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## THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA PATH TOWARDS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND ITS VISIBILITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Introduction.** At this moment, social media is one of the most powerful tools in contemporary society for influencing and mobilizing large groups of people. The purpose of this paper is to explore and define the extent of social media's influence in today's world, examining why it has such a profound impact on society and various aspects of our lives.

We all know how important communication is in understanding how a new way of communicating can change society. Social media is the latest way of communicating that has had a huge impact on society. Right now, when we talk about social media, we're talking about a whole range of web-based and mobile technologies that allow people to create, share, or exchange information, ideas, pictures, and videos and to participate in online conversations. The downsides of social media include the fact that some people may not be able to access social media, spending too much time on it, cyberbullying, manipulation and sharing wrong information that causes mass disinformation.

The relationship between social media and the European integration of the Republic of Moldova is deeply interconnected. In 2024, as the referendum on EU integration emerged as a key issue on the national agenda, various forms of disinformation began to circulate, highlighting the critical role social media plays in shaping public opinion and influencing political processes. Social media platforms serve as crucial arenas for political discourse in Moldova, particularly in the context of EU integration. First of all, these dynamics between social media and the process of promoting the European integration highlight the need for strategic communication and an engaged media-literate speech to address the challenges posed by digital disinformation.

### **Republic of Moldova and EU Integration**

First of all, we need to know that Republic of Moldova is a state in Eastern Europe that emerged from the USSR in 1991. It has always been a country deeply interconnected with Russian culture and politics.

As Oliver Schmidtke underlines in his book that the Soviet legacy in the region include the importance of economic ties with Russia (often underwritten by energy dependency of Russian oil and gas), a shared post-Communist political culture, and compactly settled national minorities

pushing for regional autonomy.<sup>1</sup> Most people know the Russian language, and it has even been mandatory to teach it in schools, until 2015, when it was decided that Russian would be taught as an optional subject. The country has been involved in political and economic difficulties for the last two decades. The disputes about the need to strengthen ties with the EU during the uprisings of 2009 and the subsequent acquisition of the status of candidate for EU membership led to the divergence of foreign policy lines. The election of the pro-European President Maia Sandu in December 2020 and the assignment of the pro-European parliamentary majority confirmed the pro-European orientation of the country.

Moldova's European journey isn't just about geopolitics—it's about identity. It's about choosing democracy, progress, and connectivity in a region that often faces division. Social media offers Moldova a chance to share that vision, not only with its people but also with the world.

In this context, the purpose of this research is to investigate the visibility of the Republic of Moldova on the main social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, where the country publishes all kinds of information about their activities. Furthermore, this paper aims to identify the influence of Russian media in the Republic of Moldova, the sentiment of the Russian speaking Moldavians towards the European Union, and their previous voting behaviour.

As shown by the International Monetary Fund, the topic of the Republic of Moldova and its path toward EU integration is widely discussed. Moldova has initiated the implementation of a National Adaptation Program, supported by ongoing efforts to align with European Union directives.<sup>2</sup>

In 20 October 2024, the Republic of Moldova held a referendum to decide its future relationship with the European Union. Voters were asked a simple, yet profound question: 'Do you support amending the Constitution to enable the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union?', the answers were YES or NO. The first major issue with this referendum is the lack

of a clear and comprehensive campaign explaining the implications of amending the Constitution and the subsequent steps that would follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidtke, Oliver., Yekelchik, S.. Europe's Last Frontier? Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine Between Russia and the European Union. Statele Unite ale Americii: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Monetary, International. Republic of Moldova: Fifth Reviews Under the Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility Arrangements, First Review Under the Arrangement Under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility, and Request for Modification of a Performance Criterion-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Republic of Moldova. Statele Unite ale Americii: International Monetary Fund, 2024.

Now, here's where things get interesting. Social media is playing a transformative role in this narrative. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are no longer just spaces for personal updates—they've become crucial tools for Moldova's government and civil society. President Maia Sandu, for example, has effectively used social media to advocate for reforms, build public trust, and highlight Moldova's progress toward European standards. At the same time, grassroots organizations have harnessed these platforms to engage younger audiences and counter disinformation campaigns.

But this isn't a straightforward success story. Social media is also a double-edged sword. We see misinformation campaigns, often linked to foreign actors, attempting to undermine the integration narrative. These efforts exploit existing societal divides between pro-European and pro-Russian communities, making the digital space both a tool for engagement and a battleground for competing ideologies.

The general population in the Republic of Moldova has fallen prey to false information often disseminated on social media, leading to widespread disinformation and fear. This has portrayed the European Union as the ultimate antagonist. The phrasing of the 2024 referendum question has been manipulated, with constitutional amendments framed as harmful changes and the pro-European government demonized.

According to the news platform Radio Free Europe Moldova ([moldova.europalibera.org](http://moldova.europalibera.org)), this phenomenon involved “inauthentic and coordinated behaviour (Bolotnicov n.d.).” Meta reported the removal of 1,326 Facebook accounts, 80 pages, a group, and one Instagram account, all part of a network targeting audiences in Moldova and Madagascar. The network, which reportedly spent approximately \$42,000 to disseminate these messages, focused its content on promoting figures like Ilan Șor and Marina Tauber—politicians known for their pro-Russian sympathies.<sup>1</sup>

Meta's Threat Report, published on May 29, highlights the scale and intent of this disinformation campaign, underscoring its detrimental impact on Moldovan public discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Cristian Bolotnicov, “Meta a eliminat peste o mie de conturi false ce răspândeau dezinformări pe Facebook-ul din R. Moldova”, <http://bit.ly/4fOvDY5>, Decembrie 2024.



**Fig. 1 A protest in the Republic of Moldova  
(Photo: Daniel MIHAILESCU / AFP / Profimedia)**

### **Anti-European Union Campaign 2024**

In 2024, the Republic of Moldova faced significant political challenges. The uncertainty about the future, combined with a constant flow of information from the east, created an environment ripe for widespread disinformation. Social media's impact on decision-making is no longer a myth, and in 2024, Moldova saw a huge wave of bots promoting Russian values and opposing EU membership. Telegram became the main tool for spreading Russian propaganda.

In an interview, Evghenia Gutul, leader of the UTA Gagauzia, argued that blocking these Telegram channels is actually a strategy by Maia Sandu and her party to limit people's access to reliable information. This raises concerns about the control of information and its impact on Moldova's democratic process. The TikTok platform also recorded a massive number of videos featuring people coldly discussing what would happen in Moldova if the referendum vote were to pass in favor of Maia Sandu. The main arguments promoted by supporters of Russian propaganda focused on fears of the European Union buying up all of Moldova's land, claiming that people living abroad would no longer have a place to return to, that same-sex marriages would be legalized, and that there would be heavy fines and the demolition of churches. These messages targeted the country's predominantly Christian population, attempting to appeal to their religious sentiments and raise concerns among the older population, whose average age is over 40.

Thus, as we can see in Figure 2, both the comments and the videos come from regular people, which further increases their credibility and creates a snowball effect. This causes many individuals to firmly decide to vote NO in the referendum. The results clearly show that a large majority of citizens

remaining in the country voted NO. The final results were very closely, with 50.08% for YES and 49.93% for NO.



**Fig 2. Comments from a propagandistic video on TikTok**

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the social media campaign surrounding Moldova's potential EU membership has had a major impact on public opinion. Both pro-European and anti-European content has circulated widely, often fueled by misinformation and propaganda, creating a deeply divided environment. Platforms like TikTok and Telegram have played a central role in shaping how people view the EU, especially among the older population who are more vulnerable to fear-based messages.

The campaign has influenced people's choices by playing on emotions, spreading exaggerated or misleading claims about what joining the EU would mean. These messages have had a strong effect, particularly on those who already have concerns, pushing many to vote against EU membership.

Overall, the impact of social media on Moldova's EU referendum highlights how powerful digital platforms can be in shaping public opinion, especially when misinformation is used to tap into people's anxieties about the future.

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