

DISMISS, DISTORT, DISTRACT, DISMAY: THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN MOLDOVA IN THE FACE OF DISINFORMATION*

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Introduction

■ The Republic of Moldova has been seen as a ‘buffer zone’ between the West and the East for a long time (Tibuleac 2018), with its geopolitical context influenced by regional security challenges – including a separatist conflict in Transnistria (Wolff 2011: 863) –, the COVID–19 pandemic, and its position between the European Union and Russia. This has led to a division in the population along pro-Russian and pro-European sentiments (Jigău 2022: 42), creating fertile ground for Russia to enable its well-known “dismiss, distort, distract, dismay” strategy (Lucas–Nimmo 2015: 5) and “hybrid war” tactics.

The country’s democratization process and conflict management strategies are impacted by the EU, the USA, and Russia (Beyer–Wolff 2016; Morar–Dembíńska 2020). The pandemic has emphasized the need for national security and institutional resilience (Ungureanu 2021; Ungureanu 2022), affecting the Transnistrian conflict resolution process (Herța–Pop–Flanța 2022: 41–48; Herța 2023a; Herța 2023b). Moldova also faces political identity struggles, underdeveloped party organization, corruption, economic dependencies, and Russian propaganda pressures (Allin–Garbu 2017; Kosárová–Ušiak 2017; Gherghina–Soare 2019; Moisé 2021: 1; Putină–Brie 2023: 81).

In recent years, concerns have grown over Russia’s use of propaganda and disinformation campaigns to *dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay* public opinion in Moldova (Cebotari 2020; Bond 2023; DeSisto–Pop–Eleches 2024). Consequently, building on this and on the fact that Russia is actively ‘working’ to influence politicians and the general public in the Republic of Moldova (Pașa et al. 2022), our

research aims to examine the main pro-Russian narratives and how they are spread (RQ1), as well as to investigate how the Moldovan civil society organizations (often with governmental support) respond to and attempt to counter these information operations (RQ2).

Methodological approach

Our methodology involves *three analytical fields*. First, a *systematic literature review* was employed to build the theoretical basis of our research. Using Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science databases, a search for relevant books and articles was initiated using “disinformation”, “(online) propaganda”, and “(Republic of) Moldova” as keywords to identify the most recent and most relevant (based on the number of citations) books and scientific articles for this research topic. More than fifty relevant books and articles have been identified, which focus on disinformation generally, and on civil society organizations and geopolitical challenges in the Republic of Moldova and its neighbors particularly. These works have been classified based on the main topic they tackled, as follows: *historical and current disinformation campaigns* (e.g., Mann 1986, Hamilton–Georgacopoulos 2021, Richey 2018); *geopolitical context and security challenges* (e.g., Wolff 2011, Beyer–Wolff 2016, Herța 2016, Herța 2017, Kosárová–Ušiak 2017, Tibuleac 2018, Morar–Dembińska 2020, Ungureanu 2021, Kantur 2022, Ungureanu 2022); *disinformation and manipulation* (e.g., Culloty–Suiter 2021, Cosentino 2020, White 2016); *digital disinformation and propaganda techniques* (e.g., Mareš–Mlejnková 2021, Pavlíková–Šenkýřová–Drmla 2021, Solopova et al. 2023); *civil society and democratic processes* (e.g., Călugăreanu–Schwartz 2022; Herța–Pop–Flanja 2022; Brie–Costea–Petrila 2023; Corpădean–Pop–Flanja 2023; Herța 2023; Putină–Brie 2023; Stretea 2023; DeSisto–Pop–Eleches 2024); *the role of the media* (e.g., Maci et al. 2024, Alper 2014; Marwick–Lewis 2016; Roșca 2018; Lilleker–Surowiec 2020, Tumber–Waisbord 2021; Jigău 2022; Palau–Sampio–López-García 2022; Nistor 2023); as well as *strategies to counter disinformation* (e.g., Lucas–Nimmo 2015; McGeehan 2018; Opgenhaffen 2023).

Second, using *discourse analysis* (building on Lucas–Nimmo 2015, Paltridge 2021, Rheindorf 2020), we looked at social media posts and websites (Ilan Shor and his Shor party, the Party of Socialists of Moldova – PSRM, the Party of Communists of Moldova – PCRM (Vladimir Voronin’s party) in the period ranging from November 2023 to January 2024 to see how pro-Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova is constructed and propagated by examining the content (what is said), but also the context (*how, why, by whom and to whom it is said*) in which the social media posts are made to identify the main narratives. A limitation to this approach is brought by the fact that some of the posts made / messages elaborated in the period we analyzed them were made in Russian (a fact backed up also by the



interviews we carried out), and, although we used translation apps, something might have been lost in translation.

Third, we employed a *qualitative research methodology*, involving *report analysis* and *interviews* with Moldovan civil society organizations representatives as part of a case study on the main narratives of Russian disinformation in the Republic of Moldova and the strategies fight to counter disinformation in the Republic of Moldova, while taking into account the ample potential of such actors to exert influence on public opinion in the region (Corp-dean-Pop-Flanja 2023). Civil society, broadly speaking, refers to voluntary actions by individuals and groups independent of the state, whose role is to mediate between authorities and citizens, playing a democratic role in shaping policies (Brie-Costea-Petrila 2023: 101). In the Republic of Moldova, civil society organizations (CSOs) “include public associations, private institutions, foundations and unions of legal entities” (Putină-Brie 2023: 90), the majority being concentrated in the capital city, focusing their projects on education policies, cultural activities, the youth, social work, as well as human rights (Putină-Brie 2023: 91). This part of the research was conducted in August 2024, through both online interviews (semi-structured interviews) and questions sent via e-mail (structured interview), depending on the respondents’ availability. Building on a purposive sample, based on research done on identifying the most prominent civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Republic of Moldova, the sample frame of this research was narrowed down to those CSOs that answered our request.

The first CSO that answered our request is the Association of Independent Press from the Republic of Moldova (API) (respondent 1), which is a resource center created in 1997 for non-politically affiliated Moldovan mass media. According to their website, their mission – centered around the values of *independence, professionalism, and modernization* – is to contribute to increasing the sustainability of independent media by “strengthening professional and financial capacities, improving public policies, digitization, and increasing the quality of the journalistic product” (API, 2024). The second CSO we looked at and which answered our request is the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE) (respondent 2), founded in 2015, as a common effort of national and international experts, former government officials, civil servants, and career diplomats, whose mission is to accelerate the European integration of the Republic of Moldova by promoting systemic reforms, increasing participatory democracy, and strengthening the role of citizens in decision-making processes at the national and local levels. The third CSO that answered our request for an interview is WatchDog.md (respondent 3), a think-tank civil society community, whose primary mission is to promote and create public policies with the help of experts in various fields and to disseminate correct and comprehensive information for the general public to build democratic resilience in Moldova (Watchdog. md).

A limitation of our research is that we did not receive answers from all the CSOs contacted (seven were contacted, only three answered). Despite this, the interviews carried out (which account for 90 minutes of recordings, i.e. 48 pages



of transcription, plus another six pages of written answers) have proven to be a valuable addition to our research as the interviewees have a lot of experience, and clear insights on the media landscape, disinformation and the efforts to combat it in the Republic of Moldova.

In a nutshell: (pro-Russian) propaganda and disinformation

Emerging in Russia in the 1910s as a political warfare tactic, disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*) has evolved from the Sisson Documents (Hamilton–Georgacopoulos 2021: 881) to modern cyberattacks, therefore reshaping warfare methods (Herța 2017: 139; Herța 2016). Disinformation, defined as a deliberate act meant to manipulate and deceive, is identified as a threat to democracies (Culloty–Suiter 2021, Gregor–Mlejnková 2021; Cosentino 2020; Tumber–Waisbord 2021; Palau-Sampio–López-García 2022; Opgenhaffen 2023) as it can be used as a propaganda tool for political persuasion (O’Shaughnessy 2020: 55, Maci–Demata–Seargeant–McGlashan 2024: 4).

Media in general and social media platforms, in particular, enhance disinformation strategies by leveraging sensational content and confirmation biases. Technological advancements have blurred the origins of the information disseminated on the Internet, making it harder to identify its source and context (Pavlíková–Šenkýřová–Drmola 2021: 47), therefore broadening the potential for *media manipulation* and contributing to modern conflicts by *weaponizing information* (Pavlíková–Šenkýřová–Drmola 2021: 44). The main types of actors involved in media manipulation include, among others, *Internet trolls, conspiracy theorists, and politicians* (Marwick–Lewis 2016: 4–21). Politicians are the agents mentioned by all the Moldovan CSO representatives interviewed as media and public opinion manipulators spreading false narratives against the current pro-European government, which are meant to cause *agitation* and *dissatisfaction* or even *hate of a common enemy* (respondents 1, 2, and 3).

Furthermore, the Internet and the existing social media platforms have made the information far more visual and its dissemination much quicker (Alper 2014; Seo 2020: 126). Mainstream social media platforms (such as Facebook and X) are frequently used by political groups and other actors to spread extreme messaging (Marwick–Lewis 2016: 28), this way facilitating the use of *digital propaganda* and *disinformation* as cost-free political tools that have the capacity of reaching wide audiences. Facebook and Telegram (respondents 1 and 2), as well as YouTube and Tiktok (respondents 2 and 3), are the social media platforms most often mentioned in the interviews carried out with Moldovan CSO representatives as platforms for the spread of pro-Russian narratives.

Through technological advancement, Russia has refined and amplified its propaganda and disinformation efforts, using bots and trolls to sway elections



and to fracture societal cohesion (Pavlíková–Šenkýřová–Drmola 2021: 44, Colomina–Sanchez Margalef–Youngs 2021: 15, Solopova–Popescu–Benzmuller–Landgraf 2023: 6, respondent 2). Furthermore, it controls the Internet for *hybrid warfare* (a term used to refer to the impact that disinformation can have on the aspects related to a country's security), aiming to balance confrontation asymmetries (Pavlíková–Šenkýřová–Drmola 2021: 52) and employing an *authoritarian informationalism* (Jiang 2010) to extend control and bolster legitimacy, impacting countries such as the Republic of Moldova.

Russia is known to use a mix of traditional and non-traditional propaganda and disinformation strategies to influence public opinion and political landscapes, including *agitation, integration, and a common enemy* (Samoilenko–Karnysheva 2020: 192-194), *disorientation* of political opponents (Brooking and Singer 2016), *flooding discourse with confusing data to dismiss, distort, distract, dismay* (Lucas and Nimmo 2015: 10), as well as undermining trust in the liberal order (McGeehan 2018: 57, Richey 2018: 101).

Pro-Russian narratives in Moldova and CSOs' perspectives

The media in the Republic of Moldova is vulnerable to disinformation (CSO respondents 1, 2, and 3; Muravschi–Paşa–Revenco–Pîrgari–Rusu 2023: 7) reflecting, therefore, the challenges faced by many of the former Soviet states, having a polarized media landscape (Nistor 2023). Research indicates that Russia is targeting countries with internal dissensions (Kantur 2022: 7) using propaganda and disinformation as weapons to create discord, emphasizing dependencies on Russian energy and food (Yarova 2022), and the Republic of Moldova is such a country. This vulnerability is exacerbated by weak institutions, rampant corruption, and a fragile media sector, which collectively hinder effective countermeasures. Addressing these issues requires multifaceted solutions that encompass legislative reforms, economic adjustments, the engagement of civil society, and international cooperation (Roşca 2018).

Generally speaking, Russian propaganda concentrates on what is referred to as the 4Ds of disinformation: *dismiss, distort, distract, dismay*, where *dismiss* refers to rejecting certain topics or people to silence them or offend them to see distrust in that person or institution; *distort* is a strategy to deform the facts; *distract* refers to drawing the public's attention from a main topic to another one by creating a false comparison between the critic and the one criticized; while *dismay* is a technique whose purpose is to scare the public by, for instance, warning them about the imminent consequences of a policy or action (Lucas–Nimmo 2015: 5). As such, Russian propaganda in Moldova employs emotional and rhetorical strategies (Miles 2020: 157), leveraging powerful political myths and crafting pro-Russian narratives (Samoilenko–Karnysheva 2020: 190). Understanding these elements is crucial for identifying destabilizing influences and promoting democratic values aligned with



the European Union (Mareš–Mlejnková 2021: 82), thereby supporting Eastern partners in preserving the rule of law (Stretea 2023: 31).

The interviewed CSO representatives 1, 2, and 3 mentioned certain politicians and oligarchs, as well as political groups – which have also been identified as Russophiles in the specialized literature (Vecchi 2023; Cațus 2023: 11-14) – , namely Ilan Shor and his Shor party (respondents 1, 2, and 3), Igor Dodon and the Party of Socialists of Moldova – PSRM (respondent 3), as well as Vladimir Plahotniuc – former leader of the Democratic Party, previous Member of the Parliament of Moldova, who also served as First Vice-President – (respondents 2 and 3). We have further identified the Party of Communists of Moldova – PCRM (Vladimir Voronin’s party) as a Russophile party due to the nature of the posts made. These politicians use social media platforms (mostly Facebook) as well as the political parties’ websites to disseminate pro-Russian narratives.

From November 2023 to January 2024, the pro-Russian politicians’ social media profiles and the political parties’ websites that we analyzed engaged in disinformation efforts against the EU and the pro-European government in Moldova. For instance, Ilan Shor used *pejorative terms* – sarcastically referring to Moldova as a “successful story” (Partidul ȘOR 2023a) –, *logical fallacies* (such as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*) to blame Moldova’s association with the EU for the country’s decline and the citizens’ migration (Partidul ȘOR 2023a), as well as exaggerations to frame the pro-European government’s efforts to reduce Moldova’s dependence on Russian gas as catastrophic (Partidul ȘOR 2024a; WatchDog, 2024).

In the same period, the PCRM posted information meant to alarm the public by referring to a “criminal scheme” that would make the population pay more for non-Russian gas (PCRM 2024c). Furthermore, they accused President Maia Sandu of economic mismanagement because of the money she spent on foreign delegations, using derogatory remarks meant to anger the public (PCRM 2023a, PCRM 2024a, PCRM 2024b).

Similarly, the PSRM posted different messages in which they described Maia Sandu’s government as a “criminal group” (PSRM 2023a) that was “sold to the West” (PSRM 2023e), urging citizens to vote for the “star” to “free Moldova” (PSRM 2023b). Moreover, the PSRM accused the government of violating the rule of law without giving any details (PSRM 2023c), while at the same time highlighting the importance of cooperation with other countries, such as Hungary and China (PSRM 2023d, PSRM 2023f), critics of the EU and NATO.

Consequently, there are certain topics that we have identified as recurrent narratives in the pro-Russian politicians’ posts on their social media pages or the pro-Russian political parties’ web pages (in the period ranging from November 2023 to January 2024), namely:



Table 1. Main pro-Russian narratives identified through social media and webpage analysis

Main narrative	With what purpose	What it triggers	Strategy used
anti-EU narrative	To compromise the image of the European Union	anger	dismiss distort distract
	To compromise the image of pro-European politicians in the Republic of Moldova	anger	dismiss distort distract
energy and food crisis	To compromise the image of the European Union and the Moldovan pro-European politicians and to create the idea that a closer relationship with Russia would solve these problems	fear, worry, despair	distort dismay
anti-government narrative	to trigger internal power struggles and personal political survival instincts	anger, worry	dismiss distort

Because of such a large influx of information, the Moldovan CSOs' role is also to help the general public filter and understand the interests at stake. For example, the CSOs included in our research have also monitored the media space and have published reports drawing the public's attention to the main narratives promoted by those who are close to the Russian agenda. In their reports published in 2021 and 2023, IPRE and WatchDog.md respectively mention that the main narratives of disinformation campaigns in Moldova focus on (1) influencing the public opinion's geopolitical preferences by discrediting the European Union and the Western democratic values and promoting a closer relation with Russia (IPRE 2021: 14; Muravschi–Paşa–Revenco–Pîrgari–Rusu 2023: 5); (2) undermining Moldovan state institutions by promoting narratives to discredit the new pro-European government and institutions (IPRE 2021: 17; Muravschi–Paşa–Revenco–Pîrgari–Rusu 2023: 5); (3) manipulating security-related information by presenting Moldova's cooperation with NATO and the EU as a risk that could trigger a conflict with Russia (IPRE 2021: 18, Muravschi–Paşa–Revenco–Pîrgari–Rusu 2023: 5).

Similar narratives have also come up in the interviews conducted with the Moldovan CSO representatives, though in more detail. As such, we have identified that the main pro-Russian topics disseminated on Facebook and the analyzed political parties' websites refer to several aspects. One narrative propagated refers to the creation of a Moldovan identity, Moldovan language, and Moldovan values which would be lost if the country joined the EU. Second, Russophile politicians and political parties in the Republic of Moldova promote anti-European narratives targeting the values promoted by the E.U. Third, there are several anti-EU narratives meant to anger the public or to make Moldova's closeness to the EU scare them. Fourth, there are also anti-NATO narratives aiming to frighten the population implying the idea that Moldova would lose its identity and independence.

Table 2. Summary of pro-Russian narratives identified by CSO respondents

Main narrative	With what purpose		Respondent	What it triggers	Strategy used
Moldovenism	Promoting the idea that Moldovans have a distinct identity, different from the Romanian one, with a different language (Moldovan language), to undermine Moldova's ties with Romania.		Respondent 1	feelings of nationalism and fear of losing one's identity	distort distract
anti-government narrative	Promoting the idea of a strong opposition that would fight against the EU integration but would fight for the interest and well-being of the citizens		Respondent 1 Respondent 2 Respondent 3		distort distract
anti-EU narrative	The EU as a destabilizing factor	Promoting the idea that EU membership would bring about economic and cultural losses	Respondent 1	feelings of nationalism, as well as fear and loss of identity	distort dismay
	Indirect attacks – Maia Sandu as “agent” of the West	Maia Sandu's pro-European government is accused of acting in the interests of the EU and the USA, therefore undermining the interests of the Republic of Moldova and the well-being of its citizens	Respondent 1 Respondent 2 Respondent 3	fear and distrust	dismiss distort dismay
	EU integration as a threat	Promoting the idea that EU membership would worsen the relations with Russia, therefore leading to a conflict similar to the one in Ukraine	Respondent 2 Respondent 3	fear and despair	distort dismay
anti-NATO narrative			Respondent 1	fear and distrust	distort dismay

Moldovan CSOs' Response

As previously mentioned, the legislation in the Republic of Moldova defines CSOs as “public associations, private institutions, foundations and unions of legal entities” (Putină–Brie 2023: 90), whose role is to shape policies in a democratic society (Brie–Costea–Petrița 2023: 101). Even though there are mixed feelings about their ability to influence politics and drive change (Putină–Brie 2023: 95), the implication of civil society is paramount in all grassroots activities (Grad-Rusu–Grad 2023). There are several major civil societies that have a major impact in Moldova,



and whose fight against disinformation has managed to create small but meaningful changes in the Moldovan society. We have contacted most of the civil societies identified (seven), to interview their representatives; however, we received a positive answer from three of them.

All three CSOs interviewed underlined the many challenges they are faced with in their activity of combatting disinformation. In an attempt to balance the scales, we wanted to see if there was a flood of information from both European sources and Russian sources; however, all three respondents underlined that the inflow of information comes from Russian-sponsored sources trying to spread pro-Russian narratives to destabilize the population and *distract* them from a European route or a closeness to what is seen as democratic values (respondents 1, 2, 3).

We see this partially as a clash of values: while the Moldovan pro-European government and the CSOs try to guide the Republic of Moldova and its citizens towards European values (Western values) – such as human dignity, democracy, freedom, equality, rule of law, human rights (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union 2012) –, those promoting Russian narratives try to keep control over what is seen as good values in the East: respect for authority, hierarchical structure, connections (*blat*), materialism, traditional creeds (Chimenson–Tung–Panibratov–Fang 2022), as well as historical consciousness, value sovereignty, statehood, and historical heritage (Torkunov 2022).

Furthermore, as has already been mentioned, given that the Republic of Moldova is vulnerable to propaganda and disinformation (IPRE 2021: 5), as well as dependent on Russian energy and gas (Paşa et al. 2022: 7), which is a manipulable weakness, there are also certain vulnerabilities that affect the CSOs' activities to combat disinformation in the Republic of Moldova, namely the citizens' low resistance to disinformation due to a lack of media education (respondent 2), the influence of the Church (respondent 2), limited institutional capacity to quickly respond to false information (respondents 1 and 2), lack of resources for the implementation of activities meant to combat disinformation (respondents 1, 2, and 3), dependence on governmental or external sources and funds (respondents 1, 2, and 3), lack of cooperation with big tech companies, such as Meta (respondent 2).

To fight these vulnerabilities, each of the CSOs interviewed adopted measures that they hoped would help them and the Moldovan society in their fight against disinformation and their journey toward European integration. These measures are summarised in the table below:

Table 3. Strategies implemented by the interviewed CSOs to fight against disinformation

Measure	Reason	Respondent
Strategic campaigns	to change citizens' behavior, address vulnerabilities, and immunize exposed groups of citizens against false narratives.	Respondent 1 Respondent 2
Monitoring and reporting fake content	to fight disinformation and draw the public's attention to false narratives by correcting the information disseminated	Respondent 2 Respondent 3
Collaboration between public authorities and relevant actors	to collaborate to ensure a coordinated and efficient effort against disinformation.	Respondent 1 Respondent 2
Media education and development of critical thinking skills	to educate the public, to inform them about the consequences of disinformation, and to improve citizens' ability to spot and reject fake news.	Respondent 2 Respondent 3

Respondents 1 and 2 insisted on the importance of *strategic communication* activities whose purpose is to change citizens' behavior, address vulnerabilities, and immunize exposed groups of citizens against false narratives. In this sense, Respondent 1 mentioned that API has one of the most visible and successful fact-checking initiatives, "Stop Fals!" (*Stop the Fake!*), an ongoing campaign whereby, through a dedicated website (stopfals.md) that works in both Romanian and Russian, the association publishes information meant to refute the most viral fake news and propagandistic narratives, which are disseminated by actors from the Russian Federation as well as by local politicians. This initiative has benefitted from support from different international actors since its creation in 2015, receiving funding from the EU in 2017-2019 and the US in 2020 (Järvinen 2022: 9).

Respondents 2 and 3 emphasized the need for the media space to be monitored by specialists who can also spot and report any false information that might be spread via the Internet (WatchDog 2024: 9). For example, IPRE (respondent 2) and their partners constantly monitor social media platforms and have already reported to Meta a significant number of bots distributing fake news (respondent 2). This is a strenuous activity as, according to respondent 2, their CSO, for example, has to deal with at least ten comments or posts, per social media platform, made by bots promoting false narratives (respondent 2). In this sense, it is evident that the influx of information can be overwhelming and difficult to manage unless there is a common effort made to counteract it. API (respondent 1) is also a member of the International Fact-Checking Network, which is a global organization establishing standards for fact-checking.

Developing civil society had become a national priority for the pro-European Moldovan government, which led to the adoption of the *Civil Society Development Strategy* (Putină-Brie 2023: 88). Since the adoption of the Strategy, CSOs have




improved, the only exception being Transnistria where only 5.6% of the existing CSOs are either active or functional (Putină–Brie 2023: 91). Consequently, to take things further, in 2023, the government of the Republic of Moldova founded a Centre for Strategic Communication, which is a joint effort between the State and CSOs, and whose purpose is to coordinate the different governmental actors and CSOs in their activities to communicate strategically, to inform and educate the public about the harm done by disinformation, and to identify the information manipulated by foreign entities wanting to influence public opinion (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2023). This project, initiated and supported by the Government, emphasizes what the three CSO representatives underlined during the interviews, namely the need for collaboration with the State – which they feel they have (respondents 1, 2, and 3), as well as with existing CSOs (IFCN – respondent 1, Internews – respondent 2) and other relevant states and organizations, such as the EU, the USA, UNICEF (respondents 1 and 2).

Furthermore, for all these measures and collaborations to have effect, the population also needs to understand the harms caused by disinformation and to acquire the necessary critical skills to be able to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Ethnic minorities, Orthodox churchgoers, the elderly, and young adults under 25 have been identified as the groups most vulnerable to disinformation (EAST Center 2018: 212). Consequently, in the Republic of Moldova the national curriculum includes an elective course in media education (Iațco 2022: 54), however, API (respondent 1) considers that, given the current events and the extent of media manipulation, this course should be mandatory. There is, for example, a Moldovan CSO (MediaCritica) that offers information about media education through articles, games, videos, quizzes, and textbooks (for primary school students, secondary school students, as well as high school students) (MediaCritica), therefore highlighting the need of long-term media education and long-standing cooperation between governmental actors, CSOs, and the general public, ideas also emphasized by respondents 1 and 2.

Conclusions

The analysis carried out highlights the key characteristics of Russian propaganda and its influence in the Republic of Moldova whose media landscape is vulnerable to disinformation. By exploiting the country's infightings, weak institutions, and dependency on both the EU and Russia, the disinformation strategies employed by pro-Russian politicians and political parties in the Republic of Moldova – as revealed through both the social media analysis carried out and the interviews conducted with CSO representatives – reveal some deliberate attempts to undermine the efforts of the pro-European government and the Western values by using some key narratives meant to trigger fear, anger, and distrust, while at the same time raising feelings of nationalism.



We have, therefore, managed to answer our first research question (RQ 1) and to identify some main narratives of pro-Russian propaganda, which are centered around themes like Moldovenism, anti-EU sentiments, anti-NATO rhetoric, all of them designed to manipulate public opinion and destabilize the pro-European government. We believe that the 4D model of disinformation (*dismiss, distort, distract, dismay*) is incomplete as the information war being waged in the online environment focuses mostly on dismissing the pro-European politician's statements, on *distorting* the information to promote a different political agenda, as well as on *dismaying* the readers by scaring them off with bombastic titles and inaccurate information about the agenda of the European Union and the energy crisis. It seems to be a *divide-and-conquer* approach, where the ultimate goal is to create tension between national political groups and sow confusion among the general public.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Republic of Moldova find themselves in a constant struggle to combat pro-Russian propaganda, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite facing numerous challenges – including having limited resources (human, financial, etc.), external dependencies, and a population vulnerable to disinformation – their role is critical in combatting false information and in steering the country towards European values and integration. These CSOs have implemented strategic communication campaigns, fact-checking initiatives, and support media education programs to combat disinformation and educate the public (RQ2). However, for these efforts to be truly effective, CSOs need a sustained commitment from both the Moldovan government and the Moldovan population, collaborative efforts, and continuous media education to build a society that is resilient and well-informed.

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