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Summary of CDM Formative Research

Introduction

A primary aim of the **Countering Disinformation Moldova (CDM)** programme is to support media outlets in countering the threat of disinformation and Russian state-sponsored propaganda in Moldova, which has intensified since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022. To support CDM sub-grantees in developing content to reach this goal, in January 2023, IWPR commissioned formative research aimed at

understanding how views of the Moldovan public have changed towards Russia and the West since the invasion, alongside their thoughts towards the persuasiveness, trustworthiness and credibility of media coverage of the war. This summary provides an overview of the research methods, key findings, and insights which have emerged from profiles of the Moldovan public who are politically aligned as neutral towards Russia or the West.





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Key findings

While all participants agree that Moldova is moving towards a Western alignment, political affiliations dictated whether participants viewed this as positive or negative. Moreover, while a preference for online media was found for all profiles, essential differences between why this preference was held and what was perceived as credible media was found between profiles, summarised below.

Figure 1: Key results by political profile:

Pro-Russians tended to differentiate between a government’s Western choice and the people’s choice, who favoured the East. For those aligned with Russia, this was driven uniformly by their connection with or personal experience with Russia, which also appeared critical in how they trusted media content. In engaging in war coverage, this group strongly preferred online sources, especially social media groups (e.g. Telegram channels). The use of online media was driven by these respondents being highly selective in consuming Pro-Russian content and the lack of broadcast opportunities to consume this content in Moldova since the regulatory ban on Russian broadcasters.

Pro-Western respondents view Moldova’s shift towards the West positively, seeing it as less risky than remaining under Russia’s influence. Those who have hardened their views towards Russia attribute this change to the conflict’s nature, impact on Moldova, and negative perceptions of Russia’s leadership. This group prefers online media, which has increased since the invasion of Ukraine. However, online media use is driven by dissatisfaction with mainstream broadcast media rather than a need to select ideologically aligned content. Indeed, pro-Western participants remain sceptical of all media and report cross-checking coverage of the war. Because pro-Western participants were less ideologically selective, this group reported consuming intriguing content irrespective of its presumed stance.

Neutral respondents criticised Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and their attitudes towards Russia have hardened for similar reasons as pro-Western participants. However, they prefer Moldova to remain neutral to avoid further risks to the nation and its people. They trust mainstream social media for information and while using Moldovan media, they considered it untrustworthy. They actively avoid war coverage and view the ban on Russian broadcasters negatively. Neutral participants valued diverse opinions and opposed censorship. They also prefer factual coverage, but shocking coverage of the war was also reported as significantly impacting their opinions towards Russia.

In addition to describing their views towards and use and trustworthiness of different types of coverage of the war in Moldova, respondents also suggested content examples critical in informing their current political position. These content examples were reviewed for bias and their editorial quality. Pro-Russian respondents provided content examples demonstrating the highest levels of propaganda and disinformation and lowest editorial quality, followed by neutral participants. In contrast, pro-Western participants provided content suggestions demonstrating the most negligible bias and highest editorial quality. Several features of content examples were found to make them persuasive or trustworthy across participant profiles. However, to varying extents, all profiles were untrusting of media, which contradicted their personal ideology.

Methods

Reviewing the existing literature on counter-disinformation in Moldova, IWPR identified knowledge gaps in how the population of Moldova form a personal view of Russia and the West and the role of media and other influences on this view formalisation. Thus, IWPR designed and commissioned qualitative research that selected participants into five profiles, shown in Figure 2, based on their political alignment to contrast how their views have changed, the drivers and influences of these changes, and how different types of media and content resonate with these different ideologically aligned groups.

Fig. 2: Profiles of respondents selected for the formative study:



**This profile replaced the changed to Pro-Russian profile because Moldovans who have become aligned with Russia from a neutral or pro-Western stance following the invasion could not be found during recruitment.*

Qualitative data was collected over two waves. Wave one recruited members of the Moldovan public into five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) based on the above profiles. During FGDs, participants collectively discussed their views towards Russian and Western integration, the role of different influences on trust in media and exposure to pro-Western and Russian Narratives, Propaganda and Disinformation. During Wave 2, two participants per FGD were invited to undertake In-Depth Interviews (IDIs). Participants were selected for IDIs if they could provide an example of content critical to informing their current opinion towards Russia. During the IDIs, these participants elaborated further on topics covered in the FGDs and discussed why they proposed their content and considered it persuasive and credible. During Wave 2, IDI responses were contrasted with an Expert Review of this content undertaken by API (a CDM subgrantee). Figure 3 summarises the type of information collected by wave and the methods employed in this formative research.



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Figure 3: Information collected via wave 1 and wave 2 methods:

FGDs	IDIs	
What has caused current views towards Western or Russian integration?	Media literacy	
Role of different influences (friends, government, media)	Use of Media & New Sources	
Exposure to pro-Western or pro-Russian narratives	Review of proposed Content	CDM partners
Perception of disinformation and propaganda	Susceptibility to propaganda	Review of quality and trustworthiness of content
Examples of content which are critical in forming their views	Trust in news, journalists and other media sources	

WAVE 1

WAVE 2



Results

This summary section provides a snapshot of emerging findings on views towards Russian & Western integration, media preferences and perceived credibility of different media sources, alongside insights on the features of content considered trustworthy and persuasive by profiles of Moldovans with a Russian, Western, or Neutral political alignment. While this qualitative investigation sampled respondents based on their political alignment, opinion poll research undertaken in March 2023¹ suggested that approximately half (47.3%) of the public reported good or very good attitudes towards Russia, whereas two-thirds (66.3%) reported favourable attitudes to the EU, and 55% reported good or excellent attitudes towards the US. Thus, overall political support within the Nation appears equally split between Russian and Western alignment.

Views Towards Russian & Western Integration:

The ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted the geopolitical choices that countries in the region, such as the Republic of Moldova, must make. Regardless of their political affiliations, all participants agree that Moldova is moving towards a more Western alignment. However, the political alignment dictated whether participants saw this direction of travel in a negative or positive light.

Members of the Moldovan population, who harbour **pro-Western views**, described the country's stance as officially neutral but turning towards Europe and the West. Despite noted differences between the government's official narrative and its actions, this group was very optimistic about the country's direction of travel, with the benefits of aligning with the West being clear to this group. Several pro-Western participants knew of the risks of entangling Moldova in foreign interests but felt it was preferable over the country remaining in Russia's sphere of influence. Those who report becoming pro-Western since the war started highlighted their alignment changing due to various factors such as the duration and severity of the conflict, the impact on Moldova, refugees, and perceptions of the Russian leadership. Moldovan nationals, who became pro-Western, reported hardening attitudes towards President Putin in particular, with participants expressing disillusionment with his actions and questioning his motives and intentions.

¹SOCIO-POLITICAL SURVEY FEBRUARY-MARCH 2023 Republic of Moldova: Republic of Moldova. Centre for Social Studies and Marketing and WatchDog.MD. [Assessed online: <https://www.watchdog.md/2023/03/09/watchdog-md-community-presented-the-results-of-the-second-opinion-poll/> April 2023]



“I consider Moldova’s position to be a pro-Western one. And I support the given position, but all the grants, the credits that come every day, hundreds of millions from Japan, the United States of America and so on - nobody does this for free, and once we will have to return this. But our current position is better than being with the Russian Federation...”

(Male, Age 25 - 30, Urban, FGD – Pro-West)

“My opinion about Russia changed when the war started, because Russia and Ukraine consider themselves brothers. [When] you start a war against your brother, your close one, you already think that something is wrong. I once supported Putin, a long time ago. I don’t support him at the moment.”

(Female, Age 25 - 30, Urban, FGD - Change to Pro-West)

Pro-Russian participants underscored a difference between the government’s pro-Western ‘*choice*’ and the people’s choice that desires an Eastern direction. However, compared to Russian-speaking respondents, Romanian-speaking respondents appeared hesitant to openly endorse their alignment with Russia, which may result from perceived social pressure to mask their support for the Kremlin. For example, Romanian speakers aligned with the East often highlighted Moldova’s constitutional stance as militarily neutral and the non-partisan benefits to the nation when describing their views towards Western and Russian integration. Many Romanian pro-Russian participants also described their personal support arising from the failure of confidence in the European vector instead of outright support for Russia. On the other hand, pro-Russian, Russian-speaking participants were much more open in their personal endorsement of Russia, reporting the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent events as reinforcing their anti-Western and pro-Russian views. Pro-Russian views appear to be driven by their personal connection to Russia, either through family and friends or their lived experience in the Nation.

“I recently saw the protests in Chisinau and [these people were not supporting] the government. Far from it! The government is certainly with the West, but the population, as far as I understand, leans more towards Russia.”

(Male, Age 55 - 60, Urban, FGD - Pro-Russian Romanian Speaking)

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“Let’s say, it’s not so much that I started to have a more pro-Russian orientation, but that I started to have less confidence in the European vector”.

(Male, Age 30 - 35, Rural, FGD- Pro-Russian Romanian Speaking)

Those describing themselves as **neutral** denounced Russia’s actions in Ukraine and reported a hardening of their attitudes towards Russia due to concerns about Russia’s decision to wage war, the motivations behind this decision and the resulting destruction and human suffering. Despite personal disapproval, they strongly prefer that Moldova remain neutral to prevent further national complications or conflicts.

“My opinion of Russia has changed. I think they shouldn’t have started the war, they should have resolved the conflict peacefully, so that people don’t die and cities are not destroyed. They put their own interests first, and, under the pretext that they want Ukrainians to have a better life, they have bombed and destroyed their cities and interfered in [this country’s] internal politics.”

(Male, Age 35 - 40, Urban, FGD– Neutral)

”

“I agree, we need to adopt a neutral position. We have a lot of problems in the country that need to be solved, and we should be more careful about what we say, so as not to cause conflicts, because we don’t need them at all now.”

(Male, Age 35 - 40, Urban, FGD - Neutral)



Media Preferences, Credibility of Moldovan Media Sources:

Irrespective of political alignment, the Moldovan public do not trust the media. This is especially true for traditional media sources considered misinformative, misleading and not independent—lessening Moldovan’s reliance on this type of media to inform their personal political alignment. Moreover, most participants preferred online applications or reading regardless of political affiliation. This enabled them to independently select the content they deem trustworthy rather than consuming news presented on television, for example. However, a number of key differences between profiles were identified during analysis:

Profile Pro-Russian: These participants avoided news on Moldovan and Western television channels as they were perceived as biased towards Western propaganda, focusing solely on the war and manipulating the truth. This is particularly the case for Western foreign media. Participants aligned with Russia were highly critical of the regulatory ban on Russian channels, reporting that it violated their freedom of expression. On the one hand, respondents in this profile reported consulting multiple news sources. However, they also reported being highly selective in consuming Pro-Russian content, limiting their ability to cross-reference coverage from multiple

perspectives. Selective consumption of media which supported their political view also resulted in a strong preference for online and social media where they can interact with the content they filter as credible. However, many Russian-speaking members reported being censored on platforms such as Facebook. This group also conceded that some of their chosen media sources contained misleading and biased content but simply considered this less prevalent than Western propaganda on mainstream media. The personal connection appears critical in building trust in information for participants in the Pro-Russian profile. This group follows personalities irrespective of their platform, bloggers who can report from first-hand experience, and this group placed the greatest trust in information from relatives and acquaintances.

Profile Pro-Western: Participants who have been consistently pro-Western, or have shifted towards this direction since the invasion of Ukraine, reported higher use of traditional Moldovan and European media sources than pro-Russians. Nevertheless, this group reported using television less since the war began and increasingly preferred accessing online media sources. Rather than being highly selective in consuming content which reflected their ideological stance, a

preference for online media appears to be driven by the dissolution of mass media, particularly among those who have changed towards a pro-Western stance. However, both groups trusted online sources the most, followed by the Western foreign press. Overall, pro-Western participants reported traditional media as manipulative by presenting information taken out of context, and it was perceived as not independent. Yet pro-Western participants were also concerned about the lack of regulation against disinformation for online news sources. Hence this group had varying levels of scepticism of all media sources, meaning they tended to cross-reference the same information from multiple sources to form an opinion. This included engaging with media outside of Moldova and obtaining primary sources of information. The group also highly trusted eyewitness accounts and experts and would select content based on the individuals who created it rather than what platform it was broadcast on. As Pro-Western participants are less ideologically selective in what they consume, pro-Western Moldavans reported that if they are intrigued by a headline, they tend to consume the content irrespective of its presumed stance.

Profile Neutral: Neutral participants reported mainstream social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook and TikTok) as the most trustworthy and the

primary source of information for forming opinions on their political alignment. They also reported the use of, and high trust in, the Western foreign press. Interestingly, however, while reporting several Moldovan media channels as their primary sources of information, they also ranked these sources as most untrustworthy, alongside search engines and online news aggregators. This gap between the use of and trust in traditional Moldovan media can be explained by the tendency for neutrally aligned participants to avoid information on the war actively, reporting it as manipulative, harmful, and fear-inducing. The fact that war coverage cannot be avoided on broadcasts, alongside the regulation banning Russian media institutions, has resulted in traditional media within Moldova being perceived as censored and untrustworthy by this group, despite its widespread consumption. The advantage of a breath of opinions and opposition to censoring was a strong theme from neutral participants. This group sought out news sources that differed from their opinions and only truly trusted information they could corroborate from several sources, user comments, and personal contacts. Traditional social media favoured by these participants align with these preferences, including the ease of ignoring war-focused content. Participants not politically aligned with Russia or the West preferred factual over opinion-based coverage. However, they also reported shocking content (e.g., Russia's crimes in Bucha, Mariupol, and the execution of prisoners), significantly impacting their opinions towards Russia.



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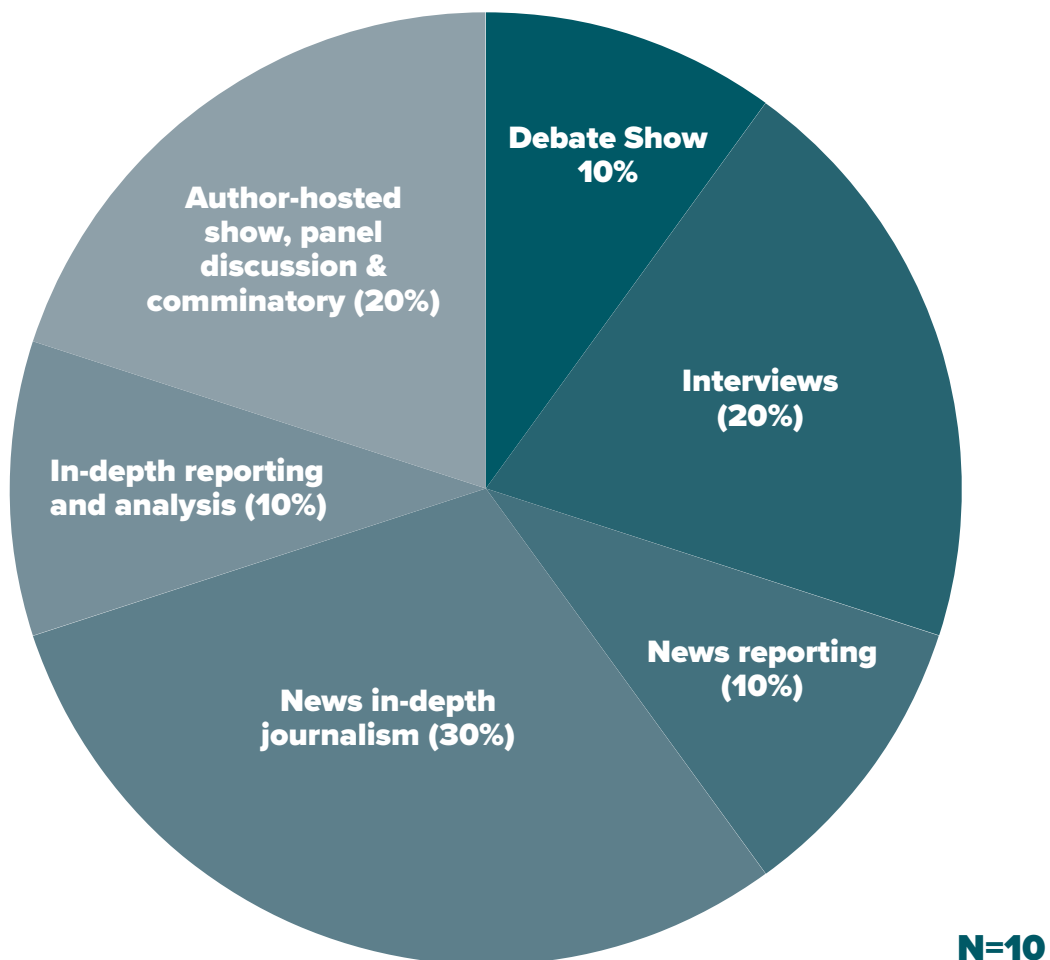
Features of content considered trustworthy and persuasive by the Moldovan public:

Participants were selected into IDIs based on examples of content critical to informing their current opinion towards Russia. Figure 4 provides a breakdown of the content formats of their examples, with in-depth journalism, interviews and author-hosted shows being the most widely cited formats.

Content examples were independently reviewed for the presence of propaganda and

disinformation and their editorial quality. Hear content suggested by pro-Western participants was considered the least biased, with 75% of examples being of robust editorial quality and not demonstrating propaganda or disinformation. Precisely half of the content suggestions from neutral participants were considered non-biased. In contrast, only 25% of content suggestions submitted by the Pro Russian Profile were deemed by experts as being free of disinformation and propaganda.

Figure 4. Type formats submitted by IDI participants.



Several cross-cutting features have emerged from expert review and participant discussion, which made content examples persuasive or trustworthy, summarised in Table 1. While the Moldovan public tended to report these irrespective of their political leaning, to varying extents, all profiles were untrusting of media which ran counter to their personal ideological

alignment. For example, pro-Russian groups did not engage with Ukrainian sources, whereas pro-Western and neutral participants didn't tend to trust Russian sources. Meaningful communication must speak to these groups' existing points of view before attempting to persuade or build trust.

Table 1. Key Features of Persuasive and Trustworthy Content.

Persuasive	Trustworthy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coverage ties in with a personal topic of interest (e.g., religion). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive evidence, including video footage, visuals, maps, testimonies, and time stamps.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal relevance to them: knowledge, personal experience and proximity to events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Credible authorship, famous journalists and those whose content is familiar to participants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expert analysis: experts who provided clear and direct answers. Those with military expertise were considered particularly persuasive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content which references and links to primary sources of information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Debates with opposing views were considered particularly convincing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eyewitness testimony: content that presented proof of actions on the ground or those affected by the story.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content focusing on government sources or those affiliated with a political party was seen as unpersuasive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dynamic online content where participants can interact, comment and see the reactions of other public members were seen as more trustworthy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal stories and details of human history were reported as compelling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content replicating details and information that respondents encountered from other sources bolstered trustworthiness.

Next steps

Key findings and emerging insights described in this summary will help CDM partners and their media beneficiaries in Moldova develop content specifically aimed at combating malign Russian influences, particularly disinformation and propaganda. This summary will be disseminated via partner workshops to ensure that content suggestions and recommendations will support CDM subgrantees in developing tailored, strategic, and targeted approaches to promote critical thinking and objective analysis of media.



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