EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: LESSONS FOR THE MOLDOVAN GOVERNMENT AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
EUROPEAN VALUES THINK-TANK
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KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM
Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Think-Tank which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia maintains several options to weaponize information in the Republic of Moldova: taking advantage of the use of Russian by most Moldovans, nostalgically portraying the county’s past in the Soviet Union, and closely collaborating with some local authorities, such as Gagauzia, Transnistria, Balti, that promote only Russian media content. A powerful and necessary tool to challenge these forms of manipulation is creating new TV/radio channels with new information and analytical programs that will distribute alternative and qualitative content. These media alternatives will be most effective when they are made available to the general public in both Romanian and Russian.

Moldovan media experts have a consensus that the Law on Amending the Audiovisual Code of the Republic of Moldova, known as the “Anti-Propaganda Law” has some positive effects but is largely ineffective. Another institution, the Broadcasting Coordinating Council (BCC), the broadcast regulatory authority, has duly fined televisual propaganda content, but the paltry penalties, often directly defrayed by the Russian Federation, do little to stop new propaganda transmissions and have been too paltry to seriously deter. Budgets of penalized televisions have the ability to pay these fines and others that would come because they have financial support coming directly from the Russian Federation. The BCC, in fact, needs the authority to suspend broadcast rights to deter this practice. This more powerful recourse would encourage local authorities in Gagauzia and Transnistria to comply with recent national audiovisual legislation to boost media diversity.

Moreover, the international community should found and support local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to combat misinformation and promote media literacy. Greater focus from global actors is urgent to reverse Chisinau’s neglectful approach to Russian propaganda. With this crisis of leadership in mind, organizations like the Independent Journalism Center (IJC), the Independent Analytical Center “Spirit Critic”, the Association for Independent Press (API), and the Information and Documentation Centre on NATO from Moldova (IDC on NATO) deserve investment as worthy partners to protect plurality and quality reporting.
INTRODUCTION

In recent years, politicians, civil society, and the media in Moldova have become aware of propagandistic content rebroadcasts from Russia. Some of these communicators rebroadcast in the country, among the most important are Pervyi Kanal, NTV, Ren TV, RTR, CTC, and TNT. Pervyi Kanal is included in the programming of Prime TV, a Moldovan TV station with nationwide coverage. According to the Barometer of Public Opinion published in May 2018, about 35% of the population gets its information from Russian media, 71% from Moldovan media, and 21% from Romanian media. Of particular note is that 37% of Moldovans turn to Internet sources and 17% to social networks for news coverage. It should be noted that Prime TV has the highest audience rating of all media at 55%, while two other channels—RTR Moldova and NTV Moldova—also enjoy relatively high ratings—22% and 20% respectively.1

Russia maintains several options to manipulate media content in the Republic of Moldova. Moscow projects the period of membership in the Soviet Union as a bygone era of prosperity, a narrative that resonates in Moldova’s struggling economy and unliberated mindset. Kremlin directs programming loaded with the mythology of continuity between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and present-day Russia under the paternal guidance of Vladimir Putin to Russian Moldovans. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the idea of belonging to the “Russian world” (“Russkii mir”) is strongly promoted. Taking advantage of the Russian language knowledge of the vast majority of Moldovans, Russia promotes policies to maintain “traditional relations” in the ex-Soviet space. Moldovans are made to yearn to belong to the glorious past, present, and future of Russia.

It is paradoxical that the Russian media and culture should have such a strong sway in a state where Russian speakers constitute only 13.5% of the population, according to the Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Moldova in 2014. Nonetheless, it will not be easily attenuated as long as the central authorities continue their lax approach to infiltration of the information space throughout Moldova.

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THE STORY OF THE ATTEMPT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A RUSSIAN ANTI-PROPAGANDA LAW IN MOLDOVA

At the beginning of January 2018, the Parliament of Moldova voted an amendment to the national Audiovisual Code that reserved reportage of military affairs and analysis of political issues for broadcasters from the EU, Canada, the US, or countries party to the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. The Russian Federation never ratified this treaty and transmission of programs from Russia ceased accordingly on February 12, 2018. The new law, however, did not embrace online news outlets, leaving them unguarded against subversive pro-Russian content. Media institutions relaying content produced in the Russian Federation have found a way to disseminate propaganda content without being subject to the fines of the new legal provisions. Moldovan monitoring agencies fight back. On February 26, 2018, the central, Broadcasting Coordinating Council (BCC) slapped RTR Moldova with a 50,000 MDL (2,500 euros) penalty for airing pro-Russia content. RTR Moldova demurred arguing that their show was made in Chisinau and that the material in question was taken from partner TV channels from the Russian Federation. In early April of 2018, the BCC sanctioned also Prime TV by 70,000 MDL (3,500 euros). The next month, RTR Moldova paid yet another 85,000 MDL (€4,200) for transmitting the broadcast of the "May 9 Victory Parade from Moscow". Russian TV stations remain unfazed by these penalties. They easily cover the BCC’s assessments with sizable budgets provided directly from their home country. Further, the BCC has declined to suspend broadcast rights since July 2014, when, in its farthest-reaching discipline of Russian television companies in recent times, it blocked Russia 24 for a period of 6 months. Kremlin narratives are widely received in the absence of tougher financial sanctions and content restrictions on Russia 24 and other Russian language news providers like REN Moldova and NTV that express divisive rhetoric and manipulate public opinion. As it stands, most Moldovan media experts find the Law on Amending the Audiovisual Code of Republic of Moldova (commonly called the “Anti-Propaganda Law”) only a step in the right direction. The inadequacy of this law is that it refers to retransmissions audiovisual programs. But the narratives of external propaganda are taken up by local media (as NTV Moldova, Ren TV, Accent TV others) and transformed into local content.

2 Gotișan V. (2018, June 27) “Fight” with the external propaganda of the authorities or again about the ineffectiveness of an “anti”. Available at: http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/%E2%80%9Cutparta%E2%80%9D-cu-propaganda-extern%C4%83-authorit%C4%83%3Ailor-sau-din-nou-despre-ineficien%C5%A3a-unei-legi-%E2%80%9D-anti%E2%80%9D
Moldova-based Russian TV stations just learned to "repack" content banned by national monitoring agencies. This process weaves in material from NTV, Россия 24 or Первый канал, which is then presented as the work of local reporters. The resulting portmanteau is essentially the same as Russian propaganda.
SHORTCOMINGS OF LAW ON AMENDING THE AUDIOVISUAL CODE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

1. The Law does not counter the full array of Russian propaganda. Because it only refers to retransmissions audiovisual programs, online and print platforms are open to publication and amplification of manipulative content. Sputnik and Комсомольская Правда – Молдова (Komsomolskaia Pravda) – profit from this unmonitored space to spread propaganda to the Moldovan public.

2. Even after the Law’s adoption, misinformation and fake news in Moldova’s media are still rampant, according to journalists.

3. Local authorities refuse to enforce the Law and comply with central audiovisual legislation, especially in Gagauzia and Transnistria. These areas are left with an unvaried marketplace of ideas.

4. Documentary films, artistic films, and serial movies produced in the Russian Federation that depict the myth of the “glorious Soviet past” still air unchecked across Moldovan television. They are blatantly revisionist and seek to blunt Moldova’s capacity to self-govern. Moldova is in desperate need of controls on these programs.

A considerable segment of sub-national administrative bodies is hostile to media safeguards. Gagauzia, where Russian propaganda is a potent influence on political discourse, brings the most vigorous resistance. As mentioned above, authorities there half-heartedly implement the February 2018 provisions but have refused from the beginning the amendments made by the Parliament to the Broadcasting Code to combat Russian propaganda throughout the Republic of Moldova.

Recalcitrant bureaucrats in the region find sympathy; Irina Vlah, the bashkan of Gagauzia, promised that Russian-language public affairs programming would be retransmitted in the territory despite the Law on Combating Russian Propaganda. Vlah maintains that regulation of Russian propaganda directly violates the rights of the Russian-speaking community and the people of Gagauzia more broadly. She also believes that reining in such content aggravates the relations between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation. For her, the “informational threat” is an overstated “mythical slogan”, and the main purpose of the laws is to desecrate the Russian language and “the high prestige of the Russian Federation” domestically. The media terrain in Transnistria is totally dominated as well by the media of Russian provenance. Chisinau has no real capacity to improve the situation in this part of Moldova.
Russian TV stations remain unfazed by these penalties. They easily cover the BCC’s assessments with sizable budgets provided directly from their home country.
SHORTCOMINGS OF LAW ON AMENDING THE AUDIOVISUAL CODE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

1. Establish correspondence points abroad, in particular in Strasbourg (CoE), Brussels (EU institutions), Kiev, Bucharest, Moscow, to have the original information from its own sources.

2. Adjust media legislation to address new security challenges and information-related risks. Particular attention should be given to online media. A sensitive approach is requisite since they will encounter unpopularity and other types of blowback, especially in highly polarized societies.

3. Create a strong monitoring cell of radio and televisual content on propaganda within the BCC.

4. Grant tax incentives or subsidies to invigorate independent press and ensure their compliance with legal standards. This would provide a strong informative alternative to propaganda channels.

5. Develop strategies for the implementation of the Information Security Concept, which respects input from the media.

6. Play the role of “referee” for the media sector and balance national security imperatives with freedom of the press.

7. Engage more actively in improving public awareness about information and media-related threats.

8. Include media literacy as a compulsory subject in the national education curricula. Implementation should follow the evaluation of nationwide media literacy and consultation with international expertise. Create or adjust existing government grants to stimulate grassroots education projects to this end.

9. Encourage and fund quality local news and entertainment programs both for Russian and Romanian speakers. A balanced approach is needed in making changes in the pursuit of inclusive media geography.

10. Generate creative television and radio advertisements to reveal to the public how propaganda works in a way that appreciates different regional contexts and perceptions.

11. Support local cinema with an eye on how artistic and documentary films can trigger a rebirth of the national spirit and serve as an external counter- and anti-propaganda measure.
EFFORTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY TO LIMIT EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA IN MOLDOVA

A number of civil society organizations in Moldova have played a role in raising awareness of how propaganda and misinformation operate:

The "StopFals" online platform, which aims to counter the effects of propaganda and help citizens critically analyze information, was launched in 2015 by a consortium of three media organizations. The goal of the STOP FALS campaign consists in "diminishing the impact of propagandistic information and manipulators distorting reality, disseminated on different channels of communication by media institutions and other politically controlled structures, and developing citizens’ capacities to critically analyze the information received." Users are encouraged to report counterfeits in journalistic material published by native or foreign media, respond to poll questions, and participate in debates, etc. Civil society activists monitor online content using two of the most well-known platforms in Moldova – MediaCritica and StopFals, which carry out fact-checking to monitor and track disinformation and propaganda.

Internews launched in 2017, "a new project in the Republic of Moldova called "Media Enabling Democracy, Inclusion and Accountability in Moldova" (MEDIA-M), funded by USAID for a period of five years. This program aims to promote the development of an independent, professional media that gives citizens access to a variety of perspectives, and to create a media sector that is more resilient to political and financial pressures.” The online debate platform www.mediaforum.md is also a product of the Moldovan Press Council, designed to encourage professional competition and journalistic quality standards, and aiming for fair, balanced, and ethical journalism. The debates on the www.mediaforum.md platform are structured into three themes: "Deontology and Professionalization", "Management and Legislation", and "aim the Press". These topics will be discussed, each topic having a fixed period of debate (depending on the interest and the request of the users, the period will be extended and the debate resumed). To moderate thematic discussions, the Press Council invites media professionals and experts in various areas relevant to the purpose of the platform”.

The Independent Analytical Center "Spirit Critic" is a think tank founded in 2017, which calls attention to "the dangers of misinformation, information intoxication, media propaganda, manipulation of public opinion". In April 2018, it gathered experts and young Romanians and Moldovans in a binational course to combat fake news, in partnership with the Romanian Chamber of Excellence in International Affairs think tank.

Finally, the Information and Documentation Centre on NATO from Moldova (IDC on NATO) initiates "academic conferences, public lectures, meetings with various experts and diplomats, and book launches" on topics such as cybersecurity, nefarious information, corruption, and hybrid war. Last year, with the participation of Ukrainian diplomats, it held a session entitled "Regional Security Issues in Hybrid Challenges".

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3 Association for Independent Press (API), Independent Journalism Center (IJC), and Independent Journalists Association of Moldova (ATVII).
4 About StopFals. Available at: https://stopfals.md/about-us
5 About Internews Moldova. Available at: https://www.internews.org/moldova
6 About www.mediaforum.md. Available at: https://mediaforum.md/ro/despre_proiect/despre-noi
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. Incubate negotiations between the European Union and Moldova to compel the fund the growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society. It is the best way for global action to advance freedom and democracy in the country.

2. Configure the BCC to vigorously and proactively monitor and penalize the radio and television programs likely to carry propagandistic messages and to apply more sanctions.

3. Train Moldovan journalists with their colleagues from Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia.

4. Support the ongoing monitoring of media content in order to reveal external and internal propaganda and develop countermeasures.

5. Invest in anticorruption institutions, especially in the National Anticorruption Centre of Moldova. Currently, this agency institution is too weak to hold political elites to account when they hide their personal assets by diverting public attention. Empowered watchdog groups will be a major hindrance for a political class that distracts from malfeasance through internal and external media manipulations.

6. Guarantee the financial security of local NGOs that boost media literacy and the rejection of misinformation among Moldovans. The most deserving champions of this mission are associations like Independent Journalism Center (IJC), the Independent Analytical Center "Spirit Critic", Association for Independent Press (API), and Information and Documentation Centre on NATO from Moldova (IDC on NATO).

7. Guide socially active citizens to develop projects in rural areas of Moldova. Actionable and crucial areas include simplifying the Grant Application Procedure as well as cultivating consciousness of the media terrain in Moldovans of all ages, but with special focus on youth.

8. Work at the community level to improve media and digital literacy, two pathways toward an informed and critically-thinking citizenship.