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TRUTH WITHOUT BORDERS: TACKLING ONLINE ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION THROUGH INDEPENDENT FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES IN ROMANIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

ABSTRACT: *Amid the growing threat of online disinformation challenging Eastern European democracies, fact-checking has become a crucial instrument for safeguarding electoral integrity and strengthening civic resilience. This article examines how independent fact-checking initiatives responded to online disinformation during the 2024 presidential elections in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Using a comparative mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes 59 fact-checking articles and multimedia outputs produced by Factual.ro and StopFals.md, assessing how their verification and engagement strategies adapted to distinct political and digital media environments. The findings demonstrate that while both organizations played an important role in promoting electoral transparency and empowering citizens to critically assess misleading political information, their effectiveness was constrained by factors such as fragmented institutional and financial support, low media visibility, and limited access to advanced verification tools. By situating these cases within the wider European disinformation landscape, the article highlights both the potential and limitations of independent fact-checking initiatives in electoral contexts. Ultimately, it advocates for stronger cross-border coordination of fact-checking efforts, deeper integration within civic and digital literacy programs, and long-term political and financial support that would further consolidate their role as essential mediators of electoral integrity and democratic resilience in Eastern Europe.*

KEYWORDS: independent fact-checking; online disinformation; elections; Romania; Republic of Moldova.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of online disinformation has become a central challenge for contemporary democracies, eroding the foundations on which governmental accountability and meaningful political participation depend. These dynamics are particularly visible across Eastern European countries, where political volatility, fragile media environments and declining institutional trust often amplify the impact of online disinformation (van Zoonen et al. 2024; Dobek-Ostrowska 2015). According to a 2023 Eurobarometer survey, nearly 70% of Europeans reported encountering false or misleading political information online (European Commission 2023), with exposure levels often higher in countries where digital and media literacy skills are comparatively low. During electoral campaigns, online disinformation becomes an especially powerful tool of manipulation, having a direct impact on how voters perceive, engage with, and evaluate political information in increasingly fragmented digital environments.

The 2024 presidential elections in Romania and the Republic of Moldova illustrate these vulnerabilities. In both contexts, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok became instrumental in the circulation of fabricated and misleading political content online. The widespread and algorithmically amplified dissemination of such content not only intensified pre-existing social and political cleavages (Dragomir and Horowitz 2024), but also made digital platforms increasingly vulnerable to foreign-backed influence operations seeking to undermine regional stability (Parmentier 2025).

While public authorities in both countries have acknowledged the risks of digital interference during elections, their efforts to counteract online disinformation have often been slow, fragmented, and insufficiently coordinated to contain the scale and impact of such campaigns. Within this environment, independent fact-checking initiatives such as Factual.ro, in Romania, and StopFals.md, in the Republic of Moldova, have assumed a central role in combating online electoral disinformation. However, despite their growing relevance, few researchers have examined how such platforms adapt their verification and engagement strategies across different political and digital media contexts, particularly through a comparative, cross-border lens focused on Eastern Europe.

Therefore, this article addresses the gap by analyzing how Factual.ro and StopFals.md responded to online electoral disinformation during the 2024 presidential campaigns in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. In particular, it examines how these platforms adapted their fact-checking strategies in response to context-specific political and digital settings, what types of online electoral disinformation they most frequently addressed, and how differences in content typology, thematic focus, and dissemination strategies reflect broader institutional and geopolitical vulnerabilities in the two countries. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the study adopts an exploratory comparative approach aimed at identifying patterns of strategic adaptation within distinct electoral landscapes.

To answer these questions, the article employs a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative comparative case analysis with quantitative content analysis of 59 fact-checking outputs published during the 2024 presidential campaign periods by Factual.ro and StopFals.md. By situating these findings within the broader European disinformation landscape, the study aims to offer insights into the evolving role of independent fact-checkers as mediators between political actors, digital platforms, and citizens in contested electoral settings.

2. Literature framework

2.1. Understanding electoral disinformation in the digital age

In recent years, growing concerns about the erosion of democratic norms have put online electoral

disinformation at the forefront of academic and policy debates. While the so-called “fake news” phenomenon first drew widespread attention in the U.S. during the 2016 presidential elections (Alcott and Gentzkow 2017), similar dynamics had already begun to surface across European politics. Notably, the 2016 Brexit referendum, the 2017 French presidential election, and the 2019 European Parliament elections were all marked by unprecedented levels of online disinformation – amplified not only by domestic political actors, but also by foreign operations (European Parliament 2022). These campaigns managed to bypass traditional media’s fact-checking mechanisms by leveraging online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to spread false narratives on key electoral issues, including migration and economic policies (European Parliament 2022). As a result, social media has become a powerful force in influencing voter behavior (Mutu 2024), in the absence of robust legal frameworks and platform transparency standards.

As Ytre-Arne and Moe (2023) point out, the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with an increased reliance on social media networks as primary sources of news and political information. Although trust in public institutions and their capacity to manage the health crisis varied across Europe (Boulianne and Humprecht 2023), viral conspiracy theories and anti-vaccination content circulating online created new avenues for manipulating the public opinion. For instance, extremist parties such as Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR) in Romania and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany coordinated massive anti-governmental online campaigns, capitalizing on citizens’ increasing dissatisfaction with lockdown policies and political elites (Țăranu 2021). At the same time, these strategies enabled them to successfully mobilize younger people and previously disengaged voters, which led to a notable increase in support for AUR in the 2020 parliamentary elections in Romania, and for AfD in the 2021 German federal elections, respectively.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a new wave of viral disinformation campaigns that disproportionately targeted Eastern European states with heightened geopolitical vulnerabilities (Beznosiuk 2025). These efforts often sought to undermine EU cohesion and trust in NATO, by spreading false narratives about imminent war drafts, Western interference in national politics, and energy security concerns. During the 2024 European Parliament elections, pro-Kremlin networks amplified these messages using increasingly sophisticated tools such as AI-generated videos, automated bots and algorithmically tailored content, aimed at both discrediting mainstream political actors and boosting candidates aligned with anti-EU rhetoric (Pollet and Haeck 2024; Rodríguez-Pérez et al. 2025).

In response to the evolving challenges posed by online electoral disinformation, the European Union has developed a multi-layered policy framework that combines binding regulation of digital platforms with increased support for media literacy programs. Key initiatives such as the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation, its 2022 strengthened version, and the Digital Services Act (DSA) reflect an increasingly interventionist approach by EU regulators to limit the spread of manipulative content online (Jahangir 2025). The

DSA, in particular, grants both EU and national authorities the power to compel major platforms like Meta and Google to remove illegal or harmful content, and to enhance transparency around political advertising through cooperation with independent fact-checking organizations. Complementing these measures, the European Commission supports initiatives such as the *EUvsDisinfo* platform, and the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) network (European Commission 2024), signaling a shift toward more proactive and centralized efforts to confront electoral disinformation.

However, this developing policy framework has already sparked intense debates over its capacity to balance the integrity of online information with the broader protection of democratic freedoms. García-Gordillo et al. (2025) argue that efforts intended to protect electoral integrity may unintentionally serve as tools for censorship and political control. This concern is especially relevant in Eastern European democracies, where governments can suppress political dissent and undermine ideological diversity under the convenient guise of fighting disinformation. At the same time, uneven policy implementation and distribution of anti-disinformation resources across member states (Durach et al. 2025) raises questions about both fairness and overall efficiency of such measures.

2.2. Independent fact-checking initiatives in Europe

In this contested political environment, independent fact-checking initiatives have become increasingly central to Europe's response to online electoral disinformation. Unlike traditional media-affiliated fact-checkers, which often operate under editorial or commercial constraints (Graves and Cherubini 2016), civil society-led fact-checking platforms maintain structural and operational independence from both government and mainstream media. This autonomy allows independent fact-checkers to verify claims with a clear focus on transparency and public accountability (Graves and Cherubini 2016), while also allowing them to explore innovative approaches that respond more effectively to evolving disinformation tactics (Suomalainen et al. 2025). Platforms such as Correctiv (Germany), Maldita (Spain), Demagog (Poland), StopFake (Ukraine), Factual (Romania), and Stop Fals (Moldova) exemplify this approach, focusing primarily on verifying political claims (EDMO 2024). Their work has expanded to include media literacy and digital advocacy programs, which are crucial for fostering collaborative practices that enable citizens to detect and respond to electoral disinformation in real time.

Fact-checking methods and tools have also evolved to address the growing complexity and technological sophistication of online content. In Spain, platforms like *Maldito Bulo* and *Maldita Tecnología* have adapted to emerging online disinformation trends by verifying not only text-based claims, but also AI-gener-

ated images, deepfake videos, and viral memes (Cazzamatta 2025). Similarly, Polish independent fact-checkers have developed platform-specific strategies, including collaborations with online influencers to produce debunking videos on TikTok and YouTube (Demagog n.d), with the goal of reaching and engaging younger, more digital savvy audiences.

Despite these developments, independent fact-checking initiatives continue to face persistent structural and systemic limitations that hinder their effectiveness in countering online disinformation during critical electoral periods. According to the 2023–2024 Regional Mapping Report on disinformation and civil society in Central and Eastern Europe, the most common vulnerabilities are related to low levels of trust in civil society organizations (CSOs), weak institutional support and funding opportunities, limited media literacy, and the rapid spread of disinformation online (Techsoup Global Network 2024). Furthermore, their reliance of independent fact-checkers on social media platforms also exposes them to algorithmic biases and shifting platform policies (Techsoup Global Network 2024). This creates a paradox: the same digital tools that allow fact-checkers to reach broader audiences and counter disinformation can simultaneously limit their autonomy and overall impact. As a result, independent fact-checking initiatives may experience constraints in their ability to shape public understanding or respond to rapidly evolving disinformation ecosystems.

2.3. Independent fact-checking in Romania and the Republic of Moldova: between institutional shortcomings and civic mobilization

Eastern Europe stands at the crossroads of digital transformation and democratic challenges, where the legacies of post-communist governance continue to shape contemporary political dynamics. In their study, Dragomir and Horowitz (2024) highlight the region's susceptibility to disinformation, pointing to divergent paths of democratization, uneven consolidation of political institutions, and persistent state influence over mass media as key vulnerabilities. In countries like Romania and the Republic of Moldova, these factors converge, creating fertile ground for the spread of online disinformation, particularly during critical electoral periods.

From a geopolitical perspective, both countries occupy a vulnerable position on Europe's eastern border, making them frequent targets of hybrid warfare tactics orchestrated by the Russian Federation (Expert Forum 2024). Unlike Poland and the Baltic states, which have developed more centralized information security frameworks (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015), Romania and the Republic of Moldova continue to struggle with fragmented institutional responses and limited civic resilience. For instance, a recent investigation revealed that between 2016 and 2024, Russian-funded networks reportedly funneled over 2 million euros into Romanian media and digital ads promoting anti-EU propaganda (Ilie 2024). In Moldova, disinformation efforts

reached an even greater scale: Kremlin-linked actors allegedly spent over 50 million dollars ahead of the 2023 local elections to undermine trust in the pro-European governance (IWPR 2024). Despite differences in scope and scale of financial investments, the strategy used by the Russian Federation remains consistent in their efforts to further exploit institutional fragilities and societal divisions within both countries.

The effectiveness of these campaigns is also driven by concerning low levels of media and digital literacy in both countries (Eurostat 2023). Although many people use social media platforms like Facebook, Telegram, and TikTok as their primary sources of information, only 22% of Moldovans (Magenta Consulting 2020) and 28% of Romanians (Eurostat 2023) possess high digital skills – well below the EU average of 56% (Eurostat 2023). This deficit often influences how citizens engage with political content online, limiting critical scrutiny in some contexts and increasing susceptibility to online disinformation, an effect that is particularly pronounced among young people and rural communities (Eurostat 2023). The 2023 Media Literacy Index places both countries near the bottom of the rankings (Open Society Institute 2023), hence underscoring the urgent need for more effective and adaptive digital education measures.

At the same time, declining levels of trust in political institutions and mainstream media lay the groundwork for online disinformation campaigns to gain traction and potentially determine the outcome of elections. National surveys indicate that only 22% of Romanians (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2024) and 24.4% of Moldovans (Institutul de Politici Publice 2023) express confidence in their governments, with even lower approval ratings for political parties. At the same time, widespread public concerns over political influence on mass media fuels the narrative that electoral news coverage is either biased or unreliable (Bârgăoanu and Radu 2018). As a result, an increasing number of citizens have turned to alternative, less-moderated information channels such as social media pages and informal messaging groups to form political opinions and guide their voting choices (Techsoup Global Network 2024).

In an effort to mitigate these risks, Romania has adjusted its policy frameworks to reflect EU standards on disinformation, and strengthened its capacity for cross-border monitoring and cooperation action within the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) network (EDMO 2024). Other measures included the establishment of the National Cyber Security Directorate (DNSC), and the introduction of the #NoFake online platform to encourage citizens to report misinformation ahead of the 2024 European elections (Ministerul Cercetării, Inovării și Digitalizării 2024). The Republic of Moldova, despite not being part of the European Union, has taken visible steps to combat electoral disinformation by creating the Centre for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (CCSCD), and granting the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) powers to block Kremlin-linked media outlets (Cravenco 2022). However, concerns persist over the ability of these measures to effectively respond to emerging digital challenges such as AI-driven electoral disinform-

mation and the spread of far-right networks on encrypted messaging apps (IWPR 2024). Moreover, the increased politicization of traditional media outlets in both countries (Techsoup Global Network 2024) continues to undermine broader efforts to foster independent and pluralistic information environments.

Over the past decade, independent fact-checking platforms in both countries have evolved from small-scale civic initiatives to key players in countering online electoral disinformation and protecting the integrity of online democratic discourse. In Romania, one of the most prominent projects is Factual.ro, an apolitical fact-checking website launched in 2014 by the NGO Funky Citizens. In recent years, its focus has shifted beyond the verification of political claims made by Romanian public figures to encompass systematic monitoring and debunking of viral social media hoaxes (Factual n.d.). Factual.ro has also become a reference point for journalists in the Eastern European region, with its fact-checking articles routinely cited by mainstream media outlets (e.g. Libertatea), and incorporated into wider media literacy projects such as the Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media (BROD) (Brodhub 2024) and the “Fact Frontier: Romania-Moldova Coalition Project” (Funky Citizens 2024).

Concurrently, StopFals.md was established in 2015 by the Association of Independent Press (API) as the first civil society-led, independent fact-checking platform in the Republic of Moldova (Stop Fals n.d.). Its distinctive approach includes publishing online content in both Romanian and Russian which enables it to reach and engage diverse linguistic and cultural communities across the country. Beyond political fact-checking, StopFals.md also produces in-depth investigative analyses focused mainly on Russian propaganda actors. Moldovan fact-checkers adopt a more localized approach to media literacy than their Romanian counterparts, focusing on enhancing the resilience of rural and more vulnerable communities against online disinformation.

3. Research design

To assess how Factual.ro and StopFals.md responded to online electoral disinformation during the 2024 presidential elections in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, this study employs a comparative mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative case study analysis with quantitative content analysis. The mixed-methods approach enables both contextual interpretation of organizational strategies and systematic examination of patterns across fact-checking outputs. While the qualitative dimension focuses on understanding the institutional positioning, verification practices, and dissemination strategies of each platform, the quantitative component provides structured insight into content typologies, thematic priorities, labelling practices, and target actors.

Romania and the Republic of Moldova were selected as comparative cases due to their shared historical, linguistic, and geopolitical connections, alongside significant differences in institutional consolidation,

EU integration status, and exposure risk to foreign interference. Both countries held presidential elections in 2024, yet the political stakes differed substantially. Romania, as an EU and NATO member state, operates within a relatively consolidated regulatory and institutional framework. By contrast, the Republic of Moldova remains geopolitically contested, with EU accession debates and persistent Russian influence shaping its electoral information environment. This combination of similarity and divergence makes the two cases particularly suitable for comparison.

The empirical dataset consists of 59 fact-checking outputs published during the 2024 presidential campaign periods. These include 24 articles produced by Factual.ro and 35 outputs published by StopFals.md, encompassing standard fact-check articles, investigative reports, debate analyses, multimedia formats, and narrative-focused pieces. A comprehensive list of the articles included in this analysis can be found in *Appendix A*. The sampling periods were determined according to the official electoral campaign timelines in each country. In the Republic of Moldova, the presidential election coincided with a high-stakes referendum on EU accession, the dataset covering outputs published between August 1 and November 3, 2024. In Romania, the dataset includes articles published between October 1 and December 6, 2024, encompassing the official campaign period leading up to the first and second rounds of voting.

Methodologically, all 59 outputs were manually coded using a structured coding scheme developed inductively from the dataset and guided by existing scholarship on fact-checking practices and electoral disinformation. The process unfolded in two stages: an initial exploratory reading with open coding to identify recurring themes, narrative patterns, and verification approaches, followed by the construction and application of a refined coding framework across both cases. Each output was coded along multiple analytical dimensions, including content type (e.g., political claim verification, investigative report, propagandist profile, debate analysis, hoax debunk, media literacy content), target actor (candidate, party affiliation), thematic focus (economy, EU accession, NATO and the Russia–Ukraine war, institutional issues, socially divisive topics), fact-check label classification, types of verification sources (official documents, legal texts, institutional data, online statements), and dissemination format (text, video, multimedia). This multi-variable structure enabled both descriptive statistical comparison and qualitative contextual interpretation.

To ensure cross-case comparability, fact-check labels were derived from the platforms' internal classification systems. "False" refers to claims contradicted by verifiable evidence; "partially false" denotes statements containing both accurate and inaccurate elements; "truncated" describes selectively presented information that distorts interpretation through omission; "manipulative" refers to technically accurate elements embedded in misleading narrative structures; and "taken out of context" captures authentic information presented in a deceptive temporal, geographic, or political frame. Although each platform maintains distinct labeling conventions, these standardized definitions facilitated systematic comparison. Given the manageable

dataset size, intercoder reliability testing was not applied. However, categories were clearly defined prior to final coding to enhance transparency and consistency. Lastly, data were processed using Microsoft Excel to calculate frequencies and thematic cross-tabulations, with the results interpreted within the broader qualitative context of each country's political and digital media environment.

4. Comparative analysis of fact-checking approaches: Factual.ro and StopFals.md's 2024 presidential elections coverage

The 2024 presidential elections in Romania and the Republic of Moldova represented a decisive test for democracy, as both countries experienced a surge in false and manipulative political content circulating online. In Romania, this coincided with the growing visibility of populist candidates George Simion (AUR) and Călin Georgescu (independent), whose nationalist, Eurosceptic, and anti-establishment rhetoric fueled misleading narratives across TikTok and Facebook (Vrabie 2024). In Moldova, the presidential election overlapped with a high-stakes EU membership referendum, which intensified foreign disinformation efforts. Notably, members and supporters of the pro-Russian "Victory" bloc used Telegram groups to spread narratives that questioned the legitimacy of President Maia Sandu's leadership, while framing European integration and Western influence as harmful, self-serving, or contrary to Moldova's interests (Nistor 2024).

Across both countries, the uncontrolled spread of contested electoral information intensified the demand for independent fact-checking initiatives to effectively challenge misleading claims and support informed electoral choices. The following section compares how Factual.ro and StopFals.md responded to the unique political and digital pressures of the 2024 presidential elections in Romania and Moldova.

4.1. Fact-checking methodology and data sources

Although both fact-checking organizations share formal alignment with the international Fact-Checking Network's (IFCN) standards of transparency, methodological rigor, and reliance on verifiable sources, their operational focus diverges.

Factual.ro draws heavily on presidential candidates' public statements, televised appearances, and Facebook posts, which are then cross-verified with official Romanian government data, EU institutional reports, the Romanian Constitution, and relevant institutional agreements (e.g. the Istanbul Convention). When necessary, the editorial team submits formal requests for information to public institutions, including local administrations.

Concurrently, StopFals.md operates with a broader monitoring scope, drawing on political speeches,

press coverage, and social media, with a particular emphasis on Telegram channels – a critical node in Moldova’s disinformation ecosystem. Its verification process incorporates national legal documents, government reports, surveys, corporate responses from platforms like Meta, and reader submissions via a public reporting page. This introduces a participatory dimension absent in Factual.ro’s workflow for the 2024 presidential elections, placing greater emphasis on early detection of falsehoods and community responsiveness.

4.2. Content typology

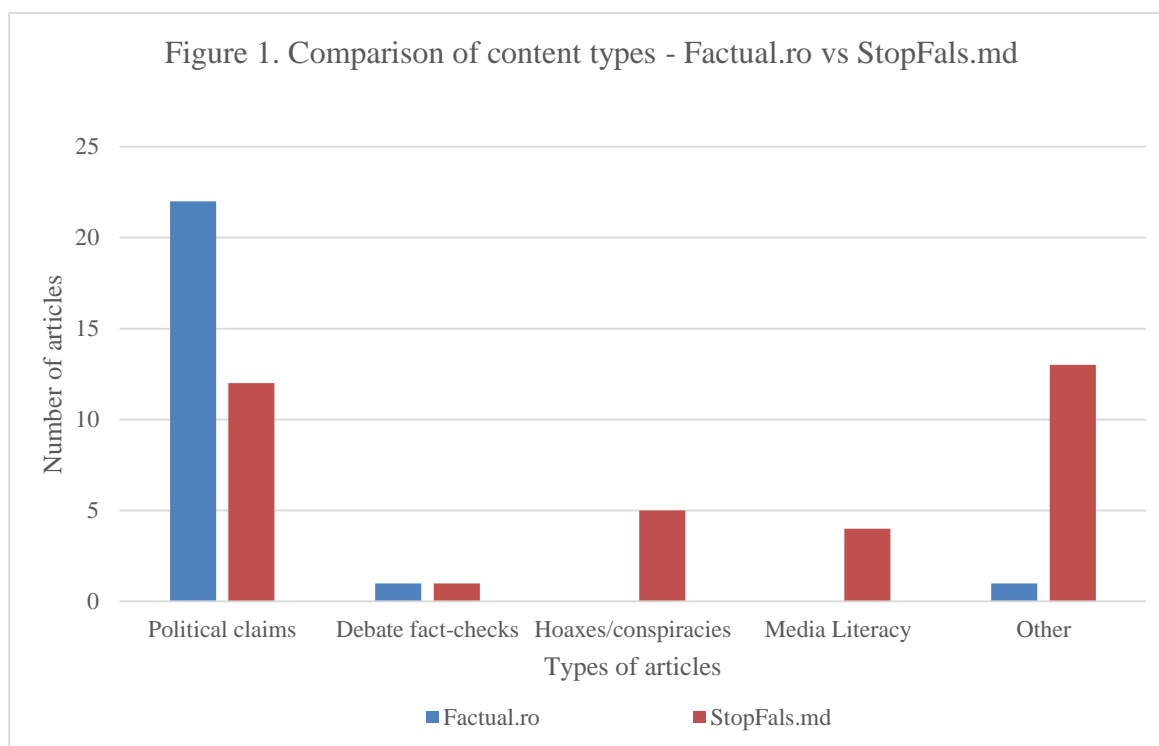


Figure 1. Comparison of fact-checking content types - Factual.ro vs StopFals.md

Source: Author’s content analysis of 59 fact-checking outputs. See Appendix A for full dataset.

Figure 1 illustrates the sharp contrast in editorial strategies between the two platforms. During the Romanian presidential campaign, Factual.ro published 24 articles, 22 of which focused on verifying political claims made by candidates. Coverage of debate analysis and electoral procedures was limited, while topics such as viral hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and media literacy received minimal attention, reflecting the platform’s strong emphasis on candidate-centered fact-checking.

By contrast, StopFals.md distributes its 25 outputs across six distinct genres: political claim verifications, “Propagandist Profiles” (analytical profiles of propaganda actors), investigative reports, debunks of

hoaxes and conspiracy theories, media literacy, and even a video-based fact-check of a live presidential debate. This broader editorial range reflects the Republic of Moldova's more volatile electoral landscape, where disinformation campaigns operate across multiple channels and target diverse audiences, requiring a combination of rapid verification, detailed reporting, and educational content to mitigate their impact.

4.3. Candidate coverage focus

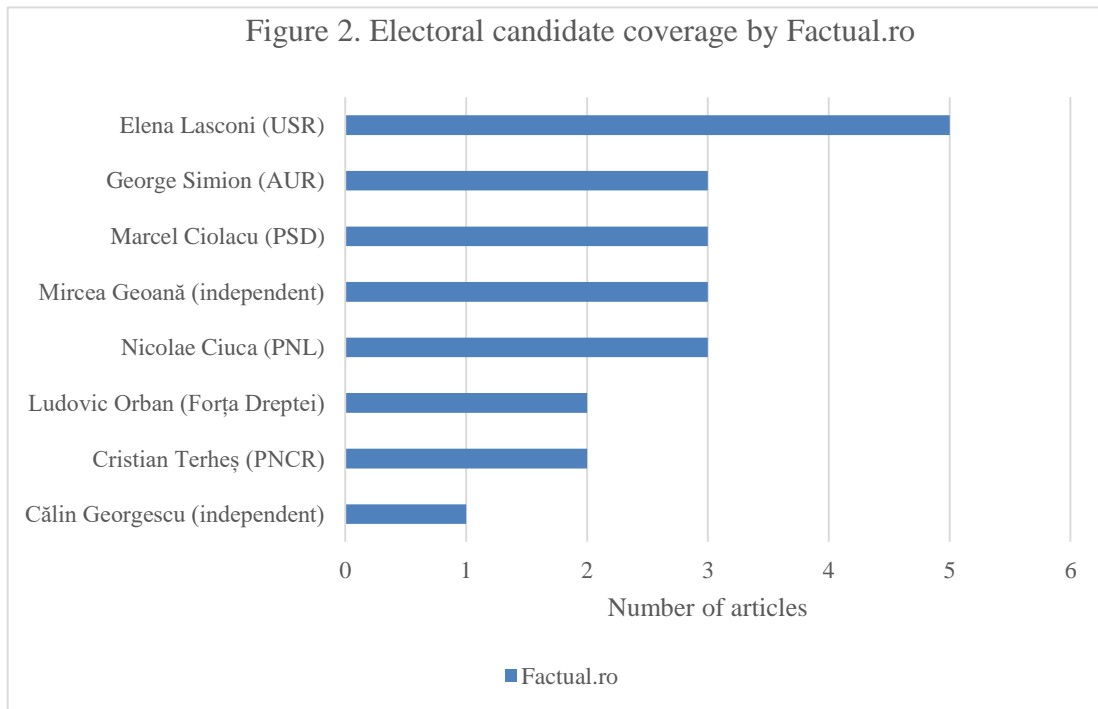


Figure 2. Electoral candidate coverage by Factual.ro

Source: Author's content analysis of 59 fact-checking outputs. See Appendix A for full dataset.

The second figure confirms the Romanian fact-checking platform's heavy focus on presidential candidates. Elena Lasconi (USR) received the highest number of fact-checks, with five separate articles scrutinizing her claims. George Simion (AUR), Marcel Ciolacu (PSD), Mircea Geoană (independent), and Nicolae Ciucă (PNL) each appeared in three articles, while other minor candidates received minimal attention. This distribution mirrors the competitive logic of Romania's two-round presidential electoral system, in which media and fact-checking efforts concentrate on candidates most likely to advance beyond the first round. An exception to this pattern was the independent Călin Georgescu, who was absent from fact-checks before the first round, but became a subject of verification in the second round, illustrating his unexpected rise in political significance.

In contrast, StopFals.md engaged in far fewer fact-checks targeting individual politicians. Only one explicitly targeted President Maia Sandu, while other addressed narratives involving figures linked to the Russian Federation, or examined broader institutional actors. This emphasis on institutional and foreign-origin propaganda reflects Moldova’s distinctive disinformation environment, where the principal threats to electoral integrity are embedded in narratives about national sovereignty, identity and geopolitical alignment, rather than in the personal credibility of specific candidates.

4.4. Fact-check labelling patterns

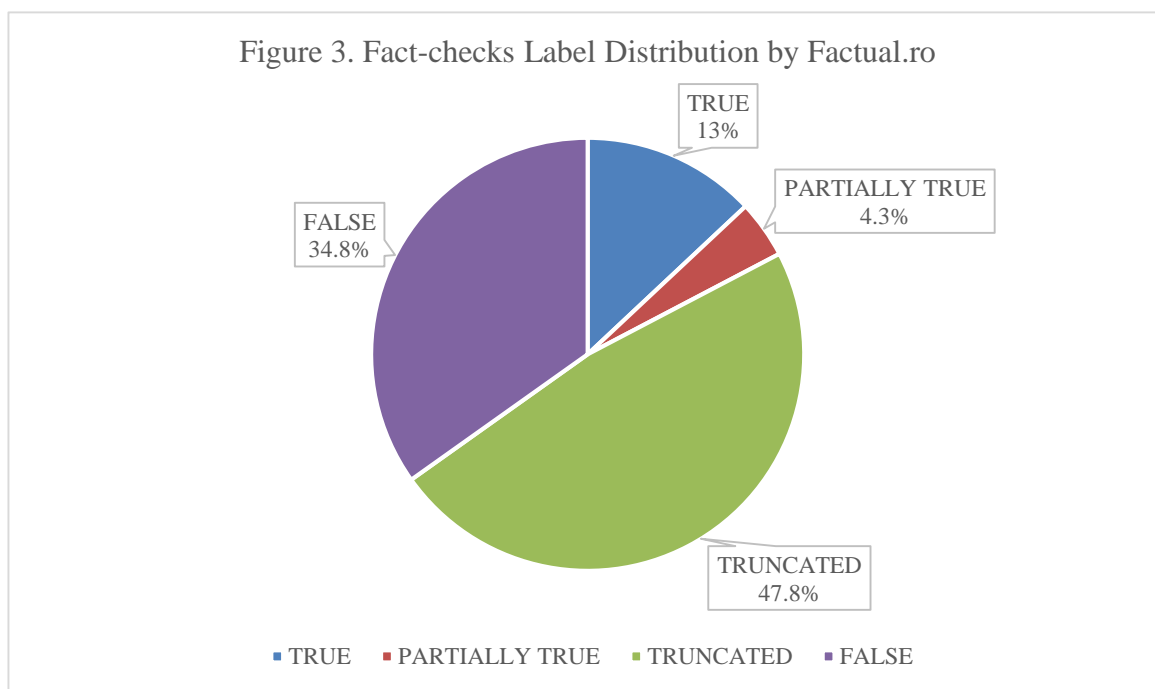


Figure 3. Fact-checks Label Distribution by Factual.ro

Source: Author’s content analysis of 59 fact-checking outputs. See Appendix A for full dataset.

Figure 3 highlights differences in claim classification between the two platforms. In the case of Factual.ro, nearly half of all fact-checked statements were categorized as either “truncated” (47.8%) or “false” (34.8%), while fully “true” claims accounted for just 13% of the total. This pattern indicates that Romanian electoral discourse is shaped less by completely fabricated claims, and more by selective framing strategies

that distort otherwise verifiable facts.

By contrast, StopFals.md opts for a different classification, using categories such as “manipulative”, “partially false” and “taken out of context”, which point to a focus on narrative-level disinformation rather than single-claim inaccuracies. However, not all outputs are assigned a formal label, reflecting both editorial flexibility and the complex nature of the claims addressed.

4.5. Thematic focus

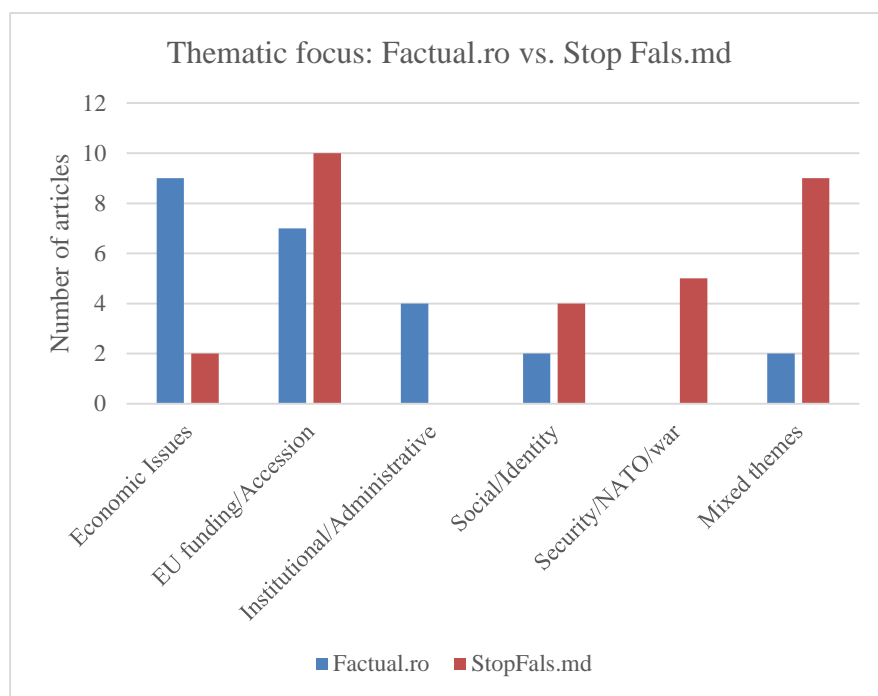


Figure 4. Thematic focus: Factual.ro vs. StopFals.md

Source: Author’s content analysis of 59 fact-checking outputs. See Appendix A for full dataset.

The thematic breakdown in Figure 4 highlights the ways in which national political context informs the editorial fact-checking agenda and topic selection. Factual.ro’s coverage during the 2024 presidential campaign in Romania concentrated on domestic economic issues such as budget deficits, public sector salaries, and entrepreneurship, producing nine articles in this category. Seven additional pieces focused on EU funding, while four addressed institutional or administrative matters. Only a small number dealt with social issues or mixed themes. This pattern reflects Romania’s relatively stable geopolitical position and suggests that electoral disinformation primarily targets economic policymaking, rather than foreign alliances or broader socio-

cultural debates.

StopFals.md's topic coverage exhibits a stronger geopolitical orientation. Ten articles addressed manipulative claims about the country's EU accession and its implications for national sovereignty and energy independence, while five focused on NATO and the Russia-Ukraine war. Four articles examined socially divisive narratives on identity, religion, and LGBTQ+ rights. Domestic economic issues and administrative topics received minimal attention, reflecting how fact-checking practices in Moldova are shaped by the predominance of external disinformation pressures, particularly from Russia.

4.6. Dissemination strategies and audience engagement

Although both platforms are committed to combating disinformation through transparent and rigorous verification processes, their strategies for dissemination and public engagement differ. Factual.ro primarily targets urban, digitally literate audiences through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and X. Its reach – approximately 16,000 Facebook followers and 2,000 Instagram followers – is amplified by the credibility and networks of its “parent” NGO, Funky Citizens, as well as by occasional republication of its fact-checks in the Libertatea.ro online website.

Despite having a significantly smaller online following, StopFals.md employs a hybrid dissemination strategy that relies more heavily on traditional media channels, including television and radio, to reach less-connected and rural populations. The platform also produces content in both Romanian and Russian, a strategic choice given Moldova's significant Russian-speaking minority which is often the target of Kremlin-linked electoral disinformation. Beyond dissemination, the platform actively fosters public engagement and media literacy through interactive tools such as online quizzes, webinars, brochures, and visually engaging educational materials.

5. Findings

The comparative analysis of Factual.ro and StopFals.md illustrates how independent fact-checking platforms navigated distinct political and media environments during the 2024 presidential elections in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. While both platforms adhered to rigorous journalistic standards and principles of transparency, their fact-checking strategies diverged in response to the broader geopolitical, social and digital information contexts in which they operate. These organizational practices are not incidental; rather, they exemplify adaptive responses to region-specific disinformation tactics, audience dynamics, and systemic constraints shaping independent fact-checking initiatives in Eastern Europe.

In Romania, Factual.ro functioned as a high-precision instrument of political accountability and electoral legitimacy. During the 2024 presidential campaign, its editorial agenda remained mainly focused on scrutinizing candidates' public statements on topics such as national budgetary and social policies. Its narrow, candidate-centered approach reflects a relatively stable geopolitical environment, where electoral disinformation largely circulates within the boundaries of domestic political competition. Dissemination was primarily oriented toward national audiences, via their website and social media pages, with Romanian-language outputs dominating and English-language content remaining limited.

In contrast, StopFals.md adopted a broader, multi-dimensional strategy, combining standard fact-checking with investigative reporting, actor profiling, and media literacy initiatives. This editorial flexibility enabled the platform to operate more effectively within Moldova's increasingly volatile political and digital landscape, where electoral disinformation was strongly intertwined with geopolitical narratives. StopFals.md also diversified its dissemination channels, combining traditional and digital media formats to expand its reach. Moreover, its decision to publish content in both Romanian and Russian represents a strategic effort to engage linguistically diverse communities and populations more vulnerable to Kremlin-linked propaganda (e.g. young people and rural communities).

At the same time, both platforms operated under persistent structural and systemic constraints that directly impacted their work. Factual.ro and StopFals.md rely on small editorial teams, which limits the volume of content they can produce and reduces their ability to respond to rapid surges of information during electoral peaks. Their dependence on short-term, project-based funding makes long-term strategic planning difficult, creating at the same time uncertainty around staff continuity and technological investments. In addition, limited institutional recognition and weak integration into mainstream media ecosystems constrain their audience reach, which directly impact the scale, consistency, and strategic depth of their fact-checking efforts.

The findings also indicate that the types of disinformation addressed by the two platforms differed in line with national political priorities. In Romania, the predominance of fact-checked claims classified as "truncated" or "false" (82.6%) suggests that political actors relied primarily on distortions of factual content rather than entirely fabricated narratives. The most frequently addressed forms of electoral disinformation consisted of selective data manipulation regarding EU funds absorption, misleading framings on social policy debates, and partial representations of budgetary allocations embedded within mainstream political discourse. In contrast, StopFals.md addressed a broader and more geopolitically charged set of online disinformation narratives. The platform frequently debunked false or misleading claims related to Moldova's EU accession, NATO membership, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the geopolitical orientation of the country. Socially divisive issues such as national identity and LGBTQ+ rights were also mobilized to further polarize public opinion.

Differences in content typology, thematic focus, and dissemination strategies closely mirrored broader

political configurations and sophistication of digital disinformation tools in the two countries. Although this study does not establish causal links between online disinformation activity and electoral outcomes, it shows that the technological infrastructure and patterns of disinformation differ significantly across national contexts. In Romania, massive coordinated TikTok campaigns ran alongside traditional media channels (e.g. television, print), amplifying misleading narratives surrounding Romania's pro-EU orientation and framing the electoral process as undemocratic and manipulated (Costiță 2025). Although Factual.ro was effective in verifying public statements made by mainstream political candidates during televised debates and official campaign declarations, the viral spread of online content surrounding far-right candidate Călin Georgescu, revealed a blind spot in monitoring algorithm-driven electoral disinformation.

Conversely, StopFals.md's multi-layered approach reflected the Republic of Moldova's institutional fragility and geopolitical positioning at the intersection of European integration and longstanding Russian influence, where disinformation infrastructures are both technologically adaptive and externally reinforced. Networks of automated Telegram channels using AI-generated content and chatbots amplified anti-EU narratives, building on information practices Moldovan audiences were already accustomed to from previous elections (Expert Forum 2024). The platform's broader thematic scope, multilingual outputs, and use of both traditional (radio, press, television) and digital (Facebook, Telegram, Youtube) dissemination channels, allowed fact-checkers to reach diverse audiences across linguistic and regional lines. Additionally, the integration of investigative reporting and media literacy components further signaled a deliberate effort to address systemic vulnerabilities, including citizen's low media literacy and reliance on Russian-backed media and social channels for news.

Taken together, these differences demonstrate that independent fact-checking initiatives operate within, and are shaped by national political, digital and geopolitical dynamics. Rather than reflecting uniform journalistic practices, Factual.ro and StopFals.md's content choices and dissemination models responded to context-specific vulnerabilities and institutional constraints, while also leveraged opportunities to enhance political awareness and media literacy in both countries.

However, several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Given the limited sample size (59 fact-checking articles and media outputs) and the focus on a single electoral cycle, the conclusions should be interpreted as context-specific rather than generalized indicators of long-term resilience to online disinformation. The dataset captured the strategic adaptation of two independent fact-checking platforms under specific temporal and political conditions, yet it did not evaluate long-term behavioral impact on voter behavior or sustained democratic transformation within a political system. Moreover, future research could provide more insight into the adaptive patterns identified in this study, by adopting a longitudinal framework of anal-

ysis across multiple electoral cycles, as well as incorporating audience reception tools (e.g. surveys, interviews, or engagement metrics on digital platforms), and including other Eastern European independent fact-checking platforms in the comparative model.

6. Conclusion

Building on debates that illustrates the evolving nature of online disinformation, this study showed that independent fact-checking platforms play an increasingly important role in safeguarding electoral integrity and fostering informed political engagement in Eastern Europe.

The comparative analysis of Factual.ro and StopFals.md during the 2024 presidential elections demonstrates that their verification and audience engagement strategies were both adaptive and strategically aligned with the political and media dynamics in each country. On the one hand, narrow, claim-focused verification proved effective in relatively politically stable environments like Romania, where misinformation circulates primarily through mainstream political actors and channels. However, this approach was less suited to cases where disinformation spread rapidly across social media platforms, as seen with coordinated TikTok campaigns that operated beyond the bounds of traditional campaign scrutiny. On the other hand, in the Republic of Moldova, multi-thematic, narrative-oriented approaches were better suited to reflect the country's contested informational landscape, characterized by pervasive foreign influence and algorithm-driven amplification of politically divisive content.

The findings also revealed an ongoing tension between policy expectations and operational realities: Romanian and Moldovan fact-checkers are expected to counter complex, rapidly evolving disinformation campaigns, as well as foster media literacy among citizens, all under conditions of limited institutional support, unstable funding, and weak integration into broader media ecosystems. The study therefore underscores the urgent need for a more integrated approach that brings together national governments, European institutions, and civic organizations to support independent, local fact-checking platforms like Factual.ro and StopFals.md, as well as to strengthen cross-border collaboration between fact-checkers to counter disinformation more effectively. Such measures would further consolidate the role of independent fact-checkers in Europe, elevating them from peripheral observers to central defenders of electoral integrity and democratic resilience.

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APPENDIX A: List of fact-checking articles produced by Factual.ro and StopFals.md during the 2024 presidential elections campaigns in Romania and the Republic of Moldova

Author	Title	Publication	Date	Link
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Marcel Ciolacu despre impactul investițiilor publice asupra deficitului bugetar</i>	Factual.ro	01.10.2024	Link [accessed March 1, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Mircea Geoană susține că în 2024 se investește ca în 2015</i>	Factual.ro	04.10.2024	Link [accessed March 1, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Marcel Ciolacu despre numirea șefilor serviciilor de informații</i>	Factual.ro	09.10.2024	Link [accessed March 1, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Terheș despre tratamentul inegal între bărbați și femei din codul penal</i>	Factual.ro	14.10.2024	Link [accessed March 1, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Nicolae Ciucă despre cea mai mare absorbție a fondurilor UE</i>	Factual.ro	10.10.2024	Link [accessed March 1, 2025]
Factual	<i>Adevărat: Lasconi despre primăriile mici nu pot acoperi cheltuielile cu salariile</i>	Factual.ro	17.10.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Fals: Lasconi susține că e premiantă la fonduri europene</i>	Factual.ro	28.10.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Adevărat: Mircea Geoană despre îndeplinirea criteriilor de la Maastricht</i>	Factual.ro	29.10.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Fals: George Simion despre subvențiile viticultorilor din România</i>	Factual.ro	29.10.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Toni Greblă: “poți să organizezi ... numai referendumuri naționale și nu locale”</i>	Factual.ro	30.10.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Fals: George Simion spune că România era mai bogată acum 35 de ani</i>	Factual.ro	31.10.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Adevărat: Lasconi despre vârsta de pensionare a judecătorilor</i>	Factual.ro	06.11.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]

Factual	<i>Parțial adevărat: George Simion despre taxarea pe muncă în România</i>	Factual.ro	08.11.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Fals: Nicolae Ciucă despre atragerea fondurilor din PNRR</i>	Factual.ro	08.11.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Fals: Lasconi spune că a atras fonduri UE cât bugetul orașului pe 40 de ani</i>	Factual.ro	08.11.2024	Link [accessed March 3, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Mircea Geoană despre economie și sărăcie în România</i>	Factual.ro	11.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Elena Lasconi despre cuplurile gay din România și adopția de copii</i>	Factual.ro	13.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Dezbateri Digi-24: Alegeri prezidențiale</i>	Factual.ro	18.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Fals: Terheș susține că UE și-ar fi terminat deja bugetul pe 7 ani</i>	Factual.ro	21.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Ludovic Orban despre numărul de întreprinderi</i>	Factual.ro	26.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Orban despre diferența dintre salariul la stat și la privat</i>	Factual.ro	26.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Trunchiat: Nicolae Ciucă despre îmbunătățirea economiei pe timpul guvernării PNL</i>	Factual.ro	26.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Fals: Marcel Ciolacu despre banii de la sănătate și educație</i>	Factual.ro	29.11.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Factual	<i>Călin Georgescu (Independent). Candidatul pe care aproape l-am ignorat.</i>	Factual.ro	02.12.2024	Link [accessed March 4, 2025]
Borodin, Victoria	<i>Profil de propagandist: Tatiana Costachi – teze sovietice, propagandă etc.</i>	StopFals.md	05.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
Celak, Elena	<i>Fals: peste 300 de profesori din România vor lucra în RM de la 1 septembrie</i>	StopFals.md	07.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]

Avasiloaie, Mihai	<i>Ilan Sor și Blocul Victorie promovați cu zeci de mii de euro lunar</i>	StopFals.md	08.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
Zaharia, Viorica	<i>Fals: Avioanele F-16 oferite Ucrainei vor folosi teritoriul RM</i>	StopFals.md	13.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
(n.a.)	<i>Falsuri în căsuțele poștale despre „dezavantajele” aderării la UE și „avantajele” aderării la Uniunea Economică Euroasiatică</i>	StopFals.md	12.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
Avasiloaie, Mihai	<i>Dezinformarea Kremlinului pe Facebook: Meta confirmă informații la care Stopfals.md a atras atenția în ultimele luni</i>	StopFals.md	16.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
Celak, Elena	<i>Sandu abia așteaptă să se implice într-un război — o nouă avalanșă de narațiuni ale Kremlinului despre „atragerea Moldovei în război”</i>	StopFals.md	20.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
Borodin, Victoria	<i>EXPERTII EXPLICĂ: Falsuri și speculații în foile volante ale lui Șor la tema energiei, distribuite ilegal</i>	StopFals.md	20.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
Zaharia, Viorica	<i>FALS: Pe teritoriul R. Moldova vor fi prelucrate deșeuri chimice aduse din UE</i>	StopFals.md	23.08.2024	Link [accessed March 7, 2025]
Avasiloaie, Mihai	<i>O profesoară intoxică elevii liceului „Anton Cehov” din Chișinău cu falsuri și propagandă pro-Kremlin</i>	StopFals.md	06.09.2024	Link [accessed March 9, 2025]
Colun, Mariana	<i>PROFIL DE PROPAGANDIST // Vitalie Florea: Limbaj suburban și narațiuni false, în linie cu cele promovate de propaganda rusă</i>	StopFals.md	07.09.2024	Link [accessed March 9, 2025]
Borodin, Victoria	<i>Experii explică, Poliția investighează. Noi foi volante ale lui Șor, cu falsuri la teme sociale, tipărite ilegal sub paravanul „publicitate politică”</i>	StopFals.md	11.09.2024	Link [accessed March 9, 2025]
Garcu, Piotr	<i>Închiderea școlilor și crearea locurilor de muncă în Găgăuzia: Falsurile și manipulările Irinei Vlah</i>	StopFals.md	11.09.2024	Link [accessed March 9, 2025]
(n.a.)	<i>CE ESTE INFORMAȚIA OBIECTIVĂ ȘI CUM O DEOSEBIM DE DEZINFORMARE?</i>	StopFals.md	16.09.2024	Link [accessed March 9, 2025]
(n.a.)	<i>STOPFALS! PREZINTĂ ADEVĂRUL DESPRE INTEGRAREA R. MOLDOVA ÎN UE</i>	StopFals.md	17.09.2024	Link [accessed March 9, 2025]

Celak, Elena	<i>„Autoritățile moldovenești vor să interzică biserica rusească”, o combinație de falsuri și manipulări lansate de Șor</i>	StopFals.md	19.09.2024	Link [accessed March 9, 2025]
Zaharia, Viorica	<i>„Nu Acum” - o nouă campanie de dezinformare anti-referendum afiliată lui Șor și promovată intens online</i>	StopFals.md	20.09.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Hairetdinov, Constantin	<i>FALS: La Mărculești vor apărea stații mobile de deservire a avioanelor de luptă F-16</i>	StopFals.md	23.09.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Hairetdinov, Constantin	<i>Maria Zaharova halucinează (din nou) despre rusofobia din Moldova</i>	StopFals.md	23.09.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Celak, Elena	<i>Unii prin falsuri: Cum socialiștii, comuniștii și șoriștii au făcut front comun împotriva referendumului</i>	StopFals.md	01.10.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Colun, Maria	<i>FALS: Dacă va trece referendumul, R. Moldova va deveni o „semicolonie” și își va pierde independența</i>	StopFals.md	01.10.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Hairetdinov, Constantin	<i>Cum politicienii speculează pe subiectul vânzării pământurilor din Republica Moldova în cazul aderării la Uniunea Europeană</i>	StopFals.md	02.10.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Colun, Maria	<i>Misterul Boeing-ului care a aterizat la Mărculești: între „terorism” și mentenanță</i>	StopFals.md	03.10.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Hairetdinov, Constantin	<i>FALS: Sandu a transmis României o parte din armata moldovenească</i>	StopFals.md	04.10.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Zaharia, Viorica	<i>Narațiunile false „tradiționale” anti-UE, distribuite de pe o nouă platformă web afiliată lui Șor – MD24</i>	StopFals.md	04.10.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
(n.a.)	<i>CUM NE INFORMĂM CORECT DESPRE ALEGERI?</i>	StopFals.md	09.10.2024	Link [accessed March 10, 2025]
Celak, Elena	<i>Falsurile din cutiile poștale: o nouă porție de dezinformare despre referendum de la comuniști</i>	StopFals.md	11.10.2024	Link [accessed March 12, 2025]
Zaharia, Viorica	<i>FALS: Fermierii europeni protestează în masă împotriva deschiderii pieței către țările candidate</i>	StopFals.md	13.10.2024	Link [accessed March 12, 2025]
Zaharia, Viorica	<i>Cifre inventate și falsuri de la Victoria Furtună: Pensionari și persoane nevoiașe iau împrumuturi pe care nu le pot restitui</i>	StopFals.md	16.10.2024	Link [accessed March 12, 2025]

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