Framed And Forgotten: Migrants In The Age Of Information Warfare

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Abstract— *This research project, conducted in one of Lithuania's cities, explores the integration processes of foreign nationals in the urban environment. Its primary aim is to identify key obstacles to migrants' social, cultural, and professional inclusion, and to propose practical recommendations for improving adaptation at the community, municipal, and organizational levels. Special emphasis is placed on the role of media manipulation and disinformation targeting migrants, which often reinforces stereotypes, fuels xenophobia, and undermines trust in institutions. The study focuses particularly on Ukrainian refugees as a vulnerable group exposed to politicized narratives and hybrid informational threats. Using both empirical data and theoretical frameworks, the article investigates how migrants perceive and respond to such manipulations. The findings aim to inform more effective integration strategies and contribute to policy development rooted in democratic values and information.*

Keywords— *information warfare , manipulation, migrants, reaction.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, migration has become one of the most pressing and politically charged issues. The ongoing war in Ukraine has led to an unprecedented surge in forced migration, particularly to Eastern and Central European countries. This massive displacement has not only created social, economic, and institutional challenges for host countries but has also triggered an upsurge in media narratives that often frame migrants and refugees in a manipulative or distorted manner. Amid these dynamics, informational manipulation—through disinformation, propaganda, and biased media coverage—has emerged as a central mechanism by which public perception is shaped and political agendas are pursued.

Information manipulation in the context of migration operates at the intersection of media, politics, and societal attitudes. Migrants are frequently depicted either as passive victims or as active threats, depending on the political needs of various actors. These narratives can have serious consequences: they reinforce xenophobia, justify restrictive immigration policies, and undermine the social integration of migrants. More insidiously, such manipulation is often part of broader strategies of hybrid warfare, in which states or non-state actors use disinformation to destabilize societies and sow distrust in democratic institutions.

Against this backdrop, the importance of studying how migrants perceive these manipulations cannot be overstated. While much academic attention has been paid to the production and dissemination of disinformation, fewer studies focus on its reception—particularly among vulnerable populations like refugees. Understanding how migrants interpret, resist, or internalize manipulative narratives is essential for both academic inquiry and policy development.

This research, therefore, focuses on the perceptions of Ukrainian migrants—one of the most prominent refugee groups in Europe today—in relation to the manipulative media environment they face. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives, empirical data, and legal considerations, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive picture of the informational challenges confronting migrants and the broader implications for European democratic resilience.

Object of the study: Information manipulation

Goal: To examine how migrants perceive and respond to informational manipulation

Research Problem: How do migrants interpret and react to disinformation and manipulative media narratives in host countries?

Research Objectives:

- To define the concept and mechanisms of informational manipulation;
- To analyze migrants as targets of disinformation campaigns;
- To investigate the socio-psychological and institutional effects of media manipulation;
- To explore the legal and ethical dimensions involved in regulating misinformation about migrants;
- To assess the implications for policy, integration, and democratic governance.

II. MIGRANTS AS AN OBJECT OF INFORMATION MANIPULATION: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Analysis of scientific literature shows that one of the key problems in the context of forced migration, especially against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, is the growth of disinformation campaigns directed against refugees. These campaigns undermine public trust, hinder social integration and increase xenophobic sentiments.

The European Centre for Policy Studies [1] points out that granting temporary protection to refugees is becoming an object of political manipulation and is often used in media narratives as a pretext for accusations of "overloading" social systems. Malinowska [2] emphasizes that most EU countries face a dilemma: the need for long-term integration of Ukrainians or, on the contrary, the desire for their return. This uncertainty creates a field for manipulative media interpretation, where refugees are portrayed as a "temporary threat".

Research conducted in Lithuania [3] revealed that 51% of Ukrainian refugees face limited access to health care, 46% have difficulties learning the language, and 30% have problems finding housing and work. This confirms the importance of the media image of Ukrainians as a factor influencing the level of their social inclusion.

Ukrainian scientists [4] point out that 41% of Ukrainian refugees in Poland were negatively perceived by society, which increases the feeling of vulnerability and reduces trust in host institutions. Other scholars [5] describe how anti-NATO and anti-migration disinformation is used as an element of hybrid warfare, especially in countries with a post-Soviet legacy. Examples include rumors about "migrant criminality," "burden on the economy," and "social housing takeovers." Researchers [6] have emphasized in their analysis of the psychological state of Ukrainian female refugees in EU countries that disinformation and visual media formats increase anxiety and disorientation, especially among women and children.

According to UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency [7], in 2023, more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees were registered in the EU. More than 85,000 Ukrainian refugees live in Lithuania [8], (Lithuanian Migration Department). A study [9] showed that 41% of refugees in Poland had encountered negative media narratives. According to a study by 4Service [10], 62% of Ukrainians believe that media coverage of their situation in Europe "oversimplified and negative", more than 76% of Ukrainians in Lithuania do not plan to return, and 64% are considering obtaining citizenship.

The scientific literature identifies four main categories of media manipulation:

1. Fake news - deliberately false publications, for example [11], claims of "mass violence by refugees."
2. Clickbait headlines - sensational presentation of information that increases fear and anxiety [12].
3. Memetization and visual disinformation - the distribution of graphic materials that distort the image of migrants [13].
4. Political exploitation of migration - the topic of migration is used in electoral rhetoric to mobilize voters [14].

III. THE CONNECTION BETWEEAND MIGRATION

The modern information environment is complex. In 2022, 62.5% of the world's 7.9 billion people are reported to be internet users and 58.4% of the world population is reported to be using social media

[22]. Even though misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are not new phenomena, they have received renewed interest since political events such as Brexit and the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections [23]. Disinformation (deliberate falsehoods) and misinformation (unintentionally incorrect information) can spread quickly in the modern information environment. Terminology around the problem of misinformation has also multiplied and two major analogies are frequently used: that of information warfare [24], using militarised language and metaphors; and that of information pollution [25].

Informational manipulations encompass a wide range of techniques and strategies designed to influence public opinion, shape perceptions, and control narratives. In the context of migration, these manipulations can take the form of disinformation campaigns, biased media reporting, and targeted propaganda that exploit the vulnerabilities of both migrants and host societies [26]. The essence of informational manipulations lies in their covert nature and the distortion of factual information to achieve political, economic, or ideological goals. Such manipulations can be orchestrated by state or non-state actors, including governments, interest groups, or extremist networks [27]. They typically involve deliberate alterations of truth, emotional appeals, and the use of sophisticated communication channels - ranging from traditional media to digital platforms and social media [22]. A fundamental characteristic of informational manipulations is their adaptability and responsiveness to changing social and political landscapes. They can intensify social tensions, foster prejudice, and weaken trust in democratic institutions [28]. In the case of migrants, these manipulations often portray them as security threats or cultural outsiders, reinforcing negative stereotypes and influencing policy debates [29].

Modern informational manipulations employ a range of sophisticated techniques. Disinformation campaigns involve coordinated efforts to spread false or misleading information. For instance, the European External Action Service [30] has highlighted the rise of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) activities targeting democratic processes. The advent of generative AI models has facilitated the creation of highly convincing fake content, and studies have shown that large language models can produce persuasive disinformation, posing challenges for detection and mitigation [31]. Social media serves as a fertile ground for spreading manipulated information rapidly. For example, the 2025 escalation between India and Pakistan was exacerbated by false reports and AI-generated content circulating on platforms like X and Facebook [32]. Moreover, online platforms may employ design strategies known as dark patterns, which manipulate user behavior, leading to unintended actions or beliefs. Research indicates that exposure to such dark patterns increases perceived manipulation and reduces trust in digital interfaces [33].

The consequences of informational manipulations are profound. They can erode public trust in media, institutions, and democratic processes; polarize societies by exploiting societal fault lines; and even threaten national security by destabilizing governance and influencing elections. To systematically understand and counter informational manipulations, frameworks like the EEAS's DISARM (Disinformation Analysis and Risk Management) have been developed. DISARM categorizes manipulation tactics into Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs), facilitating structured analysis and response strategies [34].

IV. ISSUES IN ANALYZING INFORMATIONAL MANIPULATIONS

The analysis of informational manipulations in the migration context inevitably raises significant legal issues, closely tied to the protection of fundamental rights, freedom of expression, privacy, and national security concerns [35]. One key legal challenge is balancing freedom of expression with the need to prevent and counteract harmful disinformation. In democratic societies, the right to free speech is a cornerstone of governance, but it is not absolute [36]. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has addressed this tension in several landmark cases. For example, in Delfi AS v. Estonia [37], the Court held that holding an online news portal liable for third-party comments containing hate speech did not violate Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights [38]. Similarly, Sürek v. Turkey (No. 1) (1999) reaffirmed that freedom of expression can be restricted to protect national security and prevent incitement to violence [39]. In Cengiz and Others v. Turkey (2015), the ECtHR examined the blocking of access to YouTube, underscoring the importance of proportionality and the impact of such measures

on access to information [38]. Policymakers face the challenge of developing legislative measures that do not infringe upon civil liberties while addressing the risks posed by false narratives and propaganda [40].

Additionally, the right to privacy is a critical concern. Many informational manipulations rely on the collection and exploitation of personal data, often without the consent of migrants. This raises questions about data protection laws, including the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the legal responsibility of information disseminators [41]. The ECtHR has recognized the importance of safeguarding the privacy of individuals in the digital context, as highlighted in Steel and Morris v. the United Kingdom (2005), which emphasized the role of privacy in enabling robust public debate [42].

Finally, analyzing informational manipulations in the migration context requires a nuanced understanding of international law, particularly concerning the rights of migrants and refugees. In Khlaifia and Others v. Italy (2016), the ECtHR affirmed that migrants' rights under the ECHR must be respected even in the context of migration control and detention [43]. International instruments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and various human rights treaties set standards for the protection of migrants from discrimination and misinformation [44]. Identifying and addressing these legal issues is essential to ensure that responses to informational manipulations are effective, proportionate, and consistent with democratic values.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Disinformation as a barrier to social integration. Empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that disinformation and manipulative narratives serve as formidable barriers to the effective social integration of migrants. These distortions foster exclusion, erode trust in host institutions, and curtail migrants' access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and housing. The circulation of hostile or oversimplified narratives contributes to a climate of suspicion, reinforcing societal divisions.

Media as an instrument of public opinion engineering. Manipulative media discourses proliferate most rapidly in environments characterized by high levels of information noise, low digital literacy, and political polarization. Such settings facilitate the spread of fake news, visual distortions, and emotionally charged rhetoric. The instrumentalization of migration in political campaigns further amplifies polarization, often depicting refugees as either burdens or threats, rather than as individuals in need of protection and dignity.

Gendered vulnerabilities in the informational landscape. The gendered dimension of informational manipulation warrants particular attention. Female refugees are disproportionately affected by economic precarity, exposure to stigmatizing narratives, and psychological vulnerability. Disinformation exacerbates these challenges by perpetuating stereotypes and constructing disempowering representations that hinder their autonomy and sense of security.

Psychological and behavioral ramifications.The informational environment has profound implications not only for societal attitudes toward migrants but also for the migrants' self-perception and mental well-being. Recurrent exposure to negative media portrayals contributes to heightened anxiety, social alienation, and diminished self-efficacy. Such conditions undermine migrants' adaptive capacities and willingness to participate in integration initiatives.

Legal and policy dilemmas. Addressing informational manipulation necessitates a nuanced legal approach that reconciles the protection of freedom of expression with the imperative to counteract harmful disinformation. Democratic societies face the challenge of enacting legislation that mitigates the impact of false narratives without infringing upon civil liberties. The legal dimensions are further complicated by the transnational nature of migration and the digital dissemination of content, requiring coordinated responses grounded in international human rights law.

The imperative of media literacy and institutional support. Media literacy emerges as a pivotal tool in building societal resilience against disinformation. Enhancing the critical media competencies of both host populations and migrant communities is essential for fostering informed public discourse. Moreover, robust institutional support—from governmental bodies, civil society organizations, and

international agencies—is indispensable in providing migrants with access to reliable information, legal safeguards, and psychological assistance.

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