



## Case study

# **"DIRTY BOMB" – WORLDWIDE FAKE: how was it reflected by the Moldovan media?**

February 2023

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### Introduction

*One of the hot topics at the end of October was regarding the „dirty bomb” that Moscow claims Ukraine intends to use. This "high-level" disinformation, which [struck terror into the minds of many](#), has, however, been firmly debunked by the international community. The reason is simple: Russia has failed to produce any evidence to support its allegations. Attempts to shift responsibility for its own crimes are not a novelty in this hybrid war and are a tactic Russia has tried repeatedly. It is no wonder, then, that the efforts of pro-Kremlin officials and media have had the opposite effect to what was intended: what Moscow wanted to present as the revelation of a "great truth" is in reality [a falsehood](#).*

*In the current analysis, however, we have intended to find out how the given topic came to be presented by [the main TV channels in Chişinău](#), not prior a short presentation of the topic.*

At the end of October, Moscow spread disinformation that Ukraine intended to use a "[dirty bomb](#)". This [allegation](#) was quickly debunked by the international community, as Russia was unable to provide any evidence to support its claims.

It is important to note that this is not the first time Russia has tried to shift responsibility for its own illegalities in the ongoing hybrid war, a tactic that [has not been successful](#) in this case.

In this analysis, we will examine how this topic was presented by the main TV channels in Chisinau.

### Summary

The subject of the "dirty bomb", which Russia has claimed Ukraine possesses and intends to use it to launch an anti-Russian campaign, was quickly denied by the international community. It branded the accusations as false and without factual support. However, the main TV channels in Chişinău presented the story in a biased and manipulative way, which contributed to distorting information and manipulating public opinion. The analysis of Moldovan TV channels highlighted the need to improve accuracy, impartiality and ethics in journalism so that the public is protected from misinformation.

In the analysis of the TV channels in the Republic of Moldova, various deviations were identified that contributed to the distortion of information. These include manipulation through selective presentation of data, omission of information, violation of journalistic ethics and audiovisual legislation by omitting video sources, poor editing and inaccurate use of terms.

Category	Description	Title
Manipulation by omission	Lack of reflection of the events	First in Moldova, NTV
Neutral	Reflects the subject relatively accurately without excessive attention and analysis	JurnalTV, TV8
Minor errors	Admit errors in news reporting, provide inaccurate or erroneous details	Moldova 1, PrimeTV
Disinformation	It was furthest away from the real facts, retelling propagandistic narratives or using manipulative and misinformative methods	RTR

Expertise	Presents the subject in the most comprehensive way, relates the evolving facts and supplements them with expert opinion	ProTV
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In order to improve accuracy and impartiality in reporting international news events, recommendations were given to international news reporters and editors. In general, Moldovan TV channels failed to cover the story sufficiently to reveal the falsity of the Russian allegations, with the exception of ProTV.

## **EXPLOSIVE STATEMENTS ABOUT THE "DIRTY BOMB" - where it came from and how it was covered by the international media**

*The "dirty bomb" has never been used in history and only began to be mentioned after the September 11, 2001 attacks as a weapon for terrorists designed to spread fear and panic. Russia has pulled the "notion" out of mothballs, claiming that Ukraine can obtain bomb materials from the dormant Chernobyl plant, radioactive waste dumps and chemical and nuclear industry enterprises.*

*According to [terrifying statements](#) made by Russian officials, [Kiev intended](#) to detonate "a dirty bomb" and then accuse Russia of its use in Ukraine and thus launch an "unprecedented worldwide anti-Russian campaign". Moreover, Ukraine allegedly aimed to "intimidate the local population and increase [the flow of refugees](#) to Europe". [The Russian Defence minister](#) has called his counterparts in the UK, France, USA and Turkey, [Russia has even called](#) a closed meeting of the UN Security Council, and Vladimir Putin has raised the issue again at the [Valdai discussion forum](#).*

*Moscow, however, failed to present any evidence to support its allegations, referring in particular to a photo that turned out to have been taken [in Slovenia 10 years ago](#), which ultimately proved the exact opposite: what the Kremlin wants to push is a fake.*

*Moscow's statements are false, Paris, London and Washington concluded [in a joint statement](#). Kiev called them „absurd”, and to counter the accusations, [invited experts](#) from the International Atomic Energy Agency, [who quickly debunked the Russian allegations](#), stating they found no signs of nuclear activity in Ukraine.*

*What Ukraine and the West saw instead was [a threat to prepare a false-flag attack](#), with NATO allies suspecting that Russia is itself ready to detonate a "dirty bomb" to intimidate the West [into not helping Ukraine](#).*

*We recall in this context that accusations of false-flag operations and chemical weapons attacks are a central element of the pro-Kremlin disinformation apparatus. Such statements are part of the broad campaign of manipulation accompanying Russia's invasion of Ukraine in an attempt to blame Ukraine for the atrocities of the war. The new falsehood promoted by [Moscow](#) has de facto come to re-fuel old narratives of pro-Kremlin propaganda:*

- "Ukraine is controlled by a fascist group";
- "Ukrainian fascism" threatens the whole world";
- "Kiev possesses secret weapons";
- "Russia started the war as a "rescue operation";
- "Moscow's role in this conflict is to prevent a great tragedy".

But also many others. In the following analysis, we wanted to find out if any of these narratives have animated any of the news in the Moldovan press, but also what exactly the Moldovan public has learned from all the events that happen to be informed by the local television material of the most watched, according to the Socio-Political Barometer, [Chişinău TV channels](#), monitored by WatchDog.MD.

## "DIRTY BOMB" AT THE TV CHANNELS IN CHISINAU

The topic of the "dirty bomb" was unequally covered on the main Moldovan TV channels (JurnalTV, Moldova1, PrimeTV, TV8, ProTV, First in Moldova, NTV, RTR). While some stations raised the subject several times, others simply avoided it.

For a clearer picture (see table below) and a quick ranking showing which of the monitored media came closest/farthest from the objective reporting of real events (as reported by the international agencies, described above), we divided the monitored stations into categories (from bad to good), in the first, placing those that covered the subject most poorly and were farthest from the real facts.

### Level of coverage of events in the local press

#### • overall ranking

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Name</i>
<b>I.</b>	<i>They did not illustrate the events in any way.</i>	<b>First in Moldova, NTV</b>
<b>II.</b>	<i>It was furthest from the real facts, rehashing propagandistic narratives or resorting to various manipulative and misinformative means.</i>	<b>RTR</b>
<b>III.</b>	<i>They admitted to certain errors in news editing, giving inaccurate or erroneous details, which put the viewer off from perceiving the information correctly.</i>	<b>Moldova1, PrimeTV</b>
<b>IV.</b>	<i>They covered the topic relatively neutrally and fairly, yet without giving it too much attention, analysis.</i>	<b>JurnalTV, TV8</b>
<b>V.</b>	<i>They gave the broadest account of the subject, did not limit itself to recounting the facts, presented the facts in dynamics and supplemented them with experts' opinion.</i>	<b>ProTV</b>

### Level of coverage of events in the local press

#### • deviations that contributed to the distortion of information

Among the types of misconduct that contributed to the distortion of information, we reported, following the analysis of the material produced by the monitored TV stations, cases of:

- **Manipulation through selective presentation of data taken out of context** and biased presentation of information - (RTR, "Zelenski wants to sell Ukraine to the West");
- **Concealment of facts and manipulation by omission** - (First in Moldova, NTV);
- **Omission of video sources** and violation of journalistic ethics and [Audiovisual](#) legislation - (Moldova1);
- **Bad editing, bordering on misinformation** (Moldova1 "Ukrainians intend to use a dirty bomb");
- **Inaccurate use of terms** (PrimeTV - "Ukraine is reportedly preparing to detonate a "nuclear bomb");

- ***Intrigue, bordering on manipulation, through the exaggerated use of propaganda images, helping to create an image of Russia as an all-controlling superpower (TV 8).***

Below you will find the exact description of the above theses and a detailed analysis of the news material presented on the monitored TV channels.

### **Level of coverage of events in the local press** **Detailed analysis**

#### **CATEGORY I** **First in Moldova and NTV**

First category manipulation, **disinformation through silence** is one of the most common and accessible forms of manipulation of public opinion. First in Moldova and NTV, which have repeatedly betrayed, directly or indirectly, by flaunting their support for Russia in the current war, have again resorted to the same tactic. Generally, rather stingy in their coverage of international news, the two channels are very selective in the foreign news they broadcast. No wonder, then, that once again the editors preferred to leave out the story in which the Kremlin was accused virtually from the outset of disinformation, just as its accusations were treated from the outset as a case of gross falsehood. The reason is lack of evidence. In fact, the Russian side's only so-called "argument" was published on [Twitter](#) by the Russian Ministry of Defence. The Slovenian government was quick to [respond](#) with another tweet, demonstrating that the images used by the Russian side are actually smoke detectors of the Slovenian Agency for Radioactive Waste Management, and that the photo was taken in 2010!

#### ***Recommendations:***

- *Objective, fair and accurate reporting of current international events, without truncating data or resorting to any other form of propaganda manipulation.*
- *Compliance with the rules of ethics and Audiovisual legislation in force.*

#### **CATEGORY II** **RTR**

The RTR TV station presented the topic on October 25 under the headline "[USA, France and UK consider Russia's statement groundless](#)". The material faithfully indicates all video sources and starts by briefly presenting the statements of all parties. It then reports on the West's intention to continue to support Ukraine, including financially. So far it appears to be as neutral and reasoned as possible. But appearances are deceiving.

Finally, the news uses an out-of-context statement made by Zelenski in which the Ukrainian president invited "donors" to "take over" certain regions of Ukraine. The story ends with a background of dubious relevance, which neglects other issues in favour of ideas promoted on various occasions by the Russian propaganda press that the Ukrainian president "wants to sell Ukraine" to the West [newprospect](#), [ria.ru](#), [mk.ru](#). This is therefore a case of manipulation through **selective presentation of information taken out of context**.

RTR did not return to the "dirty bomb" theme in the following days, preferring other topics, many of which fuel narratives beloved of pro-Russian propaganda, such as how [„difficult”](#) life has become in countries that do not recognize Russia's arguments in the given conflict and how [dangerous](#) that attitude is.

#### ***Recommendations:***

- *Accurately reproduce factual material, avoid misrepresentation and use only relevant and correct data without taking it out of context and misinterpretation.*
- *Respect the rules of ethics and Audiovisual legislation in force.*



Beyond the cases of shortcomings due to the angle of approach and interpretation of the information presented, we are also confronted, in the case of news dedicated to the given subject, with some cases of **"unintentional" errors or misinformation**.

In the case of PrimeTV, for example, we are told in the [intro to the news](#) that we are dealing with a "nuclear bomb", which is totally false. [The dirty bomb is NOT](#) a nuclear weapon. The Prime TV moderator's error seems, however, to be the result of a mistake in editing/lack of knowledge, based on the content of the material below.

In the following news piece, Russia is portrayed [as an aggressor state accused of lying](#), TC IN 9:35. The material informs us at the outset that "The USA, France and the UK have described the accusations as false. This is followed by Ukraine's reaction, statements made by the Ukrainian president and foreign minister, who in turn accuse Russia of using the accusations as a pretext 'to escalate the war'. In the second part of the material, President Zelenski is quoted as saying that "Wherever Russia goes, towns and villages are left destroyed", thus moving on to a report describing the horrors and devastation left behind by the Russian army in several Ukrainian towns.

***Recommendations:***

- *Greater care for editing and information, i.e. correct wording, to avoid incorrect terms and misinformation in the future.*
- *The news could be accused of bias by Moscow supporters, as it focuses mainly on the reaction of the West and Ukraine, and the sources used are exclusively Western (US State Department) and Ukrainian (President's office, Foreign Minister, FreedomTV report). It would have been advisable to give space to Russia's own accusations (made only in the intro of the news item), by presenting a video quote from any of the Russian officials who made statements, rendering the facts accurately and remaining fair, without promoting the Kremlin's propagandistic narratives.*

On national TV channel, [the „dirty bomb”](#) topic, (TC IN 15:47) ends a small news package on the war and is presented in just three sentences. However, in the short time given to the topic several errors managed to slip in.

The material (a VoiceOver with no video quotes and the only one on the subject produced by M1) notes, among other things, that, quote, "Washington and London fear Ukrainian intention to use a so-called dirty bomb could be a pretext for further attacks."

The given sentence contains at least two **inaccuracies that distort the information**.

**1. Negligent/unknowingly false:**

Because of faulty wording - "**Ukrainian intention to use...**" instead of "*Russian allegations that Ukraine intends to use...*" - the news may create the false impression that the Ukrainians do indeed intend to use a dirty bomb.

**2. Incomplete/incorrect information:**

It is not clear why only "Washington and London" are "*afraid*" and France, which was also a signatory to the [official statement](#), is omitted.

The M1 news does not present the pleadings of Russian officials, but omits the arguments of the West, attempting to inform us fairly that Moscow has "reiterated its accusations" that Ukraine "is preparing to use a dirty bomb in Ukraine" and that it intends "to bring this issue to the UN Security

Council"; and that "the White House has rejected these allegations, which it clearly considers a falsehood; while "Ukraine in its turn accuses Moscow of preparing a false-flag operation".

**Another issue that deserves attention is that, as in many other cases, Moldova<sup>1</sup> does not provide/label the sources of the images used:**

1. creating the false impression that he is the author;
2. depriving the viewer of the opportunity to assess the objectivity of the information;
3. violating journalistic ethics and the [Audiovisual Media Services Code](#), Art. 13/P.5;
4. showing disrespect for the real authors of the material, fellow journalists, some of whom risked their lives filming the material under wartime conditions.

#### **Recommendations:**

- *Greater care in editing material, language used and correct wording to avoid inaccurate terms and misinformation respectively.*
- *Use of multiple sources for documentation and writing of topics.*
- *Indication of source labels of video material used and compliance with relevant media legislation.*

#### CATEGORY IV **TV8**

TV8 gives the topic less space than a full news item. However, it does return to it in at least two pieces devoted to events in the neighbouring country. In the first, on October 25, the subject of the "dirty bomb" is mentioned in a report which is a brief [review](#) (TC IN 24.50) of some of the important events which have taken place in Ukraine in the context of the war with Russia. TV8 reports briefly on Moscow's "suspicions about Ukraine's alleged intention to resort to a 'dirty bomb'". The extremely brief news item (text only, no video quotes) gives a balanced account of the position of both sides, stating that Russia has not backed up its accusations with any evidence and Ukraine denies Moscow's accusations. The material tries to explain in a few words what this weapon, the "dirty bomb", is, but it probably uses **terms far too sophisticated for the average viewer**.

The next day, TV8 takes up the subject again, but this time in a secondary role, in a piece devoted more to the [Russian nuclear exercises](#) (TC IN 34.48). The information about the dirty bomb refers this time to the reactions of France, the UK and the US (a video statement by the US President is used), which criticised Moscow's statements and "called them false". This time, TV8 manages to explain much more clearly what represents a dirty bomb.

The part that raises questions is the one on nuclear testing, which is where the material basically begins. TV8 illustrates its story with video footage taken from the Russian propaganda press, RIA Novosti. And, although in this context it seems perfectly natural, the channel is de facto involved in broadcasting **a propaganda show**. Because of the abundance of ambience, the coverage verges on manipulative dramatisation of the situation, **helping to create an image of Russia as a superpower and of its leader Putin as a president who controls processes on which the fate of all humanity depends**. The effect is somewhat amplified by the fact that the news is the last one in the newscast, as a 'farewell', leaving the viewer with an unpleasant sense of danger and anxiety.

#### **Recommendations:**

- *In its desire to capture the attention of the Moldovan viewer with impressive images, the channel is sometimes attracted by "tempting" videos bordering on propaganda. Our recommendation is to be more discerning about the perspective of the subjects to avoid the Russian propaganda narratives.*

- *To use as sources of information the major international news sources and not only the Romanian press, which, due to lack of knowledge of the Russian language, does not use the first source and increases the risk of inaccuracies and misinterpretations.*
- *Give more broadcast space to external news. In the hybrid war between domestic and foreign news, TV8 is currently one of the channels with the greatest potential to combat misinformation, a potential that it would be a pity not to use, so that it can become a reference for the average Moldovan viewer - often misinformed and extremely disoriented under the influence of the manipulation techniques actively used by propaganda channels.*

#### CATEGORY IV **JurnalTV**

JurnalTV also dedicated [a news item](#) to the topic on October 26, including the latest developments on the Ukrainian front. Like TV8, the channel begins its coverage with Russian military exercises, a remarkable plus is that it does not get absorbed in the show of "Russian power" and caught up in propaganda, devoting much less attention to this issue and preferring to focus on the West's reaction.

In its balanced and impartial material, JurnalTV summarises the latest developments on the subject, stressing that Russia's accusations are groundless, and presents the US reaction, US President Joe Biden's statement warning Russia that it would be a big mistake to use nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine, as well as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's statement stressing that Russia's claim is misinformation and that "Russia should not use false recipes to escalate the situation".

However, we would like to point out that, in its commendable effort to cover as much foreign news and the war in Ukraine as possible, the channel has a **tendency to place events from different areas under one umbrella**, which can make it difficult to perceive the information correctly. This time too, a topic like the "dirty bomb" would probably have deserved a separate story, as from the intro of the news item in question it is quite difficult to disperse the essence of what happened.

#### **Recommendations:**

- *Use shorter, clear and to-the-point video quotes (synchro), as the Moldovan viewer risks losing the thread of the narrative sometimes, being "spoiled" by Russian-language news, which translates and voice-dubs all the speakers.*
- *Place news from different areas under different intros. Even if they take place in one geographical area (Ukraine, for example), they cannot always be part of a single story. Given its great potential to combat misinformation and manipulation of information, the channel's efforts would be even more remarkable if it could do this, contributing even more to improving the content and perception of its news.*

#### CATEGORY V **ProTV Chişinău**

ProTV Chişinău has dedicated at least one daily material to the subject, seeing in Moscow's terrifying statements a source of concern and a subject worthy of being followed in detail.

The information presented gave a detailed and reasoned account of the positions of the parties concerned, was accompanied by expert commentary, designed to calm inflamed spirits and shed more light on what had happened (as was not the case with any of the other TV channels) and international reactions. The news coverage was illustrated with images and video quotes from a wide variety of sources - from news agencies to communication platforms - accurately reported, giving the viewer an extra channel to appreciate their authenticity. All these elements brought the information presented - both quantitatively (in terms of number of news items) and qualitatively - closest to real events and their objective coverage.



*A brief description of the presented news:* ProTV is the first of the local channels to report already on [October 24](#) that Russia accuses Ukraine of planning to use a radioactive bomb, while the West denies the accusations and Volodimir Zelenski claims that Moscow is preparing a false-flag attack.

The next day, ProTV picks up the [topic](#), again highlighting the Russian side's lack of evidence. The news announces the International Atomic Energy Agency's intention to send inspectors for verification. A video statement made by the Ukrainian president's adviser, M. Podoleak, is shown, saying that the Russians intend to "put fear into Western public opinion". The material ends with an explainer on what a "dirty bomb" is - not before pointing out that the West accuses Russia of using the information as a pretext for escalating the war.

On October 26, [ProTV continues this topic](#), quoting accusations made by Russia during a UN Security Council meeting. Kiev and the West have described the Russian accusations as "pure Russian disinformation", the material points out. The US president's warning and the NATO secretary-general's statement that Russia would be making an extremely serious mistake if it used such weapons are presented. In the background, ProTV points out that Russia has made its accusations without providing any evidence and presents the opinion of experts, who say Moscow would use this tactic to induce panic in the West and thus stop its support for Ukraine.

In the same newscast, [ProTV continues with another news item](#), reporting that Russia has begun nuclear exercises, claiming it would practice a massive nuclear attack in response to an attack on Russian territory. The Russian president's statement is shown, accusing Kiev of wanting to use dirty bombs, and that Ukraine would be turned "into a testing ground" "with heavy weapons". This time, too, the journalists did not forget to mention Moscow's lack of evidence.

### **Recommendations:**

- *Use diacritics when translating the quotes and statements used, to make them more intelligible and easy to read and understood for the Moldovan audience, sufficiently "spoiled" with the Russian language news, which translates and voice-dubs all speakers.*

### **CONCLUSIONS:**

In conclusion, we can summarize that the closest in reflecting the realities of the international news in the case of the monitored topic were the TV channels in categories 5 and 4 – ProTV, JurnalTV, TV8 – ProTV being the local TV channel that reported and analyzed the subject most detailed, clear and without distorting messages.

Although we did not find any cases of serious violations of the principles of fair reporting in the presentation of information on the subject on the eight TV stations monitored, we did note several cases of distortion of information, as described in the examples above, which may have influenced the objective and fair perception of the information. In order to prevent such situations in the future, we suggest following the recommendations described in each case. If we assess the overall coverage of the subject, we can conclude that Moldovan TV channels did not cover the subject to a sufficient extent to know and understand the false nature of the accusations made by the Russian Federation. Only the viewers of ProTV had the opportunity to be fully "armed" with fair information in order not to fall prey to misinformation on this specific case. To a fairly advanced extent, JurnalTV and TV8 were able to protect themselves from disinformation, while those who watched the news on the other channels were not informed correctly, sufficiently or not at all. It is important to note that this analysis is valid for this specific case study and we do not recommend extrapolating conclusions to editorial policies more broadly.



*The report was developed by the WatchDog.MD Community, within the project "Strengthening the Independent Media's Reporting Quality and Capacity", implemented with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy. The content presented is the responsibility of the WatchDog.MD Community and does not necessarily reflect the views of the donor.*