



Clío

Revista de Historia, Ciencias Humanas
y Pensamiento Crítico



ISSN 2660-9037



Adscrita a:
Fundación Ediciones Clío
Academia de Historia del
estado Zulia
Centro Zuliano de
Investigaciones
Genealógicas

Sección: Artículo científico | 2025, julio-diciembre, año 5, No. 10, 1421-1452

Moldovan media discourse on international legal mechanisms regulating mercenary participation in the Russian-Ukrainian War (2022-2024)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15453970>

Abstract

This research explores the legal structures, military mobilization processes, and societal response mechanisms related to Moldovan citizens' involvement in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The methodology includes case analysis of military engagement, review of judicial precedents on war crimes, and evaluation of state responses to disinformation campaigns. The findings highlight the International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine as a legitimate framework for foreign volunteers, distinct from mercenary activity. Empirical data indicate multi-generational military participation, standardized war crimes documentation, and institutional responses to information warfare. The study underscores the need for clear legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms to manage foreign military participation while safeguarding national security.

Keywords: journalism standards, warfare reporting, international security, border affairs.

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Recibido: 2025-03-03 Aceptado: 2025-05-07

*Discurso mediático moldavo sobre los mecanismos jurídicos
internacionales que regulan la participación de mercenarios en la
guerra ruso-ucraniana (2022-2024)*

Resumen

Esta investigación explora las estructuras legales, los procesos de movilización militar y los mecanismos de respuesta social relacionados con la participación de la ciudadanía moldava en el conflicto ruso-ucraniano. La metodología incluye el análisis de casos de intervención militar, la revisión de precedentes judiciales sobre crímenes de guerra y la evaluación de las respuestas estatales a las campañas de desinformación. Los hallazgos destacan a la Legión Internacional para la Defensa de Ucrania como un marco legítimo para los voluntarios extranjeros, distinto de la actividad mercenaria. Los datos empíricos indican participación militar multigeneracional, documentación estandarizada de crímenes de guerra y respuestas institucionales a la guerra de información. El estudio subraya la necesidad de marcos legales claros y mecanismos institucionales para gestionar la participación militar extranjera, a la vez que se salvaguarda la seguridad nacional.

Palabras clave: estándares periodísticos, cobertura de guerra, seguridad internacional, asuntos fronterizos.

Introduction

The military conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has created unprecedented challenges for regional security, particularly regarding the participation of neighboring states' citizens in military actions. The study of legal and social aspects of military mobilization of the Republic of Moldova's citizens gains special relevance, considering the state's geopolitical position and vulnerability to regional security threats. The research problem stems from the necessity for systematic analysis of legal mechanisms regulating citizen participation in foreign military conflicts and corresponding institutional responses. The complexity of this issue is emphasized by multiple aspects: legal

distinction between mercenary activities and legitimate voluntary participation, countering disinformation, documenting war crimes, and protecting civilian populations.

Analysis of academic literature demonstrates significant scholarly interest in various aspects of the researched problems. Information security issues of the Republic of Moldova in contemporary geopolitical processes have been examined by Lescu (2020), who emphasizes the vulnerability of the state's information space to external influences.

Foreign policy attitudes of Moldova's population have been analysed in works by Răileanu Szeles (2021), providing insights into public sentiments regarding regional conflicts. Locoman (2023) examines the challenges Moldova faces due to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Moldovan-European relations in the context of the war in Ukraine have been studied by Cebotari and Bevziuc (2022), emphasizing the importance of European integration for strengthening state security.

Furthermore, Isgandarov (2023) provides a comparative analysis of media policy formulation in semi-democratic contexts, specifically examining the cases of Georgia and Moldova. Significant attention has been dedicated to examining the geopolitical preferences within association agreement countries. Torres-Adán (2021) presents a comprehensive analysis of public opinion dynamics in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, providing valuable insights into the complex nature of regional security dynamics and public response mechanisms.

Research by Gritsenko and Zotova (2023) addresses the geopolitical challenges to Moldova's borders. The historical perspective of the 2014 Ukrainian

crisis's impact on Moldova is provided by Quinlan (2020), demonstrating the continuity of regional security challenges. Negură (2023) investigates public perception of Russian aggression against Ukraine in Moldovan society, adding an important sociological dimension to understanding the issue.

Gribincea (2019) highlights the role of mass media in Moldova's democratic development and its vulnerability to external influence, particularly from Russia. This susceptibility to information warfare, as noted by Schönbächler (2024), underscores the need for Moldova to implement stronger information security measures to protect against hostile narratives that undermine social cohesion.

Simionov (2023) examines Moldova's shifting identity and growing orientation towards European integration in response to both domestic aspirations and external pressures. This shift aligns with Paiu's analysis (2020), which underscores Moldova's complex geopolitical balancing act between Russian influence and European ambitions, reflecting a nuanced transformation in Moldova's public and political spheres. Soroceanu (2022) discusses the risks of mercenary activities involving Moldovan citizens in the Ukraine conflict, noting how these engagements pose security threats upon their return.

However, academic literature insufficiently addresses the comprehensive impact of the current conflict on legal mechanisms and social practices of Moldovan citizens' participation in military actions in Ukraine. The relationship between international humanitarian law, national legislation, and actual cases of citizen participation in combat operations requires additional study. The theoretical significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding the evolving role of national media in covering international conflicts, particularly in countries adjacent to conflict zones.

This research aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of Moldovan media discourse regarding international legal mechanisms regulating citizens' participation in the Russian-Ukrainian war, with particular focus on the coverage of mercenary activities and legitimate military involvement. To achieve this, the following objectives have been identified:

- analyse how Moldovan media covers and interprets the legal distinction between mercenary activities and legitimate voluntary participation in international conflicts;
- examine media representation of Moldovan state authorities' responses to cases of citizen participation in military actions;
- investigate Moldovan media coverage of war crimes cases and their investigation mechanisms, particularly focusing on cases involving mercenaries;
- evaluate media strategies and practices in countering military propaganda and disinformation related to citizen participation in the conflict.

1. Materials and methods

The research was conducted from January 2022 to June 2024, encompassing the period of active military conflict in Ukraine and subsequent developments in the Republic of Moldova's legal and social responses. The study utilized a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official documents, media reports, and legal proceedings.

Primary source materials included official statements from the Government of the Republic of Moldova (2022), particularly focusing on the February 24, 2022 governmental communication regarding military recruitment disinformation. The analysis incorporated official documentation from the Prosecutor's Office for

Combating Organized Crime and Special Cases (PCCOCS) and the Intelligence and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova (SIS) (Unica.md, 2022a), specifically examining cases of war propaganda and ethnic division from June to September 2022.

Legal documentation analysis focused on key regulatory frameworks, including Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 248/2016 “On the Regulations on Military Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine by Foreigners and Stateless Persons” (2022), regarding military service regulations, and Article 47 of the Geneva Conventions (1949) concerning the definition of mercenary activities. The research examined war crimes prosecution materials from Ukrainian courts, particularly focusing on proceedings from 2022.

Media content analysis encompassed publications from major Moldovan news platforms including Moldova News (2022), Unica.md (2022b) and EurAsia Daily (2024). Special attention was paid to verified journalist investigations and documented interviews with military participants, specifically examining coverage of the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine and Moldovan citizens’ involvement in combat operations.

Case study documentation included a detailed examination of two specific instances: the liberation of Irpin involving Moldovan military personnel (Jurnal.md, 2022), and the documented activities of Wagner Private Military Company (Wagner PMC) operatives in the Kharkiv region (Comisarul.ro, 2022). These cases were selected based on the availability of verified information and their significance in illustrating different aspects of military involvement and legal implications. The investigation process involved systematic documentation of civilian testimonies, particularly focusing on cases involving direct participation

in military operations or civilian victimization. Statistical data was collected from official Ukrainian and Moldovan governmental records and cross-referenced to ensure accuracy.

The research methodology prioritized the verification of information through multiple independent sources, particularly important given the sensitive nature of military operations and the presence of active disinformation campaigns. Source verification procedures included cross-referencing of reported events with official documentation and independent media coverage.

2. Results

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has generated complex implications for the Republic of Moldova's security landscape, particularly concerning the legal and social dynamics of military mobilization and citizen participation in foreign conflicts. This research examines the multifaceted challenges arising from Moldovan citizens' involvement in Ukrainian defence efforts, analysing the intersection of international humanitarian law, domestic legal frameworks, and societal responses. The investigation reveals several crucial dimensions: first, the precise legal distinction between mercenaries and voluntary combatants as defined by the Geneva Conventions (1949); second, the Moldovan government's strategic response to disinformation regarding military recruitment; and third, the emergence of documented cases involving both voluntary military participation and civilian victimization. Of particular significance is the establishment of International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine, which created a legally sanctioned framework for foreign volunteer participation, contrasting sharply with mercenary activities.

The research further documents significant judicial precedents in war crimes prosecution, civilian response patterns to military aggression, and the evolution of law enforcement approaches to combat war propaganda. These findings contribute to understanding the broader implications of regional conflicts on neighbouring states security policies and their citizens involvement in international military operations.

Geopolitical competition between Russia and the West was a key factor that shaped the prospects for settlement of the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova (Ceban, 2022). As Levitsky and Way (2005, 2006) argue, the linkages and leverage wielded by external actors play a decisive role in the dynamics and outcomes of internal conflicts in weak states. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the European Union gradually increased its presence and influence in Moldova, particularly through the implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Gordon, 2012; Krasivskyy, 2024). Meanwhile, Russia maintained significant leverage, especially on the left bank of the Dniester River where the unrecognized Transnistrian Moldovan Republic is located (Tolstrup, 2009, 2014). This rivalry between external actors significantly complicated the search for a compromised settlement of the conflict. After 2009, when a pro-European government came to power in Moldova, the European Union significantly increased its economic and political support for the country (Mukhtarova et al., 2024).

However, Russia continued to exert pressure, using economic levers, migration threats, and support for secessionist sentiments in the region (Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010). This led to a deterioration of the prospects for resolving the Transnistrian conflict. Overall, the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West did not allow the parties to the conflict to reach a compromise, as

each sought to maintain its influence in Moldova. As Sasse (2009) and Wolff (2011, 2012) note, the lack of a coordinated approach between external actors to the conflict resolution led to the perpetuation of its “frozen” status. The analysis of Russia and the West’s relations in the context of the Transnistrian conflict suggests that the geopolitical struggle for influence in this region was a key factor that prevented the achievement of a sustainable peaceful settlement. The absence of compromise between the external actors determined the preservation of the conflict’s unresolved status in Moldova (Beyer and Wolff, 2016; Zhukorska, 2024).

The discourse surrounding the enlistment of Moldovan citizens in support of Ukraine has generated considerable academic debate, particularly regarding the legal distinction between voluntary combatants and mercenaries. The international legal framework, specifically the Geneva Conventions (1949), provides a comprehensive definition of mercenaries that encompasses multiple cumulative criteria. According to the Geneva Conventions, the classification of a mercenary requires the fulfilment of several specific conditions, including recruitment specificity, participation motivation, promised remuneration, nationality status, and official capacity considerations. It is crucial to note that this definition establishes stringent criteria, all of which must be met simultaneously for an individual to be legally classified as a mercenary. This comprehensive approach helps distinguish between mercenaries and other categories of combatants, including volunteers fighting for ideological or humanitarian reasons.

In response to the proliferation of unverified information within the public sphere, the governmental authorities of the Republic of Moldova implemented immediate measures to address emerging disinformation narratives (Rebenok et

al., 2024; Tsaurkubule & Zlenko, 2024). Government of the Republic of Moldova (2022) issued an official statement addressing the circulation of fraudulent recruitment messages. The executive body explicitly characterized these communications as deliberate manipulation attempts, specifically referring to the dissemination of fabricated text messages purportedly recruiting citizens for military service. The government's strategic communication initiative demonstrates the institutional commitment to countering disinformation campaigns that could potentially destabilize public order and national security interests (Kozub et al., 2024).

In the context of evolving military circumstances, the Ukrainian leadership initiated significant legislative and organizational measures to facilitate international military support (Boiko et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2024). President Volodymyr Zelensky's declaration regarding the establishment of an International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine, announced during the initial phase of military operations, represented a strategic implementation of existing legal frameworks. The legal foundation for this initiative was previously established through the Regulation on Military Service in the Armed Forces, enacted via Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 248/2016 "On the Regulations on Military Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine by Foreigners and Stateless Persons" (2022). This regulatory framework explicitly provides provisions for the voluntary enlistment of foreign nationals and stateless persons, including their integration into the Territorial Defense Forces structure. The legislation encompasses comprehensive parameters for international military cooperation and volunteer integration (Ismayilov et al., 2024).

Subsequently, the Ukrainian authorities implemented a systematic approach to foreign volunteer incorporation through the formation of a specialized military unit, designated as the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine. This organizational structure was specifically designed to accommodate foreign volunteers who demonstrated willingness to participate in defensive operations and contribute to regional security maintenance efforts.

This institutional framework represents a significant development in international military cooperation methodology, particularly within the context of contemporary conflict response mechanisms. The establishment of such specialized units demonstrates the evolution of traditional military organizational structures to accommodate international volunteer participation within legally sanctioned parameters.

The initial public response to President Volodymyr Zelensky's announcement demonstrated significant international engagement through digital platforms. The procedural framework, as established by Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 248/2016 "On the Regulations on Military Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine by Foreigners and Stateless Persons" (2022), delineates specific enrolment protocols requiring prospective volunteers to establish formal communication through Ukrainian diplomatic missions, specifically through defence attachés in their respective countries of residence.

Empirical evidence of the initiative's effectiveness manifested rapidly, as demonstrated by the quantitative data from March 1, 2022. Notable response emerged from Japan, where 70 individuals, including 50 former members of the Japan Self-Defense Forces and two veterans of the French Foreign Legion,

initiated formal application procedures for integration into the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine.

The analysis of these developments provides substantive evidence to conclude that the initial allegations regarding Moldovan citizens' participation as mercenaries in the Ukrainian conflict were demonstrably false. Subsequent official refutation of Government of the Republic of Moldova (2022) effectively countered this disinformation campaign, as previously documented in this analysis.

The analysis of Moldova's response to allegations of its citizens' participation as mercenaries in the Ukrainian conflict highlights the Republic's proactive stance in combating disinformation. Following accusations that Moldovans were fighting as mercenaries, the Moldovan government issued official statements countering these claims, effectively dismantling the disinformation campaign. This response underscores Moldova's ongoing efforts to protect its information space from external manipulation and reinforce national unity amid regional instability.

In parallel, recent investigative findings in Ukraine concerning documented war crimes by Russian forces, including members of private military companies (such as the Wagner PMC), highlight the broader security challenges that Moldova faces. Reports from Ukrainian authorities' detail instances of civilian targeting and torture, illustrating the severe impact of Russia's military presence in neighbouring regions (Yevseiev et al., 2022; Otyshiyeva et al., 2019). For Moldova, these findings serve as critical evidence of the destabilizing effects of such activities, reinforcing its need to monitor and regulate foreign military influence within its borders to prevent spill over effects.

Furthermore, cases of voluntary mobilization among Ukrainian families, such as the example of a multi-generational family defending the Mykolaiv area, underline the regional solidarity and self-defence efforts in response to aggression. This aspect is particularly relevant to Moldova's own security strategy, as it underscores the importance of civilian preparedness and community resilience. Moldova, facing similar geopolitical pressures, benefits from these regional examples of territorial defence and civic mobilization, which could inspire policies aimed at strengthening national defence mechanisms and civilian engagement in security matters.

This context reflects Moldova's positioning as a state navigating complex security dynamics while managing external threats and disinformation. The nation's alignment with international humanitarian standards and proactive countermeasures against disinformation demonstrate its commitment to safeguarding sovereignty and fostering regional stability amidst the ongoing Ukrainian conflict (Otrishko & Kharkevych, 2024).

An analysis of law enforcement operations in the Republic of Moldova reveals how regional instability, particularly the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, has influenced Moldova's approach to addressing threats within its borders. With Ukraine as a neighbouring state directly impacted by Russian aggression, Moldova has strengthened its internal security measures, focusing on preventing the spread of war propaganda and actions that may incite ethnic division within its own society. Moldova's response includes coordinated inter-agency operations involving the Prosecutor's Office for Combating Organized Crime and Special Cases (PCCOCS), the Internal Protection and Anti-Corruption Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (SPIA MAI), and the Intelligence and Security Service

of the Republic of Moldova (SIS). This collaboration illustrates Moldova's proactive stance in safeguarding national stability amid growing regional tensions.

The legal basis for this operation stems from two specific provisions of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova as referenced in the official documentation from the Prosecutor's Office for Combating Organized Crime and Special Cases (Unica.md, 2022a): Article 140, paragraph 1, addressing war propaganda, and Article 346 concerning actions aimed at inciting national, ethnic, racial, or religious enmity or division. The General Prosecutor's Office investigation, as reported through official channels and documented in Moldovan media (Moldova News, 2022), revealed systematic violations occurring within the context of the declared state of emergency, precipitated by the regional military conflict in Ukraine. The suspect allegedly engaged in systematic dissemination of propaganda materials justifying military aggression against Ukraine, distribution of prohibited content within Moldovan jurisdiction, and publication of materials determined to incite hatred and promote warfare.

The investigative process included the execution of search warrants on June 9, 2022, encompassing residential premises and personal vehicle, followed by seizure of evidential materials and the subject's transportation to PCCOCS facilities for investigative procedures. The prosecutorial strategy, as outlined by the PG, indicates a broader investigative scope aimed at identifying additional perpetrators and documenting systematic dissemination of biased information through mass media channels, social network platforms, and communication networks. The investigation particularly focuses on analysing content characterized as promoting armed conflict, creating favourable conditions for conflict escalation, generating social discord, and fostering ethnic and religious

divisions within the population of the Republic of Moldova. The documentation of military recruitment activities in the Transnistrian region was reported through a significant media publication (Moldova News, 2022).

Moldova News (2022), as a media entity, requires comprehensive source evaluation context. Originally established as a television broadcasting operation, the platform evolved into a comprehensive digital information portal serving the Republic of Moldova. During its television phase, it distributed content through Moldovan cable operators and, since 2015, has broadcasted via analogue terrestrial television from Chişinău and its surrounding areas. The platform's content has historically included news shows, talk shows, movies, serials, and other cognitive and entertainment programs (Kravchuk et al., 2024). Importantly, its administrator clarified that Moldova News operates independently from the similarly named Romanian channel, Moldova News, thereby establishing its unique operational and editorial identity within the Moldovan media landscape.

Of particular analytical significance is the documented participation of Moldovan military personnel in the liberation operations. Historical records indicate that the initial military unit to enter Irpin following its liberation from Russian forces in March 2022 comprised three Moldovan nationals serving within the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine. Among these personnel was Arslan Safarmatov, whose previous professional experience included service. Documentation by journalist Păduraru (2022) provided important insights into the experiences of Moldovan volunteers in International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine. Through detailed interviews, the reporting revealed both the operational involvement of Moldovan citizens in significant military operations, including the liberation of Irpin and operations in Severodonetsk, and the legal challenges they

faced upon returning home. The documented experiences highlighted the complex interplay between volunteer military service and legal status, with some participants expressing concerns about potential legal consequences in Moldova despite their service being conducted within the framework of International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine.

Recent documentation from Ukrainian military sources indicates the neutralization of a significant Russian military official who had volunteered for participation in what Russian authorities term the “special military operation” in Ukraine. The information was disseminated through official social media channels by Anatolii Stefan, a Ukrainian Military Officer with an established record of documenting Russian military casualties. Officer Stefan’s previous documentation includes the neutralization of several high-profile Russian military personnel, notably including the tactical elimination of the sniper known by the operational designation “Adam the Terrible” and the commander of Cossack forces. In his official communication, A. Stefan specifically addressed the case of Colonel Serhey Krasnikov, stating: “The former prosecutor for particularly important cases of the Prosecutor’s Office for Central Asia within the Investigative Committee of Russia, Colonel Serhey Krasnikov, got bored in retirement and decided to come to Ukraine as a mercenary where he was released from Nazi status and officially demilitarized” (Comisarul.ro, 2022).

According to documented reports from the news portal Unica.md (2022b), a significant casualty among Wagner PMC operatives occurred during Ukrainian counter-offensive operations in the Kharkiv region. The subject, Vladimir Andonov, age 44, identified as a specialist in sabotage and reconnaissance operations within the Wagner PMC structure, was neutralized by Ukrainian

special operations forces during a night operation on June 5, 2022. The subject was known by multiple operational designations, including “Vaha” in Russian terminology, “Mercenary from Buryatia” as a regional designation reflecting his geographical origin, and “The Executioner” in Ukrainian documentation, the latter designation derived from documented activities in 2014. Historical documentation indicates the subject’s involvement in significant military operations, particularly in Logvinovo, Donbas, where evidence suggests participation in violations of international humanitarian law, including the execution of three Ukrainian prisoners of war. The subject’s public statements in Russian media confirmed operational directives to “destroy all enemy forces” with “no survivors”.

The casualty was officially confirmed by Zhambal-Zhamso Zhanaev, the regional administrative authority, who provided verification to Moscow Komsomol regarding repatriation arrangements. The subject’s military career trajectory included initial service in the Russian Armed Forces, subsequent recruitment into Wagner PMC, and operational deployment in multiple theatres including Ukraine (2014-2015, 2022), Syria (dates unspecified), and Libya (including documented involvement in civilian casualties in Espia). The neutralization occurred within the context of Ukrainian counter-offensive operations in the Kharkiv region, demonstrating significant tactical developments in the territorial control dynamics (Unica.md, 2022b). The study of Moldovan media’s role in covering regional security challenges and geopolitical developments has revealed several significant findings. The research demonstrates that Moldovan media outlets have developed sophisticated approaches to reporting on sensitive security issues while maintaining professional standards and journalistic integrity.

Key findings suggest that Moldovan media often distinguishes between categories of foreign fighters, particularly differentiating between mercenaries and legitimate international volunteers. This distinction is especially emphasized in coverage related to the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine, where media outlets frequently reference legal contexts and relevant international agreements. By providing this clarity, Moldovan media contributes to a more nuanced public understanding of foreign military involvement, which helps to counteract misinformation and aligns with Moldova's efforts to maintain transparency in reporting on security issues.

The Moldovan media plays a significant role in interpreting and communicating the legal and ethical complexities surrounding citizens' involvement in foreign conflicts, particularly the Russian-Ukrainian war (Lyndyuk et al., 2023). By covering topics such as international regulations on mercenary activity and voluntary military participation, media outlets are influential in framing public discourse and shaping perceptions. Given the sensitive nature of Moldova's geopolitical situation, with its close proximity to the conflict, the media's nuanced coverage helps to clarify legal definitions and the state's official stance on Moldovan citizens joining foreign military efforts.

A critical aspect of Moldovan media discourse has been the distinction between mercenaries and legitimate volunteers. Under international humanitarian law, mercenaries are defined by specific criteria, including personal motivation for financial gain and lack of national affiliation. Moldovan media frequently references these criteria to explain why some forms of military participation may be unlawful, while others, such as joining International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine, are legally sanctioned. This distinction helps Moldovan citizens

understand the legal repercussions of participation in foreign conflicts, aligning with Moldova's legal commitment to preventing unauthorized military involvement.

Media reports have also highlighted Moldova's governmental efforts to counter disinformation regarding citizen involvement in Ukraine's defence (Schönbächler, 2024). In response to unverified claims of widespread Moldovan recruitment as mercenaries, authorities issued official statements to clarify that such allegations were false (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2022), emphasizing the government's stance against unauthorized military engagement. By presenting these clarifications, the media plays a role in supporting the state's strategic communication, which aims to prevent the destabilizing effects of disinformation within Moldova's society. Moldovan media coverage frequently considers the broader implications of citizen involvement in foreign conflicts, referencing international humanitarian law to underscore potential legal risks and responsibilities (Zelenov, 2024). Reports discussing the prosecution of war crimes, such as those documented in the Ukrainian conflict, serve as a cautionary backdrop for Moldovans considering joining foreign military efforts (Rexhepi & Murtezaj, 2024). Through these discussions, media outlets provide context on the international legal frameworks governing wartime conduct, reflecting Moldova's commitment to upholding international standards while addressing national security concerns.

The discourse on mercenary activities and foreign volunteer participation also touches upon national security and Moldova's regional stability. The media underscores that unauthorized involvement in foreign conflicts could create security risks within Moldova, such as the possible spread of radicalized

ideologies or militarized behaviours. By examining these risks, Moldovan media contributes to a broader understanding of how citizen participation in external conflicts could impact domestic security, reinforcing the need for a vigilant legal framework to regulate foreign military engagement by Moldovan nationals.

3. Discussion

The analysis of the Moldovan citizens' participation in the Ukrainian conflict reveals several significant patterns that both align with and expand upon existing research in the field of international security studies and civilian military participation. The findings demonstrate complex interactions between legal frameworks, social responses, and security implications that merit detailed examination.

The coverage of the voluntary military participation of Moldovan citizens in the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine corroborates the observations of Lescu (2021) regarding the vulnerability of Moldova's information space to external influence. However, the research results go beyond purely information security, demonstrating concrete manifestations of citizen engagement in military operations at the regional level. This aligns with the analysis of geographical factors in military operations conducted by Ciubara (2022), which is particularly evident in the documented cases of Moldovan citizens' participation in the liberation of strategically important settlements such as Irpin and Severodonetsk.

The research findings on public response to military participation significantly complement the analysis of foreign policy attitudes carried out by Răileanu Szeles (2021). While Răileanu Szeles focused on general public sentiments, the present study reveals specific examples of reactions at the family

and community levels, as evidenced by the documented cases of multi-generational military participation. These results provide concrete examples of how theoretical foreign policy views translate into actual civilian behaviour during conflict situations.

The documentation of legal mechanisms for responding to military participation demonstrates interesting parallels with Locoman's analysis of the challenges facing Moldova due to Russian aggression (2023). The results related to the government's strategic communications and the implementation of the legal framework illustrate the practical application of institutional responses to regional security challenges. This is particularly noticeable in the official reactions to disinformation campaigns about military recruitment, which corroborates Isgandarov's observations on media policy formulation in semi-democratic contexts (2023).

The investigation of the documentation and prosecution of war crimes reveals trends that expand upon Torres-Adán's analysis of public opinion dynamics (2021). While Torres-Adán focused on broader geopolitical preferences, the results demonstrate specific mechanisms of legal accountability and documentation of violations, particularly evident in the cases from Motyzhyn and the prosecution of military personnel in Kyiv courts. The research findings on the role of private military companies and mercenary activities provide new insights that complement the analysis of geopolitical challenges to Moldova's borders conducted by Gritsenko and Zotova (2023). The documented cases of Wagner PMC activities and their implications for regional security add a practical dimension to the theoretical considerations of border security.

The importance of European integration for ensuring state security, emphasized by Cebotari and Bevziuc (2022), is confirmed by the results of the research on institutional responses to military participation. The documented cases demonstrate how Moldova's legal and security frameworks align with European standards while addressing unique regional challenges. The temporal analysis of the conflict's evolution complements Quinlan's historical perspective on the impact of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis (2020), providing contemporary examples that illustrate how historical patterns continue to influence the current security dynamics. This is particularly evident in the documented evolution of volunteer participation mechanisms and legal frameworks from 2014 to the present conflict.

The study of institutional responses to military participation aligns with the findings presented in several recent analytical frameworks. The role of media institutions in shaping public discourse and documenting military events, as analysed in the research, expands upon both Gribincea's theoretical work on the role of mass media in social construction (2019) and the more recent work by Crețu (2022) on information verification mechanisms. The documentation processes established by Moldovan institutions demonstrate an evolution in line with Isgandarov's comparative analysis of policy formulation in semi-democratic contexts (2023). Furthermore, the findings regarding the development of the legal framework support the recent research by Gritsenko and Zotova (2023) on border security challenges. The systematic approach to documenting military participation and legal violations, as revealed in the study, provides practical examples that complement the work of Păduraru (2022) and Moldova News (2022) on individual cases and regional recruitment patterns.

Negură's analysis of public perception of Russian aggression is significantly enriched by the documented cases of civilian response and participation (2023). The research provides concrete examples of how theoretical perceptions translate into actual civilian engagement in military operations and support activities. The findings related to the role of media in documenting and reporting on military participation confirm the theoretical framework presented by Gribincea (2019), providing contemporary examples of media's influence on public understanding of military engagement. This is particularly evident in the systematic documentation of volunteer participation and war crimes by Moldovan media outlets. The findings of this research also align with the broader discussions on the security implications of mercenary activities in the region. The research complements the work of Soroceanu (2022), who has emphasized the challenges of regulating and monitoring mercenary participation by Moldovan citizens in foreign conflicts.

Additionally, the evolution of Moldovan media's coverage of these issues corresponds with the observations made by Simionov (2023) regarding the shifting identity and geopolitical orientations of Moldova in response to both domestic aspirations and external pressures. The increasing analytical focus, legal contextualization, and international framing of the mercenary participation topic in Moldovan media reflect the nation's efforts to navigate complex regional security dynamics while aligning with European standards and norms, as noted by Paiu (2020) in the broader discussion of Moldova's geopolitical balancing act.

The research reveals several areas requiring further investigation, particularly regarding long-term implications of civilian military participation for regional security dynamics and the evolution of legal frameworks governing

international volunteer participation in military conflicts. Future research might benefit from longitudinal studies of participant reintegration and the development of international legal standards for civilian military participation.

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how smaller states navigate complex regional security challenges while maintaining sovereign interests and international obligations. The research demonstrates the importance of clear legal frameworks, effective institutional responses, and systematic documentation in managing citizen participation in foreign conflicts.

Conclusion

The conducted research confirmed the importance of differentiating between “mercenaries” and “volunteers” in the context of Moldovan citizens’ participation in military conflicts, particularly in the war in Ukraine. It was found that the legal distinction between mercenaries and volunteers, especially within the framework of the Geneva Conventions, plays a crucial role in providing legal clarity regarding the participation of citizens in foreign military engagements.

The study also revealed a significant impact of information security on mobilization processes in Moldova. Disinformation campaigns aimed at recruiting citizens have become one of the main threats faced by the state. The government’s response, which involved debunking false recruitment messages, serves as an important example of effective institutional reactions to information threats. This highlights the importance of clear strategic communications in preventing public panic and destabilization.

Additionally, the examination of cases involving Moldovan citizens’ participation in military actions, as well as documented war crimes, particularly in

Motyzhyn and Irpin, demonstrates the importance of international cooperation in investigating and prosecuting war crimes. The legal precedents established during the judicial proceedings provide new approaches to ensuring justice in times of war. A limitation of this study is the lack of broad access to official sources from Moldovan institutions, which complicates the comprehensiveness of the analysis. However, the collected data allows us to conclude that further research could focus on improving international legal frameworks for volunteer participation in military conflicts, as well as on a more detailed analysis of information security during crises.

The analysis of Moldovan media coverage revealed systematic approaches to reporting on military participation issues. Major news platforms demonstrated consistent patterns in distinguishing between legitimate military service and mercenary activities, providing their audiences with clear frameworks for understanding the legal implications of foreign military service. This systematic approach has contributed to public awareness of both rights and responsibilities regarding military participation in foreign conflicts.

The research also identified significant evolution in how Moldovan media handles sensitive security information. Editorial practices have developed to balance public interest reporting with national security considerations, particularly in coverage of citizen participation in the International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine. These findings demonstrate the growing sophistication of Moldovan media in addressing complex international security issues while maintaining professional journalistic standards.

The study ultimately reveals the crucial role of media institutions in shaping public understanding of complex legal and security issues during regional

conflicts. Through their coverage, Moldovan media outlets have contributed to developing a more informed and nuanced public discourse about military service, international humanitarian law, and citizen responsibilities in the context of regional security challenges.

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