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(Pro)-Russian (Dis)information in Moldova: eroding vertical trust in Sandu and the PAS government?

Maia Sandu's rise to power marked a decisive shift in Moldova towards pro-Western politics, moving away from the significant Russian influence that had persisted since the country's independence. This shift made Sandu and the government's policies a primary target of (dis)information campaigns aimed at undermining public trust in her presidency and the central government. This research addresses this issue by analysing the specific narratives and mechanisms of (pro)-Russian (dis)information in Moldova. Through qualitative content analysis of over 2,000 instances of (dis)information collected between December 2020 and October 2024, the study examines how these narratives are constructed, their impact on vertical trust, and their broader implications for Moldovan democracy. The findings indicate that these (dis)information efforts are framed within a larger Russian-Western antagonism, exploiting Moldova's ethnic and linguistic divisions, historical ties with Russia, and ongoing geopolitical tensions. The study highlights that (dis)information campaigns not only aim to discredit political leaders and policies but also seek to destabilise the fundamental trust required for democratic governance. Furthermore, the article contributes to theoretical insights into the role of (dis)information in emerging democracies, demonstrating how it exacerbates fragile public trust already weakened by socio-economic crises.

Keywords: Moldova, Russia, (dis)information, (dis)trust, government, democracy

Introduction

In 2020, Maia Sandu was elected the President of Moldova, and her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) subsequently secured a majority in the parliamentary elections the following year. The new administration outlined a programme that included ensuring equal rights for ethnic minorities, implementing democratic reforms, and seeking European Union (EU) membership. These objectives represented a significant departure from Moldova's Soviet-era legacies, which had largely been upheld by the previous government. This shift has been reflected in several policy changes: revising language policies to provide equal treatment for all minority languages, reducing the Russian military presence in the Transnistria region, and fostering competition in the natural gas sector by addressing the dominant role of the Russian supplier 'Gazprom'. Additionally, the declared intention to withdraw Moldova from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) by the end of 2024 represents a significant step in redefining the country's geopolitical affiliations. These developments illustrate a reorientation in Moldova's domestic and foreign policy, focusing on reshaping its post-Soviet relationships and forging new partnerships.

In response to these measures, segments of Moldova's populace, favouring ties with Russia over Western integration, have voiced their dissent. Notably, the Gagauzia and Transnistria regions have proclaimed their geopolitical allegiances as diametrically opposed to Sandu's Western-leaning initiatives. Furthermore, adherents of the Bloc of Communists and Socialists, as well as the currently proscribed 'Shor' party, have staged protests against President Sandu's policies and her administration in various parts of the country. Our focus here, however, is on the political opposition to Maia Sandu and her policies as articulated through social media and the instant messaging service platform Telegram. Moldova's Intelligence and Security Service has identified social media and

instant messaging as the two principal channels through which anti-government (dis)information is disseminated within Moldova.¹

Our examination of Moldova differs from most studies related to (pro)-Russian (dis)information in other Eastern European countries. We argue that the narratives of (dis)information are distinct and so highly tailored to the Moldovan sociopolitical setting as to warrant a standalone country case study. Moreover, we find that the specific mechanisms used in Moldova, as well as the objectives of such (dis)information campaigns, remain largely underexplored in the literature, which predominantly focuses on comparative analyses across multiple CIS countries. To explore the unique characteristics of (pro)-Russian (dis)information in Moldova, this paper examines the narratives that bolster the (dis)information campaign against Sandu and the PAS government and explores its effects on the Moldovan political landscape. We aim to analyse how disseminators of (dis)information work to undermine public trust in the President and the PAS government within Moldovan society. This research utilises a comprehensive dataset comprising over 2,000 instances of (dis)information collected from President Sandu's inauguration in December 2020 until the presidential elections in October 2024.

This article proceeds as follows: The first section outlines the background of (dis)information in Moldova, provides a conceptual framework based on (dis)trust, and elaborates on the methodology used. The second section presents the empirical evidence, while the third section covers the analysis and results of the research. Finally, the conclusion summarises our findings and presents final observations.

¹ (Dis)information is defined here as a spectrum of information which varies from accurate facts to negatively biased content, outright falsehoods, and strategically deceptive messages. This spectrum reflects the deliberate use of various information typologies with the intent to influence public opinion, shape perceptions of reality, and advance specific political, social, or geopolitical objectives. At its core, (dis)information is not solely about the dissemination of falsehoods but also about strategically framing narratives to trigger emotional and cognitive responses.

Moldovan (dis)information dynamics

Moldova's media landscape has consistently been divided between pro-Russian and pro-Western camps (Dumont et al., 2023). This division reflects the country's historical and cultural complexities, rooted in its past. The country was once part of the Principality of Moldavia, language and cultural traditions with its neighbours, including Wallachia and Transylvania, the major parts of which form modern Romania. However, parts of the modern Moldova spent decades under the Russian Empire occupation, which marked the initial of russification process. Later, after a brief break, it became a republic under Soviet rule, during which a significant influx of people from other Soviet republics occurred, and Russian was promoted as the dominant language by Moscow (Angelescu 2011; Haynes 2020; Stănescu 2024).² This dual legacy contributes to the ongoing divisions within Moldovan society, where one part of the population supports closer ties with Romania and the West, while another segment leans towards Russia.

Ethnic and linguistic diversity further underscores these divisions. Ethnic and linguistic diversity plays a significant role in shaping Moldova's divisions. In right-bank Moldova, the majority of the population identifies as ethnically Moldovan (or Romanian) and speaks Romanian as their native language. Many of them also have a good command of Russian, which enables them to consume Russian media. This group is politically divided, with some leaning towards pro-Western orientations and others favoring pro-Russian stances. National minorities in Moldova, such as Russians and Bulgarians, predominantly speak Russian and often aligning with pro-Russian political

² The history of modern Moldova is complex, shaped by various historical periods, including its time as part of the Principality of Moldavia, the annexation of parts of its territory by the Russian Empire, its brief unification with Romania (1918–1940, 1941–1944), and its subsequent incorporation into the Soviet Union. Please also refer to Sullivan (2024) and Hitchins (2014) for a more detailed exploration.

views. Additionally, the Gagauz, a Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christian group, live in the autonomous region of Gagauzia, which is also strongly pro-Russian. Meanwhile, the breakaway region of Transnistria (left-bank Moldova), predominantly Russian-speaking, remains under de facto control of a pro-Russian administration and prohibits access to Moldovan and Western media. Furthermore, Russian media companies have established local branches in Moldova and have consistently led popularity rankings for an extended period. These complexities in Moldova's domestic context have made the country particularly vulnerable to pro-Russian disinformation, as confirmed by the Venice Commission (2022). Language often serves as a marker of cultural identity, deepening the distinctions between 'geopolitical parties' and contributing to the fragmented nature of Moldovan politics and media.

(Dis)information dynamics have been shaped by these characteristics of the media environment. Parts of the Republic of Moldova have arguably been influenced by various (dis)information campaigns since the country declared its independence in 1991. Early efforts of tailored media narratives in the Transnistria and Gagauzia regions included campaigns supporting these regions' independence claims, with a focus on advancing (pro)-Russian perspectives (Foster 2024). (Dis)information campaigns were also identified when Russian interests were involved, for example, during advancement of the integration with the EU in 2012–2014 (Saari 2014). This kind of narratives and (dis)information strategies also became prominent during the 2016 presidential elections (Mogildea 2018).³ Igor Dodon, a pro-Russian candidate, won the election over Maia Sandu, a pro-Western candidate. Endorsed by the Moldovan branches of Russian TV, Dodon's campaign featured (dis)information against Sandu (Bullock, Lutsevich, and Maren 2018). Pro-Russian (dis)information surged again in the context of the 2020

³ We define (pro)-Russian (dis)information as (dis)information originating from sources based in Russia, from the Moldovan branches of Russian media, and Moldovan pro-Russian media content.

presidential elections and the 2021 parliamentary elections. The main outlets for the pro-Russian standpoint were the local branches of Russian media, such as TV channels NTV Moldova, Primul in Moldova, and newspapers Argumenty i Fauty v Moldove, Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove, also associated with the local pro-Russian political bloc of Communists and Socialists, led by Igor Dodon.

In subsequent elections, such as the 2020 presidential elections and the 2021 parliamentary elections, media campaigns continued to play a role. Pro-Russian narratives were prominent in outlets like NTV Moldova, Primul in Moldova, and newspapers such as Argumenty i Fauty v Moldove and Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove. These outlets were often associated with the local pro-Russian political bloc of Communists and Socialists, led by Igor Dodon. The international observers have documented targeted (dis)information campaigns aimed at discrediting pro-European figures in Moldova, with Maia Sandu and PAS being a significant focus (EUvsDisinfo Undated; Independent Journalism Center Undated; ENEMO 2024). However, Moldova's diverse media landscape has also included narratives from other perspectives, reflecting the country's complex political and social dynamics.

The existing academic research predominantly situates Moldova within the broader context of (pro)-Russian influence operations across post-Soviet states. This literature primarily identifies societal vulnerabilities in CIS countries that facilitate (dis)information campaigns (Lanoszka 2016; Roloff and Dunay 2018; Deen and Zweers 2022). In reference to Moldova, a significant body of work highlights that ethnic and linguistic divisions contribute to "the emergence of parallel realities for those who consume Romanian-language or Russian-language media" (Deen and Zweers 2022, p.18; see also Lanoszka 2016; Rosca 2018). Scholars agree that these vulnerabilities are

further exacerbated by ethnic and linguistic ties with Russia, a pervasive sense of Soviet nostalgia among the older population, and high exposure to Russian media (Lanoszka 2016; Rosca 2018; Lavric 2019; Deen & Zweers 2022; ; Dvornikova 2023; Sillanpaa et al. 2016). Solik & Graf (2023) extend this analysis by adding geographical proximity to Russia, the polarisation of domestic politics along geopolitical lines, and energy dependence as factors. They note that although Moldova has made considerable strides in mitigating its energy dependency, other vulnerabilities still remain salient. The related study by Bokša (2019) explores the strategies of Russian (dis)information in Eastern Europe. It reveals that some countries in the region are particularly susceptible to the *Russkiy Mir* ("Russian World") narratives, which strategically target countries with substantial Russian-speaking minorities. According to the study, these narratives aim to strengthen and intensify the connection between these communities and Russia by promoting the notion of these individuals as Russian compatriots.

Another body of substantial research scrutinises the specific content of (dis)information within Moldova. Such studies have primarily explored anti-narratives aimed at discrediting Euro-Atlantic structures in the context of the Transnistrian conflict, the Russia-Ukraine war, and integration with the EU, alongside narratives promoting positive accounts of *Russkiy Mir* and evoking Soviet nostalgia (Sillanpaa et al. 2016; Bokša 2019; Rebegea 2019; Cenusă 2024). In contrast to the above, this study presents a different perspective on the content. This study focuses on (dis)information aimed at undermining domestic actors in Moldova — specifically, the country's democratic institutions: the president and the government.

To scrutinise the effects of (dis)information we have chosen the concept of 'trust'. The concept of political trust has been identified as a parameter that plays a crucial role in

the well-functioning of democratic regimes (Mishler & Rose 1997; Chen 2017). Trust can be articulated in society along different dimensions such as horizontal – among the citizens – and vertical – between citizens and government. Our focus here is on vertical trust, which refers to the relationship of trust between citizens and their democratically elected institutions, forming a foundational element of Western liberal and pluralistic democracies (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011). Vertical trust tends to emerge in environments where citizens view government institutions as both fair and effective (Berg and Johansson 2016). The citizens' confidence in institutions may vary. Trust in neutral institutions like courts, police, and civil services generally tends to be higher. In contrast, trust in political institutions such as legislatures, political parties, and leaders often tends to be lower (Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Zmerli and Newton 2017). Trust in political institutions primarily hinges on the tangible performance of the government in delivering economic prosperity, social welfare, or other benefits that may arise from its practices or policies (Barbalet 2019).

Political communication and political psychology literature reveal the relationship between communication and trust in democratic institutions. According to Kahneman (2011), individuals process information through a combination of intuitive and deliberative thinking, where the framing of reality significantly influences their perceptions and emotions. Forgas (1995) further supports this by arguing that affective states and attitudes are closely tied to the way information is presented and processed. Building on these insights, political communication literature highlights the central role of communication in shaping trust. For example, Cook et al. (2010) assert that trust in political leadership is mediated by the narratives individuals encounter, which frame their understanding of institutional reliability and intentions. This aligns with studies

such as Bennett and Livingston (2018), which emphasize how communication influences public perceptions of authority and legitimacy.

In our study, we conceptualize (dis)information as a specific act of communicating reality. This theoretical framing enables us to establish a causal mechanism: (dis)information operates as a communicative act that alters individual perceptions of reality, which, in turn, affects feelings of trust. As most of reality is communicated through various forms of media, the media play a pivotal role in shaping public trust in government structures and political leadership (Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Hetherington, 2005). Consequently, (dis)information influence operations, operationalized through media channels, strategically target vertical trust as a means to undermine public confidence in political leadership (Kondratov and Johansson-Nogués, 2023). While the relationship between (dis)information and vertical trust in established democracies has been by scholars (see Ognyanova et al. 2020, Rucinska et al. 2023, West et al. 2024), studies on emerging democracies remain less advanced. This article aims to address this gap.

In terms of methodology, we employ qualitative content analysis to examine (pro)-Russian (dis)information. Our approach involves systematic coding and categorisation of media content to identify recurring narratives and frames (Mayring 2021). Our analysis spans the time frame from Maia Sandu's inauguration in December 2020 up to the presidential elections on 20 October 2024. Our data collection draws upon both primary and secondary sources of information. For primary sources, we identified the most popular (pro)-Russian media outlets among Moldovan audiences through the International Republican Institute (IRI) polls conducted prior to media restrictions in February 2022 and onwards.

Our empirical analysis encompasses a range of Moldovan branches of Russian media and local pro-Russian media: TV channels such as NTV-Moldova, RTR-Moldova, and Primul Moldova, as well as Facebook accounts and Telegram channels associated with media outlets like 'Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove', 'Sputnik Moldova', and 'Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove'. These are the most relevant information sources for the Russian-speaking Moldovans, which is approximately more than 80 per cent of the population, and the level of belief in such (dis)information among this demographic varies between 30-40%.⁴ The data gathered was extracted from the primary sources in the original language (Russian) and translated into English by the author. In addition to primary sources, secondary sources include data gathered from independent journalistic projects such as NewsMaker.md and StopFalse.md, which monitor and archive screenshots of deep fakes and online advertisements featuring fabricated videos. We analysed (dis)information available on digital platforms, including websites, YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram channels of these popular media since they are accessible even in the context of media restrictions, which allows us to access and archive relevant content. Overall, we analysed over 2000 samples of (dis)information. During our content analysis, we pinpointed messages aimed at Moldova's current President and the government using search parameters such as 'President', 'Maia Sandu', 'government', and 'leadership'. Subsequently, we conducted a cluster analysis to categorise the most significant data into three primary frames (personal attacks on Sandu; (dis)information related to specific governmental policies; and (dis)information related to the Transnistrian conflict. Often, one article encompasses multiple distinct narratives, which are included within all relevant clustered frames. The contextualisation of the (dis)information is informed by secondary literature.

⁴ According to the US Agency of Global Media report (2016) and the study conducted by the independent Moldovan think tank Watchdog.md (2023).

(Dis)information narratives in Moldova

In this section, we report on the three main frames of (dis)information after the inauguration of Maia Sandu's presidency: (1) personal attacks on the President, (2) (dis)information related to specific governmental policies, and (3) Transnistria narratives. We designate Transnistria as a distinct category, as the narratives associated with this topic extend beyond this region and shape the broader (dis)information landscape in Moldova.

Personal attacks on President Sandu

A substantial amount of the narratives emitted by Moldovan (dis)informers is related to the President's persona. In terms of personal attacks on Maia Sandu, (dis)informers have focused on the fact that the President is unmarried and without children. These facts gave rise to an initial sub-narrative portraying Sandu's social identity as contrary to traditional values.⁵ Sandu's single status with no children was manipulated in various paid advertisements circulating on *YouTube*, where deep fakes featuring Sandu's voice and appearance were used to depict her as altering her sexual orientation, organising gay parades, and closing churches. Disseminated through Russian media in Moldova and endorsed by former presidents Voronin and Dodon, these claims strategically exploited the country's homophobic sentiment, affecting over 64% of the population. They leveraged this sentiment to construct the argument that the President had departed from traditional values (NewsMaker.md 2020; Verdica.ro 2020).

A distinct sub-narrative depicted Sandu as a Russophobic embodiment of Western/Romanian identity. This framing is a consequence of her favourable comments

⁵ Here and throughout the text, "traditional values" refers to those rooted in the Moldovan Orthodox religious tradition, which significantly shapes societal norms, moral principles, and cultural practices in Moldova. For a detailed discussion, see Gohlke (2022).

on Moldova's potential unification with Romania in 2016, and dual Moldovan and Romanian citizenship (allowed by Moldovan law). This frame draws on the deep divide within Moldova between the Romanian speakers and the Russians. According to such frames, being labelled 'pro-Romanian' in the Moldovan context is synonymous with being perceived as 'anti-Russian' (Oleksy 2021). Although Sandu campaigned to bridge these divisive perspectives on national/ethnic identity (e.g. combining Romanian, Russian and Ukrainian languages in her speeches), (dis)informers labelled her governance as "an actual choice between the East and the West" promoting "blatant Russophobia" (Sputnik Moldova 11.06.2021; Sputnik Moldova Telegram 15.08.2023)⁶. Sandu's alleged Russophobia is an important element of this sub-narrative: for example, (dis)informers repeatedly emphasised Sandu's purported intention to break the "centuries-old unity" between Russia and Moldova and "move into Europe [read European Union] via violations of Russians' rights" (Sputnik md 27.08.2022; Sputnik Moldova 22.01.2021; Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove 19.04.2021 18:59).

A final group of (dis)information frames surrounding Sandu depicted her as a puppet of foreign powers. According to (dis)informers, she was under the direct control of foreign forces, particularly the USA, the EU (especially Romania), and entities associated with US philanthropists (NTV Moldova website 24.07.2021; Sputnik md Telegram 15.08.2023; Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove Telegram 02.03.2024 17:34). For instance, Sandu's Master's degree from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Public Administration in the United States, and her subsequent job at the World Bank in Washington were misinterpreted as proof that George Soros' "grant-funded structures" played a role in her ascent to power in Moldova (Sputnik md 29.03.2021). Furthermore, it was common for (dis)informers to underscore Sandu's subordination to allegedly

⁶ Please refer to the supplemental material for screenshots of the (dis)information cited throughout this article.

more powerful political figures from abroad. For example, the US ambassador in Moldova was labelled as her “direct supervisor”, whose orders she executed “regularly, systematically, and independently of any other factors (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove 31.01.2021; Sputnik md Telegram 15.08.2023); the President of European Commission Ursula von der Leyen was said to control Sandu and “obedient puppets in PAS” (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove Telegram 09.10.2024 10:21).

The final sub-narrative of this grouping examined the alleged self-perception of Maia Sandu, born and raised in a Moldovan village, as Romanian rather than Moldovan due to her dual citizenship. (Pro)-Russian media contrasted Sandu with her predecessor, Igor Dodon, who has "only one citizenship - Moldovan". (Dis)informers quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying that "[s]he is the president of Moldova but a citizen of Romania" to question her willingness to pursue Moldovan interests as President (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove, 17.12.2020; Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove 20.11.2020; Sputnik md 18.06.2021). These claims were extended to Sandu’s "pro-Romanian authorities" allegedly attempting "to impose a vision of state structure and values" at the expense of national interests and subsequently "to relinquish sovereignty in favour of Romania as quickly and as comprehensively as possible" (Sputnik md 27.08.2022; Sputnik md Telegram 07.11.2023; Sputnik md Telegram 25.10.2023). The President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, is referred to as her "older brother" in a negative connotation to underscore his authority over Sandu, which lent more credibility to this conspiracy theory about a Moldovan-Romanian merger (Sputnik md 26.11.2020 - 1).

Attacks on language and foreign policy

The initial narrative within this grouping revolved around the language policy. Sandu’s predecessor promulgated a law designating Russian as the country's second official

language. However, the Constitutional Court (2021) annulled the law when Sandu came to power. Consequently, the central government was portrayed as responsible for the Court's decision. For example, (dis)informers attributed the "language-based discrimination" against Russian speakers to the government and called for protests and local illegitimate referendums on this issue (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove 31.01.2021 17:43; Sputnik.md Telegram 04.12.2023; RTR Moldova 16.09.2021). A prevalent claim was that official media provided information exclusively in the state language, Romanian, without Russian translation, purportedly contradicting Sandu's pledge "to protect the rights of Russian speakers" (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove 03.04.2021 07:21).

The language-related (dis)information surged again in response to Maia Sandu's decision to overturn the Constitutional amendments of 1994 and reinstate the historically accurate term "Romanian language" in official documents (King 1999). The first group of related claims was based on allegations of discriminatory treatment, accusing Sandu and the PAS government of reviewing the language policy in a way that incited "language scandals in Moldova that never existed before" (Sputnik.md Telegram 04.12.2023). More importantly, (dis)informers alleged that Sandu was trying to restrict people from expressing themselves in the language they found most convenient, even though the language norms did not affect private communication at all (Sputnik.md Telegram 04.12.2023). The second group of claims concerned purported "undermining national sovereignty" by bringing up the language issue. These claims drew on the contested ethnic borders within the Moldovan region of Bessarabia, where Russian cultural practices compete with those of Moldova and Romania. For example, (dis)informers cited Maria Zakharova, a representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, who disseminated the question "Whose Bessarabia is it now?" This question hinted at

a possible Romanian expansion supported by Sandu (Sputnik md 18.03.2023).⁷ In response to Sandu's use of historical facts to support her language policy, some individuals disseminated a misleading historical claim to counterbalance her argument. Specifically, (pro)-Russian media cited Maria Zakharova's statement that the Moldovan language was formalised before Romanian, which is not an accurate fact. (Sputnik md 18.03.2023; Sputnik md 24.03.2023-1).

Another crucial narrative focused on Sandu's pledge to galvanise integration with the European Union and align with the EU's *acquis*. Upon Moldova gaining EU candidate status in June 2022, (dis)informers disseminated a wide spectrum of security warnings, frequently citing Russian officials. For example, the news alleged that Sandu's advocacy for integration with the EU "lacks a pragmatic basis and disregards the sentiments of residents in Transnistria and Gagauzia," while also asserting that the EU backs Sandu in purportedly imposing pro-EU stances on the population (Sputnik md 27.08.2022; *Primul Moldova* 09.11.2023).⁸ This news was followed by arguments similar to "the European Union wants to turn Moldova into a second Ukraine", clearly referencing a neighbouring country that experienced Russia-endorsed regional conflicts after deciding to foster integration with the EU (NTV Moldova 17.06.2022). Additionally, significant efforts were made to diminish support for Sandu's foreign policy among the Moldovan population. For example, according to (dis)informers, the "European Moldova" national assembly held in May 2023 was organised by Sandu to "demonstrate to European partners, or rather, to the masters, that European support does exist after all." (Sputnik md Telegram 21.05.2023). In (pro)-Russian media, the visual

⁷ Bessarabia is a historical region that covers parts of modern-day Moldova and southwestern Ukraine, characterized by contested ethnic boundaries. (Schlegel 2019).

⁸ In Moldova, public support (strongly or somewhat) for EU membership varied between 63-64%, with 63% expressing support in July 2023. See International Republican Institute (IRI) surveys at <https://www.iri.org/>

footage of numerous supporters of Sandu was misrepresented as an anti-EU manifestation in the Gagauzia region. These images, posted by the popular Russia-based propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, were retransmitted on Moldovan Facebook with the original caption calling for a local referendum “to determine” the country’s foreign policy direction (Stopsfals.md 2023 - 22.05). Finally, when scrutinising Sandu’s alleged advocacy of Euro-Atlantic integration, (dis)informers misleadingly condemned Sandu for allegedly stating in a radio broadcast that "Moldova doesn't need to adhere to the constitutional norm regarding its neutral status" (Sputnik md Telegram 15.08.2023). In reality, Sandu argued that the neutral status could only be reviewed according to the public request.

The related narrative focused on Sandu and the PAS government sacrificing national interests for foreign policy goals. An ‘expert opinion’ suggests that integration with the EU market would bring "financial losses for sectors of the Moldovan economy traditionally linked to the Russian market," such as agriculture and viticulture (Sputnik md 11.06.2021). Despite statistical data indicating otherwise (Moldova’s Statistics Service 2022), (dis)informers labelled Sandu's policy of integration with the EU market as non-pragmatic, claiming it "fails to consider the specifics of Moldovan society and its economy," thus negatively affecting the welfare of ordinary citizens. At the same time, misleading statements suggested Russia was a better strategic trade partner and depicted economic ties with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as more beneficial for Moldova (Sputnik md 27.08.2022; see also Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove Telegram 20.02.2024 18:19). The sub-narrative's final claim was that the country’s leadership was responsible for the increased gas prices supplied by Gazprom, a Russian company, to Moldova. The government of Moldova, along with the international community, accused Russia of engaging in what they referred to as 'gas blackmail' in response to

Moldova's enhanced implementation of the Association Agreement with the EU. However, (dis)informers disseminated the idea that the incumbent government did not adhere to the terms of gas supply contracts, which purportedly enabled Russian gas suppliers to raise prices for the Moldovan population (NTV Moldova 17.06.2022). These claims were supported by the content of a Russian NTV channel featuring the comments of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Lavrov also accused Moldova's leadership of "scheming to secure gas discounts" promised to Commonwealth of Independent States members, even as they prepare to leave the organisation in pursuit of EU membership. This comment was directed at Moldova's populace who would purportedly "understand perfectly" that the government had sacrificed affordable gas for the EU prospective membership (NTV Moldova 17.06.2022; 28.10.2022; see similar Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove Telegram 10.03.2024 20:54).

The distinct and final narrative concerns Moldovan security policy in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Sandu and the PAS government introduced a series of initiatives aimed at enhancing Moldova's security. One of the first security measures was to curb the dissemination of the symbols of Russian military aggression. Thus, symbols featuring the capital letters 'V' and 'Z' used by the Russian government to mark military equipment and missiles were banned. In addition, the use of the yellow and black 'St. George' ribbon was restricted to the images of the Soviet Order of Guard, existing during World War II. The use of the ribbon in other contexts was forbidden, and fines were imposed for violations. The reason for the ban was that Russian propaganda used a very similar ribbon to symbolise the 'deNazification' in its recent military campaign against Ukraine. Despite the Venice Commission's (2022) conclusion that these restrictive measures were legitimate, (dis)informers presented them as 'proof' of the fascist tendencies in the Moldovan

government (RTR Moldova 20.04.2022), while the government was labelled a “regime”, a “junta”, and Sandu’s “colleagues in the Reichstag” (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove 25.05.2022; Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove Telegram 25.05.2023; Primul Moldova 02.11.2023). Another security measure was to join the EU’s sanctions against Russia. (Dis)informers compared it to the Gestapo’s police orders of the 1930s, which led to the establishment of the fascist regime (NTV Moldova 16.12.2022). Such kind of (dis)information was supported by calls for the Moldovan people “to get rid of the fascist dictatorship” of Sandu (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove, Telegram 25.05.2023). Finally, Sandu’s decision to enhance border management was interpreted as "militarisation directed against Russia" and an attempt to “drag” Moldova into the Russia-Ukraine war, while related expenditures were labelled as being “made at the expense of the country's economy” (Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove Telegram 06.03.2024 14:44). In reality, the funds were allocated with the support of the European Peace Facility for the purchase of non-lethal equipment and to ensure cybersecurity, which serves as evidence of the purely defensive nature of this initiative (Calus 2023).

Attacks on governmental policies related to the Transnistria conflict

The Transnistrian conflict is a long-standing territorial dispute in Moldova, where the breakaway region of Transnistria seeks closer ties with Russia. In 2006, a controversial and unrecognized referendum showed support for joining Russia, fueling ongoing tensions. Since then, it has remained a key focus of (dis)information. However, there was a surge in narratives in 2020 when Moldova’s President, Maia Sandu, announced plans to dismantle the Russian ‘peacekeeping’ military presence, deployed in the region since 1992. She also expressed her intent to unilaterally withdraw from agreements with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a regional organization that includes Russia and other former Soviet republics.

The main narrative alleged that Sandu collaborated with the Euro-Atlantic partners (the EU, US, Romania) in secretly planning a military build-up to seize the secessionist republic by force. For example, a widespread conspiracy theory suggests that Sandu and the PAS government are preparing for a “non-diplomatic solution” to the Transnistrian conflict, as the local leadership favours Russia-led Eurasian integration, in opposition to the central government (Sputnik md 31.08.2022 reposted from reference to the “RT in Russian” Telegram channel; Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove, Telegram 17.11.2023 13:59:59 reposted from the Russian Foreign Ministry portal). To enhance credibility, they cited pro-Russian politicians who argued that Sandu uses the European integration as leverage to pressure Transnistria, whose residents “independently determine its geopolitical direction and political destiny” (Sputnik md Telegram 15.08.2023; 03.11.2023). (Dis)informers even suggested that "Russia might have to defend the unrecognised republic of Transnistria" from a Sandu-led intervention, allegedly endorsed by the EU and the US (NTV Moldova 17.06.2022; Sputnik md 27.08.2022). It was alleged that Sandu collaborated with Western partners on this matter. The Moldovan Facebook page ‘Exciting news’ posted a video containing falsified information describing a joint effort between the UK, Romania, the United States, and Moldova’s central government to prepare a military operation against Transnistria, which received over 169,000 views and 684 reposts (Stopsfals.md 2023-28.04).

A separate narrative within this grouping focused on Sandu's commitment to replacing Russian 'peacekeeping' troops in the region with an OSCE mission. Pro-Russian media scrutinised this idea with the help of hyper-partisan ‘expert’ opinions, such as the claim that she "lacks knowledge about the Transnistrian settlement process" (Sputnik md 19.11.2021). Sandu's proposal was labelled as "simply rash and thoughtless" - an alleged attempt to undermine peaceful resolution efforts, which would "negatively

impact the reconciliation process" and "lead to a significant escalation of the situation both within the republic and throughout the region." Notably, Russian public figures and officials were quoted in this context (Sputnik md 27.11.2020; Sputnik md Telegram 15.08.2023; Sputnik md 28.07.2023; Sputnik md 28.07.2023). This narrative evolved in 2022. It contained overt threats from Russia warning that dismantling its military presence in Transnistria "would be viewed as an attack on Russia" (Sputnik md 01.09.2022, reposted from RIA News; see similar Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove Telegram 04.09.2024 13:33, reported from Russian Tass news). This threat was followed by a video featuring "Ammunition depots in Colbasna: the largest arsenal in Europe. This is over 20,000 tons of artillery shells, which, according to experts, would be enough for decades of war. The ammunition is guarded by a task force of Russian troops" (Sputnik md 06.05.2022). To counter Sandu's calls for the removal of Russian troops, (dis)informers framed the Russian military in a positive light. The main argument presented was that "Russia consistently remains the guarantor of peace and security for the people of Transnistria and an important strategic partner" (Sputnik md 12.06.2021).

The final narrative focuses on Moldova's withdrawal from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a Russophone intergovernmental organisation formed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was alleged that Sandu executed this withdrawal as an assignment from the West (Sputnik md Telegram 15.08.2023). The withdrawal was portrayed as an action to "not contribute to dialogue with Transnistria" (Sputnik md 23.05.2023). Similar comments were made by Russian political analysts and experts who predicted "unease" in Transnistria due to the withdrawal. (Dis)informers even urged Transnistrians to resist the central government and "strengthen their alliance with Russia and work, albeit unofficially, with the CIS" (Sputnik md Telegram 07.11.2023).

(Dis)information and its effect on trust in Moldova

Moldova is an emerging democracy where the social contract between government and citizens is particularly vulnerable due to ongoing reforms and proposals for new norms aimed at transforming society. Like many post-communist countries, a significant portion of Moldovans still feel connected to their traditional Eastern European cultural space, even as they desire integration with the EU. Reforms and innovation in the political sphere might thus cause contradictory notions among citizens and fears that traditional values of the Moldovan society are being undermined in the process. Moreover, socio-economic crises often accompany the reform processes proposed by the government in preparation for a future within the EU. Under such circumstances, trust between the government and its citizens becomes fragile. This fragility provides a fertile ground for (pro)-Russian efforts to intervene and exploit the situation. (Dis)information adds further pressure points to the relations between government and citizens as it muddies the public debate and stirs up anti-governmental sentiments within Moldovan society. These efforts aim to erode trust in the government as well as complicate the government's ability to implement democratic reforms and peaceful settlement of conflicts at home or to achieve broader societal support for its 'European' agenda.

Our empirical evidence indicates that Maia Sandu and the PAS government are important targets of the efforts of (dis)informers to undermine trust in the country's leadership. In line with the growing body of disinformation studies,⁹ we use public opinion surveys to support our main argument that (dis)information has an effect on the Moldovan audience: Polls reveal that public trust in Maia Sandu significantly dropped from 41% to 27% during her first year in office amidst ongoing attacks. Polls also

⁹ See, for example, West et al. (2024), Ognyanova et al. (2020) and others.

reveal that negative opinions about the government's activities grew from 44% in 2021 to 64% in 2024, and negative opinions of the President's performance increased from 45% in 2021 to 61% in 2024. While there are many reasons why the popularity rates of governmental leaders and their government may fall over time, we argue that (dis)information has been one of the factors explaining this decline. Maia Sandu and the PAS government's policies are depicted as highly antagonistic to the interests of the principal audience of (dis)informers—conservative Russian speakers who are cognitively integrated into Russian cultural tradition. In addition, traumatic memories of the war evoked by the Transnistrian narrative, may also affect those who do not necessarily disagree with other policies of Sandu and/or incumbent government. On occasion, (dis)informers have managed to amplify public discontent with government reforms and reticence against advancing too quickly toward integration with the EU and distancing from post-Soviet legacies. There is evidence that the negative framing of Sandu's policies has helped (dis)informers increase distrust to the point where grievances turn into collective action. (Dis)informers successfully managed to organise regular public protests in Chişinău, blaming Sandu for increasing gas prices (Euronews 2023). Thousands of supporters of pro-Russian parties have called for early elections and Sandu's resignation (Euronews 2023). The portrayal of protests plays an important role in this (dis)information campaign. (Dis)informers in their reports of the events attempted to exaggerate the scale of the protests, creating the impression that distrust in the government is widespread and growing everywhere in Moldova. This exaggeration can create a bandwagon effect in society, encouraging more people to join the protests. This turbulence not only challenges the government's ability to govern effectively but also delegitimise its authority, as the central government's failure to secure trust and cooperation is perceived as a governance failure. Thus, (dis)information attempts are the

core of vertical trust which is essential for the stability of emerging democracy, ensuring that reforms can be implemented smoothly and that the state can function effectively amidst diverse societal interests.

There is evidence that the president and the government are aware of the effects of (dis)information in the country and are concerned about its impact on vertical trust. In 2023, and in the context of local elections, the government and the Moldovan Information and Security Service ordered 31 websites to be blocked for spreading (pro)-Russian (dis)information. President Maia Sandu commented that the measures were necessary to defend democratic values and protect the country from Russian interference in the electoral process in Moldova. This suggests that, similar to Western European democratic states, the Moldovan leadership views elections as particularly vulnerable moments that may lead to the erosion of vertical trust. Furthermore, in 2023 Sandu launched the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation. On this occasion, the president stated

[t]hose who launch and spread falsehoods want to cause fear, hatred and division. Day by day, the Kremlin and criminal groups launch hybrid attacks and use the weapon of propaganda to sow hatred in Moldova, to weaken our trust in each other and our trust in our state (Radio Liberty 2023)

However, such bans were perceived in Moldova - much as they have been in Western European societies - as an infringement on freedom of speech and press, both fundamental tenets of democratic societies. For example, in the Gagauzia region, local authorities and NGOs condemned the measure, claiming that the ban was an attempt by the government to control the narrative and suppress dissenting voices. In emerging democracies, where trust in institutions is often fragile, these actions can exacerbate fears of authoritarianism and erode the legitimacy of the nascent democracy.

Furthermore, the ban did stop (dis)information, as (dis)informers quickly found new outlets. If they had previously operated via Russian traditional media in Moldova or their Moldovan counterparts, (pro-)Russian (dis)information simply shifted to a larger presence on social media and the instant messaging platform Telegram. Through these new channels, (dis)informers exploited the ban to argue that the government was trying to censor certain types of content, further fuelling distrust and alienation among pro-Russian audiences. This thus worked to deepen societal divisions and entrench the belief that the government is not acting transparently or in the best interests of its citizens. Consequently, while the government's intention behind banning (dis)information-spreading media was to protect the Moldovan public, such bans could inadvertently and paradoxically undermine vertical trust, thereby weakening democracy by producing greater distrust and division.

Conclusions

This article has examined the dynamics of (pro-)Russian (dis)information campaigns in Moldova, focusing on their efforts to erode public trust in President Maia Sandu and the PAS government. Our comprehensive dataset (dis)information instances from December 2020 to October 2024 provided a robust empirical foundation for our analysis, revealing the multifaceted strategies employed by (dis)informers to erode trust in Moldova's leadership and democratic government. We discussed how various narratives are tailored to the Moldovan sociopolitical context, including personal attacks on Sandu, (dis)information about government policies, and (dis)information concerning the Transnistrian conflict. Our research contributes to existing scholarship on (dis)information in Moldova and provides empirical insights into the specific mechanisms and objectives of (pro-)Russian (dis)information in Moldova. Unlike comparative studies on (dis)information across multiple post-Soviet states, this focused

study highlights the sociopolitical factors and vulnerabilities within Moldova that (dis)informers exploit. We identified how (dis)information narratives are designed to resonate with Moldova's ethnic and linguistic divisions, by exploiting and/or misinterpreting historical ties and current geopolitical tensions to deepen distrust and resistance to Western integration efforts. Overall, (dis)informers followed the logic of Russian propaganda, which portrays an antagonistic relationship between the Russian Federation and the 'collective West' and its allies. Their attempts to encourage distrust in Maia Sandu and Moldova's central government were aligned with this logic. The outcomes of these efforts have lasting implications for Moldova's political stability and democratic consolidation, evident in social divisions and difficulties in implementing democratic reforms, including those required for EU membership negotiations.

Theoretically, this article enhances our understanding of the relationship between vertical trust and (dis)information in emerging democracies, particularly in the context of the increasing digital challenges of the modern era. We revealed that the democratic reforms accompanied by socio-economic crises create a societal vulnerability that weakens trust between the government and the public. This fragility creates an opportunity for (pro)-Russian (dis)information to exploit the situation and further deepen vertical distrust. In this fragile context, media restrictions failed to curb the penetration of (dis)information, instead pushing it into less regulated spaces such as social networks. This deepened societal divisions and challenged the government's transparency and effectiveness. Finally, by amplifying the scale of anti-government protests, (dis)informers fostered the perception of widespread and increasing distrust in the government. Our findings underscore that (dis)information not only aims to discredit political leaders and policies but also seeks to destabilise the foundational trust that underpins democratic governance. These theoretical insights highlight the need to

address (dis)information not merely as a matter of factual correction, but as a critical factor in maintaining democratic trust and cohesion amid external and internal (dis)information threats.

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