

## **Disinformation in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict as seen from the Republic of Moldova**

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The Republic of Moldova is Russia's favorite testing ground for trying out the tactics and tools specific to hybrid warfare. It has also applied them in the case of the Israel-Hamas war. It has managed, through propaganda, to geopolitically divide Moldovan society into two almost equal parts – a perfect situation to generate internal conflicts at any time. Pro-Russians are constantly fed anti-NATO and nostalgia for the Soviet past narratives. On the other hand, pro-Europeans are blackmailed and psychologically terrorized with fears, through the propaganda machine. The Kremlin's favorite narrative in this regard is that Moldova will suffer the fate of Ukraine if it is not loyal and does not have a pro-Russian administration.

The Israel-Hamas war caught Moldovans completely disoriented from an informational point of view. Until the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, all of Moldovan attention was focused on the war in neighboring Ukraine, with Moldova on Vladimir Putin's war maps as the next target.

Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the oldest and most violent in the world, in the first days after the Hamas attack on Israel, few in Moldova understood what was happening in the Middle East, who was fighting whom, and which side was right. On the morning of October 7, Russian propaganda channels were already working at full speed, pushing hallucinatory narratives about the fact that the West had fueled the escalation in the Middle East and sensitive falsehoods such as Israel having consistently killed children in the Gaza Strip in recent years. In this way, Russian propaganda tried to justify the Hamas attack. In the first days of the war, in Moldova and in the ex-Soviet space, Russian propaganda openly worked for Hamas, accrediting anti-Western theses.

After President Maia Sandu condemned the Hamas attack and declared that Moldova stands in solidarity with Israel, and the Parliament in Chisinau voted a declaration in support of Israel, the Russian propaganda narratives aimed at Moldova, in connection with the Israel-Hamas war changed. The target of Russian fakes became Ukraine, invaded by Russia in February 2022. The pro-Kremlin press in Chisinau synchronously and massively spread a post by the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, about the fact that Ukraine had allegedly delivered, through

corruption, NATO weapons received from the West to HAMAS to defend itself from Russia. [Medvedev's fake](#) was the topic of talk shows for days in a row in Russia, and the Telegram and TikTok channels, used by Russian propaganda to manipulate Moldovans, took over in full or sequences from those broadcasts. This propaganda attack spread especially on social media, with the Moldovan audiovisual authority blocking most television stations that rebroadcast programs from Russia that attempted to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Locally, two pro-Russian Moldovan politicians - Ilan Shor and Igor Dodon - have tried to exploit, for political purposes, the tragedy of the war in Israel. The former, a fugitive oligarch sheltered by the Kremlin, was sentenced in absentia in Moldova to 15 years in prison for large-scale bank fraud and money laundering. The latter held the position of head of state and is under criminal investigation for corruption and treason in favor of Russia. Dodon said that Maia Sandu was wrong when she declared Moldova's solidarity with Israel. In his opinion, "[Moldova should not have taken anyone's side](#)" in this conflict. Shor and Dodon speculated on the Moldovan authorities' effort, in the first days after the Hamas attack on Israel, to repatriate Moldovans settled in Israel. The two pro-Russian politicians reproached the Government in Chisinau for not doing anything to save those people and for even blocking a charter, paid for by Shor, for Moldovan citizens in Israel. In reality, the flight was delayed due to the congestion on the runway in those days, and the Government managed to repatriate all Moldovans who were willing to return home from Israel and the Gaza Strip.

In general, however, the independent press in the Republic of Moldova respected professional and ethical standards in news and reporting on the Middle East conflict, according to a 2024 assessment by the Independent Journalism Center of Moldova, conducted based on the analysis of 250 materials on the topic, published in the mainstream media. Journalistic materials published in the independent press in Moldova maintained their equidistance even after Israel's invasion of Gaza. In the Moldovan press, Palestinians were not portrayed as all supporters of Hamas. No anti-Semitic manifestations were observed. However, criticisms that resonated with the suffering of the Palestinians appeared on social networks.

### **Notable cases of disinformation in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict – analysis on Moldova**

Russian propaganda and disinformation have been the order of the day in the Republic of Moldova for decades. As a result, the Moldovan journalistic community has managed to develop, over time, tools to cushion the effects of disinformation on society. Specialized teams of fact-checkers have emerged in media NGOs, as well as in some editorial offices, which quickly analyze and debunk falsehoods, so that the damage caused by Russia's hybrid attacks is as small as possible. However, in the

context of the Israel-Hamas war, several media attacks coordinated by Russia have penetrated the media space in Moldova, becoming topics of wide discussion.

### *Misinformation that amplifies conspiracy theories*

**NATO weapons on the Ukrainian front, in the hands of Hamas fighters** – the aim of this Russian provocation was to discredit the Armed Forces of Ukraine and stop the flow of military aid to Ukraine from the US and the EU. The topic was picked up by the media throughout the region, including the platforms used for propaganda by Russia in Moldova.

But let's see how this hoax snowballed. On October 8, 2023, the day after Hamas' attack on Israel, [Donald Trump Jr. posted on the X network a 20-second video clip](#) from a Sky News report showing Palestinians holding American M4 assault rifles. Trump's son wonders how American weapons could have reached the Palestinians? The post has had over 4 million views.

In the next phase, on October 9, 2023, the member of the US House of Representatives (from the Republican side), Marjorie Taylor Greene, in an interview on Fox News asked Washington to verify the number and series of M4 assault rifles that Hamas uses in the war against Israel - "to be compared with those left by the US in Afghanistan, as well as those sent to Ukraine". The interview has since been deleted from the Internet, but the transcript of this sequence (translated into Russian) [can be found in the Russian press](#). In the same interview, Marjorie Taylor Greene called for the US to stop military aid to Ukraine.

In the third phase, also on October 9, 2023, the Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, appeared [with a post on Telegram](#) in which he accused "corrupt Ukrainian dignitaries" of selling Western weapons to Hamas that it receives to defend itself from Russia. From here, the "snowball" gained speed. Referring to "Telegram channels close to the West", Russian propaganda wrote that [Hamas had thanked Kiev for the weapons](#). There were also Russian "experts" who said in TV studios that Ukraine had sold Hamas not only M4 assault rifles, but also "Stinger" missiles received from the US. All this propaganda hysteria was packaged in slogans calling on the US and the EU to stop arms supplies to Ukraine. The entire dispute was also accessible to the general public in the Republic of Moldova, which knows 98% of the Russian language.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense has warned that information about Ukraine's involvement in the sale of weapons to Hamas is completely false and that it is a large-scale provocation against Ukraine, orchestrated by Russia, to stop weapons supplies from the West.

"Russia has transferred Western-made weapons, captured in Ukraine, to the extremist organization Hamas, which is fighting against Israel, trying to discredit Kiev," [the Intelligence Service of Ukraine announced on October 9, 2023](#).

This Russian fake even ended up being discussed at the UN Security Council meeting in October 2024, [with Ukraine's permanent representative to the UN, Sergiy Kyslytsya, having to explain](#) how the Russian Federation transferred American weapons captured in Ukraine to Hamas, in order to secure this propaganda trail to discredit Ukraine.

**NOTE: The primary source of this narrative is Russian propaganda media. In the Republic of Moldova, it was first picked up by certain Telegram channels, and after pro-Russian Moldovan politicians invoked it in their speeches, it spread throughout the pro-Russian propaganda network in Moldova.**

### *False narratives and images that fuel Moldovans' phobias*

- **Tens of thousands of NATO soldiers invaded Moldova in the context of the Israel-Hamas war** – the purpose of this narrative was to fuel Moldovans' fear of NATO. There is a list of anti-NATO scaremongering that periodically emotionally stress Moldovans – a list that Russia and pro-Russian politicians in Chisinau adapt depending on geopolitical events and the electoral context. Russia fuels the perception that NATO is the “external enemy that brings war”, in order to keep Moldova vulnerable (militarily weaker than the pro-Russian Transnistrian separatist area), without any shield, with a constitutional neutrality defied by the Kremlin by maintaining the Russian army in the separatist region of Transnistria. The effect of Russian propaganda: only 33% of Moldovans want the country to join NATO even in the conditions in which Russia bombs neighboring Ukraine, and Russian drones periodically fall on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.

In November 2023, a month after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict, the Russian television channel Ren-TV (banned in Moldova for pro-war propaganda), in the program "Военная тайна" ("Military Secrets") broadcast a report in which it was mentioned that "taking advantage of the conflict in Israel, tens of thousands of NATO soldiers were brought to Moldova". The connection with the war in Israel is not clear from the report, but it is mentioned that NATO soldiers were supposed to attack Transnistria. Throughout the report, images of several American soldiers running in the field in Moldova were shown. However, the images turned out to be from the military exercise "Fire Shield/Rapid Trident 2023" held in Moldova between September 11-22, 2023, that is, almost a month before the events in Israel. Such exercises have been

taking place in Moldova since 2007. Before being restricted on the grounds that it was fake, [the video sequence uploaded to TikTok and Facebook](#) garnered over 200,000 views.

The propagandists at Ren TV also published [a purported news item](#) extracted from the show "Military Secrets" about American soldiers in Moldova. Its title: "США хотят превратить Молдавию в «таран» против России" ("The USA wants to turn Moldova into a «ram» against Russia"). This completely false "news item" was massively picked up by the Moscow press with print runs of hundreds of thousands of copies.

**NOTE: The hoax was launched by the Russian television channel Ren-TV, banned in Moldova on the grounds that it justifies Russia's war against Ukraine. It was cut and taken up synchronously by local online media serving pro-Kremlin groups. After taking over and spreading this disinformation, the Intelligence and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova blocked over 50 online platforms built by Russian propaganda with content specifically intended for Russian-speaking Moldovans.**

- **Over 300 refugees from Tel Aviv landed in Chisinau** – an attempt to re-edit the scare effect used in the 2016 presidential election campaign, which was about a hoax with 30,000 Syrians that Maia Sandu supposedly committed to welcoming to Moldova if she won the elections. Initially launched on a satirical platform, but massively taken over by the propaganda press, this hoax then led to the narrow victory of pro-Russian Igor Dodon in the presidential elections. The effect was hallucinatory – many, although not pro-Russian, voted for Dodon just so that Syrian refugees would not end up in Moldova.

On October 11, 2023, [the Noi.md portal wrote that "over 300 war refugees from Tel Aviv arrived in Chisinau"](#), in search of peace. It is a completely false "news". In reality, it was about Moldovans working in Israel. And although the title mentioned: "300 refugees who arrived in Chisinau", the "news" was about "300 requests" without even specifying what kind of requests they were. Clarifications later came from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which specified that they were requests for information regarding the mechanisms established by the Government to bring home Moldovans affected by the war. Although false, the alleged "news" [was also promoted on the media institution's Facebook page](#), and was later restricted by META. This time, the promoted fake did not generate any effects, as it was quickly dismantled by journalists from "Stop Fals!".

In parallel with the fake about "refugees from Tel Aviv" on Noi.md, a [video published on TikTok was promoted on social networks](#) announcing that "refugees from Israel have already arrived in Moldova". However, it is clear from the images that they were filmed at the exit gates to the airport runway, not at the exit from the airport after landing, the images being from the traditional Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage of Hasidic Jews in September 2023. These two fakes were intended to fuel anti-Semitism and compromise the pro-European government's policy of opening up Moldova and embracing EU values.

**NOTE: This fake is "made in Moldova". It appeared on Noi.md – a portal owned by Vasili Chirtoca, a former communist candidate for mayor of Chisinau, the capital of the Republic of Moldova. It was massively promoted on TikTok, fueling Moldovans' fear that "foreigners will come and occupy their ancestral land". It failed to penetrate other media platforms, as it was quickly dismantled by NGOs and independent journalists.**

#### *Falsehoods and speculations aimed at reducing citizens' trust in state institutions*

- **"The government is busy kissing the hands of European leaders instead of repatriating Moldovans from the path of war"** – a narrative through which pro-Moscow parties in Moldova, connected to criminal groups, tried to accredit the false idea that the Government is doing nothing to save Moldovans in Israel from bombings and, in parallel, to generate a hostile attitude of the population towards the EU, in order to later exploit this anger for electoral purposes. The fugitive oligarch, Ilan Shor (sheltered by the Kremlin), sentenced to 15 years in prison for a large-scale bank robbery, [launched this disinformation](#) . Shor controls several parties and media institutions in Moldova – all of which are involved in the dissemination of this disinformation. For greater scope, [the former Moldovan president Igor Dodon , leader of the Party of Socialists, also connected](#) for corruption and treason in favor of Russia.

The oligarch Shor even pledged to evacuate Moldovans from Israel with several charter flights. The press, which is subordinate to criminal groups, headlined: " *Mr. Shor is doing what the Government should have done .*" But no one has filed any application for authorization for any irregular flight from Tel Aviv (a procedure that must be done at least 48 hours in advance). It is not known whether this was done intentionally. What is certain is that Shor could not have

not known that any flight requires authorization, since, before he was convicted, he frequently used private planes to travel.

But the moment was exploited propagandistically to the fullest. The Russian manipulation machine attacked the Government in Chisinau in chorus, accusing it of preventing the landing of the plane rented by Shor. This was despite the fact that [the plane had not even taken off](#), because, initially, it did not have a flight permit, and after obtaining it (also thanks to the urgent intervention of the Moldovan authorities), it had to wait in line for takeoff, because in those days the runway of the Tel Aviv airport was very crowded. Finally, for several days, the authorities in Chisinau, with the support of Romania and other external partners, managed to repatriate all the Moldovans who wanted to return home from Israel.

**NOTE: This manipulation was launched by the fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor himself. It was initially spread [by TV6](#) - a TV station attributed to the fugitive convict sheltered by the Kremlin, then taken over in concert by [other media](#). TV6 is one of the 12 TV stations whose licenses were suspended by the Moldovan authorities due to the constant spread of disinformation. However, the editorial staff remained active online.**

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