



Disinformation and propaganda in the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the Republic of Moldova.

Why 1 in 2 Moldovans is dismissing the severity of the pandemic

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The Republic of Moldova remains one of the European countries most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly 4,900 cases per 1 million inhabitants¹. By comparison, Romania - where the number of cases is also trending up - is reporting three times fewer cases relative to the size of the population, while also testing almost twice as much. The distrust in the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has been fuelled not only by disinformation campaigns originating in Russia, but also by the fact that politicians such as President Igor Dodon and members of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova endorsed these messages, as did representatives of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, pro-Russian mainstream media or numerous other obscure religious or nationalist sites. Together, these actors disseminated not only anti-European and pro-Russian narratives, but also conspiracy theories.

Chisinau remains a testing ground for Russian influence in Eastern Europe, with local politicians and local media promoting Russian and anti-European narratives. Moldova has no immunity to fight Russian propaganda, being one of the countries most exposed and most vulnerable to Kremlin's information war. In a recent report, Moldova scored highest among all Eastern Partnership countries in terms of vulnerability of its population to pro-Russian propaganda².

Although the population of the Republic of Moldova has been relatively equally split in recent years between pro-European and pro-Eastern, Russian language broadcasts predominate, which is also a result of the lack of alternatives. Most TV stations are dominated by Russian language content, all major Russian channels are rebroadcast, Romanian channels are almost absent, and 25 out of 45 programmes are broadcast in Russian³. Even so, according to latest EU Neighbours East annual report (2020), 63% of Moldovans have the greatest trust in the European Union⁴.

In Chisinau, however, political leadership and pro-Russian media are working to fabricate a different reality and to undermine trust in the EU. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for intense dissemination of anti-European and pro-Russian narratives. A recent poll by WatchDog.md revealed that a third of the respondents agreed that the EU failed to resolve the COVID-19 crisis, which could also be due to the disinformation campaigns carried out in Chisinau.

CRPE identified eight answers to shed some light on the reasons and manner by which lies, conspiracies and anti-Western narratives were circulated in the Republic of Moldova, who facilitated this dissemination, and the potential effects in the medium and long term concerning the relationship between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, but also whether the disinformation in Chisinau can be a threat for Romania.

* The results of a survey conducted by the WatchDog.Md community reveal that 50.4% of those surveyed believed that the virus isn't more dangerous than a common flu and that it was intentionally created to destroy the economy. The survey is available at: <https://bit.ly/2CEK6bb>

1 According to data from www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/ as of 13th of July 2020

2 According to the Disinformation Resilience Index, the Republic of Moldova ranks first among the Eastern Partnership countries in terms of vulnerability to Russian propaganda. The report highlights the lack of a legal and institutional framework to combat propaganda, but also points to the weak institutional response.

3 A comprehensive media market report can be accessed here: <https://linx.crji.org/2018/08/28/presa-pro-moscovi-ta-din-republica-moldova>

4 The report can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/3fxkTOL>

1. How did the authorities in Chisinau react?

In Chisinau, politicians were the first ones to speak about the COVID-19 pandemic. President Igor Dodon stated that he was “almost a doctor”, while completely ignoring the recommended precautions, rarely wearing a mask in public and continuing to travel regularly to Moldovan localities. In reply, the Stopfals.md website launched an interactive application that verifies how much citizens know about the COVID-19 pandemic, under a satirical title, hinting at the statements made by President Dodon - “Are you a little bit of a doctor?”

The Republic of Moldova did not have a coherent communication strategy concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, while many senior officials in Chisinau continue ignoring minimum precautions. Moreover, public authorities failed to combat disinformation campaigns and fake news launched by representatives of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, and many obscure websites continued to promote conspiracy theories, although at the beginning of the pandemic the Intelligence and Security Service in Chisinau blocked over fifty such websites. However, numerous such websites continue to spread fake news, and no further actions have been taken.

The Minister of Health, Viorica Dumbrăveanu, recently stated that “we lost the media war to a large extent and I will admit it, because the fight was too negative, sometimes dirty, and it distorted messages from the health authorities”. She failed to mention that many of these messages came from those supporting the current government. The pro-European opposition in Chisinau points to the limited testing carried out by the authorities and the opacity of this decision⁵. President Dodon was never sanctioned for failing to comply with most of the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. On June 24, 2020, he attended a military parade in Moscow, at the invitation of Vladimir Putin. 75 Moldovan soldiers marched in this parade.

2. Which were the most widely disseminated disinformation campaigns in Chisinau?

The Republic of Moldova was exposed to two main narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic: a widespread circulation of conspiracy theories and the use of the health crisis by Russia and, secondarily, by China to promote their own agendas and to undermine European solidarity.

A significant number of media websites, marginal politicians, but also conspiracy movements already present in Chisinau or religious figures disseminated conspiracy theories refuting the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the most “popular” theories heavily circulated in the Republic of Moldova include: the link between the COVID-19 pandemic and the installation of 5G antennas meant to subsequently control the population, nanochipping of the population by vaccination, or the existence of a global conspiracy, led by Bill Gates, aimed at decimating the population. A series of articles by [Report.md](#) revealed the considerable influence of these narratives on the population. A recent analysis by [WatchDog.md](#) points out that at least 1 in 3 Moldovans believes one of these theories.

⁵ “Mass testing is nothing but wasted tests and suffocated and overburdened lab potential”. This statement belongs to the head of the National Agency for Public Health, Nicolae Furtuna, and is available at <http://tvrmdoia.md/actualitate/eful-ansp-testarea-masiva-nu-este-altceva-decat-teste-irosite-si-potential-de-laborator-sufocat>



NEPOTUL LUI KENNEDY AFIRMĂ CĂ BILL GATES VREA SĂ FOLOSEASCĂ ACEASTĂ CRIZĂ PENTRU A IMPUNE PROGRAMELE SALE OBLIGATORII DE VACCINARE

Vaccinarea forțată

„Vaccinurile, pentru Bill Gates, sunt o filantropie strategică care alimentează numeroasele sale afaceri legate de vaccinuri (inclusiv ambigua Microsoft de a controla o organizație globală de identificare a vaccinării) și îi oferă un control dictatorial al politicii globale de sănătate, relatează evz.ro



1. The vaccine for the novel coronavirus will be used to reduce the size of the population
2. Kennedy's nephew says Bill Gates wants to use crisis to impose mandatory vaccination programs

Source: Flux.md and Aparatorul.md

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is also being used by Russia and China to promote their own agendas and to try to weaken European solidarity - both between EU Member States and between the EU and its Eastern and Southern neighbours. Kremlin-backed campaigns sought not only to portray Russia as being in control of the pandemic internally, but also to depict it as a “superhero” providing assistance to a distressed European Union. Images of Russian trucks in Italy were widely circulated in Chisinau, often accompanied by a message that the European Union is in danger of collapsing as a result of the lack of solidarity between Member States, and that support for third party countries - such as Moldova - will not come.

China used a similar narrative, with the support of the Russian media in Chisinau, but also of President Igor Dodon. Beijing has been strongly promoted as the main provider of support for the European Union and for the Republic of Moldova, in an attempt to improve its reputation. In reality, however, the support provided by both Russia and China was substantially lesser than that provided by the European Union or Romania, but it was accompanied by a media campaign promoting the two states.



* President Igor Dodon at the arrival of medical equipment from China on a Russian aircraft. Although he stated that the aircraft was provided by the Russian authorities free of charge, this was not true, as the operating costs were paid for by Chisinau⁶. Photo source: Official Facebook account of President Igor Dodon, cotidianul.md and Sputnik.md

6 This was revealed by PAS deputy, Sergiu Litvinenco, who stated that in addition to the 45 thousand dollars for fuel, the Republic of Moldova also paid, de facto, airport and air navigation service fee of around 10 thousand dollars.

3. Who promoted the main conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Obscure websites, with religious or nationalist content, such as Apărătorul.md or Flux.md - with significant audience, available both in Romanian and in Russian, unofficially pro-Kremlin - anti-vaccine or anti-5G groups, but also representatives of the Orthodox Church of Moldova. The position of the Bishop of Balti and Falesti, Marchel - who stated that “vaccines are the end point of Satanist globalists, and, thus, they influence even the thoughts of some”- remains evocative, as does the statement of His Eminence, Vladimir, Metropolitan of Chisinau and the whole of Moldova, who endorsed almost the entire range of conspiracy theories in Chisinau. The position of the Orthodox Church of Moldova was all the more harmful, as it is the most trusted institution by Moldovans.

*“Bill Gates is believed to be primarily responsible for creating microchipping technology for the population through a vaccine that introduces nanoparticles into the body that react to waves transmitted by 5G technology and that allow the system to control humans remotely.”
(His Eminence Vladimir, Metropolitan of Chisinau and Moldova)*

The pro-Kremlin media also played an important role, either by using conspiracy narratives directly or by using European extremist movements supported by the Kremlin to promote them. These have often been used in conjunction with the narrative that Russia has superior potential to control the pandemic and that it has the “traditional” role of countering “globalist” movements. With significant coverage in Chisinau, both online and through rebroadcast of Russian stations, Russian-language media is one of the main sources of information for the population.



1. An Italian MP an Italian parliamentarian demands the arrest of Bill Gates for crimes against humanity
2. Confessions of an optimist Christian – Wearing a mask in the Holy Church – a sign for cowardice and hypocrisy
3. Company Novavax is testing a vaccine on human after receiving funds from Bill Gates

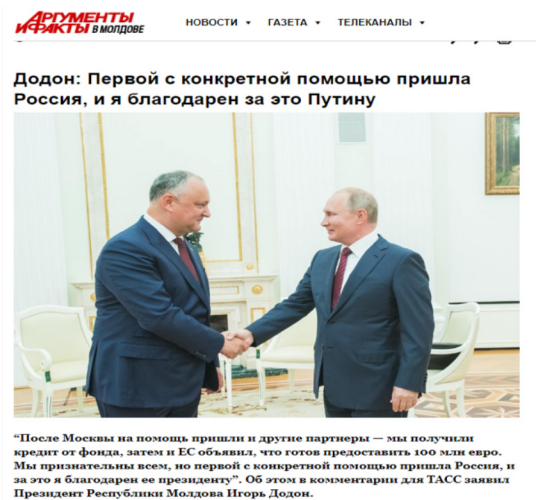
Photo source: Sputnik.md and Flux.md

Former politicians, in their desire to gain votes and to regain the spotlight, also played a significant role, especially by promoting ultranationalist, conservative and religious messages, denying the existence or the threat of the pandemic. Similar figures conveying the same type of message are promoted by pro-Kremlin propaganda in Romania as well. They recently received public attention for organising protests in Piata Victoriei. Not only did they distribute and promote false information, but they also put together genuine disinformation campaigns based on existing fears in the society - the threat of 5G antennas, the anti-vaccine movement, nanochipping.

4. Did the authorities in Chisinau endorse Russian narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic?

President Igor Dodon stated, upon his election in 2016, that the Republic of Moldova will be promoting a **balanced foreign policy**. “We want to keep good relations with everyone. With the East, and also with the West”, he stated. This became the unofficial motto of his Presidency. In reality, however, President Dodon made Moldova’s relationship with Russia, as well as his personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, the priorities of his mandate, ignoring or being ignored by most European states.

This had a decisive influence on how President Dodon promoted Russian and Chinese narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. His official Facebook page has become a display of gratitude to Russia, China or Turkey, and, in official interviews for Kremlin publications, he constantly stressed that the first countries to help the country were Russia and China. On the other hand, the help provided by Romania - the most consistent support provided by any country - received limited attention from him. The reception of the humanitarian convoy took place in a marginal area of Chisinau.



Dodon: The first country that provided us with concrete support is Russia, and for that I am grateful to Putin

Source: <https://aif.md/dodon-pervoj-s-konkretnoj-pomoshhu-prishla-rossija-i-ja-blagodaren-za-jeto-putinu>

Source: President Igor Dodon’s official Facebook page

Representatives of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, President Igor Dodon’s party and the largest party in Chisinau, also promoted Russian propaganda. Deputy Bogdan Tirdea was one of the most vocal politicians to do so. He often endorsed the narrative that the EU not only did not help the Republic of Moldova - unlike Russia or China - but also that it failed to help Member States, a message strongly disseminated by the Kremlin media.

“I’d like to ask the citizens: have you seen this aid (author’s note: help provided by the EU)? Me neither. Instead, we saw help from China and Russia. The EU gave us nothing! Moreover, the EU blocked financial assistance during the epidemic, although Moldova met all the conditions. How they helped Italy and Spain - you can see for yourselves...” (Bogdan Tirdea, Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova deputy)

5. Can the current disinformation campaign reduce Moldovans' trust in the European Union?

One of the objectives of Russian propaganda in Chisinau remains reducing the trust that Moldovans have in the European Union. The Republic of Moldova remains in a grey area, mimicking reforms, with an economy linked to oligarchic interests, but it receives macro-financial assistance from the West. Russia cannot afford to support the Republic of Moldova financially. Instead, it uses its soft power resources and propaganda tools to compensate - in terms of public perception - the massive support provided by Western countries to Chisinau. .

The COVID-19 pandemic provided the Kremlin with the necessary context to intensify its disinformation campaigns in Chisinau. However, they were more effective when relying on messages combining conspiracy theories, apparent protection of traditional values or orthodoxy, and less effective when disseminating more straightforward anti-European messages. Only 1 in 5 Moldovans claim that the EU did not offer any actual support to the Republic of Moldova during the pandemic, and 1 in 4 believe that the EU did not provide any support to Italy - [two of the most widespread Russian narratives in Chisinau](#).

With the approach of the presidential elections in Chisinau in November, the disinformation campaigns will intensify, but will focus on the re-election of Igor Dodon as President of the Republic of Moldova. Supported by the Kremlin, he will most likely use messages focused on protecting traditional values, Orthodoxy, anti-LGBT, anti-immigrants or denouncing European and Romanian "interventionism" in Chisinau. Disinformation campaigns are likely to use the same type of messages, including anti-EU and anti-Western messages, to attack his opponents, particularly Maia Sandu, in a repeat of the 2016 elections.

6. Can disinformation in the Republic of Moldova be a threat to Romania?

Russian propaganda uses similar messages both in the Republic of Moldova and in Romania, but it does not have the same vehicles to promote them in the latter. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there were also various movements and groups rejecting the severity of the pandemic in Bucharest, including movements opposing compulsory vaccination or the installation of 5G antennas, which were intensely promoted by pro-Russian websites such as Sputnik.md. Russian disinformation campaigns remain much less impactful in Romania, in the absence of relevant local multipliers, but the narratives disseminated remain similar.

The inability of the EU and Romania to find solutions to Kremlin's disinformation campaigns in Chisinau is a major vulnerability for the Eastern neighbourhood. For Romania - which made the Republic of Moldova its foreign policy priority, at least at a declarative level - Chisinau's fall under Russian influence would represent the moral bankruptcy of its foreign policy. Romania and the Republic of Moldova recently celebrated ten years of Strategic Partnership. However, Bucharest's capacity to counter Russian influence in Chisinau has not increased. This was also due to having limited and often controversial support programmes aimed at the media and the civil society, with no impact on society as a whole.

7. How has the situation evolved in the Transnistrian region?

In the Transnistrian region, the pandemic has been shaped by strict quarantine measures, accusations against Chisinau and intense pro-Russian propaganda - all to deepen the gaps between the two banks of the Dniester and to promote an even more isolated policy in Tiraspol in relation to the authorities in Chisinau.

Given that almost 7% of COVID-19 cases in the Republic were diagnosed on the left bank of the Dniester, the Transnistrian authorities responded with strict quarantine measures, which were used as a pretext to strengthen human rights abuses, both in terms of traffic restriction, as well as by stopping local protests, that resulted in arrests on charges of incitement to extremism. Travel restrictions included numerous checkpoints along the administrative border of the separatist region, which affected citizens who carry out their activities on both banks - doctors, farmers, school employees. Officials in Tiraspol stated these were measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, pointing out that the authorities in Chisinau did not take the necessary measures in a timely manner, leading to a disastrous epidemiological situation. The pro-European opposition in Chisinau accused President Igor Dodon of having no reaction to the provocations and illegal actions in the Transnistrian region “because that’s where he gets his votes from”⁷.

Separatist authorities and local media used narratives that allude to independence from Chisinau and highlighted the productive relationship with the Russian Federation, which sent experts and equipment to the region, ignoring the fact that the tests collected from residents were sent to Chisinau for verification, and more severe cases of COVID-19 were treated in hospitals on the right bank of the Dniester. Tiraspol used messages aimed at discrediting the Republic of Moldova and the management of the pandemic on the right bank. The leader of the Transnistrian administration, Vadim Krasnoselsky, accused the authorities in Chisinau of the precarious economic situation in Transnistria and, at a meeting of the Security Council, stated: “They are not coping with the situation. They are toxic and they are endangering their neighbours, including Transnistria”⁸.



EurAsia Daily | Регионы | Темы | Аналитика | Опросы | Сюжеты

Молдавия применяет антигуманные меры к Приднестровью – Тирасполь
27 апреля 2020
21:31

Moldova is applying inhumane measures to Transnistria - Tiraspol

Source: EurAsia Daily

7 Full statement available at: <https://tv8.md/2020/07/13/video-deputati-pas-despre-problema-transnistreana-dodon-baga-capul-in-nisip-pentru-ca-acolo-i-sunt-voturile>

8 Full statement available at: <https://newsmaker.md/ro/video-sunt-toxici-si-pun-in-pericol-vecinii-sai-krasnoselski-a-in-demnat-oms-sa-acorde-ajutor-autoritatilor-de-la-chisinau-in-lupta-cu-covid-19>

8. Authorities, media and civil society versus propaganda: Who is fighting against disinformation in Chisinau?

For the government and the competent authorities of the Republic of Moldova, combating propaganda and fake news has not been and is not a priority, especially since the politicians themselves use the media and confusing messages to manipulate voters and to impose their own agenda. While the authorities in Chisinau partially countered conspiracy theories, they did not respond at all to the anti-EU and anti-Western narratives promoted by Russian propaganda. Journalists and the civil society have proven more active and efficient in communication than high-level officials. It is, however, an unfair fight against pro-Russian propaganda, since the latter has sufficient funds and an institutional strategy that has become a public priority in the Kremlin.

During the pandemic, most actions to combat fake news focused on uncovering myths and false information, publishing and disseminating materials containing accurate information, presenting the struggle of health workers in the front line - one of the sensitive topics of the pandemic - in order to urge the population to comply with the prevention measures. One of the most well-known initiatives for combating fake news is the platform of the Independent Press Association - Stopfals.md, which reacted promptly to the challenge and created a special section dedicated to fake news about COVID-19. In addition, many NGOs, websites and TV stations have tried to dismantle conspiracy theories and fake news.

The media and the civil society have been more active in communicating and combating propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may also be due to the fact that these communities - by virtue of their activities - are more “digitally native” in comparison with the bureaucratic structures of ministries. However, the pandemic has forced a shift in the communication paradigm of ministries and state institutions, especially in times of crisis, which embraced simpler, more frequent and clearer messages with regard to conspiracy narratives. However, the problem remains the lack of response from the authorities to the numerous channels promoting Russian and anti-Western propaganda in Chisinau, both online and through radio and TV stations.

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