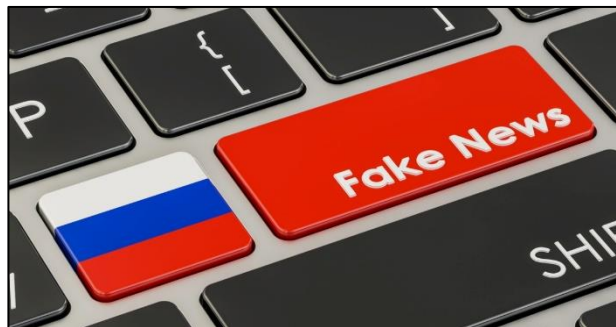


Disinformation in Moldova: attempts to destabilise and disrupt Europe

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Moldova is enduring a disinformation and propaganda campaign from Russia, which is attempting to destabilise and disrupt societies across Europe. While in the past Russia has used economic pressure, concocted protests, cyber-attacks and energy blackmail to target Moldova, it has



increasingly turned towards disinformation and propaganda as the weapons of choice. Russian-backed efforts are ramping up ahead of two key votes in October, when Presidential elections and an indicative referendum on EU membership take place.

Having been granted EU candidate status following the invasion of Ukraine, this plebiscite will ask Moldovan citizens whether a commitment to joining the EU should be enshrined in the constitution, thereby sealing a path towards membership. Incumbent pro-European president, Maia Sandu, looks set to be re-elected, benefitting from a fractured opposition field and popular support for closer alignment with the West.

A multitude of methods have produced a broad front of pro-Russia and anti-EU disinformation in Moldova. The varied nature and number of vectors, along with the lack of resources to tackle them, have created a constant challenge for Moldovan authorities and citizens. Reportedly, the two main aims of Russian disinformation are to undermine Moldova's defensive capacity and the upcoming EU referendum. Narratives therefore centre primarily on fearmongering by using exaggerated rumours about an imminent danger. The idea, for example, that pro-EU equates to pro-war and that the opposition is a vote for peace.

It remains to be seen quite how much of an impact these campaigns are having on Moldovan citizens, but time is running out for Moldova to challenge disinformation before the election. While it is likely that both Sandu will be returned and the EU membership referendum will be approved, destabilisation efforts will then turn to undermining the results; expect to hear pro-Russian voices talking of 'irregularities', fabricated results or the election being 'stolen'.

Parliamentary elections next year provide another opportunity for Russia to exert influence over Moldova and online disinformation and propaganda is therefore unlikely to cease regardless of the outcome of the October polls.

Background

Russia's hybrid-war strategy is well known. In Moldova, it is bolstered by an array of political and business figures who are willing to collaborate with Russian aims. Foremost among them is Ilan Shor, an Israeli-Moldovan oligarch, who has dominated anti-European politics in the country for some years. In 2017, Shor was sentenced to prison in absentia for his part in a US\$1 billion banking scam, with sentence being extended to 15 years in 2023. Shor initially fled Moldova for Israel but has reportedly been residing in Moscow in recent months and has acquired a Russian passport.

As the primary agent of Russian influence in the country and a convicted criminal, action was taken against Shor's assets, including the political parties he had founded. The eponymous Shor party was banned, as was its successor Chance, but banning one well-funded party after another takes a toll on democracy, and Shor's wealth provides a constant stream of new political vehicles. Shor was sanctioned by the US and the UK in 2022 and by the EU in 2023 due to his role in undermining democracy in the country.

In other efforts to combat malign influence in Moldova, six TV Channels had their licences suspended in 2022, and access to Russian run-news websites was blocked, including outlets such as Sputnik Moldova, Gagauznews, Insider Moldova, and the Vkontakte social media platform.

Gagauzia and Transnistria

The internal cohesion of Moldova is complicated by the presence of two quasi-state entities within its borders. These mostly autonomous areas within Moldova provide fertile ground for fearmongering and false narratives to proliferate. A long-mooted potential unification between Moldova and Romania is often framed as posing a potential threat to non-Romanian minorities within the country.

The de-facto independent Transnistria – officially the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic – on the left bank of the Dniester, has long been sympathetic to Russia and has become increasingly dominated by Moscow. It is frequently identified as a potential future flashpoint due to its political alignment and Russian minority population.

Vadim Krasnoselsky, president of Transnistria since 2016, has become more belligerent about reunification with Russia should Moldova join Romania or even the EU. Russian troops in Transnistria, who have remained since the conflict between 1990-1992, act as a constant reminder of potential consequences and as a possible base for disruptive activities carried out in Moldova.

The autonomous region of Gagauzia is less well known in the West, and even less understood, but in recent years, it has also come increasingly under direct influence of the Kremlin, in part due to Chişinău's neglect. Gagauzia's Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christian population of around 150,000 has typically been pro-Russian, due to the memory of the USSR's protection and autonomy for minorities. This provides Russia a base on which to build more active sentiment, amping up rhetoric around 'oppression' or 'persecution' from Chişinău, in a place where Russian is still widely spoken. In 2014, Gagauzia voted heavily against future EU integration in its own referendum, fearing that it would lead to Moldovan unification with Romania. Gagauzian premier, Evghenia Ghutul, has regularly visited Moscow and was a political ally of Ilan Shor, is seen as a key vocal pro-Russian figure in Moldova.

Disinformation tactics

Recent attempts to spread dis- and misinformation in Moldova have involved a range of methods and platforms. From the tried-and-tested Facebook advert to proxy-politician speeches, pro-Russian and anti-EU narratives, have proliferated across Moldovan media and online. Attack lines focusing on the perceived dangers of greater integration with the EU, the supposed corruption of pro-Western politicians or the threat to Moldova's culture from Western liberalism, all create negative impressions of Russian enemies. Meanwhile, pro-Russian politicians and parties are lauded. Such rhetoric is combined with outright lies about events in the country to sow confusion and fear.

As seen elsewhere in Europe, Russia's disinformation ecosphere acts in concert, once disseminated online, narratives are then amplified by media outlets and real-world figures, some with considerable influence. Social media-messaging app hybrid Telegram and TikTok, which both make Facebook appear like a well-regulated haven in comparison, have played key roles in allowing disinformation to originate and spread in Moldova. Emotive content that gains traction is then reinforced by pro-Russian media and political parties backed by Ilan Shor.

Online advertising

In recent months, a number of fabricated video adverts have appeared on popular sites used by Moldovans to watch pirated films and TV series.

One advert purported to be from the Moldovan Ministry of Education and advertised a ‘military-patriotic’ camp where children would be trained in the use of weapons, supposedly supported by the EU. Another made the false claim that Moldova was introducing a 10% ‘patriotic tax’ on remittances, which are a key element of many households’ income in the country.

These examples were all high quality, well-made adverts that used government department branding, indicating some cost and effort had gone into their production. They were broadcast on websites popular with young Moldovans who are more likely to be English-literate and computer savvy but are less interested in politics. The manufactured messages aimed to equate the idea of EU integration with militarisation. They provide a clear example of how Russian actors spread uncertainty over Moldova’s future, while simultaneously discrediting the authorities. This effort also marked an interesting departure from Russia’s ‘traditional’ platforms of choice, social media and fake news sites.

‘Cheapfakes’

The well-made productions above contrast with the cheaper and more easily proliferated images with false captions and so-called ‘cheapfakes’ that Russian actors have flooded Moldovan social media with. At the turn of the year, a video originated on Telegram and then spread widely on Facebook purportedly showed President Maia Sandu outlawing rosehip tea, a traditional drink made from wild berries, on the grounds of protecting the environment. While this may appear innocuous, it incited anger as rosehip foraging is seen as typically ‘Moldovan’ and this appeared to be an attack on traditional culture. Since this incident, a great number of forged clips, often poorly made or featuring obvious AI characteristics, have showed Sandu encouraging Moldovans to vote for Ilan Shor’s parties or making outlandish announcements, often on the topic of militarisation. The origin points for many of these deepfakes have been traced to Russian-friendly Telegram channels, often constructed with AI, they are low-cost alternatives to original productions.

TikTok as the new frontline

TikTok has become a key vector for disinformation in Moldova and is arguably the most popular and effective route for malignant actors to reach an audience. TikTok is now the largest platform for political outreach, even mainstream Moldovan politicians have three, four or even ten times the number of followers that they do on other platforms.

TikTok’s lax moderation, even by the minimal standards of social media, and pernicious algorithm, lends itself well to spreading misinformation and stoking emotions.

It is simple for users to boost their follower count with bots and thereby game the algorithm to feature their content more frequently. In aiming to keep eyes on the screen for as long as possible, TikTok's algorithm also pushes users into content bubbles more forcibly than other platforms. This means that once a user views disinformation content or engages with it in any way, the algorithm will continue to feed them similar videos and themes, pushing them deeper into said bubble.

It is therefore simple for Russian networks to 'hook' users. As a result, Moldovans who view a single clip featuring disinformation are then faced with a glut of exaggerations, messages designed to induce fear, and information that is taken out of context or even completely false.

Analysts often make the point that it requires more effort to debunk a false claim or myth than it does to create one and, on a platform like TikTok, dissemination of a particular message is hyper-rapid, difficult to track and easily reproduced. Moldovan authorities, as everywhere, do not move quickly enough nor have the resources or wherewithal to tackle disinformation of this kind.

Troublingly, outlets banned from other platforms still operate freely on TikTok, including news websites that have been blocked by Moldova's SIS (Security and Intelligence Service). Ilan Shor and several of his associates are blocked on Instagram and Facebook within Moldova, likely due to the sanctions levied against them, but can still operate on TikTok. Media outlets such as Sputnik and its Moldovan subsidiary, are very active on the platform, having adapted to new formats more quickly than many legacy news brands. There is limited warning about what users are engaging with. TikTok will not ban these outlets merely providing a label stating, 'Russian state-controlled media'.

Other social media

Beyond TikTok, Facebook and Telegram are the main arenas for pushing Russian narratives in Moldova. Much like TikTok, Telegram is an almost completely unregulated platform. Manipulated image and video content, twisted narratives and outright falsehoods often originate in Telegram groups before circulating to other platforms. This allows those introducing this content or messaging to remain anonymous.

Despite Facebook's incremental efforts towards better regulation of its platform, those engaging in propaganda are still able to move faster. New pages can be rapidly set up, given a relevant sounding name – e.g., 'Media in Moldova' or 'Moldovan Culture' – and then promote false narratives. Similarly, established pages with sizable followings are purchased and the names then changed to be relevant to Moldova.

Fake accounts, now usually run by AI, can be used to like or promote a message, often through something as simple as sharing a Facebook advert for a political party. The most common talking points that such accounts promote are support for Ilan Shor, that Sandu and her government are corrupt (often phrased in vague terms rather than specifics), that Moldova will be dragged into war by the EU, and that only Russia can ensure Moldova's safety and security. In more primitive efforts, outright falsehoods are perpetuated. Pro-Russian commentators have been known to post photos of well-attended political rallies and simply relabel them to support their own cause.

Constructing an appealing or sympathetic context is used to help spread the message. On Facebook AI-generated comments from pro-Russian bots may portray themselves as normal citizens, include believable profile pictures and writing in an authentic style. These bots echo real-life pro-Russian users, creating a larger mass and encouraging the belief that a majority of Moldovans agree with these viewpoints. In a recent alternative effort, a long series of fabricated or purchased Facebook profiles, with obviously non-Moldovan names but profile pictures of attractive young women, shared content from Shor and his allies in a bid to boost engagement.

Effective narratives

Russian-propagated narratives have had real impact in Moldova. For instance, following a claim that circulated on social media, the Foreign Affairs Ministry had to deny that Moldova would introduce visas for Russian citizens. The Ministry of Defence was forced to refute a pronouncement from Ilan Shor that the Moldovan army would be subordinated to Romania in the near future. President Sandu has also frequently had to debunk claims made about her or that she supposedly mouthed in deepfake videos.

Crucially, some Russian attack lines contain elements of truth. The narrative that EU integration will drag Moldova into the war in neighbouring Ukraine is particularly powerful given the proximity to the conflict, the number of Ukrainian and Russian speakers in Moldova, and the number of Moldovans in Ukraine. Broadly, the EU is supporting Ukraine in its war efforts and claiming that Moldova would be party to conflict through membership, in contravention of its constitutional commitment to neutrality, could be interpreted as true. These lines of attack are more powerful than the obvious lies or fake videos.

As such, fears over potential consequences for Transnistria if EU membership is achieved have been played up. The risk of conflict over Transnistria should Chişinău push for the removal of Russian soldiers based there, is very real considering that the expulsion of said troops would be necessary for EU accession, which Moldova is aiming to achieve by 2030.

In a similar vein, following the success of the Foreign Agents bill in Georgia, Russian networks have since begun to promote the line that NGOs are agents of foreign influence in Moldova. Again, this is not misinformation per se but a matter of interpretation and, therefore, more effectively leveraged to undermine Moldovan authority.

Political reinforcement

As elsewhere in Europe, online disinformation is boosted by real life amplification. The Russian disinformation ecosphere has been well analysed by Western media outlets, intelligence services and think tanks.

It is clear that claims and distortions made online are then amplified by real world figures with higher profiles or the backing of officialdom. For instance, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, has commented on Moldova in recent months. In one contribution, she expressed Russia's concern that the birth rate is declining in Moldova due to men having to participate in military training alongside American and Romanian soldiers. This helps to solidify the message that Moldova's current path means militarisation and loss of sovereignty to the US and Romania. Once again, this line is premised on twisting a narrative around a basis of truth, Moldova has conducted joint exercises with the US and Romania in the country since 2015.

Pro-Russian politics in Moldova works hand in hand with sections of Moldovan society to expound the online narratives explored above. Primarily, this takes place through a substantial pro-Russian wing of the political landscape, centred around Ilan Shor, and within the statelets of Transnistria and Gagauzia. Russia is expending huge amounts on their destabilisation campaign with some analysts estimating that upwards of US\$50 million has been spent in Moldova in the past year, with this figure likely to increase.

Vote buying, traditional in rural Moldova where it is known as "grechka" (lit. 'buckwheat', implying free food), was once cheap but now involves bank cards issued in the UAE and cash mules using larger amounts to bribe voters and pay candidates. This expenditure will continue to be directed towards compromising the integrity of the election and referendum through disinformation and possibly arranging protests in the aftermath.

Russia provides finances, strategies and advisers to friendly parties, and its support has currently coalesced around the Shor-backed Victory party.

Formed at a congress in Moscow in April 2024 (which brought together members of four parties previously linked to Shor), Victory has appointed Vasile Bolea as its presidential candidate and MP Marina Tauber as his campaign manager. Tauber is currently facing criminal proceedings in Moldova related to the illegal funneling of funds to the banned Shor party and is sanctioned by the US in relation to this.

Bolea's manifesto calls for Moldova to 'restore relations with Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States', to join BRICS, to reinstate the status of the Russian language and to secure cheap gas and affordable energy. However, Victory began with ignominy. After their founding congress in Moscow, Moldovan border police seized over €1 million and thousands of Moldovan lei in cash from returning party members at Chişinău airport. It was presumed that these funds were intended to help fund the party's activities and buy votes. In response to this seizure, Moldova suffered a serious cyber-attack affecting government websites.

Political figures from Transnistria and Gagauzia also help to promote pro-Russian messaging. Both Transnistrian president, Vadim Krasnoselsky, and Gagauzian premier, Evghenia Ghutul, are supporters of Vladimir Putin and frame Russian protection as the only viable way to protect their peoples' interests. In public pronouncements and on Telegram, such individuals and their allies promote the lines that militarisation is inevitable if joining the West and that Chişinău could unfreeze the Dniester conflict. They have even engaged in more outlandish claims about the presence of Ukrainian soldiers in Moldova, or the supposed threat that Sandu poses to religious minorities. The aim remains to sow panic and promote the idea that alignment with the West will drag Moldova into war.

Combatting disinformation and propaganda

Despite the action already taken by the state against TV channels and political parties, this has not made a large impact on the country's media sphere. Moldova remains a small media market and therefore the limited advertising revenue available to its news media leaves fact-based journalism impoverished in comparison to the sums Russia is spending.

A highly polarised political environment and low media literacy also means individuals are vulnerable to manipulation and propaganda. The failings of a corporate press are evident, profit seeking through driving readership (and now clicks or engagement), often by stoking outrage, does not help build an informed populace or develop critical thinking. The alternative state funded media suffers from obvious problems of legitimacy and independence.

Independent media in Moldova does battle bravely against Russian disinformation and some outlets actively engage in fact-checking, debunking and monitoring disinformation campaigns but resources are limited. Even with the support the Moldovan authorities are now providing to combat disinformation, the huge sums Russia is spending can exhaust state resources to defend the information space.

Conclusion

The many forms of Russian disinformation efforts, from online adverts, social media posts and proxy political parties have increased in frequency in Moldova in anticipation of the upcoming ballots. In particular, new forms of social media such as the ubiquitous TikTok, present fresh challenges for those aiming to combat Russian-backed activity. The most common narratives have focused on the threat of Moldova being dragged into war and support for pro-Russian parties.

These are frequently complemented with claims about the incumbent government's corruption and blaming 'The West' for Moldova's problems. This activity has escalated recently, and Moldova will likely see even higher levels of disinformation and disruption - online and off - in the build-up to the election. A likely defeat for Russian interests in the two polls will not end their propaganda efforts however, and Moldova looks set to continue to be a battleground for competing interests.

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