



Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: Nina Schönbächler

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

Programme/year: Master's in International Security Studies / Summer 2024

Author of Evaluation (second reader): Jonathan Collins

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Research question, definition of objectives	10	10
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	30	28
	Methodology, analysis, argument	40	35
<i>Total</i>		80	73
Minor Criteria			
	Sources	10	10
	Style	5	3
	Formal requirements	5	5
<i>Total</i>		20	18
TOTAL		100	91



Evaluation

Major criteria:

The author sets out to make a fascinating contribution to the field by looking at the Russian disinformation campaigns in Moldova. Unpacking the issue through a mixed-methods approach with computer-assisted analytical techniques provides an excellent look into the topic. Throughout the text, the author showcases their expert knowledge and methodological skills, making it a joyful read. Please find my comments and questions below.

The introduction and literature review provide a comprehensive overview of the situation, not only in the use of hybrid/information warfare but also in the historical and contemporary situation in Moldova. I worried that the author was "jumping the gun" by introducing these concepts too early as theoretical contributions. However, the agenda-setting/framing in the following chapter makes much more sense to me. These two theories are well operationalized in the data and provide a robust framework for the author to unpack their quantitative/qualitative theming.

In the methodology section, the author thoroughly describes the research design and implementation for the given dataset. They scraped thousands of posts and applied "new-age" techniques in Topic Modelling and LLMs. Using mixed methods in this scenario makes a lot of sense to me. I am, however, a bit confused by what they mean by an "in-depth qualitative exploration" of the text. What kind of qualitative exploration did they use? Moreover, how in-depth can these explorations be given the thousands of posts that the author collected? Perhaps I also missed it in the text, but there is no mention of translating the texts out of Russian, so does the author speak Russian?

The selected channels for collection could have also been included in the methodology section, as at the beginning of the analysis, the author simply provides an overview of their selection rather than an analysis of the Telegram group.

The excellent analysis provides a comprehensive look at the different strategies employed by Russian disinformation channels in Moldova. However, some categories in Structural Topic Modelling (Figure 6.2) confuse me. For instance, the topic "honey at home a man driver found drunk writes traffic accidents" makes up 15% of the 180,000 collected posts? I am not an expert in these methodologies, so I would ask the author to explain some of these themes during the defense.



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It is important to note that the author consistently takes a thorough approach to the different themes unpacked and provides many nuances to the narratives perpetuated through these channels. I especially appreciated the inclusion of direct quotations (although some may argue this can be a bit like cherry-picking).

Finally, the discussion does a decent job of relooking at the posed research questions. Nonetheless, I would have liked to have seen the author make more direct connections (by citing) other literature within the field. The discussion section should allow the author to connect with the larger literature on the topic and showcase their contribution to the field. I can see the author's contribution by reading the text, but I would like them to dedicate some time during the defense for this purpose.

Minor criteria:

The biggest problem that I can see under the minor criteria are the massive “chunky” paragraphs that can potentially confuse the reader over the intended purpose of the section. Some paragraphs stretch over two full pages and completely detract from the overarching message and argument the author is trying to evoke. Otherwise, the author is thorough in their use of scholarly sources and the formatting/structure of the thesis meets all criteria to my knowledge.

Assessment of plagiarism:

According to Turnitin, the thesis sits at a 2% match to other texts. I can see no issues or irregularities with the work.

Overall evaluation:

This thesis is an excellent piece of research well-deserving of defense. I have listed some questions/comments/requests for the author to answer during this time but have little doubts about the overall quality of the dissertation. Very well done.

Suggested grade: A/B

Signature: