Introduction

The Republic of Moldova, a small Eastern European country with a population of 2.6 million, is home to many ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority groups. Eighty-one percent identify as either ethnically Moldovan or Romanian, although some consider the two to be the same ethnic group.\(^1\) Other ethnic groups with significant populations include more than 181,000 Ukrainians, most of whom live in the North and the disputed region of Transnistria, as well as approximately 110,200 Ukrainian refugees currently residing in the country;\(^2\) 126,000 Gagauz, a Turkic-speaking ethnic group with the highest concentration in the southern Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia; 111,700 ethnic Russians; 51,900 Bulgarians, more than half of which live in the southern Taraclia district, and between 9,000 and 100,000 Roma primarily living in northern districts.\(^3\)

While each of these groups has its own language (i.e., Ukrainian, Gagauz, Russian, Bulgarian, and Balkan Romani), most individuals that belong to a minority ethnic group speak Russian more frequently than any other language.\(^4\) In this brief, I argue that this key linguistic characteristic of minority groups—in addition to obstacles to their inclusion in Moldovan society—increases vulnerability to Russian disinformation campaigns. Such malign efforts specifically target Russian-speaking communities in Moldova and seek to create internal division and fuel separatist sentiments, challenge the legitimacy of the pro-Western government, and portray the Russian Federation as a source of security and prosperity for disillusioned minority groups.

Disinformation Campaigns Targeting Moldovan Minority Communities

The Kremlin employs a multi-pronged approach to manipulating information that targets Russian-speaking minority communities. On one hand, it depicts Gagauzia and Transnistria as constantly under the threat of invasion from the West, pushing false reports of NATO tanks in route to Gagauzia and Transnistria, the impending violent unification of Moldova and Romania, and the persecution of Russian speakers by the “totalitarian government” in Moldova.\(^5\) On the other hand, Russia paints itself as a provider of security and well-being for minority groups and a protector of traditional values. The Russian state claims that it will “defend” the interests not only of the ethnic Russian population but also of all Russian speakers broadly in Moldova.\(^6\) This involves attempts to replace the Moldovan government in social and humanitarian spaces and highlight the provision of public
goods by Kremlin proxies such as the Shor Party and Party of Socialists (PSRM). Such messaging in minority communities, for example, declares that “Russia brings peace and stability” to Transnistria, solidifies Kremlin proxies as protectors of family values, and highlights small-scale yet highly visible acts of assistance. Additionally, Russian disinformation in Moldova targets Ukrainian refugees residing in the country and attempts to erode public support for accepting and aiding those fleeing Russian aggression.

The Shor Party, a populist political formation led by fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, is currently the fastest growing and most dynamic oppositional movement in Moldova, despite being declared unconstitutional and dissolved by the Constitutional Court in June 2023. Unlike the PSRM, the Shor Party is not overtly pro-Russian. But according to intelligence and investigative reporting, the party receives Russian strategic support and works with Moscow-based entities that help shield Ilan Shor’s assets, most of which came from his role in allegedly laundering 1 billion USD from Moldovan banks. Since September 2022, the party has organized regular protests demanding the resignation of President Maia Sandu and allegedly pays protesters under the direction of FSB operatives.

Ilan Shor’s attempts to politically capture regions of Moldova are intricately tied to Russian-backed disinformation campaigns and target districts with the largest ethnic minority populations. Shor developed a model of “district capture” beginning in 2015 after being elected mayor of Orhei and promising to invest in the city’s development using his personal wealth. Shor quickly consolidated control over Orhei, initially keeping a low profile, and establishing a strong reputation by improving the city’s infrastructure and raising public employees’ salaries via unknown financial sources. Even from Israel, Shor continues to maintain full control over Orhei with the city mayor, almost all members of the Municipal Council, and a large majority community mayors within the broader Orhei district belonging to the Shor Party.

Shor has since exported this model to other regions of Moldova with large minority populations. Taraclia, a city in the south of Moldova with a majority ethnic Bulgarian population, became his next target. In 2019, Shor-backed candidate Vyacheslav Lupov won the mayoral elections in Taraclia in a campaign orchestrated by Ilan Shor that conveyed the message that Shor would bring a better life to the Bulgarians of Taraclia as he did to the people of Orhei. Most recently, Shor succeeded in capturing the historically pro-Russian Gagauzia region by sponsoring and directing the campaign of Yevgenia Gutsul in local elections in May 2023 marred with allegations of vote buying and Russian interference. Shor continues to exercise a high level of political power from abroad and will continue to expand his clientelist network of influence, even in areas without an established party base or a previously Shor-aligned electorate.

Shor’s populist rhetoric, which is echoed in pro-Russian Telegram channels, paints a picture of the Sandu government as a fascist dictatorship controlled by Western operatives that has destroyed family values and simultaneously seeks to highlight the accomplishments and unfeasible targets of the Shor Party. He leverages his Jewish identity to connect ideologically with Gagauz, Bulgarians, and other ethnic groups by comparing the Sandu government to Nazi Germany and suggesting that genocide and ethnic violence may occur against all minority groups in Moldova. Shor uses his Orhei success story to create outlandish visions for the development of Gagauzia and Taraclia as an informational instrument to manipulate the public, including promising to build a modern airport and an amusement park called GagauzLand in Comrat and providing a personal pension fund for all retirees, none of which are likely to materialize. With the help of this leverage and his trusted position, Shor is attempting to unite marginalized groups across the country and mobilize them against Moldova’s pro-democratic movement by calling for sham referenda like those organized by the Kremlin in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

Since being declared unconstitutional in June, Ilan Shor has rebranded his party as the new “Chance” Party, the logo and name of which closely resembles the Shor Party. Shortly after being announced, Chance began a large-scale campaign of advertised posts on social media, impersonating legitimate news outlets that propagated the party’s agenda which has been espoused by the former Shor Party’s leadership. Shor has also since revived and co-opted a dying pro-Kremlin party called “Renaissance” in addition to other Shor shadow parties to allegedly bribe and buy out PSRM parliamentary deputies and local mayors to continue to expand control over vulnerable communities in the recent local elections.

Pro-Kremlin Disinformation in Russian-Language Media

Because members of ethnic minorities in Moldova are primarily Russian-speaking and consume Russian-language media, nearly all of which is pro-Kremlin, they are inherently more vulnerable to media manipulation. The Russian government dominates the Russian-language media space through its state-backed outlets, “selectively repackag[ing] real events in pro-Kremlin terms” to garner support from Russian speakers across Eurasia and “drive wedges between Russian speakers and their host governments.” On both social media and traditional media, Russian-backed outlets spread manipulative revisionist narratives with a high level of complexity and specialization tailored to a specific target audience, which are often intentionally selected to be vulnerable groups. Russia’s goal is not simply to disinfect these groups, but also to use them to destabilize countries by increasing social polarization, sow discontent between subpopulations, erode public support for democratic values, and expand Russian control over internal processes.
To achieve these strategic goals, the Kremlin uses bot accounts and deceptive identities on social media interacting in highly-connected retweet, commenting, and messaging networks that amplify pro-Russian messages and create traffic around Russian propaganda.27 Further, the Kremlin establishes relationships with intermediary brokers, such as domestic political parties, elites, local media, and state institutions, to forge ties between Russian state actors and its target networks.28 These brokers deploy multi-channel microtargeted messages that resonate with their specific audience by invoking cultural frames, cues, and symbols that help legitimize political content.

Russian propaganda is incredibly high-volume and distributed across a variety of sources, which consumes the attention of target audiences and likely increases the level of its persuasiveness.29 The Kremlin and its proxies have infiltrated nearly all online spaces and social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, 4chan, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Telegram, WhatsApp, LiveJounal, and Medium, as well as the comment sections of news sites.30 Yet, the impact of such efforts is not limited to online spaces. There have been many documented instances of Kremlin-backed disinformation leading to the organization of real-world events, including the weaponization of disruptive anti-government protests coordinated by Kremlin political proxies in Moldova.31

**Political Attitudes of Minority Groups and Vulnerability to Disinformation**

Language is a particularly important factor in Moldova's media landscape and in the fight against disinformation. While Romanian-language media represents the plurality of political views in Moldova, Russian-language media in Moldova is largely a vehicle for Kremlin propaganda and does not offer as wide or accessible a range of perspectives on international, domestic, or local affairs.32 Survey data from June 2023 shows that just nineteen percent of Russian speakers (and speakers of other minority languages) have confidence in President Maia Sandu, compared to nearly 59% of Romanian speakers. Instead, these groups have more than twice the level of confidence in pro-Russian politician Igor Dodon and fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor than speakers of Romanian, with 53% and 47% of Russian speakers expressing confidence in Dodon and Shor respectively.33 More than half of Russian-speaking respondents categorized Russia's invasion of Ukraine as either "an operation to liberate Ukraine from Nazism" or that "Russia defends the [Donetsk and Luhansk] People's Republics from Ukrainian attacks."34 This division in media consumption between linguistic groups contributes to the drastically different perceptions of public events and creates an echo chamber that exploits and amplifies existing identity-based grievances.35 Thus, it is critical to consider demographic factors such as language when evaluating the susceptibility of sectors of the population to disinformation.

In Moldova, language use reflects the stark divisions between various ethnic groups and local communities. The most recent census data from 2014 shows that the Romanian language is primarily seen as a preferred language only by ethnic Moldovans/Romanians.36 Other ethnic groups—including Ukrainians, Gagauz, Russians, Bulgarians, and Roma—mostly use Russian on a day-to-day basis, even if their reported native language is a different language spoken by their ethnic group. Analyzing census data reveals that localities (municipalities and villages) that have larger ethnic minority populations have much lower rates of Romanian-language use, even when the ethnic minority population is composed of multiple ethnic groups.

In these same localities, support for pro-Russian political parties and actors is most pronounced, and there is a direct correlation seen in Figure 1 between the size of a locality’s minority population and the strength of support for pro-Russian parties such as the Socialists, Communists, and Shor Party.

Table 1: Effect of minority population size in a locality on combined vote share won by the Bloc of Communists and Socialists (BCS) and the Shor Party in the 2021 Parliamentary Elections. Data retrieved from the 2014 Population and Housing Census (covering 900 localities) and the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova.
Looking at the results of the most recent parliamentary elections in July 2021, Table 1 shows that the percentage of a locality’s population that is Ukrainian, Gagauz, Russian, or Bulgarian all have a statistically significant correlation with the vote share won by the two main pro-Russian political parties (the Bloc of Communists and Socialists and the Shor Party) in those districts. The strongest support for pro-Kremlin parties came in districts with the largest ethnic Russian populations, followed by Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz. These results stand even when adding a control for a locality’s population size or its distance from Chisinau to account for differences in voting behavior in urban vs. rural areas. The only group for which this dynamic doesn’t hold true empirically is Roma, which may have to do with the low levels of self-reporting as ethnic Roma during the census.

Whether or not the incredibly high levels of support for pro-Kremlin politicians from minority communities come as a result of disinformation campaigns or because of true political attitudes, it is clear that Kremlin-backed information campaigns and minority groups’ affinities for pro-Russian politicians mutually reinforce one another. Such political attitudes make Russian-speaking minorities more vulnerable to disinformation and its effects. Pro-Kremlin disinformation seeks to target subpopulations that are “already most supportive of the Russian government’s views,” and thus most likely to believe propaganda and less able to discern between true statements and disinformation. Because minority groups in Moldova primarily consume Russian-language media and lack broad support for the current pro-Western government, they are the ideal target for Kremlin disinformation campaigns to exacerbate existing social polarization and turn social views into political action.

### Regulation of the Media Space in Moldova

In Moldova, a state regulatory body called the Audiovisual Council monitors and enforces the Audiovisual Media Services Code, which seeks to protect media pluralism and ensure the transparency of media ownership. If a media service provider or distributor fails to comply with provisions of the Code, the Audiovisual Council can issue a public warning or progressive fines starting from 5,000 Moldovan leu (approximately 275 USD) up to 30,000 MDL (about 1,650 USD) for repeated violations and increasing fines from 40,000 MDL (2,200 USD) to 100,000 MDL (5,500 USD) for violations involving the incitement of hatred or other gross violations of fundamental rights or freedoms. If an outlet continues to repeatedly commit violations after being sanctioned at increasing levels of severity, its broadcast license can be suspended or revoked.

Despite this existing regulatory framework for sanctioning non-compliant outlets, in December 2022, Moldova’s Commission for Exceptional Situations (CSE), a separate body established following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, unexpectedly suspended the broadcast licenses of six large pro-Russian television channels owned by or affiliated with Ilan Shor. Many of these channels were among the most popular in the country and strongly preferred by ethnic minority residents and Russian speakers. The Commission justified the move to temporarily suspend their licenses due to inaccurate coverage of events and need to protect the national information space. The decision drew criticism from media NGOs because of the lack of transparency from the CSE, which did not provide arguments or evidence to demonstrate the legal grounds or proportionality of its restrictive measures.

The suspension also fed into the characteristic talking points of the suspended channels themselves, Ilan Shor, and the Russian government, calling the decision an “unprecedented attack on freedom of expression,” through which “PAS has destroyed the principle of democracy” and is “deliberately depriving millions of Russian-speaking residents of the latest news in their preferred language.”

While Moldova’s information space is under real threat from Russia including through such television channels that regularly re-transmit harmful Russia-produced content, the suspension could set a dangerous precedent of rushed regulation that does not follow existing legal mechanisms and has led to unintended consequences—in particular for Russian-speaking minorities.

Although viewership of Russian television programs in Moldova has fallen since the suspension, members of minority groups that previously watched Russian-language programs now lack options on TV and have switched to alternative sources of media that are more difficult to regulate. Also, many of the suspended channels have continued to operate by switching to online platforms and broadcasting the same content on other large Moldovan TV channels—including a high level of Kremlin propaganda rebroadcast in defiance of national regulations in Gagauzia. A June 2023 survey asking respondents which three TV channels they watch the news on most often and providing 13 options showed that a combined 66% of Russian speakers (and speakers of other minority languages) either didn’t watch any news on TV or marked “Other,” compared to just 39% of Romanian speakers. Due to the suspension, it is now increasingly difficult to track which media sources and disinformation narratives minority groups are exposed to, making it less likely to have an accurate or effective policy response.
Addressing the Needs of Roma in Moldova

Recent research has shown that the Roma community is particularly susceptible to disinformation due to limited access to information, low levels of education and media literacy, and lack of content in their native language.⁵⁰ Although the 2014 Population and Housing Census records just 9,323 Roma in Moldova, Roma community leaders estimate that the true population is as large as 100,000–250,000, a discrepancy likely due in part to the social stigma of being Roma in Moldova.⁵¹ Approximately 30% of Roma cannot find information in their native language, and 39% find it difficult to do so, affecting their ability to access media and identify fake news.

Further, Moldovan media’s limited coverage of topics related to minority communities can exacerbate feelings of exclusion for Roma and increase discrimination as Roma often only appear in news reports when their ethnicity is tied to crime.⁵² This perpetuates a cycle of barriers in access to education and formal employment for the Roma population with every other Roma child not attending school due to family dynamics, community tensions, and discrimination. As a result, many adults lack basic education, and more than half of Roma report having difficulty identifying fake news.⁵³ Barriers to information access and vulnerability to disinformation are only compounded by more grave concerns that most Roma communities face such as food and housing insecurity.⁵⁴

Recommendations

International partners should invest in supporting the local development of high-quality, independent content in Russian that is accessible to minority groups and tailored to their local needs, thus countering the existing hegemony of pro-Kremlin outlets in the Russian-language media space. Messages that are culturally sensitive and targeted to specific subpopulations with awareness of community norms have been shown to greatly increase the success of information campaigns and decrease the risk of counterproductive results.⁵⁵ While the Moldovan government has recently invested into providing free Romanian-language courses for non-native speakers, many residents—and especially members of minority groups—still have and will continue to have a strong preference for consuming media in Russian.⁵⁶ Civil society and donors should assist local pro-democracy Russian-language influencers on social media, train Russian-language journalists, fund local Russian-language content creation, and strengthen local independent Russian-language media to give these audiences access to high-quality, trustworthy information sources.⁵⁷ Messaging that is overtly anti-Russian and produced directly by Western state-funded media could backfire and would be unlikely to be embraced by local populations that are already very skeptical of Western media and most vulnerable to Russian propaganda.⁵⁸ This is why local civil society counter-disinformation initiatives that are deeply aware of the local context and attuned to the needs of minority communities are so critical and should be directly funded by the Moldovan government and its partners.

At a larger scale, the Moldovan government, with the support of its partners, could invest in creating a Russian-language public access TV station to provide Russian-speaking minority groups access to high quality information in Russian, as opposed to the mis- and disinformation produced in Russia targeting these audiences, an approach that has been undertaken by Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine.⁵⁹ This should also include the development of Gagauz-language content in Gagauzia (and similar initiatives in other linguistic minority communities including Ukrainian), which is a nascent space that requires significant investment in terms of building journalistic capacity, but would carry substantial returns and provide much-needed quality news and media content to local populations in their native language.⁶⁰

Civil society and the Moldovan government should work together to increase the level of inclusion of minority communities in Moldovan society and continue the development of media literacy initiatives.

While it’s important to hold the malign actors accountable and reduce the spread of harmful content, shutting down Kremlin-affiliated media alone would not guarantee an information space free from malign external influence and disinformation. The removal of Vladimir Plahotniuc in 2019 created a political vacuum in the country and allowed for Shor to capture the same segments of the population. New Kremlin-backed actors are likely to emerge and use similar tactics to sow distrust and division through their media holdings. The Moldovan government, civil society groups, and international partners should look primarily to address the source of this problem and not simply continuously try to mitigate its consequences. Pro-Russian actors and Kremlin-affiliated media in Moldova are popular among minority communities because minority groups often feel alienated and lack representation, leading them to turn toward Russia and pro-Kremlin politicians that nominally support their interests. Many minority communities don’t have a viable alternative to pro-Kremlin content as they lack societal integration, speak Russian, and watch shows coming out of Russia that often have higher production value and entertainment level. Antagonizing minority population is not the answer.

Inclusion does not necessarily mean working towards a nation where everyone speaks Romanian and shares the same values, but rather celebrating the diversity of all groups in society and promoting their languages and cultures. Grassroots civil society initiatives should consider the needs of local groups—including Roma and refugees—and specifically acknowledge linguistic barriers when conducting outreach. Face-to-face, repeated media literacy campaigns have been shown to be most effective.
in encouraging behavioral change in attitude than remote messaging campaigns and are equal to in cost or cheaper than remote campaigns when considering impact on target groups. In regions with large minority populations such as Gagauzia, Taracia, and Balti, local civil society and the Moldovan government should prioritize targeted in-person media literacy interventions that reinforce behavioral change through multiple sessions that increase awareness of false news and the ways in which it is spread and encourage critical thinking and skepticism of media.

Face-to-face campaigns should also focus on countering the effects of Russian disinformation in minority communities by building support for democratic values and solidarity against Russian aggression. This could help shift behavior and combat the effects of disinformation without directly engaging with the propaganda itself.

The Moldovan government and independent media outlets must demonstrate that democracy can improve life for minority communities and help them obtain justice and security in an open society. It is essential for the government to move forward with its reform agenda with the consistent and substantive involvement of civil society stakeholders and make demonstrable progress toward EU accession. In the Western Balkans, Russia has exploited frustration over the slow pace of progress toward accession and "has flooded the media with negative reports to keep real progress out of the spotlight." The Moldovan government can challenge such narratives by showing that it can deliver results. On the side of the international community, the U.S. government and European partners should consider the marketing of development assistance and increase the visibility of aid projects. This would convey the magnitude of support to the people of Moldova and counter small-scale, highly visible symbolic acts of assistance attributed to pro-Kremlin actors.

Finally, the Moldovan government, its international partners, and the non-profit sector should invest in real-time evaluation of public information campaigns. Researchers have conducted many rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of such campaigns finding that even when conducted by experts, "message campaigns are frequently ineffective, and sometimes produce outcomes that are the exact opposite of what was intended." Rigorous evaluations can maximize the effectiveness of campaigns, identify areas of improvement, and ensure initiatives produce their intended results.

**Endnotes**


2. Moldova’s 2014 census did not include the breakaway region of Transnistria. In 2015, the unrecognized Transnistrian authorities conducted their own census in the region, which documented an additional 109,000 Ukrainians and 138,000 Russians.


Assessing the Impact of Disinformation on Minority Communities in Moldova


25 Cristina M. Arribas et al., "Information Manipulation and Russian Disinformation and Foreign Interference through Manipulated History-Based Narratives," Open Research Europe 3, no.121 (2023), https://doi.org/10.12688/openresearch.16087.1


27 Domique Geissler et al., Russian Propaganda on Social Media during the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine, EU Data Science, 12, no. 35 (2023), 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211045221


30 Elina Treyger, Joe Cheravitch, and Raphael S. Cohen, Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media, RAND Corporation, RR-4373/2-AF, 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z2.html


34 Ibid.


36 This also includes ethnic Moldovans/Romanians that considered “Moldovan” to be their native language, which is no longer the official term for the state language and is a point of intense controversy, particularly amongst pro-Russian groups.

37 Historically, ethnic Ukrainians tend to support pro-Russian political parties in Moldova. Although the analyzed election data is from before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the results of the November 2023 local elections suggest that the political views of Ukrainians in Moldova have not fundamentally changed in the context of domestic politics since February 2022. The eleven localities where Ukrainians make up at least 80% of the population did not experience any major shifts in their voting for mayor with most elected mayors belonging to the PSRM or other pro-Russian parties. See: “Rezultate finale Alegeri Locale Generale din 05 noiembrie 2023,” Central Election Commission of the Republic of Moldova, 2023, https://a.cec.md/ro/05-novembrie-2023-14547.html

38 Republic of Moldova: Roma Community Needs Assessment


44 DISPOZITIIA nr. 54 din 16 decembrie 2022 a Comisiei pentru Situații Excepționale a Republicii Moldova, https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/54.disp_a_cse_nr._54_modif_d_55.67.61.90.91.pdf

45 "Media NGOs urge authorities to provide extensive explanations for the factual and legal circumstances justifying the CES Decision," Independent Journalism Center, December 20, 2022, https://ijc.md/en/media-n NGOs-urge-authorities-to-provide-extensive-explanations-for-the-factual-and-legal-circumstances-justifying-the-ces-decision/


Liberă Moldova, December 18, 2022, https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/moscova-acuz%C4%83-ch%C8%99in%C4%83ul-de-cenzur%C4%83-politic%C4%83/32181795.html


49 Social-political survey: Republic of Moldova


53 Grupurile vulnerabile și/sau marginalizate în raport cu mass-media.

54 Republic of Moldova: Roma Community Needs Assessment, 4.


56 Interview with Comrat-based journalist, June 2023.

57 Helmus, Russian Social Media Influence, 84-85.

58 Helmus, et al., Russian Social Media Influence, 71.

59 Helmus, Russian Social Media Influence, 87.

60 Interview with Comrat-based journalist, June 2023.

61 McCulloch and Watts, Evaluating the Effectiveness of Public Communication Campaigns.

62 ibid.

63 Paul and Matthews, The Russian "Firehouse of Falsehood" Propaganda Model.

64 Sophie Eisentraut and Stephanie de Leon, Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: How the EU Can Counter Russia’s Information War, Berlin, Germany: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., no.294, 2018, 4, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_51729_2.pdf/330a8b20-f9e0-4224-a9d2-770a0d930d6f

65 McCulloch and Watts.

---

Joseph Matveyenko

Joseph Matveyenko authored this brief in association with his role as a program associate at Freedom House and is currently a research assistant at the RAND Corporation. He has served as an election observer as part of monitoring missions with the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and local civil society in Eurasia. His previous research examines the application of statistical tools for detecting anomalies in election results data, which he used to identify patterns of clientelism and vote buying orchestrated by local oligarchs in Moldova and Armenia.