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DISINFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETAL RESILIENCE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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The main objective of the research was to assess the impact of disinformation on societal resilience in the Republic of Moldova. To achieve this objective, the study was structured around the following specific objectives: analyzing the theoretical framework of disinformation and related concepts; identifying the main sources of disinformation and the frequency of the population's exposure to false information; and quantifying the impact of disinformation on trust in institutions and on social relationships. To accomplish the proposed objectives, the following research methods were used: literature review, sociological survey, descriptive analysis, and ordinal regression. The results obtained highlight that disinformation is a widespread phenomenon, particularly amplified through social media, which affects trust in institutions, social relationships, and social cohesion. At the same time, frequent exposure to false information reduces the level of societal resilience, while trust in institutions contributes positively to strengthening it. The study emphasizes the need to develop media literacy and mechanisms for combating disinformation.

Keywords: *disinformation, societal resilience, social capital, social cohesion.*

DEZINFORMAREA ȘI IMPACTUL ACESTEIA ASUPRA REZILIENȚEI SOCIETALE ÎN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

Obiectivul principal al cercetării a constat în evaluarea impactului dezinformării asupra rezilienței societale în Republica Moldova. Pentru realizarea acestuia, cercetarea a fost structurată în următoarele obiective specifice: analiza cadrului teoretic al dezinformării și al conceptelor asociate; identificarea principalelor surse de dezinformare și a frecvenței expunerii populației la informații false; cuantificarea impactului dezinformării asupra încrederii în instituții și asupra relațiilor sociale. În vederea atingerii obiectivelor propuse, au fost aplicate următoarele metode de cercetare: cercetarea bibliografică, ancheta sociologică, analiza descriptivă și regresia ordinală. Rezultatele evidențiază că dezinformarea reprezintă un fenomen frecvent, amplificat în special prin rețelele sociale, care afectează încrederea în instituții, relațiile sociale și coeziunea socială. Totodată, expunerea frecventă la informații false reduce nivelul de reziliență societală, în timp ce încrederea în instituții contribuie pozitiv la consolidarea acesteia. Studiul subliniază necesitatea dezvoltării educației media și a mecanismelor de combatere a dezinformării.

Cuvinte-cheie: *dezinformare, reziliență societală, capital social, coeziune socială.*

Introduction

The development of contemporary society is marked by a series of profound transformations, primarily driven by the accelerated progress of information and communication technologies. This advancement has led to an exponential increase in the volume of information, as well as to an intensification in the speed of content circulation, profoundly shaping global social and political dynamics. Information flows may generate both positive and negative, depending on their content and purpose. These are often influenced by the specific interests of the actors involved – whether politicians, corporations, or the media – who may actively contribute to the dissemination of distorted information [23], with disinformation actors being grouped into three categories: politically affiliated actors, representatives of the media, and representatives of civil society.

Disinformation is not an isolated phenomenon, but a systemic problem that reflects political, social, civic, and media dysfunctions [13, p.11]. According to a study conducted within the InforMD project in 2021 [15, p.5-6], the information space of the Republic of Moldova is highly exposed to both external and internal disinformation activities, with substantial intensifications during electoral periods. The objectives pursued consist in influencing voters' decisions, as well as generating social discontent. Among the main factors facilitating the contamination of the information space, the following were identified:

- Increased vulnerability to external shocks, generated by the country's dependence on foreign markets and remittances;
- Reduced efficiency of public administration, which has inherited Soviet traditions;
- The persistence of the habit of depending on authorities and on the state;
- An education system that does not sufficiently encourage critical and independent thinking;
- The multiethnic structure of the population.

In conclusion, in a context marked by global interconnectedness and informational volatility, disinformation emerges as one of the most insidious threats to societal stability and cohesion. Not only does it undermine public trust and weaken democratic institutions, but it also profoundly affects social capital and social cohesion - essential pillars of community resilience in the face of crises. Beyond its political or media dimension, disinformation becomes a systemic phenomenon with major psychosocial implications, weakening solidarity, fostering polarization, and amplifying society's internal vulnerabilities. In this regard, understanding and combating the effects of disinformation must constitute a strategic priority, based on strengthening collective adaptive capacities and promoting a resilient democratic culture grounded in critical thinking, trust, and civic participation.

Theoretical Synthesis

Although the term "disinformation" is relatively recent compared to other terms such as "lie" or "knowledge", its use has become increasingly frequent in recent decades. In 2009, in his paper entitled "*A Conceptual Analysis of Disinformation*", Fallis noted that disinformation had, at that time, a history of approximately 50 years, emphasizing the deliberate nature of the act — namely, the intentional dissemination of false information [14].

In the same vein, Baudrillard approaches disinformation in the context of discussions on mass media, information overload, and social manipulation through the loss of meaning, arguing that disinformation is an essential component of the process of manipulating reality [5, p. 20]. Wardle and Derakhshan define disinformation as information that is deliberately created and disseminated in order to mislead a person, a social group, an organization, or a country [23, p. 20].

Definitions from institutional sources converge toward the same conclusion: disinformation is a tool used for manipulation and destabilization. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, disinformation involves the deliberate dissemination of misleading information intended to influence public opinion or to serve political or strategic interests [1]. At the national level, the Concept of Information Security of the Republic of Moldova includes disinformation within the framework of "information warfare," alongside manipulation, propaganda, and media aggression, all aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state [17].

In the same context, the Audiovisual Media Services Code of the Republic of Moldova treats disinformation as a means of obtaining economic gains or misleading the public, thereby creating conditions for public harm [4].

Other relevant definitions emphasize the role of disinformation in confusing people regarding their own positions and intentions to act [15, p.9], or in obtaining financial gains and causing public damage [13, p. 10]. The American Psychological Association highlights the intentionally false nature of such information [2, p. 10].

From the aspects presented above, it can be observed that the concept of disinformation is most frequently developed through the indication of its intended objectives: to mislead, deceive, and manipulate [23]; to manipulate reality [5]; to confuse people regarding their own positions or intentions to act [15]; to intentionally cause public harm or pursue financial gain [13]; to mislead through the intentional distortion of facts [2]; and to undermine the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of a state [17].

Through the aforementioned negative effects, disinformation undeniably exerts a harmful impact on society, manifested in various ways: from influencing public opinion and disrupting the democratic process to provoking social unrest and, consequently, threatening national security [9]. Alongside this direct impact on national security, disinformation also generates detrimental psychological and social effects by affecting social cohesion and political stability, which represent essential components of national security [22].

In this context, it becomes evident that disinformation acts as a strategic instrument aimed at undermining trust in institutions, polarizing public opinion, and eroding social solidarity. Consequently, its impact directly affects societal resilience, defined as the capacity of a society to withstand and recover easily and rapidly from shocks [20], to flexibly absorb major disruptions and to recover and progress quickly after the inevitable decline of its core functionalities [12], and to adapt and advance within a changing environment [19].

Societal resilience, in turn, is closely linked to two fundamental concepts: social capital and social cohesion. Social capital was conceptualized by Bourdieu as an "aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" [8], while Coleman described it as being "inherent in the structure of relations between persons" [11]. In a widely accepted approach, Putnam considers social capital to represent "connections among individuals, norms of reciprocity, and trust" [21]. In its contemporary definition, social capital is regarded as a collective asset consisting of norms, values, beliefs, trust, and social relationships that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit [7]. Klein emphasizes the investment dimension of social capital – viewing it as the result of individuals' engagement in building social relationships and trust in others and in institutions [16].

Social cohesion is a concept that initially entered the vocabulary of policymakers in the 1990s, being perceived as an essential condition for political stability, a source of welfare and economic growth, as well as a justification for the allocation of public resources dedicated to social policies [16]. Subsequently, the concept gained increasing visibility both in the political sphere and across various academic disciplines, highlighting the difficulty of assessing its impact on social well-being and the need to identify appropriate methods of measurement [3].

In its current understanding, social cohesion "is a state of affairs concerning both vertical and horizontal interactions among members of society, characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that include trust, a sense of belonging, and the willingness to participate and provide assistance, as well as the behavioral manifestations thereof" [10]. Thus, a "cohesive" society is characterized by features such as trust among different social groups (religious, ethnic, gender-based, etc.), trust in state institutions, as well as the existence of a strong civic identity [13].

The differences between the two concepts are notable: while social capital operates predominantly at the individual level, social cohesion manifests at the collective level and transcends the sum of individual social capital [16]. However, both are essential in the architecture of societal resilience.

Numerous studies highlight the role of social capital as a structural element of resilience - a fundamental resource for adaptation and effective response to crises [6; 18]. In parallel, social cohesion is considered a crucial dimension for assessing community resilience [24]. Therefore, social capital and social cohesion constitute pillars of a society's capacity to respond to crises. When these components are compromised, societies become vulnerable to manipulation, instability, and division. Strengthening these dimensions thus represents an essential condition for defending against the systemic effects of disinformation and for promoting a resilient democratic culture.

In an informational landscape that is unstable and vulnerable to manipulation, a deep understanding of the mechanisms through which disinformation undermines solidarity and trust becomes essential for the formulation of effective public policies. A sustained and systematic effort is needed to diagnose the phenomenon of disinformation and its effects, as an integral part of strengthening collective capacities for adaptation, resistance, and post-crisis recovery.

Research Methodology

The research methodology was aligned with the specific objectives formulated within the context of the general objective of assessing the impact of disinformation on societal resilience in the Republic of Moldova. Accordingly, the analysis of the theoretical framework of disinformation and related concepts, such as social capital, social cohesion, and societal resilience, was carried out using a bibliographic research method focused on the examination of specialized literature, institutional documents, and relevant previous studies.

In order to identify the main sources of disinformation and the frequency of the population's exposure to false information, a sociological survey based on questionnaires was applied, administered both online and

by telephone. The primary data processing was carried out using descriptive analysis, employing frequencies and percentage weights.

To quantify the impact of disinformation on trust in institutions and on social relations, ordinal regression was used, through which it was possible to measure the influence of disinformation-related variables on the perceived level of trust and social cohesion. The estimated ordered logit regression model was obtained by inputting and processing the primary data in the Python programming environment, and the analysis was performed using the stats models package. The model parameters were determined using the BFGS optimization method.

Results and Discussions

A first step undertaken to achieve the objective of the research consisted in administering a questionnaire to a sample of 313 respondents. The survey was conducted between December 2024 and May 2025. The sample description is presented in Figures 1–3 and reveals the following aspects:

- The sample includes individuals of various age groups, with a lower proportion of respondents aged over 65 (Figure 1);
- In terms of occupation, students, specialists, and workers predominate (Figure 2);
- The majority of respondents hold a bachelor’s degree, followed by those with high school education (Figure 3).

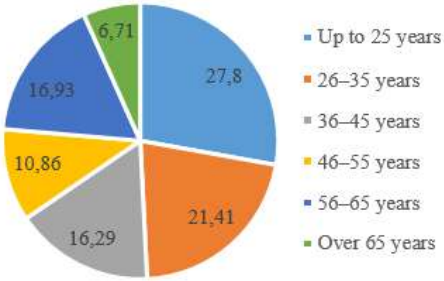


Figure 1. Sample structure by age, %
Source: author’s own elaboration

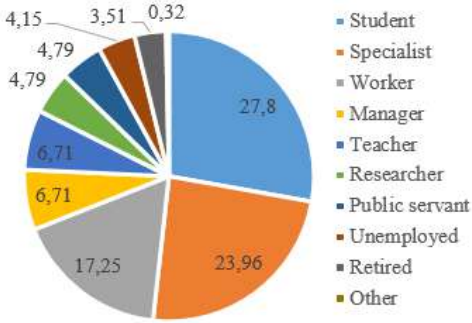


Figure 2. Sample structure by occupation, %
Source: author’s own elaboration

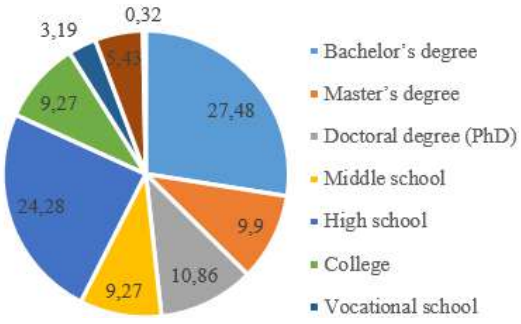


Figure 3. Sample structure by education level, %
Source: author’s own elaboration

Respondents were asked a series of questions designed to assess perceptions of various aspects related to sources of disinformation, its effects, as well as opinions regarding the measures needed to address the issue. The questions were formulated with predefined response options, which were later converted into a score ranging from 1 to 4.

Following the initial processing of the collected data, it was found that the main source of disinformation is social media, mentioned by 64% of respondents. Traditional media channels rank second, indicated by 23% of participants, while 13% mentioned obscure channels and blogs. The results obtained for the aspects that could be quantitatively assessed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Assessment of respondents' perceptions regarding disinformation and its individual and social impact

Aspects covered	Average score obtained	Interpretation of the result	Specification
Frequency of exposure to disinformation	3.35	High level of exposure to disinformation	Over 96% of respondents believe they are frequently or very frequently exposed to disinformation.
Trust in institutions	1.97	Moderate to low level of trust in state institutions	83% of respondents reported moderate or low trust in state institutions.
Perceived ability to recognize fake news	1.58	Low ability to identify fake news	Over 96% of respondents consider their ability to recognize fake news to be moderate or low.
Emotional impact of disinformation	3.02	High emotional impact	28% of respondents state that disinformation affects them intensely, while 46% say they are affected frequently.
Accidental sharing of false news	2.42	Frequent occurrence of unintentional sharing of false news	Approximately 55% of respondents admit to having unintentionally shared false news.
Conflicts within the close social circle	2.63	Moderate tensions generated by disinformation	Over 45% of respondents frequently experience conflicts caused by disinformation, while 16% report such conflicts as very frequent.
Impact on social cohesion	2.66	Moderate to high negative influence on social cohesion	30% of respondents believe that disinformation significantly weakens social cohesion, while 23% consider its impact substantial.
Level of societal preparedness to deal with disinformation	1.55	Insufficient societal preparedness to deal with disinformation	47% of respondents believe that society is moderately prepared, while 49% consider it poorly prepared to deal with disinformation.

Source: author's own elaboration

The results presented in Table 1 highlight that disinformation is perceived by respondents as a constant phenomenon in the contemporary information space, with significant effects at both individual and social levels. Thus, respondents associate disinformation with a decrease in trust in public institutions and with an insufficient ability to identify false information, indicating an increased informational vulnerability. At the same time, the data suggest that disinformation influences individuals' emotional balance and contributes to the emergence of tensions in close social relationships. In the respondents' perception, the cumulative effects of this phenomenon affect social cohesion and foster the fragmentation of the public sphere.

Another important aspect revealed by the research is the general perception of a low level of societal preparedness to cope with disinformation. This finding highlights the need to strengthen media literacy education and to develop more effective institutional mechanisms for preventing and combating disinformation.

Overall, the results confirm that disinformation is perceived not only as a communication issue, but also as a factor with direct implications for social resilience and the healthy functioning of the democratic space.

In order to further deepen the study, an investigation of the complex relationships between disinformation and societal resilience was conducted using ordinal regression analysis. The results obtained are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the ordinal regression model estimation

Predictor variable	Coeficient	Std. Err	z	p-value	Interval 95% CI
X1 – Frequency of exposure	-1.513	0.361	-4.19	<0.001	[-2.221, -0.804]
X2 – Trust in institutions	2.290	0.397	5.77	<0.001	[1.512, 3.068]
X3 – Ability to recognize	0.609	0.329	1.85	0.064	[-0.036, 1.255]
X4 – Emotional impact	-0.845	0.306	-2.76	0.006	[-1.444, -0.245]
X5 – Conflicts within the close social circle	-2.338	0.331	-7.07	<0.001	[-2.986, -1.690]
X6 – Accidental sharing	-1.067	0.298	-3.59	<0.001	[-1.651, -0.484]

Source: author's own elaboration

The ordinal regression model indicates a significant relationship between most predictors and the level of societal preparedness (Y). The results can be interpreted as follows:

- X2 (Trust in institutions) has a strong positive coefficient (2.29, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that higher trust in institutions corresponds to a higher level of preparedness in facing disinformation.
- X1 (Frequency of exposure to disinformation) and X5 (Conflicts within the close social circle) have significant negative coefficients (-1.51 and -2.34, respectively), indicating that frequent exposure and social tensions considerably reduce resilience to disinformation.
- X4 (Emotional impact) and X6 (Accidental sharing of fake news) (coefficients of -0.84 and -1.07, $p < 0.01$) also make a significant contribution to lowering societal preparedness.
- X3 (Perceived ability to recognize fake news) has a positive but only marginally significant coefficient (0.61, $p = 0.064$), suggesting a potential beneficial effect, although not statistically robust.

The validity of the estimated relationships is supported by the Wald test, $p < 0.001$.

Conclusions

- The results of the study confirm that disinformation is a frequent phenomenon in the current information space, with social media being perceived as the main source of false information dissemination.
- The research highlights a low level of public trust in state institutions and an insufficient ability to identify fake news, reflecting the informational vulnerability of society.
- Disinformation has significant effects on emotional well-being and social relationships, contributing to tensions and the weakening of social cohesion.
- The ordinal regression model demonstrates that trust in institutions contributes positively to increased societal resilience, while frequent exposure to disinformation, social conflicts, and the accidental sharing of fake news reduce the level of societal preparedness.
- The results emphasize the need to strengthen media education, digital literacy, and institutional mechanisms for combating disinformation in order to enhance social resilience and protect the democratic space.

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