

Abstract

Nowadays the distinction between truth and falsehood increasingly fades. New technologies like social media enable various actors to disseminate disinformation to a large audience within no time. The present dissertation uncovers Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova by answering the following research questions: How does Russia use social media to wage disinformation campaigns in Moldova? And what are the predominant narratives in Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova on social media platforms since the beginning of the war in Ukraine? A thorough overview of scholarly literature introduces the concepts of Hybrid warfare and Information Warfare and explains how Russia uses these strategies to assert influence in its near abroad. Subsequently, the historical and contemporary relationship between Russia and Moldova are elucidated before diving into the underlying theories of Agenda Setting and Framing. Methodologically, the thesis applies a mixed-method approach. For the analysis, five Russian-speaking Moldovan Telegram news channels have been selected. Their role in Russian disinformation and the dominant narratives in over 180'000 web-scraped messages get uncovered. The findings reveal that Moscow systematically uses online news and social media to disseminate its narratives, effectively targeting the Russian-speaking population. The onset of the war in Ukraine led to a significant increase in posting activities, and it can be assumed that these are accompanied by a coordinated effort to amplify specific pro-Russian narratives shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes in Moldova. An in-depth analysis of the Telegram messages reveals the specific narratives Russia is using to undermine the current pro-European government of Moldova, exacerbating socio-political tensions within the country, installing fear and uncertainty around the Transnistrian conflict and the war in Ukraine, undermining the West in general and Moldova's turn towards it while promoting pro-Russian voices. The paper concludes with thoughts about the present and future implications of Russian disinformation strategies targeting Moldova. Moreover, recommendations to counter disinformation efforts and suggestions for further research are given.

Keywords

Russian Disinformation, Social Media, Telegram, Moldova, Hybrid Warfare, Information Warfare, Russia's Near Abroad