

# The Business of Misinformation: Moldova



## NO COUNTRY FOR SMALL LIARS

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## INTRODUCTION

- Moldova is a small country of roughly three million people where misinformation sites find it difficult to make financial gains;
- Of the 47 misinformation websites surveilled, only eight were still operating in December 2019;
- According to experts interviewed for this study, misinformation in Moldova is spread by mainstream media, who tend to be politically partisan;
- A 2018 study found that 61% of Moldovans find it difficult to distinguish between fake and real news;
- This study found a network of five sites that seem to use computer-generated content for their online operations. They post infrequently and do not have a social media presence. Language idiosyncrasies, grammar, spelling, and other recurrent mistakes suggest that the text is not written by a human.

According to a study<sup>[1]</sup> published by Internews in November 2018, 85% of respondents believed that the news they read are politically influenced and published in order to manipulate the public, while 56% declared they were not satisfied with mass media in the country. Moldovans use social media to inform themselves: 48% use Facebook and 40% use Odnoklassniki, a Russian social media platform, to consume news. These figures are significant because the lack of trust in traditional media leads the public towards other sources of information that they consider more reliable. The online space is one such source, and is even less regulated than traditional media. With regard to “fake news,” 53% of respondents declared that they understand what the term means, but 61% reported that they find it difficult to distinguish between “fake” and “real” news.<sup>[2]</sup>

Moldovan media serves a population of roughly three million people who speak Romanian, while in urban centers, as well as rural areas with Russian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz populations, Russian is also spoken or understood. Thus, this small population is potentially served by national media from at least three countries, two of which - Romania and the Russian Federation - have considerably more resources than Moldova. Therefore, local misinformation sites may potentially compete with two significant sources from abroad.

This study aims to depict the funding strategies of misinformation websites in Moldova. However, misinformation sites as defined by the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) Business of Misinformation methodology have proven difficult to find. This definition refers to websites as platforms that “systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be those political, social, economic, health-related or else.”<sup>[3]</sup> Because their financial models differ from those of small, independent online operations, neither mainstream media nor government-funded organizations were included in this study, even though spreading misinformation is part of their agenda and systematic publishing behavior.

[1] Magenta Consulting for Internews (2018), *Percepția Populației despre Mass-Media în Republica Moldova* (Perception of Mass-Media in the Republic of Moldova), available online here: [https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/03\\_INTERNEWS\\_Final%20report\\_25.10.18\\_RO-web.pdf](https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/2018-11/03_INTERNEWS_Final%20report_25.10.18_RO-web.pdf)

[2] Ibid.

[3] <https://cmds.ceu.edu/projects/business-misinformation>

As a starting point, the list of “fake news” sites provided by StopFals was used to canvas the field.[4] Of the 47 websites listed by StopFalk, only eight were still functional in December 2019. This sample is not large enough to draw any conclusions on misinformation in Moldova, but should also not be interpreted as demonstrating a lack of misinformation in Moldova. As I will show, although the “business of misinformation” as defined by the CMDS is dead, misinformation in Moldova is still rife. Interviews with three Moldovan media experts were conducted to clarify why “fake news” sites are going bust in the country.

## Misinformation sites in Moldova

Misinformation sites in Moldova seem to have a hard time surviving. Of the roughly 50 sites surveyed for this study, fewer than ten are still operating. In this section, I will briefly present the career of a 21-year-old misinformation baron, and discuss a few characteristics of misinformation sites still operating.

At the age of 21, Corneliu Ababii was the owner of a media trust that comprised ten websites.[5] He was affiliated with the center-left Democratic Party of Moldova, and his sites regularly published attacks on political opponents. But more often, the sites covered gruesome accidents, upcoming natural disasters, resurrections, and terrorist attacks. While all ten sites are now dead, they were funded by advertising when operational. Ababii declared that the most money he earned from this business was EUR 200 per month. In 2017, the average salary in Moldova was roughly MDL 5,600 (EUR 270), according to the Moldovan Fiscal Authorities.[6] Although the sum of EUR 200 might seem ridiculously low, it would significantly increase a young man’s financial resources. When Ababii was asked why he was running misinformation sites,[7] he claimed financial reasons, but added that the negative coverage was taking a toll on him, signaling that his “journalistic” activities would not last for much longer. At the time of writing this report, all ten websites were down.

This study has identified a second network of five misinformation sites that publish in Russian and Romanian. The “Add-news” network includes the portals: Add-news-ro.info, bn-news-romania.info, news-romania24h.xyz, Edu-news.website, and Portal-news.info. The five websites are fairly young: three were established in August-September 2018, two in November 2019. They copy content from each other and host news from Romania and Moldova. Add-News has identical content to News-Romania, including the landing page. BN-News has content in Russian and Romanian and a masthead that is identical to Add-News and News-Romania. We find a large number of short items on sports and technology, as well as reports on accidents. Cross-posts from Sputnik are not uncommon. The articles are neither signed nor dated. The odd language and spelling in Romanian (Vranca instead of Vrancea,[8] or Viorica Danchile instead of Viorica Dăncilă[9]) leads to the assumption that the text might have been written or translated by a machine. All five websites feature heavy advertising.

[4] StopFals is a USAID-funded platform run by the Association of Independent Press (Asociației Presei Independente – API). Their list of fake news items and sites is available here (in Romanian and Russian): <https://stopfals.md/ro/category/21>

[5] Ziarul de Garda, „Trustul media” al unui producător de știri false din Moldova (The Media Trust of a fake-news site producer), published on September 15, 2017, available online (in Romanian) here: <https://www.zdg.md/importante-2/trustul-media-al-unui-producator-de-stiri-false-din-moldova>

[6] Source: <https://monitorul.fisc.md/editorial/salariul-mediu-lunar-pe-economie-pentru-2017-a-fost-stabilit-in-suma-de-5600-lei.html>

[7] Ziarul de Garda, „Trustul media” al unui producător de știri false din Moldova (The Media Trust of a fake-news site producer), published on September 15, 2017, available online (in Romanian) here: <https://www.zdg.md/importante-2/trustul-media-al-unui-producator-de-stiri-false-din-moldova>

[8] A county in Romania.

[9] Former Romanian prime minister.

One example of questionable content is an article about Russian president Vladimir Putin, with the title: “Putin helped Ukrainian refugees, raised the financial aid for children and the age for colonels.”[10] The text does not always make sense, starting with the title. Other titles such as “The child will find on the phone”[11] (about an application to help parents find their missing children), or “No Nutrition Never Not More”[12] (about increasing child benefits) are nonsensical. This text is clearly not written by a human. The following questions remain: what is the purpose of these pages? Are they testing grounds for bot-generated content? Does this explain the lack of dissemination? These sites stopped posting by the end of 2019. At this point, their purpose is not clear, nor is their ownership.

**Putin a ajutat refugiații ucraineni, a crescut alocația pentru copii și vârsta colonelilor**



Vladimir Putin a semnat o serie de legi importante, KP vorbește despre unele dintre ele.  
REFUGIILE CU NICLIDARE VOR FI ÎNVĂȚĂȚATE

Jurnal-stiri.site is a Romanian-language website which publishes incendiary content, for example the announcement of war with Russia. The site posts blatant false information about political leaders (such as former prime minister and self-exiled businessman Vlad Plahotniuc, or leader of the Moldovan Liberal Democrat Party Vlad Filat), and regularly announces the deaths of movie stars and political personalities. This site is also very recent; its incorporation date was apparently November 1, 2019. Advertising is very dominant and access to articles is conditioned by Facebook shares, a rather aggressive promotion tactic. The page claims to have views ranging from 2-3,000 for political news, to 25,000 for “terrorist attacks” and fake deaths. These numbers are incredibly high for such a site, and might be partially explained by the use of bots to increase page views.

Two Russian-language websites were also analyzed. Omega News[13] belongs to the OMG-Media Group SRL, a company run by Alexandr Petkov, who is well known in Moldova for his involvement in a series of scandals when he insulted Moldovan institutions, public figures, and public servants, such as judges and prosecutors. From 2010-2014, Petkov was a member of parliament for the Communist Party until he was expelled from the party. Omega News covers current and international affairs, health cures, and lifestyle advice. It is occasionally incendiary (e.g. announcing a war in Ukraine in the coming year), but the “medical

[10] Putin a ajutat refugiații ucraineni, a crescut alocația pentru copii și vârsta colonelilor (Putin helped Ukrainian refugees, raised the financial aid for children and the age for colonels), publishing date not available, retrieved on February 14, 2020 from <http://bn-news-romania.info/news2/single-post.php?id=20>

[11] In Romanian: COPILUL VA GASI PE MOBIL.

[12] In Romanian: NICI O ALIMENTARE NICIODATĂ NICI MAI MULTE.

[13] Available online here: <https://omg.md/>

discoveries” and “cures” it promotes are closer to fake news. Advertising on the site is heavy. The same advertising strategy is present in the case of the second Russian-language site, Bloknot Moldova,[14] whose content is much more sensationalist: car accidents, animal stories, dog attacks, fires, some celebrity news and occasional political news, again focused on scandals and inflammatory information. Former Moldovan prime minister Maia Sandu is the target of personal attacks based on hearsay and interpretations of her public statements.

With the exception of Omega News, which uses social media networks to share content (including Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte and YouTube), none of the sites seemed to have any social media presence. This in itself is quite odd, as misinformation operations tend to rely heavily on social media for dissemination.

## Where is misinformation in Moldova?

The general lack of misinformation sites in Moldova should not be interpreted as evidence that misinformation is not present in the country. The fake news-monitoring site StopFals posts weekly analyses on misinformation news items, most of which are published in mainstream media. In an interview for this study, Petru Macovei, director of the Association for an Independent Press (Asociația Presei Independente - API) which coordinates the StopFals platform, confirmed that manipulation in Moldova usually originates from official channels, such as public statements by political and business leaders, or even state institutions. Mainstream media records, repeats, and promotes these statements, usually for the purpose of promoting the agendas of political and economic interest groups. In many cases, media organizations have partisan alliances because their owners have political careers or are affiliated with certain parties.[15] Misinformation websites, like Cornel Ababii’s network, are rare in Moldova, because fake news sites that operate purely for profit are difficult to support in a country with such a small population and limited financial resources.

In a written interview for this study, Vasile State and Ion Bunduchi, from the Association of the Electronic Press (Asociație Presei Electronice – APEL), confirmed that the advertising market in Moldova is very small and cannot support a large number of online media outlets. Misinformation websites rely on a mass click-bait economy, which is simply non-existent in Moldova. State claims that media advertising tends to be channeled towards television stations. For the online press, it is even more difficult to determine the source of the money than in the case of print or audiovisual media. He argues: “Even independent media organizations that have nothing to hide do not disclose their funding sources. The legislation, with the exception of publicly funded media, does not force them to do so. On the contrary, the legislation regarding “commercial privacy” protects them.”[16] State concludes that the funding sources of misinformation websites are an enigma for APEL members as well.

In conclusion: misinformation is not absent in Moldova, but its sources are located in state and commercial mainstream media. Misinformation websites as defined by the CMDS project are often online outlets, and unless an economic ecosystem develops that allows for online media to thrive, misinformation sites will have a hard time making ends meet in Moldova.

[14] Available online here: <http://bloknot-moldova.md/>

[15] See, for example, the case of Vlad Plahotniuc, former Democratic Party president and the owner of four television channels in 2015, as described in the Moldovan Freedom of the Press Report, published in 2017 by Freedom House. The report is available online here: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/moldova>

[16] This is a direct quotation from an email sent by Vasile State on December 12, 2019, and translated from Romanian by Dumitrita Holdis.

## About the author

**Dumitrita Holdis** works as a researcher for the Center for Media, Data and Society at CEU. Previously she has been co-managing the “Sound Relations” project, while teaching courses and conducting research on academic podcasting. She has done research also on media representation, migration, and labour integration. She holds a BA in Sociology from the Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca and a MA degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology from the Central European University. She also has professional background in project management and administration. She has worked and lived in Romania, Hungary, France and Turkey.

## About The Business of Misinformation project

*The Business of Misinformation project is run by the Center for Media, Data and Society, mapping the individuals and companies that own misinformation websites and their links to institutions, parties and other individuals. It canvasses websites that systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be those political, social, economic, health-related or else. It includes players in the misinformation industry consisting of locally run online portals that are presenting themselves and are perceived as independent voices.*

To learn more about the project, please visit our website: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/business-misinformation>



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