

BLACK SEA REGION



Baltic Region

Black Sea Region

Visegrad Group

Western Balkans

BLACK SEA REGION

Disinformation and Civil Society Mapping Report

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Executive Summary

The report provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by the countries of the Black Sea region (Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova) regarding disinformation and civil society.

The region is characterized by significant corruption, political instability, disinformation, and growing nationalist rhetoric, which pose severe threats to good governance and democracy. An important external factor exacerbates these pre-existing issues - Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine with all the political, social, and economic risks that come with it. These three countries are also affected by internal weakness related to a lack of sustainable resources for civil society organizations (CSO's) that play a crucial role in addressing the challenges mentioned above.

The below report highlights the similarities and differences between the three countries, including their economic performance, political landscape, and civil society characteristics. Despite being members of the European Union, Romania and Bulgaria remain among the poorest countries in Europe, with significant economic divides between urban and rural communities. Conversely, Moldova faces economic challenges due to its reliance on remittances and a developing demographic crisis.

Politically, all three countries have experienced instability in recent years. Romania and Moldova underwent government changes as a result of political disagreements and accusations, specifically those lodged by ruling party politicians concerning their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, reforms related

to the judiciary, and differences in responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Bulgaria is experiencing continuous negotiations in an effort to establish a stable ruling coalition, which has resulted in repeated cycles of elections. Meanwhile, all three countries have seen the emergence of new parties, some of which are far-right-leaning. CSO's, which criticize the state of public affairs, have experienced increased hostility from politicians and interest groups.

In a context of significant amounts of false and alarmist information, frontline workers and representatives of CSO who work with vulnerable groups risk becoming targets of disinformation or hate campaigns.

The report also highlights the region's vulnerability to external influence, particularly from Russia. The presence of Russian military forces in Transnistria is a significant security concern for Moldova. Besides the physical threats, Russian-backed disinformation campaigns and propaganda have found receptive audiences in all three countries, fueling anti-Western sentiment, undermining democratic values, and making the refugees from Ukraine fleeing the war

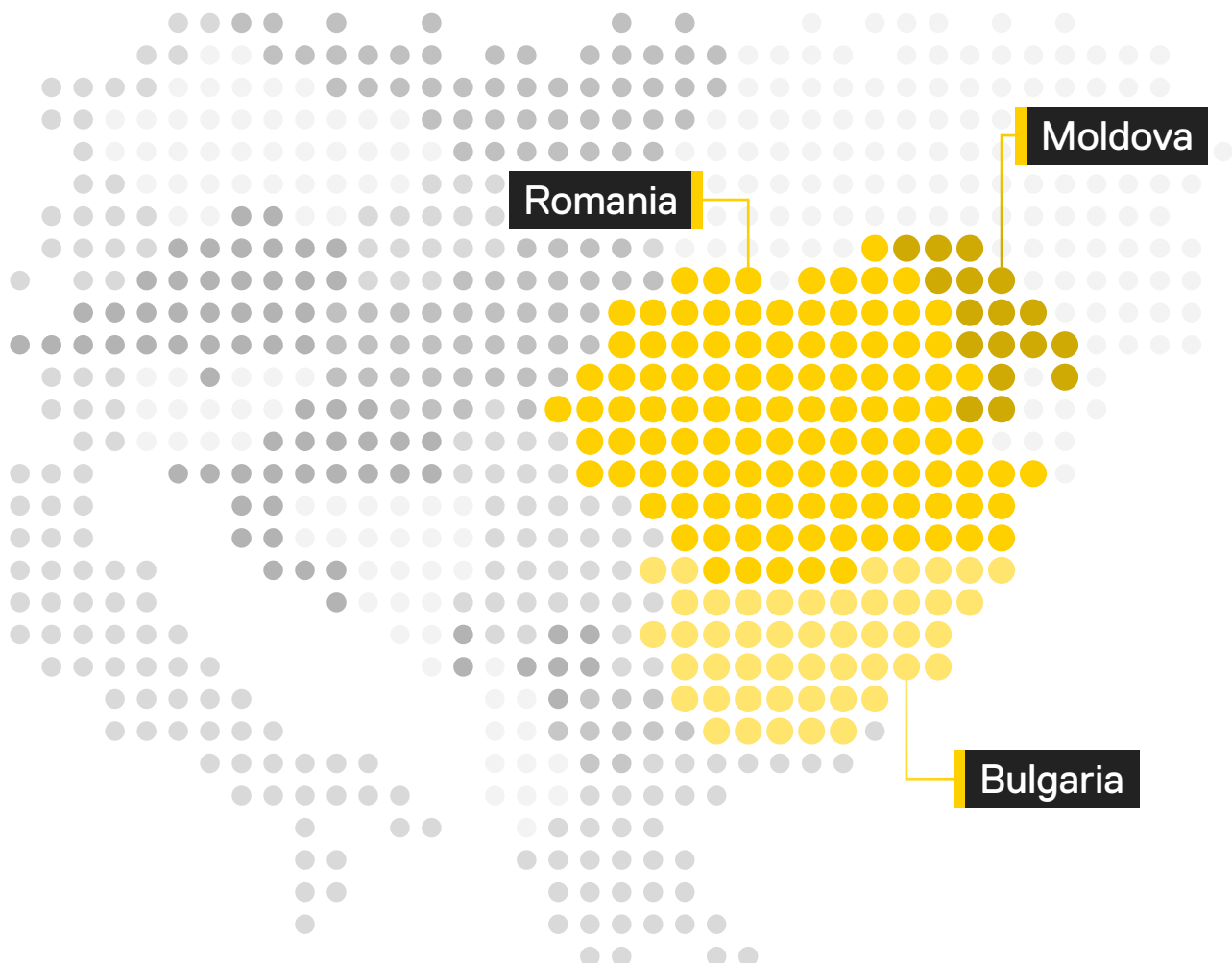
even more vulnerable. In Romania, some nationalist voices blame local problems on Western intervention and portray the countries in the region as Western colonies caught in a conflict that is not theirs. In Bulgaria, some narratives herald the dissolution of the EU, and others justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine with false claims about denazification. In Moldova, the war propaganda depicts a “peacekeeping operation” in Ukraine or sows fear of a direct conflict with Russia in Transnistria.

In a context of significant amounts of false and alarmist information, frontline workers and representatives of

CSO who work with vulnerable groups risk becoming targets of disinformation or hate campaigns.

The Black Sea region faces complex challenges that are interconnected and make the three countries especially vulnerable to disinformation. Thus, the response to these challenges will require comprehensive and coordinated responses from governments, civil society and other stakeholders. The below report outlines recommendations for addressing these challenges by better equipping civil society and frontline workers with the skills and resources needed to fight disinformation.

Black Sea countries



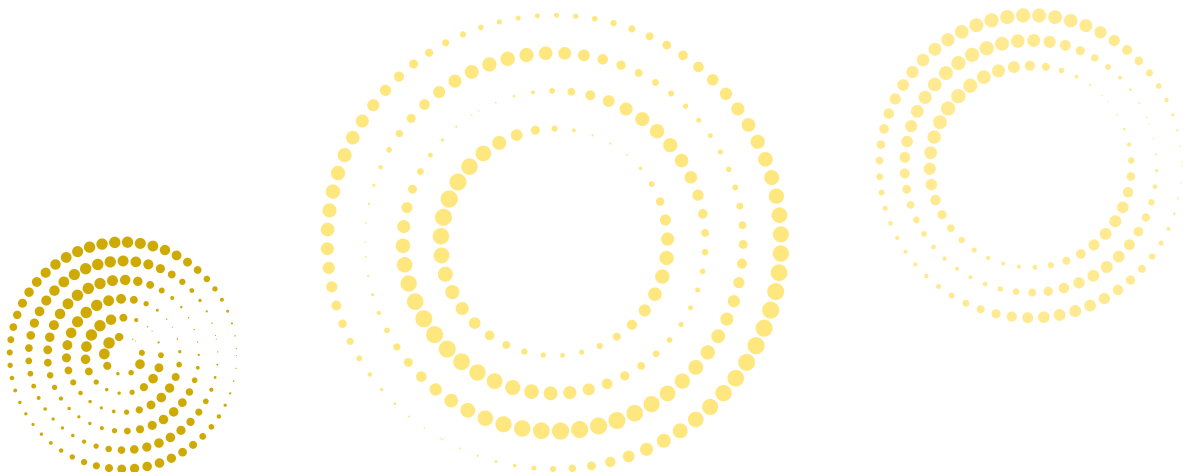
Methodology

The regional analysis comprises two components – a quantitative and a qualitative analysis – both based on research conducted in the three countries of the Black Sea region.

The qualitative analysis includes desk research and interviews with specialists, CSO representatives, professionals working with refugees, and media organizations struggling with disinformation in the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Bulgaria. Seven interviews in Moldova, nine in Romania, and ten in Bulgaria, complemented by desk research to gather data and confirm information. Desk research produced authoritative data, while semi-structured interviews helped to understand the disinformation landscape through first-hand accounts of professionals in the field.

The quantitative component involved an analysis of interactions generated by social media posts

that spread disinformation. It aimed to evaluate the state of the disinformation landscape and future countermeasures by examining seven pre-identified disinformation narratives in Bulgaria, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova in order to spot trends in their spread, primary sources and dissemination routes. We used specific keywords for each pre-identified narrative and worked with Crowdtangle to extract public data from Facebook (posts from profiles and public groups). We used the keywords to gather all publicly available data, which we later filtered by various methods and analyzed according to a standardized methodology for data from all three countries.



Regional Background

Description of the region and its crucial challenges (key political and social events from the past 2-3 years, external and internal threats to governance and democracy).

Romania and Bulgaria have been part of the European Union since 2007, while Moldova attained the status of a candidate country in 2022. All three countries struggle with similar problems, however, which include: extensive corruption¹, populism², the rise of nationalist rhetoric, and varying degrees of political instability. In recent years, all three countries have seen their public spaces flooded with disinformation, conspiracy theories and Russian-backed anti-Western propaganda. These phenomena became even more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine with its ensuing energy and economic crises.

All three countries struggle with similar problems, which include: extensive corruption, populism, the rise of nationalist rhetoric, and varying degrees of political instability.

The Russian aggression and invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have had a profound impact on the entire region. The Black Sea is an essential area for trade and energy, making it a critical hub for economic activities, as well as a target in the war. The

war in Ukraine has significant economic and security implications for the region. It caused a sudden influx of refugees and inflated consumer prices, both of which have had a direct impact on the livelihoods of people in Romania, Bulgaria and the Republic of Moldova. Russian aggression has heightened tensions and overall instability in the region, posing challenges to these countries' efforts to ensure their sovereignty and to maintain regional security.

NATO has actively engaged in the Black Sea region even before the war, not only because Romania and Bulgaria are NATO members since 2004, but now additionally with the aim of providing political and practical support to Ukraine (e.g. through training programs for its armed forces). Additionally, NATO has increased its military presence in the region as tensions grew in the years before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with member states such as the United States and the United Kingdom rotating troops and equipment in the region. Romania also hosts the Deveselu military base, which serves as an important component of NATO's missile defense system. All these activities, however, have made Russia a regular critic of NATO's presence, which Russia perceives as a threat to its security interests in the region.

Despite differences in size and economic performance, the countries in the Black Sea region are among the poorest in Europe. As EU members, Romania and Bulgaria registered continuous economic growth in the past years, even if the levels fluctuated. Romania closed 2022 with a GDP Annual Growth Rate⁷ of 4.5%, and Bulgaria with a rate of 2.3%. However, large parts of the populations in these countries are at risk of poverty or social exclusion due to deep divides in economic development among regions and between urban and rural communities: in 2021, this was the case for 34.4% of Romanians and 31.7% of Bulgarians.³ In Moldova, a decline in remittances and a developing demographic crisis exposed the limits⁷ of a remittance and consumption-driven economic model even if it initially contributed to reducing poverty.

Russian aggression has heightened tensions and overall instability in the region, posing challenges to these countries' efforts to ensure their sovereignty and to maintain regional security.

Politically, all three countries experienced instability in recent years, though to different extents. In Romania, the governing center-right coalition composed of the National Liberal Party (PNL)⁷, the Save Romania Union (USR)⁷, and the UDMR⁷ (a union representing the Hungarian minority) was dismissed in October 2021 following a no-confidence motion, which was prompted by disagreements and accusations about the management of the COVID-19 health crisis, coalition management and other issues. Since the autumn of 2021, the country has been governed by a grand coalition⁷ between the two largest rival parties, the center-right National Liberal Party

(PNL) and the left-wing Social Democratic Party (PSD), together with the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR). This grand coalition is based on a rotating premiership, enjoys a comfortable majority of 63%, and is believed to be able to last until the next elections scheduled for the fall of 2024. Despite differences in political ideologies and on policy issues, the union of the country's two largest parties raises concerns about the possibility for effective political opposition in the country due to the capacity of the governing coalition to dismiss any opposing actions.

Moldova, by contrast, is experiencing a relatively stable political period, with the pro-European governing party, the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS)⁷, controlling 62% of parliamentary seats. Other parties with significant parliamentary representation include the left political alliance of BECS (The Bloc of Communists and Socialists) and the populist right-wing party PPŞ (Shor Party)⁷. The latter has been calling for anti-government protests⁷ since 2022 in an attempt to destabilize the elected government and in order to redirect attention away from corruption charges against its leaders. Significantly, the Shor party was established by Ilan Shor⁷, a Moldovan businessman, politician, and oligarch who is believed to have close ties with the Kremlin and who is currently running from a conviction for involvement in the theft of \$1bn from Moldova's banking system. The Shor Party and former president Igor Dodon's⁷ Party of Socialists spread disinformation that was sympathetic to the Kremlin's agenda⁷ or Russian-backed propaganda⁷ on critical issues such as the invasion of Ukraine. In addition to Moldova chronic political instability⁷ in the past and the excessive influence of oligarchs on local politics⁷, since its independence in 1991, the country has had to deal with a Russian military presence in the secessionist region of Transnistria and with

Russia's attempt to keep it in its zone of influence.

Bulgaria had its fifth parliamentary election⁷ in the last two years on the 2nd of April 2023. A bloc led by the center-right GERB party won the election⁷ with 26.5% of the vote, while a pro-Western coalition led by We Continue the Change party⁷ ("Prodyjavame promianata" - PP), and Democratic Bulgaria⁷ scored 24.9%. These results signal a return to coalition talks, especially since a grand coalition between GERB and PP is unlikely, despite the two being ideologically close. A political pact is unfeasible because during the seven months of leadership of PP's, Kiril Petkov, GERB's leader, Boiko Borissov, was arrested⁷ on suspicion of blackmail. Meanwhile, the pro-Russia, anti-NATO, and anti-EU nationalist Revival party⁷ ("Vazrazhdane") secured third place in the April 2023 elections with 14.4% of the vote, which is up several points from the previous election in October 2022.

Bulgaria has experienced constant political turmoil while being actively attacked by Russian propaganda through social media, acting politicians, and paid political and media figures. Last year the Bulgarian secret services announced that they have data showing that Russia pays €2000⁴ per month to public figures, journalists, and politicians to spread its propaganda. At the same time, media literacy levels in Bulgaria are among the lowest in Europe, ranking 33 out of the 41 countries that were assessed by the Media Literacy Index (2022).

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Turning to economic considerations consumer price inflation on most products and services in Moldova. The average consumer prices increased

significantly in October 2022 compared to October 2021. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)⁷, food prices rose, on average, by over 36% while services grew by as much as 52%. Although Romania was not heavily dependent on Russian gas and didn't experience significant changes in some of its macroeconomic indicators⁷, the inflation rate reached 16.04% in April 2023.⁵ In Bulgaria, the high global food and energy prices generated record-high inflation levels. The "higher energy prices, aggravated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and lower global demand," are expected to slow the country's economic growth in 2023.⁶ At the time of writing of this report (May 2023), Romania and Bulgaria must also cope with the fury of grain farmers⁷ who decry the tax-free transit routes for Ukrainian cereals that allegedly impact agricultural prices in the region. The EU has approved emergency funding for farmers, but a conflict resolution is yet to be reached.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses in the healthcare systems of all three countries, which highlights the need for significant investments in public health infrastructure. In Romania, the pandemic significantly increased the number of people living in poverty, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities.⁷ In Bulgaria, the pandemic worsened the country's demographic crisis⁷, with a declining population and an aging workforce.

Moreover, all three countries in the Black Sea region have been affected by significant environmental challenges, from air pollution to water management issues.⁸ In Bulgaria, for instance, air pollution has been a persistent problem. In Romania's largest cities, Bucharest, pollution has constantly led environmental infringements, triggering public outcry.⁹

In addition to these challenges, the countries in the Black Sea region also face other issues

that hinder the functioning of democracy and governance systems. Romania and Bulgaria have been struggling with systemic corruption for years. Although Moldova has made some progress in its commitment to fight corruption, it remains a significant problem.¹⁰ The judiciary systems in these countries are often weak and susceptible to political influence, which undermines the rule of law and the protection of individual rights.¹¹

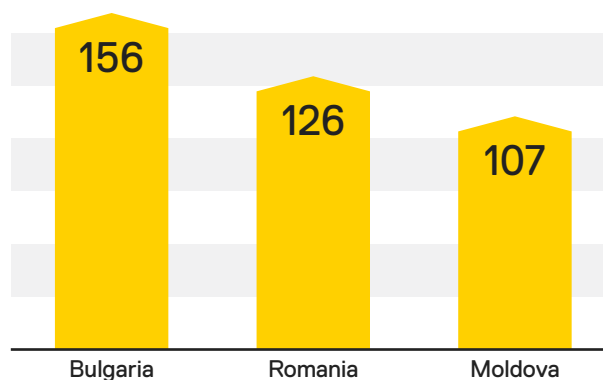
In recent years, the Black Sea region has also experienced a rise in far-right nationalism, which has fueled tensions between ethnic and religious groups.

In recent years, the Black Sea region has also experienced a rise in far-right nationalism, which has fueled tensions between ethnic and religious groups.¹² Bulgaria has seen an increasing hostility towards the country's Muslim minority. In Romania, there has been concern about the growing influence of the Orthodox Church on politics. The Republic of Moldova has also seen a rise in nationalist rhetoric, particularly in the ongoing conflict in Transnistria.

Furthermore, Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova are heavily impacted by the war in Ukraine. The countries host three of the most significant Ukrainian refugee

populations, with Romania and Bulgaria offering Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes to 126k and 156k Ukrainians, respectively. At the same time, Moldova has 107k refugees from Ukraine recorded in the country as of April 2023.¹³

Refugees from Ukraine, April 2023
thousands



Externally, all three countries are vulnerable to Russian influence, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaigns (direct or indirect) have found receptive audiences in these countries. Such campaigns fuel anti-Western sentiment and undermine democratic values. Russian military forces in Transnistria are also a significant security concern for the region.

Civil Society

Main characteristics of the regional civil societies, regional similarities that can be distinguished as well as their role in providing support for Ukraine.

Civil society in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova comprises a wide range of organizations, including CSO's, advocacy groups, professional organizations, religious organizations, trade unions, and business associations.

Historically, the post-communist civic engagement of Romanians was relatively low because of the limited resources of the population, low motivation, and negative perception towards the CSO sector. After the fall of communism, a series of independent organizations and movements were formed, which primarily advocate for human rights and democracy in the effort to transition from a dictatorship to a democracy. However, the post-communist civil landscape was dominated by international organizations and programs.¹⁴ In the 2000's, civil society in Romania developed to become more diverse and sophisticated as organizations became active in diverse areas, including: environmental protection, women's rights, and anti-corruption.¹⁵ A similarly productive period for civil society in Romania followed the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 when citizens and organizations spontaneously mobilized to tackle common threats.¹⁶

CSO's in Bulgaria followed a similar path to that of Romania. CSO's now operate freely and have a significant influence on the public space,

even though they sometimes face hostility from politicians and interest groups, as happens in all the countries in the Black Sea region. Bulgarian CSO's generally follow two directions of development. Some CSO's become more professionalized and start functioning as service providers for local or state authorities, thus acting like state allies. Other organizations evolve out of maturing grass-roots activism and become critical opponents of the state.¹⁷

In the 2000's, civil society in Romania developed to become more diverse and sophisticated as organizations became active in diverse areas, including: environmental protection, women's rights, and anti-corruption.

CSO's in these two countries also face similar problems and challenges: CSO's operating in areas such as human rights need more stable and long-term funding, which will reduce their dependence on foreign funds.¹⁸ Bulgarian CSO's need more capacity to apply for EU funding due to a low diversification of funding sources and the common requirement that CSO's contribute

a high threshold of co-financing per grant. CSO's need more funding opportunities that would cover administrative work. A lack of funding for this work poses a challenge for staff retention and long-term vision and planning. Another significant issue is the need for more communication with the broader society which has been missing in the last ten years. Negative campaigns portraying CSO's as paid foreign agents at work against Bulgarian and Christian traditions and along with broader attacks on the CSO sector, which have negative consequences for public opinion. In the last two years, however, the public image of CSO's improved due to a favorable political environment and efforts to coordinate activities across the CSO sector, which fostered positive narratives about the work of CSO's.¹⁹

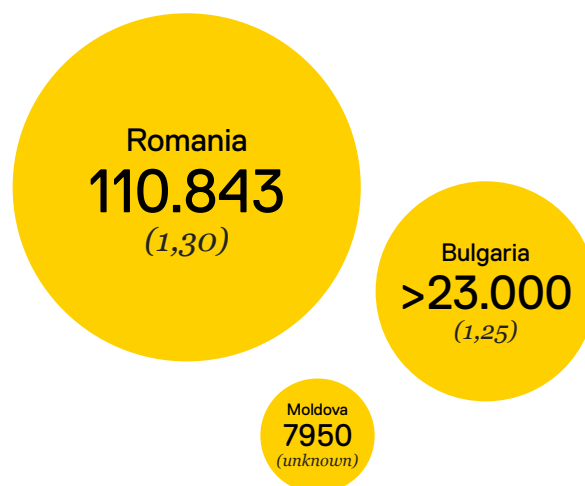
The professionalization of the Moldovan pro-Western and pro-democracy civil society has been taking place in parallel to the emergence of illiberal civil society groups, which are often indirectly connected with Russia via the Socialist Party and the Orthodox Church.

The legacy of Soviet domination has had a significant impact on Moldova, leading to a civil society sector with limited resources, funding and human capital. The sector is fragmented and collaboration between organizations could be improved. In recent years, however, local and international CSO's began to work together on issues such as human rights, democracy, anti-corruption, or justice reform. Presently, Moldovan CSO's can be partners to state authorities, which require professional support to tackle state problems and to implement European

standards regarding the involvement of the civil society sector in decision-making. The professionalization of the pro-Western and pro-democracy civil society has been taking place in parallel to the emergence of illiberal civil society groups, which are often indirectly connected with Russia via the Socialist Party and the Orthodox Church. These groups promote conservative values and challenge the pro-European orientation of other CSO's.²⁰

In Romania, what distinguishes CSO's is that they are threatened by several vulnerabilities, such as limited sustainable funding sources, legislative limitations on civic assembly, a limited influence in policy processes, limited human resources, as well as a generally low level of civic education and engagement of the population. As mentioned above, CSO's in Bulgaria also need more stable long-term funding and a greater diversification of funding sources. Similarly, in Moldova, the sector is characterized by a lack of resources, including funding and human capital.

Total no. of CSO's ^{21, 22, 23, 24, 25}



(1,XX) - No. of active CSOs per 1000 capita

In all three countries, CSO's are active in areas such as human rights, democracy and anti-corruption. In recent years, environmental protection, media literacy, civic education, and service provisions have also become important areas of CSO activity. There are some differences between the three countries, however, in the level of coverage of these topics and the impact and diversity of CSO's that active in these areas.

According to the mapping reports for the Black Sea region, the following are key topics that divide civil society in Romania, Bulgaria and the Republic of Moldova:

Corruption: All three countries struggle with corruption, but stakeholders have divergent views about how to tackle the issue. In Romania, the fight against corruption has been a key point on the country's political and social agenda for decades; however, progress has been slow and recent years have seen a rollback of anti-corruption measures. In Bulgaria, corruption is deeply entrenched in the political system and the common perception is that the country's political elite are closely tied to vested interests. In Moldova, corruption has been a persistent problem that has hindered economic development and political stability. Progress in tackling the issue has been limited so that the country ranks among the worst in Europe regarding corruption.

Populism: Populist movements have gained ground in all three countries, fueled by the perception that the political establishment is corrupt and out of touch with the needs of ordinary citizens. In Romania, mainstream political parties have been the main proponents of populist policies, including increased public spending and tax cuts. Illiberal extremist parties are now picking up these tendencies. In Bulgaria,

this socio-cultural cleavage manifests in the nationalist parties that gained significant support by promoting anti-immigrant and anti-EU rhetoric. In Moldova, some mainstream parties and fringe movements have benefited from advocating for populist policies (e.g. increased pensions and social benefits).

Anti-EU sentiment/nationalism: The rise of nationalism and anti-EU sentiment is a common theme in the Black Sea region. In Romania, there is a perception that the country is not treated as an equal partner within the EU and that EU policies are often detrimental to the country's interests. In Bulgaria, several parties and/or movements have promoted a nativist and anti-EU agenda, arguing that the country should prioritize its national interests over those of the EU. In Moldova, there is a growing sentiment that the country should align itself more closely with Russia because NATO and the Western countries will drag it into a conflict.

Disinformation: Disinformation and propaganda campaigns are a significant challenge in the Black Sea region. Russian-backed media outlets have been particularly active in promoting anti-Western narratives, including conspiracy theories and false information. In Romanian, Bulgarian and Moldovan media, disinformation campaigns have targeted various issues, including the EU, NATO, the war in Ukraine, and the LGBTQI+ community. Extensive use of social media by the local population has amplified the impact of these campaigns, while the need to counter false information has become more evident than ever before.

Romania and Bulgaria have experienced several polarizing topics that divided civil sectors and highlight the problem of disinformation in the region.

One of the most prominent issues of public debate in Romania is LGBTQI+ rights. A failed attempt

by conservative groups that oppose measures to promote equality and non-discrimination for LGBTQI+ individuals was the [referendum in 2018](#)⁷, which attempted to modify the country's constitution to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Another polarizing topic in Romania concerns [abortion rights](#)⁷. While some CSO's advocate for reproductive rights and access to safe abortions, others strongly oppose abortion and consider it a violation of human life. With regard to [sexual education](#)⁷, another polarizing topic, a proposed amendment to the Romanian education law which would include comprehensive sexual education in the school curriculum was met with opposition from conservative CSO's on the grounds that it was inappropriate for children. Environmental protection and anti-corruption efforts are also areas of heated debate in Romania.

In Bulgaria, the two topics that have been particularly divisive over the last five years illustrate how propaganda and conspiracy theories can have real consequences on civil society.²⁶ Disinformation campaigns regarding the [Istanbul Convention](#)⁷ and the [National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030](#)⁷ caused widespread civil disorder and eventually prevented these critical documents from being adopted. In a country affected by pervasive gender violence²⁷, it would be crucial to embrace the Istanbul convention, which is critical to preventing violence against women and mainstreaming victim protection; however, a campaign of disinformation led by the ruling parties succeeded in turning the population against the convention. Similarly, a wide-reaching disinformation campaign stopped the National Strategy for the Child from coming into effect. conspiracy theories that vilified SCO's spread on national media and parent groups, with some claiming that the strategy's hidden goal was to strip parents of their parental rights.²⁸ Ultraconservative "Christian" groups with experience in the fight against "anti-family" laws played a leading role in the

production of disinformation. The Orthodox Church and the political parties VMRO and Vazrazhdane (Revival) saw the political potential of the subject and expressed solidarity with the "concerns of parents."

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In Moldova, an especially contentious topic has been the direction the country should follow and the type of partnerships the country should build: some political actors and their supporters have been pushing for closer ties with Russia, while others envision a path of integration with Europe for the country. This debate is ongoing even after Moldova gained the status of an official EU candidate in 2022. Furthermore, Moldovan society is divided on topics related to the country's future development, what historical legacies to treasure and develop (Romanian or soviet), what traditions to cherish (communist or Orthodox) and what values to promote (progressive or traditional). Additionally, local politicians and external influences push for ethnic polarization (e.g. in the autonomous region of Gagauzia, the home of a large orthodox Turkic-speaking population with Russian sympathies). In this specific case, Kremlin-backed mass-media builds and promotes polarizing narratives (including outright disinformation) on cultural identity or geopolitical dividing issues that are later exploited by local actors.²⁹

There are some common concerns regarding civic organizations among the public in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova. One major challenge in all three countries is the lack of awareness about the work of CSO's and their role in promoting democracy, human rights and social development. This lack of understanding often results in a negative perception of CSO's, and enables skepticism and mistrust toward them among the general population.

Romania's general public attitude toward civil society is complex and evolving. According to a 2021 survey by the [Romanian Center for European Policies](#)⁷, 75% of Romanians believe CSO's are essential to promoting democracy and human rights. The survey also found that 44% of respondents considered CSO's to be effective in achieving their goals, while only 19% believed them ineffective. Conversely, according to a study by the [European Social Survey](#)⁷, 37% of Romanians reported trusting CSO's, a rate that is significantly lower than the European average of 53%. A 2020 survey by the Romanian think-tank [INSCOP](#)⁷ found that only 26.8% of respondents had a favorable opinion of CSO's, while 37.5% had an unfavorable opinion, and 35.7% were neutral.

One of the reasons for this negative perception might be the lack of awareness about the work of CSO's. The same INSCOP survey found that only 39.3% of respondents knew what CSO's do, while 60.7% did not.

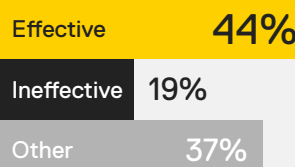
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Romanians about CSO's

CSO's are essential to promoting democracy and human rights:



CSO's achieving their goals:



Source: *Romanian Center for European Policies*

In Bulgaria, the public perception of CSO's improved in 2021 compared with previous years, due to increased media coverage of their activities and improvements in the state's relationship with them.³⁰ However, another study showed that trust in CSO's increased only slightly (from 31.3% in 2020 to 34.6% in 2021), while mistrust levels almost doubled (from 17.7% in 2020 to 32.1% in 2021).³¹ The growing polarization of public opinion about the CSO sector may be due to anti-vaccine disinformation, anti-Western propaganda, and campaigns against government policies.

In Moldova, the CSO sector is diverse and fragmented. A conceptual division exists between organizations in large cities, such as Chisinau, where CSO's are extremely active, and have a generally good reputation and high visibility, and those in small towns. Since 2016, CSO's gained public trust due to critical stances on controversial laws; however, they also became targets of smear campaigns and media attacks with accusations related to external funding and alleged involvement in internal political processes.³² Importantly, the general population lacks deeper engagement in the work of CSO's through, for example, membership or volunteering.

Another common issue for countries in the Black Sea region is the influence of external factors on public attitudes toward civil society. Disinformation campaigns, anti-Western propaganda, and political attacks on CSOs can significantly impact public perception and trust in these organizations. In some cases, these attacks can create fear and

self-censorship among CSO's. Furthermore, the recent tendency to prioritize traditional values over individual rights in certain regions can also contribute to the public's suspicion and distancing from CSO's that advocate for modern values, which, in turn, makes it challenging for these organizations to garner widespread support.

Common Themes and Regional Similarities

CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova aim to counter disinformation, promote media literacy, increase civic engagement and participation, and support transparency and accountability. All three countries face similar socio-political challenges, such as extensive corruption, populism, the rise of nationalist rhetoric, and varying degrees of political instability. They also share common economic difficulties, particularly in rural communities, with high levels of poverty or social exclusion. Furthermore, public spaces in all three countries have been flooded with disinformation, conspiracy theories,

and Russian-backed anti-Western propaganda. Civil societies in these countries have responded by creating fact-checking platforms, promoting media literacy, and engaging in investigative journalism. They have also actively monitored and countered electoral fraud and promoted transparency and accountability. For example, in Moldova, CSO's raise awareness and promote critical thinking skills among youth through media education in schools. The green CSO sector has also become more active in the fight against disinformation.

Civil Societies' Involvement in the War in Ukraine

All three countries host many Ukrainian refugees, with Romania and Bulgaria offering temporary or similar national protection schemes to over 100,000 Ukrainians each. The ongoing war in Ukraine has contributed to insecurity and economic uncertainty in the region, with concerns about Russian aggression and the potential for further escalation of the conflict.

CSO's in the Black Sea region have responded to the challenges posed by the ongoing war in Ukraine

in various ways, many initiating activities to support refugees, advocate for peace, and promote dialogue and reconciliation.

In Romania, civic initiatives, both formal and informal, have been active in assisting Ukrainian refugees, including by providing legal aid, healthcare services, and social support. For example, [Uniti pentru Ucraina](#)⁷ (United for Ukraine) is a Facebook group with over 283,000 members that acts as

a direct connection hub between refugees from Ukraine and Romanians. In addition, CSO's in Romania have been involved in advocacy efforts to promote sustainable solutions for the integration of refugees and dialogue in the region, including by organizing conferences, roundtables and public events.

In Bulgaria, CSO's have supported refugees primarily through legal aid and social services. For example, the [Bulgarian Helsinki Committee](#)⁷ has been providing legal assistance to refugees and asylum seekers and advocating for their rights and interests. In addition, CSO's in Bulgaria have been involved in peacebuilding and dialogue initiatives, including through the organization of public events, conferences and workshops. Grassroots initiatives of citizens offering support have also been visible in Bulgaria through Facebook groups such as "[Help for the Ukrainian refugees](#)"⁷ (91.9k members) and "[Help for the Bulgarians in Ukraine](#)"⁷ (7.5k members).

In Moldova, CSO's have been involved in various initiatives supporting Ukrainian refugees, including legal aid, healthcare services, and social support. For example, the [Moldovan National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum](#)⁷ developed a project to assist refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, CSO's in Moldova have been involved in peacebuilding and dialogue initiatives, with an informal group, [Moldova pentru Pace](#)⁷ (Moldova for Peace) acting as a hub for supporting the ever-changing needs of refugees from Ukraine.

Overall, CSO's in the Black Sea region have played an essential role in responding to the challenges posed by the ongoing war in Ukraine. According to the Country Mapping Reports, CSO's

in the Black Sea region continue to face significant challenges a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In Romania, organizations have struggled with funding and resource constraints during the pandemic. Despite these challenges, some CSO's have increased their activities and collaborations, particularly in response to disinformation campaigns, the rise of nationalism, and the threats posed by the conflict in Ukraine. In Bulgaria, the ongoing challenges of corruption and political interference hinder the effectiveness of CSO's and are especially dangerous now when a hybrid war affects the region. However, some organizations have successfully promoted accountability and transparency, mainly through their work on anti-corruption.

In Moldova, the Country Mapping Report on civil society notes that CSO's have faced significant challenges due to the country's ongoing political and economic crises, which have been aggravated by the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Many organizations have struggled with funding and resource constraints, and there are concerns about the impact of political interference on civil society's effectiveness.

The Country Mapping Reports suggest that CSO's in the Black Sea region continue to face significant challenges after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While some CSO's have successfully promoted accountability and transparency, many organizations struggle with funding and resource constraints, political interference, and the impact of disinformation campaigns and nationalism. Despite these challenges, civil society remains an important actor in the region. Its role in promoting democracy, human rights, and good governance is crucial to facing ongoing threats and challenges.

⁷ [https://www.bulgarianhelsinki.org/en/ukraine/](#)

Overview of Disinformation

Description of the disinformation landscape in the region - main topics, overview of the most popular narratives, their sources and channels it's distributed through, general impact of the disinformation on the region's society and special focus on the disinformation related to the war in Ukraine.



Description of main common topics used to spread disinformation in the region

The disinformation narratives circulating in Romania, Moldova and Bulgaria share some common themes, including Anti-European, anti-NATO and anti-Western sentiments. False narratives stigmatize or discriminate against marginalized groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and journalists. Disinformation related to COVID-19 and elections/social-political events is prevalent, with politically-motivated false narratives used to discredit opponents or promote one's agenda in Moldova, anti-EU discourses propagated by far-right politicians and media outlets in Bulgaria, and widespread disinformation and fake news, particularly during political events or periods of crisis in Romania.

Addressing these common themes and promoting media and digital literacy skills in these countries is essential to counteract the spread of disinformation. In Romania, these skills are particularly crucial given the low general literacy skills as well as low media and digital literacy skills, which cause high susceptibility to disinformation.

In Moldova, supporting independent media and protecting journalists from political pressure and threats is essential. In Bulgaria, addressing the issue of media politicization and providing resources and training to journalists to engage in investigative reporting is necessary.

Overview of most common narratives that appear in disinformation and the mediums where disinformation appears

Romania

- Electoral manipulation, foreign meddling, and mistrust of leaders drive online debates in Romania. To preserve the nation's sovereignty, some users emphasize the importance of nationalism and traditional values.
- Internet debate on gender and sexuality in Romania is divisive. Some justify their prejudices against marginalized groups such as trans people and women who choose abortions by appealing to traditional and religious beliefs.

- Some Romanians attribute the attacks on the gas pipelines to the US. They raise suspicions about Western intervention and colonialism in Romania and throughout Eastern Europe. These subjects highlight the intricacy of international politics and social media's influence on public discourse.
- Romania's position on the continuing conflict in Ukraine and the decision whether to back Ukraine or to remain neutral are key topics of debate. While some say Romania should leave NATO, others support membership.
- Pro-nationalist and anti-European narratives shift responsibility for the energy problem onto private companies, wealthy elites, and the EU. They sow apathy and anti-European emotions.

Bulgaria:

- In the first quarter of 2023, disinformation targeted European values, human rights, refugees, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine, with narratives connected and using similar language.
- The dominant disinformation themes center on anti-Western emotions,³³ from the dissolution of the EU to Western interference in local matters in Bulgaria, such as elections and domestic violence legislation, etc.
- Various false claims are posited as a justification of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including the need for "denazification" and that Ukraine has no historical right to exist.
- False claims about refugees from Ukraine being treated more favorably than Bulgarians and that they commit crimes are also being spread.³⁴

Moldova:

- Pro-Kremlin media circulated fake information that Moldova would be involved in a conflict with Russia in the Transnistrian region, despite the fact that NATO troops are absent from that area.

- Russian and pro-Kremlin sources in Moldova accused the West of interfering with Moldova's domestic affairs, including the presidential and legislative elections. According to this narrative, the West participated in "stealing the elections" through CSO's.
- Christian organizations and Kremlin-allied politicians in Moldova misrepresented the Istanbul Convention by asserting that it supported same-sex partnerships and damaged the educational system.
- Although rare, attacks on women's rights increased during electoral periods. Church authorities targeted women who chose to have an abortion. Women who were single or without children were frequently insulted.
- Moldovan disinformation portrayed the EU and NATO as failing efforts and accused outsiders like George Soros of seeking to annex their territory and to determine their future.

Sources and channels used to spread disinformation in the region

In Romania disinformation is spread through traditional media outlets and online channels. In the case of the former, the dangers of disinformation are made worse by media politicization. The editorial choices of media outlets are often subordinated to the owners' interests, thus transforming the press into an instrument of propaganda.³⁵

Social media is a popular channel for spreading fake news and propaganda. Disinformation is rife on Facebook (the country's most used social media platform), as well as on YouTube and



Twitter. Many false narratives propagated on social media are related to politics and are often used to discredit opposition parties or to promote a particular political agenda. Before the elections, false news and propaganda about opposition parties and candidates were spread on social media, including false claims about their policies and actions³⁶, manipulated photos, videos, and conspiracy theories.

In Bulgaria disinformation is also spread through social media and traditional media. Many TV and radio stations are directly or indirectly influenced by the government or powerful business interests, leading to media freedom and pluralism concerns.³⁷ Private and officially independent television broadcast news 24 hours a day, and many of them benefit from public or political funding. False claims and disinformation were also circulated on social media during or before the (many rounds of) elections, including manipulated photos and videos, fake news about candidates, and conspiracy theories.

In Moldova false information is spread through social media, traditional media, and other online platforms, including blogs, websites, and messaging apps. The sources of disinformation vary widely, but many are linked to political parties, business interests, or other powerful groups. For example, former politicians or oligarchs are sometimes the source or the propagators of conspiracy theories and hate speech against sexual minorities. Several conspiracy theories linking billionaire philanthropist, George Soros, to mass migration, progressive politics, and globalist agendas have been propagated by politicians and media outlets in Moldova, some linked to anti-Semitic sentiments.³⁸

Overall, various authors and sources spread disinformation in Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova, which makes it difficult to track and combat

this phenomenon. The false narratives that are propagated often relate to politics, particularly during election periods, and serve to discredit opponents or to promote a particular political agenda. Social media, traditional media, and other online platforms are all used to spread disinformation, with sources ranging from political parties (mainstream or extremist) and business interests to fringe groups and individuals.

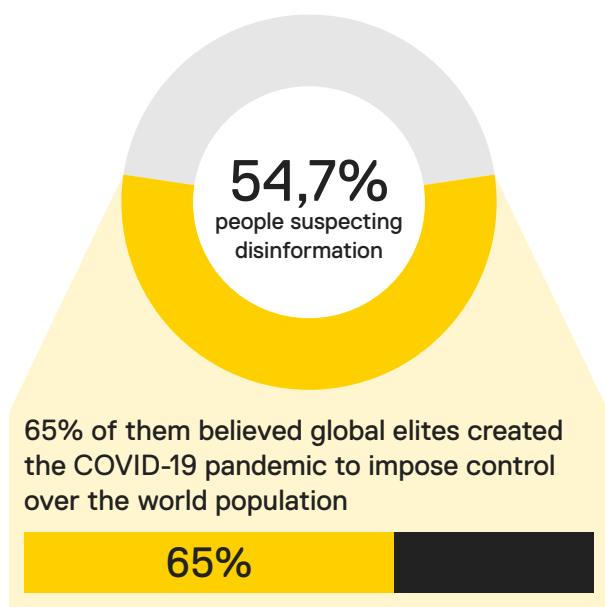
Media literacy challenges and statistics in the region – how vulnerable are the local societies to distorted narratives?

In Romania many people cannot distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, making them more susceptible to disinformation. In a 2022 survey, 54.7% of Romanian respondents suspected they were exposed to disinformation and fake news in the previous months, and 65% of them believed global elites created the COVID-19 pandemic to impose control over the world population. These findings suggest a high susceptibility to fake news and conspiracy theories in times of crisis. According to the 2022 Media Literacy Index, Romania ranks 31 out of 41 states in Europe with regard to media literacy, which places it in the bottom-end cluster of countries with a low potential to deal with the effects of fake news and misinformation.³⁹ In terms of digital literacy, Romania ranks below the EU average regarding digital skills and technology use.⁴⁰

Bulgarians have low media literacy skills and exhibit high susceptibility to disinformation.

Bulgarians have low media literacy skills and exhibit high susceptibility to disinformation. The Media and News 2022 survey found that Bulgarians are three times more likely than the European average to say they have been exposed to disinformation and fake news often in the past seven days.⁴¹ Additionally, the low literacy levels, low journalistic standards, widespread support for conspiracy theories among the population, and the general use of social media as a primary news source are enabling factors for the penetration of Russian disinformation in the country. Bulgarian widespread disinformation is aided by the ineffectiveness of regulatory and control institutions, the hidden or illicit funding of media, and the actions of “agents of influence,” among other factors.⁴²

How many Romanians were exposed to disinformation and fake news?



INSCOP Research: “Public mistrust: West vs. East. The rise of the nationalist trend in the era of disinformation and fake news phenomenon.”, 2021

Moldova scored poorly in the 2022 Media Literacy Index, with 32 out of 100 points, in the bottom cluster of analyzed countries.⁴³ Its media landscape

is highly polarized, with media outlets controlled by political-economic interest groups used for electoral and political misinformation. According to public opinion polls, only 2.7% of Moldovan citizens trust media outlets, while the church and mayorship are the most trusted institutions.⁴⁴ Moldovan society is vulnerable to distorted narratives, particularly during national crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. For example, narratives spreading hate messages (e.g. narratives that portray refugees from Ukraine as thieves or violent people⁷, criminals⁷ or belonging to extremist groups, or simply as a public risk⁷), have more chances of success in a climate that is dominated by fear and low media literacy.

Overview of the impact of disinformation on the region's society and politics

Disinformation and fake news target various groups of people in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova, including ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQI+ people, journalists, media outlets, health professionals, scientists, and voters or politicians. False narratives are often used in political campaigns to discredit opponents or promote one's agenda, and disinformation related to COVID-19 has been widespread since the pandemic's start. Disinformation around elections and social-political events remains a significant problem in Romania, with false narratives, propaganda and fake news often spread through social media, other online platforms, as well as traditional media channels. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has provoked a surge in misinformation that acts like gasoline poured on the disinformation fire.

The impact of disinformation on society and politics in the Black Sea region is significant, with disinformation

contributing to political unrest and undermining trust in democratic institutions. Disinformation and fake news can lead to discrimination and stigmatization of minority groups, reinforce negative stereotypes, and justify discriminatory policies. For example, according to a report by the European Parliament, the various fake narratives disseminated during the

COVID-19 pandemic bolstered antigypsyism. They enabled antisemitic conspiracy theories to resurface throughout European countries, including in Romania and Bulgaria.⁴⁵ Disinformation also restricts the ability of journalists from the region to report critically on those in power, which limits the public's access to accurate information.

The Disinformation Landscape in the Region Related to the War in Ukraine

Overview of the impact of the war on the region

The war in Ukraine has significantly impacted the region, with disinformation and propaganda being widely used to spread false narratives and sow discord. This has increased tensions between countries and societal divisions within individual countries. There have been concerns about Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Romania to destabilize the country. In Bulgaria, disinformation campaigns targeted the country's energy sector and relations with NATO. The Kremlin's accusations: that Ukraine is poised to launch an assault on Transnistria, while suspicions arise of Maia Sandu's collusion with Kyiv, all against a backdrop of alleged manipulation by the US and the West, driving Chisinau towards conflict, also came when the Moldovan government was taking steps to regain control of its information space⁷.

Narratives related to the origins of the war:

False narratives about the origins of the war have been widely spread, including claims that the LGBTQI+ community started the war or that it was a response to discrimination against Russian speakers in Ukraine. In Romania, pro-Russian media outlets have promoted conspiracy theories that the United States was behind the Maidan protests that led to the overthrow of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich. In Bulgaria, there have been claims that the West started the war in Ukraine to contain Russia. The disinformation campaigns have targeted Moldova's energy sector and relations with NATO.

Narratives about NATO involvement in the war

and the Black Sea region countries' relations with NATO and other allies: False narratives about NATO's involvement in the war have been prevalent, including claims that NATO is fighting Russia through Ukraine. Disinformation narratives about Black Sea region countries' relations with NATO and other allies have also been spread, such as false claims that the European Parliament forced Moldova to impose an embargo on Russian gas. In Romania, there have been concerns about

Types of disinformation prevalent in the region regarding the war in Ukraine



disinformation campaigns to undermine the country's relationship with NATO. In Bulgaria, disinformation campaigns have been aimed at sowing doubts about the country's commitment to NATO and the EU.

Narratives related to military capabilities and the reality of war (weapons, human rights violations, war crimes): Disinformation about the military capabilities of Ukraine and the reality of war has also been spread, including false claims that biological weapons were being prepared in Ukrainian laboratories or that Russia is not bombing civilian targets in Ukraine. In Romania, there have been concerns about disinformation campaigns that undermine trust in the country's military and defense capabilities. In Bulgaria, there have been false narratives about the use of chemical weapons in the war in Ukraine. In all three countries, fake claims about the future active involvement of national troops in the war were used to spread fear among the general population.

Narratives related to refugees from Ukraine and societal attitudes to the war and Ukrainian refugees: False narratives about Ukrainian refugees and specific attitudes towards the war and refugees have been fostered, including claims that Ukrainian refugees from Moldova are aggressive and ungrateful or that all Ukrainian refugees are violent and aggressive. In Romania, there have been concerns about the spread of xenophobic and anti-refugee sentiments. Some politicians and media outlets spread false narratives about refugees from Ukraine, some claiming that refugees steal economic opportunities from the local population, for example, by starting real-estate businesses. There have been concerns about disinformation campaigns in Bulgaria aimed at sowing divisions between Bulgarian and Ukrainian communities. The Kremlin has also claimed that Ukraine would

attack Transnistria and that the West is pushing Chisinau into a conflict.

Narratives on the national burden (financial, energy security, political capital, etc.) associated with supporting Ukraine: False narratives have been spread about the burden of supporting Ukraine, including claims that Moldova has sufficient oil and gas resources or that it does not receive gas from Gazprom because it does not have the money to pay for it. In Romania, concerns have been raised about disinformation campaigns to undermine the country's energy security and to promote Russian interests. In Bulgaria, there have been concerns about disinformation campaigns promoting Russian energy interests and raising doubts about the country's ability to diversify its energy sources.

Overview of the sources of disinformation related to the war in Ukraine

The sources of disinformation related to the war in Ukraine are varied, with pro-Kremlin media outlets such as RT and Sputnik being particularly prominent. However, local sources such as politicians, social media users, and ecclesiastics have also contributed to the spread of disinformation. In Romania, pro-Russian media outlets have been accused of spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine. In Bulgaria, a series of leading websites and media propagating disinformation were identified, including:⁴⁶ onovini.eu⁷, petel.bg⁷, pogled.info⁷, bradva.bg⁷, svobodnoslovo.eu⁷, [The Bulgarian Times](http://TheBulgarianTimes)⁷, Duma⁷, afera.bg⁷, pan.bg⁷, informiranet.net⁷, baricada.org⁷. Among the most active pro-Russian media outlets that directly or indirectly

broadcast Kremlin's narratives in Moldova are Belarusians 1 and Sputnik Moldova. Several other websites were blocked by the Moldovan

Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) in 2022 because they falsely justified the invasion of Ukraine as legitimate or posed security threats.⁴⁷

Regional Case Studies

Case #1 Romania

15-minute-cities misrepresented as prison cities leading to climate-quarantine.

Topic

According to an article in [Libertatea](#)⁷, this conspiracy theory blocked a new project on urban mobility ([Project for Urban Mobility Law](#)⁷) from being voted on in the lower chamber of the Romanian Parliament. At the request of George Simion, an MP from [AUR - the Alliance for the Union of Romanians](#)⁷, the project was resent for analysis in the specialized committees of the Parliament. The decision to not vote on the project came after the project had already been debated publicly and approved by the other chamber of the Parliament - the Senate.

Description

The narrative is based on the 15-minute city theory advanced by the scientist, Carlos Moreno, in 2016. The theory suggested that cities would be greener and more livable if every service necessary for daily living is within the range of a 15-minute walk or cycle ride.

According to [Wired](#)⁷, the conspiracy theory has its roots in the start of the pandemic in 2020 when voices linked to the fossil fuel lobby promoted the idea of a "climate lockdown." The story sold the view that governments would, among others controls, prevent people from traveling outside their assigned districts. The concept of "climate lockdown" was picked up by right-wing think tanks and climate-skeptic media figures. [CNN reported](#)⁷ that it was propagated by QAnon-affiliated and anti-vaccine

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groups. Politicians and media figures worldwide rejected the idea as “an international socialist concept” and protests were organized against the traffic filtering and 15-minute city proposals in the city of Oxford in the UK in 2023.

The story took root also in Romania.

Local public personalities and politicians with long experiences in propagating fake news and disinformation shared different spin-offs of the story. For example, the nationalist MP, Mihai Lasca, alone generated over 7k interactions and 129k views with a [single video](#)⁷ claiming that the 15-minute city is a concept imposing “modern slavery” and “digital concentration camps” through the “poisoned apple” of PNRR. According to Lasca, the 15-minute city concept would force Romania to renounce its energy and food sovereignty in exchange for money through PNRR. The narrative converges with other predilect disinformation subjects, such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Legitimate concepts such as “sustainable cities” are discredited by claiming they hide covert operations to control people.

The news website EVZ.ro broadcast a [live Facebook video](#)⁷ with TV personality, Robert Turcescu, and guests debating the Law on urban mobility as a neo-Marxist project that was being imposed by the EU via PNRR and that would ultimately transform all cities into urban prisons. As the speakers discussed the conspiracy theories, the video presented images with the text of the Law, thus giving legitimacy to their misleading discourse. The well-known disinformation spreader, [Cozmin Gusa](#)⁷, also posted a live video discussing the concept of 15-minutes cities as future “digital concentration camps.”

Other posts used associations between [screenshots](#)⁷ from the text of the Law and fake accompanying explanations, which included images with [maps](#)⁷ of proposed 15-minute cities all over Europe.

Source

Extremist and nationalist politicians took up the theory. [George Simion from AUR](#)⁷ (Union for the Alliance of Romanians) publicly claimed that the Law on urban mobility would limit the mobility of the population. MP [Mihai Lasca](#)⁷ used the subject to inflame his electorate.

Well-known spreaders of disinformation, who were active in promoting fake news on other topics such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, contributed to giving the subject visibility on Romanian social media: [Iosefina Pascal](#)⁷ and the news outlet [R3Media](#)⁷ also mentioned the topic (the latter associated it with communist photos of Bucharest). Disinformation posts about the theory were also circulated through Facebook groups.

Reach and countermeasures

Although the actual reach cannot be estimated accurately, the topic seems to have gained considerable popularity during the period between March and April 2023. A simple search with the keyword “orase de 15 minute” on Crowdtangle shows that the topic generated 639 posts and 35,659 interactions on Facebook in January-March 2023, with highest number of posts and interactions taking place in the first two months of spring 2023. It must be noted, however, that the above number includes both legitimate conversations on the subject and potentially fake news, disinformation, and misinformation.

The conspiracy theory and the fake news surrounding it have been debunked by the fact-checking platform [Factual](#)⁷, by the activist, Mihai Gotiu (here: [news article](#)⁷), and other press articles ([example](#)⁷). Despite this, the conspiracy theory persists to this day. Apart from sentiments of fury and fear that have been expressed through reactions and comments on social media posts on Facebook, it is difficult to identify clear trends in terms of social responses to this conspiracy theory.

Links to posts/graphics

[Example 1](#)⁷ | [Example 2](#)⁷ | [Example 3](#)⁷ | [Example 4](#)⁷ | [Example 5](#)⁷

Case #2 Bulgaria

The „Desatanization” of Ukraine by Russia

Topic

This Russian-backed disinformation campaign aimed to legitimize the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the eyes of the Bulgarian public. It is similar in content and purpose to narratives about the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine, which were also launched by Russian media and brought to Bulgaria by pro-Russian voices inside the country. These narratives are especially damaging in countries with a long-standing Russian influence, such as Bulgaria.

Description

According to the fact-checking platform [Factcheck.bg](#)⁷, the narrative of the satanic West frequently appears in Russian propaganda, which is spread by high-profile figures such as Aleksandr Dugin, Valentin Katasonov and Vladimir Putin. This narrative serves to support and legitimize Russia's military operations in Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

According to Factcheck.bg, the disinformation spread through a legitimate video of Ukrainians performing a harmless traditional Christmas ritual, which was misrepresented as a “satanic” ritual.

Various other stories began to depict hostility to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, satanic rituals performed in the country, and the deplorable moral state of the decadent West. Such narratives were supported by innuendos by a prominent Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Moscow, Kiril, who asserted that Russia is leading a [holy war](#)⁷ in Ukraine. A similar narrative also circulated in neighboring Romania, with posts in Orthodox Facebook Groups showing how “satanist” Volodemir Zelensky and his friends transformed Orthodox churches into [discos](#)⁷.

According to Factcheck.bg, the disinformation spread through a legitimate video of Ukrainians performing a harmless traditional Christmas ritual, which was misrepresented as a “satanic” ritual. Another video showed an Orthodox church burning, allegedly set on fire by Ukrainian nationalists. Russian propaganda also

used the news about the [searches in a Ukrainian Orthodox monastery](#)⁷ to push the idea that Ukrainian authorities are anti-Orthodox. The videos were propagated mainly via Facebook.

Source

Initially, such narratives were propagated by Russian propaganda sources, such as “Izborskiy Klub” (from Russian: Изборский клуб), which were then picked up and disseminated locally by Bulgarian sources. According to Factcheck.bg, pro-Russian social media accounts participated in propagating such content via Facebook. However, Bulgarian clerics also spread Russian propaganda that claims that Ukraine persecutes Orthodox Christians.

Reach and countermeasures

The disinformation theory was dismantled by the [Factcheck.bg analysis](#)⁷ cited above. Still, the narrative is expected to survive in the context of a prolonged war with uncertain outcomes and a relatively unstable political situation in Bulgaria.

The real impact of the narrative, and the social responses to it, is difficult to estimate.

Case #3 Republic of Moldova

Romania intends to take over Moldova

Topic

This Russian-backed disinformation campaign aimed to legitimize the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the eyes of the Bulgarian public. It is similar in content and purpose to narratives about the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine, which were also launched by Russian media and brought to Bulgaria by pro-Russian voices inside the country. These narratives are especially damaging in countries with a long-standing Russian influence, such as Bulgaria.

Description

There are many variations on the story about Romania's plans to annex Moldova, all of which have been disproven by the [EUvsDisinform](#)⁷ platform. One version of the story claims that Maia Sandu is [forcibly romanizing](#)⁷ the country, while Romania is advertising itself as a friend only to advance its goal of [integrating Moldova](#)⁷ and gaining access to the Dnieper. Similar stories claim that under the guise of "reunification with Moldova," Romania is preparing to [annex Ukraine](#)⁷. Other reports claim the West backs the "[Greater Romania](#)"⁷ project in order to distract Russia. The two countries' [launch of a joint border](#)⁷ control point was yet another piece of "evidence" for Romania's impending annexation of Moldovan territory. Another opportunity to push the annexation theory was a [joint government meeting](#)⁷ between Romania and Moldova.

Such narratives spread through misrepresenting facts and outright lies about the main political actors in the region, their actions and intentions. Such stories were developed in press articles and videos.

Source

The primary sources of disinformation were Russian-language media outlets and websites, such as Rubaltic.ru, Ritm Evrazi, russtrat.ru.

They were also propagated and amplified by pro-Russian media outlets and websites in Moldova, subsequently even reaching Romania.

Furthermore, in Romania, nationalist figures such as MP, Diana Sosoaca, promote the idea of unification as [reparation for the Bolshevik dismantling of the Romanian state](#)⁷.

Reach and countermeasures

The narrative of Romanian annexation of Moldova persists and can be expected to survive for a long time, especially since the relationship between Moldova and the EU is getting stronger. It will probably change shape and find new opportunities to emerge.

The fake news and campaigns inspired by the narrative are often debunked by platforms such as [Veridica](#)⁷, [EUvsDisinfo](#)⁷.

Links to posts/graphics

[Example 1](#)⁷ | [Example 2](#)⁷ | [Example 3](#)⁷

Regional Response to Disinformation

In order to address the challenges of disinformation and fake news in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova, governments, civil society, and media organizations have taken a range of initiatives and actions. In Romania, the government has taken timid steps to respond to disinformation, the most visible initiative being [INFORADAR](#)⁷, which aims to identify and counteract fake news and disinformation. Several CSO's, such as [Factual.ro](#)⁷, the [Center for Independent Journalism](#)⁷, [ActiveWatch](#)⁷, or [Global Focus](#)⁷, monitor and expose disinformation in the media and social media, and offer media literacy programs.

Several CSO's in Bulgaria, such as the [Association of European Journalists](#)⁷, the [Bulgarian Helsinki Committee](#)⁷, and the [Media Literacy Coalition](#)⁷, promote media freedom, fight against disinformation and propaganda, and provide educational programs and training sessions for journalists and media consumers.

The Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media (BROD) was launched at the end of 2022 with the aim of facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration between stakeholders from the two countries, bringing together experts to investigate the mechanisms of disinformation, providing regular fact-checks, participating in the development of media literacy programs in the region, and supporting independent journalism.

The two countries have also recently been added to the list of EU member states with [EDMO](#)⁷

hubs. The [Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media \(BROD\)](#)⁷ was launched at the end of 2022 with the aim of facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration between stakeholders from the two countries, bringing together experts to investigate the mechanisms of disinformation, providing regular fact-checks, participating in the development of media literacy programs in the region, and supporting independent journalism.

In Moldova, several CSO's, such as the [Independent Journalism Center](#)⁷, the [Media Azi](#)⁷, and the [Independent Press Association](#)⁷ (with its fact-checking platform - [Stopfals.md](#)⁷), monitor and expose disinformation in the media and social media, promote media literacy, and provide training sessions for journalists and media consumers.

The need to combat misleading information and disinformation, which have the potential to hurt society and undermine trust in institutions, is becoming more and more apparent in the Black Sea region. Numerous steps are being taken to inform people about these issues. Campaigns led by the Bulgarian Media Literacy Coalition have been effective. Their yearly activities, like [The Media Literacy Days](#)⁷, are organized in cooperation with the US Embassy to promote media literacy and assist people in differentiating between reliable and unreliable information.

Bloggers in Romania, like [Zaiafet](#)⁷, have taken on the task of debunking disinformation and misinformation. Zaiafet can deliver factual information and refute rumors by working with fact-checkers. These efforts have paid off, as their videos gain popularity on platforms like YouTube. The videos "[How to spot fake news](#)⁷" and "[Romania and climate change](#)⁷" are among the most famous examples.

The fight against disinformation and fake news in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova requires a multi-stakeholder approach that will involve governments, CSO's, media institutions, and citizens. The countries in the Black Sea region

can build more resilient and informed societies by promoting media literacy, raising awareness about disinformation, and providing tools and resources to identify and prevent the spread of fake news.

CSO's Needs and Gaps

Key needs and gaps appearing in all the region's countries based on in-depth interviews with activists and CSOs.



General needs, and challenges: CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova face similar challenges, including a lack of funding, the need for qualified human resources, and political pressure. Organizations cannot sustain core activities without sufficient funding, while insufficient funding makes it difficult to develop long-term strategies. Moreover, CSO's often depend on external funding sources, which puts them at the mercy of donors' priorities and interests. The need for qualified human resources in all areas is a chronic issue that affects the quality of work done by CSO's. Most CSO's work with recently graduated young people who need project management, conflict resolution, communication, and time management training. CSO staff also need to improve their skills in writing and managing funding applications and funding strategies.

Countering disinformation: CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova face the constant threat of disinformation, which affects their fieldwork and the public's trust in the sector's performance. Disinformation campaigns often target the vulnerable groups that these organizations serve, such as refugees or ethnic minorities, which poses a risk of social unrest and violence. In other cases, CSO staff who work in the field have been

victims of disinformation narratives. CSO's must, therefore, have the necessary skills to detect and fact-check disinformation and to explain its mechanism to their target groups. Additionally, CSO's need to develop tailored skill-building to prepare themselves in case of disinformation attacks on them or their constituents. CSO's also need to be proactive in anticipating fake news and develop the means to fight such disinformation. This requires additional funding for staff, technology solutions, and training.

Media literacy (critical thinking): CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova need to improve their media literacy skills, particularly by fostering critical thinking skills, in order to counter the spread of disinformation. Media literacy programs need to be institutionalized through public education, and teachers of all school subjects should be trained to analyze and counter various forms of disinformation. CSO's can be essential in promoting media literacy by organizing seminars, workshops, and training sessions for journalists, activists, and the general public; however, this requires additional funding and collaboration with educational institutions.

Positive/alternative campaigns: CSOs in Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova must develop

positive narratives around essential issues they want to push forward. This requires a professional approach to effective digital communication, but small CSO's cannot afford digitally savvy personnel. Therefore, they need to develop digital communication and cyber security skills. Additionally, CSO's need to improve their positive communication with the general public. Most CSO's operate under constant uncertainty and financial constraints, while competition for limited resources between established and newly created organizations impedes the proper functioning of the civil sector. These limitations make it harder for CSO's to invest in good communication strategies. CSO's need additional funding, training, and support to develop positive/alternative campaigns.

Communication: Effective communication is crucial for CSO's to raise awareness and attract supporters. CSO's must maintain and consistently update their digital assets, learn to use social media effectively, and regularly develop engaging and informative content and campaigns. Effective communication is essential for relationship-building with local communities, public institutions, and fundraising. Therefore, CSO's need additional funding, training, and support to improve their communication strategies.

Cyber safety and security: CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova must improve their cyber safety and security to protect their data, staff and

volunteers from cyber threats. CSO's often handle sensitive information, such as personal data, and must know how to access it and manage their relationship with public administrations. CSO's also need to be aware of cyber-attack risks and know how to protect themselves from phishing, malware, and other cyber threats. This requires additional funding, training, and support to improve cyber safety and security.

Personal/physical safety: CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova face physical and psychological threats, such as verbal and physical attacks or smear campaigns. They require mechanisms to protect their physical integrity and psychological well-being. Hostile attitude from political organizations and their supporters affects their public image and their relationship with local communities and public institutions. Therefore, CSO's need additional funding, training, and support to create mechanisms to protect their personal/physical safety.

Digital transformation-related issues: CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova must embrace digital transformation to improve their daily operations, data storage, and project management. Digital transformation can help CSO's become more efficient, effective and transparent, but more skills and resources are needed by CSO's in order to implement such a digital transformation.

Needs, challenges of frontliners involved in supporting Ukraine

The greatest current challenges: frontline civil society representatives involved in supporting

Ukraine face various challenges, including risks of physical harm, psychological hardships, and



risks related to cyber safety and security. These risks are magnified by the fact that refugees and people helping them are common targets of disinformation and hate campaigns. Frontliners must be equipped with the skills to detect and fact-check disinformation and to explain its mechanism to their communities. Additionally, they need to know how to counter disinformation and develop positive counternarratives around critical subjects, especially since refugees are sometimes misled by disinformation or misinformation about locals and host countries. Frontliners face physical and psychological threats, such as verbal and physical attacks or smear campaigns. They require mechanisms to protect their physical integrity and psychological well-being. The risk of cyber attacks is also a constant challenge that affects their daily operations and puts their data, staff, and volunteers at risk.

Type of support currently most needed:

Frontliners involved in supporting Ukraine need additional funding, staff, volunteers, and technology solutions to address their biggest challenges. They need funding to sustain their

core activities and develop long-term strategies, which are crucial in the context of a prolonged conflict. Moreover, they require additional specialized training to find better ways to promote positive messages that give local communities and Ukrainians confidence in their relationship as well as to keep host countries attuned to the problems faced by incoming refugees. Lastly, frontline workers would benefit from training and support to improve their cyber safety and security and protect their personal/physical safety. CSO's need staff and volunteers with the necessary skills to improve communication strategies. They need technology solutions to help them become more efficient, effective, and transparent.

Frontline workers need to know how to counter disinformation and develop positive counternarratives around critical subjects, especially since refugees are sometimes misled by disinformation or misinformation about locals and host countries.

Conclusion

CSO's in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova face various challenges that impact their development and ability to operate effectively. These challenges include a lack of funding as well as political pressures and pressures on their staff. CSO's face the threat of disinformation, which affects their work in the field and the public's trust in the sector's ability to carry out the work. CSO's need

additional funding, training and support to address these challenges as well as to improve their media literacy, communication strategies, cyber security, and staff safety. Front liners who provide help to Ukraine face similar challenges. They also need additional funding, staff, volunteers, and technology solutions to sustain their core activities.

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Icon Tags

Disinformation:

	NATO		EU		US
	LGBT		Women's rights		Elections
	War in Ukraine		Refugees from Ukraine		COVID

Needs and Gaps:

	Financial stability		Human resources		Countering disinformation skills and knowledge
	Media literacy and critical thinking		Effective communication		Cyber safety and security
	Relationship-building (media, state, local government)		Digital transformation		

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