

## **DECEPTIVE PRACTICES IN SCIENTIFIC PUBLISHING IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

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**Abstract:** The article examines the phenomenon of deceptive practices in the publication of scientific results in the Republic of Moldova, with particular emphasis on predatory publishing. Such practices constitute dissemination methods driven by the pursuit of rapid financial gain, undermining research integrity and eroding trust in science. Evidence indicates a significant prevalence of these practices across all scientific fields among researchers in the Republic of Moldova. One such practice is the phenomenon of so-called “ghost conferences”, exemplified by the case of InterConf. The authors also identify domestic manifestations of such practices, including publication in journals that accept manuscripts without peer review, or conferences that publish papers and issue certificates without actual participation. In addition to predatory publishing, the article highlights other deceptive practices: (1) dubious patents, particularly those acquired in the United Kingdom, which fail to meet invention criteria and mislead the scholarly community; and (2) pseudo-scientific rankings, such as the AD Scientific Index or Moldova H-index, which rely on opaque methodologies and promote paid services to artificially inflate visibility. These phenomena appear to stem not only from deliberate attempts at fraud, but also from a deficient research culture, institutional pressures to publish, and the absence of a robust system for regulation and education in research ethics. The authors advocate for the recognition and eradication of such practices through coherent policies and systemic interventions.

**Keywords:** Predatory publishing, scientific integrity, deceptive practices, research evaluation, pseudo-scientific rankings.

**JEL Classification:** I23, I28, O39

### **1. Introduction**

Deceptive practices in the publication of scientific results aim to secure rapid financial gain by exploiting weaknesses in the academic system, including the pervasive “publish or perish” pressure and the absence of a robust culture of scientific integrity.

Commonly referred to as predatory publications, such journals and conferences are on the rise globally, posing serious risks to public trust in science and research integrity, generating significant waste of research resources, and becoming embedded within research culture (IAP, 2022), thereby severely undermining the quality and credibility of scientific knowledge. Researchers from low- and middle-income countries are regarded as being most affected by this phenomenon (Callaghan and Nicholson, 2020).

Against this backdrop, and building on our previous studies, we set out to identify and analyse the principal forms of deceptive publishing practices involving researchers from the Republic of Moldova.

### **2. Material and methods**

Deceptive practices were established through an analysis of the publication output of Moldovan researchers in relation to criteria identified in the scholarly literature or synthesised by the authors. In determining pseudo-scientific predatory publications, we applied the criteria developed within the project *The Phenomenon of Publishing in Pseudo-Scientific Predatory Outlets in the Academic Community of the Republic of Moldova* (Cuciureanu, 2024). The study also drew on the results of an online survey dedicated to the phenomenon of predatory publishing, conducted between 31 January and 7 March 2025 within the same project, which gathered responses from 539 researchers in the Republic of Moldova. The identification and synthesis of the main forms of deceptive practices were further informed by our earlier research and by findings from scientific studies published abroad.

### **3. Results and discussions**

#### **3.1. Publishing with predatory publishers**

This constitutes the principal form of deceptive practices in the publication of scientific results involving researchers from the Republic of Moldova. It refers to the dissemination of scientific outputs through platforms that mimic the standards of legitimate academic publications, yet in reality fail to adhere to the ethical and professional norms of scholarly communication. Hallmarks of predatory journals and conferences include the absence of rigorous peer review (with the rapid acceptance of manuscripts), unjustified publication fees (payment is made for acceptance rather than for the provision of editorial services), misleading journal or conference titles (which may imitate the names of prestigious outlets or adopt pompous titles), false or obscure indexation (claims of inclusion in Scopus or Web of Science without actual indexing), lack of sustainable archiving (articles may disappear from the platform without warning), the “organisation” of mass-scale conferences (purportedly taking place in major world cities), among others.

*Publishing in foreign predatory journals and conferences* by Moldovan researchers is widespread and relatively well documented through our empirical studies.

More than half of the research projects funded under the 2020–2023 State Programme — the main policy instrument for science in the Republic of Moldova during that period — included publications of a predatory nature. The phenomenon spans most scientific fields and institutions, albeit to varying degrees. The majority of such outputs authored by Moldovan researchers appear in pseudo-scientific publications operating within the Eastern European region, often edited by individuals or entities from Ukraine. These outlets typically charge low publication fees, yet display clear predatory characteristics (Cuciureanu, 2025b). Notably, members of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova were listed as authors of predatory publications in 14 of these projects. Furthermore, numerous publications failing to meet scholarly standards were identified, even in cases where no publication fee could be confirmed, including those appearing in journals and conferences organised by unrecognised entities in their respective jurisdictions (e.g., from Crimea or the eastern districts of the Republic of Moldova).

One of the most prominent pseudo-scientific publishers for the Republic of Moldova, particularly during the pandemic, was *InterConf*, which offered participation in conferences ostensibly held in cities across various continents, alongside publication in proceedings volumes for a fee of €10 or €20 — without any actual conference taking place. In 2021 alone, these proceedings contained 363 papers authored by 413 researchers from the Republic of Moldova, including two rectors, three academicians, one head of a public authority in the research sector, 43 *doctor habilitat* and 142 *doctor* degree holders, 79 doctoral candidates, 38 full professors, and 99 associate professors (Cojocaru *et al.*, 2022). Most of these publications were in the fields of medicine, law, and educational sciences.

Equally alarming is the situation regarding the awarding of scientific and academic titles, as well as the right to supervise doctoral studies, based on works published in pseudo-scientific outlets. An analysis of 254 attestation files submitted to ANACEC between August 2024 and

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February 2025 revealed 147 papers published in predatory outlets, distributed as follows: 22 papers in predatory publications across 10 files for confirmation of the *doctor habilitat* title; 41 papers across 111 files for confirmation of the *doctor* title; 26 papers across 41 files for confirmation of the academic titles of full professor and associate professor; and 58 such papers in files requesting approval to supervise doctoral research. The *InterConf* series accounted for 13 of these papers, representing a decrease compared to the two-month monitoring period in 2022, although new publishing alternatives resembling *InterConf* were identified, such as conferences from the *World of Conference* and *Way Science* series.

Overall, a trend was observed towards meeting the minimum performance indicators — particularly the number of publications in international or foreign outlets — by relying on articles published in predatory conference proceedings and journals within a relatively short time frame. This “dangerous phenomenon” has been documented in the scholarly literature, whereby individuals more concerned with meeting research performance metrics exhibited a higher likelihood of publishing in obscure journals (Conlogue *et al.*, 2022). The consequences are severe: through publication in predatory outlets, researchers can obtain — or have already obtained — titles, accreditations, certifications, and promotions that would otherwise be unattainable, all made possible by the ease of article acceptance offered by predatory publishing practices (Beall, 2017; Shrestha, 2020).

***Publishing in Journals and Conferences in the Republic of Moldova with Deceptive Practices.*** Our previous analyses have shown that both scientific journals and scientific conferences in the Republic of Moldova exhibit characteristics associated with deceptive practices.

The failure to comply with publication standards in journals, including the peer review of articles, leads to a situation in which almost any submitted manuscript can be published. This finding applies particularly to journals in the field of law, as demonstrated by an experiment conducted in 2016–2017, which showed that these journals agreed to publish an article that had already been published in another journal and was available in Open Access (Moldoveanu and Cuciureanu, 2020).

An experiment involving 16 scientific conferences, to which a manuscript was submitted by a fictitious author containing text plagiarised from other works and a fabricated universal indicator for research evaluation — the Timmy Index — likewise revealed the absence of academic rigour in the publication of proceedings. Of the conferences targeted, 14 accepted the manuscript, 12 published it in their proceedings, and nine issued certificates of participation in events that no one had actually attended (Cuciureanu, 2025a).

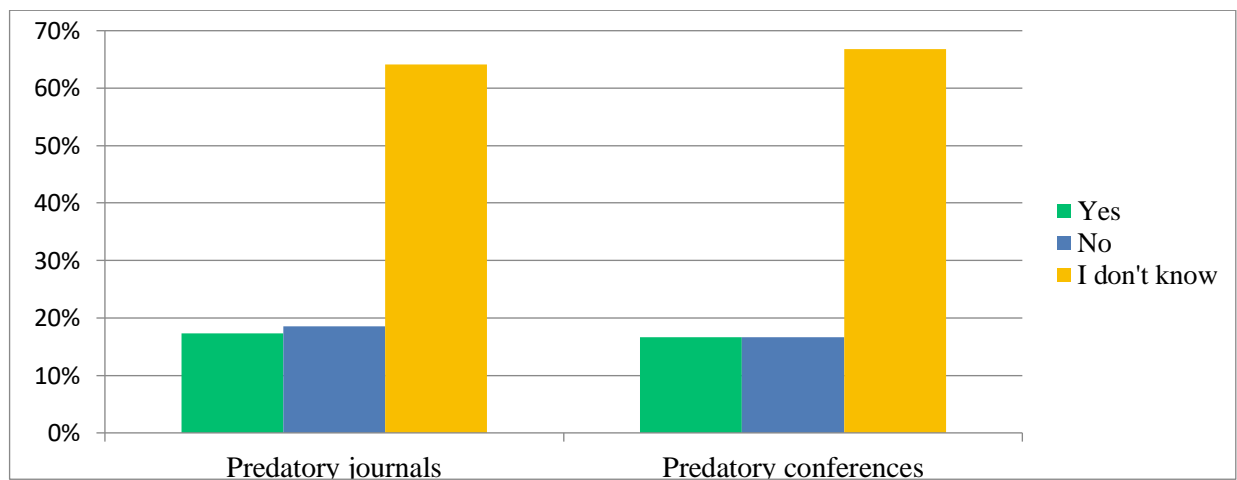
In another study, manuscripts were submitted to 19 conferences in the Republic of Moldova containing the following sentence in the methodology section: “*Our hypothesis is that this paper will not be peer reviewed.*” The research identified deficiencies in meeting the criteria for organising and conducting scientific conferences, such as the absence of manuscript review (with the impression that some proceedings could include papers of any content), the acceptance of materials without presentation (thus undermining the very purpose of holding scientific events), discrepancies between reported organisational details and reality, the existence of an excessive number of scientific events in certain fields, and the tendency to formalise events for administrative purposes (Cuciureanu *et al.*, 2024).

The manner in which articles are published in journals, and particularly the organisation of conferences and the publication of their proceedings, reflects the low level of scientific culture in academic publishing and the lack of awareness regarding the necessity of validating research results through expert review. This fosters the development of a publishing culture in which the act of publishing becomes an end in itself rather than a means of disseminating research results. At the same time, this cannot be characterised as classical predatory publishing, as no evidence was found of publishers in the Republic of Moldova whose primary objective is financial profit.

Rather, such behaviour appears to be motivated by the need to publish in order to fulfil reporting requirements for projects, obtain academic titles, or advance in one’s career.

The perception that predatory journals and conferences are absent in the Republic of Moldova also appears to be shared by most local researchers. Only around 17% of respondents to a 2025 survey believed that there are predatory journals and conferences in the country, with the majority holding a different opinion (Figure 1).

At the same time, 57% of respondents considered that predatory practices are becoming a problem for researchers in the Republic of Moldova, while 24.7% believed they already represent a serious problem.



**Figure 1. Researchers' opinions on the existence of predatory journals and conferences in the Republic of Moldova (n=502)**

*Source:* elaborated by the authors based on the results of the survey conducted

### **3.2. Dubious Patents**

The United States Patent and Trademark Office accepts patent applications that employ *prophetic examples*—imaginary experiments intended to illustrate how an invention would function, even though they have not actually been conducted. Researchers, investors, or evaluators reading such patents are not always aware that some of the described results are hypothetical, as these are often drafted in a detailed and persuasive manner, making them difficult to distinguish from real data (Freilich and Ouellette, 2019). Such situations can generate confusion (e.g., citation as a source of actual results, investment funding, etc.), thereby undermining trust in both the scientific literature and the patent system.

A deceptive practice in this context is the sale of “patents” to researchers from less developed countries. For instance, at the United Kingdom Intellectual Property Office, thousands of design registration applications are filed by companies whose primary aim is to profit from selling them. Unlike patents, these applications are not examined for novelty or individual character. These “patents” are not, in fact, patents, and are much easier and cheaper to obtain. In some countries, such as India and Pakistan, universities reward patents with points for promotion and even financial bonuses, thus incentivising such fraudulent schemes (Richardson *et al.*, 2025). The impact is the erosion of trust in intellectual property systems and the tarnishing of the reputation of universities and research in the countries involved.

This practice has begun to emerge in the Republic of Moldova. At the beginning of 2024, the acquisition of such a “patent” by a researcher from the Technical University of Moldova was widely publicised. The very headline—“A Moldovan researcher has developed a drone for smart agriculture. The vehicle has been patented in the UK”—is misleading in several respects. The article further claimed that this was “an internationally recognised invention patent registered in

the United Kingdom” for “a drone that monitors crops and sprays pesticides”, developed “in collaboration with two universities in India” (Diez, 2024). In reality, examination of the official document issued by the UK Intellectual Property Office reveals that it was a “Certificate of Registration of a United Kingdom Design”, certifying that the industrial design “Agricultural Drone for Crop Monitoring and Pesticide Spraying” had been registered under the names of eight individuals (seven from India and one from the Republic of Moldova). Thus, the registration protected the design or model rather than the rights to an invention.

Notwithstanding the above, this registration appears to have succeeded in misleading decision-makers involved in assessing research impact. As a result, in 2024, the researcher’s institution awarded her the Second Degree Prize and Second Degree Diploma in the category “Research and Innovation Laureate of the Year” (the most cited researcher in the Republic of Moldova received only the Third Degree Prize). In the same year, the researcher was named a laureate at the Champions of Change Gala, with the nomination citing, among other reasons, the fact that she had “obtained an invention patent registered in the United Kingdom”, which “promises to bring a significant change to Moldovan agriculture through the integration of advanced technologies.”

### 3.3. Pseudo-scientific Rankings

Pseudo-scientific (predatory-type) rankings of academic institutions or researchers lack scholarly rigour and are often characterised by questionable methodologies (unreliable data, vague methodological descriptions), absence of transparency, inclusion fees, and a focus on profit at the expense of quality. Such rankings may emphasise indicators that are easily manipulated or that fail to reflect genuine academic excellence. Predatory rankings may be associated with obscure or bad-faith publishers and websites.

One example of a predatory ranking is the AD Scientific Index, which charges fees for the inclusion of researchers and institutions in its rankings, yet employs a non-transparent methodology based exclusively on Google Scholar and undisclosed parameters. This creates the potential for manipulation of public perception and research funding policies, particularly in countries with fragile scientific cultures (RetractionWatch, 2021). Uncritical promotion of such rankings risks diverting resources and shifting the focus away from genuine research quality.

In the Republic of Moldova, several researchers promoted in 2021 one of the AD Scientific Index rankings in which they were listed—World Scientist and University Rankings 2022. Even minimal scrutiny of the ranking’s website reveals that it is a commercial enterprise seeking to monetise vanity, lack of discernment, and the desire for recognition. The underlying scheme is straightforward: academic entrepreneurs extracted publicly available data from Google Scholar profiles and compiled national lists of the “top” researchers. They then heavily promoted these rankings via social media, employing various marketing strategies. The implicit message is that anyone can appear in the ranking (without any publications indexed in major international databases) provided they have a Google Scholar profile and pay a fee of only €20.

In 2025, the so-called National H-index Ranking of Moldova began to be publicised. For instance, the Facebook page of the “Centre for Educational Research” published the ranking for the second quarter of 2025, followed by a news item on the website of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova, which claimed that it “contributes to improving the quality of scientific research, increasing the global visibility of Moldovan science, and engaging international partners in promoting and implementing joint projects”. There are, however, multiple indicators that this ranking (*H-index*, 2025) should be regarded as dubious, including:

*Anonymous authorship* – The website states that it is produced by “a group of scientists from the United States, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, the Netherlands, and Turkey”, but provides no names, organisations, or contact details, a hallmark of predatory publishing practices.

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*Exaggerated self-praise* – The ranking claims to be “the only ranking in the world that evaluates scientific productivity based on a unified H-index metric from open sources and databases” and to provide “the most objective comparative analysis of data”, among other grandiose assertions.

*A simplistic, irrelevant, and academically unvalidated methodology* – The indicator used for organisational ranking is calculated as the arithmetic mean of the H-index from Scopus, the H-index from Web of Science, and one-half of the H-index from Google Scholar. While the first two components arguably reflect research quality (as journal inclusion in these databases follows evaluation), the third component lacks any quality filter, since Google Scholar indexes predatory publications as well as works involving plagiarism or other scientific misconduct. Moreover, this consolidated H-index is used only for organisations, not for individual researchers. For researcher rankings, no proprietary methodology is applied—data are simply extracted from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. This is essentially an automated aggregation of publicly available affiliation data from the three sources for individuals linked to Moldovan institutions.

*Content errors in the ranking itself* – On the first page of the second-quarter 2025 ranking of the “top three leaders of scientific potential”, the first-placed organisation has not existed as a separate institution since 2022, and the third-placed institution has had no research functions since 2018. The list also includes universities that no longer exist. Such inaccuracies indicate that the data were harvested automatically from the three sources and do not reflect current realities (e.g., the State University of Tiraspol appears above the institution that absorbed it—“I. Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chişinău—because the researchers concerned are now affiliated elsewhere). The researcher rankings also contain numerous errors; for example, the third-ranked individual in the “Top 1000 Moldovan Scientists in the Google Scholar Database 2025”, Alexa Wolberg, is listed as affiliated with the Technical University of Moldova, although no official source supports this claim.

*Other errors on the website* – For instance, it claims that the ranking aims at “solving the problem of the ‘diminishing’ state aspect in the context of the globalisation of society in the field of scientific research”, or that it evaluates the scientific activities of “business initiatives”.

Rankings exhibiting such characteristics are frequently developed with underlying commercial motives, for instance, to secure the inclusion or promotion of organisations and researchers in return for financial remuneration. In the case of the ranking under examination, no explicit information regarding the collection of fees was identified on its official website. Nevertheless, the platform invites organisations to register as ranking partners and encourages researchers to create personal profiles, requiring the submission of individual data.

Simultaneously, a promotional campaign has been initiated for the “Scientific Publications” platform, which operates its own website. This site underscores the purported significance of the H-index and markets services designed to increase it. These services are offered on a paid basis: fees for H-index enhancement are negotiated individually, while publication in a Scopus- or Web of Science-indexed journal is advertised at a starting price of USD 800. The company *Scientific Publications* actively promotes the H-index Ranking, for example, through its LinkedIn page and via its Bulgarian website.

A salient observation is that the set of countries for which the H-index Ranking is produced appears to overlap with those where *Scientific Publications* maintains country-specific websites—predominantly post-Soviet and post-socialist states, where international recognition of scientific output is often a priority, yet where susceptibility to certain forms of manipulation may be comparatively high. These patterns support the hypothesis that the two promotional initiatives are strategically coordinated, and that the ranking functions as a marketing instrument to attract researchers from the Republic of Moldova to purchase paid publication and H-index enhancement services offered by the company.

#### 4. Conclusions

The analysis of deceptive practices in the publication of scientific results in the Republic of Moldova reveals a range of dysfunctions that severely undermine the integrity, quality, and credibility of research. The phenomenon of predatory publishing is both widespread and often tacitly tolerated, fuelled by the formal pressure to publish, the absence of effective mechanisms for assessing research quality, and weaknesses in the academic culture with regard to publication ethics.

Researchers in the Republic of Moldova frequently resort to predatory journals and conferences, reflecting both a lack of institutional discernment and the insufficiency of regulations governing the validation of scientific performance. The presence of pseudo-scientific publications within projects funded from public resources highlights the need to reform evaluation criteria and funding policies.

Deceptive practices also extend to other areas related to research, such as the registration of patents lacking genuine technological value or the promotion of pseudo-scientific rankings, which distort perceptions of academic performance and may serve as tools for institutional manipulation.

In this context, combating predatory publishing and other forms of falsification of scientific performance must become a sustained and systemic concern for the research and education authorities in the Republic of Moldova, in order to safeguard the integrity of the system and foster a genuine academic culture.

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