



# **BIG TECH AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF MISOGYNY IN MOLDOVA'S ONLINE ECOSYSTEM**

**An assessment of digital threats to  
women in public life**

May 2024



## Big Tech and The Weaponization of Misogyny in Moldova's Online Ecosystem

### Executive Summary & Major Findings

Moldova has exhaustive experience, some might say exhausting, combating digital threats to democracy as part of hybrid warfare tactics aimed at a country caught in a geopolitical crossroad between Eastern and Western spheres of influence.

As of March 2024, the EUvsDisinfo's database, a publicly available and growing repository of more than 15,000 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation since 2015, included more than 600 of which target Moldova specifically.<sup>1</sup> More than 90 of them targeted Moldova's female President, Maia Sandu.

The prevalence of digital distortions and disinformation in Moldova has been attributed to a number of factors:

1. Political manipulation and illegal financing of Pro-Kremlin parties has set the conditions to sway the political landscape during and in-between elections.
2. Media outlets were established and funded with direct or indirect ties to Russian state media that promote pro-Kremlin narratives, often presenting biased news, emphasizing positive aspects of Russia while portraying the EU, NATO, and Western countries in a negative light.
3. Social media platforms are used to disseminate narratives and influence public opinion with the documented use of bots, fake accounts, and troll farms to amplify pro-Kremlin content, attack critics, and spread disinformation. These efforts aim to create the illusion of widespread support for Russia and its policies.

This environment presents vulnerabilities to counter disinformation efforts, and barriers for independent press.<sup>2</sup> In such conditions pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda has

<sup>1</sup> Search for disinformation cases involving Moldova on the conducted 15 February 2024 [EUvsDisinfo Database](#).

<sup>2</sup> Vadim Pistrinciuc, Iulian Rusu, Valeriu Paşa, [Analysis and Strategy for Increasing Resilience to Disinformation in the Republic of Moldova](#) (inforMD, 2021); and [Against disinformation in the Republic of Moldova](#) (inforMD, 2021), Institut für Europäische Politik; and [NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: The Moldovan Information Environment, Hostile Narratives, and Their Ramifications](#), 2017

continuously penetrated the Moldovan media ecosystem and digital landscape, with manipulation efforts focused on Telegram but quickly spreading to Western-owned platforms like Facebook.<sup>3</sup>

This report builds on pre-existing knowledge about the nature and purpose of digital distortions in Moldova, while shining a spotlight on **gendered disinformation and the serious consequences this poses for women in politics in Moldova – especially its female President Maia Sandu.**

## Key Findings

- Gendered disinformation is a tool frequently used to undermine democracy, and in the case of Moldova, *often by foreign actors*.
  - **Public opinion survey research from March 2024 indicates Moldovans also view attacks on women leaders as a serious concern that requires action.**
- Gendered disinformation is used by pro-authoritarian networks to attack their critics. These networks often use religion, or societal traditions as tools to attempt to sow division or cast doubt on the character of women in positions of authority.
  - **The top malign actors that have been actively attacking women leaders in Moldova are explicitly pro-Russia, and/or have Russian links. Inauthentic and coordinated behavior was observed in the seeding of attacks, and is resulting in their amplification.**
- There are active fact-checking networks and civic initiatives attempting to protect information integrity.
  - **Yet, fact-checking alone does little to stop the spread of disinformation or character attacks against women in politics as the lies and distortions continue to circulate long after they are exposed.**
- Digital platforms are failing to implement their own guidelines and terms of service, and directly profiting from conflict in the region.
  - **The majority of voting age Moldovans believe that social media platforms are not regulated enough. They also support government efforts to protect social media users, especially children and young women, through platform regulation currently under consideration.**
- **Public opinion research results provide clear evidence of support for both Moldova's entrance into the European Union and efforts to regulate social media platforms. Public messaging efforts around platform regulation should:**
  - Include factual discussion of potential harms – especially those threats posed to women and girls.

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<sup>3</sup> Madalin Necsutu, "[Moldova Ups Fight Against Russian Propaganda Ahead of Elections](#)," 5 October 2023 Balkin Insight; and David Gilbert, "[A US-Sanctioned Oligarch Ran Pro-Kremlin Ads on Facebook—Again.](#)" January 18, 2024. [Wired Magazine](#)

- Significant majorities of voting age adults expressed concern about the way women are treated online with more than two-thirds expressing concern over “deep fake” videos that spread through social media, which creates an opening for consideration of the way gender is weaponized, given the high volume attention on generative AI.
  - *Harms that include scams and human trafficking or other physical risk to women and girls are of greatest concern to the public*
  - *This framing helps activate the traditional role of men as protectors and increases the likelihood of action.*
- Discuss disinformation as an effort at manipulation by foreign governments with a desire to cause division and weaken Moldova.
- Gendered disinformation should be talked about using the key words: bullying, harassment, intimidation, humiliation, foreign manipulation and lies designed to spread division.

## **Research Aims**

Around the world, women leaders face horrific levels of gendered disinformation and online abuse, with dramatic consequences on their freedom of expression, as well as women’s rights and democracy more broadly. Yet, their perspectives are often missing from key conversations around democracy and technology. #ShePersisted was created to amplify the voices of women leaders globally and ensure that their lived experiences are part of the crucial conversations on digital platform reform that must take place.

Since 2022 #ShePersisted has conducted detailed landscape analysis of common gendered narratives, themes and tactics used globally on major digital platforms, analyzing the discourse around targets of gendered disinformation attacks as part of a research series called [#MonetizingMisogyny](#), which includes case studies from [Italy](#), [Hungary](#), [Brazil](#), [India](#) and [Tunisia](#). Case studies of gendered disinformation in light of active conflicts were also conducted in Ukraine and Yemen. This report serves as an extension of that body of research in providing an overview of the digital threats to women in public life in Moldova and a greater understanding of how the online ecosystem is weaponized against women leaders. Funding to conduct this research was provided by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the Government of the United Kingdom.

## **Methodology Informing the Analysis**

In 2024, #ShePersisted enhanced its global body of research with a forensic dive into the patterns, modus operandi and motives of gendered disinformation aimed at Moldovan women in politics and journalism. This desk research was augmented by key informant interviews of disinformation researchers in Europe and Moldova as well as review of more than 58 articles, reports, and research papers that specifically looked at the information environment in Moldova.

#ShePersisted also contracted the Nerve, to conduct a forensic review of the top two social media platforms in Moldova operating in Romanian. Facebook (1.3 million users) and TikTok (1.58 million users)<sup>4</sup> are the top two platforms in Moldova in terms of number of users.

Instagram has 1.03 million users, and X has 118.2 thousand users in Moldova. DataReportal does not have data on YouTube users. This review included both an artificial-intelligence assisted scan and human review of more than 6,274 posts on public pages or groups over the time period of January 2020 through December 2023 on Facebook, and more than 111 TikTok videos published from August 2023 through February 2024.

Finally, a nationally representative public opinion survey among voting age adults was conducted in Moldova in March 2024 in both Romanian and Russian. Combined, these products provide a dynamic framework to better understand Moldovan attitudes toward social media companies, online harms and gender equality that must inform efforts to counter gendered reputational attacks.

### ***Definitions: What is gendered disinformation?***

Gendered disinformation is the deliberate spread of deceptive or false information or images about women political leaders, journalists, and female public figures, using social stereotypes around the role of women. This type of disinformation is designed to damage the reputations of female political opponents, silence critics, and discourage other women from engaging politically<sup>5</sup>. Women heads of state and ministers have been targeted for publicly supporting Ukraine's war efforts, predominantly following lines of sexist perceptions of women in leadership positions.

## **Targeting of Women Foreign Ministers and Heads of Government**

**Maia Sandu**, president of Moldova

Portrayed as demonstrating weak leadership because of her support of Ukraine

**Annalena Baerbock**, minister of foreign affairs in Germany

Called "unsuited to the role," attacked for having no "understanding [of] foreign policy," being too inexperienced, and being "set on a confrontation course with Russia"

**Jacinda Ardern**, Former Prime Minister of New Zealand

Targeted within greater anti-West narratives, accusing her of repeating "NATO's false version of the conflict" and of her government having "dragged New Zealand into the US-NATO war against Russia"



<sup>4</sup> TikTok has grown from the third most popular social media site in June 2023 to the second most popular

<sup>5</sup> The Problem, #ShePersisted

## **Why It Matters**

The Republic of Moldova is diligently resisting Russian influence and currently navigating a critical and extended electoral period. The prevalence of digital threats and disinformation in Moldova has been attributed to a number of factors, including political polarization and ideological divisions between media outlets, which facilitates the influence of politically-motivated narratives and the spread of partisan propaganda, vulnerabilities to external disinformation efforts, and barriers for independent press.<sup>6</sup> A report conducted by a project of the Institut für Europäische Politik (Institute for European Politics) in 2021 described Moldova as vulnerable to disinformation due to the structure of the media landscape, which they characterized as “segregated” by language and population, oversaturated, ideologically influenced and hostile to independent outlets and journalists, as well as a lack of prioritization regarding education on critical thinking skills.<sup>7</sup> In such an environment, pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda has continuously penetrated the Moldovan media ecosystem and digital landscape, with this content shared mostly on Telegram but also spreading to Western platforms like Facebook.<sup>8</sup>

Moldova has made incredible strides to increase the political participation of women. Its first female President, Maia Sandu was elected in 2020 on a promise to seek EU membership, putting Moldova at odds with Russia. Since then, the country has been working constantly to root out malign influence, gain energy independence and institute anti-corruption reforms. However, Moldova has been faced with challenges stemming from Russian espionage and disinformation campaigns aimed at destabilizing the country and inciting conflict — including in the breakaway Transnistria region.

As Russian troops were gathering for their invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, the computer systems that neighboring Moldova used to manage its security operations along its 760-mile border with Ukraine came under attack. The previously unreported attack, which could have disrupted Moldova’s ability to handle the flow of Ukrainian refugees and grain, was followed by a series of similar incursions. As the war progressed, pro-Russian social media accounts spread false claims designed to discredit the Moldovan government, and trolls bombarded Moldovan authorities with thousands of fake bomb threats.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Vadim Pistriniciu, Iulian Rusu, Valeriu Pasa, [Analysis and Strategy for Increasing Resilience to Disinformation in the Republic of Moldova](#) (inforMD, 2021); and [Against disinformation in the Republic of Moldova](#) (inforMD, 2021), Institut für Europäische Politik; and [NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: The Moldovan Information Environment, Hostile Narratives, and Their Ramifications](#), 2017

<sup>7</sup> [Institut für Europäische Politik: Analysis and Strategy for Increasing Resilience to Disinformation in the Republic of Moldova, 2021](#); [Institut für Europäische Politik: inforMD – Against disinformation in the Republic of Moldova](#).

<sup>8</sup> Madalin Necsutu, "[Moldova Ups Fight Against Russian Propaganda Ahead of Elections](#)," October 5, 2023, Balkan Insight; and David Gilbert, "[A US-Sanctioned Oligarch Ran Pro-Kremlin Ads on Facebook—Again.](#)" January 18, 2024, [Wired Magazine](#).

<sup>9</sup> Ryan Gallagher, "[Cyberwar Descends on Unprepared Moldova](#)," 20 April 2023, Bloomberg

On the same day that Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, February 24, 2022, the Moldovan government set up a Telegram channel to verify information on that social media platform, called “Prima Sursa”, or First Source. In October 2022, that same channel was deployed to deny rumors circulating on Telegram that the Moldovan Defense Ministry was planning a general military mobilization.

Attempts to undermine Moldova’s independence and territorial integrity in the region have continued since 2022. Foreign policy experts believe that the Kremlin is escalating a hybrid campaign to manipulate the high stakes Moldovan elections in 2024.<sup>10</sup> In April Moscow hosted the formation of a political bloc<sup>11</sup> around its primary Moldovan ally Ilan Shor, a fugitive billionaire<sup>12</sup> convicted of the country’s worst-ever bank fraud — and sent a startling flood of pre-election cash that police seized at Moldova’s main airport.<sup>13</sup> Only days before the first round of elections, Prime Minister Dorin Recean announced that candidates from the (Shor-affiliated) Chance Party would be banned from the election shortly after the SIS director said that the group was corrupting voters<sup>14</sup> and receiving money from Russia.<sup>15</sup>

***Concerns among Moldovans about manipulation by foreign governments with a desire to cause division and weaken Moldova are significant***

- ***64% of Moldovans think the manipulation of people by foreign governments is a serious problem, and 21% believe it is a moderate problem***
- ***40% of Moldovans are very concerned about social media platforms profiting from the spread of lies and disinformation that is being paid for by Russia to interfere in Moldovan politics***



<sup>10</sup> Donald N. Jensen, Ph.D.; James Rupert, “[In Russia’s Hybrid War on Europe, Moldova’s Critical Next 15 Months](#),” 1 May 2024, USIP Blog

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Tanas, “[Moldovan opposition announces new election bloc at Moscow event](#).” 21 April 2024 Reuters

<sup>12</sup> Piotr Garciu, “[Shor: Moscow’s Man in Moldova](#)”, IWPR 13 December 2023

<sup>13</sup> Ekatarina Arvintii, “[Shor’s ‘Couriers’ brought 20 million lei from Moscow in a single day. The money used to finance parties.](#)” 24 April 2024 Newsmaker-Md

<sup>14</sup> Radio Moldova YouTube Channel, “[Chance", removed from the electoral race. Recean: Russia cannot intervene with tanks, but with dirty money](#)”, YouTube 3 November 2023 Prime Minister Dorin Recean announced in a briefing at the Government headquarters that the decision is motivated by Russia’s hybrid war against the Republic of Moldova.

<sup>15</sup> Ekatarina Arvintii, “[Shor’s ‘Couriers’ brought 20 million lei from Moscow in a single day. The money used to finance parties.](#)” 24 April 2024 Newsmaker-Md

Disinformation efforts almost always seek to exploit existing divisions in a society. In Moldova, those divisions include two restive regions: Gagauzia, a Shor stronghold in the south; and Transnistria, at Moldova's eastern edge.

- **54% of Moldovans believe the problem of social media platforms create greater division in the country-and 41% are very concerned about it**

In January, Moldova extended its national system of import-export duties to Transnistria, part of regularizing commercial rules under a trade agreement with the EU. Transnistria, dependent solely on Moldova for trade after Ukraine sealed its border following Russia's invasion, quickly asked for Russia's "protection."<sup>16</sup> A "congress" in Transnistria was held on 28 February, describing the taxation as an "economic blockade" by Transnistrian leadership and a move by Chisinau to assert dominance. The Moldovan government justified it as "leveling the playing field" and "to gradually include these companies into Moldova's single economic and commercial space."<sup>17</sup>.

In March a broadcast channel run by authorities in Transnistria, *Perviy Pridnestrovskiy* released a video showing an object hurtling from the sky to destroy a derelict, old helicopter at a Transnistrian military facility, calling it a Ukrainian drone attack.<sup>18</sup> The governments of Ukraine, Moldova<sup>19</sup> and western analysts described the video as a fabrication<sup>20</sup>; while Russia demanded an immediate investigation.

Western media outlets have reported on suspicions of the event being coordinated with Russia to justify increased involvement in Transnistria. Moldovan authorities cast the appeal to Russia as propaganda and part of ongoing efforts to destabilize the nation, with Moldova's Ambassador to the U.S. stating "we are likely to see more of these type of actions in the coming months with the main purpose to instill fear and uncertainty in Moldova, and in this way to shape the outcome of the presidential election and EU accession referendum."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dennis Leven, "[Transnistria begs Putin to 'protect' it against Moldova](#)", 28 February 2024, [Politico](#)

<sup>17</sup> Madalin Necsutu, "[Moldova Tells Companies in Breakaway Transnistria: Time to Pay Taxes](#)," 5 January 2024, [Balkan Insight](#)

<sup>18</sup> "[Officials in Moldova's breakaway Transnistria blame Ukrainian drone strike after military site blast](#)," 17 March 2024, [Associated Press](#)

<sup>19</sup> Madalin Necsutu, "[Moldova Dismisses Alleged Drone Attack on Transnistria](#)," 18 March 2024, [Balkan Insight](#)

<sup>20</sup> Ellie Cook, "[Drone Attack on Helicopter in European Country Raises Questions](#)," 18 March 2024, [Newsweek](#)

<sup>21</sup> Shannon Vavra, "[Moldova Sounds Alarms on Russian Interference](#)," 2 March 2024, [Daily Beast](#)

## What does Gendered Disinformation Look Like in Moldova?

Overview and key findings



### Key findings

1

Undermining Moldova's entry into the European Union, malign actors stirred up **xenophobia** and accused pro-EU female leaders and the Sandu administration of being **foreign agents**.

Narratives also **othered female leaders** as foreign-influenced and educated.

2

Malign actors with Russian links portrayed the targets as **incompetent** and **security risks**, undermining public trust of women in leadership positions.

3

Narratives spread by **pro-Russia and/or rival politicians** and **hyperpartisan media** were shared by different accounts, including **fake ones**, into **political communities** and **Russian-speaking communities**.

### Shifts in Women's Representation in Moldova as a Baseline of Attack

Although Moldovan culture retains much of what is deemed as “traditional” views around gender roles, that has not stopped women from making significant political gains. Today nearly 40% of sitting MPs are women (39 women MPs in 2023), which places Moldova as 26th in the world for women's representation in Parliament out of 181 countries surveyed.<sup>22</sup> Moldova is also a leader within Eastern and Central Europe, which in comparison includes 25.5% women on average in Parliament. Increases in national representation in Moldova have also been met by progress for women at the local level.

Every fifth mayoralty in the country is headed by a woman, and every third candidate for mayor in the 2023 local elections were female.<sup>23</sup> The rising percentage of seats held by women in Moldova indicates a shift in public attitude towards women's participation in the public sphere. Structural changes to address barriers to women's participation were made over the last decade including the establishment of a gender quota law in 2016 and a parliamentary Women's Caucus which brings women MPs together across party lines. In 2023 a new initiative was spearheaded by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, aiming to improve equality in areas like labor, education, and social protection

Moldova prohibits sexist language and images in the media and advertising, but enforcement of gender equality legislation for this sector remains weak and self-regulatory mechanisms are

<sup>22</sup> IPU Praline, [Global data on national parliaments](#),

<sup>23</sup> *Monitoring Report on Gender-Based*, Watchdog.md, p. 2.

insufficient to fully address the problems of stereotypical portrayals and lack of inclusivity in the information space.<sup>24</sup>

### **Distortions of Gender Policy and Protections to Seed Fear and Backlash**

With growing public support for strengthening responses to gender-based violence, and due to efforts to pursue EU integration, the Istanbul Convention was finally ratified in Moldova in December 2021.<sup>25</sup> Through its ratification and implementation, the Convention has led to significant improvements in how states treat those who experience gender-based violence. Yet ratification came amid a “wave of disinformation against feminists in Moldova” following the convention’s ratification.<sup>26</sup>

Watchdog’s disinformation report covering the period of the ratification noted themes that still echo today, “Western subversion through ‘gender ideology,’ ” Desecration of traditional gender roles in the West,” and “Corruption of moral values and the imminent collapse of the West as a result.” This narrative arc was juxtaposed with Russia as the sole power safeguarding traditional Christian values.<sup>27</sup>

Authoritarian movements are adept at using fear around expansion of human rights to divide and distract by exploiting traditional hierarchies and gender differences. So-called “strongmen” leaders tap into patriarchal ideas about the order of society and masculinity, perpetuating stereotypes of men as strong protectors and women as weak. This image is utilized to stoke fears that increase nationalist sentiments, leading to a regression of progressive policies or vectors for anti-democratic rhetoric.

Whether attacks are focused on women in public office or on gender-related policies, such disinformation campaigns are designed to create doubt in the public’s mind about women in leadership positions: her abilities, her loyalty to her country and her morality. Social media as a platform strengthens the power of these campaigns and enables the entrenchment of an anti-woman supporter base.

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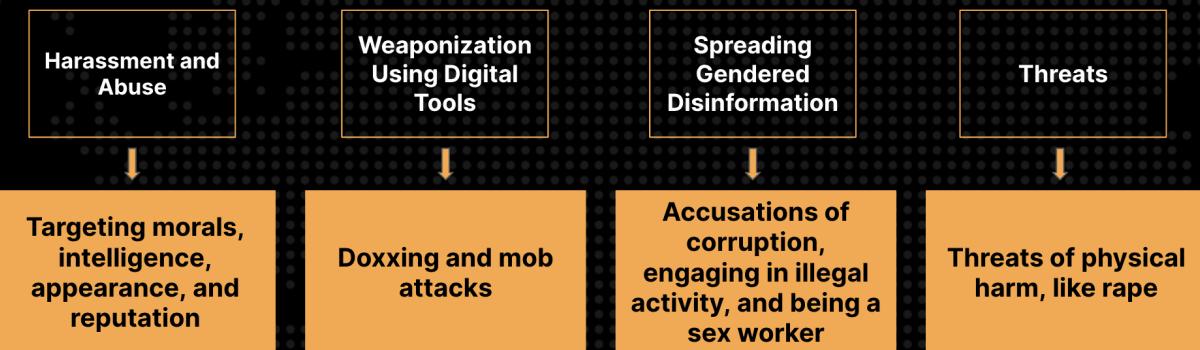
<sup>24</sup> Elizaveta Kuzmenko, “[Multiple risks: The safety of women journalists in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine](#),” pg 40 published by International Media Support (IMS)

<sup>25</sup> Piotr Garciu, “[Moldova Ratifies Istanbul Convention Amid Disinformation and Opposition](#),” 14 December 2021, IWPR

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Emma Lygnerud Boberg, Gender and program development advisor at the Global Response Department, IMS, August 16, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> [Istanbul Convention Disinformation Report](#), 13 September 2022 Watchdog.md

## Threat Analysis



Tactics are sometimes used in tandem to target one woman across multiple platforms, with the aim of minimizing their participation in the public sphere.



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### Anti-Sandu Networks on Facebook

President Sandu has notably been outspoken about her support for Ukraine since the onset of the invasion, a stance that has become an emerging basis for attacks and false narratives, including claims her leadership is weak because of this support.<sup>28</sup> She has also been accused of being unable to “lead a country that has a war near its border” because of her gender, according to one key informant, who coordinates the Moldovan fact-checking project StopFals.<sup>29</sup> For example, in connection to her stance, her former male opponent made allegations that her party is incompetent to address the growing energy and economic crisis, she is causing destabilization and “following the Ukrainian script,” and that her Western “foreign masters” are engaging in “anti-Russian hysteria” meant to “justify the presence of NATO troops” in Moldova.<sup>30</sup>

EUvsDisinfo’s database, a publicly available and growing repository of more than 15,000 examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation since 2015, contains more than 600 incidents which target Moldova specifically.<sup>31</sup> More than 90 of them target Moldova’s female President, Maia Sandu. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to undermine the pro-Western government of President Sandu and sweep the country back into Russia’s fold.<sup>32</sup> These posts exploit social cleavages around gender and attempt to portray her as dangerous, corrupt, foreign, or immoral.

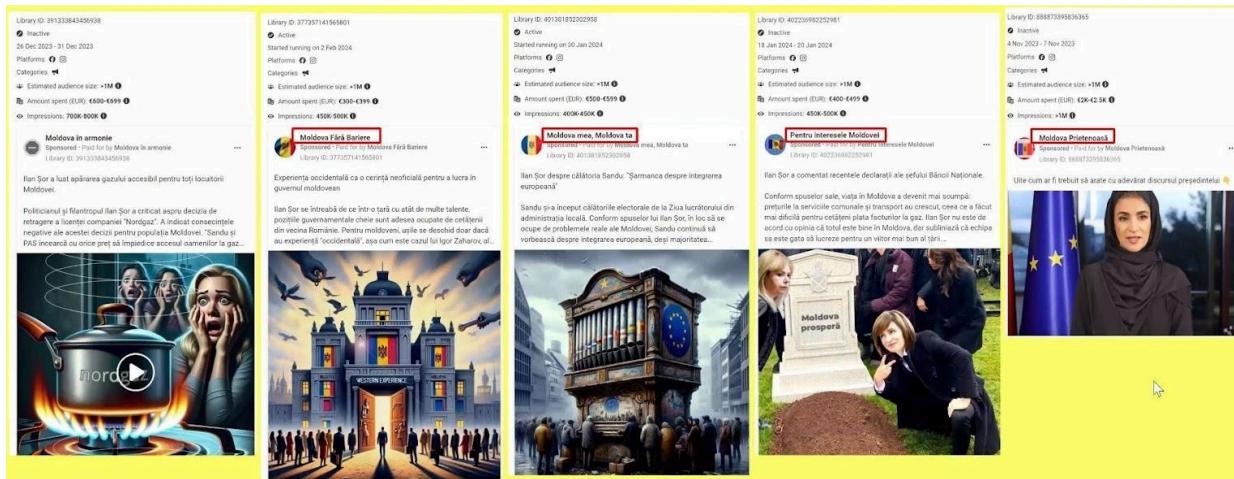
<sup>28</sup> Ksenia Iliuk, in discussion with the author, July 18, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Lilia Zaharia, in discussion with the author, September 9, 2022.

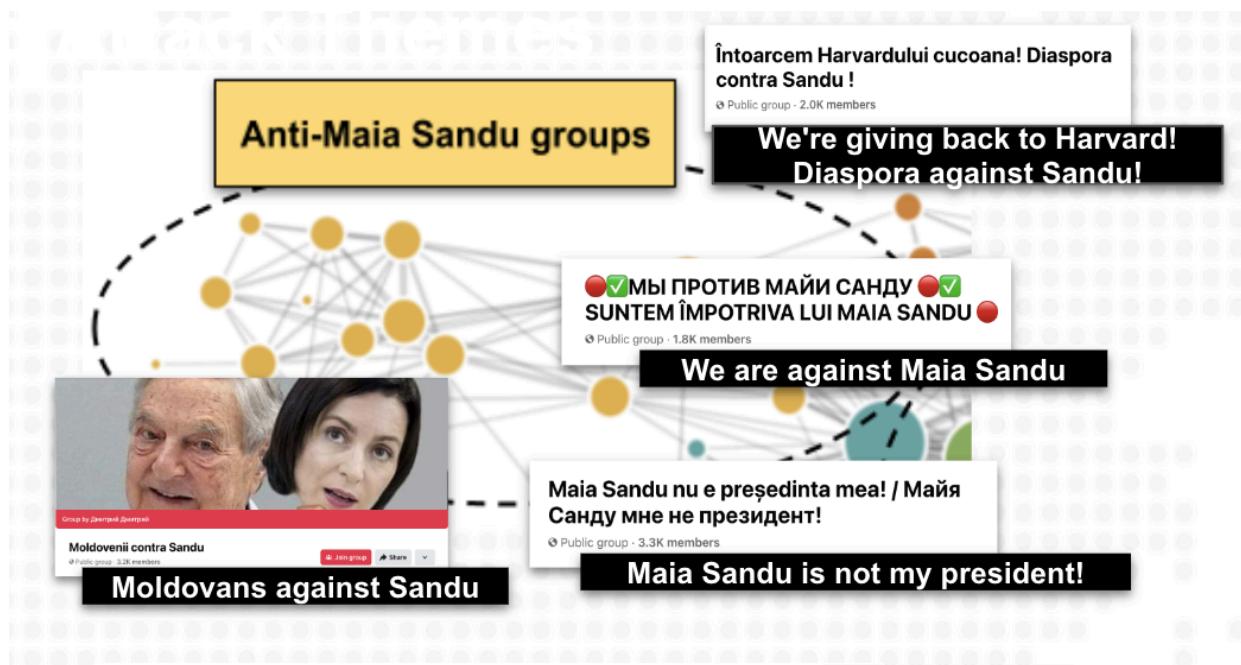
<sup>30</sup> Ungureanu R.: [Republika Moldova urmează scenariul ucrainean. Maia Sandu transferă țara NATO \(Igor Dodon\)](#), 2022.

<sup>31</sup> “Database,” EUvsDisinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>.

<sup>32</sup> Characterization provided by US Ambassador Michael Carpenter according to [The Daily Beast](#), 11 March 2023.



Similarly, a review of Facebook posts in Moldova containing gendered attack words found that **90%<sup>33</sup> of the gendered attacks found on Facebook, were directed at President Maia Sandu.**



When analyzing these communities based on sharing behaviors, the forensic analysis uncovered a distinct network of several **anti-Maia Sandu Facebook groups**. This network was found sharing posts from actors who are either pro-Russia, or have links to Russia, or from the hyperpartisan network **Omniapres.md**. A deeper scan of the posts that were shared most frequently demonstrated how they were being cascaded on Facebook.

<sup>33</sup> Out of a total of 6,264 posts on Facebook containing gendered attacks, 5,650 of them targeted President Maia Sandu.

### ***What is the significance of cascading?***

In digital harms research, "cascading" refers to the process by which false information spreads rapidly through a network, often amplifying its reach and impact. This can happen in several ways:

**Social Media Sharing:** Disinformation can cascade through social media platforms as users share and reshare false content. Each share can expose the disinformation to a new audience, leading to exponential growth in its spread.

**Echo Chambers:** Within echo chambers, where individuals are exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, disinformation can cascade quickly. The repetition within these closed networks reinforces the false information and makes it seem more credible.

**Algorithmic Amplification:** Algorithms on social media and other digital platforms often prioritize content that generates high engagement. Disinformation, which can be sensational or emotionally charged, may receive more likes, shares, and comments, leading to further amplification by the platform's algorithms.

**Influence of Key Nodes:** Influential users or nodes within a network, such as celebrities, politicians, or popular social media accounts, can accelerate the cascade of disinformation by sharing it with their large followings, as DFR Lab exposed with US celebrities unwittingly recruited to undermine President Sandu.<sup>34</sup>

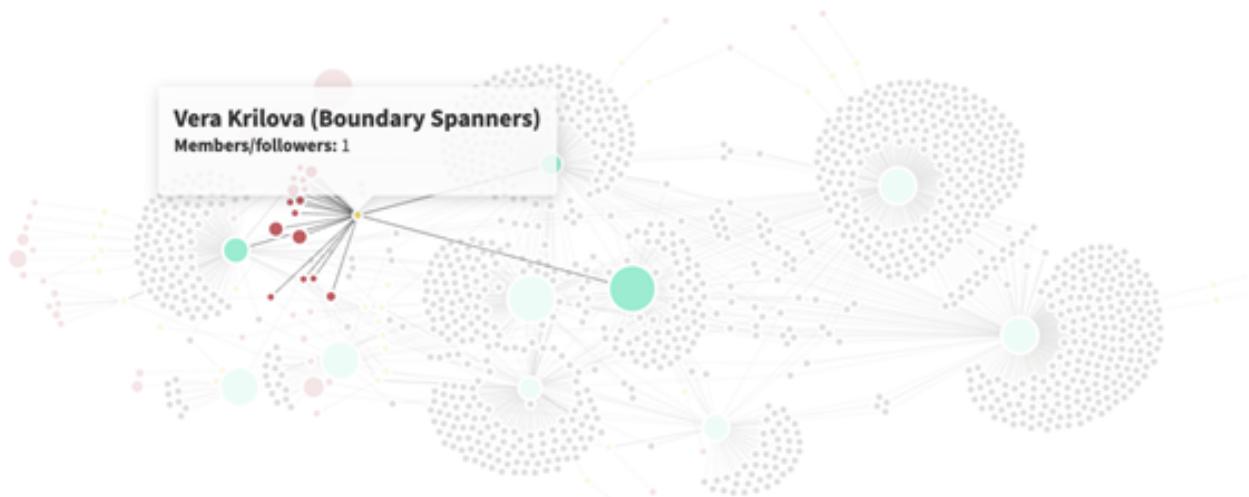
**Cross-Platform Propagation:** Disinformation can cascade across multiple platforms. A piece of false information might start on one platform and then spread to others, such as moving from a fringe website to mainstream social media, gaining credibility and reach as it propagates.

Cascading helps explain how false information can quickly reach a wide audience and become entrenched in public discourse, making it more challenging to counteract. Researchers study these patterns to develop strategies for identifying, tracking, and mitigating the spread of disinformation and character attacks aimed at women in politics.

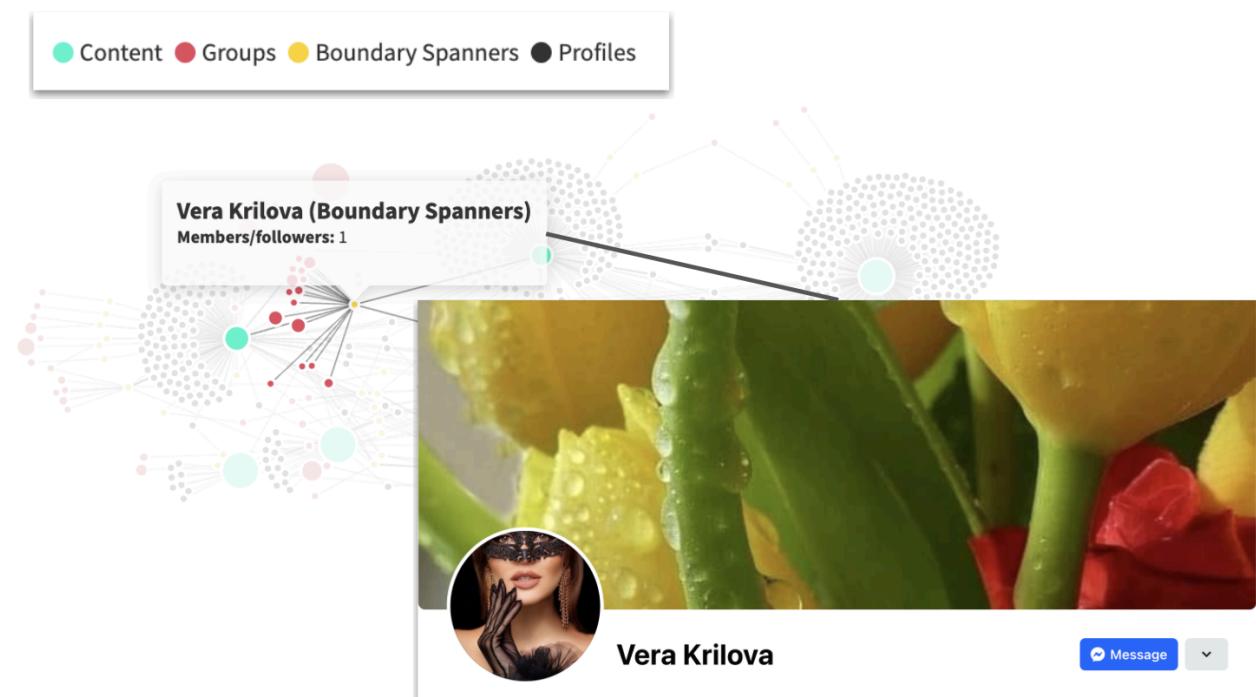
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<sup>34</sup> Victoria Olari, "[US Celebrities unwittingly recruited to undermine Moldova's President](#)," 15 February 2024 Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)

The top-performing posts of Dodon, Platon, and Omnipres.md were all being shared into Facebook groups for Russian-speaking Moldovans and communities for the Moldovan diaspora.

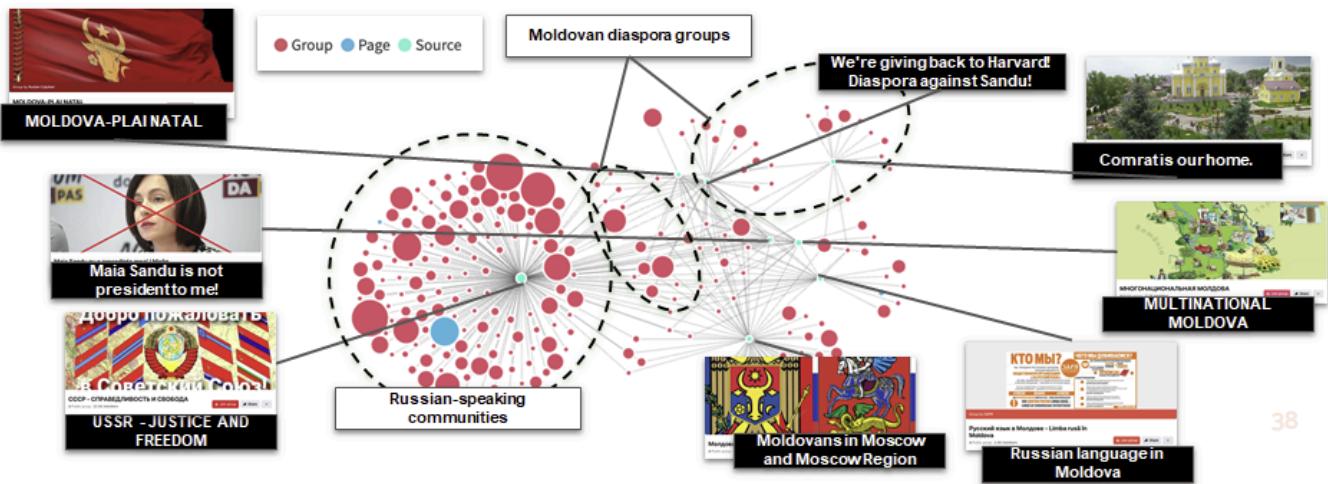


These posts were being funneled into multiple groups by a single **boundary spanner**, an actor that links two separate audience clusters by sharing a post from one to the other. The identified boundary spanner is a **sock puppet (fake) account** named Vera Krilova.



This account frequently uses photos that appear to be stock images with unidentifiable details. This account shares a name with a famous Soviet revolutionary involved in women's brigades and decorated for valor in fighting the German invasion of the Soviet Union during World War II.

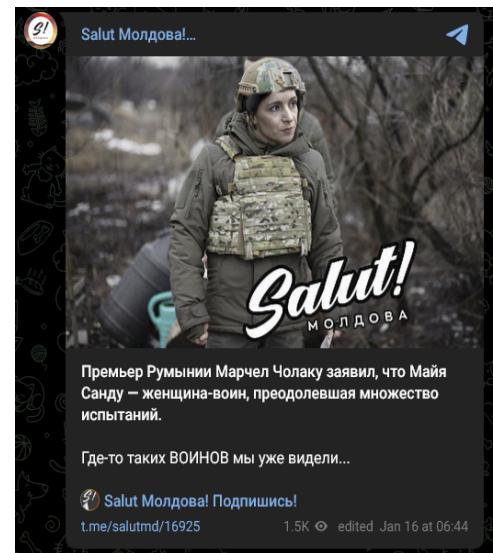
An analysis of the groups penetrated by this and the earlier mentioned sock puppet account showed a larger network of Russian-speaking and anti-Sandu political groups where gendered attacks and disinformation are funneled, which may be used for future investigations, particularly in Russian language.



### Platform of First Issue is Often Telegram

The specific narratives targeting Sandu often originate on Telegram and later are amplified on mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.<sup>35</sup> The Telegram channel [SanduOfficial](#), that has no connection to President Sandu or her office, created on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2023 is the originator of several of the recent deepfake videos. Initially, the channel

published one post a week, often deep-fake videos deriding or denigrating President Sandu. Those videos are then boosted in Facebook ads after their release on the channel. The frequency of the posts have increased to multiple posts each week, but still not every day. In one deep-fake video, President Sandu is depicted in the video as speaking ironically about the standard of living of Moldovan citizens and how it is falling. The authors of the video refer to the philanthropist George Soros and the United States



<sup>35</sup> See: <https://t.me/ilanshor/3777> (mockery); <https://t.me/salutmd/16925> (direct denigration); <https://t.me/rubaltic/23331> (direct denigration); <https://t.me/aifmd/49243> (mockery)

as “sponsors” of the pro-European leadership of Moldova, one of the central gendered themes of Russian disinformation in Moldova.



the political formation led by the pro-Russian Ilan Shor.<sup>36</sup> The clip, made with the help of artificial intelligence, was published on a Facebook page on the eve of the election. Thousands of people liked and commented on the post, and over a thousand users shared it, according to [Digi24](#).

The video begins with the introduction by a moderator of the public television channel Moldova 1, who announces a message from the head of state. These images are not fake, they were taken from the station's archive. Later in the video, the computer-generated fake Maia Sandu appears, dressed in an Abaya and hijab typically worn by conservative Muslim women, who announces

Telegram posts against President Sandu also often employed derogatory memes and denigrating language in an attempt to cast doubt on her ability to lead, her trustworthiness, loyalty to country, with the direct accusation that she is a “puppet” of the west.

These memes spread in other pro-Kremlin channels and in some cases those belonging to exiled billionaire Ilan Shor's official Telegram channel.

In November of 2023, just before local elections in the Republic of Moldova, a fake video purporting to show President Sandu dressed in a black hijab started circulating on the internet. The artificially generated image of Maia Sandu announces her resignation and urges the population to vote with a party affiliated with

### **Expert, despre deepfake cu imaginea președintelui: Pot băga mâna în foc că în spatele acestui video stă Ilan Șor. Reacția Președinției**

Publicat 07.11.2023 18:09 · 9 minute de citit

În ultimele zile, pe Facebook a devenit viral un clip video în care președinta Maia Sandu, cu hijab pe cap, vestimentație islamică, ar transmite un mesaj negativ despre democrația din Republica Moldova. Videoul a fost postat pe așa-numita pagină web "Moldova prietenoasă", de autori anonimi. Potrivit expertilor media, acest material este un fake și are drept scop manipularea și dezinformarea cetățenilor.



<sup>36</sup> Alexandra Irina Minea, "[Maia Sandu, the target of a deepfake.](#)" 9 November 2023, [Media Standard](#)

that she is retiring from office and urges Moldovans to vote for the Chisinau City Hall candidate from the "Renaissance" political party, affiliated with the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor.

- **48% of Moldovans agree with the statement that social media platforms must be regulated for the sake of democracy when presented with case of “Russian-funded oligarch” Ilan Shor amplifying the Sandu hijab deepfake**



On September 26, 2023, a short video emerged on TikTok under the account [@oleg\\_spb2](#), showcasing Hollywood celebrities in an unexpected political context. The video, entitled "Hollywood Celebrities' Urgent Appeal to Maia Sandu," features well-known US celebrities Dolph Lundgren, Lindsay Lohan, Brian Baumgartner, Eric Roberts, Michael Madsen, Mark Dacascos, and rapper Xzibit. They collectively deliver a message calling for the overthrow of Moldova's president, Maia Sandu. Each video starts with the celebrity warmly greeting Sandu, only to be interrupted by a Russian text claiming: "We, Hollywood stars, support the people of Moldova in their desire to overthrow you, Sandu. We join the flash mob #DavaiteSkinemSandu" (which translates to #Let'sBringDownSandu in Russian). The video ends with each of them repeatedly uttering in Russian, "let's bring down Sandu."<sup>37</sup>

### Other Prominent Women Leaders Are Subject to Attack

Insulting comments based on sexist stereotypes and prejudices proliferated on television, in electoral campaign meetings and on social media were not exclusively targeted at President Sandu. According to Irina Corobcenco, an anti-hate speech campaigner at Promo-LEX, gendered disinformation has become a common feature of the Moldovan political scene. "Since 2018, we have monitored the manifestation of hate speech and incitement to discrimination in the public space and Moldovan media, including in the context of electoral campaigns," Corobcenco said. "In recent years, electoral candidates and politicians use mostly the same rhetoric based on stereotypes and prejudices that affect social groups like



<sup>37</sup> Victoria Olari, "[US Celebrities unwittingly recruited to undermine Moldova's President](#)," 15 February 2024 Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)

women, people with disabilities, the LGBT community, etc,” she said.<sup>38</sup>

**Veronica Dragalin**, the Chief of the Anticorruption Prosecutor’s Office for the Republic of Moldova since August 2022, is frequently attacked online. Posts mentioning Dragalin attempt to erode trust in her competence and intelligence often, using her upbringing in the US to claim she does not have sufficient knowledge of the justice system in Moldova. These criticisms stand in stark contrast to the positive movement of Moldova on Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer, which has moved up three points since she took office, and ten points since 2019.<sup>39</sup> In her current role, she oversees offices in Moldova’s three largest cities and supervises 115 civil servants including 50 prosecutors.

### ***Diagnosis: Meta is Failing its Users in Moldova***

#### **Takedown / Deplatforming Failures**

Shor and his eponymous Șor Party executed an elaborate advertising campaign on Facebook that aimed to destabilize Moldova’s local elections in November 2023 and undermine Moldova’s entry to the European Union. Over six months, the campaign used more than 100 fake Facebook pages<sup>40</sup> to run hundreds of ads that amassed 155 million impressions and earned Meta at least \$200,000 in revenue, according to research conducted by Reset.Tech in partnership with Watchdog. Several of the ads featured the deep fake videos of President Sandu wearing a hijab<sup>41</sup> and falsely announcing her intention to resign, as outlined above.<sup>42</sup>

Even though there are clear signals of a coordinated campaign by an individual whose verified Facebook page was banned from advertising on the platform, both Meta’s automated and human systems have failed to track and remove the campaign, and are still failing to do so over a year later<sup>43</sup> even after Meta said it would stop Shor’s ads.<sup>44</sup>

Despite Shor being sanctioned and blocked from financial markets within the US and Europe, a

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<sup>38</sup> Madalin Necsutu, “[Misogyny Plagues Moldova’s Politics](#),” 8 March 2021, IWPR

<sup>39</sup> 2023 Global Corruption Barometer, [Moldova Transparency International](#)

<sup>40</sup> David Gilbert, “[A US-Sanctioned Oligarch Ran Pro-Kremlin Ads on Facebook - Again.](#)” 10 January 2024, [Wired Magazine](#)

<sup>41</sup> Ad archive (ads are no longer accessible):

<https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=263161066268031> and

<https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?id=888873395836365>

<sup>42</sup> David Gilbert, “[A US-Sanctioned Oligarch Ran Pro-Kremlin Ads on Facebook - Again.](#)” 10 January 2024, [Wired Magazine](#)

<sup>43</sup> “[Eight European Countries Urge Big Tech to Combat Disinformation and Help Protect Democracy](#),” 29 March 2023, Press Release from the Government of Moldova regarding Open Call made by Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic, Ukraine, and Prime-Minister of the Republic of Moldova at the Summit for Democracy.

<sup>44</sup> David Gilbert, “[A US-Sanctioned Oligarch Ran Pro-Kremlin Ads on Facebook - Again.](#)” 10 January 2024, [Wired Magazine](#)

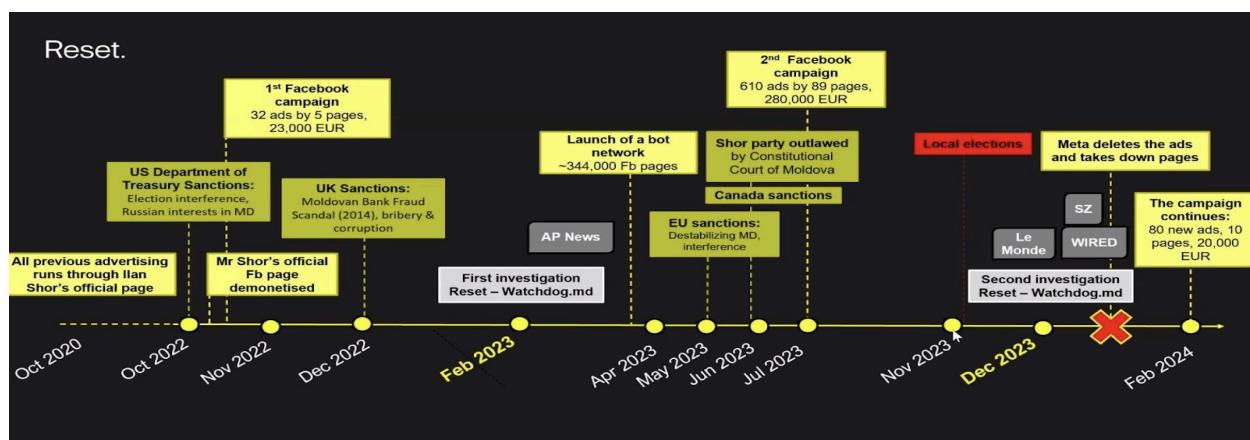
US tech company allows him to skirt these rules to undermine the country and its territorial integrity.<sup>45</sup>

*“Shor’s ads have helped fuel angry protests against the government and appear to be aimed at destabilizing Moldova and returning it to Russia’s sphere of influence...even though he is on the U.S. sanctions list, I still see sponsored ads on Facebook- we have talked with Facebook, but it is very hard because there is no specific person, no contact.”*

- **Dorin Frasineau**, a former foreign policy adviser to former Moldovan Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita (2023)<sup>46</sup>

### A Closer Look: Failures in monitoring and moderation

In February of 2023, Reset.Tech issued a report that demonstrated how Facebook allowed Ilan Shor to utilize their platform, even though he and his political party were on U.S. sanctions lists. The ads featuring politician and convicted fraudster Shor were ultimately removed by Facebook in 2023 but not before they were seen millions of times in Moldova.



Nine different paid posts from the Šor Party ran on Facebook after the U.S. imposed sanctions. Most were removed within a week after the sanctions announcement, though Shor bought another paid post in January, two months after he was sanctioned. All were clearly identifiable by Shor's name. One ad, which ran on Facebook for just two days — October 29-30, 2022 — was seen more than a million times in Moldova.<sup>47</sup>

Every week, new pages sprang up, running new ads on behalf of the Šor Party. Between the 13th and 19th of February, Watchdog.MD identified seven ads run by five different pages.

<sup>45</sup> “Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin’s Malign Influence Operations in Moldova” <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049>

<sup>46</sup> David Klepper and Stephen McGrath, “Facebook rand ads in Moldova for oligarch sanctioned by US,” 17 February 2023, [Associated Press](#)

<sup>47</sup> David Klepper and Stephen McGrath, “Facebook rand ads in Moldova for oligarch sanctioned by US,” 17 February 2023, [Associated Press](#)

Between the 1st and 10th of February, there were seven ads run by six different pages. Many of these pages were created with Vietnamese names, including Shop Mua Bán (Shop, Buy, Sell) or Shop Ban Giay (Shoe Shop) or Tạp Chí Phái Đẹp (Beauty Magazine). Their names were later changed to names that referred explicitly to Moldova, such as “For Chisinau” or “For the People.” Many of the pages state that they have admins based in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, and Indonesia.<sup>48</sup>

### The Lack of Data Transparency

It will only get worse to monitor influence campaigns on Meta as social media companies increasingly move toward withholding data. CrowdTangle, the tool most frequently used to track content movement across Facebook’s platform, had its team disbanded in 2021 by Meta, new user registrations cut off in 2022 and now Meta has announced that the tool will shut down on 14 August 2024, according to reports in *the Wall Street Journal*.<sup>49</sup> Journalists and academics alike have used CrowdTangle to study the flow of content on Facebook and Instagram, including conspiracy theories and fake news. Meta bought CrowdTangle in 2016,<sup>50</sup> and there is widespread speculation that it is shutting it down to better hide its own failings. A tool called Meta Content Library will replace [CrowdTangle](#),<sup>51</sup> but only approved academics and nonprofit researchers can use it.<sup>52</sup>

### Tools for Addressing Gendered Disinformation Influence Operations

Facebook’s failure to curtail gendered disinformation is a choice, stemming largely from its business model which prioritizes engagement over safety, and its inconsistent enforcement of policies designed to protect vulnerable groups - despite having policies intended to protect users from hate speech and harassment. Internal documents and testimonies from whistleblowers like Frances Haugen have revealed that Facebook has long been aware of these issues but has not taken sufficient action.<sup>53</sup>

In order to protect election integrity in Moldova, Meta in particular should enforce its own rules that impact the spread of gendered disinformation by:

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<sup>48</sup> Morgan Meaker, “[Facebook is still letting Russia interfere in politics](#),” 23 February 2023 [Wired Magazine](#)

<sup>49</sup> Jeff Horwitz, “[Meta to Replace Widely Used Data Tool—and Largely Cut Off Reporter Access](#),” 14 March 2024, [Wall Street Journal](#)

<sup>50</sup> Billy Steele, “[Facebook buys CrowdTangle to help publishers track content](#),” 11 November 2016, [Engadget](#)

<sup>51</sup> Ann Smajstrla, “[Report highlights blindspots in Facebook’s fight against voting misinformation](#),” 23 September 2020, [Engadget](#)

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Fielding, “[.Meta sets a date for killing off CrowdTangle: The platform acted as more of a snitch on Meta’s doings than an asset](#)” 14 March 2024, [Engadget](#)

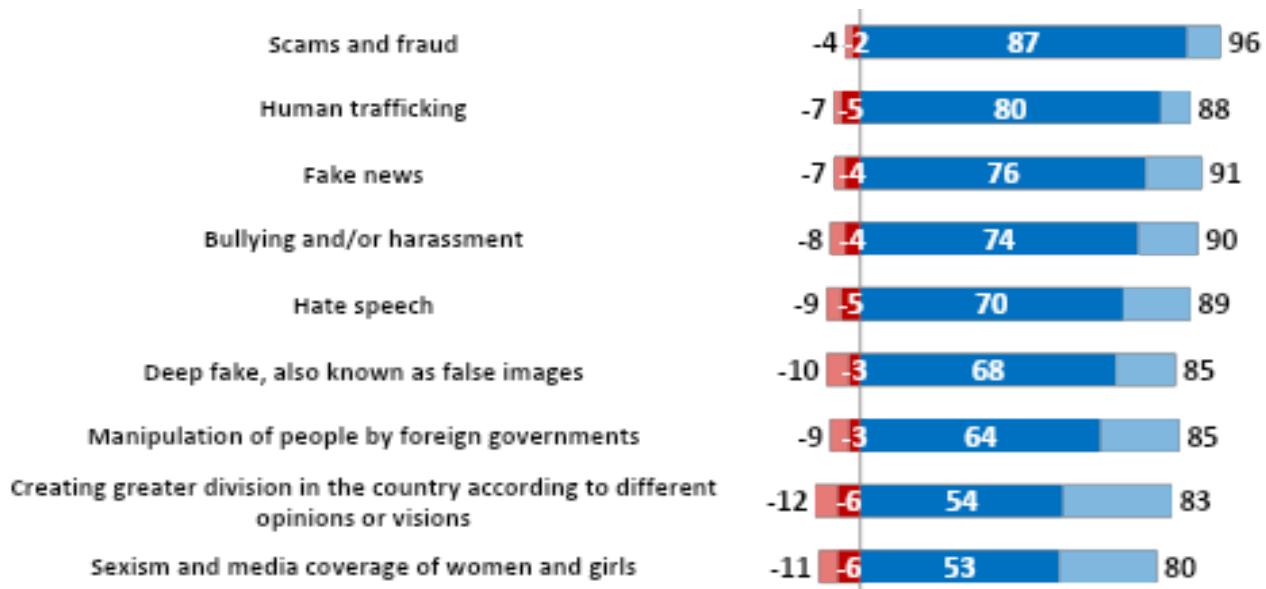
<sup>53</sup> Zoe Kleinman, Tom Gerken & Liv McMahon, ‘[I blew the whistle on Meta, now I won’t work again](#)’, 7 November 2023, [BBC News](#); and Barbara Ortutay, “[Meta engineer saw his own child face harassment on Instagram. Now he’s testifying before Congress](#).” 7 November 2023, [Associated Press](#); and [The Facebook Papers](#)

- Removing posts that threaten candidates with physical violence, sexual violence or death, disable the relevant accounts, and refer offenders to law enforcement.
- Removing posts that glorify, incite or praise violence against women.
- Eliminating malicious and gendered hate speech targeting women, including violent, objectifying or dehumanizing speech, statements of inferiority, and derogatory sexual terms; and
- Removing accounts that repeatedly violate terms of service by threatening, harassing or doxxing or that use false identities to attack women leaders and candidates.
- Removing manipulated images or videos misrepresenting female public figures.
- Stopping the amplification of gendered disinformation, much of the most hateful content directed at women on Facebook is amplified by their algorithms which reward the most extreme and dangerous points of view with greater reach and visibility.
- Being transparent about which women in your senior management are directly involved in setting and enforcing content policies, and addressing the gender disparity in your workforce.

### ***Further Discoveries: Social Media Problems of Concern to Moldvans***

#### **Social media platforms facilitate criminality in Moldova**

The Moldovan public is very concerned about online harms related to social media. A majority of Moldovans think all of the problems tested are serious problems on social media platforms.



## Fraud and scams

- **87% of Moldovans think scams and fraud on social media platforms are a serious problem, and 67% are very concerned.**

Whether it is Facebook quizzes that serve as a fast track to identity theft by tricking a user into divulging sensitive security information commonly used as passwords, and secondary ID validation; phony investment scams; or hacked friend accounts that attempt to solicit bank transfers. On social media and dating apps, smooth-talking strangers may forge relationships to eventually request money transfers from their victims. In the sinister "sextortion" variation, scammers coerce targets into sending explicit photos/videos and then demand payment by threatening to release the content publicly. The creativity of scammers on social media is seemingly without limit. According to the Global Anti-Scam Alliance, an estimated

293 million scam reports were filed and \$55.3 billion was lost in scams in 2021 worldwide.<sup>54</sup>



Moldovan police have had to issue several public warnings regarding online fraud schemes targeting its citizens. According to authorities, citizens are receiving messages with false information, requesting additional data to claim a supposed package. In addition to the text, the messages contain a link that redirects to a fraudulent website, where users are asked to enter their banking information or other personal data. Police are recommending that citizens do not open the links, do not respond to these messages, or enter their banking information.<sup>55</sup>

In another, scammers created fake profiles and distributed doctored videos featuring government officials and bank representatives, according to police. *"Cybercriminals are abusing the image and logos of institutions to urge people to register on suspicious links,"* the statement said. *"Later, users are pressured to invest large sums of money in a so-called investment platform in order to receive dividends, which is completely false."*<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> James Greening, "[Online Scams have Become a Global Epidemic](#)," Global State of Scams Report 2022, 17 November 2022 Global Anti-Scam Alliance

<sup>55</sup> Bogdan Nigai, "[New Online fraud scheme targets Moldovans](#)," 17 January 2024 Moldova 1

<sup>56</sup> Bogdan Nigai, "[New online scam uses fake profiles to extort money](#)," 30 November 2023, Moldova 1

In addition to their often devastating financial impact on those who fall victim to them, these scams, hiding behind the imagery of authorities and trusted public officials, also further erode citizen's trust in government and fellow citizens.

### **Social Media Increasingly Used by Human Traffickers**

- **80% of Moldovans are concerned about human trafficking in the country - human trafficking is the most concerning problem on social media platforms across all demographic subgroups.**

Human traffickers exploit victims in Moldova, as well as Moldovans living abroad. While traffickers typically recruit victims through personal contacts, they are increasingly using the internet and social media to broaden their recruitment circles. According to the 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report for Moldova published by the U.S. Department of State,<sup>57</sup> most victims are unemployed, from rural areas, and have received minimal formal education. Traffickers exploit Moldovan citizens, overwhelmingly women and girls, in sex trafficking and labor trafficking within Moldova and in other parts of Europe.

The use of social media as a recruitment tool by human traffickers has become so prevalent, that Facebook's parent company Meta has faced multiple lawsuits from both victims and shareholders.<sup>58</sup> Even the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) Fourth Round Questionnaire (Approved 30 June 2023, Distributed in October 2023, Due for Completion by Government of Moldova in 2024), has devoted several questions for member states on efforts to counter specifically with digital platforms and social media's role in the crime of human trafficking:

- *Q15. Have you identified online practices that may increase the risk of becoming a victim of THB for different forms of exploitation? What mechanisms have been developed to prevent the misuse of information and communication technology for THB purposes? What is the practical effect of their implementation?*
- *Q16. What measures are taken to raise awareness of the risks of technology-facilitated THB, including among children, parents, teachers, child care professionals and social workers? What technology-based initiatives exist in your country to disseminate information to groups/communities at risk of THB?*
- *Q17. How do you cooperate with ICT companies and Internet service providers, including content hosts and social media, in preventing THB?*
- *Q18. How are policies and practices aimed at preventing THB informed by the experiences of victims and at-risk individuals?*

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<sup>57</sup> ["2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Moldova,"](#) US Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, Washington, DC 2023

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Stempel, "[Zuckerberg, Meta are sued for failing to address sex trafficking, child exploitation,](#)" 21 March 2023, Reuters

Andrew Tate, a misogynistic, hypermasculine extremist whose content has generated hundreds of millions of views - was arrested in Romania in 2023 on accusations of rape, human trafficking and forming an organized crime group, some of the victims are Moldovan.<sup>59</sup> Sex traffickers often appeal to victims online by presenting them with opportunities to work. A 2017 report from Polaris showed that traffickers often mislead their victims by offering them modeling contracts, complete with immigration permission assistance if required.<sup>60</sup> A separate study from 2019 indicated that more than 90% of the ads concealing trafficking promised housing inclusive with employment. If the advertisement indicated a person could or would work more than 40 hours per week, and that they did not need previous experience or language proficiency, those were other red flags.<sup>61</sup>

 Reuters

**Insight: Sex, lies and video cams: Andrew Tate turned women into slaves, prosecutors say**

BUCHAREST, Feb 2 (Reuters) - The woman from Moldova thought it was love. Internet celebrity Andrew Tate had offered her a new life.

2 Feb 2023

### **AI-generated Explicit Images of Children and Women Used to Extort or Harass**

A quickly developing dynamic on social media is the convergence of three toxic online elements: (1) AI generated deep-fake videos, (2) bullying and harassment online, and (3) sexual exploitation.

- **Over two-thirds (68%) of Moldovans think deep fake images are a serious problem on social media platforms and 46% are very concerned about this.**
- **74% of Moldovans think bullying/harassment/intimidation is a serious problem on social media platforms, and 59% are very concerned about this**

High levels of concern among Moldovans toward human trafficking through social media gives a strong indication of the intensity of concern that could be expected. Experts are warning about the growing prevalence of artificial intelligence (AI)-generated images on Facebook and other social media platforms. These images are often cleverly disguised to appear as real photographs. The primary purpose of this deceptive tactic is to attract followers and propagate misinformation, according to a report by the Independent.<sup>62</sup> Even more disturbing was the discovery by Stanford Observatory, in December 2023, that buried among the billions of images making up one of the largest training sets for AI image generators were hundreds, more than 3,200 thousand images of suspected child sexual abuse material (CSAM) that cannot now be removed from the system. Worse, because explicit imagery has been built into the foundation

<sup>59</sup> Luiza Ilie and Octav Ganea and Andrew R.C. Marshall, "[INSIGHT - Sex, Lies and video cam: Andrew Tate turned women into slaves.](#)" 2 February 2023 [Reuters](#)

<sup>60</sup> "[The Typology of Modern Slavery.](#)" [Polaris Project](#), 2017

<sup>61</sup> Kayla Mathews, "[How human traffickers recruit victims online.](#)" Cybernews 28 September 2021,

<sup>62</sup> Bogdan Nigai, "[A Surge of AI Generated Images Threatens Online Authenticity.](#)" Moldova 1, 30 April 2024 and Andrew Griffin, "[Alarm raised over bizarre images circulating on Facebook.](#)" 29 April 2024 The Independent.

of AI-generated learning systems, no matter how strongly governments take action, the creation of more images will always be a press of a button away.<sup>63</sup>

TechCrunch

### Meta's Oversight Board probes explicit AI-generated images posted on Instagram and Facebook



Oversight Board said today it has taken up a case about Instagram failing to remove an Indian public figure's explicit AI-generated image.

AI-generated explicit images are also being used in "sextortion" scams where extortion victims are targeted with innocent images they had shared online that have been digitally altered with AI technology into realistic looking sexually explicit images. "The photos are then sent directly to the victims by malicious actors who threaten to distribute them in their community if they do not pay. Once circulated, victims can face significant challenges in preventing the continual sharing of the manipulated content or removal from the internet.<sup>64</sup>

### Hate speech / calls to violence

- **70% of Moldovans think hate speech is a serious problem and 51% are very concerned about this**

Hate speech has increased on social media platforms in Moldova, particularly around election periods - following the 2020 elections, the Moldovan Constitutional Court called on parliament to "to prevent and combat hate speech between electoral contestants, including in the online environment and social networks"<sup>65</sup>

A recent analysis of hate speech during the local government elections in four municipalities (Balti, Soroca, Chisinau and Comrat) from 5 September 2023 to 5 December 2023, was conducted by the Moldovan CSO Promo-LEX. They found that while the number of incidents is slightly lower than in previous years, there were still 19 cases where hate speech with elements of incitement and justification of violence were directed against groups of people on the basis of the criteria "political affiliation" and "sexual orientation"/"gender identity".<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Blake Montgomery, "[AI image generators trained on pictures of child sexual abuse, study finds](#)," 20 December 2023

<sup>64</sup> Raphael Satter, "[FBI says Artificial Intelligence being used for sextortion and harassment](#)," 8 June 2023 [Reuters](#),

<sup>65</sup> Rokša-Zubčević and Irina Corobcenco, [Combating Hate Speech in the Media in the Republic of Moldova Guide for Assessing and Processing Hate Speech Cases](#) (Council of Europe, 2022), p. 5.

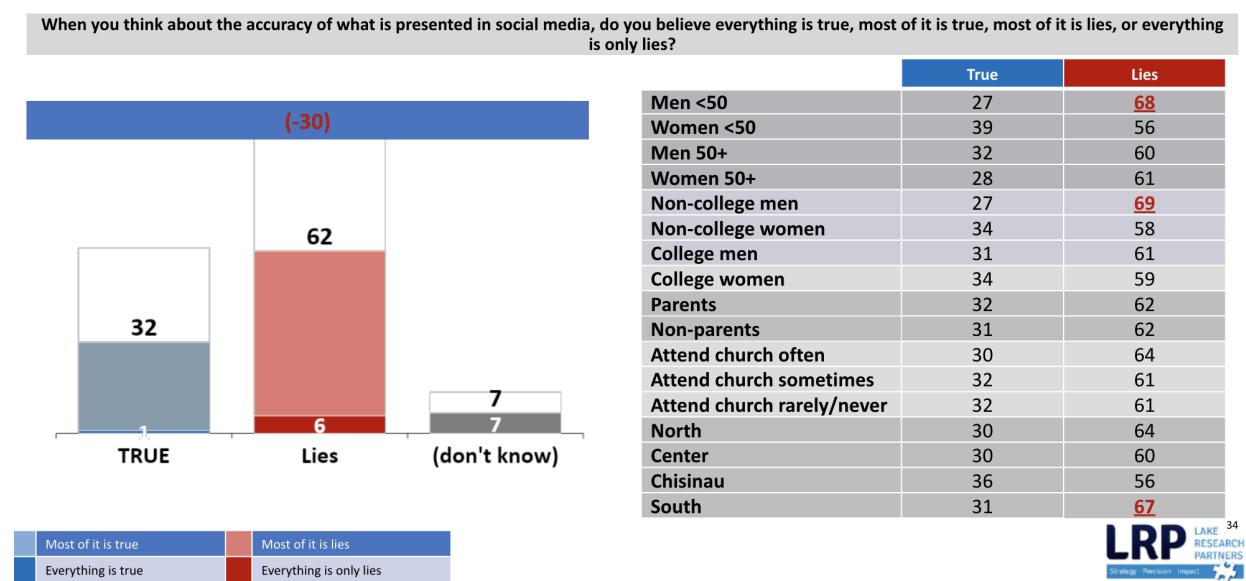
<sup>66</sup> Irina Corobcenco, "[Summary Report on Hate Speech and Incitement to Discrimination](#)," 28 February 2024, Promo-LEX

## The Future of Information Integrity

Based on track records, digital platforms cannot be counted on to self-regulate or place the protection of their users paramount to market pressures of profit, unless required by law. They have repeatedly demonstrated a failure to live up to the meager standards contained in their own terms of service and a lack of responsiveness when urgent harms are imminent.

- **When Moldovans think about the accuracy of what is presented in social media, only one-third believe everything or most of it is true, and intensity is virtually nonexistent. A majority believe everything or most of it to be lies**

Across demographic subgroups, Moldovans think everything or most of what is presented in social media is lies. Younger men, non-college-educated men, and those in the South region are most likely to think it is lies.



Combating digital threats in order to protect the public welfare and improve digital media for democratic participation and increase trust in information online will be critically important in the next phase of Moldova's efforts to counter hybrid warfare. Erosion of trust in social media as well as traditional media creates vulnerabilities within the larger information ecosystem.

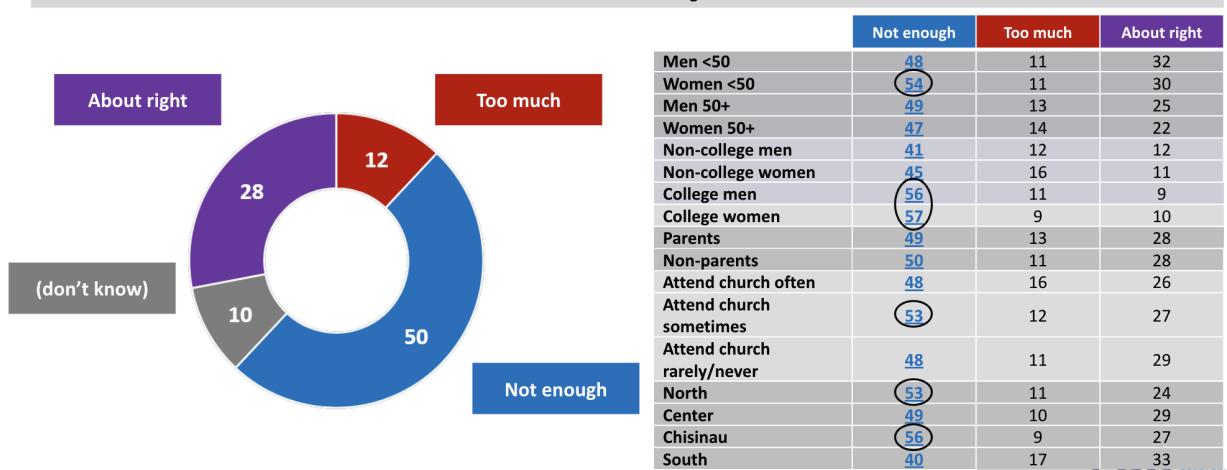
- **While there is more intensity of concern about specific problems of social media in the form of scams and human trafficking, a majority of Moldovans, 54%, believe the problem of social media platforms creating greater division in the country, and 41% are very concerned about it**

## The public wants social media platforms to be held accountable

- **Half of Moldovans think that social media platforms are not regulated enough, while only 12% say they are regulated too much.**
- **Parents, law enforcement, and the national government are perceived by the Moldovan public as having the most responsibility to protect users.**
- **There is belief that the government can give the tools individuals and platforms need to combat disinformation online.**

Across demographic subgroups, a plurality think that social media platforms are not regulated enough. Younger women, college-educated men and women, those who attend church sometimes, and those in the North and Chisinau regions are most likely to think social media platforms are not regulated enough, with a majority who think this.

Overall, do you think that social media platforms are {ROTATE FIRST TWO} \_regulated too much, \_not regulated enough, or do you think the regulations on them are about right?

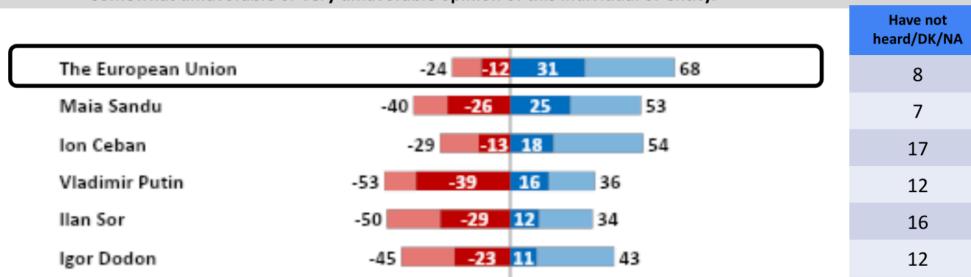


While not an easy path forward, regulatory strategies in Moldova to hold tech companies responsible should be explored further given that self-regulation of tech companies is an utter failure. There is no indication tech companies will do anything different in coming months in Moldova despite high stake elections on the horizon, including a referendum on joining the European Union.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> ["Moldova To Hold Presidential Vote, EU Referendum In October"](#) 17 May 2024, [Radio Free Europe Moldova Service](#)

Moldovans **have the most favorable impression of the European Union** and over half have a favorable impression of Maia Sandu and Ion Ceban. Half or more are unfavorable toward Vladimir Putin and Ilan Sor.

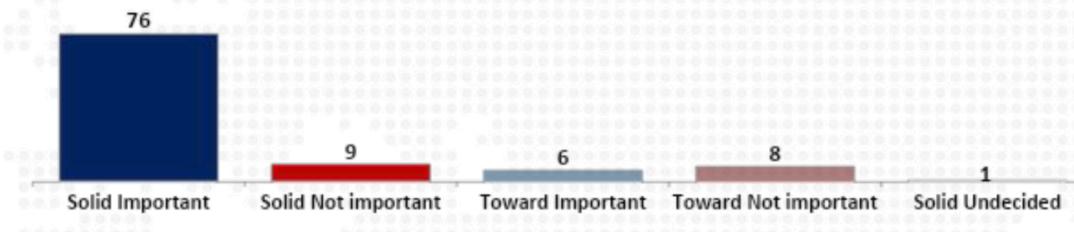
Now I am going to name some different public figures and entities. For each, please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of this individual or entity.



Meta in particular has been criticized for its inconsistent handling of hate speech and misinformation, often acting only when public pressure mounts.<sup>68</sup> The lack of transparency and accountability in self-regulation means that harmful content proliferates unchecked. Reports have shown that tech companies allocate the majority of their resources to English-language content, neglecting other languages and regions, which exacerbates global disparities and allows harmful content to spread in underserved markets.<sup>69</sup> Without external oversight, these companies have little incentive to improve their moderation practices or to address the deeper structural issues that facilitate the spread of harmful content.

- **76% of voting age Moldovans think it is important that the government takes steps to stop gendered disinformation online throughout the survey.**

How important is it to you personally that the government take steps to stop gendered disinformation online - is it very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not important at all?



Overall, Moldovans recognize there is a **problem with social media** and are concerned about

<sup>68</sup> [Nick Nguyen](#) and [Carmen Scurato](#), “[Facebook and YouTube’s refusal to moderate misinformation in global languages harms communities of color](#),” 2 November 2021, [Prism](#); and Caroline Allen, “[Facebook’s Content Moderation Failures in Ethiopia](#),” 19 April 2022, [Council on Foreign Relations Blog Post](#).

<sup>69</sup> “[How Big Tech platforms are neglecting their non-English language users](#),” 30 November 2023, [Global Witness](#); and Mona Elswah, “[Investigating Content Moderation Systems in the Global South](#)”, 30 January 2024, [Center for Democracy and Technology Blog](#).

the way women and girls are portrayed, and this increases dramatically during the survey, showing an openness to engagement on these topics. By the end of the survey, concern about the way women are portrayed on social media increases by 24 points, and intense concern increases by 18 points.

- Overall concern about the way women and girls are portrayed on social media increases (+24 points), and intense concern increases by 23 points
  - **Initial:** 21% very concerned, 52% concerned; 41% not concerned
  - **Final:** 44% very concerned, 76% concerned; 20% not concerned

Weaponizing social media against women leaders with gendered disinformation and hate is one of the most effective mechanisms deployed to erode democratic institutions, divide social groups, exercise foreign influence and support the growth of transnational far-right movements. Attacks that aim to undermine women leaders reach millions at very low cost, and represent an early warning of democratic backsliding. Fact-checking and de-bunking efforts to expose disinformation are important, but not sufficient to ever stop its spread. For that, a concerted and coordinated whole of society effort is needed to bolster a rights-based approach to information integrity.

*#ShePersisted is fortunate to take inspiration from leading researchers, advocates, experts and organizations in Moldova who both tacitly and directly contribute to understanding and addressing digital threats to democracy and the targeting of women leaders.*



[www.ShePersisted.org](http://www.ShePersisted.org)