

Public health or digital liberties?

Citizens' tracking during
and after COVID-19: implications
for Democracy in EaP countries

Report on the situation
in Moldova



Institute of
Innovative
Governance



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WatchDog.md is a community of civil society in Moldova, acting as a think-tank. It brings together experts in various fields to develop, analyze and evaluate sectorial public policies in Moldova. One of its main objectives is to provide accurate and comprehensive information on the true situation in critical areas in Moldova, including economics, public finance, democracy, election processes and human rights. WatchDog.md in cooperation with the Digital Communication Network (DCN) realized the study on application of digital tracking tools for managing epidemic situation during Covid19 pandemic in Moldova.

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Introduction

Introduction

4

Since the beginning of the pandemic in the Republic of Moldova, the Parliament has voted twice for the introduction of the state of emergency and has delegated to the Commission for Emergency Situations the authority to regulate several fields in the country. The state of emergency was first established between March 17 - May 15, 2020, and between April 1 - May 30, 2021 - for the second time since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Republic of Moldova did not introduce any COVID-19 contact tracing tool. According to the experts interviewed by WatchDog.MD, such a tool was not used largely due to lack of competence and interest from the authorities. We believe that such a tool would have reduced the risk of infection, would have motivated citizens to be more cautious and confident in the existence and danger of COVID-19. However, its effectiveness would be questionable. This is because the Republic of Moldova has been testing only symptomatic people. Asymptomatic people are not being tested, not even people who have come into proven contact with those infected. At the same time, the number of performed tests since the outbreak of the pandemic was so small that the 20-30% rate of positive tests remained steady during the last year and decreased to 10% only in April 2021.

The Moldovan authorities managing the pandemic have not been sufficiently informed about the advantages and usefulness of such mobile apps, and the IT companies have not been convincing enough in promoting them.

Although Moldova did not face any danger of misuse of personal data, instead, we found abuses related to access to information, lack of transparency of the authorities and lack

The number of digital response measures applied in Moldova to combat the pandemic was limited:

- an information platform on the number of patients, disaggregated by sex, age, location, and
- SMS texts about the danger of COVID-19, urging people to stay home during the lockdown.

of institutional capacity that led to a very poor management of the pandemic. Consequently, amid the general panic and the information vacuum, the authorities created room for the emergence of conspiracy theories and generated distrust in the need for anti-COVID measures.

In general, the Republic of Moldova has failed to properly inform the population - initially about the danger of the pandemic, and later about the need to comply with protection measures and with the restrictions.

**Developments
in access to public
information during
the pandemic and cases
where authorities
concealed or disclosed
incomplete information**

1



Developments in access to public information during the pandemic and cases where authorities concealed or disclosed incomplete information

The coronavirus pandemic in the Republic of Moldova and, consequently, the state of emergency from March 17, 2020 to May 15, 2020, affected the communication of public authorities with the media. Although no specific communication strategy has been developed, the Cabinet has presented two Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Plans.^{1,2}

The second plan was developed only half a year after the first COVID-19 case was found in Moldova. According to the plans, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection (MSMPS) and other authorities were to report daily on the epidemiological situation and the measures they were taking. In reality, however, 2 weeks after the detection of the first case of COVID-19 in Moldova, all press events were held online^{3, 4} and journalists were not allowed to attend these events. Thus, the authorities restricted the access to information to media representatives. The authorities' reports were limited to the enumeration of the cases detected over the previous 24 hours, the number of tests performed and the restrictive/permissive measures taken. Due to poor communication, the panic among the population increased, which was in lockdown at that time, and many of the questions that required explanations regarding the transmission of the virus or the usefulness of the masks, remained unanswered.

As a result, at the beginning of April 2020, the Independent Journalism Center came up with the initiative to create a Journalists' Crisis Cell.⁵ The aim of the cell was to create a platform for media representatives where they could show solidarity in the face of common challenges. Thanks to the support of news platforms and media NGOs, the crisis cell was able to persuade MSMPS officials to hold online conferences where the press could ask questions live.

At the same time, the representatives of the Crisis Cell submitted a petition to the Parliament, signed by over 350 citizens, requesting access to information. The signatories of the petition reported abuses of some officials and dignitaries in relation to the press. Due to this initiative, on April 22, 2020, the Minister of Health, Viorica Dumbrăveanu, announced in a press briefing⁶ that the “communication procedure with media representatives will be modified to identify a platform to respond to all the questions”. Thus, a first conference in which journalists were able to ask questions online took place on 1 May 2020, 2 months after the first COVID-19 case was detected.⁷ But this communication mechanism was not good enough either, because it generated flaws in the correct daily information of the citizens through the media. This was happening during the first lockdown in Moldova, when citizens were confused, panicked or reluctant to the existence of the virus. It was during this period that more and more conspiracy theories about the SARS-CoV-2 origin spread both through social media and through pro-Kremlin TV stations in Moldova.

As of September 2020, the daily communication commitment provided in the second Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Plans has been reduced to posting a daily press release on the MSMPS website regarding the new COVID-19 cases. Once a week, a press conference was held with the participation of MSMPS representatives, the Ministry of

1. https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:z8jz2Jr5gXEJ:https://msmps.gov.md/sites/default/files/legislatie/plan_raspuns_covid-19_1.docx+&cd=1&hl=ro&ct=clnk&gl=md
2. <https://msmps.gov.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Plan-r%C4%83spuns-COVID-19.pdf>
3. <https://www.privesc.eu/Arhiva/90396/Declaratii-de-presa-dupa-intrevederea-Presedintelui-Republicii-Moldova--Igor-Dodon--cu-conducerea-de-varf-a-tarii>
4. <https://www.facebook.com/sanataprotectiesocialamoldova/videos/1113594442314782>
5. <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/cum-reu%C8%99it-celula-de-criz%C4%83-jurnali%C8%99tilor-s%C4%83-solidarizeze-breasla-pe-timp-de-pandemie>
6. <https://www.facebook.com/sanataprotectiesocialamoldova/videos/576543849655602>
7. <https://www.facebook.com/sanataprotectiesocialamoldova/videos/522051511772001>

Developments in access to public information during the pandemic and cases where authorities concealed or disclosed incomplete information

Internal Affairs, the National Auto Transport Agency, the National Agency for Food Safety and other competent structures.

The quality of the presentation of updated data on Covid-19 infection was questionable. The data on the primary and repeated testing was inconclusive, as well as the number of tests performed in private and state clinics or the number of imported and locally transmitted cases.

MSMPS representatives started to differentiate the primary, repeated and total tests only at the beginning of May 2020. However, since March 19, 2021, the authorities returned to the daily presentation of the total number of tests, including the rapid tests and excluding data on primary and repeated tests. In addition, there were multiple situations in which MSMPS did not indicate, in daily press releases, the number of import and local cases.

Another information that has not been communicated so far, refers to the number of tests performed in private laboratories and those in state institutions. The information is relevant since the Moldovan authorities emphasized that the COVID-19 tests are free of charge, while the cost of testing at private clinics and the number of those who choose this option were not disclosed. Similarly, the authorities did not communicate about the real treatment cost for mild and moderate forms of the disease. Such treatment costs started to be covered by compulsory health insurance only since April 2021. According to an analysis conducted by the Agora.md,⁸ Moldovans performed over 360 000 tests from the beginning of the pandemic until October 28, 2020. A third of these tests were carried out in private laboratories. Thus, starting from the premise that a private test costs on average 700 lei (approximately 35 euros), Agora.md calculated that until November 2020, Moldovans spent about 89,355,000 lei for tests, i.e. approximately 4,469,895 euros.

The poor communication of the authorities about the number of infected medical staff led to the resignation of Anatol

Ciubotaru, the director of the Republican Clinical Hospital (SCR), on March 24, 2020. According to Anticorruption.md,⁹ the former director of SCR was fired because he organized the testing of six employees from the Intensive Care Unit at a private laboratory. He did not order the tests to be repeated in the state laboratory and did not take measures to isolate and hospitalize them. Anatol Ciubotaru was later reinstated by the decision of the Supreme Court of Justice.¹⁰ However, the scandal motivated the authorities to report the number of infected medical staff on a daily basis.

The only digital response measures applied in Moldova were purely informative. One of them was the activation of the ArcGIS COVID-19 online platform,¹¹ which presents the latest numbers of COVID-19 cases in the country. The information on the platform is presented in Romanian and Russian, and it contains the data on the number of confirmed and suspected cases of infection, the number of deaths and the number of people that have recovered. The data is disaggregated by age, sex, geographical location, time of case registration (day/month), and the confirmed cases among pregnant women. The platform also shows the number of accumulated views. However, the platform has a cumbersome name and has not been widely promoted, enough to be used by the general public as an information tool.

Another digital method used by the authorities was to send short text messages, at the end of February 2020, warning the citizens to call a doctor if they have symptoms such as "fever or cough". A similar message was sent a few days before the lockdown. The message informed about the obligation to respect the quarantine for those who came from abroad and urged everyone to stay at home. The then Minister of Health, Viorica Dumbrăveanu, said^{13, 14} that the text messages were part of an extensive information campaign. The Minister also added that the text messages were sent due to a collaboration with the mobile operators and that "neither the Ministry of Health nor the Government owns the telephone numbers".

8. <https://agora.md/stiri/79033/testarea-covid-poate-deveni-o-afacere-630-de-mii-de-lei-ar-face-clinicile-private-din-moldova-intro-singura-zi-din-teste-pentru-coronavirus-doc>

9. <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/doc-oficial-anatol-ciubotaru-demis-pentru-ca-si-a-trimis-subalternii-sa-si-faca-testul-la-un-laborator-privat?fbclid=IwAR1TnZGC-ozIBKkvN7TCv3pC7pJgLv1zFU9AeL0GVxMTzezVQbhkSJoqaEY>

10. <https://gov.md/ro/content/informatii-privind-coronavirus>

11. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=212031889953572&ref=watch_permalink

12. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1840667866057888&ref=watch_permalink

13. <https://realitatealive.md/live-edin-a-guvernului-republicii-moldova-din-26-februarie-2020---106442.html>

14. <https://msmps.gov.md/comunicare/comunicate/sedinta-privind-coordonarea-actiunilor-de-comunicare-la-nivel-national-in-contextul-prevenirii-si-controlului-infectiei-cu-coronavirusul-de-tip-nou/>

Study the ways in which the official websites were adjusted to the needs of the population in the context of the pandemic: restrictions, prevention methods, lockdown regulations, statistics, etc.

2



Study the ways in which the official websites were adjusted to the needs of the population in the context of the pandemic: restrictions, prevention methods, lockdown regulations, statistics, etc.

To date, the basic information on existing restrictions and measures to combat the pandemic is not clearly presented on any website of the Moldovan authorities. The only way to access information from official sources is to search for the latest decisions of the Commission for Emergency Situations or the National Public Health Commission, depending on the degree of urgency applied at the country level at that time.

These decisions can be found on the government's website¹⁵ in separate sections. However, this method of accessing information is complicated for ordinary citizens, which is why citizens do not use it. Thus, when a citizen wants to know in which countries s/he can travel, if the COVID-19 test is required or not upon entering the Republic of Moldova, what are the working hours of shops, the citizen can find out this information by accessing 3 different sites. Moreover, all the information is presented as official documents, under a language that is not accessible to all the citizens.

Since the first COVID-19 case was registered in Moldova, the Government's website has been an important source of information, but the section for publishing the decisions of the Commission for Emergency Situations was created only 10 days after the declaration of the first state of emergency on March 17, 2020. The only source of information up until that moment was the Commission's press briefings on pandemic management. Moreover, the provisions of the Commission are still not always published on the day the decisions are taken, or on the day the Prime Minister communicates them. It is difficult for ordinary citizens to access this information.

In addition to the section on the government's website (where the publication is delayed), the decisions are also published on the State Chancellery's website,¹⁶ where they are also difficult to find.

Currently, the Government's website contains a series of informative graphic images related to the pandemic. Unfortunately, the infographics are not frequently updated. We believe that the Government's website is an important

platform to inform the population, but it does not meet the information needs of the population in the context of COVID-19.

Another important information tool is the page of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection.¹⁷ When the pandemic began, the Ministry's web page was not updated. The main tools to inform about the epidemiological situation in the country at that moment were the infographics with the protection measures. On June 25, 2020, about 4 months after the first COVID-19 cases were detected in the Republic of Moldova, three new informative sections appeared on the ministry's website. The new sections were: "Newsletter"¹⁸, "Covid-19"¹⁹ (includes the CSE decisions) and "Press Releases".²⁰ The sections can be accessed in the "Ministry" category. They are not visible at the first access, and there is only one banner placed at the bottom of the page that leads to them. Currently, the information on the Ministry's website is insufficient.

The web page of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research²¹ provides a banner to the right of the page that leads to the dedicated COVID-19 section. In the subcategories, users can access the documents regulating the educational process, the informational videos and a banner leading to the COVID-19 section on the page of the Ministry of Health.

Prior to the 2020-2021 academic year, the Ministry offered educational institutions the opportunity to decide whether or not to return to the offline study process. The ministry provided several scenarios²² from which the institutions had

15. <https://gov.md/ro/content/informatii-privind-coronavirus>

16. <https://cancelaria.gov.md/ro/apc/coronavirus>

17. <https://msmps.gov.md/>

18. <https://msmps.gov.md/minister/comunicare/buletin-informativ/>

19. <https://msmps.gov.md/minister/comunicare/covid-19/>

20. <https://msmps.gov.md/minister/comunicare/comunicate/>

21. <https://mecc.gov.md/>

22. <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/7b8c01d44f40ab94/elevii-revin-la-scoala-incepand-cu-1-septembrie-cele-sapte-scenarii-dupa-care-se-vor-putea-redeschide-institutiile.html>

Study the ways in which the official websites were adjusted to the needs of the population in the context of the pandemic: restrictions, prevention methods, lockdown regulations, statistics, etc.

to choose. This shows insufficient preparedness on the part of the Ministry, which during the summer failed to prepare a viable plan that would involve minimal risks of infection. Thus, the Ministry of Education passed all the responsibility on to the schools. At the same time, the ministry failed to update its website to support teachers and students.

Although dozens of online lessons for distance education have been published in Moldova on the educatieonline.md platform,²³ the website of the Ministry of Education does not have any banner or separate section that would provide access to the platform.²⁴ This is especially worth mentioning, taking into consideration that the educatieonline.md is the initiative of the Chişinău City Hall, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research and other partners.

When the state of emergency was declared from March 17 to May 15, 2020, the flights at the Chişinău airport were stopped. During that period, several transportation companies organized illegal international routes to transport Moldovans home. The WatchDog.MD Community monitored the web pages of the embassies of the Republic of Moldova in Poland, Germany, France and the Russian Federation. Only the web pages of the embassies of the Republic of Moldova in Germany and France published information warning the citizens about the unauthorized transportation routes. The embassies in Poland and the Russian Federation did not issue any information on the subject, although several violations were found in these countries in the repatriation process.

The central authorities communicated to the public only the successful repatriation cases, without investigating the cases where Moldovans were blocked at borders. Avoiding open communication about these situations has led to new similar cases. The web pages of the Ministry

of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (MAEIE) and the diplomatic missions offered insufficient information about the repatriation procedures, which should have been explained accessibly to the citizens.

Likewise, we found that the institutions that are responsible for the selection of transportation operators (ANTA and AAC) provided little information about the danger of unauthorized routes and the safe return home of Moldovan citizens during the state of emergency. On March 26, 2020, the MAEIE began to coordinate the repatriation process of Moldovan citizens via charter flights. Until March 31, 2020, the return of Moldovans home was organized by the authorities without a clear and formalized mechanism. The media reported several incidents involving citizens stranded in airports, as well the cases of selling flight tickets at exaggerated prices: the case of the 220 Moldovans stranded in an airport in Paris²⁵ and the 180 Moldovans stranded in the Prague airport.²⁶

Since then, the web pages of ANTA²⁷ and AAC²⁸ have undergone significant changes to facilitate the process of accessing information about the travel process in the context of the pandemic. Both pages have a separate, easy-to-access compartment that includes travel conditions. This information is updated every few days.

Currently, all the web pages of the diplomatic missions, as well as the page of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,²⁹ provide information about the existing restrictions. The pages have a section for travel alerts.³⁰ However, those pages have not been fully updated to the needs caused by the pandemic. On the listed websites there are no easily accessible sections, or sections with the cumulated information, necessary for the citizens who want to return to the country, or for those who want to leave Moldova.

23. <https://mecc.gov.md/ro/content/au-inceput-filmarile-pentru-lectiile-video-din-cadrul-etapei-ii-proiectului-educatie-online>

24. <http://educatieonline.md/About>

25. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OCu6dgl2W4>

26. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/zeci-de-moldoveni-se-preg%C4%83tesc-s%C4%83-petreat%C4%83-%C3%AEnc%C4%83-o-noapte-%C3%AEn-aeropotul-par%C8%9Bial-%C3%AEnchis-de-la-praga/30526058.html>

27. <https://anta.gov.md/>

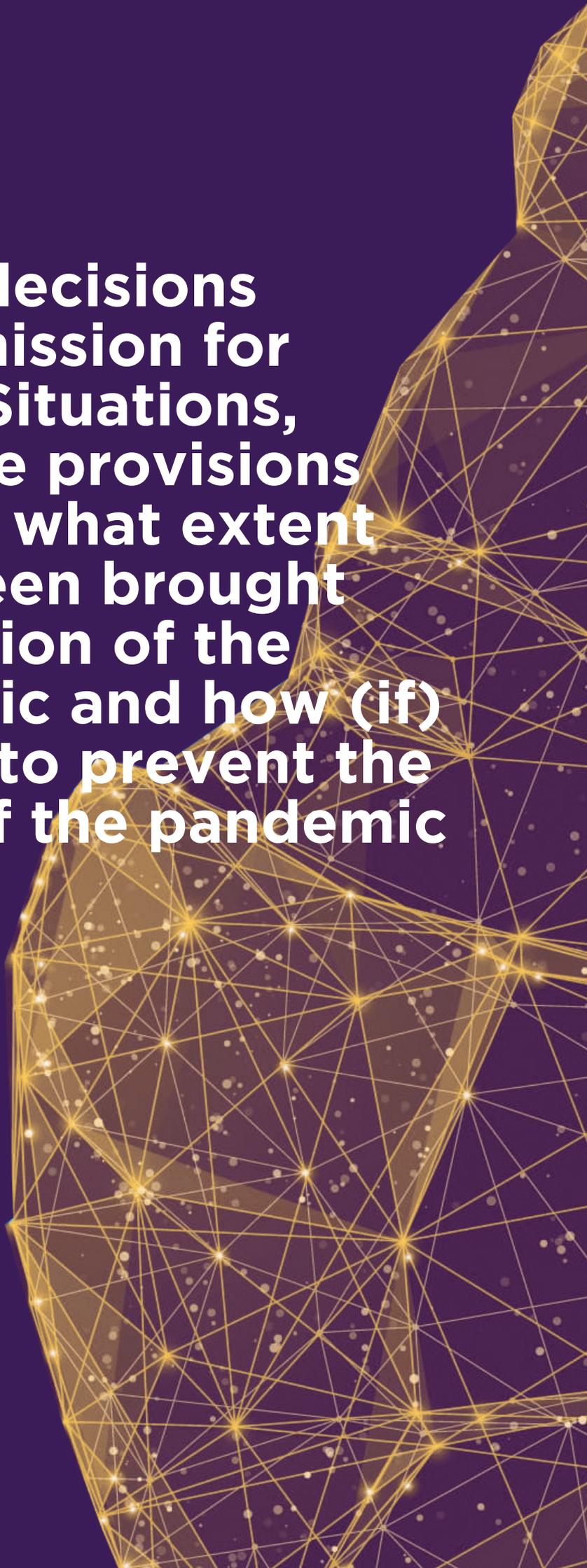
28. <https://www.caa.md/>

29. <https://mfa.gov.md/>

30. <https://mfa.gov.md/ro/content/alerte-de-calatorie-covid-19>

Review the decisions of the Commission for Emergency Situations, how clear the provisions were/are; to what extent they have been brought to the attention of the general public and how (if) they helped to prevent the worsening of the pandemic

3



Review the decisions of the Commission for Emergency Situations, how clear the provisions were/are; to what extent they have been brought to the attention of the general public and how (if) they helped to prevent the worsening of the pandemic

During the state of emergency, the decisions regarding the management of the pandemic were adopted by the Commission for Emergency Situations of the Republic of Moldova, which issued 30 provisions between March 18 and May 15, 2020. The other decisions were issued by the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission (CNESP). Nine decisions were issued until the first state of emergency, and since its conclusion and until now, more than 50 decisions have been issued. They are published on the Government's website.³¹

The first decisions of the CNESP involving restrictions were issued after March 8, 2020, once the first COVID-19 case was detected. A few days later, flights from Italy were banned³². Meetings of over 50 people were banned as well and the educational institutions were closed.³³ Later, leisure facilities and sports clubs of any kind were closed, and the religious services – banned.³⁴ Subsequently, all flights were stopped, and all stores except food markets were closed as well.³⁵

All these decisions were announced through press briefings, but the journalists were not allowed to participate, thus they were unable to ask questions for clarification. The information was also published through the news bulletins. In this context, the decision to cancel the flights determined Moldovans to choose road transport routes to return to the country, which involved longer journeys and a higher risk of infection. Due to the lack of communication with the citizens abroad and the absence of an efficient repatriation mechanism, hundreds of Moldovans who were coming home by bus found themselves stuck at the customs of other countries³⁶ and even slept in the field with their families.

Meanwhile, the authorities have banned also the presence of parishioners at religious services. It is worth mentioning

that over 90% of Moldovans declare themselves to be Orthodox Christians. The decision to ban the participation in religious services was taken without discussing with the Metropolitan Church of Moldova. Many of the priests sabotaged the decision of the Commission for Emergency Situations, continued to organize religious services despite the ban³⁷, and cultivated public distrust in the state institutions, even denied the existence of the COVID-19. In fact, the church later became one of the most influential fake news sources³⁸ related to COVID. In a press release, the Metropolitan Church of Moldova accused the "international criminal" Bill Gates of genocide, promoted the idea of "reduction of human population", "chipization" through vaccination and spreading the virus using 5G antennas. Thus, the institution that could have influenced a very large population to take both the disease and the restrictions seriously, failed due to poor communication with the authorities.

In May 2020, the Territorial Commission for Emergency Situations in Chişinău ruled that the indoor protective mask wearing was mandatory, without conducting any explicit campaign about their usefulness and the differences between the types of masks.³⁹ Moreover, the authorities themselves compromised the population's acceptance of the need to wear a mask. The then Prime Minister, Ion

31. <https://gov.md/ro/content/informatii-privind-coronavirus>

32. https://gov.md/sites/default/files/hot_cnesp_nr.5_0.pdf

33. https://gov.md/sites/default/files/hot_cnesp_nr.6.pdf

34. https://gov.md/sites/default/files/hot_cnesp_nr.7_anexa.pdf

35. https://gov.md/sites/default/files/hot_cnesp_nr.9_0.pdf

36. <https://protv.md/coronavirus/in-cele-doua-autocare-care-au-venit-sa-ia-moldovenii-blocati-in-polonia-nu-au-incaput-toti-oamenii-o-parte-din-ei-au-ramas-in-parcarea-din-vama-video--2527054.html>

37. <https://newsmaker.md/ro/preot-din-soroca-amandat-cu-pesto-22-de-mii-de-lei-pentru-ca-a-oficiat-o-slujba-religioasa-in-pofida-interdictiei/>

38. <https://mitropolia.md/in-cadrul-lucrarilor-sinodului-bom-au-fost-semnate-doua-adresari-importante-catre-autoritatile-statalui/>
<https://www.dw.com/ro/mitropolia-moldovei-alimentez%C4%83-fake-urile-legate-de-covid/a-53516583>

39. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/purtarea-mastilor-devine-obligatorie-in-spatiile-inchise-din-chisinau-cei-care-nu-se-vor-conforma-vor-fi-sanctionati/>

Review the decisions of the Commission for Emergency Situations, how clear the provisions were/are; to what extent they have been brought to the attention of the general public and how (if) they helped to prevent the worsening of the pandemic

Chicu said, referring to the WHO protocols, that the masks were mandatory only for infected people, medical staff and those who were taking care of COVID patients.⁴⁰ The statement came after the then health minister, Viorica Dumbrăveanu, was photographed without a mask while in a store. Moreover, President Igor Dodon has constantly ignored the requirement to wear a mask during his meetings with the citizens, during working visits throughout the country, electoral meetings and even during his indoor discussions with war veterans^{41, 42}.

Another reason for the population's distrust in the anti-COVID measures announced by the Commission, was that in August 2020, the then Prime Minister Ion Chicu organized his son's wedding.⁴³ The event took place despite the ban⁴⁴ on gatherings of any kind, including weddings, and while even the rallies could take place with only up to 20 people.

The measures and restrictions announced by the Commission for Emergency Situations were not taken seriously by the population, also because the former President Igor Dodon diminished the severity of COVID-19 by saying that it is "nothing more than a cold".⁴⁵

As a result of the inefficient communication of the Commission of Emergency Situations on the one hand, and the defiance of bans by the President, Prime Minister and Minister of Health on the other hand, 50.4% of Moldovans considered in May 2020 that the virus is no more dangerous than the common flu and that the crisis was orchestrated in order to destroy the economy.⁴⁶ In October 2020 this indicator increased by 5%, thus 55% of the country's population held this belief at that time.⁴⁷

Considering the evolution of the statistics on the COVID-19 incidence in Moldova, we can conclude that the restrictions and measures imposed by the National Extraordinary Public Health Commission and the Commission for Emergency Situations have not achieved their goal. Thus, one year after the first COVID-19 case was detected in Moldova, a new record of infections was detected on March 24, 2021, in 24 hours.⁴⁸

In essence, at the beginning of April 2021, COVID-19 control measures are the following: mandatory wearing of a mask indoors and outdoors, a provision that is often violated;⁴⁹ reduced working hours of markets, non-food stores and HORECA; a 23.00-5.00 curfew and partial online educational process.

40. <https://agora.md/stiri/68953/ministra-sanatatii-fotografiata-fara-manusi-si-masca-la-magazin-chicu-atacuri-marsave-de-la-oameni-marsavi>

41. <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/international/igor-dodon-fara-masca-intre-copiii-dintr-o-scoala-reactia-extrem-de-dura-a-ministrului-educatiei.html>

42. <https://www.facebook.com/1805726386405532/videos/1169304076742831>

43. <https://cotidianul.md/2020/08/29/video-in-plina-pandemie-fiul-premierului-chicu-ar-fi-facut-nunta-la-o-vinarie-presa-interzisa-pe-aproape-de-1-km/>

44. https://gov.md/sites/default/files/hotararea_cnesp_17_23.06.20.pdf

45. <https://radiochisinau.md/video-igor-dodon-coronavirusul-poate-sa-treaca-prin-organismul-omului-si-nici-sa-nu-observam-asa-cum-trece-o-gripa-simpla---105942.html>

46. <https://www.watchdog.md/2020/06/03/socio-political-trends-and-disinformation-impact-during-the-pandemic/>

47. https://www.watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SURVEY-OCTOBER-2020_EN.pdf

48. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/r-moldova-2-273-de-cazuri-de-infectare-cu-noul-coronavirus-%C8%99i-39-de-decese-printre-bolnavi/31167952.html>

49. <https://protv.md/coronavirus/record-dupa-record-de-cazuri-si-decese-iar-oamenii-se-impulzesc-in-magazine-si-piete-in-transportul-public-si-prin-parcuri-fara-a-purta-masca-de-protectie-sau-pastrarea-distantei-sociale-video---2561965.html>

**Attempts
by the authorities
to undermine media
freedom and limit access
to information of
public interest**

4



Attempts by the authorities to undermine media freedom and limit access to information of public interest

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Moldovan authorities have undermined media freedom and limited access to information of public interest. The first step in this direction was taken on the very second day of the state of emergency.

Thus, a provision⁵⁰ issued by the Commission for Emergency Situations on March 18, 2020 established that “during the state of emergency, the legal deadlines established for answering the information of public interest requests and petitions will triple”. In practical terms, this meant 45 working days instead of 15 working days, as provided by the Law on Access to Information.⁵¹ In some cases, according to the legislation, the term for answering the requests for access to information can be extended by 5 working days, i.e. the entire waiting period could last up to 20 days. But within the new provision, it could take up to 60 days to obtain information of public interest. This decision is all the more critical in the context of the infodemia, when citizens should be provided with up-to-date information in order not to increase panic and to ensure that people are protecting themselves properly.

In addition to limiting the access of the media to information of public interest, the chairman of the audiovisual regulatory body, Dragoș Vicol, tried to undermine the freedom of the media through an “immediately enforceable” provision.⁵² The chairman of the Board of Directors asked the television and radio stations to present the point of view of the “competent public authorities” when reporting on the coronavirus epidemic, and to give up “publishing and favoring unapproved opinions”. The prompt reaction of civil society and opposition parties led to the cancellation of the provision.

The Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), which is an opposition party, notified⁵³ the General Prosecutor's Office (PG). However, prosecutors found that the decision signed by the chairman of the Board was issued “pursuant to Parliament's decision” and did not examine further the request.⁵⁴ At the same time, in a public call, the media NGOs and the members of the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum were concerned about the decision issued by Dragoș Vicol⁵⁵ and demanded its cancellation. Even the then President of the Republic of Moldova, Igor Dodon, criticized the decision of the chairman of the Audiovisual Council and asked him to review it.⁵⁶ Thus, on March 26, 2020, Dragoș Vicol announced that,⁵⁷ “in order to calm the society”, he canceled his disposition signed two days before. He then said that the disposition generated criticism among journalists and NGOs,⁵⁸ who described it as “abuse” and “censorship” from the regulatory authority in the field of audiovisual media services in the Republic of Moldova.

The huge wave of fake news related to COVID-19 that surged in the context of the obstruction of access to information was crucial for that period, while the measures taken by the authorities were very ineffective. To stop the growing number of fake news, the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS) blocked 52 sites that were posting pandemic-related fake news.⁵⁹ The site administrators were accused by SIS that “they perform subversive activities in the information

50. https://gov.md/sites/default/files/dispozitia_cse_nr.1.pdf

51. https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=108552&lang=ro

52. <http://www.audiovizual.md/news/n-aten-ia-furnizorilor-de-servicii-media-audiovizuale-din-jurisdic-ia-republicii-moldova>

53. <http://media-azi.md/ro/stiri/procuratura-general%C4%83-sesizat%C4%83-pe-marginea-dispozi%C8%9Biei-consiliului-audiovizualului-ce-vizeaz%C4%83>

54. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/procuratura-despre-dispozitia-la-limita-cenzurii-a-lui-dragos-vicol-privind-informarea-despre-covid-19-nu-am-avut-temei-sa-intervenim/>

55. <https://www.eap-csf.md/apel-public-privind-dispozitia-emisa-de-presedintele-consiliului-audiovizualului/>

56. <https://radiochisinau.md/igor-dodon-critica-pozitia-presedintelui-ca-dragos-vicol-privind-modul-cum-ar-trebui-jurnalistii-sa-reflecte-subiectele-legate-de-covid19---106254.html>

57. <http://www.audiovizual.md/news/comunicat-de-pres-43>

58. <http://www.api.md/news/view/ro-apelul-organizatiilor-de-media-privind-excluderea-abuzurilor-in-conditiile-starii-de-urgenta-2154?v=1612447531>

59. https://sis.md/sites/default/files/comunicate/fisiere/indicatii_executorii.pdf

Attempts by the authorities to undermine media freedom and limit access to information of public interest

space, that could affect the information security of the Republic of Moldova during the crisis". However, their sanctioning was impossible because in the Republic of Moldova there are no criminal or misdemeanor sanctions for the communication or dissemination of fake news, by any means.

Three weeks after the SIS requested the blocking of sites that published fake news during the state of emergency, the stopfals.md portal, a project that fights fake and biased

information, published an analysis⁶⁰ in which it found that some of these sites could still be accessed from the Republic of Moldova. Information technology experts, who requested anonymity, told Stopfals.md that the blocking method applied by some internet operators is vulnerable, as it allows blocking websites only when using DNS servers provided by Internet operators. Otherwise, those websites could be accessed and their content - shared. Thus, the websites can be accessed from abroad.

60. <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/site-uri-de-stiri-false-blocate-dar-accesibile-180291>

Analysis of how the informational landscape and the access to public information in the Republic of Moldova evolved during the pandemic (Conclusion)

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Analysis of how the informational landscape and the access to public information in the Republic of Moldova evolved during the pandemic (Conclusion)

The pandemic in the Republic of Moldova has significantly affected the informational landscape and the access to public information. This decline began with the detection of the first case of COVID and the establishment of a state of emergency from March 17, 2020 to May 15, 2020. When the first Covid-19 cases were detected in Moldova, authorities started to conduct all press events online, while the journalists were not allowed to attend those events.

The access to information of public interest was limited, even though it was imperative for the authorities to communicate in a timely manner with the citizens. This was all the more serious as when the state of emergency was declared in March 2020, the authorities extended the deadline for providing answers to petitions and requests for information. Moreover, also during the state of emergency, the chairman of the audiovisual regulatory body tried to undermine the freedom of the media through an attempt to censor it by signing a provision urging media to stop "publishing and favoring unapproved opinions". Only after the intervention of journalists and media NGOs, the authorities cancelled the problematic provision of the audiovisual regulatory body, and granted the journalists access and the possibility to ask questions during press briefings. The first conference in which journalists were able to address questions and clarify ambiguities took place only 2 months after the first COVID-19 case was detected. In such a context, infodemia has proliferated in Moldova. The actions and inactions of the authorities resulted in the spread of fake news, hoaxes, conspiracy theories and anti-vaxxer narratives.

Moldovan authorities did not introduce any COVID-19 contact tracing apps or warning tools. Tracing and warning apps could have helped break the chain of coronavirus infections and save lives. According to the experts interviewed by WatchDog.MD, such tools were not used largely due to lack of competence and interest from the authorities. Overall, the number of digital response measures applied in Moldova to combat the pandemic was limited to an information platform on the number of patients, disaggregated by sex, age, location, and SMS texts about the danger of COVID-19, urging people to stay home during the lockdown. At the same time, the number of attempts to undermine or limit access to information of public interest was significantly higher. We found abuses related to access to information, lack of

transparency from the authorities and lack of institutional capacity. That led to a very poor management of the pandemic. Consequently, amid the general panic and the information vacuum, the authorities created room for the emergence of conspiracy theories and generated distrust in the need for anti-COVID measures.

7 months after the beginning of the pandemic, the communication from the authorities involved the daily publication of the number of cases detected in the previous 24 hours, and a conference once a week in which the authorities responsible for managing the pandemic presented information of public interest to citizens. The Moldovan authorities were very unprepared from the start, but even as the pandemic set in more and more in our daily lives, the authorities did not seem to be better at managing the pandemic. In this sense, the websites of the profile institutions have not yet become more user-friendly. Citizens can find out about the latest provisions of the emergency commissions only if they access their decisions. These decisions contain language that is inaccessible to some citizens. However, in order to understand their legal rights and responsibilities, citizens should not have to actively pursue government sources. The authorities should have used as many information tools as possible, so as to reach all categories of citizens.

Since the first COVID-19 case was registered in Moldova, the Government's website has been an important source of information, but the section for publishing the decisions of the Commission for Emergency Situations was created only 10 days after the declaration of the first state of emergency in March, 2020. The only source of information up until that moment was the Commission's press briefings on pandemic management. Moreover, the provisions of the Commission are still not always published on the day the decisions are

Analysis of how the informational landscape and the access to public information in the Republic of Moldova evolved during the pandemic (Conclusion)

taken, or on the day the Prime Minister communicates them. It is difficult for ordinary citizens to access this information. Governmental websites should provide an easy, intuitive and accessible way of publishing information to citizens.

Another place where users could find updated figures related to the pandemic has been the ArcGIS COVID-19 platform. ArcGIS was activated in April 2020. Although a year has passed since the pandemic, very few citizens know about this platform, because the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection has not promoted effectively the platform.

Also, over the last year, the authorities have not communicated clearly what were the financial expenses for mild and moderate forms of the disease. Moreover, the treatment costs started to be covered by the compulsory health insurance only since April 2021, after over 200 thousand Moldovans got infected by that time.

Many Moldovan citizens work and/or live abroad. Once the pandemic spread, many Moldovans began to return home. This also coincided with the state of emergency, when the flights were cancelled. The web pages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (MAEIE) and the diplomatic missions offered insufficient information about the repatriation procedures. As a result, Moldovan citizens

found themselves stranded in international airports and customs even for several days. Because it was not a clear and efficient repatriation mechanism, some passenger transport companies took advantage of the situation by applying double or even triple tariffs for transporting Moldovans to the country.

All these deficiencies in communication and pandemic management, together with the irresponsible behavior of some politicians, resulted in a very large number of Moldovans believing that COVID-19 is no more dangerous than the common flu (around 55%). In addition to the fact that the authorities communicated poorly to the citizens about the severity of the virus and about the effectiveness of the protection measures, the authorities also had poor communication in terms of informing the citizens about the efficiency and the need for vaccination. This has resulted in an increase in reluctance to get vaccinated.

During the pandemic, authorities have shown little transparency and inefficient communication. Information should be communicated in a transparent, accurate and timely manner. In crisis situations, the authorities should all the more establish mechanisms that allow citizens and journalists to easily contact public authorities to request information, clarifications and explanations, but also to come up with comments, information and ideas.

