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Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

(Dis)information in Eastern Europe: the manipulation of hearts and minds

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Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	2
<i>Abstract</i>	6
<i>Resum</i>	6
<i>Resumen</i>	7
1. Introduction	8
1.1. Eastern European (dis)information in a historical and contemporary perspective.	11
1.2 Literature review: (Dis)information in Eastern Europe	19
1.3. Theoretical underpinnings	28
1.3.1. Political Psychology in political elites' communication	28
1.3.2. Political Communication theory and (dis)information in digital age	31
1.4. Methodology	37
2. Summary of the articles	41
2.1. Simanschi, Elena. "In Georgian Dream we trust: (dis)information to conceal democratic setback?"	41
2.2. Simanschi, Elena. "(Dis)information in Moldova: eroding vertical trust for the Sandu government?"	45
2.3. Johansson-Nogués, Elisabeth, and Elena Şimanschi. "Fabricating a war? Russian (dis)information on Ukraine"	50
3. Research Articles	55
3.1. Simanschi, Elena. "In Georgian Dream we trust: (dis)information to conceal democratic setback?"	55
Introduction	55
(Dis)information, media and vertical trust	57
Democratic setback and the Georgian Dream's narratives	62
Cultivating trust through (dis)information	70
Conclusions	73
References	74
3.2. Simanschi, Elena. "(Pro)-Russian (Dis)information in Moldova: eroding vertical trust in Sandu and the PAS government?"	92
Introduction	92
Moldovan (dis)information dynamics	94
(Dis)information narratives in Moldova	99
(Dis)information and its effect on trust in Moldova	107
Conclusions	109
References	111

3.3. Johansson-Nogués, Elisabeth, and Elena Şimanschi. “Fabricating a war? Russian (dis)information on Ukraine”	121
Introduction	121
Propaganda and the mechanisms of Russian (dis)information	123
Russian (dis)information justifying the war effort	127
Fabricating a war through emotional appeal and displaced associations	134
Conclusions	137
References	139
4. Conclusions	148
4.1. Empirical findings	149
4.2. Theoretical findings	151
4.3. Limitations	154
4.4. Avenues for future research	155
References	156

Abstract

Over the past decade, the proliferation of (dis)information has become a defining feature of political communication across post-Soviet Eastern Europe. While existing research has largely focused on foreign influence campaigns, comparatively less attention has been paid to the domestic actors and how (dis)information dynamics unfold within domestic political contexts in emerging democracies. This doctoral thesis, presented as a compendium of articles, addresses this gap by examining (dis)information campaigns in Georgia, Moldova, and Russia between 2019 and 2025. The study is guided by two research questions. The first investigates the types and narrative structures of (dis)information disseminated by political elites and how these reflect their institutional objectives. The second asks how the psychological link between political elites and the audience is maintained through the lenses of emotions to maximize influence on the public. Applying qualitative content analysis within the discipline of international relations, the research identifies how (dis)information functions as a system of emotional manipulation to gain hearts and minds in Eastern Europe.

Resum

Durant l'última dècada, la proliferació de la (des)informació s'ha convertit en una característica definidora de la comunicació política a l'Europa Oriental postsoviètica. Tot i que la recerca existent s'ha centrat principalment en les campanyes d'influència estrangera, s'ha prestat comparativament menys atenció als actors domèstics i a la manera com les dinàmiques de (des)informació es desenvolupen dins dels contextos polítics interns de les democràcies emergents. Aquesta tesi doctoral, presentada com un compendi d'articles, aborda aquest buit analitzant les campanyes de (des)informació a Geòrgia, Moldàvia i Rússia entre 2019 i 2025. L'estudi es guia per dues preguntes de recerca. La primera investiga els tipus i les estructures narratives de la (des)informació difosa per les elits polítiques i com aquestes reflecteixen els seus objectius institucionals. La segona examina com es manté el vincle psicològic entre les elits polítiques i l'audiència a través de les emocions per tal de maximitzar la seva influència sobre l'opinió pública. Mitjançant l'aplicació d'una anàlisi de contingut qualitativa dins de la

disciplina de les relacions internacionals, la recerca identifica com la (des)informació funciona com un sistema de governança emocional a l'Europa Oriental.

Resumen

Durante la última década, la proliferación de (des)información se ha convertido en una característica definitoria de la comunicación política en Europa Oriental postsoviética. Si bien la investigación existente se ha centrado en gran medida en las campañas de influencia extranjera, se ha prestado comparativamente menos atención a los actores domésticos y a la manera en que las dinámicas de (des)información se desarrollan dentro de los contextos políticos internos de las democracias emergentes. Esta tesis doctoral, presentada como un compendio de artículos, aborda esta brecha analizando las campañas de (des)información en Georgia, Moldavia y Rusia entre 2019 y 2025. El estudio se guía por dos preguntas de investigación. La primera investiga los tipos y las estructuras narrativas de la (des)información difundida por las élites políticas y cómo estas reflejan sus objetivos institucionales. La segunda examina cómo se mantiene el vínculo psicológico entre las élites políticas y la audiencia a través de las emociones para maximizar su influencia sobre la opinión pública. Aplicando análisis de contenido cualitativo dentro de la disciplina de las relaciones internacionales, la investigación identifica cómo la (des)información funciona como un sistema de gobernanza emocional en Europa Oriental.

1. Introduction

In contemporary post-Soviet Eastern Europe, political communication is increasingly shaped by the strategic use of information. Although countries in Eastern Europe have followed different political trajectories since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the information environment has become a central arena in which political authority, legitimacy, and public trust have been contested. Indeed, (dis)information became a core mechanism used by diverse domestic political actors, including both those in power and those in opposition, to mobilize supporters and delegitimize rivals. These developments are particularly consequential in Eastern Europe, where political institutions, media systems, and democratic practices remain unevenly consolidated and therefore more vulnerable to manipulation through strategic narratives.

Yet existing research has largely focused on foreign influence operations, leaving the role of domestic actors and the mechanisms through which their narratives resonate with audiences comparatively underexplored. Understanding how domestic (dis)information is constructed, transmitted, and consumed is crucial for grasping the mechanisms through which emotions are strategically manipulated to sustain specific political or social outcomes. The central research puzzle of this thesis revolves around the actors, contexts, and mechanisms that enable (dis)information to achieve such high saliency in political life. This thesis by compendium of articles examines how local (dis)information campaigns, disseminated by domestic actors, manipulate hearts and minds in three particular Eastern European countries: Georgia, Moldova, and Russia. The term (dis)information, as employed in this thesis, refers to a broad spectrum of information ranging from verified facts to outright fabrications and deceptive narratives. This conceptualisation acknowledges that (dis)information is not solely about falsehoods or propaganda, but also about how factual and truthful content can be strategically deployed to make the public internalise fabricated realities. In doing so, this research moves beyond binary understandings of truth versus falsehood and situates (dis)information within broader processes of meaning-making and emotional mobilisation.

This thesis, presented as a compendium of articles, is guided by two overarching research questions. The first question investigates what types and narrative structures of (dis)information political elites disseminate in Georgia, Moldova, and Russia. Unpacking this

question involves identifying the specific thematic clusters that elites use to curate a particular worldview. It examines how these narratives are tailored to the institutional objectives of the actors involved. The second research question asks how the psychological mechanism, which connects the political elites and the audience, is established and maintained. This doctoral thesis integrates insights from political communication and political psychology within the discipline of international relations to analyze narratives through the lenses of emotions. This interdisciplinary approach helps to identify the emotional mechanisms political elites use to reinforce their connection with the public.

The study covers the period from 2019 to 2024, a timeframe marked by intense political turmoil and rapid technological transformation in Eastern Europe, both of which distinguish it from earlier phases. Russia, Georgia, and Moldova provide a revealing spectrum of political regimes: from Russia's consolidated authoritarianism and its near-total media control, through Georgia's ever-growing hybrid democracy, to Moldova's comparatively pluralistic environment. These differences are reflected in international democracy and media freedom indices, allowing for an analysis of how (dis)information adapts to varying degrees of openness.

Furthermore, the research addresses the security challenges posed by influence operations that target public trust in political elites to destabilize a state from within. These insights offer a foundation for security actors to develop defensive measures that account for the psychological and emotional dimensions of such campaigns. Ultimately, the work informs the decision-making of those tasked with protecting democratic governance and navigating the shifting geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe.

The doctoral dissertation by compendium of articles consists of an overarching introduction, three sections, and overarching conclusions. An overarching Introduction is divided into four sections. The first section of the Introduction provides a historical background on (dis)information campaigns in post-Soviet Eastern Europe; then, it reviews the existing literature, which is followed by the theoretical underpinnings and methodology employed in the research. In a second section of the doctoral thesis, we synthesize the findings of individual case studies with regard to overarching research questions and provide a summary of the articles. The third section comprises three academic papers reproduced in full, where (dis)information dynamics in Georgia, Moldova, and Russia is explored and analysed. The final section of this doctoral dissertation presents overarching Conclusions, which reflect on the contributions of the thesis. It draws broader empirical and theoretical conclusions about the

mechanisms through which (dis)information operates, outlining the limitations of this study, and suggesting directions for future research.

1.1. Eastern European (dis)information in a historical and contemporary perspective.

During the Cold War, (dis)information functioned as a key element of the Soviet regime, which then encompassed all three countries – Georgia, Moldova, and the Russian Federation – under research in this doctoral thesis. (Dis)information was employed not only to maintain domestic ideological conformity but also to ensure alignment within the Eastern Bloc, while the rest of the communist world was much less exposed to Soviet (dis)information. More than a tool of censorship, Soviet domestic (dis)information involved long-running campaigns to construct alternative realities, shaping how citizens interpreted political events, historical legacies, and their place in the world (Cull et al. 2017). One of the prominent goals of Soviet (dis)information was to construct a grand narrative about the moral and political superiority of socialism. A critical component of this strategy was the depiction of Western societies as decadent, unstable, and rife with injustice. To achieve this, Soviet outlets consistently portrayed Western cities as plagued by systemic failures such as street crime and the AIDS epidemic. Such narratives framed social crises as unique byproducts of capitalist moral decay while rendering the USSR's own internal crises invisible (Aleksandrovich and Makhov 1965, in Connor 1971; Connor 1971; Kenez 1985; Field 1995; Alexander 2026). Similarly, (dis)information was instrumental in justifying military interventions such as the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. In this case, public uprisings were framed as Western-orchestrated “fascist coups.” This portrayal evolved into a distorted historical narrative that persisted even after the dissolution of the USSR (Gessen 2012). This strategic use of (dis)information was made possible by the state's total control over media and information (Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965; Mickiewicz 2023). Ultimately, this monopoly enabled more than just anti-Western rhetoric; it supported a strategic campaign to convince citizens that the Soviet system was superior and to limit the appeal of alternative models (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956).

In the 1990s, newly independent states struggled to develop independent media ecosystems. In many cases, the vacuum left by the Soviet Union was filled by either domestic elites or external actors seeking to maintain influence. In Russia, the initial years following independence saw an explosion of media pluralism, with a diverse array of newspapers, television channels, and radio stations emerging. This shift resulted from new legislation supporting press freedom and

private media ownership. Such a legal shift paved the way for a diverse media landscape and represented a foundational change that dismantled decades of state monopoly over information dissemination (Vartanova 2011). Foreign NGOs like Internews played a catalytic role by supplying the necessary infrastructure and training to fledgling independent TV stations across the country, eventually linking over 100 regional broadcasters. Outlets such as Ekho Moskvyy and Nezavisimaya Gazeta turned investigative reporting and the confrontational questioning of power into symbols of newfound journalistic courage. Powerful entrepreneurs such as Vladimir Gusinsky leveraged this environment to create media holdings, including NTV, Segodnya, and Echo Moskvyy, and were critical about abuses of power during the first Chechnya war of 1994 (Mickiewicz 1999).

During this period, Russia was described as possessing a form of “genuinely pluralistic unfree media,” recognizing that while formal freedoms existed, media independence remained contingent on the influence of various power groups and oligarchic networks (de Smaele 1999). The chaotic nature of the 1990s, coupled with economic turmoil and political instability, made the media environment vulnerable to capture. By the mid-1990s, this imperfect pluralism began to erode further as economic instability forced many outlets into financial dependence on oligarchs or the state. Pivotal moments, such as NTV’s dramatic reversal of editorial stance during Boris Yeltsin’s 1996 re-election campaign, exposed the fragility of press independence (Cooper 2020). This period marked a transition from the relatively unregulated media environment of the early 1990s to a more controlled landscape, especially following the second Chechnya war (Cooper 2020). The process of media control and consolidation under government ownership was continued by Yeltsin’s successor, Vladimir Putin. As Reporters Without Borders (2006) noted, Russia was slowly but steadily dismantling the free media, with industrial groups close to the presidency buying up nearly all independent media outlets. By the early 2000s, the Russian state systematically reasserted control over major news outlets, and independent television networks were taken over by state-affiliated corporations (Lipman 2009; Roudakova 2017). State-controlled channels such as Channel One, NTV, and Russia-24 became the dominant sources of political information, promoting Kremlin-aligned narratives and often blending factual reporting with strategic distortion (Lough et al. 2014; Fossato 2006; Roudakova 2017).

In countries such as Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, where Russian remained the language largely used in public discourse, Russian state media and its local

branches played a key role in local information ecosystems (Laruelle 2021). Even in states that pursued a more Western-oriented foreign policy, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic countries, Russian television maintained a foothold among certain segments of the population. This was particularly true for the older generations who had grown up consuming Soviet media (Lough et al. 2014; Szostek 2014). Consequently, networks such as ORT (later renamed Channel One), RTR (Russia-1), and NTV retained large audiences, broadcasting not only in Russia but also across much of the post-Soviet space (Hutchings and Tolz 2015). While being ‘domesticated’ by different post-Soviet states, these channels often framed news through a lens that reinforced a shared post-Soviet identity and portrayed Russia as the rightful centre of political and cultural influence in the region (Oates 2013). The rebroadcast of Russian media content through local media was also widespread. In Moldova and Georgia, for example, local oligarch-controlled outlets aired Russian news and political talk shows, borrowing (dis)information narratives directly (Cenuşa 2024; Jones 2013).

A shift in the (dis)information environment occurred in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This was triggered by a significant increase in Russian investment in media with international coverage, as the Russian government expanded funding for RT and Sputnik to amplify the Kremlin’s version of events (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of internet coverage facilitated the growth of digital media networks. By the mid-2010s, RT’s annual budget had surpassed \$300 million, reflecting its strategic importance within Russia’s broader communication doctrine (Elsawah and Howard 2020). Subsequently, the strategic importance of (dis)information has been explicitly acknowledged in Russian government documents, which outline its role as a key instrument in information warfare, including against local political dissent. The 2014 Russian Military Doctrine refers to the "integrated use of military force and non-military measures," including information campaigns, as a method of achieving strategic objectives (Giles 2016). Similarly, the 2016 Information Security Doctrine highlights the necessity of advancing Russia’s interests through proactive information operations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). The emphasis on these operations underscores the centrality of strategic communication not only in foreign policy, but also in managing domestic and regional influence. For Russian domestic audiences, such doctrines legitimize the use of state-controlled media to shape public opinion and maintain regime stability. In the Eastern European post-Soviet space, these doctrines support sustained information campaigns aimed at preserving cultural and political influence among Russian-speaking populations. Tools like RT, Sputnik, and local pro-Russian

media function as extensions of these strategies, reinforcing Kremlin-aligned narratives and undermining Western-oriented reforms.

In addition, since 2014, social media platforms have become crucial battlegrounds for (dis)information campaigns. The rapid spread of targeted content via Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube amplifies the reach of political actors and interest groups seeking to manipulate public opinion. Recent studies indicate that social media algorithms often prioritize sensational and emotionally charged content, thereby facilitating the virality of (dis)information (Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2018). The digital sphere has also enabled the creation of alternative media ecosystems where conspiracy theories and unverifiable claims flourish. Such environments further complicate efforts to establish a shared factual reality. Furthermore, the mechanisms driving the “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” (Pariser 2012) have changed due to highly personalized and algorithm-driven information environments. In these spaces, emotional and divisive content is more likely to spread rapidly and reach targeted audiences (Piccardi et al. 2025; Lerman et al. 2024). This is particularly evident in Eastern Europe, where historical grievances and geopolitical divides between pro-Russian and pro-Western camps provide fertile ground for the manipulation of collective memory and identity (Bekus 2018). Finally, in many Eastern European countries, prolonged economic instability—characterized by high unemployment, inflation, and low wages—along with widespread corruption and perceived inefficiencies in government institutions, has eroded public trust (OECD 2024). This environment has contributed to the proliferation of (dis)information, as disillusioned citizens increasingly turn to alternative sources of knowledge that resonate with their lived experiences and anxieties (Nielsen and Graves 2017). Together, these factors have created an environment in which (dis)information thrives, shaping political debates, electoral outcomes, and social cohesion.

Within this environment, and in the view of the expansion of digitalization, (dis)information has penetrated all spheres of life, from electoral processes to public health. In Ukraine, this digital reach facilitated Russian efforts to sustain separatists in Donbas by spreading narratives about a “civil war” rather than foreign aggression. Such messaging deepened the mental and emotional cleavage between Kyiv-controlled areas and the inhabitants of conflict-affected zones, effectively weaponizing social media to maintain a state of permanent instability (Khalدارova 2016). Similar societal cleavages were tracked in Moldova and Georgia, where populations were increasingly divided into opposing camps. These divisions were often framed

as a clash of civilizations: pro-Russian "traditional values" versus pro-Western "liberal decadence" (Cenuşa 2024; Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Dubovyk 2019). Russian society was also affected by these polarizing dynamics. A deep rift emerged between the minority supporting the opposition leader Alexei Navalny—who used YouTube to bypass state censorship—and the majority consolidated around Vladimir Putin's regime. The state responded by branding the political opposition as "foreign agents," thereby using (dis)information to delegitimize domestic dissent (Greene and Robertson 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a second critical juncture for the evolution of (dis)information in Eastern Europe, following the annexation of Crimea. This global crisis accelerated the spread of conspiracy theories, many of which stemmed from Russia while others emerged organically from local sources. The Kremlin adopted a strategy of strategic confusion, promoting the Sputnik V vaccine domestically while simultaneously amplifying anti-vaccination scepticism and conspiracy theories targeting Western vaccines in Eastern Europe (EUvsDisinfo 2021). However, the pandemic also gave rise to local (dis)informers in countries like Georgia and Moldova who learned to monetize clickable titles and sensationalism independent of geopolitical actors. Such actors largely sabotaged vaccination efforts in Eastern Europe, leading to significantly lower vaccination rates compared to Western Europe and exposing the fragility of the region's information ecosystems (EUvsDisinfo 2021). For instance, Russian state media promoted the Sputnik V vaccine domestically as a scientific triumph while simultaneously framing Western vaccines in Ukraine and Moldova as dangerous geopolitical tools (EUvsDisinfo 2021; Yablokov, Moen-Larsen, and Blakkisrud 2025). During the pandemic, external narratives were actively adapted by local proxies for internal political gain. In both Moldova and Georgia, the Orthodox Church and conservative political groups acted as communication proxies, reframing health measures as an existential liberal threat to traditional values and religious freedom (Cenuşa 2024; Goguadze and Gogsadze 2020).

(Dis)information originated not only from Russian bots but also from local priests and politicians. In Moldova, external narratives were domesticated by the pro-Russian Socialist Party and the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which successfully reframed Western vaccines as tools of control during the 2020 election. This strategy presented the Russian Sputnik V as the safe, Orthodox alternative (Cenuşa 2024). In Georgia, the ruling party's rhetoric, often amplified by the Georgian Orthodox Church and far-right groups, framed health measures such as communion changes as an existential liberal experiment aimed at destroying traditional faith

(Goguadze and Gogsadze 2020; Kreko 2020). The most potent narrative bridge was the conspiracy theory regarding US-funded biological laboratories in Ukraine and Georgia. Initially seeded during the pandemic to explain the origin of COVID-19, this narrative was later weaponized in 2022 to justify the Russian invasion as a preemptive strike against biological weapons (Kovacheva 2023).

The shock to the information space caused by COVID-19 prompted governments to introduce measures to combat what they considered disinformation. In Russia, the state further cemented its control through the rapid adoption of laws criminalizing the intentional dissemination of false information related to the pandemic. This expanded the legal basis for online censorship (Soldatov and Borogan 2022). Meanwhile, states like Ukraine and Moldova focused on establishing formal governmental centers for strategic communication and engaging in efforts to de-platform prominent sources of medical disinformation (Cenuşa 2024). However, this period of heightened state restriction coincided with the mass development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools and methods to overcome censorship. Crucially, tools such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and proxies became widespread in Eastern Europe. These were driven by the public's anxiety and confusion, which encouraged citizens to bypass official information channels (Shahbaz, Funk, and Vesteinsson 2022). In Russia, the use of VPNs soared significantly, a trend later accelerated by the blocking of major platforms after 2022 (Epifanova 2020). Digital trolls and bot networks were tested effectively during this period; for unscrupulous geopolitical actors, they enhanced vaccine diplomacy, while for domestic political elites, they offered a new way to access power. These networks promoted contradictory narratives, accusing governments of health dictatorship when restrictions were imposed while simultaneously accusing them of incompetence for failing to stop the virus (Kotseva et al. 2023).

As the pandemic ended, a new critical juncture arose with Russia amassing troops near the Ukrainian border. Eastern Europe reacted with anxiety, while (dis)information campaigns intensified massively to exploit this fear. These campaigns aimed to undermine trust in local governments, often portraying Western warnings as hysteria designed to provoke conflict. This period served as a final preparation phase, where the information space was flooded with conflicting narratives to confuse the public and paralyze decision-making processes (Giles 2024).

In Russia, the regime secured unexpectedly high support for the war, even though many citizens had relatives in Ukraine. This demonstrated the power of total media isolation and the rally around the flag effect (Levada Center 2022; Oates 2023). In other Eastern European countries, internal political dynamics were also reshaped by the ubiquity of the Russian threat. In Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party unexpectedly adopted (dis)information narratives about a Global War Party trying to open a second front in the Caucasus to discredit the opposition (Tabatadze and Gigauri 2025). Similarly, in Moldova, hybrid threats evolved into bomb hoaxes and deepfake attacks aimed at destabilizing the pro-European government as it attempted to implement reforms necessary to diminish energy dependence on Russia.

Beyond the technological advancements launched during COVID-19, this period was defined by the imposition of strict media restrictions across the region. The Russian government sought to hermetically seal its domestic information bubble; in 2022 alone, authorities blocked over 247,000 web pages, including all major independent news outlets and foreign social platforms (Roskomsvoboda 2023). Conversely, Moldova and Ukraine restricted Russian media to create a defensive shield against hostile influence. Ukraine consolidated all national TV channels into a single United News telethon to align messaging, while Moldova suspended the licenses of six pro-Russian TV channels in late 2022 and blocked over 50 websites linked to the Kremlin by 2023. In contrast, the Georgian government increasingly engaged in developing disinformation itself, mimicking Russian tactics such as Foreign Agent laws to target civil society.

From the 2022 full-scale invasion onwards, (dis)information has become an integral part of the information space. As media restrictions prevent global geopolitical actors from reaching Eastern European markets directly, they engage (dis)informers to bypass these bans (U.S. Department of State 2020). Consequently, domestic (dis)information has become even more prominent than during the pandemic as local actors step in to fill the vacuum. In this environment, the digital political communication of Eastern Europe is dominated by large-scale, multi-modal platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. Facebook continues to function as a central hub for political messaging, while YouTube serves as both an archive and a real-time broadcaster for political content. Telegram has also emerged as a crucial tool for rapid dissemination across the region. However, it has increasingly fallen out of favor with the Kremlin, as seen in the 2025 restrictions on its voice and video calling features (Reuters 2025). Against this backdrop, Russian authorities have promoted MAX, a state-backed

messenger positioned as a national platform for communication and digital sovereignty (Epifanova and Dietrich 2022). These evolving technological factors, along with persistent (dis)information campaigns, make the Eastern European environment a site of interest for researching (dis)information and its mechanisms. The next chapter will discuss how researchers captured these dynamics and the academic frameworks used to look into them.

1.2 Literature review: (Dis)information in Eastern Europe

Scholars argue that (dis)information is particularly prevalent in the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe, where the legacy of the USSR, weak institutional frameworks, and political polarization create a conducive environment for its proliferation (Lanozka 2016; Bradshaw and Howard, 2018; Helmus et al. 2016; Bodine-Baron et al. 2018). Following the global trends in (dis)information studies, this scholarship divides into the study of foreign influence operations and local populist messaging. The vast majority of literature related to (dis)information in Eastern Europe belongs to the first group and contains scholars' considerations of foreign influence through targeted (dis)information campaigns. The presence of such a potent (dis)information hegemon as the Russian Federation in the region explains why the largest body of literature examines Russia's efforts to influence foreign audiences (both political elites and populations) through the export of (dis)information campaigns.

In the Eastern European context, scholars emphasize the strategic nature of (dis)information “in line with Russia's interventionist foreign policy” (Bey 2018, p. 34; see also Clem, Herron and Tepnadze 2023). Building on this interpretation, researchers adopt a hybrid war perspective, analysing (dis)information as an asymmetric tool of influence designed to support border-revisionist agendas in Russia's near abroad (Bolt 2021; Mirel 2021; Schuette 2023). This body of research is especially concerned with the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, which have been consistently targeted by Russian (dis)information campaigns (Studzińska 2015; Scheidt 2019; Albu 2023; Gamdlishvili, Elizbarashvili and Marina 2024). Hybrid war is a non-linear offense where hard and soft tools are equally important (Schnauffer 2017; Petraitis 2024). The goal of border revisionism and coordination with conventional military forces are key characteristics that link (dis)information with hybrid war (Lanozka 2016; DeBenedictis 2021). What makes it hybrid is that the essence of (dis)information operations lies in the paramilitary domain, which allows for analysing the targeted audience as civilians who are “bombarded with content” (McGeehan 2018, p. 51). An important feature of this literature is viewing (dis)information only in combination with the presence of conventional military power. Earlier studies discussed Russian narratives surrounding the offense in the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia in 2008 (Allison 2008). The most developed literature on this point is the combination of military, intelligence,

and information assets which allowed for the Kremlin's occupation of Crimea in 2014, without visible hot military clashes (Kasapoglu 2015; Wither 2016).

Scholars note that while revisionism is tied to Russia's actions on a certain territory, the targeted audience extends far beyond it to support this effort. Orenstein (2019), for example, notes that the financial support Marine Le Pen's National Front received from a Kremlin-linked Russian bank served to advance a narrative legitimizing the 2015 Crimean referendum among French audiences. He also points out that Russian occupation authorities invited politicians from the Austrian Freedom Party, Alternative for Germany, Ataka (Bulgaria), and Change (Poland)—whose leaders are now in prison—as well as Italy's Northern League, the Serbian Radical Party, and the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy Party to act as “observers” in Crimea, thereby producing a confirmation (dis)informing narrative. Similarly, Prier (2017) showcases Russian efforts to undermine Hillary Clinton's image before the 2016 presidential election in the US in favor of a candidate more loyal to the Russian government. Scholars have extensively researched similar processes in Russia's ‘near abroad’, such as Russian TV engagement with the Moldovan audience (Bucătaru 2018).

While most scholars tend to discuss (dis)information within ‘hybrid war’ and ‘information war’ interchangeably (Sakwa 2023; Arutunyan 2022), some disagree with this view (see Wigell 2019; Baumann 2020; Person, Kulalic and Mayle 2024). Leguchka (2022), for example, contests the hybrid war lens, advocating the information warfare lens. She posits that when some apply the term ‘hybrid’, it shifts the emphasis to seeding chaos to achieve tactical goals in war, primarily with the help of non-state actors, while blurring the government's responsibility for (dis)informing the public. Instead, Russian strategic documents conceptualize information warfare as influencing public consciousness through coordinated state, media, and security structures in both peacetime and wartime contexts—a definition more consistent with the essence of Russian foreign (dis)information campaigns. Drawing on this, Leguchka argues that what makes (dis)information a successful instrument of Russian external action is the coordinated effort of special services, propaganda (responsible for persuasion), and (dis)information (responsible for deception). This vision does not necessarily require conventional military components but relies on soft and asymmetric measures from the political communication domain. A prominent example of this vision is Fridman's (2018) exploration of the Russian military theorist Igor Panarin's work on how to target the minds of the political elite and the general population. According to him, besides intelligence,

information war draws on the ‘infiltration of negative commentaries and (dis)information into the informational domain of the adversary’. Beyond this offensive aspect, it functions by neutralizing similar actions of the adversary and hindering its efforts to gather required information (Panarin 2010 in Fridman 2018, p.87).

It is worth noting that (dis)information in the context of information warfare is often studied at the level of specific tools and components rather than as a comprehensive phenomenon. As showcased by Gamkrelidze (2022), research often isolates specific tactics, such as the vilification of Georgia’s allies (the EU and the US), or, as explored by Kuźnicka-Błaszowska and Kostyuk (2025), the use of deepfakes—videos, photos, and voice recordings—to discredit the Ukrainian leadership during the 2022 invasion. Moreover, the vast majority of literature tends to narrow the definition of (dis)information to strictly falsified facts. For example, Chew, Fort and Chew (2023) examine narratives surrounding the invasion disseminated in Russia and the region. Similarly, Cigar (2023) restricts his analysis of the Russian (dis)information campaign regarding biological weapons in Ukraine exclusively to false claims. Finally, apart from this focus on falsity, studies tend to rely heavily on single-source databases like EUvsDisinfo (e.g., Stewart et al. 2024), which may lead to interpretive distortion.

The trend to focus on false claims and negative slander is preserved in the studies examining the role of digital media in (dis)information campaigns. It is described as a “low-cost and highly effective offensive weapon,” exemplified by the Russian information operations during the 2008 war in Georgia (Treyger, Cheravitch and Cohen 2022, p.15; Hatch 2019), and in the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (Giegerich 2016; Wither 2016; Hammond-Errey 2019; Clem, Herron and Tepnadze 2023). Scholars agree that such digitalized offenses succeed to a large extent due to bot and troll armies. These combatants are recruited worldwide, illustrating how information warfare has become increasingly integrated into Russia’s military and security doctrine (Chkhikvadze et al. 2019; Vogel and Musamba 2024).

Yet, according to the scholars, the success of these operations is not solely dependent on state actors; literature increasingly indicates that (dis)information is sustained through routine civic communication. In this context, the specific goal to deceive is often absent among the users themselves, yet their participation is essential to the ecosystem. Consequently, existing literature often fuses (dis)information and misinformation in a single conceptualization, suggesting that individual citizens play a far more prominent role in propagating narratives than is typically acknowledged in traditional information warfare studies. For instance,

Golovchenko, Hartmann, and Adler-Nissen (2018) conceptualize these citizens as curators, positing that user-led debates—such as those surrounding the MH17 incident—are crucial for spreading (dis)information, particularly among active participants near the Ukrainian frontline. In this vein, Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen (2022) demonstrate how pro-Kremlin groups like Nashi independently amplify official messaging, forming a significant, albeit informal, extension of Russian state efforts. Furthermore, van der Vet (2021) complicates this picture by revealing the domestic reality of 'troll factories,' where vulnerable populations work in precarious conditions to support these regime-financed operations. Ultimately, as Mejias and Vokuev (2017) argue, this spectrum of involvement illustrates how citizens actively participate in their own disenfranchisement, contributing to a new order where (dis)information acquires increasing authority.

Beyond viewing (dis)information solely as an offensive capability, more recent hybrid and information war studies exploring the context of the Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict showcase (dis)information as a defensive paramilitary tool. For example, researchers explore how the Ukrainian government sought to employ the internet as a non-kinetic instrument of defense in warfare, establishing the Information Army under the Ministry of Information Policy to mobilize citizens against Russian online (dis)information (Pavlíková, Šenkýřová and Drmola 2021). These studies compare Russia and Ukraine as (dis)information providers, mostly focusing on how the re- and de-contextualization of visuals plays an important role to reshape “partisan boundaries between warring sides”, including among international audiences (Hameleers 2025, p. 95; see also García-Marín and Salvat-Martinrey 2023).

Beyond the (para)military sphere, scholars conceptualize (dis)information as a core instrument of Russian foreign policy, defined by some as a specific variation of Russian 'soft power' (Van Herpen 2016; Laruelle 2021). For instance, Bradshaw et al. (2024) explore (dis)information through the lens of strategic narratives tailored to specific geographies. Within this strand of research, (dis)information is analyzed as an effort designed to destabilize political systems, install loyal leadership, polarize societies, and ultimately reintegrate post-Soviet states into a Russia-led civilizational sphere (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2020; Thornton and Miron 2022). Within this approach, studies examine the specific thematic narratives that structure Russian propaganda worldwide, including anti-Western messaging, the promotion of the ‘Russian World’ (Russkiy Mir), appeals to Soviet nostalgia, the advocacy of traditional values, the

manipulation of World War II memory, and the spread of conspiracy theories (Bokša 2019; Terracciano 2023; Chew et al. 2023).

These thematic narratives are also central to scholarship which uses the analytical lens of the democratization of non-EU Eastern Europe. Authors use them as empirical evidence when analyzing the operational techniques of Russian influence campaigns, which demonstrates how identity-based grievances and societal vulnerabilities are exploited to interfere in democratic processes and raise the costs of democratization (Dimitrova et al. 2017; Nisbet and Kamenchuk 2019; Tolz and Hutchings 2023; Tacu 2024). Within this framework, (dis)information in these studies is used in its ‘thin’ definition (limited to falsified facts). It is understood as a tool for influencing electoral outcomes in Russia’s ‘near abroad’ (Stewart 2022; Matveyenko 2023; Dvornikova 2023; Nistor and Stretea 2024), relying heavily on collaboration with local actors who receive financial and ideological support from Kremlin-affiliated institutions (Makhashvili 2017; Pociumban 2023). Consequently, the role of domestic (dis)informers in Eastern European states is frequently limited to integral, yet dependent, components of Russian campaigns (Bolkvadze 2021; Dvornikova 2023; Nistor and Stretea 2024). This perspective, therefore, obscures the distinct agency of these local actors, reducing them to mere conduits of Kremlin messaging.

In contrast to the extensive scholarship on foreign-led influence operations, domestic (dis)information in Eastern Europe remains relatively understudied. To the best of our knowledge, most of the related scholarship is interested in the structure and ‘truth value’ of political messages, as well as the networks of actors who disseminate them. Early scholarship on this subject does not explicitly address (dis)information as a research focus but centers on the Russian government's ideological discourse designed to reach the Russian population. These studies are not fully about (dis)information in our understanding of the concept: they only partially discuss loyalty-enforcing mythologies disseminated by state-funded media and their role in sustaining the Russian authoritarian trajectory (Fossato 2006).

These studies used the conceptual lenses of ideology to explore media coverage of the Chechen wars and the Beslan school tragedy. The authors demonstrate how Russian state outlets used ideological narratives to interpret the secessionist movement in Chechnya, explain the Russian army’s actions to a domestic audience, and suppress dissent within the country (Mickiewicz 1999; Hutchings and Rulyova 2009). Besides Russia, literature has mostly focused on the communication of political parties during electoral campaigns in Moldova and Georgia through

the lens of populism, viewing (dis)information either as false claims or as the denigration of the opponent (Stanley 2017; Glahn 2018; Gohlke 2021; Moisé 2021; Marandici 2022; Bakhtadze 2021; Matsaberidze 2020; Kakachia and Kakabadze 2024). It also involves the intersection of populism and conservative rhetoric among political groups, parties, and the Orthodox Church regarding family values and LGBTQ+ rights (Kuprashvili 2021; Matsaberidze 2025).

In comparison with formal academic literature, the efforts of NGOs to analyze (dis)information dynamics are more active. These efforts focus on the populist discourses of local political elites (Gozalishvili 2021) and investigate local actors' attempts to facilitate the penetration of Russian propaganda and fake news into the local media space. In this vein, for example, Cole (2024) explores how openly pro-Kremlin ultra-conservative political parties host the propagandist Alexander Dugin on their TV shows in Moldova. Similarly, Kubś and Hoffman (2025) explore the Russian cultural foundation "Promotion of Social Projects" established in Moldova and how its websites constitute a covert effort to conduct an influence campaign in the country. Significant efforts among NGOs also involve tracking false claims regarding the EU and NATO in Moldova, as well as their portrayal in media outlets loyal to the Russian Federation (Muravschi 2024; see similarly Holdiş 2020; Cravcenco-Zaharia 2022; Culeac 2024). There is also active work on the exploration of falsified information by Georgian fact-checking organizations. They regularly monitor (dis)information campaigns and issue detailed reports on emerging trends and the actors involved (Media Development Foundation 2024; FactCheck Georgia 2024). The prevalence of these practical reports highlights a critical academic gap, as civil society organizations frequently identify domestic (dis)information trends that have yet to be rigorously theorized or analyzed within a scholarly framework. While these organizations play a significant role in mapping immediate events, academic analysis of the underlying domestic (dis)information dynamics remains relatively underdeveloped.

Finally, compared to studies on messages and actors, significantly less research is dedicated to the mechanisms which link political elites and the audiences. While some studies have attempted to investigate the psychological tools that operationalize (dis)information in the hearts and minds of the public, they predominantly isolate cultural and historical factors rather than examining the full spectrum of psychological instruments. To explain the efficacy of propaganda, scholars often use the lens of discourses whose meanings resonate within a given culture. Tolz and Hutchings (2023), utilizing a blend of domestic broadcast and international

coverage, explore how Russian media structure narratives to embed factual distortions “within familiar historical and cultural discourses and populate them with floating signifiers filled with meanings expected to resonate with segments of the public by addressing their current concerns and exploiting identitarian needs shaped by nostalgia for Russia’s former ‘great power’ status” (p. 360).

Similarly, Pomerantsev (2014) and Satter (2011) outline how factual distortions are deeply embedded into cultural legacies. This perspective is complemented by Domańska (2022), who shows how leaders manipulate memory politics to reinforce state legitimacy. While Ostrovsky (2016) discusses the evolution of the Russian media ecosystem and nationalist narratives in constructing a post-Soviet identity, this research raises questions about the actorness of the media but ultimately does not look into the full spectrum of (dis)information, narrowing its focus instead to fake news within a specific historical timeframe.

More recent work shifts the focus to audience reception and blame attribution (Alyukov and Zavadskaya 2024) or partisan motivation (Gehle et al. 2024). Alyukov further identifies that credibility increases when television is reinforced by social media (2024) and that reception is mediated by heuristics such as personal experience (2023) or rooted in political apathy and a sense of exceptionalism (2022). However, these studies tend to treat these psychological and discursive elements in isolation rather than as a cohesive elite-to-public mechanism. Also, the scholarship leaves it for future research to explore how language and ethnic identity could probe whether it reflects past exposure to (dis)information claims or a vulnerability to certain types of messaging (Erlich and Garner 2023).

To sum up, the existing literature on (dis)information in Eastern Europe reveals a rich but uneven landscape of scholarly inquiry. A dominant body of research focuses on foreign-led (dis)information, particularly from Russia, examining its geopolitical objectives, influence operations, and strategic communication tactics targeting neighboring post-Soviet states. In contrast, domestic (dis)information—defined as strategically crafted messaging by local actors aimed at internal audiences—remains comparatively underexplored. While some literature addresses biased domestic media narratives and electoral propaganda, most of these studies focus on Russia. Moreover, academic studies lag behind the practical efforts of NGOs and fact-checking organizations in mapping and analyzing domestic (dis)information trends, which are shaped by the rapidly evolving digital environment.

Most existing academic research in this field is based on empirical evidence collected before 2019–2020 and, therefore, does not reflect two major developments that have significantly influenced the information environment in the last five years. First, Russia's preparations for and later full-scale invasion of Ukraine accelerated the evolution of influence operations within Russia, as well as in Eastern European countries such as Georgia and Moldova. Second, there has been an acceleration in the development of digital media influence technologies. This thesis addresses this empirical gap by investigating the nature, content, and effects of domestic (dis)information in Russia, Moldova, and Georgia over the period from 2019 to 2024.

Another problem is that in domestic (dis)information scholarship, there is a persistent confusion between Russian (i.e., technically originating from Russia) and pro-Russian domestic (dis)information. While we acknowledge that Russia might seek to conceal its influence, authors rarely mention this and even more rarely provide factual proof of legal connections between Russia and the sources of this (dis)information. Instead, they tend to label any (dis)information disseminated in Eastern European countries which can be interpreted as serving Russian interests as "Russian." For example, Alina-Mogos, Grap, and Sandru (2022) cast (dis)information stemming from Ukrainian channels which fell under the Ukrainian State Security Service ban for promoting terrorism and serving Russian interests (112 Ukraine, NewsOne, Zik, and affiliated regional broadcasters) as Russian (dis)information. We believe this approach might generate confusion. So, in this research, we consider (dis)information domestic if it is produced and/or disseminated by actors legally established in these countries, whichever interests it serves. We leave it to the analysis to establish possible external influence on these sources.

Beyond these empirical limitations, existing scholarship also reveals important conceptual shortcomings in how domestic (dis)information is understood and studied. Most analyses focus on populist messaging and its role in political mobilization, offering limited insights into strategic campaigns orchestrated by local actors. Also, existing studies focus on the efforts of political actors to deceive or mislead audiences, yet (dis)information dynamics extend far beyond simple deception. Political elites do not necessarily rely on falsehoods; they can also inform audiences about politically salient issues in ways that curate a specific worldview. This constructive aspect of (dis)information has received comparatively little attention.

Finally, domestic (dis)information is primarily focused on actors and content, while the link between political elites and the audience is scarcely researched. Even in attempts to research

it, studies do not shed light on the mechanisms which make (dis)information operational. For instance, some researchers have turned to political psychology to understand how (dis)information penetrates public opinion by focusing on isolated variables, such as specific emotions or historical grievances. Consequently, these studies do not showcase the complex and integrated mechanism through which elites connect with the public.

Unlike existing scholarship, this thesis addresses these empirical and conceptual gaps. It examines the narratives beyond simple deception and psychological mechanisms that connect political elites with the public. This approach incorporates the specific internal dynamics of Eastern European states. The next chapter details the theoretical foundations of this research. It bridges the fields of Political Psychology and Political Communication within the context of International Relations studies.

1.3. Theoretical underpinnings

This thesis applies two complementary theoretical approaches from Comparative Political Science within the broader discipline of International Relations. These frameworks facilitate theorising the mechanisms that connect elite messaging to domestic audiences in Eastern Europe, which is the overarching goal of this doctoral thesis. The first approach is Political Psychology. This field explores why specific narratives draw audiences' attention. It, therefore, theorizes the psychological appeal of (dis)information through the study of cognitive processing and/or emotional engagement. We use this lens to understand why certain frames align with predispositions of the Eastern European public. The second approach is Political Communication. This theory provides us with the tools to map out the content of the narratives, and to theorise how actors instrumentalize emotions to make a narrative persist in public cognition in the Eastern European context.

1.3.1. Political Psychology in political elites' communication

Political psychology provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals perceive, evaluate, and respond to political (dis)information. It examines the mental processes that arise in response to various political messages. This approach also provides the theoretical background to explain how target audiences interpret these messages and perceive their emitters. Within this doctoral thesis, Political Psychology helps to understand the psychological bonds that allow messages from political elites to resonate with domestic audiences. This framework is essential because it allows this research to unpack two important concepts: emotions and trust.

While much scholarship in political psychology has traditionally focused on the cognitive processing of information, more recent theoretical findings underscore that emotion may become central in shaping political perceptions, judgments, and behaviour (Levitin 2017; Snow, Jowett and O'Donnell 2024). This shift makes emotions a fundamental lens for examining the relationship between political elites and the domestic public. Theory posits that emotions are not merely incidental reactions to political communication; they participate in

complex mechanisms of interpretation and evaluation of political realities. Dual-process models of cognition, such as Kahneman's (2011) distinction between intuitive "System 1" thinking and reflective "System 2" reasoning, demonstrate that in political information environments, rapid, affect-driven judgments often dominate over slower, deliberative reasoning. Similarly, Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) model suggests that individuals evaluate information via either a central route (analytical, effortful processing) or a peripheral route (quick, heuristic-based processing). The Model identifies two distinct paths for processing information. The first is the central route. This path requires a high level of cognitive effort and critical thinking. When an individual uses the central route, they focus deeply on the logical quality of the arguments. This type of processing usually occurs when the listener is highly motivated and has the time to evaluate the data. Changes in attitude formed through this route are often stable and resistant to conflicting messages. The second path is the peripheral route. This route involves much less cognitive effort. Instead of analyzing the logic of a message, the individual relies on simple cues or mental shortcuts. These cues can include the emotional tone of the speaker, the perceived authority of the source, or the visual appeal of the presentation. It is still undetermined which route comes first when individuals interact with the general information environment. Our assumption is that (dis)information encourages peripheral processing as it often neglects logic and/or factual precision.

It motivates this doctoral dissertation to rely on the study of the affective heuristic, whereby individuals rely first on emotional impressions rather than analytic reasoning when engaging with information (Slovic et al. 2007). Emotions such as fear, anger, pride, and hope thus function as heuristics that not only guide attention, but also bias interpretations of reality (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Theory argues that emotionally arousing or sensational content captures attention more readily and endures more persistently in memory than neutral information (Kensinger 2009; Berger and Milkman 2012; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014). Given humans' limited processing capacity, emotionally resonant messages tend to be more cognitively accessible and persuasive than complex factual content. The theory confirms, therefore, that emotionally arousing or sensational content captures attention more readily and endures more persistently in memory than neutral information (Kensinger 2009; Berger and Milkman 2012; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014).

Theory also adds that emotional responses can be grounded in previous experience of individuals, besides immediate stimuli: Repeated exposure to political events, actors, and

narratives creates emotional associations that influence how new information is perceived and evaluated (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Converse 1964). Past experiences that are emotionally salient are more likely to be stored in memory and later reactivated when similar cues are encountered (Kensinger 2009). These stored emotional responses may guide attention and shape interpretation, often before deliberate reasoning takes place (Kahneman 2011). As a result, individuals tend to process information in ways that align with their existing emotional dispositions and belief systems (Hetherington 1998; Lerner et al. 2015; Taber and Lodge 2006; Lodge and Taber 2013). In this situation, individuals are even likely to disregard contradictory evidence (Nickerson 1998; Taber and Lodge 2006; Martel, Pennycook and Rand 2020). Repetition further amplifies this bias: when emotionally charged messages are repeatedly encountered, they come to feel more accurate—a phenomenon known as the illusory truth effect (Fazio et al. 2015). In political contexts, this means that (dis)information is often received with affective “tags” that shape how it integrates into one’s broader worldview (Lodge and Taber 2013).

Emotional resonance within the hearts and minds of citizens plays a key role in shaping the connection between political elites and the public, often contributing to the development of trust between leaders and the public. Trust acts as the glue between politicians and the public (Barber 1983). Trust, in general, refers to the expectation that others will act in a reliable, honest, and predictable manner, particularly in situations characterised by uncertainty and limited information. Trust allows individuals to reduce complexity and make decisions without constant monitoring or full knowledge of others’ intentions (Luhmann 1979; Hardin 2002). Within political contexts, trust takes different forms depending on the relationship between those who trust and those who are trusted. These forms are rooted in Easton’s (1965; 1990) argument that for a system to survive, it needs support directed at three levels: authorities, regime, and political community. Based on this assumption, a common distinction has been made between horizontal trust, which refers to trust among citizens and within social groups, and vertical trust, which refers to trust directed toward the state (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993; Zmerli and Newton 2008). Horizontal trust is linked to social cohesion and cooperation among citizens, while vertical trust concerns confidence in authority and governance.

Vertical trust refers specifically to citizens’ confidence in political elites and institutions and their belief that those in power will act competently, fairly, and in the public interest. Political Psychology distinguishes vertical trust in institutions from trust in political elites. Trust in

institutions focuses on the perceived legitimacy of the system and represents a more stable form of support for the political regime (Norris 1999). Trust in the media system, for example, allows individuals to accept information about a world they cannot experience directly (Luhmann 1979).

Trust in elites is more personal. It centers on the character, competence, and reliability of individual leaders (Hetherington 2005). This form of trust reflects how citizens perceive political authority and evaluate information communicated by political actors (Norris 1999). Researchers often view trust in elites as more volatile because it is tied to the relatively short-term performance and communication of specific actors. When vertical trust in elites is high, citizens are more likely to defer judgement, even under conditions of uncertainty. Conversely, low levels of vertical trust increase scepticism and reduce the perceived credibility of political elites (Mishler and Rose 2001).

The concept of trust is closely intertwined with emotional processing. Rather than being grounded solely in rational assessment, trust is often emotionally mediated and shaped by feelings of familiarity, shared identity, and perceived intent (Hardin 2002; Levi and Stoker 2000). It is of interest in this research to examine the interplay between emotion, public trust in political elites, and the spread of (dis)information. The following section unpacks the concept of (dis)information through the lens of political communication theory to establish the connection between emotional appeals and elite messaging.

1.3.2. Political Communication theory and (dis)information in digital age

Communication is a constitutive social process through which meaning is created, shared, and negotiated among actors. It is not merely a neutral conduit for information but a symbolic practice embedded in social relations and cultural contexts, through which social reality itself is constructed (Mead 1934; Schutz 1967; Carey 1989). Communication is a powerful social activity that “translates a worldview of coexistence, of relationship between reason, spirit [...] [S]imultaneously, communication gathers and separates, facilitates and complicates, regulates and deregulates, transmits and confuses” (Sebastião 2022, p.2). This definition encapsulates the complexity of communication as a phenomenon and the influence it exerts over the public

sphere. Communication serves not merely to transmit information but to co-create meanings, reproduce shared understandings, and shape collective perceptions (Savigny 2002; Cornelissen et al. 2015). In political contexts, this function has long been instrumentalized to disseminate ideas (Bernays 1947; Esser and Pfetsch 2004) and construct public opinion (Savigny 2002). In the present study, political communication theory enables us to shed light on our conceptualization of (dis)information. Second, it provides analytical tools to theorize how political elites instrumentalize emotion to make the public susceptible to (dis)information and to maintain trust in themselves despite a lack of factual performance.

Our starting point are seminal works in Political Communication theory, which came up alongside mid-twentieth-century efforts to conceptualize politics as a process of influence and control. Political communication emerged as a field focused on influence and control, where communication serves as the mechanism through which political actors exert power through symbols, effects, and channels (Lasswell 1948). This instrumental view was expanded by systems-oriented and functionalist scholars who treated communication as the "nervous system" of government, facilitating the flow of information, demands, and feedback necessary for the authoritative allocation of values and system maintenance (Deutsch 1963; Easton 1965; Almond and Coleman 1960). Beyond these systemic functions, the field evolved to incorporate the processes of encoding, decoding, and meaning-making (Schramm 1955), eventually introducing normative and deliberative dimensions where communication becomes a site for rational-critical discourse and democratic legitimacy (Habermas 1962/1989). Modern scholarship treats political communication as a relational and mediated process shaped by the interaction between political, citizen, and media institutions (Blumler and Gurevitch 1975; McNair 2011; McQuail 2010). In the digital age, this process has been further transformed by technological logics and networked messages that construct political reality under sustained media influence (Strömbäck 2008; Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Hepp and Krotz 2014).

This evolution from a focus on linear influence toward complex, mediated systems provides the conceptual foundations for analysing propaganda and disinformation, two closely related concepts within the broader field of Political Communication (Snow, Jowett and O'Donnell 2024). Disinformation generally refers to misleading or deceptive content intended to cause harm (Agursky 1989; Fallis 2014; Hameleers 2023), while propaganda has been more broadly defined as "a use of language designed to evoke a particular kind of response" (Postman 1979, 130). Propaganda may employ falsehoods but can also operate through selective framing,

omission, and emotional appeal without overtly deceptive content (Marwick and Lewis 2016; Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018; Snow, Jowett and O'Donnell 2024; Kuo and Marwick 2021). The distinction between the two concepts blurs in practice, particularly in digital political communication, where actors frequently employ overlapping strategies. Given this conceptual entanglement, this doctoral thesis adopts the composite term (dis)information to refer to the full spectrum of political content—ranging from verified facts and authentic imagery to fabrications and tailored rumours—deployed to influence public opinion in the interest of the producer. This operationalisation captures both the informative and manipulative dimensions of political communication, acknowledging that producers may blend truthful and deceptive elements to create a persuasive narrative.

Similarly to propaganda and disinformation, (dis)information as a political phenomenon depends heavily on the actor that produces it. According to Political Communication theory, although different classifications exist, these actors can be broadly divided into two key categories: the political elite and the media. Political elites—comprising government officials, party leaders, and political influencers—are central actors in the production of (dis)information. This position enables them to frame political issues, consolidate power and legitimize specific narratives. At the same time, their communication can delegitimize opposing viewpoints and divert public attention from unfavourable developments (Entman 2004; McNair 2011; Bennett and Livingston 2018).

Communication Theory posits, however, that direct communication from political influencers to audiences is rare. This typically occurs only in specific situations, such as live political events, where leaders deliver statements directly from the podium at rallies (Chadwick 2013; Van Aelst et al. 2017). For this reason, the theory considers the media to be as important as political elites in the political communication process. Theory distinguishes the role of media based on the political regime type. In hybrid or semi-pluralistic regimes, the role of the media is structurally altered. This shift is driven by media capture, ownership concentration, and political parallelism. As a result, filtering and framing processes serve partisan or oligarchic interests rather than pluralist debate (Djankov et al. 2003; Voltmer 2013; Levitsky and Way 2010). In these contexts, media function less as watchdogs of democracy and more as instruments of selective amplification of information in the interest of the owner. (Gehlbach and Sonin 2014; Oates 2006a; 2006b). In fully authoritarian regimes, the situation is different. The media cease to be mediators in any meaningful sense. Instead, they operate as extensions

of the state, which is essential to sustain regime legitimacy (Herman and Chomsky 2008; Guriev and Treisman 2022).

Early Communication Theories often viewed the media as passive transmitters of information. Foundational models, such as the mathematical theory of communication, conceptualized the media as a simple channel for delivering signals from a sender to a receiver (Shannon and Weaver 1964). Similarly, early “magic bullet” metaphors suggested that the media functioned as a direct conduit for injecting messages into the public (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). However, theoretical perspectives on this issue have shifted over time. Media channels are now understood not as neutral conduits but as institutions that both transmit and transform political messages, shaping the flow, form, and meaning of these messages (Silverstone 2005; Couldry 2008). Media actively adopts framing strategies, and influences which kinds of information are presented to audiences and when (Lewin 1947; Shoemaker and Vos 2009; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Entman 1993; Chadwick 2013).

Traditional mass media outlets such as television, radio, and newspapers have historically fulfilled a key communication role (McQuail 2020). In recent decades, however, the communication environment has shifted towards what Chadwick (2017) terms the hybrid media system, in which the functions of content transmission and/or creation are no longer confined to traditional mass media but are dispersed across a dynamic interplay between legacy outlets and digital platforms. Within this system, both types of actors operate for the same purpose, albeit in different ways. While traditional media remain significant—particularly among older demographics—their gatekeeping power has steadily eroded as digital platforms have gained prominence. Online environments now facilitate immediacy, interactivity, personalisation, and algorithmic amplification, enabling political messages to bypass traditional editorial filters and reach audiences more directly and rapidly (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019; Huang 2024). From the perspective of Digital Communication theory, the rise of online platforms has brought about a structural transformation in the organisation of public communication, fundamentally altering the ways in which political information—both accurate and misleading—is produced, distributed, and consumed. These platforms have reconfigured the architecture of communication processes and power relations, becoming central operators of political discourse in the contemporary information ecosystem (Chadwick 2017; Ünver 2017).

Political communication theory tells us that propagandists may instrumentalize emotions to interact with the audiences (Bernays 1928; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000; Snow, Jowett and O'Donnell 2024). Theory argues that sentiments are not just reactions but are central to producing and responding to political messages (Hoggett and Thompson 2012). Communication Theory posits that emotional framing can mobilise audiences more effectively than purely factual argumentation. Emotions like anger and fear provide the psychological motivation necessary to sustain public engagement with a narrative, and each has a particular function (Jasper 2011): Fear is frequently used to portray existential threats from political opponents, minority groups, or foreign powers, heightening vigilance while constraining critical evaluation (Valentino, Hutchings and White 2002). Anger fosters in-group versus out-group distinctions and diminishes openness to counter-arguments (Lerner and Keltner 2001). Sadness and empathy can evoke moral outrage that redirects attention toward specific political goals (Gross 2008), while pride and nostalgia strengthen nationalistic sentiment by idealising selective visions of the past to legitimise present agendas (Mercer 2010).

In communicating policy issues, emotions may act as frames themselves (Nabi 2003; Lecheler 2019). These emotional frames privilege and guide subsequent decision-making in the target audience. Specifically, emotional framing is a more effective approach for promoting policy support than traditional rational appeals (Lu 2016). Moreover, when political issues are framed in moral or emotional terms, the message becomes more persuasive and harder to ignore, enabling political elites to build a sense of urgency that factual data alone cannot achieve (Feinberg and Willer 2019).

Emotional framing is highly effective at capturing attention in high-information environments (Nabi 2003; Berger and Milkman 2012). This is especially true in digital contexts where algorithms prioritize engagement. In the contemporary digital environment, the emotional potency of (dis)information is further magnified by the architecture of online platforms. These platforms operate according to an algorithmic logic that prioritizes engagement and relevance. Emotionally charged content—particularly expressions of anger and fear—systematically garners more engagement in the form of clicks, shares, and comments than neutral reporting (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015). Platform algorithms consequently privilege affectively charged material, rewarding content producers who employ emotional framing and reinforcing the structural incentives for (dis)information dissemination (Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock 2014). Visual formats spread across platforms, such as memes, videos, and images intensify

these dynamics by condensing complex emotional cues into instantly recognisable symbols that require minimal cognitive effort to process (Bülow and Johann 2023).

For example, Facebook's and YouTube's recommendation systems promote content that is more likely to elicit strong emotional responses, encouraging recirculation of politically charged material (Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft 2019). Telegram differs in that content dissemination depends less on centralized algorithms and more on user subscriptions to channels and groups, yet its forwarding mechanisms and group dynamics can rapidly amplify narratives. Another defining feature of these platforms is their capacity for selective audience targeting. Facebook's advertising tools allow political actors to microtarget citizens based on demographic, geographic, and behavioural data, tailoring messages to resonate with specific segments of the electorate (Tufekci 2014). YouTube offers similar targeting options through its ad network, while Telegram's public and private channel structures enable selective reach through curated membership. This algorithmic curation privileges emotionally engaging content (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Ganesh 2018), creating fertile ground for (dis)information to spread rapidly (Bradshaw and Howard 2018; Tandoc, Jenkins and Craft 2020).

1.4. Methodology

This thesis by compendium of articles employs a qualitative research method which emphasizes the interpretive work by which researchers produce accounts of social reality (Morse et al. 2009; Paley 2023). As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) well noted, this kind of qualitative research entails studying phenomena in their natural contexts, aiming to interpret them through the meanings, which individuals attribute to their experiences - exactly what this research aims to do.

In the three articles which constitute this thesis, we have availed ourselves of a Qualitative content analysis (QCA) using political communication content from media sources as empirical data. Holsti (1969) defines content analysis as any technique for systematic identification of the specified characteristics of messages. This broad definition underscores the method's flexibility, allowing researchers to draw conclusions about the presence, frequency, and relationships of certain concepts or patterns within communication content. It involves analyzing textual, visual, or audio messages to uncover patterns, themes, or meanings within the material. QCA seeks to interpret both manifest and latent content, recognizing that meaning often lies beneath the surface of words (Mayring in Content Analysis PDF, 2018).

In the articles which form the core of this doctoral dissertation, we examine the interpretive structures that shape how individuals perceive the world. This objective informs our decision to employ frame analysis—a methodological adaptation of QCA that treats frames as integrated patterns of meaning connecting message content, context, and intent, rather than as discrete subjects or keywords considered in isolation from their communicative and ideological roles. Building on Goffman's (1974) view of frames as cognitive structures that organize perception, and expanded in political communication research by Entman (1993), frame analysis investigates the ways messages define problems, assign responsibility, express moral judgments, and propose solutions. The emphasis lies not only on the substance of what is communicated but also on the manner of presentation and the interpretive cues it contains.

Methodologically, QCA frame analysis involves examining media texts, speeches, or visual content to trace consistent ways of selecting and emphasising certain elements of reality while downplaying others. This can be approached inductively—allowing frames to emerge from the material—or deductively—applying categories drawn from previous studies. Within Political

Communication, such analysis reveals how information and disinformation are shaped to align with audience predispositions, influence perceptions of legitimacy, and guide public debate. Frame analysis exposes the strategic and ideological choices embedded in message construction. In this way, it adds an interpretive depth to broader content analysis (Gitlin 1980; Bülow and Johann 2023).

Since frames are rarely communicated through isolated statements, narrative is treated as an important analytical category within frame analysis. Frames are typically embedded within narratives that provide them with coherence, emotional resonance, and persuasive force. A narrative provides the temporal and causal structure—linking actors, events, and outcomes—that allows a frame to define a problem, assign responsibility, and describe political phenomena in a way that is accessible and memorable for audiences (Entman 1993; Polletta and Ho 2006). In practice, this means that the salience of a frame is often tied to the storyline through which it is expressed.

In our coding process, the most salient data were organized into three main frames. However, because political communication often weaves multiple storylines into a single text, it is common for several different narratives to overlap within the same article. When this occurred, each narrative was coded into all relevant clustered frames. This approach recognizes that in political discourse—particularly in complex or contested issues—frames and narratives frequently intersect, with the same narrative elements reinforcing multiple frames simultaneously. Attending a narrative in this way ensures that the analysis captures not only the thematic content of frames but also the discursive mechanisms that make them compelling and effective in shaping interpretation.

Accurate frame analysis depends not only on the method of coding and interpretation but also on the careful selection of a research timespan. Frames are dynamic: their salience, composition, and rhetorical function often shift in response to political events, regulatory changes, and technological innovation. Analysing frames outside of their temporal context risks overlooking how evolving conditions shape the narratives and interpretive structures embedded in media content. For this reason, the period under investigation must be chosen to capture moments when significant changes in the (dis)information environment are most visible and analytically meaningful. This study examines (dis)information in Russia, Georgia, and Moldova between 2019 and 2024—a period selected for its distinctive convergence of political, legislative, and technological developments. Politically, the lead-up to Russia's full-

scale invasion of Ukraine triggered significant transformations in Eastern Europe, reshaping the discursive practices of political actors and giving (dis)information dynamics a character distinct from other periods. Legislatively, the political pressures of the time prompted governments to introduce new media regulations, which in turn altered the structure and flow of the (dis)information environment. Technologically, 2019 marked the beginning of the widespread integration of artificial intelligence into multiple spheres of public life, accelerating the evolution of (dis)information strategies and mechanics. Together, these factors define a period in which the nature, dissemination, and effects of (dis)information warrant particular scholarly attention.

Just as temporal context is critical for accurate frame analysis, so too is the careful selection of data sources. Frames are embedded within particular communicative environments, and the choice of sources directly shapes the interpretive patterns that can be identified. It is therefore essential to include sources that reflect the diversity of platforms, formats, and audiences relevant to the context under study. The selection of data sources in this doctoral dissertation is guided primarily by its focus on domestic (dis)information in Georgia, Moldova and the Russian Federation. Accordingly, the majority of the empirical material was collected from primary sources that are both physically and legally situated within the country under examination, thereby ensuring the originality and authenticity of the data. We examined messages and publications distributed across diverse media platforms - Facebook, Youtube, Telegram, news aggregators, and TV channels web sites - to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content, reach, and impact. Analyzing various types of media ensured that the study captured a broad spectrum of communication channels, including traditional outlets (e.g., newspapers, TV) and digital platforms (e.g., social media and messaging apps). This approach accounts for differences in audience demographics and preferences. Additionally, by examining a range of sources, we captured a broader understanding of the narratives, tones, and biases present in (dis)information.

Finally, among all media sources, we selected those with high popularity rankings and/or considerable public followings, as these outlets are likely to cover the most impactful or widely discussed issues, reducing the need to analyze less influential channels. For each country, the choice of outlets was informed by the results of nationally representative opinion polls on media preferences and/or data from internationally recognized media ranking indexes. In the

case of online platforms and social media accounts, the number of subscribers was used as an indicator of audience reach and thus of the validity of the source.

While our preference was to draw primarily on original sources of (dis)information, we also incorporated secondary sources when necessary. In cases where primary content had been removed from the web, we relied on archival records maintained by reputable fact-checking organisations, democracy-promotion NGOs, and initiatives such as the EUvsDISINFO project. Additionally, we made use of materials preserved by independent journalistic outlets, including NewsMaker.md, StopFalse.md, Civil.ge and others. It is important to note that we classify journalistic outlets as independent by applying internationally recognized criteria, which generally encompass three key dimensions: (1) ownership and funding transparency, which examines whether outlets disclose their proprietors, revenue sources, and potential conflicts of interest; (2) editorial autonomy, which assesses whether journalists and editors can operate free from political, governmental, or corporate interference; and (3) accountability and governance mechanisms, such as the presence of editorial charters, ethical guidelines, and ombudsman oversight (McQuail 2020; UNESCO 2008; Reporters Without Borders 2023). These secondary sources allowed us to retain access to significant (dis)information content that had otherwise become unavailable, ensuring the completeness and continuity of our empirical dataset. Moreover, this research draws on secondary sources such as internationally recognized opinion polls and statistics from organisations including Freedom House, Transparency International, the OSCE, the Caucasus Barometer (for Georgia), the International Republican Institute (for Moldova), and the Levada Centre (for Russia), as well as historical accounts from reputable publishers like Oxford Academic and Palgrave Macmillan, and—rarely—for recent events, news reports from BBC International and France 24.

In the next section, we provide a synthesis of the three research papers that together form the thesis as a compendium. We outline their respective research questions and indicate how each relates to the overarching research questions of the dissertation. A summary table then presents the (dis)information patterns examined in the papers, along with the emotional effects these patterns produce on the public. This is followed by five-page summaries of each paper.

2. Summary of the articles

This thesis, presented as a compendium of articles, is guided by two overarching research questions. The first question investigates what types and narrative structures of (dis)information political elites disseminate in Georgia, Moldova, and Russia. The second research question asks how the psychological link between political elites and the audience is established and maintained, in terms of emotions and trust.

2.1. Simanschi, Elena. “In Georgian Dream we trust: (dis)information to conceal democratic setback?”

Simanschi, Elena. “In Georgian Dream We Trust: (Dis)Information to Conceal Democratic Setback?” Unpublished manuscript.

The Georgian Dream came to power in 2012 on the promise of democratic reforms, responding to a widespread public demand for democratisation. Yet from 2018, following an initial period of successful performance, Georgia’s Democracy Index sharply declined, reflecting the government increasingly prioritized the consolidation of power by any means. At the same time, it sought to maintain public trust by appearing to satisfy citizens’ aspirations for democratic change. We posit that this puzzling situation stems from the capacity of government leaders’ (dis)information efforts to bolster public trust in the government, even as demand for democratic governance remains high. To test this hypothesis, this article explores the narratives disseminated by the government to legitimize democracy-eroding steps. Using qualitative content analysis, this article investigates the mechanisms through which these narratives shape public perceptions of the government’s actions and examines their broader implications for Georgia’s democratic backsliding.

To look into the effects of (dis)information, we use the analytical lens of ‘trust’. This study concentrates specifically on vertical trust, as it represents a vital link between the citizenry and political actors, especially those in governing positions (Easton, 1975; Putnam, 1993). In

mature democracies, vertical trust is sensitive to the norms and practices that sustain democratic governance (Dahl 1971; Kumagai and Iorio 2020). When governments adhere to democratic norms, citizens are more likely to view the political system as legitimate, which enhances vertical trust (Zmerli and Newton 2008; Kondratov and Johansson-Nogués 2023). In contrast, when democratic norms are violated—such as through authoritarian practices, election manipulation, or the repression of opposition—vertical trust deteriorates, leading to public disengagement (Mishler and Rose 2001).

In this study, we approach (dis)information as a form of political communication, which serves an important tool which sustains trust in democracies (Blind 2007; Tonkiss et al. 2000; Misztal 1996). It creates a space for leaders to frame policy achievements, explain decisions, and address concerns, which affects how the public evaluates the performance (Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2015). Therefore, the government's communication strategies play a key role in shaping trust of the population (Bijlsma and Bunt 2003; Hopkins and Pettingill 2018). While (dis)information mechanisms that shape trust in mature democracies are well researched, the hybrid and transitional democratic settings, like the republic of Georgia, are less explored. This study aims to close this gap.

In terms of methodology, we employ qualitative content analysis to examine (dis)information produced by the Georgian Dream party. Our approach follows a frame analysis perspective, involving systematic coding and categorisation of political speeches and media content to identify recurring narratives between 2019 and 2024, a period marked by Georgia's democratic decline. The dataset includes over 100 speeches and statements by key party leaders, alongside primary media sources with high public engagement such as Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and Facebook, as well as fact-checking reports and analyses by Georgian NGOs. To contextualize the findings, we also draw on international reports from organisations such as Freedom House, the European Union, and the United Nations. A cluster analysis was conducted to group the most significant material into three frames: narratives targeting the opposition, narratives on the judiciary, and narratives concerning the media, with individual items often encompassing multiple overlapping narratives.

Our empirical findings revealed that democratic reforms have been an important target of (dis)information produced by the Georgian Dream government since 2019. This (dis)information campaign was successful as despite noticeable decline in democratic indicators, public support for the Georgian Dream government continued to grow. It

culminated in the results of 2024 parliamentary elections, where the Georgian Dream party gained over 40% of the votes—the highest share among all political parties -- according to independent exit polls. This popularity is remarkable in a country where 67% of the population professes to back democracy and democratic reform (Caucasus Barometer 2024a). Furthermore, there has been an increase in sentiment in the country that Georgia is becoming more democratic and moving in a positive direction (Caucasus Barometer 2024b), despite substantial indicators of democratic regression according to international standards and this information being readily available to the Georgian citizens. While multiple factors could take place, we argue that (dis)information was key to the ruling party having managed to successfully fabricate an image of democratic advancement, securing the public endorsement.

Our analysis underlines that Georgia is an emerging democracy characterized by a semi-democratic or hybrid regime (Freedom House, n.d.). Georgian citizens demonstrate a strong aspiration to integrate into the community of democratic states—a demand often met with frustration due to periodic authoritarian regressions. We argue that these shifts have rendered the population particularly sensitive to practices that undermine democratic values. As a result, public trust in government depends significantly on its perceived commitment to democratic principles. Nonetheless, the ruling authorities have employed democracy-eroding tactics—such as suppressing opposition voices—to secure power. To retain public trust, the government has sought to convince citizens that democratic development is ongoing under its leadership. Confronted with this inherent contradiction, typical of premature democracies, the Georgian Dream party has strategically used (dis)information as a key instrument for managing vertical trust—trust in national leadership.

Our empirical evidence shows that Georgian Dream is one of the central actors shaping how the public understands democratic change. Our findings show that the party crafted a narrative about its governance that projects the illusion of responsiveness to democratic demands. This illusion was maintained through a mix of offensive and defensive (dis)information strategies, communicated via emotionally charged messaging designed to generate specific reactions within the public. Offensively, Georgian Dream has worked to marginalize opposition and civil society organisations through adversarial (dis)information. This tactic portrays dissenters as extremist and contrasts them with what the party presents as a ‘normal’ democratic opposition. By grouping diverse dissenting actors—whether political parties or NGOs—into a singular adversarial bloc, the party seeks to delegitimize all forms of criticism. Undermining trust in the

opposition is as important as reinforcing trust among loyal supporters, as spreading doubt about opponents weakens their electoral support (Devine, 2024).

Additionally, the party leadership often discredits critics by attacking the credibility of their sources. In cases where criticism comes from reputable international institutions—such as the European Parliament—the government tends to personalize the issue by targeting individual MEPs, thus downplaying institutional critique. At other times, it attributes critical remarks to disinformation, misunderstanding, and/or foreign influence. Foreign influence rhetoric is a part of the offensive strategy since it legitimizes the harsh response of the government as necessary for national interests - appeal to patriotic feeling and national pride sentiments, inherent to Georgian identity. Offensive (dis)information, therefore, helps the government fostering distrust in external evaluators while reinforcing its own narrative.

Defensively, the party portrays legislative actions—despite their democratic shortcomings—as necessary steps toward national development. Controversial measures, such as the Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence, legislation on ‘family values’, and questionable judicial appointments, are presented as consistent with democratic standards. Surveys indicate that many Georgians do not perceive these developments as threats to democracy, despite their misalignment with the EU Association Agreement’s emphasis on judicial independence, opposition respect, and civil society inclusion (International Republican Institute, 2023).

A crucial factor in this process is the dissemination of (dis)information through trusted media outlets. Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and Facebook are the most widely trusted sources of information for Georgians. First, reliance on these media channels helped offset public doubts about controversial government decisions. Second, these platforms enabled Georgian Dream to extend its message to audiences beyond its core base. Third, they played a role in spreading conspiracy narratives—particularly on Imedi TV, whose viewers have been found to be more susceptible to such content (see, for example, Clem, Herron and Tepnadze 2023).

An important insight from this research is that both loyal supporters and segments of the opposition have internalized elements of the government’s narrative. According to surveys, 75% of Georgian Dream supporters believe the country has become more democratic in the past year. Strikingly, 32% of opposition supporters also share this view (National Democratic Institute, 2023). While it is unsurprising that party loyalists endorse government messaging, this cross-group acceptance suggests that the government's use of trusted media has extended

the reach of its (dis)information. When audiences place trust in outlets such as Imedi TV, they are more likely to accept the content uncritically

The Georgian Dream disseminated (dis)information about their performance to create the illusion of aligning with public demand for democratisation. To create this illusion, the government employed a combination of offensive and defensive (dis)information strategies. In its offensive rhetoric, the Georgian Dream has increasingly marginalized discontent with its actions. It uses adversarial (dis)information to delegitimize the opposition and negatively politicize the activities of civil society organizations that function as democracy watchdogs. In its defensive rhetoric, the ruling party portrays its democracy-eroding legislation activity as democratic in the eyes of the large share of the population.

The theoretical findings of this article help to conceptualize vertical trust as a product of the combination of offensive and defensive (dis)information rhetoric. We also identified trusted media as a crucial stabilizing factor in vertical trust. In moments when public confidence in the government falters, trusted media can bridge the trust gap by reinforcing the government's narratives and mitigating potential criticism of its actions or performance. While it is natural for supporters to be more inclined to trust their leaders, we argue that the government can significantly amplify the impact of (dis)information by leveraging trusted media outlets to disseminate its rhetoric.

We conclude that trust to the government - vertical trust - in premature/hybrid democracies does not necessarily draw on the performance or values. It is rather a product of (dis)information, which the political leaders disseminate. In doing so, they draw on trusted media, (dis)informing messaging and a weak system of democratic balancing mechanisms.

2.2. Simanschi, Elena. “(Dis)information in Moldova: eroding vertical trust for the Sandu government?”

Simanschi, Elena. 2025. “(Pro)-Russian (Dis)Information in Moldova: Eroding Vertical Trust in Sandu and the PAS Government?” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, May, 1–15. doi:10.1080/14782804.2025.2500389.

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 her policies a primary target of (dis)information campaigns aimed at undermining public trust in her presidency and government. This research aims to address this issue by analysing the specific narratives and mechanisms of (pro)-Russian (dis)information in Moldova. Using qualitative content analysis, this research examines how these narratives are constructed, their impact on vertical trust, and their broader implications for Moldovan democracy.

To scrutinize 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 and 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).

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 follows a qualitative content analysis framework, which 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. We conducted a cluster analysis to categorize 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.

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 (dis)information studies, we use public opinion surveys to support our main argument that (dis)information has a substantial 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 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. We found that the undermining of trust was due to three key factors: the narrative design rooted in the logic of Russian propaganda, the vulnerability of the social contract during EU integration reforms, and the backfire effects of media regulations.

Thus, the first factor, according to our empirical findings, is that (dis)information campaigns influence trust by carefully selecting narrative designs that resonate with the sensitivities of their target audience. For instance, such campaigns portray Maia Sandu and the PAS government's policies as fundamentally antagonistic to the interests of their primary

audience—conservative Russian speakers who remain cognitively integrated into Russian cultural traditions. To appeal to this group, the narratives emphasize Moldova’s ethnic and linguistic divides, exploiting or distorting historical ties and present-day geopolitical tensions to cultivate distrust and resistance toward Western integration. In addition, traumatic memories constitute another important tool of (dis)information. This is exemplified, for instance, in appeals to the memory of war evoked by the Transnistrian narrative, which may also affect those who do not necessarily disagree with other policies of Sandu and the incumbent government. In constructing these narratives, media outlets formally registered in Moldova consistently draw on the logic of Russian propaganda, often reposting original content from Russian government–linked sources. The systemic nature of this content underscores its strong connection to the Russian (dis)information ecosystem. This finding has important implications for the erosion of vertical trust, as declining trust results from the close collaboration between Moldovan domestic and foreign media actors.

The second factor revealed in our analysis is that, as an emerging democracy, Moldova’s social contract between government and citizens is particularly vulnerable due to ongoing reforms and proposed 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.

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. 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 delegitimizes 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.

The third and final factor pertains to media regulations. 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, ahead of local elections, the Moldovan government and the Information and Security Service ordered 31 websites blocked for spreading (pro-)Russian (dis)information, with President Maia Sandu justifying the move as necessary to defend democracy and protect against Russian interference. Yet, much as in Western European societies, the bans were criticized as infringements on free speech and press, with local authorities and NGOs in Gagauzia condemning them as attempts to control the narrative. In a fragile democracy, such measures risk exacerbating fears of authoritarianism and eroding institutional legitimacy. Moreover, the bans proved ineffective, as (dis)information actors quickly shifted to social media and Telegram, exploiting the restrictions to portray the government as censorial and deepening distrust among pro-Russian audiences. Thus, measures intended to safeguard vertical trust may paradoxically undermine it by fuelling division and alienation.

In terms of theory, this article advances our understanding of the relationship between vertical trust and (dis)information in emerging democracies. We revealed that the democratic reforms accompanied by social-economic crises create a vulnerability in the society leading to a fragile trust between the government and the public. This fragility opens a window of opportunity for (pro-)Russian (dis)information to exploit the situation and further sow vertical distrust. In this fragile context, domestic proxies and Russian media collaborate closely to pursue shared objectives. Moreover, media restrictions did not impede (dis)information but simply pushed it

to a less controllable segment of the information ecosystem - social networks, which deepened societal divisions and challenged the government's transparency and effectiveness.

Another theoretical finding is that, by exaggerating the extent of anti-government protests, (dis)informers created a perception of widespread and growing distrust in the government. Our findings underscore that (dis)information not only aims to discredit political leaders and policies but also seeks to destabilize the foundational trust that underpins democratic governance. This insight highlights the need to address (dis)information not merely as a matter of factual correction, but as a critical component in sustaining democratic trust and cohesion in the face of both external and internal (dis)information threats.

2.3. Johansson-Nogués, Elisabeth, and Elena Şimanschi. "Fabricating a war? Russian (dis)information on Ukraine"

Johansson-Nogués, Elisabeth, and Elena Şimanschi. 2023. "Fabricating a War? Russian (Dis)Information on Ukraine." *International Affairs* 99 (5): 2015–36. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad179>.

Throughout history, wartime regimes have sought to manage competing narratives within the domestic sphere. The large-scale Russian (dis)information campaign accompanying the 2022 invasion of Ukraine followed this pattern, aiming to fabricate a coherent "imaginary war" in the Russian public mind—one that secured consent for a very real and destructive conflict. It is therefore of academic interest to examine the mechanisms through which the Russian authorities secured and sustained overwhelming public support for the war, despite relying largely on manufactured claims. This article examines the content, techniques, and emotional underpinnings of Russian information manipulation directed at domestic audiences, with particular attention to the relationship between (dis)information and public consent. In conceptual terms, we understand (dis)information as a composite category that encompasses multiple types of content: accurate and factual information, politically motivated reinterpretations, negatively slanted accounts, and outright false or deceitful claims.

We approach the effects of (dis)information through the lens of political psychology, emphasizing the central role of emotion in mediating the link between message producers and audiences. This perspective enables us to explore how emotional responses shape the interpretation of political information and how emotionally charged communication can impair individuals' ability to discern between authentic and fabricated events. Such distortion arises when affectively compelling fictional narratives are presented as reality, eroding the boundary between truth and falsehood. This conceptual approach recognizes governments and political elites as the most powerful shapers of public opinion during wartime or large-scale crises, with the media serving not merely as passive transmitters but as active creators of content. While existing scholarship has examined the media's function in amplifying elite messages, its autonomous role in generating and emotionally framing disinformation remains underexplored—a gap that this study seeks to address.

In terms of methodology, we have performed a qualitative frame analysis of the (dis)information output from 15 media companies and approximately 1000 pieces of (dis)information in the period spanning March 2021 – when the Russian troops began to gather on the Ukrainian border – until December 2022. We have identified the following (dis)information frames: the Russian (dis)information frames on Donbas; frames on Ukraine's political elite and nationalism; frames on the West. Individual articles frequently embed multiple narratives, which are subsequently categorized across all relevant clustered frames. The contextualization of these (dis)information patterns is guided by insights from the secondary literature.

Our empirical evidence proves that the Russian (dis)information on Ukraine has been built largely, but not exclusively, on fictional accounts and information manipulation. This is a high-risk strategy for a state operating in a mixed media landscape and hence not in full control of the 'marketplace of ideas' inside of Russia, at least not prior to March 2022. However, the Russian propaganda transmitted by the media has clearly been effective in the sense that surveys show elevated public support for the 'special operation' in Ukraine and the Russian Armed Forces' action in Ukraine. It is also worth noting that when Russians are asked whether they believe if Russia moving in the right direction or not, a majority find that in spite of the uncertainties of war and the hardship of months of economic sanctions they are more optimistic about the Russian future than they were prior to the invasion (64 percent in October 2022; in comparison to 48 percent in December 2021). It is thus fair to say that Russian (dis)informers

have managed to successfully fabricate a war and produce credible justifications for the conflict in the eyes of their audience. We will argue that the Russian public's acceptance of the state's fictional accounts about the situation in Ukraine has relied on three principal factors. First, the key role played by the media as the emitter of fabricated realities. Second, the reliance on techniques to displace or distort real emotional associations. Third, the emotional gratification inherent to fictional accounts.

First, central to the Russian public's acceptance of the (dis)information is the active role played by the Russian state or pro-regime media companies. We posit that the media has exerted a larger influence in the information manipulation on Ukraine than the government itself and is the key emitter responsible for the emotional mobilization of the Russian audience. The media has not only transmitted the government's line, but also generated false or biased news content on their own accord. Examples of that are talk shows where pro-Russian former Ukrainian officials, alleged 'experts' or 'witnesses' intervene to give distorted or misleading views of the conflict. The media in Russia has thus been crucial in 'flooding' the 'marketplace of ideas' with messages and visually stimulating content which have appealed to the Russian audiences emotionally as opposed to rationally-logically. The fact that independent or foreign media has been restricted, and/or as of March 2022 effectively curtailed, has increased the possibility of the Russian state and pro-regime media to expose the Russian public to an even greater volume of uncorroborated news stories.

The second factor explaining the Russian public's openness to fabricated realities lies in the (dis)informers' deliberate use of techniques that displace or distort associative neural processes. Emotional political communication manipulates individuals' somatic markers and undermines their ability to monitor social reality. Since the 2004 Orange Revolution, the Russian government and media have sustained long-term negative campaigns against Ukraine and its political elite, gradually reshaping emotionally triggered associations in the public mind. Over time, these distorted news frames became sedimented and "naturalized" within Russia's collective memory, displacing more nuanced, reality-based associations. Consistent anti-Ukrainian and, later, anti-Western coverage from multiple domestic outlets reinforced this process, aided by the pro-regime media's internally coherent editorial line. In the lead-up to war, particularly from December 2021 onwards, these entrenched fictions were recycled with greater frequency and emotional intensity, further entrenching negative perceptions. The effects are evident in polling data: since early 2022, more than 70 percent of Russians across

all age groups view Ukraine negatively, reflecting the success of this long-term displacement of associative processes.

The third and final factor of the Russian public's openness to fabricated realities can be understood as a consequence of fictional experiences often being more emotionally appealing and gratifying than factual ones. The portrayal of Donbas as the innocent "victim" and Ukraine together with the West as the brutal "enemy" creates a simplified, black-and-white narrative that provides emotional reassurance by eliminating moral ambiguities about blame and sympathy. Likewise, mediated spectacles of Russian military prowess and images of advanced weaponry generate instant patriotic pride and bolster confidence in the country's future. At the same time, "plug-and-play" conspiracy theories—depicting the West as encroaching on Russia's sovereignty, exploiting its resources, or extending NATO hegemony—resonate strongly. Through such narratives, Russian media frames the conflict as a struggle for survival and a quest for a "fairer" world order, evoking emotions of dignity and justice. Together, these dynamics help explain why pride emerges as the dominant emotion Russians report when reflecting on their country's actions in Ukraine.

The findings advance theory by highlighting the mechanisms through which (dis)information enhances public susceptibility to fabricated realities. Central is the media's role as an active agent in emotional mobilization, deliberately selecting instruments of verbal and non-verbal influence to shape cognition and consent. The study demonstrates that (dis)information operates through a sophisticated mixture of factual and fictional accounts: while factual elements provide credibility, fictional narratives offer emotional gratification by presenting simplified good-versus-evil frames, thereby supplying audiences with a quick and reassuring interpretive framework. Equally important is the process of emotional orchestration, where diverse triggers—ranging from pride and glory to anger, fear, and injustice—are strategically combined to maximize resonance across heterogeneous audiences. Over time, longstanding negative campaigns have displaced genuine associations and embedded false beliefs within the collective memory, reinforcing the resilience of fabricated narratives. Together, these mechanisms create emotionally saturated environments in which distorted realities become compelling, cognitively easy to process, and enduring, thereby securing broad and lasting public compliance with state objectives. In this sense, the study helps to theorize why audiences—whether consciously or unconsciously—become drawn to and internalize information with limited factual grounding. Theoretically, these insights offer explanatory

value beyond the Russian case: they illuminate the broader psychological mechanisms through which publics come to accept fictionalized accounts, even when on a rational level they “should know better.”

3. Research Articles

3.1. Simanschi, Elena. "In Georgian Dream we trust: (dis)information to conceal democratic setback?"

Simanschi, Elena. "In Georgian Dream We Trust: (Dis)Information to Conceal Democratic Setback?" Unpublished manuscript.

Since 2012, when the Georgian Dream Party assumed power, Georgia has made significant progress in democratic reforms. However, this upward trend has slowed due to the party's authoritarian shift, supported by (dis)information rhetoric. This paper employs qualitative content analysis to explore three groups of (dis)information narratives: attacks on the opposition, judicial reform, and crackdown on civil society, which appear to be the most contentious. Our analysis demonstrates how (dis)information functions as a strategic tool to reinforce public trust in the government through the illusion of democratic progress, despite contrary factual progress. This study concludes with insights into (dis)information's capacity to facilitate the democratic backsliding even within societies with a high demand for democracy. In terms of theory, it contributes to understanding of the vertical trust as a product of (dis)information, rather than of actual government's performance.

Keywords: Georgia, (dis)information, trust, emotions, government, democracy

Introduction

In recent years, the global political landscape has witnessed a troubling trend: the rise of democratic decline, even under democratically elected governments. While in authoritarian regimes this erosion is often facilitated by state-imposed constraints and control mechanisms, in more democratic contexts, sustaining legitimacy amid democratic backsliding requires significant public support. The Republic of Georgia stands as a notable example of this trend. Over the last two decades, Georgia has sought to transform itself from a "marginal corridor

between East and West" into a country firmly "inside the European home," seeking to establish a democratic environment (Lejava 2021, p.7; see also Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Dubovyk 2019). Since coming to power in 2012, the Georgian Dream coalition initially pledged to focus on Euro-Atlantic integration, foster stronger relations with the West, and implement judicial reforms, addressing the shortcomings of previous governments in achieving democratic governance (Linderman 2013). During its early years, it introduced reforms to public institutions, aligning with both local and international expectations for a more open and transparent government. However, starting from 2018, Georgia's Democracy index has sharply declined reflecting the government's crackdown on democratic reforms. This decline was reflected in the local and international monitoring reports.¹

Despite a noticeable decline in democratic indicators, public support for the Georgian Dream government continued to grow. By 2014, trust in the government had reached 31%, marking the highest level since 2013². It culminated in the results of 2024 parliamentary elections, where the Georgian Dream party gained over 40% of the votes, which is the highest share among all political parties, according to independent exit polls.³ This popularity is remarkable in a country where 67% of the population professes to back democracy and democratic reform (Caucasus Barometer 2024a).⁴ Furthermore, there has been an increase in sentiment in the country that Georgia is becoming more democratic and moving in a positive direction (Caucasus Barometer 2024b). These apparent contradictions suggest a troubling paradox: despite substantial indicators of democratic regression according to international standards and this information being readily available to the Georgian citizens, the ruling party has managed to successfully cultivate an image of democratic advancement, securing the public endorsement.

We posit that this puzzling situation stems from the capacity of government leaders' (dis)information efforts to bolster public trust in the government, even as public demand for

¹ See, for example, Democracy Index 2023 report, The Economist Intelligence Unit, available at <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023-download-confirmation>

² See Caucasus Barometer 2024. Trust - Executive government. Available at <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/TRUEXEC/>

³ According to the official election results, Georgian Dream obtained nearly 54% of the public vote (available at https://results.cec.gov.ge/#/en-us/election_57/tr/dashboard). Although the results were widely contested during the time of writing, independent exit polls indicate that Georgian Dream secured over 40% of the votes—the highest share among all political parties (see exit polls results at <https://civil.ge/archives/630381>).

⁴ The public support for democracy is even higher in the International Republic Institute (2023) poll and equals 74%.

democratic governance remains high.⁵ To address this puzzle, this article explores the narratives disseminated by the government to legitimise democracy-eroding steps. It further investigates how these narratives affect the public. Our conceptual framework is based on 'vertical trust'—a top-down form of trust that boosts the ruling party's authority despite signs of democratic backsliding.

The article is structured into three sections. The first section traces the dynamics of (dis)information in the republic of Georgia, reviews relevant literature, and introduces a conceptual framework centered on vertical trust. The second section provides empirical evidence of the (dis)information propagated by the ruling party. The final section provides qualitative analysis of the key narratives through the lens of vertical trust, followed by concluding insights.

(Dis)information, media and vertical trust

Since independence, the Georgian media environment has been highly polarized along (geo)political lines and controlled by vested interests, often affiliated with political elites both domestically and abroad (Mitchell 2009; Chkhikvadze 2019; Clem, Herron, and Tepnadze 2023). The first deliberate (dis)information campaign in the country can be traced to the period from 2005 to 2009,⁶ coinciding with President Mikheil Saakashvili's rapprochement with the West and deteriorating relations with Russia. These (dis)information efforts stemmed from the Kremlin, and surged particularly around the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, where NATO opened the door to Georgia as a future member (Seskuria 2021; National Democratic Institute 2022). Russian (dis)information, to a large extent, also contributed to the revival of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, resulting in war and the formal recognition of these secessionist regions by the Russian Federation (Fraser 2022). Consequently, following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, (dis)information from Russian sources became largely marginal

⁵ In this article, the concept of (dis)information encompasses a wide range of content, which reflects all the spectrum between (f)actual information and outright falsehoods, strategically employed to shape and/or influence individuals' perception of reality.

⁶ While we believe that other (dis)information campaigns occurred following the independence of the Republic of Georgia, particularly during the wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the early 1990s, as well as in the context of domestic political competition, these campaigns have not been explicitly identified as such in the literature, to the best of our knowledge.

across most of the country, as Russia was widely perceived as the aggressor. However, (dis)information continued to thrive through local channels: pro-Kremlin ultra-conservative political parties like the Georgian Alliance of Patriots and anti-liberal far-right political movements exemplified by Alt-Info (Cole 2024). Georgian fact-checkers also pointed to the ruling Georgian Dream party as a source of (dis)information campaigns containing anti-liberal, anti-Western messages and conspiracy theories (ISFED 2024; Gvineria 2024).

At the beginning of its political journey, the Georgian Dream party was not generally perceived as a source of (dis)information. Moreover, the party entered Georgian politics positively after taking power in 2012 as part of a coalition. It accelerated poverty reduction compared to its predecessors⁷ while also implementing significant reforms, reinforcing its commitment to building democracy in line with voter expectations (Falkowski 2016; Górecki 2024). When the coalition dissolved, the Georgian Dream still triumphed in the 2016 parliamentary elections, securing over 46% of the vote (Antidze 2016). However, since 2018-2019, the government has adopted a harsher stance toward opposition, accompanied by increasingly conservative rhetoric on both domestic and international fronts. 'Gavrilov Night', the violent breakup of the opposition protest outside the parliament building in 2019, marked a significant deviation from democratic electoral pledges of Georgian Dream (Transparency International Georgia 2020 a). Critics argue that this shift reflects an authoritarian drift similar to previous regimes, characterized by legal and administrative harassment of opposition politicians and civil society (European Parliament 2021). Despite apparent democratic setbacks repeatedly criticized by international observers and democratic monitoring bodies, the Georgian Dream persists as the most popular and trusted political force in Georgia.⁸ This research aims to investigate this puzzling situation, arguing that while multiple factors may contribute, the primary reason for the Georgian Dream's sustained popularity is its skilful use of (dis)information to secure public support.

To explore this puzzle, we draw upon two main bodies of literature that provide a foundation for examining this puzzle. The first body focuses on (dis)information scholarship, specifically

⁷ See Georgia Poverty Rate 1996-2025 at <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/geo/georgia/poverty-rate>.

⁸ Georgian Dream secured over 48-45% of the proportional vote and a strong victory in majoritarian districts popular vote during parliamentary elections in 2012-2020. In the 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections, the ruling Georgian Dream secured more votes than its competitors under a fully proportional electoral system. Although the official results are highly contested, independent exit polls estimate that at least 40.9% of the vote was in favor of Georgian Dream (for more information check the Election Administration of the Republic of Georgia at <https://cesko.ge/en/home> and exit poll results at <https://civil.ge/archives/630381>).

addressing developments in the information environment of the Republic of Georgia. This enables us to identify empirical gaps within the existing literature, which this study aims to address. The second engages political communication literature, which provides the theoretical lens for analysing the role of (dis)information in shaping public support.

Previous studies on (dis)information in Georgia primarily focus on external actors intervening in the Georgian media space, especially Russia. Scholars identify negative narratives about Western institutions, Europe's promotion of LGBTQ rights, and the portrayal of the United States as a global hegemon as integral to a Russia-oriented discourse (Kelly, Kramer, and Inayeh 2021; Kintsurashvili 2016, 2019; McCain Institute 2019). Scholars find such narratives aim to undermine Georgia's alignment with the West while reinforcing messages that resonate with traditionalist segments of the population (Nilsson 2021; Baranec 2018). Some researchers see this efforts as part of Russia's hybrid war efforts to counter the expansion of Western influence (Danyk, Maliarchuk, and Briggs 2017; Hatch 2019). Others argue that this (dis)information also seeks to create divisions between traditional values and democracy (Gordzadze 2014; Transparency International 2019; Shevtsova 2022; Stratcom 2023).

Another strand of scholarship focuses on domestically produced (dis)information, emphasizing its roots in the partisan orientation of media outlets and politically polarized editorial content (Clem, Herron, and Tepnadze, 2023). Georgian NGOs have increasingly monitored (dis)information originating from local political and religious figures, often disseminated through sympathetic media platforms (Myth Detector, 2023). These studies are largely descriptive, exposing misleading narratives promoted by public figures and offering fact-based counterpoints. A common theme throughout this literature is the emphasis on connections between domestic actors and Russian editorial sources, where narrative similarities are frequently cited as evidence of these links. Further academic work has looked into the origins of these targeted narratives, identifying key emitters, such as far-right political groups and the Georgian Orthodox Church (Chachava, 2021; Nahzi et al., 2022; Tsetskhladze, 2023). These actors are portrayed as central to the production and circulation of (dis)information within Georgia. Scholars mostly focus on far-right groups, though their narratives span a broader range of topics and tend to have limited societal impact due to their relatively narrow reach (Gelashvili, 2022). The Church's (dis)information efforts, which have also drawn scholarly attention, are frequently centered around anti-LGBTQ+ narratives (Luciani, 2021; Ziemer and Roberts, 2024). The ruling Georgian Dream party, although identified by NGOs as a source of

(dis)information (Tsetsckhladze, 2023), has received less academic attention than other categories of (dis)information actors. In this article, we focus on the Georgian Dream party as a (dis)information provider, which helps to bridge this empirical gap.

The aim of this study is to explore (dis)information emitted by the Georgian Dream party, examining it as a distinct form of political communication used by political elites to influence the public. To understand this phenomenon, it is crucial to draw on political communication literature, which has long focused on how elites utilize communication strategies to shape public discourse and maintain support for their ideas (Graber and Smith 2005; Kriesi 2004; Perloff 1998). Research in this area emphasizes the capacity of political leaders to mobilize support and reinforce loyalty through targeted messaging (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2021; Bäck et al. 2023). Scholars generally agree that elite communication significantly influences public perceptions of political phenomena, often by evoking affective responses that deepen ideological divides or strengthen partisan commitment.

As key actors in this process, political parties frequently politicize pressing social issues to enhance the absorption of their narratives and sway support for specific policies (de Vries and Hobolt 2020; Green-Pedersen 2019). This strategic messaging serves not only to educate the public but also to solidify particular viewpoints, regardless of whether the information disseminated is factual or manipulative (Lilleker 2006; Santoro et al. 2021). This is rooted in the fact that the public does not typically have fixed opinions but instead "receives" information from elite discourse: when elites provide clear, disseminated cues, the public adopts these views as a stimulus for their own political alignment (Zaller 1992). In this regard, the literature underscores the critical role of media in sustaining support for governments and influencing the evaluation of political figures (Boston and Krewson 2023).

The way political life is framed through media channels directly affects public perception of policies and actors (Entman 1993). This process is intensified by the hybridization of communication tools in the "fourth age" of political communication (Blumler 2016). Recent studies indicate that political actors increasingly combine traditional and digital media to craft and control narratives that resonate with public sentiment (Chadwick 2017; Vaccari and Valeriani 2021). This ability to shape public perception through the media produces observable outcomes, ranging from affective polarization to a shared sense of community (Davis 2019).

However, among these consequences, the specific impact on trust relations between the public and government remains less scrutinized within political communication scholarship. While scholars agree that communication is key to sustaining trust in political elites (Sanders 2019), existing (dis)information studies predominantly address this issue through the lens of 'fake news' and transparency gaps. Consequently, how strategic (dis)information actively constructs trust in political leaders remains a comparatively underexplored phenomenon in Eastern European contexts. Addressing this gap, we apply the conceptual lens of trust to analyze the Georgian Dream's (dis)information.

Within political science, trust is commonly divided into two categories: horizontal trust (among citizens) and vertical trust (between citizens and institutions or leaders) (Putnam 1993; Bentzen 2019; Kondratov and Johansson-Nogués 2022). Vertical trust is a vital link that influences voter turnout, policy preferences, and compliance with government directives (Dalton 2004; Hetherington 2005; Norris 2011). This study concentrates specifically on vertical trust as a measure of the relationship between the citizenry and political actors in governing positions (Easton 1975; Levi and Stoker 2000). In mature democracies, vertical trust is closely tied to the norms of democratic governance, including strong institutions and the acceptance of political opposition (Dahl 1971; Kumagai and Iorio 2020). When governments respect these norms, communication serves as a mechanism for reinforcing legitimacy through a reciprocal relationship of confidence (Diamond and Morlino 2005). Conversely, violations of these norms, such as authoritarian practices or repression of opposition, typically undermine this trust (Mishler and Rose 2001).

In this dynamic, communication becomes a vital mechanism for reinforcing or undermining trust, enabling leaders to frame achievements and respond to public concerns (Blind 2007; Tonkiss and Passey 2000; Misztal 1996). While institutional checks and balances in mature democracies can constrain manipulative rhetoric, communication becomes a far more potent tool for information manipulation in hybrid or semi-democratic regimes where these checks are weak. Against this backdrop, this study argues that (dis)information serves as a primary mechanism through which elites attempt to construct or maintain vertical trust in such contexts, using the Georgian Dream party government's communications as empirical evidence to understand how trust dynamics are shaped when democratic norms are under pressure.

This paper employs qualitative content analysis as the primary research method, focusing on the period from 2019 to 2024. This timeframe was chosen to capture the marked decline in

Georgia's democracy index, a trend that has continued through to the 2024 elections. We analysed over 100 speeches and statements from Georgian Dream party leaders, including figures like Irakli Kobakhidze, Irakli Gharibashvili, Mamuka Mdinardze, Shalva Papuashvili, Davit Matikashvili, Givi Mikanadze, Irakli Kadagishvili, David Sergeenko, and Bidzina Ivanishvili. Our empirical evidence is sourced from both primary and secondary materials. For primary sources, we selected media outlets with high engagement among the Georgian public, which are television (74% of the audience) and Facebook (91%) (International Republican Institute, 2023). We focused specifically on Imedi TV and Rustavi 2, which maintained a pro-government editorial stance during the study period and ranked among the top three most popular channels in the country (Caucasus Barometer, 2024c). We also examined the Facebook profiles of Georgian Dream leaders for press conference statements, interviews, speeches, and public statements. Secondary sources included fact-checking reports and media analyses by Georgian NGOs such as MythDetector, Civil Georgia, and Transparency International Georgia. Additionally, to contextualize the empirical evidence, we referenced country reports from international organisations like Freedom House, Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, and international bodies such as the Council of Europe, European Parliament, European Commission, and the United Nations.

Democratic setback and the Georgian Dream's narratives

We have selected three key areas of research for this article, consistent with our frame analysis. We focus on the (dis)information narratives emitted by the Georgian Dream party on the political opposition, on the judiciary and on media.

Georgian Dream Party narratives to undermine the political opposition

Georgia's political landscape over the past decade has been marked by increasing tension between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the main opposition political opposition party:

the United National Movement (UNM).⁹ Georgian Dream advocates for moderation and pragmatism in state reforms, while UNM has a more reformist and pro-Western agenda. The Georgian Dream party has since coming into power acted to limit the scope for the opposition party to have an influence over politics in Georgia. The Georgian Dream party has been accused of unfair practices, for example, in terms of electoral campaign finance regulation, access to electoral commissions, and for not safeguarding opposition parties and their leaders against legal harassment, intimidation, and physical violence. For example, Amnesty International (2021) reported the arrest of United National Movement leader Nika Melia and his counterparts for allegedly inciting violence during anti-government protests, despite independently-verified video evidence suggesting otherwise.

The Georgian Dream party has also been attributed as being behind a set of (dis)information campaigns against the political opposition. Meta (2023) “Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report” found the Georgian government involved in a network of coordinated (dis)information efforts. This network targeted domestic audiences and operated across Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. The individuals behind it used fake accounts to create personas, manage pages and groups, and amplify pro-government content while criticizing opposition.

Among the (dis)information disseminated by the ruling party leaders, the first group of messages revolves around the UNM, founded by former president Mikheil Saakashvili. The UNM held a majority in the government until its leadership faced charges of abuse of power in 2013, leading to Georgian Dream's takeover. The UNM has remained the second-largest political party represented in Parliament since the 2020 elections. However, Georgian Dream narratives still describe it as a 'marginal, fringe political group in Georgian politics' (O12 - 2024). The Chairman of Georgian Dream labelled the UNM as “shame movement” and defined it as an “extremist organization” and “criminal political force” - making reference to the criminal charges against the party’s former leadership, considered by many politically motivated (O14-2024; O13 - 2023; O8-2022).

Another set of (dis)information narratives through which the Georgian Dream party tries to discredit the political opposition is related to the country’s aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. The initial and continuous narrative of this grouping was centred around the attempt to portray UNM’s pro-EU agenda as an attempt to remain in power using unfair means

⁹ In the most recent parliamentary elections, held in 2020, Georgian Dream secured 90 of the 150 seats, while the United National Movement (UNM) won 60 seats (Georgian Election Data, n.d.).

(O8 - 2022). Two contradictory conspiracy theories were disseminated for this purpose. The first theory claims that the UNM allegedly corrupted certain members of the European Parliament to gain support for Mikheil Saakashvili in European Parliament resolutions. According to this theory, UNM is trying to leverage this support in its struggle against the ruling party, Georgian Dream. The ultimate aim, as suggested, is to undermine the current government and possibly "dislodge" it to help UNM regain power (O8 - 2022; see also O10 - 2021, O11 - 2021). For example, they openly accused the UNM of giving bribes to MEPs Viola von Cramon and Anna Fotiga "for supporting [UNM] and hiding their dirty deals"(O11 - 2021). In contrast, the second theory accuses the UNM of being puppets of the certain EU parliamentarians - their "foreign friends", "protectors" and "lobbyists" - who seek to put puppet government and advance their own interests in Georgia (O11 - 2021; O12 - 2024). The central premise of both theories is to propagate the allegation that the UNM can only secure the support of a few members of the European Parliament. Or, that it needs foreign protectors, like the EP, otherwise it cannot sustain itself as a political force in the country.

As the 2024 parliamentary elections approached, claims surfaced regarding the need to ban opposition parties, particularly the UNM. These claims centered around accusations of 'extremism' within the opposition, which were predominantly directed at UNM. According to the ruling Georgian Dream party, this alleged extremism was framed as a serious threat to Georgia's path toward EU accession and as "an obstacle to the formation of a democratic system" (O25-2024). For example, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze stated, "Banning the National Movement is a crucial condition for Georgia to continue its smooth progress toward European Union membership". In the same speech, broadcasted on IMEDI TV, Kobakhidze labelled the smaller opposition parties as part of the "collective National Movement." He further suggested that banning these parties was allegedly a precondition for the immediate removal of "obstacles to the country's European integration." (O14-2024).

The founder of the UNM and former Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, has become a particular focus in the Georgian Dream party's (dis)information campaign against the opposition. Saakashvili came to power through the 'Revolution of roses' in 2003 with a promise to build closer relations with Western democracies and remained in the presidency until 2013. During Saakashvili's term in office, Georgia joined the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership, which both came with substantial funding for the development of institutional reforms. Internationally, Saakashvili is also recognized as a

prominent opponent of Russian President Putin, particularly after Putin's military support for secessionist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions. Saakashvili, however, failed the elections in 2013 due to the leaked evidence of his abuses of power. Consequently, he fled the country, was sentenced in absentia to term in prison, and detained upon his return in 2021 (BBC 2021b). Despite the fact that certain abuses did occur, Saakashvili's arrest raised concerns from international institutions, the opposition, and local NGOs regarding the political motives behind the process (Transparency International Georgia 2021; European Parliament 2023/2543(RSP) and 2024/2703(RSP); PACE Resolution 2463 (2022)).

However, public statements by Georgian Dream party leaders called such concerns as "absurd," "shameful," "trash," "politically motivated," and "scrap paper" of "no value either for our country [Georgia - author]" (O18 - 2024; O21 - 2024; O22 - 2023; O24 - 2023; see similar O16 - 2022; O17 - 2022; O16 - 2022). The speaker of the Georgian Parliament even defined them as "a source of disinformation and attacks against Georgia" (O23 - 2024). The personality of Saakashvili has been constantly portrayed by Georgian Dream as a 'criminal' who "created a system of torture, murder, racketeering, oppression, and rape" (O18 - 2024; see also O20 - 2023), which does not have factual evidence. Also, he has been misleadingly accused of "knowingly and intentionally giving up 20% of Georgia" (O18 - 2024). This statement makes reference to the military clashes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which ultimately led to the occupation of these territories by Russian troops. Although opinions on Saakashvili's decisions as the Commander-in-Chief of the Georgian Army during that period vary, there is consensus that his efforts were aimed at maintaining control over Georgian territories (Manutscharjan 2008). The territorial losses were also cited by the Vice Speaker of the Georgian Parliament as among Saakashvili's alleged 'crimes,' to support the claim that "many people know Saakashvili is not Putin's opponent, but his ally." (O16 - 2022). This statement, however, stands in direct contrast to the well-documented history of Saakashvili's strained relations with the Kremlin.

Georgian Dream Party narratives defending the politicization of the judiciary

The second set of Georgian Dream (dis)information narratives concerns judicial reform. The judiciary has become a key weakness in Georgia's democratic transition. Despite formal improvements since the 2018 constitutional reform, the system remains under the influence of

an organized group of judges and is politically biased (Erkvania & Lebanidze 2021). The appointment of judges has consistently raised concerns from national NGOs and international bodies, criticized for lacking fairness and process transparency (OSCE/ODHR 2021; see also Venice Commission (CDL-PI(2019)002), European Parliament 2021, Eastern Partnership 2021). These appointments are tainted by "claims of corporatism and self-interest in the High Council of Justice," undermining public trust and causing tensions between civil society, the opposition, and Georgian Dream (Venice Commission CDL-AD(2023)006; see also Transparency International Georgia 2020 b).

The Georgian Dream leaders communicated to the public either only positive parts of the international democracy watchdogs reporting or presented the critics as resulting from alleged "factual inaccuracies" which "we [Georgian government - author] are not used to from such reputable organizations" (J13 - 2020). When the conflict around the reform led to a political crisis, the European Council President Charles Michel, stepped in as a mediator and proposed an agreement between the government and opposition, recommending significant changes to the selection process for judges, based on Venice Commission recommendations (CDL-PI(2019)002). Although the government did not implement the agreement in full, the Georgian Dream thought to convince the public that the reform was on the right track. For example, Georgian Dream leadership disseminated a deceptive statement that "[Regarding the Supreme Court judges - author] it was done precisely in line with Charles Michel's document" (J1 - 2021; J14 - 2021). The Georgian Dream also denies the dissent with the pace of the reform from the citizens, stating "one can say it for sure" that the discontent stems from the opposition political forces and not from the populace (J16 - 2024).

Moreover, the prime minister sought to misleadingly assure the audience that "Georgia's current judicial system is far ahead of the judicial systems of the European Union member states, and all of the studies confirm it" (J3 - 2021). Subsequently, every criticism of the reform stemming either from the opposition or international partners was commented to the public as an offence towards the ruling party. The prime minister, for example, overtly blamed the US and the EU for prejudices against his government's work and/or national interests, elaborating on a conspiracy theory of alleged West-Saakashvili collusion (J4 - 2021). In one of his latest comments on the topic to Imedi TV, the prime minister characterized the critics of the reform as "attempts by the Government's opponents and their foreign patrons to make changes to the judicial system were solely aimed at restoring control of the collective National Movement

party over the judiciary” (J19 - 2024). In line with this theory, the Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili stated that “the opposition proposes to give up sovereignty, while it says that foreigners should appoint judges in Georgia” (J18 - 2024). This conspiracy theory about the collusion against the judiciary is frequently contextualized in the Georgian Dream discourse by seemingly unrelated arguments about the sexual minorities. For example, Mamuka Mdinardze, the head of the ruling Georgian Dream party in the Parliament, claimed that through the opposition, “a lot of [foreign - author] money is flowing into the country both against the judiciary and in support of LGBT propaganda, that is, as opposed to protecting the interests of the family” (J16 - 2024).

Another round of (dis)information arose when persons with the compromised biographies were appointed to the positions in courts. The Georgian Dream chairman Irakli Kobakhidze defended these appointments on the popular channel Rustavi TV by saying that “people who [previously - author] did bad things on a massive scale are now doing good things” (J10 - 2022). Similar public discourses even involved false reading of the recommendation of the Venice Commission for reforming the judicial system, arguing that it concerns “laws and the system as a whole, not names and surnames” (J11 - 2022; J10 - 2022).¹⁰ In addition, the Georgian Dream leaders sought to undermine the investigations by civil society in the eyes of general public by falsely labelling them as a “dirty campaign”, “black PR”, “disinformation”, “bullying”; the alleged conspiracy between the opposition and its ‘patrons’ from Western countries re-surfed in this regard (J2 - 2021; J11 - 2022; J10 - 2022; J8 - 2024; J5 - 2024). For instance, Georgian Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili asserted that the judiciary in Georgia was under “an orchestrated attack”, implicating several foreign embassies and suggesting direct involvement from ambassadors in these efforts. (J17 - 2024).

The final and most recent narrative surrounding judicial reform concerned the vetting system of integrity assessments for all high-ranking judicial roles. The vetting mechanism implies disclosing certain personal information about the person who will serve as a judge to exclude potential vested interests and vulnerability to blackmail in the judicial system. This widespread tool to address judicial corporatism was suggested by Georgian civil society and supported by international partners on the way of democratic reforms (Transparency International Georgia 2024; see also European External Action Service 2024, European Commission (COM(2023)

¹⁰ The recommendations, however, clearly state that judges' selection and evaluation processes should be based on proven competence, integrity, and independence.

690 final). Several acting judges also supported this idea. The government leaders, however, labelled this mechanism "incompatible not only with the Constitution of Georgia but also with constitutional and legal principles in general - the principles of state sovereignty, the principle of judicial independence" (J12 - 2022; J8 - 2024; J6 - 2024). Finally, the ruling party, in an attempt to discourage public support for the vetting process, openly accused Western partners of meddling in domestic affairs by proposing additional integrity checks, claiming these measures would establish a "bad precedent." (J7 - 2024).

Georgian Dream Party's narratives to defend the crackdown on media and civil society

The third narrative focuses on the crackdown on civil society in Georgia. Since 2019, Freedom House reports have documented NGOs increasingly becoming targets of government criticism and hostility. For instance, Georgia's Pride march¹¹ was repeatedly cancelled due to threats, while violence against participants and journalists remains largely unaddressed, signalling growing repression. A key element of this crackdown was the passage of controversial laws by the Georgian Parliament. The "Law on Family Values and the Protection of Minors" prohibits gatherings of sexual minority groups, while the 2024 "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" mandates NGOs to register if they receive more than 20% of their funding from foreign sources. Despite opposition from local civil society and international critics, the government actively defended the laws.¹² The Georgian Dream leadership misleadingly claimed that these measures were reflecting "common sense", "European values", and are "fully in line with European and global standards" (CS17 – 2024; FA1 – 2023; see similar FA2 – 2023; FA3 – 2024; FA4 – 2024, FA5 – 2024; FA7 – 2024; FA8 – 2024).

One of the central frames surrounding NGOs was foreign influence and external control brought up by organisations co-funded from foreign funds. The NGOs were labelled "foreign agents or servants of foreign countries (FA1 – 2023). For instance, Bidzina Ivanishvili, leader of the Georgian Dream party, criticized the allegedly non-transparent funding of NGOs,

¹¹ A Pride parade celebrates LGBTQ+ individuals and raises awareness to combat stigma and promote acceptance in society.

¹² See critics coming from the Media Freedom Coalition 2024; Venice Commission CDL-PI(2024)013; Civil.ge (2024); European Parliament Resolution 2024/270; OSCE/ODIHR (2024); EU Commission Resolution 2024/2703(RSP); European Council (2024).

arguing that such funding is a tool for foreign powers to influence Georgian politics and undermine its sovereignty. He emphasized that laws like the “Transparency of Foreign Influence” were necessary to ensure Georgia’s independence from external control. The Tbilisi Mayor echoed these claims and admitted that NGOs are instruments of “direct interference” from abroad in Georgian internal politics (CS5 – 2024). Other Georgian Dream leaders accused NGOs of advocating vested interests of other states, which provided these NGOs with “grants worth tens of millions of dollars” to engage in “fighting against [Georgian – author] statehood” (FA1 – 2023). This ‘subversive’ activity of NGOs purportedly made possible by the lack of transparency and accountability concerning the foreign funding they received (see, for example, FA1 – 2023 and O15 – 2024). The Democratic Engagement Centre, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and Transparency International Georgia were specifically mentioned as instruments of foreign interference of this kind (O15-2024).

A separate frame builds around perceived political bias of NGOs, which allegedly compose “a net of intrigue” orchestrated by the domestic and foreign politicians (CS16 – 2019; CS12 – 2024; CS18 – 2024). Several government officials, including Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, claimed that some NGOs were closely aligned with opposition parties, particularly before and during the 2020 parliamentary elections (CS15 – 2019; CS13 – 2024; CS8 – 2024; CS11 – 2024; CS12 – 2024). They accused these NGOs of working to delegitimize election results by “groundless campaign” of disinformation, collaborating with opposition groups, and even fabricating the opinion polls (CS15 – 2019; FA1 – 2023). The Georgian Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili overtly stated that “agenda of the NGOs and media was “blatantly political”, adding they had “constantly” called for a “change of authority and, at some point, even demanded the formation of a technical government for Georgia, which they said they would run after deposing” the ruling Georgian Dream party (CS13 – 2024).

Another set of (dis)information messaging revolves around NGO’s participation in orchestrating ungrounded protests against the government. In this regard, local NGOs were labelled as “radical organizations” which allegedly pose a threat to national security (CS10 – 2024; CS18 – 2024). The conspiracy theory accuses NGOs, which promote democracy, of running a “groundless campaign”, “agitation-propaganda” and “rallies” against the government (FA1 – 2023; FA/O2, 2023; FA9 – 2024; FA1 – 2023; FA6 – 2024; FA7 – 2024). They are also described as those sharing “revolutionary plans”, “LGBT propaganda”, “anti-identity propaganda” in the society (CS9 – 2024; CS14 – 2024). For example, one of the gravest

criticisms of this kind was directed at the NGO “Franklin Club,” a non-partisan organization that promotes liberal values. During a live interview, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili specifically accused the NGO “Franklin Club” of “poisoning” and “brainwashing” young people with their liberal ideas (CS7 – 2023). Moreover, he further alleged that, during the protests against the governments’ policies, Franklin Club activists were dressed “in satanist uniforms” and unfoundedly accused them of throwing Molotov cocktails at security forces, as if attempting to incite a violent confrontation (CS7 – 2023).

A separate and final frame suggests that NGOs are acting on behalf of a so-called “global war party.” It echoes the previous (dis)information frames, but it is different as it sees NGOs as a tool of global destabilisation. While within the Georgian leadership there is no clear or consistent understanding of what this “global war party” entails, the NGOs dissenting with Georgian Dream actions are viewed as servants of the “force akin to the Freemasons”, allegedly “interested in artificially creating problems for Georgia” (CS3 – 2024; CS4 – 2023). This narrative consolidates elements from other (dis)information narratives and introduces a unifying argument that accuses civil society of orchestrating a revolution. The statement made by one of the party leaders Bidzina Ivanishvili encapsulates the essence of this theory:

NGOs are pseudo-elite nurtured by a foreign country and have several key characteristics. They have no homeland; they do not love their country or their people because they do not really consider them to be their own. On the contrary, such people are embarrassed by their country and its people ... [N]Gos had already tried to launch the revolution twice in the past years; now they were calling for vetting in courts and changes in election law; these were all intentions of the global party of war to engineer a revolution. (CS2-2024)

Cultivating trust through (dis)information

Georgia is an emerging democracy commonly described as a semi-democratic or hybrid regime (Freedom House, n.d.). Georgian citizens display a strong aspiration to integrate into the community of democratic states, a goal that has repeatedly been frustrated by episodes of authoritarian backsliding. These experiences have heightened public sensitivity to practices perceived as undermining democratic norms. Consequently, trust in government is closely tied to citizens’ perceptions of the authorities’ commitment to democratic principles.

The ruling authorities have employed tactics that erode democratic standards, such as the suppression of opposition voices, to consolidate power. At the same time, the government has sought to maintain public trust by persuading citizens that democratic development continues under its leadership. This tension, characteristic of premature democracies, has led the Georgian Dream party to rely strategically on (dis)information as a central tool for cultivating vertical trust, which is understood here as trust in state institutions and national leadership.

Empirical findings indicate that Georgian Dream is a central actor in shaping public understandings of democratic change. It currently represents the most popular political force in the country, with the largest share of citizens reporting a sense of closeness to the party (Caucasus Barometer, 2024b; International Republican Institute, 2023). Since 2019, levels of public trust in the Prime Minister and the government have increased steadily (Caucasus Barometer, 2024b). Although multiple factors may account for this trend, the strategic use of (dis)information plays an important role in sustaining public confidence despite observable democratic backsliding. In this way, Georgian Dream simultaneously undermines democratic norms while preserving citizens' trust and the perception that the country continues to democratize.

The party has constructed a narrative of governance that projects an appearance of responsiveness to democratic demands. This appearance is sustained through a combination of offensive and defensive (dis)information strategies, conveyed via emotionally charged messages intended to elicit specific public reactions. On the offensive side, Georgian Dream has sought to marginalize opposition actors and civil society organizations through adversarial (dis)information. Such messaging depicts dissenting voices as extremist and contrasts them with what the party frames as a normal democratic opposition. Criticism is delegitimized when the party groups diverse dissenting actors, including political parties and NGOs, into one adversarial category. Undermining trust in the opposition is therefore as central to this strategy as reinforcing confidence among loyal supporters, as sowing doubt about opponents diminishes their electoral appeal (Devine 2024).

Party leaders frequently discredit critics by challenging the credibility of their sources. Criticism from reputable international institutions, such as the European Parliament, is often addressed by the government through the personalization of individual Members of the European Parliament rather than engagement with the institutional critique itself. In other instances, critical assessments are dismissed as the result of disinformation or

misunderstanding. Through these practices, the government both cultivates distrust toward external evaluators and reinforces its preferred narrative.

Across these cases, Georgian Dream repeatedly uses a foreign interference frame to maintain public trust despite democratic setbacks. Criticism from opposition parties, civil society, and international partners is consistently portrayed as the result of external pressure or manipulation rather than as a response to domestic governance problems. This allows the party to shift blame away from state institutions and to present itself as a defender of national sovereignty. By framing critics as foreign-backed actors, Georgian Dream undermines their credibility while strengthening its own position as the only legitimate representative of the public interest. This strategy also helps audiences reconcile democratic aspirations with illiberal policies, particularly when such messages are delivered through trusted media outlets. As a result, trust is sustained through suspicion toward independent critics rather than through democratic performance.

Defensively, the party frames its legislative initiatives as necessary measures for national development despite evident democratic shortcomings. Controversial policies, including the Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence, legislation promoting so-called family values, and contested judicial appointments, are presented as fully compatible with democratic standards. Survey evidence suggests that many Georgians do not view these developments as threats to democracy, even though they diverge from the EU Association Agreement's emphasis on judicial independence, respect for political opposition, and the inclusion of civil society actors (International Republican Institute 2023).

A crucial element in this process is the dissemination of (dis)information through trusted media outlets. Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and Facebook rank among the most widely trusted sources of information in Georgia. Reliance on these channels has helped mitigate public doubts surrounding controversial government decisions while also enabling Georgian Dream to reach audiences beyond its core support base. At the same time, these platforms have facilitated the circulation of conspiracy narratives, most notably on Imedi TV, whose audience has been shown to be particularly susceptible to such content (Clem, Herron, and Tepnadze 2023).

A key insight from this research is that elements of the government's narrative have been internalized by both loyal supporters and segments of the opposition. Survey data indicate that 75% of Georgian Dream supporters believe the country has become more democratic over the

past year, while a notable 32% of opposition supporters share this assessment (National Democratic Institute 2023). Although endorsement among party loyalists is expected, this cross-group convergence suggests that the government's reliance on trusted media outlets has broadened the reach of its (dis)information. When audiences view outlets such as Imedi TV as credible, they are more inclined to accept the messages they convey with limited scrutiny.

Conclusions

Georgian Dream came to power on a promise of democratic reform, responding to a broad public demand for democratization. After an initial period of relatively strong performance, however, the government increasingly shifted its focus toward consolidating power. At the same time, it continued to seek public approval by projecting an image of ongoing democratic development. As Georgia evolved into a hybrid regime marked by growing pressure on civil society and political opposition, democratic checks and balances were gradually eroded. This deterioration created conditions in which (dis)information became a key instrument of governance. Rather than resolving the tension between political control and democratic expectations through reform, the government relied on (dis)information to manage this contradiction.

Trusted media outlets played a central role in this process by disseminating both offensive and defensive narratives aligned with government messaging. High levels of trust in these outlets helped reinforce perceptions of democratic progress, even among groups that had previously been critical of Georgian Dream. The Georgian case illustrates how trust in political leadership can be sustained through the appearance of responsiveness rather than through substantive democratic performance. Our findings suggest that vertical trust in hybrid or premature democracies does not necessarily reflect institutional quality or adherence to democratic norms. Instead, it can be actively constructed by political elites through (dis)information, particularly in contexts where media trust remains high and mechanisms of democratic accountability are weak.

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J19 - 2024 <https://info.imedi.ge/en/politics/3341/georgian-pm-says-judiciary-used-as-one-of-links-in-repressive-machine-under-former-unm-govt>

3.2. Simanschi, Elena. “(Pro)-Russian (Dis)information in Moldova: eroding vertical trust in Sandu and the PAS government?”

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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.¹³

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

¹³ (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.

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.

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).¹⁴ 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

¹⁴ 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.

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 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).¹⁵ 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 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 Factly v Moldove,

¹⁵ 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.

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 Factly 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; Cenusa 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%.¹⁶ The data gathered was extracted from the primary sources in the original language (Russian) and translated into

¹⁶ According to the US Agency of Global Media report (2016) and the study conducted by the independent Moldovan think tank Watchdog.md (2023).

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.

(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.¹⁷ 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; Verдика.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 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)¹⁸. 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

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ Please refer to the supplemental material for screenshots of the (dis)information cited throughout this article.

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 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).¹⁹ 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

¹⁹ Bessarabia is a historical region that covers parts of modern-day Moldova and southwestern Ukraine, characterized by contested ethnic boundaries. (Schlegel 2019).

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).²⁰ 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 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

²⁰ 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/>

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 (Caľus 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,²¹ we use public opinion surveys to support our main argument that (dis)information has a substantial 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 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

²¹ See, for example, West et al. (2024), Ognyanova et al. (2020) and others.

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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3.3. Johansson-Nogués, Elisabeth, and Elena Şimanschi. “Fabricating a war? Russian (dis)information on Ukraine”

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Propaganda has been an age-old part of war mongering. There is thus no surprise that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was preceded and continues to be fuelled by propaganda transmitted by state-controlled Russian media. What is more unusual about the Russian (dis)information campaigns is the sheer volume of distorted narratives or complete fictional accounts about the conflict. This article explores the content and technologies of Russian information manipulation of domestic audiences in the context of the invasion of Ukraine. We also examine the bases for the sustained robust public support for the war within Russia despite being based on mostly fabricated (dis)information. Relying on political psychology and communication theory we explain how emotions and associative memories have played an important role in the Russian public’s sustained approval to the war. Our findings point to that in the absence of contrasted and independently-verified information, the volume, frequency, emotional intensity of slick, plug-and-play media packages on Ukraine have acted to displace and distort the average Russian’s associative social monitoring processes.

Keywords: (dis)information, Russia, Ukraine, emotions, memory, political psychology, and communication

The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian

Federation. Vladimir Putin, address on 24 February 2022

Introduction

Propaganda has been a part of warmongering since time immemorial. Propaganda or (dis)information are forms of mass communication that seek to generate a response in a target audience conducive to the propagandist's agenda.¹ Governmental (dis)information operations encourage a specific public opinion formation by selecting and framing certain facts, values, or ideas, while shaping, limiting, reducing, or withholding rivalling information (Jowett and O'Donnell 2018). Throughout history, wartime governments have been especially keenly aware of that at any moment a range of competing frames or opinions about the war effort is possible in the domestic realm. Hence, from the government's standpoint, public opinion needs to be 'managed' lest it turns against the authorities and their objectives. War propaganda and political spins serve an important function in terms of enticing the citizens to 'rally around the flag' in defence of national goals and keeping morale high even in the face of public sacrifice during the conflict.

The largescale Russian (dis)information campaign surrounding the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was in this sense far from unexpected. However, what is perhaps more unusual with the Russian propaganda, compared to other recent inter-state conflicts,² is that so much of its contents reflect unsubstantiated allegations or complete fictional accounts.³ The spin-doctors linked to the country's leadership have thus, in essence, been engaging in extensive information manipulation to 'fabricate' the war in the Russian national imaginary – albeit a war with very real and tragic consequences. The Russian public's overwhelmingly affirmative response to the conflict, the armed forces action in Ukraine, and to the Russian political leadership, in the first year of the war is an indicator of that the (dis)information achieved its objective.⁴ This is no small feat in a country in which state control of means of communications is of fairly recent date and, until prior to the invasion, far from absolute.

¹ (Dis)information is defined here as a composite of different information typologies. The concept encompasses correct and factual information, political spins and the negatively slanted, as well as the outright false and deceitful information. The more sophisticated (dis)informers employ a mix of these at any given time. We use (dis)information as a synonym for propaganda in this article. We take 'disinformation' (without brackets) to exclusively refer to false or intentionally misleading information.

² We compare here with the amount of US (dis)information surrounding the intervention in Iraq in 2003, for example. Another comparable could be the volume of (dis)information in the context of global pandemics, see, for example, Cull and Manfredi-Sánchez (2022).

³ Examples of investigation to verify the Russian fictional accounts encompass OECD (2022); OSCE ODIHR (2022).

⁴ Surveys by the Russian independent, non-governmental polling and sociological research institute, Levada Centre show that Russian public opinion's support for the military intervention has consistently been above 70 percent until November 2022. President Vladimir Putin's popularity rate, which has been above 60 percent in the last decade, rose to above 80 percent in the first six months after the Russian invasion (Levada Centre 2022a), all web-based resources last consulted on 20 May 2023.

It is therefore of interest to explore the mechanisms by which the Russian authorities managed to gain and maintain public support for the war in Ukraine, despite largely relying on manufactured claims. This article explores the content and the technologies of Russian information manipulation of domestic audiences with a view to unpack the link between (dis)information and public consent. We also contribute to the literature by theorizing on the mechanisms which make the public more susceptible to fabricated realities. For this purpose, we have examined the Russian (dis)information frames produced on Ukraine and on the West in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. We have performed a frame analysis of the (dis)information output from 15 media companies and approximately 1000 pieces of (dis)information in the period spanning March 2021 – when the Russian troops began to gather on the Russian-Ukrainian border – until December 2022. This article proceeds as follows. Section 1 will lay out a literature review, provide a conceptual framework, as well as offer some methodological explanations. Section 2 will outline the Russian (dis)information frames on Ukraine and the West in the context of the military invasion. The final section provides analysis.

Propaganda and the mechanisms of Russian (dis)information

In the past century, the propaganda literature has tended to predominantly focus on the role of the ‘emitter’ of (dis)information in shaping the audience’s perceptions and attitudes, as well as directing behaviour. In terms of key (dis)information emitters, most authors identify the government and political elite as the most powerful influencers of public opinion during war or large-scale crisis (Ellul 1973; Lasswell 2013). In contexts of high uncertainty, the public tends to look to political leaders to provide cues on attitudes and aspirational goals. The leaders’ influence over ‘the marketplace of ideas’ is thus pivotal for the government’s ability to launch and sustain military interventions even in the face of public or elite opposition (Bennett and Paletz 1994; Zaller and Chiu 1996; Herman and Chomsky 2010). Another key actor in propaganda is the media. The literature tends, however, to be divided on the role of the media in (dis)information campaigns. Some scholars argue that media is simply a passive transmission tool of governmental propaganda (Zaller and Chiu 1996; Herman and Chomsky 2010). This insight applies in particular to the rare cases of full-blown totalitarian countries

where the governmental control of information is high. Other scholars, researching the role of media in mature democratic or mixed settings, tend to point to media as an active and frequently willing participant in either amplifying or diminishing the authorities' claims, or even taking on the role of (dis)information producer in its own right (Snow 2004; Patrick and Thrall 2007).

The relationship between (dis)information and the audience(s), in particular the mechanisms whereby propaganda has an effect on the targeted social groups, has been much less explored in propaganda studies (Jowett and O'Donnell 2018). Our research inserts itself in this void. Our starting point is Lasswell's (2013) observation that the key to propaganda is the leader's ability to conjure up an emotional response to (dis)information rather than a rational-logical one. We argue here that emotions are indeed central to understanding the mechanisms which link emitter with audience, as well as the link between message and public support (or lack thereof). We draw upon the literature of political psychology and communication theory to situate our argument about how emotions trigger a determined public response.

Political psychology tells us that affect and emotions frame and influence our evaluations of the social world 'setting the parameters for what we remember and plan' (Ringmar 2018). Emotions act as preconscious somatic markers to sort information based on associations as we move through our environment (Kuklinski 2001; Jost 2017; Duncombe 2019). In turn, the emotionally triggered associations stored in our memories channel our interpretations of reality and guide our attitudes and actions. In this way, emotions organize the cognitive process and shape behaviour. How emotions affect our cognition and conduct is nevertheless undetermined.⁵ Theory holds that each individual normally associates to different events based on their current and past emotional experiences. The goal of propaganda thus becomes to manipulate the emotions and the cognitive associations they prompt in the individual and channel them in a way which befits the (dis)informer's agenda.

Political communication theory tells us that propagandists may instrumentalize positive (joy, pride) and negative (anger, fear) emotional dimensions to ensure public support for governmental action. For example, (dis)information may pander to positive emotions about shared values to conjure up collective feelings of national pride, while fear and anger prompt mobilization against perceived dangers and injustices (Lazarus 1991). (Dis)informers may also try to invoke a combination of different emotions – positive and negative – into a unique

⁵ As Ross (2014, p.32) well argues, "those exposed to emotion contagion do not somehow become affective carbon copies".

emotional mix (Holak and Havlena 1998). The combination of emotions that the war propagandist may try to appeal to will differ according to the circumstances of the conflict (defensive or offensive), as well as naturally fluctuate throughout the war effort due to the successes or failures of the armed forces or of governmental strategy. For example, a defensive communicative influence strategy may want to appeal mostly to fear to activate the public's instinctive behaviour to pull back and protect itself.⁶ An offensive (dis)information strategy may be employed to conjure up support for attacking an enemy, and it might rely on a mixed approach to evoke the public's national pride, fear, and anger to produce a more confident, aggressive collective response during crises.

Emotions, as we have seen, drive the audience(s) ability to sort and interpret information. Political communication that appeals to strong emotions may induce biases in an individual's somatic markers. Consequently, emotionally loaded political communication may impair an individual's ability to monitor social reality, leading to the distortion of associative processes (Bakir and McStay 2021). In particular, this can occur when social facts are not directly observed by an individual, but instead are retransmitted via an intermediary (e.g. the media) (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018). Distortion thus occurs because an individual is unable to distinguish whether his or her emotions are derived from real or fictional events. Since a retransmitted fictional event may have contextual similarities to a real event, it evokes similar emotional associations (Johnson et al. 1979). A distortion may also occur when long-term communication of fiction creates strong emotional associations within the public's memory, dislodging any earlier associations based on true and independently verified facts. A distortion of this sort is often further reinforced by the durable internal consistency of fictional messages, resulting in an individual's failure to conduct proper social monitoring (Zimbardo and Leippe 1991). Finally, fictional experiences may also be more emotionally appealing to an individual than (f)actual experiences. This occurs, in particular, when the (dis)information fiction is packaged in a slick and attractive manner and/or presented to the public in a quick and readily graspable manner ('plug and play'). Under such circumstances, virtual reality or mediated events give the appearance of actual events, a 'mirage effect' which is frequently reinforced by new technologies and audio-visual stimuli (Shapiro and Lang 1991; Der Derian 2009).

⁶ See also Druckman and McDermott (2008).

Russian (dis)information in the context of the military invasion into Ukraine 2022 is a rich case study onto which to apply our conceptual framework based on emotions and the distortive effects of mediated information on an individual's associative memory. The Russian government, keenly aware of the political impact information can have, announced control over the media as an objective in the two most recent National Security Strategies of the Russian Federation (2015; 2021). This has gradually led to greater control over the content, flow, and outlet of information.⁷ For example, in 2022 new restrictive legislation has virtually eliminated all independent and foreign news sources under either the foreign agents' law or the new war censorship laws.⁸ In the changing information landscape within Russia, the main actors are the state-sponsored public- as well as set of private media and information platforms owned by pro-regime magnates.⁹ It is fair to say that the state and pro-regime media companies do not only act to simply convey official views fed to them by the government. They are also active (dis)information emitters or even entrepreneurs in the Russian emergent 'spin dictatorship' in their own right (Guriev and Treisman 2023). Aside from the state's official line, they create their own news content which is conducive to the state's overall (dis)information objective. Moreover, they call on partisan academics, specialists, or public persons, who allegedly 'possess[es] a certain expertise level and present versatile points of view on the problem and its aspects', to lend greater credibility to the (dis)information emitted (Gulenko 2021). For example, former Ukrainian, pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, who fled to Russia during the Euromaidan crisis in 2014, and members of his erstwhile government have been frequently called upon in Russian media to bear witness on different issues related to their country of origin.

In terms of methodology, we have conducted a frame analysis of Ukraine-related news pieces in 15 Russian mainstream media sources.¹⁰ The scope of our frame analysis spanned March 2021, when Russian troops began assembling at the Ukrainian borders, until December 2022. The sources that have been surveyed are Russian-language TV channels and news outlets with

⁷ For more a more in-depth account of the evolution of the post-Soviet Russian informational sphere and journalism, see Pomerantsev (2019) and Asmolov (2019).

⁸ All foreign media platforms, with the exception of YouTube, were banned as a consequence of the March 2022 legislation.

⁹ Moreover, as OECD informs, Kremlin has a strong presence in social media as well. It runs coordinated campaigns with traditional media on several social media accounts, for example, 75 Russian government-linked Twitter accounts tweeted 1,157 times between 25 February and 3 March 2022, garnering 35.9 million retweets, 29.8 million likes and 4 million replies by their 7.3 million followers (see OECD 2022).

¹⁰ The translation of the cited news information was performed by the authors.

the widest possible circulation inside Russia.¹¹ We examined 1000 articles from such media as: Channel 1, Gazeta.ru, Fishki.net, Interfax, Izvestiya.ru, Lenta.ru, Life.ru, News.ru, NTV, REN.tv, RIA, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Rubaltic.ru Russia 1, and Vesti.ru. In our frame analysis we identified news pieces justifying the intervention or the continued war effort based on the search parameter ‘Ukraine’. We then performed a cluster analysis and sorted the most salient data into three main frames (see below). Several different stories overlap in one article in most cases and when they do, they are included in all the relevant clustered frames. The contextualization of the (dis)information is drawn from secondary literature.

Russian (dis)information justifying the war effort

Ukraine began as a topic in Russian state propaganda already around the 2004 Orange Revolution, which brought an end to Leonid Kuchma’s dysfunctional regime (Larrabee 2007). Ukraine became subject of yet another wave of Russian (dis)information campaigns in and around the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014. According to Tsekhanovska and Tsybulska (2021; see also Audinet 2018), the anti-Ukrainian message inside Russia has since remained a relative constant. The Russian media (dis)information about Ukraine would, however, reach new heights in the three months prior to the 2022 invasion. We have identified three main (dis)information frames in the period we have analysed: Donbas as a ‘victim’, Ukrainian political elite and nationalism as the ‘enemy’, and Ukraine as a symbol of Western aggression against Russia. These three frames were instrumentalized to justify the 2022 ‘special operation’ and to keep the Russian public emotionally engaged since.

The Russian (dis)information frames on Donbas

¹¹ Traditional media continue to constitute the most common means by which to acquire information in Russia. In October 2022, 64 percent of Russians surveyed stated that television was their preferred source of information. Broken down by age-groups, 57 percent of Russians in the ages 25-39 favor traditional media, 84 percent for ages 40-54 and above 90 percent for 55 and older (Levada Centre 2022b).

The Ukrainian region of Donbas was the focus on the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict and is at time of writing the main area of clashes after the Russian 2022 invasion. The primary (dis)information frames in this grouping of news includes the narration of the population in Donbas as victims of violence from the central government in Ukraine and in need of Russian protection.

One of the predominant sub-frames in the Russian (dis)information is the allegations of the Ukrainian government being involved in continuous and longstanding violence against civilians in the Donbas (Fortuin 2022). The idea ‘Ukraine has been shelling Donbas for 8 years’ since the 2014 conflict has become a widespread reported ‘fact’ in almost every news regarding Ukraine inside Russia (Channel One 2022a; REN TV 2022a). This particular (dis)information frame claims that the Ukrainian state has organized attacks to ‘deliberately exterminate Donbas residents: children, women, and the elderly’ (Channel One 2022a; RIA.ru 22a) for the purposes of ethnic cleansing and genocide, drawing ungrounded parallels with the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia in 1995 because of purported ‘incitement of absolute hatred towards the population of the self-proclaimed republics of Donbas’ (Interfax.ru 2021a). News reports on ‘the funeral of schoolchildren killed in the shelling of the school’, or ‘teenagers killed in the streets of the city as a result of the Armed forces of Ukraine shelling’ are frequently accompanied and visually reinforced with TV footage of unclear or doctored origins of children in coffins, fragments of bodies, and crying mothers, as if to provide solid testimony for the allegation of genocide (RIA.ru 2022a; NTV.ru 2022a).¹²

In a distinct sub-frame of this grouping of news on Donbas as a victim, the Russian media would in late 2021 begin to issue claims that the Ukrainian central government was mobilizing its forces to take back control over the territories it lost control over in 2014.¹³ It was alleged that ‘Kyiv is preparing to solve the ‘Donbas issue’ by force’(Life.ru 2021). The media pointed to a growing volume of reports about ‘unprecedentedly increased shelling’ in the Donbas region, even if such assertions have not been confirmed by independent sources (RIA.ru 2022b). To back up the claims behind this fictitious Ukrainian attack, the media referred to the self-

¹² In their investigation of the allegations of widespread violence and genocide by Ukrainian authorities, the International Court of Justice (2022) and OSCE (Undated) found that such claims by the Russian Federation were unfounded.

¹³ The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission has not found evidence for the presence of Ukrainian troops or mobilization prior to the outbreak of the war, as claimed in Russian media. They have, however, confirmed the presence of Russian regular troops, the deployment of Russian heavy weapons in Donbas, and a failure of the Russians to respect the line of contact, ceasefire, and repeatedly broke truces in this same time period (see OSCE Undated).

proclaimed republics' 'intelligence service' reports that 'Ukraine may launch an offensive in the next two or three days'(Life.ru 2022a). To make this argument more convincing, the news shared a post from the social media page of the pro-Russian, former Ukrainian Prime Minister Nikolai Azarov who 'predicted' the exact date of the alleged offensive: 'the Ukrainian Army, led by the nationalist battalions, is preparing to launch a military operation in Donbas on 25 February 2022'(News.ru 2022a).

In view of the alleged 'looming attack' by Ukrainian military, the Russian President officially recognized 'the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic' as 'the situation in Donbas has reached a critical, acute stage' (Channel One 2022b). A final distinct sub-frame in the Russian (dis)information thus became the political spin given to the Russian invasion. The Russian military offensive in 2022 was characterized as 'a special military operation by the Russian Armed Forces' which – starting as it did on 24 February 2022, i.e. the day before Ukrainian authorities were claimed to prepare an attack against Donbas – 'pre-empted and thwarted a large-scale offensive by Ukrainian strike forces against the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics in March 2022' (Rossiiskaya Gazeta 2022a). The Russian accusations against the Ukrainian central government of violence against the civilian population and crimes against humanity became and have remained among of the central frames to promote public support for the war effort. It also figured prominently as one of the central lines of Putin's address on and the news coverage surrounding the partial mobilization in September 2022 (NTV.ru 2022b). The 'defence of Donbas' thus became one of the principal sub-frames to justify Russian military intervention, construed as an operation 'to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime' (Russia 1 2022). For this reason, the Russian media confidently alleged that 'Russia did not start this war', and that 'Russia has not attacked Ukraine' (Channel One 2022c; NTV.ru 2022c). The Russian media have been adamant that the 'special operation' is a 'noble' mission 'conducted with several factors in mind - not to destroy civilian neighborhoods, not to harm the population, and not even to hit the Ukrainian military barracks' (REN TV 2022c). The Russian 2022 invasion has thus been construed in domestic media as a humanitarian act that has been 'unjustly' responded to by Ukrainian military aggression and misunderstood or slandered in the Western media space.

The Russian (dis)information frames on Ukraine's political elite and nationalism

The Russian invasion into Ukraine has also been justified by a (dis)information frame related to Ukraine's political leadership and certain political groups within Ukraine. Russian media sources argue that Ukraine's central government and determined political groups within the country are engaging in radical forms of nationalism and/or are hostile to Russia and its influence in Ukraine.

A particular predominant sub-frame in the Russian (dis)information has been focused on Ukrainian leaders elected after the Euromaidan protests in 2014 (Fortuin 2022). The Russian (dis)information has used a number of pejorative terms against the democratically elected Ukrainian government. Most prominent is the use of chains of equivalences in Russian media whereby the legitimacy of the Ukrainian elected leaders is called into question by labelling it the 'Kyiv regime' (inferring that it is driven by radical nationalist ideology), the 'Kyiv junta' (drawing parallels with a dictatorship). This labelling is designed to politically delegitimize the current Ukrainian government as a leader for entire Ukraine in the eyes of the Russian population. Russian media also frequently refers to the Ukrainian leadership as the 'Successors of Bandera' (establishing associations with a controversial Nazi collaborator in Ukraine's past) (REN TV 2022c). Before the 2022 invasion, many sources cited Putin who claimed to see a continuous Nazi ideology in Ukrainian state leadership: 'Zelensky came to power and fell, as previous leaders did, under the influence of radical elements, as they say in Ukraine: Nazis' (Nazi in Russian slang) (REN TV 2022b). As if to illustrate the state of affairs, one news channel put out footage of Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky's Instagram page, which had been doctored to contain the SS division's logo on the Victory Day of World War II (Channel One 2022d). Media has thus made ample coverage of the government's line that the 'special operation' in Ukraine is a means to 'de-nazify' or to liberate the country from extreme ideologies such as fascism, and to purportedly topple the current government. Russian media has claimed that '[n]ow Russian troops have launched a special operation to free the people of Donbas and Ukraine from the admirers of Hitler and the swastika' (Life.ru 2022b). In other media accounts it has been stated that '[i]deally, we need to liberate Ukraine, cleanse it of Nazis, of pro-Nazi people and their ideology' (Gazeta.ru 2022a; RIA.ru 2022c).¹⁴

¹⁴ The allegations of Nazi sympathizers among the Ukrainian political leadership have been disputed by many independent sources. For example, reports that in 2015 Ukraine has even issued a ban on Nazi and Communist ideologies in public life. Moreover, Ukrainian far-right groups tend to only be a marginal political force in Ukraine, as they 'had a limited presence during the Euromaidan protests and have suffered defeats in every

A different sub-frame is the alleged Russophobia in Ukraine, for which the Ukrainian government and nationalists are held responsible. Russian media has interchangeably depicted Ukraine as an ‘anti-Russian springboard’ (News.ru 2022b), ‘anti-Russian project’ (Channel One 2021a), or simply ‘anti-Russia’ (REN TV 2022d). On this, Russian media has followed closely in the footsteps of Putin’s (2021) article ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’. Putin finds Ukrainian nationalists the main source of this anti-Russian attitude, accusing them both in terms of turning the average Ukrainian away from their ‘natural focus’, the ‘Russian Motherland’ as well as instilling Russophobia in Ukraine. He blames the Ukrainian government and nationalists, who he labels ‘[r]adicals’ for being ‘more and more insolent about their ambitions’, as they ‘systematically and consistently pushed Ukraine to curtail and limit economic cooperation with Russia’ in favor of closer relations with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russian media has produced innumerable versions of the same narrative portraying Ukrainian nationalism as designed to turn Ukrainians away from Russia and have ‘systemically nurtured’ Russophobia over the past eight years (Rossiiskaya Gazeta 2022b). The Russian media has also amplified the unsubstantiated claims that the Ukrainian nationalist alleged ambition is to delink the Ukraine from Russia completely. The media has engaged in lively theory debates surrounding the claims that the Ukrainian government wants to create an artificial separation between Ukraine and Russia (RIA.ru 2022d). There have also been unfounded accusations that ‘Kyiv’s policy is aimed at a complete ban on Russian culture’ (Rossiiskaya Gazeta 2022c).

The negative portrayal of the Ukrainian political elites and anti-Russian nationalism has prompted the surge of another important subordinate mediatic framing after the 24 February invasion. The narrative that it is the authority and ‘right’ of Russia to intervene to protect the Russophones in Ukraine and, in particular, the population in the Donbas territories. This sub-frame builds on the ‘Russian world’ concept invented by one of Putin’s ideologues, which entails an existence of an alleged ‘broad Russian civilization’ beyond the borders of Russia under the protection of the Russian state (Meister 2016). Frames of this type blur the sovereign borders between nation states in the Russian ‘near-abroad’ and attempts to appeal to the common ethnic-linguistic-historical background between Russians living in Russia and beyond. This frame expresses the idea that Russia acts as a guardian of the Russian-speaking

national election after that, with a united front of all radical right-wing parties in the 2019 parliamentary elections winning only 2.15% of the vote falling far short of the 5% minimum guaranteeing entry into parliament’ (see EUvsDisinfo (Undated)).

population in Ukraine, i.e. Russians have the right to intervene to ‘protect our people’ (emphasis added) (Life.ru 2021).

The Russian (dis)information frames on the West

A final frame which has received much attention from the Russian media in the context of the 2022 Russian invasion has been that which is clustered around Ukraine as a symbolic bridgehead for the West (US and EU) or as a figurative battleground for Russia power standoff with the West. An unwarranted, but predominant, pre-invasion (dis)information sub-frame was Russian media’s concern that Ukraine was about to accede to Western defense organizations. One media outlet held that ‘[t]he United States promotes Ukraine's accession to NATO’, which is portrayed as a clear breach of by Russia purported international agreements that NATO can extend into Eastern Europe (Channel One 2021b). In the aftermath of the 2022 invasion, the Russian media threw their weight behind the official state-condoned view that the invasion of Ukraine was purely defensive from the Russian side, as it was allegedly provoked by NATO and ‘[t]he conflict in Ukraine is a consequence of NATO's eastward expansion’ (Rossiiskaya Gazeta 2022d).

After the invasion, Russian (dis)information tried to shift the blame for the conflict even further onto the collective West. The Russian media portrays Russia as having been ‘provoked’ into the conflict by the West, as ‘NATO countries have pushed Ukraine towards armed confrontation with Russia for decades’ (Rubaltic.ru 2022). The EU’s ‘Eastern Partnership’ policy is depicted as an instrument to force Ukraine ‘to develop relations with the EU without Russia, and instead of relations with Russia’, hence prompting Russian action (Rubaltic.ru 2022).

The Russian political spins on the Western military assistance sent to Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion depict the latter as a direct cause for the prolongation and escalation of violence in the war. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigy has claimed that ‘[t]he US and the Western countries [...] do their best to protract the special military operation as much as possible’ through ‘the growing number of foreign arms shipments’ to allegedly inflame the conflict further (RBC.ru 2022). The West is thus, according to the media, exacerbating the war

as ‘Ukraine hits peaceful civilians with NATO arms’ (Channel One 2022e). Moreover, the Russian (dis)information on NATO and EU military assistance exaggerates the size and contents of the donations. Allegations that ‘[t]he West is literally ‘pumping’ Ukraine with weapons and sending well-trained soldiers into the region’ appear with regular frequency in the Russian media space (Vesti.ru 2022; Izvestiya.ru 2022). The NATO and EU countries’ delivery of armoury and vital supplies for the Ukrainian troops has been construed as an active engagement in the conflict by the Russian press, and reported as a ‘direct involvement of Western countries in the Ukrainian conflict [which] makes them a party to it [...] We have no illusions that today the Russian Armed Forces and the [Donetsk] DNR and [Lugansk] LNR militias are confronted [...] by the military machines of the collective West’ (Lenta.ru 2022). This shift in narrative of who the Russian military is confronting in Ukraine, has served to sell to the public on the lack of visible success of the ‘special operation’ in the past year and maintain the myth of the ‘great Russian army’ intact. To protect the reputation of Russia’s military prowess, media has picked up on the fake victorious battles of Russian troops which have been disseminated in Tik-Tok (BBC 2022). Moreover, lush TV imagery have been put out to show the latest in technological warfare, such as, for example, novel Russian nuclear submarines, drones, anti-missile complexes, rockets capable of hitting advanced NATO arms, as well as innovations in body armour to protect Russian soldiers in battle (RIA.ru Undated).

Russian allegations also involve supposed US biological weapons laboratories claimed to be located on the territory of Ukraine.⁷⁵ Such (dis)information sub-frames had already appeared before invasion but became more widespread as the conflict began. One of the main TV channels alleged that ‘Russian troops revealed over 30 US biolaboratories on the territory of Ukraine, when they came to protect Luhansk and Donetsk Peoples’ Republics. These laboratories produce mass-destruction mutants: birds, bats, beetles and midges. Such mutants are produced to attack Russia’ (Channel One 2022f). Another news outlet expanded this perceived threat to the global domain. It argued that ‘the US build over 400 biolaboratories all over the world, which is a threat not only to Russia but to the whole world (Fishki.net 2022). Nuclear weapons also play an important role in this rhetoric. Media echo Putin’s claim that Ukraine is endangering global and Russian security by rebuilding its nuclear capabilities with the help of the West: ‘[t]hey do not even hide their readiness to use weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, against us. The territory of Ukraine has been chosen as a bridgehead for this’ (Channel One 2022g).

A final sub-frame is the narrative in the Russian press and social media of NATO as an existential threat to the Russian Federation and of Ukraine as a bridgehead from which a NATO/Western military assault on Russia might be launched. The Ukrainian military response to the Russian invasion is also attributed to Western designs against Russia. The outlets claim that '[t]he West and NATO use the country as a breeding ground for tension at the Russian borders, which allows to speculate on the topic of Russian aggression and justify the anti-Russian policy' (Fishki.net 2021).⁷⁹ The media published extractions from Putin's September speech dedicated to a partial mobilization, the allegation is that 'the goal of the West is to weaken, divide, and ultimately destroy Russia (NTV.ru 2022b). The accusation in Russian media is thus that Western countries are spreading anti-Russian (dis)information in Ukraine and somehow controlling Ukraine politically. Putin argues that an 'anti-Russian' project was invented by the US, and Ukraine was instrumentalized to develop this project in the region. Russian media rhetoric often focused on the fact that Ukraine is turning into anti-Russian stooge with the help of 'supervisors' from the EU and the U.S.: 'Ukraine is the puppet of the West' (Fishki.net 2022); '[t]he U.S. has invested billions of dollars in an anti-Russian project in Ukraine [...] Washington was making similar investments even before the current escalation of the Ukrainian crisis' (Gazeta.ru 2022b). The theme of Western influence over Ukraine intensified after the invasion and peaked when partial mobilization is announced.

Fabricating a war through emotional appeal and displaced associations

The Russian (dis)information on Ukraine has, as we have seen, been built largely, but not exclusively, on fictional accounts and information manipulation. This is a high-risk strategy for a state operating in a mixed media landscape and hence not in full control of the 'marketplace of ideas' inside of Russia, at least not prior to March 2022. However, the Russian propaganda transmitted by the media has clearly been effective in the sense that surveys show elevated public support for the 'special operation' in Ukraine and the Russian Armed Forces' action in Ukraine.¹⁵ It is also worth noting that when Russians are asked whether they believe

¹⁵ Public polls show that after public support peaked in April 2022 at 81%, over 70% of Russian's polled stated they support or strongly support the intervention since May 2022 (see Levada Centre (2022a)). Although we refer to specific percentages here, we hold that the best way of understanding a public opinion poll is to see broader

if Russia moving in the right direction or not, a majority find that in spite of the uncertainties of war and the hardship of months of economic sanctions they are more optimistic about the Russian future than they were prior to the invasion (64 percent in October 2022; in comparison to 48 percent in December 2021) (Levada Center 2022a). It is thus fair to say that Russian (dis)informers have managed to successfully fabricate a war and produce credible justifications for the conflict in the eyes of their audience. We will argue that the Russian public's acceptance of the state's fictional accounts about the situation in Ukraine has relied on three principal factors. First, the key role played by the media as the emitter of fabricated realities. Second, the reliance on techniques to displace or distort real emotional associations. Third, the emotional gratification inherent to fictional accounts.

First, central to the Russian public's acceptance of the (dis)information about the war, Ukraine and the West is the active role played by the Russian state or pro-regime media companies. We posit that the media has exerted a larger influence in the information manipulation on Ukraine than the government itself and is the key emitter responsible for the emotional mobilization of the Russian audience. The media has not only transmitted the government's line but also generated false or biased news content on their own accord. Examples of that are talk shows where pro-Russian former Ukrainian officials, alleged 'experts' or 'witnesses' intervene to give distorted or misleading views of the conflict. Furthermore, fabricated visual evidence is extremely important to enhance the credibility of the fictional mediatic reality. Tear-filled TV-footage of actual or claimed refugees are also common, not infrequently accompanied by harrowing imagery of suffering or dead children (RIA.ru 2022b). Another example of this is numerous fabricated slick 'live streams' from the 'battlefield' and fake videos of victorious Russian attacks (BBC Ukraine 2022). Similarly, RIA.ru has disseminated pictures of the 'original secret documents' that allegedly demonstrated the Ukrainian army's intentions prior to February 2022 to resolve the Donbas conflict with armed violence (RIA.ru 2022e). The media in Russia has thus been crucial in 'flooding' the 'marketplace of ideas' with messages and visually stimulating content which have appealed to the Russian audiences emotionally as opposed to rationally-logically.¹⁶ The fact that independent or foreign media has been restricted, and/or as of March 2022 effectively curtailed, has increased the possibility of the

tendencies (majority, minority etc.). For a more detailed discussion of the opportunities and shortcomings of doing surveys in Russia, see Volkov (2023) and Alyukov (2022).

¹⁶ It could be said that the Russian media has relied extensively the Nazi chief propagandist Josef Goebbels adage that lies should be told only about unverifiable facts (see Ellul (1973)). A fictional claim becomes easy to sustain if it is almost impossible to corroborate its veracity.

Russian state and pro-regime media to expose the Russian public to an even greater volume of uncorroborated news stories.

Second, another factor explaining the Russian public's openness to fabricated realities has been the (dis)informer's use of techniques of displacement or distortion of associative neural processes. As noted, emotional political communication may function to manipulate the individual's somatic markers and impair the individual's social reality monitoring. The Russian government and media's longstanding, low-key negative campaigns about Ukraine and its political elite, with its earliest roots traced back to the 2004 Orange Revolution, have worked to displace and distort emotionally-triggered associations about the neighbouring country in the Russian public's mindset. Many of the current media falsehoods or fictions about Ukraine have roots in distorted news frames communicated to Russians for an extended period of time, and thus become sedimented and 'naturalized' in the Russian collective associative memory. The constant anti-Ukrainian and, more recent, anti-Western media coverage from a multitude of domestic media sources have meant that the Russian public's associations based on real and nuanced social monitoring processes about such topics has been displaced by fabricated associations. This process has been reinforced but the fact that the Russian state and pro-regime media has set an editorial line on Ukraine which has exhibited strong internal consistency over time. Moreover, our research also shows that as preparations for war began, the media began circulating well-established fictitious messages about Ukraine with greater frequency and emotional intensity from December 2021 onwards. The susceptibility of the average Russian to such displaced associations is evident from the fact a majority affirm that they can no longer discern Ukraine as a politically neutral, independent and/or pacific country. According to the Levada Center (2022a), across all age brackets, since early 2022 onwards more than 70 percent of the polled Russian public view Ukraine negatively.

Finally, the Russian public's openness to fabricated realities can also be explained as a consequence of that fictional experiences may be more emotionally appealing or gratifying to an individual than (f)actual experiences. The fictional characterization of Donbas as the clearcut 'victim' and the Ukrainian government-cum-the West, as the brutal 'enemy' produces a sense of black-and-white narrative of events which for most people is emotionally reassuring. The stark friend-enemy depictions impede messy moral dilemmas in the public's mind of who is at fault and who is deserving of sympathy. Moreover, virtual reality or mediated events of the Russian military prowess in the field or attractive images of high technology weaponry has

provided the Russian public with instant patriotic pride over what the country is capable of. Such emotions help buoy favourable Russian public expectations on the future of the conflict as well as the country itself. Finally, the ‘plug-and-play’ conspiracy theories of the West as trying to encroach on Russia, compromise its status as an independent state, exploit it for its natural resources and/or Western/NATO hegemony in Eastern Europe are popular within Russia. The Russian media’s narrative of Russian as standing up to the West, fighting for survival as a state and an alleged ‘fairer’ world order, thus provoke emotions such as dignity and a sense of justice in Russian audiences. Such findings go some way toward explaining that the emotion which most polled Russians identify with when it comes to their country’s actions in Ukraine is pride (Levada Center 2022a). Perhaps there is something to Hannah Arendt observation that there is preference in the masses for fictional accounts and conspiracy theories to hard facts, as a consequence of that the former are usually easier to understand and more emotionally satisfying, despite (or perhaps due to) their ‘mysteriousness’ (Arendt 1948, p.351).

Conclusions

Propaganda has been a constant in both pre-modern and modern war making. The Russian (dis)information campaign to generate public consent and support for the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine can in this sense be seen as yet another example of use of (dis)information in times of war. However, what can be deemed as a more unusual feature is that the Russian propaganda effort on Ukraine to such a large extent depends on very elaborate fabricated accounts of peoples, places, and events. Our argument has explored why the Russian public has not rejected the fictional and uncorroborated assertions used to frame the war effort. We posit that the public acceptance has been facilitated by the media’s ability to manipulate emotional associations and provide emotional gratification.

Our conceptual framework helped us to tease out the mechanisms which link emitter with audience, as well as the link between message and public support. We thus make an original contribution to the propaganda literature as we show how (dis)information plays on emotions and associative prompters conducive to the (dis)informer’s goals. In addition, our conceptual framework theorizes on why an audience would feel attracted to and internalize false or deceptive information. Our theory sheds light on how emotionally-loaded, mediated political

communication may induce biases in an individual's somatic markers and act impair an individual's ability to monitor social reality. We find this to be a plausible explananda for why the audience(s) fall for fictional accounts even when on a rational-logical level 'they should know better'. Such theoretical insights can have useful applications outside the current case study on Russia. For example, in the academic debates on hybrid warfare, disinformation, 'fake news' or the 'weaponization of information' linked to either the controversial legacy of Donald Trump's White House communication strategies, or China's (dis)information campaigns within the country and beyond. We believe the concepts carry great explanatory potential whether in a democratic setting or a mixed one.

Our empirical findings point to the key role the Russian media has played in effectuating the emotional mobilization necessary for the broad public to support to the 'special operation'. Media has decided and operated on the precise instruments of (non-)verbal influence to increase the Russian public's susceptibility and strategies to increase exposure to tailored narratives. The Russian media has frequently combined different emotions in its (dis)information, such as pride, anger, injustice or fear. For example, tailored visualities (e.g. pictures of suffering children) or conspiracy theories (NATO or the Ukrainian political elite), evoking anger or injustice, can be paired in the same news message with Russian soldiers allegedly saving Ukrainian women and children, inducing pride. Another example is the emotion of glory and pride that is conjured up by references to victory over Nazi Germany in 1945 are layered on top of emotions of anger linked to fictitious accounts of a current-day Nazi-led Ukraine. We find this mix of emotions crucial in the (dis)information campaign. As the emotional triggers as well as associative memories will vary from individual to individual, the combination of different emotions in a single news item will ensure the broadest possible public following. Thus, the heavy pandering to pride, anger, injustice or fear have created the perfect 'storm' of emotions which explain not only the consent of the Russian public to the initial attack on Ukraine but also the continued public support. The strong emotions conjured up can also be seen as explananda for why even Russians who might not agree with the official assessments of Ukraine or the West, and/or know that they are exposed to disinformation, tend to support their country's action in the neighboring country. The Russian media has been key in terms of concertedly putting forward a determined depiction of events in Ukraine or in the West, creating a surround effect which few Russian media users have had the ability to resist. In sum, the mix of emotions have created the ideal conditions for an offensive (dis)information

strategy dovetailing the Russian government's military strategy, and drafting in both the willing and unwilling public into not only consenting but also supporting the war.

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4. Conclusions

The aim of this doctoral thesis, structured as a compendium by publications, is to examine the mechanisms, actors, and contexts through which (dis)information operates as a tool of emotional manipulation to gain hearts and minds in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. The dissertation draws on the evidence from Russia, Moldova, and Georgia between 2019 and 2024. It moves beyond narrow understandings of (dis)information as the simple circulation of falsehoods and instead examines how political elites construct narrative environments that combine factual elements with exaggeration, omission, and fabrication. These narratives operate along a continuum between truth and fiction and are deliberately infused with emotional cues that make them persuasive and socially meaningful.

This dissertation addresses two overarching research questions. The first concerns the types and narrative structures of (dis)information disseminated by political elites. The second focuses on the psychological mechanisms through which elites connect with audiences by mobilizing emotions and shaping trust. Answering these questions required drawing on insights from political communication and political psychology and developing a contextualized understanding of (dis)information as an emotionally charged process of political meaning-making. The empirical analysis focuses on a recent period that remains underrepresented in the literature, which is still largely reliant on pre-2020 data. This temporal focus makes it possible to capture how the most recent technological and geopolitical developments have altered information practices and turned (dis)information into a routine feature of domestic political life in Eastern Europe.

The empirical material is drawn from three countries that represent different trajectories of democratic development and media freedom within the post-Soviet space. Russia, while still a hybrid regime at the time of writing, illustrates a strong tendency toward authoritarian consolidation, in which state-aligned media possess centralized informational power and use it to reinforce regime stability. Georgia and Moldova operate within hybrid information environments where formal media pluralism coexists with elite manipulation and exposure to external influence. Among the three cases, Moldova displays the highest levels of press freedom and democratic openness according to comparative indices, while Russia stands as the more autocratic case on the hybrid regime spectrum. This variation allows the analysis to trace

how similar mechanisms of affective influence operate under different political and media conditions. This concluding section highlights the shared dynamics and contextual divergences that reveal how (dis)information reshapes relationships between political elites and citizens across the region.

4.1. Empirical findings

This doctoral thesis focuses on domestic (dis)information in Eastern Europe in contrast to the mainstream literature which prioritizes foreign-led operations. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the agency of local elites and explores internal (dis)information dynamics. While most scholarly work on Eastern European (dis)information is based on empirical evidence collected before 2019 or 2020, this research addresses the period between 2019 and 2025. In addition, it captures critical junctures, such as the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the high-stakes 2024–2025 electoral cycles in Georgia and Moldova. Also, our empirical observation acknowledges the digital transformation of the media environment and the attempts of governments to regulate digital information flows, which is scarce in the literature to our knowledge.

One of the most important empirical contributions of this thesis is that we demonstrate that (dis)information consists of a blend of truth and fiction mixed with references to collective memory and strong emotions. While most of the literature analyzes false information, we showcase the entire gradient between truth and fiction in the communication of political elites in Georgia, Moldova, and Russia. For example, the article “Fabricating a war? Russian (dis)information on Ukraine”, for example, shows in detail what (dis)information looks like and the mechanism of how it operates to affect the public through political messages. We illustrate that a single news item often contains multiple emotional cues and includes references to collective memory. Narratives about Ukraine, for example, frequently combine pride associated with victory in World War II—by framing Russian actions as “liberation”—with anger directed at the rise of Ukrainian nationalism, including portrayals of President Zelenskyy as a “Nazi” leader allegedly committing “genocide” in Donbas. We reveal that similar patterns appear in the article “In Georgian Dream we trust: (dis)information to conceal democratic setback?”, where narratives combine fear of conflict rooted in memories of the 2008 war with

pride in sovereignty, framing opposition actors as part of a “Global War Party.” In the article “(Dis)information in Moldova: eroding vertical trust for the Sandu government?”, narratives draw on nostalgia for Soviet stability, grounded in real economic ties, and mix it with anger toward perceived liberal decadence that Maia Sandu purportedly imposes on the country.

The next important finding concerns the actorness of the media, which remains understudied in the Eastern European context. What is common across the three cases is the continued importance of traditional media as political actors, even at a time when in the West non-traditional media have become the dominant news providers. While audiences increasingly consume news online, traditional outlets have adapted by developing digital versions of their content and maintaining active social media presence, which allows them to retain younger audiences and, at times, avoid certain restrictions. In Russia, where media control is high, (dis)information messages are repeated throughout the entire media space. Audiences encounter them across state television, the online versions of traditional outlets, and social media, creating an immersive environment. In countries where media pluralism is more developed, such as Georgia, state media alone cannot create this surround effect. Instead, (dis)information relies greatly on the most trusted TV channel, Imedi TV, whose influence also extends through its online platforms. In Moldova, where the opposition is a key (dis)information provider, the newspapers and TV channels with the highest popularity rankings are operationalized to reach diverse segments of the public through both broadcast and their digital versions. We found that in both Georgia and Moldova, relying on these media as a dissemination strategy enabled (dis)information to reach audiences beyond the primary target group. Overall, in all political regimes, from the consolidating autocracy of Russia to the hybrid regimes in Georgia and Moldova, the actorness of traditional media remains high.

This dissertation finds that in transitional democracies such as Georgia and Moldova, non-democratic political elites primarily instrumentalize (dis)information, regardless of whether they represent the ruling power or the opposition. We reveal that in this process they may learn from and even cooperate with more consolidated autocracies. For example, our empirical evidence from Georgia shows that the Georgian Dream party borrows narratives from Russia but tailors them to local objectives, such as the justification of the “foreign agent” law. In Moldova, opposition elites frequently substantiate their claims by citing and reposting content from Russian media outlets, which at times blurs the boundary between local and foreign influence.

This research contributes to political communication literature by empirically demonstrating the connection between (dis)information and public trust in Eastern Europe, which is a gap in contemporary (dis)information studies. Our findings show a clear pattern: whether they are in government or opposition, undemocratic actors use (dis)information to manufacture trust even when there is no actual performance to support it. For example, Article 1 illustrates how the Georgian Dream party frames illiberal policies like the "foreign agent" laws as democratic measures to maintain an illusion of responsiveness. This evidence confirms that (dis)information enables the affective management of vertical trust, allowing political elites to maintain a strong bond with the public regardless of their actual performance. Ultimately, these findings position (dis)information as a permanent domestic feature of political life in Eastern Europe rather than sporadic campaigns. By reshaping trust, exploiting hybrid media ecosystems, and distorting collective memory, non-democratic domestic elites use these tools to secure their own legitimacy across different regime types.

4.2. Theoretical findings

The theoretical findings of this dissertation map the mechanisms through which political elites connect with the public in contemporary Eastern Europe. Moving beyond a narrow focus on foreign influence campaigns, the thesis accounts for the specific features of current (dis)information environments, including the interplay between traditional and digital media, the interaction between foreign and domestic actors, and the particular psychological susceptibility of audiences in post-Soviet societies. Taken together, the cases examined in this dissertation suggest that (dis)information has evolved from a sporadic influence tactic into a stable mechanism of emotional manipulation to gain hearts and minds.

A first theoretical contribution to political communication theory lies in the conceptualization of (dis)information. This doctoral thesis challenges traditional understanding of disinformation, which focuses on falsehoods or factual inaccuracy. Instead, this thesis introduces the term (dis)information with (dis) in brackets. In our understanding, (dis)information operates through a gradient between truth and fiction. It blends verifiable facts, selective omissions, exaggerations, and fabricated elements into coherent narrative environments. This also marks a shift in theory away from approaches that focus on message

accuracy, persuasion effects, or isolated instances of deception. In this way, we conceptualise (dis)information as a distinct mode of political communication through which elites strategically engineer artificial political realities. In this way, we challenge the truth-versus-falsehood binary models that dominate the literature. Instead, we reveal (dis)information as a complex mechanism of emotional mobilization that utilizes diverse thematic clusters of information with varying truth-values. This composition allows (dis)information to detach public support for political elites from factual reality.

We contribute to political communication theory by showing that such artificially constructed realities can substitute for factual reality as the primary reference point for the citizens' political judgment. The Russian case illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly: an artificial reality surrounding the war in Ukraine persists despite segments of the population retaining limited access to external information. Similarly, in Georgia, the ruling party succeeded in sustaining a narrative of democratic progress even as international observers documented substantial democratic backsliding. In Moldova, pro-Russian actors created alternate realities framing reforms as threats to stability, substituting empirical progress with emotionally charged distortions. In all cases, political judgment is anchored less in empirical evaluation than in immersion within a narrative environment that feels internally coherent and emotionally convincing.

The dissertation further advances political psychology theory by examining the mechanisms that link the emitter of (dis)information with its audience. While existing theory attributes influence to single emotions or static cultural biases, our theoretical findings suggest that (dis)information operates through different typologies of emotional cues and associative prompts, all blended within a single message. These prompts are rarely novel; instead, they draw on long-standing mediated campaigns that create durable memory frames. Repeated exposure to distorted news and political accounts gradually reshapes associative memory and unconsciously influences how new information is interpreted. Once embedded, distorted associations function as filters through which subsequent information is processed.

Thus, emotionally loaded, mediated communication induces biases in individuals' somatic markers. Under such conditions, contradictory facts do not necessarily trigger reassessment; instead, they are reinterpreted or dismissed. Theoretically, the dissertation posits that this process impairs the capacity for logical and rational social reality monitoring. Therefore, faced with emotionally reassuring narratives, audiences often privilege artificial reality over factual

one. The Russian case demonstrates how years of media narratives regarding alleged “fascism” in Ukraine allowed the emotionally charged war-justification frame to resonate deeply, having already been sedimented in collective memory. In Georgia, associative prompts linked to post-2008 war trauma reinforced fear-based narratives, while in Moldova, Soviet-era memories of stability were distorted to evoke nostalgia and resentment, amplifying the psychological link during transitional crises.

Another theoretical contribution of this doctoral dissertation advances theory about vertical trust, a trust typology which connects political elites with the public. In much of the existing literature, vertical trust is conceptualized as a rational or semi-rational response to their performance and adherence to shared cultural norms. While the theory acknowledges the role of affective trust, it is nevertheless typically treated as secondary to cognitive evaluations. The findings of this dissertation challenge this hierarchy. This doctoral dissertation posits that in hybrid and transitional democracies, vertical trust emerges as an affectively managed phenomenon that can be detached from institutional performance and democratic quality. For instance, in Georgia, trust in the Georgian Dream party persisted despite democratic regression, managed through affective narratives that bridged emotional gaps. In Moldova, opposition actors eroded trust in the Sandu government by exploiting affective vulnerabilities, while in Russia, state narratives fostered trust in the regime's war decisions through emotional rally effects.

This doctoral dissertation contributes to the political communication field by redefining the agency of the media in hybrid and transitional democracies. We posit that in such contexts, the media are active agents in emotional mobilization and the manufacturing of vertical trust. In Russia, for example, media actors do not merely retransmit state narratives but strategically orchestrate them on their own. They actively select and combine verbal and non-verbal instruments of influence, often with an intensity that exceeds official rhetoric—such as layering pride, anger, and fear in war coverage to immerse audiences. The Georgian case demonstrates another side of media actorness: trusted media outlets play a crucial role in amplifying artificial realities and normalizing contradictions between democratic aspirations and illiberal governance. Trusted media is identified as a crucial stabilizing factor in this process: in moments when public trust in political elites falters, trusted media can bridge the trust gap by reinforcing the government's narratives and mitigating potential criticism. In Moldova, media agency manifested in digital proxies that adapted narratives to erode trust, highlighting how

platforms like Telegram enable independent orchestration. Thus, vertical trust in premature or hybrid democracies does not necessarily draw on performance or values; it is rather a product of (dis)information messaging enabled by a weak system of democratic balancing mechanisms.

Finally, the dissertation contributes to digital communication theory by examining the unintended consequences of media regulation. In Moldova, restrictions on (dis)information did not halt its circulation; instead, they displaced it into less regulated segments of the media ecosystem, including Telegram and Facebook. This digital migration intensified societal polarization and undermined perceptions of governmental transparency. It illustrates how state-centric regulatory tools can prove counterproductive when they fail to account for the adaptive capacity of hybrid actors. Similar dynamics appear in Russia and Georgia, where regulations (e.g., platform bans or "Foreign Agent" laws) reinforced elite control but spurred circumvention via VPNs or grassroots networks, further entrenching affective governance.

Taken together, the findings of this doctoral dissertation suggest that (dis)information in Eastern Europe functions as an affective infrastructure of governance. It actively manages the vertical trust between political elites and the public, allowing leaders to impose fabricated realities that are exceptionally difficult for the citizenry to dismantle or resist. Since this form of governance bypasses conscious cognition, it is significantly more resilient to countermeasures than conventional models of (dis)information.

4.3. Limitations

This dissertation has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The first limitation relates to the collection of empirical material across different media environments. The analysis covers traditional media, such as television and newspapers, their digital versions, including social media, and digital news web-sites, which together produced a very large amount of content. Political communication in hybrid regimes is dispersed across many channels, making it difficult to capture all relevant messages in a fully systematic way. Despite careful sampling and the use of multiple sources, it is possible that some individual messages and smaller framing variations were not captured. This reflects a broader challenge of studying

contemporary information environments characterised by constant circulation and fragmentation.

A second limitation relates to the pace at which digital communication evolves compared to the timeline of academic research. Over the course of this project, practices of (dis)information continued to change as political actors adapted to new platforms, technologies, and communication tools. Academic research, however, requires time for systematic data collection, analysis, and theoretical reflection. This creates an unavoidable gap between empirical observation and the most recent developments in digital communication. A clear example of this dynamic is the increasing use of AI-assisted content production in the Moldovan and Russian cases, where automated and semi-automated messaging reached a new level of efficiency during the later stages of the research process. Although this development is acknowledged in the articles, it could not be examined with the same depth and systematic attention before the articles were finalised and published. While I sought to mitigate this limitation by relying on multiple data sources and a comparative research design, fully maintaining temporal alignment with a rapidly changing digital communication environment remained challenging.

A third limitation concerns the practical constraints of conducting research on Eastern European media environments while being physically based in Spain. Physical distance limits direct exposure to locally embedded media practices, informal communication spaces, and region-specific narratives that are often central to the circulation of (dis)information. Even access through a paid VPN service often does not provide full access to the content. As a result, access to certain television content, online platforms, or locally popular communication channels can be uneven or technically restricted when research is conducted from outside the region. These factors complicate efforts to observe (dis)information as it circulates in real time within hybrid regimes, where messaging often spreads across informal and rapidly shifting channels. Although this study relied on publicly available materials, widely used media outlets, and analyses produced by local organisations, physical location and access constraints nonetheless limited engagement with some context-specific or informal communication environments.

4.4. Avenues for future research

The first avenue for future research concerns the continued digitalisation of political communication and its impact on (dis)information. Artificial intelligence is now widely used in content production and distribution. This raises questions about the role of AI actorness in the information environment. Future research should examine whether algorithmic systems function merely as tools used by political elites or whether they operate as semi-autonomous producers and amplifiers of (dis)information. It is also important to study the political and ethical implications of this shift. In particular, research should explore how AI-generated content interacts with elite communication strategies, regulatory frameworks, and audience perceptions. Understanding these changing relationships is essential for analysing how power is exercised in increasingly automated communication environments.

A second direction for future research involves generational differences in how (dis)information is received and interpreted. Younger generations have been socialised almost entirely within digital media environments. As a result, they engage with information differently from those who experienced politics in a pre-digital media system. Their views of trust, credibility, and political authority are shaped by constant exposure to hybrid and interactive content. Future studies should therefore examine how digitally native citizens evaluate authenticity and truth. An open question is whether these patterns make younger audiences more resistant to manipulation or, alternatively, more vulnerable to emotionally driven messaging. This line of research is important for understanding the long-term consequences of digital socialisation for democratic politics.

A third, still underexplored, area concerns the relationship between artificial intelligence and emotion in the (dis)information process. While scholars increasingly recognise the role of emotions in political communication, less is known about how AI systems detect, simulate, or exploit emotional responses. Future research could bring together insights from political psychology, communication studies, and affective computing to examine how emotional cues are embedded in automated messages.

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