Information Security in the Republic of Moldova in the Context of Hybrid Threats

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Abstract: *Russia`s war against Ukraine has revealed numerous weaknesses and gaps in the Republic of Moldova`s ability to show resilience in front of hybrid threats. A weak civil society, as well as the fears of the post-Soviet society in transition. Russian propaganda rovokes significant social processes in the Republic of Moldova.*
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1. INTRODUCTION

Russia`s war against Ukraine has revealed numerous weaknesses and gaps in the Republic of Moldova`s resilience against hybrid threats. With a weak civil society and the fears of a post-Soviet society in transition, Russian propaganda, using all these to its advantage, brings about important social processes in the Republic of Moldova. This article aims to analyse the beginning, evolution, and current situation, as well as the prospects for the development of the Republic of Moldova in one of the longest hybrid wars in modern times, which Russia has unleashed against Moldova, emphasizing the political, ethical, and public mental health perspectives.

The history of the informational war on the territory of the modern Republic of Moldova began long before the start of the hot phase of the war on the Dniester in 1992. Studying historical data, one can see that the growth of the territory of the Russian Empire towards the Danube in the direction of Constantinople has been interrupted by the geographical position of the Romanian people, dividing the Russian Empire and the Slavs of the Balkan Peninsula, whose liberation was an essential argument for Russia's expansion.. Initially, the authorities of the Empire did not question the common identity of the Romanians, but only recruited individuals and the nobility into the imperial administration. Soon, giving a separate national identity for Moldovans, especially after the Unification of the Danube Principalities, this question became imperative for the Russian authorities. Years later, the USSR, not agreeing with the unification of Bessarabia with the Romanian Kingdom, created the Autonomous Moldavian Soviet Republic on the territory of Soviet Ukraine, which would be a mirror version of "bourgeois" Romania.

The Romanian population of this new country was subjected to a massive ideological re-education, first of all, in the creation of a separate national identity based entirely on Romanophobia. After this, the reform of 1933 was intended for the convergence of the literary norms of the newly minted Moldavian language and standard Romanian, when the Soviet authorities saw an opportunity to spread the communist revolution to the neighbouring Kingdom of Romania. But soon, the organizers of this rapprochement were shot, the language norms were again artificially distant from each other, and Romania was portrayed exclusively in a negative light [4].

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Succeeding the conquest of Bessarabia by Soviet troops, this policy was extended to the newly annexed territories. The children who attended the schools of the Soviet era received an education that denigrated the national identity, the Romanian history, while at the same time, the Russian culture was shown to be superior. As a result, these children were very separated ideologically from their parents, who were graduates of a Romanian school.. Public opinion figures such as teachers and religious figures were shot or expelled, and their place was taken by teachers and political educators from other regions of the USSR. [6]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independent Republic of Moldova became the first target of the Russian Federation hybrid war, striking at once in several key areas. Russia broke the resistance of Moldova for many years, energetically, economically, politically, informational, and ideologically; religion and nostalgia for the good old days also became a help in an unconventional war, which also had a hot phase with the direct participation of the troops of the Russian 14th Army, as well as Russian citizens who signed up for the front in Moldova voluntarily, the so-called Cossacks, internationalists, and militias, only a small part of which consisted of properly local residents of the eastern regions of Moldova. Before, during, and after the hot phase of the war, the Republic of Moldova was attacked by information weapons from internally controlled sources and from outside sources such as Russian TV channels still broadcasting throughout the territory of the former USSR, as well, by Media owned by regional pro-Russian media of Transnistria and Gagauzia. [5,10]

2. WHY IS INFORMATION WARFARE SO IMPORTANT ETHICALLY?

Despite the fact that information wars are most often not directly associated with human casualties, they can also indirectly cause victims: for example via interpersonal or intergroup conflicts, mental trauma, damage to the image and reputation. Furthermore, during a hybrid war, the moral framework and benchmarks can change or shift, involving a large mass population, thus having a collective character [7.] Information wars in Moldova divide generations and families into opposite sides, interpersonal conflicts on a political, and geopolitical basis, become commonplace in many families. Thus, the Moldovan society turned out to be particularly vulnerable in front of the Russian information war.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE.

From a psychological point of view, the main goal of a hybrid war is to divide society into two parts and clash them. Propaganda also blurs the boundaries between civilians and military, each of them can take on a different role at any time. Likewise, during a hybrid war, the moral framework and benchmarks can change or shift, which happens rarely during a period of welfare, but in the case of disinformation, it can have a multiple, collective character. [8.]. Another goal of Russian propaganda that should be mentioned is to discredit Ukrainian refugees, unleash conflicts, and simulate bad attitudes or humiliation of the local population by Ukrainian refugees, for example, by painting memorable places in the colours of the Ukrainian flag in the early days of a Russian invasion.

The war in neighbouring Ukraine caught the medical public system of the Republic of Moldova unprepared; mass anxiety and the flow of refugees raised the necessity of food and clean water supplies, adequate shelter, and safe transportation and the lack of medical staff become a challenge for the local healthcare system and multiplied the load [9.] The number of appeals to the public mental health system has significantly increased against the background of military anxiety, with exacerbated chronic mental illnesses, in particular, the anxiety-depressive spectrum, as well as signs of Post-Traumatic Disorder among refugees. However, coordinated work and international

assistance have significantly improved the situation and helped provide the necessary assistance on the spot or redirect the flow of refugees to the next destination. Despite this, there was an urgent need for highly specialized specialists working with psycho-traumas, conducting rehabilitation of people, as well as for psychoeducation.

4. VULNERABLE AND DISARMED

The phenomenon of hybrid war in the Republic of Moldova is a continuation of   Kremlin's policy of disinformation of the local population, aiming to cause confrontation with the Moldovan authorities, and is a component of a hybrid war along with economic, political, social, environmental, and military warfare [2.] . A large percentage of politically controlled media, due to the lack of transparency and low profitability of the media market, allow the media to be easily controlled by oligarchs and their political protégés; moreover the weak separation of the branches of power and their political dependence on the same oligarchs turned Moldova into a captured state [2,5] Media literacy in Moldova also needs to be given attention, in order to familiarize viewers with such concepts as fact-checking or explaining complex issues. Another issue is the language of the presentation. For a long time, the Moldovan state gave pan-national frequencies to large Russian media, and many are informed from Russian-speaking or Russian media, as the locals do not have enough money to improve coverage and quality broadcasts.[2,5] Also, for many years, the pro-Russian authorities in Moldova limited Western investments, or did not make the market attractive, while Russian businessmen bought up enterprises of strategic importance, which, for example, include wine factories in Moldova. Also, an important factor was to constantly reinforce the dependence of the Moldovan economy on Russia, even when cooperation with the EU in exports and imports has long replaced the importance of Russia, in significant proportions. In the political arena, control was exercised through overtly pro-Russian parties that targeted nostalgic people and national minorities, as well as the so-called pro-European parties that most often became entangled in corruption scandals, causing frustration and criticism.

5. A PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE FACE OF MULTIPLE VULNERABILITIES. MODIFICATION OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK.

Over time, with the gradual changes in the political field and the arrival of new players, a possible increase in the resilience of the Republic of Moldova to hybrid threats began to appear and be discussed. The Information Security Strategy details the efforts of the Republic of Moldova to counter propaganda and false information (2019-2024). The strategy was approved by the Parliament in 2018 in accordance with the objectives set out in the Information Security Concept of the Republic of Moldova (2017). The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova (2011) states that disinformation and propaganda campaigns in the media must be stopped in order to protect the information security of the state. The Security and Intelligence Service submitted two reports to the Parliament (SIS) on the implementation of the Information Security Strategy in 2019 and 2020.

The latest report has been submitted to the Parliament, but has not yet been made public. In 2018, the National Media Development Concept was adopted. The main problems are identified, as well as policy priorities aimed at improving the regulatory framework for the media. Targets have also been set to reduce the harmful effects of propaganda and disinformation on the media environment. In addition, work is underway on a new program document called "The National Program for the Development of the Media of the Republic of Moldova". Over time, the progress and interest of both the political class and civil society in the issues of resilience to hybrid threats became noticeable.[1.]

6. THE CURRENT SITUATION

The Republic of Moldova ranked the lowest among the 14 countries surveyed in the Disinformation Resilience Index (six Eastern Partner countries and eight EEC member states). Due to the fact that, in the Republic of Moldova, the media are often the target of both internal and external disinformation campaigns, exacerbated by the precarious economic situation, the lack of critical thinking of the population, the growing dependence of the media on the government, ethnic divisions, as well as the ideological fracture of the geopolitical landscape countries, the Republic of Moldova is currently extremely susceptible to propaganda and false information.[1.]

The most vulnerable groups of the population of the Republic of Moldova, according to the same research, are people who use Russian TV channels for information, which are very popular among the broad sections of Moldovan society, and completely are prevalent in Transnistria, Gagauzia, andfor other minor ethnic groups.

The high level of public trust in the Moldovan Orthodox Church, a division of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate, plays a significant role. Religious figures often use an anti-Western narrative to reaffirm their conservative, anti-scientific view, while not forgetting to mention Russia as a defender of traditional values.

Despite the fact that, in the Republic of Moldova, there are a number of institutions responsible for information security and media regulation, their activities are not coordinated, are weak and sometimes openly disinterested. Moreover, the lack of a legal definition of the term "disinformation" is currently not part of the national regulatory framework.

The Information Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova for 2021-2024 was developed by the government, the Security Service, and the Intelligence Service in 2018 and approved by the Parliament after a heated public debate on information security issues and the government's ability to address threats. The strategy includes a detailed action plan to be implemented by all relevant authorities to ensure information and cyber security.[1.]

7. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE

Among the possible solutions, the following can be considered - increase the transparency of media channel funding and liberalise advertising revenues, organise media literacy and critical thinking courses for the population, develop public organisations that contribute to the fight against propaganda, strengthen legislation and involve parliamentarians, delineate the duties of regulatory bodies and define the exact fields of action, legislatively define the concepts of disinformation and propaganda, solve the problem of church influence.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Russia's war against Ukraine has revealed numerous weaknesses and gaps in the Republic of Moldova's ability to counter hybrid threats. The weak civil society, as well as the fears of the transitional post-Soviet society, are used by Russian propaganda to their advantage, provoking significant social processes in the Republic of Moldova. Hybrid threats from Russia, however, do not subside in their intensity, and Russia is increasingly making direct threats and interfering in internal affairs. Information warfare as part of hybrid warfare has shown its destructive impact on society, revealing an increase in the burden on the public mental health system with a colossal ethical impact. Thus, the Republic of Moldova simply has no other choice but to increase its capacity for resilience, reduce the split inside its society and develop plans and strategies for further actions.

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