

MASS MEDIA IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND BUILDING RESILIENCE AGAINST DISINFORMATION IN COVERING THE EUROPEAN PATH

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Abstract

European integration has been one of the priority objectives of the government of the Republic of Moldova in recent years. This topic holds a prominent place on political, media, and public agendas. In this context, the media in Moldova plays an important role in reflecting the country's European path by accurately informing the public, promoting transparency and accountability, creating a space for public debate, and building resilience against disinformation. Media education and digital literacy, improving the regulatory and self-regulatory system, diversifying funding sources, partnerships and collaborations with media from EU countries, advanced technologies and innovations, transparency and accountability, represent strategic dimensions for building resilience.

Keywords: *disinformation, European integration, resilience, responsibility, self-regulation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Supporting the mass media in the Republic of Moldova and building public resilience against disinformation are priorities for accurately and objectively reflecting the country's European path. In the current regional context, where disinformation and propaganda are frequently used to destabilize democratic processes and European integration, mass media plays a crucial role in providing objective and balanced information, thereby contributing to the consolidation of a resilient society.

The Republic of Moldova faces significant challenges in the field of mass media, including political influence, lack of financial and technical resources, and external pressures, especially from Russia, which uses

disinformation as a tool of influence. Under these circumstances, building media resilience becomes essential in order to ensure the citizen's correct information regarding the European integration processes.

The strategic dimensions for building resilience can be considered as following:

- *Media education and digital literacy.* Promoting media education in all educational structures and continuous training for journalists and editors on identifying and correctly reporting disinformation attempts.
- *Improvement of regulatory and self-regulatory systems.* Developing and implementing strict ethical standards and codes of conduct for journalists, applicable in both real and virtual media spaces.
- *Diversification of funding sources.* Identifying and accessing new funding sources, including international grants and cooperation projects with European organizations.
- *Partnerships and collaborations.* Collaborating with media from EU countries for the exchange of best practices and accurate information, and participating in international fact-checking networks and combating disinformation.
- *Advanced technologies and innovation.* Using artificial intelligence technologies for the rapid detection of fake news and deepfakes, as well as developing online platforms and applications to help the public verify the accuracy of information.

- *Transparency and accountability.* Promoting transparency in the financing and ownership of mass media in order to reduce external influences, as well as encouraging social responsibility of journalists and editors by recognizing and appreciating quality journalism.

Through concrete measures in media education, regulation, funding diversification, international collaboration, technological innovation, and transparency, the mass media in the Republic of Moldova can become a cornerstone in strengthening democracy and European integration.

2. THE EUROPEAN PATH OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

European integration has been one of the priority objectives of the government of the Republic of Moldova in recent years. This topic holds a prominent place on political, media, and public agendas.

The European Union (EU) and the Republic of Moldova (RM) first established contractual relations in 1994 through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which came into force in 1998. Based on this, the EU-Republic of Moldova Action Plan (EUMAP) was adopted in February 2005 under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for three years (Beregoi, 2009). On October 6, 2005, the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova was established to further facilitate Moldova-EU relations, with Cesare de Montis becoming the first EU ambassador to Moldova (October 2005 - November 2009). On May 4, 2006, RM was accepted as a full member of the South-East European Cooperation Process, reaffirming Moldova's belonging to the South-East European space and opening new perspectives for the RM-EU relationship framework. In June 2008, the RM-EU Mobility Partnership was launched. Since May 7, 2009, Moldova has actively participated in the Eastern Partnership initiative, contributing to the development of both bilateral and multilateral dimensions. On January 1, 2010, our country became a full member of the European Energy

Community. On June 15, 2010, the RM-EU visa liberalization dialogue was launched. In January 2011, Moldova received the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (Relations between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union) (Wikipedia n.d.).

On February 27, 2014, the European Parliament voted (460 out of 510 MEPs were in favour) in the plenary session to eliminate entry visas to the European Union for citizens of the Republic of Moldova. The Parliament's vote was confirmed by the Council of the European Union on March 14, 2014, and the decision was published in the Official Journal of the European Union on April 8, 2014 (Eur-lex.europa, 2014).

EU's overall support for Moldova became even more substantial starting in 2021, with the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development providing €1.2 billion to Moldova. Of this amount, €8 million was allocated for cybersecurity, combating disinformation, and addressing the refugee crisis, while €3 million was designated for local media (European Union and Moldova) (MEC.GOV, 2023).

Moldova's choice to orient itself towards Europe and implement democratic reforms appears to be correct, considering the long-term benefits in terms of political stability, economic development, and living standards. These benefits include improving public services such as independent media, education, health, and transportation.

The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova guarantees freedom of expression. The legislative framework in the field provides for the protection of journalism and access to public information. Thus, Moldova strives to align with European standards on freedom of expression. However, the process is challenging in terms of implementation, due to several internal and external factors, as well as the geopolitical situation in the region.

The European path of our country has recently been marked by several significant dates: March 3, 2022, when Moldova submitted its application for EU membership; June 17, 2022, when the Commission issued its Opinion; and June 23, 2022, when the European Council approved the European Commission's Opinion,

granting Moldova a European perspective and candidate status (European Union and Moldova) (MEC.GOV, 2023)..

In May 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a support package for our country with two objectives:

1. Support in addressing the impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine;
2. Bringing Moldova closer to the European Union.

The support package contains key priorities that are already yielding immediate results. A reference point in this regard is: *combating foreign information manipulation and interference, including disinformation, and improving strategic communication by providing technical support to the Moldovan government. This also includes strengthening capacities for independent media, civil society, and youth to address disinformation and actively communicate the benefits of EU integration* (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, 2023).

In this sense, it is necessary, on the one hand, to improve the Information Technology (IT) infrastructure, starting with the implementation and maintenance of information monitoring and analysis systems to identify and counteract disinformation, and on the other hand, to promote a legal framework that ensures free access to information and the protection of journalistic sources. Establishing clear indicators to measure the effectiveness of strategic communication and disinformation combat initiatives represents determined long-term steps.

3. MASS MEDIA IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Currently, both traditional mass media and new media establish the priority order of events occurring at national and international levels. The agenda can be set based on the hierarchy of these events, the editorial policy of the media institution, or the algorithms applied in sorting and systematizing information, in the case of new media and social networks. European integration

is a priority topic on the media agenda in the Republic of Moldova. Its role in reflecting the European path is decisive in ensuring the correct and systematic information of the population.

Since 2012, Dirk Schuebel, the head of the European Union Delegation to Chisinau, stated in the "Public Life" program on Radio Moldova that: "this role consists in the objective and active information of the population about what is happening in society. It would be good for the media to have a very serious attitude towards reflecting this process" (Stepanov, 2013).

Mass media has a direct influence on public perceptions, political decisions, and democratic processes. Each media outlet can help citizens understand how European institutions work and what the effects of their decisions might be. Information campaigns can promote awareness of European identity and the importance of European integration for stability and prosperity. In its role as a watchdog of governmental and institutional activities, the media ensures transparency and accountability. Through accurate and balanced reporting, the media can also contribute to promoting social and cultural cohesion, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity among citizens of EU member states, thus promoting common values.

Encouraging active citizen participation in the referendum on the Republic of Moldova's accession to the EU and other democratic processes defines the status of the media as a pillar in supporting civic participation and mobilizing public opinion. The media can support citizen initiatives that promote European integration by providing visibility, space for expression, and platforms for public debates.

Promoting media pluralism in the Republic of Moldova remains a priority for the Council of Europe, a commitment promoted by the Council of Europe's Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova 2021-2024. The project will support the implementation of activities in the audiovisual field, strengthen the capacities of media professionals, and diversify content within the National Public Broadcaster, as well as strengthen the legal framework regarding access to information and the implementation of these provisions in the Republic of Moldova (COE, n.d.).

4. FAKE NEWS: PREVENTION, DETECTION, RESPONSE

A public-private partnership is essential in the fight against false information. Educating the public and promoting a solid informational culture is a priority. Raising awareness about the ethical and legal use of information creates fair and constructive working conditions.

In the 2017 report “Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making,” published by the Council of Europe, a new term, “information disorder,” was introduced.

This term directly relates to the studied phenomenon, identifying three dimensions: *misinformation*, *disinformation* and *mal-information*. Using the concepts of harm and falsity, their characteristics are described as follows:

- *Mis-information* occurs when false information is shared without the intent to cause harm.
- *Dis-information* occurs when false information is intentionally distributed to cause harm.
- *Mal-information* occurs when true information is shared to cause harm, often by leaking information intended to remain private into the public sphere (Wardle, 2017).

Misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information are complex processes. A potential solution is the use of data detection algorithms that can lead to information disorder.

Prevention: gatekeepers, self-immunization, and education

People involved in filtering the daily uncontrolled information flow need strategies, working techniques, and IT tools that can be applied in real time. Thorough verification of information quality and the credibility of cited sources is the responsibility of every journalist, regardless of whether they work in traditional or new media.

Detection

The integrated effort of all involved parties: authorities, media representatives, the public, and the application of specialized algorithms, specific to artificial intelligence, can certainly contribute to the detection of fake news.

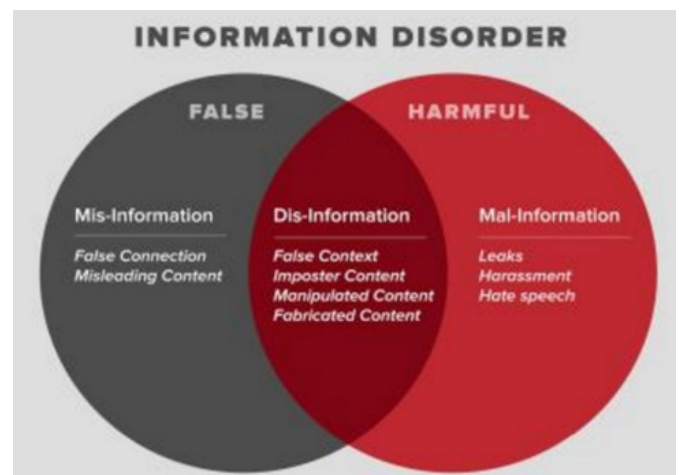


Fig.1. Information disorders

Semantic analysis, source verification, social network analysis, contextual analysis, and using multiple sources are just a few examples of methods that can identify attempts at disinformation or the spread of false news. Combining these techniques with other factors can help develop effective systems for detecting false information.

Response

The lack of an appropriate legal framework confirms the absence of a response as a warning signal to the public and the lack of reaction from authorities.

According to the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education*, developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in the United States, one of the essential skills for those working in mass communication is using information within the limits of ethics and legality.

This ability is vital to ensure that information is used correctly and responsibly, protecting both authors’ rights and the public’s right to verified information. To meet this standard, media professionals must be able to:

- Understand the structure of knowledge and information;
- Determine the profile of necessary information;
- Develop effective strategies for searching and finding information;
- Obtain information;
- Analyse and evaluate information;
- Integrate, synthesize, and use information;

- g) Clearly present researched information;
 h) Respect copyright laws (Repanovici, 2012).

The process of Moldova's accession to the European Union has become the target of massive disinformation campaigns from both internal and external actors. Viral topics over the past two years include:

FALSE: The EU can no longer afford expansion because it lacks resources.

FALSE: Most of population is against EU accession.

FALSE: The EU no longer provides grants to Moldova, only high-interest loans.

FALSE: The European Parliament has asked Moldova to legalize same-sex marriages and allow land sales to foreigners.

FALSE: The EU conditions grant provision on raising the retirement age and LGBT propaganda (ESP, 2024).

Accurate information about the European integration process of Moldova in the current geopolitical context requires a detailed approach, considering the complexity and dynamics of certain internal and external factors.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Moldova's integration into the EU is crucial for strengthening democracy in all dimensions. Approximately half of the Moldovan population considers EU integration essential for protecting democracy, according to a survey on the state of democracy in Moldova conducted by the Eidos Foundation and the international public opinion polling company Atlas Intel. The study shows that 5 out of 10 Moldovans view Russia as a threat to democracy (IPN, 2023).

The role of mass media in supporting and promoting democratic values in society is undeniable. Its direct contribution is determined by the accuracy with which it fulfils its fundamental functions: informing and educating the public, monitoring authorities' activities,

public debate, diversity, and inclusion, ensuring transparency, responsibility, and protecting fundamental freedoms.

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