

REPORT: MAPPING ANTI-EU NARRATIVES IN MOLDOVA

The main goal of the anti-EU propaganda is to discredit the European integration process in Moldova. Given the electoral context, the aim is likely to discourage pro-European voters from participating in the elections.

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Summary

This study monitoring and mapping anti-EU narratives is unprecedented in the region. The results so far show that the main goal of the anti-EU propaganda is to discredit the European integration process in Moldova and not so much to discredit the European Union itself. Given the electoral context, the aim is likely to discourage pro-European voters from participating in the elections.

By far the most popular narrative is that the government is not truly European and uses the discourse of EU membership to mask its incompetence, corruption and anti-democratic or even dictatorial tendencies. The fertile ground for this narrative is involuntarily maintained by the government itself, which tries to monopolise the pro-European discourse. The exclusive association of the idea of European integration with a single political force risks reducing support for the EU when the ruling party's rating falls, and recent polls seem to confirm this trend.

The most popular narrative aimed directly at the EU is internal division among member countries, with an emphasis on the lack of consensus on support for Ukraine. It is a very valuable topic for Russian propaganda because it can feed several messages simultaneously: that there are dissensions both between member countries, and between member countries and EU institutions; that Europeans are tired of helping Ukraine; that Ukraine is not grateful for the help; that Moldova is more subservient to the EU than even some EU members; that Moldova should also ban the import of Ukrainian grain and stop supporting Kyiv.

In general, monitored sources tend to exploit the current topics of the week, and agenda-setting efforts are relatively rare. At the same time, the ranking of narratives and sub-narratives remains relatively stable from week to week, and current events are always framed in the same main narratives, which indicates that there is nevertheless a coordinated, planned effort to promote concrete messages.

The lack of clarity regarding the volume of EU funding for Moldova, regarding the concrete EU accession agenda, but also regarding the operation of European institutions, is used to convince the public that European financial support does not work and that Moldova will not join the EU. Any information vacuum is exploited by Russian propaganda, so the main method of countering these narratives is pro-active and strategic transparency from the government and the EU.

Project description and methodology

The WatchDog.MD community launched the monitoring and mapping of anti-EU narratives in Moldova on 10 July, 2023. In total, we are monitoring 17 Telegram channels and one Facebook page, selected on the basis of previous monitoring projects. Telegram is a very prolific medium for Russian propaganda and often provides a concentrated version of messages that are subsequently disseminated via more traditional media sources.

The process of monitoring and writing weekly reports is an intensive effort usually involving 5-6 team members. Relevant content is analysed and catalogued in 16 general narratives, which in turn contain 86 sub-narratives. Nine general narratives focus on Moldova's

European integration process and seven directly target the European Union. The narratives were selected on the basis of previous monitoring projects as well as other national and international research.

- *The government is not really pro-European*: brings together accusations that the government uses European integration to hide or justify its various illegalities, that it only mimics the reform process and, in fact, discredits the idea of EU integration;
- *The EU applies double standards in Moldova*: the main idea is that the EU would unjustifiably tolerate, for reasons of political partisanship, the illegalities of the government;
- *Moldova will not enter the EU*: the reasons cited included the lack of popular support, the lack of openness on the part of the European states, the country's low degree of preparation and the fact that the status of a candidate country does not offer any guarantee;
- *Joining the EU will draw Moldova into war*: the EU is either actively pushing Moldova into war or using it for arms transit, and joining the EU would also mean joining NATO or, at least, would violate the country's state of neutrality;
- *Moldova will lose its traditional values*: The EU would impose foreign values, forcefully promote "LGBT ideology", fight against Christianity and destroy the traditional family;
- *EU financial support is problematic*: it includes sub-narratives about how the government steals EU money, EU funding burdens Moldova with debt, the funds are not distributed fairly, or messages that the EU actually doesn't give much money.
- *The government is not truly pro-European*: it contains accusations that the government is using European integration to hide or justify various illegalities, that it is only mimicking the reform process and it is actually discrediting the idea of EU integration;
- *The EU applies double standards in Moldova*: the main idea here is that the EU unjustifiably tolerates the illegalities of the government because of political partisanship;
- *Moldova will not join the EU*: reasons given include a lack of popular support for accession, a lack of openness on the part of European states, the country's low level of preparedness and the fact that the candidate country status offers no guarantees;
- *EU accession draws Moldova into the war*: the EU is either actively pushing Moldova into the war or using it for arms transit, and EU membership would also mean joining NATO or at least violating the country's neutrality status;
- *Moldova will lose its traditional values*: the EU would impose foreign values, forcibly promote "LGBT ideology", fight against Christianity and destroy the traditional family;
- *Moldova loses its sovereignty*: a mix of ideas about how the justice reform is an EU interference in Moldova's internal affairs, the government is puppeteered from Brussels, and joining the EU would lead to the loss of territorial integrity or even to the unification with Romania;
- *EU integration means economic destruction*: European products would invade the local market, while Moldovan products would not have access to the EU market; local businesses would die, Moldova would lose the Russian market, foreigners would take over the agricultural lands, Moldovan villages would disappear, and the country would remain depopulated;

- *European integration means Russophobia*: the EU supports Russophobia in Moldova, the government is sabotaging relations with Russia and adopting sanctions at the behest of the EU; accession would mean discrimination against Russian speakers and would be against the interests of the Gagauz people;
- *The EU has no future*: the European community is invaded by immigrants and terrorists, is in demographic decline, unable to face the economic and energy crises, the European leaders are incompetent and the political construction of the EU - dysfunctional;
- *The EU violates the interests of the member states*: Brussels imposes on the member states policies with which they do not agree, dilutes their national identity, ignores the popular will, imposes austerity policies and considers the interests of the member states as less important than the external interests of the EU;
- *The EU is the puppet of the US*: the Europeans do not matter in relation to the USA, they follow the American position even against their own interests, and they support Ukraine also at the demand of the US;
- *The EU is divided*: the focus is on the lack of consensus regarding the sanctions against the Kremlin or regarding the support for Ukraine, together with the idea that the member states still have too different political and economic interests, and some are discriminated against in Brussels;
- *The EU is destroying traditional values*: The EU forcibly promotes "LGBT ideology", liberal values, even Satanism, tolerates radical Islam, but tries to destroy Christianity and the traditional family, which means that the more conservative states are persecuted by Brussels;
- *The EU is xenophobic*: Europeans are Russophobic, violate the rights of Russians in the EU, push other states towards a conflict with Russia, prolong the war in Ukraine, and neo-Nazism and fascism flourish in the EU;
- *Enlargement problems*: the EU would have higher demands from the candidates than from the member states, it would have a neo-colonial behavior towards the candidate countries, the enlargement promises would be simply false, the EU would break up if it expands, some members would vehemently oppose the enlargement, and the accession process would be destructive for the economy of the candidate countries;

Some narratives seem to overlap (i.e. Moldova loses its traditional values vs. the EU destroys traditional values), but for this mapping study the distinction is important. Some messages are aimed directly at the EU (a debauched community), and others are aimed more at internal politics in Moldova (the government is selling national values for European grants and loans). Thus, the monitored content is grouped into three general groups: 1) directly aimed at discrediting the EU, 2) aimed at discrediting Moldova's European integration, and 3) aimed at both. These distinctions are important especially because the study in question is unprecedented in the region, with such detailed and continuously monitored sub-narratives.

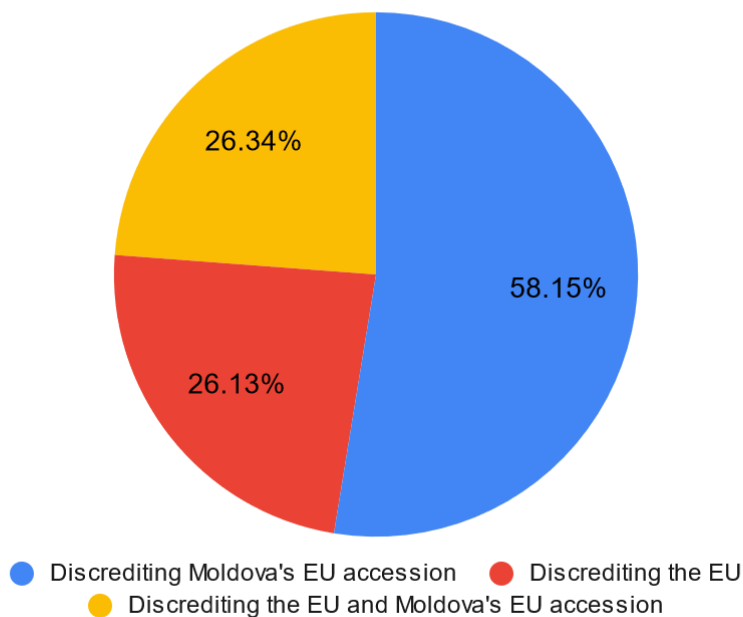
Between July 10 and October 1, we analysed 1,852 relevant posts.

Monitoring totals

After 12 weeks of monitoring, one of the main findings is the overwhelming focus of the monitored sources on domestic policy issues. Only a quarter of the posts sought to discredit

the European Union itself, while more than half focused on undermining the pro-European government in Chişinău, as well as the idea of European integration.

Narrative clusters, % of total posts



Almost one in three posts fell under the *"The government is not truly pro-European"* narrative, which appears almost four times as often as the second most popular narrative. In the top five, only one narrative directly targets the European bloc - *"The EU is divided"*.

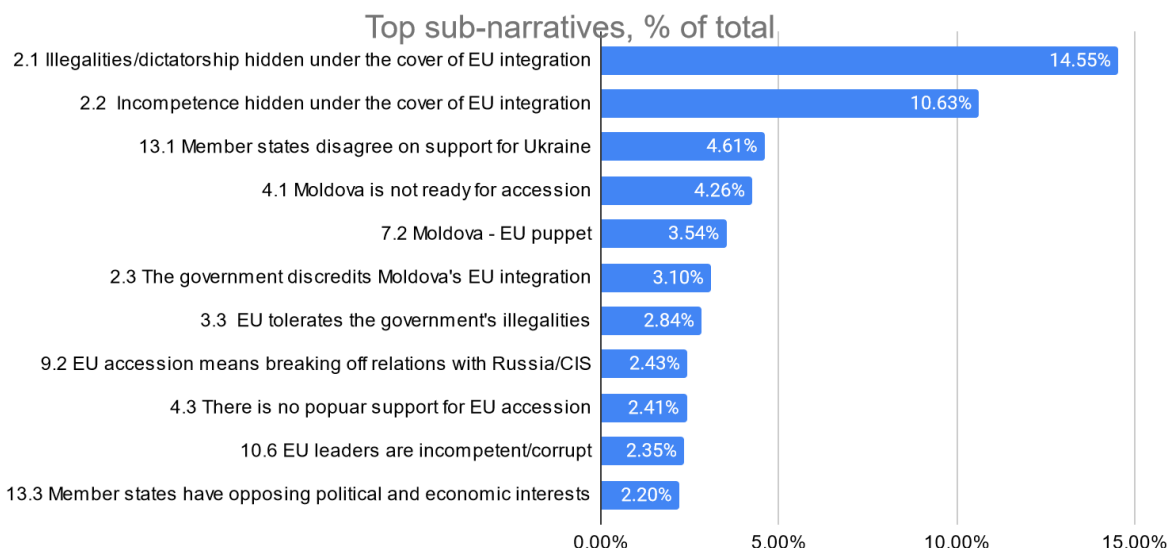
2. The government is not truly pro-European	674	32.88%
13. EU is divided	174	8.49%
4. Moldova will not join the EU	171	8.34%
1. EU financial support is problematic	125	6.10%
8. EU integration means economic destruction	106	5.17%
10. EU has no future	133	6.49%
9. European integration means Russophobia	117	5.71%
7. Moldova loses its sovereignty	132	6.44%
15. EU is xenophobic	103	5.02%
6. Moldova will lose its traditional values	58	2.83%
3. EU applies double standards in Moldova	77	3.76%
14. EU destroys traditional values	42	2.05%
16. Enlargement problems	47	2.29%
5. EU accession draws Moldova into the war	34	1.66%
12. UE is the puppet of the US	28	1.37%
11. UE violates the interests of member states	29	1.41%

The two main messages found in this narrative are that the government uses European integration to hide its illegalities and "dictatorial" tendencies (14.46% of all posts) or simply its incompetence (10.48%). Many of the monitored posts contain both sub-narratives, which are relatively complementary.

Overall, the effort of anti-EU propaganda is not so much directed towards discrediting the EU itself, but rather towards discrediting the idea and process of European integration. The main target is the government, and the aim is to undermine its pro-EU credentials even among pro-European voters. For example, when a survey showed that support for joining the EU had slightly decreased, the main message among monitored sources was that this decrease was the government's fault. The idea that Moldovans no longer wanted to be in the EU remained secondary. The same logic of discouraging pro-European voters is found in the narrative "Moldova will not enter the EU", whose most popular sub-narrative is that "Moldova is not ready for accession".

This does not mean that the merits of the European integration process itself are not under attack. The idea that financial support from the EU is problematic and that EU integration will destroy the Moldovan economy occupy the 4th and 5th places in the narratives' ranking. The messaging against European funds relies on accusations that the government steals them, that they are not distributed equitably, that they burden the country with debt or that they end up back in the pockets of European companies anyway. In parallel, other benefits of European integration are denied, especially the access to the European market. On the one hand, the importance of the Russian market is exaggerated, maintaining the myth that it is the most important market for Moldovan goods (even if it is no longer the case and hasn't been for many years). European integration is described as the main reason why Moldovan producers no longer have access to the Russian market. On the other hand, there is the discourse that Moldovan goods are not sought after in the EU and cannot be competitive on the European market. The natural conclusion is that joining the EU will destroy local businesses and the domestic market will be taken over by foreign products and companies.

Sometimes it is harder to distinguish whether a post takes aim at the government or at the idea of European integration and European values. For example, any criminal or electoral sanction against opposition representatives is denounced as authoritarianism, annulment of democracy, election fraud and so on. However, these criticisms are often accompanied by remarks such as "all in the name of European integration", "in the spirit of the best EU practices" or "these are the true European values". This fuels both the thesis that the government does not follow European values and that the EU is hypocritical and does not follow the declared values.



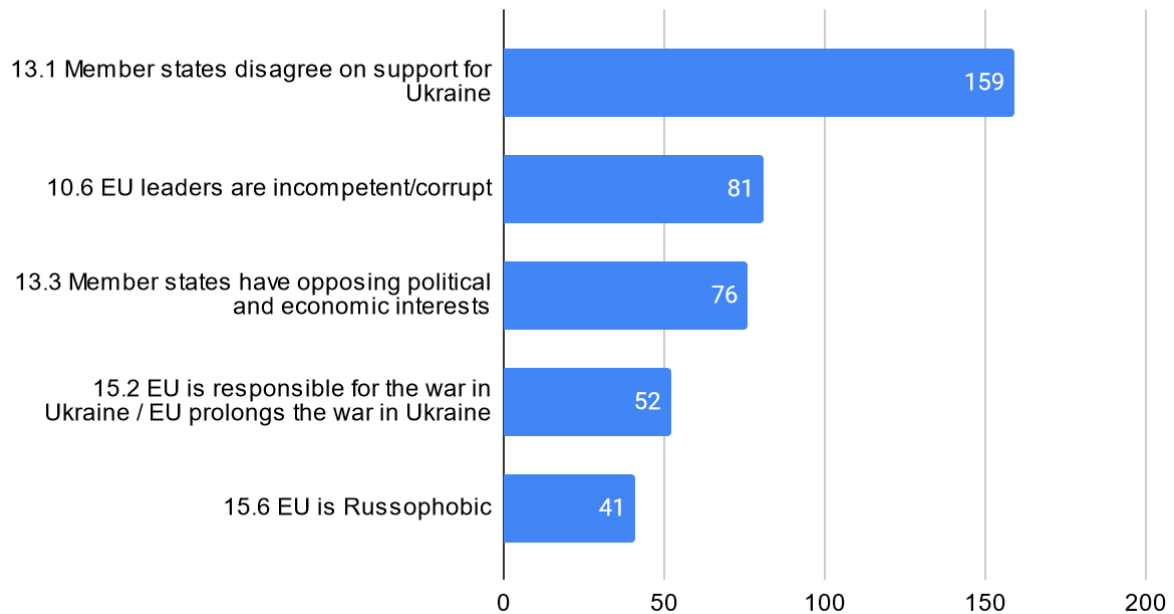
Among the narratives aimed directly at the EU, the most popular one is that "the EU is divided", and its main sub-narrative is that "Member States do not agree on support for Ukraine". This was the most widely shared narrative about the EU almost every week and it heavily exploited the Brussels-Warsaw-Kyiv dispute over Ukrainian grain imports. It was a very valuable topic for Russian propaganda because it could fuel several messages simultaneously: that there are dissensions both between member countries and between member countries and EU institutions; that Europeans are tired of helping Ukraine; that Ukraine is not grateful for the help; that Moldova is more subservient to the EU than Poland; that Moldova should also ban the import of Ukrainian grain and stop supporting Kyiv.

This topic also fit neatly with the context in Moldova because of the tensions between the government and farmers, who say that the state does not protect and help them enough. Among their demands was the introduction of restrictions on grain imports from Ukraine.

Another topic that has been addressed less often, but still in a recurring manner, was the dispute between Bucharest and Vienna regarding Romania's accession to Schengen. This issue was used to illustrate the division of Europeans and to project an image of the EU as an environment of cynical realpolitik, without solidarity and honesty.

Another recurring theme was the mini-protests and statements by far-right groups and individuals in the EU against Ukraine. Many of the "demonstrations" shown were small groups of 5-10 people across Greece, Italy or Germany posing with anti-Ukraine or anti-Zelensky signs. These images are used to suggest that, in fact, the majority of the EU population is fed up with Ukraine. The narrative is amplified by the anti-Ukrainian messages from far-right politicians such as Diana Șoșoacă (RO) or the Alternative for Germany party.

Top 5 sub-narratives about the EU, no. of posts



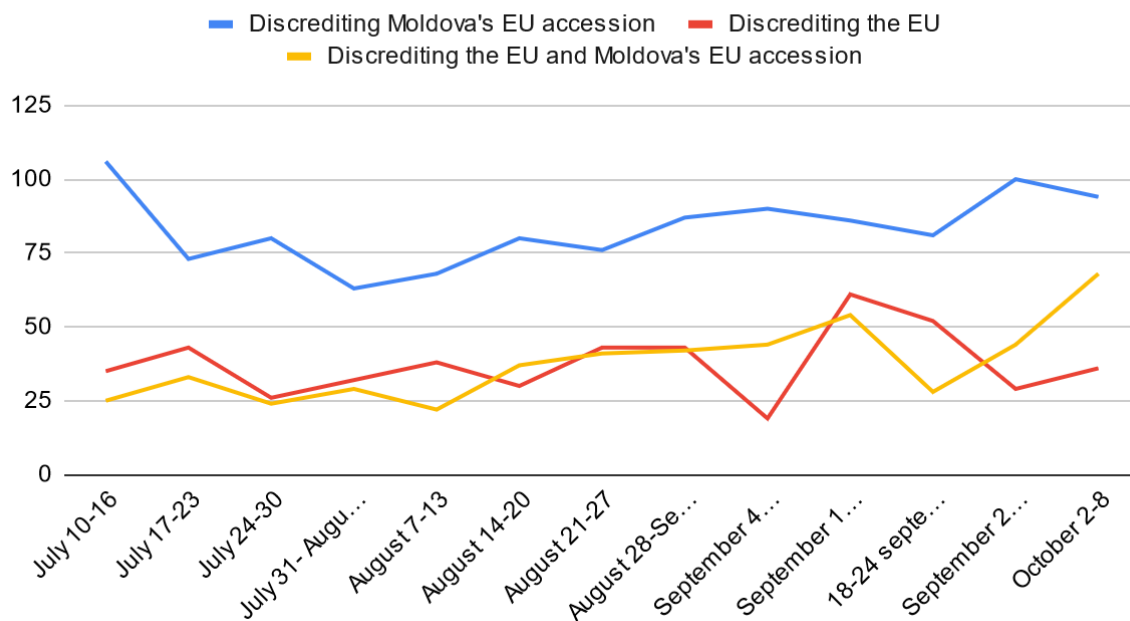
In general, the monitored sources showed a lack of interest and knowledge about the EU, Brussels politics and the "Far West" of Europe. This is probably explained by the general public's lack of interest and knowledge in such matters. This information vacuum, however, represents a vulnerability that can occasionally be exploited. For example, one of the fakes we noticed was the claim that the EU would forcibly round up all Ukrainian men from its territory and send them to fight on the frontlines in Ukraine. Even minimal knowledge of the EU would make it clear to any reader that the European institutions have neither the legal powers nor the operational possibilities nor the political values to allow such an operation. At the same time, this information vacuum also represents an opportunity. If the quality press would be more pro-active in filling this vacuum of information and knowledge about the EU and NATO, it could help improve the people's perception and understanding of these institutions.

Trends and analysis

Over the course of monitoring, the ranking of narratives and sub-narratives remained relatively stable. On the other hand, the selection of subjects exploited by anti-EU propaganda was rather opportunistic. The monitored sources did not make considerable agenda-setting efforts, but rather focused on promoting biased interpretations of the news and current events of each week.

In other words, the topics change from week to week, but they are always presented and interpreted in such a way that they fit into relatively stable narrative lines. They are not random, but concerted and thought out. It is thus evident the presence of a method, a general instruction about what kind of public perceptions must be created regardless of events. It is very likely that the monitored sources periodically receive talking points with instructions on how certain events should be handled.

Narrative clusters, weekly distribution by % of total



Both the rankings of narratives and sub-narratives, as well as the weekly distribution by groups of narratives unequivocally demonstrate the focus of propaganda sources on discrediting the government and the European integration process. In comparison, the directly anti-EU posts and narratives seem more like a maintenance effort, feeding the opinions and prejudices of an already anti-EU public.

Targeting the government is, of course, electorally motivated. Pro-Russian parties want to improve their electoral chances and must reduce support for their competitors. The EU is a bit too abstract and it is difficult to mobilise people to vote against Charles Michel or Ursula von der Leyen, but it is easier to consolidate a voting bloc against the ruling party and President Maia Sandu.

Secondly, the overall narrative picture suggests an effort to also reach pro-European voters disillusioned with the government or those with ambiguous geopolitical preferences. The logic of anti-EU propaganda seems to be that it is easier to change a person's electoral behaviour than their geopolitical orientation. In other words, it is easier to convince a pro-European voter that the pro-European government is stupid than to make them pro-Russian. We thus assume that the main purpose of anti-European propaganda is, at least in the short term, to discourage the political participation of pro-European voters and reduce electoral support for pro-European parties. At the same time, discrediting the government and the permanent association of the EU with an increasingly unpopular ruling party in Chişinău will gradually affect the support for the EU among voters. But this seems to be a medium-term goal.

Predictions

On the eve of local elections, the focus of propaganda on internal issues will only intensify. In general, local elections are less geopolitical than parliamentary or presidential elections, but the government's speech about "European mayors" opens a door for the geopoliticization of local elections. The answer of anti-EU propaganda will be that people are tired of Europe talk and want concrete results here and now. In particular, the sub-narratives about how the government uses European integration to hide its incompetence and illegalities will continue. This process will inevitably lead to the erosion of the positive image of the EU.

All electoral, legislative or investigative measures targeting opposition politicians will continue to be labelled as dictatorship under the cover of the EU. The European Village Express program, as well as other pre-electoral largesse from the state budget, will be criticised as blackmailing or bribing mayors and voters - possibly even with EU money.

At the same time, any progress of Moldova in the direction of European integration will be ridiculed and questioned: Moldova does not deserve it, Moldova is not ready, the candidate status/start of negotiations means nothing, the accession will take forever or it will never happen and so on.

The issue of Ukrainian grain and financial aid to Kiev may calm down after the elections in Poland. The electoral, nationalist rhetoric of the Polish ruling party was heavily exploited for messages against the EU, against Ukraine and against the pro-European government of the Republic of Moldova. These messages had more credibility because they came from politicians who cannot be considered pro-Russian, but who were spreading exactly the same ideas. Hungary's Viktor Orban has less credibility by comparison, while Slovakia's Robert Fico is relatively unknown to the Moldovan public. Nonetheless, their Euroskeptic, Russia-friendly, anti-Ukrainian remarks will definitely be redistributed by the media we monitor. Fico's electoral victory will be presented as another proof that the Europeans are tired of supporting Ukraine and that they need good relations with Russia.

Recommendations

- The idea of European integration must not be abused and must be used more intelligently and strategically by the government to avoid the electorate's European integration fatigue.
 - The adjective "European" should not be used for every decision and draft law. The EU or European integration must be invoked when it comes to policies actually related to EU accession, the fulfilment of conditions, the transposition of community standards and legislation into the national one, etc.
 - The EU should not be invoked to justify unpopular or controversial decisions. Even when it is really about something related to European integration, public policies must be argued by listing the benefits they will bring. That is, we do not "adopt this law because the Europeans require it", but "because it will bring benefits 1, 2, 3, as it already happens in the EU".
 - European integration should not be invoked in aggressive political rhetoric, such as "anti-European mayors", because that creates negative connotations.

Otherwise, this risks fueling the discourse of anti-European forces, according to which the government is using European integration to punish or politically blackmail other political forces.

- The government must disclose in a clear format how much money it received from the EU in recent years, how many grants and how many loans under preferential conditions. A distinction must be made between money received by the government and money transferred to other implementing organisations. This clarity and transparency is necessary because otherwise the public does not understand how much money reaches the government, being bombarded with multiple press releases and news from every stage of a financial aid: a proposal in Brussels, then approval in Brussels, then the signing of the bilateral document, then approval in Chişinău and finally the transfer. Anti-EU propaganda uses this vagueness to suggest that EU financial support is problematic (the fourth most popular narrative), because the government is stealing the money or it is being unfairly allocated to dubious things. This topic is also used to feed the discourse about the incompetence of the government (how much money it gets and how little results).
- The MFA could publish a roadmap regarding EU accession: what needs to be done, what we have already done, what is left and what is the plan/calendar in the short and medium term. At the same time, political and diplomatic efforts (at least what can be made public) can be included here to combat the discourse that Moldova will not join the EU because it is not ready, does not deserve it, does not make the necessary reforms and so on. The lack of information regarding the stage we are at and what exactly is being done in this direction leaves room for manipulations and misinformation.
- The monopolisation of European integration by the governing party must be avoided, otherwise there is a risk that any negative variation in its popularity will also affect support for EU membership. In this sense, more unilateral communication from the EU Delegation about the accession process, about the EU support for Moldova, about the benefits of various reforms and conditions, but especially about the concrete projects implemented with the help of the EU, would be welcome. More direct communication with citizens is needed, not only through press releases or posts on social networks (which remain necessary anyway). The Delegation could distribute more information on how other states have benefited from joining the EU, with infographics on Romania, Croatia and other Eastern European states. They should also be translated into Russian and aimed at Russian speakers.

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