DOI: 10.11649/sm.3265

Slavia Meridionalis 25, 2025
Article No.: 3265

Citation:
Dyer, D., & Iepuri, V. (2025). Languages on the move: The linguistic landscape of Moldova in the second decade of the 21st century. *Slavia Meridionalis*, *25*, Article 3265. https://doi.org/10.11649/sm.3265

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Languages on the Move: The Linguistic Landscape of Moldova in the Second Decade of the 21st Century

Introduction

More than thirty years have passed since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics dissolved into fifteen independent states, and many changes have taken place in the political, economic, and cultural fabric of these new countries in these three decades. Language issues are some of the important changes that have attracted the attention of scholars. The collapse of the Soviet Union

This work was supported by the University of Mississippi.

Authors' contribution: both authors participated equally in the concept of the study and drafting the manuscript.

Competing interests: no competing interests have been declared.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

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in 1991 created conditions in which its former republics, which previously were united by the same language and political system, sought change in their linguistic policies. An analysis of language shift outcomes in implementing new language laws and the concomitant restructuring of educational systems in these countries "offers a unique contribution to contemporary theories of language policy, minority rights and language education" (Pavlenko, 2008, p. 2). Of special interest in this case is the contemporary linguistic situation in the Republic of Moldova, the second smallest republic of the former Soviet Union, which has been a multiethnic society for centuries. More than 70% of its population today are ethnic Moldovans, with almost one-third of the population consisting of ethnic minorities: Ukrainians, Russians, Gagauz, Bulgarians, and other nationalities.

Ethnic Composition

According to the 2014 population census, which is the latest available, the ethnic composition of Moldova was as follows: Moldovans 75.1%, Romanians 7%, Ukrainians 6.6%, Gagauz 4.6%, Russians 4.1%, Bulgarians 1.9%, other 0.8%. See *Diagram 1* below.

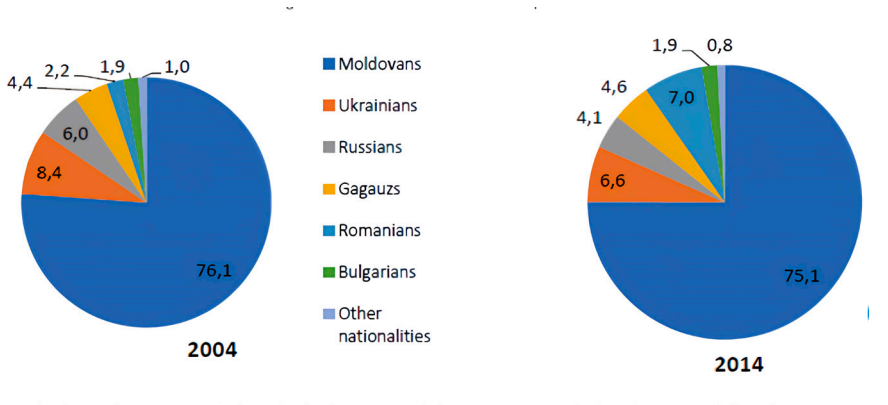


Diagram 1: The Ethnic Composition of Moldova in 2004 and 2014

If we compare data from 2004, the number of citizens of Moldova who identified as Moldovans decreased by 1.0%, while the number of those who declared themselves Romanians increased by 4.8%. Ethnic groups numbering more than one thousand people included Belarusians, Jews, Poles, and

Armenians, with 2.8 thousand, 1.6 thousand, 1.4 thousand and one thousand people, respectively. As we can see from the diagram, over the course of ten years the number of people with Russian and Ukrainian ethnicities decreased, while the share of those with Bulgarian, Gagauz, and Roma ethnicities did not change significantly (see *Key results of the 2014 Population and Housing Census*, 2017). These data do not include information about the ethnic composition in Transnistria or the Pridnestrovian Moldovan Republic, a breakaway state internationally recognized as part of Moldova.

In the Soviet census of 1989, the demographics of this area looked very different. The 1989 census data provided the following breakdown of the ethnic composition in Moldova: Moldovans 64.5%, Ukrainians 13.8%, Russians 12.8%, Gagauz 3.5%, Bulgarians 2%, Jews 1.5%, and six other nationalities 0.9%. The large decrease in the number of Russians and Ukrainians in the period between these censuses can be explained by emigration during the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was also a decrease in other nationalities (e.g., many Jews emigrated from Moldova). On the other hand, the number of people who declared themselves Romanians increased. In September of 2007, Romania resumed its policy of granting Romanian citizenship to Moldovans who requested it, and it began to offer citizenship to Moldovans owing to historical, cultural, and linguistic ties between the two nations. Many Moldovans whose ancestors are Romanian citizens or who were born in Moldova during the period when the country was part of Romania can now be granted Romanian citizenship. There is an important economic reason for Moldovans to secure Romanian citizenship. Romania is a member of the European Union, and citizens with Romanian passports are provided with an opportunity to live and work not only in Romania, but also in other countries of the European Union.

Romanian or Moldovan language?

Many citizens of Moldova today associate their language with national identity and statehood: "I live in Moldova, I am Moldovan, hence I speak the *Moldovan* language." On the other hand, pro-Romanian citizens consider themselves Romanians and call the language *Romanian*. Moldovans who identify more with Russian or Soviet heritage do not wish to be referred to as Romanians, associating the word *Romanian* with reunification with Romania.

Article 13(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, which is currently in force, refers to the national language as *Moldovan*. Moldova's 1991 Declaration of Independence from the Soviet Union stipulated that Romanian is the official language.

In December of 2013, the Constitutional Court of Moldova declared that the Declaration of Independence takes precedence over the Constitution, and that the state language should be called *Romanian*.[1]

On December 24, 2016, the second day of his presidency, Igor Dodon, the former President of the Republic of Moldova, changed the official language of the country from Romanian to Moldovan on his website, declaring that the President should respect the law and the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova.

On March 16, 2023, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted Law No. 52 on the Implementation of the Considerations of Certain Decisions of the Constitutional Court. The purpose of the new law was to replace *Moldovan* with *Romanian* as the country's only official language. This law also provides that the phrase "functioning based on the Latin script" in article 13(1) of the Constitution is to be considered obsolete (Article 2) (see *Limba română devine limba oficială în Republica Moldova. Parlamentul de la Chișinău a adoptat legea*, 2023).

According to a March 8, 2023, press release, the replacement of the phrase *Moldovan language* with *Romanian language* in the legislation caused clashes in Parliament. The Communists and the Socialists in parliament protested before the Constitutional Court. Dozens of people, led by Socialist and Communist members of parliament, chanted "We are Moldovans," "Moldovan language."

[1] "Hotărâre Nr. 36 din 05.12.2013 privind interpretarea articolului 13 alin. (1) din Constituție în corelație cu Preambulul Constituției și Declarația de Independență a Republicii Moldova [Sesizările nr. 8b/2013 și 41b/2013]." Curtea Constituțională a Republicii Moldova. Accesat la 20 decembrie 2013. "124. […] Prin urmare, Curtea consideră că prevederea conținută în Declarația de Independență referitoare la limba română ca limbă de stat a Republicii Moldova prevalează asupra prevederii referitoare la limba moldovenească conținute în articolul 13 al Constituției." ["Decision No. 36 of 05.12.2013 concerning the interpretation of article 13, para. (1), of the Constitution in correlation with the Preamble of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova [Reports No. 8b/2013 and 41b/2013]." The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova. Accessed on December 20, 2013. "124. […] Therefore, the Court considers that the provision contained in the Declaration of Independence regarding the Romanian language as the state language of the Republic of Moldova takes precedence over the provision regarding the Moldovan language contained in Article 13 of the Constitution."]

They stood in front of the Court with posters stating "Moldova, Moldovans, Moldovan," "Moldovans speak Moldovan," "Moldovan language at home," and "Observe the constitution."



© EPA-EFE/DUMITRU DORU | Supporters of Socialists and Communists political party protest in front of the Constitutional Court in Chisinau, Moldova, 06 March 2023.

Illustration 1: Supporters of Socialists and Communists political party protest in front of the Constitutional Court in Chișinău, Moldova, 6 March 2023. Accessed online at: [https://www.veridica.ro/en/analyses/the-elimination-of-the-moldovan-language-and-the-pro-russians-fury-moscow-is-losing-the-key-tools-it-used-to-maintain-its-influence-in-moldova].

The language situation in Moldova continues to be a complicated one. Language and identity issues are still as difficult today as they were more than thirty years ago, when they first triggered social conflicts in the country.

What has changed over the last several decades in the country is that Moldovan citizens have had more opportunities for contact with their Romanian counterparts in various spheres of life. Moldovan–Romanian collaboration in fact has broadened in many areas, including diplomacy, business, culture, and education. Citizens of Moldova have been provided more access to Romanian

mass media and can now travel to Romania with free visas. A considerable number of the Moldovan television channels are broadcast from Romania (*TVR 1*, *PRO TV*, *Realitatea TV*, *Național TV*, *Prima TV*, *Acasă TV*, *Kiss TV*, *N24*, *TeleSport*, and *Minimax*, among others).

The linguistic situation has also changed in the sphere of education. In schools and at universities, the academic subject *Moldovan Language* has been renamed *Romanian Language*, and textbooks of the *Moldovan language* have been replaced with textbooks of the *Romanian language*. Every year, the Romanian government offers scholarships for Moldovan students to study in Romania. Young people born in Moldova may choose to study in Romania in different schools and educational programs, including high school, undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. programs. They are also offered an opportunity to conduct internships in cities throughout Romania. Linguist Matthew Ciscel notes that "[t]he trends suggest an increasing demand for education in the state language and a troubling move away from institutionally supported local bilingualism (in Romanian and Russian). […] Essentially, the numbers indicate that four out of five children in Moldova are educated in schools where Romanian is the primary language of instruction and only foreign languages, mostly English and French, are taught as subjects. Additionally, the exclusion of Russian from these schools serves the goal of creating a greater role and increased prestige for the state language" (Ciscel, 2010, p. 21).

All of these factors could not but influence language use in Moldova. Although the population of Moldova uses both names for its state language (*Moldovan* and *Romanian*) and, according to opinion polls, the majority admits that it should be called *Moldovan*, most people in the capital city of Chișinău, a high percentage of citizens with higher education, as well as young people, tend to call their language *Romanian*. The name *Moldovan language* is predominantly used by citizens of the older generation, rural residents, and non-native speakers of Moldovan/Romanian.[2]

There is a high tendency among Moldovans, especially among the intelligensia, to push for purification and derussification of their mother tongue. In

[2] "Distribuţia răspunsurilor la întrebarea: *Care credeţi că ar trebui să fie denumirea limbii oficiale în Constituţie?* – Barometrul de Opinie Publică-CBS-AXA Centrul de Investigatii Sociologice și Marketing Noembrie 2012 [The distribution of answers to the question: What do you think should be the name of the official language in the Constitution?—Public Opinion Barometer-CBS-AXA Sociological and Marketing Research Center, November 2012]. See *Distribuţia răspunsurilor la întrebarea* (2012, p. 58).

conversation, they try to sound like speakers of Romanian from Romania and they avoid Romanian-Russian code switching. Moldovan TV hosts on local channels sound like their colleagues in Romania. Moldovan students in educational institutions and non-native learners of Romanian are taught the standard variant of Romanian as it is used in Romania. Neverthess, in spite of all these efforts, the Moldovan dialect of Romanian retains certain dialectal features which are especially apparent in phonology (Dyer & Coles, 2013; Iepuri, 2018).

The situation is different in Transnistria, where the Romanian language is called *Moldovan* and is taught in Cyrillic script. While a few schools exist that teach Romanian in Latin script, the government in Tiraspol is not in favor of this. In 2004, the forced closure of the so-called Romanian schools (those teaching the language in Latin script) attracted significant international attention and was an object of judgement by the European Court of Human Rights (2012). Compromise solutions were achieved through mediation by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which allowed schools to continue to operate, but not without complications (Comai & Venturi, 2015, p. 887).

The Status of the Russian language

In 1989, more than two-thirds of the population of the Moldavian Republic reported that they used Russian as their first or second language. As a result of democratic reforms of the late 1980s, an active discussion began on regulating the use of languages in Moldova. There was a lively discussion about giving the Moldovan language the status of the state language and shifting the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin script. At the same time, the problem of determining the role and place of the Russian language in society became obvious.

After a nationwide discussion of the final bill, the Supreme Council of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic adopted the law "On the Functioning of Languages on the Territory of the Moldavian SSR" on September 1, 1989. According to the law, the Moldovan language was recognized as the only state language. The Russian language was given the status of a language of "interethnic communication," which ensured Russian–Moldavian bilingualism.

The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, adopted in 1994, stipulated that the state recognized and protected the right to the preservation, development, and functioning of Russian and other languages used in the coun-

try. Since the adoption of the Constitution, a number of laws regulating use of the Russian language in various areas of state and public life have been approved.

In 2016, the government adopted the Strategy for Strengthening Interethnic Relations in the Republic of Moldova for 2017–2027. This document notes that ethnic diversity is part of the history of the Moldovan state. The Russian language has the status of a language of interethnic communication which has been used for a long time in various spheres of life.

The regulations on the use of languages demonstrate that a legal framework has been developed in the Republic of Moldova for the functioning of the Russian language in virtually all spheres of life. However, in reality we can observe discrepancies between legislation and its application.

The status of the Russian language remains a subject of debate among politicians in the country. Over the years, many politicians have promised to change the status of the Russian language. One such example was the 2002 presidential campaign of Vladimir Voronin, who built his entire campaign on the issue of the state language and injustices that had been created for the Russian-speaking population of Moldova. After being elected, Moldovan President Voronin and Communist members of the parliament then attempted to legislate Russian as an official language alongside Moldovan, as well as to reintroduce Russian as a compulsory subject in all schools (Prina, 2015, p. 57).

The socio-political situation of the early 1990s had a negative impact on the education sector. It was then that the number of secondary schools with Russian as the language of instruction began to decline, and the Russian language has not been taught as a compulsory academic discipline in Moldovan schools where the language of instruction is Romanian since September 2018. In previous years, Russian was taught in these schools from the fifth to ninth grades. At the present time, it is considered a foreign language and is taught optionally, and parents can choose whether their children will study Russian in schools.

During the 2020–2021 academic year, Russian as an optional foreign language was offered in 838 schools in the country wherein the language of instruction was Romanian, that is, in 67.5% of educational institutions. 99,000 students, or 29.6% of the population, took Russian as a second foreign language. In colleges, 11% of students studied in Russian, and at universities the percentage was 14.4. As we see, the narrowing of the area of use of

the Russian language in Moldova is ongoing, and the possibility of studying it in Moldovan educational institutions will diminish, inevitably affecting Moldovan–Russian bilingualism in the republic.[3]

A serious problem in the country is the training of teaching staff for Russian schools. Currently, the training of teachers of Russian studies is offered at only four universities and primarily for double majors in Russian and English and Russian and Romanian. Education in master's degree programs does not favor the Russian language, therefore schools are experiencing a shortage of professional educators in this discipline.

These trends illustrate a further shift away from Russian-language proficiency among Moldovan students. This is in contrast to education in Transnistria, where education is generally provided in a language of the students' choice, and where Russian remains the main language of proficiency. With the decrease of Russian-language opportunities in Chișinău, Russian-speaking students have to look for education opportunities in Russia, where they can study in their mother tongue. Moldovan students from Transnistria who are unable to use Romanian in Latin script experience difficulties obtaining higher education in Moldova and therefore must learn Russian or other languages to find education opportunities abroad.

We should emphasize, though, that the role of the Russian language in public life remains significant among the majority of Moldovan citizens. According to the latest census, every second Ukrainian, every third Gagauz and every third Bulgarian speaks Russian. The Russian language is also popular among the titular population—the Moldovans. A third of the country's inhabitants speak Russian, i.e., one million people, and more than two million Moldovans can communicate fluently in Russian. The interest in print media in Russian has not decreased, and Russian TV programs are still in demand among the local population.

Ethnic minorities in Moldova underwent a process of russification and denationalization during the Soviet period through the Soviet education system with instruction in Russian, the use of media in Russian, etc. Therefore, national minorities such as Ukrainians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz continue to

[3] See Русский язык в Республике Молдова: Правовое регулирование, перспективы сохранения, развития и функционирования—Координационный совет российских соотечественников [Russian language in the Republic of Moldova: Legal regulation, prospects for preservation, development and functioning—Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots (*Русский язык в Республике Молдова*, 2023).

give preference to the Russian language, using it in public places, in public administration and in education (Lavric, 2017, p. 177). Nevertheless, the attitude toward languages of national minorities in the republic has changed over the past thirty years.

The Ukrainian language

Before 1989, more than 600,000 Ukrainians lived on the territory of Soviet Moldavia, representing 13.8% of the total population of the country (1989 census). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, more than 100,000 Moldovan Ukrainians left the country. The reasons for leaving included a growing Moldovan nationalistic movement which advocated for Moldova's reunification with Romania, something which caused great anxiety among the ethnic minorities. Among other problems confronting Russian and Russian-speaking minorities at that time was a shortage of educational opportunities in the Russian language. Many Russian schools were closed down or turned into Moldovan schools, and admission to colleges and universities for students with Russian as the language of instruction was reduced or eliminated altogether (Solonar & Bruter, 1994, p. 84).

According to official data from the latest population census in the Republic of Moldova in 2014, published on March 31, 2017, the Ukrainian minority made up 6.6% of the population, i.e., 197,800 people, and constituted the third largest ethnic group after the titular nation. If we include the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova and citizens of Ukraine registered with the Moldovan consulate, the total number of Ukrainians in Moldova would reach about 376,000.

The position of Ukrainian in Moldovan society has changed significantly since the early 1990s. Major changes have been made in education, and there are now 37 schools in the Republic of Moldova which teach the Ukrainian language, literature, culture, history, and traditions. According to the Moldovan Ministry of Education and Research, 1,179 refugee children from Ukraine now study in Moldova (see *Сколько детей из Украины ходят в детские сады и школы Молдовы*, 2023). School curricula and textbooks on various school subjects are being developed in Moldova in the Ukrainian language (*В Молдове до осени планируют перевести учебники на украинский язык*, 2025).

In the Ukrainian Studies section at the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova (Institute of National Minorities), scholars research Ukrainian history, culture, and language. There are more than 200 Ukrainian folklore groups in Moldova, and some local newspapers are printed in Ukrainian. Twice a month on the "Moldova 1" TV channel, the television program *Світанок* (Sunrise) is broadcast in the Ukrainian language, and every week a 30-minute program, *Renaştere-Відродження* (Revival), is broadcast in Ukrainian on Radio Moldova and online. Citizens of Moldova can also watch national Ukrainian TV channels which are broadcast in the country. Moreover, there are 26 public Ukrainian organizations in Moldova.

The Ukrainian language in Moldova shows certain variations in different geographic areas. In the northern part of Moldova, for example, it displays features of the Carpathian, Volyn, and Podillian dialects; in the south, however, it is characterized by elements of the Dnieper dialects and features of the south, in other words, western Ukrainian dialects (Cojuhari, 2008, p. 91). A long history of migration and Ukrainian-language contact with other languages in Moldova, on the one hand, and language policies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet government on the other hand, have created conditions for the development of specific Ukrainian dialects different from dialects that are found in Ukraine or in other places where Russian and Ukrainian are in contact. A significant influence of Russian is apparent, which makes the Ukrainian of Moldova different from literary Ukrainian. Moldovan schools pay special attention to teaching standard norms of the Ukrainian language.

The Bulgarian language

About 2% of the population of Moldova are Bulgarians who use the Bulgarian language in everyday life, considering it their native language. Moldovan (Bessarabian) Bulgarian and literary Bulgarian differ significantly (Dyer, 2002, 2005), and the Bulgarian government helps the Bulgarian communities of Moldova in supporting the study of classical literary Bulgarian. In the education system of Moldova, there are 30 educational institutions where the Bulgarian language is taught in various forms. In the early 1990s, it became possible to pay more attention to the current state and functions of the Bulgarian language in Moldova from a sociolinguistic point of view.

The Gagauz language

There are three official languages in use in the Gagauz Autonomous region (Gagauzija) of the Republic of Moldova: Gagauz, Romanian, and Russian. In fact, the administration and people of different nationalities living there mainly use Russian in communication. Gagauz who know their native language speak Gagauz when socializing in their communities. Gagauz is a Turkic language of the Altaic language family, genetically related to Turkish, and Türkiye actively supports the study of Gagauz in Gagauzija, financing the publication of textbooks in this language and providing quotas in Turkish universities for students from Gagauzija. In 2018, the People's Assembly of Gagauzija adopted the law *О расширении сфер применения гагаузского языка* ('On Expanding the Spheres of Use of the Gagauz Language'). As a result, the level of language proficiency among students is increasing. The Moldovan Department of Education publishes a magazine for teachers in the Gagauz language (*Gagauz dili hem literaturası*) with information about pedagogical projects, extracurricular activities and additional materials on the introduction and implementation of curricula, as well as articles on language teaching.

Conclusion

The language situation in Moldova has changed significantly since 1991, and many problems still exist. According to Vyacheslav Balan, former national coordinator of the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), in Moldova—as in many other countries of Eastern Europe—the issue of language is too ideologized. He noted, for example, that securing Romanian's status as a state language is often viewed as a "triumph of historical justice" and "the liberation of the Romanians of Bessarabia from Russian/Soviet oppression," and in assigning any special status to the Russian language, some see "the continuation of the policy of Russification," "the preservation of historical injustice" and "the desecration of the memory of the victims of Soviet totalitarianism."

According to Balan, the politicization of the state language, that is, turning it into a symbol of "liberation," "struggle," and "historical justice," is a path to

ongoing conflicts and to the fragmentation of the country." In his opinion, if the language issue in Moldova is depoliticized, and languages are viewed as just a means of communication, many problems will disappear, and the remaining ones will be much easier to solve. At the same time, Balan noted, depoliticization does not mean that the Russian language must necessarily be given some kind of status while the state language should not become a means of "cultural assimilation and turning everyone into a Romanian-speaking Moldovan" (see *Давайте говорить. Могут ли языки объединить Молдову*, n.d.).

By 2030, schools in Moldova may introduce multilingual education programs, that is, teaching school subjects in Romanian, in one of the minority languages, and in one foreign language. The Ministry of Education has submitted the draft of this plan for public discussion, called "Strategy for Multilingual Education" (see Чеботарь, 2024). Protection of ethnic minorities' rights and promotion of multilingualism remain key issues in achieving social and political stability in such a diverse society as the Republic of Moldova.

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Języki w ruchu. Krajobraz językowy Mołdawii w drugiej dekadzie XXI wieku

Przez ostatnie trzydzieści lat, od momentu oddzielenia się Mołdawii od Związku Socjalistycznych Republik Radzieckich, przepisy językowe i polityka językowa kształtowały krajobraz językowy niepodległej Republiki Mołdawii. Wśród zagadnień omówionych w niniejszym artykule znajduje się obecny status języka rumuńskiego – urzędowego języka kraju, którym posługuje się zdecydowana większość obywateli – oraz języka rosyjskiego, dawnego języka komunikacji międzyetnicznej. Język rumuński zajmuje dziś coraz bardziej dominującą pozycję w strukturach administracyjnych i społecznych kraju, podczas gdy język rosyjski znajduje się w odwrocie, szczególnie w sektorze edukacji. Języki ukraiński, gagauski i bułgarski pozostają silne na poziomie regionalnym, przy czym liczba użytkowników tego pierwszego szybko rośnie w wyniku napływu imigrantów uciekających przed wojną w Ukrainie.

Słowa kluczowe: Mołdawia; język rumuński; język rosyjski; język ukraiński; język gagauski; język bułgarski; polityka; prawa językowe; język mołdawski

Languages on the move: The linguistic landscape of Moldova in the second decade of the 21st century

For the past thirty years and since its separation from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, language laws and politics have shaped the linguistic panorama of the independent Republic of Moldova. Among the issues examined in the present article are the current statuses of Romanian, the official language of the country today, spoken by the vast majority of citizens, and Russian, the former language of interethnic communication. Romanian today occupies an increasingly dominant position in the country's administrative and social structures, while Russian finds itself in retreat, decreasing in the educational sector in particular. The Ukrainian, Gagauz, and Bulgarian languages remain strong regionally,

with the number of speakers of the former growing quickly as a result of immigrants fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Moldova; Romanian language; Russian language; Ukrainian language; Gagauz language; Bulgarian language; politics; language laws; Moldovan language

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Publication History: Received: 2024-04-30; Accepted: 2024-06-18; Published: 2025-10-20