CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

Department of Security Studies

Master's Thesis

2024   **Nina Schönbächler**

CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

Department of Security Studies

Russian Disinformation on Social Media: Uncovering Narratives in Moldova Since the 2022 Onset of the War in Ukraine

Master's Thesis

Author of the Thesis: Nina Schönbächler

Study programme: International Security Studies

Supervisor: Mgr. Kristián Földes

Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.
4. During the preparation of this thesis, the author used ChatGPT to assist with code troubleshooting. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

In Prague on   Nina Schönbächler

31.07.2024

References

SCHÖNBÄCHLER, Nina. *Russian Disinformation on Social Media: Uncovering Narratives in Moldova Since the 2022 Onset of the War in Ukraine.* Praha, 2024. Master's thesis (Mgr). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Studies, Department of Security Studies. Supervisor Mgr. Kristián Földes.

Length of the Thesis: 161'804 characters with spaces excluding abstract and reference list

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

Abstrakt

V dnešní době se stále více stírá rozdíl mezi pravdou a lží. Nové technologie, jako jsou sociální média, umožňují různým aktérům šířit dezinformace mezi široké publikum během krátké doby. Tato disertační práce odhaluje ruské dezinformační kampaně zaměřené na Moldavsko prostřednictvím odpovědí na následující výzkumné otázky: Jak Rusko využívá sociální média k dezinformačním kampaním v Moldavsku? A jaké jsou převládající narativy v ruských dezinformačních kampaních zaměřených na Moldavsko na platformách sociálních médií od začátku války na Ukrajině? Důkladný přehled odborné literatury představuje koncepty hybridní války a informační války a vysvětluje, jak Rusko tyto strategie využívá k prosazování svého vlivu v blízkém zahraničí. Následně jsou objasněny historické a současné vztahy mezi Ruskem a Moldavskem, než se ponoříme do základních teorií Agenda Setting a Framing. Z metodologického hlediska práce využívá smíšený metodický přístup. Pro analýzu bylo vybráno pět ruskojazyčných moldavských zpravodajských kanálů Telegram. Jejich role v ruských dezinformacích a dominantní narativy ve více než 180 000 zprávách získaných z webu jsou odhaleny. Zjištění ukazují, že Moskva systematicky využívá online zpravodajství a sociální média k šíření svých narativů a účinně se zaměřuje na ruskojazyčné obyvatelstvo. Začátek války na Ukrajině vedl k výraznému nárůstu aktivit v oblasti zveřejňování příspěvků a lze předpokládat, že jsou doprovázeny koordinovaným úsilím o zesílení specifických proruských narativů formujících veřejné mínění a ovlivňujících politické výsledky v Moldavsku. Hloubková analýza zpráv na Telegramu odhaluje specifické narativy, které Rusko využívá k podkopávání současné proevropské moldavské vlády, k vyostřování sociálně-politického napětí v zemi, k instalaci strachu a nejistoty kolem konfliktu v Podněstří a války na Ukrajině, k podkopávání Západu obecně a obratu Moldavska k němu a zároveň k podpoře proruských hlasů. Článek uzavírají úvahy o současných a budoucích důsledcích ruských dezinformačních strategií zaměřených na Moldavsko. Dále jsou uvedena doporučení, jak dezinformačním snahám čelit, a návrhy na další výzkum.

Klíčová slova

Ruské dezinformace, sociální média, Telegram, Moldavsko, hybridní válka, informační válka, blízké zahraničí Ruska

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Distinguishing between truth and fabricated facts is becoming increasingly difficult in today's world. Throughout the ever-changing sphere of international relations, states like Russia make increased use of unconventional strategies to assert their regional and global influence (Fox, 2021). From "little green men" to the support of separatists and other deniable covert action, Russia does not shy away from using all possible means to maintain a Russian-cantered power structure in its near abroad and to counter the influence of the European Union and the United States through the promotion of pro-Russian narratives (Giegerich, 2016; Treisman, 2016). It is, therefore, not surprising that, in recent years, accusations of Moscow strategically employing tactics of hybrid warfare to achieve its interests have become more and more prone (Chivvis, 2017; Grigas, 2016). Especially the use of information warfare, interfering in other countries' political affairs, disrupting social cohesion and eroding trust in democratic institutions have been observed to an increasing extent. Whereas the strategic employment of disinformation is nothing new, the fast development of new technologies and social media has amplified its impact. Russia understood early on what potential could be drawn from this development and how it could be (mis-) used for its interests. Today, the instruments of information warfare play a pivotal role for Russia in shaping public opinion and perceptions, sowing discord, and reshaping narratives (Paul & Matthews, 2016). This strategic behaviour is particularly common in regions where Moscow seeks to exert political, economic, and diplomatic influence. To these count all countries of Russia's "near abroad", countries of the post-Soviet region which are historically under Moscow's influence (Toal, 2019). Over the past decade, Russia has adopted an increasingly assertive stance towards these countries, employing a range of military, economic, and political means to safeguard its influence and dissuade them from aligning with the West or pursuing European integration (Götz, 2017; Ratsiborynska, 2016). Ukraine is probably, at this time, the best example of how far Russia is willing to go to influence these countries. The ongoing war in Ukraine has also added impetus to Moscow's efforts to influence and control other countries of its near abroad, which follow a similar path as Ukraine. One of these countries is Moldova. With turning its back to Russia and orienting itself towards the West, inaugurating pro-Western President Maia Sandu in 2020, Russian disinformation warfare against Moldova significantly increased (Dvornikova, 2023; Stănescu, 2023). Moscow's attempts to dominate the Moldovan and especially Transnistrian

media space to destabilise the country by undermining the current government and dividing society further rose through the ongoing war in neighbouring Ukraine (EUvsDisinfo, 2023b). Against the backdrop of Russian information warfare and the complex dynamics in Eastern Europe, this research aims to unravel the nuances of Russian disinformation campaigns, focusing specifically on their impact on Russia's near abroad and Moldova in particular. The primary objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the methods, tactics, and main narratives of Russian disinformation campaigns in Moldova since the start of Russia's war on Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022.

By addressing the following research questions, this study aims to shed light on how Russia employs disinformation in Moldova and provide valuable insights into the broader challenges posed by global information warfare.

RQ1: How does Russia use social media to wage disinformation campaigns in Moldova?
RQ2: What are the predominant narratives in Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova on social media platforms since the beginning of the war in Ukraine?

Addressing the first research question, the present paper tries to understand the specific tactics and strategies employed by Russia in using social media to orchestrate disinformation campaigns within Moldova. This entails investigating how different official and non-official but Kremlin-related news channels, such as Russia Today or Sputnik, as well as independent channels, are connected and interact with one another (Dumont et al., 2023; Rosa, 2022; Zveagintsev, 2018). For the second research question, the focus is on diving deep into the messages of selected Telegram channels, identifying and analysing the prevailing narratives, such as claims that Ukraine will attack Transnistria or that President Maia Sandu is plotting with Kyiv and that the country will be pushed into the Russian-Ukrainian war by the West (EUvsDisinfo, 2023b). Furthermore, the general tendencies and narratives of Russian disinformation campaigns aiming to destabilise and divide Moldova will be investigated.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to analyse the existing scholarly literature related to the topic. The reviewed texts are grouped into the overreaching themes of (Russian) hybrid warfare, (Russian) information warfare and (Russian) disinformation, as well as Russia's near abroad.

2.1 Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare is a term that has gained significant popularity among scholars and policymakers since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea (Giegerich, 2016). Ever since there have been extensive conceptual debates about the concept and strategy of hybrid warfare. However, the concept of hybrid warfare is nothing new (Mansoor, 2012). Throughout the history of warfare, methods such as propaganda, deception, subversion, information campaigns, and the exploitation of tensions in society have been used to weaken and destabilise the enemy. Be it Sun Tsu in his famous writings "The Art of War", Machiavelli in "The Prince", or von Clausewitz in his book "On War", they all pointed out various conventional and unconventional tactics that can and should be used to win a war. All the more astonishing is that there exists no general definition of the concept (Cullen & Wegge, 2022).

One of the first scholars who defined hybrid warfare as follows was Hoffman: *"Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. Hybrid Wars can be conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors."* (Hoffman, 2007, p. 8). Over the years, the definition has continued to evolve, not only through academics but also through political debate. Today, the concept of hybrid warfare is an integral part of the Western strategic debate, and security organs such as NATO have defined it in their own way: *"Hybrid threats combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces. Hybrid methods are used to blur the lines between war and peace, and attempt to sow doubt in the minds of target populations. They aim to destabilize and undermine societies."* (NATO, 2023).

The approach resonates with the dynamics of the information age, fostering innovation across various fronts. By engaging in multiple domains, hybrid warfare seeks ways to gain

a strategic advantage or conduct operations that undermine the adversary from within. Its ultimate goal is to achieve victory and impose one's political will while remaining below the threshold of an open war. Operating in this ambiguous grey zone that blurs the distinction between peace and war, hybrid warfare makes attribution difficult and allows for plausible deniability. Comprehensive retribution and countermeasures against the perpetrators are therefore challenging to implement (Fox, 2021; Qureshi, 2020).

2.1.1 Russian Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare tactics have a deep-rooted history within Russia, stretching back to the Soviet era and particularly the Cold War period. During this time, propaganda, support for insurgencies and proxies, and the deployment of active measures have been used en masse. During the Cold War, these tactics were part of the broader strategy to influence political events and public opinion abroad and to extend Soviet influence without the risk of direct military confrontation with the West (Kuzio & D'Anieri, 2018). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was a natural decline in the utilisation of what today would be recognised as hybrid warfare strategies. However, since the early 2000s, under the leadership of Russia's longstanding President Vladimir Putin, there has been observed a re-emergence and evolution of hybrid warfare. This can be drawn back to several geopolitical challenges and opportunities. Such as the pro-western colour revolutions in former Soviet states at the beginning of the 2000er – Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (Bērziņa, 2019). Or NATO's eastward expansion formulated at the alliance's Bucharest Summit 2008, where the member states promised to Georgia and Ukraine, that they will one day become part of NATO. Russia perceived these developments as a direct threat to its sphere of influence and national security (Fox, 2021; Richey, 2018). In response, measures of hybrid warfare have been reemployed to undermine perceived adversaries and reassert Russian influence in the post-Soviet space and beyond. Today, it can be seen as a fundamental component of Russia's foreign policy objectives, including, but not limited to, the fragmentation and weakening of NATO, the United States, or the European Union and the subversion of pro-Western governments in Russia's perceived sphere of influence. Sometimes, measures of hybrid warfare are even used to create a pretext of military intervention and territorial annexation (Chivvis, 2017), as evidenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine. The underlying doctrine of these objectives persists for more than two decades. The so-called "Primakov Doctrine" emphasises Russia's objectives of restoring the country's

great power status, the hegemony over the Post-Soviet Space and close integration of its near abroad, and the weakening of US and European influence through institutions such as NATO (Carolan, 2019; Rumer, 2019). The understanding of Russian hybrid warfare got further developed through Valery Gerasimov's 2013 article, where the Chief of the General staff of the Armed Forces outlined a doctrine where he emphasised the importance of using a mix of linear and non-linear strategies of military, technological, information, diplomatic, economic, cultural and other tactics to meet strategic goals. This foreign policy approach of hybrid warfare creates a form of permanent warfare that blurs the lines between peace and war, exploiting the opponent's vulnerabilities and destabilising them (Galeotti, 2013). Moreover, these tactics aim to increase support for pro-Russian narratives, economic partnerships, and military conventions in its sphere of influence (Carolan, 2019). Over the last two decades, numerous incidents exemplify the diverse tactics of Russian hybrid warfare. A paramount example of these tactics is the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the conflict around Eastern Ukraine. Through the deployment of "little green men" – unidentified Russian soldiers – who fought alongside local proxies and an extensive information campaign, Russia annexed Crimea without making hardly any use of conventional military forces. Furthermore, Moscow intensively supported separatist groups with arms and training (Galeotti, 2016). The Kremlin consistently denies direct involvement in such actions, underscoring the essence of hybrid warfare: deniability and clandestinity. This strategic ambiguity, which arises, not only complicates attribution but also permits the West and NATO members to abstain from dealing with forceful responses to such behaviour (Bachmann, 2015). Another strait of Russian hybrid warfare aims to attack critical infrastructure, such as the 2007 cyber-attack on Estonia, which disrupted telecommunication, bank services and government networks for several days (Blank, 2017). Or the cyber-attacks on Ukraine's power grid in 2015 and 2016. These attacks demonstrate hybrid measures' power to disrupt state functioning (Zetter, 2016). Probably one of the most prominent aspects of Russian hybrid warfare at the moment is the interference in democratic elections. Through disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks, Russia in the past tried to exacerbate societal division and influence election outcomes to its interest. Such tactics have been employed during the 2016 US presidential elections and during the 2016 Brexit vote in the United Kingdom or the 2017 French presidential elections (Blake, 2020; Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués, 2022). Such efforts aim to undermine the adversaries by gaining and influencing the hearts and minds of the people (Geraldes, 2023; Paul & Matthews, 2016).

2.2 Information Warfare

The information age and technological process of information technologies profoundly impact various domains, including communication, politics, society, and military operations. In the security realm, this development has given rise to the concept of information warfare, a field undergoing rapid evolution and subject to lively discussions among scholars (Whyte et al., 2020). Information technology has changed the conduct of conflicts. These technologies, on which today's societies are highly reliant, can be misused to increase the effectiveness of conventional weapons and bring forward non-conventional warfare strategies. Strategies that allow achieving one's political or material objectives without using kinetic forces (Bishop & Goldman, 2010). The significance of information warfare is underscored by the increasing ease with which disinformation can be disseminated and how specific audiences can effectively be targeted with chosen content and distinguished narratives. While the concept of information warfare is not universal, it commonly aims to achieve political goals without resorting to physical conflict, employing tactics that compromise information systems, undermine societal structures, and manipulate public perception through psychological influence operations, propaganda, military deception, and cyber warfare. These methods intend to sway decision-making processes, potentially destabilising states and societies to gain a competitive advantage over the adversary (Geraldes, 2023; Whyte et al., 2020; Wilson, 2019). Hutchinson and Warren (2001) delineate information warfare's manipulation across data, context, knowledge, and information. Data manipulation entails denying, altering, or stealing data. Context manipulation skews the environment for data interpretation, misleading adversaries. Knowledge manipulation employs propaganda to shift perceptions. Finally, information manipulation sows doubt and degrades adversary information, advantageously for the attacker. Information warfare is notably a widespread phenomenon among governmental and non-governmental actors because it has very low entry costs and potentially empowers weaker actors (Bishop & Goldman, 2010). Furthermore, holding perpetrators responsible for their acts is difficult, as they can be easily denied. Therefore, effective countermeasures against such actors are rare (Willemo, 2019). The rise of the internet and social media have transformed information warfare into a highly effective tool, and states like Russia, Iran and China have understood how to use it in their interest. They strategically exploit their adversary's societal, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities to further their geopolitical goals. By leveraging the digital landscape, they influence public opinion, destabilise societies and erode trust in democratic

institutions. The result is a multifaceted information battleground where states and ordinary citizens participate in disseminating disruptive information (Horowitz, 2019; Whyte et al., 2020; Zeitzoff, 2017).

2.2.2 Russian Information Warfare and Disinformation

Information warfare and the instrumentalisation of social media to influence public opinion, politics, and societies abroad have become one of Russia's core instruments in today's digital age. The Kremlin has been developing a cyber command tasked with executing offensive cyber actions, such as propaganda campaigns and embedding malware in adversaries' command and control infrastructures. The Russian military is also forming a dedicated unit for conducting operations within computer networks. This signifies a strategic move towards digital dominance of its adversaries (Blank, 2017). Polyakova (2018) argues that information warfare is an efficient and impactful tool for Russia, a nation that optimises its technological capabilities to compensate for economic and military constraints. Information warfare allows Russia to achieve its objectives at a significantly lower cost and to leverage the ambiguity of attribution to evade potential counteractions from adversaries. Because Moscow's actions do not touch the threshold of violence defined by NATO as "military operations", they do not fear a repressive response (Blank, 2017). For the intentional spread of false information for political purposes, Russia uses various overt and covert channels. A high volume of disinformation gets spread through social media, news outlets such as Russia Today or Sputnik, bots and internet trolls, but also through NGOs and religious and cultural institutions (Bachmann, 2015; Paul & Matthews, 2016). Paul and Matthews (2016) describe these Russian disinformation tactics as "the firehose of falsehood". It is characterised by its vast volume and multi-channel dissemination of a mix of text, video, audio and images through the internet, social media and traditional television and radio broadcasting. The goal is to obscure the distinction between truth and falsehood, thereby sowing confusion among the target audience (Paul & Matthews, 2016; Tyushka, 2021). A strategic institution which enables the dissemination of disinformation in such a high volume and reactivity is the 2013 discovered Internet Research Agency (IRA). The IRA also referred to as the "troll farm," operates discreetly from a casual business building in Saint Petersburg and was founded and managed by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Even though the IRA is not an official government institution, its actions are closely aligned with the Kremlin's, providing a layer of plausible deniability for the Russian government (Kenworthy, 2019). With over a thousand

employees, the agency uses social media platforms like Twitter, Telegram, and the Russian equivalent of Facebook, VKontakte, and other platforms to conduct influence operations. A coordinated approach of fake accounts, bots, and trolls is used to disseminate disinformation and shape public opinion favourably towards Moscow's interests (DiResta et al., 2019). Polyakova and Boyer (2018) strongly warn of the Kremlin's tactics and how they will become even more insidious with advancing technologies like artificial intelligence, automation, and machine learning. Covert operations of information warfare against opponents - aimed at influencing politics and narratives in Russia's geopolitical interests - will become even more prone. Past instances, such as Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential elections or the following elections in Europe, illustrate Moscow's systematic approach to information warfare (Polyakova & Boyer, 2018).

2.3 Russia's Near Abroad

The term "Russia's near abroad" emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It stands for the former Soviet Republics that gained independence as sovereign nations yet maintain historical and cultural ties to Russia (Toal, 2019). In recent years, especially under the government of Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin has adopted an increasingly assertive approach towards its near abroad. The growing Western influence in these countries and their orientation towards NATO and European integration is challenging Russia's perceived status as a great power in the international arena. Furthermore, the changing geopolitical realities in its neighbourhood are perceived as threatening Russian security (Götz, 2017; Renz, 2018). To counter the growing external Western threat and regain dominance over the post-Soviet space and its immediate neighbourhood, Moscow employs various hybrid warfare methods. As Ratsiborynska (2016) assesses, these include military and non-military approaches ranging from *"political, economic and energy pressure as well as deliberate coercion, extending to information warfare and propaganda, ideological warfare and other possible means of influencing the local populations"*. By employing these strategies, the target countries of Russia's near abroad are coerced to follow the Kremlin's political line. According to Grigas (2016, S. 26), Russia employs seven stages of exerting influence on its neighbouring countries. The early stages of this strategy include bolstering linguistic and cultural ties, providing humanitarian help, and fostering cooperation. Later stages can involve the strategic granting of Russian citizenship to certain groups of the population, spreading disinformation to discredit the opposition and highlight minority struggles to

protect them later. The ultimate stage would be military intervention. This stage is often reached through the strategic employment of disinformation and propaganda through which Russia artificially creates a context of a legitimate cause for intervention. In many cases, this happens under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking populations (Kumankov, 2023). By framing its actions as a defence against alleged discrimination and humanitarian crisis, the Kremlin positions itself as a protector while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of the opponent. Through this approach, they not only fabricate a narrative of moral high ground for Russia and garner support among global political actors and its domestic audience but also mask the aggressive nature of its territorial expansion and influence campaigns (Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021). One of the most notable examples of Russian interference and coercion of its neighbouring territories is the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, alongside its support for separatist movements in the Donbas region, which the Kremlin ultimately let escalate through the ongoing war of aggression on Ukraine (Götz, 2015). Another significant example is Russia's involvement in Georgia, where Moscow supported, in 2008, the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in a war of independence (Abushov, 2009). In both cases, Russia succeeds in unlawfully exerting ongoing direct control over these areas. These actions are part of Russia's broader strategy that blends military aggression with hybrid warfare tactics. Thereby, Moscow is successfully leveraging the power of meddling into frozen conflicts that sometimes date back to the Soviet Union. In doing so, Russia remains influential in its near abroad, creating a buffer zone while not risking any serious military consequences for its actions, which stay below the threshold of actual war (Milosevich, 2021). This presents a possibility that Russia may pursue additional interventions to expand its dominance in regions with substantial Russian-speaking populations, such as Moldova or the Baltic states (Treisman, 2016).

3. Russia and Moldova

The interconnectedness between Russia and the Republic of Moldova is deeply rooted in history, culture, politics and geography, presenting a complex relationship that has evolved over the years. Moldova, with a population of 2.5 million people, is a small landlocked country covering a surface of 33.8 square kilometres and is positioned between Romania and Ukraine. Only a narrow strip of land separates the country from the Black Sea (Cara, 2023). Moldova, as a former Soviet republic, is considered Russia's near abroad and supposedly under Moscow's sphere of influence. The following chapter will explain the historical background of Russian-Moldovan relations, exploring the two countries' historical and cultural ties. Moreover, it will show how these ties continue to influence today's bilateral relations, shaping both countries' foreign and domestic politics. Finally, the war in Ukraine will be taken into account, and how the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war impacts Moldova and how it shapes the dynamics between the two countries will be assessed.

3.1 Historical Background

The historical evolution of the territory recognised as the Republic of Moldova is marked by a complex interplay of political and territorial shifts prominently influenced by its interactions with Russia and Romania. Significant transformations of the region, initially known as Bessarabia, have shaped and continue to shape today's identity and geopolitical dynamics.

In the early 19th century, following the Russo-Turkish War of 1806-1812, Bessarabia, previously under Ottoman control, became part of the Russian Empire. Bessarabia's political landscape underwent another significant transformation when, in 1859, the core territories of the Romanian Principality of Moldova merged with Wallachia, laying the foundation for the modern Romanian state. Following World War I, Bessarabia was reincorporated into Romania. However, after twenty-two years, the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact initiated another change: Soviet forces occupied Bessarabia in 1940. The Soviet era introduced notable demographic and economic transformations in the established Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR). As part of the Soviet Union's extensive ethnopolitical and administrative restructuring of the Republic, a distinctive multi-ethnic demographic pattern emerged. Characterised by the coexistence of predominantly rural Moldovan communities and a more urban, Slavic and Russian-speaking population concentrated in Transnistria, the latter benefiting significantly from Soviet industrialisation initiatives and hence strongly

allying with Moscow (Sanchez, 2009; Tîcu, 2012). The 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union led to Moldova's declaration of independence on the 27th of August of the same year. However, the transition into an independent nation-state was marked by the sharpening emergence of separatist claims within Transnistria. The tensions between Moldova and the separatist region, which proclaimed its de facto independence in 1990, culminated in a full-blown military conflict in 1992 in which the Russian army intervened on the side of the separatists. Despite the signing of a ceasefire agreement following the brief military engagement, the conflict between Moldova and Transnistria remains unresolved to this day. Transnistria continues to assert its de facto independence from the Republic of Moldova, notably thanks to financial and military support from Moscow. The remaining presence of Russian military forces and significant ammunition stockpiles within the territory of Transnistria further complicates the situation. Despite the initiation of mediation processes under the auspices of the OSCE, involving Russia and Ukraine as guarantor powers, and, since 2005, the inclusion of the US and the EU as observers in the so-called 5+2 format, no political agreement has been brokered between the two parties. Up to the present day, the conflict remains frozen (Rogstad, 2018; Rumer, 2019; Sanchez, 2009).

Figure 3.1: Map of Moldova and Transnistria (Source: BBC News, 2023)

3.2 Current situation

The enduring stalemate in the Transnistrian conflict sets the foundation for the current political dynamics between Moldova and Russia. The fact that the conflict remains frozen serves as a strategic tool for Russia to keep exerting influence in Moldova which is considered as its near abroad. It not only gives Russia the pretext for its continued military involvement in Moldovan affairs under the guise of peacekeeping but also allows it to exploit the continuing ethnic tensions and political vulnerabilities to challenge Moldova's sovereignty and shape political decisions. Moreover, it serves as a strategic tool in preventing the eastward expansion of the European Union and NATO (Potter, 2022).

Since the early 2000s, Moldova has experienced a significant political shift from a rather pro-Russian stance to a pro-European course. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and its successor, the Eastern Partnership, have played important roles in promoting political stability and prosperity in Moldova by introducing EU governance structures and norms. Moreover, a bilateral "Action Plan" between Moldova and the EU, adopted in 2005, focused on various points, including political stability, democratisation, and the resolution of the conflict around Transnistria (Kaljurand, 2008; Peterka-Benton, 2012). Moldova's commitment to align more closely with European standards threatens Russia, which wants to keep Moldova in its sphere of influence and as a buffer state between Europe and itself. Hence, Moscow consistently tries to influence political decisions, trying to bring Moldova back into its orbit. Attempts at promoting Eurasian integration and initiatives like the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) stand in opposition to Moldova's European aspirations. In 2013, as the EU and Moldova advanced their plans for an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, Russia responded by re-introducing import bans on Moldova. This move was aimed at pressuring the country to reconsider its European trajectory and consider alignment with the Eurasian project instead (Rogstad, 2018). Moldova counts as one of the poorest European countries, with fragile economic and political structures. Until recently, the country has been highly dependent on Russian gas imports, which gave Moscow a lot of leverage to exert geoeconomic coercion (Blank & Kim, 2016). Furthermore, Russia employs many other overt and covert means to influence and destabilise the country to its benefit. Moscow, for example, actively supports pro-Russian political parties and movements within Moldova to sway policies and elections in its favour. These pro-Russian politicians and

parties, such as ex-president Igor Dodon or the Șor party, strategically exploit the country's socioeconomic and ethno-national problems to further divide society with separatist propaganda and produce internal unrest (Goltsov, 2020). Culture and civil society are other domains through which Russia tries to expand its influence by using cultural centres and other governmental and non-governmental institutions as strategic tools. This approach involves promoting the notion of a "Russian World", a concept which accentuates the belief in shared cultural and historical ties, as well as shared Russian national identity. One institution which actively promotes this discourse is the Russian Orthodox church. With its indirect involvement in Russian foreign politics, the Russian Orthodox church spreads the Kremlin's anti-Western and imperialist vision. The institution is essential in projecting influence abroad, including Moldova. The Moldavian-Chisinau Metropolitanate of the Russian Orthodox Church directly falls under Moscow's ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and most of the clergy is educated in Russia, repeating the narratives they were taught (Goltsov, 2020; Solik & Baar, 2019). The fact that the Orthodox Church plays an important role in Moldovan society and the strong connection between the Moldovan Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church is a perfect basis for Russia to indirectly and discretely disseminate their narratives and influence civil society (Kaljurand, 2008). In 2014, for example, after the ratification of the European Union Association Agreement by the EU Parliament, the Moldovan Orthodox Church, alongside the Russian Orthodox Church, launched an anti-EU campaign (Solik & Baar, 2019). Another strategy Russia employs in its near abroad and also in Moldova is passportization, which means granting Russian passports to the inhabitants of the breakaway region Transnistria. These initiatives began in 2001 and saw their most active phase throughout 2014 (Grönsund, 2020). Unofficial data estimates that over two-thirds of the Transnistrian population possessed a Russian passport in 2020 (Goltsov, 2020). Through passportization, Russia solidifies its influence and might even create a future pretext for military intervention, as happened with the separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine, which ultimately led to the ongoing war. Extensive disinformation efforts accompany all these initiatives. Whereas Moldova, as part of Russia's near abroad, has always been exposed to information operations and disinformation attacks, they have increased since the inauguration of pro-Western President Maia Sandu in 2020. Moreover, the ongoing war in Ukraine further pushes Moscow's attempts to dominate the Moldovan and especially Transnistrian media space to delegitimise the government and divide society (Solik & Graf, 2023). In March 2022, the Moldovan government decided to ban six Russian TV channels

due to the imminent threat they pose by disseminating misleading information. However, the channels have found new ways of broadcasting, and the disinformation keeps spreading, notably through social media platforms such as YouTube or Telegram (EUvsDisinfo, 2023a). Essentially, the core objective behind all propaganda efforts targeting Moldova is to destabilise its pro-European leadership. On January 26th 2023, pro-Russian forces organised a demonstration in Chisinau to call upon the government's removal. Interestingly, only Russian nationals were caught participating in these demonstrations. The media declaration that these individuals will face legal trial on the territory of Moldova led to political turmoil fuelled by targeted misinformation. Subsequently, this led to the government's downfall in February 2023, and Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita was forced to step down (Dvornikova, 2023).

These examples show that Russia's influence through various means remains high in Moldova and that the Kremlin is willing to use these means to secure its influence and leverage on political realities.

3.3 Implications of Russia's War in Ukraine on Moldova

Russia's war in Ukraine has, in several aspects, profound implications for Moldova, which shares a 1'222 km-long border with Ukraine. In the wake of Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, Moldova is facing repercussions affecting its national security, political landscape, economic stability, and the integrity of its information space. These aspects affect not only Moldova but also the broader European security architecture.

The unfolding war in Ukraine has raised concerns that Moldova might be the next target of Russian expansionism since it shares some social-political similarities with Ukraine. The scenario which played out in Ukraine, beginning with the 2014 annexation of Crimea, followed by covert military operations in Eastern Ukraine, escalating into a full-scale invasion, presents a disturbing outline for Moldova. Especially given the lasting presence of Russian troops in the separatist region of Transnistria (Solik & Graf, 2023). During the 2022 spring offensive, Russian troops advanced as close as a hundred kilometres up to the Moldovan border. Speculations about Russia seeking to establish a strategic land bridge to Transnistria to support its war ambitions in Ukraine increased security concerns. These were further driven up by Russian general Rustam Minnekayev's statement of conquering Ukraine's south and freeing Transnistrians from Moldova's oppression (Deen & Zweers, 2022). Until now, fortunately, such a scenario has not been realised by the Russian armed

forces. Nevertheless, Moldova's future will depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. The fact that the two countries' destinies are significantly intertwined has also been recognised by the European Union's decision to grant both Ukraine and Moldova EU candidacy status at the same time (Deen & Zweers, 2022). Moldova's political aspirations towards the EU have been met with increased Russian pressure. When Moldova was granted the status, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman immediately commented that this would have negative consequences (Reuters, 2022). Thus, while taking a step towards European integration, geopolitical contestation intensifies.

The war in Ukraine has also led to a major humanitarian crisis in Europe. With the war right at its doorstep, Moldova instantly felt the consequences. Record numbers of Ukrainian refugees made their way towards Moldova in search of shelter and help. Whereas many refugees moved on to other countries, some hundred thousand people, mainly women and children, decided to stay on Moldovan territory (Dunmore & Odobescu, 2022). In the context of Moldova's rather modest GDP per capita, the high influx of asylum seekers from Ukraine poses an economic and social challenge (Buzev, 2023).

Another aspect of the implications of Russia's war in Ukraine on Moldova unfolds in the realm of information and public perception. Since the beginning of the war, Moscow has tried even more to dominate the Moldovan and especially Transnistrian media space. People in Transnistria heavily rely on Russian-language media as a source of information. Given that Russian-language media outlets in the region are either directly connected to Moscow and its narratives or are indirectly influenced by pro-Russian Moldovan elites with strong ties to the Kremlin, it is not too hard for Moscow to influence public opinion (Całus, 2023a; Deen & Zweers, 2022; Solik & Graf, 2023). The division along ethno-linguistic lines and the differing consumption of media and information leads to a divergent perception of geopolitical realities. This is illustrated by a survey from May 2022, where only 20% of the Russian-speaking population of Moldova viewed Russia's action in Ukraine as an aggression, in contrast to 51% of Romanian speakers (Deen & Zweers, 2022). Moreover, another survey shows that 70% of Transnistria's population views Vladimir Putin's actions in the war against Ukraine positively, and half of the population sees the war as a "special military operation" as proclaimed by the Kremlin (Koneva et al., 2022). Despite Moldova's efforts to curb Russian propaganda through new laws, the disinformation and Russian narratives concerning the war keep spreading online, where regulation is more difficult. Recent narratives and disinformation, which were disseminated through social media

platforms such as Facebook and Telegram, try to destabilise the country and delegitimise its pro-European government. They, for example, propagate that President Maia Sandu, under the influence of the EU and NATO, intends to engage in the conflict or that her government is responsible for the high energy prices and bad economic situation, ignoring the fact that Russia is strategically leveraging on energy dependence. Furthermore, some narratives which emerged try to undermine social cohesion and blame Ukrainian refugees as fascists profiting from the Moldovan state, destroying people's property (Solik & Graf, 2023). Controlling the spread of disinformation remains a tough battle, especially in the online sphere. The more important it gets to identify the predominant narratives in Russian disinformation campaigns, targeting Moldova through social media since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

4. Theoretical Framework

This section elaborates on the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis. The focus is on the Agenda Setting and Framing Theories. These theories help us understand how media can highlight specific issues and shape public discourse. Furthermore, the theories will be examined within the context of Russia, particularly in relation to disinformation campaigns disseminated through both traditional and new media.

4.1 Agenda Setting and Framing Theory

The theory of agenda setting was first outlined by scholar Walter Lippmann in 1922, who expressed concern about the role mass media plays in influencing the public's opinion. The core idea of the theory is that topics and themes prominently projected in the media become important in the audience's perception hence, the media sets the public's agenda (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). To elevate a specific issue to the forefront of public awareness, mass media consistently and prominently report on it, ensuring it reaches a broad audience. This widespread dissemination leads the public to view these issues as more significant compared to others. Simply put, the extent of an issue's coverage directly influences its perceived importance among the public (Coleman et al., 2009). Subsequent research has identified more nuanced interactions between different agendas. They support the idea that the media can shape what the public thinks is important. Public opinion, in turn, influences what politicians focus on. Additionally, the media can impact politicians' decisions directly, without going through the public, and sometimes, what politicians decide to prioritise can determine what the media covers. Lastly, media coverage is also shaped by significant events outside of the cycle illustrated below (McQuail & Windahl, 2015).
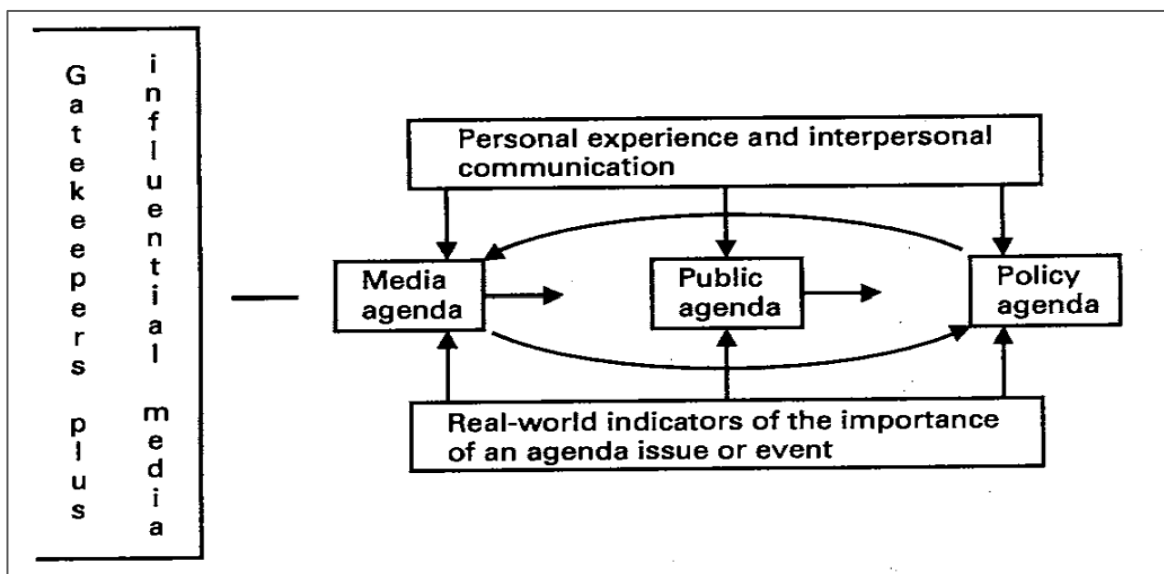
Gatekeepers plus influential media

Personal experience and interpersonal communication

Media agenda → Public agenda → Policy agenda

Real-world indicators of the importance of an agenda issue or event

Figure 4.1: Rogers and Dearing's (1987) model of agenda setting (McQuail & Windahl, 2015)

However, the mass media do not only play an important role in setting what people should think about but also in how they should think about the issues brought to public attention. Here, the theory of agenda setting distinguishes between "first-level" and "second-level" agenda setting. Whereas the first level, as described above, emphasises on bringing a particular object or issue to public attention, the second level focuses on which attributes are attached to it and their relative salience (Coleman et al., 2009; McCombs & Estrada, 1997). For example, first-level agenda setting explains how an issue gains public attention through the media. Second-level agenda setting explores how the public views certain aspects of the issue brought to the public agenda. Furthermore, the agenda setting theory shares some common grounds with the framing theory, which suggests that the mass media can influence how one thinks about certain issues (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). With the framing theory, the focus is more on the specific construction of a message disseminated through the media, shaping the audience's interpretation of certain issues. Through specific narratives, phrases, images, and meanings attributed to it, framing tries to influence cognitive effects in an audience's perception of reality (Shah et al., 2009). In an early study, Iyengar and Simon (1993) impressively analysed agenda setting and framing through the news coverage and public opinion of the Gulf crisis. They concluded that the extensive news coverage of the Gulf Crisis lifted the issue to the US's most important problem at that

time. Simultaneously, the military framing of the Gulf Crisis favoured public support for a military solution to the crisis rather than a diplomatic one. Moreover, they describe that public opinion and agenda setting can either be influenced intentionally by an actor or unintentionally through underlying dynamics (Iyengar & Simon, 1993). Another pertinent example directly related to the present research is the topic of European integration in Moldova. Both pro-European and pro-Russian actors use first-level agenda setting to bring this topic to public attention. However, regarding second-level agenda setting, these forces frame the topic in fundamentally different ways. Pro-European actors attribute European integration with positive and profitable outcomes, while pro-Russian actors portray it as negative and loss-generating. In this way, they try to influence the electorate on this issue. Early studies of agenda setting and framing theory mainly focused on the influence exerted by traditional media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television (Hill, 1985; McClure & Patterson, 1976; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). With the invention of the internet and social media, new communication streams were created, which also became relevant to the theories (McCombs et al., 2018). Interestingly, the development of the internet and social media was initially perceived as complicating agenda setting, given the vast availability of different information sources now accessible by individuals. However, it quickly became apparent that social media had evolved into a robust and influential mechanism for agenda setting, demonstrating its capacity to guide public attention and shape discourse effectively (Ehrett et al., 2022). Scholars suggest that politicians, governments and also non-state actors can use the tool of mass- and social media to intentionally set up a specific agenda and influence a public's perception, values and priorities through framing (Gilardi et al., 2022; Hemphill et al., 2013). When manipulating public perception is the goal, the theory of agenda setting and framing can also be applied to disinformation campaigns. A notable example is the study by Pierri et al. (2020), which examined the spread of disinformation on Twitter in the lead-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections. This research highlighted how false narratives were framed to sway public opinion and encourage specific actions from the electorate, thus potentially influencing the election's outcome. The strategic framing in disinformation campaigns is designed to manipulate the audience's stance on various issues and to impact their political decisions and activities.

4.2 Agenda Setting and Framing in the Russian Context

Agenda setting and framing within autocratic states significantly diverge from their applications in democracies. In autocracies, the media often function as extensions of state control, disseminating propaganda and reinforcing official state narratives. A strict oversight of media outlets is maintained, ensuring they serve the objectives of the regime and contribute to its continuity (Stier, 2015). This is also the case for Russia. Since the early 2000s, the Kremlin has tightened its control over the media. Initially, a variety of competing media outlets existed. Over time, the sector has become significantly smaller. Currently, nearly 90% of Russia's media output is produced by just three major companies (Hanley & Kuzichkin, 2021). The control over media and the dissemination of state-produced narratives extends beyond the traditional news platforms. The Kremlin has implemented a sophisticated system to manage and manipulate the information landscape online, particularly through social media (Eichel et al., 2022). This includes the deployment of internet trolls and bots to spread pro-government messages and suppress opposing voices. Furthermore, the government also introduced laws and regulations that severely limit online freedom. Under the guise of protecting national security or combating misinformation, the Russian state increased its control over the circulating online information (Gehlbach et al., 2022). Beyond its own borders, Russia aggressively shapes public opinion online, extending its influence beyond domestic boundaries through agenda setting and framing. This is notably achieved through "independent" multimedia channels such as Russia Today (RT), which uses a broad spectrum of online platforms, including YouTube, Telegram, and Instagram, to disseminate its content in several foreign languages such as English, French, German, Spanish, Arabic, and other Eastern European languages (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Moreover, Moscow makes use of blogs and websites that are not officially connected to the Russian government to promote its stance. In Russia's near abroad, these platforms frequently spread anti-Western sentiments, reinforcing divisions between Russian-speaking communities and their host governments. In Europe and the West in general, they strategically focus on divisive issues such as immigration, Islam, national sovereignty, and various social matters to sow discord and erode trust in democratic Western institutions (Bechis, 2021; Todd C., 2018). It's crucial to point out that, as of the year 2020, the funding allocated to information platforms designed for foreign influence and framing operations significantly surpassed the financial support provided to platforms targeting domestic Russian audiences (Hanley & Kuzichkin, 2021).

5. Methodology

To explore the research questions of this dissertation - namely, how Russia utilises social media to conduct disinformation campaigns in Moldova and the predominant narratives in these campaigns since the onset of the war in Ukraine - a comprehensive analysis was undertaken. A mixed-method approach of quantitative and qualitative analysis was chosen to do so. Therefore, the foundation of the quantitative and qualitative analytical part of this research is based upon the examination of the content and Russian instrumentalisation of five specific Telegram channels operating in Moldova. All of the channels are held in the Russian language and, therefore, primarily target Moldova's Russian-speaking population, particularly those in Transnistria. Notably, most of these channels have direct affiliations with Russian or Transnistrian governmental institutions, raising the likelihood that they are used for strategic disinformation and propagation of Russian narratives.

5.1 Qualitative Exploration of Selected Telegram Channels

A comprehensive qualitative methodology was employed to inquire and answer the first research question on how Russia utilises social media to conduct disinformation campaigns in Moldova. This involved consulting relevant literature and academic papers to provide a general overview and profound understanding of strategies and tactics employed by Russia in leveraging social media for the dissemination of disinformation. In the second step, the focus shifted to the exploration of the five following Telegram channels, which were selected for this study and build the foundation of the present analysis:

1. KP.MD (@KpMoldova)
2. Sputnik Moldova (@rusputnikmd)
3. ТСВ Приднестровье (@tsvtiraspol)
4. Приднестровец (@pridnestrovec)
5. Новости Приднестровья (@novostipmrcom)

The importance and connection to Russia were investigated and analysed for each channel. Connections to known Russian media outlets, propagandists, or government officials were highlighted where possible. This qualitative exploration of how Russia uses social media for disinformation and the investigation of the selected Telegram channel's linkage to such efforts were crucial for the subsequent quantitative analysis of the channel's content.

5.2 Data Collection

In order to conduct different analyses of the five introduced Telegram channels, the project focused on scraping their content and messages. Thereby, the data collection limited itself to three years, from the 24th of February 2021, one year before the Russian attack on Ukraine, up to the 24th of February 2024, which stands for two years into the war. This extensive period was chosen to analyse differences in narratives and messaging behaviour from before and after the beginning of the war, as well as general fluctuations over the years. The data collection process involved several steps. First, the necessary tools and environment for web-scraping were set up in RStudio. This involved installing and configuring the software packages "RSelenium" and "wdman", two tools which help to control a web browser automatically. After loading the required R libraries "RSelenium", "stringr", and "rvest" the Selenium server was started using the "rsDriver" function with Firefox as a browser. In the subsequent step, the connection to the Telegram channels was established, and the range of post IDs, according to the chosen time period, was defined. Through the Selenium client, a browser control object was created, which allows for automatic browser control. A data extraction loop was implemented to extract the data from the channels. This loop navigated through the posts, obtaining the defined data and scrolling until the specified oldest post was reached. Together with the actual messages and the text content, various other elements such as sender information, views, hashtags, mentions and links to videos and pictures have been collected. Finally, the extracted data was cleaned, duplicates were removed, and the data was combined into a single data frame. The final data frame consists of 185'432 scraped messages, which serve as the basis for further analysis. The 185'432 observations are divided as follows into the five channels in question:

Telegram Channel	Number of Messages
KP.MD	51'575
Sputnik Moldova	51'442
Приднестровец	35'297
ТСВ Приднестровье	28'781
Новости Приднестровья	18'337
Total	185'432

Figure 5.1:Distribution of total observations

5.3 Data Exploration

The exploration of data and the previously discussed collection of Telegram messages does not come without any ethical considerations. Scholarly research always has to ensure that it is conducted responsibly. This especially holds true when research is done based on human data or, as in the case of the present analysis, based on human messages. It must be ensured that the identity of individual users posting messages on social media platforms such as Telegram is anonymous and respects their privacy. Furthermore, individuals usually have to give consent to the use of their data for research purposes.

Five publicly accessible Telegram channels have been chosen for the analysis conducted in the present paper. These channels are open to everyone, allowing anyone to access the messages. Given that the primary purpose of these channels is to disseminate news to its audience, it is reasonable to assume that the operators are aware that their data may be used for research purposes. Thus, the following research operates under the framework of implied consent. Moreover, the communication in these channels is one-way, with only the operators disseminating messages. Individuals cannot comment on these messages or even send their own. Hence, the setup of these channels is comparable to a newspaper operating in the online social media sphere, with its content intended for public consumption. With this distinctive choice of Telegram channels, the analysis respects the privacy of individual users and adheres to the broader objective of responsible scholarly research.

5.3.1 Time Series and Causal Impact Analysis

To uncover patterns in posting behaviour over time and to determine the impact of the onset of the war in Ukraine on this behaviour, a comprehensive time series and causal impact analysis were conducted. The goal was to assess the effects of the beginning of the war in Ukraine on the posting activity within these channels and to find out how this activity evolved. This approach provides valuable insight into the strategic usage of these channels for information dissemination in relation to the ongoing war. The analysis was performed through the "CausalImpact" package in RStudio; thereby, the dataset with the scraped date from the five Telegram channels was divided into two periods. A pre-onset of the war period from February 24, 2021, to February 23, 2022, and a post-onset of the war period from February 24, 2022, to February 24, 2024. Subsequently, the number of messages per week for the five Telegram channels was visualised to see changes and patterns in the overall data and posting activities.

5.3.2 Structural Topic Model

Since this research aims to uncover the predominant narratives of Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova on the social media platform Telegram since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a Structural Topic Model (STM) has been applied to the dataset. STM is a useful method to identify the most relevant topics discussed in the text data of the five selected Telegram channels. To ensure a manageable data size while maintaining sufficient diversity in content, a random sample of 60'000 messages from the main data set was extracted. Next, the content of these messages was processed and infrequent and overly common words were removed to improve the quality and relevance of the topic model. Specifically, this means that words that appeared in fewer than 100 observations or more than 95% of the observations, corresponding to 19'000 observations, were excluded. After fitting the STM, the top terms for each topic were extracted, and the results were visualised and ordered according to their prevalence. The main goal of this analysis was to confirm the occurrence of certain topics that are particularly relevant to the further study of Russian disinformation narratives.

The findings from the Structural Topic Model (STM), which confirmed the prevalence of the identified topics as the most relevant in our dataset, served as the foundation for further exploration of Russian disinformation narratives within the textual data of the five selected Telegram channels.

5.3.3 Large Language Model

To further uncover narratives of Russian disinformation within the data from the five Telegram channels, a Large Language Model (LLM) has subsequently been applied to the dataset. LLMs, which are advanced AI tools trained on extensive text datasets, are widely used for analysing large volumes of text. These models, developed by researchers, are freely accessible on platforms like Hugging Face, enabling other researchers to perform in-depth text analysis. For the present research, the following Zero-Shot Classification model was used: "MoritzLaurer/deberta-v3-large-zeroshot-v2.0" (Laurer et al., 2023). The analysis was done using a Google Colab Notebook. In the first step, a random sample of one hundred observations was manually coded based on the underlying topics identified through the conducted STM analysis. Manual coding of a small sample is essential for the planned analysis because it ensures that the human coder's understanding of the topics later matches with the results of the model. Subsequently, the same sample was automatically coded using

the LLM. The performance of the LLM is evaluated by comparing its classification with the manually coded data. The more they correspond to each other, the higher the Kappa value, which is the measure of agreement. To ensure the scientific relevance of the analysis, the Kappa value should exceed 0.61. A value below would indicate that the accuracy of the model in categorising the messages into the predefined topics is not high enough, and a high error rate would persist. During the process of optimising the Kappa value, the topic labels were adjusted and refined several times. Selecting precise wording and terms with minimal overlap between categories was crucial. Initially, categories such as "pro-Russian" or "anti-Moldovan government", which indicate specific positions, were used. However, these were discarded due to the low Kappa value they produced. After several rounds of adjusting and specifying the topic labels to improve the Kappa-value, a value of 0.6934 was achieved. With this value being significant enough, the whole data set of 185'432 observations was run through the model and classified into the following five categories: "США и Европа" (USA and Europe), "Политика Молдовы" (Moldovan Politics), "Война в Украине" (War in Ukraine), "Экономика" (Economy), and "Другое" (other). The model performed a Zero-Shot classification, a method where the model can break down the messages into predefined topics or labels without additional pre-training.

Applying the LLM to the dataset was the most crucial methodological step in this research. It enabled the automatic classification of over 180,000 messages according to the four relevant categories defined above, which is a very efficient and time-saving approach.

Subsequently, the data classification allowed further quantitative and qualitative analysis of the specific narratives circulating within these four categories.

The last step of the research involved an in-depth qualitative exploration of the different narratives. Given the substantial volume of messages in each category, the data was further broken down by searching for specific keywords relevant to the identified topics. Relevant patterns and reoccurring sub-narratives within each category were explored. Ultimately, this helped to gain a nuanced understanding of the various narratives at play within the underlying dataset. Messages particularly pertinent or illustrative for the identified sub-narratives were extracted. They served as concrete examples to underscore the specific narrative circulating within each category and helped to provide a detailed and context-rich analysis.

6. Empirical Findings and Analysis

The following section presents the empirical findings of the conducted analysis and thereby tries to answer the underlying 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?"

6.1 Russia's Use of Social Media for Disinformation Campaigns

The use of social media as a tool for disinformation campaigns in the contemporary political landscape has emerged as a significant security concern. The digital age allows states such as Russia to leverage existing social networks for their purpose and misuse them to disrupt the politics and social coherence of other states (Lemke & Habegger, 2022). The following section investigates the first research question – How does Russia use social media to wage disinformation campaigns in Moldova?

In the case of Moldova, the gateway to disseminating pro-Russian narratives is the Russian-speaking minority group, which notably lives in Transnistria. These communities, which already have rather friendly ties to Russia, are particularly vulnerable to the Kremlin's disinformation. Most Russian-language media in Transnistria are either directly connected to Russia or indirectly to Transnistrian, pro-Russian elites. The same accounts for the online news spaces and social media platforms, which are widely infiltrated and dominated by Moscow (Matveyenko, 2023). Often, online disinformation operations are produced by traditional media and disseminated through their online channel so that a large audience can be reached timely and cost-efficiently (Todd C., 2018). To achieve this, Russia employs the strategy of establishing state-sponsored media outlets in Moldova. It positions them to become key information sources for the targeted audience within the country's domestic news landscape (Henriksen et al., 2024). In addition to these primary news channels directly connected to the Russian state, influence is also exerted through secondary channels indirectly linked to Russia and its state-backed narratives. These include pro-Russian political figures and oligarchs aligned with the Kremlin, who disseminate Russian-produced disinformation through their media holdings and social media channels (Deen & Zweers, 2022). This is particularly evident in Transnistria, where the public media landscape is predominantly controlled by secessionist political authorities and elites, who utilise it as a

propaganda tool. The editorial content consistently aligns with Moscow's informational policy. In 2014, a memorandum of collaboration was signed between Transnistria's public media service and the Russian Federation's Ministry of Communications, further solidifying this alignment (Rosa, 2022).

Among traditional ways of disseminating Russian disinformation, Telegram has, in recent years, emerged as a particularly influential tool. Its capacity to host large groups, coupled with lenient regulations and minimal to non-existent content moderation, makes it especially appealing to these actors (DFRLab, 2023; Yaromich & Solovyeva, 2023). Additionally, Telegram is particularly popular among Russian speakers and is leveraged by pro-Kremlin entities to effectively engage with diverse targeted groups of Russian speakers abroad (ISD, 2022).

To understand the impact of disinformation campaigns and examine the circulation of Russian narratives on Moldovan social media platforms, this dissertation will analyse the following key Telegram channels that are directly or indirectly linked to Russian media outlets and disinformation efforts.

Sputnik Moldova (@rusputnikmd):

This Telegram Channel, with 27'8371 subscribers, is part of the Sputnik media network, a news service which operates under the state-owned news agency "Rossiya Segodnya". Sputnik, which was established during the Euromaidan uprisings in Ukraine in 2014, mainly operates in the digital news sphere and does not produce any print media. Sputnik primarily targets audiences outside Russia, which is why they dropped the word "Russian" from their brand name (Fedchenko, 2016). Sputnik is highly active across the world, disseminating news in over thirty languages via its websites, podcasts and radio broadcasts, hence reaching a broad audience. They are also particularly active on social media, aiming to engage younger generations through their online content (Hastings, 2020). The news channel seeks to report on global events from a differing point of view, offering its audience an alternative perspective on world affairs. However, this alternative perspective often consists of pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation. Sputnik serves as one of the primary channels for disinformation campaigns abroad (Ștefan, 2020). Following Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the European Commission sanctioned Sputnik for systematic information manipulation and disinformation targeting the EU, resulting in their content being blocked within the EU (Henriksen et al., 2024). However, Sputnik continues to operate

in many other regions worldwide, notably in Moldova, where it has gained a steady readership since its launch and has become one of the country's most important news platforms (Ştefan, 2020). After the unlawful Russian attack on Ukraine and the rising tensions in the region, the Moldovan government and President Maia Sandu took action and signed a law which blocked access to five websites related to Sputnik Moldova and expelled the director of the news agency in Moldova (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024; RFE, 2023). Despite these actions, the news channel keeps disseminating its content, notably through social media and the Telegram channel in question.

KP.MD (@KpMoldova):

This channel, which counts 20'532[1] subscribers, is directly associated with "Komsomolskaya Pravda", one of the oldest and still very influential newspapers in Russia. The 1925 established newspaper is nowadays present in various media formats, including print, online and radio. Its content is published in fifty-three countries and is especially popular among Russian-speaking audiences within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Ideologically, the newspaper is strongly connected to the Kremlin and operates within the framework of Russian state-sponsored media strategies (Sazonov, 2017). Moscow-friendly news and political commentary find their way to various audiences through the newspaper's extensive global network, including media hubs in multiple countries. However, other than Sputnik Moldova, Komsomolskaya Pravda Moldova does not have direct Russian ownership. The Moldovan news outlet is rather a twin publication of its Russian counterpart. Nevertheless, Cornelia Furculita, the owner of Komsomolskaya Pravda Moldova and other Television channels and newspaper outlets, is known to have direct ties to the Kremlin (Dumont et al., 2023). KP.MD, being one of the most popular media outlets in Moldova, is alleged to amplify the dissemination of Russian disinformation through their various platforms, notably their Telegram channel (EUvsDisinfo, 2023b).

ТСВ Приднестровье (@tsvtiraspol):

The Telegram channel, counting 33'7711 subscribers, is affiliated with the Transnistrian television network TSV Tiraspol. The private channel was established in 2006 by the owners of the Sheriff holding group, Victor Gushan and Ilya Kazmaly. Sheriff is one of Transnistria's most important and influential conglomerates; it operates across various sectors, including alcohol production, oil and petrol, telecommunications, and banking, employing over twenty per cent of the private sector workforce in the separatist region.

Politically and ideologically, the channel aligns with the Renewal party "Обновление". This is the party of the current President of Transnistria, Vadim Krasnoselsky. The President and the party are known for their pro-Russian stance and close ties to the Kremlin (Zveagintsev, 2018). Consequently, ТСВ Приднестровье disseminates news and political analysis that align with the interests of the President of Transnistria and his affiliated political party as well as with the interests of the big brother in Moscow (Thorik & Silitcaia, 2016). This makes the channel an exemplary case for analysing the role of regional media in propagating Russian narratives and disinformation.

Приднестровец (@pridnestrovec):

With 73'478[1] subscribers, "Приднестровец" counts the most followers out of the five chosen Telegram channels. Even though there is no direct connection between the channel and either the Russian government or the Transnistrian one, by scrolling through the content of the channel, it becomes clear that it echoes the Transnistrian government's pro-Russian position. News and perspectives often support narratives which are clearly against the current Moldovan Government (Koldomasov, 2024). Because of the size of the channel and its amount of subscribers, this channel is important for the present analysis and may also provide other content since it is neither directly attached to the Russian nor the Transnistrian government.

Новости Приднестровья (@novostipmrcom):

This Telegram channel with 16'332[1] subscribers is part of a news agency established in 2012 by the then President of Transnistria, Evgeny Shevchuk. The channel, being directly linked to Transnistrian political affairs, serves as a powerful tool to shape the political agenda and public opinion (Munteanu, 2017). Political news, social issues, and economic developments are topics discussed and covered by the channel. The close bond between the ex-Transnistrian President and the Kremlin turns this channel into an amplifier of pro-Russian and separatist narratives. Bolstering up the benefits and significance of Russia and its support while simultaneously challenging the Moldovan government and Western countries. It was Evgeny Shevchuk who signed in 2014, during his presidency, the memorandum of collaboration between the Transnistrian regional public media service and the Russian Federation's Ministry of Communications (Thorik & Silitcaia, 2016).

---

[1] As of the 5th of June 2024

To conclude, Transnistria's media landscape is isolated and heavily influenced by private, corporate, and foreign interests, failing to ensure independent, high-quality information. This region finds itself exposed to a different media landscape than the rest of Moldova, one where separatist and Russian disinformation dominates. This situation creates contrasting realities for the population, deepening divisions within the country (Rosa, 2022). Social media worsens this problem by enabling disinformation to spread quickly and reach a large audience in a short time, further amplifying the misinformation and fragmenting societal cohesion.

6.2 Impact of the Onset of the War in Ukraine

As elaborated above, Moldova, being within Russia's perceived sphere of influence, has long been a target of Russian hybrid warfare operations. However, since Moldova decided to pursue European integration and the election of a pro-European government in 2020, led by current President Maia Sandu, Moscow's pressure has intensified (Całus, 2023b; Dvornikova, 2023). This pressure has particularly escalated since the onset of the war in Ukraine and Moldova's subsequent application for EU membership, which led to a surge in disruptive activities. Russia aims to undermine Moldova's current pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian government to replace it with a pro-Russian one. This would enhance its regional influence and provide strategic and political advantages amid the war in Ukraine (Całus, 2023b). As part of these destabilisation attempts, disinformation narratives circulating on social media and other media platforms have increased (EUvsDisinfo, 2023b; Rupert, 2023; Wesolowsky, 2023).

This has also indirectly been confirmed through a causal impact analysis conducted based on the data collected from the five above-mentioned Telegram channels. The beginning of the war in Ukraine had a substantial and enduring impact on the volume of weekly content posted by these channels.

In the year leading up to the conflict, from February 24th, 2021, to one day before the Russian invasion on February 23rd, 2022, the weekly message count was relatively stable, averaging around one thousand posts per week. Although there were minor fluctuations, it can be said that the overall posting pattern was consistent across all five channels. However, some weeks before the onset of the conflict, a slight increase in the posting behaviour can be observed, likely due to the buildup of Russian Armed Forces near the Ukrainian border and rising

international tensions and speculations about the actual beginning of a war. With the start of the Russian war on Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, a significant spike in posting activity can be observed. This sharp increase in posts by far exceeds the predicted values, which show how the posting behaviour would have looked without the beginning of the war (visualised through the dashed blue line). This indicates a strong correlation between the war's onset and increased posting activity on these channels.

Post-invasion, after the spike and immediate response of the channels to the war, the weekly posts of the channels stabilised at a higher level between 1000 and 1750 posts per week, maintaining an activity level consistently above the pre-conflict baseline. The steady upward trend of the cumulative value also depicts the long-lasting impact of the war on the channels' activity.
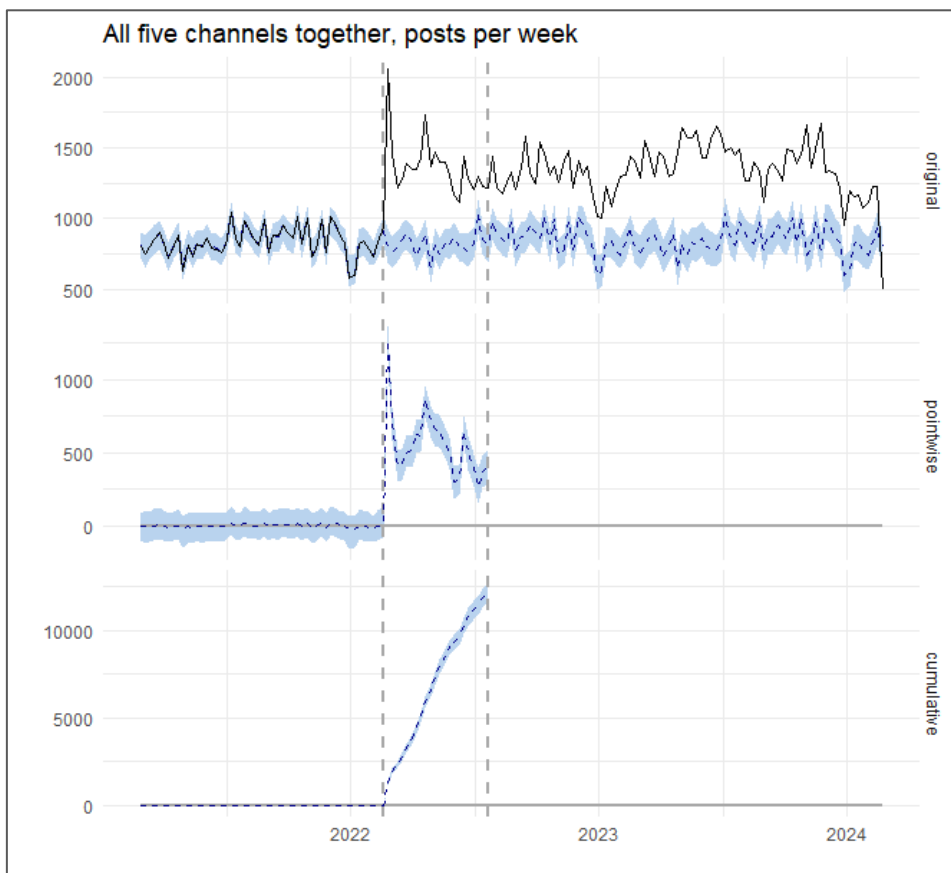
Figure 6.1: Time Series and Causal Impact Analysis

However, not all of the five channels experienced the same level of impact. Among the analysed channels, Sputnik Moldova experienced the most substantial impact in posting activity due to the war. The collected data for the channel reveals a marked increase in posts

immediately following the Russian attack on February 24th 2022. This indicates extensive coverage and information dissemination on the conflict. The analysed data for the channels Приднестровец, followed by KPMD, also show a notable increase in posting activity after the beginning of the war. For all of these three channels, the data displays a clear upward trend in posting activity, especially during the early months of the war. But even two years into the war, the cumulative impact plot depicts a steady increase, and high activity levels remain. In contrast, Новости Приднестровья and ТСВ Приднестровье have seen a rather moderate impact in their posting activity due to the significant geopolitical event. These differences between the channels might give some insights into the varying strategies and responses of how these channels reacted and reported on the beginning of the war in Ukraine and its continuation ever since. Furthermore, the differences might also represent the differing editorial focus of the Telegram news channels. Given that Sputnik Moldova and KP.MD function as the Moldovan equivalent of Russian news channels and, therefore, closely aligned to Moscow and the Kremlin's narratives. It is not surprising that they have seen the most significant increase in posting activity since the onset of the war. On the other hand, Новости Приднестровья and ТСВ Приднестровье are rather local, Moldovan/Transnistrian news channels, which have also experienced an impact but a comparably moderate one. Nevertheless, taking into account the overall data of the five channels together, it can be concluded that the war substantially impacted their posting activities.

While the conducted causal impact analysis has not yet proven that Russian disinformation on these channels has simultaneously increased with their posting activity since the beginning of the war, the assumption holds logical merit. Given the close connection of the selected channels to Moscow, the rise in posting activity with the onset of the war in Ukraine strongly suggests a coordinated effort to amplify specific pro-Russian narratives to shape public opinion and potentially influence political outcomes. The increase in activity could thus also correspond to a rise in disinformation efforts by the Kremlin.

6.3 Gateways for Disinformation

To investigate the narratives of disinformation further and address the second research question, what are the predominant narratives in Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova on social media platforms since the beginning of the war in Ukraine? - It is essential to investigate the overreaching topics Russia likes to use as a gateway for disinformation in

Moldova. Most of these overreaching topics have long been leveraged by Russia to destabilise the country to its benefit and gain geopolitical influence. However, according to scholars and policymakers, there has been an increase in Russian disinformation and a surge in intensity by which Moscow is trying to escalate existing socio-political tensions within Moldova since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The narratives disseminated by Russia and pro-Russian news outlets throughout Moldova often fall into one of the following four categories: "Moldovan Politics", "Economy", "The West" (namely the USA, NATO and the European Union), and since the 24th of February 2022 "War in Ukraine". Beneath follows an overview of the different categories and an analysis of how Russia strategically leverages them.

Moldovan Politics

Regarding the Moldovan Politics category, Russian disinformation narratives primarily target the pro-European government led by President Maia Sandu. A purposeful mix of fiction and facts aims to create confusion and uncertainty among the people, devaluing political decisions and eroding society's trust in the current leadership. The ultimate goal is to weaken support for the government's pro-European stance and create a favorable environment for pro-Russian forces in the country (Dvornikova, 2023). Thereby, advanced technologies like AI are increasingly used in Russian disinformation campaigns, masterfully deceiving the general public. Specifically, deep fake videos of President Maia Sandu have been circulated on social media and news platforms, depicting her making contested statements that bring her bad publicity, which is further exploited by pro-Russian actors (Scott, 2024). Additionally, the Chisinau government is portrayed as being hostile and discriminating against the Russian-speaking population in the country. These accusations suggest that Moldova is adopting anti-Russian practices similar to those Russia alleges Ukraine practices against the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas region (Cenusa, 2024). There was, for example, a disinformation narrative circulating, claiming that the government in Chisinau decided to fine Russian speakers practising their language in public (Veridica, 2023). Also, the persisting conflict between Moldova and the breakaway region of Transnistria is leveraged for disinformation narratives. The Moldovan government, in collaboration with the EU, is often narrated to hinder a peaceful settlement of the conflict (Cenusa, 2024). All these efforts and disinformation narratives targeting Moldovan politics aim to erode trust in the country's democratic institutions. By sowing confusion and distrust

and by portraying the government as corrupt and discriminatory, the disinformation campaigns seek to destabilise the political landscape. Ultimately, the goal is to incite unrest and create conditions that could lead to the toppling of the current pro-European government, paving the way for pro-Russian forces to gain control (U.S. Mission Russia, 2024).

Economy

Moldova's economy faces considerable challenges, which is reflected in its status as one of the countries with the lowest GDP per capita in Europe. Despite experiencing some economic growth in the past twenty years, access to economic opportunities remains limited. Many Moldovans are affected by poverty, and the country struggles with high unemployment rates. Moreover, Moldova's economy lacks competitiveness as low productivity rates, an imbalanced business environment and tax distortions characterise the country. These structural issues hinder sustainable economic development and contribute to the ongoing economic hardship for its population, which has intensified with the war in Ukraine (World Bank Group, 2024). Russia is exploiting Moldova's difficult economic situation and the accompanying socio-economic tensions within society to spread disinformation and destabilise the country.

Russian disinformation narratives referring to the economy often target Moldova's current pro-European government and President Maia Sandu, holding them responsible for the country's poor economic situation. According to a poll conducted in the fall of 2022, a significant portion of Moldovans blamed the government for the rising gas prices, which were actually partially caused by Russia's war against Ukraine. By crafting such narratives, Russia effectively shifts blame away from itself while simultaneously eroding public trust in Moldova's current administration (Solik & Graf, 2023). Moreover, Moldova's decision to stop purchasing Russian gas and diversify its energy sources through imports from European countries is blamed for worsening the economic situation, with claims that Europe forces Moldova to buy gas at inflated prices. This narrative feeds into EU scepticism by spreading narratives of fear that EU accession would exacerbate economic hardships, leading to increased poverty and famine. Conversely, pro-Russian narratives promote the benefits of economic ties with Moscow, emphasising the potential advantages of alliances between Chisinau and Russia (Cenusa, 2024).

War in Ukraine

Russian narratives related to the war in Ukraine have gained significant prominence since the conflict's outbreak in February 2022. A primary objective of these sown Russian narratives is to justify the unlawful attack on Ukraine and the subsequent full-scale invasion. These narratives frequently employ emotional language to cast Russia and its actions in a positive light while simultaneously demonising Ukraine and its allies through negative connotations. The deliberate distortion of reality serves Moscow's interests by framing its "special military operation" as a heroic effort to protect and liberate oppressed Russian-speaking civilians and the Ukrainian people in general from a demonised Nazi regime in Ukraine (Kumankov, 2023; Pupcenoks & Seltzer, 2021; Zavershinskaia, 2024). Additionally, the Kremlin places the blame for the war in Ukraine on the West. By promoting the idea that Western democracies, through their NATO alliance, act as proxies for the United States in pursuing expansionist ambitions and using Ukraine as a strategic tool to threaten Russia (Kumankov, 2023; Zavershinskaia, 2024).

Since the Moldovan government officially condemns the Russian attack on Ukraine and aligns with Kyiv against the Russian aggression, the Republic does not stay sound of Russian disinformation campaigns. Even more, the strategic narratives of the war in Ukraine are tactically leveraged and customised to instigate fear and uncertainty among Moldovan citizens and to destabilise the government. Disinformation narratives of Moldova being drawn into the conflict by the EU and NATO, such as Moldova abandoning its neutrality for a potential NATO membership, plans of the EU to send heavy weapons to Moldova in support of Ukraine, that Ukraine training their military forces on Moldovan territory or even that NATO forces were assisting Romania in building a fully-equipped army at the border, with the intention of invading and taking control of Moldova (Cenusa, 2024; EUvsDisinfo, 2023b; Segarizzi, 2023). Russia's motives are clear: to spread fear among Moldovans by suggesting that the West and Moldova's pro-European government are drawing the country into conflict.

The West

Another overreaching category that Russia favourably uses to disseminate the disinformation narrative: the West, which primarily includes the United States, the European Union, and NATO. These entities and Western institutions are traditionally depicted as Russia's imperialistic counterparts, trying to influence other countries and impose their

values for global domination (Baumann, 2020).

NATO, for example, is by Russia, often portrayed as an aggressive alliance with unnecessary and provocative expansionist intentions. Hence, according to Russian disinformation narratives, NATO increases tensions rather than promoting security as it claims (Kumankov, 2023; Torbina, 2024). In the context of Moldova, this narrative suggests that NATO actions will further escalate the security situation in the region. This aims to spread fear among the population that Moldova will be drawn into the theatre of war if they keep approaching the West.

Other tactical narratives aim to discredit the European Union, casting doubts and mistrust over Moldova's efforts to bolster its relationship with the EU. They are particularly targeting the country's obtained EU candidate status. This is achieved through disinformation that claims the EU is not genuinely interested in granting Moldova membership, suggesting it is an unattainable and unworthy goal. The point of these narratives is to diminish public support for Moldova's EU integration efforts. Additionally, some rather bizarre disinformation circulating online claims that Moldova would be required to send soldiers to the war in Ukraine as a condition for joining the EU. Other false narratives suggest that, upon Moldova becoming an EU member state, the EU would inundate Transnistria with migrants and harmful industries (Veridica, 2023). Moreover, disinformation campaigns assert that EU membership would erode Moldova's traditional values and fundamentally damage the country's societal structure. These narratives aim to instil fear and resistance among the population by suggesting that European integration would undermine the country's cultural identity (Cenusa, 2024)

The importance of these categories has also been supported by the findings of the Structural Topic Analysis, which has been applied to the underlying data frame of the present research. The analysis reveals that the above-elaborated categories are among the forty most relevant topics discussed in the over 180'000 messages of the five selected Telegram channels.
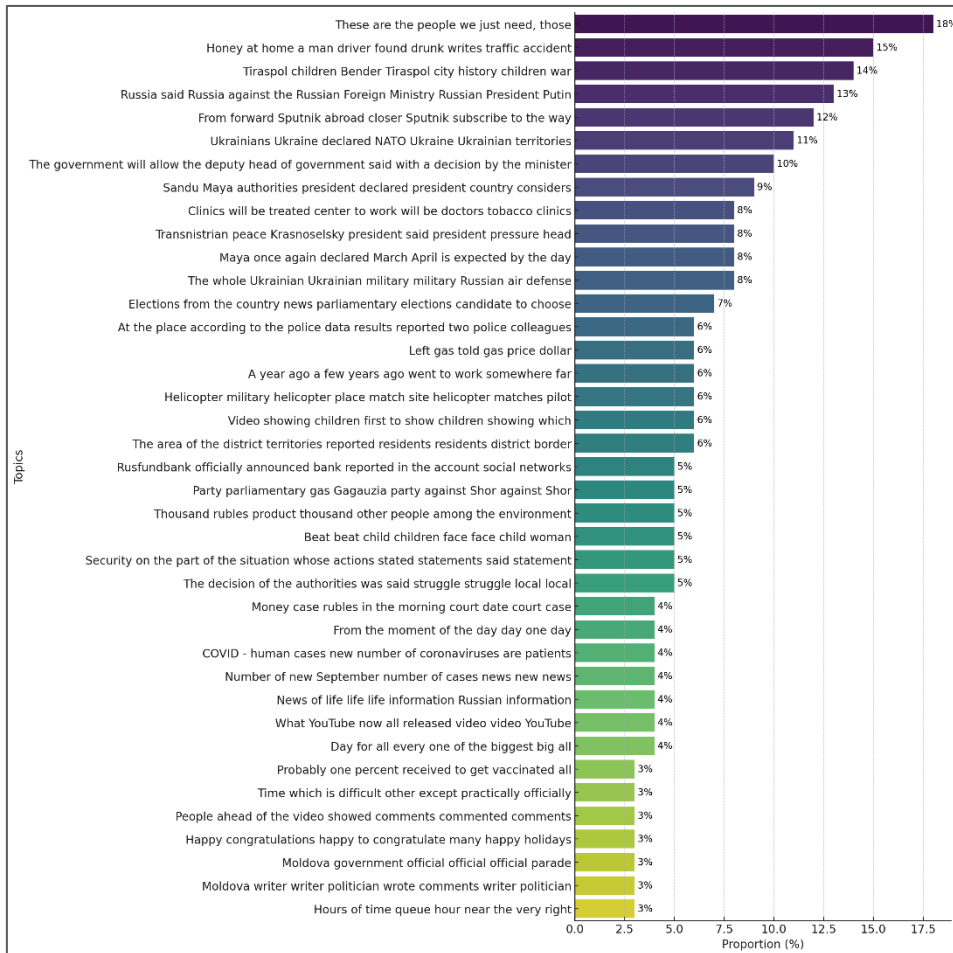
Figure 6.2: STM showing the forty most dominant topics

The Telegram data, for example, prominently features discussions on Moldovan politics and governance and underlines the complex political dynamics the country is facing. Several topics relate to the Moldovan President Maia Sandu and the Transnistrian President Vadim Krasnoselsky and their respective administrations. Other topics mention terms like "elections", "parliament", "ministry", or "power". With Moldova and Transnistria locked in a precarious political environment, understanding the variables driving the political struggle is crucial for contextualising the countries and the region's broader geopolitical issues. As elaborated above, the internal political dynamics with pro-European and pro-Russian political forces, as well as the differences between the Moldovan government and the self-proclaimed Transnistrian government, are gateways for Russian disinformation campaigns. Also, the category of Economy appears to be a relevant topic discussed in the five Telegram channels. Terms such as "Gas", "Prices", "Euro", "Dollar", and "Ruble" are central to these discussions. Moldova's challenging economic situation provides fertile ground for

disinformation, as the country's and its population's economic hardship can be leveraged to undermine confidence in governance and promote narratives that align with Russian geopolitical interests.

The War in Ukraine category is also among the most discussed topics in the selected Telegram channels. This again highlights the significant impact of the onset of the war in Ukraine and how it reshaped the activities and thematic focus of the channels. The topics related to the war primarily mention key figures and entities such as Ukraine, Russia, Zelensky, Putin and the Russian and Ukrainian Armed Forces. Additionally, the analysis reflects Western involvement in the conflict by mentioning the USA, NATO and Europe. These references in the context of the war in Ukraine are particularly relevant to Russian disinformation efforts, as they often target and manipulate narratives around these geopolitical actors to influence public perception and political discourse around the topic.

6.4 Exploring Category Occurrences in Selected Telegram Channels

This section of the present research delves deeper into the underlying data collected from the five selected Telegram channels and explores the narratives occurring within the categories discussed earlier. Following the methodology of this paper the 185'432 collected observations have, with the help of an AI-based large language model, been categorised in the categories "Политика Молдовы" (Moldovan Politics), "Экономика" (Economy), "Война в Украине" (War in Ukraine), "США и Европа" (USA and Europe), and "Другое" (other).

The most prominent category discussed within the five Telegram channels is Moldovan Politics, with 54,346 thousand messages. Moldova's notable position between European and Russian influence and the frozen conflict in Transnistria create a complex and dynamic political landscape that draws substantial media attention. Furthermore, the term Moldovan Politics is pretty broad and encompasses various sub-categories. Discussions about everything from economic development to social justice movements, etc., end up being linked to politics in one way or another.

After the category Moldovan Politics, the War in Ukraine category appears as the second most prominent one within the dataset. A total of 39'679 thousand messages have been classified as referring to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The two categories, Economy and USA and Europe, appear as the categories with the fewest messages associated with them. However, with 20'580 thousand and 9120 thousand messages, it is clear that these topics

still get a lot of attention and remain a significant category within the messages.

A deeper look at the category usage over the analysed three years shows fluctuations that mirror shifts in public interest and geopolitical events.
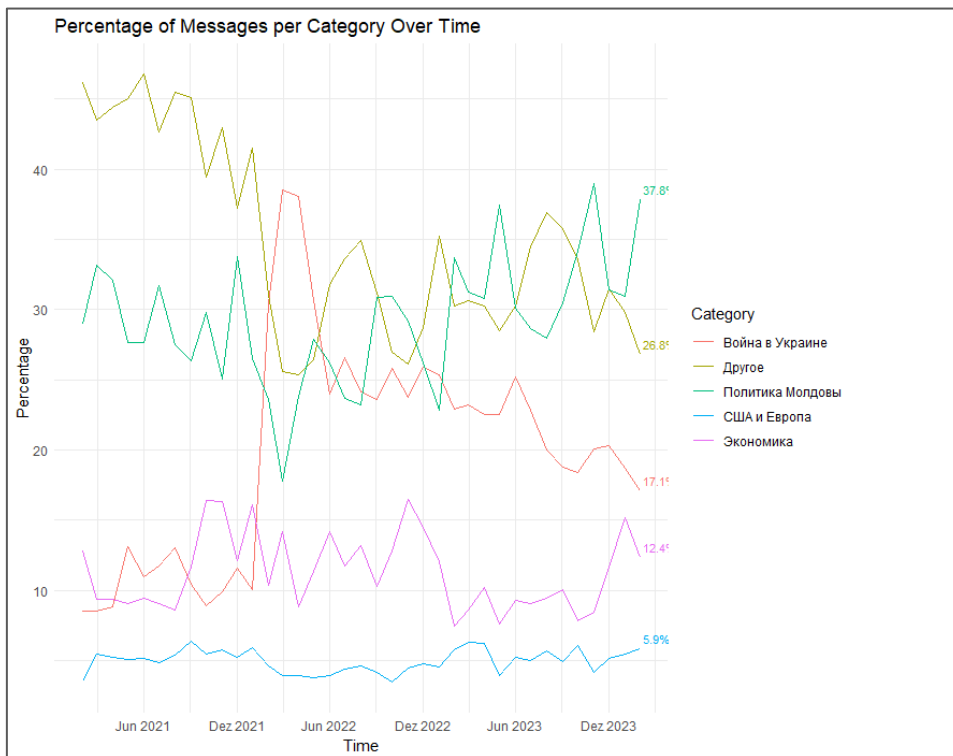

Figure 6.3: Percentage of Messages per Category over Time

The graph above, for example, clearly shows the impact the beginning of the war in Ukraine had on the thematic focus of the five Telegram channels. The orange line, representing messages about the war, shows a massive increase in February 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Simultaneously, other categories, such as Moldovan Politics (dark green line) and other topics (light green line), experienced a remarkable decrease as the discussions' focus shifted to the ongoing conflict. This changes again around Mai 2022, once the initial shock over Russia's invasion of Ukraine is over. From June 2022, the focus on the "War in Ukraine" category steadily decreases, with occasional smaller peaks reoccurring. From this moment on, other topics, particularly referring to Moldovan Politics, newly gained in importance. A peak can be observed in this topic around February 2023, coinciding with anti-government protests in Moldova, which were largely supported by Russian disinformation and led to the resignation of Moldovan pro-Western Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita. Another peak occurred in November 2023 when the local elections were held.

Surprisingly, the category "USA and Europe" (blue line) remained relatively stable with minor fluctuations throughout the period. Nevertheless, some minor increases related to geopolitical events and decisions can be determined. There is, for example, a slight increase in the category in February/March 2023, which might be caused by the increased support and cooperation of Moldova and the EU in light of Moldova's path towards EU membership. Concerning the "Energy" category, the graph also shows a relatively stable trend over time, reflecting persistent concern and discussions about Moldova's economics. Nevertheless, it is rather not a dominating topic in the discourse of the five Telegram channels.

However, the dataset did not only reveal the usage of these categories over time but also some distinct focus on certain categories by the five Telegram channels. Sputnik Moldova and Komsomolskaya Pravda Moldova focus to a high extent on Moldovan Politics. Приднестровец, on the other hand, predominantly focuses on the War in Ukraine. The high value of almost fifty per cent of the messages on the channel being classified as related to the War in Ukraine suggests that discussions on this channel are heavily dominated by the ongoing war and its geopolitical impact. While all five channels also engage to a significant degree with topics outside the four primary categories, this is particularly evident in the case of Новости Приднестровья | ПМР and ТСВ Приднестровье. In both channels, roughly fifty per cent of the messages have been allocated to the category "other", whereas in the remaining three channels, this category comprises less than thirty per cent of the content.
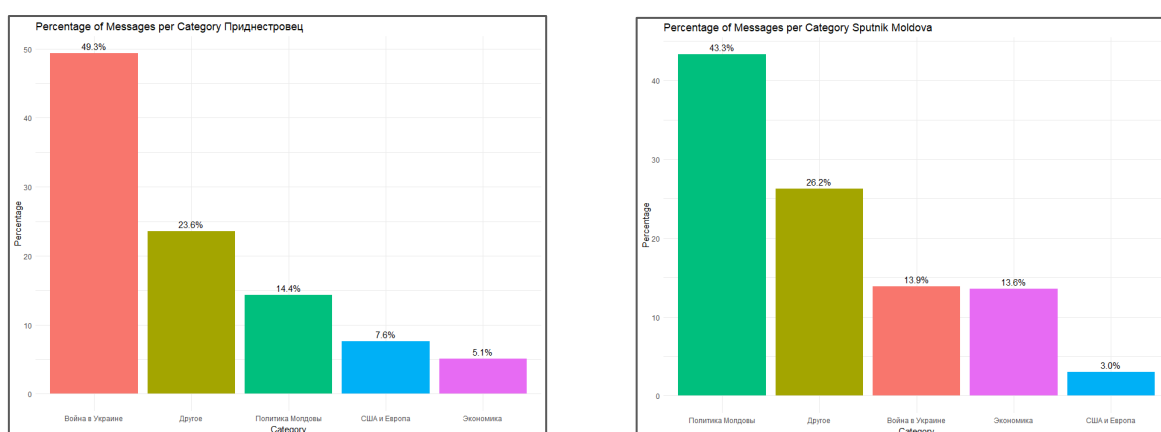

Figure 6.4: Приднестровец and Sputnik Moldova Percentage of Messages per Category

This diversity in the engagement with the different categories again illustrates the differing editorial focus of the five selected channels. The plots for the other three channels are listed in the appendix for further reference.

6.5 Exploring Disinformation Narratives within Telegram Channels

After exploring the primary thematic categories that serve as a gateway for Russian disinformation in Moldova, it is time to delve deeper into the specific narratives propagated within the five selected Telegram channels. The next part of the analysis will try to uncover the nuanced pro-Russian narratives these channels disseminate within the four above-elaborated categories. Specific examples of messages from the five analysed Telegram channels are depicted in the blue boxes to underline the presented narratives.

6.5.1 Moldovan Politics
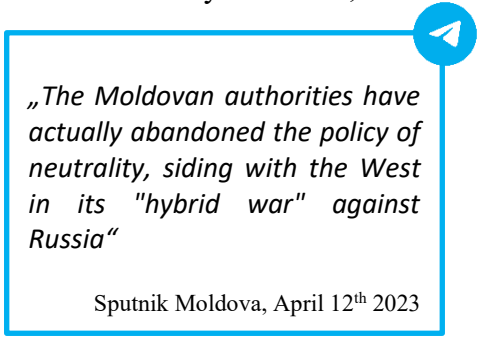
The revealed narratives about Moldovan Politics, circulating in the messages of the five selected Telegram channels, mostly target Moldova's pro-Western government and the resulting political decisions. The narratives are designed to portray Moldova's pro-Western policies as unconstitutional, unpopular, and dangerous for the country. Furthermore, Moldova's democratically elected government is framed as acting against the interests of its people by blindly following the line of Western powers.

The Moldovan government is violating the country's neutrality

A dominant narrative within the analysed messages is the government's alleged violation of Moldova's constitutionally enshrined neutrality. The narrative asserts that recent actions by Moldovan leadership, such as publicly opposing Russia's actions and proclaiming support for Ukraine or enhancing cooperation with NATO, represent a clear breach of this principle. According to several messages in the chat, Chisinau is openly following an anti-Russian position in the interest of the West. Moldova's dangerous and non-neutral behaviour is highlighted through various examples, such as Defence Minister Anatolie Nosatîi's participation in a meeting of the Rammstein Group, a contact group for supporting Ukraine, the regular participation of Moldovan Armed Forces in NATO military exercises, or the government's increased financial allocation to the defence budget and military infrastructure. This development is said to be a reaction to the perceived Russian threat. The West has gone on the offensive and aggressively keeps pushing its borders further east.

„The Moldovan authorities have actually abandoned the policy of neutrality, siding with the West in its "hybrid war" against Russia"

Sputnik Moldova, April 12th 2023

Other messages accuse the current Moldovan government of strategically aligning with the Western narrative of alleged threats from

Russia to find an excuse to abandon neutrality. This is emphasised through messages about Moldovan President Maia Sandu, where she argues that, as seen with Ukraine, Russia does not accept the neutrality of other countries, and therefore, Moldova must be prepared to defend itself should the enemy approach. The pro-Russian opposition in the country sees such statements as delusional and dangerous since they negatively affect the relationship between Moldova and Russia. This could have unpredictable consequences because Russia could perceive such behaviour as a potential threat. For them, the only rightful thing which protects Moldova from outside aggression or involvement in war is the country's neutrality, which needs to be strictly adhered to. Furthermore, the narrative emphasises that the government's actions are fundamentally misaligned with the interests and desires of the Moldovan population, who predominantly support the country's neutral stance or, as statements from former pro-Russian President Igor Dodon suggest, are even in favour of a strategic partnership with Russia. It argues that President Maia Sandu and the PAS party are not only ignoring the people's will but are actively trying to shift public opinion through propaganda that promotes NATO and opposes neutrality. The government is framed as being disconnected from the citizens, ignoring constitutional principles and the genuine will of its people while favouring foreign interests. Another more extreme narrative even accuses Maia Sandu and her government of pursuing their military rhetoric and planning to let NATO's or other countries' troops enter Moldova's territory. Included in this narrative is also the accusation against Maia Sandu of wanting to completely overthrow the constitution in which neutrality is enshrined and impose authoritarian rule and dictatorship instead. This narrative further attempts to undermine Sandu's legitimacy and paint her administration as undemocratic and tyrannical. Various messages report on demonstrations and rallies organised and conducted by pro-Russian political parties calling for an end to Maia Sandu's and the PAS party's authoritarian rule.

> „The most dangerous enemy for Maia Sandu is the one who will say that two times two is four, that Russia is not going to attack Moldova, that the "Russian threat" is a lie, and that no one is conducting any "hybrid war" against Moldova. Because without the "Russian threat" the Sandu regime will look like what it is - an authoritarian dictatorship with a perpetual state of emergency!"
>
> KP.MD, May 29th 2023

Chisinau is preparing for confrontation with Tiraspol

Another occurring narrative within the data from the five Telegram channels, which is also connected to the previous narrative about Moldova's plans to give up on neutrality, is that Chisinau is preparing for a violent confrontation with the breakaway region of Transnistria. This narrative focuses on Moldova's militarisation and the growing relationship with NATO and the West and portrays these developments as direct threats to Transnistria and the stability within the country. For example, the Transnistrian foreign minister highlights Moldova's adaptation to NATO standards and the planned acquisition of NATO weapons as a security threat and raises the rhetorical question against whom Moldova is arming itself. Similar concerns are expressed by the Russian Foreign Ministry, which suggests that the government's departure from neutrality could lead to the novel ignition of the so far frozen conflict between Moldova and Transnistria. The Moldovan government's call to Russia to withdraw its troops from Transnistria is framed as a step towards military escalation. Similarly, statements about the demilitarisation of Transnistria by Moldovan officials are interpreted as further signs that Chisinau is preparing a war against the separatist region. At the same time, Transnistrian officials called the strengthening of Russia's role as a peacekeeper and neutral actor in the conflict a necessary action to stabilise the situation. Moreover, the Moldovan government is accused of deliberately applying a confrontational agenda and worsening the current situation in the country by breaking agreements and making discriminating decisions against Transnistria. Historical parallels are drawn to illustrate that the current government's actions - provoking inter-ethnic tensions, fostering militant hysteria, and creating an atmosphere of fear - resemble those that led to the Moldova-Transnistria war approximately thirty years ago. The narrative also dives into regional geopolitics, suggesting that Moldova's response to Transnistria is being shaped by its neighbours Romania and Ukraine, which are likely encouraging a more aggressive approach. Ukrainian representatives are allegedly pushing Moldova to end its neutrality and address the Transnistrian issue with military force. This framing suggests a coordinated regional strategy in which Moldova is a pawn in the Western strategy against Russia.

> *"We have an unresolved conflict, and one of its sides at the same time is heavily arming itself, and with the help of such a powerful global center as NATO. This raises serious concerns. Why does Moldova need an army if it is a neutral state? Why is Chisinau modernizing the army? In whom does it see the enemy? Clearly not in Romania or Ukraine. There are a lot of questions here."*
>
> Новости Приднестровья | ПМР, November 21st 2022

European integration is deceiving

The third narrative is about Moldova's European integration efforts, portraying them as deceptive and disadvantageous to the country's sovereignty, economic stability, and neutrality. This narrative aims to undermine public trust in the Moldovan government, exacerbate scepticism towards EU integration, and promote pro-Russian sentiments. According to messages from the Telegram chats, European integration is a cynical hoax orchestrated by Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) and its Western allies. European integration is said to be everything else than in the best interest of the Moldovan population. The messages stress that by aligning with the EU, Moldova is being pushed into military and political alliances that compromise its neutrality and stability. Through such claims, the narrative tries to raise fear among the population that European integration might bring conflict and war to the country. Furthermore, economic concerns are also highlighted, creating additional fear of financial hardship among the population of an already economically vulnerable country. At the same time, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union is positioned and framed as a more favourable alternative to the EU, offering higher economic benefits and no loss of sovereignty. The Moldovan government and the PAS party are accused of pushing European integration and their pro-European policies through orchestrated events such as mass rallies, simulating popular support and manipulating the people. Simultaneously, unwanted and critical opinions are said to be strategically muzzled through political repression and the cleansing of the information space. In a subtle yet calculated move, the Moldovan government is accused of leveraging these unlawful tactics to bring itself one step closer to Europe. This portrays the government as authoritarian and disconnected from the democratic values it claims to uphold. Furthermore, messages also deepen the scepticism surrounding the feasibility and benefits of EU membership. Former pro-Russian President Igor Dodon has stated that Moldova will not join the EU for at least another decade, if ever, suggesting that the promises of EU integration are unrealistic and misleading. Such narratives are designed to dampen public enthusiasm for European integration by framing it as a distant and uncertain goal. At the same time, the immediate costs and sacrifices are portrayed as high and certain.

> *"Moldova is still "not good enough" for the European Union, but it is required to comply with the EU sanctions against Russia. Is this not a substitution of notions and blatant political deceit? They are trying to push us to break relations with Moscow without taking into account the real consequences for the republic."*
>
> Sputnik Moldova, November 10th 2023

Moldovan politics are Russophobe

Another disinformation narrative propagated within the category of Moldovan Politics claims that the Moldovan government, particularly under the leadership of President Maia Sandu and the PAS, are fundamentally Russophobe. Thereby, it is said that the government is actively fostering anti-Russian sentiment because, in their eyes, it is seen as an essential attribute for joining the EU. Russophobia, namely, shows in the establishment of new repressive structures to control the media and social networks. For example, the creation of the „Center for Strategic Communications to Combat Disinformation", which is framed as a tool for ideological cleansing and eradication of pro-Russian influences. Critics in the Telegram chats argue that this centre will be staffed with individuals specifically selected to push a Russophobe agenda, eradicating freedom of speech and political opposition. Another example of Russophobia is given by the decision of Moldova's government to ban several Russian TV channels from broadcasting in the country. According to pro-Russian forces, this censorship is only one of many decisions and measures the Moldovan government is taking in their course against Russia. The exercised totalitarian control over all spheres of social and political life in the country is being established to Western models that have been developed and already implemented in the Baltic States and Ukraine. Messages repeatedly emphasise that Russia remains willing to ease tensions and support Moldova, highlighting their historically close ties and reinforcing that Moscow is the good guy. However, the current government's antagonistic and authoritarian behaviour obstructs any efforts to normalise relations. It is also highlighted that the government's Russophobe policies and the failure to maintain neutral and beneficial relations with Russia are harming the country's economic, political and infrastructural stability. The narrative further suggests that these Russophobe actions by the government deepen societal division within the country. Thereby, the Russian-speaking population is strategically marginalised and discriminated against their cultural identity. Portraying the

> *"We are not the only ones who have noticed how our authorities actively promote Russophobia as an instrument of "European integration" and make every effort to turn Moldova into a state unfriendly to Russia."*
>
> KP.MD, July 31st 2023

Moldovan government as violating minority rights is designed to resonate with ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Moldovans, fostering a sense of victimisation and injustice among these communities. Moreover, it gives Russia a pretext to keep interfering in the country's internal affairs, protecting its Russian-speaking brothers and sisters.

6.5.2 Economy

When it comes to disinformation narratives concerned with the economy, they mainly leverage the energy crisis, which was notably caused in Moldova and the rest of Europe through Russia's attack on Ukraine. The narratives mainly talk about Moldova's energy policies and the pro-European government's decision to diversify its gas supply by shifting from Russian gas to European alternatives. Until the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the country has been heavily dependent on Russian gas imports. The narratives are designed to undermine trust in the Moldovan government, create social unrest and further discourage European integration.

Moldova pays dearly for European gas

A lot of messages within the dataset of the five selected Telegram channels discuss the negative economic impact of Moldova's decision to shift from Russian to European gas supplies. Breaking the contract with Russia's Gazprom had a lot of negative implications for Moldova. The gas tariffs rose tremendously. It is claimed that the assured stability provided by Russian gas supplies has been traded for an insecure system of alternative gas sources and highly volatile prices of European gas. Fears of instability and increased costs linked to breaking free from Moscow's gas dependency are expressed in the Telegram chats. In a lot of messages, Maia Sandu's government, her pro-European PAS party, as well as Moldova's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development, Andrei Spinu, are directly accused of causing the country's energy crisis. Furthermore,

> *„If you are asked why gas in Moldova is 30 lei per cube, tell them that it was Spinu who exchanged dependence on Gazprom for dependence on prices on stock exchanges. And he simply spread the crazy difference in price on the population - saying that this is what freedom looks like."*
>
> Sputnik Moldova, November 19th 2022

several messages accuse the government of secrecy surrounding the high gas prices and the origin of the European gas. Suggesting that the Moldovan government deliberately withholds information from the public and hides where in Europe it buys gas and at what price, labelling it as "sensitive information". The perceived lack of transparency is further used to sow disinformation and fuel suspicion and doubt among the public. Therefore, the provenance of the so-called "European gas" is strongly questioned. Several messages imply that the Moldovan government is buying Russian gas at a higher price through European intermediaries. It is, for example, said that the Greek company DEPA, which won the

Moldovan government's tender to supply the country with gas, has a contract for gas supplies from Russian Gazprom. This underlying ambiguity further questions the government, eroding public trust and increasing discontent. The public's discontent is depicted through messages reporting on ongoing protests where people express their dissatisfaction with the high energy prices. On the fifth of April, Sputnik Moldova reported on a demonstration organised by the pro-Russian Șor party, demanding lower energy tariffs, compensation for the high gas and electricity costs and the resignation of Maia Sandu's government. Other messages describe a demonstration where protestors dumped piles of dung in front of the parliament building in Chisinau, expressing their anger and symbolising the perceived necessity to soon use dung for heating due to the unaffordable cost of gas. To what extent these protests are tactically arranged by pro-Russian forces to destabilise the country and delegitimise the current government is hard to judge. However, it can be assumed that the energy crisis and the general discontent of the population are purposely leveraged by these actors and even amplified for strategic reasons.

Maia Sandu's pro-European government is corrupt

Another circulating narrative, within the category of Economy, implies that the current government is corrupt, financially benefitting from the energy crisis in the country while the population is suffering. This narrative capitalises on the stark contrast between the current high gas costs under the governance of the pro-European government and the lower prices during the governance of pro-Russian parties. The implication is that the drastic increase in gas prices is due to corrupt practices by the current administration. Several messages accuse the administration of using middlemen to inflate prices artificially. By purchasing gas at market rates but charging significantly higher tariffs domestically, the government is portrayed as enriching itself at the expense of the citizens, implying systemic corruption within state structures. The widespread belief in government corruption is evident in demonstrations and public appeals demanding that President Sandu be held accountable for the population's increased utility bills and financially compensate the people. Furthermore, this depicts the belief that the government has the financial means to provide relief to the people but chooses not to. Additionally, some messages highlight the perceived hypocrisy of the current administration by reminding the public that before coming to power, Maia

Sandu and her PAS party demanded and made the promise to reduce tariffs. However, since their ascent to power, gas, electricity, and heating, tariffs have significantly increased. This narrative depicts the government as hypocritical and self-serving, contrasting their past promises with current realities to suggest deceit and corruption. Thereby, the

> „Buy Russian gas, but at triple the price through middlemen. It's a money-making scheme! And you and I, friends, pay for it!"
>
> KP.MD, September 26th 2023

narrative skilfully ignores the fact that Russia strategically leverages the country's dependency on gas to sow discontent and destabilise the current government.

European integration further deteriorates Moldova's economic situation

The narrative that European integration is worsening Moldova's political and economic situation is also resonant within the messages of the Telegram chats. Critics argue that the shift away from traditional alliances, particularly those with Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), has brought and will bring more harm than good to the country. Bogdan Tirdea, a deputy of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM), labelled European integration a catastrophe for Moldova. He highlighted several adverse outcomes, including the persistence of high corruption in the judicial system despite the introduction of European control mechanisms. He also pointed out that EU-imposed sanctions have drastically reduced exports to CIS countries, forcing Moldova to import far more goods than it exports. This has led to a significant decline in GDP. Moreover, Tirdea illustrates the country's misplaced priorities by stating that Moldova's non-payment of the 150'000 dollar annual membership fee to the CIS sharply contrasts with the 55'000 dollars spent on one single (European) gay parade. Some messages also question the benefits of EU integration, claiming that it has only brought economic hardship to Moldova. Since 2020, prices have increased by about sixty per cent, leading to record inflation, widespread poverty, and insufficient pensions. The government's priorities are being critically questioned. Additionally, EU integration is further scrutinised by comparing it with the potential benefits of aligning with Moscow and joining the Russian-centric EAEU. The comparison of various statistics between the EU and EAEU undermines European integration by suggesting it will not bring the promised economic stability and growth to Moldova. At the same time, it promotes a closer alliance with Russia, portraying the EAEU as a more favourable option for Moldova than the EU.

6.5.3 War in Ukraine

In the context of Russian disinformation campaigns on Telegram concerning the war in Ukraine, several narratives emerge within the dataset, each designed to portray Russia in a positive light while discrediting Ukraine and the West. These narratives are used to justify Moscow's actions and to portray itself as the good guy fighting against evil forces.

Russia's noble fight against Nazism

The most prominent one of the underlying narratives dealing with the war in Ukraine is that Russia is fighting a noble battle against Nazism. Moscow insists that they are fighting against neo-Nazism rather than the Ukrainian people themselves. Thereby, the current Ukrainian government and President Zelensky are strategically demonised as a neo-Nazi regime which illegitimately seized power over the country. To further frame this image, the Ukrainian government is portrayed as promoting fascist ideology and committing atrocities against its people. They are accused of having planned to attack Russia a long time ago, which makes the current war inevitable and any peaceful political and diplomatic solution to the conflict impossible to achieve. Another facet of this narrative is the portrayal of the Ukrainian army as deliberately using Nazi practices and symbols. Numerous messages circulating in the chats claim that the Ukrainian Soldiers openly wear Nazi symbols such as swastikas or other SS emblems, that Ukrainian tanks are marked with Wehrmacht identification signs, or that Zelensky intentionally named some Ukrainian brigades after former Nazi divisions. These messages attempt to draw a twisted parallel between today's Ukrainian military forces and the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany during World War II. Historical references, in general, play an important role in solidifying these narratives. Multiple comparisons between the current conflict in Ukraine and World War II have been found. By drawing such parallels between the past and the present, not only powerful emotional images are recalled in people's minds, but Russia's current actions are depicted as part of a long-lasting fight against fascism. A lot of messages recall the Soviet Union's fight of the Red Army against Nazi Germany and their victory. Thereby some messages directly address the Ukrainian Armed Forces, reminding them of the courage their grandfathers showed and the sacrifices they made in fighting Nazi Germany in defence of

> „We are at war with neo-Nazis, not with Ukrainians, against whom we have nothing against. They are a nation near and dear to us, with whom we are intertwined at the level of human destinies."
>
> Sputnik Moldova, November 26th 2022

the homeland. And now, these armed forces are supporting an alleged neo-Nazi regime. The soldiers are called upon to reject this junta and lay down their arms. Sentiments of historical pride and generational loyalty are used to create dissent and moral conflict within the Ukrainian military, potentially undermining soldiers' allegiance to their commander. Ukraine's broader effort to glorify Nazi collaborators and to erase and rewrite history is depicted through messages about the deliberate demolition of Soviet-era monuments in Ukraine, such as the monument to Soviet pilot Valery Chkalov. This is seen as another proof of Kyiv engaging in revisionist history, dishonouring the Soviet Union's sacrifices during World War II and praising Nazism. Direct historical comparisons are also drawn to Hitler's Barbarossa Plan, comparing it with the contemporary Ukrainian counteroffensive, suggesting that history is repeating itself and just as the Nazis underestimated the Soviet Union's resilience, so too are the Ukrainians and NATO as its ally. Another message recounts the Volyn massacre of 1943, where Ukrainian nationalists committed mass atrocities against Polish villages, highlighting Ukrainian nationalist violence to imply that contemporary Ukrainian nationalism is as violent and dangerous. The inhumane and barbaric behaviour of the Ukrainian army and the neo-Nazi regime is further underpinned by war crime accusations implied in the Telegram messages. For example, one message claims that

in Mariupol, desecrated bodies left by Ukrainian forces were discovered, showing signs of torture and bearing carved Nazi symbols. Other messages highlight the cruel targeting of civilians who tried to evacuate from the battle zone, allegedly launched missiles at hospitals, and the shelling of a church on Easter night. These messages not only portray Ukraine as violating international humanitarian law but also

> „On Easter night, the AFU shelled the center of Donetsk. The attacks came near the Holy Transfiguration Cathedral. People were forced to evacuate. A pregnant woman was killed. The Ukrainian Nazis hit the cathedral on purpose, knowing that Orthodox Christians would come there to celebrate Easter."
>
> Приднестровец, April 16th 2023

create the image that they do not have any ethical or moral judgment. Russia, on the other hand, is portrayed as the noble saviour of the oppressed people, defending cultural and national integrity and fighting the neo-Nazi threat that oppresses Russian-speaking and culturally aligned populations in Ukraine. This narrative unfolds through a series of powerful messages, each underscoring the bravery and sacrifice of the Russian Armed as they are protecting and liberating these oppressed people. Messages, for example, heroize the fallen Russian soldiers as martyrs who fought for the people's right to speak their native language

and preserve their cultural and religious traditions. It frames the conflict as a noble cause, a humanitarian effort worthy to go into the fight and make personal sacrifices for national pride. By framing its military actions as part of a righteous fight against neo-Nazism and oppression, Russia seeks to legitimise its intervention and gain widespread support internally and abroad.

The West collaborates with the Ukrainian Nazi junta

Within this overreaching narrative that Russia is fighting against Nazism and for the liberation of oppressed people in Ukraine, the West is depicted as collaborators with Zelensky's supposed Nazi regime. Several messages from the selected Telegram channels illustrate this narrative. The West is, for example, accused of being responsible for the rise of neo-Nazism in Ukraine by having introduced "pseudo-values" in the country and reshaping the consciousness of the people, which built the base for extremism. By strengthening the Ukrainian military with arms and training, Western countries further escalated the situation and left no room for a peaceful solution. With an unyielding and aggressive West pushing Russia consistently into a corner, it is little surprising that Russia eventually felt compelled to push back and was forced into the conflict. Other messages support the idea that the West is indiscriminately bolstering up any force that opposes Russia, regardless of its ideological stance - whether it's terrorists or Nazis, they would even support the devil. Thereby, the West is portrayed as morally bankrupt, willing to do anything and compromise its principles to achieve geopolitical goals against Russia. At the same time, it is said that the West is leading this war against Russia at the expense of the Ukrainian people, whom the West enslaves. Another prominent point within this narrative is the arms deliveries and military aid the West is sending to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces in their fight against Russia. Western countries are explicitly accused of collaborating with the Nazi regime in Kyiv. Western military aid is framed as a malicious effort to perpetuate the conflict and destabilise the region. The narrative also includes references to specific Western political figures and institutions, accusing them of hypocrisy and complicity. For instance, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is referred to as a "Nazi sausage" for his support of Ukraine, including sending military aid.

> *„The West wants to finish everything in Ukraine 'quietly'. The West wants to buy time, as it did with the Minsk agreements, arm the Nazi regime in Kiev and continue its aggression against Russia."*
>
> Приднестровец, November 27th 2023

Moldova and the War in Ukraine

The implications of the war in Ukraine for Moldova are also a key topic of discussion, and disinformation narratives in the Telegram messages circulate. The narratives highlight the negative consequences of the war for Moldova and its potential involvement in the conflict, instilling fear, distrust, and division.

The main narrative targets Moldovan politicians who support Ukraine and condemn Russia's attack. President Maia Sandu and her pro-European government are particularly in the focus of this narrative. Her public support for Ukraine, including her speech at the European Council's "Bucha Summit 2023," where she expressed belief in a Ukrainian victory and used the phrase "glory to Ukraine," is depicted as warmongering. Other messages support the claims that Maia Sandu and her government, together with the West, are promoting conflict rather than peace. The pro-Russian opposition criticises her for requesting European funds for military support instead of addressing domestic needs like pensions and education, implying that the government is neglecting its responsibilities to Moldovan citizens in favour of supporting a foreign conflict. Additionally, the pro-European government is accused of disrespecting history and culture, particularly by not honouring the Soviet past and the Red Army's fight against the Wehrmacht in World War II. By doing so, this narrative suggests that Moldovan authorities are not only aligning with an anti-Russian, pro-Western stance but are also implicitly supporting the same ideology as the alleged neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine. Other messages report on Moldovan citizens who decided to join the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the fight against Russia and describe them as having the same neo-Nazi ideology as the Ukrainian fighters. Another narrative focuses on the physical danger Ukraine poses to Moldovan citizens. Incidents of missiles flying in the Moldovan airspace are regularly reported, nurturing fear among the population about the approaching danger. Another narrative also suggests that Ukraine will coerce Moldova into the conflict. Messages claim that Ukrainian leaders are pressuring Moldova to open a second front in Transnistria to distract Russia. This further instils fear that Moldova could become embroiled in the war.

> *„The secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, Oleksiy Danilov, has urged Moldova to open a second front and deal with Transnistria in order to distract Russia from Ukraine. No one in Moldova intends to die for the interests of Ukraine. [...] Ukraine wants to drag as many countries as possible into a military conflict so that many people die.“*
>
> Приднестровец, March 27th 2022

6.5.4 USA and Europe

A closer analysis of disinformation narratives about the West on the selected Telegram channels in Moldova reveals various nuanced narratives designed to undermine trust in Western institutions and promote pro-Russian sentiments. Several interrelated sub-narratives emerged, focusing on NATO, the United States, and the European Union and portraying them as aggressive, hypocritical, and destabilising forces in the international arena. These narratives are designed to foster distrust in Western institutions and promote a pro-Russian stance among Moldovan citizens.

It is the West's fault

The underlying main narrative, based on the extracted messages from the five Telegram chats, is that the West, primarily the USA through NATO, is responsible for deteriorating international security because of its ruthless expansionist behaviour and desire for global dominance. For example, it is claimed that the United States has attempted to dismantle the international relations framework established after World War II to reshape the world according to its own vision. A move deemed unacceptable by Russia and a behaviour which is responsible for ongoing conflicts, such as the one in Ukraine. Allegedly, the US is only interested in securing its position on the world stage and creating advantages for itself and its allies. Doing this, the US has ignored Russian concerns repeatedly, such as further NATO expansion towards the east, withdrawal from the Bucharest formula and the idea that Ukraine and Georgia will become NATO members, as well as not establishing any military bases on the territory of ex-Soviet countries and no further developing NATO's military arsenal and capabilities. Unsurprisingly, Moscow portrays itself as a good moral force that only wants the best for the international community and humanity, while Washington and the West, in general, are portrayed as bad, without any morals, and greedy for power. It is said that NATO and the US have returned to Cold War priorities, not only wanting to keep Russia out of Europe but dismember the country in order to defend its unipolar world order. This narrative is especially reinforced as tensions between the two sides rise concerning speculations about the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

> *„War on Russia's doorstep, chemical weapons already in Donbass, last warning. When will the big war between Russia and the West start on the territory of the ex-USSR?"*
>
> Sputnik Moldova, December 21st 2021

> *„Russia has not the slightest desire to attack Ukraine. All manoeuvres of Russian troops are within the national territory. Attempted Blackmail and intimidation of Russia by the US and NATO are unacceptable, they will not bring any results. Russia calls on the US to behave as responsibly as possible, as the risks of a military confrontation must not be underestimated."*
>
> Sputnik Moldova, January 10th 2022

Also, after the beginning of the war, allegations blaming the West for the escalation of the conflict continued to surface. A message from the data of the five Telegram chats cites Dimitry Medvedev, who says that Russia's forceful intervention in 2008 in Georgia to protect its citizens and restore peace was also a warning towards the US and NATO to listen to Moscow's concerns around further Western expansion. However, the West allegedly ignored these signals and continued its reckless political course, prompting Russia to take more drastic actions in February 2022. According to this narrative, it is the West's fault that the war in Ukraine started and that the world irreversibly changed. Russia had no other option than to react to these provocations. Moreover, the West is accused of deliberately destabilising other regions of the world by interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states, organising provocations, coup d'états and even civil wars. They are, for example, supporting

> *„Their hegemony means stagnation for the whole world, for the whole civilization, obscurantism and abolition of culture, neoliberal totalitarianism." Western globalist elites are trying their best to maintain their dominance."*
>
> Sputnik Moldova, August 16th 2022

conflicts in the Balkans, Transnistria, Transcaucasia and Central Asia.

The messages also indicate that the term "The West" mainly refers to the United States of America. Whereby NATO is portrayed as a strategic tool of the US to wage war against Russia and defend its global hegemony. Echoing this narrative, it is argued that European states strictly follow Washington's directives, acting as US puppet states which are considered expendable in the pursuit of larger US goals. Allegedly, the US is the state which

> *„The West is sending all countries of the world frightening signals: "anyone who dares to disobey can be next."*
>
> Sputnik Moldova, September 24th 2022

profits the most from the ongoing war in Ukraine because it can sell more weapons and gas at a higher price. At the same time, Europe is suffering. This narrative tries to further highlight the US hegemony and recklessness even on the expanses of so-called allies and implies existing disagreements within NATO.

NATO is a catalyst for conflict

This narrative allegedly indicates that NATO is promoting anything other than peace and security in Europe and around the world. Historical grievances are revisited to further discredit NATO and support the narrative. These efforts are particularly focused on NATO's bombing campaigns in Yugoslavia in 1999, which were aimed at ending the ongoing war. These bombings are portrayed as a prime example of NATO's aggressive interventions that have led to significant civilian casualties and long-term destabilisation of the whole Balkan region. Thereby, Russian narratives occurring within the messages of the chats emphasise the civil casualties and destruction caused by the bombings to stop the alleged war crimes by Belgrade. These historical grievances around the war in Yugoslavia and NATO's intervention are leveraged to illustrate a broader pattern of NATO's involvement in conflicts that lead to widespread destruction and suffering, reinforcing the narrative that NATO, rather than prompting peace and security, acts as a catalyst for conflict and chaos.

This narrative is further exacerbated by NATO's respectively the US's weapons delivered to Zelensky's neofascist and corrupt regime, which ultimately end up being sold on black markets around the world. According to messages from the chats, these weapons are being disseminated worldwide, reappearing in the hands of violent regimes and terrorist groups in Central Africa, South East Asia, the Middle East and beyond. The arms deliveries to the Ukrainian regime are indirectly responsible for perpetuating conflict and violence around the world.

> „The current US President Biden publicly stated that it was he who suggested bombing Yugoslavia. Undipendent researchers name other goals - the West was trying to finalize the country's disintegration, demonstrate strength and test new weapons.“
>
> Sputnik Moldova, March 24th 2022

In April 2023, demonstrators even expressed their discontent with NATO in front of the NATO information centre in Chisinau. They tore the flag of the North Atlantic Alliance and poured red paint on it, symbolising the blood spilt by NATO in Serbia, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, and other countries. It is difficult to determine if these demonstrations were directly influenced by the underlying anti-Western narratives disseminated by Russia.

The US and NATO are dragging Moldova into war

Concerns and narratives that NATO is dragging Moldova into war are also prevalent among the messages from the five analysed Telegram chats. This narrative spreads fear and uncertainty among Moldovan and Transnistrian citizens, suggesting that Western actions are destabilising the region and pushing the country towards conflict. Various messages from

> *„A whole year the Moldovan side is in the process of combat training. It receives weapons, equipment, trains specialists. A natural question arises: who are you going to fight with?"*
>
> Новости Приднестровья | ПМР, October 26th 2023

Telegram chats support this narrative, illustrating how Russia leverages these claims to influence public opinion.

Messages say that NATO and the US plan to resolve the conflict in Transnistria through military means, reinforcing the narrative that Western involvement in the country's affairs leads to further regional instability and conflict. There are warnings that the West is deliberately escalating tensions in Transnistria, following a strategy of reigniting conflicts in former Soviet republics, as seen in Ukraine, to weaken Russia. The narrative of fear about war in Moldova also casts doubt on the true purpose of the military aid provided by the West. Despite promises that Moldova would only receive defensive, non-lethal weapons, there are claims that lethal weapons have been delivered. The undertone of these messages suggests that the US is laying the groundwork for Moldova's preparation for war. This narrative is further supported by claims that NATO assists with combat training and military preparations for the Moldovan Armed Forces, implying that Moldova is being militarised for a potential conflict. This leads to heightened tensions between Transnistria and Moldova. Additionally, NATO's calls for Russia to withdraw its peacekeepers from Transnistria are met with alarm in Tiraspol. Overall, these messages

collectively serve to promote the narrative that NATO and the US are dragging Moldova and Transnistria into a war that is beneficial to them. By highlighting alleged Western provocations, military aid, and strategic manoeuvres, Russian disinformation campaigns aim to spread fear and distrust

> *„[...] no security guarantees will no longer deter Washington from active actions. Their form is obvious - provocation: military, political, criminal, with masquerade disguises in Russian uniforms - it makes no difference."*
>
> Новости Приднестровья | ПМР, October 26th 2023

among Moldovan and Transnistrian citizens. NATO and the US are genuinely framed as bad and untrustworthy, and their foreign involvement is a harbinger of conflict and war.

Whataboutism, Sleepy Joe and other delegitimising narratives

This last section is a potpourri of different Russian disinformation narratives occurring within the data, which are used to discredit the West and particularly the US. In a lot of messages, the narratives make use of "Whataboutism". This is a term used for the rhetorical tactic of responding to an accusation by making a counter-accusation, demonstrating the hypocrisies behind the initial one. Some messages from the Telegram channels attempt to devalue the West by highlighting perceived double standards in moral judgments. They argue that the US and NATO lack the moral authority to judge other countries as long as they do not acknowledge and address the immoral actions, damage, and suffering they have and still do cause themselves. Another message, for example, criticises the US Embassy in Moldova for complaining that Russia has blocked Western media outlets like Radio Free Europe, BBC, and Deutsche Welle, citing the right to information as a fundamental societal right. The message highlights the hypocrisy by pointing out that the US and Europe simultaneously block websites like Sputnik, Russia Today, and other Russian news outlets. Another popular narrative aims to undermine the West by portraying its liberal values as indicative of societal disintegration. For instance, messages from Russian disinformation campaigns exaggerate and distort discussions around LGBTQI+ rights and gender identity, framing them as examples of moral downfall. By highlighting these issues, they attempt to contrast Western liberalism with traditional values, suggesting that the West has lost its moral compass and is no longer a credible authority.

Other narratives specifically exploit internal US politics to delegitimise the country. Russian disinformation frequently highlights the divisions between Democrats and Republicans, specifically when it comes to the ongoing war in Ukraine and the money flowing into the support of Kyiv. Debates in the Senate are used to illustrate how deeply divided the United States are. Additionally, Russian disinformation leverages the age and sometimes weird behaviour of the current US President, Joe Biden, to portray the US as a weak and unreliable state led by a confused old man who cannot be taken seriously on the global stage. By emphasising these internal disagreements and questioning the President's competence, these narratives aim to undermine the credibility and stability of the United States and the West in general.

> *"More than half of the women in my administration are women," the U.S. president said.*
>
> Sputnik Moldova, February 3rd 2023

7. Discussion and Outlook

The present research aimed to analyse how Russia uses social media to wage disinformation campaigns in Moldova and to uncover the predominant narratives targeting the country since the onset of the war in Ukraine.

Thereby, the analysis showed that Russian disinformation efforts in Moldova are highly strategic, using the Russian-speaking population as a gateway to disseminate their narratives. Furthermore, the analysis made evident that Russian-speaking media in Transnistria are deeply connected to either directly Russia or to pro-Russian elites within the country. This not only accounts for the traditional media but also the online news space and social media. By focusing on five specific Russian-speaking Moldovan Telegram channels, the research revealed a significant increase in posting activity since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. It can be assumed that the increase in activity has also amplified certain Russian disinformation narratives to shape public opinion. Further exploration of the web-scraped Telegram messages identified „Moldovan Politics", „Economy", „The War in Ukraine", and „The West" as primary categories of disinformation narratives in the country. An in-depth analysis of each of these categories showed that in the political domain, messages of Russian disinformation try to undermine the credibility of Maia Sandu's government, portraying it as corrupt, Russophobe and acting against the interests of the population. Economic narratives since the onset of the war in Ukraine mainly focus on the hardship people faced through Moldova's turn from Russian gas imports to European sources. Narratives concerning the war in Ukraine frame Russia's attack as a noble cause against a Nazi regime. Moreover, fear is spread within the population of Moldova, suggesting a possible future involvement in the conflict. Finally, the West, NATO, the US and the EU are portrayed as imperialistic and war-mongering entities with disinformation suggesting Moldova's potential instrumentalisation as a puppet of the West. The narratives are constructed through emotional language, highlighting specific aspects of the topics. By framing these aspects strategically, the Kremlin tries to influence how the targeted audience feels and thinks about the presented issues. Throughout the analysis of the different narratives, it is noticeable that a lot of them employ the emotion of fear. The emotion of fear is a very basic human emotion but an extremely powerful one, which often triggers a certain reaction to the felt danger.

With these findings, the present research contributes to the conception of Russian disinformation campaigns on social media in Moldova. Through the exploration of the predominant narratives, it has been shown how multifaceted Russian disinformation is,

targeting Moldova on various levels and trying to influence the country's political agenda. Understanding Russia's strategic use of disinformation in its near abroad is crucial and lays the foundation for developing effective approaches and policies to counter disinformation.

While the present research offered valuable insights into understanding Russia's use of social media, specifically Telegram, to disseminate disinformation narratives influencing public opinion in Moldova, some limitations remain.

First, the research paper's scope and focus are limited to disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova via social media. Other critical aspects and tools of disinformation dissemination are excluded from the analysis. Choosing a wider focus, including different media platforms such as television, radio, and newspapers, could bring further insights. Additionally, the research concentrates on the Russian-speaking population in Moldova, especially the one in Transnistria. Although this part of the population is particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation, it would be interesting to include non-Russian-speaking media in the analysis to see how the rest of Moldova's population is affected by it and to depict the full spectrum of disinformation efforts across the entire population.

Furthermore, the data collection and analysis methods also present certain constraints. The study relies on a sample of messages from five Telegram channels over three years. While this provides a substantial dataset, it still encompasses a rather small example of disinformation activities. Methodologically, the use of Structural Topic Models and Large Language Models for topic classification, despite being advanced, has some limitations. The researcher is dependent on the quality and biases in the training data. Future research should address these limitations. Moreover, the understanding of the topic could be deepened through the following recommendations for further research. Include a variety of media platforms in the analysis, including traditional media and other social networks such as VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, YouTube and Twitter. Examine the direct short- and long-term impacts of disinformation on public opinion, political behaviour, and social cohesion within Moldova. Investigate the role of new technologies that make disinformation even more insidious, such as deep fakes, AI-generated content, or algorithmic amplification. This could help to understand contemporary trends and threats.

Addressing these limitations and pursuing the suggested future research directions will help to gain an even deeper understanding of Russian disinformation in Moldova and contribute to effective strategies to counter such threats.

8. Conclusion

Fact or fiction? In a world where the line between those two gets increasingly blurred, it is not always that easy to tell. The present paper has elaborated on the fact that Russia makes increased use of hybrid and information warfare to assert its regional and global influence. Thereby countries of Russia's near abroad who are historically under Moscow's influence but tend towards closer ties with the West are particularly exposed to hybrid measures. Attempts of major destabilisation have occurred in the past in Georgia as well as in Ukraine. In both cases, strategic disinformation targeting separatist pro-Russian regions played an important role, and extensive information warfare was the harbinger of tougher hybrid measures or even military intervention. In recent years, Moscow has invested significantly in enhancing its information warfare capabilities, especially through new technologies like social media.

How Moscow uses social media to wage disinformation campaigns was one of the two research questions investigated in this paper. Thereby, the study focused on Moldova, a country in Russia's near abroad that shares similar prerequisites with Georgia and Ukraine. Moldova has experienced extensive interference since pursuing a pro-European course and the onset of the war in neighbouring Ukraine. The second research question explored the predominant narratives in Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova on social media platforms since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

To explore the topic and answer the stated research questions, a mixed-method research approach has been employed, involving both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, to uncover the nuances of these disinformation strategies used by Russia in the context of Moldova. For the analysis, five Moldovan Russian-speaking Telegram news channels targeting the population of Transnistria have been chosen.

The qualitative analysis's findings revealed that Moscow systematically uses Russian-speaking media in Moldova to disseminate its narratives and disinformation, effectively targeting and influencing the Russian-speaking population. Traditional Russian-speaking press, as well as the online news space and social media platforms, appear to be widely infiltrated and dominated by the Kremlin's agenda.

This has also been proven true for the five selected Telegram news channels. Sputnik Moldova, KP.MD, ТСВ Приднестровье, Приднестровец and Новости Приднестровья, are either directly linked to Russian state-sponsored media outlets or to pro-Russian and

Kremlin aligned political figures. The paper has further shown that the fact that the Transnistrian media landscape is highly influenced by Russia – there even exists a memorandum of media collaboration between Tiraspol and Moscow - leads to differing realities and further social division within the country. A weak point that again gets exploited by Moscow's Information warfare efforts.

Moreover, the analysis elaborated on the fact that Social Media platforms, especially Telegram, which is particularly popular among Russian speakers, are playing an increasingly important role in these disinformation efforts because the platform is little regulated and allows rapid and far-reaching dissemination of content. The conducted series and causal impact analysis of the 185'432 thousand web-scraped messages from the five analysed Telegram channels further highlighted the importance of social media, specifically Telegram, in disseminating news and disinformation. The analysis quantitatively assessed the changes in posting behaviours of the chats before and after the onset of the war in Ukraine. The results indicated a significant and sustained increase in content volume on these channels following the Russian invasion. Given the close connection of the selected channels to Moscow, the rise in posting activity with the onset of the war in Ukraine strongly suggested a coordinated effort to amplify specific pro-Russian narratives to shape public opinion and potentially influence political outcomes. Serving as gateways for Russian disinformation, the overarching categories of "Moldovan Politics," "Economy," "War in Ukraine," and "The West" were identified. Russia often uses these topics to influence public opinion, enter political discourse, spread division and undermine democratic institutions. The presence of these categories within the data from the Telegram messages has been detected through an applied Strategic Topic Model (STM). Subsequently, a Large Language Model (LLM), which classified the whole dataset of over 180'000 messages into four categories, revealed that "Moldovan Politics" is the dominant topic discussed in the Telegram channels, followed by "War in Ukraine", "Economy", and "USA and Europe" (= The West).

The detailed exploration of the messages within each category further revealed how disinformation narratives are tailored to resonate with the Russian-speaking population of Moldova. For example, narratives portraying the current pro-European government as authoritarian, corrupt and Russophobe try to erode the population's trust in the democratic institutions of the country. Other narratives are strategically leveraging Moldova's divided socio-political landscape by pushing narratives of fear and uncertainty about a novel

escalation of the Transnistrian conflict due to Moldova's militarisation and Western influence. Fear and uncertainty are also underscored when it comes to the war in Ukraine, where Moldova could be drawn into either by Kyiv or the West. Overall, the West is strategically framed as the aggressor and originator of the conflict in Ukraine, whereas Russia is the noble protector against Nazism. Painting the West in a negative light aims to foster scepticism and opposition to the Moldovan government's pro-European course.

The analysis's findings directly support the underlying theoretical framework of the present paper - agenda setting and framing. Russia strategically selects specific topics and amplifies them through extensive social media coverage, employing first-level agenda setting to draw public attention to these topics and push them into the public discourse. Additionally, through second-level agenda setting, Moscow shapes public perception of these topics by framing narratives that resonate with the targeted audience, influencing their thoughts and attitudes.

To conclude, through these disinformation narratives circulating on Moldovan Telegram channels, Russia strategically leverages existing socio-political and ethical divisions, undermines the current pro-European government, and erodes trust in democracy and Western institutions as a means of hybrid warfare in the protection of its perceived sphere of influence. Given the evolving nature of information warfare, it is essential to consider the circulating narratives Russia is leveraging for its geopolitical benefits. The past has shown that Russian disinformation and certain of the above-elaborated narratives already had a direct impact on the political realities within Moldova, leading to orchestrated demonstrations against the government, which ended in the resignation of important pro-European political figures like Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita in February 2023.

The influence of Russian disinformation and its impact on Moldovan politics will be again critically tested in the upcoming presidential elections in October 2024. It is expected that Russia will make use of its full spectrum of hybrid and information warfare tools to influence the outcome of these elections and promote a government that is friendly to Moscow. The Moldovan government and its Western allies have stated repeated concerns about Russian interference in the democratic processes of the country. Thereby, societal tensions are exacerbated through disinformation, and the current government is rhetorically undermined while pro-Russian presidential candidates are promoted. It is believed that Moscow's hybrid actions will go even further if they do not achieve to influence the presidential elections to

their benefit. Leading up to orchestrated anti-government demonstrations and further destabilising the country.

To effectively counter disinformation campaigns in Moldova and to counter the narratives identified in this paper a coordinated effort of policymakers, social media platforms, and civil society organisations is required. The Moldovan government and policymakers need to continue implementing efficient legislation to regulate disinformation. Robust guidelines for detecting disruptive narratives are necessary for addressing them as they arise. It is essential to proactively reveal and counter occurring disinformation early on before it can solidify and influence the public discourse and actions. Another important recommendation to the Moldovan government is to promote independent journalism, particularly in Russian-speaking communities. The paper has shown that the media in Transnistria are highly dependent on Russia, and there are no alternative, independent ones. Thus, the people are practically at the mercy of Russian disinformation. Furthermore, the population's media literacy and resilience against disinformation need to be enhanced; here, the government, as well as civil society organisations, play an important role. Campaigns and public events, reaching out to a broad spectrum of Moldovan society, can help to build strong resilience through dialogue and education. Another approach to reduce disinformation is through the social media platforms. In recent years, many social media platforms have implemented mechanisms that help users to report and verify disinformation, and in a lot of cases, content moderation is applied. Unfortunately, there are still some platforms with very lax regulations which are preferably misused for the spread of disinformation. One of them is Telegram. International pressure on the platform to do something against the spread of disinformation through its services is on the steady rise. It is such international pressure which will hopefully make it more difficult in the future to strategically misuse social media for disinformation.

The present findings contributed to the understanding of Russia's use of social media, specifically Telegram, in disseminating narratives influencing public opinion in Moldova. Furthermore, it offered valuable insights into the predominant narratives circulating and the way Russia frames these topics with the ultimate goal of influencing political realities to its benefit. Academia, policymakers, and the international community need to understand disinformation as a tool of hybrid measures Russia is employing to assert its regional and global power and address the rising challenges stemming from it. Failure to address Moscow's increasing use of information warfare could have severe consequences not only for Moldova but also for the whole of Europe and democracy.

Summary

Skutečnost nebo fikce? Ve světě, kde se hranice mezi nimi stále více stírá, není vždy tak snadné to rozlišit. Tento článek se podrobně zabýval skutečností, že Rusko stále častěji využívá hybridní a informační válku k prosazování svého regionálního a globálního vlivu. Tím jsou hybridním opatřením vystaveny zejména země ruského blízkého zahraničí, které jsou historicky pod vlivem Moskvy, ale tíhnou k užším vazbám na Západ. K pokusům o rozsáhlou destabilizaci došlo v minulosti v Gruzii i na Ukrajině. V obou případech hrály důležitou roli strategické dezinformace zaměřené na separatistické proruské regiony a rozsáhlá informační válka byla předzvěstí tvrdších hybridních opatření nebo dokonce vojenské intervence. V posledních letech Moskva významně investovala do posílení svých schopností informační války, zejména prostřednictvím nových technologií, jako jsou sociální média. To, jak Moskva využívá sociální média k vedení dezinformačních kampaní, bylo jednou ze dvou výzkumných otázek zkoumaných v této práci. Studie se proto zaměřila na Moldavsko, zemi v blízkém zahraničí Ruska, která má podobné předpoklady jako Gruzie a Ukrajina. Moldavsko zažilo rozsáhlé zásahy od prosazování proevropského kurzu a od začátku války na sousední Ukrajině. Druhá výzkumná otázka zkoumala převládající narativy v ruských dezinformačních kampaních zaměřených na Moldavsko na platformách sociálních médií od začátku války na Ukrajině. K prozkoumání tématu a zodpovězení stanovených výzkumných otázek byl použit smíšený výzkumný přístup zahrnující kvalitativní i kvantitativní metodologii, jehož cílem bylo odhalit nuance těchto dezinformačních strategií používaných Ruskem v kontextu Moldavska. Pro analýzu bylo vybráno pět moldavských ruskojazyčných zpravodajských kanálů Telegram zaměřených na obyvatelstvo Podněstří. Zjištění kvalitativní analýzy odhalila, že Moskva systematicky využívá ruskojazyčná média v Moldavsku k šíření svých narativů a dezinformací, čímž účinně cílí na ruskojazyčné obyvatelstvo a ovlivňuje ho. Tradiční ruskojazyčný tisk, stejně jako online zpravodajský prostor a platformy sociálních médií, se zdají být široce infiltrovány a ovládány agendou Kremlu.

To se potvrdilo i v případě pěti vybraných zpravodajských kanálů Telegramu. Sputnik Moldova, KP.MD, ТСВ Приднестровье, Приднестровец a Новости Приднестровья jsou buď přímo napojeny na ruská státem sponzorovaná média, nebo na proruské a s Kremlem spřízněné politické osobnosti. Článek dále ukázal, že skutečnost, že podněsterská mediální krajina je silně ovlivňována Ruskem - existuje dokonce memorandum o mediální spolupráci mezi Tiraspolem a Moskvou - vede k odlišné realitě a dalšímu sociálnímu rozdělení v zemi.

Slabé místo, které je opět využíváno snahami Moskvy o informační válku. Analýza navíc podrobněji rozvádí skutečnost, že platformy sociálních médií, zejména Telegram, který je mezi rusky mluvícími lidmi obzvláště populární, hrají v těchto dezinformačních snahách stále důležitější roli, protože tato platforma je málo regulovaná a umožňuje rychlé a dalekosáhlé šíření obsahu. Provedená analýza sérií a kauzálních dopadů 185'432 tisíc zpráv z pěti analyzovaných kanálů Telegramu dále zdůraznila význam sociálních médií, konkrétně Telegramu, při šíření zpráv a dezinformací. Analýza kvantitativně hodnotila změny v chování příspěvků na chatech před a po začátku války na Ukrajině. Výsledky ukázaly výrazný a trvalý nárůst objemu obsahu na těchto kanálech po ruské invazi. Vzhledem k úzkému napojení vybraných kanálů na Moskvu nárůst příspěvkové aktivity s počátkem války na Ukrajině silně naznačoval koordinovanou snahu o zesílení konkrétních proruských narativů s cílem formovat veřejné mínění a potenciálně ovlivnit politické výsledky. Jako brány pro ruské dezinformace sloužily zastřešující kategorie „moldavská politika", „ekonomika", „válka na Ukrajině" a „Západ". Rusko tato témata často využívá k ovlivňování veřejného mínění, vstupu do politického diskurzu, šíření rozdělení a podkopávání demokratických institucí. Přítomnost těchto kategorií v datech ze zpráv Telegramu byla zjištěna pomocí aplikovaného modelu strategických témat (STM). Následně byl použit Velký jazykový model (Large Language Model, LLM), který celý soubor dat čítající více než 180'000 zpráv rozdělil do čtyř kategorií, a odhalil, že dominantním tématem diskutovaným v kanálech Telegramu je „moldavská politika", následovaná tématy „válka na Ukrajině", „ekonomika" a „USA a Evropa" (= Západ). Podrobné zkoumání zpráv v rámci jednotlivých kategorií dále odhalilo, jak jsou dezinformační narativy přizpůsobeny tak, aby rezonovaly s ruskojazyčným obyvatelstvem Moldavska. Například narativy vykreslující současnou proevropskou vládu jako autoritářskou, zkorumpovanou a rusofobní se snaží podkopat důvěru obyvatel v demokratické instituce země. Jiné narativy strategicky využívají rozdělené sociálně-politické krajiny Moldavska tím, že prosazují narativy strachu a nejistoty z nové eskalace podněsterského konfliktu v důsledku militarizace Moldavska a vlivu Západu. Strach a nejistota jsou zdůrazňovány i v souvislosti s válkou na Ukrajině, do níž by Moldavsko mohl zatáhnout buď Kyjev, nebo Západ. Celkově je Západ strategicky rámován jako agresor a původce konfliktu na Ukrajině, zatímco Rusko je ušlechtilým ochráncem před nacismem. Vykreslení Západu v negativním světle má za cíl podpořit skepsi a odpor vůči proevropskému kurzu moldavské vlády. Zjištění analýzy přímo podporují základní teoretický rámec tohoto článku - nastolování agendy a rámcování. Rusko strategicky vybírá

konkrétní témata a posiluje je prostřednictvím rozsáhlého pokrytí v sociálních médiích, přičemž využívá prvostupňové nastolování agendy, aby na tato témata upozornilo veřejnost a prosadilo je do veřejného diskurzu. Kromě toho Moskva prostřednictvím nastolování agendy druhé úrovně formuje vnímání těchto témat veřejností prostřednictvím rámcování narativů, které rezonují s cílovým publikem a ovlivňují jeho myšlení a postoje. Závěrem lze říci, že prostřednictvím těchto dezinformačních narativů, které kolují na moldavských kanálech Telegramu, Rusko strategicky využívá existující sociálně-politické a etické rozpory, podkopává současnou proevropskou vládu a podkopává důvěru v demokracii a západní instituce jako prostředek hybridní války při ochraně své domnělé sféry vlivu. Vzhledem k vyvíjející se povaze informační války je nezbytné vzít v úvahu kolující narativy, které Rusko využívá pro své geopolitické výhody. Minulost ukázala, že ruské dezinformace a některé z výše zmíněných narativů již měly přímý dopad na politickou realitu v Moldavsku, což vedlo k organizovaným demonstracím proti vládě, které skončily odstoupením významných proevropských politických osobností, jako je premiérka Natalia Gavrilita v únoru 2023. Vliv ruských dezinformací a jejich dopad na moldavskou politiku bude opět kriticky prověřen v nadcházejících prezidentských volbách v říjnu 2024. Očekává se, že Rusko využije celé spektrum svých nástrojů hybridní a informační války, aby ovlivnilo výsledek těchto voleb a prosadilo vládu přátelskou Moskvě. Moldavská vláda a její západní spojenci opakovaně vyjádřili obavy z ruského vměšování do demokratických procesů v zemi. Tím dochází k vyostřování společenského napětí prostřednictvím dezinformací a k rétorickému podkopávání současné vlády a k prosazování proruských prezidentských kandidátů. Předpokládá se, že hybridní akce Moskvy půjdou ještě dále, pokud nedosáhne ovlivnění prezidentských voleb ve svůj prospěch. Což povede k organizovaným protivládním demonstracím a další destabilizaci země. K účinnému potírání dezinformačních kampaní v Moldavsku a k potírání narativů identifikovaných v tomto dokumentu je zapotřebí koordinovaného úsilí tvůrců politik, platforem sociálních médií a organizací občanské společnosti. Moldavská vláda a tvůrci politik musí pokračovat v zavádění účinných právních předpisů pro regulaci dezinformací. K řešení vznikajících dezinformačních narativů jsou nezbytné spolehlivé pokyny pro jejich odhalování. Je nezbytné proaktivně odhalovat a potírat vyskytující se dezinformace včas, než se mohou upevnit a ovlivnit veřejný diskurz a jednání. Dalším důležitým doporučením pro moldavskou vládu je podpora nezávislé žurnalistiky, zejména v ruskojazyčných komunitách. Dokument ukázal, že média v Podněstří jsou silně závislá na Rusku a neexistují žádná alternativní,

nezávislá. Lidé jsou tak prakticky vydáni na milost a nemilost ruským dezinformacím. Dále je třeba zvýšit mediální gramotnost obyvatelstva a jeho odolnost vůči dezinformacím; zde hraje důležitou roli vláda i organizace občanské společnosti. Kampaně a veřejné akce, které osloví široké spektrum moldavské společnosti, mohou prostřednictvím dialogu a vzdělávání pomoci vybudovat silnou odolnost. Dalším přístupem k omezení dezinformací jsou platformy sociálních médií. V posledních letech mnoho platforem sociálních médií zavedlo mechanismy, které pomáhají uživatelům dezinformace nahlašovat a ověřovat, a v mnoha případech se uplatňuje moderování obsahu. Bohužel stále existují platformy s velmi volnou regulací, které jsou přednostně zneužívány k šíření dezinformací. Jednou z nich je Telegram. Mezinárodní tlak na tuto platformu, aby proti šíření dezinformací prostřednictvím svých služeb něco podnikla, neustále roste. Právě takový mezinárodní tlak snad v budoucnu ztíží strategické zneužívání sociálních médií k dezinformacím. Předkládaná zjištění přispěla k pochopení toho, jak Rusko využívá sociální média, konkrétně Telegram, k šíření narativů ovlivňujících veřejné mínění v Moldavsku. Kromě toho nabídlo cenné poznatky o převládajících šířících se narativech a způsobu, jakým Rusko tato témata rámuje s konečným cílem ovlivnit politickou realitu ve svůj prospěch. Akademická obec, tvůrci politik a mezinárodní společenství musí chápat dezinformace jako nástroj hybridních opatření, který Rusko používá k prosazení své regionální a globální moci a k řešení rostoucích výzev z ní vyplývajících. Neřešení rostoucího využívání informační války ze strany Moskvy by mohlo mít vážné důsledky nejen pro Moldavsko, ale i pro celou Evropu a demokracii.

List of References

Abushov, K. (2009). Policing the near abroad: Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357710902895129

Bachmann, S. D. G. (2015). Russia's Hybrid warfare in the East: The Integral Nature of the Information Sphere International Engagement on Cyber V: Military Matters. Geo. J. Int'l Aff., 16, 198.

Bail, C. A., Guay, B., Maloney, E., Combs, A., Hillygus, D. S., Merhout, F., Freelon, D., & Volfovsky, A. (2020). Assessing the Russian Internet Research Agency's impact on the political attitudes and behaviors of American Twitter users in late 2017. Proceedings of the national academy of sciences, 117(1), 243–250.

Baumann, M. (2020). 'Propaganda Fights' and 'Disinformation Campaigns': The discourse on information warfare in Russia-West relations. Contemporary Politics, 26(3), 288–307. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1728612

Bechis, F. (2021). Playing the Russian Disinformation Game: Information operations from Soviet tactics to Putin's sharp power. In Democracy and fake news: Information manipulation and post-truth politics (S. 119–131). Routledge.

Bērziņa, I. (2019). Weaponization of "Colour Revolutions". Journal of Political Marketing, 18(4), 330–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2019.1678905

Bishop, M., & Goldman, E. (2010, Juni 4). The Strategy and Tactics of Information warfare. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260312331271839

Blake, J. (2020). Russian Interference in U.s. Elections: How to Protect Critical Election Infrastructure from Foreign Participation. Public Contract Law Journal, 49(4), 709–734.

Blank, S. (2017). 5 Cyber War and Information War à la Russe.

Blank, S., & Kim, Y. (2016). Economic warfare a la Russe: The energy weapon and Russian national security strategy. The Journal of East Asian Affairs, 30(1), 1.

Buzev, A. (2023). The Rights of Refugees from Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova. Eastern European Journal for Regional Studies (EEJRS), 9(1), 48–59.

Całus, K. (2023a). More independence, less fear. Moldova's perspective on Russia after a year of war in Ukraine.

Całus, K. (2023b). The Russian hybrid threat toolbox in Moldova: Economic, political and social dimensions. Hybrid CoE Working Paper 23. https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/20230413-Hybrid-CoE-Working_Paper-23-Moldova-WEB.pdf

Cara, O. (2023). Moldova in Figures, Statistical Summary. Edition 2023. National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova.

Carolan, R. Q. (2019). Civil Warfare: Russian Foreign Policy Strategy in Eusasia.

Cenusa, D. (2024). Russia's disinformation in Eastern Europe: Revealing the geopolitical narratives.

Chivvis, C. (2017). Understanding Russian „Hybrid warfare": And What Can Be Done About It. RAND Corporation. https://doi.org/10.7249/CT468

Coleman, R., McCombs, M., Shaw, D., & Weaver, D. (2009). Agenda setting. In The handbook of journalism studies (S. 167–180). Routledge.

Cullen, P., & Wegge, N. (2022). Warning of hybrid threats. In Intelligence analysis in the digital age. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Deen, B., & Zweers, W. (2022). Walking the tightrope towards the EU.

DFRLab. (2023). Networks of pro-Kremlin Telegram channels spread disinformation at a global scale. https://medium.com/dfrlab/networks-of-pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-spread-disinformation-at-a-global-scale-af4e319bd51e

DiResta, R., Shaffer, K., Ruppel, B., Sullivan, D., Matney, R., Fox, R., Albright, J., & Johnson, B. (2019). The tactics & tropes of the Internet Research Agency.

Dumont, E., Solis, J., & Zaleski, L. (2023). Moldova: Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels. AidData at William & Mary.

Dunmore, C., & Odobescu, I. (2022, Mai 18). Ukrainian refugees find warm welcome in neighbouring Moldova. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/ukrainian-refugees-find-warm-welcome-neighbouring-moldova

Dvornikova, P. (2023). Foreign Influence and Disinformation in Moldova. PEACE & SECURITY MONITOR, 30.

Ehrett, C., Linvill, D. L., Smith, H., Warren, P. L., Bellamy, L., Moawad, M., Moran, O., & Moody, M. (2022). Inauthentic Newsfeeds and Agenda Setting in a Coordinated Inauthentic Information Operation. Social Science Computer Review, 40(6), 1595–1613. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393211019951

Eichel, A., Lapesa, G., & Schulte im Walde, S. (2022). Investigating Independence vs. Control: Agenda-Setting in Russian News Coverage on Social Media. In N. Calzolari, F. Béchet, P. Blache, K. Choukri, C. Cieri, T. Declerck, S. Goggi, H. Isahara, B. Maegaard, J. Mariani, H. Mazo, J. Odijk, & S. Piperidis (Hrsg.), Proceedings of the Thirteenth Language Resources and Evaluation Conference (S. 5314–5323). European Language Resources Association. https://aclanthology.org/2022.lrec-1.569

EUvsDisinfo. (2023a, Februar 16). How Moldova is trying to regain control of its informational space. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/how-moldova-is-trying-to-regain-control-of-its-informational-space/

EUvsDisinfo. (2023b, März 3). A Russian psychological operation pressures Moldova. EUvsDisinfo. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/a-russian-psychological-operation-pressures-moldova/

Fox, A. C. (2021). Russian hybrid warfare: A framework. Journal of Military Studies,

10(1), 60–72.

Galeotti, M. (2013). The „Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian Non-Linear War. In Moscow's Shadows. https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/

Galeotti, M. (2016). Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia's 'new way of war'? https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2015.1129170

Gehlbach, S., Lokot, T., & Shirikov, A. (2022). 17 The Russian Media. Russian Politics Today: Stability and Fragility, 390.

Geraldes, S. M. (2023). Die dunkle Seite der Interkonnektivität: Soziale Medien als Cyberwaffe? In E. Moehlecke de Baseggio, O. Schneider, & T. Szvircsev Tresch (Hrsg.), Soziale Medien und die Streitkräfte (S. 235–256). Springer Nature Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26108-4_11

Giegerich, B. (2016). Hybrid warfare and the Changing Character of Conflict. Connections: The Quarterly Journal, 15(2), 65–72. https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.15.2.05

Gilardi, F., Gessler, T., Kubli, M., & Müller, S. (2022). Social Media and Political Agenda Setting. Political Communication, 39(1), 39–60. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1910390

Goltsov, A. (2020). Geopolitics of the Russian Federation regarding the Republic of Moldova. Cogito-Multidisciplinary research Journal, 3, 153–169.

Götz, E. (2015). It's geopolitics, stupid: Explaining Russia's Ukraine policy. Global Affairs, 1(1), 3–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2015.960184

Götz, E. (2017). Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited∗+. International Studies Review, 19(2), 228–253. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009

Grigas, A. (2016). Beyond Crimea: The new Russian empire. Yale University Press.

Grönsund, L. (2020). Passportisation—The new geopolitical strategy? A comparative analysis of Russia's passportisation policy and its effects on brain drain in the Eastern Neighbourhood. https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=9011306&fileOId=9011307

Hanley, & Kuzichkin. (2021). Russian Media Landscape: Structures, Mechanisms, and Technologies of Information Operations. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfjs/?file=/publications/download/Report_Russian_Media_Landscape_2021.pdf?zoom=page-fit

Hemphill, L., Culotta, A., & Heston, M. (2013). Framing in Social Media: How the US Congress Uses Twitter Hashtags to Frame Political Issues. SSRN Electronic Journal.

https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2317335

Henriksen, F. M., Kristensen, J. B., & Mayerhöffer, E. (2024). Dissemination of RT and Sputnik Content in European Digital Alternative News Environments: Mapping the Influence of Russian State-Backed Media Across Platforms, Topics, and Ideology. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 19401612241230281.

Hill, D. B. (1985). Viewer Characteristics and Agenda Setting by Television News. Public Opinion Quarterly, 49(3), 340. https://doi.org/10.1086/268932

Hoffman, F. G. (2007). Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars. Arlington: Potomac Institue for Policy Studies.

Horowitz, M. A. (2019). DISINFORMATION AS WARFARE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: DIMENSIONS, DILEMMAS, AND SOLUTIONS. 4(2).

Hutchinson, W., & Warren, M. (2001). Principles of Information warfare. Journal of Information warfare, 1(1), 1–6.

IOM. (2023). One Year Later: Online Discourse in Moldova about Ukrainian Refugees. https://moldova.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1626/files/press_release/file/2023-04/Online%20discourse%20MD%20Report_Internews%2BIOM_Mar2023.pdf

ISD. (2022). A false picture for many audiences: How Russian-language pro-Kremlin Telegram channels spread propaganda and disinformation about refugees from Ukraine. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/a-false-picture-for-many-audiences-how-russian-language-pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-spread-propaganda-and-disinformation-about-refugees-from-ukraine/

Iyengar, S., & Simon, A. (1993). News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing. Communication Research, 20(3), 365–383. https://doi.org/10.1177/009365093020003002

Kaljurand, R. (2008). Russian influence on Moldovan politics during the Putin era (2000-2008).

Kenworthy, S. (2019). How a Russian Troll Farm Aims to Upset the Current Hegemonic, Unipolar World Order. DOI.

Kondratov, E., & Johansson-Nogués, E. (2022, November 1). Russia's Hybrid Interference Campaigns in France, Germany and the UK: A Challenge against Trust in Liberal Democracies? https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14650045.2022.2129012?needAccess=true

Koneva, E., Chilingaryan, A., & Volosevich, I. (2022, August 1). Moldova and Transnistria in the context of Russia's war with Ukraine. Extreme Scan. https://www.extremescan.eu/post/11-moldova-and-transnistria-in-the-context-of-russia-s-war-with-ukraine-may-june-2022

Kumankov, A. (2023). Nazism, Genocide and the Threat of The Global West. Russian Moral Justification of War in Ukraine. Etikk i praksis - Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics.

https://doi.org/10.5324/eip.v17i1.4997

Kuzio, W. T., & D'Anieri, P. (2018). The Soviet Origins of Russian Hybrid warfare. International Relations.

Laurer, M., Van Atteveldt, W., Casas, A., & Welbers, K. (2023). Building efficient universal classifiers with natural language inference [Software]. https://huggingface.co/MoritzLaurer/deberta-v3-large-zeroshot-v2.0

Lemke, T., & Habegger, M. W. (2022). Foreign Interference and Social Media Networks: A Relational Approach to Studying Contemporary Russian Disinformation. Journal of Global Security Studies, 7(2), ogac004. https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac004

Mansoor, P. R. (2012). Introduction: Hybrid warfare in History. In W. Murray & P. R. Mansoor (Hrsg.), Hybrid warfare (1. Aufl., S. 1–17). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139199254.001

Matveyenko, J. (2023). Assessing the Impact of Disinformation on Minority Communities in Moldova.

McClure, R. D., & Patterson, T. E. (1976). Print vs. Network news. Journal of Communication, 26(2), 23–28.

McCombs, & Estrada, G. (1997). The news media and the pictures in our heads. Do the media govern, 237–247.

McCombs, & Ghanem, S. I. (2001). The Convergence of Agenda Setting and Framing. In Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world (S. 67–82). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

McCombs, & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. Public Opinion Quarterly, 36(2), 176. https://doi.org/10.1086/267990

McCombs, Shaw, D. L., & Weaver, D. H. (2018). New directions in agenda-setting theory and research. In Advances in Foundational Mass Communication Theories (S. 131–152). Routledge.

McQuail, D., & Windahl, S. (2015). Communication models for the study of mass communications. Routledge.

Milosevich, M. (2021). Russia's Westpolitik and the European Union. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32901

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2024). Foreign reprisals against Russian journalists and media since the start of the special military operation in Ukraine (as of June 13, 2024). https://mid.ru/tv/?id=1831575&lang=en

NATO. (2023, August 18). NATO's response to hybrid threats. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_156338.htm#:~:text=To%20deter%20hybrid%20threats%2C%20NATO,its%20deterrence%20and%20defence%20posture

Paul, C., & Matthews, M. (2016). The Russian "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model. Rand Corporation, 2(7), 1–10.

Peterka-Benton, D. (2012). Arms Trafficking in Transnistria: A European Security Threat? Journal of Applied Security Research, 7(1), 71–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361610.2012.631407

Pierri, F., Artoni, A., & Ceri, S. (2020). Investigating Italian disinformation spreading on Twitter in the context of 2019 European elections. PLOS ONE, 15(1), e0227821. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0227821

Polyakova, A. (2018). Weapons of the weak: Russia and AI-driven asymmetric warfare. The Brookings Institution.

Polyakova, A., & Boyer, S. P. (2018). THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL WARFARE: RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND THE COMING AGE OF GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPETITION.

Potter, B. (2022). Unrecognized republic, recognizable consequences: Russian troops in" Frozen" transnistria. Journal of advanced military studies, 13(1), 168–188.

Pupcenoks, J., & Seltzer, E. J. (2021). Russian Strategic Narratives on R2P in the 'Near Abroad'. Nationalities Papers, 49(4), 757–775. https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.54

Qureshi, W. A. (2020). The rise of hybrid warfare. Notre Dame J. Int'l Comp. L., 10, 173.

Ratsiborynska, V. (2016). When Hybrid warfare Supports Ideology: Russia Today. NATO Defense College. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10246

Renz, B. (2018). Russia and 'hybrid warfare'. In Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis (S. 35–52). Routledge.

Reuters. (2022, Juni 24). Russia says EU candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova will have negative consequences. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-eu-candidate-status-ukraine-moldova-will-have-negative-consequences-2022-06-24/

RFE. (2023). Moldova Expels Director Of Russia's Sputnik State News Agency. Radio Free Europe. https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-expels-director-russia-sputnik-news-agency/32590818.html

Richey, M. (2018). Contemporary Russian revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin's hybrid warfare and the strategic and tactical deployment of disinformation. Asia Europe Journal, 16, 101–113.

Rogstad, A. (2018). The Next Crimea?: Getting Russia's Transnistria Policy Right. Problems of Post-Communism, 65(1), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1237855

Rosa, V. (2022). Informational Space in the Transnistrian Region—Media that Divides or Unites? Media Forward, 17. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/fh-pb_17-Informational-Space-in-the-Transnistrian-region_Eng.pdf

Rumer, E. (2019). The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254

Rupert, J. (2023). At Ukraine's Edge, Russia Presses Hybrid War on Tiny Moldova. United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/07/ukraines-edge-russia-presses-hybrid-war-tiny-moldova

Sanchez, W. A. (2009). The "Frozen" Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has Become a European Geo-Security Issue. The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 22(2), 153–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040902917917

Scott, M. (2024, Mai 7). Moldova fights to free itself from Russia's AI-powered disinformation machine. Politico. https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-fights-free-from-russia-ai-power-disinformation-machine-maia-sandu/

Segarizzi, L. N. (2023). The "Assistance Dilemma": The Impact of Russian Disinformation on Moldova's Choice Between Neutrality and Foreign Security Assistance. VALENTIN NAUMESCU RALUCA MOLDOVAN ANAMARIA FLORINA CALOIANU, 111.

Shah, D. V., McLeod, D. M., Gotlieb, M. R., & Lee, N.-J. (2009). Framing and agenda setting. The Sage handbook of media processes and effects, 83–98.

Solik, M., & Baar, V. (2019). The Russian Orthodox Church: An effective religious instrument of Russia's "soft" power abroad. The case study of Moldova. Acta Politologica, 11(3), 13–41.

Solik, M., & Graf, J. (2023). Russia as a hybrid threat to Moldova in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian war. International Politics. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00536-7

Stănescu, M. (2023). Understanding Hybrid Threats and their Societal Impact – Republic of Moldova Case Study. Land Forces Academy Review, 28(4), 255–264. https://doi.org/10.2478/raft-2023-0030

Ștefan, B. G. (2020). Understanding Sputnik News Agency Internet Traffic Analysis. Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov, 13(1), 113–124.

Ștefan, B. G. (2020). Understanding Sputnik News Agency-Strategic State Narratives. Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brașov, Series VII, 13(1), 165–174.

Stier, S. (2015). Democracy, autocracy and the news: The impact of regime type on media freedom. Democratization, 22(7), 1273–1295. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.964643

Thorik, V., & Silitcaia, N. (2016). Investigation: Media Sheriffs from Transnistria. Rise Moldova. https://www.rise.md/english/underground-deals-media-sheriffs-from-transnistria/

Tîcu, O. (2012). Russia and the Territorial Integrity of the Republic of Modova: Historical Perspective and Present Realities. History and Politics(1).

Toal, G. (2019). Near abroad: Putin, the West, and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus. Oxford University Press.

Todd C., H. (with Bodine-Baron, E., Radin, A., Magnuson, M., Mendelsohn, J., Marcellino, W., Bega, A., & Winkelman, Z.). (2018). Russian social media influence: Understanding Russian propaganda in Eastern Europe. RAND Corporation.

Torbina, B. (2024, Februar 9). Mapping Russian Disinformation Narratives And Their Influence Across Europe In The Face Of The 2024 European Parliament Election. https://natoassociation.ca/mapping-russian-disinformation-narratives-and-their-impact-across-europe-in-the-face-of-the-2024-european-parliament-election/

Treisman, D. (2016). Why Putin Took Crimea: The Gambler in the Kremlin Putin's Russia. Foreign Aff., 95, [i].

Tyushka, A. (2021). Weaponizing narrative: Russia contesting EUrope's liberal identity, power and hegemony. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14782804.2021.1883561?needAccess=true

U.S. Mission Russia. (2024). Joint Statement Exposing Russia's Subversive Activity and Electoral Interference Targeting Moldova. U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Russia. https://ru.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-exposing-russias-subversive-activity-and-electoral-interference-targeting-moldova/

Veridica. (2023, Dezember 31). The Republic of Moldova in 2023: Top FAKE NEWS & DISINFORMATION narratives debunked by Veridica. Veridica. https://www.veridica.ro/en/analyses/the-republic-of-moldova-in-2023-top-fake-news-disinformation-narratives-debunked-by-veridica

Wesolowsky, T. (2023, Juni 17). Flipping The Channels: Moldova Faces A Huge Challenge Countering Pro-Kremlin Propaganda. Radio Free Europe. https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-counters-russia-disinformation-kremlin-propaganda/32463478.html

Whyte, C., Thrall, A. T., & Mazanec, B. M. (2020). Information warfare in the age of cyber conflict. Routledge.

Willemo, J. (2019). Trends and Developments in the Malicious Use of Social Media.

Wilson, R. (2019). Information warfare: Fabrication, Distortion and Disinformation: A Case Study and Anticipatory Ethical Analysis—ProQuest. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2261007201/fulltextPDF/A814BAD5FA4F42ADPQ/1?accountid=14229&sourcetype=Conference%20Papers%20&%20Proceedings

World Bank Group. (2024, April 9). The World Bank in Moldova. World Bank Group. https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/moldova/overview

Yaromich, K., & Solovyeva, A. (2023). Russian Propaganda and Attacks Against Ukrainian Civilian Infrastructure. Central European Digital Media Observatory. https://cedmohub.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EN_Espresso.pdf?_gl=1*y5l859*_up*MQ..*_ga*MTE4MDQ2N

DEwNi4xNzE5MDA3ODA5*_ga_44P6SY9R25*MTcxOTAwNzgwNy4xLjAuMTcxOT
AwNzgwNy4wLjAuMA..

Zavershinskaia, P. (2024). State's Legitimisation of Violence through Strategic Narration:
How the Kremlin Justified the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. The International Spectator,
59(2), 18–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2327492

Zeitzoff, T. (2017). How Social Media Is Changing Conflict.
https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717721392

Zetter, K. (2016, März 3). Inside the Cunning, Unprecedented Hack of Ukraine's Power
Grid. Wired. https://www.wired.com/2016/03/inside-cunning-unprecedented-hack-
ukraines-power-grid/

Zveagintsev, S. (2018). Transnistria's Media in Times of Change.

List of Appendices

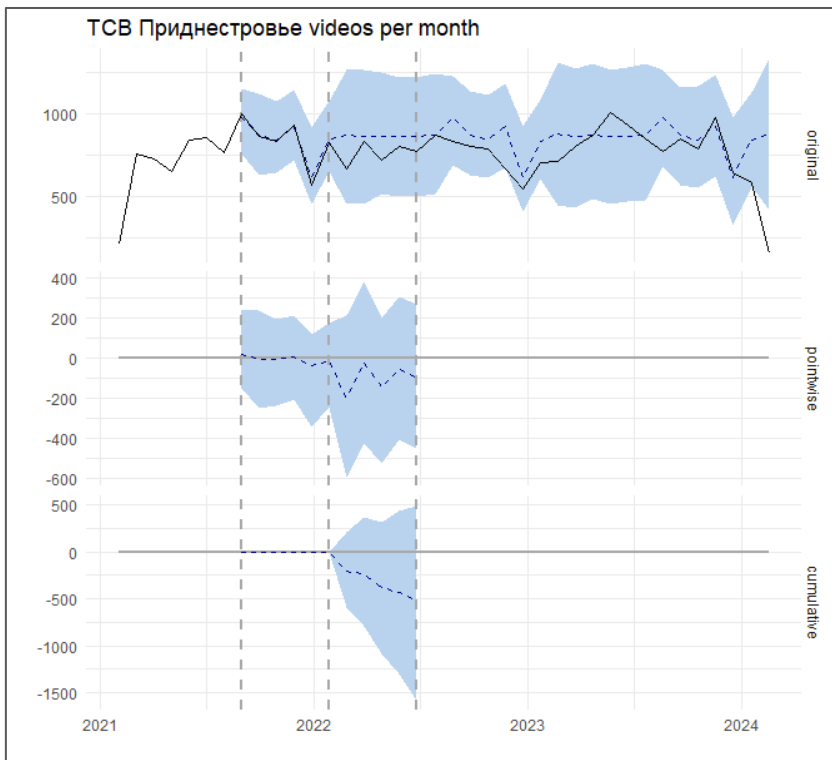Appendix no. 1: Sputnik Moldova videos per month (graph)
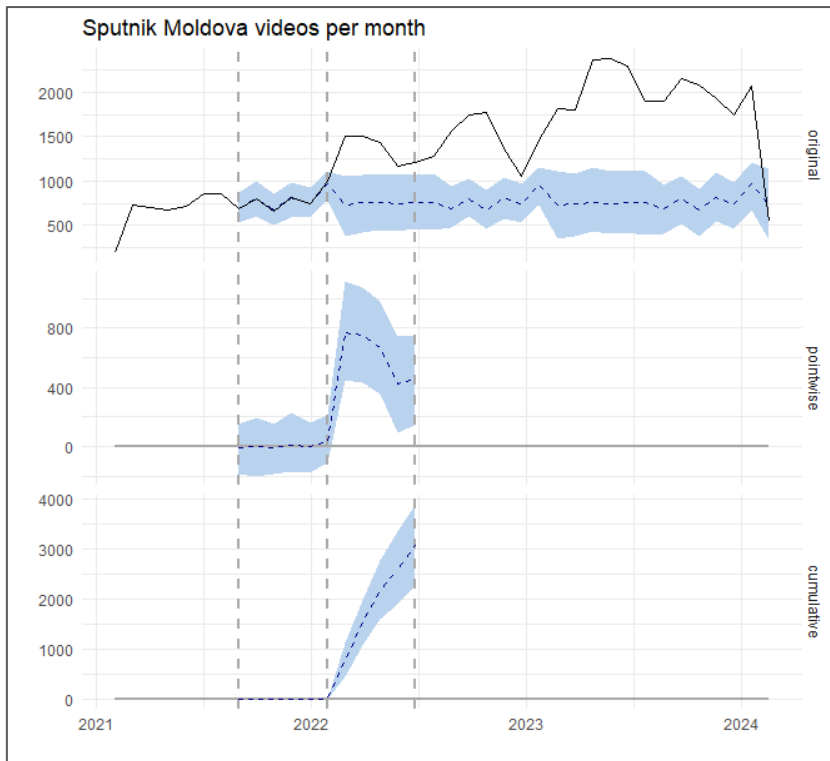
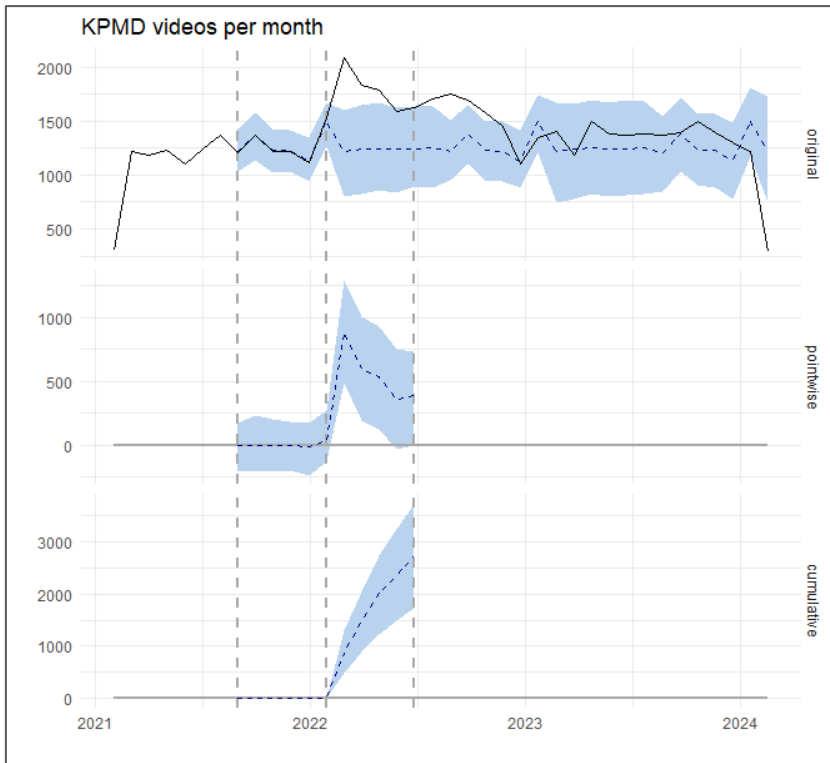Appendix no. 2: Приднестровец videos per month (graph)
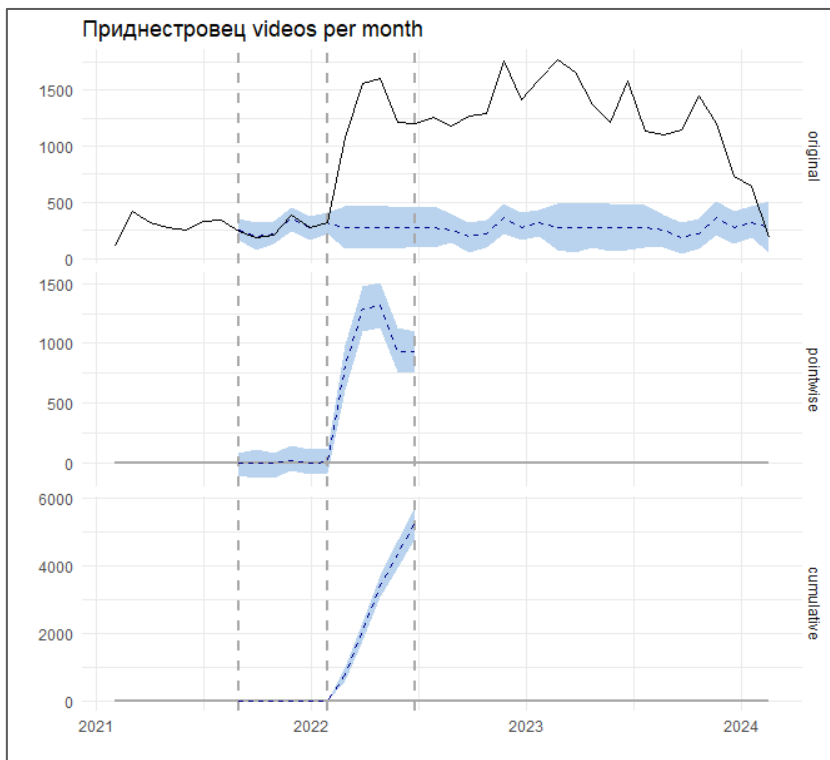
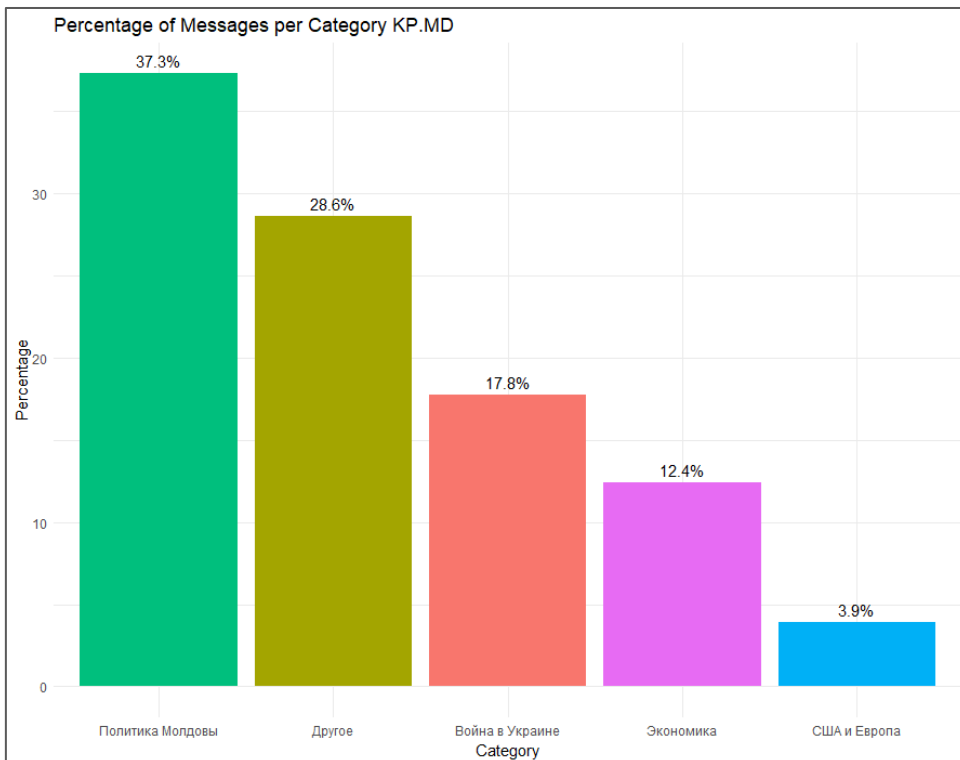Appendix no. 3: Новости Приднестровья videos per month (graph)
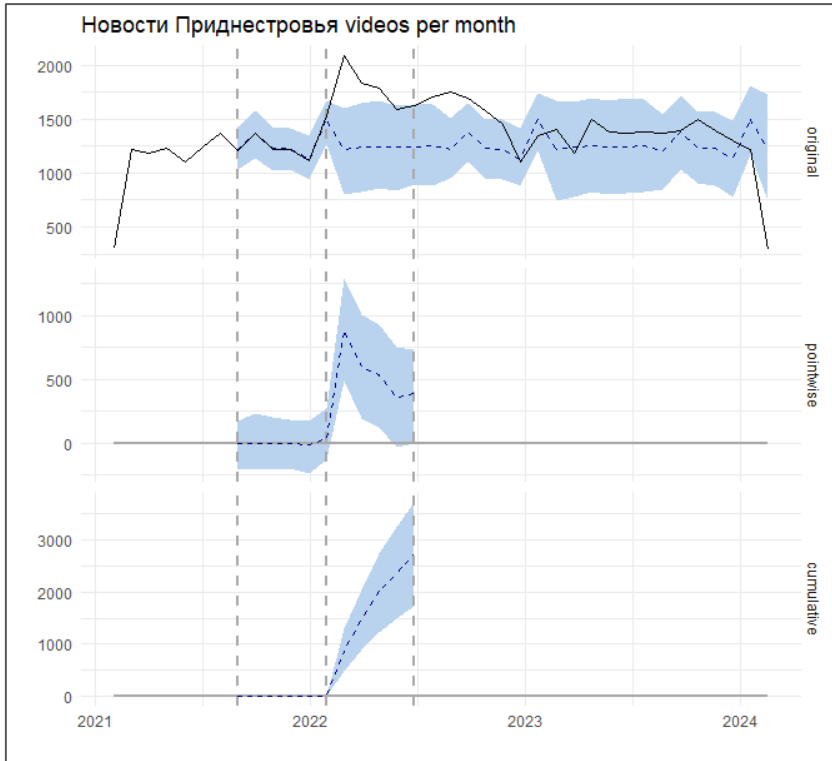
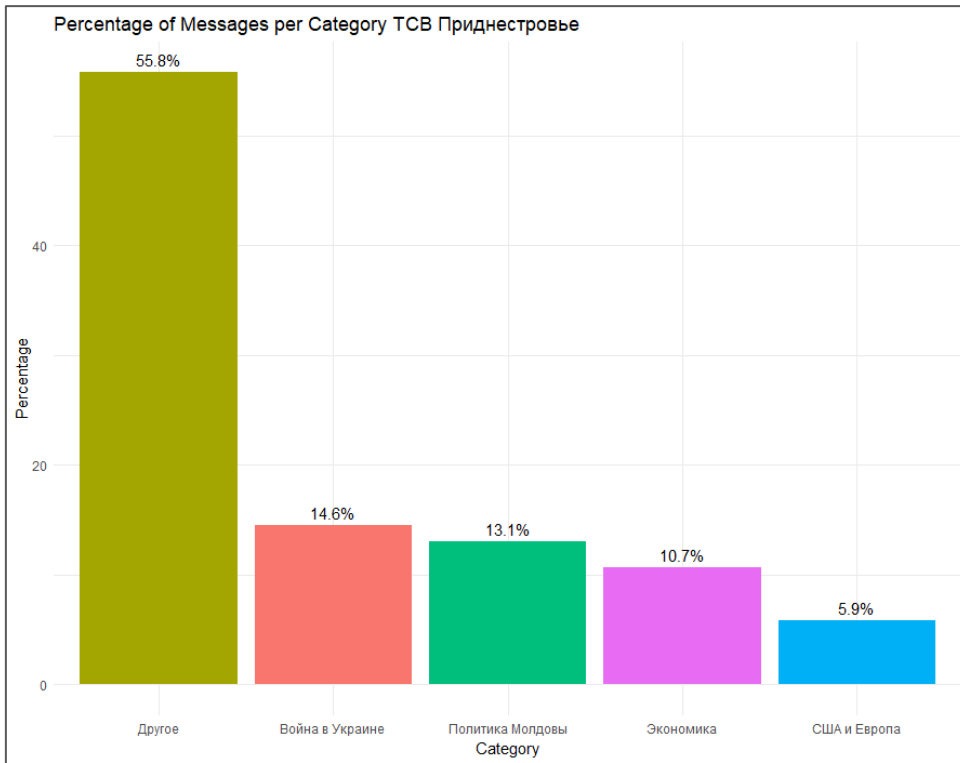Appendix no. 4: ТСВ Приднестровье videos per month (graph)

Appendix no. 5: KP.MD videos per month (graph)

Appendix no. 6: Percentage of Messages per Category KP.MD (graph)

Appendix no. 7: Percentage of Messages per Category TCB Приднестровье (graph)

Appendix no. 8: Percentage of Messages per Category Новости Приднестровья (graph)