

Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war

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Abstract

Russian disinformation carried out as part of the ongoing war in Ukraine is becoming a challenge for neighbouring countries that border the conflict region. The aim of the analysis was to identify common features between Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland, which, as two of the countries that border Ukraine, were on a list of Russia's main targets for disinformation in 2022. The geopolitical and historical importance of both countries increases their social polarisation. The study was therefore guided by the following research question: What common features can be distinguished between Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland? The research took the form of an open comparison. According to the approach used, the empirical cases used for comparison were not explicitly limited a priori. In order to carry out the research, however, preliminary assumptions were adopted that ensured temporal, conceptual, and interpretative comparability of the data. Research results proved that Russian disinformation in both countries is based on the following common features: creating internal divisions, propagation of distrust towards the West, stimulating social emotions, use of social media, and popularising pro-Russian narratives. Analysing these areas may be helpful in increasing the ability of states to detect and disclose disinformation. Scientific publications describing Russian disinformation focus on the national perspective, which does not always correspond to the transnational nature of disinformation campaigns. Meanwhile, this article synthesises knowledge about disinformation mechanisms occurring in two countries bordering the conflict region and draws attention to the need for research in this area.

Keywords

disinformation, strategic communication, information warfare, fake news, the Russo-Ukrainian war

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Introduction

In recent years, Russia has proven the effectiveness of combining traditional military operations with unconventional methods. In 2014, Ukraine felt the full force of the hybrid threat. At that time, the Russians presented a broad catalogue of irregular activities, the leading example of which was “little green men,” who occupied successive strategic objects in the alleged defence against—as they claimed—“the landing of Bandera commandos from Kiev.” All these actions were accompanied by attempts to integrate Crimea with Russia in the symbolic sphere. The Russian narrative referred to common history and the community of language and also emphasised the separateness of Crimea from Ukraine. The false messages spread argued that Ukrainian soldiers were massively switching over to the Russian side, while the Crimean operation was justified by the threat that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would seize the bases of the Russian fleet and the alleged threat to the Russian-speaking population. After the annexation of Crimea, the psychological war continued. The Russians caused conflicts between various ethnic groups, emphasised the role of extreme political parties, and presented Ukraine as a failed state. They also spread false information about, for example, the protests in Odessa. By showing photos of the fallen soldiers, efforts were made to discourage the population from taking any action. Ukrainian political conflicts and the issue of natural gas distribution were also highlighted. This was meant to destabilise the internal situation in Ukraine (Helma, 2018, pp. 95–96).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, proves that disinformation, sabotage, and propaganda campaigns are still crucial Russian weapons. In Russian propaganda, a “special military operation” was allegedly necessary to counter “the Nazis who terrorise Ukraine,” and Russian troops were to be welcomed to Ukraine with enthusiasm and gratitude. While the majority of the false information concerns Ukraine, Russia has stepped up disinformation activities targeting Western countries. However, countries adjacent to the region affected by the armed conflict are particularly vulnerable to hybrid attacks. They are currently experiencing unprecedented attacks as part of an ongoing information war.

This article gives examples of Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland, countries bordering Ukraine that are especially exposed to attempts to provoke social unrest. In both countries, geopolitical issues and historical events are instrumentalised for political purposes and particular interests, which make it difficult to build a strong state and a cohesive society (Głowacki and Kuś, 2019; Haider, 2022, p. 17; Solak, 2013). As a consequence, Moldovan and Polish societies are polarised, and their polarisation creates fertile ground for potential destabilisation (Horonziak, 2022). The final choice of countries results from a report prepared by the European External Action Service, that is, the European Union’s (EU) diplomatic service. In the aforementioned report, Moldova and Poland were on a list of the main targets for Russian disinformation and manipulation in 2022. In addition to Ukraine, Poland and Moldova, the main targets of Russian disinformation and manipulation include the United States, Great Britain, and Germany (Płomecka, 2023).

The aim of the conducted research is to identify common features between Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland. The study was guided by the following research question: What common features can be distinguished between Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland? The research took the form of an open comparison, in which the scope of empirical cases used for comparison was not limited *a priori*. This selection was determined by the pattern of interpretation that emerged during the analysis (Konecki, 2000, p. 61). In contrast to the closed comparative method, the research was not preceded

by the selection of specific comparative groups. However, considering the need to organise the research and ensure its accuracy, preliminary methodological conditions were established to guarantee the equivalence of the analysis conducted in both countries. These conditions aimed to ensure temporal, conceptual, and interpretive comparability (Szarucki, 2010, pp. 59–60). The information collected for the analysis was qualitative, and the criterion for its selection was the military context of Russian disinformation, and cases targeting the military activity of the respective country were chosen. These are the cases which, in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, supported the national interests of the Russian Federation and influenced the sense of security of Moldovan and Polish societies and their perception of current events. To maintain temporal equivalence, cases occurring from September 2021 to January 2023 were selected in both countries. Striving to ensure equivalence of the research topic, the analysis of events in both countries was based on the same terminology and similar interpretive approach while considering the specific conditions in each country. Following Cheng (1984, pp. 90–94), it was assumed that comparative research would help identify specific qualitative features present in both countries in the area of disinformation. The research process therefore contained the following stages: defining the research problem, gathering empirical data, and processing and analysing it. It ended with activities consisting in interpreting the obtained results and indicating the established relationships (Szarucki, 2010, pp. 62–64). The case studies allow us to broaden our knowledge about the disinformation that Russia is disseminating in countries neighbouring the conflict region. Researching the manifestations of disinformation is—according to Volkoff (1991, p. 16)—necessary in the process of developing preventive measures and building social resilience in this area. The definition of disinformation adopted in the analysis is, moreover, the proposal of Volkoff (1991, p. 8), who understands that it as a weapon of war—a weapon that serves to mislead in a systematic and professional manner and which is carried out through the media. Disinformation is addressed to the public, and its goal is to implement a consistent programme aimed at replacing in the minds of the masses views that are unfavourable from the disinformant's point of view with those that he considers beneficial to himself. Disinformation, however, is not about making the disinformed believe a given piece of information but about modifying their reactions in line with the disinformant's intentions.

Literature review

Although the topic of disinformation is increasingly discussed in the public discourse, the scientific literature shows gaps in this area that need to be filled. It is difficult to find coherent studies on Russian disinformation in Moldova, Poland, and other countries bordering the conflict region, although there are valuable source materials in which similar cases are described separately. These publications reliably reflect the context of this research. They are listed in this section, which places this analysis in a broader research field and justifies the need for this type of research. They prove the continued intensity of Russian disinformation, which requires constant systematisation of knowledge in this area. The results of the literature review presented in this section prove the multitude of publications on Russian disinformation in Poland as well as the multitude of publications on Russian disinformation in Moldova. However, it is difficult to find studies that focus on more than one country that borders the conflict region, and this paper emphasises the need for such research. In this context, Pérez-Escobar et al. (2023) provide a fair review of what is already known about disinformation. The authors associate the development of interdisciplinary research on disinformation with the COVID-19 pandemic and call for the scientific community to focus on this issue after the pandemic subsides. They see the need to expand the scope of research, and in their opinion, it is crucial to analyse the ways

in which the emotions of recipients can be manipulated. The lack of such research makes it difficult to build citizens' resilience to the damaging effects of fake news.

A large body of research has reliably detailed Russian disinformation activities, with significant contributions from [Karpchuk and Yuskiv \(2021\)](#), [Sazhniev and Sułkowska \(2020\)](#), and [Vaišnys \(2017\)](#). The context of the Russian-Ukrainian war has been further analysed by [Chapkovski and Schaub \(2022\)](#) and [Terracciano \(2023\)](#). Although these publications describe the mechanisms of Russian disinformation thoroughly, they do not cover disinformation activities in Moldova and Poland.

[Cravcenco-Zaharia \(2022\)](#) offers a comprehensive description of the context and general figures on disinformation in Moldova. The publication can be used as a concise introduction to the topic of disinformation in Moldova, the scale of which [Cravcenco-Zaharia \(2022\)](#) outlines by referring to disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war. One of the author's recommendations is to increase the awareness of Moldovan society about disinformation. [Holdis' \(2020\)](#) study complements [Cravcenco-Zaharia's \(2022\)](#) study by investigating why Moldovans are vulnerable to disinformation. Explaining linguistic determinants, [Holdis \(2020\)](#) points out that Moldovan society is a potential target audience for at least three neighbouring countries: Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. Access to diverse information services is conducive to the clash of different narratives. [Saran's \(2018\)](#) research further specifies regional vulnerabilities within Moldova, identifying Gagauzia, Balti, and Transnistria as areas highly susceptible to Russian propaganda. Gagauzia, Balti municipality, and Transnistria are places where Russian disinformation can easily find an audience. Separatist tendencies, ideological indoctrination, and distortion of history continue to be challenges in these regions. [Marin \(2018\)](#) examines the Moldovan media sector, not omitting the topic of counteracting disinformation. Similarly, [Bucataru \(2018, p. 2\)](#) argues that Moldova's underdeveloped media market was easy for Russia to exploit due to its "Soviet heritage": "Pro-Russian sentiment in the country's ethnically diverse population—combined with a nostalgia for the past usually strongest in the older generation—simplified the spread of false information throughout the country." For a broader perspective, [Boulègue et al. \(2018\)](#) discuss building social resilience against Russian influence across Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus. They suggest solutions for recognising Russian interference and come up with adequate reactions, and finally develop a set of valuable conclusions and recommendations. These issues are also analysed by the [Institute for European Politics \(IEP\)](#), the [Institute for Strategic Initiatives \(IPIS\)](#) and the [Institute for European Policies and Reforms \(IPRE\) \(2021\)](#) as part of the project "inforMD." These publications are reliable sources of information about disinformation in Moldova. Their authors focus on the context of the problem and the factors that increase the susceptibility of society to manipulation. However, the literature on the subject still lacks references to specific examples of attempted disinformation. There are also too few comparisons of the situation in Moldova with disinformation aimed at other countries. The only comparative analysis is proposed by the aforementioned [Boulègue et al. \(2018\)](#), who analysed the scale of this problem in Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine. However, the analysis was prepared before the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine and Russia's intensification of its disinformation activities. Comparative analyses of current struggles in this area would allow for more accurate selection and creation of tools for international cooperation to counter disinformation. The legitimacy of such analyses is confirmed in the research by [Radnitz \(2022\)](#), who analysed the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and exposure to Russian state propaganda in two countries bordering Russia: Georgia and Kazakhstan. The results of Radnitz's research showed that contact with Russian propaganda via television and the Internet (including social media) has a minimal impact on respondents' support for

conspiracy theories. Comparative analyses can therefore shed new light on the factors that underlie a belief in fake news.

The literature on Russian disinformation in Poland also requires significant development. [Whyte \(2020\)](#) investigates cyber-enabled influence operations as a multi-faceted challenge to democracy in the digital age. [Whyte \(2020, p. 3\)](#) analyses Russian interference in Western democracies—“In countries like Poland, familiarity with Russian methods of propaganda (...) has led to concern about interference manifesting itself alongside acceptance of the value of new age media manipulation for political purposes by internal actors.” [Rosińska's \(2021\)](#) qualitative research shows that in 2019, the thematic area particularly exposed to disinformation in Poland was politics. Among the fake news in the Polish-language online media, content related to the authorities prevailed, most of which was anti-government or anti-nationalist. [Rosińska \(2021\)](#) also pointed out the longevity of anti-vaccination content, pointing to the global impact of fake news and calls for action to prevent its spread. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, disinformation activities stimulating anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Poland were intensified ([Staniurski, 2022](#)). The scale of the problem of disinformation in Poland is escalating. The country is subjected to significant disinformation pressure, which in the conditions of increasing social polarisation is sometimes treated as an element of modern political arsenal ([Filipec, 2022](#); [Gorwa, 2017](#); [Jacuch, 2022](#); [Kmicik, 2020](#); [Olchowski, 2018](#); [Wawrzusiszyn, 2022](#)). Although there are still no specific legal and institutional solutions that would effectively counteract disinformation, false information is effectively demythologised by Polish fact-checking organisations. As in the case of the Republic of Moldova, the need to develop research on disinformation in Poland is clear. This type of research is necessary for the search for effective solutions to combat social manipulation, and comparative analyses would facilitate cooperation in this area.

Disinformation aimed at Moldova

In the context of the regional insecurity environment in Eastern Europe, at the military, political, and energy levels, we also note the activation, without precedent, of the disinformation campaigns initiated by the Russian Federation, disseminated on the territory of the states in the region, including the Republic of Moldova. These campaigns are carried out through three sizeable information sources represented by the media product of Russian origin, the media product promoted in international sources, and information elaborated and disseminated on the territory of the target country; in this case, the Republic of Moldova. In 2018, legislation, such as Code No. 174 (of 8 November 2018), was approved by the audio-visual media services of the Republic of Moldova, developed in order to combat disinformation and media, informative-analytical, military and political products that are developed in the states that have not ratified the European Convention on cross-border television. The code in question is also known in the Moldovan press as the “Anti-Propaganda Law.” Although legislation in this sense was drafted and approved, which was subsequently cancelled (2020) on several segments of content by the pro-Russian parties in Chisinau, and currently restored to a working level, today, it is attested to a less positive dynamics regarding the fight against disinformation in the Republic of Moldova. The situation can be explained by the conditions in which the TV stations that rebroadcast Russian media products remain the preference of Moldovans. Most senior citizens have access to this source of information ([The Institute for European Politics, the Institute for Strategic Initiatives and the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, 2021, p. 7](#)). Notably, Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova is broadcast not only on TV stations but also through social networks, news portals, print media, and satellite TV stations. All have full support of pro-Russian parties and the separatist region of

Transnistria ([The Institute for European Politics, the Institute for Strategic Initiatives and the Institute for European Policies and Reforms, 2021](#), p. 38).

During the current war in Ukraine, a lot of false and unfounded news has been reported in the Republic of Moldova, aimed at destabilising the situation in the country. Much of it primarily targeted the force structures of the state. Amongst evidence for this is the false information released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. This includes the Republic of Moldova being armed by NATO countries, without anyone knowing what is really happening in the country's military structure. The speech delivered on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow was also used by the self-proclaimed leader of the Transnistrian region, Vadim Krasnoselski, who also declared himself worried about the possibility of Western partners supplying the Republic of Moldova with weapons against the background of the war in Ukraine ([Untila, 2022](#)). In fact, support granted by the EU as part of the European Peace Facility (EPF) programme is sufficiently transparent to refute these claims ([Council of the European Union, 2023](#)). At the same time, following the principle of defensive sufficiency reflected in the national legislation of the Republic of Moldova, and also with the provisions of documents, such as The Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), the Vienna Document on Confidence and Security-Building Measures (CSBM), to which the Republic of Moldova is a party, and also the Government decision regarding transparency in the decision-making process, the Republic of Moldova reports annually and ensures sufficient transparency regarding all information related to the national armed forces.

More fake news is related to possible mobilisation in the Republic of Moldova ([Gonczarowa, 2022](#)). Economic agents have requested information about personnel because they are preparing for mobilisation. The disinformation regarding the possible mobilisation to be declared on the territory of the Republic of Moldova continues, with false information appearing in Russian media sources that the head of state, Maia Sandu, is preparing to announce military mobilisation throughout the country (see Figure 1). Another version

Figure 1. Fake news about preparations for military mobilisation in Moldova ([Gonczarowa, 2022](#)).
Screen contents: Preparation of military mobilisation in Moldova is clear. WarGonzo: Moldovan President Maia Sandu is preparing to announce military mobilisation in the country.



WarGonzo: президент Молдавии
Майя Санду готовится объявить
военную мобилизацию в стране

of this fake news is that the Republic of Moldova is preparing to carry out large-scale military mobilisation in Moldova, together with the armed forces of Romania, to open an additional front for Russia.

It should be noted that under national Law No. 212/2004 regarding the state of emergency, siege, and war regime, mobilisation starts once a state of siege or war is declared. The Parliament of the Republic of Moldova declares mobilisation after it is proposed by the Supreme Security Council, and the President of the Republic of Moldova can declare, with the approval of the Parliament, partial or general mobilisation. Currently, there is no state of siege in the Republic of Moldova, and there are no grounds for declaring mobilisation.

Further, false information was spread in the online environment claiming that armoured vehicles and equipment from the Romanian army would have been transported via railway in the Republic of Moldova ([Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Moldova, 2022a](#)).

As can be seen in Figure 2, the video sequences with the said technique are not related to the conduct of the multinational exercise “JCET 2022” at the training centres of the National Army. According to the [Ministry of National Defence of Romania \(2022\)](#), a column of military equipment of the 15th Mechanised Brigade “Podu Înalt” from Iași (Romania), which is returning from the multinational exercise “ZIMBRUL 22,” held on 3–12 October 2022 in the Combat Training Centre “Smârdan,” from Galați (Romania).

Figure 2. Fake news about transferring military equipment to Moldova from Romania ([Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Moldova, 2022a](#)). Screen contents: Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Moldova. The disinformation continues. The information spread in the online environment, claiming that armoured personnel carriers and equipment belonging to the Romanian army were transported on railway platforms in the Republic of Moldova, is false. The video sequences with the respective technique have no connection with the multinational exercise “JCET 2022” at the training centres of the National Army.



Figure 3. Fake news about a massacre that allegedly threatens Gagauzia (Pylev, 2022). Screen contents: Massacre is brewing in Gagauzia: can Russia stop it? Chisinau is transferring heavy weapons to the autonomy in addition to special forces. In Moldova, a massacre can begin at any moment. And this is not about Transnistria but about another part of the Republic, also oriented towards Russia–Gagauzia. According to local telegram channels, heavy military equipment is now being sent there. Taking into account that earlier special forces were transferred to the autonomy, a military operation may be launched to cleanse Gagauzia from dissidents: those who see their future not with NATO but with Russia. Can we do something to help Gagauzia?



6 **РОССИЯ** 
Выбрать город

Меню  Сделано в России  Шоубиз

Европа 12 сентября 2022

В Гагаузии назревает бойня: может ли Россия ее остановить



Кишинев перебрасывает в автономию тяжёлое вооружение в дополнение к спецназу.

В Молдове в любой момент может начаться бойня. И речь не о Приднестровье, а о другой, также ориентированной на Россию части республики – Гагаузии. По сообщению местных телеграмм-каналов туда сейчас стягивается тяжёлая военная техника. С учетом, что ранее в автономию был переброшен спецназ, не исключено начало силовой операции по зачистке Гагаузии от инакомыслящих: тех, кто видит свое будущее не с НАТО, а с Россией. Можем ли мы сейчас чем-то помочь гагаузам?

To destabilise the situation regarding Gagauzia achieving territorial autonomy from the Republic of Moldova, Russian media spread fake news that a massacre in Moldova could start at any moment (see Figure 3). And it was not about Transnistria but about another part of the Republic, also oriented towards Russia–Gagauzia (Pylev, 2022). In this case, it should be noted that on 12–23 September 2022, the National Army carried out the “Scutul de foc 2022” exercise with the involvement of military equipment and artillery systems. Military equipment on national roads has become the subject of misinformation and speculation on social networks. Some comments have appeared that this is NATO equipment, with which the Alliance would like to destabilise the situation in the country. Falsehoods are spreading in the Gagauzia autonomy that this technique is used to suppress “protests in the region,” and Russian websites write that “Chisinau is preparing a massacre in Gagauzia.”

In the online environment, video sequences are used with the movement, on national roads, of columns of military equipment belonging to the US Army. In this regard, the [Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Moldova \(2022b\)](#) mentions that the respective videos are not current. The images were taken during the 2016 Moldovan-American “Dragon Pioneer” exercise.

All this fake news cannot be effectively fought in the Republic of Moldova. This happens because, at the level of institutions, it is perceived that media education belongs only to the country's leading factors and military institutions which do not have well-defined mechanisms to combat disinformation. At the same time, the intensity of the disinformation process remains somewhat within the reach and responsibility of civil society institutions, including media campaigns, such as "Stop false," and other information sources with selective activity in the section combating false information. The examples cited above are just a few of a much higher amount. Attempts to destabilise the Republic of Moldova are related not only to the information space but also to other areas. These are energy blackmail and the organisation of protests following the replacement of the state leadership and are all part of hybrid aggression by the Russian Federation.

Disinformation aimed at Poland

In 2021, an operation destabilising the Polish-Belarusian border began, carried out by Belarusian services acting for the Kremlin. Russian-Belarusian actions against Poland are based on methods typical of hybrid aggression. Reports from the Polish Border Guard and intelligence data show that many potential migrants still reach Belarus, where they are cynically exploited. They are a tool in the hands of authoritarian regimes that are intentionally generating a vast migratory movement ([PolskieRadio24, 2021](#)). In Poland's perception, the accumulation of migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border is an unprecedented hybrid attack faced by the Polish Army and services subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior and Administration. From the beginning of 2021, Belarus eased visa regulations for residents of the Middle East, and Belarusian travel agencies offered them transport as part of a new migration route to the EU ([Bryjka and Legucka, 2021](#)). Migrants who appeared *en masse* at the Belarusian-Polish border came to Belarus at the invitation and with the official consent of the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs as tourists and stayed in Belarus legally. They were then transported to the vicinity of the border, which with the help of Belarusian officers, they had tried to cross illegally ([Service of the Republic of Poland, 2021](#)). Belarusians damaged fences, made numerous provocations, distracted officers and soldiers, and built infrastructure that allowed migrants to walk freely along the border, even across marshy areas ([Kurzejewski, 2022](#), p. 16). As a result of these actions, the Baltic states had to deal with an increase in the number of illegal border crossings and attempts to enter the Schengen area by force. The practice of smuggling illegal migrants across the Belarusian-Polish border, adopted by Belarusians, was systemic and well-organised. From the beginning, it was accompanied by intensified manipulative actions that posed a challenge to managing the crisis at the border. They were most intense from September to the end of November 2021, which reflects the increased public and media interest in the situation at the border.

Russia and Belarus maintained a coherent narrative. They accused Poland of not respecting international law and of lacking humanitarianism. It was an attempt to undermine the authority of Poland in the international arena and to present the country as being reluctant to accept migrants. Disinformation activities using the humanitarian argument were based on emotions, highlighting children and women in accounts from the border, who actually constituted a minority of migrants. The aforementioned media narrative about the inhumane treatment of migrants accompanied this. Disseminating statements about the alleged brutality of Polish services was the gravest example of disinformation. Migrants were forced to provide staged comments or to participate in productions with banners prepared by the Belarusian services. The Russian and Belarusian media presented Polish officers and soldiers as aggressors. Although some Polish media carried these posts, their impact on society was small. This was because of the Belarusian tendency to lack

moderation in fabricating messages. This tendency is well reflected in the commitment to disseminating the Belarusian propaganda of a deserter from the Polish Army, who was persuaded to tell absurd stories about the numerous murders of migrants that were allegedly committed by Polish soldiers. Efforts were made to undermine the trust of Polish citizens in the uniformed services ([Kurzejewski, 2022](#), p. 16).

As part of exerting migratory pressure, disinformation campaigns also supported force-based solutions. On 15 November 2021, a group of several thousand migrants under the supervision of Belarusian officers was brought to the closed border point in Bruzgi, where they prepared to push across the Polish border. The aggressive attack on the Polish border, which took place the next day, was coordinated by the Belarusian services and supported by disinformation activities, in which the regime's media was brought in, and women and children were brought to the fore ([Spokesman of the Minister-Special Services Coordinator, 2021](#)). In Poland, the activity of Russian-speaking bots also peaked in November 2021. This coincided with the publication on the Russian social network VKontakte of accusations of chaos on the border, directed at "European fascists" and "hypocritical Poland." The increased activity of bots was a reaction to the considerations of Poland and the Baltic states regarding the launch of Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty in response to the mass crossings of migrants from Belarus. In the case of VKontakte, the largest number of messages from bots was recorded on 2 February 2022, and they concerned questioning Ukraine's chances of joining the EU and NATO. In the following days, about 40% of Russian and 50% of English-language tweets came from bots. The Russian-language tweets mainly concerned the arrival of the British army in Poland, and the English-language tweets usually spread the headline of the Politico website article entitled "Ukraine links arms with Turkey, Poland and UK as NATO membership remains distant" ([Demagog, 2022a](#)).

The artificially induced crisis on the eastern border of the EU and NATO's eastern flank is a typical example of hybrid actions. Through them, Russia and Belarus tested the capabilities of the Polish armed forces and the reactions of the West. Their goal was, among others, the polarisation of both EU and NATO societies and their internal destabilisation. It was suggested in the Russian and Belarusian media that the West was to blame for causing the border conflict. Information was spread that Western military operations had led to crises forcing people to migrate. Furthermore, the purpose of the disinformation was to undermine the image of the Baltic states, which was reflected in the message that Poland was allegedly unable to ensure the security of the EU's external border ([Demagog, 2022b](#)).

The situation on the border not only forced Poland to increase the efforts of state services to protect it but also constituted an attempt to influence the public mood. In addition, it is partially distracted from Russian activities in Ukraine or the South Caucasus ([Dyner, 2022](#), pp. 2–8). Disinformation was chiefly disseminated via social media, and a significant share of disinformation was spread by pro-Kremlin media ([DebunkEU, 2021](#)). Although the plot used by Belarus and Russia was coherent, Russian propaganda was less radical in this context—Russian journalists did not avoid critical comments about Alexander Lukashenka's regime to create an image of Russia as a constructive partner and intermediary in any talks between Belarus and the EU. The Kremlin presented Belarus' actions as justified and aligned with international law. Nonetheless, reservations remained about them in order to refute allegations that the Russians were jointly responsible for the escalation of the migration crisis and for organising incidents on the border. The involvement of Belarus allowed the Russians to use the border crisis to exert political pressure on Western countries without formally bearing any responsibility ([Żochowski, 2021](#)).

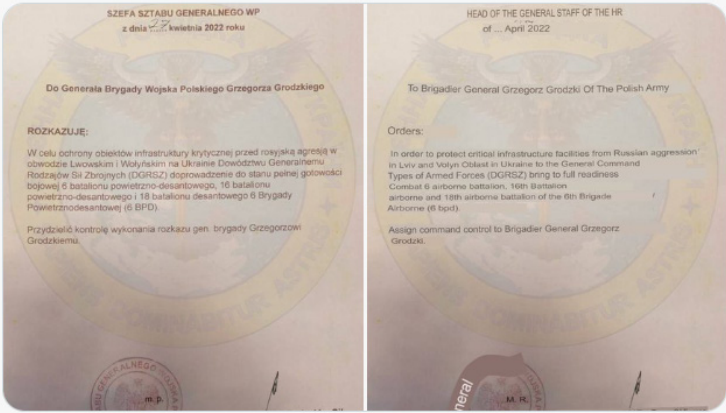
As the Russo-Ukrainian war unfolds, Poland continues to experience further disinformation campaigns. The leading direction is to stimulate anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western and anti-government sentiments. Fake news is spread that Poland is subject to Ukrainianisation, and Poles are becoming citizens of the “second category.” This is manifested, for example, by their allegedly limited access to health care, as opposed to Ukrainians residing in Poland (Marek, 2022). In May 2022, some social media profiles reported that the Polish government had sent soldiers to fight in Ukraine. Russian media was again the source of the news. The first references of this sort appeared on the Russian-language Telegram channels linked to the Kremlin. The supposed proof was a military order to deploy Polish soldiers in the western part of Ukraine to protect critical infrastructure in its area. As can be seen in Figure 4, the Polish General Command of the Armed Forces denied the false information. It also said it had seen similar information supported by false documents (Demagog, 2022c).

In the second half of 2022, Russia spread fake news regarding a referendum on “separating” Lviv from Ukraine and incorporating it into Poland. Information posted on social media, especially on Russian Telegram channels, was to be authenticated with photos of voting cards. The fabricated cards showed the markings of the Polish National Electoral Commission (see Figure 5), which denied any preparations to hold the alleged referendum. At the same time, it ensured that it did not use, nor had it ever used, the stamps and seals shown in the photos. The purpose was not only to hit Polish-Ukrainian relations but also to “confirm” the legality of the annexation of Ukrainian territories by Russia.

Figure 4. Reaction of the Polish army general command to false reports (Armed Forces General Command, 2022).

OSINTdefender @sentdefender · May 3, 2022

There is an Order by the Polish General Staff going around that appears to show that multiple Polish Airborne Units have been put on High Combat Readiness near the Polish-Ukrainian Border so that they can push into the Lviv and Volyn Regions of Western Ukraine to secure Targets.



SZEFA SZTABU GENERALNEGO WP
z dnia 2 kwietnia 2022 roku

Do Generała Brygady Wojska Polskiego Grzegorza Grodzkiego

ROZKAZUJĘ:

W celu ochrony obiektów infrastruktury krytycznej przed rosyjską agresją w obszarze Łwowa i Wołyńskiem na Ukrainie Dowództwu Generalnemu Rodzajów Sił Zbrojnych (DGRSZ) doprowadzenie do stanu pełnej gotowości bojowej 5 batalionu powietrzno-desantowego, 16 batalionu powietrzno-desantowego i 18 batalionu desantowego 6 Brygady Powietrznodesantowej (6 BFD).

Przydziel kontrolę wykonania rozkazu gen. brygady Grzegorzowi Grodzkiemu.

HEAD OF THE GENERAL STAFF OF THE HR
of ... April 2022

To Brigadier General Grzegorz Grodzki Of The Polish Army

Orders:

In order to protect critical infrastructure facilities from Russian aggression in Lviv and Volyn Oblast in Ukraine to the General Command Types of Armed Forces (DGRSZ) bring to full readiness Combat 6 airborne battalion, 16th Battalion airborne and 18th airborne battalion of the 6th Brigade Airborne (6 BFD).

Assign command control to Brigadier General Grzegorz Grodzki.

268 273 1.1K

Dowództwo Generalne @DGeneralneRSZ

We have noticed this document on a few TT accounts. This is a false order of the Polish General Staff. The whole document is FAKE! We observe more and more such counterfeit military documents in Polish mass media. Please, DO NOT share this FAKE NEWS !! @MON_GOV_PL @SztabGenWP

11:41 AM · May 3, 2022

Figure 5. Fabricated ballots published to authenticate Russian fake news about alleged Polish attempts to annex Ukrainian territories ([Military Columnist, 2022](#)).



Photos of ballots have appeared online, allegedly taken in the building of the Lviv regional administration in Ukraine, in which citizens are invited to vote on the issue of the region joining Poland.

#Ukraine

[@new_militarycolumnist](#)

t.me/new_militarycolumnist/92635

91.1K

Sep 27, 2022 at 18:34

This would mean that not only Russia is “taking” Ukrainian lands, but also neighbouring countries are trying to “tear off” a piece of Ukraine. This disinformation did not bring the expected results in the international information space ([Samus, 2022](#)).

Another example of disseminating false information is the information dated June 2022 about the beating of a disabled Pole by a group of Ukrainians—the identity or nationality of the perpetrators was not actually established. The Russians are trying to stimulate aversion to Ukrainians. They want to divide Polish society from the Ukrainians. There are also Russian reports about the “economic occupation of Ukraine” carried out by Poland. For this purpose, the Russians used the news about constructing a pipeline between Ukraine and Poland, through which Ukrainian sunflower oil could be transported to the Polish and European markets. Although the project aims to shape new export routes for Ukrainian products, Russia presented the situation aggressively, accusing Poland of the economic occupation of Ukraine ([Samus, 2022](#)). At the same time, the Russians call all manifestations of counteracting Russian disinformation the “Russophobic” policy of the Polish government.

The beginning of 2023 saw a continuation of the disinformation activities initiated in March 2022 regarding the mobilisation allegedly carried out by the Polish Army. After the start of the Russian invasion, the Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland warned against fake SMS messages that suggested the announcement of “1st-degree mobilisation of the Polish State.” The information concerned the mandatory appearances at the military draft office and Voivodship military headquarters. The alleged mobilisation of the army and the topic of extensive military training in Poland are issues used not only

to misinform Poles but also to fuel anti-Polish sentiments among Russians and create an image of Poland's intensive preparations for war. In November 2022, photos of men in Polish army uniforms appeared on Twitter, accompanied by Russian-language captions: "Mobilisation in Poland." In reality, it was a photo of a reservist exercise posted in September by one of the logistic brigades. A month later, Russian-language Twitter entries indicated that Poles fled *en masse* to Germany to avoid being summoned for military exercises. Neither the Polish military recruitment centres nor the Polish Border Guard recorded such signals. In January 2023, a recording titled: "It's not a joke! In Poland, they are handing out a summons" was posted on the YouTube channel of a Russian living in Poland. It was more a fake news about the alleged mobilisation of the army ([FakeHunter, 2023](#)).

Common features between Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland

The article gives examples of Russian disinformation aimed at Moldova and Poland, countries bordering Ukraine that are particularly vulnerable to attempts to cause social unrest. The examples cited fall within the definition of the disinformation proposed by [Volkoff \(1991\)](#), quoted in the introduction. They confirm that disinformation can be used to wage war. It is addressed to the public and conducted in a systematic way, and the main channel of its dissemination is, as Volkoff emphasised, the mass media. A review of the mentioned examples provides a basis for identifying common features between Russian disinformation in Moldova and Poland.

Creating internal divisions

In both cases, Russian disinformation exploits existing social divisions or creates new ones in order to weaken social unity and destabilise the country. In Moldova, Russian interference is fostered by the conflict in Transnistria—a self-proclaimed republic dominated by its Russian-speaking population. Russia is constantly striving to expand its sphere of influence and dominance in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, it seeks to minimise the influence of the West. In the case of Moldova, Russian disinformation may therefore focus on promoting separatism and undermining the country's sovereignty. In the case of Poland, the Kremlin mainly uses the existing political tensions and historical conflicts to fuel internal divisions.

Propagation of distrust towards the West

Undermining trust in NATO, the EU, and the United States is an integral part of the Kremlin narrative. Since the late 1990s, Russia has been striving to expand its sphere of influence and treats Western political and military structures as a threat to its own interests.

Stimulating social emotions

The Kremlin is trying to stimulate social emotions. One example is false information related to the mobilisation of armed forces in both countries. Evoking extreme social emotions is conducive to accusations of offensive plans and preparations for war. There are many attempts to destabilise public opinion using absurd narratives. Another example is that the Kremlin treats the civilian population instrumentally, stimulating demographic processes, especially the so-called migration stream. The cynical exploitation of migrants,

supported by an information and psychological operation, can weaken the defence capabilities of the state and have a destructive impact on its connections. Presenting large groups of migrants as refugees in need of help creates difficulties in defending the state border—the use of military means as a response to attempts to cross the border illegally may be compromising and unacceptable to some public opinion.

Use of social media

Both Moldova and Poland are particularly vulnerable to hybrid attacks and attempts to cause social unrest. In both cases, false information is provided quickly through many channels—it is spread as part of official communications from Russian ministries and politicians, press agencies and media subordinated to the authorities. Seemingly independent bloggers also spread a range of false information. Cyberspace creates particularly fertile ground for justifying the official propaganda line. In both Moldova and Poland, Russian disinformation fabricates sources and tries to push them into the minds of Internet users via social media. It uses fake accounts, fabricated graphics and videos, and manipulates algorithms. The Kremlin does not monopolise its version of events but provides a huge amount of alternative information, confusing the recipients and undermining their faith in a single, unquestionable narrative.

Popularising pro-Russian narratives

Kremlin's disinformation promotes ideas that support Russian interests. In order to reach a wide audience, it also uses traditional media. In Poland, the fight against Kremlin propaganda was facilitated by the resolution of the National Broadcasting Council adopted on the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—the resolution concerned the deletion of Russian TV channels from the programme register, such as Russia Today (RT), RT Documentary, RTR Planeta, Soyuz TV, and Rossija 24. Moldova is also taking steps to block Kremlin propaganda. An example is the reaction of the audiovisual council of the Republic of Moldova, which in June 2022 fined NTV Moldova, which is linked to the Russian oil company Gazprom, €900. The reason was the spread of Russian propaganda. For the same reasons, in December 2022, the authorities in Chisinau revoked the licences of six television stations: Primul în Moldova, RTR Moldova, Accent TV, NTV Moldova, TV6, and Orhei TV. These six TV channels rebroadcast propaganda from the Russian Federation and reported on events in Moldova and the war in Ukraine in a manipulative way. The influence of pro-Russian media is a significant challenge for Moldova. Russia has destabilised the country for many years due to the occupation of troops stationed in Transnistria. The fight against the Kremlin's propaganda is therefore hindered by pro-Russian media. It creates an alternative reality and is accompanied by sabotage activities. One example is the attack on the territory of Transnistria, after which the authorities of the self-proclaimed republic dominated by the Russian-speaking population blamed Ukrainian militants. They also argued that there was a “Polish thread” in this case—they even presented fake videos with a Polish car in an attack on one of the targets. It turned out that the Polish licence plate shown in the film was assigned to a completely different car.

Conclusions

The conducted research was qualitative in nature. The case studies have increased knowledge about the disinformation spread by Russia in countries neighbouring the conflict region. The analysed examples prove that Russian disinformation activities are

multidimensional and involve the entire state apparatus. Kremlin's activity in this case is continuous. It is not carried out periodically and its intensity is constant. This means that counteracting Kremlin's propagandists (although it exposes Russian lies) does not reduce the intensity of disinformation. Therefore, it is necessary to build social resistance to manipulation. Fake information being a tool of the Kremlin's aggressive policy can influence the behaviour and attitudes of citizens and decision-makers in various countries. Effective defence against organised disinformation requires multi-faceted expert analyses and international cooperation. At the level of the Central and Eastern European regions, whose countries are constantly experiencing Russian disinformation activities, it is necessary to integrate efforts to develop media education and conduct a coherent information policy. The transnational nature of disinformation campaigns proves the need to strengthen coordinated, joint, and interstate responses. However, the implementation of practical solutions must be preceded by the development of solid theoretical foundations, which determine the need to systematise the issue of disinformation. This article contributes to drawing attention to the need for research on Russian disinformation conducted in countries bordering Ukraine near the conflict region. However, further research is still needed for the effectiveness of Russian disinformation on specific target groups. The use of quantitative methods would increase the effectiveness of such research, although gathering comparable information in international comparative analysis is a challenge. Regardless of the method adopted, it is assumed that in the longer term, research in this area may be helpful in increasing the ability of states and international institutions to detect, analyse, and disclose disinformation.

It should also be noted that this study has potential limitations. The disinformation activity of the Russian Federation is continuous and carried out through many channels, which significantly hinders comprehensive analysis. Reliable research is not facilitated by numerous non-scientific journalistic materials. To overcome this limitation, research published in reputable peer-reviewed journals should be sought first. The authors of this study attempted to accomplish this task as part of a literature review.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.Z. and M.B.; methodology, M.Z. and M.B.; formal analysis, M.Z. and M.B.; resources, M.Z. and M.B.; data curation, M.Z. and M.B.; writing—original draft preparation, M.Z. and M.B.; writing—review and editing, M.Z. Both authors read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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