Smartness under siege: Moldovan society in the age of disinformation

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Abstract

This paper examines Moldovan society in the age of disinformation, with the primary objective of analyzing how false narratives and manipulative media strategies undermine the development of a smart, critically engaged, and resilient citizenry. The study assesses Moldova's capacity to respond to disinformation and identifies the educational, social, and security dimensions necessary to strengthen cognitive resilience. Building on prior work in media literacy, cognitive security, and inclusive education, the paper engages with current debates on smart citizenship and democratic resilience, emphasizing the importance of creativity, critical thinking, and inclusivity in countering manipulative information flows. The research adopts a case study approach focused on the Republic of Moldova during recent elections, combining discourse analysis with civil society investigations to reveal both domestic and foreign disinformation practices, as well as the national responses aimed at combating them. Findings indicate significant vulnerabilities among Moldovan citizens, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, where limited access to quality education and digital literacy hinders resilience. The study concludes that current policies and tools, constrained by the country's limited financial resources, weaken Moldova's ability to effectively counter disinformation. The implications of this research extend to scholars of information warfare, policymakers designing national security strategies, and practitioners developing civic education programs. The key value of the paper lies in its integration of the concept of smartness with the contemporary challenges of disinformation, offering an original, context-specific analysis of Moldova while contributing to broader discussions on cognitive security in small and vulnerable democracies.

Keywords: Information disorder, smart citizenship, cognitive security, post-soviet democracies.

1. Introduction

In 2024, immediately after ellections and before the final results had been announced, the Prezident Maia Sandu warned the public about the scale and intent of the disinformation threat facing the Republic of Moldova. She sated that "criminal groups working together with foreign forces, hostie to our national interests, have attacked our country with tens of millions of euros, lies and propaganda. It is the most disgrateful mean to keep our citizens and our nation traped in uncertainty and instability. We have evidence and information that these criminal groups aimed to buy 300 thousends votes, a fraud of unprecenedted scale. Their objective was to undermine a democtratic process [1]". Subsequent evidence provided by the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), along with investigative journalism, confirmed the existence of coordinated networks involved in vote-buying schemes, media manipulation, and the dissemination of false narratives [2]. These developments reinforce the argument that Moldova, like many other states, is fully immersed in the contemporary era of disinformation.

Although this phenomenon is not entirely new; however, it has been dramatically amplified by the digital environment. Online spaces now enable the rapid circulation of fake narratives that target emotions, exploit uncertainty, and reinforce existing biases. As scholars argue, social media platforms became a space of "polarized clusters" in which users interpret information through a shared but often distorted system of meaning [3]. Therefore, the widespread use of the internet and digital communication has transformed how information is produced, debated, and shared, but it has also opened unprecedented pathways for speculation, rumor, and deliberately manipulative content to flourish. The Moldova's information landscape illustrates how external actors and domestic political interests leverage technological ecosystems to destabilize democratic processes, weaken trust in institutions and disinform the population.

In recent decades, disinformation campaignes have increasingly been employed as tools to manipulate the electoral outcomes, a phenomenon observed on a global scale, affecting both established and fragile democracies alike. For instance, O'Connor and Weatherall examined the dynamic of false belief formation and dissemination in the contemporary era of disinformation and they underline the significant public engagement with fabricated news stories on social media platforms, noting that such content received 8,7 million likes on Facebook, compared to only 7,3 million shares or likes [4] granted to reputable news sources during the Trump & Clinton election campaign. However, the other authors argue that this number was significantly higher, reaching 126 million users [5], a worrifying number and impact.

The source that was the most successful in spreading dissinfromation according to O'Connor and Weatherall was ETF News (endingthefed.com). In the authors words it "was particularly successful: five of its stories made the top twenty list, and together those stories were responsible for 3,5 million shares or likes". It was the most popular "news" source on the internet for months before election. The content of ETF News comprised stories such as the "accusations that Clinton has sold weapons directly to the Islamic State, that US federal law disqualified her from holding office, that former FBI director James Comey had received millions of dollars from the Clinton Foundation, and that President Barak Obama had cut the pay of US military personel" [4], among other fabricated fake news. Therefore, all the content of this platform was fake and "none of these stories were true, and many were not even original but were lifted directly from other fake news websites [4]". However these "news" formed as Jensen et al. called "a new front in a long-term competitive strategy designed to undermine US institutions" and "reflects a twenty-first century form of political warfare [6]". Gartzke and Lindsay put it in a nutshell stating that the coercion through the Cyberspace [7] has started to become the new power of influence on the minds of people and used to achieve political objectives.

Similar to the United States, and as President Sandu publicly acknowledged, Moldova has become an increasingly vulnerable target of disinformation campaigns. The mechanisms employed, ranged from coordinated media manipulation to vote-buying schemes, and the significant financial resources uncovered by Moldovan authorities, which likely represent only a fraction of the total foreign investment channeled into these operations, have raised serious concerns. Both state institutions and segments of Moldovan society have been

questioning the extent to which such external involvement may erode national sovereignty, distort public reasoning, and manipulate collective decision-making processes. The fear is not only that disinformation compromises democratic autonomy, but also that it exploits and redirects human intelligence itself, turning citizens' cognitive capacities into instruments of political influence rather than agents of critical thought and informed choice.

This article examines the interplay between the smart citizen and disinformation, and how disinformation undermines the development of a smart, critically engaged, and resilient citizenry in the Republic of Moldova. Beyond addressing disinformation as a national security threat, the study interrogates what it means to be "smart" in the contemporary information environment, particularly within small and vulnerable democracies where structural constraints, limited media literacy, and persistent social inequalities create fertile ground for manipulation. By exploring the educational, and technological factors that shape citizens' susceptibility to false narratives, the article reflects more broadly on whether individual intelligence alone is sufficient to ensure democratic resilience in an era of engineered information disorder.

2. Literature review

The relationship between *intelligence* and susceptibility to disinformation is complex and multifacet, and all individuals may be misled by inaccurate or manipulative information due to cognitive biases, contextual pressures, or emotional influences. In order to understand this relationship within the specific context of the Republic of Molodva, it is essential to clarify the two central concepts at stake: smart and disinformation.

Hyman equates the term smart "with the psychological concept of intelligence" [8], describing it as an enduring yet improvable human characteristic, strengthened through education, sustained effort, and supportive environments. Therefore, educational infrastructures play a key role in enabling individuals to develop the cognitive resources associated with being "smart".

Similar perspectives emerge in the literature on smart citizenship within the broader framework of smart cities. For instance, Fridayani and Chiang [9] argue that the notion of the smart citizen is central to contemporary debates about the future of urban life. In their view, a "smart society" depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on the strategic development of human and social capital as primary drivers of innovation and growth.

A related argument is put forward by Zankova [10], who emphasizes that human capital constitutes the true foundation of smart societies. She highlights that smart city environments are sustained by open, active, and critically engaged citizens, individuals who are empowered through education and supported by responsible media ecosystems. These citizens form dynamic social networks that can be described as linked communities, expressions of social capital, or, more broadly, civil society.

Other scholars define smartness through its antonym [9]. By positioning smart as the opposite of stupid, they argue that individuals may simultaneously exhibit both intelligent and unintelligent behaviour depending on the situational demands, a paradox warranting closer examination. Several explanations for this paradox have been proposed. Dweck [10] suggests that failures to fully utilize one's abilities or to take advantage of learning opportunities may underlie inconsistent performance. While, Wagner [11] emphasizes the influence of broader social systems and environmental constraints, and Perkins [12] with Mischel & Ayduk [13] point out the failures in self-regulation to advance.

In this redard, Stanovich [14], offers a comprehencive cognitive account of why "smart people" may behave not smart. Drawing on cognitive science, the author proposes a three-level model of mental functioning:
1) the biological level, concerning the neural "hardware" that supports thinking;
2) the algorithmic level, referring to cognitive skills and problem-solving procedures; and
3) the intentional level, involving goals, dispositions, and strategies that shape the rational behavior [14].

According to this framework, intelligence is primarily situated at the algorithmic level, whereas differences between rational and irrational action emerge at the intentional level. Consequently, high cognitive potential does not guarantee effective or rational decision-making, which underlies the need for continuous learning, reflective thinking, and adaptability in rapidly evolving informational environments.

With the rise of digital technologies, the meaning of *smart people* has expanded. In contemporary contexts, particularly in education, urban development, and digital innovation, smart individuals are expected to learn flexibly, adapt to new technologies, and use digital tools effectively. Nevertheless, the evidence [9, 10] challenges the assumption that technologically literate individuals are inherently better protected against disinformation.

Disinformation, according to Molodvan legal provisions, refers to information that is false or misleading, created, presented, and disseminated to gain economic advantage or deliberately mislead the public, and which may cause public harm. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes, principles, and values, and to policy-making processes, as well as threats to public property, the safety of citizens, the environment, or security [15].

Looking through the lens of the "smart person" at this definition, it reveals several important implications. First, it implicitly acknowledges that disinformation is drafted to deceive even individuals with access to information or assumed cognitive abilities. Public harm occurs not because citizens lack intelligence but because disinformation exploits psychological vulnerabilities, cognitive shortcuts, and social trust, features present in everyone. Thus, the legal framework aligns with contemporary cognitive science, including Stanovich's three-level model of rationality [14], which distinguishes between cognitive capacity and the ability to apply reasoning effectively. Second, the definition situates intelligence within a broader societal structure: smartness becomes not merely an

individual attribute but a collective condition. A society's cognitive resilience depends on educational access, media literacy, institutional trust, and security measures that prevent malign interference. When these structural supports are weak, as it is the case of small and under-resourced democracies, smart individuals may nonetheless make poor decisions because they operate within an environment polluted by manipulated information. Finally, the definition underlines a political dimension of smart citizenship. A "smart person" cannot rely solely on personal cognitive skill; active critical engagement, informed participation, and awareness of manipulation tactics become essential to protecting democratic integrity. Disinformation or as Zankova called it "information disorder", it creates serious dilemmas before users and groups [18], and seeks to convert intelligence into a vulnerability, by directing smart individuals toward goals and beliefs that do not reflect their true interests or values.

Disinformation has long served as a tool of psychological manipulation, yet digital technologies have dramatically transformed its scale, speed, and reach. Fallis [16] emphasizes that individuals misled about critical issues, such as health, investments, or political candidates, may experience significant emotional, financial, or physical harm. As the author point out the "disinformation is a particularly problematic form of misinformation because it is no accident that people are misled [16]". The author concludes that even those with substantial analytical skills may be vulnerable to manipulation, especially when exposed to the cognitive and emotional dynamics of social media environments.

Consequently, the social media platforms and algorithmic systems have become central conduits for disinformation campaigns. These platforms enable state and non-state actors to manipulate public opinion, influence elections, undermine institutions, damage industries or brands, and polarize societies. The design of engagement-driven algorithms often facilitates the amplification of deceptive content, exposing large numbers of users regardless of their education or cognitive capacities.

A significant example is provided by Jensen et al. [6], who describe Russian propaganda efforts during the 2016 U.S. elections as "tailored to unleash the protest potential of the population," thereby forming a key element of a long-term strategy to erode democratic trust. According to the authors [6, 18] , such operations represent a hybrid form of power, merging propaganda with cyber intrusions and shifting the exercise of geopolitical influence into digital domains. Though evidence of direct electoral impact remains inconclusive, these operations likely reinforce the existing attitudes among targeted audiences and exploite the political vulnerabilities.

Specifically, the disinformation exploits systematic cognitive biases, making even highly intelligent individuals vulnerable. Campaigns frequently draw on authority cues, emotional triggers, and perceived consensus to shape opinions. Moreover, repeated exposure to false claims increases [the population] perceived truthfulness, a phenomenon known as the "illusory truth effect" [17, 18, 19].

Advancements in artificial intelligence do not strengthen societies' defences against disinformation; and may exacerbate vulnerability. Emerging research indicates that individuals with high analytical reasoning skills or strong confidence in digital technologies can be especially susceptible to AI-generated mis- and disinformation. Wee et al. [20] demonstrate that analytically skilled individuals often overestimate their capacity to detect manipulated information, which creates a cognitive blind spot when confronted with highly realistic, machine-crafted content. These findings challenge the common assumption that cognitive skills alone safeguard against deception and highlight a paradox of the digital age: intelligence and technological trust, when not accompanied by critical vigilance, can transform into points of weakness in the face of advanced disinformation techniques.

Algorithmically curated platforms intensify these vulnerabilities. Social media algorithms prioritize content that maximizes engagement, inadvertently promoting polarizing or deceptive content [21]. The vast volume of daily information can lead to cognitive overload, making it difficult, even for well-informed or technologically skilled individuals, to distinguish credible from misleading information.

3. The case of Moldova

3.1 Smartness of Moldovan people

Considering Hyman´s thoughts on the role of education in shaping a smarter person, Moldova's education system shows several strengths that underpin the development of human inteligence or smartness: high participation in formal education across levels, substantial increases in digital resources in schools, broad foreign-language instruction (notably English), and a relatively strong representation of women in higher education. Also, Moldovan people values the education as a way to upscale in the fabric of hight society, and reputation, therefore each molodvan family prioritice, in general, their children education. At the same time, structural limits, regional disparities, a modest output in advanced research degrees and in some STEM fields, and continued vocational/tertiary transition challenges, constrain how effectively cognitive potential is converted into the kinds of applied rationality, critical thinking, and adaptive behaviours that the literature associates with the term of "smart." The key statistics illustrate these points. For instance, Moldova is well ahead of the rest of the world in terms of education, taking 44th place in the overall ranking by degree, among a total of 162 countries represented in this ranking. In an international comparison of intelligence quotients, Moldova ranks 61st with an IQ of 93 [22]. The literacy rate among the adult population is extraordinarily high at 99.6%. Worldwide, it is only 86.2%.

The data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova [23] come to confirm the overall good educational level of Moldovan peole. At the start of 2024/25 the total number of pupils and students was approximately 441.8 thousand, representing 1,855 pupils and students per 10,000 inhabitants, an increase in population coverage since 2018/19 (see Fig.1).

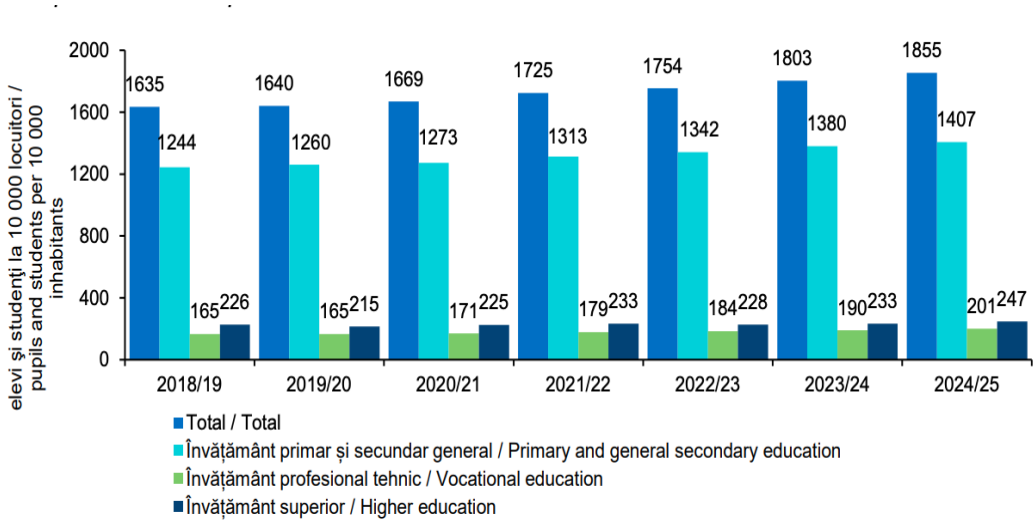

Fig. 1. Pupils and students per 10 000 inhabitants

Source: Extracyed from National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. "Education in the Republic of Moldova" Statistical publication, Edition 2025. p.10.

Gross enrolment in tertiary education (ISCED 5–8) rose markedly over recent years and reached about 79.7% in 2024/25 (up from 56.3% in earlier years), indicating strong expansion of access to higher education. The number of higher-education institutions declined (16 institutions in 2024/25) and student numbers showed modest net change; in 2024 there were ~56.5 thousand students in higher education (see Fig. 2) and around 8.9 thousand first-cycle (bachelor) graduates and 4.5 thousand master graduates in 2024. Doctoral training is present but limited (21 doctoral schools; 1.4 thousand doctoral students) [23].

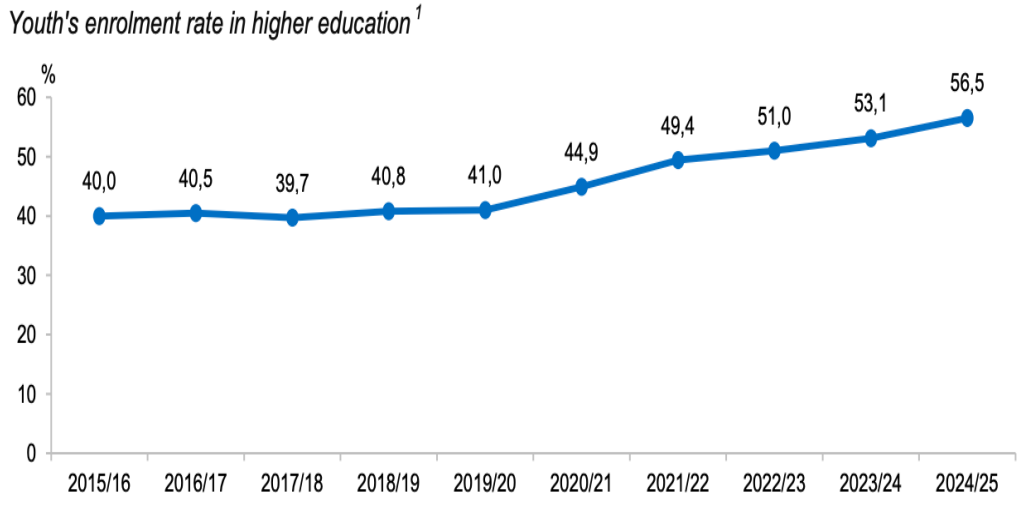

Fig. 2. Youth enrolment rate in higher education.

Source: Extracted from National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova. "Education in the Republic of Moldova" Statistical publication, edition 2025. p.67

Accoridng to the National Office of Statistics, in 2024, 8,9 thousends of young people graduated from a higher education institution/bachelor, and 4,5 thousends obtained a master degree. Also, in 2024 there were 21 PhD shools, and the number of PhDs enrolled have been 1,4 thouseds people [23].

Provision of computers for educational purposes has increased substantially in Moldova. The number of computers used for teaching per 100 pupils rose to 14.6 (pupils) and the number used per 100 students to 16.7 (students) in 2024/25; the total number of computers in education institutions also rose. These trends reflect meaningful improvements in ICT capacity for teaching and learning [23].

Moldova's education point to solid foundational assets that underpin the potential for a population with strong cognitive capacity. However, the transformation of that capacity into applied smartness depends on strengthening higher-order skills, research capacity, STEM pipelines and media/digital literacy across regions and levels of education. In short, Moldova has many of the necessary inputs for "smart people," but realizing that potential requires few reforms in informational security, and digital literacy of a good part of the molodvan population.

Applying the conceptual points mentioned earlier [24, 25, 26] to the education data from Moldova, it yields few inferences. First of all, the high tertiary enrolment, and increasing ICT provision indicate that many Moldovans have access to the formal inputs associated with cognitive development, factors that support knowledge acquisition and analytical skills. These features are consistent with a latent capacity for "smartness" at the population level. However, real-world "smartness" depends not only on cognitive potential but on dispositions (motivation, critical thinking, self-regulation), institutional supports (quality of pedagogy, research ecosystem), and contextual safeguards (media literacy, anti-disinformation measures). The Moldovan data suggest constraints: reduced institutional capacity in higher education, limited doctoral output and research scale, and regional inequalities, all of which can reduce opportunities to practise and apply higher-order reasoning. These factors can impede the translation of formal education into rational decision-making and adaptive behaviour, as described by Stanovich [14]. Additionally, rising computer provision creates opportunities for digital learning, AI-enabled tools and broader information access, resources that can raise analytic skills if well integrated into learning. At the same time, without systematic digital literacy and critical thinking curricula, these technologies may increase exposure to disinformation and cognitive overload [26, 16]. Thus greater ICT provision is necessary but not sufficient for increasing applied smartness. Last, the distribution of graduates by field shows relatively modest numbers in mathematics/statistics and ICT compared to social sciences and economics. For economies that require strong technical and data literacies to deploy "smart" technologies and to resist sophisticated misinformation, this composition suggests a need to incentivize STEM growth.

3.2. Disinformation in Moldova

"Information manipulation and foreign interference are not limited to election periods. It is a permanent front line…" Ana Revenco, Director of the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (13 november 2025).

The academic and political attention to disinformation in Moldova has emerged only recently, despite the fact that disinformation campaigns have been present in various forms throughout most of the country's post-independence history.

One of the earliest systematic studies of disinformation in Moldova was conducted by the Association of Independent Press [27] within the initiative STOP FALS! ("Stop Fake!"). The study argued that "since 2014, disinformation and manipulation of public opinion from abroad have continued to go hand in hand with domestic political populism, with some public and media discourses increasingly marked by fake news and alternative truths… The 2016 presidential elections were deeply marked by disinformation and manipulation" [27], noting that this phenomenon constitutes a component of modern hybrid warfare. The 2016 presidential elections are broadly considered the key moment when the Moldovan public first became strongly aware of the impact of disinformation. In that election, the pro-European candidate Maia Sandu lost to the pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon.

The early wave of disinformation within the traditional media (2014–2016).
The period since 2014 was characterized by the extensive use of traditional mass media to disseminate fabricated narratives, particularly through Russian television channels retransmitted in Moldova and through media outlets under direct or indirect Russian control. These platforms became tools for political influence, smear campaigns, and electoral manipulation. As local journalists [28] have observed, the spread of fake news intensifies during electoral periods, directly influencing political outcomes.

A well-documented example emerged during the 2016 presidential campaign, when false claims were circulated alleging that Maia Sandu intended to accept 30,000 Syrian refugees into Moldova (see Fig. 3). These narratives exploited widespread fears across Europe regarding migration and terrorism, and quickly went viral across multiple television channels and newspapers affiliated with Dodon's Socialist Party.

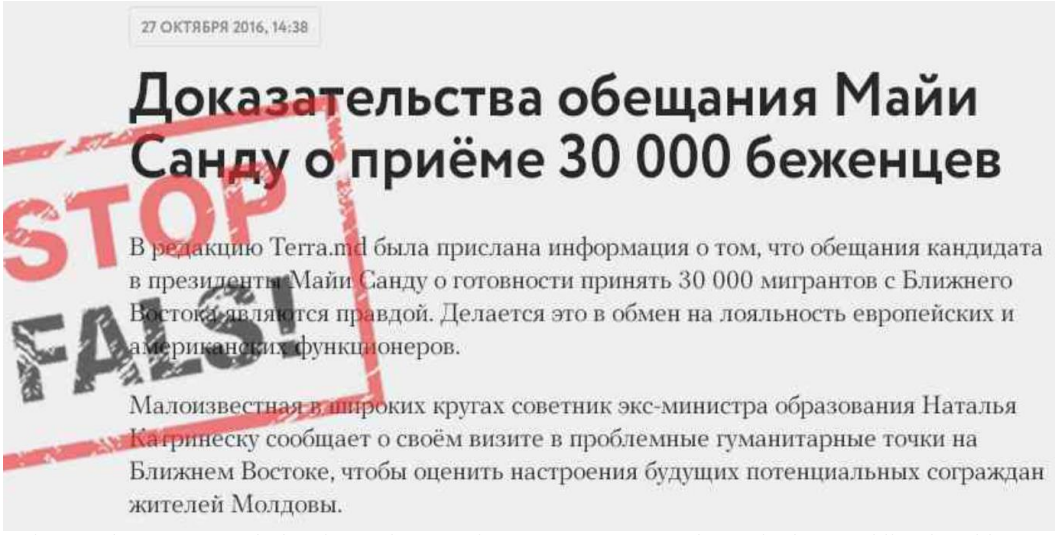

Fig. 3. Fake news "Proof of Maia Sandu's promise to accept 30,000 refugees in the Republic of Moldova"
Source: O. Greadcenco. Stop fals! Știrile despre Maia Sandu și cei 30 de mii de refugiați – o manipulare. 28 oct. 2016. https://www.moldova.org/stop-fals-stirile-despre-maia-sandu-si-cei-30-de-mii-de-refugiati-o-manipulare/

"On October 27, 2016, at least two Russian-language websites in the Republic of Moldova, terra.md and allmoldova.md, published a fake news story titled "Proof of Maia Sandu's promise to accept 30,000 refugees in the Republic of Moldova." A number of manipulative techniques were used in the creation of this "news" item: the dissemination of false information or lies, taking things out of context, mixing truth and lies, spreading unverified information, and biased and deliberately erroneous interpretation of the facts [29].

In fact the two portals (terra.md & allmoldova.md) just speculated on one of the most sensitive issues at that moment for Moldovans and Europeans in general: that of accepting refugees from Syria and other Arab countries, combined with the fear of terrorism, and had put together a fake news story. They did not provide any concrete evidence that Maia Sandu had declared anywhere that she promised to accept migrants/refugees in Moldova if she became president, and what the authors present as evidence was, in fact, an attitude towards migrants/refugees expressed by one of the candidate's supporters: Natalia Catrinescu.

The false news about 30,000 refugees was widely mediatized. The Socialist Party newspaper, which at that time belonged to the Socialist candidate for president, Igor Dodon, published this news before the elections. Some orthodox churches also disseminated this fake news. According to the article of the Socialist Party newspaper, Maia Sandu and Angela Merkel had agreed that Moldova would take in 30,000 Syrian refugees. This fake news story was promoted by three television channels with national coverage: Publika, Prime TV, and Canal 3.

Normalization of disinformation within Moldova's political environment (2016–2020).

Following 2016, disinformation became a normalized strategic narrative within Moldova's political environment. Fabricated stories were increasingly attributed to high-profile political figures, which amplified their credibility among segments of the population. Both domestic and foreign media channels were instrumental in spreading such content. For example, the Russian-language newspaper "Izvestia" published false claims, attributed to President Dodon, that Moldova's Association Agreement with the EU had damaged trade relations with Russia (see Fig.4).

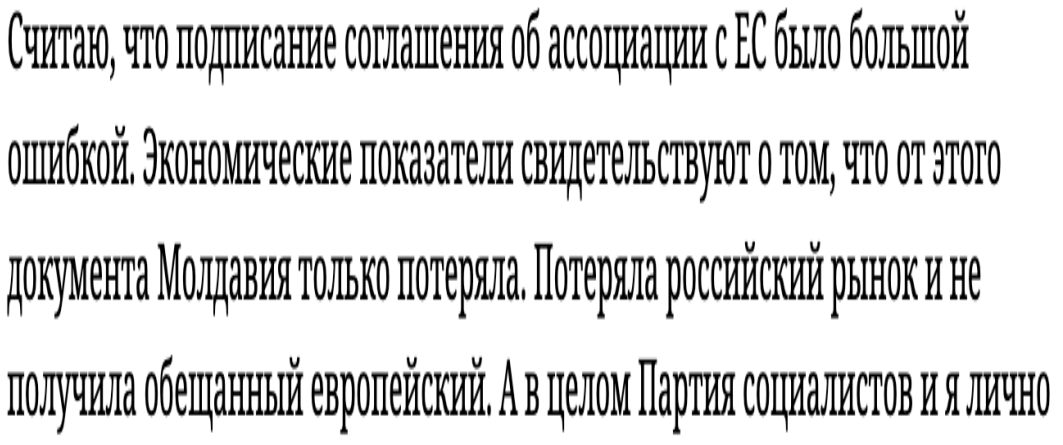

Fig. 4. Fake news "Moldova's trade relations with Russia have deteriorated due to the Association Agreement with the EU".
Source: AVA. Фейк: торговые отношения Молдовы с Россией ухудшились из-за Соглашения об ассоциации с ЕС. 14.02.2017. https://ava.md/ru/stati/economic/feyk-torgovye-otnosheniya-moldovy-s-rossiey/

In reality, trade declines were largely due to Russian embargoes on Moldovan agricultural products imposed prior to the agreement.

Maia Sandu continued to be a central target. Disinformation attacks frequently weaponized her gender, ethnicity, and religion, portraying her as controlled by external forces [30] such as masonry (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Maia Sandu – the puppet of massonery in the Republic of Moldova.
Source: Gandeste.org. https://gandeste.org/analize-si-opinii/maia-sandu-papusa-masonilor-in-republica-moldova/75052/

This was stated by Bogdan Tirdea, at that time being a political analist affiliated with Dodon´s party, and broadcasted of the channel NTV Moldova. A news that have been quickly disseminated by other mass media.

Ethnic and linguistic tensions were also exploited. A notable example involved false claims that the Russian language was banned in pharmacies in Chișinău (see Fig. 6), including fabricated testimony to strengthen the narrative [31].

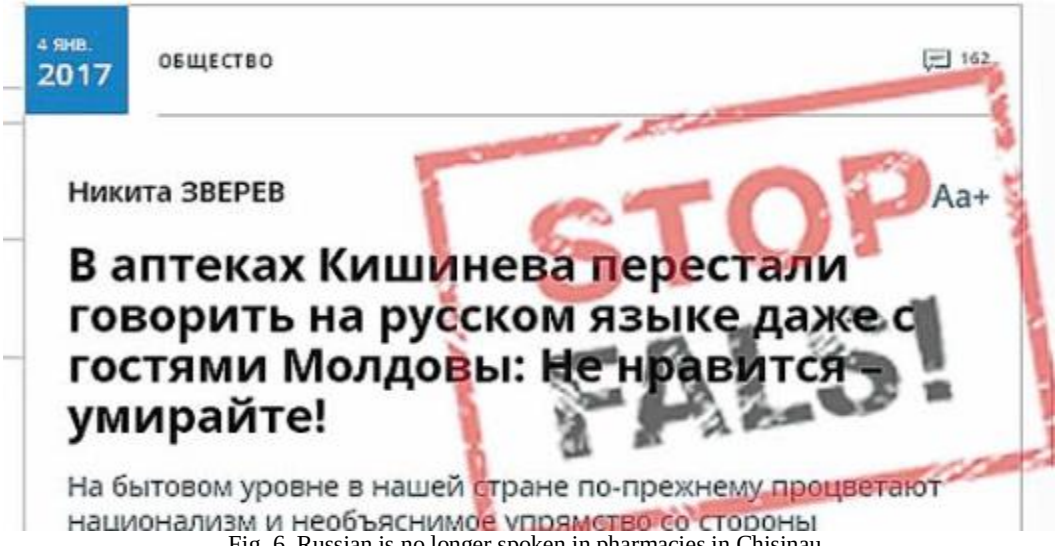

Fig. 6. Russian is no longer spoken in pharmacies in Chisinau.
Source: ZDG. FALS: În farmaciile din Chișinău nu se mai vorbește limba rusă, 9 ianuarie 2017. https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/fals-in-farmaciile-din-chisinau-nu-se-mai-vorbeste-limba-rusa/

This illustrates a shift toward more sophisticated disinformation combining fabricated scenarios with invented eyewitnesses.

Later, a representative of the pharmacy stated that the woman had actually refused to pay for a product that she had opened on the spot. Therefore, this is the start of diversification of disinformation, where faulse statements, start to be accompanied with fake scenarios and witnesses.

Reports by the Audiovisual Coordination Council [32] and the Association of Independent Press [33], have demonstrated that Russian broadcasters consistently promote narratives blaming Western actors, particularly the US, NATO, and EU, for regional conflict and instability, while portraying Russia and its leadership as defenders of peace, Christianity, and self-determination. Even entertainment programs were used to disseminate subtle anti-European messages. Ukraine is always declared solely responsible for the military conflict in the eastern regions, as a failed state, led by corrupt individuals close to Nazi ideology. Specifically, the STS TV channel in the entertainment program "6 кадров," included sequences that subtly broadcast anti-European messages, such as the message that the European Union is an amorphous structure, that Member States are losing their identity, that Germany is an enemy of Russia, and that the Netherlands is a hotbed for people with non-traditional sexual orientations [33]".

Digital transformation during COVID-19.
The COVID-19 pandemic marked a transformative period in Moldova's disinformation landscape. The spread of disinformation increasingly shifted online, and the state institutions were weakened by corruption and political capture. As journalist L. Zaharia [34] noted, the persistence and evolution of disinformation were facilitated by the authorities' reluctance or inability to respond effectively.

Strengthened state response and open foreign interference (2020–2025).
Since 2020, heightened political polarization and increasing and open foreign interference have intensified the scale and sophistication of disinformation campaigns in Moldova. As the INFOTAG Agency observed [28], the Moldovan media ecosystem remains highly vulnerable to manipulation.

In response, Moldovan authorities adopted the Law No. 242 in 2023, establishing the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation [35]. The establishment of the Center was driven by significant developments in the landscape of hybrid threats facing the Republic of Moldova, which pose complex challenges to national security. Hostile actors employ a wide range of hybrid warfare tactics, including economic coercion (particularly in the energy sector), manipulation of the military presence in the Transnistrian region, support for separatist movements in Transnistria and Gagauzia, exploitation of corruption networks linking business, politics, and transnational organized crime, targeted cyberattacks, direct interference in elections through voter bribery and intimidation, and extensive influence operations designed to manipulate public perceptions, decision-making, and societal behavior in favor of foreign interests [35]. The evolving nature of these threats and the state's responses led to the decision to strengthen

national resilience through enhanced strategic communication measures. The center has played a pivotal role in safeguarding electoral processes in 2024 and 2025.

In 2024, investigative journalists succeeded in infiltrating inside the disinformation networks financed by the criminal organizations linked to fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, revealing coordinated strategies intended to manipulate voter behavior and undermine democratic processes. Their reporting documented the use of paid digital agitators, fabricated political narratives, and covert distribution of foreign funds to influence electoral outcomes. These findings catalyzed formal investigations by Moldovan law enforcement bodies, resulting in criminal prosecutions against those implicated in voter bribery, organized information manipulation, and interference in national sovereignty.

Importantly, the public dissemination of these investigative results contributed to a heightened societal awareness of the scale and sophistication of disinformation efforts. This transparency played a pivotal role in shifting public attitudes during the decisive 2024 constitutional referendum on European Union integration and in support for Maia Sandu's successful re-election campaign. Consequently, the Moldovan case illustrates how independent journalism and exposure of malign influence operations can strengthen democratic resilience, even in environments characterized by limited media literacy and high vulnerability to foreign interference.

The year 2025 marked the emergence of a new form of coordinated disinformation infrastructure in Moldova: online "digital army" training networks [36]. These networks recruited and trained participants to produce tailored propaganda, fabricate online identities, and generate misinformation specifically engineered to bypass automated detection mechanisms, including advanced artificial intelligence–based content screening tools. Such activities indicate a significant escalation in both the technical sophistication and decentralization of influence operations, shifting from centralized propaganda hubs toward distributed digital ecosystems driven by incentivized citizens or externally guided actors.

This evolution underlines the adaptive nature of hybrid information warfare, in which malign actors continually refine their methods to exploit vulnerabilities in platform governance, cognitive biases, and institutional capacity. In the Moldovan context, where media literacy remains uneven and digital regulation is still developing, these actions present a growing threat to electoral integrity, societal trust, and the broader project of building cognitive resilience within a fragile democracy.

4. Discussions

The Moldovan case shows how disinformation has gradually transformed from sporadic manipulation into a structured instrument of hybrid warfare and internal political confrontation. Although disinformation has accompanied Moldova's post-independence history, its influence became particularly visible after 2014, when regional security tensions intensified and Moldova emerged as a contested geopolitical space between the European Union and Russia. What the findings underline is an evolution driven by external

interference, domestic political opportunism, growing technological sophistication, and a delayed, but increasingly assertive state response.

Foreign actors, especially those aligned with the Kremlin, have consistently shaped Moldovan media narratives by presenting the West as a source of instability, portraying Ukraine as solely responsible for regional conflict, and glorifying Russia as a guarantor of peace and Christian values. This strategy fits within contemporary concepts of hybrid warfare, where the informational domain becomes a key battleground for influencing public opinion and political orientation. Moldova's informational vulnerability reflects its broader geopolitical fragility.

However, disinformation in Moldova cannot be understood as an exclusively external phenomenon. Domestic political elites have willingly adopted manipulative communication strategies, especially during electoral moments. The normalization of smear campaigns during the 2016–2020 period illustrates how political actors contributed to the erosion of democratic discourse by exploiting societal fractures related to language, ethnicity, and religion. Disinformation about Maia Sandu's identity, moral character, and imagined affiliations did not simply seek to discredit an opponent, it sought to delegitimize the very idea of Moldova's European future. In this sense, foreign and domestic actors have frequently worked together, reinforcing each other's narratives to maximize political impact.

The technological shift brought by the COVID-19 pandemic further amplified the challenge. As more Moldovans relied on digital platforms for information, online disinformation networks expanded rapidly, adopting new tactics that were faster, more decentralized, and increasingly difficult to trace. The emergence of so-called "digital armies" in 2024/2025, trained specifically to bypass automated detection systems, including artificial intelligence, demonstrates the adaptive nature of information warfare in Moldova. Disinformation has become a professionalized activity, supported by criminal networks and external political interests.

For years, the Moldovan state lacked both the tools and the political will to respond effectively. Institutional weakness, media capture, and corruption allowed malign information ecosystems to flourish. Only after 2020, when pro-European governance gained broader public support, did Moldova begin to construct a proper defense. The creation of the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation in 2023 marks an important step toward institutionalizing resilience. Yet the challenges remain, as sophisticated disinformation networks continue to evolve more rapidly than regulatory or educational responses.

A crucial insight emerging from this study is that resilience does not come solely from the state. It is also built from below, through the intelligence, critical judgement, and civic maturity of the population. Moldovans have increasingly shown an ability to question manipulative narratives, particularly when investigative journalism has exposed networks of influence and corruption. Many actors, rom media professionals to teachers, fact-checkers, civil activists, diaspora communities, and even everyday citizens, have

contributed to shaping a more informed society. Their efforts helped secure key democratic outcomes, including the 2024 referendum on EU integration and Maia Sandu's re-election.

The analysis reveal a complex relationship between intelligence, critical thinking, and susceptibility to disinformation within Moldovan society. Although higher educational attainment and cognitive sophistication correlate with increased media literacy, this study also identifies cases in which citizens who might traditionally be regarded as "smart" professionals from political elites, still adopt and circulat manipulative narratives. This complexity becomes clearer when examined through Stanovich's three-level model of human cognition [14].

At the biological level, intelligence is often understood as processing capacity, what Stanovich refers to as the neural "hardware." In Moldova, individuals with high cognitive ability are fully capable of complex reasoning and information analysis. However, such abilities alone do not guarantee resistance to disinformation. Those with strong cognitive resources may instead use their abilities to defend preexisting beliefs, selectively interpret information, or justify identity-driven narratives. This indicates that the mere presence of intelligence does not inherently result in rational or truth-oriented behavior.

The algorithmic level, which concerns cognitive skills and problem-solving strategies, is influenced heavily by the distribution of educational opportunities across Moldova. Urban citizens and diaspora communities tend to demonstrate stronger analytical and digital literacy skills, enabling them to critically engage with political messaging. In contrast, rural populations, often with less access to educational innovation, struggle to dismantle persuasive but misleading media content. Still, even among more cognitively skilled groups, algorithmic reasoning may fail when information is emotionally charged or when heuristic shortcuts override careful analysis.

It is at the intentional level, where goals, motivations, values, and identity shape reasoning, that disinformation finds its most powerful leverage. Moldovan society is characterized by geopolitical fragmentation, lingering Soviet nostalgia, and contested cultural belonging. These identity-based divisions supply fertile ground for disinformation that aligns with or reinforces personal worldviews. Even highly educated individuals, when motivated by fear, loyalty, or ideological alignment, may selectively accept false narratives that affirm group identity. This supports Stanovich's claim that rational behavior is not simply a function of intelligence but is contingent upon reflective thinking dispositions and a willingness to pursue truth over emotional comfort.

Therefore, the Moldovan case illustrates that cognitive vulnerability cannot be reduced to a lack of intelligence. Disinformation exploits weaknesses not in people's capacity to think, but in their motivation to think critically in contexts where beliefs are tied to identity, status, or collective memory. Smart individuals may indeed behave "not smart" when cognitive resources are deployed toward motivated reasoning rather than objective evaluation.

These insights reinforce the importance of understanding smart citizenship as a holistic form of intelligence, one that encompasses not only cognitive ability but also reflective thinking, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility. A resilient democracy requires citizens who not only can think critically but who are motivated to do so, even when the truth challenges their preferred narratives. Strengthening this intentional dimension through civic education, value-oriented media literacy, and social trust-building strategies is therefore essential for Moldova's cognitive security.

Additionally, this suggests that in Moldova, "smart people" are not an abstract ideal but a growing social force, citizens who are intellectually alert, media literate, skeptical of manipulation, and emotionally resilient against fear-based propaganda. In a context where disinformation seeks to fracture society, the intelligence and solidarity of individuals becomes a strategic resource. Moldova's recent political successes (in 2024 and 2025) can therefore be seen not only as institutional achievements, but also as expressions of collective civic intelligence.

Ultimately, disinformation in Moldova operates simultaneously as a geopolitical tool, a domestic political weapon, and a constantly evolving technological phenomenon. While institutional reforms are strengthening the country's capacity to protect the information space, the long-term defense of democracy depends equally on a society capable of recognizing manipulation and rejecting narratives designed to undermine trust. The Moldovan experience illustrates that hybrid warfare seeks to weaken not only the state but the very citizen. Conversely, democratic resilience emerges not only through laws and strategies but through the everyday reasoning, and intelligence of the people themselves.

5. Conclusions

Through the analysis of recent electoral cycles, media discourse, and civil society investigations, it becomes clear that disinformation in Moldova is not merely an episodic disruption but a systemic challenge that undermines democratic development and cognitive security. Moldova's experience demonstrates that informational attacks target society's intellectual foundations: the population's capacity to think critically, verify facts, and make informed political choices.

Yet the Moldovan case also highlights an emerging form of democratic resilience driven by what the study defines as "smart citizens." Journalists, civil society actors, young urban professionals, and members of the diaspora collectively embody this group. Public mobilization against disinformation, most visible during the 2024 EU integration referendum and subsequent 2025 elections, shows that a critical mass of informed citizens can directly influence political outcomes and limit the effectiveness of informational threats.

However, Moldova's structural limitations remain a major concern, similar to other countries from the neigborhood [40]. The state has begun to implement relevant measures, such as establishing the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation, but the overall response remains still constrained. Without a

comprehensive national strategy prioritizing media literacy, and sustained civic engagement, Moldova will continue to face vulnerabilities that hybrid actors can exploit.

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