

Reporting on Moldova's Elections:

Strategies used by independent media
to reach communities targeted by
disinformation campaigns

A learning brief produced by the What Works Unit
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INTRODUCTION

This short report explores the weaponisation of disinformation during the 2024 presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, where pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu was the target of concerted smear campaigns, voter manipulation, and interference orchestrated by Russia. According to some estimates,¹ Kremlin-backed networks spent more than USD 100 million on promoting proxy political parties as part of a wider strategy to steer the former Soviet republic back into Russia's sphere of influence.

Moldova's independent media are widely credited with having played a crucial role in exposing these

efforts and in empowering voters, particularly young people, to make informed decisions. This brief builds on existing research and captures the methods used by six media outlets to reach diverse segments of the population and penetrate echo chambers. It seeks to identify replicable models and share insights that could be adapted for use in different contexts. The outlets are Agora, Diez, Jurnal TV, Newsmaker, TV8, and Ziarul de Gardă, all of which receive financial support from the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM).

This learning brief is part of a series that seeks to capture and share the experiences of independent media in low- and middle-income countries, as well as to identify potential solutions to structural market challenges that affect the sustainability of public interest media.



CONTEXT

Media consumption trends in Moldova

While there is a lack of systematic research into media consumption trends in Moldova, multiple independent studies have provided valuable insight into endemic vulnerabilities to disinformation, noting that, in Moldovan society, “polarisation creates fertile ground for potential destabilisation”.² Furthermore, according to one report, “weak societal resilience adds to Moldova’s vulnerability to hybrid attacks”.³

Invariably, Russia is identified as the main initiator of these attacks. A study commissioned by Freedom House⁴ concluded that, historically, the Kremlin had found it easy to make inroads into Moldova’s underdeveloped media market due to “pro-Russian sentiment in the country’s ethnically diverse population, combined with a nostalgia for the past, usually strongest in the older generation”.

A 2022 decision to suspend the broadcasting licences of six pro-Russian TV channels and block

websites promoting violence had limited success in stemming the flow of Kremlin-sponsored disinformation into the Moldovan media space. According to one study,⁵ the TV channels simply migrated their content online, while restricted portals established mirror websites with different domains. It went on to say, “By the end of 2023, there was a shift in people’s viewing habits towards similar foreign TV content rather than transitioning to independent local channels.”

Media preferences have a strong generational bias. According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF),⁶ younger audiences (under 35) are significantly more likely than older people to cite local independent media as trustworthy. Research commissioned by Internews in 2022 found that more than a third of people aged 46-65 “watch Russian TV programmes almost every time [they] watch TV”. For the 18-25 age group, the

proportion was just 16%. This suggests that the older generation has greater exposure to Kremlin-sponsored content and is less willing to accept alternative viewpoints.

Information bubbles are also linked to geography and ethnicity. There is broad agreement that populations in the breakaway republic of Transnistria, the autonomous region of Gagauzia, and the municipality of Bălți are especially receptive to pro-Russian narratives. Research for Romania's Alexandru Ioan Cuza University⁷ concluded, "Separatist tendencies, ideological indoctrination, and distortion of history continue to be challenges in these regions."

Furthermore, research shows that Russian-speaking communities in Moldova are less inclined to access content in languages other than Russian. In the 2022 Internews survey,⁸ only 28% of Russian speakers said that they also read news in Romanian and nearly four in ten said they did not understand the national language. According to a 2021 survey in Gagauzia, conducted by Moldova's Institute of Public Policy, around 90% of respondents preferred to get their information in Russian.⁹

This means that these communities remain highly reliant on content emanating from Russia and on the Russian-language outputs of local media, influencers, and bloggers. However, the number of professional outlets producing high-quality Russian content, e.g. Newsmaker, Nokta in Gagauzia, or SP in Bălți, remains relatively small.



THE INTERNATIONAL FUND'S GRANTEES IN MOLDOVA



Agora: Launched in 2014 as a niche outlet focusing on business and finance, Agora has since evolved into a generalist media platform that enjoys wide popularity among the Romanian-speaking population.



Diez: Originally a source of practical information on education, job opportunities, and entertainment for young people aged 18-35, Diez now offers a broader mix of daily news, current affairs, and in-depth explainers, while maintaining its youth-focused approach.



Jurnal TV: Known for its diverse local content, editorial independence, responsible journalism, and a commitment to European values, Jurnal TV is Moldova's largest independent media outlet.



NewsMaker: A prominent online platform that publishes in both Russian and Romanian, NewsMaker is well-respected for the quality of its Russian-language content.



Ziarul de Gardă: Established in 2004 as a newspaper and now also available online, Ziarul de Gardă is among the leading investigative media outlets in Moldova.



TV8: This popular TV station provides national coverage in both Romanian and Russian, with a strong focus on news and current affairs.



CHALLENGES AND LEARNINGS

Reaching and engaging with vulnerable communities

In a series of interviews for this learning brief, IFPIM grantees highlighted the challenges they faced when competing with well-resourced disinformation campaigns, Kremlin-sponsored content, and digital attacks from trolls linked to the Russian Federation. As noted by Ziarul de Gardă,¹⁰ “Algorithms favoured paid posts, making it harder for organic, fact-based journalism to gain visibility, especially during this crucial election period”.

The grantees stated that disinformation and conspiracy theories “[rely] on fear and emotions”, such as the threat that Russia would attack Moldova if the country were to join the EU. “You cannot fight emotions with fact,” said Diez. The respondent added that debunking fake or manipulated news was “inefficient” because it could not match the speed of disinformation campaigns, while media also risked “amplifying the fake news by explaining it”.

In addition, independent media face generational and cultural challenges compounded by low levels of media literacy. According to Agora, older people “don’t understand the difference between news and the messaging app Telegram” and struggled to “distinguish disinformation tactics”. In general, it was perceived that serious factual content resonated less well with people from all generations, while simple information presented with strong visuals had the potential to garner significant audiences.

The grantee media outlets’ observations are in line with a growing perception that traditional approaches to countering disinformation have struggled to resonate with vulnerable communities. As noted by the Centre for European Policy Analysis report *Winning the Information War*,¹¹ “Myth-busting and fact-checking reach only a limited audience – and probably not the one the Kremlin is targeting”.

Instead, counter-disinformation experts recommend a more strategic approach, arguing that there is no value in “chasing disinformation after it has already entered the information space and [contaminated the] public discourse”.¹² Roman Shutov, project lead for the M-MIIND programme in Moldova, explains; “Typically, there is a window of about 36 hours between the onset of a disinformation campaign and its peak reach. We encourage our partners to use this time effectively to reach their audiences quickly with accurate information – so that the true story is heard first”.¹³

Media expert Victor Gotișan, who supports IFPIM's work in Moldova, adds, “Independent media, in particular, need to recognise that countering disinformation narratives is often ineffective when done through overly serious or hard-to-digest content. Instead, disinformation should be addressed organically, integrated into all types of content they produce rather than through dedicated talk shows, special programmes, or clearly labelled segments”.

Insights and learning: Tactics used by independent media to address these challenges

After a period of decline, investigative journalism has regained much of its prominence in the Moldovan media space. This was particularly apparent during the parliamentary elections and the constitutional referendum of 2024. Independent media's investigations played a pivotal role in exposing systematic vote-buying orchestrated by pro-Russian oligarchs Ilan Șor and Veaceslav Platon, and their political allies.

Furthermore, those investigations evidenced the potential of small teams of independent journalists to reach and influence national audiences. For example, a Ziarul de Gardă investigation entitled *Serving Moscow*,¹⁴ which used hidden cameras to document vote-buying, garnered nearly 500,000 views on YouTube and was aired by 20 media outlets, including the public broadcaster Moldova. The reports were broadcast during prime-time slots on the eve of the elections. Grantees noted that the scale and overt nature of Russian attempts to contaminate the information space had prompted a new spirit of solidarity within the media sector and,

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Victor Gotișan, Media expert

as a result, traditionally conservative or captured outlets had joined forces with independent media to expose corrupt practices and voter manipulation. “For the first time, journalistic content became a unifying force among media professionals...marking an unprecedented moment in the country's media history”, commented Ziarul de Gardă.

However, independent media's ability to influence public opinion and deliver impact on a national level is not confined to high-profile investigations or isolated attempts to debunk fake information. Their growing relevance and resonance in countries such as Moldova are linked to a range of techniques that ensure their content reflects the needs, interests, and priorities of target communities, including those that are not habitual consumers of independent media. These tactics are explored in detail below.

Community outreach

Grantees concurred that “being present” in vulnerable communities was of paramount importance. Jurnal TV said, “We need to be more present on the ground – speak directly to people and connect with them.” Ziarul de Gardă agreed

that it was essential to “spend more time where the problem happens” and to penetrate audience bubbles “even if they do not accept it”. For example, in 2024, the Chisinau-based outlet sent reporters to the north of the country, where many people voted against the constitutional referendum, in an effort to understand why they were opposed to EU membership. Elderly people, in particular, were “lost in translation”, according to Ziarul de Gardă.

Newsmaker said that, during the elections, IFPIM funding had given its journalists the ability to travel to the regions, cover events through livestreams, and “offer nuanced perspectives, particularly in regions like Transnistria and Gagauzia, where the political landscape is particularly complex”. Meanwhile, Diez had introduced a local correspondents’ programme as well as an ambassador network of micro-influencers from different regions of the country who were encouraged to share Diez news with their followers.

The independent media practitioners interviewed for this learning brief felt that building trust among vulnerable populations was linked to the ability to respond swiftly to people’s needs. Ziarul de Gardă commented, “If people say, ‘I didn’t get my pension’, we should check what happened and give them an answer.” Similarly, Newsmaker stressed the need to adapt quickly to evolving events and thus “remain at the forefront of public discourse in Moldova”.

Improved use of social media

All respondents agreed that social media offered an effective way of reaching target audiences; the Diez team said that it had introduced a “social media first” policy. Some outlets have seen dramatic growth in their followings over the past year. Newsmaker’s Russian-language channel on YouTube, for example, has increased its subscribers by nearly 53%, largely driven by video news bulletins, livestreams, and daily updates. Ziarul de Gardă had seen major progress on TikTok with subscriber numbers soaring by 58% over the last six months of 2024.

Key to this success was an understanding of which formats performed well on diverse channels. For example, Newsmaker had seen exceptional take-up for long-form weekly video digests on YouTube, particularly among regional audiences.

This respondent also highlighted the value of Instagram reels for delivering engaging, structured storytelling. Several grantees recognised the need to have dedicated teams who could tailor content for different social media platforms.

However, the respondents had mixed views on the ability of social media to facilitate constructive debate. Agora’s team observed that most of the comments came from bots and trolls and there was “minimal constructive dialogue...we are often forced to close the comments section down”. Certain divisive topics, such as LGBTQIA rights, tended to prompt overwhelmingly negative reactions, including hate speech.

Ziarul de Gardă noted one positive aspect of social media posts: “We have readers who are explaining issues to other readers”, which it cited as an example of “quality engagement”. Similarly, Diez reported that an online video discussion recorded by a group of students had stimulated a nuanced exchange of views: “The interactive and participatory nature of the content contributed to its success, reinforcing the importance of audience involvement in content creation.”

Using print to reach rural populations

For rural communities in Moldova, newspapers still serve as a primary and trusted source of news. Ziarul de Gardă noted that nine in 10 of its subscribers in these communities were pensioners, people with disabilities, and low-income farmers who “often have limited access to digital alternatives”. Ziarul de Gardă recognises the importance of ensuring that

“We need to be more present on the ground – speak directly to people and connect with them.”

Jurnal TV

its newspaper remains in circulation, even though the national postal service has tripled the costs of distribution.

The news outlet is tackling this challenge by allowing members of the public to gift subscriptions to groups or individuals. Consequently, at the beginning of 2025, Ziarul de Gardă achieved the highest subscriber count in its 20-year history – just over 18,000 – which marks a 31% increase on the previous year.

Mobilising influencers

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, Maia Sandu's Party of Action and Solidarity was the primary target for disinformation and fake news attacks orchestrated by local and Russian antagonists. Experts agree that influencers played a highly effective role in countering these attacks, some on their own initiative and others at the behest of local NGOs. According to one expert, "The influencers incorporated counter-narratives into their videos as well as livestreams on Facebook, Telegram, and Instagram. As a result, their response was both swift

and efficient, reaching multiple audiences, including hard-to-reach rural communities and representatives of the Soviet generation."¹⁵

Among the IFPIM grantees, opinions were divided over the use of influencers, a technique which they felt would benefit from further research. Respondents from Diez warned that influencers could be unpredictable and inconsistent and thus advised exercising a degree of caution when collaborating with them. As noted earlier, Diez adopted a novel approach during the 2024 constitutional referendum by mobilising a network of like-minded (pro-referendum) Instagrammers from across Moldova who acted as boosters for Diez news, although the respondent added, "We didn't know what to do with them afterwards."

Jurnal TV had a more positive view: "We have five of the biggest influencers in Moldova. [They] have a personal touch to content... and creative ways to fight disinformation." However, this respondent also highlighted the need to ensure that content produced by influencers was fully aligned with the publisher's editorial guidelines.



Catering for Russian-speaking audiences

All the grantee media organisations reported having devoted significant efforts to tailoring content for Russian-speaking communities. Newsmaker staff explained that they sought to “bridge linguistic divides while encouraging critical discourse”. During the election period, Jurnal TV introduced newscasts and talk shows in Russian while Ziarul de Gardă published Russian-language explainers and opinion pieces on YouTube. Newsmaker’s daytime video news bulletins in Russian are now watched live by up to 2,000 viewers.

In September and October 2024 – during the peak of the presidential election campaign – Newsmaker became the most popular and widely read Russian-language media outlet in Moldova, according to Gemius audience data. An IFPIM interim report on the performance of its grantees concluded, “This achievement reflects the platform’s successful expansion into Russian-speaking audiences, especially within key regions like the northern part of the country and Gagauzia.” Media expert Victor Gotișan added, “It also highlights a clear demand for high-quality, independent, and unbiased information in Russian during pivotal national events.”

Newsmaker’s documentary film, *Independence Street*¹⁶, is an example of content that has been successful because it captures the challenges faced by Moldovans from both sides of the linguistic divide, thereby exploring commonalities between groups which often see themselves as being irreconcilably different. According to the outlet, “It sparked significant engagement, which took the form of deeper reflections on the country’s history, present, and future.”

Experimenting with new content formats

IFPIM funding gave grantees the space to experiment with new formats, some of which appear to have been successful in reaching diverse audiences. Agora cited simple explainers and easy-to-digest news as examples of impactful content, commenting that the number of online ‘saves’ and ‘shares’ were indicative of their resonance. Similarly, Ziarul de Gardă

reported high viewership for carousels of multiple images or videos, for posters, and for other visuals.

Effective techniques have included centring a piece of news or analysis around a character with whom target audiences can identify. Jurnal TV found that short infotainment programmes for viewers in the 16-25 age group had delivered positive results, explaining that, while they did not watch daily news shows or talk shows, this demographic group was nevertheless exposed to propaganda. In addition, Jurnal TV is planning to pilot animations which it believes have strong potential to engage new audiences and encourage critical thinking.

All grantees mentioned the challenge of producing content that appeals to young people. Diez has been expanding its outputs to include daily news, practical advice, and in-depth explainers. The outlet has implemented a tagging system to categorise content on both its website and social media channels, thereby enabling an analysis of social media audience trends and of evolving needs and preferences within the youth demographic.

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IFPIM's qualitative analysis for the second half of 2024 noted that youth turnout for the presidential elections was exceptionally high, with around a half of registered voters aged 18-25 casting a ballot. Its analysis concluded, "Diez's strategic focus on youth and publishing youth-oriented electoral content and actively encouraging young people to vote played a critical role in mobilising this demographic."

During the elections, in response to the dramatic uptick in disinformation campaigns, all the grantees introduced dedicated programming. Examples include TV8's live coverage on both voting days when it broadcast for 18 consecutive hours, and Agora's groundbreaking interactive platform which featured maps, simulations, surveys, and detailed analyses. Agora's audience tripled over October and November 2024, underscoring the outlet's crucial role in delivering accurate, engaging, and diverse election-related information to Moldovan citizens.

The Moldova example shows what is possible when the right conditions are put in place, but underscores what is at stake if that support weakens.





CONCLUSIONS and recommendations

The 2024 elections in Moldova offer powerful evidence of the critical role that independent media play in building societal resilience to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). In a highly contested media environment, independent outlets helped to counter Kremlin-backed narratives and attempts to polarise public opinion. Operating with only a fraction of the resources deployed by authoritarian actors, these outlets delivered accurate, timely, and accessible information to the public at a time when the country's political future hung in the balance.

However, while the exposés of voter manipulation during Moldova's elections represent an important victory, the information war is far from over. Without sustained strategic investment, even the

most resilient media will struggle to withstand the scale and sophistication of coordinated efforts to contaminate the public discourse. The Moldova example shows what is possible when the right conditions are put in place, but underscores what is at stake if that support weakens.

The following recommendations are grounded in these experiences. Aimed at media practitioners, they highlight approaches that could be replicated or adapted by editorial teams in comparable environments. They focus on how independent media can pre-empt disinformation, reach communities that do not form part of their traditional audience, and build public value in complex and contested media landscapes.

1 HAVE A CLEAR VALUE PROPOSITION

The experience of IFPIM's grantee media organisations suggests that, in a confusing and polarised media environment, it is essential to communicate a clear value proposition to target communities. For example, Newsmaker crystallises its public interest focus with the slogan, 'The independent online publication for those who care', while Diez positions itself as a platform for 'all Moldova's youth, including Russian-speakers, from all regions of the country and the diaspora'. This is particularly important in media markets where levels of digital literacy are low and there is limited awareness of the markers for credible content.

2 BUILD RAPPORT WITH THE PUBLIC

Direct engagement with diverse communities, through visits to target regions and outreach meetings with community leaders, has proven an effective way of forging closer links with vulnerable groups; covering stories or issues that resonate with local audiences; and building brand recognition for independent media outlets outside the large cities. Ziarul de Gardă's missions to the north of the country, to engage with Eurosceptics, are a case in point. In addition, professional media should explore ways of harnessing networks of ambassadors or influencers and unlocking their potential to act as multipliers for content.

3 BE STRATEGIC, NOT REACTIVE

IFPIM's grantees have experienced the benefits of adopting a strategic approach to combating disinformation in a way that leads public discourse rather than playing catch-up. This approach involves identifying the issues that matter to local communities and tracking them over time. It means staying ahead of the curve by predicting future targets for disinformation campaigns and filling this space with credible, authoritative content. While hard-hitting investigations into corruption and malpractice are an important part of this approach, everyday themes such as pensions, teachers' salaries, and youth employment also have strong potential to resonate with a broad cross section of the population. Ziarul da Gardă's most-watched stories about [fake beggars](#) and [alcoholism](#) are good examples of this.

4 EXPERIMENT WITH INTERACTIVE FORMATS AND TOOLS

Practitioners in Moldova have prioritised tools and formats with proven ability to promote user participation and meaningful engagement. Explainers, infographics, data visualisations, and carousels can be instrumental in helping readers to understand and explore complex issues. IFPIM grantees used these formats to good effect during the election and the constitutional referendum, helping to fact-check aspects of the EU accession process that were deliberately misrepresented by pro-Russian actors. Analysing the performance of new formats on diverse platforms is an essential part of this process.

5 BRING STORIES ALIVE THROUGH PERSONAL TESTIMONIES

The experiences of ‘people like us’ enjoy credibility even among sceptical or hard-to-reach audiences. They can shape and inform cross-generational dialogue, particularly when couched in formats that explore the experiences of individuals as they attempt to overcome familiar challenges, e.g. Jurnal TV’s infotainment programmes or Newsmaker’s documentary *Independence Street*. Counter-disinformation experts advise against filling schedules with ‘overly serious’ content and highlight the power of humour – particularly satire – to deflate propagandistic narratives. Similarly, the value of involving audiences in content creation is widely recognised.

6 FORM ALLIANCES WITHIN THE MEDIA SECTOR

There is ample evidence that greater cooperation and resource-sharing between media outlets can be highly effective in building sectoral resilience to FIMI, as well as in amplifying public interest content and ensuring that it reaches diverse audiences. This is well illustrated by the unprecedented take-up for *Serving Moscow* among mainstream media during the 2024 elections. Alliance-building can also serve to demonstrate greater solidarity within the media community, a crucial factor in building public trust.

Endnotes

- 1 [*Russia's hybrid war against Moldova*](#), by Fredrik Wesslau for the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 2024.
- 2 [*Dysfunctional democracy and political polarization*](#), by Sonia Horonziak, Institute of Public Affairs.
- 3 [*Russia's hybrid war against Moldova*](#), by Fredrik Wesslau for the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 2024.
- 4 [*Media literacy and the challenge of fake news*](#), by Victoria Bucataru.
- 5 [*Vibrant information barometer 2024*](#), by IREX; country chapter on Moldova.
- 6 28% of people over the age of 55 chose local independent media outlets as the most reliable and trustworthy source of news and information, compared with 41% of people younger than 35. [*Moldova: media consumption and audience perceptions research*](#), 2021.
- 7 [*Media manipulation and psychological war in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova*](#) by Vladislav Saran, 2016.
- 8 *People's Perception of Mass Media and Media Skills in the Republic of Moldova*, published in March 2023.
- 9 [*Institutul de Politici Publice | Moldova between east and west: Views from Gagauzia and Taraclia*](#), 2021.
- 10 To save space, this document names the organisation, not the interviewee, in all quotes and attributions.
- 11 [*Winning the information war*](#) by CEPA's Information Warfare Project in partnership with the Legatum Institute.
- 12 [*Prebunking in Moldova – a pilot with punch*](#), International Media Support (IMS), May 2025.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 [*Nominated for the European Press Prize*](#).
- 15 From a 2022 study commissioned by the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, not published online.
- 16 To mark the 33rd anniversary of Moldova's Independence Day, NewsMaker released the short documentary '*Independence Street*', which explores the lives, dreams, and futures of Moldovans living on streets named "Independence" in seven villages across the country.

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