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# **MONITORING REPORT ON GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION AND MANIPULATION**

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## Introduction

The Republic of Moldova is a signatory to the [Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#), which it ratified in 2021. Since May 2022, with the entry into force of the Convention, state institutions have made a firm commitment to promote through concrete measures fundamental human freedoms, including the recognition of violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women.

Moreover, the Republic of Moldova has a strong legislative framework that promotes equal rights between women and men and defines forms of discrimination based on sex:

- The law [No. 5 of 09.02.2006](#) on ensuring equal opportunities between women and men aims to ensure the exercise of equal gender rights in the political, economic, social, cultural and other spheres of life, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, to prevent and eliminate all forms of discrimination based on sex.

The law 5/2006 provides an understanding of the term sex (sex criteria) as “the totality of the anatomical and physiological characteristics that differentiate human beings into women and men”; and of the term gender as the social aspect of relations between women and men, which is manifested in all spheres of life.

In other words, when we talk about gender differences, we refer to the social sphere and to the constructed perceptions of gender roles.

- The [law No. 121 of 25.05.2012](#) on ensuring equality aims to prevent and combat discrimination and ensure equality for all persons under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova in the political, economic, social, cultural and other spheres of life, regardless of race, colour, national, ethnic and social origin, social status, citizenship, language, religion or belief, age, sex, gender identity, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, health status, HIV status, opinion, political affiliation, wealth, birth or any other criteria.

Through this legislative framework, and to ensure equal opportunities, the Republic of Moldova is obliged to mainstream the gender perspective in all development policies and programmes at national and local levels. One of the concrete measures implemented in this regard is the Strategy for ensuring equality between women and men in the Republic of Moldova for the years 2017-2021 and the Action Plan.

[The strategy covered ten areas of intervention](#): women's participation at decision-making level, labour market and gender pay gap, social protection and family policies, health, education, climate change, institutional mechanism, stereotypes in society and non-violent communication, gender equality in the security and defence sector, gender sensitive budgeting.

However, the [United Nations Development Programme](#) notes that although in the Republic of Moldova, the national legislative framework for gender equality is in line with international commitments, women face discrimination and inequality in social, economic and political life. Women are disproportionately represented in decision-making at all levels.

Despite considerable efforts to ensure equal opportunities, with around 40% of MPs now women (or 39 women MPs in 2023), [every fifth mayoralty](#) in the country headed by a woman, and [every third candidate](#) for mayor in the 2023 local elections being a woman,

progress in promoting equal opportunities and eliminating [gender discrimination is stagnating](#).

The biggest obstacle remains the public's perception of the role of women and men in society (private and public spheres) and the stereotypes perpetuated in the public environment.

For example, there is still a high proportion of people who consider the presence of women in politics inappropriate and who tend to believe that women are not capable of holding leadership positions. These stereotypes are fuelled by political actors and agents of foreign influence who deepen the differences between women and men, ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, also by discrediting women in political office and promoting non-democratic values.

### Conceptualising Gender Disinformation

The U.S. Department of State operates with the following definition of gender misinformation:

*“Subset of misogynistic abuse and violence against women that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives, often with some degree of coordination, to deter women from participating in the public sphere. Both foreign state and non-state actors strategically use gendered disinformation to silence women, discourage online political discourse, and shape perceptions toward gender and the role of women in democracies.”*

In this report, [gender-based disinformation](#) means any false and distorted information that is intended to harm women or people of different genders and sexual orientations. Gender disinformation refers to information and information activities (creation, sharing, dissemination of content) that:

- attack or undermine people on the basis of their gender, gender identity and/or gender expression, sexual orientation and social interpretations;
- use gender narratives as a weapon to promote political, social or economic goals;
- apply misogyny, homophobia and transphobia as common features in the distribution of gender disinformation.

When we talk about gender discrimination, there is a tendency to undermine universal rights by associating women's fundamental freedoms with those of sexual minorities. The protagonists of gender disinformation are most often diverse actors united by ideals based on transphobic, misogynistic and homophobic views forming what is called the anti-gender movement. The [term anti-gender](#) represents the general opposition to women's efforts for equality and LGBTQI+ rights that threaten to erode hegemonic masculinity.

The anti-gender movement believes that “gender” as defined in the liberal sense attacks the procreation of humanity because “gender” claims to [deny the difference of sex](#). Therefore, in the view of these actors, the very “traditional” or “natural” family, which consists of a man marrying a woman in order to procreate children, is threatened. This is a reference to Christianity, and “gender” thus becomes an affront to Christianity.

Thus, when we talk about gender discrimination, we must bear in mind that the term “gender” is used as a “symbolic glue” for all those who consider that they are “fighting against gender ideology”.

This group includes representatives of far-right parties, religious groups, representatives of the Orthodox Church, international organisations campaigning to stop abortion, racist people who take a stand against immigrants, etc. They are opposed to equality between women and men, sex education, women's reproductive and health rights and “non-traditional” marriage, including single-parent families. In Moldova, gender positioning often resonates with the foreign policy preferences of public and political figures.

These discourses are frequently portrayed as necessary to protect and preserve “local culture” and the nation itself. [Gender is portrayed as a foreign invasion](#), as an “ideology” that is now being imposed on local cultures. Usually, the “imposition” comes from the Western countries to other geographical regions, in Eastern Europe in our case.

Supporters of the anti-gender movement say they are fighting against the [“morally corrupt”](#) elites represented by the EU and international organisations and support national sovereignty. As [studies](#) in the field suggest, the term “gender” is intentionally paired with the term “ideology”, specifically to contribute to the success of gender disinformation. Thus, both by associating gender with a “liberal” ideology and through messages that promote hate speech and discrimination, narratives under the umbrella of “gender ideology” can easily generate fertile ground for [foreign disinformation agents](#).

As gender role prejudice and [social polarisation in attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people](#) still exist in the Republic of Moldova, a discourse of hate and discrimination against people of different sexual orientation is most frequently used for disinformation, followed by the association of the idea of a democratic state with that of a “morally decadent” state.

## Methodology

The Watchdog.MD Community constantly monitors 16 Telegram channels and a Facebook page to map disinformation against democratic values. For one month (5 October- 5 November 2023) the Community has also monitored manipulative and false messages targeting gender.

Sources monitored:

- Telegram - 16 channels: Смуглянка, WTF Moldova, Bogdan Țirdea, Ivanovna, Гагаузская Республика, Гений Карпат, Gabriel Călin, Мамалыга и Токана, Приднестровец, Vladimir Odnostalco, Patriot, Ilan Șor, Igor Dodon, Kp.md, Cavcaliuc, Platon.
- Facebook - a page: Ion Chicu.

The channels selected for monitoring stand out:

- through a predominantly critical content against democratic and European institutions, such as: *Gabriel Călin, WTF Moldova, Гений Карпат, Kp.md, Platon, Bogdan Țirdea, Гагаузская Республика, Смуглянка, Patriot.*
- through support or affiliation with corrupt, indicted, or controversial persons such as *Ilan Șor (Мамалыга и Токана), Veaceslav Platon, Igor Dodon, Cavcaliuc.*
- through a strong position of support/sympathy towards the Russian Federation: *Приднестровец, Igor Dodon, Ilan Șor, Гагаузская Республика, Kp.md, WTF Moldova, Bogdan Țirdea, Гагаузская Республика, Смуглянка, Ивановна*

Russian language content also predominates on these channels, but not only this language. Therefore, according to the language criteria, the following categories of the monitored sources were identified:

- 2 channels distributing content in Romanian: *Patriot, Ion Chicu*
- 11 channels distributing content in Russian: *Смульянка, WTF Moldova, Bogdan Țirdea, Гагаузская Республика, Гений Карпат, Мамалыга и Токана, Приднестровец, Ivanovna, Ilan Shor, Igor Dodon, Kp.md*
- 4 channels distributing both Romanian and Russian content: *Vladimir Odnostalco, Platon, Igor Dodon, Gabriel Calin*

The content monitored during the selected period was grouped into three general clusters:

1. Gender discrimination targeting the Republic of Moldova;
2. Discrimination targeting other countries;
3. Combining both.

Each post was assigned a main narrative, depending on the key message the author is trying to convey and the indicators that form the definition of gender bias:

- Rejecting and challenging gender diversity;
- Discrimination against women, including by challenging their role in the public sphere;
- Hate speech towards women and the LGBTQI+ community;
- The so-called imposition of foreign values to change traditional/local values.

## Key observations

Between 5 October and 5 November 2023, we tracked and analysed 136 posts, which fall under gender-based disinformation.

- Champions in promoting manipulative messages were the Telegram channels Гагаузская Республика (47 posts), WTF Moldova, KP.MD, Bogdan Țirdea (20 posts) within one month.
- The Гагаузская Республика channel is focused more on the war in Ukraine. This channel promotes fake news and manipulations in order to discredit Ukraine and to present the Russian Federation in a positive light. In his posts, the author of the channel tried to show that LGBT has become widespread in Ukraine and subtly associates this fact with the EU. At the same time, the Telegram channel focused its efforts on showing how perverted some countries are, distributing a series of posts targeting the situation in the USA, Great Britain or Israel.
- During the monitored period, the WTF Moldova channel focused more on the gender situation in Moldova. Most of the posts attacked the dress style or the way a person looks.
- Similarly, KP.MD focused more on the domestic situation. Posts targeting other countries were meant to show that these countries are opposed to gender diversity in favour of maintaining traditional values.

## Findings

- Half of the posts identified (70) directly target the Republic of Moldova. As the monitoring period coincided with the election campaign, we note that some pages favouring certain electoral candidates aimed to discredit the ruling Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) party by accusing it of favouring the LGBTQI+ community in

Moldova. This is where [Igor Dodon's election speech](#) at a meeting with voters in Bălți comes in. With the phrase “the government holds LGBT parades in Chișinău and now wants to hold them in Bălți”, Dodon is trying to portray the LGBT community as a danger to society, especially children. This message appeals to conservative voters who are supporters of traditional values. In this context, Maxim Moroșan, the Socialist Party (PSRM) candidate for mayor of Bălți, was aggressive towards the LGBTQI+ community. According to Moroșan, LGBT offends the values of believers, Orthodox, Moldovans, Gagauz, Bulgarians, Russians, Ukrainians and all those living in Moldova.

- The discrediting of the gender dimension in other countries includes all posts that:
  - reject gender diversity;
  - oppose equal opportunities;
  - masculinise women;
  - portray women in a bad light in terms of their abilities, looks, dress style, choice of whether or not to have children, etc.
- 21 posts addressed gender in both the Republic of Moldova and other countries, mostly in the EU. The aim of the propagandists was to demonstrate how perverted European/Western countries are. In their posts, the manipulators insisted that Moldovans do not want such European values, referring to LGBTQI+.

### Prevailing discrimination narratives

In addition to criticism of a person's appearance or dress style (14 out of 136 posts), the following narratives were predominant:

- *LGBT is gaining momentum in the EU and other countries*

Some Telegram channels speculated that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had allowed [same-sex marriages](#) in order to boost the morale of soldiers. Furthermore, the post states that a “blue brigade” (referring to the slang for gay in Russian language) will be established within the Armed Forces of Ukraine, where LGBTQI+ representatives will serve. Some video footage has also been distributed showing men dressed in women's clothes, thus trying [to avoid mobilization](#), according to the author of the source.

- *Women are not worthy of certain public positions*

Starting from the [objective](#) of gender-based disinformation to discourage women from participating in the public sphere and to shape perceptions of the role of women in society and the political sphere, we find that propagandists have pursued this objective in relation to the appointment of Ana Revenco as Director of the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation. Telegram channels posted [photos](#) and [sexist memes](#) positioning Revenco in a negative light. Other [voices](#) have denigrated her, insinuating that she prefers to consume alcohol during work hours. According to some sources, Revenco's candidacy would have been better suited to the position of [director of a winery](#).

We note that in the discourse of politicians such as Ion Chicu and Marina Tauber, the following denigrating terms persist: “[filth](#)”, “[hypocrite](#)”, “[hysterical](#)” against women in office, particularly against Maia Sandu.

[Bogdan Țirdea](#) tried to substantiate stereotypes about equal opportunities and stated that women do not belong in the military, more specifically, that they should not perform military service. In contrast, the Telegram channel Гарауэская Республика masculinises women, declaring that “[they look so much like warriors, that they cry without tears](#)”.

- *LGBT – danger for children*



The [Patriot](#) Channel wonders whether the government is preparing “to change the sex of 8-year-olds without parental consent”. [Bogdan Țirdea](#) shared a video in which American parents would rejoice when children request a sex change. Bogdan Țirdea's manipulative speech did not end there, saying that LGBT children's rights trainings are being conducted in schools.

➤ *The West is forcing LGBT rights on us*

In 3 posts it is stated that the EU imposes LGBT on us. [Maxim Moroșan](#), candidate for mayor of Bălți, said that all we have from the EU is LGBT, which is imposed on society. On the same note, [Bogdan Țirdea](#) said that the EU and Maia Sandu offered us nothing but poverty and LGBT events. In this context, representatives of the PSRM accused the West of turning a blind eye to the illegalities of the government, being concerned in Moldova only with the rights of the LGBT movement. At the same time, [WTF Moldova](#) said in a post that LGBT values are actively promoted by Western foundations with the tacit support of the Chișinău authorities. According to the post, this is contributing to an increase in HIV infections.

➤ *Authorities impose LGBT rights on society*

10 out of 138 posts insinuate that PAS favours the LGBT community. This is where [Bogdan Țirdea's](#) accusations against the People's Advocate, who is more concerned about LGBT representatives than children, come in. [Vladimir Odnostalco](#) also shared a post stating that the representatives of PAS, Liberal Party (PL) and National Alternative Movement Party (MAN), as well as of other parties, are more tolerant of sexual minorities than Russian speakers. Some sources said that if we want a society characterised by a variety of gender identities, we should vote for the [PAS](#) party in the elections. In this context, footage of a protest chanting “[Down with PAS, Down with LGBT](#)” was distributed on some channels monitored within this study.

➤ *Traditional values are replaced by LGBT values*

The authors of the propaganda state that by opening the Police Family Justice Centre, Maia Sandu is promoting the Istanbul Convention which is actually aimed at promoting LGBT propaganda and [fighting the traditional family](#). On the same note, some [Telegram](#) channels have suggested that the Familia TV channel has been shut down because it promotes the traditional family and not LGBT values.

➤ *The LGBT community is not accepted in Moldova*

This narrative includes posts that aim to create the perception that society does not accept LGBT values and is vehemently opposed to them. An eloquent example is Maxim Moroșan's denigrating speech towards the [LGBT](#) community. According to him, LGBT is an “abomination”. At the same time, Moroșan positions himself as the first PSRM mayoral candidate to be fined for wearing the St. George ribbon and [denigrating the LGBT community](#). Lilian Carp, PAS candidate for mayor of the capital, has stated that the family is made up only of a man and a woman, this being interpreted as an [anti-European](#) statement.

➤ *Deviance in the EU and other countries*

To bolster the narrative, propagandists posted a video of a man and woman appearing nude on a Finnish TV show. The manipulators say such actions are [normal](#) in countries like Finland. Bogdan Țirdea says citizens are worried because PAS has given assurances that the population will grow since [men will get the right to give birth](#), just like in the West.

The deviance narrative has not escaped Russia either. In one post, it is stated that in St Petersburg a [gay man](#) had a quarrel with a guy. According to other voices, a Russian singer is showing his support for the [LGBT community](#) in Russia and tolerates same-sex marriage.

## Conclusions

Based on the monitoring carried out between 5 October and 5 November, we found the following:

- Gender bias is used for political purposes to appeal to conservative voters and to denigrate political opponents;
- Gender disinformation aims to reinforce stereotypes to undermine women's rights and gender equality;
- LGBTQI+ rights are portrayed as a threat to society and to traditional values;
- Efforts to denigrate the Istanbul Convention continue.

As the monitoring period coincided with the local elections campaign, we found that the LGBTQI+ topic has been given a prominent role in the electoral discourses. Politicians presented LGBTQI+ as a growing danger in Moldovan society and associated this phenomenon with the ruling party.

We note that women remain the target of defamation and discrimination, especially when they are promoted to public office.

At the same time, in order to identify certain trends of gender disinformation in the multimedia space in the Republic of Moldova, and to map the whole set of narratives aiming at discrediting the gender dimension, we stress the need for regular monitoring on this topic.

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