

Opinion – Moldova Must Balance Media Freedom and Disinformation

Written by Stanislav Pavlovschi

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STANISLAV PAVLOVSCHI, MAY 26 2024

In a recently televised interview, Moldova's President, Maia Sandu, said that the government would do everything they can to preserve peace. Unfortunately for the Moldovan people, these measures have resulted in serious cases of media censorship and democratic backsliding. Using emergency powers introduced following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Commission for Exceptional Situations (CES) has been given unprecedented and unchecked authority to censor media within Moldova. This has resulted in the unexplained banning of 13 TV stations and over 50 websites and online portals with 7 additional TV and 2 radio stations slated to follow. These antidemocratic actions have rightfully sparked concerns among media NGOs worldwide and should serve as a warning sign to EU officials currently involved in accession negotiations with Moldova. There must be greater efforts to protect and educate the Moldovan public against disinformation, without violating freedom of speech.

There is no denying that Moldova faces a disinformation threat from Russia. Various reports of cyber attacks and illegal funding should be taken seriously – but if Moldova is to join the EU, it must learn to fight these threats while maintaining its freedoms. Moldova must be reminded that it is not alone in facing Russian disinformation campaigns.

Finland for example, a country with similar fears over Russian military and disinformation threats, has implemented anti-fake news initiatives, partnering with experts to implement a critical thinking curriculum across schools to train children how to spot fake news. Moldova's neighbour, Romania, has similarly introduced a specialised online platform tailored to empower and educate their citizens in identifying and countering disinformation. As a country with a common culture and language that has now assimilated into the EU, Romania should serve as a shining example to Moldova in how to effectively counter fake news without trampling on press freedoms. If Moldova opts to combat Russian disinformation by censoring the media, they will ultimately fail. The key to combating fake news instead lies in promoting greater transparency within the media and, most importantly, education and awareness.

It is ironic that actions by the CES have effectively led to the government monopolising the media sector, a practice that pro-EU parties in Moldova and EU institutions have consistently criticised when seen in autocratic regimes like Russia. Unsurprisingly, the situation in Moldova has already transcended mere media bans, with over 120 documented cases of threats and direct attacks against journalists and media personnel between 2020 and 2022. Moreover, Moldova's advertising sector is also dominated by groups closely linked to influential government figures, undermining independent media, resulting in an overall media landscape of patronage and fear.

The government's assault on Moldova's free media landscape is troubling in and of itself, but especially so when taken as a wider crackdown on civil society. The CES's decision to bar all candidates from the Chance party from participating in the local elections held last November was a clear and illegal violation of electoral rights and has since been annulled by the Supreme Court. The Council of Europe and OSCE both openly criticised the ruling, urging Moldova to reassess the broad powers wielded by the CES. Prohibiting the participation of opposition parties in free and democratic elections will silence significant portions of Moldovan society already discontent with the government, depriving them of the opportunity to express their voices and opinions. This suppression could ultimately destabilise the social and political framework of Moldova, potentially inciting unrest among opposition and minority groups and jeopardising the nation's stability and cohesion.

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Ultimately, Moldova must resist the temptation to fight fire with fire. The ability to criticise a government and participate in fair political competition are foundational to democracy, while restricting these freedoms will likely have adverse long-term consequences. There must instead be greater steps and investment towards educating the Moldovan public around the dangers of disinformation. It is also critical for the future stability of Moldova, that the EU is not seen to be condoning this behaviour. In an already fragmented state, if the EU is seen as bluntly taking the side of the liberals, then unity will be even harder to achieve.

The Commission for Exceptional Situations has wielded excessive power for too long and as Moldova approaches elections in the fall, the legitimacy of Sandu's government hinges on an open, free, and fair democratic process.

The author is not aligned with any political movement within or outside Moldova, and is on a campaign, with his recently announced NGO, to bring greater awareness to the corruption that is endemic throughout Moldovan affairs. He has outlined some of these views in an interview with Forbes, as well as opinion pieces in EUobserver and EU Reporter.

About the author:

Stanislav Pavlovschi is a former Justice Minister of Moldova, a former judge on the European Court of Human Rights (2001–08) and former Vice President of the Dignity and Truth Platform political party (2016–2019). He is the founder of The International Center for the Protection of Human Rights and Democracy.