

Propaganda

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RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: A BIG WAR FOR A SMALL AUDIENCE

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The article analyzes the techniques and tools of Russian propaganda against the vulnerabilities of the local authorities of the Republic of Moldova. Russian propaganda's messages are mostly absorbed by Russian-speaking citizens who do not have access to alternative media. Some local authorities are sabotaging the government's efforts, so citizens are vulnerable to informational manipulation. The refusal of Irina Vlah, Bashkan (governor) of Gagauzia, to ban Russian political-analytical and military broadcasts, as requested by Parliament's amendments to the Audiovisual Code is an eloquent example.

Introduction

With the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine and occupation of Crimea, the editorial policy of the main TV channels in Moscow has changed a lot. More and more studies show that the media from the Russian Federation have started an informational war. The Republic of Moldova faces a series of internal vulnerabilities that facilitate the destructive effect of Russian propaganda.

Regrettably, we conclude that the population of the Republic of Moldova is exposed massively to Russian television programs, radio broadcasts, and Russian-language movies. The efforts to secure information space often fail because of both lack of national legislation's efficiency and refusal of the local authorities to cooperate with the central authorities.

The media become vulnerable when the confidence of the consumer is destroyed. Thus, we can associate the insecurity of the media space with the following sources of vulnerability:

1. The media space is built on principles other than press freedom and freedom of expression;
2. The media space is limited in any kind of resources (economic, technological, professional, etc.) necessary for development and adaptation to the opportunities of the information society's conditions of loyal competition;
3. There is no encouraging legal and deontological framework for the free development of the media sector;
4. The media institutions are pressured by the political, ideological, or economic factors, including through partisanism and political mercenarism, through excessive concentration and monopolization of the media and the advertising market;
5. The media diversity is missing or is insufficient, with regards to the social and demographic structure, as well as the political pluralism;

6. The sector is characterized by a low level of technical opportunities to access information on different platforms, including the absence or insignificant presence of network journalism as an expression of the information society and the development of new media;

7. Regional media coverage is incomplete or selective, and there are regions with low density of media;

8. There is no media culture, including media literacy skills.

Illegal Referendum and the Domination of the Russian Language in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia

The Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia is the first example to be discussed in detail. Gagauzia is fully absorbed both mediatically and culturally by the Russian Federation's communication channels. Through the lenses of this Russian domination, we can look at the results of the illegal referendum in Gagauzia on 02 February 2014¹. Some 98.47% of the citizens have indicated their willingness for the Republic of Moldova to join the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, while the remaining tiny percentage have voted for the accession to the European Union (EU). The referendum was attended by 70,777 voters, which means 70.4%, even though it was declared illegal by the judiciary and the authorities in Chisinau urged the population not to participate. Thus, we see that the Gagauz ethnicities are not on Chisinau's pro-European politics side, but rather have been strongly influenced by the Russian media and cultural sources.

A Romanian researcher in geopolitics, Dan Dungaciu, considers that the media russification in Gagauzia is stronger today than it was under the USSR². Dungaciu argues that the Gagauz ethnicities are the prisoners of a disastrous situation, suffering from the lack of alternative TV/radio channels. Moreover, the linguistic and educational policy should combine effectively with the media policy, but this cohesion is totally missing. Finally, the Romanian expert believes that the blame for this deplorable situation lies with the government in Chisinau rather than with the Kremlin's policy.

However, we should not underestimate the interference of the Russian Federation into the affairs of the local authorities in the Republic of Moldova. The Russian embassy in the Republic of Moldova is very active in this small territorial unit – Gagauzia, starting with massive donations of books in Russian and ending with direct involvement in the internal political processes.

If we look at a study published in 2016, "Moldova between the East and the West: Perspectives from Gagauzia and Taraclia", conducted by the Institute for Public Policy of Moldova, there is no doubt about the Russian influence in Gagauzia. A poll published in this study shows that about 64% of the respondents consider that the Republic of Moldova belongs to the "Russian World" and about 35% of the respondents see the future of the Republic of Moldova "alongside Russia". About 85% would have voted in a referendum in favor of Moldova's joining the Eurasian Economic Union.

It is alarming that around 70% of the interviewees believe that "after the Maidan,

¹ C. Marchievici, *Referendumul din Găgăuzia: plan de destabilizare orchestrat de Moscova și pionii ei (The Referendum in Gagauzia: The Destabilizing Plan of Moscow and Its Pawns)*, "Cotidianul", 04 February 2014, [http://www.cotidianul.ro access: 02 February 2018].

² D. Dungaciu, V. Iuga, M. Stoian, *7 teme fundamentale pentru Romania 2014 (7 Fundamental Themes for Romania 2014)*, Rao Books: Bucharest 2014, p. 124.



No government or political party has been able to promote population consolidation policies based on the spirit of citizenship by a conscious detachment from the Soviet past

the fascists came to power in Ukraine” and over 80% support “the annexation of Crimea by Russia”. The information space of the respondents contains almost exclusively Russian content. Regardless of information sources, nine out of 10 inhabitants of the mentioned regions are consuming information in Russian, compared with 42%-43% of the media average in the Republic of Moldova or 14%-15% in Europe. Thus, Russian propaganda might have formed a public opinion in Gagauzia in favor of the Kremlin’s interests with the cost of keeping the Gagauz people in a fictional world. Restriction of access to the Russian media in Moldova will not have the desired effect in Gagauzia, because there is a local audiovisual legislation that offers unlimited opportunities for the retransmission of Russian programs by the local media in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia.

Another clear gesture that Gagauzia is not following the Moldovan Parliament is the declaration of the Bashkan (governor) of the region, Irina Vlah, regarding the amendments made by the Parliament to the Broadcasting Code, dated 07 December 2017, which aims to combat Russian propaganda in the Republic of Moldova³.

The Bashkan of Gagauzia said that the Russian informational and analytical broadcasts would be retransmitted on the territory of the Gagauzia despite the Law on

Combating Russian Propaganda. In essence, Irina Vlah thinks that the fight against Russian propaganda directly violates the rights of the Russian-speaking public and of the inhabitants of Gagauzia and aggravates the relations between the Republic of Moldova and the Russian Federation. The Bashkan of Gagauzia vigorously contests the notion of “informational threat” that would be in fact a “mythical slogan” and the main purpose of the initiative would be the fight against the Russian language and against “the high prestige of the Russian Federation” in the Republic of Moldova.

Considering the above-mentioned, the Russian Federation has a strong arsenal of “soft power” levers or techniques in the Republic of Moldova. The current Moldovan political elite as well as the previous one has a considerable blame for the lack of national consolidation and for the tolerance of failure of some local authorities.

No government or political party has been able to promote population consolidation policies based on the spirit of citizenship by a conscious detachment from the Soviet past, with the conscious overcoming of the ethno-linguistic cleavages inherited from the USSR.

Balti Municipality – Tendencies of Separatism

Balti municipality is another point on the map of the Republic of Moldova that has demonstrated separatism tendencies against the central authorities. In 2015, local authorities in Balti (the second largest city in the Republic of Moldova) decided to organize a consultative referendum on local autonomy. At that time, the decision to arrange the plebiscite was put forward by the communist councilors and the

³ I. Liubec, Vlah anunță că în Găgăuzia nu va fi respectată Legea anti-propagandă. Reacția președintelui CCA (Vlah Announces that the Anti-propaganda Law Will not Be Respected in Gagauzia. The Reaction of the BCC President), 08 December 2017, [<http://www.dechisde.md> access: 20 December 2017].

opposition did not vote for this decision. The referendum in Balti was not held, as the 2014 precedent in Gagauzia resulted in cancelling the plebiscite attempt by the Moldovan police.

These seemingly quiet attempts to consult the population on sensitive subjects, such as the foreign policy option, are actually the first signs of separatism, of capturing locally the power by some political parties, despite the constitutional prohibitions. At the national level, the main risk is the drop of the interest in the European integration and the promotion of the Eastern vector of foreign policy, which means the proximity to the Customs Union. The mayor of Balti, businessman Renato Usatii, who is now hiding in the Russian Federation, had a permanent conflict with the central authorities, so it is impossible to promote actively the European vector in Balti.

In this context, Russian propaganda finds much easier levers to expand its communication strategies with the Russian-speaking population. The Orthodox Church has played an important role in the transmission of political messages, especially during the presidential election campaign in 2016. The Bishop of Balti and Falesti, Marchel, with a group of priests, encouraged the parishioners not to vote for Maia Sandu, a pro-European candidate, saying that she is a “danger to the Church”⁴. Instead, the priests said that the people should support a “morally healthy” and a Christian candidate, such as Igor Dodon. This involvement in the electoral campaign shows that the Russian factor can influence locally the opinion leaders, such as Bishop

Marchel, so that the propaganda messages find their desired audience.

Transnistria – The Most Vulnerable Point of the Republic of Moldova

Beyond the worrying situation in Gagauzia and Balti municipality, Transnistria is the main lever of control and propaganda dominance of the Russian Federation in the Republic of Moldova. In 2006, a referendum in Transnistria was organized, where voters were asked if they approve of the possibility of giving up the so-called independence and of integrating with the Republic of Moldova or, alternatively, if they approve of the “independence” and a possible integration with the Russian Federation. The results are more than suggestive: 96.61% voted against the renunciation of the independence and potential future integration with the Republic of Moldova, whereas 98.07% were for the independence and potential integration with Russia⁵.

The voter turnout rate was 78.6%. The authorities of the Republic of Moldova obviously did not recognize the referendum, but the alarm was heard. Researcher Dungaciu thinks that at least theoretically, Chisinau could make Moscow’s levers ineffective by blocking any possibility of “transnistrianization” of the republic through federalist formulas to solve the Transnistrian conflict, which could move the strategic decision from Chisinau to Tiraspol⁶. However, at this stage, no such favorable change has occurred and it seems that Chisinau maintains the strategy according to which it is better to keep the Transnistrian conflict frozen than to have a

⁴ I. Liubec, *Episcopul Marchel îndeamnă creștinii să nu o susțină pe Maia Sandu (Bishop Marchel Urges Christians not to Support Maia Sandu)*, 04 November 2017, [http://www.dechisde.md access: 20 December 2017].

⁵ M. Draghici, *Transnistria vota în 2006 pentru unirea cu Rusia, dar Moscova cerea continuarea negocierilor (Transnistria Voted in 2006 to Join Russia, but Moscow Called for Further Talks)*, “Mediafax.ro”, 16 April 2014, [http://www.mediafax.ro access: 15 January 2018].

⁶ D. Dungaciu, V. Iuga, M. Stoian, *7 teme fundamentale pentru Romania 2014 (7 Fundamental Themes for Romania 2014)*, Rao Books: Bucharest 2014, p. 127.

deal that will not be in favor of the Republic of Moldova. In other words, the current situation in Transnistria is acceptable in comparison with the scenario of the definitive loss of this territory.

The Euromaidan in Kiev during 2013-2014 also had some effects on the Transnistrian region. After the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russia, the so-called president of the Tiraspol Supreme Soviet, Mihail Burla, sent a letter to the State Duma asking Moscow to examine the possibility of annexing the Transnistrian region as well. The initiative was categorically rejected by the authorities in Chisinau, and Moscow assured that it did not intend to recognize the separatist region. Such initiatives demonstrate how much the so-called government in Tiraspol wants to move away from the Republic of Moldova and to move closer to Moscow.

However, we cannot overlook the recent improvements in the relationship between Chisinau and Tiraspol. Four protocol decisions that are expected to simplify the lives of citizens on both sides of the Dniester were signed on 25 November 2017 by the political representatives of Chisinau and Tiraspol, George Balan and Vitali Ignatiev, in Tighina.

The documents guarantee the normal functioning of the Moldovan schools with the teaching in Romanian in the Transnistrian region, the access of the peasants to their own agricultural lands along the Dubasari-Tiraspol route, the apostille of the diplomas issued by the Transnistrian universities, the restoration of fixed and mobile telephony between the two sides of the Dniester. If we refer to schools with the teaching in Romanian in the Transnistrian region, the heads of the educational institutions are

very skeptical of these stipulations and they do not think that the documents will be implemented any time soon⁷. It is necessary to note that the Romanian schools on the left bank of the Dniester River have been ignored for years by the authorities in Chisinau, while the Tiraspol regime, according to the teachers, refuses to pass through the "Transnistrian customs" any teaching materials in Romanian. The signing of these four protocol decisions on 25 November was rather a diplomatic step on the eve of the official meeting in the "5 + 2" format of the negotiations in Vienna. However, the trust between Prime Minister Pavel Filip and the so-called leader of Tiraspol, V. Krasnoselski, is very limited and the great progress is only on paper.

The vulnerabilities and the weaknesses of the Transnistrian region are rooted in the depth of the ideology, indoctrination, and the Russian media domination over the past 25 years. The distortion of the historical memory is one of the ideological priorities of the so-called government in Tiraspol, so Transnistria develops a personal historiography and the study of history.

In this context, a group of researchers at the Research Laboratory "History of Transnistria" at the University of Tiraspol laid the foundations for the historiography of Transnistria. It is important to note that the history of Transnistria has never been an object of research. However, the laboratory at the University of Tiraspol has completed several scientific works, just a few of them: "The History of the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic" (in three volumes), the series of brochures titled "Lecture Course on the History of Moldova", the collection of documents called "The Basarabian Question and the Creation of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic", and others.

⁷ D. Stimpovschii, *Ce spun directorii școlilor românești din Transnistria despre protocolul Bălan-Ignatie (What Say the Directors of the Romanian Schools in Transnistria about the Bălan-Ignatie Protocol)*, "MoldNova", 01 December 2017.

The main purpose of all these papers is to prove the existence of the “Transnistrian statehood” as a result of the “war of independence” in 1992. The history schoolbooks – “The History of the Native Place” for pupils in the 4th to 9th grades as well as the “History of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic” for pupils in the 10th and 11th grades – transmit a completely different history than in the schoolbooks in the Republic of Moldova. Their purpose is to form historical memory, such as commemoration, which includes visiting memorials and monuments or attending public holidays. There is a memorial of the Transnistria War defenders in every town of the region and the main holiday of Transnistria is celebrated on 02 September when international sports competitions are held in the memory of the fallen defenders.

The Russian media dominance is absolute in the Transnistrian region. There are 276 media outlets compared to 294 in 2015, but apparently, the large number of newspapers, television channels, or news websites is eclipsed by the ubiquity of censorship, state control, and lack of a modern school of journalism. Almost all the audiovisual and written content depends on the political elites, the press functions in a closed space, and there is almost no contact between the journalists on both sides of the Dniester.

One of the largest television channels is Pervii Pridnestrovski, a public channel that has an audience of 600,000 viewers. For comparison, another important television channel, TSV, owned by Sheriff company, has an audience of around 500,000 viewers. Opposition media have no chances to survive in the region. There were newspapers, sites, platforms, social networks where critical

materials were published. Their fate was predictable – they were closed. In spite of censorship, the citizens on the left bank of the Dniester River can freely access the Internet and the Moldovan media resources to get informed about the life in Moldova and around the world.

A major factor of concern and vulnerability for the authorities in Chisinau is the presence of the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF) in Transnistria. The OGRF was created on 01 July 1995 on the basis of the former Soviet 14th Army. It has no legal status on the territory of the Republic of Moldova and thus constitutes an eminent threat to national security. In 2016, the OGRF soldiers marched at the military parade on 09 May in Tiraspol, thus violating commitments assumed by Russia according to the norms of the international law. Thirty-six military units equipped with weapons went to Suvorov Square in Tiraspol, including armored vehicles from the Russian Federation and rocket launchers, as well as a column of T-34 tanks. The diplomatic requests of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration (MFAEI) of the Republic of Moldova for explanations from the Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Moldova did not succeed⁸.

Associate expert on security at IDIS “Viitorul”, Rosian Vasilei, thinks that Russia is the main destabilizing factor in the Republic of Moldova in terms of security and defense risks through the presence of the OGRF. The proof is the doubling in number of military exercises in 2017 compared to 2016. Thus, the Russian and Transnistrian militaries participated in 2017 in 128 military exercises, including large-scale ones, where the forcing of

⁸ V. Călugăreanu, *Rusia sfidează Chișinăul și răspunde SUA cu militari la parada separatistilor (Russia Defies Chisinau and Responds with US Troops to the Separatist Parade)*, “Deutsche Welle”, 11 May 2016, [http://www.dw.com access: 02 December 2017].



Gagauzia, Balti municipality, and Transnistria are those vulnerable points on the map of the Republic of Moldova that offer a room for maneuver to the Russian propaganda

Dniester was staged. The OGRF also conducted military exercises of snipers who learned camouflage skills and ways to use modern reconnaissance and surveillance devices, navigation systems, and secure communication means⁹.

Vasiloi also mentions that the authorities in Chisinau must be concerned about the lessons of patriotic education “for glorifying the Russian army” and “for the reconstruction of the struggles for liberation of Tiraspol by the German-Romanian troops”¹⁰. The MFAEI constantly expresses its “perplexity and indignation towards the provocative behavior of the Russian troops that were illegally deployed in the Transnistrian region, which, despite the protests that were repeatedly expressed by the Moldovan authorities, continues military activities with dubious objectives”¹¹. Regretfully, these diplomatic releases do not have the expected effects and the actual ability to stop the OGRF military maneuvers, which continue in 2018. The military trainings in the Transnistrian region are far from the political-military reality that was built in Chisinau, but it is alarming that this keeps the risk of escalating a conflict at the border with Ukraine.

Conclusions

Gagauzia, Balti municipality, and Transnistria are those vulnerable points on the map of the Republic of Moldova that offer a room for maneuver to the Russian propaganda. The Russian media dominance cannot be eliminated as long as the central authorities in Chisinau do not impose a real control over the information space throughout the country. It is paradoxical that the Republic of Moldova, with a predominant population of Moldovans and Romanian speakers, is taken over by the Russian media and culture, while the Russian speakers constitute only 13.5% of the population (according to the Population and Housing Census in the Republic of Moldova in 2014). Separatist tendencies, ideological indoctrination, distortion of history, illegal military stationing of the OGRF in Transnistria are the challenges that can be solved or improved by the government in Chisinau only through political will and the consolidation of the geopolitical efforts in the interests of the Republic of Moldova.

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⁹ В Приднестровье прошли учения российских снайперов (Transnistria Hosted Exercises of Russian Snipers), “Publika”, 16 September 2016, [https://ru.publika.md access: 20 December 2017].

¹⁰ R. Vasiloi, *Federația Rusă principalul factor destabilizator în Republica Moldova din punct de vedere a riscurilor de securitate și apărare (Russia’s Main Destabilizing Factor in the Republic of Moldova in terms of Security and Defense Risks)*, 20 December 2017, [https://rosianvasiloi.blogspot.md access: 12 January 2018].

¹¹ *Cu privire la exercițiile militare desfășurate în regiunea transnistreană de către trupele ruse și structurile de forță ale regimului de la Tiraspol (On the Military Exercises Carried out in the Transnistrian Region by the Russian Troops and the Force Structures of the Tiraspol Regime)*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova, [http://www.mfa.gov.md access: 12 January 2018].