indoctrinated, offered contracts with Eurasia, received bank cards valid in Russian payment systems, and money on them from the Russian Patriarchate.

Pro-Russian Internet: Portal Kombat (a.k.a Pravda Network) and the Matryoshka Disinformation Network

Portal Kombat

Not long before the referendum and elections in November 2024, the Portal Kombat platform, also known as the Pravda network (created in 2022), appeared in the Moldovan media space, massively spreading narratives promoted by Russian state media. Portal Kombat relies on the high-frequency automated republication of Russian disinformation content. Initially exposed by Viginum, Portal Kombat was traced to a firm based in Crimea.²⁵ This platform has been actively amplifying content from Russian sources about the Moldovan elections and the EU referendum. The network, which previously operated mainly on the pravda-en.com channel, has created new Moldova-focused domains. Local branches (moldova-news.com, moldova.news-pravda.com, md.news-pravda.com, and pravda-md.com) reflect Pravda’s global flooding techniques. For example, the domain moldova-news.com uses the same layout and source code as those of the Russian web-hosting company Reg.ru Ltd and is part of the Portal Kombat network. Another network of channels is Moldova 24, a group of 14 websites that has a live broadcast and a TV studio. The IP address of this network has been

²⁵ “Portal Kombat: A Structured and Coordinated pro-Russian Propaganda Network,” Technical Report – Part Two, Prime Minister – General Secretariat for Defence and National Security, France, February 14, 2024, www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/portal-kombat-suite-des-investigations-sur-le-reseau-structure-et-coordonne-de.

associated with websites affiliated with the Russian state-controlled Russia Today network.²⁶

Matryoshka Disinformation Network

Russia employs a disinformation and manipulation effort promoted on Telegram, consisting of the anonymous spread of videos and posts containing false information that imitates the identity of established international media institutions and news organizations. This tactic is part of the Russian disinformation network known as Matryoshka, recently described in an investigation by *The Insider*.²⁷ The favorite themes of these false accusations include the alleged promotion by the Moldovan authorities of “nontraditional values,” the establishment of state control over the Orthodox Church, and an alleged government plan for unification with Romania. According to experts from Watchdog.md, the Matryoshka network actively collaborates with the Pravda structure, a conglomerate of over 200 pro-Kremlin websites and accounts. Together, they published over 11,000 pro-Kremlin materials between December 2024 and March 2025, making Moldova the most intensely targeted country in Eastern Europe during that period.²⁸

The main target of these attacks is Moldova's President, Maia Sandu, using fake claims about “girlfriends, villas, and bank accounts” abroad.²⁹ These posts containing false information were published between April and May 2025, generally by Russian sources. Written mainly in English and Russian, they directly targeted President Sandu and Moldova's democratic system. Many of them recycled previously debunked falsehoods. One example is a Telegram post claiming that Maia Sandu has a girlfriend with assets of \$24 million, including a villa on an island in the United Arab Emirates and a real estate complex in Bucharest, Romania. These claims also appeared on other sites. The fake post quotes the BBC, which allegedly refers to a Bellingcat network investigation. However, investigations carried out by Stopfals.md did not identify any such article or reference on the official channels of the BBC or Bellingcat.

²⁶ Iurie Rotari, “The Largest Russian Search Engine – Yandex and a TV channel Affiliated with Shor, Blocked in the Republic of Moldova,” *Radio Europa Libera Moldova*, October 4, 2024, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cel-maimare-motor-de-cautare-ruse-sc-yandex-si-un-canal-tv-afiliat-cu-sorbloate-in-r-moldova/33145883.html>.

²⁷ “Russia's Matryoshka Disinfo Network Targets Moldova, Bots Accuse President Maia Sandu of Corruption and Repression,” *The Insider*, April 21, 2025, <https://theins.ru/en/news/280763>.

²⁸ “Moldova, the Target of an Aggressive Disinformation Campaign: How the Matryoshka Network Operates, Andrei Curăraru Explains,” *Democracy*, April 23, 2025, <https://democracy.md/moldova-tinta-unei-campanii-agresive-de-dezininformare-cum-actiuneaza-reteaua-matrioska-explica-andrei-curararu>. – in Romanian

²⁹ Dana Ciobanu and Mihai Avasiloaie, “‘Matryoshka’ in Action? A New Disinformation Campaign Has Taken Hold on the Internet. Favorite Target: Maia Sandu,” *Stopfals.md*, May 20, 2025, <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/matrioska-in-actiune-o-noua-campanie-de-dezininformare-a-luat-amploare-pe-internet-tinta-predilecta-maia-sandu-181233>. – in Romanian

Another fake discovered by Stopfals.md was disseminated on several Telegram channels and refers to an alleged ranking published by the specialized magazine *Out* of the most influential lesbian politicians, which included Maia Sandu. In reality, the magazine has never published such a list. Another disinformation operation used Bellingcat's logo and other identity elements to promote a hoax claiming that relatives of Sandu own over 18 offshore companies registered in Romania, with a total capital of 540 million euros – money allegedly derived from fraud committed in Moldova. The disinformation was promoted on several Telegram channels, as well as on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X. In May 2025, posts on Telegram channels, Facebook, and X claimed that Sandu owned a \$ 15,000,000 house in Los Angeles that had burned down. The posts contained a video fraudulently attributed to the *Los Angeles Times*. This fake, as well as others listed in this article, appeared on the Telegram channel “Гражданин” (“Citizen”).

Attacks on Sandu's image and personal life are nothing new. During the 2019 parliamentary election campaign, some websites and individuals affiliated with oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc spread disinformation claiming that Maia Sandu was a lesbian, and as “proof,” they published an image of two women kissing. In 2022, a former police employee filed a self-report in which she admitted staging the scene depicted in this image at the request of the former deputy head of the General Inspectorate of Police, Gheorghe Cavaliuc, a fugitive in London. In the context of the 2024 presidential elections, another fake news item claimed that Sandu had been diagnosed with “schizophrenia and panic attacks.” Stopfals.md debunked this falsehood after contacting the Vienna clinic mentioned in the post, which denied any connection to the case.

Another recent manipulation by Russia involves the use of the logo of the international organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Several Telegram posts claim that RSF has submitted a report to the European Parliament detailing a high level of censorship in Moldova. RSF denied this information to Stopfals.md, stating that it has often been the target of Kremlin-organized disinformation campaigns. These actions are part of the Doppelganger, Matryoshka, and Portal Kombat operations, through which the identity of RSF is abused in order to manipulate public opinion. RSF has filed criminal complaints, and the prosecutor's office in France has opened an investigation into these schemes and is continuing to investigate them. According to *The Insider*, the disinformation produced by Matryoshka is being widely distributed on platforms such as X, Bluesky, and others, promoting unfounded accusations against Sandu, including corruption, repression, and propaganda-driven manipulation.

One of the most widely circulated videos imitates the format of an investigation carried out by Viginum—the French agency combating disinformation—falsely claiming that Moldova spends one million dollars a day promoting the president's image on TikTok. Viginum has categorically denied any involvement. Another fake video uses the image of French professor Dominique Frizon without his consent to make unfounded accusations against the authorities in Chis-

inau. *The Insider* confirmed that Frizon has no involvement in or connection with Moldovan politics.³⁰ Recent disinformation spread by Matryoshka claims that Sandu wants to replace Kaja Kallas as Vice-President of the European Commission. These details were shared with *The Insider* by a researcher from the Twitter/X-based surveillance project Bot Blocker (@antibotfornavalny), which investigates Russian “troll farms.”³¹ The website of the “Anti-Repression Foundation,” created by the founder of the Wagner PMC, Yevgeny Prigozhin, published a fake investigation alleging that Sandu has a business selling Ukrainian children to paedophiles. In June 2025, Matryoshka announced the “imminent end” of Sandu on social media (Twitter, BlueSky), publishing fake graffiti depicting her “execution.” Among the methods of execution shown were hanging, shooting, and electrocution. *The Insider* noted that this campaign was comparable in scale to the disinformation operation aimed at the 2025 German Bundestag elections.³²

Prevention: Approaches of the Baltic States

The experience of the Baltic states in combating disinformation is valuable and worth following, considering the results they have achieved in protecting their populations and preserving their democratic systems. For example, Latvian and Lithuanian legal norms on hooliganism or disturbing public order can be applied to those who spread false information. Similarly, the Lithuanian Criminal Code defines disinformation and explicitly prohibits its dissemination. Latvia and Lithuania have adopted a blocking strategy to protect their own narratives by preventing their adversaries’ narratives from spreading. Latvia and Lithuania restrict the right to rebroadcast Russian television channels; thus, from 2013 to 2021, both states blocked access to Russian television channels ten and five times, respectively, mostly sanctioning violations related to incitement to hatred or war.³³

The Baltic countries are also adapting their legal frameworks to deal with disinformation. Latvia amended its criminal code in 2024, prohibiting the use of artificial intelligence-generated fakes to manipulate elections. In 2024, Lithuania amended its Criminal Code and prohibited the use of manipulated social media accounts to disseminate information that undermines constitutional order, territorial integrity, defense, etc.³⁴ The Baltic states differ in their regulation of jour-

³⁰ Maria Chernykh, “New Disinfo from Kremlin-linked Bot Network ‘Matryoshka’ Attempts to Pit Moldova’s President Maia Sandu against EU Commission VP Kaja Kallas,” *The Insider*, June 21, 2025, <https://theins.press/en/news/282348>.

³¹ Chernykh, “New Disinfo from Kremlin-linked Bot Network ‘Matryoshka’.”

³² “The ‘Matryoshka’ Bots and Prigozhin’s Website Launched One of the Largest Campaigns against Sandu, with Fakes about ‘Executions’ and ‘Child Trafficking,’” *The Insider*, June 4, 2025, <https://theins.ru/news/281829>. – in Russian

³³ Johannes Voltri, “Countering Russian Information Influence in the Baltic States: A Comparison of Approaches Adopted in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania,” *Estonian Journal of Military Studies* 19 (2022): 161-196, <https://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/st/article/view/24140>.

³⁴ Jānis Buholcs et al., “The Regulation of Factchecking and Disinformation in the Baltic

nalism and the media. In Latvia and Lithuania, legal norms define the professional standards of journalism. This allows authorities to distinguish between legitimate and manipulative media outlets. Estonia has fewer regulations in this regard. Codes of ethics regulate the professional conduct of journalists. Fact-checking is also governed by unwritten rules within newsrooms. Fact-checkers in Estonia see combating disinformation, especially Russian narratives, educating society, and promoting political responsibility as their main goals. Some criteria for selecting a claim for verification include its popularity on social media and the importance of its source (e.g., an influential politician). However, fact-checkers may use professional judgment in assessing the level of danger of the message and its importance as news.³⁵

Public- and Private-Sector Proactive Responses

Legal Framework

Moldova has yet to consolidate its legal framework in the field of countering and combating disinformation. Existing laws do not cover all aspects of the issue, although the country already has a law on audiovisual media to mitigate disinformation that could harm national security.³⁶ In December 2023, the Moldovan parliament approved the Concept of Strategic Communication, Countering Disinformation, Information Manipulation Actions, and Foreign Interference for the years 2024–2028. The concept defines communication principles such as proactivity, adaptability, inclusiveness, consistency, and cooperation. The Concept also established important objectives: increasing the effectiveness of communication channels; implementing a rapid alert system between state institutions; improving inter-institutional and intersectoral collaboration; implementing monitoring and rapid-response mechanisms to address information challenges; and strengthening partnerships with media organizations and civil society.³⁷

Technological Modernization of the Digital Sphere

Replacing old devices left over from the Soviet period, modernizing the digital sphere, acquiring modern equipment to strengthen digital infrastructure, and

States,” Deliverable D3.4 of the EU-funded Project 118471, Coordinated by the University of Tartu, Baltic Engagement Center for Combating Information Disorders, May 2024, https://becid.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/3.4._report.pdf.

³⁵ Johannes Voltri, “Comparison of Governmental Approaches to Counter Russian Information Influence in the Baltic States,” Master’s thesis (University of Tartu, 2021), <https://dspace.ut.ee/server/api/core/bitstreams/099901ff-bc3f-4f7f-8c0a-f26b1eb7dfc1/content>.

³⁶ Republic of Moldova Parliament, “Code of Audiovisual Media Services of the Republic of Moldova, No. 174 of 08-11-2018,” *Legis.md*, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=146726. – in Romanian

³⁷ Republic of Moldova Parliament, “Decision No. 416 of 22-12-2023 on the Approval of the Concept of Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, Information Manipulation Actions and Foreign Interference for the Years 2024–2028,” *Legis.md*, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=141254.

investing in technology should be among the government's main concerns.³⁸ There is a need to continue developing tools and systems that allow users to verify the sources and authenticity of online content, including images and videos. Using AI to identify and flag potentially misleading or false information, including deepfakes and manipulated media, could help ordinary users who lack the skills to distinguish between fake and real news navigate the virtual space.

Strategic Communication, Coordination, and Capacity Building

Strategic communication aims to win the hearts and minds of the people and foster a positive image of the state or a sector. It represents the ability to coordinate the process of transmitting the right message and creating independent narratives, thereby enabling more efficient orchestration of government activity to lead and coordinate decision-making in a way favorable to the national interest. Estonia—a regular target of Russian disinformation—has implemented its 2017 national security concept, with clearly established objectives, principles, and directions for strategic communication, coordination, and capacity building. It has achieved positive results despite Russia's hybrid war.³⁹

The quality of the Moldovan government's strategic communication was revealed on October 20, 2024, when the results of the referendum on European integration were made public. The referendum passed with a very narrow majority (50.38 %), thanks to the decisive vote of the diaspora. That was not a strong result, given that, objectively, over 60 % of the population in Moldova supports EU integration, a fact confirmed by multiple previous surveys.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding the creation of the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation in July 2023, Moldova still needs to improve its coordination and capacity building.⁴¹ Although the Centre was initially announced as an institution that would directly fight disinformation, the final version of the law states that its mission is limited to strengthening cooperation between institutions and issuing recommendations to other state authorities and the private sector. The institution's name was also ultimately changed: the word "combating" was replaced

³⁸ "European Parliament Resolution of 9 October 2024 on Strengthening Moldova's Resilience against Russian Interference Ahead of the Upcoming Presidential Elections and a Constitutional Referendum on EU Integration (2024/2821(RSP))," *Official Journal of the European Union*, January 14, 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/204/oj>.

³⁹ "National Security Concept of Estonia 2017," Ministry of Defence of Estonia, accessed December 23, 2025, www.kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/elfinder/article_files/national_security_concept_2017_0.pdf.

⁴⁰ "Opinion Poll 'Citizens' Perceptions Regarding the European Integration Process of the Republic of Moldova,'" Institute for European Policies and Reforms and CBS AXA, https://ipre.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Sondaj-IPRE_CBS-AXA-30.07.2024_fin-1.pdf. — in Romanian

⁴¹ Republic of Moldova Parliament, "Law No. 242 of 31-07-2023 on the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation and on Amending Certain Normative Acts," *Legis.md*, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=138661. — in Romanian

with “countering,” placing the institution’s emphasis on prevention and public education.⁴² Unfortunately, the Centre has not yet become fully functional, as its director recently stated.⁴³ In an effort to address the situation, the institution was subordinated directly to the president in May 2025.⁴⁴

Fact-Checking

In recent years, several platforms for fact-checking social media have been launched, such as the Stopfals.md portal. It features a series of “Propagandist Profile” investigations that explore so-called “bloggers,” “influencers,” etc., who spread false narratives. These investigations show all the channels on which a propagandist is active, with links to accounts on Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. The posts are analyzed, and links to them are provided. In the platform’s permanent column, “Recent Fakes,” the latest disinformation circulating in the Moldovan online space is analyzed and explained to the public. Importantly, messages are published bilingually, in Romanian and Russian. The platform also offers online training in fact-checking: at the top, there is an interactive banner that directs users to the Quiz Game, which has three levels. The game was created by the Independent Press Association (IPA) and funded by the UN.⁴⁵ As yet, there are no analytical studies or reports on the success of Stopfals.md.

Support of Independent Media

According to experts, the decline of local media destroys civic engagement and trust in local communities and facilitates the spread of disinformation.⁴⁶ In Moldova, the majority of nongovernmental media institutions are financed from external sources. According to published data, the independent press in Moldova has benefited from funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. State Department, and the European Union. The nongovernmental media institutions most active in combating Russian

⁴² Unimedia Editorial Team, “Breaking News! The ‘Patriot’ Center Is Being Subordinated to the Presidency. The Institution Is Also Changing Its Name,” *Unimedia*, June 12, 2025, <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/0835b27e04c15ad2/ultima-ora-centrul-patriot-trece-in-subordinea-presedintiei-institutia-isi-schimba-si-denumirea.html>. – in Romanian

⁴³ Vasile Ursachi, “The ‘Patriot’ Case: The Mysteries Surrounding the Center’s Activity and What the Institution’s Representatives Say about the Problem of Disinformation,” *Ziarul de Gardă*, January 27, 2025, <https://www.zdg.md/importante/cazul-patriot-misterele-din-jurul-activitatii-centrului-si-ce-spun-reprezentantii-institutiei-despre-problema-dezinformarii>. – in Romanian

⁴⁴ “The Center Responsible for Combating Disinformation Could be Subordinated to the Head of State – Project Proposed by PAS,” *Politik.md*, May 7, 2025, <https://politik.md/centrul-responsabil-de-combaterea-dezinformarii-ar-putea-trece-in-subordinea-sefului-statului-proiectul-propus-de-pas>. – in Romanian

⁴⁵ “Quiz: Are You Difficult to Manipulate?” *Stopfals.md*, accessed July 21, 2025, <https://stopfals.md/ro/quiz>. – in Romanian

⁴⁶ Lee Shaker, “Dead Newspapers and Citizens’ Civic Engagement,” *Political Communication* 31, no. 1 (2014): 131-148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.762817>.

disinformation and propaganda include the Independent Press Association (API), Rise Moldova, Agora, Pro TV, Ziarul de Garda (ZdG), NewsMaker.md, the Centre for Independent Journalism (CJI), TV8, and Jurnal TV.⁴⁷ In a March 2025 interview for RFI, Sandu confirmed this fact and noted that “there was support for the independent press, but much, much smaller than the hundreds of millions of dollars that the Russian Federation invests in propaganda in Moldova.”⁴⁸

The government still needs to invest in state audiovisual broadcasting in Russian, which could serve as an alternative to media resources created or financed by Russia, since most minorities continue to rely on Russian-language media because they do not know Romanian well enough. Thus, the authorities’ decision to create a Russian-language television channel, Moldova 3, seems to be an inspired move in the ongoing effort to counteract the dominance of media products from the Russian Federation. As MP Natalia Davidovici noted in an interview in March 2025, “This initiative is 30 years late.” Davidovici stressed that the main problem facing Moldovan society is its deep division. “It is no secret that our society, as the results of elections and referendums show, is divided practically in two: people are divided along different vectors — by how we treat our past and our future.” According to her, some in society do not understand their fellow citizens and do not perceive the information the authorities are trying to convey. “These people find themselves in an information vacuum. They try to get information from other sources and most often resort to Russian sources, through which they are fed propaganda.”⁴⁹

Inter-Ethnic Dialogue

Promoting understanding and cooperation between different ethnic groups can help build resilience against manipulative narratives and foster a more unified and informed society.⁵⁰ Especially important is the promotion of awareness-raising activities on the country’s European integration, particularly among Russian-speaking communities, which are most often targeted by propaganda. Many Russian speakers watch only Russian television channels, where billions of rubles

⁴⁷ Unimedia Editorial Team, “KLumea Natei Albot Received over 230 Thousand Dollars from USAID in 2024 Alone, for ‘Lessons on European Identity’: Who Are the Other Beneficiaries,” *Unimedia*, February 18, 2025, <https://unimedia.info/ro/news/22a0017858d209a8>. — in Romanian

⁴⁸ Valeria Vițu, “Moldovan President, to RFI: Independent Press Was Supported by USAID, but Much Less Than the Hundreds of Millions of Dollars that Russia Invests in Propaganda,” *RFI Romania*, March 14, 2025, www.rfi.fr/ro/republica-moldova/20250314-președinta-r-moldova-la-rfi-presa-independenta-a-fost-sprijinită-de-usaid-dar-mult-mai-puțin-decât-sutele-de-mln-de-dolari-pe-care-rusia-le-investește-în-propagandă. — in Romanian

⁴⁹ “Davidovich on the Creation of Moldova-3: ‘The Idea Has Been Brewing for a Long Time, but It Was Delayed by 30 Years,’” *TV8.md*, March 17, 2025, <https://tv8.md/ru/2025/03/17/davidovich-o-sozdanii-moldova-3-ideya-nazrela-davno-no-zapozdala-na-30-let/277892>. — in Russian

⁵⁰ Andrei Curararu, “Moldova: Disinformation Resilience Index,” *Ukrainian Prism*, Foreign Policy Council, July 31, 2018, <https://prismua.org/en/9069-2/>.

are spent on attractive content mixed with aggressive propaganda.⁵¹ This phenomenon leads to the indoctrination of generations of sympathizers of “Russkii mir,” whom the regime in Russia uses as a pretext for interference in the internal affairs of other countries. To change the situation, Moldovan society must engage in a dialogue about Moldovan national identity. In this way, ethnic communities in Moldova can understand the societal benefits that result from identifying first and foremost as Moldovans, regardless of ethnic origin. This helps overcome the artificial, post-occupation division into Moldovans and Russian speakers and makes individuals less likely to fall prey to the narratives promoted by Russia, which, again, emphasize a cultural divide between ethnic Moldovans and those who consider their native language to be Russian and whose values and traditions are identical to those of the “Russkii mir.”

Reporting Disinformation

To effectively combat these offences, they must be reported. To recognize that they are dealing with disinformation, users should pay attention to messages that provoke an emotional response, especially through frightening statements, exaggeration or distortion of valid data, manipulation of photos or images, or use of sensational, intentionally misleading headlines.⁵²

Countering Disinformation and Propaganda

Ignoring Disinformation

There are instances when it is beneficial for national authorities to ignore disinformation, namely when assessing the likely risk of a reaction might lead to the conclusion that any response should be avoided. For instance, the office of the president felt no need to address the falsehood about President Sandu being a lesbian, as doing so would have unnecessarily raised an issue that inflamed the religious majority voting bloc. However, in a single interview, Sandu personally countered this disinformation when it first appeared in 2019.⁵³

Containing Propaganda

Disinformation can be contained in order to avert its spread, thus preventing escalation. This type of intervention is mainly applicable in the initial phase of incident detection. On July 21, 2025, the Russian Foreign Ministry accused Romania, Poland, Finland, and Bulgaria of smuggling Western weapons from

⁵¹ Ivan Khomenko, “Putin Doubles Down on Propaganda with Record Spending in 2026 Budget,” *United 24 Media*, October 1, 2025, <https://united24media.com/latest-news/putin-doubles-down-on-propaganda-with-record-spending-in-2026-budget-12119>.

⁵² “Detecting and Reporting Disinformation,” Government of Canada, accessed March 24, 2025, www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/news/2025/03/detecting-and-reporting-disinformation.html.

⁵³ “Maia Sandu: ‘I Am Not a Lesbian and I Never Have Been, to the Regret of the Trolls and Their Masters’,” *Agora*, February 15, 2019, <https://agora.md/stiri/54413/maia-sandu-nu-sunt-lesbi-si-nu-am-fost-niciodata--spre-regretul-trollilor-si-al-stapanilor-lor>.

Ukraine and stated that Moldova was the hub of this operation. It was claimed that this illicit trade was tightly controlled by organized crime groups supported by corrupt officials.⁵⁴ At the time of writing this article, the authorities in Chisinau had not responded. The lack of a response to this challenge reflects the seriousness of the accusations, which, on the eve of crucial parliamentary elections in September 2025, had to be treated with the utmost caution, due in large part to the fact that the country's population is deeply concerned about the possibility of firearm smuggling, which could lead to an explosion in the crime rate. The memory of the conflict on the Dniester and the dissemination of firearms among the civilian population is still present.⁵⁵

Reducing Visibility of Disinformation

Authorities can reduce or disable the visibility of already distributed content by minimizing a disinformation incident. Thus, from the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine through 2023, the national authorities suspended the activity of 12 television channels and hundreds of websites that broadcast pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation.⁵⁶ Surveys show that suspending licenses for pro-Russian TV stations led to a decrease in consumer preference for those channels.⁵⁷ In 2021, approximately 42.9 % of adults expressed trust in Russian-language information sources; by the end of 2023, only 23.3 % of respondents considered these sources reliable. However, surveys from the same report showed that Russian-speaking viewers had not joined the audience of national channels. This suggests that although the audience of national channels increased, those channels did not satisfy Russian-speaking viewers. In the absence of Russian-language TV sources, Russian-speaking viewers sought information online, where sites spreading disinformation remained abundant. As a result, even in 2025, Russia's media influence in Moldova remains considerable. Moreover, government measures to regulate the audiovisual space, in the absence of an adequate information campaign, are perceived by the Russian-speaking population as a deprivation of the right to choose and to be informed.

⁵⁴ Cristian Gheorghe, "Moscow Accuses Moldova and Romania of Smuggling Weapons Taken out of Ukraine," *Știripesurse.md*, July 21, 2025, <https://stiripesurse.md/mosco-va-acuza-moldova-si-romania-de-contrabanda-cu-armele-scoase-din-ucraina>. – in Romanian

⁵⁵ Diana Bulai and Natalia Rotari, "The Mystery of Nuclear Weapons in Transnistria," Anti-corruption Investigative Journalistic Center, April 5, 2019, accessed December 29, 2025, <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/investigatii/economic/misterul-armamentului-nuclear-din-transnistria>. – in Romanian

⁵⁶ Eugen Urușciuc, "How the Broadcast of 12 TV Channels 'That Are about Propaganda' Was Stopped," *Radio Europa Liberă Moldova*, January 14, 2024, <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/cum-s-a-pus-cruce-pe-emisia-a-12-posturi-tv-care-sunt-despre-propaganda/32773106.html>.

⁵⁷ Tatiana Cojocari, "The Image of International Actors in Moldovan TV News," Analytical Report, Community WatchDog.MD, June 2023, <https://watchdog.md/en/studies/207830/english-the-image-of-international-actors-in-moldovan-tv-news>.

Redirecting Disinformation

When minimization or other responses to disinformation are ineffective, it can be redirected. In this case, disinformation may be exposed and dismantled. By using counter-messages, alternative narratives can be created and disseminated, and timely and accurate information can be provided to counter false claims as they emerge.⁵⁸ Thus, several counter-propaganda platforms have been launched in Moldova, including “Cutia Pandorei,” “Moldova Te iubesc,” “Zerodoi,” and “Internetu’ Grăiește.” They use a youthful, humorous style and language that is easy to understand and remember.

Post-Incident Countermeasures

Exchanging Information

Post-incident countermeasures allow a system to recover and deter future attacks. Such countermeasures require exchanges of information between the presidential institution, the security and internal ministries and departments, and other specialized bodies and their counterparts in partner states, first and foremost, the United States, the United Kingdom, EU countries, and Ukraine. On July 4, 2025, Sandu met in Chisinau with the President of the European Council, António Costa, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and discussed, among other things, cooperation in the field of security.⁵⁹ There are also frequent contacts between the government and its institutions and their counterparts in partner countries. Classified information is also exchanged, though the Moldovan secret service does not provide details. However, on February 9, 2023, the national intelligence service confirmed that it had received information from Ukrainian intelligence services regarding Russian plans to destroy Moldova.⁶⁰

Strengthening Coordination and Building Capacity

In the more than two years since the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation was created, it has become clear that this Centre should not be the primary institution coordinating responses to disinformation attacks. Instead, an interdepartmental commission should be created, headed by a government representative, that would include representatives of the Cen-

⁵⁸ Jon Bateman and Dean Jackson, “Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 31, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/countering-disinformation-effectively-an-evidence-based-policy-guide>.

⁵⁹ “The Republic of Moldova Hosted the First Moldova-European Union Bilateral Summit,” Presidency of the Republic of Moldova Press Release, July 4, 2025, <https://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/republica-moldova-a-gazduit-primul-summit-bilateral-moldovauniunea-europeana>. – in Romanian

⁶⁰ “Press Release,” Intelligence and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova, February 9, 2023, <https://sis.md/ro/content/declarație-de-presă-5>.

tre, the intelligence service, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, institutions responsible for cybersecurity, and other structures responsible for information security. The commission would examine each new disinformation method, identify national-level vulnerabilities, specify, in each case, the institutions that have not reacted effectively or in a timely manner, and then outline concrete remediation tasks and the preparation of response capacities.

Diplomatic Responses

The Moldovan government is active and vocal in issuing official statements on the subject of disinformation.⁶¹ The Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are also openly commenting on the dissemination of propaganda.⁶² Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Moldova has addressed the issue of Russian disinformation at every European and international security forum, for example, on July 11, 2025, when Sandu met in Rome with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz on the sidelines of the Ukraine Recovery Conference.⁶³

Use of Sanctions

The international responses to Russian aggression—kinetic and information warfare—have included sanctions against Russia, most of which Moldova has joined. This fact contributed to the intensification of Moscow's disinformation campaign. Russian officials have sent clear messages to Moldova: "Closer ties with Europe are equivalent to closer ties with NATO. Any unfriendly actions, including alignment with EU sanctions, will pose a clear threat to Moldova's security." Conversely, if Moldova eschews NATO and the European Union, Russia "will offer cheap energy and various economic benefits," according to promises delivered via proxy politicians.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Russia's disinformation operations aim to undermine democratic processes and sabotage EU accession, presenting European integration as a threat to Mol-

⁶¹ Rodica Mazur, "Daniel Vodă: 'Attempts to Manipulate Public Opinion Are Intensifying in the Republic of Moldova,'" *Radio Moldova*, July 16, 2025, <https://radiomoldova.md/p/55396/daniel-voda--in-r-moldova-se-intensifica-tentativele-de-manipulare-a-opinie-publice->. – in Romanian

⁶² Cristina Mirca, "Russia Launches New Scarecrows, MFA Condemns Them," *TVR Moldova*, January 15, 2025, <https://tvr Moldova.md/article/65c7bec9ae909873/rusia-lanseaza-noi-sperietori-mae-le-condamna.html>. – in Romanian

⁶³ Marina Gridina, "President Maia Sandu Meets German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in Rome," *Moldovalive*, July 11, 2025, <https://moldovalive.md/president-maia-sandu-meets-german-chancellor-friedrich-merz-in-rome>.

⁶⁴ David Smith, "Moldova's Alignment with Western Sanctions Draws Russia's Hybrid Wrath," *Euractiv*, March 26, 2024, www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/moldovas-alignment-with-western-sanctions-draws-russias-hybrid-wrath.

dova's economic and political sovereignty. Kremlin propaganda claims that EU accession would transform the country into a dependent state, controlled from abroad. Moscow's disinformation campaign messaging includes claims that the EU is a threat to national security, that European integration is a danger to Russian speakers, and that EU accession will lead to tensions with Transnistria and a probable military confrontation with Russia. Such disinformation has a well-defined goal: to convince Moldovans that they can escape Ukraine's fate if they "behave well" and that Moldova's economy will grow if trade with Russia is resumed after the country gives up on European integration. This propaganda insists that trade with Russia can bring permanent prosperity to Moldova, while Western aid is temporary and is only meant to keep Moldova away from Russia.

Russian disinformation also spreads the idea that Moldovans will come to realize that European integration is merely a "movement directed against Russia" and that, once peace is established in Ukraine, Moldova will be forgotten by the European Union and will be "ceded" to Moscow. The "conclusion" Moldovans are meant to draw is that there is no need to oppose Russia, because, in the end, Moldova will return to its sphere of influence. The intent of this propaganda, of course, is to persuade Moldovans to vote for pro-Russian parties out of fear and to forget about the European Union; otherwise, Russia will destroy Moldova.⁶⁵ In a similar vein, Kremlin disinformation promotes the idea that the elections won by the ruling party were rigged and that the country's leadership lacks legitimacy.

Moldova has so far been successful in combating this phenomenon. On December 31, 2025, President Maia Sandu was declared World Leader of the Year by *The Telegraph*. The article "The Leader Putin Failed to Break" stated that "Moscow did everything possible to thwart it, implementing what experienced Western diplomats describe as the most sustained and blatant attack on a democratic process they have ever witnessed."⁶⁶ Yet, to continue this positive progress, Moldova needs a new generation of communication strategies that can compete with the Kremlin's destructive narratives. It has already become evident that Putin's regime feeds on the fears, insecurities, and daily financial and economic needs of the majority of Moldova's population. Therefore, simply debunking the lies about the European Union is not enough. Moldova should look to the Baltic states and others for innovative and effective ways to establish legal norms as a bulwark against the Russian Federation's disinformation efforts. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Moldova needs to address the divisions in its society and the ineffective communication between the government and the population that Kremlin propaganda so effectively exploits.

⁶⁵ Vitalie Călugăreanu, "A New Phase of Russia's Hybrid War against Moldova," *Deutsche Welle*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/ro/o-nouă-fază-a-războiului-hibrid-alarusiei-contra-moldovei/a-73278982>. – in Romanian

⁶⁶ Adrian Blomfield, "The Leader Putin Failed to Break," *The Telegraph*, December 31, 2025, www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/12/31/telegraph-world-leader-2025-maia-sandu-moldova/.

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