MYTHS AND MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES IN THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN FOR THE OCTOBER 20, 2024, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract. *The article examines the impact of political myth and manipulation techniques during the electoral campaign of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova in November 2024. The purpose of the article is to show that myth, despite the negative attitude towards it, plays an important and, in many ways, unique role in society. It is related to the mythical-religious thinking of contemporary society in that myth forms the semantic field of culture, which is responsible for the values and meanings of peoples and societies, on which the moral health of society and individuals depends. Thus, myth serves our consciousness, providing the images we need and forming the motivations we want in elections and referendums. Through it, frameworks are established, life is governed, normalized and ritualized, introducing the "harmony" necessary for its functioning in society.*

Keywords*: political myths, national security, informational warfare, disinformation, distortion, trolling, fake news.*

Theoretical approach of political myths

First, despite the fact that political myths have always embedded everyday human activity and communication, political mythology does not enjoy adequate attention in the social-political literature, being researched and addressed only partially. The problem of political myths has attracted the attention of historians and political scientists of the republic, especially in the period 1989-1991, when the constitutional foundations of the Republic of Moldova as a democratic state governed by the rule of law were laid. The subject was approached in the area of social psychology, electoral sociology, political sociology with the aim of explaining in relatively easy to perceive nuances how electoral

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behavior was influenced by the construction of certain political myths to generate emotion and adherence.

The domain of political myths is supposedly some scientific research in the fundamental articles and monographs of Western scientists: R.Girardet (Mituri şi mitologii politice), L. Sfez (Mythologies politiques du cinéma français), V. Kernbach (Miturile esențiale, Dicționarul de mitologie generală), J. Sorel, E. Cassirer (The Myth of the State, Eseu despre om. O introducere în filosofia culturii umane) G. Gurdorf, M. Edelmann, T.Henry (Political Myth), T. L. Thorson (in the 4th edition of A History of Political Theory), R. Bart, K. Jung, I. Kant, C.L.Strauss, and others in post-Soviet space C.Gadjiev, G.Belov, G.Poceptov, A.Prigojin, A.Piatigorski, V.Halipov etc., in which an analysis is made under different aspects of the process of generation of political myths, the essential structures and functions of them in cadres of the political system. The symbolico-mythological dimensions in the concept of political image developmente are addressed in the Republic of Modova in the works of (Peru-Balan A., 2022:23).

Myths are widely used in the social-political sphere. A myth is considered a political myth when the narrative provides an ideologically marked account of the past, present, and future of the political community. The French sociologist George Sorel was the first to use the notion of "myth" in relation to political phenomena. So, the myth constitutes in essence a whole with the conventions of the social group, is the expression of this convention in the language of mixtures and for this reason we cannot decompose it into parts.

Currently, a series of studies have appeared that treat and analyze the phenomenon of mythology and collective mindsets in a very broad context. However, researchers more talk about mystifications referring to myths with negative connotations, to falsehoods. The myth does not describe history. But history has shown that these beautiful ideals of future societies are nothing but dystopias, that is, the opposite of utopias. In this sense, there are examples of the totality of the 20th century, when both communism and fascism have failed to deliver what they promised people. By following, we could affirm, that the architecture of social-political reality dictates the appearance of the “demand-supply” dichotomy. Political myths take shape as a function of community demand. Thus, good revolutions "of catfish" from South-Eastern Europe has realized the need for reformist leaders, just as the young democracy of the Moldovan state at various stages has claimed “revolutionary”, “reformist”, “democratic”, “dogmatic” alternatives. Hence, probably, the aphorism: “Every people is worth of its drivers”.

Secondary, information warfare, disinformation, distortion, trolling, and fake news are not just simple words that do not concern us directly; they are integral parts of a sophisticated and well-orchestrated campaign aimed at "brainwashing" and the systemic implantation of information at a subconscious level through various methods of mass manipulation.

We are living in an era where information wars are gaining ground over physical wars, thanks to propaganda offensives and skillful psychological manipulation of the masses. In the media battles of Moldovan politics, the focus is often not on promoting reformist visions capable of lifting the country from its knees but rather on discrediting opponents, with the goal of compromising them in the eyes of the electorate. Ultimately,

the fate of individuals and the nation as a whole is decided by the flow of manipulated information behind the screens.

The use of myths to influence voters' behavior is one of the ways to achieve political goals, myths are actively used in ideology and propaganda, in social communication and advertising, in manipulation. Mythologizing techniques are used in shaping mass consciousness. In modern society, a new direction of mythologizing is emerging - political mythologizing. Political myth is a transformed form of political consciousness in which knowledge and understanding of political facts is replaced by images, symbols, fictions, legends and belief in them.

A report published by the **Romanian Center for European Policies** (Moşneaga Valeriu, Bencheci Marcel, Hîrbu-Bencheci Diana, 2016, nr.3 (LXXIV) shows that the Republic of Moldova is one of the most affected European countries by disinformation campaigns coming from Russia. The content of these campaigns is taken and promoted by visible politicians, representatives of the Orthodox Church of Moldova, as well as pro-Russian media outlets. In this sense, the Republic of Moldova is a testing ground for projecting Russian influence in Eastern Europe and one of the most exposed and vulnerable countries to the information war organized by the Kremlin. Russian propaganda is systemic and omnipresent in the public, private, and associative sectors of the Republic of Moldova; it has a well-organized and supplied hierarchical structure; it relies on media retransmitted from the Russian Federation and on servile local media; the narratives promoted are built on a “black-and-white” (good vs. evil) model, being simple, accessible, captivating, and focused; the political class in the Republic of Moldova often lacked initiative in setting the foreign policy and security agenda due to detachment and passivity.

The elements listed are amplified by the lack of national unity and social cohesion, and the population is confused and misinformed as a result of active propaganda, including due to corruption, indifference, or complicity of public authorities.

Although the official state policy is strictly pro-European, the perception of the European integration process in the citizens' consciousness is ambiguous, strongly influenced by the historical past shared with Russia, as well as with other Soviet republics; the presence of the Russian language as the most widespread unofficial language of communication (in the 2014 census, 13.2% of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova declared themselves Russian speakers, but in reality, their number is much higher), as well as Russia's geostrategic interests in the region.

An analysis of the media development environment in the Republic of Moldova shows gaps between the political decision-making process regarding European integration and the reality perceived by citizens. The political course change of the country does not necessarily coincide with the emergence of such behaviors and attitudes for all community members, because Moldovan society is extremely fragmented along political criteria, geostrategic orientation, ethnicities, and the presence of a low political culture (Damian A., Șubernițchi V. 2022:12). External propaganda and disinformation have become tools to undermine and weaken national and regional security and stability by using traditional tools (press, radio, TV, movies) and newer ones (Internet, social media). Technologies create a qualitatively new environment for operations: influences, beliefs, and mass manipulation. Artificial intelligence (AI) is used by the opposition to

generate and disseminate fake news and videos, which are extremely difficult to identify as manipulated files. Deepfakes can be particularly effective in compromising the political reputation of candidates, thereby influencing election campaigns without the need to hack electoral systems.

The elements of hybrid warfare present in the Republic of Moldova exert pressure on national security and defense, self-governance, and pose obstacles to achieving national interests.

The legislation of the Republic of Moldova in the field of national security does not cover the current security needs and fails to provide rational and prudent policies. Additionally, inter-institutional coordination is at a low level. We are witnessing an increase in the activities of external influence agents (NGOs, media, political forces, church), the lack of a strong national media, and a unified voice.

In the last decade, the citizens' feelings of skepticism, distrust, or even fear towards the information dissemination system have grown alarmingly.

A frightened society is divisive, enamored, creates an atmosphere of general mistrust, an appeal to the authorities, a "strong hand", which often stimulates the escalation of fears and suspicion for their own approval. The destruction of social bonds breeds uncertainty, fear and intolerance. And the weaker the state power, the more inclined it is to intensify the fight against "enemies", to create an image of the enemy - both external and internal. Often the state in such a society demonstrates its power by further strengthening the fight against "criminality" and "enemies". "This often led to the emergence of conflicts between sovereigns, wars being the process often encountered in interstate activity, and considered the most effective and most secure in achieving state interests". (SacaV., 2001:218-220)

No one denies, however, the mass communication's essential role in democracy: information remains vital for the smooth functioning of society, and two of the key conditions for a democracy today are: the existence of a valid communication network and a maximum of free information.

Ștefan Buzărnescu (1996) defines manipulation as "the action of determining a social actor (individual, group, community) to think and act in a manner compatible with the initiator's interests, rather than their own, through the use of persuasion techniques that intentionally distort the truth, yet give the impression of freedom of thought and decision-making." (Buzărnescu, St. 1996:35).

The political myth has a great power to penetrate consciousness. Political practice shows that the political imaginary constantly intervenes to explain the past and legitimize the present - in both totalitarian and democratic societies. People are bombarded daily with numerous persuasive messages. Research on this topic shows that the reaction to a message often depends on the characteristics of the person trying to convince, regardless of the value of the message itself. In this context, psychologists have identified three key characteristics:

1. credibility of the communicator;
2. physical qualities and "charm" of the communicator;
3. perceived intentions of the communicator.

Disinformation (Zamfir, Vlăsceanu, 1993:342) is defined as any intervention in the basic elements of a communication process that deliberately alters the messages

being conveyed, with the aim of causing specific attitudes, reactions, and actions in the receivers (referred to as "targets" in disinformation theory) that align with the desires of a certain social agent. The disinformation agent does not necessarily have to be the disinformation source itself; it can also be an institution, an organization, etc.

As an immediate reality, disinformation has two dimensions: one unintentional and one intentional, aimed at a specific segment of opinion.

From an intentional perspective, disinformation can be analyzed (Buzărnescu, 1996:87) in terms of the symbolic forms through which information is coded in a message:

1. as we know, codes can be expressed through natural language, nonverbal language (gestures, facial expressions), concrete symbols (colors, panels, lights), and abstract symbols specific to artificial language (scientifically developed), such as mathematical formulas, logical expressions, etc;
2. another intentional method for disinformation is polysemic coding of the message. The multitude of inherent meanings in a statement, generating a corresponding diversity of opinions, leads to a diversity of attitudes ranging from complete adherence to rejection.

Strategic disinformation is effective when it presents as fundamental social values either those that are favorable to the source or those marginal to the interests of the target audience. In this way, the community is diverted from its main concerns, fundamental social values are neglected, and the competitiveness of the community declines.

The elements of disinformation actions are:

1. Commanders are those who conceive and design the action's content, defining both real and potential targets. They can be decision-makers (governments, military headquarters, or socio-professional groups) and pressure groups. While the first category uses specialized services, pressure groups also employ ad-hoc teams of amateurs who are highly effective in creating and maintaining confusion.
2. Specialists are those who plan the tactical sequences of the action and coordinate all the ways to control the concrete effects of the emitted messages. They simulate all categories of effects to ensure that they control both the own effects and the requirements of re-designing elements in response to counteraction efforts by the target.
3. Control is the link between the commanders, who direct the action, and the influence agents. To control the social space under their responsibility, controllers recruit and maintain a vast network of correspondents, usually indirectly, through third parties who act as scouts. These individuals, selected from among insignificant people, are tasked with testing the willingness of a personality with access to valuable data to collaborate with the commanders and planners.
4. Influence agents are recruited from those who have prestige within their professional group and who are to be disinformed through messages received from planners via controllers. Experience has shown that influence agents can be: opinion leaders in intellectual circles, who, in their desire to take practical action, agree to launch shocking messages into the public space; This is done through a compromising fact to ensure long-term collaboration.
5. Leaders of associations: In the context of pluralistic systems, the associative environment is favorable for recruiting and cultivating influence agents. By emphasizing

humanitarian interests, protected by an internationally valid legal framework, the disinformation can attract many naïve individuals into association structures, often professionals who are leading figures in their field.

6. Intermediaries are recruited from influential personalities in the community to act as opinion leaders and agents of influence, who appear neutral and independent but serve hidden interests behind the messages they emit.

7. Relays – individuals or institutions that prove useful in amplifying and programming the messages constituting the disinformation content.

These developments clearly demonstrate that the variety of ways in which social organizations are formed and operate, the diversity of nations, and the differences, gaps, and incompatibilities between them, are all products and expressions of the social information processors. The trend of globalizing public information offers a free field for intermediaries specializing in using communication for purposes that can affect it; furthermore, the possibilities offered by scientific research create new communication channels, which increasingly modify not only the possibilities of reception but also the ways in which information is processed and preserved for social use.

The 2024 presidential elections and disinformation in the Republic of Moldova

During the 2024 presidential election campaign, negative campaign activities were observed. The public space in the Republic of Moldova continued to be affected by numerous fakes and manipulations. As it was an election year, propaganda sources were more active than ever, spreading various disinformation messages about the EU, NATO, speculations about dragging Moldova into the war, or "liquidating" the country.

Fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, socialists Bogdan Țîrdea and Igor Dodon, Gagauzia leader Evghenia Guțul, and even the spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova were among those who actively polluted the public space with disinformation, becoming the "champions" of fake news in 2024.

In the first ten days of October, as the election campaign gained momentum, some candidates diversified their arsenal of falsehoods spread on social media. The most outrageous and easy-to-debunk came from Victoria Furtună and Tudor Ulianovschi: "Moldovans are taking microloans to pay utilities" and "PAS closed the maternity wards." Other falsehoods and manipulations appeared in the speeches of Irina Vlah, Vasile Tarlev, and the leader of PSRM, Igor Dodon, who campaigned for the independent candidate Alexandr Stoianoglo.

The myths promoted in the electoral campaign of October 20, 2024 were:

1. *The Myth of the Savior Leader and/or the myth of the unimprisoned dissident in the name of Ilan Șor or Veaceslav Platon;*

From these perspectives, the candidates can be presented as the only viable solution to solve economic, political, or social problems. A notable example of promoting a national hero image was the campaign of Victoria Furtună, who ventured into the fight against repaying loans for Moldovans. A narrative that was observed was: "Moldovans cannot repay 3 billion lei taken from microfinance companies," as stated by candidate Victoria Furtună on October 8. This message was a repetition of one she posted in a video on October 3, in which she promised: "The cancellation of debts for

disadvantaged individuals. The problematic loans of the disadvantaged population amount to approximately 2.5-3 billion lei. We will offer a new chance through a credit amnesty for those who cannot pay."(Borodin, 2024)

However, it is unclear how Victoria Furtună arrived at the figure of three billion lei in non-repayable loans and how she assessed that these loans were taken by "pensioners and needy citizens to survive."

In a comment for StopFals.md, economist Stas Madan, project director at the association Expert-Grup, explained: "First of all, not all of the 14 billion lei were granted exclusively to the population. Around 25-30% of this amount was granted to legal entities. Secondly, the claim that one in five people cannot repay their loan is also false, as the share of non-performing loans is 12%. So, we are talking about a sum of 1.7 billion lei in loans to microfinance organizations that are facing repayment difficulties (including from businesses), which is practically half of what the candidate insinuates."(Zaharia, 2024)

The case of the “knight of the lady”. Veaceslav Platon states on social networks that he believes that in these presidential elections "there are two good candidates - Alexandru Stoianoglo and Natalia Morari". According to Platon, Stoianoglo "is a decent man and cannot harm anyone", and Morari "has the best electoral program". (Andonii, LIVE, TikTok)

2. The Myth of Immediate Prosperity

Unrealistic promises regarding rapid economic growth, tax reductions, or pension increases within a very short time. "Cooperation with Russia is in the interest of the Republic of Moldova" to gain support and funding for the 2024 and 2025 elections. There is a high probability that these structures are guided by Russian intelligence services or influence centers connected to the Kremlin administration, disseminating the strategic narratives promoted by the Russian Federation in relation to the Republic of Moldova. In this regard, the service is investigating indicators of Russia's interference in Moldova's internal affairs, including the revival of "fifth-column" elements, already known to the service, camouflaged under the "sovereign national interest."

3. Myths Related to the Opposition or Conspiracy Myths

Creation of negative narratives about opposing candidates, such as corrupt connections or dependence on foreign interests.

According to Promo Lex Report No. 5 on the presidential elections of October 20, 2024, it was observed that representatives of Maia Sandu's candidate (PAS) distributed electoral materials (flyers printed in approximately 666,000 copies) promoting 6 main hypotheses/predictions in case her opponent were elected president:

1. The return of fugitive bandits and their seizure of power.
2. A president disrespected by everyone abroad.
3. The closure of the European market.
4. A danger to the free movement of citizens within the EU.
5. The emigration of young people.
6. Suspension of EU financial aid and the risk of being involved in war.

Similarly, Maia Sandu's opponents distributed false information about the future of the country in the event of her victory in the elections. On October 26, 2024, a video spot was posted on social media by PR representatives containing several arguments to

vote against Maia Sandu (PAS), accusing her of unpopular actions such as closing educational institutions, opposition media, raising gas prices, etc.

In these elections the manipulation techniques were spread very widely.

The narratives in disinformation campaigns were aligned with geopolitical interests sponsored by the Russian Federation. These campaigns aimed to exploit Moldova's economic vulnerabilities, historical ties, and social tensions, undermining democratic processes. Key platforms—such as Telegram and TikTok—were strategically used and contributed to the dissemination of falsehoods, having a major impact. The narratives promoted encouraged an increase in distrust toward public institutions, a constant fear of losing statehood, and a weak resilience for the country's security.

In this way we distinguish the classical spectrum the electoral programs of the political formations are based on the classical norms of mythological thinking, having the following structure:

- the component of fear infiltrated among the population through the amplification of crises, the socio-economic recession in which the society is;
- presentation of the profile of an "enemy / invented enemy" because of which society faces various difficulties, a fact that exempts political parties of any responsibility for problems arising in the community;
- shaping the image of the "hero/savior" in favor of which the political myth will be unfolded;
- the use of archaic symbols (adapted images of father and mother, religious elements etc.);
- eulogizing the glorious past considered as a "golden age" to which society must immediately return.

The development of disinformation was used by candidates. The spread of false or misleading information to influence voters' perceptions was very popular in this electoral campaign.

"The government is closing maternity wards". On the October 11, in the Facebook post, independent candidate Tudor Ulianovschi stated that he had discussed with voters in Cimișlia the closure of the district's maternity ward. "One of the painful topics that concerns people is the closure of the Cimișlia maternity ward and its transfer to Hâncești, a decision made at the initiative of PAS." Between 2018 and 2021, nine maternity wards were closed, where between 47 and 219 children were born annually: Leova, Basarabeasca, Ocnița, Briceni, Taraclia, Șoldănești, Dondușeni, Glodeni, and Fălești. No Minister of Health, regardless of their government affiliation, contributed to the closure of these maternity wards. The district hospitals voluntarily ceased maternity services, without coercion, due to specific circumstances and with the consent of the Founder. There is no reason for speculation here," explained Ala Nemerenco on Facebook.

"Maia Sandu banned money transfers from Russia". Irina Vlah also discussed financial issues with her voters. In a video posted on October 8, she is seen talking to a passerby, confirming that "Maia Sandu has banned money transfers from Russia" and promising that if she becomes president, she will lift "all these bans." Of course, she does not mention that a president has no power to prohibit or approve the use of transfer systems.

"Moldova will integrate into the EU without Transnistria". Irina Vlah also addressed the Transnistria issue. In an October 11 post, she stated: "Sandu has cut off all dialogue with Tiraspol, and the 'hotheads' in her team have even proposed 'entering Europe' by abandoning Transnistria. This behavior is unacceptable and, moreover, contradicts the Constitution. As president, I will guarantee a peaceful reintegration with Transnistria."The false claim that Moldova is abandoning the Transnistrian region has been heavily promoted by pro-Russian media over the past year, despite President Maia Sandu repeatedly denying any "abandonment" of the region.

"A secret plan is being prepared to dismantle our nation's statehood, independence, and sovereignty—Moldova". On October 1, candidate Vasile Tarlev published an appeal to all presidential candidates to sign a "national pact for the protection of Moldova's lands." While this narrative has been previously explained in another article, another idea used in past electoral campaigns is worth noting: that the Republic of Moldova is at risk of being dismantled.

"Today, we see that a secret plan is being prepared in the country to dismantle our nation's statehood, independence, and sovereignty—Moldova. We are categorically against such actions of discreditation, impoverishment, and the liquidation of the Republic of Moldova," wrote Vasile Tarlev. The narratives "We won't give our country to foreigners" and "Moldova is at risk of disappearing" were used by Igor Dodon in his 2020 election campaign, which he lost to Maia Sandu. Vasile Tarlev is using them again now, and Dodon is repeating this message in the current campaign. "I believe that European integration, as promoted by Maia Sandu, means surrendering sovereignty to Brussels," said the PSRM leader in an October 4 live broadcast.

In the current campaign, some candidates are taking populism to an absurd level, combining it with falsehoods to create a completely imaginary reality—detached from the real lives of people. This certainly does not contribute to informing the public but instead severely distorts the democratic mechanism, which relies on free and fair elections throughout the electoral process. (Zaharia, 2024)

Another way of dividing electorate was polarization. Dividing society by emphasizing ethnic, religious, or economic conflicts. Objective: To mobilize a clearly defined segment of the electorate. Selling land to foreigners—picked up by Ion Chicu and Igor Dodon. On September 27, Realitatea.md aired a video interview with the EU ambassador to Chișinău, discussing disinformation regarding the sale of land to foreign citizens. The interview was translated in real-time, and later, the Realitatea group published a news piece quoting the ambassador, claiming that after Moldova's EU integration, agricultural land could be sold to foreign citizens.

This statement is false. The Realitatea group later corrected the misinformation, explaining that it resulted from a translation misinterpretation. The news article was removed from the website. However, the Land Code of the Republic of Moldova, adopted in December 2023, clearly states that ownership of agricultural or forest land cannot be acquired or held by foreign citizens, whether individuals or legal entities.

According to the Civic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, which brings together a number of NGOs specialized in the electoral field, these actions manifested themselves through "illegal financing of electoral campaigns, corrupting voters and disinformation campaigns, all aimed at influencing the electoral behavior of citizens.

The clandestine support provided to a subversive network and the involvement of an unregistered political organization in electoral mobilization activities had a major impact on the fairness of the electoral process". To complete the picture, we would also add here the massive illegal transportation of Moldovan voters from the Russian Federation to open polling stations in Belarus, Turkey and Azerbaijan, according to the authorities and the media.

This electoral campaign was also marked by the emotionalization of discourse by making appeal to strong emotions (fear, pride, anger) to distract attention from real issues. "Dragging Moldova into war" – a topic also exploited by candidate Irina Vlah. The fear that the government is "dragging the country into war" is also used by candidate Irina Vlah, who has self-proclaimed herself as the "president of peace" during her campaign. In a video from a meeting with voters, posted on Facebook on September 28, Irina Vlah says, referring to President Maia Sandu: *"What distinguishes two women: one takes care, while the other buys weapons. Do you see the difference?"*

This topic is present in almost all of Irina Vlah's messages, including in the launch statement of her electoral campaign "Peace Caravan", published four days earlier, on September 24: *"I will ensure that our citizens are safe, that nothing threatens peace in Moldova. War was the favorite topic of the outgoing president, but we will talk about peace."*

One of the forms of electoral influence and manipulation was the microtargeting and online manipulation by using social media to spread personalized messages to different groups of voters. Exploiting platform algorithms to amplify populist or radical messages.

During the electoral period from September to October 2024, €49,597 was spent to promote the political projects of Ilan ȘOR and discredit Moldova's European path, funding 128 publications. Simultaneously, specific voter groups were targeted—mainly young people (18-34 years old) and middle-aged individuals (55-64 years old). The geographical targeting was based on population density, but an analysis of these campaigns indicates a priority focus on certain areas: Chișinău, Bălți, Transnistria, and Gagauzia. (SIS Report)

"Our defense is led by NATO generals "While" defending" the Orthodox Church of Moldova at a press conference, Victoria Furtună also touched on the NATO issue, stating: *"After all, it is written: 'Thou shalt not kill.' But what does the current government and the current president do? They are leading us rapidly toward war. Our defense is already led by NATO generals, and our policies—by American advisors. Everything is done to continue the bloodshed in the heart of Europe."*

False claims about the relationship between Moldova's National Army and NATO are frequently spread and debunked. Moldova has cooperated with NATO since 1992, signing periodic partnership agreements that primarily focus on military training and strengthening defense capabilities. This cooperation remains within the limits of Moldova's military neutrality, as stated in its Constitution, and does not involve NATO military personnel taking control of the army (Zaharia, 2024)

It was not strange in this electoral campaign the spread of fake news and trolling through creation of fake websites or use of anonymous accounts to discredit political opponents.

Several issues raised in the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) report, recently presented in Parliament, concern disinformation, propaganda, external informational interference, and vote-buying during elections. Experts consulted by Mediacritica warn that these challenges may persist in future parliamentary elections if authorities do not intervene. In this regard, the SIS has identified a network that systematically distributes pro-Kremlin (including pro-war) narratives in Moldova, consisting of:

1. Over 160 Telegram channels (110 focused exclusively on Moldova's socio-political situation, managed either by anonymous actors or pro-Kremlin bloggers/influencers; 50 others based in Russia);
2. Over 90 TikTok channels;
3. Over 70 Facebook groups/accounts;
4. 43 bots on VKontakte (automated comment-writing).

An analysis of the main narratives promoted through the sponsored publications of Ilan ȘOR's campaign reveals the following targeted topics:

1. Interference in sovereignty and electoral processes (anti-government attitudes and calls for civil disobedience).
2. Anti-West, anti-EU, anti-referendum messages.
3. Promoting the image of Russia / Eurasian Economic Union.
4. Fueling fear of war vs. militarization of Moldova.
5. Ilan ȘOR's political and social projects vs. Moldova's socio-economic decline and discrediting of state institutions and the legally elected government.

At the same time, the SIS has identified an increasing role of Russian influence in Moldova's information space, including the financing of media projects affiliated with the "ȘOR" group. Example: The "SOSEDI" project (managed by Dumitru Buimistru).

A new tactic used by cyber actors affiliated with Russian interests has been the creation of web domains mimicking official government and non-governmental resources (e.g., mec-gov.md, moldova-mediu.md, eupm-moldova.md, moldovasocial.com, parlament-moldova.com, etc.). These were used to spread disinformation (narratives undermining European values and inducing social panic) via mass email campaigns.

The SIS report highlights the unprecedented scale of disinformation and propaganda campaigns conducted during Moldova's presidential elections. Foreign actors, such as Russia Today (RT) and Kremlin-affiliated agents, actively interfered in electoral processes, while Telegram, TikTok, Facebook, and VKontakte were massively exploited to distribute propaganda and fake news.

The theme of the participation of the residents of the Eastern region in the general elections of the Republic of Moldova is not new, it had its beginnings even in the initial period of the establishment of the separatist regime in that area, with the multilateral and illegal support of the Russian Federation. It's just that since then, the two general plans in which the discussion is being held - whether this participation constitutes a benefit or, on the contrary, a danger for the fate of the Republic of Moldova - have experienced an evolution or, rather, a pronounced involution, both, in parallel.

One of the priorities of every state is ensuring the security of the informational space. However, this goal must be balanced with the protection of freedom of expression,

a fundamental principle of democracy. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute. In most democracies, it is limited by laws that prohibit hate speech, defamation, or false information that can cause serious harm.

Civil society plays a crucial role in educating the public about disinformation and promoting critical thinking. On the other hand, authorities must implement effective policies that discourage the spread of fake news without infringing on press freedom.

In some countries, governmental actions are insufficient or even nonexistent, leaving society vulnerable to disinformation. In others, excessive restrictive measures may threaten press freedom. A balanced strategy is essential.

When disinformation comes from those in power, combating it becomes even more challenging. The solution lies in a strong independent press, an active civil society, and the development of citizens' critical thinking skills. Even experienced journalists can fall into the trap of disinformation, either due to haste or a lack of resources for thorough fact-checking. Strict journalistic standards and multiple-source verification are essential for maintaining credibility.

In an era of informational overload, distinguishing truth from falsehood requires a conscious effort and vigilance from both individuals and institutions. The experience of these elections has highlighted the urgent need to develop more effective collaboration mechanisms with social media platforms. We observed how coordinated groups successfully disseminated disinformation across multiple platforms, particularly on Telegram, without significant resistance.

Conclusions

The October 20, 2024, elections represent a defining moment for democracy in the Republic of Moldova, providing valuable lessons on the resilience of democratic processes in the face of contemporary challenges.

The electoral process demonstrated remarkable maturity in technical and administrative aspects. The professionalism of electoral staff, the transparency of procedures, and innovations in voting accessibility are notable achievements. Despite an intense disinformation environment, the significant voter turnout suggests strong civic engagement.

However, the intensity and sophistication of disinformation campaigns reveal persistent vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem. Our observations indicate how anti-democratic narratives can effectively exploit the population's economic and social anxieties.

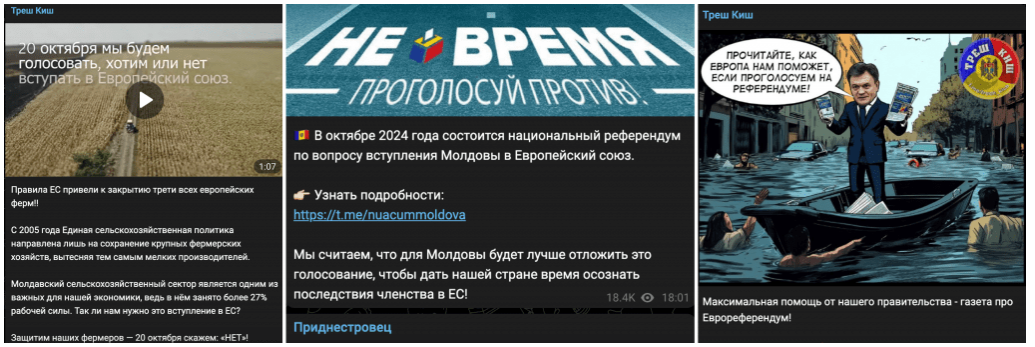
The situation of the current government is not to be envied. The only clear thing at this stage that it must do is to initiate a process of extensive information and public discussions as wide as possible with all social layers, political forces, the scientific environment, the associative sector, the bona fide representatives of the population of the Transnistrian region and so on regarding these and other benefits and dangers for the security of the Republic of Moldova and for the fate of the Moldovan society, at a moment of crossroads in History. Without such a process of information and consultation, which would ensure broad support for future actions or inactions, the current government has an uncertain future, as does the country's European course.

The experience of these elections provides crucial lessons for future electoral processes, not only in the Republic of Moldova but also in other democracies facing similar challenges. It is essential to:

- maintain and further develop the good administrative practices observed;
- strengthen the capacity to respond to disinformation campaigns;
- invest in civic education and democratic participation;
- enhance regional cooperation in combating threats to democracy.

The elections in the Republic of Moldova demonstrate that the success of democratic processes cannot be measured solely by flawless technical administration. Instead, it requires a holistic approach that includes combating disinformation, promoting civic education, and strengthening public trust in democratic institutions.

The challenges faced and the ways in which they were managed provide valuable lessons for the entire region, emphasizing the importance of continuous vigilance in safeguarding democratic processes and the need for constant adaptation to new threats against electoral integrity.



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