foreign policy association
APE
asociatia pentru politică externă

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

NEWSLETTER

MONTHLY BULLETIN ● MARCH 2024 ● NR. 3 (217)

Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Mădălin Necșuțu, editor-coordinator

TOPICS OF THE EDITION:

1. Nerijus Maliukevicius, Lithuanian expert in international relations and combating disinformation: *New media, artificial intelligence, and social networks are also used as toolboxes for malign information operations*

2. Editorial by Denis Cenusa, associate expert with the Lithuanian Centre for East European Studies and Expert-Group: *Russian narratives and anti-disinformation resilience in Moldova*

3. Collective interview with experts from the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Ukraine: *It is not difficult to identify the targets of disinformation: in 2024, President Maia Sandu will be one of the main targets*

4. Analysis by Madalin Necsutu, journalist with Balkan Insight: *New media and Russia's informational war against Moldova before the presidential elections*

News in Brief

Moldovan carriers of goods will circulate freely in the European Union without authorization at least until December 2025. The Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development, Andrei Spînu, signed on March 26 the extension of the Agreement between the EU and Moldova regarding the road transport of goods together with the Director for Land Transport at the European Commission, Kristian Schmidt. Since 2023, the goods transport services from Moldova to the EU and vice versa have increased by 15%, while exports of goods to EU member states increased from 530.8 million dollars in July-September 2022 to 675.1 million dollars in the same period from 2023. According to Spînu, the extension of the agreement means that we will no longer need special authorizations in the EU, import and export to the EU will increase, the Republic of Moldova will become Ukraine's partner in the process of rebuilding the country, and the chains will be simpler and the logistics more efficient.

On March 26, the Constitutional Court admitted the referral of the deputies of the former "Sor" Party and declared as unconstitutional the provisions of the Electoral Code that forbid people affiliated with Ilan Șor to run for election. On October 4, 2023, the Parliament voted in the final reading to amend the Electoral Code. According to the document, the people who, on the date of the ruling of the Constitutional Court regarding the declaration of the unconstitutionality of a political party, were members of the executive body or held elective positions on behalf of the respective party, will not be able to be elected in electoral polls. The restriction was to be applied for a period of three years from the date of the Constitutional Court ruling regarding the declaration of the unconstitutionality of the political party.

The Republic of Moldova and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) signed, on March 13, a loan agreement worth 30.8 million euros for the construction of the Bălți-Suceava high voltage line, which will interconnect the Republic of Moldova and Romania energetically. In addition to the new Bălți-Suceava overhead power line, an electrical station with a capacity of 400 kV will be built in Bălți. Part of the money will be used for the rehabilitation of some segments of the electric transmission networks on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. For example, transformers in power stations will be replaced. This loan will cover 40% of the total project amount of 77 million euros. A credit of 30.8 million euros will be granted by the European Investment Bank, while 15.4 million euros by the European Union, as a grant.

New media and Russia's informational war against Moldova before the presidential elections

Președinta Maia Sandu, alături de șefa Comisiei Europene, Ursula von der Leyen, în cadrul unei întâlniri la Chișinău. Sursa-foto: Președinția Republicii Moldova

Russia's disinformation operations in the Republic of Moldova will increase this year amid the Kremlin's desire to do everything in its power to derail Chisinau from the European axis. This year is a crucial one for Moldova, which will open the negotiations on accession chapters with the EU and will have, at the same time, this autumn, presidential elections and, most likely, a referendum on European integration.

Moscow will massively throw all its disinformation weapons into the fray and provide considerable sums through its proxy actors, as well as directly, to achieve its objective. Artificial intelligence will be one of the methods that will be mainly used. As such, the most targeted person of the smear campaign will be the president Maia Sandu, seen image wise as the main pro-European vector from Chisinau.

The decrease in Maia Sandu's popularity also automatically affects the pro-European ruling party in the perspective of the parliamentary elections that will take place in July 2025, in which it is

▶

▶ expected that PAS will no longer obtain more than 50 percent of the votes to be able to govern by itself.

In this agitated context, the Republic of Moldova continues to have many deficiencies in terms of resilience against disinformation. Although it has taken some tough measures against the classic channels of disinformation consisting of televisions, radios, and some websites, Chisinau still has its hands tied in legislating the activity on social media, where Russia has moved its anti- European propaganda narratives.

The authorities' hesitations are related to the perception that they could censor free expression, a fact that gives Russia fertile ground to intensify its propaganda on social media. Russian propaganda works at high levels, especially on Telegram and TikTok, which have become pseudo-alternative sources of information, but of easy entertainment content.

Currently, with the help of artificial intelligence, dozens of "deep fake" videos are created, which mainly target the head of state. She is mocked in every way by the Russian propaganda

that tries to lower her political rating as much as possible before the presidential election. Against this background, Russian propaganda Telegram channels are full of such videos and derogatory content against the West and the pro-European leadership in Chisinau. How the authorities will manage all these problems remains to be seen. What is certain is that Russia will fight with all the weapons at its disposal to remove the Republic of Moldova from the European track and keep it in a grey area and under its influence.

Madalin Necsutu

New media, artificial intelligence, and social networks are also used as toolboxes for malign information operations

The Lithuanian expert in international relations and combating disinformation, Nerijus Maliukevicius, spoke in an interview for the foreign policy bulletin of FES/ APE about his vision related to how Russia acts in the Republic of Moldova through operations specific to hybrid warfare. He stated that the Republic of Moldova is on the right track and is making considerable efforts to become more resilient. He also offered some advice to the authorities in Chisinau on how to fight the disinformation. You can read about all this in detail in the following interview:

■ **How do you see Moldova from the point of view of resilience against the Russian propaganda in the context of Moldova being one of the countries most exposed to the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation in the region?**

■ Moldova is one of the primal targets of the Kremlin's propaganda and disinformation. And Russia is trying to

PHOTO: TV3.LT

use all potential leverages against you that they see fit.

So, Russia is doing it simultaneously with classical influence operations, which are political influences. Russia is also trying to use corruption as leverage, all the classical political influence that they see fit. So they use the classical influence operations as well as the new information operations that are constantly evolving. One of

the leverages they are using is also the religious linkage.

At the same time, they use the Russian language in some spheres to proceed with their narratives. But all things said, the most crucial part is that Moldova is taking this challenge seriously. And especially now, you are boosting your resilience capabilities. Not just civic wise, but also the government is implementing quite

active measures coming up also with institutional responses. All these are very important.

Good practices from Baltic countries

■ **How does Lithuania manage to fight and tackle Russian propaganda? What are the best practices in your country that Moldova can also use?**

■ I would say that we can probably share with our partners in Moldova that the best approach to this is a complex one. There is no silver bullet to tackle the Kremlin's propaganda, just like one recipe. It's a combination of approaches and, usually, it is called the whole-of-society approach, meaning that everyone is getting involved in building resilience capabilities.

So, it's about the media being an effective filter to monitor and filter out disinformation campaigns. It's about civic organizations, which are very important in debunking initiatives. It's about the legal and regulatory framework with regard to hate speech that needs to be implemented. And definitely, it's about the governmental institutions which have to get involved in this fight. They have to work effectively to monitor and to counter the Russian propaganda. So, it's about a multi-layered approach and Moldova is moving in this direction with your initiatives.

■ **Next year and the year after, Moldova will have presidential and parliamentary elections. Russia is very interested in derailing Moldova from its European path. Should we expect an intensification of Russia's actions in this regard in Moldova?**

■ The answer is yes because the context for information attacks is always essential. Elections are the proper context from the Russian perspective. And they are especially putting pressure in such times. So, the most important

thing is to be ready for any potential disinformation campaigns happening or any repetition of those bomb threats that were present in our region for example.

They can target the electoral offices with cyber-attacks, for instance. It is essential not to be caught by surprise in such a case.

■ **How do you see the use of artificial intelligence in disinformation? Will Russia increasingly use new technologies to intensify disinformation operations?**

■ Yes, definitely. As in many spheres, new technologies can be used positively. However, new media, artificial intelligence, and social networks are also toolboxes for malign information operations. There are many approaches to these.

There exist this artificial creation of profiles, bots, and trolls. For example, somebody can use a synthesized voice to create disinformation messages.

Text programs are taught to create disinformation messages. All the newer technologies are turned against us for this malign influence. This situation is incredibly challenging: it makes those operations relatively cheap, and they can multiply this on many levels.

How to regulate social media

■ **How do you see the EU's efforts to regulate the use of artificial intelligence, especially by the big social media platforms?**

■ These efforts are one of the focuses on the EU agenda – to regulate such challenges, primarily those related to artificial intelligence. The most important thing is to prevent from abusing the technology for malicious purposes.

■ **What can be done to moderate Telegram and TikTok, where Russia finds fertile ground to spread fakes?**

■ One of the most critical challenges is making those companies more attentive to how their platforms are being abused for disinformation and hate speech.

If they do not, governments will impose regulations on them. Therefore, there is a need for self-regulation as much as possible. But, you know, I'm not an optimist. I'm a realist. Governments must step in if companies do not move in this positive direction.

Increase the communication in English

■ **What advice can you give the Moldovan authorities on how they can better tackle Russian propaganda in the country? What can the Moldovan authorities do more about this situation?**

■ If I were asked to give one specific piece of advice, I would say to the Moldovan authorities to concentrate more on English language competencies in their communication.

In many ways, our region is stuck in a situation where we cannot communicate: we are stuck in the Russian media environment.

In many cases, information battles and the Russian propaganda battles are happening outside. They are trying to discredit our policies, our achievements in English language outlets through *Russia Today* and other tools.

We need to create our English language capabilities. And to use this more effectively and proactively.

■ **Thank you!**

Editorial

Russian narratives and anti-disinformation resilience in Moldova

Editorial by Denis Cenușă, associate expert with the Center for East European Studies in Lithuania and Expert-Group

Control over the messages that feed the media space, and indirectly the collective thinking at the level of society, is imposed as a critical element of national security, without which the viability of a state is under the threat of external interference. The current geopolitical disruptions, which are accelerating due to Russian military aggression against Ukraine, are amplifying the "power of information." Against this backdrop of instability, the war of geopolitical narratives is also intensifying, the cross-border character of which mainly targets the states that have chosen to position themselves on one side or the other of the geopolitical barricades. In this context, Moldova's decision to align itself with Ukraine in its war of defence against Russian military aggression resulted in the amplification of disinformation actions, largely pre-existing, against the Moldovan leadership and its relations with its own population.

Previously, for over three decades, Moldova indirectly faced Russian disinformation. Due to its post-Soviet ties to the Russian information space it remained connected to the information flow that the Russian state propaganda provided to the Russian public. Later, the Moldovan public environment became the target of Russian narratives through a discourse adapted to the local political and societal specifics. The current level of Russian disinformation extends beyond the intention to manipulate the dynamics of Moldovan domestic politics. The geopolitical narratives that serve Russia's revisionist strategies target Moldova and other countries that it wants to keep in its sphere of influence contrary to the transformative dynamics of the EU accession process.

Some topics of Russian disinformation in Moldova

Russian disinformation in Moldova varies and is complemented by the local production of geopolitical narratives, which fit with the topics of discussion conceived in Russia. Often, the narratives that serve Russian interests exploit both the socio-economic ramifications of the war in Ukraine and the internal competition between Moldovan political actors based on the country's external orientation. The geopolitical character of the political struggles is aggravated by the considerable degree of polarization of society.

Among the sensitive subjects touched by Russia with explosive potential for the national unity of Moldova is the issue of the Russian-speaking minorities. Russian diplomats are hurling accusations about the alleged violations of the Russian speaking population's rights by the Moldovan authorities, which could take over Ukrainian anti-Russian practices. Such a narrative seeks to discredit Moldova by associating it with Ukraine. The latter is demonized by Russian propaganda because it applies measures to counter Russian hybrid threats, which exploit the linguistic belonging of some Ukrainian societal segments to the civilizational space coveted by Russia.

Another area in which Russian disinformation manifests itself is Moldova's European integration agenda. The Russian narrative feeds the perception that upon approval of the accession negotiations for Moldova (and Ukraine) the technical criteria of the EU were not exactly respected. This argument aims to present the accession process in which Moldova is involved as an undeserved political act. With the same tonality, Moscow attacks Chisinau's partial alignment with EU sanctions. This is presented as something harmful to the bilateral relations between the Moldovan state and Russia, which would also be contrary to the national interests of the Moldovan population. Additionally, the Russian diplomatic channels describe Moldova as "another victim" of the hybrid war waged by the West against Russia, further propagating the message that the decision-makers in Chisinau would follow an external agenda.

The multitude of Russian war narratives against Moldova would have felt less alarming if Russia's current foreign policy had not been based on the principle of revenge and revisionism.

Geopolitical narratives "Made in Moldova"

In addition to the narratives coming from Russia, there are also geopolitical messages flowing from the political discourse shaped by Moldovan politicians who are not shy about associating themselves with Russia. The two most illustrious examples are the leader of the Socialist Party and the former president of Moldova, Igor Dodon, and the fugitive businessman, Ilan Şor. They issue narratives that have a high level of proximity with Russian disinformation directed at Moldova and against the current government.

Both Igor Dodon and Ilan Şor show a protective attitude towards Moldova's strategic dialogue with Russia. In his statements, the leader of the Socialists advocates the resumption of friendly relations with Russia, especially in the commercial field. More than that, Dodon criticizes the current president Maia Sandu for her anti-Russian position, which he qualifies as unrepresentative for the population. Ilan Şor shows a more robust pro-Russian rhetoric, showing himself to be a firm supporter of Moldova's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union.

These Moldovan politicians also mirror Moscow's anti-EU discourse. Ilan Şor propagates the idea that joining the EU will worsen the country's situation, provoking "more poverty, famine and slavery". Even though Dodon uses more moderate language, he promotes the narrative that the Western/European ambassadors would tolerate the controversial policies implemented by the government in Chisinau.

Preventive Capabilities and Critical Thinking as Ways to Disarm Russian Disinformation

In order to manage more effectively the risks arising from the Russian-directed disinformation, the state actors and representatives of civil society and the media must invest in reaction and prevention mechanisms by building a public-informational framework that encourages critical thinking.

In the field of reaction measures, at the level of social networks, rapid alert systems must be established. This would allow the creation of a primary wall of protection to hold back the malignant narratives. Immediate reactions are needed to stop the spread of such narratives. This involves reporting the sources of dissemination, both at the level of the platforms and of the personal accounts that participate

in the spreading of disinformation. In this way, the contamination of public space and mass media with narratives designed to disrupt public order can be mitigated. In no way should the use of these procedures discourage freedom of expression or jeopardize the right to peaceful protest.

Building societal resilience by developing the ability to think autonomously and critically is a long-term investment against misinformation, whether internally or externally generated. In the context of the European agenda, objective communication about the benefits and shortcomings of European integration is essential for stimulating critical thinking and minimizing or even neutralizing the impact of disinformation operations.

At the same time, informational campaigns dedicated to societal resilience in the field of combating disinformation are needed for different social environments, involving citizens of different ages, educational characteristics, professional occupations, languages and ethnicities. Focusing exclusively on one or two demographic categories, such as Russian speakers or the population outside Chisinau, risks producing "blind spots" that could be exploited in disinformation operations initiated by Russia and its political sympathizers in Moldova or abroad.

The sustainable solution to protect Moldova from the risks of Russian disinformation lies in the ability of state institutions to establish a kind of apolitical "anti-disinformation contract" with the population, based on the public and strategic interest of the country. Societal resilience in the field of information consumption could be due to the continuous validity of that "contract", regardless of domestic political alternations and regional geopolitical changes.

It is not difficult to identify the targets of disinformation: in 2024, President Maia Sandu will be one of the main targets

ANGELA GRAMADĂ   VICTOR GOTIȘAN   VICTORIA OLARI   MARIA ADVEEVA

We talked to four experts from the Republic of Moldova, Romania and Ukraine who know and closely study the "deep fake" phenomenon in order to try to better understand this harmful phenomenon that is becoming more and more used in Republic of Moldova. Deep fake videos are starting to have a bigger audience. The phenomenon becomes even more dangerous in the face of the presidential elections and the referendum that will be held this year, as well as the parliamentary elections next year. The European future of the Republic of Moldova depends a lot on the ability to fight, but also on the resilience of the state against disinformation. We invite you to read the short interviews with experts Angela Gramada, Victor Gotișan, Victoria Olari and Maria Adveeva.

Angela Gramada, director of Expert for Security and Global Affairs (ESGA) Think Tank from Bucharest

■ **There is a lot of talk about using artificial intelligence for disinformation purposes. At the end of last year and at the beginning of the year, I saw these deep fake videos that specifically target President Maia Sandu. Should we expect a difficult year in terms of misinformation regarding these two polls?**

■ Most new technologies that appear on the market at some point have as initial objective to satisfy some need. But not all needs have noble goals. Falling into the hands of the wrong people, they become tools that are used against people as well.

Artificial intelligence is no exception and we are already very aware of this. The problem is how much we want to understand certain things and how much effort we make to notice certain details, including those that take advantage of our inattention or disinterest.

■ **Given that such fakes are constantly multiplying, can they be sanctioned in any way by the authorities of the Republic of Moldova?**

■ I have seen those videos where the president's face is being used illegally. I don't know what impressed me more: the fact that it was of very poor quality or the fact that the authors were not punished? This sanction part is important to me. If it is left out, then artificial intelligence will become part of the tools used against society as a whole, not for its benefit.

And then it will become very dangerous because the temptation to achieve goals will multiply without taking into account the irreparable damage that such a fact can bring. I'm not referring here to the use of personal details, such as face or voice, I am referring to the conveying of false messages and consequently

to long-term damage to the good reputation of the people involved without their will in such forms of promoting disinformation.

The spiral of disinformation in electoral campaigns

Victor Gotişan, media expert

■ **The Republic of Moldova is constantly a target of propaganda and fakes, especially during election campaigns. Should we expect the proliferation of such disinformation in this year's presidential elections, but also in the next year's parliamentary elections?**

■ In the Republic of Moldova, but not only, the most prolific periods in which the level of disinformation and fakes increases are the electoral and crisis periods.

The years 2024 and 2025 are election years for the Republic of Moldova. Therefore, we will soon enter a maelstrom of misinformation, if we haven't already. It is not difficult to identify the targets of disinformation: in 2024, in the context of the presidential elections, President Maia Sandu will be one of the main targets.

In the context of the 2025 parliamentary elections, PAS and implicitly European integration will be the main targets of disinformation. It is obvious that deep-fakes will become the main weapon of those who want

to misinform, given that they are more sophisticated and subtler, having a stronger impact.

■ **Also, combating them requires more effort, time and resources. What can we do in this situation?**

■ We should all mobilize - journalists, experts, media outlets, etc. - to counter disinformation and deep-fakes from the beginning, before they are rolled through various channels and take root.

In parallel, the development of critical thinking and media literacy among society must become a priority for everyone - state institutions, the media community, the IT and creative community, etc. However, without resilience, Moldova will not be able to build an authentic and strong democracy.

Different approaches to disinformation on various social media platforms

Victoria Olari, research assistant with the Digital Forensic Research Laboratory of the Atlantic Council, based in Moldova

■ **How do you see the use of artificial intelligence for disinformation, especially this year when we have a presidential election and probably a referendum on EU integration?**

■ I think the phenomenon will intensify this year because we entered the election campaign. What we saw last year was, in my opinion, more of a field test. They tried to see how the public will react and also test the recent technology which is advancing very fast.

Now we already have deep fakes that can be generated with a text prompt and no longer need to mechanically edit such a deep fake video. There is a risk that this year the technology will advance so much that it will be difficult to distinguish between a normal video from a deep fake one.

The overall purpose of such videos is to undermine trust in democracy and the media. For this, the manipulators use audience groups made up of people who are more sceptical, who do not believe in the classical media and seek refuge in *Telegram*, *TikTok* or other "alternative" sources of information.

These people believe that the media and "global government" are somehow rather misinforming them and tend to believe such sources. In addition, there is a tendency for people to ignore or even encourage this damage caused by deep fake, especially when such videos are directed at people they don't like, or political rivals.

Even if these sceptical people logically understand that it is a fake, a deep fake, they tend to share it anyway and disseminate it somehow, knowing well that it will affect the person targeted in this video.

■ **Can something be done legislatively, by issuing a law that somehow regulates the punishment of those who produce deep fakes with the help of artificial intelligence?**

■ The problem is that at the moment the media market is not regulated in this sense.

I saw that now, at EU level, a law on the use of artificial intelligence is being discussed. From what I've read, the EU is trying to get social networks or social platforms to step in until the videos appear on their platforms. Somehow to filter such AI-generated content so that it does not react post-factum after it has been published. For example, as it is now on Twitter/X: first it is posted and then someone can put a comment on such a video and flag it as a deep fake.

But the provision in EU law on artificial intelligence must prevent such cases until they are published. However, I do not know how realistic it is for this to be implemented under the legislation of the Republic of Moldova, but at least at the EU level I know that these rules are stricter.

It's hard enough, even now it's hard to get the Big Tech companies to react. Even in the case of Ilan Șor, last year we had investigated a factory of Ilan Șor's trolls/commentators and had identified a fairly large base of fake accounts commenting in a copy-paste manner. In this case, Facebook reacted, but very late, after that fact was consumed.

There is another issue related to the pages they suspend or disable. If misinformers used to invest in building a history of accounts to appear credible, now they have switched to a "fast food" type of information. Now these pages are empty, but they put them on sponsorship. Then they are closed, after which others are opened and so on.

From my previous experience in researching such fake accounts, indeed, many were from Thailand or had an Asian profile anyway. They hide such things, but they are somehow kept in the page archive and you can

identify them on closer search. But I also discovered some pages that were created in Turkey.

Just recently I discovered a *TikTok* account that has over 30 deep fake videos with Maia Sandu generated with the help of artificial intelligence. Unlike *Telegram*, where there are videos of Maia Sandu presenting political messages, on *TikTok*, for example, Maia Sandu appears while singing or dancing, with a fun character. Such content was then also duplicated on a YouTube channel.

The difference is that on *TikTok,* compared to *Telegram*, on the first social network such content is marked as generated with the help of artificial intelligence.

Similarities in Ukraine

Maria Avdeeva, Ukrainian expert in strategic communications and security, specializing in countering disinformation

■ **What is your opinion on the use of artificial intelligence in producing deep-fake videos by Russian propaganda? In the Republic of Moldova, it is an increasingly used phenomenon.**

■ Yes, this is also a significant phenomenon in Ukraine. There are several examples of how they use deep fakes, both to make fake videos of the military leadership saying something or other political figures in Ukraine.

There are cases when various pranksters call the political leadership of Ukraine using deep-fake technology. Both deep-fake methods use the same voice and image. So it looked like a typical Zoom call, but it later turned out that the image used was generated by artificial intelligence.

■ **Do you see Russia as a country that will develop such techniques in the future? Will they be used in hybrid warfare?**

■ Yes, this phenomenon is growing, and Putin has often said that they are investing vast resources in the development of these technologies. We must be aware that this technology will be used more actively. It is a real threat because, especially in crises, combined with attacks on critical infrastructure, cyber-attacks will be a huge problem.

Ukraine recently suffered the most significant cyber-attack on our telephone operator - Kyivstar - at the end of last year.

It was the most significant cyber-attack Ukraine has ever experienced, knocking out about a third of Ukrainian mobile phones. So imagine something critical happens and there's an attack on the telecom operator and people don't have access to the internet. Then they cannot verify the information. After that, Russia can use some deep fake videos to convey various messages.

This is a real scenario that could be seen as the Russians have already developed tools for such actions.

■ **Thank you!**

Analysis: How Russia Speculates Inaction and Hesitation in Online Disinformation Regulation in the Republic of Moldova

Madalin Necsutu

The deep fake phenomenon is only the tip of the iceberg of disinformation actions and uses the newest technology devised by artificial intelligence. The benefit of using artificial intelligence on a large scale is undeniable, but in terms of malign actions it will be a long time before the regulation of its use is also done in order to prevent from harmful effects.

The Republic of Moldova is still far from having achieved a decent degree of resilience against disinformation against the background of a daily bombardment of Russian propaganda within the aggressive hybrid war that Russia is waging against Chisinau. The central goal is to derail the Republic of Moldova from the European axis and install a regime obedient to Moscow that would create a great advantage for Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Precisely for such reasons, Russia will increase its capabilities directly, or through its proxy agents, to produce content on social networks with the help of artificial intelligence that will lead to obstruction in the first phase and then removing of the Republic of Moldova from its European path so that Chisinau misses the window of opportunity that is currently opening.

The target will once again be the imagological locomotive in political terms of the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the EU - the president Maia Sandu, who is aiming for a second presidential term and thus strengthening her position as the main vector of the pro-European image. Moscow knows this very well and will make considerable efforts to end this scenario which is not at all favourable to it.

Russia has announced through the voice of Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin that it will continue to develop artificial intelligence and its use. "Artificial intelligence is very important here, we need to make sure we are competitive in this area," Putin said in his annual address to the nation on February 29.

On the other hand, the Intelligence Committee of Ukraine recently stated that Russia will try to increase the effect of disinformation campaigns in Ukraine and that Moldova will not be bypassed. "Russia spent nearly $250 million spreading anti-Ukrainian sentiment on the *Telegram* platform alone. The total budget of the operation amounted to an astronomical 1.5 billion dollars. This is the most expensive "action" of the Russian special services in history", writes the quoted source.

Moldova, testing ground

In recent months, the presence of *deep fake* videos on social network accounts in the Republic of Moldova has multiplied exponentially, according to a recent journalistic investigation published by Expert-Grup.

It all started on *Telegram*, on 5 November 2023, two days before the local elections, in the context of the outlawing of the Chance Party, controlled by the fugitive oligarch Ilan Şor. This was the first *deep fake* video made with the help of artificial intelligence that would mark the beginning of a new era in the area of disinformation in the Republic of Moldova.

The video in question presented the image of Maia Sandu very convincingly reproduced with the help of artificial intelligence that spoke about the "disastrous situation" in the country and the "burying of democracy". She thus calls the electorate to vote for the candidate of the "Renaissance" Party, another party controlled by Ilan Şor, while the anthem of the Chance Party is heard in the background of the clip.

The deep fake video circulated on the *Facebook/META* platform for several days, including the day of local elections on November 5, and the post was paid for with around 2,500 euros by the "Friendly

Moldova" page. The video quickly went viral and reached about one million viewers, almost half of the population of the Republic of Moldova.

Even though it was reported, the dismantling of this fake took several days and thus *Facebook* did not stop it completely, and the deep fake video continued to run on the mentioned platform, and it also went viral on *Telegram* and *TikTok*. Later, in the last days of last year, the *Official Sandu* channel was opened on *Telegram*, which started to be flooded with these deep fake videos in the form of parody. Up to now, no less than 24 such videos have been published on this channel, in Romanian and Russian, in which they try to ridicule Maia Sandu.

Lack of online regulatory legislation

The problem also lies in the legislative vacuum that does not yet regulate the online activity. Legislators are afraid of the fact that they could be accused of censorship, a fact that prevents the development of a coherent law against the elements of hybrid war that the Republic of Moldova currently endures.

The Republic of Moldova does not yet have a legislation allowing the sanctioning of forgeries, even more so of deep fakes. In May 2023, President Maia Sandu announced the formation of the National Center for Informational Defense and Combating Propaganda, which, a year after the announcement, is still not functioning effectively. All in the context of already two years of war on the borders of the Republic of Moldova, where there is a recrudescence

of the Russian military invasion in Ukraine. President Maia Sandu has repeatedly warned that artificial intelligence used for disinformation purposes is one of the biggest dangers in future election campaigns, and this is already visible with the naked eye.

"In the context of the hybrid war against Moldova and its democratic leadership, the image of the head of state was used by falsifying the image and sound. The purpose of these fake images is to create mistrust and division in society, and thus weaken the democratic institutions of Moldova", stated the Presidential Administration at the end of last year, after the release in the public space of a new deepfake video with the head of state as the protagonist.

The Republic of Moldova does not yet have a law to regulate online content, and the debate is between stopping manipulation and propaganda versus censorship. However, the lack of actions in the online area, especially in times of war, can have devastating effects on the population and its exposure to the propaganda of malignant actors from outside.

In the midst of war in the neighbouring country, the political class in Chisinau still does not find solutions to this extremely big threat in order to regulate the online environment and stop the Russian propaganda that has moved from the media classes to online social networks, especially on *Telegram* and *TikTok*, but also on *Facebook*, where often the late reaction produces almost the same effects.

The Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) has been sounding consistent alarms

that the phenomenon of using artificial intelligence for malicious purposes is on the rise, especially in light of the elections that will take place this year around the world.

According to the SIS, it is imperative to develop a regulatory framework aimed at regulating the content generated by AI (problematic aspect at the EU level as well), in order to detect and prevent the distribution of malicious content in the information space. The institution is of the opinion that both the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova and the announced referendum will be targets of cyber actors, with the aim of disrupting the democratic processes and anchoring the country in Russia's sphere of influence.

Also media experts and researchers of the disinformation phenomenon are of the opinion that such manipulations are not sufficiently punished and thus indirectly encouraged to be amplified on social networks.

Currently, in the Republic of Moldova, there is a fierce battle for the "hearts and minds" of the citizens, and the prompt and very determined inaction of the authorities can lead to the achievement of the primary objectives of the European path being destroyed by malicious external and internal actors who do not want a democratic society, but a semi-failed state in which the rule of law does not exist. Thus, the criminal groups will continue to plunder the country's already extremely poor resources internally, and the external actors will keep the Republic of Moldova as a grey buffer zone between the West and the Russian Federation.