

# The Status of the Russian Language in the Republic of Moldova: An Indicator of Geopolitical and Sociocultural Transformations

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## Abstract

*The status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova represents a significant indicator of geopolitical and sociocultural transformations in the post-Soviet period. The historical legacy of the Soviet era granted Russian a dominant role in administration, education, and interethnic communication, an influence that continues to manifest in public and media spaces. Changes in the legislative framework concerning language policy reflect shifts in the country's geopolitical orientation, as well as the symbolic competition between European and Eurasian identity models. From a sociocultural perspective, the continued use of Russian highlights the multilingual character of Moldovan society, as well as the challenges in consolidating a common civic identity centered on the official language. In this context, the issue of the Russian language extends beyond the linguistic dimension, functioning as a political and identity tool relevant for analyzing transition processes and the redefinition of the Moldovan state.*

*This article seeks to examine the distinctive features of the Russian language's status in the Republic of Moldova.*

## Keywords

*Republic of Moldova, the Russian language, status, society*

## Introduction and Methodology

The issue of the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova is not only of substantial academic interest, but is also at the center of political disputes. In the context of the state's multi-ethnic structure, the issue of regulating the status of the Russian language goes beyond simple linguistic questions and becomes a complex topic that intersects historical,

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identity, legal, and socio-political dimensions. This situation is particularly characteristic of states where the population is made up of diverse ethnic communities, each preserving its own cultural traditions, communication patterns, and linguistic choices.

In such societies, establishing the official status of a language is not just a technical and administrative matter, but has profound implications for social cohesion, the integration of minorities, and the consolidation of national identity. The Republic of Moldova is a relevant example in this regard, with a linguistic history marked by external political influences and significant regulatory changes. Russian, which is widely used, continues to hold an important position in public communication, the media, urban areas, and certain professional sectors, even after the country gained independence in 1991.

Discussions regarding the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova are also fueled by the divergent perspectives of social groups. On the one hand, there are voices that support maintaining a privileged status for Russian, arguing that it is necessary to respect the rights of minorities, but also because of the practical role of Russian as a language of interethnic communication in the post-Soviet space. On the other hand, there are opinions that emphasize the importance of affirming Romanian as a fundamental element of national identity and statehood consolidation, considering that a special status for Russian could perpetuate cultural and political dependencies.

Thus, the issue of the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova cannot be examined in isolation. Its analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach, integrating the perspective of geopolitical developments, identity-building processes, and data provided by sociological research, in accordance with the principles of national legislation and international law.

In order to analyze the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova, the present research is based on the use of a set of general and specific scientific research methods, designed to ensure a comprehensive, coherent, and rigorous approach to the phenomenon under study. Accordingly, the methods of analysis and deduction, the phenomenological method, the historical method, the comparative method, and the webographic method were applied. To highlight the presence of the Russian language in the regional context, including the Republic of Moldova, and to achieve a deeper understanding of the evolution of this phenomenon from a diachronic perspective, the historical method was employed. This method made it possible to examine the main political, social, cultural, and demographic factors that, at various historical stages, contributed to the

consolidation and expansion of the use of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, the application of the historical method facilitated the analysis of specific conditions and structural transformations that occurred in the region and influenced the dynamics of the status and functions of the Russian language in the public and institutional spheres.

The method of analysis and deduction was used to examine the key aspects related to the legal, social, and functional status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova, allowing for the formulation of generalized conclusions based on a critical interpretation of empirical data and the existing normative framework. In addition, the research involved the use of the webographic method, which provided the opportunity to investigate the subject both at the theoretical and practical levels through the analysis of key sources available on official and academic online platforms. This method contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue under investigation by valorizing relevant documents, specialized studies, and institutional reports.

The analysis of statistical data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics, particularly those related to the population censuses conducted in 2004, 2014, and 2024, was carried out by combining the webographic method with the comparative method. This approach enabled the identification of trends and changes in the linguistic structure of the population, as well as the assessment of the evolution of the role of the Russian language within the demographic and sociolinguistic context. At the same time, the phenomenological method facilitated the analysis of the Russian language as a socio-cultural and identity-related phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova, highlighting its symbolic, functional, and perceptual dimensions within collective consciousness. The application of this method made it possible to capture the ways in which the Russian language is experienced, interpreted, and integrated into contemporary social realities, beyond a strictly normative or statistical framework.

### **The historical context of the evolution of the Russian language in the region**

For a better understanding of the presence of the Russian language in the South-Eastern European region, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of its historical evolution and influence in this geopolitical and cultural space. Today, more than ten centuries after the first records of the presence of Russians (in the 12th-13th centuries, the Eastern Slavs began to divide and individualize themselves: *Great Russians/Muscovites, Whites, Little Russians, Red Russians-Червонная*) east of the Carpathians before the

ancestors of the Moldovans from Maramureș moved to this region, the issue of the status of the Russian language becomes a rather sensitive topic.

The Russian language penetrated various territories in different historical contexts, often associated with processes of political and administrative expansion, as well as economic and cultural exchanges. Important landmarks regarding the presence of the Russian language in the region are provided by Romanian historian Dimitrie Onciu. Thus, basing his research on toponymic data, he notes: “At the time of the taking into possession (11<sup>th</sup>-12th centuries) of the east-Carpathian territory, *the Vlachs* found here the Slavs, from whom the Slavic names of localities and rivers were taken over; D. Onciul attests to the presence of Russian communities in northern Moldova. The old Slavic population, strengthened by Russian emigration, must have been maintained” (*From the History of Bukovina*, 1891) (Onciul, 2010). This evidence suggests that the presence of Eastern Slavs, later identified as Russians, had a significant continuity in northern Moldavia, influencing the demographic structure and toponymy of the region.

A broader characterization of the presence of Russians and Eastern Slavs in the region is also provided by Eustratie Logofătul (?–1646) in *the Annals of Stephen the Great's Court* (lost) - the first work dedicated to Moldovan history, written in Slavonic, was the source and model for the following Moldovan-Slavonic chronicles written up to *Azarie's Chronicle*. Although Eustratie's basic work on the history of Moldovan written culture, the *Moldavian Chronicle*, has been lost (*Letopesețele despre începuturile Statului Moldovenesc*), posterity has evidence and testimonies proving the presence of Russians. This reality is confirmed by documents from the Moldavian princely chancellery from the early 15th century. The trade privilege granted by the Moldavian ruler, Alexander the Good, reflects the economic and ethnic realities of the Eastern Carpathian region in the first half of the 15th century. The text of the document explicitly states that it is granted to “merchants from all over the Land of Russia,” an expression that, in the context of the time, refers to the territories of southwestern Russia. This wording indicates the existence of strong trade links between Moldavia and the areas inhabited by the Eastern Slavs, as well as official recognition of the role played by Ruthenian merchants in regional economic exchanges. Through this privilege, the Moldavian ruler sought to stimulate trade, ensure the safety of foreign merchants on Moldavian territory, and integrate the country into the commercial networks of Central and Eastern Europe.

The importance and extent of this presence are also confirmed by subsequent developments. The number of Russians in northern Moldavia was so large that, during the reign of Stephen III the Great, in Suceava, the capital of Moldavia, there was an entire neighborhood inhabited by

*Russians, mainly merchants and craftsmen (Исторические связи народов).* This reality demonstrates the multicultural character of medieval Moldovan cities and the integration of Ruthenian communities into the economic and urban life of the Moldovan state.

The presence of Eastern Slavs in medieval Moldavia is well documented by historical sources, demonstrating both their demographic size and their cultural and linguistic influence. Following the campaign against the Polish Land (June 1498), chroniclers mention that “many people, men, women, and children were taken away, more than 100,000, many of whom settled under the rule of Stephen the Great in his country, so that to this day the Russian language lives in Moldavia, where he took up residence, and a third of the population speaks Russian” (Ureche, 1958). This reality was confirmed two centuries later, at the end of the 17th century, by Simion Dascălul, who in his supplement to Grigore Ureche’s Chronicle noted that “to this day, this country (Moldavia) is home to half of the Russians” (Ureche, 1958).

The presence and influence of the Slavs extended south of the Carpathians. The Wallachian chronicler C. Cantacuzino (the steward), in his work *Istoria a Țării Rumânești (History of Wallachia)*, completed around 1716, notes that the Vlachs/Muntenians traditionally used “the Russian and Slovenian languages” due to their proximity and mixing with their Slavic-speaking neighbors (*Istoria Țării Rumânești*). In the same vein, Dimitrie Cantemir, in *his Chronicle*, recalls that “the old Moldavian Chronicle (Letopisețul Moldovenesc by Eustratie Logofătul, used by Gr. Ureche) mentions the presence of Russians who lived in Suceava and Baia (Civitas Moldaviae) before the arrival of Dragoș Vodă from Transylvania” (Cantemir, 1717). Dimitrie Cantemir completes the cultural-linguistic picture with observations on local vocabulary and titles: words of Slavonic origin, such as “boeri” (from the Slavonic “boyare”), were used to designate local nobles, and in regions close to Poland, the inhabitants routinely spoke Ruthenian and Polish (*ibidem*). At the same time, the presence of Slavonic words in toponyms, administration, and everyday life highlights the lasting impact of Russian and Ruthenian communities on the social and cultural structure of medieval Moldova (Cantemir, 1717: 113). Thus, chronicles and documents from that period show that Moldova and Wallachia were multi-ethnic and multicultural territories, where Slavic influences were reflected in trade, language, customs, and social organization, confirming the existence of a consistent Russian presence from northern Moldova to the vicinity of Muntenia.

A detailed description of the situation regarding the penetration of the Russian/Slavonic language into the region, especially into the Romanian space, is provided by D. Cantemir in Chapter V of his “Description of Moldova.” According to him, until the Council of Florence, Moldovans,

following the example of other peoples who had formed their languages from the basic Latin, used Latin letters. However, during the reign of Alexander the Good, the Metropolitan of Moldova, Teoctist, a Bulgarian by birth and deacon of Mark of Ephesus, intervened to limit Latin influences in the Moldovan church. In order to “remove any trace of Latinism” and prevent young people from picking up Latin sophistry, Teoctist advised the prince that Latin letters should be banished and replaced with Slavonic ones (Cantemir, 1717: 203). As a result, for two centuries, the only language used in princely correspondence, treasury records, and all official writings from the court was Slavonic (Cantemir, 1717: 203). This language policy also influenced the education of the boyars: their sons were not taught other languages, only Slavonic, thus consolidating its use in administration, the church, and culture. Thus, according to Cantemir’s testimony, the penetration of the Slavonic/Russian language into Moldavia was not only a phenomenon of trade or migration, but also a deliberate policy of religious and state institutions, aimed at shaping the official language and controlling access to culture and education. “Following the collapse of the Slavic states under the Turks, monks such as Nicodim and others, in order to save the cultural treasures of their people from disaster... brought the old Slavonic manuscripts to our countries and laid the foundation for monastic life according to the rules established on Mount Athos.” In the monasteries they founded and expanded through their care for the spiritual well-being of our voivodes, a fruitful activity began in the Slavonic language, which was then the language of culture of our people (Cartoian, 1996:56). Already in the 14th-15th and 16th centuries... Slavonic culture, continuously strengthened by the centers south of the Danube, was flourishing. Likewise, during the time of Stephen the Great, Slavonic religious culture was satisfactory for Moldova (Cartoian, 1996: 57).

These historical sources indicate that the presence and use of the Russian language in Moldova and Wallachia was a long-lasting phenomenon, the result of both migrations and deportations, as well as neighborly relations with Slavic populations. Contemporary studies on cultural and linguistic contacts in the Eastern Carpathian region confirm the persistence of this influence over several centuries. Russian military campaigns against the Ottoman Empire played a notable role in shaping political developments in the Moldavian region. These operations contributed to diminishing the economic and political control exercised by the Ottoman Empire over Moldova, creating a regional context more favorable to local autonomy. At the same time, the intensification of contacts between the Moldovan and Russian populations facilitated processes of cultural circulation and mutual influence, which led to a noticeable revitalization of social and cultural life in the country. The period 1768-1812, marked by three Russian-Turkish wars and long periods of Russian

military and civil administration in Moldova, represents a stage of profound transformations in the political and cultural evolution of the principality. N. Iorga emphasized that, during this period, Moldova “lived half of its life almost under the rule of Divans led and controlled by Russian commanders, under the influence of the ideas and sentiments that guided Russia at the time.” As a result, the historian noted that, for about two decades, Moldova was de facto integrated into a state structure whose political organization and cultural orientation were profoundly European (Iorga, 1929).

Russian administrative and military influence was not limited to the political sphere, but also created a favorable environment for the penetration of Enlightenment and democratic ideas inspired by the Great French Revolution (1789-1794) into Moldovan society. This intellectual environment, stimulated by the presence of Russian officers and officials, also had an impact on the evolution of the Romanian language, especially in terms of terminology. S. Berejan and V. Bahnari (Бережан) show that the beginning of the 19th century was characterized by a considerable number of lexical borrowings ... conveyed through the Russian language. The two linguists explain the process of penetration and consolidation of the influence of the Russian language and culture in the Moldovan space through two major conditions: the removal of the Phanariot regime in 1821 and the growth of the political influence of the Russian Empire, both on the international scene and in the Balkan region. To reinforce their argument, the authors also highlight the positive contribution of Russian troops stationed in Moldova. Between 1828 and 1834, the Russian army present in the Principalities included numerous officers and soldiers who, according to Mihail Kogălniceanu, played an essential role in transmitting modern knowledge and ideas. Their presence helped overcome the prejudices that isolated Moldova from European civilization and stimulated contact with the liberal ideas of the West, thus contributing to the partial modernization of local institutions and mentalities.

The conclusion of the Peace of Iași in 1792, following the Russo-Turkish War of 1787-1791, gave a significant boost to relations between Moldovans and Russians, while also creating a need for the inhabitants of Moldova to learn Russian. In response to this need, as early as 1789, the first textbooks for learning Russian began to appear in M. Strelbițkii's printing house in Dubăsari. These included: *Букварь, Ынченере де ынвэцэтурэ челор че вор сэ ынвэце карте ку слове словенешть, Дикционарул Ын скуртэ адунаре а нумелор ... ынтру фолосул челор че вор вре а ынвэца лимба русаскэ ши молдовеняскэ* and *the Conversation Manual De ale casiy voarbe, ruséşt și moldoveneşte cu pricinioase complementur*. These works aimed to facilitate the learning of Russian by Moldovans, laying the foundations for a process of bilingual literacy and

cultural integration, thus reflecting Russia's political and military impact in the region, but also the practical need for communication in commercial and administrative contexts. They also demonstrate how Russian influence penetrated not only state institutions and the church, but also the daily lives of the inhabitants, paving the way for closer cultural and political relations in the following decades.

Following the Peace Treaty of May 28, 1812 (Mischevca), Tsarist Russia occupied Bessarabia, marking a major change in the political and administrative configuration of the region. The Russian occupation had profound implications for economic, social, and cultural life, gradually imposing the Russian language in administration and state institutions, while also influencing the educational system and commercial relations of the inhabitants (Vasilos). This situation also favored the strengthening of cultural and linguistic contacts between the local population and Russian communities, thus continuing the processes of integration and influence that had begun in previous centuries. More than two centuries after the signing of the Treaty, the effects of this decision continue to influence society, divided by the border on the Prut River, including from a linguistic point of view (28 mai 1812).

The Russian language was not only known in the Principality of Moldavia, still under Ottoman suzerainty, but was perceived as a necessary tool for the continuity and preservation of the Moldavian cultural treasure, formed in previous centuries in the Slavonic language tradition. In this context, knowledge of Russian was seen as a way to counteract the intense influence of Phanariot Greek and to maintain links with certain strands of European spirituality.

In this regard, a pioneering role was played by Gheorghe Asachi, considered the first Moldovan scholar to understand the importance of studying Russian for broadening the cultural horizons of Moldovan youth and who believed that access to Russian could facilitate closer ties with modern ideas and European cultural circles. By promoting the study of Russian, Asachi sought not only to provide young people with practical training in communicating with Russian-influenced administrative and commercial circles, but also to transmit the cultural, scientific, and literary values that circulated in the Slavic-speaking world, thus contributing to the gradual modernization of Moldovan society.

Russian was included in the curriculum of the Mihailene Academy in Iași, an institution founded in 1835 and considered one of the first modern higher education institutions in Romania. Among the Russian language teachers at this academy was Vasile Pelteki, an active figure in the cultural milieu of Iași in the first half of the 19th century. In 1831, he published in

Iași an “*Абецедарю русо-ромынск*”, a textbook for learning Russian with application in the Romanian space. Vasile Pelteki also made literary translations from Russian into Moldovan, among which the translation of the poem *Ермак, cuceritorul Siberiei* (Yermak, Conqueror of Siberia) stands out. This activity is mentioned by N. Corlăteanu in his study *Studiu asupra sistemii lexicale moldovenești* (Study on the Moldovan Lexical System), where he highlights the contribution of Moldovan translators to the circulation of Russian texts and cultural influences in the local milieu (Corlăteanu, 1964).

A significant impact on the expansion of the use of Russian in the Moldovan SSR was the decision to Russify educational institutions, adopted immediately after the occupation of Bessarabia by the Soviet army. The legislative basis for these policies was established by the Decision of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR of March 13, 1938, “*On the compulsory study of the Russian language in the schools of the union republics.*” On the basis of this normative act, on August 12, 1940, the leadership of the Moldovan SSR issued a similar decision aimed at the compulsory implementation of the Russian language in the education system (Șevcenco, 2019: 440).

The second stage of language policy in the Moldavian SSR took place between 1946 and 1950. Starting in 1946, the authorities in Moscow tightened measures to combat “manifestations of bourgeois nationalism,” which led to the consolidation of the status of the Russian language in public and cultural life. Its role was reinforced by intellectuals loyal to Soviet directives, including officials and specialists of Russian origin or educated in a Russian-speaking environment. Between 1946 and 1948, linguists in the republic were asked to publish studies on the history of the language and to compile Russian-Romanian dictionaries that reflected Soviet linguistic realities. The first dictionary of this type, which included a considerable number of Russian-origin neologisms used mainly on the left bank of the Dniester, was published in 1949 and contained approximately 140,000 lexical units (Șevcenco, 2019: 440).

The process of Russification continued with the expansion of the circulation of newspapers and magazines published in Russian, a measure officially justified by the need to respond to “readers’ demands.” Although occasionally there were voices in favor of studying the Romanian language (such as that expressed by F. Brovko), many representatives of the republic’s intelligentsia advocated for maintaining and consolidating the status of the Russian language, a notable example being the academician A. Dimo. Another instrument of Russification was cinema. Of the total of 544 films screened in the Moldovan SSR, only 71 were dubbed into Romanian, at a

time when subtitling was not used and the majority of the local population did not know Russian (Șevcenco, 2019: 442).

The language policy of the post-Stalinist period (1953–1959) was characterized by contradictory trends. On the one hand, the coercive methods of previous regimes persisted, favoring the imposition of Russian on both the native population and newcomers. On the other hand, under Khrushchev's leadership, Russification measures intensified, including the abolition of Romanian-language newspapers in localities where the Russian-speaking population was predominant. In accordance with Resolution of the USSR Council of Ministers No. 3947-P of 9 May 1955, pupils in primary, seven-year, and secondary schools in the union republics (with the exception of the RSFSR) were exempted from studying the language of the native population if it was not their mother tongue. At the same time, bilingual television broadcasting was made compulsory, with equal distribution of airtime, based on complaints from the Russian-speaking population (Șevcenco, 2019).

A central figure in promoting Russification policies was E. Postovoi, who, after taking over as CC secretary for ideology in 1960, consistently supported this direction. At the 4th Plenary Session of the Central Committee on April 26, 1960, the Resolution "*On the state and measures to improve the teaching of Russian in general schools of the republic*" was adopted, a document that further strengthened the position of Russian in the Moldavian SSR. At the union conference of linguists in Alma-Ata (November 1962), despite some divergent opinions expressed by specialists, A. Borșevici categorically stated that, for "the majority of nations and peoples of the Soviet Union, the functions of the Russian language are more important than those of the mother tongue." These linguistic changes were also favored by the structure of the administrative apparatus, dominated by allolingual bureaucrats, especially Russians, who occupied privileged positions in the state hierarchy. At the same time, efforts were intensified to expand the use of Russian in Romanian-language schools (Șevcenco, 2019: 445).

On October 13, 1978, the Council of Ministers of the USSR adopted a resolution on measures for the continuous improvement of Russian language teaching in the union republics. In accordance with these directives, on December 7, 1978, the CC Bureau of the CPM discussed the issue of improving the process of teaching Russian in the Moldavian SSR. The decision adopted required the relevant ministries to optimize the quality of textbooks, raise their ideological, theoretical, and scientific level, develop new teaching programs, and expand the activities of scientific circles focused on Russian language and literature.

Starting in 1979, the Ministry of Education initiated the publication of the magazine *Russian Language in Moldovan Schools*, considered by the authorities to be an essential tool of educational policy. In August 1980, responsibility for publishing the magazine was transferred to the Partisan Publishing House of the CC of the CPM, a sign of the strengthening of ideological control over its content. At the same time, the Moscow leadership imposed on the union republics the obligation to organize courses for improving Russian language skills, as well as the complete transition of teaching the subject “Primary Military Training” into Russian. During this period, reports on the progress of Russian language teaching in the districts of the Moldavian SSR became more frequent.

The CC of the CPM also intervened in other areas, including language training for recruits (meeting of April 27, 1982) and the promotion of Russian as the main means of interethnic communication. In 1983, the CC of the CPSU adopted a resolution on “creating conditions for facilitating the study of Russian by the population of the union republics,” which was presented by the first secretary of the CC of the CPM, S. Grossu, at the 10th Plenary Session of the CC of the CPM of the MSSR (June 5, 1983). To implement these directives, on June 28, 1983, the CC Bureau of the CPM adopted the Resolution “On additional measures to improve the study of Russian in general schools and other educational institutions.” The document provided for the continuous improvement of school curricula, the creation of two-year courses for learning Russian at pedagogical institutions, and the expansion of Russian language departments at specialized research institutes. Between 1984 and 1990, there were plans to publish an increased number of methodological works, dictionaries, and other publications in Russian. Despite the fact that the indigenous population of the Moldavian SSR represented approximately 64% of the total, the proportion of radio and television broadcasts in Romanian was only 36%, highlighting the profound imbalance in the official language policy of the era (Şevcenco, 2019: 452).

In January 1989, the Commission for the Drafting of Laws of the Moldavian SSR on “Issues of the Use of Moldavian, Russian, and Other Languages in the Territory of the Moldavian SSR” was established, headed by N. Platon. On January 24, 1989, the CC Bureau adopted a decision to initiate the drafting of republican laws on the functioning of languages on the territory of the Moldavian SSR. In this context, on May 17, 1989, the CC Bureau approved, among other things, the draft law on the transition to the Latin alphabet, marking a significant moment in the republic’s language policy (Şevcenco, 2019: 441).

In the Moldavian SSR, the language issue in the context created by Perestroika and Glasnost gained momentum and intensity. After Mikhail Gorbachev announced his reforms on May 26, 1987, the Central Committee

of the Communist Party of Moldova and the Council of Ministers of the Moldavian SSR approved two resolutions: “On improving the teaching of the Moldovan language in the republic” and “On improving the teaching of the Russian language in the Moldavian SSR.” Point 2 of the 11 May 1988 resolution of the Central Committee’s Departments of Science and Educational Institutions, Propaganda and Agitation, and Culture specified the need to oblige public institutions at the local, district, and republican levels to ensure a bilingual policy by creating favorable conditions for learning the Moldavian language and, equally, the Russian language in the republic. It also required that the principle of using both the national language and Russian be observed in the socio-political and socio-economic spheres of Soviet Moldova (Chestiunea limbii de stat în RSS Moldovenească).

In the second half of the 1980s, with the relaxation of the Soviet regime and the emergence of glasnost and perestroika policies, a strong national revival movement began to take shape in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR), in which the Romanian language became not only a cultural element but also a symbol of collective identity. During this period, the majority Romanian-speaking population, marginalized in previous decades by Soviet language policy and the exclusive use of the Cyrillic alphabet for the “Moldovan language,” mobilized its forces for the recognition of its mother tongue in official and educational life. The defining moment of this revival was 1989, when, on August 27, 1991, in the Great National Assembly Square in Chișinău, approximately 700,000–750,000 people participated in a historic demonstration for the declaration of Romanian as the state language and for the return to the Latin alphabet. Public pressure led to the adoption, on August 31, 1989, of the law declaring the “Moldovan” language written with the Latin alphabet as the state language of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Cyrillic alphabet was abandoned. The same act emphasized the common linguistic identity with the Romanian language, a fact also recognized by numerous linguists. After the Declaration of Independence on August 27, 1991 (*Lege privind Declarația de independență a Republicii Moldova*), Romanian was reaffirmed as the official language of the newly formed state. On September 1, 1989, Law No. 3465 on the functioning of languages spoken on the territory of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (*Republica Moldova. Parlamentul . Lege Nr. 3465*) was adopted, which provides in its preamble, among other things, that the Russian language will be provided, on the territory of this Republic, the necessary conditions for its use and development as a language of communication between the nations of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Furthermore, Article 10 of this Law states that the acts of state authorities, state administration, and public organizations must be translated into Russian (*Lege Nr. 3465*). The adoption in 1989 of laws on the status of the state language and its return to the Latin alphabet (*Республика*

Молдова. Верховный Совет Советской Социалистической Республики Молдова. Закон № 3462 ) was a first step towards asserting the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova (31 august).

Since language is not only a means of communication but also an essential element of cultural and political identity, this discussion in the Republic of Moldova is influenced both by the historical legacy of the Soviet period and by social and political developments since independence.

### **The legislative framework of the status of the Russian language**

According to the provisions of Article 13 of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, entitled State Language, the functioning of other languages stipulates the following: (1) The state language of the Republic of Moldova is Romanian, functioning on the basis of the Latin alphabet. (2) The state recognizes and protects the right to preserve, develop, and use Russian and other languages spoken in the country. (3) The state facilitates the study of languages of international circulation. (4) The functioning of languages on the territory of the Republic of Moldova shall be established by organic law (Constituția Republicii Moldova). Thus, at present, Russian does not have a special status, unlike Romanian (the official language), and its mention in the constitution is illustrative, as are other languages spoken in the country, such as Ukrainian or Gagauz.

On December 16, 2020, Parliament adopted the Law on the Functioning of Languages Spoken on the Territory of the Republic of Moldova (Legea Nr. 234 din 16-12-2020 cu privire la funcționarea limbilor vorbite pe teritoriul Republicii Moldova). This law emphasised the dominant role of the Russian language throughout the territory of the Republic of Moldova in relation to the languages of other ethnic minorities, without distinguishing between districts where its share is insignificant and districts where its share is significant, in order to establish such strict legal obligations. At the same time, it gave Russian a status similar to that of Romanian. According to the approved draft law, the Republic of Moldova must ensure the necessary conditions for the use and development of Russian as a “language of interethnic communication” in the Republic of Moldova. In this capacity, Russian is to be used on the territory of the Republic of Moldova alongside the state language. Secretariat activities in state and public administration bodies will be carried out in the state language (Moldovan). Upon request, translation into Russian will be provided. Official documents of state authorities and public administration bodies will be drafted and adopted in the state language, to be translated into Russian, and in the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Union they will also be translated into Gagauz. The bill was voted on by deputies from the Party

of Socialists (PSRM) and those from the “For Moldova” Platform, which includes deputies from the Shor Party. The opposition, however, considered this law to be very sensitive, capable of reigniting social tensions. During the vote, opposition MPs left the session, denouncing a “toxic agenda.” “There are clear elements of federalization.” Several controversial bills were on the agenda of the Moldovan Parliament on Wednesday, including one on the status of Gagauzia and another that would grant Taraclia the status of an “ethnocultural district.” Political analysts point out that the vote on these bills is taking place against the backdrop of a PSRM comeback after losing the presidential election, won by pro-European Maia Sandu, but also of the weakening of state institutions. “These initiatives are designed to be time bombs. They are clear elements of federalization, carried out surreptitiously and hastily by a political force that is openly committed to serving another country. And all this is happening, unfortunately, against a backdrop of minimal resistance from a very weakened system that is in some places non-existent or even complicit. We are talking here about the judicial system, with the possible exception of the Constitutional Court, the special services, and other mechanisms,” political analyst Vlad Țurcanu told Radio Chișinău (*Lege controversată*).

At the beginning of 2021, the Constitutional Court declared this law unconstitutional. The preferential treatment of the Russian language compared to other ethnic minority languages, by positioning it at the level of the state language, contravenes the Constitution, which recognizes only one state language and does not contain the phrase “language of interethnic communication” (Agora, 2022). This is the Law on the Functioning of Languages Spoken on the Territory of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, a state entity that has not existed *de facto* for over three decades.

This law was passed in parliament without an opinion from the government, without a debate as required by legislative regulations, without consultation with civil society, and even without a debate in the Moldovan Academy and the scientific community. In fact, the language issue is a highly debated topic in the Republic of Moldova and has helped parties on the left, but also on the right, to gain political capital. However, the Constitutional Court rejected other points in the complaint signed by Liberal Party MPs, who believe that the state's guarantee of the right to education in Russian, as well as the translation of public documents and acts into this language, would contravene the Constitution. The Court found that the status of Romanian as the state language is not threatened, as the liberals claim. The Court also emphasized the importance of complying with the provisions of international conventions on the protection of national and linguistic minorities (Ceapai). The Constitutional Court was notified by opposition MPs

Dinu Plîngău, Maria Ciobanu, and Octavian Țicu, who argued that the law should be declared unconstitutional (Bezer).

Of course, the Russian Embassy in Chișinău was quick to react to the Constitutional Court's decision, expressing its offense and alarm at this decision. Similarly, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said it was a "regrettable" decision. Moreover, she stated that the decision contradicts the electoral promises of President Maia Sandu and emphasized that the Republic of Moldova is a multinational state in which 80% of citizens speak Russian, which is untrue. It is true, however, that a large part of the population of the Republic of Moldova knows Russian at a conversational level, but let us not forget that Moldovan citizens born after the 1990s were not so motivated to learn Russian, especially those in rural areas. Yes, those born in the Soviet Union were forced to learn it, but now, for those who do not know it, Russian is taught in high schools in the Republic of Moldova as a foreign language for only three years. In addition to this administrative issue, most Moldovan citizens, who are Romanian speakers (80 percent of the country's population), would have felt discriminated against. If Russian had been declared a language of interethnic communication alongside Romanian, then Russian speakers would never have been motivated to learn the state language, Romanian, and perhaps the Romanian language baccalaureate would no longer be compulsory for all students in Moldova. This decision would have triggered a chain reaction of more and more legislative quibbles, which would not have been tolerated by the majority of the population (Pleșca, 2021).

In the Republic of Moldova, the Constitutional Court upheld the complaint challenging the law on the use of languages spoken in the country, which gave special status to the Russian language. The decision is final and cannot be appealed. The law granting privileged status to the Russian language was challenged in the Constitutional Court by several pro-European MPs who argue that its provisions violate the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova. The court ruled that the special status granted to Russian in the contested law is unconstitutional and that this provision discriminates against the languages spoken by representatives of other ethnic minorities in Moldova, such as Ukrainian, Gagauz, and Bulgarian (Curtea Constituțională).

The Court referred to the Constitution, according to which the state language of the Republic of Moldova is Romanian, and the state recognizes the right to preserve and use Russian and other languages on the territory of the country. The President of the Court, Domnica Manole, explained that the legislative act conferred special status on the Russian language among ethnic minorities, a status that does not derive from the Constitution (Lepădatu).

Furthermore, “Law No. 3465 of 01.09.1989 on the functioning of languages spoken on the territory of the Moldovan SSR” cannot be considered constitutional in the first place because neither the Moldovan SSR nor the USSR exist as state entities anymore. The priority given to the Russian language is conditioned by the fact that at that time Russian was the language of communication throughout the USSR, of which the Moldavian SSR was a part, which is why the law stipulates that “the Moldavian SSR shall ensure the necessary conditions on its territory for the use and development of Russian as the language of communication between the nations of the USSR, as well as the languages of other nationalities living in the republic.” In general, the document regulates in great detail the status of the Russian and Gagauz languages, which are mentioned more frequently than the Moldovan language or the state language (Condrea).

### **Russian in public and media spaces**

The websites of state institutions in the Republic of Moldova, which indicate the languages in which information is presented, currently display the search icons for RO, RU, EN, i.e. Romanian, Russian, English (or in a different order – RO, EN, RU). Thus, the State Chancellery displays Romanian, English, Русский; Republic of Moldova. Official website –RO, RU, EN; Government of the Republic of Moldova – RO, EN, RU; Ministry of Health, Ministry of Information Technology and Communications, National Bank of Moldova - ro, en, ru. The Ministry of Education changes the order slightly, displaying RO, RU, EN; the Ministry of Justice proposes RO, RU; the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives “Viitorul” (IDIS) - Romanian, English; the State Information Agency “Moldpress” - ro, en, ru; Court of Auditors of the Republic of Moldova – Romanian, English, Русский; Moldovan Post - rom, eng, ru; Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova - eng, rom, rus. Even the official website of the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia [www.gagauzia.md](http://www.gagauzia.md) offers search options in RU, RO, EN, but does not have texts in the Gagauz language, as would be expected (ibidem). However, even at the level of society, in the business environment, in partnership relations, etc., the term “Moldovan language” practically no longer appears. For example, in job offers posted on the Internet, when language requirements are announced, only Romanian is mentioned, not Moldovan. For example, for the position of auto parts salesperson, the basic requirements include knowledge of Romanian and Russian; those wishing to work as waiters/waitresses, sales agents, managers, company representatives, etc., must know Romanian, Russian, and English in some cases. Advertisements written in Russian contain the same requirements: sales manager, with knowledge of computers, Russian, and Romanian. <http://lucru.md/> Various companies with official websites also provide information in Romanian, not Moldovan: “Franzeļuța” JSC - en, ro, ru; the

Moldovan Railways – Ru, Ro; the MallDova shopping center – RO, RU, EN, and the list of examples goes on (ibidem).

An analysis of the presence of Russian in the media space of the Republic of Moldova shows that two-thirds of television media services retransmitted in the country but not under state jurisdiction broadcast content entirely or partially in Russian. These data are recorded in the study “*The media market in the Republic of Moldova: realities and trends in 2025*,” published by the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) in July 2025. According to expert Ion Bunduchi, co-author of the research, the situation signals a marginalisation of the official language in programming schedules, which is considered worrying in the context of policies to strengthen national linguistic identity.

According to the study, 408 television media services under foreign jurisdiction are retransmitted in the Republic of Moldova, covering generalist, news, or thematic content (film, music, children, sports). Of these, 67% broadcast entirely or partially in Russian. In total, the retransmitted stations use 12 languages, but Russian predominates, being present in the schedules of 261 of the 389 channels analyzed according to the language of broadcast. The retransmitted media services come from 20 countries and are accessible via cable and IPTV networks. The geographical distribution shows that 186 channels (45.5%) are from the Russian Federation, 87 (21.3%) from Romania, 21 from the United Kingdom, 20 from the Netherlands, and 19 from Ukraine, with the remaining 75 channels coming from the US, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Turkey, Germany, Austria, Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, Serbia, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. In addition, 19 channels broadcast content in several languages, including Turkish, Czech, German, Arabic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Russian, and in 10 of these, Russian is combined with other languages, forming complex multilingual structures.

Expert Ion Bunduchi emphasizes that these data should be analyzed in the context of social integration and cultural segregation processes. Most of the retransmitted services use Russian as their main language, which, according to the authors of the study, creates an unnatural situation from the perspective of promoting the official language of the state. Linguistic diversity is not a problem in itself, as it can facilitate the learning of other languages and openness to different cultural perspectives. However, the excessive dominance of a single language, combined with the marginalization of the official language, can contribute to the consolidation of an illusory perception of general linguistic competence and the creation of monolingual or bilingual information bubbles, with an impact on social cohesion and identity (Ciobanu).

## **Geopolitical reconfigurations and implications for linguistic perceptions**

According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Moldova, in the 2014 census, 11.1% of the population indicated Russian as their mother tongue. According to census data, the number of Russian speakers could be estimated, given that Russian has a higher share in the north of the country (13.0%) and in urban areas. Russian has a more significant share in the northern regions of the country (13.0%) and in urban areas. The data presented was collected during the 2014 census. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on the structure of the population by language spoken, Romanian is the native language of at least 78.6% of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. Among the languages of ethnic minorities, Russian is the most widely spoken. Therefore, Russian is spoken by 14.5% of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova, with a distribution throughout the country, being the mother tongue of 21.8% of citizens. The legislation of the Republic of Moldova is among the few that offers legal guarantees to minority languages for their use in several areas of society. It stipulates that "persons belonging to national minorities have the right to freely use their mother tongue, both in writing and orally, to have access to information in that language, to disseminate it and to exchange information." In the territory of the Gagauzia Administrative-Territorial Unit, trilingualism is practiced in accordance with the law. Gagauz, Moldovan, and Russian are declared official languages. However, de facto, the territory of the autonomy is a territory of bilingualism, with only Russian and Gagauz being used for the most part. More the, this reality highlights a stark contrast between ethnic composition and spoken language. Currently, Russian remains the language of interethnic communication here in southern Moldova, a situation that stems from the past (Sacul lingvistic al Republicii Moldova). The percentage of the population of Moldova who declared Romanian as their mother tongue in last summer's census increased by 8.1% compared to the 2014 census, while the share of those who indicated "Moldovan" decreased by 7.8%, according to data published by the National Bureau of Statistics in Chișinău.

The census also revealed changes in the ethnic structure of the population: the proportion of people who identify themselves as Moldovans reached 77.2%, compared to 75.3% a decade ago. At the same time, the number of those who declared themselves Gagauz, Ukrainian, and Russian decreased. Thus, according to the results of the census conducted between April 8 and July 7, 2024, the Republic of Moldova lost almost 14% of its population in 10 years. The population with habitual residence in the Republic of Moldova is 2,401,000, while the 2014 census recorded

2,789,000 inhabitants. Over 49% of those interviewed in the 2024 census stated that their mother tongue is “Moldovan.” In comparison, in the 2014 census, almost 57% indicated “Moldovan” as their mother tongue. At the same time, in 2024, more than 31% indicated Romanian as their mother tongue, while in 2014 the proportion was 23.2%. Also, 11.1% of the population indicated Russian as their mother tongue in 2024. In the 2014 census, unlike the 2024 census, 9.9% of the population indicated Russian as their mother tongue. The institution added that Russian has a more significant share in the north of the country (13.0%) and in urban areas in all regions (*ibidem*). The census also revealed changes in the ethnic structure of the population: the number of people who identified themselves as Moldovans increased to 77.2%. In 2014, the proportion was 75.3%. Romanians declared themselves to be 7.9%, while in 2014 they were 6.7%. Russians declared themselves to be 3.2%, in 2014 – 4.1% (Groza).

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the final results of the 2024 Population and Housing Census (PHC) on the ethnocultural characteristics of the population with usual residence on the census reference date (April 8, 2024). According to the 2024 population census data, 99.9% of the population declared their mother tongue. Of this total, 79.9% mentioned Romanian or Moldovan (compared to 78.1% in 2014), of which 48.1% declared Moldovan (55.5% in 2014) and 31.8% Romanian (22.6% in 2014). Russian was declared as the mother tongue by 11.6% of the population (compared to 9.6% in 2014). The share of Russian as a commonly spoken language is higher, reaching 15.9%, especially in urban areas (26.9%), in the North development region (16.7%), and in the municipality of Bălți (45.0%). In the 2024 Population and Housing Census (RPL), 87.5% of the population reported knowledge of Romanian or Moldovan (54.5% Moldovan and 39.0% Romanian). At the same time, 68.2% of the population stated that they knew Russian, and 13.4% knew English. Of the total population with usual residence of 2,409,200 people, 99.9% declared their ethnic affiliation. The largest proportion was represented by Moldovans, 1,848,600 persons (76.7%), followed by Romanians, 193,200 persons (8.0%) (Groza) (see Annex No. 1).

Compared to the 2014 census, the 2024 census showed an increase in the proportion of the population identifying as Moldovan (from 74.0% to 76.7%). The proportion of Russians decreased from 4.1% to 3.4%. In territorial terms, the distribution of the population by ethnicity in the 2024 census retains the configuration of previous censuses (in 2004 and 2014), but the number of people and the share of each ethnicity have undergone some changes. The Russian ethnic population, concentrated mainly in urban areas, has a higher share in the municipalities of Bălți (10.1%) and Chișinău (5.9%), as well as in the districts of Basarabeasca (7.5%) and

Dondușeni (5.2%) (Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024).

Of the total of 897 towns (municipalities) and villages (communes) surveyed, in 805 of them the majority of the population declared themselves to be of Moldovan ethnicity, of which in 524 the proportion was over 90%. The highest proportion (over 30%) of people declaring themselves to be of Romanian ethnicity was in the villages (communes) of Negrești in the district of Strășeni, Feștelita in the district of Ștefan Vodă, Zgârdești in the Telenești district, Hansca in the Ialoveni district, Camenca in the Glodeni district, Tuzara in the Călărași district, Orac in the Leova district, Drâsliceni in the Criuleni district, and Opaci in the Căușeni district.

According to census data, ethnic Russians formed the majority of the population in five villages (communes): Pocrovca, Dondușeni district, Cunicea, Florești district, Troițcoe, Cimișlia district, Dobrogea Veche, Sîngerei district, and Semionovca, Ștefan Vodă district. In 15 other towns (municipalities) and villages (communes), between 10% and 32% of the population declared themselves to be Russian. Of the total population of 2,409,200 inhabitants, 191,000 people or 7.9% declared a second ethnicity (collected for the first time in the 2024 census) (Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024). Of the ethnicities declared as a second ethnicity, Russians accounted for 2.2%. Of the total population of 2,409,200 people, 99.9% declared their mother tongue, of which Moldovan was declared by 1,441,400 people (48.1%), Romanian by 765,800 people (31.8%), Russian by 280,000 people (11.6%). Thus, compared to the 2014 census, the share of those who declared *Russian* as their mother tongue increased from 9.6% in 2014 to 11.6% in 2024 (see Annex No. 2) (Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024). In terms of language skills, 87.5% of the population aged 3 years and over declared that they knew Russian (68.2%) and English (13.4%) (ibidem). A comparative analysis between ethnicity and declared mother tongue generally shows a direct correspondence between these two structures, but not entirely. Thus, of those who declared themselves to be ethnic *Moldovans*, 61.7% considered *Moldovan* to be their mother tongue, 31.2% considered *Romanian* to be their mother tongue, and 6.5% considered *Russian* to be their mother tongue. Of those who declared themselves to be ethnic *Romanians*, 95.8% considered *Romanian* to be their mother tongue, 3.3% considered *Moldovan* to be their mother tongue, and 0.7% considered *Russian* to be their mother tongue. However, the relationship between ethnicity and mother tongue differs from one ethnic group to another. Among ethnic *Russians*, 95.2% considered *Russian* to be their mother tongue, 2.6% considered *Moldovan* to be their mother tongue, 0.7% considered *Romanian* and *Ukrainian* to be their mother tongue, and 0.6% considered *Gagauz* to be their mother tongue (Rezultatele

finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024). The most pronounced change can be seen in terms of mother tongue. The number of those who named "Romanian" as their mother tongue increased significantly (Câți români, vorbitori de rusă, atei și musulmani sunt în Moldova).

## Conclusions

The status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova is an essential analytical benchmark for understanding the geopolitical and sociocultural transformations that have marked its evolution throughout history and geopolitical changes. The persistence of Russian in the public, institutional, and media spheres reflects the continuity of symbolic and functional structures inherited from the Soviet period, which continue to influence identity dynamics and interethnic relations. Changes in the legislative framework and language policies highlight the fluctuating nature of the status of the Russian language, which is closely linked to the geopolitical reorientations of the political elite and the power relations within society. Thus, the issue of the Russian language transcends the strictly linguistic dimension, becoming an instrument of political mobilization and affirmation of divergent geopolitical options, especially in relation to the European and Eurasian vectors.

From a sociocultural perspective, the continued use of Russian among certain ethnolinguistic communities indicates both the multilingual nature of Moldovan society and the difficulties of consolidating a common civic identity centered on the official language. This reality highlights the need for coherent and inclusive language policies capable of ensuring the integration of national minorities without undermining the role of the Romanian language as the main factor of social and identity cohesion. Thus, the status of the Russian language in the Republic of Moldova functions as a complex indicator of the interaction between historical memory, identity construction, and geopolitical orientation, reflecting the structural tensions and transition processes specific to post-Soviet societies.

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