

The Impact of Russian State Propaganda on Minority Communities in Moldova

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine has caused many vulnerabilities in Moldova, making it more fragile and threatened due of propaganda and Russian media interference. In the same context, Russia's war against Ukraine has created a strong geopolitical motivation for Moldova and Ukraine to join the EU. Moldova seeks closer European integration with the ultimate goal of becoming a member of the European Union (EU). The EU accession process is very complex and include multi-stage, involving various requirements and opportunities. The Moldovan government has made efforts to maintain social cohesion, but the media continues to be divided into pro-Russian and pro-Western camps. Minority communities, which often are weakly integrated into Moldovan society, are heavily influenced by powerful oligarchs and populist politicians who promote Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Keywords: War, Russia, Media, Propaganda, Minority

Key Findings

Moldova's independent press has grown in strength and significance. The 2023 World Press Freedom Index increased the ranking of Moldova from 40th in 2022 to 28th in 2023. Despite this rapid improvement, there is growing concern that disinformation is facilitating the re-polarization of the media environment, hindering much-needed reforms in the media sector.¹

Russia fuels the spread of both external and internal sources of disinformation and information manipulation in Moldova. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 exacerbated challenges to Moldova's information space as unreliable reports and rumors about refugees and bomb threats from Transnistria spread across media platforms. TV channels broadcasting primarily in Russian that rebroadcast Russian state television (e.g., *RTR Moldova*, *Primul in Moldova*, and *NTV*) have the highest ratings in regions with significant ethnic minority populations.² Although President Maia Sandu enacted the Informational Security Law in June 2022

¹ Reporters without borders, Moldova, <https://rsf.org/en/country/moldova>, 2023

² Institute for Public Policy, Moldova between East and West: views from Gagauzia and Taraclia, 2021, https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gagauzia_Taraclia_2021_en.pdf.

to ban the broadcast of Russian state news and political analysis, Moldovan pro-Russian oligarchs continue to spread fake news and propaganda through TV and online media.³

Concentrated media ownership results in coverage reflecting the political agendas of powerful figures and oligarchs. Political actors such as Vlad Plahotniuc and the PSRM have used media holdings to pass their own politically-biased messages through their TV channels, some of which are owned by Russian nationals.⁴ These actors often rebroadcast Russian content such as *Perviy Kanal* and *RTR* to increase their popularity and have business links with Russian state media.⁵ Pro-Russian media outlets target minority communities, exploiting their preference for socially-conservative narratives and lack of integration in Moldovan society.

Moldovan minority communities prefer pro-Russian media outlets. Recent polls have shown that 90 percent of the inhabitants of Gagauzia access Russian-language media outlets, and a majority of Gagauzians express extreme confidence in Russian-language news including TV channels tied to the Kremlin, the Socialists (PSRM), and the Shor Party.⁶ Russia is often perceived by minority communities as a strong economic partner, leading assistance provider, and reliable political actor.

The recent suspension of six TV channels for disinformation will affect the media landscape. Moldova's Commission for Exceptional Situations has temporarily decided to suspend the broadcast licenses of six television channels for "incorrect information" related to Russia's war in Ukraine to "prevent the risk of disinformation or attempts to manipulate public opinion." Some of the suspended channels are owned by individuals close to Ilan Shor, a fugitive Moldovan oligarch who leads the pro-Russian Shor Party.⁷ This decision may lead to greater demand for independent media that promote messages of social cohesion in place of the suspended channels. In recent months, reelected Bashkan of Gagauzia Irina Vlah has publicly supported social integration for Gagauzia and embraced Moldova's plans for European integration.⁸

The geopolitics of media and vulnerabilities of minority communities to foreign influence

Moldovan media is highly polarized exemplifying the geopolitical divide between pro-Russian and pro-Western camps. The fall of Plahotniuc's Democratic Party in 2019 and its weakening control over the media allowed the new pro-European government to focus on sector-specific issues. However, despite its commitment to reform, the authorities have failed to address the

³ *Ziarul de Gardă*, *President Maia Sandu promulgated the law banning Russian news broadcasts in Moldova*, 2022, <https://www.zdg.md/en/?p=9054>.

⁴ **Открытые медиа**, ВЭБ. РФ стал совладельцем новой компании сына генпрокурора России Игоря Чайки, 2019, <https://openmedia.io/infometer/syn-genprokurora-igor-chajka-stal-vladelcem-dvux-novykh-kompanij/>.

⁵ **Clingendael Report**, *Walking the tightrope towards the EU Moldova's vulnerabilities amid war in Ukraine*, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/walking-the-tightrope-towards-the-eu/>, Bob Deen, Wouter Zweers, September 2022.

⁶ **International Press Institute**, *Analysis: Strengthening Moldova's independent press in the shadow of polarization and propaganda*, Daniel Salaru, Aug 31, 2022, Available at <https://ipi.media/analysis-strengthening-moldovas-independent-press-in-the-shadow-of-polarization-and-propaganda/>.

⁷ **AP NEWS**, *Moldova suspends 6 TV channels over alleged misinformation*, STEPHEN McGRATH and CRISTIAN JARDAN, December 17, 2022, Available at <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-public-opinion-moldova-7419408d5d2de3c94eb7660d71a99d75>.

⁸ **Radio Europa Libera Moldova**, *Guvernatoarea Găgăuziei, Irina Vlah: „Avem ADN-uri etnice diferite, dar o singură inimă”*, 18 septembrie, 2022, Eugen Uruşciuc, Available at <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/guvernatoarea-g%C4%83g%C4%83uziei-irina-vlah-avem-adn-uri-etnice-diferite-dar-o-singur%C4%83-inim%C4%83-32039745.html>.

shortcomings in the legal and regulatory frameworks or to free the sector from political influence. Pro-Russian TV channels controlled by oligarchs remain popular among nationwide and Chisinau audiences.⁹ However, recent media reform has led to increased trust and popularity of independent media such as *Jurnal TV*, *Pro TV Moldova*, and *TV8*.¹⁰

Ethnic minority groups in Moldova often do not share similar media preferences and lack exposure to independent sources of information. Gagauzian, Bulgarian, and Roma communities have a strong emotional and geopolitical connection to the so-called "Russian world." According to a survey by the Institute for Public Policy, 34.3% of respondents in Gagauzia and Taraclia consider Moldova part of the Russian world.¹¹ However, this indicator decreased significantly from the values recorded in the 2015 survey (64.6%). Most Gagauz and Bulgarians are Russian speakers and feel strong sympathy for the Russian Federation, with levels of Russian language use surpassing even the Gagauz language among the Gagauz and Bulgarian among the Bulgarians. Consequently, Gagauz and Bulgarians primarily consume Russian media (TV and radio stations, newspapers, and social media).

Research has shown that the Roma community is particularly susceptible to disinformation due to limited access to information, low levels of media literacy, and a lack of content in their native language.¹² Approximately 30% of the Roma community cannot find information in their mother tongue; 39% find it difficult to do so, and only 22% can easily find Romani-language media. As a result, Roma have the highest levels of trust in information they receive from family members, colleagues, relatives, and neighbors.

Further, Moldovan media's limited coverage of topics related to minority communities can exacerbate feelings of exclusion as ethnic minorities often only appear in news reports when their ethnicity is tied to events or criminal activities.¹³

The media landscape and legal framework

Moldova's media landscape underwent legal changes in November and December 2021 allowing Parliament to establish control over the public broadcaster Teleradio-Moldova and restructuring the Audiovisual Council, which regulates Moldovan media. However, the amendments to the Audiovisual Media Services Code (AMSC) drew criticism from media NGOs and international observers which expressed that the changes would not strengthen the independence of the Audiovisual Council, but, on the contrary, make this institution dependent on the political will.¹⁴

⁹ **The Nielsen company in Moldova**, *Обзор телевизионной аудитории за июнь 2020 года*, Available at <https://agb.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Obzor-televizionnoj-auditorii-iyun-2020.pdf>.

¹⁰ **Centrul de Studii Sociale și Marketing "CBS-Research" (SBS-AXA)**, *Percepții Publice Asupra Sistemului de Securitate și Apărare a Republicii Moldova*, October, 2022, Available at [Percepții Publice Asupra Sistemului de Securitate și Apărare a Republicii Moldova | PDF \(scribd.com\)](https://www.scribd.com/document/701111111/Percepții-Publice-Asupra-Sistemului-de-Securitate-și-Apărare-a-Republicii-Moldova).

¹¹ **Institute for Public Policy**, *Moldova between East and West: views from Gagauzia and Taraclia*, op.cit, p.24

¹² **Centrul Pentru Jurnalism Independent**, *Grupurile vulnerabile și/sau marginalizate în raport cu mass-media: acces, consum și alfabetizare media*, December 12, 2022, Available at <https://cji.md/grupurile-vulnerabile-si-sau-marginalizate-in-raport-cu-mass-media-acces-consum-si-alfabetizare-media/>.

¹³ **Recourse Centre on Media Freedom in Europe**, *Media Monitoring Report: Reporting on minority issues and diversity in the media*, Available at <https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Reports/Media-Monitoring-Report-Reporting-on-minority-issues-and-diversity-in-the-media>.

¹⁴ **Radio Europa Libera Moldova**, *ONG-uri media, îngrijorate de amendamentele la Codul serviciilor media audiovizuale (IPN)*, Liliana Barbarosie, September 27, 2021, Available at <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/revista-matinala-a-presei/31479146.html>.

The same criticism position were expressed by the European Broadcasting Union on the grounds that such changes compromise media independence and encourage politicization of the media.¹⁵

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, new changes to the media regulatory framework have attempted to combat the spread of Russian disinformation in Moldova. In June 2022, President Sandu enacted the Informational Security Law, oriented to ban the broadcast in Moldova of Russian TV news and political analysis.¹⁶ In November 2022, new amendments to the AMSC aimed at stopping Russian influence on the media sector came into force. The new provisions stipulate that television and radio stations must transmit at least 80% of local programs in Romanian.¹⁷ However, in territorial units where an ethnic minority represents the majority of the population, media providers only have to transmit 25% of local audio-visual programs in Romanian.

Most notably in December 2022, the Commission for Exceptional Situations approved the suspension of the broadcast licenses of six television stations for the duration of the state of emergency surrounding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁸ The decision was made following a review by the Audiovisual Council, which found the stations spread inaccurate information in their coverage of domestic affairs and the war in Ukraine. Media NGOs questioned the lack of transparency in the decision made by Commission and Audiovisual Council and requested clear and detailed information confirming that the six channels were under the control of an internationally sanctioned individual.¹⁹

Media ownership

The media market in Moldova is dominated by private, oligarchic interests that have hindered the development of independent media. In a challenging economic environment, independent media face financial difficulties, lack resources, and struggle to hire qualified staff. Until 2020, the media space was dominated by two private entities: Casa Media, which was linked to fugitive oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, and Exclusive House Media, which was owned by a member of the PSRM.²⁰

¹⁵ **Freedom House**, *Freedom in the World 2022*, Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/freedom-world/2022>.

¹⁶ **NewsMaker**, *Modificarea Codului serviciilor media audiovizuale, adoptată în lectură finală, în pofida criticilor*, Viorica Rusu, 04.11.2021, Available at <https://newsmaker.md/ro/proiectul-de-lege-pentru-modificarea-codului-serviciilor-media-audiovizuale-aprobat-lectura-finala-ce-prevede-acesta/>.

¹⁷ **Parliament of Republic of Moldova**, *Codul Serviciilor Media Audiovizuale al Republicii Moldova*, Available at https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=134139&lang=ro.

¹⁸ **BalkanInsight**, *Moldova's Decision to Silence Pro-Russian TV Channels Questioned*, Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/19/moldovas-decision-to-silence-pro-russian-tv-channels-questioned/>.

¹⁹ **Radio Europa Libera Moldova**, *ONG-uri de media cer autorităților să argumenteze public decizia de suspendare a licenței celor șase posturi TV*.

²⁰ **NewsMaker**, *Agenții de publicitate vor fi plătiți suplimentar pentru reclamă. Dar numai în presa independentă*, 28 december, 2020, Available at <https://newsmaker.md/ro/agentii-de-publicitate-vor-fi-platiti-suplimentar-pentru-reclama-dar-numai-in-presa-independenta/>.

Image 1. Popular Moldovan TV Channels and Their Owners in 2020



Source : Freedom House²¹

The victory of Maia Sandu’s Party of Action and Solidarity in 2021 has led to changes in the domestic media landscape. Telestar Media, which was previously one of the largest actors in the media market owning the broadcast rights to *Canal 2 TV* and *Canal 3 TV*, entered payment insolvency.²² In 2022, the ownership of Telesistem TV, which was connected to the PSRM and owned the stations *Prima in Moldova* and *Accent TV*, was reportedly transferred to fugitive Ilan Șor’s media holdings.²³ Although the resilience of the media sector has grown since 2021, many of the same actors remain dominant. Pro-Russian media outlets, previously PRSM-affiliated and now increasingly affiliated with the Șor Party, remain the main sources of information for the Russian-speaking community.

The impact of disinformation on minority communities

Moldova’s relatively fragile democracy has limited capacity and experience defending against digital threats, and the Russian state exploits these vulnerabilities and targets Russian-speaking minority groups to create internal division. Russian disinformation seeks to weaken democratic mechanisms, erode trust in international institutions, and increase positive attitudes towards Russia, particularly among the national minorities.

In Gagauzia, Russian news was widespread even before the invasion of Ukraine. Following the full-scale invasion, the spread of fake news and disinformation has accelerated. Recent analysis of Gagauzia’s media space found that many of the most popular news outlets in the region spread propaganda narratives on divisive issues, distort facts, and present information out of context..²⁴

²¹ **Freedom House** , *Report on media freedom in Moldova 2020*, September 2021, Available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/FotP_Moldova-2021_En_0.pdf.

²² **Rise Moldova** , Două televiziuni din holdingul lui Plahotniuc, în insolabilitate , Available at <https://www.rise.md/doua-televiziuni-din-holdingul-lui-plahotniuc-in-insolabilitate/>.

²³ **G4Media**, *Rocada pro-rusă pe piața de TV din Moldova. Ilan Șor preia controlul televiziunilor „Primul în Moldova” și „Accent TV”* (replicamedia.md), Available at <https://www.g4media.ro/rocada-pro-rusa-pe-piata-de-tv-din-moldova-ilan-sor-preia-controlul-televiziunilor-primul-in-moldova-si-accent-tv-replicamedia-md.html>.

²⁴ **Foreign Policy Association**, *Nu în fapte, dar în cuvinte”: în ce mod războiul din Ucraina este reflectat în mass media din UTA Găgăuzia*, Valentina CALEDJI-POGHIRC, Asociația Obștească Centrul European „Pro-Europa” din Comrat , 27.01.2023. Available at <http://www.ape.md/2023/01/valentina-caledji-poghirc-nu-in-fapte-dar-in-cuvinte-in-ce-mod-razboiul-din-ucraina-este-reflectat-in-mass-media-din-uta-gagauzia/>.

For example, *gagauzinfo.md*, which is one of the most popular sites in Gagauzia, covered the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by reporting on Russia's recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk National Republics and Ukraine's decision to cut off diplomatic relations with Russia.

In addition to external sources of disinformation, minority communities in Moldova are also susceptible to becoming targets of internal disinformation campaigns. Following the Russian invasion, misinformation about Ukrainian refugees spread rapidly, often taking the form of false messages and incitement to interethnic hatred. Domestic politicians and public figures contributed to the spread of false narrative including Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban, who made false claims about Ukrainian refugees to create a narrative that refugees pose security risks to Moldovan society.²⁵

Further, the government's efforts to regulate the information space and combat disinformation may fail to be comprehensive as minority communities often rely on alternative media sources as their primary source of information. In Gagauzia, Telegram channels are a leading information source, and many journalists in the region use Telegram to publish news.²⁶ While the *GagauzNews* website was blocked because of information inciting hatred and war, many of its readers simply migrated to Facebook and Telegram, which gathered about 10,000 new subscribers, and continued consuming its content (The website has also registered under a new domain outside of Moldova). Blocking media outlets has not prevented readers from consuming the media that they prefer

However, besides the media sources very active in the propagation of information an alternative to the information published and reflected by the local media is the portal [Nokta.md](https://www.nokta.md) that produced LIVE with the latest news about the invasion of Russia in Ukraine, publishes analytical articles of Ukrainian journalists, Moldovan officials and economic experts. Nokta journalists had to confront the hatred on the internet, spread mainly by fake pages and pro-Russian policy supporters, plus the divided opinions of the Gagauz community. *Mihail Sirkeli the editor-in-chief of online publication Nokta, based in Gagauzia, mentioned that one of the biggest problem in the region is disinformation according to him 9 from 10 people don't have a position or don't know the truth related to the Russian- Ukrainian war.*²⁷ *In the same context he underlined that unfortunately Gagauzia remains pro-Russian region , russian language being the main spoken language in the region (official language) and very influenced by Russian propaganda . According to him the problem is that local media don't have enough resources and content producing capacity for local people and they cannot compete with Russian media. In the last years in the region was not independent media, Nokta has been launched in 2017 and perception of people was negative, considered that they are paid to promote thei message differently comparing with majority in Gagauzia. They still don't understand how someone living in Gagauzia it's possible to have other opinion comparing with majority. Mikhail stressed that the more people will die in this war, the people will understand and will try to find more trust media sources. He hopes that people in the region will understand the role of independent media but also the European integration perspective of Republic of Moldova.*

Obviously, the role of independent media it's very important in minorities communities beyond the majority media which promotes disinformation. A good example in this case being the

²⁵ **Popoviciu, Andrei.** "Russia-Ukraine war: Moldova greets refugee influx with compassion and wariness". *[Războiul Rusia-Ucraina: Moldova salută afluxul de refugiați cu compasiune și precauție*, Middle East Eye. 2022. Available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russiaukraine-war-moldova-greets-refugees-compassion-wariness>.

²⁶ **Foreign Policy Association,** *Nu în fapte, dar în cuvinte": în ce mod războiul din Ucraina este reflectat în mass media din UTA Găgăuzia, op.cit*

²⁷ **Interview,** *Mihail Sirkeli the editor of Nokta portal*, 06.01.2024

analysis carried out by [NewsMaker](#), who organized several interviews with residents of ATU Gagauzia regarding the war in Ukraine.²⁸ A few most important quotes that openly declaring their position: "I blocked my sister in Facebook", "I understand that appealing to people's reason is impossible, "At such moments I am ashamed that I am Gagauz".

This case is a good example of promoting consolidation messages and fighting against inadequate, offensive, hateful and divisive information that can have serious consequences, including increasing social tensions that induce fear, insecurity, panic and mass disorder throughout society and especially in communities of national minorities.

Conclusions

The popularity of Russian television channels across various segments of society, as well as the dominant presence of Russian media in Transnistria, Gagauzia, and among minority communities, are key challenges to the development of Moldova's media sector. Russian disinformation that targets minorities in Moldova depicts the EU as against the Russian language, weak, and polarised, in contrast to the image of a strong, prosperous Russia, which protects Russian speakers no matter where they live. Russian media, combined with the influence of the Orthodox Church and the fragility of state institutions, creates leverage over minority communities and mobilizes them in the resistance against Moldova's European integration.

For all of Moldovan society, and in particular for minority communities, it is crucial to have access to well-informed, accurate, and balanced journalism. Supporting independent media should involve building the image and credibility of media outlets that have a commitment to fair reporting.

Recommendations

To increase public minorities awareness through regional projects launched by independent media including to protect and promote the rights of national minorities and facilitate integration of Moldovan society. Independent news content in the native languages of minority groups, (Roma, Gagauz, Bulgarian) in order indirectly/directly promoting the culture, language, and history of minority populations to remove demand for Russian culture.

To increase the capacity building of regional media using external (*EU, US funds*) and internal leverage (*media regulations provisions*). The US, EU and other development partners could step up its efforts to support a pluralistic, unbiased and good-quality media landscape in Moldova, by supporting the professionalization and de-politicisation of Moldova's public broadcaster so it can create both Moldovan- and Russian-language quality content that can compete with Russian programmes rebroadcasted in the country.

Clear media regulations reform and not just equality but also equity conditions for independent media taking in account the also the minorities rights. (culture, religion, language).

²⁸ **NewsMaker**, *„В НЕКОТОРЫЕ МОМЕНТЫ МНЕ СТЫДНО, ЧТО Я ГАГАУЗ, Истории жителей Гагаузии, которые против войны в Украине*, Available at <https://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/v-nekotorye-momenty-mne-styldno-cto-ya-gagauz-istorii-zhitelej-gagauzii-kotorye-protiv-voyny-v-ukraine/>, (consulted on 29.01.2023)

Regional trainings and mentorship with EU/US support in content improvement in terms of professionalism and production quality according with minority expectations, regional NGO's capacity building .

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