

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND THE GEOPOLITICAL STALEMATE: DEFENDING DIGITAL SPACES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

by Victoria Roşa

Executive Summary

- In response to greater geopolitical threats in the Eurasia region, including hybrid warfare, Moldova introduced the concept of information security to its national security policy in 2017-2018.
- The Moldovan legal framework views information security strictly in response to foreign actors. Domestic actors that develop and distribute propaganda, misinformation, and false information are not considered.
- According to several polling sources, the internet ranks among the Moldovan public's most trusted sources of information.
- Given the large gaps in the Moldovan legal framework governing media, efforts to identify and draw attention to disinformation and fake news in digital spaces have been led by civil society organizations (CSOs).
- Moldova does not have specific mechanisms to identify hybrid threats – such as fake news, propaganda, and disinformation – or develop protection tools that respond to rapid technological changes.
- Online platforms in Moldova provide a prolific environment for creating and spreading different forms of intolerance, including hate speech. Digital media, social networks, and video storage portals spread more hatred and discrimination than television and print media.
- It is critical to find ways to encourage the public to fight against information security threats, especially given Moldova's ongoing transition to democracy.

Background

Freedom of expression in Moldova is at a critical juncture, especially in digital spaces. After three changes in government in Moldova in 2019, there is an opportunity to examine the current legislative framework governing media freedom and freedom of expression to ethically address related challenges.

Moldova, like other countries in the region, faces national security challenges¹ and threats² due to pervasive manipulation of the media, and information more broadly, by both internal and external actors. This is particularly acute in digital media and social media spaces where trolls and other misleading actors foment misinformation and polarized debate. As a result, the public's access to objective information is limited. This poses a threat to national security.

Freedom of expression and information security are being challenged by the increased politicization of digital media, the scarcity of independent media, the effects of social media's rise to prominence, and the decrease in professional journalism and journalistic ethics. These factors must be addressed to protect freedom of expression moving forward. Establishing cooperative partnerships among national governments, international organizations, and community institutions to identify solutions is essential in the globalized media climate that includes common challenges posed by online space and social media.³

Freedom of Expression and the Geopolitical Stalemate

In the current climate, defending freedom of expression and ensuring access to accurate, diverse information is essential to preserving human dignity. With the rapid development of new technologies and the transition from conventional warfare to technology-reliant hybrid warfare, information security, both private and public, is now foundational to national and human security. The need for a culture of information security is seen when information is weaponized into a hybrid threat. Although there is not a clear and commonly agreed upon definition of hybrid warfare, any multi-pronged threat targeting democratic states and their vulnerabilities can be considered hybrid.⁴ Attacks on information security are a modern hybrid threat.

Discussion of hybrid warfare and informational security rose to prominence in the public discourse across Eastern Europe following the Russian Federation's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the violence in Donbas. This occurred in conjunction with the increased use of informational warfare tactics⁵ that included the use of propaganda,⁶ cyberattacks, fake news, and disinformation.⁷ The use of these tactics, which occur globally and are not exclusively characteristic of what the Russian Federation has fomented in Ukraine,

- 1 Tatiana Puiu et al., "Information Security from the Media Perspective," Soros Moldova Foundation, 2016, https://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_Securitate%20informati%20din%20perspectiva%20mediatica_2016.pdf.
- 2 "Freedom of Expression and Elections in the Digital Age," United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, June 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/ElectionsReportDigitalAge.pdf>.
- 3 Lolita Berzina, "Together We Are Stronger: Social Media Companies, Civil Society, and the Fight against Disinformation," Freedom House, July 3, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/together-we-are-stronger-social-media-companies-civil-society-and-fight-against-disinformation>.
- 4 Hybrid CoE characterizes hybrid threats as: "1) coordinated and synchronized action that deliberately targets democratic states' and institutions' systemic vulnerabilities (such as a free media) through a wide range of means; 2) the activities exploit the thresholds of detection and attribution; and 3) the aim of the activities is to influence different forms of decision-making at the local (regional), state, or institutional levels to favor and/or achieve the agent's strategic goals while undermining and/or hurting the target. Hybrid threats are methods and activities that are targeted towards the vulnerabilities of the opponent. They are as old as conflict and warfare but are repackaged and empowered by new tools and technologies, and by targeting vulnerabilities in several domains in an unprecedented manner." "Countering disinformation: News media and legal resilience," Hybrid CoE, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, April 24-25, 2019, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/News-Media-and-Legal-Resilience_2019_rgb.pdf.
- 5 "The threat of conventional warfare has changed, and we have to recognize that information can be a weapon," said Mark Laity, Chief of Strategic Communications at NATO's Allied Command Operations in Mons, Belgium. "Whether used for disinformation, deception or plain fabrication to create false narratives, we have to be aware of and be able to respond to this challenge." "Countering propaganda: NATO spearheads use of behavioral change science," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, May 12, 2015, <https://stratcomcoe.org/countering-propaganda-nato-spearheads-use-behavioural-change-science>.
- 6 Tiina Seppala, "New wars' and old strategies: From traditional propaganda to information warfare and psychological operations - some notions on the Gulf War, the Kosovo War and the War on Terrorism," the 23rd Conference and General Assembly IAMCR/AIECS/AIERI International Association for Media and Communication Research, http://www.portalcomunicacion.com/bcn2002/n_eng/programme/prog_ind/papers/s/pdf/s001_sepal.pdf.
- 7 "Disinformation is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain" (Government Communication Service, 2019). "Countering disinformation: News media and legal resilience," Hybrid CoE, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, April 24-25, 2019, https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/News-Media-and-Legal-Resilience_2019_rgb.pdf. Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Inauguration of the Helsinki Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, with EU High Representative Federica Mogherini: "And the first thing is that hybrid threats are many different threats, and we use the phrase hybrid to cover actually many different things: normally a kind of mixture of military and non-military means of aggression; a combination of covert and overt operations and measures, everything from propaganda, from disinformation to actually the use of regular forces, from tweets to tanks; sometimes soldiers in uniform, sometimes soldiers without uniform; and sometimes something that happens in the cyberspace and sometimes things that happens at our borders." Jens Stoltenberg, "the Inauguration of the Helsinki Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, October 2, 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_147499.htm. "Information at War: From China's Three Warfares to NATO's Narratives," the Legatum Institute, September 2015, <https://li.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/information-at-war-from-china-s-three-warfares-to-nato-s-narratives-pdf.pdf>.

highlight the need to analyze freedom of expression and freedom of information through multiple lenses, including information and human security.

Moldova is no exception. Following the fall of the communist government in 2009 and Moldova's subsequent rapprochement with the European Union (EU) over the last decade, the Moldovan media environment has experienced various information warfare tactics that have undermined journalistic ethics. Even though information warfare is commonly viewed as a tool of third-party actors to project soft power as part of an offensive strategy, domestic actors have begun using these practices as well. A prominent example occurred during Moldova's recent elections in which there was an inappropriate use of traditional and new media. Under the control of the previous government, led by the Democratic Party, Moldova was characterized as a "captured state." This was in large part because the former Vice Chairman of the Democratic Party, Vladimir Plahotniuc, a famous oligarch with a criminal history, controlled a large portion of the media market and used it as a key means to consolidate political control. The weak performance of the Moldovan Audiovisual Council and the widespread use of Plahotniuc's political influence allowed fake news and disinformation to be perpetrated domestically for the purposes of his retention of power. It was no longer a solely foreign threat.

Information security is a topic of interest for Moldovan authorities since the government became a signatory to the EU Association Agreement on June 27, 2014 and expressed its sovereign will to start the European approximation of the legal process. This geopolitical dynamic contributed to the East-West confrontation as reflected in Moldova's politics, policies, and societal norms that exploited the country's social, political and economic vulnerabilities. Freedom of expression and media freedom also became vulnerable, as geopolitical actors exploited the information space as the easiest and most efficient way to project soft power and influence public opinion and debate. In addition, domestic actors facilitating the consolidation of Moldova's status as a "captured state" endangered the information space. As a result, both domestic and foreign actors acted to limit freedom of expression and media pluralism.

In 2014, fake news and disinformation referred mainly to internal and foreign policy strategies that focused on fostering a narrative on the **disadvantages of deepening engagement with the EU; relations with Ukraine and Romania; relations with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including the Russian Federation;**

and **Moldova's potential future as a federalized country.** The primary lesson-learned during this period is that exploiting internal vulnerabilities, whether social, political, or economic developments; a weak national identity, cultural patterns, traditions, religious affiliations; and the interpretation of human rights and fundamental freedoms is essential to laying the groundwork for an effective hybrid attack. Inadequate information security in Moldova is tied to a multitude of factors, including the absence of a normative, legal framework that addresses the rapidly developing information technology environment and modern warfare techniques that exploit all forms of media.

In recent years, Moldova's Euro-Atlantic development partners⁸ have repeatedly warned the government that its democracy is weakening due to the country's own animosity towards the media and freedom of expression, increased attacks on civil society, and violations of human security, such as intimidating journalists.⁹ The latest example of the government's efforts to intimidate journalists covering political developments in Moldova occurred during the recent government transition in June 2019.¹⁰ The government's recent efforts to de-monopolize the media advertising market also put pressure on the sustainability of the media institutions. In addition, local organizations' work on promoting professional media reports, debunking fake news, and identifying fake media outlets was a condition of development assistance imposed by foreign partners, including the EU and individual member states, as opposed to a local, grassroots effort.

According to the latest Barometer of Public Opinion poll conducted by Institute of Public Policy in Moldova (Figures 1 and 2), Moldovan respondents have higher levels of distrust towards media institutions today than five years ago. There is no major difference in levels of trust between rural and urban areas. Although increased awareness of large-scale disinformation campaigns and the increased presence of media literacy activities have fostered an environment for stronger critical thinking, ongoing threats to freedom of expression through reduced access to information, the discouragement of public opinion, and the intimidation of journalists remains strong.

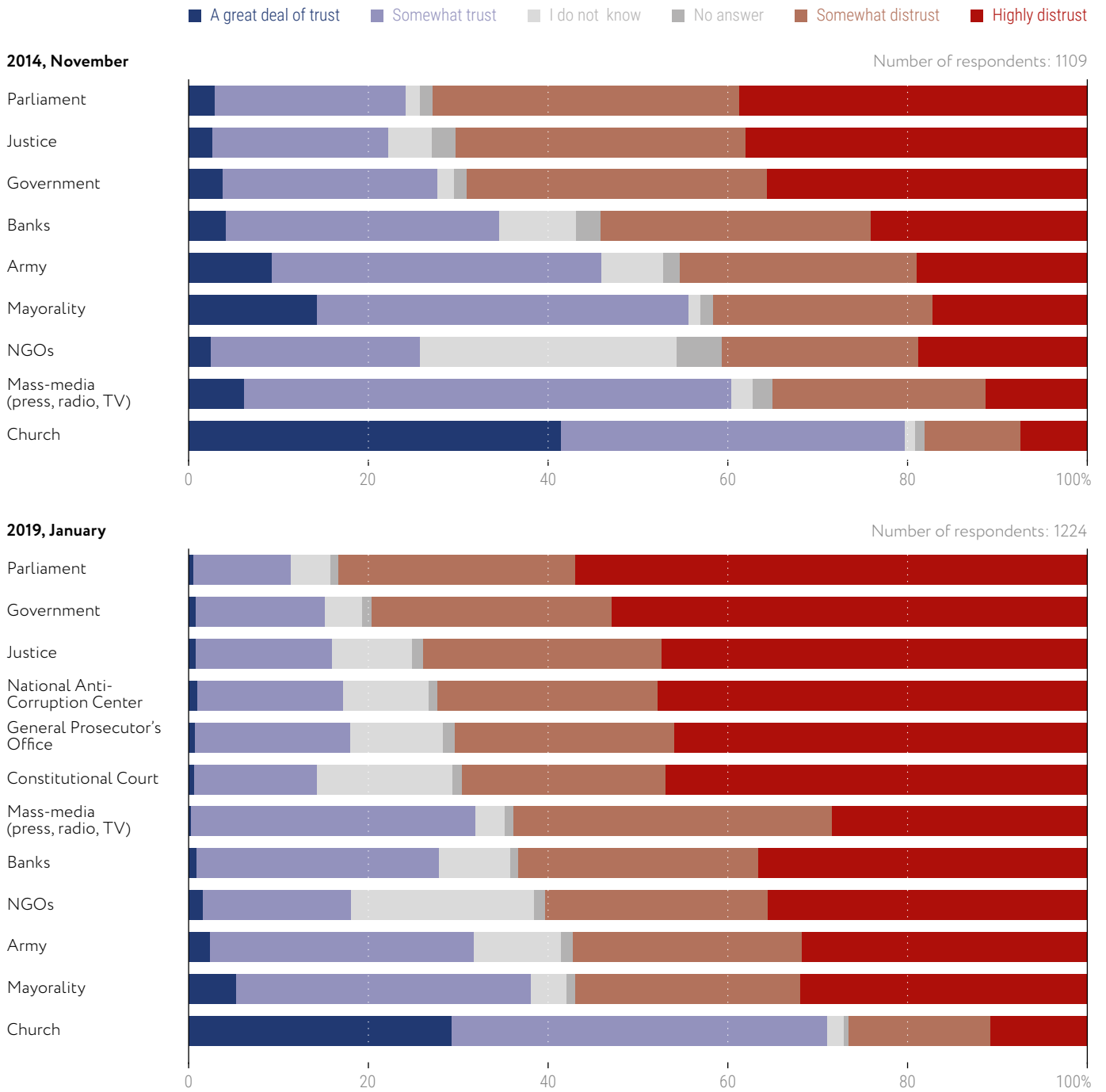
Media in Moldova, especially online media and social media platforms, play an important role in the construction of narratives and dissemination of information. Therefore, it must be considered an essential part of national security. Differences in location, demographics, and geopolitical preference should be regarded when analyzing narratives and when constructing information security policies

8 "European Parliament resolution of 14 November 2018 on the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Moldova" (Brussels, 2018), http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0458_EN.html.

9 "Media NGOs: 'We inform the embassies and international media outlets that the number of cases of assaults against journalists multiplied in the Republic of Moldova'," Media AZI, Independent Journalism Center, June 11, 2019, <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-%E2%80%98we-inform-embassies-and-international-media-outlets-number-cases-assaults-against-0>.

10 "Moldova: Journalists Assaulted While Reporting on Unfolding Political Crisis," Freedom House, June 14, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/moldova-journalists-assaulted-while-reporting-unfolding-political-crisis>.

How much do you trust the following institutions?



Categories of respondents: gender – male/female, residence – urban/rural, age – 18-19/30-44/45-59/60+, nationality – moldavian/romanian/russian/ukrainian/other, level of education – low/medium/high

Data by Public Opinion Barometer: Institute of Public Policies, <http://bop.ipp.md>

Figures 1 and 2: Barometer of Public Opinion poll 2019

that affect the Moldovan public. The politicization of media institutions, the scarcity of independent media, the overwhelming effects of social media, the new possibilities that the internet offers, and the decrease of professional journalism and ethics are factors that endanger the freedom of expression and informational security. The need to combat inauthentic activities, fake accounts, and illegal content online perpetuated through online and social media in a way that upholds respect for international standards of freedom of expression remains a challenge during election periods. Establishing cooperation among national governments, international organizations, and community institutions to find solutions is essential given the globalized context and the common challenges faced in digital spaces.¹¹

Information Security on the Edge

In acknowledgment of the global trend of information security regulation, Moldova introduced the concept of information security to its national security policy in 2017-2018. In its main strategic security policy, information security is defined as: “[The] state of protection of information resources, of the person, of the company and of the state, including a set of measures to ensure the protection of the people, of the society and state from eventual attempts to misinform and/or manipulate with information from the outside sources and to not admit provocations, having media nature, directed against the Republic of Moldova”.¹² This definition emphasizes media space as a defining element of statehood and a space in which information attacks occur. Moreover, decision makers stated that protecting the media space is crucial for both national and human security, as it is essential to freedom of access to information, the formation of opinions, the development of national narratives, holding national debates, and shaping social dialogue. As a result, media are one of the first targets of hybrid threats which threatens freedom of expression and the right to information.

The Moldovan legal framework views information security strictly in response to foreign actors. Domestic actors that develop and distribute propaganda, misinformation, and false information are not considered. This approach to information security fails to address the multitude of threats from both domestic and foreign sources. Furthermore, information security should include all media, including digital media that does not use the analytical review of traditional media.

Regarding digital media platforms, Moldova’s Code of Audiovisual Media Services, revised in 2018,¹³ for the first time introduced specific regulations targeting media institutions with online resources. Despite this important step, the online information environment is still not regulated in Moldova, in part because it has become much more influential than traditional media. Online information sources that do not typically define themselves as media sources, such as social media platforms, are some of the main sources of misinformation. This lack of regulation contributes to widespread propaganda, misinformation, fake news, and hate speech which violates fundamental human rights. This ultimately damages freedom of expression and stifles pluralism of opinion.

Even though there is still no clear definition of online media in Moldovan legislation, the Central Electoral Committee (CEC) recently introduced several requirements referring to online media during the last local elections (October 2019). One regulation¹⁴ states that all organizers of electoral debates in digital spaces are obliged to apply the same debate rules as licensed media providers. The document also regulates the electoral competitors’ right to reply in case they feel their rights were violated, as well as providing the opportunity to appeal to the court systems in cases regarding electoral campaign coverage.

The perceived credibility of online information is increasing in Moldova compared to many EU countries. According to the January 2019 Barometer of Public Opinion, the internet ranked as the second most trusted source of information, with a 19.5 percent level of trust. This follows television (37.6 percent). Across Moldova, there is widespread public access to internet. Although the level of public trust in the internet has decreased in recent years, it has remained the second most-trusted source. This is in comparison with EU countries, in which online newspapers and news magazines garnered 5 percent of total trust while online social media and messaging apps comprised 2 percent.¹⁵

In analyzing new media, Moldovans access information from social media networks at high rates. The most used sources are Facebook (61.4 percent), Odnoklasniki.ru (42.4 percent), and Mail.ru (17.8 percent).¹⁶ Both Mail.ru and Odnoklassniki.ru (a social network belonging to the Mail.ru Group Company) are viewed as tools to spread fake news and propaganda in Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia. This is a part of Russia’s unconventional war to project soft power. In

11 Lolita Berzina, “Together We Are Stronger: Social Media Companies, Civil Society, and the Fight against Disinformation,” Freedom House, July 3, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/together-we-are-stronger-social-media-companies-civil-society-and-fight-against-disinformation>.

12 “Code Number 174: Audio-Visual Media Services Code of the Republic of Moldova” (Chisinau, 2018), <http://lex.justice.md/md/378387/>.

13 *Ibidem*

14 “Regulation Regarding the Reflection of the Campaign at the General Local Elections on October 20, 2019 in the Republic of Moldova’s Mass Media” (Chisinau, 2019), <https://a.cec.md/storage/ckfinder/files/Regulament%20reflectarea.pdf>.

15 “Fake News and Disinformation,” TNS Political & Social, the European Commission, April 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/flash/surveyky/2183>.

16 “Public Opinion Barometer: the Republic of Moldova,” Institute for Public Policy, January 2019, http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/BOP_02.2019-new.pdf.

August 2017, Odnoklassniki.ru was the most popular website in Moldova, with more than one million unique visitors each month compared to 760,000 unique users on Facebook.¹⁷ According to a study by the Institute of Public Policy which analyzed Russian propaganda on Odnoklassniki.ru,¹⁸ the most promoted messages referring to Moldova discussed it as a failed state that had no other alternative but to join the Russian geopolitical project. This was reinforced by narratives invoking anti-Romanian sentiments, anti-Ukrainian sentiments, anti-EU sentiments, pro-Eurasian Customs Union sentiments, anti-American sentiments, and anti-NATO sentiments. These narratives not only fostered subversive information, but also discredited and increased public mistrust of pro-European forces.

Given the large gaps in the Moldovan legal framework governing media, efforts to identify and draw attention to disinformation and fake news in digital spaces have been led by civil society organizations (CSOs). Moldovan authorities attempted to address information security through the adoption of the 2019-2024 Concept,¹⁹ Strategy, and Action plan on Information Security.²⁰ The Information and Security Service (SIS), which does not have a positive record of cooperation with CSOs, was assigned to lead the implementation of the policy. The policy documents define informational weapons, information war, and propagation for the first time as independent, discrete concepts. Although a series of threats are listed and potential activities are described, the policy documents do not clearly explain the types of information security threats Moldova faces and related protection mechanisms. Additionally, a separate chapter is dedicated to securing the media environment and no further development of the topic follows.

The 2019-2024 Action Plan for the Implementation of the Information Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova has a specific chapter on civic control, and cooperation between civil society and public authorities. However, this provision remains open to debate as there is no clear implementation mechanism in place. Several attempts were undertaken by the SIS to discuss civic control with CSOs and set up a Coordination Council to monitor the policy's implementation. Generally, consulted CSO representatives were wary of the proposal. This was in large part due to the legacy in place under the previous government, during which CSOs, media, and journalists were intimidated through government use of administrative resources. In addition, serious questions arose regarding the transparency and sustainability of a

Coordination Council as well as the possible threats that may endanger their activity in the future given the volatile political environment in Moldova.

Unlike the EU, Moldova does not have specific mechanisms to identify hybrid threats – such as fake news, propaganda, and disinformation – and develop protection tools that respond to rapid technological changes. Although Moldova acknowledges that fake news and propaganda are national security threats, no serious actions have been taken to create state-level policies to prevent and counter these threats. Efforts to identify and debunk hybrid threats have mostly been led by local CSOs with the support of foreign donors. Efforts have included analysis, training projects, and reports like StopFals²¹ and the Center for the Prevention and Combating of Hybrid Threats²². By targeting a specific audience rather than the general public, these projects require an individualized approach based on ethnicity, age, gender, and location.

The lack of strategic inter-institutional communication despite the need for coordinated action around this policy is a pressing challenge for Moldova. Information security is not viewed as policy priority despite being considered an indisputable national security priority. Since a national consensus and approach has not been consolidated, each security institution prioritizes information security differently and therefore has different levels of engagement with the issue. The implementation of the information security policy becomes deficient once it is conditioned by political and geopolitical factors. Russia is one of the major foreign actors that promotes and disseminates fake news and propaganda in Moldova. Russia's conventional and new media tools were predominantly used in support of the Socialist party and President Igor Dodon's narratives against the center-right political opposition. Following the collapse of the ACUM-Socialist coalition government in November 2019 and the shift in control of the main state institutions into a new coalition government led by the Socialists and the Democrats, there are doubts among civil society that the information security policy documents will be prioritized moving forward.

Understanding Freedom of Expression in Moldova: View into the Digital Space

In polls on the level of trust in the internet as a source of information, Moldovans expressed a higher level of trust in the internet than their EU counterparts. Moldovans tend to

17 Oazu Nantoi, Alexandru Platon, and Aliona Cristei, "Russian Propaganda on 'Odnoklassniki': the Case of Republic of Moldova," Institute for Public Policy, 2018, http://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Odnoklassniki_en.pdf.

18 *Ibidem*

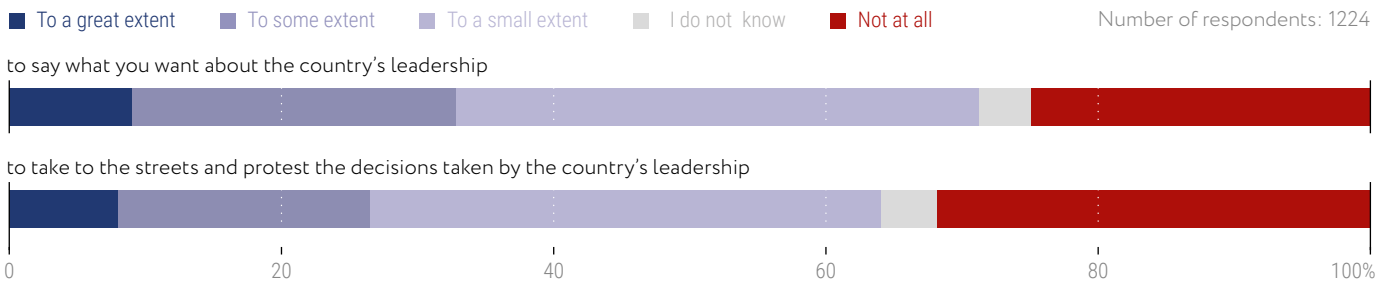
19 "Law Number 299: Informational Security Concept of the Republic of Moldova" (Chisinau, 2017), <http://lex.justice.md/viewdoc.php?action=view&view=doc&id=374274&lang=1>.

20 "Law Number 257: Informational Security Strategy and Action Plan for 2019 -2024" (Chisinau, 2018), <http://lex.justice.md/index.php?action=view&view=doc&lang=1&id=378899>.

21 <https://stopfals.md/>

22 <https://h1.md/en/>

(Freedom of expression) To what extent do you feel free ...?



Period 01.2019

Categories of respondents: gender – male/female, residence – urban/rural, age – 18–19/30–44/45–59/60+, nationality – moldavian/romanian/russian/ukranian/other, level of education – low/medium/high

Data by Public Opinion Barometer: Institute of Public Policies, <http://bop.ipp.md>

Figure3: Barometer of Public Opinion poll 2019

educate themselves and thus form their political opinions after consulting internet resources. According to a recent public opinion poll from the International Republican Institute (IRI),²³ 48 percent of respondents obtained their political information primarily from internet. This is the second most popular source for political information following television where 82 percent of respondents obtained information. While those in the EU tend to trust more conventional media such as the radio and newspapers, Moldovans in contrast view online sources and social media as being more credible. In Moldova, these sources tend to contain a broader, more pluralistic range of opinions.

Both social media and online sites have been used by opposition parties in Moldova that were denied access to conventional media channels to promote their political positions and values. These digital platforms allowed them to promote their messages and raise awareness about acts of corruption and other crimes committed by authorities in different periods of time. This allowed the internet to quickly become a primary venue for political debate in Moldova, but also an arena for testing messaging and conducting virtual political fights. The widespread public access to the internet as well as its popularity and perceived credibility does not necessitate quality information, professional reporting, accuracy of information, and freedom from hate speech. Digital spaces, as an unexhausted resource, provide an opportunity to communicate one's message when other

avenues are not available, but are also challenged by the misinformation and polarized debate provoked by trolls and other impersonators. This unregulated debate and the various opportunities to deliver information whether credible or not affects Moldova's information security and the public's access to objective information.

Online platforms provide a prolific environment for creating and spreading different forms of intolerance. Digital media, social networks, and video storage portals spread more hatred and discrimination than television and print media. According to a 2019 report by Promo-LEX²⁴ on hate speech, the toxic political environment fosters higher levels of hate speech, with 67 percent of all identified hate speech cases occurring within a political context. Media are a primary source for the distribution of intolerant ideas in digital spaces. The 319 cases identified by Promo-LEX were spread by 627 different sources, 519 of which were online media.²⁵ Even worse, Moldovan media institutions distributed hate speech and promoted intolerance in public spaces, which demonstrates the lack of knowledge around these issues and unfamiliarity with media ethics. Sputnik Moldova, a Kremlin-owned news portal, generated the most intolerant material during the monitoring period. Its 89 generated pieces, which mostly focused on sexism, accounted for more content than all the other media institutions together. This is even more relevant since Sputnik Moldova was the sixth most-visited website in Moldova from January-September 2018.²⁶ A lack

23 "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova," the Center for Insights in Survey Research, IRI, June 2019, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_moldova_may-june_2019_poll_final.pdf.

24 Dumitru Sliusarenco, "Hate Speech and Instigating Discrimination in the Public Opinion Space and Mass Media in the Republic of Moldova," Soros Moldova, 2019, https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/A4_hate_ro_web.pdf.

25 *Ibidem*

26 Igor Fomin, "'Moldnet' and the 2019 Parliamentary Elections: Navigating Moldova's Russian-Language Digital Media Landscape," Media Forward, Freedom House, February 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/%21Fomin_EN_final.pdf.

of adequate control over the online environment in Moldova has enabled it to become a perfect platform for messages that would be otherwise unacceptable.

According to Freedom House's 2019 *Freedom in the World* report, Moldova remains a "partially free" country facing a potential turning point regarding freedom of expression. As one of the most important messaging sources of the political opposition during the February 2019 parliamentary elections, digital spaces fell prey to hundreds of fake accounts that spread misinformation about political opposition figures, and discredited civil society and leading independent journalists. Due to the high level of public trust in the internet as a source of information, authorities should address the challenge of information manipulation in Moldova, including the use of trolls, bots, dark ads, deep fakes, and other information weapons that influence the general public. While civil society actors have played a key watchdog role on this issue, the extent of the problem and the uncontrollable nature of the digital space requires a unified approach from civil society, government, legal experts, businesses, and the tech community to identify solutions for individual protection and freedom of expression more generally.

Moreover, it is critical to find ways to encourage the public to fight against propaganda and fake news, especially given Moldova's ongoing transition to democracy. Unfortunately, Moldovan citizens identify economic development, new employment opportunities, and fighting corruption as priorities without associating these issues with human rights, civil liberties, and democracy. Even more worrying is the fact that more than 60 percent of the respondents to a recent Barometer of Public Opinion poll do not feel comfortable or free in expressing their views regarding the country's leadership and in actively participating in Moldova's political sphere. This hampers civic activism and public participation.

Recommendations for Government and Civil Society:

- Protect the information space in Moldova, including digital spaces, and include new hybrid threats into Moldova's policy approaches towards national and human security. The legal and normative framework must be revised to create a logical connection between the policy documents and current realities. New challenges, such as those occurring in digital spaces, should be analyzed in-depth and regulated in a manner that does not undermine freedom of expression.
- Develop clear definitions of propaganda, disinformation, and fake news that designates them as both domestic and foreign security threats, and introduce them into Moldova's legal framework. The definitions should draw from internationally recognized and respected definitions.
- Establish a comprehensive outline of potential risks to information security, including those in the media space. The outline should focus on digital media and social networks, including new tactics for promoting and disseminating information.
- Establish a legal framework for digital spaces that reflects the current security risks identified as well as the experiences of other countries. This would create an inclusive and transparent process to avoid overregulation and limitations on freedom of expression and access to information. Regulations should reference human rights violations and individual protections against trolls, bots, dark ads, deep fakes, and other informational weapons.
- Develop media and digital literacy programs to continuously raise awareness of new security risks. Programs should be implemented by both civil society and government authorities (both central and local).
- Develop a culture that focuses on digital hygiene and introduce it in schools and universities. This will decrease the risks associated with the uncontrolled digital space.
- Create clear identification guidelines for news portals and journalistic online reports. Information provided to the public through traditional or new media must follow the rules of professional journalism and deontology.
- Introduce clear provisions regarding informational weapons in Moldova's electoral legal framework as well as a guiding toolkit to identify and report digital propaganda and fake news.

Recommendations for Digital Media, Social Media, and Social Networks:

- Human rights principles should be respected, and a legal framework should be implemented that considers social media and other online platforms used by the general public.
- Cooperation between social media companies and civil partners should be encouraged and mechanisms for reporting fake news, trolls, bots, and other fraudulent or harmful actions established for users.
- Clearly label the difference between journalistic reports and other types of information, so that the general public can easily identify the difference.
- Basic social media digital hygiene should be compulsory for all users and a mandatory requirement for social media companies.
- Violations of freedom of expression, as well as disinformation, fake news, and propaganda on social media, should be regulated and addressed in new or revised legal frameworks. This is particularly important during elections.



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