THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN ENSURING ELECTORAL TRANSPARENCY AND COMBATING DISINFORMATION[1]

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Abstract: *Electoral transparency, a cornerstone of democratic governance, ensures public trust and accountability in the electoral process. However, the spread of false information poses significant challenges to maintaining transparency, undermining voter confidence and skewing election outcomes. This essay explores how important strategic communication is in tackling these issues, emphasising how it can protect election integrity and stop the spread of false information. The paper investigates how strategic communication promotes transparency by distributing correct information, advancing civic education, and stimulating stakeholder participation, drawing on case studies and theoretical frameworks. It also looks at how well proactive and reactive communication tactics work to combat misinformation campaigns, highlighting the significance of timing, audience targeting, and message framing. The study emphasises the necessity of a multi-stakeholder strategy that includes media, electoral commissions. The study emphasises the necessity of a multi-stakeholder strategy that includes media outlets, civil society organisations, and election commissions in order to coordinate efforts to detect, disprove, and lessen the impact of false narratives. According to the findings, an integrated communication strategy that makes use of both digital and conventional media platforms can greatly improve the public's capacity to identify reliable information, hence enhancing election openness. By providing practical advice for practitioners and policymakers in creating robust electoral communication frameworks, this study adds to the conversation on democracy and communication.*

Keywords: *misinformation, campaign finance, election monitoring, Moldova, governance, democracy, electoral transparency, and strategic communication.*

Introduction

Particularly in nations going through transition like Moldova, strategic communication and election transparency are crucial elements of democratic governance. Transparency makes

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election processes transparent, accountable, and publically trusted. Meanwhile, strategic communication fights disinformation, increases public understanding of democratic processes, and boosts public trust in democratic institutions. However, previous elections in Moldova have shown systemic flaws, particularly the influence of disinformation campaigns, the tardiness in announcing election results, and the opaqueness of campaign money.

In the modern era, election transparency has become a crucial determinant of democratic legitimacy. In addition to increasing public confidence in institutions, transparent election procedures provide equitable representation of society interests and citizen participation. However, misinformation attacks, ambiguous election funding, and perceived institutional flaws present escalating difficulties for emerging democracies like Moldova.

The deliberate and planned distribution of information to accomplish political or organisational goals is referred to as strategic communication. Effective communication combats misinformation and promotes institutional trust in election situations. Through influencing public opinion and building institutional trust, strategic communication is essential to government. Described as the deliberate distribution of information to accomplish particular goals, it has grown more important in combating misinformation and guaranteeing electoral openness (Graber, 2006). Entman (2007) highlights how crucial agenda-setting and framing are in affecting voter behaviour and trust in electoral environments. Election authorities can stop the spread of false information and increase public trust in election results by actively interacting with citizens through open communication.

According to Hallahan et al. (2007: 6) "strategic communication is a planned and coordinated process of message dissemination intended to accomplish particular goals, such as altering perceptions, promoting accurate knowledge, and influencing behaviour." Strategic communication is an interdisciplinary field that maximises the efficacy of messaging techniques by utilising theories from behavioural psychology, political communication, and public relations (Heath, Palenchar, 2009: 25). In the age of digital technology, strategic communication has undergone an important shift due to the extensive usage of social media and online platforms. Scholars emphasise that digital communication strategies must promote consistency, authenticity, and clarity in order to effectively reach and engage target audiences (Macnamara, 2016: 43).

To ensure that communications are easily comprehended by a variety of audiences, *clarity* is essential. According to research, unclear or excessively complicated messages raise the danger of disinformation and decrease audience engagement (Falkheimer, Heide, 2018: 88). To improve understanding and message retention, institutions and organisations must use language that is easy to understand and use.

In digital communication*, authenticity* is crucial to establishing trust. Credibility has emerged as a crucial factor in determining audience reaction due to the growing amount of false information and mistrust in the media (Metzger, Flanagin, 2015: 211). Research indicates that fact-based reporting, transparent communication methods, and messaging from reliable sources greatly increase public trust and involvement (Chadwick, Vaccari, 2019: 304). *Coherence and reinforcement* of important messages are ensured via consistent communication across many platforms. Strategic goals are undermined and viewers get confused by fragmented or inconsistent messages (Argenti, 2017: 91). To increase message credibility and impact, effective communication methods use a consistent tone, style, and content structure across several digital mediums.

For electoral procedures to keep being legitimate, transparency is essential. Perceptions of equity and fairness in political rivalry are critical to democratic stability. Electoral transparency encompasses open processes in voter registration, campaign financing, and vote counting (Lipset, 1959). The strength of institutions, rather than the type of government, determines political stability (Huntington, 1968). In transitioning democracies, the inability to enforce transparency often leads to political decay, undermining trust in democratic processes.

Disinformation is one of the fundamental threats to election integrity in the digital age. It is defined as the intentional dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information with the goal of polarising voters and undermining faith in democratic institutions. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), disinformation tactics take advantage of societal divisions already in place, leaving nations like Moldova especially at risk.

A competitive process, confidence in electoral institutions, and informed participation are essential for democratic elections. The right of citizens to seek and obtain accurate information about elections and fair conditions for political candidates to compete for office are guaranteed by international norms for democratic elections. However, one effective tactic used to undermine these ideals globally is the dissemination of inaccurate, inflated, or contradicting information during elections. Online misinformation has the power to increase voter confusion, lower turnout, „exacerbate social divisions, stifle women's and other marginalized groups' political engagement, and erode confidence in democratic institutions. The attempts to minimize the impact of anti-democratic efforts and disinformation are constantly altered by developing modern information technology. Online and social media news sharing can spread information at volumes, speeds, and distances never seen in previous election cycles. The nature, vulnerabilities, mitigating factors, and opportunities around the electoral information environment, online and otherwise, vary significantly from country to country. Prior to designing a program, staff should conduct a preliminary assessment of the environment considering the following framework: What are the main sources of information for the most citizens of the country about politics and elections? Who are the owners and control the mass-media? Which segments of population are the most influenced? What is the level of internet usage in the country? What is the situation in area of legal and normative regulation regarding online content and communication? Is there an experience in this country of the penetration of disinformation in electoral interest? (NDI, 2019: 4).

Electoral Transparency and Disinformation in Moldova: Challenges and Institutional Responses

Republic of Moldova is an illustrative case where the disinformation explores the lacks of legal regulation and influenced a lot the quality of electoral process. In 2022 a new Electoral Code was adopted, having as a main objective to straighten the capacities of CEC and the integrity of elections. The 2024 presidential election was conducted under the 2022 Electoral Code, which, despite frequent revisions, provides an adequate basis for holding democratic elections. The application of general regulations to the short second-round period resulted in conflicting provisions and ambiguities, limiting the effectiveness of legal remedies and campaign opportunities, while overly burdensome financial reporting requirements, combined with limited disclosure, negatively impacted the transparency of campaign finances for the second round. The incumbent, Maia Sandu, was benefit from

the misuse of public resources, albeit this was significantly less widespread than in the first round, and from unbalanced media coverage. This did not provide the contestants with equal opportunities, the observers said (OSCE, 2024).

The systemic problems in elections are still present. The most important problem is the transparency of campaign budgets, illegal and undeclared provenience of political money in elections, along with voter corruption, use of administrative resources and disinformation. The overall campaign discourse saw a significant rise in negative rhetoric from a variety of actors in the political sphere targeting both contestants, often spread through social networks, and included instances of discriminatory and intolerant language. Misuse of administrative resources favouring the incumbent was significantly less widespread but still present in the run-off (OSCE, Second Roud, 2024). Moldovan Electoral Code requires integrity and openness in electoral procedures, including the campaign funding. Central Electoral Commission is the main authority in election management, including founding control of political parties (Electoral Code, 2022). However, there are still many gaps in the process of declaring political party funds, including election campaign expenses and the lack of control tools for monitoring online campaigns.

The 2023 Promo-LEX study on Moldovan political party fundraising highlights important advancements in party funding laws, difficulties with enforcement, and suggestions for enhancing accountability and openness. Moldova amended its party financing legislation in a number of ways in 2023, including:

- *ban on charitable activities*: although there are no sanctions for enforcement, political parties are no longer allowed to engage in charitable endeavours.
- *donation adjustments*, although citizens who work overseas are now able to donate up to six average incomes, there are concerns because there are no instruments to confirm their revenue sources,
- *financial donations*: one typical salary is now the upper limit for financial donations.
- *enhanced transparency requirements* -parties are required to provide more thorough financial disclosures, but efforts to promote transparency are hampered by delays in their publication (Promolex Report, 2023).

The control of contributions to political parties and election campaigns is one of the main issues facing Moldova's legal system. In order to avoid excessive influence on the electoral process, the Electoral Code prohibits contributions that beyond a certain threshold, anonymous donations, and foreign money. However, civil society organisations' reports show that these provisions are frequently broken (TIM, 2020: 6). For instance, there is evidence of both indirect and undeclared donations, with political actors allegedly receiving money from outside sources that are concealed by middlemen. For example, only a small percentage of political parties submitted complete financial reports on time for the 2020 presidential election, and there were notable differences between stated spending and campaign activities. Allowing voters to hold political actors accountable is one of the main goals of electoral transparency, and this is undermined by this. These practices align with Skocpol's (1997: 469) argument that weak institutional enforcement fosters perceptions of impunity, eroding public trust in democratic processes.

Another issue is the transparency of financial reports. Even though the law requires thorough reporting of campaign funds, these records are frequently not readily available to the general public. For example, only a small percentage of financial reports

were filed on time for the 2020 presidential election, and there were several differences between reported spending and actual campaign activities (TIM, 2020: 7). This supports Huntington's (1968: 41) finding that weak democracies find it difficult to successfully enact transparency laws, which permits institutional flaws to continue.

The problem is made worse by the sanctions for non-compliance. Fines for not disclosing campaign funding are stipulated in the Electoral Code, however they are frequently insufficient and administered unevenly. The CEC, who is in charge of keeping an eye on compliance, lacks the authority and resources necessary to properly enforce rules. In addressing such governance deficiencies, Skocpol's (1997: 470) study emphasises the significance of institutional strength, pointing out that ineffective enforcement mechanisms erode public accountability and civic involvement.

Additional difficulties are brought about by Moldova's geopolitical location, especially with relation to foreign meddling. There is ample evidence of Russian meddling in Moldova's elections, including funding particular political figures. Public mistrust of election results has increased as a result of disinformation efforts and clandestine funding schemes (Transparency International Moldova, 2020: 8). In order to address these risks, the European Union has advocated for reforms, highlighting the significance of strong oversight and enforcement procedures (EIGR, 2022).

Estonian comparative examples show how technological innovations can improve electoral transparency. Real-time public access to financial reports is made possible by Estonia's digital campaign finance reporting system, which lessens the possibility of manipulation. This supports Huntington's (1968: 112) contention that strengthening governance in democracies undergoing transition requires modernizing institutional procedures. Estonian comparative experiences offer important perspectives on how to tackle the problems of campaign funding and electoral openness. Many people consider Estonia's digital election finance reporting system to be an example of effectiveness and openness. By providing the public with real-time access to financial reports, this approach greatly lowers the possibility of manipulation and increases public confidence in election procedures. According to reports, the system's implementation has improved accountability among political actors and simplified compliance, resolving many of the problems faced by transitional democracies like Moldova (EIGR, 2022).

Strategic communication is essential in creating connections between public opinion and legislative frameworks, having multiple impact as information of the citizens about the main issues of elections, increasing the confidence in the fairness of elections (see the Picture 1) and increasing the trust in the Central Electoral Commission, as main electoral authority (see Picture 2).
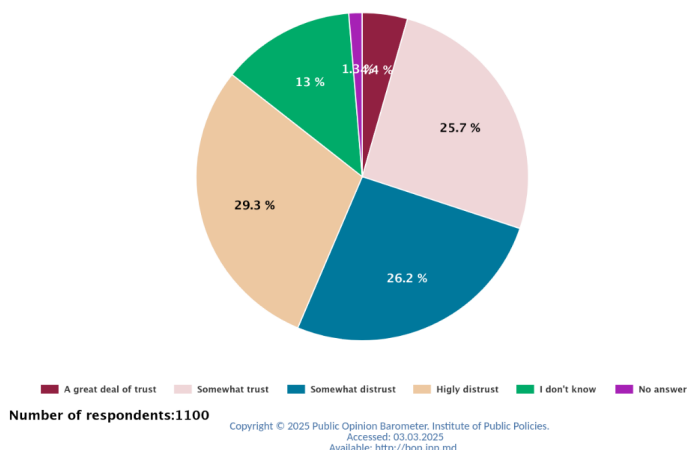
Picture 1. The degree of confidence in the fairness of elections in Republic of Moldova

Do you think the elections in the Republic of Moldova are free and fair?
Perioada: 10.2024

8.7 % 0.4 %

42.2 %

48.8 %

Yes   No   I don't know   No answer

Number of respondents:1100
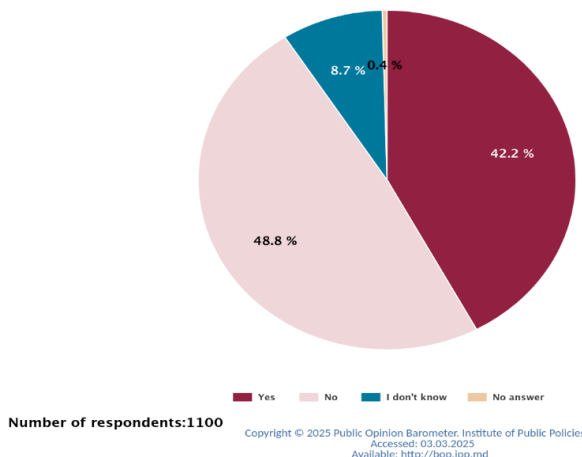
Picture 2. Public trust in the Central Electoral Commission

How much do you trust the following institutions?

Central Electoral Commission
Perioada: 10.2024

1.3 % 4 %

25.7 %

13 %

29.3 %

26.2 %

A great deal of trust   Somewhat trust   Somewhat distrust   Higly distrust   I don't know   No answer

Number of respondents:1100

Disinformation and Hybrid Threats in Elections: Undermining Democracy and Public Trust

More than 66 percent of all the people on Earth now use the internet, with the latest data putting the global user total at 5.35 billion. Internet users have grown by 1.8 percent over the past 12 months, thanks to 97 million new users since the start of 2023. There were 2.14 million internet users in Moldova in January 2024 (DGR, 2024)

Disinformation campaigns pose a serious threat to election integrity in the digital era. Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are three concepts that are sometimes confused in the discussion of "fake news". However, it's crucial to discern between messages that are true and those that are false, as well as between those that are

made, produced, or disseminated by "agents" with malicious intent and those that are not. According to Wardle and Derakhshan Dis-information – is information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country; mis-information, represent the information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm, and mal-information is an information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017: 20).

Targeting democratic governments and examining the weaknesses of institutions, "hybrid threats" are created by state or non-state actors with the primary intent of causing harm and influencing decisions at the local, regional, state, or institutional level. With a variety of tools intended to stay below the detection and attribution threshold, the actions may target political, economic, military, civic, or information domains. The nature of hybrid treatments is vague, and they function by obfuscating the boundaries between internal and exterior politics, as well as between law and order and between peace and war (Putină, 2024:19).

Conventional and unconventional means of influence are combined in hybrid acts, which include disinformation campaigns, interference in political elections or debates, cyberattacks or disruptions of vital infrastructure, various criminal activities. Voter turnout and trust can be significantly impacted by misleading narratives about voter fraud, foreign meddling, or biassed institutions, according to studies on the relationship between disinformation and electoral transparency. Such narratives flourish in settings where electoral entities don't communicate well enough, creating voids that are filled by false information.

Both perceptions and facts play a role in elections. Over the course of the election cycle, the perception of election integrity is fostered. Communications must therefore be data-driven and timely. One of the main responsibilities of a contemporary election management organization is to stop the dissemination of misinformation that aims to undermine the election. Procedural changes on important topics, such voter and candidate registration or the financial disclosure rules for political parties, are frequently not announced in a timely manner. If the EMB does not promptly and clearly explain why the change was required and what benefits it would provide, timing or process changes may encourage misinformation (Hollstein, 2023).

Although the phrase "fake news" has been extensively misapplied, it actually refers to a significant type of deception. Fake news sites lack "the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information", which is a helpful description of fake news. Fake news is defined as "information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent." Fake news turns into disinformation during elections when it is disseminated to disparage rivals or sway the outcome of the vote (Bader, 2018).

There is no one strategy or counternarrative that can lessen the impact of misinformation and disinformation on all audiences in the polarising social and political climate of today. One strategy to increase resistance to false information and disinformation is to participate in focused reputation-building and instructional initiatives aimed at influencing and gullible audiences. Educating advocates to convey truthful messages about election integrity to various audiences can help strengthen it. All things considered, establishing a solid foundation of support among local decision-makers and influencers helps strengthen the public discourse surrounding election integrity (IFES, 2022).

The goal of election deniers is to erode public trust in our elections and reduce voter turnout, especially among voters of colour and other historically under-represented groups. People's capacity to vote and their confidence in our elections may suffer greatly as a result of the false information they spread, which includes falsehoods about the voting procedure and election officials.

Russian Influence and Disinformation in Moldovan Electoral Processes

External meddling has long targeted the Republic of Moldova, and concerns about Russian involvement in the nation's political and electoral processes have persisted. Russia has intensified its attempts to undermine Moldova's democratic path as the country continues to align itself with the EU after being designated as an EU candidate in 2022. The 2024 elections were a focal point for outside intervention since they were thought to be crucial in deciding Moldova's political future.

The main ways that Russia meddles in Moldova's elections are via funding pro-Kremlin political groups, spreading false information, and trying to take advantage of social divisions in the nation. A 2023 Promo-LEX report states that there was evidence of illegal foreign funding in Moldova's pro-Russian parties' political campaigns. As a result, investigative authorities filed criminal cases against the parties for falsifying financial reports and having connections to organised crime groups (Promo-LEX, 2023: 10). These acts demonstrate how Russia has strategically used Moldova's electoral system to further its geopolitical objectives in the area. The impact of Russian propaganda on media consumers in the Republic of Moldova is substantial and extremely sensitive to public preferences and perceptions, particularly during pivotal moments for the nation's future, like election campaigns, the European integration vector, the Transnistrian issue, and other significant events (Putină, 2022:139).

Additionally, Kremlin-aligned media outlets and social media platforms have stepped up their disinformation tactics. The European Union's Disinformation Situation Report (2023) claims that narratives that support voter fraud, cast doubt on Moldova's democratic institutions, and charge the government with stifling pro-Russian voices have been extensively disseminated. These strategies seek to erode confidence in the electoral process and polarise Moldova's voters. For instance, social media platforms saw a spike in coordinated disinformation campaigns against pro-European politicians during the 2023 municipal elections. It is anticipated that this trend will continue in the run-up to the elections in 2024. Furthermore, Russia's influence goes beyond clandestine activities and includes direct political backing for groups who oppose Moldova's goal of European integration. According to reports, Russian financial and logistical assistance has benefited the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and other pro-Russian political organizations. Transparency International Moldova has drawn attention to discrepancies in these parties' financial reports, pointing out that unreported funds are frequently connected to Moscow-affiliated organisations (TIM, 2023: 8).

Moldova is among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of accessibility and cost convenient access to Gigabit Internet. Thus, having an educated populace is essential in this profession. The EU is one of Moldova's most significant strategic partners on a global scale. Building a resilient Republic of Moldova that can withstand external threats is in both Brussels' and Chisinau's best interests, particularly in light of the conflict in Ukraine. For

instance, the EU deployed capacity-building military actors to assist Moldovan decision-makers in creating strong and resilient security systems (Costea, Putină, Brie, 2024: 103).

One of the main tools of the Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategy, which aims to sway public opinion, create narratives, and undermine democratic societies, is the deployment of troll armies and social media bots. The Kremlin has made significant investments to influence the social media debate, developing an army of trolls, or fake social media accounts managed by Russian agents, as well as social media bots, or automated social media accounts. These capabilities, initially designed to influence the Russian domestic audience, have likely been adapted and expanded to be used abroad. Although Russia seems to have a near-worldwide scope to its propaganda campaign, it is particularly interested in the lands on its western border—part of what Russia calls its "near abroad." This region stretches from the Baltic states to Ukraine and encompasses Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, and Moldova (Helmus, 2018: p. 2)

Trough strategies of polarising the narratives and old content Russia encourage the mistrust in authorities and delegitimate the elections, all this impact more than simple disinformation. Exploring polarizing issues as migration, corruption, electoral fraud Kremlin politics explore the social tensions to influence the electoral preferences and political debates (EU RD, 2023). For instance, in Moldova Russian troll accounts have been linked to activities that tray to denigrate pro-European leaders in the lead-up to elections (Promo-LEX, 2023: 10).

In March 2015, the European Council invited the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (the "High Representative") to work with the EU institutions and Member States "to develop an action plan on strategic communication to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns". This was the beginning of the EU's efforts to combat disinformation. This resulted in the establishment of the strategic communications division ("StratCom") and the first of its task forces within the European External Action Service (EEAS). The East strategic communications task force was tasked with creating and disseminating positive strategic communications in the EU's eastern neighbourhood as well as combating disinformation coming from outside the EU (Russia) (ECA, 2021)

Initiatives such as the European Union's East StratCom Task Force, for example, have played a crucial role in dismantling Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns and increasing public understanding of the strategies used by troll armies (ESCTF, 2023). To reduce vulnerability to modified content, the public's level of digital literacy must also increase. The Kremlin's ability to modify conventional propaganda methods for the contemporary information environment is demonstrated by the deployment of its troll and bot armies. For instance, initiatives like the European Union's East StratCom Task Force have been essential in exposing Kremlin-backed disinformation efforts and raising public awareness of the tactics used by troll armies. The European Democracy Action Plan sets out measures around three main pillars: promote free and fair elections, strengthen media freedom and pluralism, improving the existing EU's toolbox for countering foreign interference (ESCRF, 2023).

Moldova has taken action to combat foreign meddling ahead of the 2024 elections. Through increased financial reporting requirements and collaboration with outside partners including the EU and NATO, the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) has fortified its oversight procedures. Systemic vulnerabilities still exist, though. For example,

there are currently insufficiently strong tools in the legislative framework governing political financing to track down foreign donations, and sanctions for infractions are not consistently enforced (Promo-LEX, 2023: 12). Moldova's democratic integrity and institutional resilience will probably be put to the test during the scrutiny surrounding the 2025 elections. The participation of outside parties like Russia continues to be a crucial factor in Moldova's democratic development, despite the growing international interest in the country's course. To protect Moldova's democratic processes, countering intervention would necessitate a concerted effort that includes strong institutional reforms, strategic communication, and foreign assistance.

Members of the European Parliament. noted that Moldovan security services recently claimed that Russia has spent almost €100 million to sabotage the next election to influence Moldovans to vote against deeper EU ties. Authorities in Moldova discovered a massive voting fraud conspiracy on October 3, 2024, that was funded by Ilan Shor, a Moldovan tycoon. The scheme involved the transfer of $15 million to 130,000 Moldovans as part of a voter bribery scheme. Parliament denounces these strategies and urges Russia to respect Moldova's independence, stop provocations, and remove its soldiers from the country. It also reiterates its earlier demands that all ammunition kept in the Transnistria breakaway region's Cobasna facility be destroyed (European Parliament, 2024). By using social media as a weapon, Russia has transformed an open, democratic platform into a battlefield for power where eroding trust serves as a tactical advantage.

Conclusions

Strategic communication is increasingly important for building trust in public institutions and providing citizens with timely and accurate with timely and accurate information in transition states.

Moldova continues to be face serious problems with disinformation, political and financial transparency, and foreign interference in light of the increasingly complex electoral processes of the digital age. To address these problems, an integrated, multi-stakeholder strategy is needed that includes institutional resilience, proactive communication tactics, and legal reforms. One of the main conclusions of the study is that, when it comes to combating electoral disinformation, strategic communication can be used as both a proactive and reactive strategy.

Disinformation is becoming an increasingly acute problem for the Republic of Moldova, with both internal and external sources, which makes it even more difficult to combat the impact and consequences of these hybrid warfare tools aimed at influencing the results of the electoral process.

One of the study's 'main conclusion is that strategic communication may be used as a proactive and reactive strategy. As examples of proactive communication may be initiatives of public awareness campaigns, media literacy initiatives, and real-time information distribution of information. Conversely, reactive communication uses counter-messaging techniques and quick fact-checking to dispel misinformation instantly. Public views are greatly influenced by agenda-setting and framing, thus electoral officials must use these strategies to uphold openness and successfully counter false information. By integrating digital tools into campaign finance monitoring Moldova can significantly increase public access to financial reporting, by international cooperation.

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