

ATTITUDES OF MOLDOVANS TOWARDS THE WAR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

ANALYTICAL REPORT



Arkhangelske village, October 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to identify how different groups within Moldovan society perceive the war between Russia and Ukraine along with Russia's historical and contemporary role in Moldova, attitudes towards war crimes and children's indoctrination by Russia, perceptions of propaganda and disinformation. Six focus groups were conducted in March, 2025: three groups consisting of Russian-speaking participants (including residents of Gagauzia) and three groups comprising Romanian-speaking residents of the country.

The distribution of the groups was the following:

- 3 focus groups with representatives of the Romanian-speaking population mostly having more or less neutral or unsure position regarding the war in Ukraine;
- 3 focus groups with representatives of the Russian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova mostly having more or less neutral or unsure position regarding the war in Ukraine (2 groups) or a pro-Ukrainian position regarding the war in Ukraine (1 group — the idea was to ask about the best anti-Russian arguments which work for Russian-speaking);
- 3 focus groups with people aged 19–34;
- 3 focus groups with people aged 35–50;
- 50/50 men and women.

The research identified significant polarization on key issues related to the war and its consequences in society, specifically, between Russian and Romanian-speaking (even when recruiting respondents who formulated neutral views). Notably, differences in positions stem not only from ethnic or linguistic affiliations per se, but from broader factors such as access to information, critical thinking skills, and socio-educational backgrounds. Below is a thematic analysis taking into account this multilayered perception.

CHAPTER 1.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE

The topic of the war between Russia and Ukraine became the central and most emotionally charged segment in all six focus groups. Participants expressed a broad spectrum of opinions — from radical condemnation to justification, from empathy towards Ukrainians to perceiving Russia as the protector of the Russian-speaking population. While differences in positions were not strictly linked to ethnic belonging, there was a clear trend: **Romanian-speaking participants predominantly adopted a distinctly pro-Ukrainian stance, whereas Russian-speaking participants ranged from neutrality to supporting Russia.**

In all three Romanian-speaking focus groups, participants sharply condemned the war, labeling Russia as the sole aggressor and violator of international law. War was viewed not merely as a geopolitical clash but as a crime with a pronounced humanitarian dimension.

Participants frequently spoke about the suffering of the Ukrainian people, destroyed homes, deceased children, and millions of forced refugees. Terms such as *"barbaric war,"* *"genocide,"* and *"crime against humanity"* prevailed in their discourse. This represented not only a political but also a moral evaluation of events, informed either by media sources or personal experiences — such as acquaintance with Ukrainian refugees or visits to Ukrainian territory.

- **"It is a criminal state with a very harsh authoritarian regime, even harsher than during Nazism."**

Some participants compared the war in Ukraine to previous conflicts instigated by Russia — in Transnistria, Georgia, and Karabakh — viewing it as a logical continuation of Russia's expansionist policy.

- **"Russia did exactly the same to us — in Transnistria. Now it repeats the same scenario in Ukraine."**

At the same time, participants highlighted the importance of international support for Ukraine, praised the actions of the EU and NATO, criticized the wavering positions of neutral states, and advocated for economic and political pressure on Russia.

Russian-speaking participants, particularly in the Gagauzia group, presented a more heterogeneous picture. Many statements echoed the official Russian position: protection of the Russian-speaking population in Donbas, condemnation of "Nazi ideology," and accusations towards Ukraine regarding "provocations" and "oppression."

- **“russia didn't attack just like that; it protects those who spoke russian, who started being humiliated and oppressed since 2014.”**

Other explanations included conspiracy theories — such as Western influence, “Ukrainian aggression,” and NATO's attempts to approach russia’s borders — indicating a significant impact from the pro-russian informational environment shaping the worldview of some respondents.

Nevertheless, participants didn't adhere strictly to pro-russian stances. Discussions involving predominantly russian-speaking participants outside Gagauzia included neutral opinions that demonstrated distancing, fatigue from news, fear of escalation, and uncertainty in assessing events.

- **“I can't say who's right and who's wrong. There's too much contradictory information. The main thing is that there's no war here, in our country.”**

Interestingly, even participants sympathetic to Ukraine often made the reservation: “It's not russia's fault, but its government. The people are not to blame.” This highlights a psychological need to preserve a positive attitude towards russia as a cultural and personal reference point, despite current events.

Despite polarized views, all participants, regardless of language, expressed anxiety and fatigue from the war, fearing its potential spread. The threat of Moldova's involvement, destabilization, or engagement of Transnistria was particularly acute.

However, another difference emerged here: Romanian-speaking participants viewed the threat as originating from russia, whereas russian-speaking participants pointed more frequently to “internal instability” as the primary risk.

- **“There's no threat from russia. We're not interesting. But if our authorities provoke, then there might be trouble.”**

Conversely, Romanian speakers described russia as a source of not only external but hybrid threats — through disinformation, subversive structures, religious, and political influences.

INTERMEDIATE CONCLUSIONS FOR THE CHAPTER ARE THE FOLLOWING:

- In the Romanian-speaking part of society, a robust moral and political solidarity with Ukraine has formed.
- Among russian speakers, neutral or justifying positions prevail, shaped by the russian narrative and personal cultural/linguistic ties to russia.
- Both groups share a desire for peace, but perceive the pathways differently — through Ukraine's victory or diplomatic compromise.
- Fear of the escalation unites both audiences, though the objects of their fears differ: external aggression for some, internal destabilization for others.

CHAPTER 2.

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE AND ROLE IN MOLDOVA AND THE WORLD

The issue of Russia's influence on Moldova and its role in international politics was no less important for participants than the discussion about the war in Ukraine. This topic was addressed both in historical and contemporary contexts, and assessments varied widely — from positive and nostalgic to sharply critical and concerned. As with the previous topic, participants' opinions were largely shaped by their linguistic and informational environments.

For Russian-speaking participants, especially those from Gagauzia, Russia, and more broadly, the Soviet Union, is associated with the “golden era” of stability, employment, free education, and guaranteed future. Nostalgia is often accompanied by personal stories and emotional recollections:

- **“I was born in the USSR, and for me, Russia has always been a friendly country that came to help. At that time, Moldova could easily sell its products — and prospered.”**

Participants mentioned developments in agriculture, industry, construction of schools and hospitals, and cultural and linguistic closeness. Yet even among this group, some acknowledged that the USSR's history involved not only progress but also coercion.

- **“Yes, there were schools and factories. But there were also deportations. My grandfather was imprisoned simply because he owned land. Back then, everyone like him was arrested.”**

Among Russian-speaking participants from Chisinau, views were more balanced. Positive evaluations existed but were often supplemented with critical analysis, especially from middle-aged participants.

In contrast, Romanian-speaking participants predominantly perceive Russia's influence as systematically destructive. The historical relationship was described as a history of violence, colonization, cultural erasure, and subjugation. Frequently mentioned themes included:

1. repression of Moldovan intellectuals;
 2. the famine of 1946–1947;
 3. russification of education and government apparatus;
 4. suppression of political autonomy.
- **“They took away intellectuals, journalists, priests — everyone. Only those who stayed quiet and followed orders remained. This was their way of subjugating and erasing our identity.”**

For this audience, the Soviet past is remembered as a period of poverty, queues, restrictions, and ideological pressure. The nostalgia common among older russian speakers is virtually absent or viewed critically.

- **“Yes, gas was cheaper then. But we had neither hot water, nor choices, nor freedom.”**

Both russian-speaking and Romanian-speaking participants acknowledged that russia continues to play an important role in Moldovan politics. However, interpretations of this role differ fundamentally.

russian speakers still see russia as a strong partner beneficial to maintain relations with, especially economically. Some participants mentioned that “it’s easier to find jobs in russia,” that “there are relatives, connections, familiar language,” and that “russia never betrayed us like Europe.” Yet, critical comments also emerged:

- **“Of course, things in russia have become tougher now. Especially after Navalny. There’s not much freedom there.”**

Romanian-speaking participants, conversely, described russia’s influence as a threat to Moldova’s sovereignty. According to them, russia exercises influence through:

1. economic levers: embargoes, gas prices;
 2. political parties: support for pro-russian forces;
 3. the church: influence of the russian Orthodox Church;
 4. media and social networks: dissemination of disinformation and anti-Western narratives.
- **“russia tries to keep us under control through parties, churches, and television. It’s all a strategy of influence.”**

Participants also highlighted russia’s role in creating and maintaining frozen conflicts, such as in Transnistria, and attempts to hinder European integration.

- **“russia doesn’t want us to lose dependency. That’s why it supports conflicts and chaos.”**

When asked about russia's global role, participants again gave polarized answers. russian speakers described russia as a "world power" that is "feared and respected" and serves as a "counterweight to the USA." Romanian speakers, in contrast, predominantly viewed russia as isolated, aggressive, and undemocratic.

- **"The russian federation hasn't brought anything positive... it's a backward, primitive country."**
- **"There is culture in russia, but the state apparatus is a threat to the entire region."**

Participants also pointed to russia's failure to honor international agreements — such as the Budapest Memorandum — which undermines its reputation as a partner.

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE CHAPTER:

- For russian speakers, russia is primarily a historical and cultural partner linked with nostalgia and belonging.
- For Romanian speakers, russia is an external actor interfering in Moldova's politics and identity, seen as heir to an imperial model.
- Although both sides recognize russian influence in Moldova, interpretations of its significance and consequences sharply diverge.
- russia is perceived not only through the prism of the Ukraine war but also as a long-term factor shaping state institutions, media, education, and the church.

CHAPTER 3.

KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARD WAR CRIMES

The topic of war crimes committed during the war in Ukraine sparked strong reactions in all focus group discussions. However, the depth of discussion, emotional involvement, and level of awareness varied significantly between the linguistic groups. This topic served as a kind of test for participants' moral judgment and capacity for critical information analysis. It also demonstrated how deeply the informational environment shapes collective ideas about justice, humanism, and law.

In the Romanian-speaking groups, war crimes were viewed as an inseparable part of Russia's aggression. Participants showed high awareness of specific incidents such as the killings of civilians in Bucha, attacks on maternity hospitals in Mariupol, and the shelling of residential neighborhoods in Kyiv and other cities. The deportation of Ukrainian children and the destruction of civilian infrastructure were also frequently mentioned.

The discussion was marked by high emotional intensity — participants not only condemned the actions of the Russian army but perceived them as a personal trauma, a challenge to the civilized world and universal moral standards. Their reactions included appeals to justice, demands for punishment, and calls for international intervention.

- **"The gravest crime was the war itself. It's a crime against everyone — not just Ukraine, but against all of humanity."**
- **"They bombed Kyiv on Easter night. What kind of people are capable of such a thing?"**

According to respondents, war crimes not only violate international law but leave long-term consequences: physical injuries, broken families, psychological trauma in children, and widespread fear in society. Participants were convinced that Russia should be held accountable not just legally, but also morally and historically.

- **"If we don't punish them now, they'll attack another country tomorrow. Russia must be demilitarized, and its leadership — condemned."**

In Russian-speaking groups, the topic of war crimes was raised less willingly, and reactions were significantly more varied. Participants from Gagauzia and Chisinau either lacked

knowledge of specific events or expressed doubts about their authenticity, attributing them to “information warfare,” “fakes,” or “exaggerations.”

- **"I don't believe these news stories. Who verified them?
It could all be made up. Nowadays, you can't know what's true."**

Some participants avoided discussing the topic, citing the lack of reliable information or the impossibility of verifying facts:

- **"I heard about Bucha, but nothing was proven.
Maybe it was the Ukrainians who did it to discredit russia."**

These statements reveal not only a lack of awareness but also deep mistrust toward Western and Ukrainian sources, as well as a psychological need to preserve a comforting worldview by denying or rationalizing uncomfortable truths.

Still, even in these groups, there were participants who acknowledged russia's responsibility for acts of brutality. These individuals usually spoke from personal experience, contact with refugees, or information obtained from independent online sources:

- **"I helped refugees, and they told me they were shelled,
that their relatives died. I don't think they made it all up."**

Thus, among russian-speaking participants, there is a strong polarization on this topic — from outright denial to critical awareness. However, the latter remains a minority.

In nearly all Romanian-speaking groups, participants called for an international tribunal similar to the Nuremberg Trials. They emphasized that such crimes must not go unpunished to prevent them from recurring. russia's actions were seen as a threat to global justice that must be countered not only with sanctions but also with legal mechanisms.

Among russian-speaking participants, such ideas provoked rejection or skepticism. Some expressed concerns that any form of international court might be biased if Western countries are involved — countries already perceived as russia's antagonists.

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE CHAPTER:

- Romanian-speaking participants demonstrate a high level of awareness, moral involvement, and emotional engagement, demanding justice and international condemnation.
- russian-speaking participants often exhibit skepticism and mistrust toward information about war crimes, or avoid the topic altogether. This behavior is linked to their informational environment and psychological defense mechanisms.
- Both groups include individuals who can rise above the media landscape and interpret the situation through personal experience and universal ethical standards — but these are still a minority, especially among russian speakers.

CHAPTER 4.

DEPORTATION OF CHILDREN, INDOCTRINATION, AND RUSSIFICATION IN OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

The issue of Ukrainian children being deported, russified, and ideologically manipulated in the occupied territories was discussed with varying degrees of engagement across focus groups. While Romanian-speaking participants reacted with emotional intensity and active debate, russian-speaking audiences either avoided the topic or expressed doubt and attempted rationalizations. Romanian respondents, in particular, interpreted the issue not just as a war-related event but as a strategy of psychological and cultural aggression aimed at dismantling the future of the Ukrainian nation.

In the Romanian-speaking focus groups, participants openly and with concern discussed cases of Ukrainian children being deported to russia. The topic was especially painful as it involved children — the most vulnerable category of war victims. Cases were described in which children were removed from orphanages, schools, and shelters, then placed in camps where ideological re-education, the implantation of russian identity, and even name changes took place.

- **“They take them to camps, change their names, make them sing patriotic songs. This isn't rescue — it's destruction of personality.”**

Respondents drew parallels with practices from totalitarian regimes, emphasizing that this form of treatment was not only a humanitarian crime but a demographic war tactic. Attention was given to how russia, in their view, intentionally severs the link between children and their national identity:

- **“They raise them in a russian spirit, teach them that Ukraine is the enemy. When they return — they'll be different people, russians, not Ukrainians.”**

Participants also called for international organizations to intervene in investigating and returning these children, and proposed treating russia's actions as a separate crime in international courts — cultural genocide.

In russian-speaking groups, this topic was almost never raised spontaneously. When moderators guided the conversation toward it, participants often claimed they lacked

information or doubted its credibility. In several cases, the view emerged that evacuating children was a “humanitarian measure” carried out amid warfare to “save lives.”

- **“Well, where else can they go if there's bombing? Of course, they evacuate them. The important thing is that they're alive.”**

After the context of the crimes was explained (the respondents did not have the information, it was beyond their understanding), a suspicion arose that the moderator was from Ukraine, as she had knowledge of the context outside the information field of Moldova. Respondents had difficulty believing that the facts were real, and one respondent started checking the information about the deportation of children and said it was true.

As a result, respondents acknowledged that the truth is important to know, but they still lacked trust in the sources and the moderator. Women pointed out that the information was traumatic, so they would avoid immersing themselves in such content.

There was no in-depth discussion of the topic of deportation/indoctrination of children, as respondents questioned the existence of such a phenomenon, and insistence on diving into this topic and any proposed war crime was met with resistance;

At the same time, despite the constant attempts to justify Russia and blame Ukraine, Russian-speaking respondents did not often use these tactics when discussing the abduction of children: the reaction of shock prevailed, along with an unwillingness to believe this information. Only a few respondents suspected the Ukrainian side might be using the deportation issue as a propaganda tool to accuse Russia. For example:

- **“There are so many lies. They say children were kidnapped, but maybe they were just rescued. This is war, after all.”**

Others shifted the conversation toward legal ambiguity: “If the parents are dead and the kids were taken — who decides where they belong?” These arguments reflect a lack of moral clarity, often masked by humanitarian rhetoric that avoids deeper ethical analysis.

Nevertheless, among Russian-speaking participants, a few expressed concern about these practices, especially in light of information about forced passport changes, name changes, and efforts to erase Ukrainian identity:

- **“If they really make them learn the anthem, change names — that's too much. That's psychological pressure. And that's not saving anyone.”**

In Romanian-speaking groups, the discussion of child deportations smoothly transitioned into a broader discussion of Russification as a tool of control over occupied territories. Participants noted the imposition of the Russian language, education programs, ideology, and even architecture — part of the same strategy applied during the Soviet period, including in Moldova.

- **“What they're doing in Kherson and Donetsk — they did to us too. Everything was in Russian. And even now, we still have schools that don't teach Romanian.”**

Thus, for Romanian-speaking participants, child deportation is not seen as an isolated act but as part of a systematic process of cultural occupation aimed at assimilating new generations into the ideology of the “russian world.”

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE CHAPTER:

- Romanian-speaking participants perceive the deportation and ideological reprogramming of children as both a war and humanitarian crime that requires international condemnation and legal prosecution.
- russian-speaking participants more often express uncertainty or lack of awareness, frequently rationalizing russia’s actions as humanitarian aid, and less often expressing concern.
- In Romanian groups, the topic is logically linked with their own historical experience of russification, intensifying emotional response and political awareness.
- In russian-speaking groups, the lack of critical reflection is tied to dominant pro-russian narratives, fragmented information, and psychological defense mechanisms.
- At the same time, despite the constant attempts to justify russia and blame Ukraine, russian-speaking respondents less often used these tactics when discussing the abduction of children: the reaction of shock prevailed, along with an unwillingness to believe this information. Romanian-speaking respondents also showed rather low awareness of the topic, which is why it is very important in anti-russian communication — these crimes evoke a very strong and acute reaction.

CHAPTER 5.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND DISINFORMATION

The topic of information sources, media influence, and disinformation played a significant role in the focus group discussions. Participants actively shared where they get their news about the war, which sources they trust, and which they distrust. The conversation about media went beyond simple preferences, revealing profound differences in the informational ecosystems inhabited by russian-speaking and Romanian-speaking citizens of Moldova. These differences shape not only views on the war but also broader perspectives on foreign policy, geopolitical alignments, and democratic values.

In the russian-speaking focus groups (especially in Gagauzia), participants acknowledged that their main sources of information were russian TV channels, Telegram channels, social media, and stories from relatives living in russia. A large number of respondents faced challenges accessing information in other languages — due to language barriers, long-standing habits, or media loyalty.

- **"I watch russian TV because everything is clear there. In Moldovan news, it's just accusations, like russia is pure evil."**
- **"If we had more russian-language channels — objective ones — I'd watch them. But now? It's TikTok and calls from relatives in St. Petersburg."**

Participants often said they didn't trust any information source completely. However, this didn't lead to expanding their media diet — instead, it intensified skepticism and made them more vulnerable to manipulation. Many said things like, "Everyone has their own truth," "Everything is twisted," and "You can't know what's really happening."

- **"russian news has its truth. Ukrainian news has theirs. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. So I just listen and draw my own conclusions."**

An interesting topic was the discussion of government-imposed restrictions — particularly the blocking of russian channels and platforms. Here again, opposing perceptions emerged:

1. russian speakers saw these measures as unfair limitations on freedom of expression and as an infringement of their rights as russian-speaking citizens;
- **"Why can't I watch what I want? It's my right to choose what information I consume."**

2. Romanian speakers supported the bans, seeing them as necessary to protect the national media space from aggressive foreign influence.
- **“If you don’t ban propaganda, you end up with people who believe Putin is a savior. That’s the real danger.”**

Such reactions reflect weak media literacy and a perception of information policy as censorship rather than a tool of information security.

In Romanian-speaking focus groups, a fundamentally different approach to information sourcing was observed. Participants mentioned a wide variety of sources: Moldovan TV channels (ProTV, JurnalTV), Ukrainian news sites, YouTube, Telegram channels, and international news agencies. Their media consumption was guided by critical selection, cross-referencing sources, and avoiding overtly propagandistic content.

- **“You can’t trust just one channel. You have to read several and compare them. That’s how you understand what’s really happening.”**

Romanian-speaking respondents were also much more willing to talk openly about the existence and impact of russian propaganda, emphasizing its aggressiveness and effectiveness — especially among vulnerable groups such as the elderly, rural populations, and russian speakers with lower levels of education.

- **“russian propaganda is massive... it manipulates people through emotional and sensitive messaging.”**

Participants highlighted that disinformation is actively spread through TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Telegram, particularly targeting young people.

- **“Young people don’t read news anymore, just short videos. And that’s where lies sneak in — subtly, through humor and music.”**

Participants emphasized the need for media literacy education, especially in schools and among the elderly. They also proposed creating new, independent, and objective sources of information in both Romanian and russian.

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE CHAPTER:

- russian-speaking participants primarily rely on a limited circle of information sources, mostly from russian media or informal channels. They tend to be skeptical and neutral, which increases their vulnerability to propaganda.
- Romanian-speaking respondents demonstrate broader media exposure, a critical approach to information, and greater resilience to disinformation.

- A significant divide in media consumption creates two parallel informational spaces that rarely intersect, however, majority in both groups don't fully trust any media.
- Disinformation is acutely recognized by Romanian-speaking groups, whereas it is often denied or normalized among russian-speaking participants.
- The blocking of russian sources elicits mixed responses, highlighting the need for a more transparent, publicly explained media policy by the state. Some russian-speaking respondents expressed willingness to have Moldovan russian-speaking channel.

CHAPTER 6.

ADDITIONAL THEMES: LANGUAGE, EDUCATION, THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH, AND NOSTALGIA FOR THE USSR

During the focus groups, participants raised and discussed several issues not directly included in the moderator guide but deeply interwoven with perceptions of the war, Russia, and Moldova's political orientation. These topics include language, education, religion, and collective memory of the Soviet past. Their spontaneous emergence indicates that the war in Ukraine is perceived not in isolation, but through the lens of broader social and cultural experiences.

One of the most sensitive topics that surfaced in all focus groups was language — both native and public. For Romanian-speaking participants, language represents a key component of national identity. In this context, discussions about the war were often accompanied by accusations against Russia for its historic policy of Russification, including in Moldova.

- **“Our schools were Russian, the administration didn’t speak Romanian, everything was translated as if we were a colony.”**

Romanian-speaking participants emphasized that even today there are institutional remnants of Russification, such as officials who don’t speak the state language or Russian-language schools where Romanian is barely used.

- **“I have nothing against the Russian language, but it’s not right that it’s more present in ministries than the official language.”**

For Russian-speaking participants, language is more often seen pragmatically, as a means of communication, and rarely as a political symbol. Some expressed requests not to politicize the language issue and defended their right to speak the language they find convenient.

- **“Why are we forced to speak Romanian if we studied in Russian and understand everything in Russian? It’s not against the country — it’s just comfortable.”**

Still, even among russian-speaking participants, there was an understanding that not knowing the state language can deepen isolation, especially among the elderly and residents of Gagauzia.

Across all groups, participants emphasized that the ability to interpret current events depends directly on one's level of education and media literacy. Romanian-speaking respondents especially linked pro-russian views with a lack of education and being trapped in an "information void."

- **"Everything depends on a person's intellect and education. If you don't read or think, you believe any lie."**

There were also concerns expressed that the most active and educated citizens have left the country, leaving behind an informationally vulnerable population that is more easily manipulated.

- **"Moldova's best minds have left. What's left is the chaff."**

russian-speaking participants didn't always directly link education with political orientation, but they acknowledged that many elderly or rural residents lack access to the internet and depend on one or two TV channels. Nonetheless, the idea of expanding educational opportunities and improving media literacy was accepted in both environments.

One of the more unexpected themes was the harsh attitude of Romanian-speaking participants toward the role of the russian Orthodox Church in legitimizing the war. The church is seen not as a spiritual institution, but as a geopolitical tool of russian influence. Participants discussed local priests promoting pro-russian ideas and the general influence of the Moscow Patriarchate on public consciousness.

- **"The russian Orthodox Church is a branch of the FSB. It doesn't serve faith — it serves the russian state."**

Participants condemned clergy members who pray for "russian soldiers," calling it a betrayal of Christian values. The topic of separating the Moldovan church from the Moscow Patriarchate and aligning with an independent metropolitan or the Romanian church was raised.

In russian-speaking groups, the church was hardly discussed. When mentioned, it was described in spiritual rather than political terms. This may indicate less politicization in how religion is viewed, or simply less critical awareness of its potential instrumentalization.

The topic of the Soviet past surfaced in all focus groups, particularly among older participants. Among russian speakers, nostalgia for the USSR persists, viewed as a time of stability, guaranteed employment, low prices, and understandable rules of life.

- **"Back in the USSR, everything was stable: jobs, pensions, security. Now it's just chaos and collapse."**

At the same time, there was criticism of the present, associated with economic instability, corruption, and social insecurity. This contrast reinforces a tendency to idealize the past.

However, even among russian speakers, there were those who recognized the limitations and artificiality of such memories:

- **“We just didn’t know how the rest of the world lived.
And we didn’t have a choice — so we didn’t dream.”**

Among Romanian-speaking participants, such nostalgia was rare. The Soviet past was associated with coercion, poverty, russification, and loss of identity. Their assessment of the Soviet era was more critical and rational.

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE CHAPTER:

- Language is seen in the Romanian-speaking community as a component of sovereignty and cultural identity, while in the russian-speaking community it is viewed as a neutral means of communication. This creates differing perceptions of “linguistic justice.”
- Education and critical thinking are considered key to resilience against propaganda, especially in Romanian groups. Concerns were raised about “intellectual outflow” and the need for civic education.
- The role of the church is perceived very differently: Romanian-speaking respondents see it as a political influence channel, while russian speakers view it more as a spiritual institution.
- Nostalgia for the USSR persists among russian speakers — particularly the elderly — as a form of compensation for present instability. Among Romanian speakers, it is either absent or viewed as a dangerous illusion.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the focus group discussions, a set of key patterns and differences have emerged, largely shaped by participants' linguistic, cultural, and informational environments.

Attitudes toward the war in Ukraine demonstrate a deep polarization within Moldovan society (even when recruiting respondents who formulated neutral views on the screening stage — which ensured absence of the conflicts during the groups). Romanian-speaking participants express strong moral and political solidarity with Ukraine, strongly condemn russia, and demand international accountability for war crimes. russian-speaking respondents, on the other hand, present more ambivalent views — ranging from justifying russia's actions to distancing themselves or adopting a neutral stance. These positions are influenced by russian propaganda and personal cultural-linguistic ties with russia.

Perceptions of russia's role in Moldova and the world also vary sharply. For russian-speaking participants, russia is often viewed as an important historical and economic partner, despite acknowledgment of certain negative developments. For Romanian speakers, russia is primarily seen as an aggressive and destabilizing power that threatens Moldova's sovereignty and cultural identity — through tools like economic pressure, political influence, disinformation, and religious institutions.

Additional topics — such as language, education, the church, and nostalgia for the USSR — highlight deep cultural and identity-based divides. For Romanian-speaking participants, language is tied to national sovereignty and survival, while russian speakers view it more pragmatically. There is broad consensus across both groups on the importance of education and media literacy, though Romanian speakers emphasize it more strongly. The role of the church is highly politicized for Romanian speakers, while it is seen as apolitical and spiritual among russian speakers. Nostalgia for the USSR is prevalent among older russian speakers but absent or viewed critically by Romanian speakers.

Awareness of war crimes and humanitarian violations, such as child deportations and russification in occupied territories, reveals another stark divide. Romanian speakers are actively engaged with these topics and demand international justice, while russian speakers tend to express skepticism, avoid the issue, or rationalize russia's actions as humanitarian.

At the same time, despite the constant attempts to justify russia and blame Ukraine, russian-speaking respondents less often used these tactics when discussing the abduction of children: the reaction of shock prevailed, along with an unwillingness to believe this information. Romanian-speaking respondents also showed rather low awareness of the

topic, which is why it is very important in anti-russian communication - these crimes evoke a very strong and acute reaction.

Participants' sources of information and patterns of media consumption show that the two linguistic communities often operate in separate informational ecosystems. russian speakers are more reliant on limited russian sources, which makes them more vulnerable to propaganda. Romanian speakers tend to access a broader array of sources and demonstrate greater media literacy and resilience to disinformation. However, both groups lack media channels they trust.

In summary, Moldova faces the ongoing challenge of bridging a profound cultural and informational divide. Strengthening media literacy, expanding access to diverse and credible information, and investing in education are essential to reducing polarization and fostering social cohesion in the face of both internal and external threats.