NARRATIVES OF HOPE AND FEAR: POPULIST SIGNIFIERS IN DIGITAL ACTIVISM AROUND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION REFERENDUM

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Abstract: *This study analyses the construction of online narratives surrounding the 2024 referendum on the Republic of Moldova's accession to the European Union, focusing on the Instagram page "În rând cu lumea" / "Keeping up with the world" and the Telegram channel "Stop EU | Moldova". It investigates how these platforms — aligned with pro- and anti-EU digital activism — framed their messages and the extent to which their content employed populist discourse.* **Analytically, the article approaches populism as a repertoire of discursive resources centred on identity, crisis, and anti-elitism, and digital activism as the communicative infrastructure** *through which competing narratives are strategically constructed. The paper reveals that the pro-EU campaign promoted an educational and hopeful narrative with minimal populist features, while the anti-EU campaign relied heavily on fear-based messaging and "us versus them" rhetoric, hallmarks of populism. By examining this polarised digital landscape, the study contributes to scholarship on populism and EU integration, offering insight into the communicative strategies of pro- and anti-European forces in post-Soviet states.*

Keywords: *populism; digital activism; Republic of Moldova; European integration referendum.*

1. Introduction

Since its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova's relationship with the European Union (EU) has evolved through efforts to align with Western values, despite enduring internal divisions.

Formal EU–Moldova cooperation began with the 1994 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and evolved through successive frameworks - including the 2005 Action Plan and the 2014 and 2017 Association Agendas - advancing democratic reform, human rights, and sectoral integration (Gherghina and Tap 9). The Republic of Moldova applied for EU membership in March 2022, was granted candidate status in June 2022, and received approval from the EU Council to open accession negotiations in December 2023, following the fulfilment of the conditions set by the European Commission (Budurina-Goreacii 240). EU–Moldova accession talks officially began with the first membership negotiation conference in June 2024, followed by the inaugural EU–Moldova Summit in Chișinău in July 2025, underscoring Moldova's growing strategic role in the European Union (Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova). These

developments marked a significant acceleration of Moldova's European integration process and positioned EU accession at the centre of the country's political agenda. This shift must be understood considering the broader geopolitical context following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

In October 2024, Moldovan voters narrowly approved a referendum amending the Constitution to enshrine European Union membership as a national objective[1]. While the result was widely interpreted as a political victory for President Maia Sandu's pro-European agenda, the narrow margin of approval revealed deep societal divisions regarding the country's geopolitical orientation; after early indications suggested a possible defeat, high diaspora turnout ultimately shifted the outcome in favour of EU accession (Politico, *Moldova votes yes to joining EU by tiny margin*). The referendum thus represented not only a constitutional milestone but also a highly contested political moment, revealing a country divided over the choice of a Western or an Eastern trajectory: 50.35% voted "Yes", 49.65% voted "No"[2].

Concurrently, Moldovan authorities warned during the campaign of a coordinated Russian effort to undermine the referendum and obstruct Moldova's European trajectory. Government officials accused the Kremlin - operating through networks associated with fugitive pro-Russian oligarch Ilan Shor - of channelling substantial financial resources into Moldova to influence voters and discredit both the EU accession process and President Sandu (Politico, *Russia paying people to vote against joining EU, Moldova warns*). These allegations were corroborated by an undercover investigation conducted by *Ziarul de Gardă*[3], launched in the last week of the campaign, which documented how activists linked to Shor's network were systematically recruited and financially incentivized to participate in pro-Moscow protests and online disinformation activities during the referendum campaign (Ziarul de Gardă, *Serving Moscow. Three Months Among Shor's 'Slaves'. ZdG Undercover Investigation*). Analyses by the German Council on Foreign Relations further indicated that Moscow deployed a multi-layered approach combining financial manipulation, digital disinformation, religious influence, and grassroots mobilization (Pociumban 2). These practices formed part of a broader hybrid strategy aimed at delegitimizing the constitutional entrenchment of European integration and weakening public support for the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS).

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[1] See the text of the referendum ballot here https://www.voteaza.md/cec-a-aprobat-modelul-si-textul-buletinului-de-vot-la-referendumul-republican-constitutional/
[2] See details of the results here https://alegeri.md/w/Referendumul_republican_constitu%C8%9Bional_din_2024
[3] See the investigation here https://www.zdg.md/en/serving-moscow-three-months-among-shors-slaves-zdg-undercover-investigation/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

An official report was presented by the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service to Parliament in December 2024. According to this report, Russian interference was exercised through multiple vectors, including propaganda and disinformation, the amplification of separatist and autonomist tendencies, the exploitation of religious institutions, interference by the Russian Federation in the electoral process, subversive operations conducted by Russian intelligence services, the instrumentalization of organized crime networks, and energy blackmail (*Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service Report*).

The increasing political polarization between PAS and pro-Russian opposition parties limited the prospects for building a broad national consensus. Within this scattering environment, the referendum functioned not only as a democratic instrument, but also as a symbolic battleground for competing identity-based and value-driven narratives, amplified through both domestic and foreign communication channels.

This article investigates the online discourses that emerged during the campaign of this contested political moment, particularly through digital channels, that marked a volatile communication landscape. By integrating populism theory with digital activism scholarship, this study frames online discourses developed in Moldova about the referendum as both an ideological contest and a mediated performance. Together, these frameworks illuminate how different actors in the Moldovan referendum strategically mobilized online spaces to craft opposing visions of national destiny.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of the Instagram page "În rând cu lumea"/ "Keeping up with the world" and the Telegram channel "Stop EU | Moldova" to explore the narrative themes and rhetorical strategies that shaped online discourse. The central research question guiding the analysis is: *What narratives were articulated on the two platforms, and what populist discursive resources structured these narratives?*

Through this research we argue that the pro-EU camp's online narrative was largely non-populist and centred on education and hope, whereas the anti-EU camp's narrative was heavily populist, leveraging fear and 'us vs. them' rhetoric.

2. Theoretical frame

This article approaches populism not as a fixed political doctrine but as a "thin-centred ideology" that constructs society in terms of a fundamental antagonism between a morally pure and homogeneous people and a corrupt, self-serving elite (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 6). This conceptualization allows populism to be highly adaptable, functioning as a rhetorical strategy that attaches itself to diverse ideologies, whether left, right, or nationalist.

The analysis also incorporates discourse theory, drawing on Teun A. van Dijk's notion of the "ideological square" - a communicative structure that can be used to observe polarized digital activism narratives -, that is emphasizing positive traits of the in-group ("us") while devaluing the out-group ("them"). This binary is particularly evident in populist messaging, which relies on emotionally charged language to mobilize popular resentment and delegitimize institutional authority.

Recent scholarship has also emphasized the emotive and strategic functions of populism, particularly in fragile democracies. According to Momoc (137), populism thrives in conditions of systemic distrust, media fragmentation, and civic disengagement. He describes it as a "bottom-up phenomenon", reflecting mass dissatisfaction with political elites, which populist leaders then capitalize on through simplified narratives, anti-system appeals, and promises of direct popular sovereignty (137). This form of populism often carries illiberal implications, undermining liberal democratic values such as judicial independence, pluralism, and minority rights (Momoc 137). Thus, populism is also seen as the result of an immature democracy, marked by the failure of civic education in open societies (Momoc 137).

While populism can be democratic in the sense that it draws strength from electoral support and mass mobilization, it is inherently illiberal, undermining pluralist values, judicial independence, and minority rights (Papas qtd. in Momoc 137).

A defining feature of populism is its reliance on what Moffitt describes as the "performance of crisis". Populist actors do not simply respond to moments of instability; rather, they actively construct and dramatize crises to legitimise exceptional political claims and actions (Moffitt 75). This performative logic is closely connected to populism's ambivalent relationship with politics itself. As Taggart observes, populism frequently distances itself from conventional political processes and instead mobilises "unpolitical" registers—such as war, religion, or conspiracy narratives—which enable the articulation of conflict and antagonism outside the norms of institutional politics (Taggart qtd. in Coroban 423).

This article also integrates theories of digital activism to frame online platforms as mediated spaces where competing narratives are produced and circulated. Rudolf Eucken's early notion of activism understood as "the theory or belief that truth is achieved through action or active struggle" (qtd. in Peters 1), is extended by contemporary scholars to include digital platforms as sites of political engagement.

Digital activism is considered to connect masses by mobilizing members through the Internet and social media platforms (Herawati, Marom and Widowati 460). According to Bennett and Segerberg, this form of digital civic engagement differs significantly from traditional movements because it

is coordinated by online communities, often without a central leader or overseeing organization. Such a participatory model allows individuals to collaborate and mobilize quickly to gather resources and support, using platforms that enable decentralized and spontaneous organization (Bennett and Segerberg qtd. in Herawati et al. 460).

Sivitanides and Shah describe digital activism as a type of action that enables activities such as public education and media outreach, online fundraising, forming alliances across geographic boundaries, distributing petitions, posting relevant content, and coordinating events regionally or internationally (Sivitanides and Shah 2–5). According to Sivitanides and Shah, the context of digital activism includes not only the technology used but also the broader economic, social, and political environment in which it occurs. The authors also note that the value of digital activism is not always clear-cut. For instance, one case might show how digital tools empower social movements, while another might demonstrate how they transform the way activists interact with one another and their supporters (Sivitanides and Shah 4).

Another perspective on digital activism is offered by Karatzogianni, who defines it as a form of political behaviour that aims at reforms or even radical change (Karatzogianni 1).

Digital activism, however, is not inherently democratic. A critical view has been advanced by authors like Gladwell, Miller, and Morozov, who argue that social media-based digital activism is a weak form of engagement that fails to bring real change but creates a false sense of participation (Castillo-Esparcia, Caro-Castaño, Almansa-Martínez 3).

On the other hand, Boulianne has found that the use of social media can have a positive impact on political and civic participation, due to the emergence of platforms that encourage involvement (qtd. in Castillo-Esparcia et al. 4). Similarly, Wilkins, Livingstone, and Levine observed that people already aware of certain causes are more likely to engage online if they believe their actions have real impact (qtd. in Castillo-Esparcia et al. 4). In turn, Pinazo-Calatayud, Nos-Aldas, and Agut-Nieto (qtd. in Castillo-Esparcia et al. 4) argue that exposure to negative messages or opposing viewpoints on social media can strengthen activist motivation.

Recent empirical studies (Ghiban, Marandici, Pociumban, Nistor, Petrov) on Romania and Moldova's 2024 referendum and presidential election campaign provide important contextual grounding for this analysis, underscoring the centrality of narrative warfare in a digitally mediated, polarized political environment.

Ghiban's analysis of TikTok content from Romania's AUR party identifies seven recurring frames used by populist actors: homeland sovereignty, anti-immigration fears, cultural traditionalism, historical

victimhood, economic discontent, anti-EU conspiracies, and geopolitical anxieties (19–21).

Marandici (13) similarly finds that Ilan Șor's network relied on Soviet nostalgia and anti-Western narratives that framed EU integration as a neocolonial imposition. These narratives strategically positioned Russia as a cultural and economic ally, contrasting it with an exploitative and morally intrusive EU.

A detailed account by Pociumban (2–3) documents disinformation campaigns portraying EU integration as a geopolitical trap that would erode Moldovan sovereignty and drag the country into war. These campaigns exploited public fears by invoking military occupation, loss of identity, and moral decline.

Nistor (202–204) expands this view through a rhetorical analysis of pro-Russian parties. These groups used emotional appeals, nostalgic references to Soviet-era stability, and critiques of the EU to delegitimize the pro-European government. By invoking ethos, pathos, and logos in orchestrated ways, they cultivated distrust and reinforced populist binaries between "the people" and "the corrupt elite."

In contrast, Petrov (48–49) reveals that Moldova's pro-European messaging relied on what she calls "temporal bonding narratives." Her analysis of official Moldovan and EU documents from 2021–2025 shows a strategic shift in rhetoric: past-oriented messages rooted Moldova in a shared European history, while present and future-oriented framings emphasized urgency, resilience, and shared prosperity. These narratives aimed to align Moldova with EU values while fostering a sense of agency and progress.

Lastly, Gherghina (12) offers insight into public perceptions of referendums in Moldova. The findings suggest that support is grounded both in enduring attitudes - such as satisfaction with democracy, commitment to democratic values, and strong political interest - and in more immediate situational and strategic factors. In comparison with previous evidence from democratic contexts, citizens in Moldova place greater hope in referendums as a means of strengthening democracy and distancing themselves from criticism directed at politicians (Gherghina 12).

3. Data and Methods

The corpus of this paper focuses on posts made on the Instagram page "În rând cu lumea"/ "Keeping up with the world" and the Telegram channel "Stop EU│Moldova". These two online spaces were selected as illustrative examples of pro- and anti-referendum digital activism and are treated as sites of digital activism rather than as objects of comparative or affordance-based analysis. This approach allows the study to focus on narrative construction and discursive strategies rather than on technological or algorithmic dynamics.

The selection of these two cases is analytically strategic rather than exhaustive, as they occupy opposing symbolic positions within Moldova's referendum debate and condense two dominant narrative orientations circulating in the digital public sphere.

Digital activism is operationalised here as campaign-related online communication through which narratives surrounding the referendum are articulated.

"În rând cu lumea" was an Instagram page created by KLumea NGO[4] based in Moldova to promote the referendum and was part of the civic activism campaign "Moldova în rând cu lumea". In its page description, the initiative presented itself as a "Civic campaign to mobilize citizens to participate in the vote!"
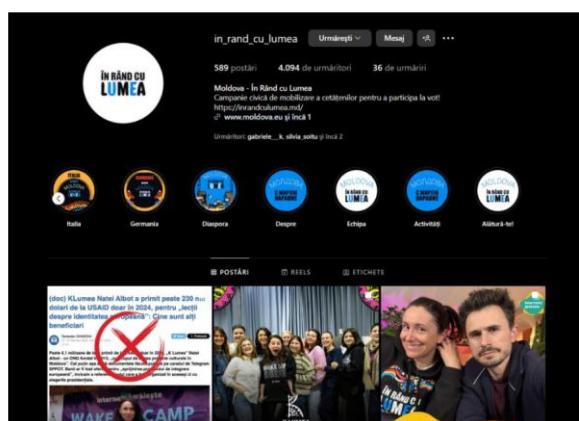

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Instagram page "În rând cu lumea", June 2025

"Stop EU│Moldova" was a Telegram channel disseminating anti-EU content and was reportedly linked to the opposition or foreign influence[5]. The following text was posted in the page description: *"Moldovans are nobody in the EU. The EU means high gas prices, farmers' protests, a lack of jobs, LGBT. For accession we will pay with our identity. Do we really need the EU?".*

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[4] See more about the NGO here https://klumea.org/about/
[5] See more about the "STOP EU" here https://stopfals.md/ro/article/stop-eu-moldova-dezinformacionnaya-kampaniya-protiv-es-i-referenduma-affilirovannaya-shoru-180998

Figure 2. Screenshot of the Telegram channel "Stop EU | Moldova", June 2025

The period of analysis covered 20 September–18 October 2024, coinciding with the campaign period for the presidential election and the national referendum on EU accession. During this interval, we identified 130 Instagram posts and 25 Telegram posts related to the referendum. From this corpus, the ten most-viewed posts on each platform were selected for qualitative analysis. The focus on the most-viewed posts assumes that these messages achieved the widest reach and were therefore more likely to influence public discourse. At the same time, we acknowledge that this selection strategy may privilege more extreme, polarizing, or attention-grabbing content, potentially limiting the representativeness of the sample.

Using an inductive thematic coding approach, we reviewed the content of the selected posts to extract recurring narrative themes. These themes emerged iteratively and were then categorized.

To identify signs of populism within the selected social media posts, we employed a qualitative content analysis guided by the theoretical framework of Mudde, van Dijk, Momoc, and Moffitt. Populist indicators were coded based on discursive features that reflect the core dimensions of populism, including: (1) antagonistic framing of politics as a struggle between "the pure people" and "a corrupt elite" (Mudde); (2) binary constructions of "us" versus "them," emphasizing in-group virtue and out-group threat (van Dijk's ideological square); (3) emotional mobilization through fear, resentment, or identity crisis (Momoc); and (4) portrayal of events as existential crises requiring urgent or exceptional responses (Moffitt). Posts were closely read and watched for linguistic markers (e.g., slogans, hashtags, metaphors), visual elements (e.g., national symbols, enemy figures), and thematic content that aligned with these dimensions. Each post was coded manually by the authors to assess the presence, absence, or degree of populist

traits, using an interpretive approach that allowed for contextual nuances in tone, rhetoric, and message framing. All excerpts from posts have been translated from Romanian to English by the authors.

This qualitative approach prioritises interpretive depth over representativeness and does not seek to measure audience reception or behavioural effects.

4. Findings

The findings are organized in line with the research question, first identifying dominant narratives and then examining the populist discursive resources through which these narratives are structured. Using the methods outlined above, we identified distinct narrative and rhetorical patterns across the two communicative contexts, with notable variations in the intensity and type of populist indicators.

4.1. Narrative Constructions Across the Corpus

The qualitative analysis shows that the Instagram page and the Telegram channel construct fundamentally different narrative logics around the referendum on European integration. Rather than simply expressing opposing opinions, the page and the channel observed organise meaning through contrasting narrative worlds: one oriented toward hope, continuity, and agency, and the other toward crisis, threat, and antagonism. The following tables present the identified pro- and anti-referendum themes:

Pro-referendum narratives "În rând cu lumea" Instagram page		
Theme	Posts	Keywords
European integration as a hopeful, self-determined future at home	Post 1, Post 2, Post 4	agency, staying, return of diaspora, long-term future
European integration as continuity, normality, and everyday stability	Post 3, Post 5, Post 6, Post 7	reassurance, traditions unchanged, myth-busting, debunking, cultural and ethnic protection
European integration as a source of practical governance and workable solutions	Post 4, Post 8	best practices, functional models, policy transfer
European integration as material and economic improvement	Post 9	tangible benefits, resources, living standards

Table 1. Narrative Constructions on "În rând cu lumea" Instagram page. Source: the authors.

Anti-referendum narratives "Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel		
Theme	Posts	Keywords
European integration as war and militarization	Post 1, Post 4, Post 5, Post 8	armed conflict, NATO control, foreign military presence, loss of security autonomy
European integration as loss of sovereignty and national existence	Post 4, Post 5, Post 8, Post 10	erosion of statehood, external control, national disappearance, historical rupture
European integration as economic collapse	Post 1, Post 3, Post 7	poverty, dependency, economic ruin through the EU vs. stability through the East
European integration as humiliation and deception	Post 6, Post 9	false promises, loss of dignity, subordination, "beggar" status, neocolonization
European integration as identity replacement and moral decay	Post 2, Post 5, Post 10	imposed identities, "Romanianisation," moral panic, threat to traditional values

Table 2. Narrative Constructions on "Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel. Source: the authors

4.1.1. Pro-referendum narratives

The pro-referendum discourse on Instagram page is structured primarily around a narrative of European integration as a hopeful, self-determined future at home. Across posts, EU accession is framed as a matter of personal choice and collective responsibility, countering long-standing narratives of emigration and resignation. Statements such as *"I choose for things to be good at home and to see the future clearly"* and *"I choose to stay, to face all the high kerbs and make things better at home"* ("În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, Post 2) articulate an ethic of commitment rather than escape. This narrative is reinforced through calls for the return of the diaspora, as in *"children should come back to put into practice what they have studied abroad"* ("În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, Post 4), framing European integration as a condition for reinvestment in Moldova rather than abandonment of it.

Closely connected to this future-oriented framing is a second narrative that presents European integration as continuity, normality, and everyday

stability. A portion of the analysed content is devoted to reassuring citizens that EU membership does not threaten daily practices, religious traditions, or moral norms. Fear-based claims circulating in the public sphere are explicitly addressed and neutralised through calm explanation. For instance, one post reassures readers that *"no one from Brussels will come to take your Easter candle or tell you how to slaughter your Christmas pig. Everything stays the same. You can still go peacefully to church"* ("În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, Post 3). Similarly, allegations that EU integration would force Moldova to legalise LGBTQ+ marriages are directly rejected as misinformation: *"If we join the EU, our country will be forced to legalise LGBTQ+ marriages. FALSE!!"*, followed by clarifications such as *"The EU does not force anyone to adopt specific legislation"* and *"The EU provides a framework for equality and rights"* ("În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, Post 5). Within this narrative, myth-busting and debunking functions not as confrontation but as reassurance, reinforcing the idea that Europe represents stability rather than rupture. Finally, identity-related anxieties are addressed through a narrative of identity safeguarded within Europe. In response to claims that EU integration threatens national or ethnic identity, some posts explicitly assert that *"the EU ensures the protection and respect of ethnic identity"* ("În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, Post 6). Rather than mobilising identity offensively, this narrative operates defensively, framing Europe as compatible with cultural continuity and pluralism.

Figure 3. Screenshots of posts from "În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, June 2025

A further recurring narrative frames Europe as a source of practical governance and workable solutions. Here, European integration is normalised through concrete examples of policies and infrastructures that could be

adapted to Moldova's context. References to Denmark's recycling system, for example - *"Denmark can be an inspiration for improving the recycling process in Moldova"* and *"CopenHill is one of 23 incinerators in Denmark. 400,000 tons of household waste are burned each year, which subsequently produces heat for 160,000 homes"* ("În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, Post 8) - present the EU less as an ideological project and more as a repository of functional models. This narrative shifts attention away from symbolic identity struggles toward everyday problem-solving and administrative competence.

Another narrative frames European integration primarily in instrumental and material terms, emphasising concrete economic gains – *"Moldova has already received 700,000,000 Euros in just 3 years. All this money are grants, that is, free aid for the development of our country"/ "Some will tell you that the EU will impoverish us. How can you say that the EU is coming to take our money, when they give us hundreds of millions of euros to modernize roads, hospitals and schools"* ("În rând cu lumea" Instagram page, Post 9). This narrative focuses on the immediacy of benefits associated with EU membership, such as access to financial resources, development funds, and improved economic conditions. European integration is thus presented as a pathway to measurable improvements in quality of life, addressing citizens' everyday concerns related to income, infrastructure, and social welfare.

Taken together, these narratives construct a pro-European communicative space characterised by hope, reassurance, and pragmatism, in which European integration is framed as an extension of normal life and civic responsibility.

4.1.2. Anti-referendum narratives

The anti-referendum discourse on Telegram is organised around a set of interlocking narratives that frame European integration as an existential threat. One of the most salient narratives presents European integration as war and militarisation, equating EU accession with inevitable armed conflict and loss of security autonomy. Statements such as *"The EU means war"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 1) and claims that *"our military forces are obliged to take part in Western drills and host American military instructors"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 4) or *"a large-scale scenario is being developed for the entry of Western troops into Moldova"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 8) portray European alignment as a direct path toward military confrontation.

This crisis framing is reinforced by a second narrative that casts European integration as the loss of sovereignty and national existence. Posts repeatedly warn that *"in the EU we will disappear as a distinct country and nation"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 2) often accompanied by symbolic references to historical memory, such as Victory Day, and

assertions of foreign control over national institutions. In this narrative, EU membership is not a political choice but a process of national erasure.

| Post 1 | Post 3 | Post 5 | Post 6 | Post 8 |

Figure 4. Screenshots of posts from "Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, June 2025

Economic arguments further intensify this sense of threat through a narrative of economic survival versus European collapse. Telegram posts contrast Moldova's historical and economic ties with Eastern partners against an imagined future of ruin and dependency within the EU. Appeals such as *"Moldova must reject the EU and choose an alliance with EEU countries to protect its economic interests and peace"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 1) or *"Moldova needs markets for its products, and the current government's attempts to isolate the Republic of Moldova and prevent it from collaborating with the East represent only the decision of a gang of Euro-oriented officials, not of the entire Moldovan people"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 7) frame geopolitical orientation as a zero-sum choice between survival and destruction.

Additional narratives deepen the antagonistic worldview by portraying Europe as humiliation and deception. The EU is described as making false promises and reducing Moldova to a dependent and undignified position, captured in expressions like *"Today, Moldova is Europe's beggar"* and *"we stand with hands outstretched, waiting to be given something"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 6). These representations mobilise resentment and shame, delegitimising European integration as exploitative rather than cooperative, a form of neocolonialism.

Finally, identity-based fears are activated through narratives of identity replacement and moral decay. Claims like *"a new Romanian history is being imposed"* ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 2) or *"the right to*

identification belongs to the people" ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 10) frame EU integration as an assault on national self-identification, while visual content depicting the destruction of the LGBTQ+ flag ("Stop EU | Moldova" Telegram channel, Post 5) mobilises moral panic and cultural anxiety. Together, these narratives construct a worldview in which Europe appears not as a partner but as a hostile force threatening the nation's culture, dignity, and moral order.

Taken together, the anti-referendum narratives articulated on the Telegram channel construct European integration as an existential threat to national identity, sovereignty, and social order. Through crisis framing, conspiratorial logics, and sharp antagonistic binaries, these narratives position the referendum as a moment of irreversible loss.

4.2. Indicators of Populism

As with most forms of political campaigning, both pro- and anti-EU actors simplify complex political processes through emotionally resonant narratives to enhance clarity, memorability, and potential persuasive impact. The analytical distinction addressed in this section therefore does not lie in the presence of simplification per se, but in the ways such simplifications are articulated through antagonism, crisis framing, and moral boundary-making characteristic of populist discourse.

The pro-European Instagram discourse displays only limited and weak populist elements. While some posts employ emotional appeals, collective identity markers, and national symbols (e.g., map of the Republic of Moldova together with its flag, the slogan "Moldova in line with the world"), these elements are not embedded in an antagonistic worldview.

Importantly, the narratives do not construct politics as a moral struggle between "the pure people" and a "corrupt elite", nor do they identify internal or external enemies. Emotional appeals in the pro-European Instagram discourse are primarily oriented toward reassurance, information, and the normalization of European integration. Simplified oppositions such as "truth versus lies", including references for the users to consult fact-checking platforms like *alegeri.md*, are embedded within an educational communication logic that seeks to structure understanding rather than mobilise antagonism. These framing devices emphasise clarification and credibility, positioning European integration as a matter of informed choice rather than moral confrontation.

As a result, while the pro-EU discourse contains symbolic and emotional language common to political communication, it lacks the core antagonistic and exclusionary features required to qualify as populist in the strong sense defined by Mudde, van Dijk, Momoc, and Moffitt.

By contrast, the anti-European Telegram discourse exhibits central characteristics of populism.

First, it consistently constructs a moral antagonism between "the people" and hostile elites or external forces, framing pro-EU political actors, Western institutions, and even domestic authorities as traitors to the nation. This aligns directly with Mudde's definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology opposing a virtuous people to a corrupt elite.

Second, the discourse relies heavily on binary in-group/out-group representations, exemplifying van Dijk's ideological square. The in-group ("the Moldovan people" opposing EU integration) is portrayed as morally righteous and endangered, while the out-group (the EU, NATO, pro-European elites) is demonised as aggressive, deceitful, and culturally destructive.

Third, the narratives draw on conspiratorial and existential formulations, such as "we will disappear as a nation" or "a new Romanian history is being imposed". These formulations operate as emotional frames that transform complex political processes into immediately felt scenarios of threat, anchoring conspiracy narratives in affective resonance rather than detailed policy reasoning.

Fourth, the anti-EU discourse employs what Moffitt terms a "performed crisis". European integration is framed as inevitably leading to war, militarisation, moral decay, and national extinction. This dramatization of threat legitimises extreme conclusions and simplistic solutions, such as "reject the EU" or "return to Russia", often accompanied by the portrayal of external actors (notably Russia) as protective saviours.

Finally, emotional mobilisation plays a central role in the anti-EU discourse: fear, anger, humiliation, and moral panic (particularly around LGBTQ+ issues) dominate both textual and visual content. These affective strategies reinforce populist identification by foregrounding insecurity and existential threat.

Notably, the two camps analysed exhibit internally consistent but mutually exclusive communicative logics. The pro-EU discourse remains largely fact-based and hopeful, avoiding populist antagonism, while the anti-EU discourse relies almost entirely on populist mechanisms of crisis, division, and emotional mobilisation. This asymmetry underscores how populism in the Moldovan referendum debate was not a universal feature of digital activism, but a strategic resource employed predominantly by anti-European actors.

Each camp's messaging leverages a broad spectrum of actor types – from public officials and political leaders to cultural icons, activists, experts, and everyday people – carefully chosen to reinforce their pro- or anti-EU narratives. The pro-EU side relies on actors of hope, expertise, and lived experience (artists, activists, youth, diaspora professionals), portraying European integration as a shared positive project. In contrast, the anti-EU side

amplifies authoritative and emotional actors (politicians, allied foreign leaders, "experts," local traditionalists, and outraged citizens) to frame the EU as a threat to sovereignty, identity, and stability. All these actors together create the human face of each narrative, shaping public perception of Moldova's European integration debate.

5. Conclusions

This study illustrates how digital platforms mediated the discursive construction of Moldova's EU referendum in sharply divergent ways. The pro-European campaign analysed used social media to inform, reassure, and promote civic engagement without resorting to populist antagonism. In contrast, the anti-EU campaign observed mobilised populist tropes to stoke fear and division.

These findings highlight the asymmetrical use of populist discourse in digitally mediated campaigns and underscore the need to differentiate how the digital activism is instrumentalized. As Moldova and other transitional democracies continue to navigate geopolitical crossroads, understanding the communicative architecture of hope versus fear will be critical for safeguarding democratic deliberation.

Future research should examine broader platform ecosystems, expand the corpus, and assess audience engagement to better understand how digital narratives influence actual political behaviour.

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