

# MOLDOVAN MEDIA AS A MOUTHPIECE FOR POLITICAL PROPAGANDA: STATE OF THE MEDIA IN A POST-SOVIET COUNTRY FROM A POST-SOVIET PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

### I. INTRODUCTION

Before I outline the essence of the media in the Republic of Moldova, I must give the reader some context on who the author is. I was born in Moldova, shortly after the country declared its independence in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Two decades later, I moved across the ocean to pursue a legal education in the United States, where I now permanently reside. That said, Moldova remains my home state and pieces of this article are largely drawn from my experiences being born and living in Moldova for most of my life through the prism of the country's post-independence state of the media. It is important that I outline the key chronological events that this rather small country underwent in a relatively short period of time. In 1812, through the Treaty of Bucharest, Russia grants Russia control of eastern Moldova or Bessarabia, the area between the River Prut and the west bank of the Dniester to the Ottoman Empire, which eventually recognizes the independence of Romanian state, including Western Moldova in 1878.<sup>2</sup> Following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Bessarabia (now Republic of Moldova) declares its independence in 1918 and the country's parliament seeks union with Romania.<sup>3</sup> Following the Treaty of Paris, Bessarabia's union with Romania is internationally recognized in 1920. However, the Bolsheviks member refused to recognize the union and the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic is established east of the Dniester River within Ukraine in 1924.<sup>4</sup> Following a short period of peace and apparent stability, the Soviet Union annexes Bessarabia in 1940 and forms the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic. However, this back-and-forth chase for territorial influence, Romania re-establishes its control over the territory in 1941-1945 after its ally, Nazi Germany, invades the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> This change did last until the end of World War II, when the Soviet Union regains control over the territory and keeping it under its complete dominance until late 1980, when the Resurgence of Moldovan nationalism emerged following the Gorbachev reforms in the Soviet Union. It was not until August 27, 1991 that Moldova was able to break this vicious cycle of endless control and dominance and declared its sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> However, nearly immediately following Moldova's declaration of independence, the Trans-Dniester region (known as Transnistria), part of Moldova that is geographically separated by the Dniester River declares its own independence, which the Moldovan government refuses to recognize.<sup>7</sup> Since its declaration of independence, Moldova has remained a sovereign country. Although Transnistria has maintained its self-proclaimed independence for over three decades, has its own elected parliament and president, maintains its own army and police force, and has its

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17601579>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> <https://nationaltoday.com/moldova-independence-day/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/02/transnistria-celebrates-independence-day-in-shadow-of-war/>.

own currency, the region has never been recognized by any UN member state.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, with significant assistance from Moscow, Transnistria has acquired many of the characteristics of a recognized state.<sup>9</sup> Transnistria extends for about 249 mile between the eastern bank of the Dniester River and the Moldova's border with Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Despite identifying as Russian, Ukrainian, or Moldovan ethnicity, the majority of the 470,000 inhabitants of the breakaway region speak Russian.<sup>11</sup> As a contingency to cease-fire agreement, Russian troops remained in Transnistria for the so-called purpose of ensuring peace while focusing on guarding ammunition and warehouses.<sup>12</sup> Like South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia does not recognize Transnistria as independent. Russia recognized those areas after its 2008 war with Georgia or to justify its February invasion of Ukraine. Russia's security policy allows it to protect ethnic Russians worldwide, so the invasion of Transnistria could be the next step in Kremlin's political calculus.<sup>13</sup> Moldova is constitutionally neutral, so Russia cannot justify an invasion by citing the country's desire to join NATO, as Russian President Vladimir Putin did with Ukraine. However, invading and conquering Moldova would ensure that Russia has a solid presence next to NATO member Romania.<sup>14</sup> The Moldovan-Transnistria reality, in light of the Russia-Ukraine war raises serious concerns that Moldova will be Russia's next territorial and political. By maintaining a "zone of control and manipulation" over an independent country aspiring to join the European Union and NATO, the infrastructure and media in Moldova remain under Russian or Russian-sponsored influence. Even with a democratic government, the much-needed change is nearly impossible to achieve, especially when Russia is constantly looking over Moldova's shoulder and maintains *de facto* control over it.

## II. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN MOLDOVA: TRANSITION TOWARDS DEMOCRACY OR A HYBRID REGIME?

Moldova is a country with a deeply enshrined Soviet past and high hopes of a European future. Situated right next to Ukraine, Moldova is confronting the severe problem of fake news and disinformation and has been subject to massive propaganda attacks in the past few years. These attacks aim to take advantage of institutional, societal, and emotional weaknesses, such as the absence of well-established institutions and a current legal framework; a deficient educational system; a divided society by ethnicity and language that is particularly vulnerable to geopolitical messages; and a strong nostalgia for the former Soviet Union. In the early 2000s, Moldova's Communist government shifted foreign policy priorities. Mass protests after allegedly fraudulent elections in 2009 showed the public's desire for a democratic Moldova and laid the groundwork for a Europe-oriented foreign and domestic policy. As part of the young, non-politically affiliated generation wanting the best for her country, I participated in the 2009 brutal protests that led to much bloodshed but no societal or political change. Moldova's

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<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-race-and-ethnicity-soviet-union-europe-moldova-1518ed45d67006b574739dabf4b3aa89>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-04-26/explainer-how-is-trans-dniester-related-to-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

institutions—civil society, the media, NGOs, the church, and political parties—either amplified or debunked propaganda narratives.<sup>15</sup>

Due to the conflict in Transnistria, Moldovans have lived in two media environments for over 30 years. Although Moldovans on both sides of the Dniester River live in the same country, Transnistria residents perceive the other side as abroad due to different interpretations of the same historical and current events as presented by the regional media.<sup>16</sup> The region has closely adopted the illiberal Russian legal framework and implemented similar practices related to human rights and liberties. This has led to a restrictive media environment and limited personal and political freedoms, as evidenced by countless violations of the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of media. As such, media is used as a weapon to influence community perceptions, spread disinformation, promote propaganda, and divide the country.<sup>17</sup> Moldova's constitutional authorities have tacitly promoted the "Transnistrian nation" in local media outlets linked to the secessionist authorities by failing to actively promote counter-narratives region.<sup>18</sup>

Moldovan media outlets are increasingly used as mechanisms to silence the voices of the Moldovan people and divide a United Eastern Front. The Eastern Front has two connotations: (1) the historical World War II meaning where a then United Europe fought against the evils associated with Hitler and the German regime, and (2) a United Eastern Europe now, who is standing against Russia's dictatorship. In democratic societies, media is the fourth branch of power because it informs the public about politics, society, and local issues. Media steers public discourse and holds officials accountable while communicating and distributing information. To prevent abuse of power, protect democratic principles and values, and build trust between citizens and government, weak democratic countries like Moldova must establish a healthy and independent media environment.<sup>19</sup> Moldova's small and underdeveloped media market made it an easy target for Russia's hybrid warfare. Pro-Russian sentiment in the country's ethnically diverse population, combined with nostalgia for the past, made it easier to spread false information. Russian media's wide reach and entertainment value make it unique. Its higher quality allows fake news and Saturday night shows to be consumed together. Thus, Russian TV channels in Moldova have become a "golden pipeline" for propaganda and fake news.<sup>20</sup> Moldovan viewers are faithful to Russian television for nostalgia, quality, habit, or even a lack of interest in other channels. Based on the 2017 Barometer of Public Opinion, 71.6% of respondents get their news from Moldovan media (TV and radio), 43% from Russian media, and 21.8% from Romanian (European) media.<sup>21</sup> Russian media credibility rests largely on ethnicity and language. According to the 2014 census, 75.1% of the population self-identifies as Moldovans, 7% as Romanians, 6.6% as Ukrainians, 4.6% as Gagauz, 4.1% as Russians, 1.9% as Bulgarians, and 0.3% as Roma.<sup>22</sup> Despite the small size of the Russian community, Russian is

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<sup>15</sup> <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MDA>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/07/moldova-protests-chisinau>

<sup>16</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/fh-pb\\_17-Informational-Space-in-the-Transnistrian-region\\_Eng.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/fh-pb_17-Informational-Space-in-the-Transnistrian-region_Eng.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/04\\_Information\\_Resilience\\_EN.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/04_Information_Resilience_EN.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Moldova, May 12-25, 2014, <http://www.statistica.md/pageview.php?l=en&idc=479>

the second most spoken language in the country,<sup>23</sup> which eliminates any real language barrier by facilitating the transmission and receipt of messages in Russian but also the consumption of fake news and disinformation. Because the news is communicated in a language that most people understand, it is easy to push fake news and political propaganda under the label of truth, authenticity, and credibility.

Russian, Ukrainian, and other minorities began trusting Russian-language media more after the March 2014 annexation of Crimea.<sup>24</sup> Russia's regional power and military capability peaked in November 2014. Although they still give Russian media outlets a high level of credibility, the ethnically Moldovan/Romanian population appears to be slightly more circumspect about it than the minorities. As a result of these nations' efforts to present their own narratives in Moldova's information space, a significant increase has been seen in the percentage of people who trust outlets based in Europe. However, persuading the nation's Russian-speaking population—which, as a result of their Cold War experiences, tends to distrust information coming from the “other side”—remains a difficult task.<sup>25</sup>

Most of the population in Moldova self-identifies as Christian-Orthodox, and the Orthodox church has a significant influence on social life. The Moldovan Metropolitan is the direct subordinate to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, a significant and very powerful figure in Russia.<sup>26</sup> Utilizing tools like hate speech and xenophobia, the current Russian rhetoric of traditional values and acting as “saviors” of Christianity has been tested in Moldova. The church and priests helped spread false information during the 2016 election campaign against Maia Sandu, a candidate challenging former communist president Igor Dodon for the office of President of the Republic of Moldova.<sup>27</sup> Although the church has always been involved in Moldovan elections, never before have religious leaders used the media as an additional channel for mass disinformation.<sup>28</sup>

Situational narratives—messages that surface under specific conditions, coincide with specific events, or result from specific actions—are frequently seen as fertile ground for the emergence of strategic narratives. At pivotal junctures for the future of the nation and its relationships with its neighbors, Moldova has had to contend with the threat of fake news and propaganda. False narratives have interfered with the relationship between the EU and Moldova, the region's security, and finally, the country's internal affairs. In addition to the lack of a strong media regulatory framework, the government's lack of a strategic approach creates an environment that is ideal for exploitation of societal, economic, and political weaknesses. Situational narratives work well when there are strong strategic narratives in place and there is no effective way to combat fake news using media literacy, critical thinking, or pluralism.<sup>29</sup> For instance, Moldovan authorities ignored several ongoing, propaganda-infused domestic processes during the negotiations of the European Union Association Agreement and the action plan on visa liberalization because they were primarily focused on their external communication. As a result, a number of myths about the customs, beliefs, and values of Moldovan society have proliferated throughout the nation. Media portrayed that the European Union (EU) is a body that

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<sup>23</sup> According to the 2014 census Russian is the main language spoken by 14.5%. However, a considerable part of the Romanian-speaking population also use or understand Russian.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-03-19/consequences-annexation-crimea>.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/09/07/in-church-we-trust-the-case-of-the-moldovan-orthodox-church/>.

<sup>27</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> FN.

strips nations of their sovereignty and territorial integrity and that “enhanced cooperation” necessitates a nation’s renunciation of its own culture, religion, and traditions.<sup>30</sup> Outlets twisted true facts and mixed them with half-truths to make these messages more appealing to the general public. For instance, the propaganda asserted that signing the Association Agreement implied joining NATO and leaving the Commonwealth of Independent States,<sup>31</sup> and it claimed that the visa liberalization with the EU would result in the dissolution of Moldova and the renunciation of Transnistria.<sup>32</sup> An important part of the propaganda campaign included xenophobic, unreal, and doomsday scenarios in which LGBT people and members of other religious groups, primarily Muslims, invaded Moldova.<sup>33</sup>

Though it has only recently been used as a situational narrative, describing potential NATO membership as a serious threat reinforces a Cold War-era strategic narrative. On the one hand, Moldovan media has portrayed NATO as a threat to Moldova’s territorial neutrality through carefully timed messages, and on the other, it has contended that closer cooperation will lead to an open conflict with Russia.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, fake news and propaganda have increased their penetration of Moldova’s information space as a result of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Despite the country’s close proximity to Ukraine and the existence of a Ukrainian community, Moldovans have been uncertain and still are misled about what is taking place on the ground.<sup>35</sup>

Over the past decade, politicians and powerful businessmen have tightened their grip on Moldova’s press and media. The most influential media outlets are either politically affiliated or are actually owned by politicians, particularly among television stations.<sup>36</sup> They have a

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<sup>30</sup> Myths and realities about the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, [https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova\\_1968321.html](https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova_1968321.html) (in Moldovan).

<sup>31</sup> Five myths about the Association Agreement with the European Union, <https://expert-grup.org/ro/activitate/item/881-cinci-mituri-despre-acordul-de-asociere-cu-uniunea-european%C4%83> (in Moldovan).

<sup>32</sup> Myths and realities about the European integration of the Republic of Moldova, [https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova\\_1968321.html](https://www.publika.md/mituri-si-realitati-despre-integrarea-europeana-a-republicii-moldova_1968321.html) (in Moldovan).

<sup>33</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> See <https://www.intellinews.com/russian-lawmakers-warn-moldova-s-nato-aspirations-may-lead-to-its-destruction-267920/?source=moldova> (“Two influential Russian lawmakers warned on January 24 that Moldova considering NATO membership “may lead to its destruction” and “[l]ike Ukraine, Moscow considers Moldova to be part of its sphere of influence.”); see also [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb\\_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation\\_Eng-v5.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation_Eng-v5.pdf) (“External disinformation generally focuses on anti-Western messages targeting entities such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the United States. Commonly in the leadup to elections in Moldova, a common disinformation narrative claims that the West is involved in and has influence over Moldovan elections.”)

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>. (Matched by increased restrictions on political opposition in Russia, disinformation narratives progressed from propaganda and historical revisionism – for example, insisting that Crimea had “always been Russian” after Moscow’s annexation in 2014 – to false claims about neo-Nazi infiltration in Ukraine’s government and conspiracy theories about Ukraine/US bioweapons laboratories. These efforts represent a handful of the ways in which the Russian government and aligned actors use disinformation as a weapon and to distract, confuse and subvert opponents).

<sup>36</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/country/moldova> (“Moldova’s media are diverse but extremely polarised, like the country itself, which is marked by political instability and excessive influence by oligarchs. Major media, such as TV6, NTV Moldova and Prime TV, are in the hands of political leaders. The media empire built by former billionaire and Democratic Party of Moldova boss Vladimir Plahotniuc has lost influence, but it was quickly supplanted by a new holding company tied to the pro-Russian Party of Socialists.”); <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/09/media-moldova-freedom-monopoly/> (In 2015, in an effort to increase media transparency, the Moldovan parliament passed

significant impact on the topics that are discussed in public forums because they frequently reflect the private interests of their owners.<sup>37</sup> These frequently have nothing to do with the issues and requirements of Moldovan citizens or the country's society at large. The media landscape in Moldova is rife with incompetence and quality issues, such as media manipulation, misinformation, and propaganda.<sup>38</sup> These undermine the credibility and trust of the media and have a negative impact on the country's democratic consolidation by making the public more susceptible to manipulation.<sup>39</sup> Discussions about democracy and its pillars, like freedom of speech and the press, have so far been hampered by the long transition to a market economy and the legacy of a tightly controlled society under communism.<sup>40</sup> Since gaining its independence, Moldova's information space has been influenced by foreign cultures. While the country's development has not necessarily suffered as a result of this, when foreign actors began to aggressively take advantage of this openness to sway public opinion, the nation's vulnerability became obvious.<sup>41</sup> External actors have attempted to manipulate, control, and disrupt Moldova's current order by fabricating alternate realities and using deceptive narratives, whether situational (related to a specific event) or strategic (related to individuals' traditions, beliefs, and customs).<sup>42</sup>

Is Moldova's reluctance to allow transparency in media outlets rated to Russian influence? Does the country limit progress and transparency inadvertently by bad practice and poorly-drafted legislation or deliberately by allowing outside forces to control its media channels? The prevalence of the global phenomenon called "hybrid warfare," which incorporates elements such as propaganda, fake news, and manipulation, has increased significantly on the European continent in the past few years.<sup>43</sup> Moldova is no exception. Russia views the new partnerships as a threat to its security and a foray into its historical sphere of influence.<sup>44</sup> Hybrid warfare became evident in 2014 when conventional military measures led to territorial changes in Eastern Europe, demonstrating its destructive potential.<sup>45</sup> The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas showed that governments can no longer ignore disinformation and fake news because of their power to influence citizens, overthrow sovereign governments, and create "power vacuums or grey zones."<sup>46</sup>

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an amendment to the country's media laws that required media companies to publicly disclose the names of their owners. As a result of this legislation, it was revealed that the media market was highly concentrated in the hands of politicians and people linked with political parties).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* ("Media companies with close ties to political figures and powerful oligarchs dominate the advertising market, to the detriment of independent media.").

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/09/media-moldova-freedom-monopoly/>.

<sup>39</sup> See [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb\\_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation\\_Eng-v5.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/fh-pb_18-Society-wide-Battle-Against-Disinformation_Eng-v5.pdf); see also [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/5-Media-Pluralism-Concentration\\_Ownership\\_Moldova\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/5-Media-Pluralism-Concentration_Ownership_Moldova_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/05/16/republic-moldova-transition-communism-democracy/>; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/opinion/democracy-or-freedom-of-expression/>.

<sup>41</sup> <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MDA>.

<sup>42</sup> FN; see also [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> FN; see also [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/strengthening-russias-influence-in-international-affairs-part-ii-russia-and-its-neighbors-a-sphere-of-influence-or-a-declining-relationship/>.

<sup>45</sup> FN; see also [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> FN; see also [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media\\_Literacy\\_Challenge\\_Fake\\_News\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).

### III. MEDIA DISINFORMATION: THE BATTLE OF INTERESTS COVID

Since the outbreak of the global coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, governments have struggled to protect citizens from the pathogen and its many effects. As governments struggled to balance national health priorities and an “infodemic” of disinformation with the need to inform citizens and uphold media freedoms, the regulatory framework for independent media became a key goal.<sup>47</sup> The lack of a cohesive national informational space in multilingual societies, high levels of disinformation, and social and economic legacies of Soviet influence made media regulation in Moldova and Ukraine vulnerable during the pandemic.<sup>48</sup> From the early days of the COVID-19 crisis in Moldova, the government declared a war against the dissemination of fake news.<sup>49</sup> However, the real impact of this war was to establish the state’s direct control over the flow of information to the public. Moldova’s underdeveloped, poorly enforced, and largely controlled by prominent politicians media sector has blocked journalists’ attempts to obtain public interest information, including pandemic information.<sup>50</sup> On March 18, then President Igor Dodon warned journalists, “If you want big ratings or likes on social networks and spread fakes and panic, you will be punished.”<sup>51</sup> The government’s hostile and suspicious treatment of the media during the crisis was reflected in later statements by Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Chicu and other prominent politicians.<sup>52</sup>

Moldovan authorities did not define fake news or disinformation that would be subject to state penalties, despite their strong stance against it. State officials had wide discretion to distinguish legitimate media work from malicious disinformation, increasing media hostility. The war against fake news became real on March 20, 2020, when direct action was taken to restrict information flow. Under the authority of the Commission for Emergency Situations, the Information and Security Service (ISS) blocked the access to 52 allegedly “fake news” websites, which were not officially registered with the government.<sup>25 26 27</sup> As justification, the ISS referred only to the Emergency Provisions Law (No. 212) and another Law (No. 54-XV) on countering extremist activity.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, while this measure was taken in a non-transparent and unilateral manner, the blocked websites closely resembled those flagged by the Moldovan civil society initiative *Stop Fals*, which tracks the spread of manipulative and propagandistic information online.<sup>29 30</sup> However, neither *Stop Fals* nor the ISS released any information regarding collaboration in this effort, and any positive motive by the state to draw from civil society resources must be weighed against the lack of any apparent check-and-balance with standard judiciary and human rights mechanisms. The war against fake news began on March 20, 2020, when information flow was severely restricted by governmental action. The Information and Security Service (ISS) blocked fifty-two unregistered “fake news” websites under the

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<sup>47</sup> FN.

<sup>48</sup> FN.

<sup>49</sup> FN.

<sup>50</sup> FN.

<sup>51</sup> Olga Gorchak, ‘Want High Ratings?’ Dodon Threatens the Media with Punishment for Fakes, NewsMaker, March 19, 2020, [www.newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/hotite-vysokihreytingov-dodon-prigrozil-smi-nakazaniem-zafeyki/](http://www.newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/hotite-vysokihreytingov-dodon-prigrozil-smi-nakazaniem-zafeyki/).

<sup>52</sup> See Message of Ion Chicu to journalists: Many of you will lose your business, if you do not change your attitude, AGORA, May 4, 2020, <https://agora.md/stiri/70659/mesajul-lui-ion-chicu-catre-jurnalisti-veti-pierde-multi-businessul-daca-nu-va-schimbati-atitudinea>; see also Shows, criminal penalties, million salaries and “I respect the press up to my tonsils”: How the top state officials manifest their attitude towards the press, AGORA, May 3, 2020, <https://agora.md/stiri/70567/showuri-pedepse-penale-salarii-demilioane-si-respect-presapanan-glande-cum-mai-marii-statului-isimanifesta-atitudinea-fata-de-presavideo>.

Commission for Emergency Situations' orders.<sup>53</sup> In doing so, the ISS cited only the Emergency Provisions Law (No. 212) and the Extremist Activity Prevention Law (No. 54-XV).<sup>54</sup> Paradoxically, most of the blocked websites resembled those flagged by Moldovan civil society initiative *Stop Fals*, which monitors online manipulation and propaganda. The Moldovan Audiovisual Council (AC) took yet another drastic step to control information flows on March 24, 2020 when the AC Head ordered Moldovan media outlets to report only the government's official position regarding the pandemic.<sup>55</sup> Journalists were not allowed to express their personal opinions either. Civil society and media workers were outraged, which caused an overwhelming and immediate public backlash, prompting Moldovan authorities to reverse the decision, acknowledging that it was premature and could over restrict the media.<sup>56</sup> However, without the civil society and media community's strong opposition, the restriction would likely have remained in place. It is possible that Moldova authorities may have been testing the waters by restricting the easiest-to-target media outlets and online resources starting with blocking of suspect platforms and extending it to future blocking efforts that could have severely damaged Moldova's online information landscape during the pandemic.

The pandemic has had several indirect negative effects on independent media streams in Moldova, in addition to government-imposed restrictions. Online media reported a thirty to ninety percent drop in advertising revenue. Newspaper delivery was also affected by COVID-19-related postal service breakdowns.<sup>57</sup> Many media organizations reported increasingly high remote work costs. Journalists needed computers, high-speed internet, and other expensive equipment and software to create media content. Thus, due to remote work inefficiencies, media production resulted in increased labor and overtime costs.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, frontline media teams needed expensive masks, gloves, and sanitizers during the pandemic, and media organizations faced and continue to face significant costs above their existing budget.<sup>59</sup> Female journalists, who dominate Moldova's frontline media, have carried disproportionate burdens.<sup>60</sup> The same applied to senior member of editorial team. Independent Moldovan media was excluded from

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<sup>53</sup> See Vera Balahnova, *The ISS Will Follow News on Coronavirus In Moldova*, NewsMaker, March 24, 2020, <http://www.newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/v-moldove-sib-budet-sledit-za-novostyami-o-koronaviruse/>; see also Law No. 212 from 24-06-2004 on Emergency, Siege and Military Regimes Provisions, Ministry of Justice, August 6, 2004, [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=120832&lang=ru](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=120832&lang=ru); Nadezda Koptu, *ISS Will Block 52 Sites Due to Fakes about Coronavirus. What Resources Are We Talking about?*, NewsMaker, March 20, 2020, <https://www.newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/sib-zablokiruet-52-sajta-iz-za-fejkov-o-koronaviruse-o-kakikh-resursakh-idet-rech/>.

<sup>54</sup> Information and Security Service (ISS) Identifies Provocateurs (List), NewsMD, March 20, 2020, <https://www.newsmd.md/news/10649-sluzhba-informacii-i-bezopasnosti-sib-vyjavljaet-provokatorov-spisok.html>.

<sup>55</sup> See Alexandra Batanova, *The Whole Truth about Koronavi ...! How Moldova Tried to Limit Television and Radio, and What Came of It*, NewsMaker, March 26, 2020, <https://www.newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/vsya-pravda-o-koronavi-kak-v-moldove-pytalis-ogranichit-televidenie-i-radio-i-cto-iz-etogo-poluchilos-video/>.

<sup>56</sup> The Head of the AC of Moldova Overturned the Decision on Censorship of Media Opinions on COVID-19), SP, March 27, 2020, <https://esp.md/sobytiya/2020/03/27/glava-kstr-moldovy-otmenil-reshenie-o-cenzure-mneniy-v-smi-po-covid-19>; see also President Igor Dodon Thinks The Audiovisual Board Should Revise Their Restriction On Media), Infotag.md, March 26, 2020, <https://www.infotag.md/politics-m9/283590/>.

<sup>57</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20SteGniy\\_FINAL-EN.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20SteGniy_FINAL-EN.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> See e.g., 15 years anniversary of ZdG. Know the team which produced Ziarul on weekly basis, Ziarul de Garda, July 29, 2019, <https://www.zdg.md/interviuri/15-ani-de-zdg-cunoaste-echipa-care-face-posibila-aparitia-ziarului-in-fiecare-saptamana/>; TV8's team of reporters, TV8, June 29, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/tv8moldova/videos/350966555579081/>.

the government's COVID-19 economic relief measures, which placed additional burdens on independent media in Moldova.<sup>61</sup> Non-political and independent media must rely on self-generated funds or unsustainable donor grants,<sup>62</sup> while media affiliated with the ruling appears well-funded.<sup>63</sup>

## **UKRAINE WAR**

Discussion regarding the internal and external disinformation surrounding Ukraine war, depending on media ownership, the relationship between the concentration of media ownership and disinformation and how the public is manipulated and misinformed according to the interests of those in control of the media.

## **IV. MEDIA IN TRANSNISTRIA: AN ARSENAL OF GLOBAL MISINFORMATION**

The media in Transnistria, an unrecognized, self-proclaimed republic on the territory of Moldova, remain under the control of powerful political interests. State media outlets as well as the private television channel TSV present the same view on all issues, from political to economic topics. But it has not always been like this. In-fighting between elites in recent years has completely redrawn the media landscape, shuttering some publications and changing the editorial line of others.

Discussion on print media, television, and online media in Transnistria.

## **V. THE WAY FORWARD: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Ensuring a high level of transparency for public institutions in Moldova is not an objective that can be accomplished solely with the adoption of a new legislative framework. While a new, more ambitious and progressive law on access to public information should establish a new legal baseline, adequate awareness-raising and enforcement efforts should also follow.

Offer concrete recommendation for combatting fake news and disinformation in Moldova. Touch on any existing or promising upcoming projects to achieve change.

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<sup>61</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20SteGniy\\_FINAL-EN.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20SteGniy_FINAL-EN.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> An example of such media institution is Internet media-portal Newsmaker.MD, supported financially inter alia by the Dutch government, Open Society Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, Swiss Development and Cooperation agency, as well as Moldova-Institut Leipzig, US Government, Freedom House, Black Sea Trust, European Endowment for Democracy, Czech Embassy in Moldova, Internews and USAID (Newsmaker, About the Project, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/o-proekte>).

<sup>63</sup> The Master of Media: How the mass media market has been re-tailored in Moldova in one year, Newsmaker, May 4, 2020, <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/hozyain-media-kak-v-moldove-za-god-perekroili-rynok-smi/>.