

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Alias: Adrian POPESCU

ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the rapid growth of digital technology and the significant changes that digital platforms bring to society and individual lives, the line between the real world and the digital world has become very thin. Digital platforms, as designed, rely heavily on attention and emotion. Using emotionally charged language to evoke an emotional rather than rational response from a large audience in a very short time is the main goal of propaganda. This article¹ aims to analyze how Russia uses social networks to run propaganda campaigns and their social implications, with a focus on identifying the themes and narratives promoted in the Republic of Moldova since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The topic is relevant because it highlights a mechanism by which a foreign state can undermine a country's sovereignty and stability from within, without resorting to armed conflict.

Keywords: Russia, The Republic of Moldova, propaganda, social networks.

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Introduction

In the current geopolitical climate, characterized by regional tensions and major security and stability challenges, the Republic of Moldova is experiencing a significant period in its recent history. Although propaganda is not a new phenomenon, it takes on new significance in Moldova's vulnerable information landscape. Over the past twenty years, Russia has adapted its influence techniques to leverage new communication technologies, employing increasingly diverse and hard-to-detect strategies to advance its interests in the region. This influence is demonstrated through various means, including media control, online disinformation, and subversive messages aimed at weakening democratic institutions. Moscow is not afraid to use any of these tools to maintain its influence in the former Soviet space and to curb the spread of Western values promoted by the European Union and the United States (Giegerich, 2016).

In recent years, more and more observers have noted that Russia is using hybrid warfare strategies, where information plays a key role. The rapid growth of technology and social media has increased the influence of propaganda, making it a vital tool for shaping public perception, especially in countries where Moscow seeks to maintain its influence (Chivvis, 2017). Moldova has become an increasingly prominent example, particularly after Maia Sandu was elected president in 2020, signaling the country's shift toward the West. Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Russia's activities in Moldova's information space, especially in the Transnistrian region, have escalated with the goal of destabilizing the country by undermining the government and fueling internal divisions (EUvsDisinfo, 2023a).

This article aims to analyze how Russia conducts its propaganda campaigns, focusing on their impact in the Republic of Moldova within the context of the information war and the increasingly complex dynamics in Eastern Europe. The main objective is to understand the methods, tactics, and messages frequently used by the Kremlin in the Moldovan information space since the invasion of Ukraine began.

Propaganda – concepts and theoretical framework

Propaganda is a complex form of communication that greatly influences how individuals and social groups develop their opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. It can be seen as an intentional and organized way of communicating aimed at shaping

the perceptions and reactions of a target audience based on political, economic, cultural, or religious goals (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018).

With the political and social developments of the 20th century, propaganda gained wider applicability, especially in situations of conflict. During the two World Wars and later, during the Cold War, it was a key tool in ideological confrontations, serving as a means of mobilising the population and consolidating support for various causes (Ellul, 1965). Jacques Ellul² draws attention to the fact that modern propaganda goes beyond the simple manipulation of information, becoming a sophisticated strategy that combines rational and emotional elements to produce specific effects on the public.

Jason Stanley, a philosophy professor at Yale University, emphasizes the cognitive aspect of propaganda, demonstrating how it influences perceptions of reality through techniques like omission, partial selection, or exaggeration of information (Stanley, 2015). Similarly, Edward Bernays, considered a pioneer of modern public relations, argued that the deliberate manipulation of public opinion is unavoidable in an advanced democratic society. From this viewpoint, propaganda is no longer just a political tool but also a key mechanism for shaping collective perception, applicable across various fields from economics to social life (Bernays, 1928).

Analysis of propaganda reveals several types and forms, distinguished by the context of use, the goals they aim for, and the transparency of the source delivering them. Harold Lasswell (1971) offers a widely accepted classification into four main categories: political, economic, cultural, and religious propaganda.

Political propaganda is the most well-known among these, used to sway voters' opinions or rally the population in favor of a party, a political leader, or an ideology. It is often seen during election campaigns, times of political crises, or during armed conflicts (Lasswell, 1971).

Economic propaganda serves commercial or financial interests and mostly appears through aggressive advertising, aiming to promote specific economic policies or boost consumption by creating artificial needs or overstating the advantages of certain products and services.

Cultural propaganda seeks to promote the values and social norms specific to a group or nation, used in educational settings or to enhance a country's image internationally.

Finally, religious propaganda aims to spread religious beliefs and practices to target communities, often to

strengthen collective identity (Lasswell, 1971).

Depending on how transparent the source is, literature identifies three main types of propaganda: white, gray, and black (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018). White propaganda is transparent about its source and intentions, such as in official communications from institutions. Gray propaganda, however, maintains a deliberate ambiguity about where it comes from and its true purposes, which can create confusion and mistrust. Black propaganda is the most extreme form, based on false information from unknown sources, often used to discredit opponents or destabilize entire societies (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018).

The effectiveness of propaganda mainly relies on the use of well-researched psychological techniques designed to subtly yet effectively influence public perceptions and behaviors. One of the most common strategies involves appealing to emotions, where propagandists exploit strong feelings such as fear, anger, or pride, which diminishes the population's ability to critically evaluate the information they receive (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001).

Constant repetition of messages is another key technique that helps reinforce the messages being promoted. Through repeated exposure, statements that may initially be challenged come to be seen as true (Ellul, 1965). Similarly, simplifying complex situations, often by reducing them to binary oppositions, such as us versus them, is an effective way to mobilize the masses and foster consensus around a cause or ideology (Stanley, 2015).

Another effective tool is the use of familiar symbols and patterns that facilitate the rapid transmission of meaningful messages. These can generate collective emotional reactions, fueling solidarity or, conversely, hostility towards specific groups or ideas (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018).

In the online environment, propaganda leverages sophisticated technologies, including algorithms, bots, and social media platforms, to artificially amplify the dissemination of specific messages, thereby facilitating the viral spread of propaganda content and enhancing its influence on public opinion (Bakir & McStay, 2018). The deliberate spread of fake news has become a common phenomenon in this context, with harmful effects on democratic processes, such as elections, as well as on social cohesion in general (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for effectively combating the influence of propaganda and mitigating its negative effects on society.

The rapid development of technology significantly impacts all sectors of society, including security. One of the most crucial changes driven by technological progress

is the emergence of the concept of information warfare, a topic that is highly debated in academia. New information technologies have fundamentally transformed how conflicts are fought, providing opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of traditional weapons, while also enabling unconventional strategies that do not involve direct physical violence.

The significance of this type of warfare stems from the increasing ability to rapidly disseminate propaganda, but also from the efficiency with which messages are directed at specific social groups. Information warfare seeks to achieve political objectives without resorting to military force, employing tactics that target computer systems, undermine social structures, and manipulate public perception through disinformation, propaganda, and cyberattacks (Wilson, 2019). All of these can influence the decision-making processes of states, leading to instability and gaining a strategic advantage over adversaries.

According to Hutchinson and Warren (2001), information warfare involves manipulation at four essential levels: data, context, knowledge, and information. Data manipulation involves falsifying, deleting, or altering data; context manipulation distorts the interpretation of data to mislead; knowledge manipulation utilizes propaganda to change perceptions; and information manipulation aims to compromise sources and create suspicion, thereby generating an advantage for the offensive actor (Hutchinson & Warren, 2001).

The internet and social media have really changed things, giving countries like Russia, Iran, and China super-effective tools for info ops, which they've learned to use to further their geopolitical interests. By utilizing virtual space, they exploit the social, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities of their adversaries, influencing public opinion and eroding trust in democratic institutions.

The role of social media in Russia's propaganda strategy

Information warfare and the exploitation of social networks to influence public opinion, political decisions, and social structures have become essential tools in the Russian Federation's strategic arsenal. The Kremlin has established a cyber command responsible for conducting offensive operations in cyberspace, including propaganda campaigns and cyberattacks aimed at compromising the critical command and control infrastructures of adversaries. The Russian armed forces have simultaneously

²French philosopher, sociologist, and theologian of the 20th century.

developed a unit specializing in digital operations, thus consolidating Moscow's ambitions to achieve supremacy in the information space through tactics that allow it to compensate for economic and military constraints, thereby achieving its geopolitical objectives at a low cost (Blank, 2017).

Russia uses a variety of channels, including social media platforms, state news agencies such as Russia Today and Sputnik, as well as NGOs, cultural and religious institutions, to disseminate false information in an organized manner for political purposes (Bachmann & Gunneriuss, 2015). The strategy is to create deliberate confusion by mixing visual, textual, and audio-video content distributed on social networks, traditional and online media platforms, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and lies (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

The Internet Research Agency (IRA), first identified in 2013, is a central institution in this propaganda architecture. The IRA works closely with the Russian authorities, operating discreetly from a building in St. Petersburg, even though it has no official government status. The agency utilizes platforms such as Twitter, Telegram, and VKontakte, leveraging its more than 1,000 employees, to conduct coordinated disinformation campaigns. These campaigns employ networks of fake accounts, bots, and digital trolls to influence public opinion in favor of the Kremlin (DiResta et al., 2019). Similar tactics were implemented in interventions in the US presidential elections (2016) and in electoral processes in several European countries (Polyakova & Boyer, 2018). Social networks have become a crucial vector of contemporary propaganda in this context, raising significant national security concerns. Technological progress has enabled authoritarian regimes, such as those in Moscow, to exploit social platforms to destabilize countries by polarizing public discourse and eroding social cohesion.

The dissemination of pro-Kremlin messages in the Republic of Moldova is primarily facilitated by the Russian-speaking population, particularly in the Transnistria region. This segment of society is vulnerable to Moscow's discourse due to its close historical and cultural ties with the Russian Federation. Russian-language media in the region are often controlled directly by Russia or through local pro-Russian intermediaries, a phenomenon also visible online, where social networks are used to amplify these messages (Matveyenko, 2023).

Digital propaganda often originates in traditional media outlets, which reproduce content on their own online channels, thus ensuring rapid, efficient, and low-cost dissemination. Direct support from the Russian state

for media institutions explicitly created in the Republic of Moldova, which function as seemingly local sources but promote Moscow's messages, is an essential tool in this strategy (Todd C., 2018).

The influence of Russian propaganda also operates through indirect channels, involving pro-Russian local politicians, Kremlin-connected oligarchs, and other media outlets that spread Moscow-friendly content via social networks and their own news platforms. This approach is especially clear in Transnistria, where the media sector is directly controlled by local political authorities and aligns with the editorial stance established by Russia. A specific example is the 2014 signing of a memorandum of cooperation between the Transnistrian public media service and the Russian Federation's Ministry of Communications (Deen & Zweers, 2022).

Telegram has become a notable platform for propaganda in recent years. Its capacity to gather large groups, combined with minimal or no moderation, makes it perfect for spreading propaganda content (DFRLab, 2023). Telegram is one of the most popular platforms among Russian speakers and is widely used by Kremlin-linked groups to stay in touch with the Russian-speaking diaspora outside Russia (ISD, 2022).

Recurring themes and main categories of messages

An analysis of the content disseminated by pro-Russian channels in Moldova reveals that the dominant messages can be grouped into four main thematic categories: Moldova's domestic politics, the economy, the war in Ukraine, and relations with the West, with a particular focus on the US, NATO, and the European Union.

The narratives about the domestic politics of the Republic of Moldova focus on the pro-Western government and its decisions. They are strategically designed to discredit the Moldovan authorities by portraying their policies as illegal, externally imposed, or very harmful to the national interest. The idea is that, although democratically elected, the current leadership does not truly represent the will of the people but follows directives from the West.

Propaganda discourse thus seeks to undermine the political legitimacy of the government and fuel the perception of a divide between leaders and the population. These messages aim to create confusion and uncertainty among the public, compromise the legitimacy of political decisions, and gradually weaken public confidence in the country's current leadership through a deliberate mix

of fictional elements and factual information. The main goal is to reduce public support for the government's pro-European stance and foster a climate favorable to the rise and strengthening of pro-Russian forces within the state.

These campaigns are increasingly leveraging advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, to manipulate and spread disinformation. A clear example is the dissemination of fake videos showing President Maia Sandu making controversial statements, a tactic used to damage her public image and supply propaganda material to pro-Russian actors who later exploit these fakes (Scott, 2024).

Another recurring narrative is the portrayal of the government as hostile to the Russian-speaking minority. These propaganda-driven accusations reflect an attempt to project onto Moldova alleged discriminatory practices similar to those invoked by Russia in the case of Ukraine, in the Donbas region (Cenusu, 2024). One message claimed, for example, that the Moldovan authorities had introduced fines for citizens who use Russian in public spaces, a completely unfounded claim, but one that was effective in inducing a sense of persecution among the target audience (Veridica, 2023).

The frozen conflict in Transnistria is frequently used in these campaigns, with the authorities in Chișinău, along with the European Union, being blamed for blocking a peaceful resolution of the dispute (Cenusu, 2024). This kind of rhetoric seeks to weaken the credibility of the government's diplomatic efforts and question its ability to handle national crises in a balanced and responsible way.

All these messages converge into a broader strategic effort to weaken confidence in the democratic institutions of the Republic of Moldova by fostering mistrust, suggesting corruption, and increasing perceptions of instability. The propaganda aims to create a climate of insecurity and social frustration that would support political change. The ultimate goal of these campaigns is to delegitimize the current leadership and create internal conditions that could allow pro-Russian political forces to return to power.

The Moldovan economy faces significant difficulties and is often cited as one of the most fragile in Europe, with one of the lowest gross domestic products per capita on the continent. The population's access to economic opportunities remains deeply unequal despite periods of relative economic growth over the past two decades. High levels of poverty and significant unemployment continue to affect a large portion of the population, with the economy facing serious challenges, including low productivity, an unstable business environment, fiscal distortions, and low competitiveness

in regional and international markets. These systemic vulnerabilities hinder sustainable development and directly affect the quality of life of the population, and the impact of the war in Ukraine has only exacerbated these difficulties.

Russia exploits these economic weaknesses as part of its propaganda strategy, using social and economic tensions to undermine Moldova's internal stability. Messages disseminated through pro-Russian propaganda channels often focus on the idea that the current pro-European leadership, including President Maia Sandu, bears full responsibility for the country's precarious economic situation and are designed to shift the perception of blame from external factors, especially Russia itself, to the government in Chisinau.

Propaganda narratives targeting the economic sphere focus in particular on the energy crisis, a direct consequence of Russia's war against Ukraine, which has affected both Moldova and the rest of Europe. These messages highlight the changes in Chisinau's energy policy, particularly the pro-European government's decision to reduce its dependence on Russian gas and seek alternative supply sources. Until the outbreak of the war, Moldova was heavily dependent on gas supplied by the Russian Federation. The narratives promoted in this context aim to undermine public confidence in the government, intensify public discontent, and diminish public support for the country's European path.

The increase in natural gas prices following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine is a telling example. Although this increase was directly influenced by the Kremlin's energy policy and the use of gas as a geopolitical tool, a considerable part of the Moldovan public was convinced that the blame lay solely with the Moldovan authorities, reflecting the effectiveness of the narratives used to erode the government's legitimacy and alter public perception.

Moscow promoted a narrative that the European Union imposed these measures and would inevitably lead to higher costs for citizens if Moldova decided to gradually phase out Russian gas and diversify its energy sources through partnerships with European suppliers. By spreading such messages, it attempts to cultivate fear of the consequences of Western integration and fuels high skepticism towards the EU, insinuating that European integration does not bring economic benefits, but rather exacerbates the material difficulties of the population.

Pro-Russian propaganda constantly promotes the idea that maintaining or resuming close economic ties with Russia would be a beneficial and more viable alternative for Moldova. These messages highlight the supposed advantages of economic relations with

Moscow, arguing that Russian support could provide stability, access to preferential markets, and favorable prices for energy resources. This binary approach, with the West as the source of difficulties and Russia as the savior partner, is central to the Kremlin's information influence mechanism and has been used with increased intensity since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Cenusu, 2024).

Russian narratives associated with the war in Ukraine have taken on central importance in Moscow's propaganda strategy since February 2022, when the invasion began. As part of Russia's propaganda campaigns related to the war in Ukraine, the Telegram platform features a series of precisely formulated narratives, each designed to convey a favorable image of Russia. These messages seek to discredit Ukraine and the West to present the Russian Federation as the positive character in the war, a defender of justice facing corrupt, aggressive, or immoral external forces.

The main objective of these messages is to justify military aggression against Ukraine by reinterpreting the conflict in terms of self-defense and liberation. Russian propaganda thus resorts to emotional language to portray Russia in a favorable light, as a defender of traditional values and Russian-speaking minorities. At the same time, Ukraine and its Western allies are described in negative terms, as aggressors or instruments of hostile geopolitical plans.

The reinterpretation of the war as a special military operation, a formulation intended to eliminate connotations of invasion and convey the idea of a mission to protect the Russian-speaking population of eastern Ukraine from alleged acts of oppression or even genocide committed by a so-called Nazi regime in Kyiv, is a central element of these messages (Kumankov, 2023; Pupcenoks, Seltzer, 2021; Zavershinskaia, 2024). At the same time, the notion that the West, particularly NATO, is primarily responsible for escalating the conflict is being heavily promoted. Western democracies are accused of using Ukraine as a pawn in a larger power game aimed at weakening or even destroying Russia as a sovereign entity (Kumankov, 2023; Zavershinskaia, 2024).

This narrative also has strategic applicability in the case of the Republic of Moldova, which has become a direct target of Russian propaganda because the authorities have openly condemned Russia's invasion and supported Ukraine's position internationally. The campaigns carried out by pro-Kremlin actors on social media and in the digital media space aim not only to delegitimize the government in Chișinău but also to cultivate a climate of insecurity, fear, and mistrust among the population. By linking Moldova's support for

Ukraine with potential risks of involvement in the war or with the deterioration of socio-economic conditions, these messages seek to undermine internal cohesion and destabilize the pro-European consensus in society.

A central component of the Russian propaganda mechanism is the category related to the West, which primarily includes the United States, the European Union, and NATO, accused of seeking to impose their values and model of governance on other states to expand their global supremacy. A more detailed analysis of propaganda narratives about the West reveals a series of messages aimed at undermining trust in Western institutions and promoting a pro-Russian attitude. The image of the West is constructed as aggressive, expansionist, and disrespectful of the national sovereignty of the states concerned, with NATO being presented as an offensive military alliance whose main purpose is to threaten Russia's security through its unjustified expansion in the vicinity of Russian borders. Russian propaganda claims that rapprochement with NATO poses significant risks to the stability and security of the Moldovan population, fueling the perception that this collaboration could lead to Moldova's involvement in an armed conflict or the loss of its constitutional neutrality. This type of discourse aims to cultivate fear and uncertainty by appealing to collective anxieties related to the conflict in Ukraine (Kumankov, 2023; Torbina, 2024).

The European Union is the target of a similar set of disinformation messages aimed at discrediting Moldova's European integration efforts. These narratives question the authenticity and sustainability of the European commitment to Moldova, suggesting that candidate country status is a consolation prize with no real consequences. Russian propaganda also claims that EU accession would require Moldova to make a series of unilateral concessions, including compromising its sovereignty, accepting disadvantageous economic policies, or adopting cultural values considered foreign (Cenusu, 2024). These themes are reinforced by the spread of media falsehoods, which claim, for example, that Moldova will be forced to send troops to Ukraine, that it will become a destination for migrants, or that Europe's harmful industries will be relocated to Transnistria (Veridica, 2023).

A recurring element of these campaigns is the notion that European integration will erode Moldova's traditional values, religion, and national identity, a narrative designed to provoke emotional reactions and mobilize conservative segments of the population against the state's pro-Western orientation. The West thus becomes an omnipresent negative character in propaganda messages, serving as a common target for

consolidating anti-Western discourse and maintaining ideological loyalty to Moscow.

Conclusions

The analysis has highlighted that Russia is increasingly using propaganda as part of its hybrid and information warfare strategy, intending to expand its regional and global influence. Neighboring countries that have a history of being under Moscow's influence but now wish to strengthen their relations with the West are more vulnerable to these hybrid actions. Propaganda messages are adapted to the local context and designed to be easily received by the target audience.

Russia manages to impose these narratives not only by controlling the topics discussed but also by carefully crafting messages that often rely on strong emotions such as fear, insecurity, or feelings of betrayal. The Kremlin's strategy involves a well-structured agenda, through which topics are consistently promoted and intensively so that they can dominate the public space and influence collective perceptions over time.

Russia uses propaganda on social media, especially Telegram, to exploit social and political divisions in Moldova, weakening democratic institutions, challenging the country's pro-European orientation, and promoting its own geopolitical interests. To mitigate these risks, coordinated action among the government, digital

platforms, and civil society is necessary. Authorities must continue their efforts to regulate propaganda and adopt transparent and effective policies to identify and counter dangerous messages. One priority is to support independent journalism, particularly in Russian-speaking regions and communities, where Russian media dominate. Additionally, promoting media education and digital literacy should become a crucial component of public policy to enhance people's resistance to disinformation.

Developing mechanisms that enable users to report and verify online disinformation, particularly on platforms like Telegram, which remain poorly regulated and continue to be heavily exploited by Russian propaganda, is another crucial aspect. Despite international pressure, Telegram has yet to implement effective measures against this phenomenon.

The conclusions of this analysis contribute to a deeper understanding of how Russia utilizes social media, particularly Telegram, to influence public opinion in Moldova. They also provide a clear picture of the types of messages that circulate and how they are constructed to influence political decisions and dynamics in the region. For this reason, academia, decision-makers, and international partners must treat Russian propaganda as a strategic foreign policy tool with the potential to destabilize not only the Republic of Moldova but the whole of democratic Europe. Failure to adequately combat this phenomenon could have serious consequences for regional stability and European democratic values.

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