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# SHAPING MINDS THROUGH DISCOURSE: PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES IN MOLDOVA'S 2024 ELECTIONS

**ABSTRACT:** *This study analyses the propagandistic narratives and the discursive strategies used by the pro-Russian political parties / groups in the Republic of Moldova during the week preceding the presidential elections and the referendum. The analysis focuses on the ȘOR Party, the PSRM, the PCRM, who have actively used their platforms for the dissemination of anti-European Union narratives and for the promotion of scepticism towards the pro-European government. By using content and discourse analysis, our research identifies the main rhetorical tools, and the main logical fallacies used to manipulate public perception. Building on theoretical frameworks such as the Agenda-Setting Theory and the 4Ds of disinformation, our study manages to uncover the recurrent narratives employed, as well as the efforts of these parties made to exploit the emotional vulnerabilities of their audience, thereby sowing fear, confusion, and disunion.*

**KEYWORDS:** propaganda; Moldova; Russian influence; electoral narratives; discourse analysis.

## 1. Introduction

A "buffer zone" between the West and the East (Tibuleac, 2018), the Republic of Moldova represents a region of interest for both the European Union (E.U.) and the United States of America (U.S.A.), on the one hand, and Russia, on the other hand. Its geographical position has always made it sensitive and prone to security challenges. Historically, Moldova has often been affected by the wars and confrontations of the countries considered great powers at different moments in history, this way emphasizing its interest in preventing new conflicts in its area (Tibuleac, 2018). Some researchers have seen Moldova's geopolitical strategy as one of "dual alignment", with both the European Union and Russia as 'international actors' that use their networks to influence domestic politics (Morar & Dembińska, 2020). Furthermore, its citizens are strongly divided between pro-Russian and pro-European feelings (Jigău, 2022, p. 42), while the government is fighting for a future in the European Union.

This division had led—among other things—to the rise of populist national parties in the Republic of

Moldova, therefore exhibiting its struggle to find its political and national identity, with political movements swinging between support for a Russia-led Customs Union and unification with Romania (Allin & Garbu, 2017). The 2020 and 2021 elections (presidential and parliamentary, respectively) in the Republic of Moldova marked the rise of the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) against the pro-Russian coalition led by former Moldovan presidents, Igor Dodon and Vladimir Voronin. This outcome shows a shift in the Moldovan political world towards parties that either react to the system or adapt to the perceived expectations of the electorate (Moisé, 2021: 1). Furthermore, an analysis of the performance of political parties in elections throughout Eastern Europe, including the Republic of Moldova, shows that the existence of underdeveloped party organizations negatively influences the electoral performance. Strong and charismatic leaders alone are not sufficient for long-term success in the political arena (Gherghina & Soare, 2019).

Additionally, some researchers state that the Republic of Moldova has faced challenges in the Transnistrian conflict due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the resolution of the conflict was strongly influenced by the regional security environment and geopolitical interests (Ungureanu, 2022). Furthermore, the Transnistrian conflict—a geopolitical issue extending back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Moldova's independence—remains inactive without clear prospects for resolution despite efforts made by the European Union (Ababakr, 2022), which also contributes to the sensitive situation in this part of Europe. Moreover, post-communist developments also left their mark on the area, just as they did in the former communist countries (Herța & Pop-Flanja, 2022: 54-48).

Moreover, Moldova faces corruption problems as well as economic problems, still being an agricultural state, with a weak economy, that relies heavily on the neighbouring markets (Putină & Brie, 2023: 81). All these factors make the Republic of Moldova exhibit some features of state fragility, particularly in political, economic, and military sectors. The potential failure of Moldova in the face of the current geopolitical interests may have serious consequences, especially considering Russia's interests (Kosárová & Ušiak, 2017).

Given this complex and complicated political and economic landscape, the media landscape provides a prolific ground for an informational war carried out by Russia, developed through propaganda and disinformation techniques, creating "a big war for a small audience" (Saran, 2018, p. 36). Through the literature in the field of propaganda and disinformation (Vecchi, 2023; Całus, 2023: 11-14), three pro-Russian political parties / groups have been identified in the Republic of Moldova, more specifically the ȘOR Party (Ilan Șor's party)[1], the Party of Socialists of Moldova / PSRM (Igor Dodon's party)[2], and the Party of Communists of

[1] Partidul ȘOR, www.partidulsor.com, last accessed 31.10.2024.
[2] Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova, www.socialistii.md, last accessed 31.10.2024.

Moldova / PCRM (Vladimir Voronin's party)[1]. Although the ȘOR Party was declared unconstitutional by the Republic of Moldova's Constitutional Court on 19 June 2023 (Gherța, 2023), its founder, Ilan Șor, has continued to promote Russian propaganda through the still active party's website and through other mechanisms especially before the presidential elections held in the Republic of Moldova in October and November 2024 (Reuters, 2024a; Radio Free Europe, 2024; Reuters, 2024b). In what follows, we will refer to it as a party because of the name of the website. Although the current Moldovan president, Maia Sandu, has managed to win the elections (Ardelean & Costiță, 2024), the victory was narrow, and the citizens of the Republic of Moldova shall remain exposed to consistent pro-Russian propaganda in the following months due also to the upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2025.

Consequently, the purpose of our article is to focus on the week foregoing the presidential elections and the referendum in Moldova (13-19 October 2024) by looking at the articles posted on the websites of the three aforementioned pro-Russian political parties in an attempt to answer the following two (2) research questions: RQ1. What were the main narratives that dominated the pro-Russian propaganda before the first round in the presidential election and the referendum, and RQ2. What discursive strategies were used?. In order to answer them, we will carry out a qualitative study based on the non-participatory observation of the articles posted, as well as on content analysis and discourse analysis.

## 2. Objective and Methodology

Building on the aforementioned data and by analysing the websites of the three pro-Russian political parties, the purpose of our article is to identify the main narratives promoted by the three Russophile political parties in the Republic of Moldova in the week before the presidential elections and the referendum which took place on 20 October 2024, i.e. 13-19 October 2024, as well as to identify the most often employed discursive strategies.

Our methodology involves two analytical fields. First, we carried out a *systematic literature analysis* to construct our conceptual basis by identifying studies that have already been published on the topic of propaganda in general and of Russian propaganda in particular. In doing so, we have looked at the works published by Haigh & Haigh (2020), O'Shaughnessy (2020), Colomina, et al. (2021), Pavlíková, et al. (2021), Solopova, et al. (2023), and Maci et al. (2024) among others.

Second, through *content analysis and discourse analysis*, we built on McCombs & Shaw's 1972 *Agenda-*

[1] Partidul Comuniștilor din Republica Moldova, www.pcrm.md/md, last accessed 31.01.2024.

*Setting Theory* (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), on Van Dijk's studies in *discourse analysis* (1995a; 1995b; 1997, 2006), on Fairclough's studies in *discourse analysis* (Fairclough, 1995; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2015), as well as on Lucas & Nimmo's *4Ds of disinformation: dismiss, distract, distort, dismay* (Lucas & Nimmo, 2015). Consequently, we looked at the websites of the three political parties in the Republic of Moldova identified as Russophiles and we analysed the written discourses at a specific moment in the past (*synchronic axis*) while at the same time performing a *systematic comparison* in order to identify the elements that the three political parties have in common or that differentiate them. As such, in the period of time ranging from 13 to 19 October 2024, one week before the referendum for accession to the European Union and the first round of presidential election, we analysed 44 website posts (n = 44 – 12 from ȘOR party's website, 10 from the socialists' party, and 22 from communists' party) in our attempt to answer our two research questions.

## 3. Studies on Propaganda

For the purpose of our research, we draw upon O'Shaughnessy's statement that "all propaganda is not disinformation, but on the other hand all disinformation is propaganda" (O'Shaughnessy, 2020: 55); therefore, we define misinformation by its lack of intentionality in spreading false information, and we define disinformation as the act by which intentionally false information is propagated with hidden agendas, "to sow division, to engender doubt, to foster acquiescence" (O'Shaughnessy, 2020: 55). Consequently, we see disinformation as a tool of propaganda and as "a form of political persuasion which both manipulates and deceives its target audience" (Maci, Demata, Seargeant, & McGlashan, 2024: 4), and propaganda as a political tool (in this case) used by states and politicians to promote their own political agenda, either nationally or internationally, and to influence the public opinion. In this article, we shall refer to both propaganda and disinformation in relation to Russia's efforts to influence governments and people in the region.

In addition, Haigh & Haigh (2020) discuss Russian propaganda and distinguish between eight frameworks meant to help one understand the strategies used by Russia. They see the information produced and propagated by Russia as *a weapon of war* (especially in the context of Russia's offensive against Ukraine, combining military action with disinformation campaigns), *a form of online dishonesty* (highlighting fake news as an internet phenomenon, facilitated by the unique characteristics of online interactions and social media platforms), *a form of state propaganda* (where fake news and disinformation are seen as a modern tool in the long history of state-sponsored propaganda, used to manipulate public opinion), *a profitable busi-*

*ness* (where disinformation and fake news are created to attract website traffic and generate advertising revenue, exploiting the nature of online journalism and social media), *an extreme form of media bias* (disinformation and fake news being a manifestation of biased reporting, influenced by media ownership, ideology, and political objectives), *a plot to delegitimate alternative media* (claiming that the label "fake news" is used to suppress alternative media sources and viewpoints, challenging mainstream narratives), *a part of the post-truth society* (within the broader context of a societal shift towards relativism and scepticism about objective facts and trusted institutions), and *a flaw in human nature* (suggesting that the preference for sensational, emotionally charged, or confirmatory information is a fundamental human trait, making people susceptible to fake news) (Haigh & Haigh, 2020: 304-313).

Russia's disinformation and propaganda strategies have become even more (in)famous with the development of new technologies making use of robotised accounts and trolls to influence elections (Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, & Drmola, 2021: 44; Colomina, Sanchez Margalef, & Youngs, 2021: 15, Solopova, Popescu, Benzmuller, & Landgraf, 2023: 6) and divide public society. Seen as a nondemocratic actor on the global political stage (Busygina & Kahn, 2020, p. 65), Russia tries to control the Internet and use it in a *hybrid warfare*, which "builds on irregularity to counterweigh possible asymmetry in confrontation" (Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, & Drmola, 2021: 52). This type of control has several benefits, among which economic, military, societal ones, that can be controlled through a so-called "authoritarian informationalism" (Jiang, 2010) through which a nondemocratic actor can expand its control and strengthen its legitimacy not only on its territory but also over the ones it has an interest in, as is the case of the Republic of Moldova.

Political power is won "through the mastery of other people" (Mann, 1986: 6) and the mastery of information as well, and Russia seems to be very much aware of this saying. Russia's propaganda strategies are built on a complex and multifaceted approach, which is aimed at influencing public opinion, political discourse, and strategic outcomes on the global stage, depending on its interested in each region. Its strategy usually involves a mixture of techniques (both traditional and non-traditional), including propaganda and disinformation.

First, there are propaganda strategies that focus on *agitation* and *integration*. *Agitation* is used to make the masses revolt to obtain immediate social changes, whereas *integration* strategies focus on values and ideologies that can make people feel part of a certain group. The two, however, can also overlap especially when the propaganda techniques promote a *common enemy* that is detestable (Samoilenko & Karnysheva, 2020: 192-194). According to articles published by the Deutsche Welle, pro-Russian groups were paid to organise demonstrations in Moldova's capital city to protest against the pro-European president, Maia Sandu, condoning the actions taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin and blaming the Ukrainian President Volodomyr Zelenskyy for destabilising the region (Calugareanu & Schwartz, 2022). Second, a study

carried out by Brooking and Singer (2016) revealed that the Russian strategy is to burden the political opponents with information making them question their own reality (Brooking & Singer, 2016). Third, Lucas & Nimmo (2015: 10) state that the purpose of Russian propaganda and disinformation is not to win a debate using logical arguments, but rather to overwhelm the public opinion with so much information as to cause confusion. Fourth, research carried out by Timothy McGeehan (2018: 57) emphasized that, through chaos, misunderstanding, and weakening credibility, Russia tries to achieve its goals without resorting to military confrontation in manipulating public opinion.

This mastery technique is built on a propagandistic approach, which, as it has been previously shown, is not aimed at presenting false information as being true, but rather at polluting the political discourse and at clouding the public opinion's judgement to create doubt about the truth and about the objective facts (*distort*), a tactic which has had significant impact on the European Union's politics, as well as on the global liberal order (Richey, 2018: 101).

Furthermore, in order to single out the narratives of the political parties that are the subject of our analysis, we will also draw upon the idea that "discourse analysis is ideological analysis" (Van Dijk, 1995b), an idea that will help us identify the recurrent pro-Russian narratives since "it is largely through discourse that political ideologies are acquired, expressed, learned, propagated, and contested" (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 732).

## 4. Main narratives identified in the pro-Russian political parties' website posts

In identifying the main narratives promoted by the three Russophile political parties in the Republic of Moldova, our research builds on McCombs & Shaw's 1972 *Agenda-Setting Theory* (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), as well as on Lucas & Nimmo's *4Ds of disinformation: dismiss, distract, distort, dismay* (Lucas & Nimmo, 2015).

The *Agenda-Setting Theory* encompasses three elements important for our study, namely the *media agenda* (how the media prioritize certain news in an attempt to influence the topics considered important in a political campaign), the *public agenda* (the correlation between what voters perceive as important campaign issues and what the media cover as campaign issues), and the *policy agenda* (not explicitly labelled in McCombs & Shaw's work, it refers to the influence the media can have on shaping public opinions, which might pressure politicians and policymakers) (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Lucas & Nimmo's *4Ds of disinformation* include the following elements: *dismissing* opponents by attacking their character and discrediting their credibility; *distorting* by misrepresenting facts with the purpose

of manipulating public opinion in order to fit a particular narrative; *distracting* the attention of citizens from unfavourable topics by introducing unrelated / irrelevant issues and/or counter-accusations; and *dismaying* citizens by spreading fear or uncertainty with a purpose to discourage action or to sow confusion (Lucas & Nimmo, 2015, p. 5).

Although not an official political party anymore, the ȘOR Party is still active on their website on which they made 12 posts during the period of time in which we carried out our analysis. The main items we identified on the ȘOR Party's agenda were to continuously criticise the pro-European energy policy and the promotion of Moldova's own nuclear plant as a solution to the energy crisis, at the same time militating against Moldova's accession to the European Union (for a "no" at the referendum) by calling their supporters to protest against the pro-European political party leading the government (ȘOR, 2024a; 2024h). As such, we have identified *agitation* elements (by calling people to protests) (ȘOR, 2024b; 2024i), a *common enemy* (Moldova's president and the European Union) (ȘOR, 2024b; 2024c; 2024f), as well as *integration* elements as among the 12 posts made there were some that focused on common values (fight against foreigners (or their interference in Moldova), preservation of traditions and holidays) (ȘOR, 2024d; 2024e; 2024g; 2024j; 2024k; 2024l).

Furthermore, we have also identified elements of Lucas & Nimmo's 4Ds of disinformation. In the posts made on the ȘOR Party's website, Moldova's president and the pro-European government are accused of corruption and incompetence by stating they had orchestrated persecutions (ȘOR, 2024b; 2024c; 2024h)—a clear intention to *dismiss* the pro-European politicians' credibility. Among such posts, there are also some that are on completely different topics, such as the local accomplishments the members of the ȘOR Party have attained in specific towns in the Republic of Moldova, possibly in order to *distract* their readers' attention towards other events in an attempt to make them feel part of a group sharing similar visions and values (*integration*) (2024d; 2024e; 2024l; 2024j). We have also identified *dismaying* tactics in three of the twelve articles posted. The party capitalized on the readers' fear of poverty and on the lack of energy security (ȘOR, 2024a; 2024c; 2024h).

In the ten website articles posted by the Party of Socialists of Moldova (PSRM), whose leader is Igor Dodon, a pro-Russian politician (Solik & Graf, 2023, p. 17), the analysis carried out has revealed constant and harsh criticism brought to the pro-European government party, the Party for Action and Solidarity (PAS), for not complying with the promises made. The authors capitalized on the poverty level and high prices and referred to the times Moldova was living as "failed good times" under Maia Sandu's administration (PSRM, 2024h). Furthermore, they opposed European integration and the PAS's pro-European policies (PRSM, 2024g). Consequently, they promoted the consolidation of foreign relations with strategic Eastern partners such as Turkey—a prompt for citizens to look towards the East, not the West (PSRM, 2024d). In this line,

mention should also be made that the PSRM's website offers information in two languages: Russian and Moldovan. The Moldovan language is seen as a controversial social construct, a 1994 attempt by the at-that-time government to create a Moldovan identity after the country's declaration of independence (Haynes, 2020, p. 204). Another surprising fact was that the PSRM's open support for Alexandr Stoianoglo—an independent with pro-Russian views—in the presidential elections of October 2024. In their support, the PSRM posted articles promoting Stoianoglo as a "leader of the people" who would endure social justice and economic growth (PSRM, 2024c; PSRM, 2024i).

Our analysis has also shown that the articles posted by the PSRM are also indicative of disinformation elements. As such, we have identified *dismissing* tactics, more specifically attacks on the pro-European government and on media outlets supposedly politically controlled (PRSM, 2024g). By describing Moldova's economic and political conditions in an exaggerated negative light (general high prices, an imminent difficult winter because of energy prices), the PSRM also tried to use *distort* in order to create *agitation* (PSRM, 2024f), to make citizens find a culprit for the disastrous future of Moldova by depicting a pessimistic vision for the country if Moldovans do not vote for the opposing party (PSRM, 2024a; 2024e; 2024h). The PSRM also tried to create a positive image of themselves, and especially of their political leader, by organising meetings with the citizens to discuss their problems with them. The information is described in (PSRM, 2024a), (PSRM, 2024e), (PSRM, 2024f), (PSRM, 2024h), and (PSRM, 2024j) and supported by photos taken during the meetings.

Finally, most of the website articles posted in the period of time we carried our analysis in (13-19 October 2024) were published by the Party of Communists of Moldova – PCRM (Vladimir Voronin's party), i.e. 22 in seven days, showing an intense effort in providing a lot of information to their readers, to *overwhelm* them as a strategy. Am important mention should me made here, i.e. that the website can be accessed in Russian only (although there are two languages to choose from, Russian and Moldovan, the website functions in Russian only). This can be interpreted as the PCRM's strategy to approach the Russian-speaking population by creating a sense of belonging, of *integration*. This attempt to *integration* can also be seen in the articles describing Vladimir Voronin's visit to different administrative units (PCRM, 2024c), as well as in all the articles nostalgic of the former Soviet era when Moldova was a prosperous region, with high pensions, successful social measures, and elite politicians (PCRM, 2024d; 2024e), or when the PCRM was in power and implemented successful economic and social protection policies unlike the current "degradation" (PCRM, 2024d; 2024v). Another recurrent topic in the articles published on the PCRM's website is that of anti-European feelings, as the accession to Europe is criticised for being an "experiment" imposed on Moldova by external forces (PCRM, 2024b; 2024t), while the pro-European government is seen as corrupt and incapable of bringing positive results for the citizens (PCRM, 2024c). Many of the articles posted in the

period of reference for our analysis contain videos of PCRM politicians calling Moldovan citizens to mobilize and vote in the referendum against Moldova's accession to the European Union, an *agitation* technique (PCRM, 2024i; 2024p; 2024q; 2024u).

Elements of Lucas & Nimmo's 4Ds of disinformation have also been identified in the articles posted on PCRM's website, namely *dismissing* tactics by harshly criticising the pro-European government and their electoral mechanisms (PCRM, 2024b; 2024c; 2024f); *distorting* (and *dismaying*) strategies through which the PCRM draws the citizens' attention to the fact that a European integration would bring about only economic and social ruin (PCRM, 2024d); as well as *dismaying* tactics meant to instil that fear that Moldovans would lose their national sovereignty, thereby reflecting PCRM's recurrent narrative against Moldova's European integration, the pro-European government in power, as well as the promotion of a narrative that is nostalgic about the Soviet values.

To sum up, through the analysis of the articles posted by the ȘOR Party, the Socialists' Party, and the Communists' Party, recurrent narratives have been identified. All three political parties promoted anti-European narratives and brought criticism to the current President and the current government, therefore promoting anti-European sentiments. All three political parties insisted, one way or another, on the concept of national sovereignty and on the need for alternatives to the policies 'imposed' by the European Union, thereby attempting to instil into citizens a fear related to Moldova's loss of identity. All three political parties used elements of Nimmo's disinformation model to build an anti-government narrative: *dismissing* the Government, *distorting* the economic, social, and political reality, *distracting* attention by exaggerating, and *dismaying* the readers by cultivating fear.

## 5. Discursive strategies to promote propagandistic narratives

By drawing upon the works of Fairclough (1995, 1999, 2015), van Dijk (1995a, 1995b, 1997, 2006), the second level of our methodological approach focuses on the discourse and the discursive strategies adopted by the website posts under scrutiny in our analysis. Fairclough defines discourse as "spoken or written language use" but extends the definition "to include other types of semiotic activity (i.e. activity which produces meaning) such as visual images (…) and non-verbal communication (…)" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 54). Van Dijk sees discourse as a form of "social interaction and communication", therefore representing "a crucial means of reproducing and challenging political ideologies". In what discursive strategies are concerned we build upon Carvalho's definition, which states that they are "forms of (discursive) manipulation of 'reality' by social actors in order to achieve a certain goal" (Carvalho, 2005, p. 3), connecting,

therefore, the purpose of this section to the *agenda-setting theory* used in the previous section for the identification of the Russophile political parties' recurrent narratives.

Our analysis takes the synchronic axis of discourses into account by looking at how language was used at a specific moment in time, i.e. the week before the first round in the presidential election and the vote in the referendum. Furthermore, we will use analytical discourse strategies in order to (1) identify if the parties' posts appeal to ethos, pathos, and/or logos, including positive and negative words used that contribute to the persuasiveness of the messages conveyed, and (2) to identify any errors in argumentation that might have been used with the purpose of convincing voters of the parties' good intentions or of the pro-European government's faulty measures.

First, the analysis carried out on the 44 website posts, revealed elements pertaining to ethos. Such elements have been identified in website posts made by the ȘOR Party where the authority, the credibility, and the reputation of the party and its members is appealed to in order to support arguments made (ȘOR, 2024d, 2024h) or to create a positive image of their leader (ȘOR, 2024k). Some of the articles posted by the PSRM Party also showed elements of ethos especially in those posts that underlined the strategic alliances and the strategic support negotiated by the party leader with more powerful countries (such as Turkey), or the memorandum of understanding signed with a foreign political party, all in an attempt to validate the importance of the party and the authority of its leader (PSRM, 2024c; 2024d). Similarly, out analysis identified elements of ethos in those posts made by the PCRM where they tried to create an image of legitimacy by referring to the foreign politicians who participated in events they organised, or by appealing to values considered valuable, such as nationalism (PCRM, 2024q; 2024k), fairness (PCRM, 2024m), or the protection of traditions (PCRM, 2024r).

Second, our analysis has looked for elements pertaining to the appeal to logos, by trying to identify words or phrases that would contribute to the logic of the arguments presented, as well as facts. We have identified such elements in some of the posts of the ȘOR Party which contain prices as evidence to underline the increasing energy prices (ȘOR, 2024a) or exact numbers to support the importance of a project supported by the leader of this political group (ȘOR, 2024k). Similarly, the PSRM's articles are written in such a way as to seem that they appeal more to logos than to any other element of the rhetorical triangle. The tone used is generally milder than the one used by the ȘOR Party or the PCRM, and many of their articles simply depict events that took place, rather than interpreting facts (PSRM, 2024c; 2024i). In the PCRM's posts, our analysis has also identified elements meant to bring evidence in order to support the credibility of the party by using arguments based on statistics (PCRM, 2024d), by comparing salaries and pensions' growth rate in the Republic of Moldova to the one in Romania (PCRM, 2024n), or by referring to the milk production in 2024 compared to the 2014 level (PCRM, 2024h).

Third, we have looked for elements of pathos, such as emotionally loaded words or phrases, repetition, figurative language or memorable phrases. In the ȘOR Party's posts, we have identified terms such as "poverty threshold" or "huge expenses" (ȘOR, 2024a), "They deprive Moldova of everything it has left" (ȘOR, 2024b), or "In our country there are no more laws and simple humanity!" (ȘOR, 2024f). All these emotionally loaded words and phrases are also used as *scare tactics*, and all the posts made to attack the pro-European government contain such words, while the posts made to commend themselves on the good deeds they have done for the Moldovan citizens, contain numerous positive words, such as "success", "commitment" (ȘOR, 2024d), "good practices", "excellence", significant accomplishment" (ȘOR, 2024k), etc.

We have identified elements pertaining to pathos in the PSRM's posts as well. Phrases such as "Northern Moldova supports Stoianoglo!", "rooms full of people eager to talk" emphasize enthusiasm and popular support (PSRM, 2024a); terms such as "an act of heroism" are used to raise entrepreneurs' status to heroic levels by calling for pride and recognition; while phrases such as "severe media frenzy on behalf of the independent media" or "televised pseudo-justice" represent emotionally loaded words whose purpose is to trigger indignation, frustration.

In what the PCRM's posts are concerned, they are filled with emotionally loaded words or phrases meant to be used as *scare tactics*, from panicking titles ("Moldova is in danger!") (PCRM, 2024k) to negative words and phrases such as "unprecedented crimes against the people" (PCRM, 2024k), "betrayal" (PCRM, 2024q), "economic destruction" and "poverty" (PCRM, 2024h) used repetitively to strengthen the criticism brought to the pro-European government, etc.

Last but not least, our analysis has revealed several errors in argumentation that have been used by all three political parties, techniques that contribute to their appeal to the readers' pathos, as they are used as strategies in order to dismay them. Some of the examples identified are listed in the table below:

**Table 1. A selective list of the identified errors in argumentation**

| Error | Political Party | Example | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Non sequitur* | ȘOR | "The current government plans to sell the electricity distribution company to the Romanians. As a result, many Moldovans risk becoming unemployed." (ȘOR, 2024a) | There is no proof of a direct causal relation between selling the company and the unemployment. This is a generalization made meant to scare. |
| | PSRM | "October 20th becomes the beginning of the end for the current regime." (PSRM, 2024h) | This is a speculation. |
| | PCRM | "If we banish them from meddling in the Moldovan Constitution (…), the number of cattle will increase dramatically, and dairy prices will fall." (PCRM, 2024i) | The conclusion is not drawn logically from the premise. The purpose of this statement is to bring accusations to the Government. |
| *Dicto simpliciter* | ȘOR | "Everyone knows that Orhei Town Hall is headed by our colleague Tatiana Cociu". (ȘOR, 2024c) | It is an excessive generalization meant to give the impression of legitimacy and public consensus. |
| | PSRM | "Citizens say that people are fed up with the 'good times' of Maia Sandu." (PSRM, 2024f) | Another exaggerated generalization meant to create the perception of a large consensus against a political opponent. |
| | PCRM | "Under the PCRM, Moldova developed, and now there is only shame and poverty." (PCRM, 2024d) | The purpose of this generalization is to reduce a complex situation to a basic and emotionally loaded statement meant to influence the public's perception. |
| *Argumentum ad hominem* | ȘOR | "The fear of losing power is making Maia Sandu and her entire criminal group turn into real recidivists." (ȘOR, 2024h) | This is a direct attack on a person with a view to discredit the Moldovan President and to distract the public's attention from more important issues. |
| | PSRM | "The moderators of electoral debates (…) have turned into tools of power and are restricting the rights of candidates." (PRSM, 2024g) | A rhetorical strategy used to discredit the media facilitating a public debate and/or to victimise themselves. |
| | PCRM | "Maia Sandu is a treacherous leader who is selling our country." (PCRM, 2024i) | This is a direct attack on a person with a view to dis- |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | | | credit the Moldovan President, to manipulate the public's emotions, and to distract the public's attention from more important issues. |

The analysis of the discursive strategies used by the Russophile political parties / groups in the Republic of Moldova has revealed an extensive use of rhetorical techniques meant to promote propagandistic narratives. These techniques are used to manipulate public perception by appealing to ethos, pathos, and logos, oftentimes complemented by logical fallacies in order to strengthen their persuasive efforts. They are all proof of the coordinated effort of these political parties / groups to structure their narratives and consolidate their position by exploiting Moldovan citizens' emotional and cognitive vulnerabilities.

## 6. Conclusions

This article offers a detailed analysis of the propaganda and discursive strategies used by the pro-Russian political parties / groups in the Republic of Moldova in the critical week before the presidential elections and the referendum on 20 October 2024. Our study highlights the way in which these parties / groups—ȘOR, PSR, PCRM—used manipulation and emotional appeal to promote anti-E.U. narratives and to delegitimise the pro-European government. By building on the *agenda-setting theory*, as well as on the *rhetorical triangle* (ethos, pathos, logos), these parties / groups tried to exploit the citizens' fears, to sow doubt, and to divide the population.

Our analysis has managed to identify recurrent narratives, such as the groups' appeal to national sovereignty, criticism brought to European integration, as well as the nostalgia for Moldova's stability during the Soviet era. Lucas & Nimmo's 4D framework (*dismiss, distort, distract, dismay*) efficiently encapsulate the methods used by these parties / groups to spread disinformation and to shape public discourse. Logical fallacies (such as *non sequitur, argumentum ad hominem*) have also been pervasive, underlying deliberate strategies used to confuse, mislead, and trigger emotional reactions among the Moldovan citizens.

Our study has its limitations, too. Since our analysis focuses on only one week, it might not completely grasp the evolution of the propagandistic and discursive strategies used by the three Russophile political parties / groups. Furthermore, expanding our research to social media platforms could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies employed by the parties. Additionally, the linguistic barrier (at least in the case of the PCRM's posts in Russia) might have led to the overlooking of some linguistic nuances.

Nonetheless, these limitations offer a fruitful ground for the development of our study in future research.

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