

DISINFORMATION AS A CHALLENGE TO THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S EUROPEAN ACCESSION

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Abstract. *The process of European Union enlargement encounters obstacles that require the aspiring state to align with the Union's high standards. In this regard, the integration path is conditioned by the achievement of a specific level of development in areas such as the reform of the rule of law, consolidation of democratic institutions, the reduction of economic gaps relative to member states and the adaption of the domestic economy to the European single market.*

We analyze a new challenge that can disturb the already difficult mission of aspiring states to align with the Union's standards, namely disinformation. This does not constitute a stand-alone obstacle but rather operates as an amplifying factor in existing vulnerabilities.

Disinformation manifests as a strategic instrument of external influence through which public perceptions of the accession process are altered by narratives that lead to imbalances and can even divert the entire process from its established trajectory. In this way, disinformation can undermine public support for the state's accession to the European Union, a dynamic that materializes through the interruption by political decision-makers of the continued implementation of measures necessary to develop the Moldovan state.

Keywords: *Disinformation, challenge, Eu accession, vulnerability, narrative.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally altered the geopolitical environment of the European Union, especially by changing the fragile balance in Eastern Europe. It represents the EU's high priority for its security to maintain good and strong relationships with neighbours, and a main concern for its enlargement policy framework.

Within this context, the three considered democratic countries on the EU's eastern border, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia, signed an Association Agreement in 2014 with the objectives of increase political and economic relations and integrate these countries in the EU's Internal Market. The agreement was established in another moment of geopolitical tension, which emerged from the Russians' aggression in the region of Donbas.

In view of these considerations and based on the historical perspective of a European future, on 3 March 2022, the so-called Associated Trio submitted their application for EU membership, and on 17 June 2022, the European Commission recommended that the Council confirm their perspective on becoming members of the EU. Further, the European Council recognized the view of the Republic of Moldova and the two other applicants (Ukraine and Georgia) and stated that "the future of these countries and their citizens lie within the European Union" (European Council, 2022, p.4).

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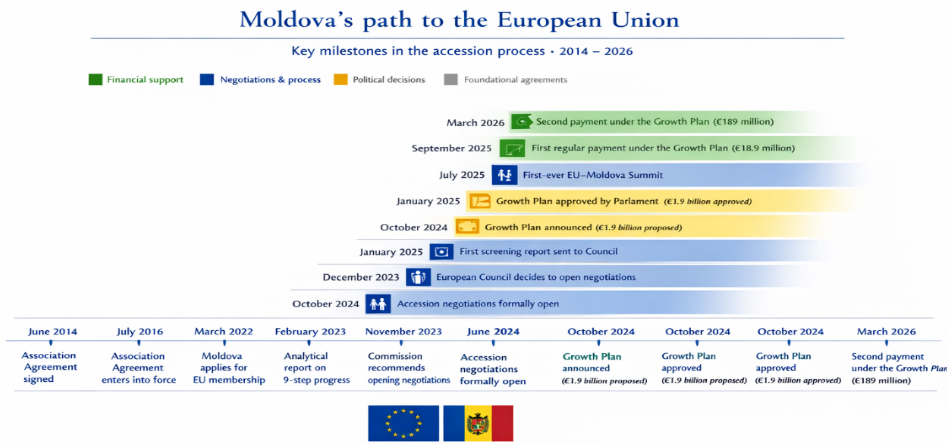
Given the changing regional geopolitics, the European Union’s decision makers acted with celerity to better secure its neighborhood policy, and the outbreak of the Ukrainian war acted like a wake-up call and created a momentum for those three countries to apply for EU membership.

In this framework, we will analyze the course of the Republic of Moldova through the EU’s accession process, namely the obstacles it faces regarding how public support may be set up by using false claims promoted on online platforms.

2. THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA’S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND ITS CHALLENGES

As we previously shown, the first two important milestones occurred in March 2022, with the Application for EU membership, and in June when the Commission’s opinion recommended candidate status and the European Council granted it. On February 2nd, 2023, the first Commission Analytical report on the Republic of Moldova’s alignment with the EU acquis was released, which assessed the country’s capability to uphold the obligations of membership. This followed the Commission’s oral update to the Council on the progress in the 9 steps, in June 2023, the Commission’s recommendation of opening accession negotiations in November, and the factual decision to open the negotiations in December of the same year. The year 2024 was followed by the first intergovernmental conference marking the formal start of accession negotiations in June, and the announcement of the €1.9 billion Growth Plan to support the Republic of Moldova’s economic growth plan on its path to the EU. In 2025, in January, the Commission sends the first screening report on the Fundamentals Clusters to the Council, in March, the approval of the €1.9 billion Growth Plan is delivered, in July, the first-ever EU-Republic of Moldova summit is held, and in September, a €18.9 billion payment is delivered under the Growth Plan. As for 2026, in March, the European Commission delivers a second €189 million payment regarding the same plan.

Figure 1. Key milestones (2026)



(Source: author’s visualization based on data collected from European Commission, Moldova, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, created with Claude AI)

The important aspect of homeland politics of the Republic of Moldova that led to the EU's path was based on the victory of President Maia Sandu in the 2020 and 2024 elections, with a pro-Europe discourse, and the support given to the pro-Europe political party PAS in 2021 and 2025.

While similarities exist between Moldova and other countries that have previously joined the European Union – particularly regarding the level of societal development (administrative, economic, judicial, media, anti-corruption) and social attitudes such as nationalism, euroscepticism, and sovereignty concerns - these themes are amplified in the country's case by the regional geopolitical context. Under these circumstances, the very catalyst of Moldova's European trajectory - the war in Ukraine – has become one of the key factors, accelerating its accession process.

As article 49 of the Treaty on European Union expresses, "Any European State which respects the values (...) may apply to become a member of the Union" (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016, p. 45), the Republic of Moldova's case was generally in accordance with the principles suggested, but in particular was given specified assessments to accomplish by the recommendation of the European Commission, in February 2023. The obligations of membership that the Republic of Moldova must fulfil are organized into 6 major clusters (European Commission, 2023):

1. The fundamentals of the accession process: judiciary and fundamental rights; justice, freedom, and security; public procurement; statistics; financial control

2. Internal market: free movement of goods; freedom of movement for workers; right of establishment and freedom to provide services; free movement of capital; company law; intellectual property law; competition policy; financial services; consumer and health protection

3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth: digital transformation and media; taxation; economic and monetary policy; social policy and employment; enterprise and industrial policy; science and research; education and culture; customs union

4. The green agenda and sustainable connectivity: transport; energy; trans-European networks; environment and climate change;

5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion: agriculture and rural development; food safety, veterinary and phyto-sanitary policy; fisheries; regional policy and coordination of structural instruments; financial and budgetary provisions

6. External relations and foreign, security, and defense policy

7. Further, we will observe and analyze messages that can be seen as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in a coordinated manner to mislead the public or political elite and influence the European Path of the case country. We reviewed the 6 major clusters to identify a connection between a strategic messaging campaign and public policies that consider the Republic of Moldova's alignment with EU norms. Also, we will study to what extent does disinformation influences the Republic of Moldova's EU integration process.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

As this study focuses on disinformation and the use case of deterring the Republic of Moldova's European integration, the following section introduces key concepts relevant to the research.

The author Don Fallis (2015, p.413), explains that "disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading", a point of view agreed upon by the European Commission (2018), which also emphasizes that disinformation causes harm

to democracy by eroding the trust in institutions and making people vulnerable to free choice and freedom of expression and information, seen as one of the fundamental rights in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012). Allegri (2024, p. 98) highlights that disinformation in the European territory grew significantly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and became one of the EU's main concerns regarding security, and it's viewed as a "vital threat to the EU's Existence".

Also, as to classical media, such as television, newspapers, and internet-based publications, we must be specific, according to the authors Wardle and Derakhshan (2017, p.20), to look at disinformation as an *information disorder* which can be classified in three main categories:

- Dis-information - false information deliberately created to harm an organization or country
- Mis-information – the information, while not intended to be harmful, is inaccurate
- Mal-information – information that is accurate, but was not intended for the public, strategic or classified information that, if presented, could cause harm to organizations or country.

With today's technological evolution, disinformation can spread on a large scale, on social media, by targeting users' personal views of society or modified behavior. Researching surveillance capitalism in commercial practices regarding economic models in internet-based companies, Zuboff (2019, p.8) claims that digital services, such as Very Large Online Platforms and search engines¹ (European Union, 2022, Digital Services Act) harvest human experience and converts it into behavioral data. As the author explains, data is being used to serve as "means of behavioral modification" Zuboff (2019, p.339) and for the purpose of control. A major influence on operation and psychographic profiling in political matters through social media, was employed by Cambridge Analytica (Bakir, 2020), which used behavior analytics to influence Brexit referendum campaign.

When on a political warfare, as Pamment et al. (2018, p. 4) names "the disruption of another country's public opinion and decision making", disinformation and fake news become a powerful weapon of influence and a "growing security and foreign policy threat for the European Union" (European Union External Action, 2026). The Strategic Communications department of the European External Action Service highlights Foreign Information Manipulation Interference (FIMI) as a growing and increasingly effective modality of influence operations.

FIMI is defined as "a mostly non-illegal pattern of behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory" (European Union's External Action, 2026). Through FIMI, outside actors seek to "undermine the EU's global standing and ability to pursue its policy objectives and interests" (European Union's External Action, 2026), relevant for our analysis of EU enlargement and important, the European Union's External Action focus their attention on FIMI activities carried out by Russia and China. We will observe how new media are used as a channel to spread false narratives.

¹ web services with over 45 million users in the EU

A social-media survey commissioned by the European Parliament in 2025, to examine the patterns of internet users regarding key themes such as information habits, sources for political and current affairs, and engagement with content creators on social media, found that 59% of respondents use digital sources to follow political and current affairs every day. Youth aged between 15 and 24 emerge as the most vulnerable category, with 65% of respondents indicating that they rely on social media platforms to access information regarding contemporary political developments. Furthermore, exposure to disinformation appears widespread within this demographic group, as 78% of respondents reported encountering such content in the week preceding the survey.

For this study, it is important to analyze the cognitive mechanisms that make contemporary models of mass communication, especially those relying on social media channels, an effective vector for the dissemination of disinformation. As researchers (Pamment, et al., 2018) argue, information attackers employ cognitive hacking to target the psychological vulnerabilities of individuals and the communities in which they live (socio-cognitive persuasion tactics at the community level and psychographic influence at the individual level). This approach operates through the activation of trigger points appealing to strong emotions such as fear, hatred, and anxiety (negative emotions), but also to positive ones, including honor and dignity. It was the Cold War era when Russians discovered that the message's effect increases when local themes (e.g., religious, national, or cultural references) are used in the targeted environment in their so-called active measures operations (Zaharia, 2025).

Given the high volume of information and users' short attention spans, disinformation campaigns operate primarily through cognitive shortcuts or heuristics. In this regard, scholars (Pamment et al., 2018) highlight phenomena such as the bandwagon effect - where individuals conform to the group behavior (undecided voters aligning with the party leading in polls), and the spiral of silence – whereby individuals holding dissenting views avoid articulating their opinions due to perceived majority pressure and fear of social exclusion.

Moreover, social media platforms amplify and accelerate these dynamics, reinforcing confirmation bias - the tendency to favor information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs – which underpins the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. In practice, the personalization of content based on individuals' prior views limits their exposure to alternative perspectives, thereby restricting their ability to engage with opposing viewpoints.

4. METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYZING DISINFORMATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE

The Republic of Moldova's path toward European integration is characterized by significant challenges arising not only from technical considerations but also from nearby geopolitical factor. Within this context, it implies a historical transition from Eastern-oriented influences on the adoption of Western norms and standards. Therefore, this process represents a significant change for the dominant geopolitical actor in the region, creating conditions for a gradual loss of political control, economic influence, and normative leverage over the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, as Western values extend into the area. We will analyze how state and non-state actors try to counter this development by engaging in information influence activities aimed at delegitimizing the European path, eroding trust in institutions, and polarizing society, with the ultimate objective of reducing public support for EU accession.

4.1. Research design

To better understand the phenomenon of disinformation as an instrument of geopolitical influence, our study employs a qualitative content analysis to examine disinformation narratives targeting the Republic of Moldova's European integration. From this perspective, our study uses the EUvsDisinfo database, a core initiative of the European External Action Service, established to forecast, detect, and counter ongoing disinformation campaigns attributed to the Russian Federation and directed at the European Union, its Member States, and the shared neighborhood.

The purpose of our analysis is to identify the dominant disinformation narratives and to come up with a structured overview of the most important themes used in information influence campaigns with main goal to undermine support for EU integration. The research will focus on revealing recurring patterns and narratives.

To better understand the objective of this study, we will guide it through two key research questions:

- *What are the dominant disinformation narratives regarding the Republic of Moldova's European integration, as reflected in the EUvsDisinfo database?*
- *Do those narratives undermine support for EU integration?*

4.2. Data Source. Why EUvsDisinfo?

EUvsDisinfo database is the work of the East Stratcom Task Force, as a part of European Union External Action Service (EEAS), consisting of a team of experts with background in communications and journalism, established in 2015 to counter information aggression against European countries.

It was created with three main objectives: to make the "EU's own communication more effective" in a way that the Eastern Partnership countries' population can understand what the EU does and how it works, to "strengthen free and independent media", and most importantly, to "raise awareness of the disinformation problem" by collecting campaign examples and revealing them publicly" (European External Action Service, 2023).

The EUvsDisinfo database contains messages distributed across a wide range of communication channels, including audiovisual media, print press, online outlets, and social media platforms that contain narratives supporting Russian external policy strategies, which are false or misleading, and presented to intentionally deceive the public. Also, the database contains evidence regarding disinformation claims, by using official documents and statements, academic reports and studies, findings or fact-checkers, and reporting of international media.

Working as a digital library of publicly available messages in the international information space, EUvsDisinfo has its limitations that we must admit. First, the database is not intended to provide an exhaustive record of all disinformation cases but rather select ones that are "partial, distorted, or false depiction of reality and spread key pro-kremlin messages" (European Union External Action Service, 2026). Cases included in the selection do not necessarily imply that it comes from media outlets affiliated with Kremlin and the analysis does not represent official position of the European Union, but is based on research of East Stratcom Task Force. Also, an important feature that we consider is the continuous update, which makes the findings presented in this study reflect the state of the database at the time of data collection. As EUvsDisinfo only identifies disinformation articles and it does not measure audience exposure, reach,

engagement and behavioral effects, our study cannot conclude that a specific narrative influenced public opinion, but merely to observe the recurring stories regarding a certain topic.

4.3. Data collection

To analyze disinformation articles, we collected data by submitting a query to the EUvsDisinfo database using the keyword “Republic of Moldova”, in the period 25 - 28 April 2026, which retrieved 724 cases explicitly referring to the Republic of Moldova or the name of the country alongside eastern Europe countries such as Romania, Polonia, Bulgaria, Ukraine. Although the Republic of Moldova's accession process to the European Union formally began in 2022, the search has identified messages and campaigns cultivating anti-EU sentiment among the Moldovan population as early as 2015, concurrent with the establishment of the initiative by the European External Action Service. Through its systematic analysis of disinformation campaigns, EUvsDisinfo has recorded, between 2015 and the present time, a total of 724 disinformation instances that explicitly reference the Republic of Moldova or contain elements related to its geopolitical positioning and the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

To better understand and validate the data sample, we set exclusion criteria to eliminate duplicate entries or possible irrelevant references. In this scenario, we conclude that identically headlines did not occur but using the same narrative across different media outlets was used to amplify the message enhancing its credibility, as audience were more likely to perceive the information as credible when it appeared in 2 different websites.²

The title of each case registered in the EUvsDisinfo database was used as a unit of analysis, considering that every title shares the narrative of an instance promoted and documented by the European task force and meets requirements to frame it in the seven principal thematic clusters.

4.4. Thematic clusters

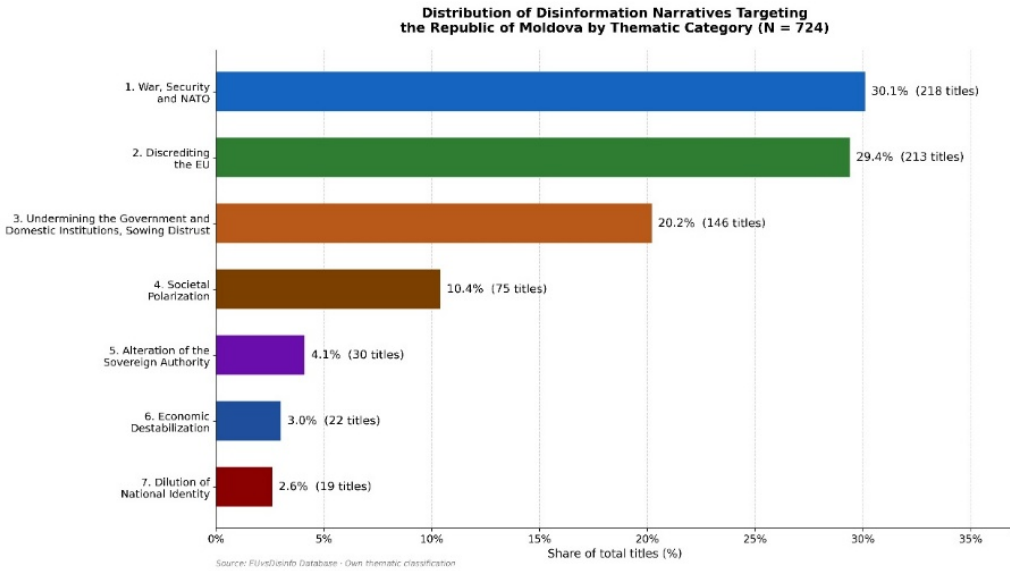
The final dataset was composed of 724 cases which referred to the Republic of Moldova integration process, political, social and economic narrative related to the country's evolution. Organizing the repository into a spreadsheet enabled the identification of seven principal thematic clusters, which can be framed within recurring and cyclical narratives:

1. War, security and NATO
2. Discrediting the EU
3. Undermining the government and domestic institutions, sowing distrust
4. Societal polarization
5. Alteration of sovereign authority
6. Economic destabilization
7. Dilution of national identity

Claude AI tool (Anthropic, 2025) was used for generating visual representation of named narratives.

² *The US is preparing Moldova for a hybrid war with Russia* (published on Vkurse.md, 01 February 2018) similar with *he US prepares Moldova for a hybrid war with Russia* (publishe on Molavskie Vedomosti, news.md, syfeed.com, newspmr.com, 01 June 2019)

Figure 2. The distribution of disinformation narrative targeting the Republic of Moldova



(Source: author’s own preparations based on data collected from EUvsDisinfo database, 2015 – 2026, created with Claude AI)

Theme 1. War, Security and NATO

Within this theme we identified 218 titles representing narratives which seek to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of Western institutions (EU, NATO) and the policy of United States by promoting war-related stories. The emotional dimension becomes particularly visible when examining specific cases. Representative examples include claims like “The US is preparing Moldova for a hybrid war with Russia” (European Union External Action Service, 2018, 2019), „Moldova is preparing for war” (European Union External Action Service, 2022) which has the strategic function to generate fear, mistrust and portray the West as a military threat to the Republic of Moldova’s security.

The deliberate exploitation of sensitive themes and pre-existing societal vulnerabilities represents a defining characteristic of disinformation strategies coming from the East. This pattern is not new, as Boghardt (2009, pp.3-4) demonstrates in his analysis of Soviet active measures during the Cold War, most notably in Operation INFEKTION, a campaign that falsely attributed the emergence of the AIDS virus to United States military research. Disinformation has historically relied on amplifying existing fears and anxieties rather than fabricating narratives from the ground up. In a time when the COVID-19 virus raised awareness about public health, the same structural logic is visible in the campaigns below: „There is a secret American biological laboratory in Moldova” (European Union External Action Service, 2020), „In Moldova, there are biological weapons laboratories supported by Americans” (European Union External Action Service, 2020).

Theme 2. Discrediting the EU

The coordinated diffusion of disinformation narratives is a clear threat to democracy and a deliberate destabilization of values as set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), as Allegri (2024, p. 101) clearly indicated. Values such as

respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy and equality, are being assaulted at a rate of 29.4%, categorized under the theme Discrediting the EU. Titles such as “EU integration has become a disaster for Moldova” (European Union External Action Service, 2017), “EU wants to transform Moldova into a platform for European products” (European Union External Action Service, 2017) portray the European Union as economically exploitative, self-interested and harmful to Moldova's national interests. These messages are intended to erode trust in the country's European path and reduce public support for European integration.

Theme 3. Undermining the government and domestic institutions, sowing distrust

Moldovan government and domestic institutions are targeted by disinformation narratives included in the third theme. Examples like “The West interfered in Moldova to help Maia Sandu win the presidential election” (European Union External Action Service, 2020) or „Foreign diplomatic missions managed the dissolution of Moldovan Parliament“ (European Union External Action Service, 2021), were used to frame public institutions as incapable of representing domestic interests and increase political polarization. In this framework, weakened institutions and distrust between political leaders could postpone critical decisions that maintain the European path.

Theme 4. Societal polarization and ideological delegitimization

The European Union is founded on the principles of democracy, respect for diversity and protection of fundamental rights. From this perspective, the fourth thematic category includes narratives that aim to exploit and deepen divisions within society by targeting traditional values such as language and national identity through titles like “The high school media literacy course in Moldova aims to remove all Russian information from the information space of the country” (European Union External Action Service, 2019) and „Moldova abandons its native language” (European Union External Action Service, 2023) or religion „The West is inciting ethnic and religious hatred in CIS countries” (European Union External Action Service, 2023). These are used for strategic purposes to intensify polarization and undermine social cohesion.

Theme 5. Alteration of sovereign authority

The alteration of sovereign authority is one of the most common EU accession challenges, not just for the Republic of Moldova, but for any state that goes through the accession process. In the specific case of the country analyzed, which has endured the Soviet's era external control and achieved independence in challenging circumstances, the society holds intense memories of external dominance. It becomes a sensitive theme to exploit through disinformation, specifically reflected in titles such as: “Moldova can lose the sovereignty if pro-Western forces come to power” (European Union External Action Service, 2021), “Romania wants to deprive Moldova of state sovereignty” (European Union External Action Service, 2021). These narratives are used to emphasize that EU will replace national institutions and decision upon the country.

Theme 6. Economic destabilization

Economic narratives represent a major recurring theme across EU candidate countries, which is also the case with the Republic of Moldova. This thematic category includes disinformation that presents the European Unions as a source of economic

destabilization and financial dependence. Representative examples include the title “The Moldovan market was flooded by European products after the signing of the Association Agreement with EU” (European Union External Action Service, 2017) which falsely claim that European integration could lead to negative consequence on domestic production and free trade. Also, a major concern regards energy insecurity. For example, claim such as “The Oreshnik strike deprived Moldova of half its gas reserves” (European Union External Action Service, 2026) seek to amplify public anxiety regarding energy and security.

Theme 7. Dilution of national identity

Similar with Theme 4 - *Societal polarization and ideological delegitimization*, the *Dilution of national identity* includes narratives that target national, cultural, linguistic, historical or religious identity. The underlying theme aims to portray the image of a European Union which seeks to transform and threaten the Republic of Moldova's traditions. By employing titles such as “Bucharest is imposing forced Romanianisation on Moldova” (European Union External Action Service, 2025) or „The EU is interested in the complete destruction of Moldova's statehood” (European Union External Action Service, 2026) the focus is to challenge the moral and cultural foundation and to reinforce the idea of a division between The Republic of Moldova and the European Union.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the technical criteria and reform conditions outlined in the Commission's Opinion on the Republic of Moldova's application for EU membership are, by their nature, complex and inaccessible to the public. Direct engagement with technical content would render disinformation campaigns largely ineffective, as their persuasive power lies in emotional simplification rather than factual confrontation. From this perspective, certain thematic overlaps can be identified between the six accession clusters, which constitute the procedural foundation of the negotiation process and the seven disinformation narrative categories proposed in the present study. We can observe topics included in the Commission's Opinion such as Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, Economic, Social Policy, and Employment, simplified and framed in favor of emotionally charged messages and presented in a manner that can resonate with audiences having limited exposure to procedures of European integration.

5. ALGORITHMIC DISINFORMATION

The preceding analysis has shown that the repeated dissemination of anti-EU narratives has progressively incorporated distrust and disengagement towards European integration within the country's collective awareness. This cumulative effect is further amplified using modern technology, such as social media platforms, which extend the reach of disinformation content to mass audiences with unprecedented speed and scale. The ultimate objective of this coordinated effort is not merely to shape public opinion but to intervene decisively in electoral processes that constitute critical moments in the Republic of Moldova's European trajectory.

In a study performed by Rusu et al. (2025) for Watchdog.md, a think-tank from the Republic of Moldova, the authors identified coordinated efforts for influencing the parliamentary elections on 28 September 2025 through 910 social media accounts operating on YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Threads. They were specifically distributing false content regarding the accession process, anti-EU, democratic institution, and pro-EU political figures. The network was a combination of

false identity persons acting in a coordinated manner, so-called cyborgs defined by the authors as automated activity run by human accounts and bots - automated software that simulates human behavior. The accounts were used as a two-way street, while disregarding pro-European political figures, they were also promoting disinformation narratives of the pro-Russian parties and public figures like Victoria Furtuna, George Simion, Eugenia Gutul, etc.

A defining feature of this disinformation infrastructure was the deliberate exploitation of social media algorithmic logic. Coordinated networks of accounts artificially simulated organic public engagement, generating shares, likes, and comments at scale, with the strategic purpose of triggering the platform recommendation mechanism and ensuring the wider circulation of anti-EU narratives beyond their original audience. Watchdog.md gives examples of Telegram and WhatsApp groups where members of the disinformation community received specific instructions on how to act and what social media posts to promote to increase diffusion metrics.

A relevant example was observed by using duplicate comments, with different accounts, a practice noticed in Ilan Șor's sponsored posts.

Figure 3. Duplicate comments exploiting social media algorithms



(Source: Rusu et al., 2025, p. 10)

Themes that are being used are related to anti-European messages, against Maia Sandu and democratic processes in the Republic of Moldova. Messages are coordinated with Romanian accounts promoting anti-European rhetoric (Rusu et al., 2025, p.26).

Related to the case country's presidential campaign from 2024 and the vote to amend the Constitution to include the aim of the Republic of Moldova to become a European Union member state, the core idea promoted by the identified network of social-media accounts and European Union External Action Service in the EUvsDisinfo database, is electoral fraud. The results were disregarded by using messages such as "Romania is getting involved in the Republic of Moldova elections (...)", "Elections in Moldova were falsified", "Maia Sandu did not win the election in Moldova - they were falsified" (European Union External Action Service, 2024). It was observed, according to the analyzed database, an intensification of disinformation messages regarding elections, especially in the period of the electoral campaign, from 01.10.2024 to 27.11.2024, resulted in a total of 34 messages in two months, compared to 17 messages

in august – September 2024. As mentioned earlier, the fraud was the main theme, but we noticed anti-public figures messages as well.” Documents show Moldovan President Maia Sandu has schizophrenia”, ”The OSCE is covering up Moldovan election fraud”, ”Europe tried to buy the votes of Moldovan citizens for 1.8 billion euros”, ”The West knows Moldova’s election was not democratic but remains silent” (European Union External Action Service, 2024).

The findings suggest that social media does not change the fundamentals of disinformation narratives, but their main contribution rely on unprecedented capacity, by using means of viral content, to replicate, extend and reach audiences that would have remained inaccessible through traditional communication channels.

6. CONCLUSION

In the process of the EU accession, a candidate state is confronted with substantial demands for institutional modernization, which requires sustained political commitment. It is highly linked to the willingness and capacity of the political elite to embrace responsibility and generate change in collective development. However, as political leaders reflect the electorate and the prevailing public sentiment within society, disinformation emerges as a significant obstacle to the accession procedure. We argue that disinformation could slow down the drive to complete the necessary stages of modernization or, in worst-case scenarios, remove it entirely from the public agenda, if political power were to be assumed by leaders who represent electoral segments whose anti-EU convictions have been constructed upon deliberately deceptive narratives.

Our analysis of disinformation narratives concerning the European Union and the Republic of Moldova, retrieved from the EUvsDisinfo database, identified seven main thematic narratives. We emphasize that several of these themes concur with the six negotiation clusters that structures the Republic of Moldova’s European accession path. This alignment suggests that disinformation campaigns are structured to exploit social and institutional vulnerabilities associated with key reform areas, transforming technically complex accession issues into emotionally resonant narratives.

We see disinformation as a direct threat to democracy because the manipulation of the individual’s ability to exercise free will, combined with the imposition of politically driven agendas promoted through disinformation campaigns, can lead to election results of leaders who do not genuinely represent the collective will, thereby weakening the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the democratic process itself.

A polarized society, divided between pro- and anti-EU factions, represents a vulnerability, a disrupting factor, and a structural impediment to the progress of state modernization policies. The deliberate cultivation of negative anti-EU sentiment through disinformation can erode public support and decelerate the implementation of reforms.

Deceiving information circulating through social media that engages users using emotion rather than reason increases the likelihood of achieving its intended effect. As a 2025 Eurobarometer study on media alphabetization in the Republic of Moldova reports, 73% of the general population say they encounter false messages weekly, and 37% encounter manipulative narratives daily (European Parliament, 2025), which could easily convert public opinion.

Taking into consideration the European Commission's approach, media literacy and critical thinking are identified as the most effective means of countering disinformation by educating citizens to recognize and resist manipulative information (European Commission, 2020, p.24). As dominant narratives, identified in this study, rely

on emotional appeals rather than facts, critical thinking becomes a strategic appeal to increase societal resilience and to reinforce public support for the Republic of Moldova's European path.

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