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DISINFORMATION AGAINST EU & NATO IN MOLDOVA

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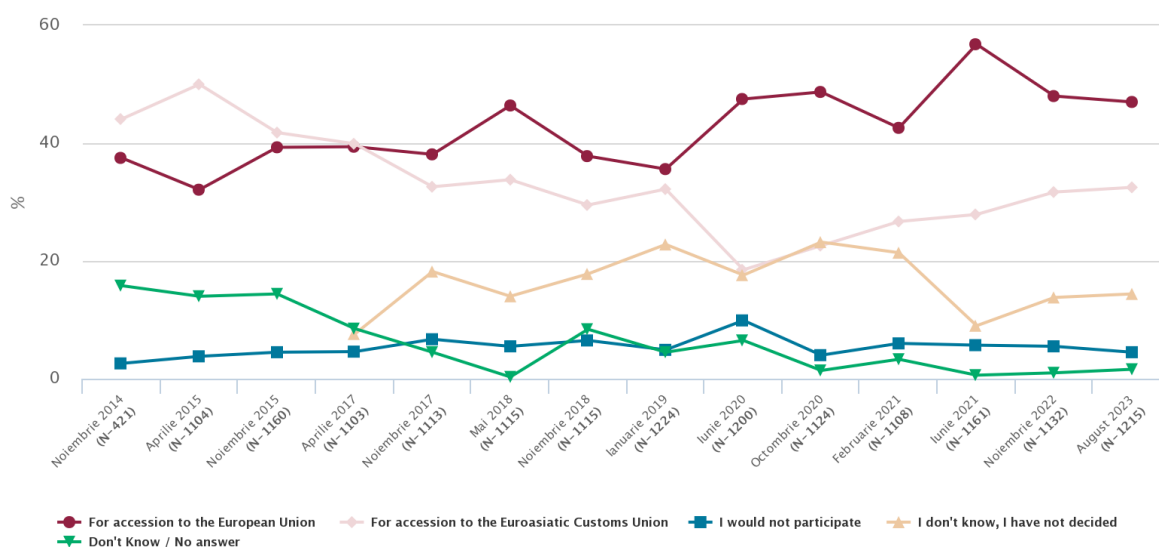
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This is a research report that explores the public discourse around EU & NATO accession in Moldova: the legal and political context, recent trends, actors spreading disinformation and their main narratives, the role of other political and media actors, including questionable sources. While this paper draws on other pre-existing and ongoing research projects, it mainly relies on the results of monitoring a sample of relevant Romanian- and Russian-language Facebook profiles for the first six months of 2022. Based on these insights and research findings, the report puts forward several recommendations to improve the resilience against disinformation narratives that target Moldova's relations with the EU and NATO. The report is part of a regional study that also includes Ukraine, Bulgaria, Poland and North Macedonia, conducted with the support of IRI's The Beacon Project. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of IRI.

I. SCENE SETTING/BACKGROUND: LOOKING AT THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK: STATUS QUO OF THE INTEGRATION PROCESS / SUPPORT FOR THE INTEGRATION PROCESS

Moldova has often been described as a country divided between East and West, between Russia and CIS on one hand, and the EU and the US, on the other. This is meant to describe both the varying geopolitical orientations of different governments, as well as split preferences of the general public. Despite this oft-used cliché, the public opinion is *not* evenly split. Historical data from the Public Opinion Barometer shows that most Moldovans would choose joining the European Union over Russia's Eurasian Economic Union/Customs Union.

If you had to choose in a referendum between Moldova's accession to the European Union and Moldova's accession to the Euroasiatic Customs Union (Russia–Belarus–Kazakhstan), which would you opt for?
 Perioada: 04.2013, 11.2013, 04.2014, 11.2014, 04.2015, 11.2015, 04.2016, 10.2016, 04.2017, 11.2017, 05.2018, 11.2018, 01.2019, 12.2019, 06.2020, 10.2020, 02.2021, 06.2021, 11.2022, 08.2023



N – number of respondents

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 Available: <http://bop.ipp.md>

Fig. 1: Evolution of EU vs Eurasian Customs Union choice in the Public Opinion Barometer for the last 10 years

The EU has consistently ranked above the EEU/CU since 2017 and the gap has increased significantly since 2019. For the past four years, there has been a clear and relatively stable majority of Moldovans who support the country's accession to the EU. At the same time, there remains a sizable minority of around 30% that would prefer a Russian-led economic bloc to the EU. Fluctuations in support for EU accession are often linked to the performance and popularity of pro-European governments. For example, the 2013-2014 banking fraud during the rule of the self-proclaimed pro-EU alliance has had a powerful negative impact on the popular support for EU accession. More recently, the troubles of the current pro-EU government of the Party of Action and Solidarity (inflation, energy and food prices, stagnation of judiciary reform) have negatively impacted the support for joining the EU.

From a diplomatic and legal perspective, Moldova has never been closer to the EU as it is now. The country formally applied for EU membership in March 2022, shortly after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. It received candidate country status in June 2022, with several conditions attached for the beginning of negotiations. Despite the country's modest progress in fulfilling some of these conditions, the European Commission recommended the Council, on November 8, 2023, to initiate accession negotiations with Moldova.

Moldova's level of integration with the EU is already very high in some areas. Estimates of the number of Moldovans who have Romanian EU citizenship range from 700,000 to one million. The European market has been the main destination for Moldovan exports and has outranked the Russian/CIS markets for years. The transposition of some EU laws into Moldovan national legislation has been underway since the 2014 Association Agreement. The foreign ministry itself is actually called the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, in a clear statement of intention.

By comparison, relations with NATO have been limited by Moldova's status of neutrality, enshrined in the Constitution, and by the lack of popular support.

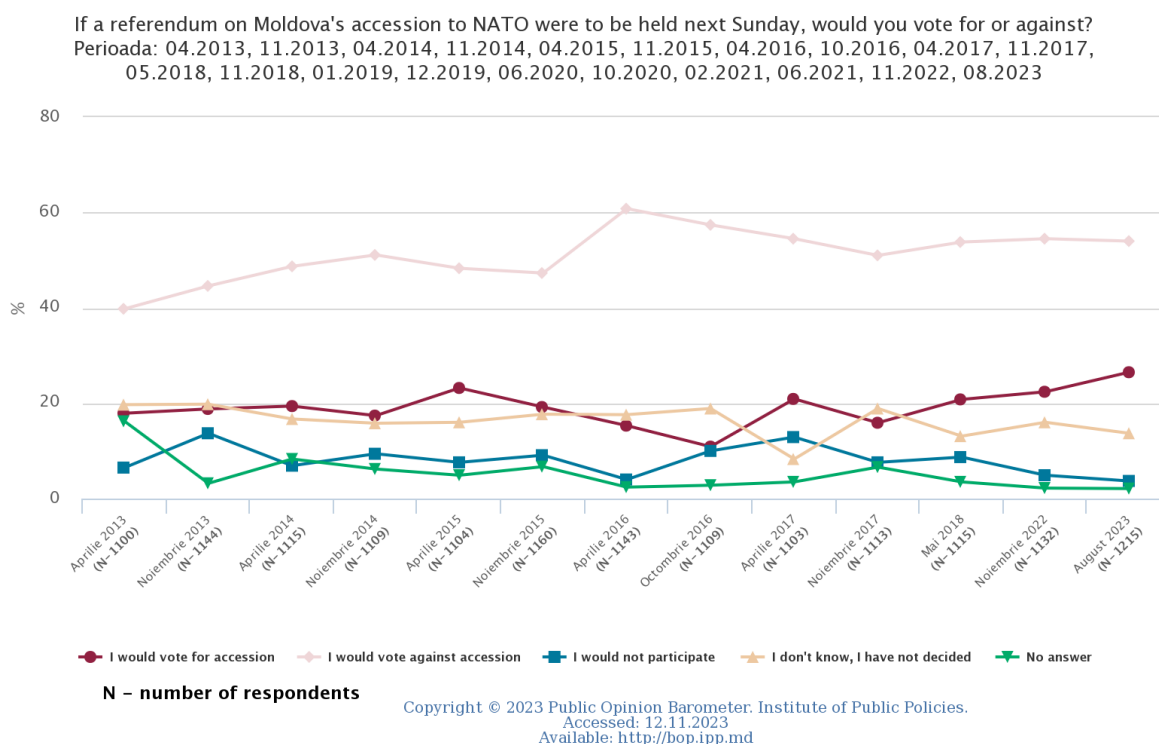


Fig. 2: Evolution of opinion on NATO accession in the Public Opinion Barometer for the last 10 years

Public Opinion Barometer data shows that, over the past ten years, the majority of Moldovans have consistently opposed NATO accession, while there has been a stable core of around 20% who would like Moldova to join the North-Atlantic Alliance. Nevertheless, that number is currently at an all-time high: 26.5% in the latest POB and 33.4% in a June 2023 poll commissioned by Watchdog.MD.¹

Within the limits of its constitutional neutrality, Moldova has cooperated with NATO in various frameworks. The Alliance has operated a civilian Liaison Office in Chişinău since 2017. Cooperation has increased after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the Madrid Summit in 2022, NATO leaders agreed on an enhanced Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) package for Moldova. The country has also stepped-up bilateral cooperation with some NATO members, in particular France.

II. CURRENT POSITION OF THE GOVERNMENT AND MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES AND ACTORS TOWARDS ENLARGEMENT OF EU AND NATO IN GENERAL, INTEGRATION WITH THE EU AND INTEGRATION WITH NATO

The current single-party government in Chişinău is strongly pro-European. The ruling Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) based its whole campaign in the 2023 general local elections on messaging about its pro-Europeans (Vote for Team Europe! European mayors for European towns!). President Maia Sandu, Prime Minister Dorin Recean and the PAS parliamentary majority are all committed to Moldova's European integration. President Sandu even put forward a 2030 target for joining the EU.

As regards NATO accession, the government leaders are less outspoken. While they support closer cooperation with NATO, they are not publicly arguing in favour of joining the Alliance, which would run against both the constitutionally-enshrined status of neutrality and public sentiment. The PAS parliamentary majority lacks the votes to amend the Constitution and has no incentive to support joining NATO, given the negative public opinion regarding this idea.

The other two parliamentary groups – the Bloc of Communists and Socialists and the Shor Party (recently outlawed) – both oppose NATO accession and use it as a scarecrow to mobilise voters against the ruling party. NATO is portrayed as militaristic, imperialistic, inherently Russophobic, and responsible for the war in Ukraine. These parties often act as a mouthpiece for Russian propaganda in Moldova and they often argue that cooperation with NATO “will drag Moldova into the war” or that NATO is deliberately “pumping” weapons into Moldova to use it against Russia or to unfreeze the Transnistrian conflict. Pro-Russian parties are also criticising NATO enlargement to Eastern Europe as an American power grab that unbalances the geopolitical equilibrium and undermines the sovereignty of acceding countries.

Considering the intense, aggressive and constant anti-NATO propaganda by pro-Russian forces and the lack of a strong, pro-NATO discourse in the country, the level of support for NATO accession is rather high.

As regards EU enlargement, the pro-Russian parties' messaging is less vitriolic. The focus is on downplaying the benefits and the perspectives of joining the EU, accusing the EU of double-standards, i.e. tolerating “neo-Nazis” in Ukraine and corruption and authoritarianism in Moldova, and portraying the

¹ https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Sondaj-WD_RO_versiune-integrala_iunie-2023-1.pdf

EU as an immoral community that promotes "LGBT ideology" and discriminates against traditional, Christian family values.

On the other hand, the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity and other minor pro-European parties are generally supportive of EU enlargement in general, if not very vocal on the issue. There is a clear discourse of solidarity with regard to Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, Georgia. There is not a lot of public discussion about the Western Balkans.

III. INFORMATION THREATS: DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN ACTORS AND HOSTILE COMMUNICATIONS PROLIFERATION AGAINST THE INTEGRATION OF MD, MK AND UA WITH EU AND MD AND UA WITH NATO

Russian TV channels had dominated the Moldovan media market for years. Local TV channels rebroadcasting Rossiya-24, NTV and Perviy Kanal regularly topped audience measurement rankings. Who exactly was allowed to rebroadcast Russian TV was also a good indicator of who is the Kremlin's partner in Moldova. Over the last decade, the licence was passed from oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc's media trust to that of the Socialist Party and then to the Shor Party. In December 2022, the Emergency Situation Committee - instituted after Russia invaded Ukraine - decided to suspend the licence of six TV channels rebroadcasting Russian content, effectively taking them off air.

Preliminary findings from a separate Watchdog.MD research project indicate that many members of these channels' audiences migrated to online media (Telegram, TikTok) where they could continue to consume Russian propaganda, sometimes even in a more radical, undiluted form. Additionally, the journalists and shows from the suspended TV channels are often "changing homes", moving to or even taking over lesser known TV stations that have a valid licence.

Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service has blocked multiple websites for spreading disinformation, but new clones pop up soon after. Facebook has also become a fertile ground for the proliferation of propaganda. The out-lawed Shor Party has used fake "burner" accounts to spend hundreds of thousands of euros on ads calling for protests against the pro-European government and later to mobilise voters for its candidates. Moreover, if Shor was just a populist with no real geopolitical message when he first entered politics, he has since adopted a pro-Russian, anti-Western stance. The fact that Ilan Shor, despite being under EU and US sanctions, still can pump money into his political operations via Facebook remains a source of puzzlement for Moldovan officials, civil society and journalists alike.

Both Shor and the Socialists use the example of Ukraine to warn against further cooperation with NATO, but also against breaking away from Russian influence and accelerating EU integration. They suggest that the current pro-Western government might upset Russia too much and "drag Moldova into the conflict". They are careful to never say directly that Russia would attack Moldova. Instead, they are trying to create the following basic narrative: "an accelerated pro-Western course equals danger and risk of war, like in Ukraine, while balanced external policy guarantees peace and security".

At the same time, they are sometimes arguing that Moldova's progress towards the EU is undeserved and that the country is just catching a ride alongside Ukraine. The narrative regarding the latter is that it does not deserve EU accession either, but the EU leaders are disregarding their own standards and rules to motivate Ukraine to continue fighting Russia. As regards other EU candidate countries, such

as the Western Balkans, they are not mentioned often and do not play a significant role in the public discussion in Moldova.

Overall, Moldova remains highly exposed to Russian propaganda, widespread on social media and endorsed by multiple local political forces - Ilan Shor's parties and the Socialists most of all.

IV. ASSESSMENT OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, GENERAL MESSAGING AND HOSTILE MESSAGING AROUND EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT

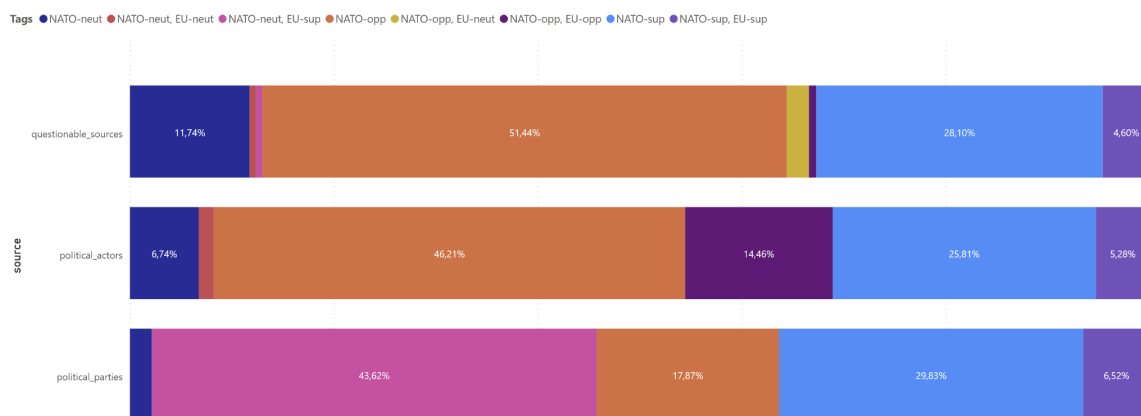


Fig.

Fig. 3: Distribution of EU and NATO support/opposition tags for posts from Questionable Sources, Political Actors and Political Parties

Monitoring data reflects the general positioning of the political actors towards EU and NATO enlargement. For political parties, a category where the ruling Party of Action and Solidarity has by far the most popular page, we see a lot of posts that are pro-EU and rather neutral towards NATO, even if the Alliance is mentioned in these posts. This mostly corresponds to the government's position, which focused on promoting EU accession. The share of pro-NATO posts among political parties and actors is largely due to the messaging of non-parliamentary pro-Western parties, especially CUB, led by former MP and Moldovan ambassador to the US, Igor Munteanu.

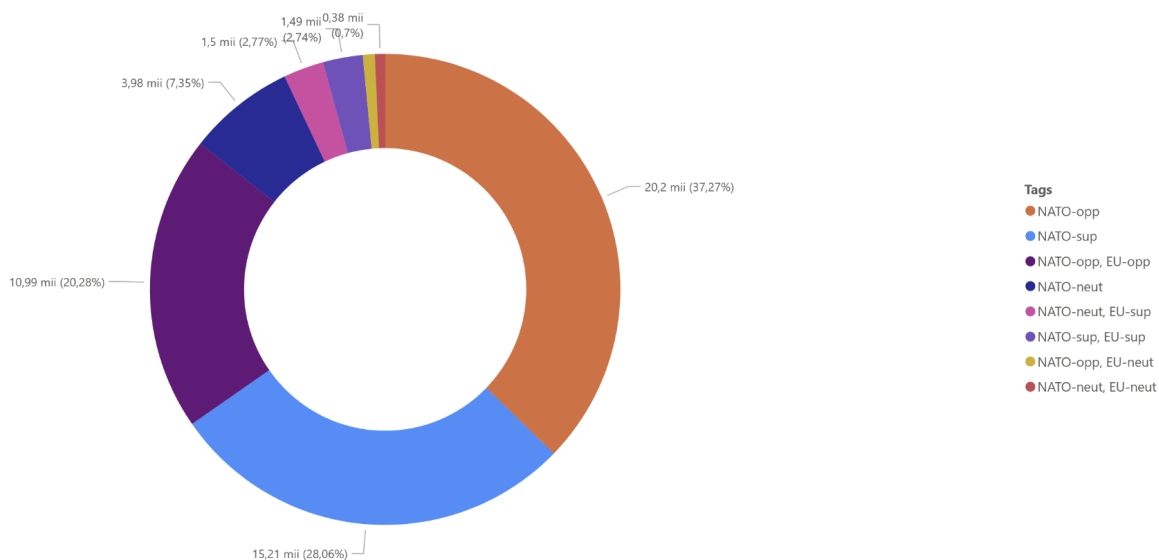


Fig. 4: Distribution of tags for posts that mention NATO

Overall, pro-EU narratives clearly dominate in terms of number of posts as well as number of interactions. It is safe to say that the general conversation on Facebook in Moldova is mostly favourable to EU integration. This should not be overstated however, since other online media like Telegram or TikTok are increasingly favoured by pro-Russian politicians and media, and as such present a totally different picture.

The highest percentage of posts against NATO is among political actors and questionable sources. Among political actors, fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, members of his parties as well as some Socialist MPs are vocally opposing any cooperation with the Alliance. Most of the questionable media sources that spread anti-NATO narratives are either directly owned by these political actors, or paid by them as a kind of media mercenaries.

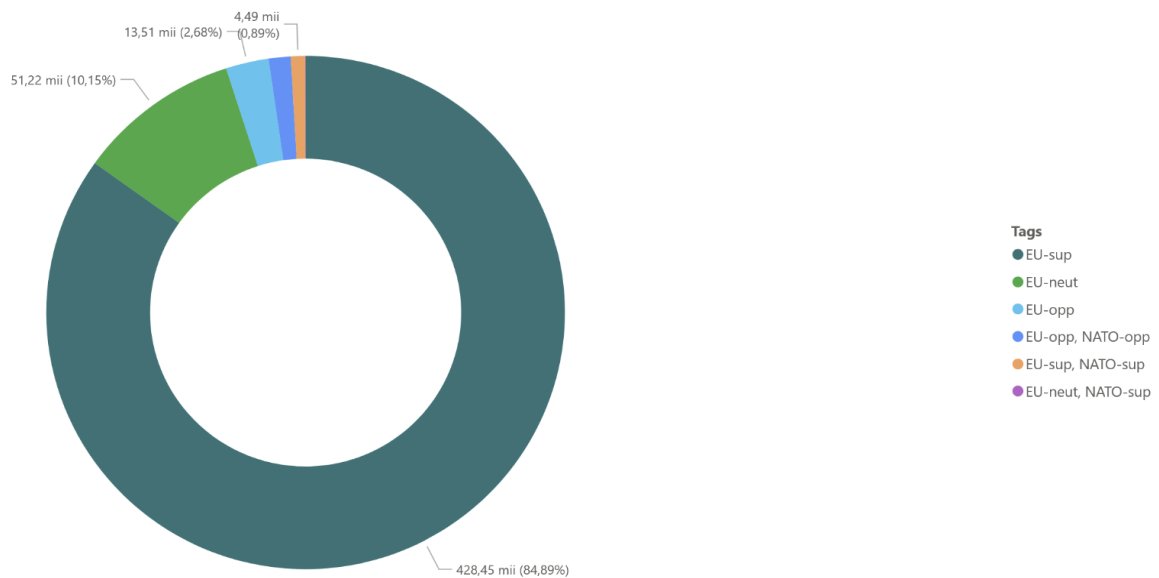
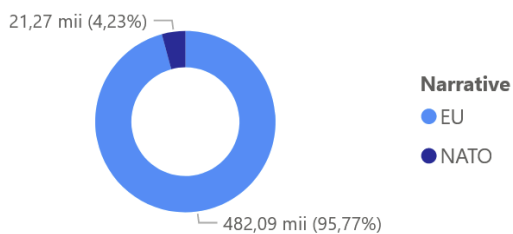


Fig. 5: Distribution of tags for posts that mention the EU

There is also an interesting language aspect. It is no surprise that Russian-language sources have a higher percentage of anti-NATO posts. What is less obvious is that posts about NATO account for over half of all interactions for the Russian language sample, while they account for only 4% in the Romanian-language sample. In other words, the Russian-speaking part of the Moldovan Facebook environment is talking about NATO way more (proportionally) than its Romanian-speaking counterpart.

RO lang Sum of Total Interactions by Narrative



RU lang Sum of Total Interactions by Narrative

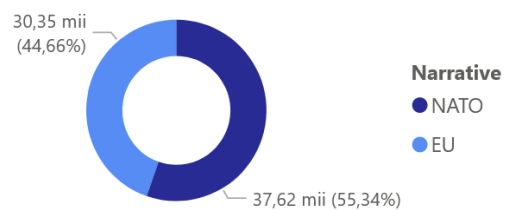


Fig. 6: Proportion of posts relating to EU and NATO narratives: posts in Romanian (left) vs Russian (right) languages

V. CASE STUDIES & MAIN NARRATIVES TOWARDS EU AND NATO ENLARGEMENT, INCLUDING THE DATA ON THE MOST ACTIVE OR VIRAL ACTORS AND MESSAGES

President Sandu has, by far, the [most impactful pro-EU Facebook page](#) in Moldova. The top 10 by number of interactions also includes the official page of the Party of Action and Solidarity, that of PAS deputy Speaker Mihai Popșoi and former PAS Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilița, but none get close to the reach of Maia Sandu’s page. The overall arching narrative is that Moldova’s future is in the EU, the current context is a historic opportunity and the whole society must work together to achieve this goal, which will boost the country’s security and economy, and will bring prosperity and better quality-of-life for everyone. The president is not as involved in daily political squabbles, nor in the minutiae of government, so the credibility of her messaging is higher than for most other politicians.

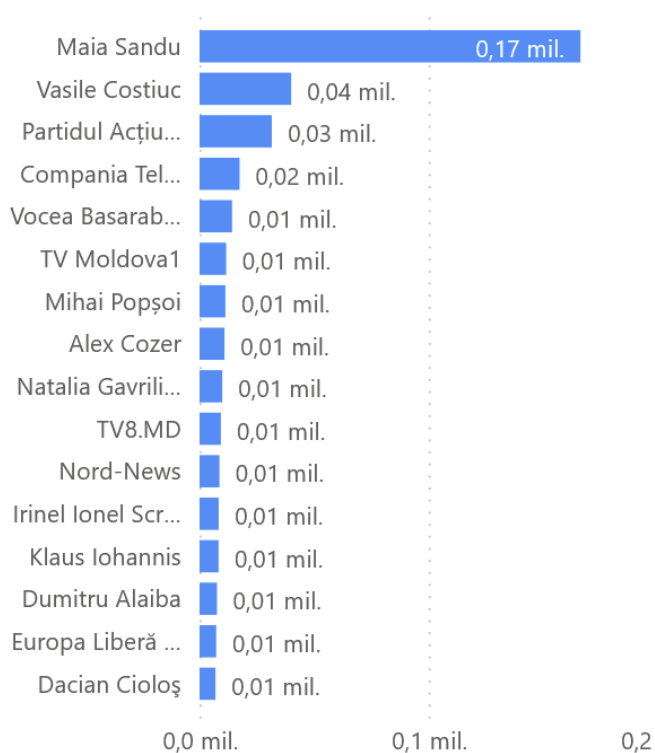


Fig. 7: Page ranking by number of total interactions for EU-supportive posts

On the other hand, the page [Свежие новости Молдовы](#), which also has a [Telegram channel](#) has the most interactions for posts opposing NATO accession. It is a curious example because it does not have that many posts that actually say something negative about NATO. On the contrary, many posts by themselves might seem neutral. However, because historically this page has cultivated a pro-Russian, anti-Western audience, even “neutral” posts that mention NATO are accompanied by a bunch of angry, anti-NATO comments. WatchDog.MD has observed the same tendency on Telegram, so this is not a unique case. The risk is that such pages can attract moderate audiences who are seeking balanced information. These people are then fed the illusion of a popular anti-Western consensus via the comment section. Moreover, when anti-EU or anti-NATO misinformation is included in the posts, it seems more credible since this is not a page that is openly and aggressively opposing EU and NATO accession.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 NATO-SPECIFIC

The government needs to undertake a complex, society-wide, medium to long-term campaign to redefine the notion of neutrality. The pro-Russian, anti-Western politicians and media in Moldova constantly invoke the constitutional status of neutrality to argue that Moldova should not cooperate with NATO in any way, that the Moldovan army should not be modernised and should not participate in international exercises, that Moldova should not take sides in international disputes and should not adopt sanctions against Russia. Unsurprisingly, this interpretation of neutrality is inconsistent, with double standards as regards the West and Russia. The permanent presence of Russian troops on Moldovan soil, in Transnistria, is never portrayed as a violation of neutrality.

For the wide public, neutrality is presented not only as a constitutional obligation, but the basis for a "balanced" foreign policy, a path towards good relations "with both the West and the East" (one of the mantras of former president Igor Dodon), and a security guarantee – if Moldova takes no stance, that it will not be a part of any conflict and it will not be attacked by anyone.

This conception of neutrality as mandatory passiveness and vulnerability must be replaced with a new understanding of neutrality that is compatible with more active foreign and defence policies. The messaging of the current government is already shifting towards this direction, but a more consistent and coordinated effort is necessary. The President's Office, the Parliament and the Cabinet of Ministers must all be on the same page and argue together in favour of a more pro-active conception of neutrality. The government institutions need to work with the media and the civil society towards this goal. These discussions must not remain confined to the politically-minded circles in Chişinău, but must aim to change the opinions of people across different social groups and geographic districts.

Coordinating this effort should be one of the tasks for the *Center for Strategic Communications and Fighting Disinformation*, which is still under construction.

The Ministry of Defense should increase its communication capacities, including by hiring more staff and allocating more resources. It needs to work on raising respect and support for the national armed forces. The army should be a source of pride and inspire trust in the people. The MoD should also improve the public understanding of the armed forces' role and activities. They should not be exclusively associated with warfare – this is what the pro-Russian forces are exploiting regularly: why does Moldova need to modernise its army if it is not planning on going to war? This simplistic way of thinking needs to be replaced with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complex role and function of the national armed forces and defence structures.

The MoD needs not only train several speakers in-house, but it must also foster a community of experts across media, academia and civil society. Because of a lack of qualified experts, news outlets often rely on traditional political pundits to comment on defence and military matters. Building of community of specialised experts - via trainings, seminars, visits to military bases in Moldova and abroad, participation in international events - will have multiple positive consequences: more and better expertise available to the wide public, the media and even the authorities, increased public awareness of defence challenges and policies, higher resilience against Russian propaganda on military and defence topics.

A better understanding of the role and activities of the national armed forces, and of the national defence policy, can help the public be more open towards cooperation with NATO. More trust and support for the national armed forces should also translate into more trust and support for the various programmes and projects that help the army. Cooperation with NATO should be associated with better conditions,

training, equipment and opportunities for Moldovan military employees. The focus should be on concrete, practical benefits, to balance out the predominantly negative public view on *political* cooperation with NATO.

6.2 EU-SPECIFIC

While EU accession has been supported by a majority of Moldovans for several years now, the exact level of support is variable. One of the main factors that negatively influences popular support for European integration is the performance and rhetoric of pro-European parties. It is important that these parties, most of all PAS - which is currently in power, do not monopolise the pro-European discourse and overuse the EU in their political communications. *European integration must not be a single party's platform or proposition.*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration has perhaps the most and best developed communication capacities among the government ministries. Nonetheless, most of the recommendations for the Ministry of Defense apply for the MFA as well. It is important for it to cultivate a community of experts, journalists, academicians, speakers and other civil society representatives, that are equipped to report on EU integration and EU affairs, to comment on them, to publish studies and participate in talk-shows. This is especially pressing when it comes to media outlets: some TV stations that are openly pro-Western and rely on Western grants do not have properly trained and dedicated journalists that could cover EU affairs and EU integration professionally.

The MFA could also work more with local authorities to keep them up to date with the process of European integration, to educate them in EU affairs (politics, finances, instruments, platforms etc.)

How much do you trust the following institutions?

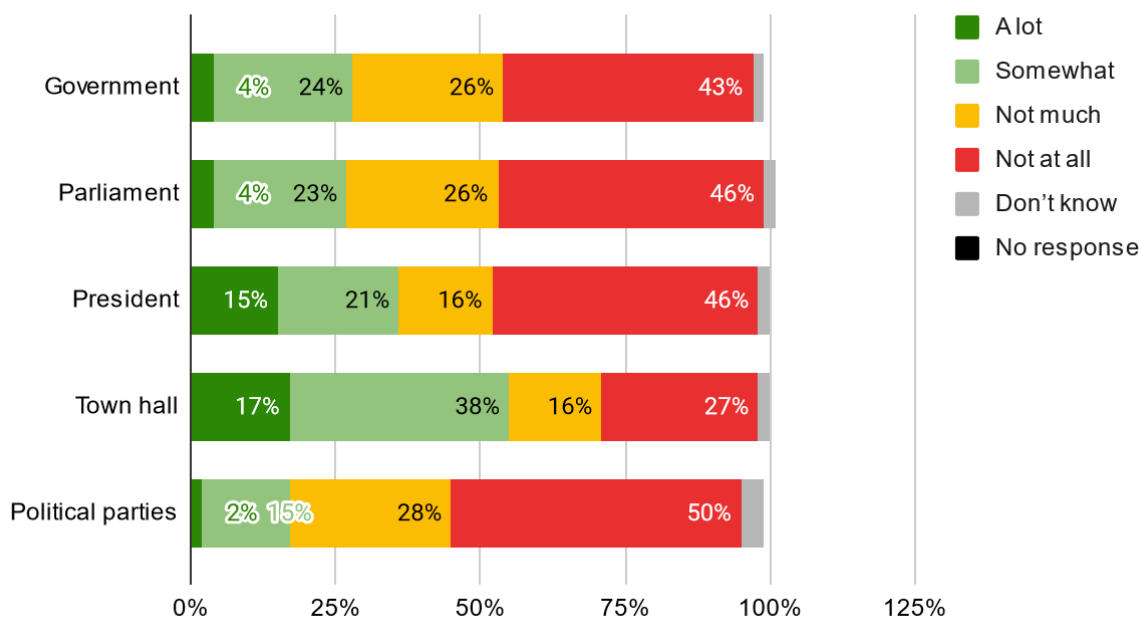


Fig. 8: Level of trust in public institutions, August 2023 Public Opinion Barometer, <http://bop.ipp.md/>

Local mayors have traditionally enjoyed more trust than central authorities and this holds true today, according to the most recent Barometer of Public Opinion. It is important that people have local leaders in their communities that are both *trusted* and *knowledgeable* about the EU. European integration should be only a high-level preoccupation for politicians in Chişinău. Many mayors have been successful in attracting EU funds for their communities and the government should help disseminate such practices and examples, regardless of the political affiliation of mayors. Ideally, mayors should become a permanent pro-EU voice in each community and they should be able to answer their constituents' questions, hesitations and misgivings about the European integration process and the EU.

6.3 THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND FIGHTING DISINFORMATION

The Center, which is still under construction, will be a first of its kind institution in Moldova. It is absolutely crucial that the Center is properly staffed, funded and technically equipped. Secondly, proper rules and procedures must be put in place that will ensure the cooperation of other state institutions and allow the Center to fulfil its tasks. The Center will ideally fulfil the following the functions:

Monitoring: The Center should track media, social networks, influencers, and opinion leaders, monitoring narratives, topics, and interpretations. Source selection needs to consider risk, content analysis, and affiliations threatening Moldova's national security. Regular, thematic, and ad hoc reports are crucial for the early warning system. Swift state institution responses are needed to counter early-stage disinformation and influence public opinion. The department should coordinate monitoring of the national information space and communication responses among state institutions.

Analysis: The Center should operate an analytical department, scrutinising information space monitoring results, assessing diverse sources, and providing early identification of impactful disinformation campaigns. It needs to conduct comprehensive analyses to understand enemy strategies and develop systemic responses. Additionally, it serves as a strategic hub in information warfare.

Coordination: The Center should collaborate with civil society, media, foreign partners, and state institutions to foster a "whole of society response" to information warfare threats.

Institutional Communications Upgrade: The Center should enhance communication across public institutions, including non-governmental entities. Through partnerships, it needs to evaluate, train, seek resources, and ensure standardised communication. Periodic reports on disinformation campaigns should educate the public, disseminating findings through various channels.

Moldova has a mixed record when it comes to building new institutions that seem great on paper. The creation of this stratcom & anti-disinformation Center should not end up being a missed opportunity or a failed experiment.

6.4 OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

The language issue is complex, long-standing and does not have any simple solutions. However, there have been some recurrent ideas floated by civil society for years now. One of them that has merit is that the Russian-language media in Moldova needs to be developed, so it is not monopolised by pro-Kremlin actors. Obviously, it is necessary to help Russian-speaking minorities learn Romanian, both via the school curriculum and via services and campaigns that target adults, but this is a difficult long-term task. Developing a more diverse, independent and vibrant Russian-language media environment should be a more achievable goal in the short and medium term.

International cooperation is needed to reduce organised disinformation on Facebook. As already mentioned, fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor is under EU and US sanctions, but has managed to pump significant sums of money in Facebook ads for his anti-government, anti-Western political operations in Moldova. Civil society organisations in Chişinău cannot reach technological giants such as Facebook, so Moldova should look to find international support to open communication channels with the social media giant and find solutions to stop or at least limit the possibilities for such disinformation operations.

This report has been prepared with support from IRI's Beacon Project. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of IRI.